Conference Report

National Consultation: *Different Tales* Project
Childhoods and Children's Literature

The *Different Tales* project began in 2006 seeking to engage with reading material that would speak to non middle class children; to *create* what was lacking in mainstream literature, and *counter* what was widely available and circulated already. In one of the early workshops, the team surveyed books published by the National Book Trust, Children's Book Trust, India Book House etc and came to the conclusion that much of the children's literature brought out in the post-independent period was ideologically and pedagogically concerned with turning children into patriotic, unquestioning citizens, while glossing over deeply complex regional histories, conflicts, power relations, and subject positions. The project sought to work towards (counter) narratives that would help children make sense of the world around them, by focussing on aspects such as whose point of view the story is told from, and can the stories widen and complicate a child's worldview by evoking feelings that haven't been felt in relation to characters that haven't been represented.

The National Consultation (November 29-30th, 2024) on the *Different Tales* project was a two day conference organised by Anveshi, about 25 years after the books were first published. The central aim of this consultation was to look at how the second phase of this project can be taken forward— to build on what the first phase had established, by exploring new languages, mediums, and stories for the future.

The first day of the conference began with a session on 'Childhood and Media'. Sumana Kasturi began the day of presentations: she spoke about an edited volume titled *Childscape Mediascape* that she had brought out with Usha Raman in 2023. The book seeks to study children's representation in and engagement with media, in light of our current context of increased digitisation and mediation through screens. Although it is true that there is inequality of access even in the digital sphere, where some are "media-rich" and others "media-poor", the centrality of digital media itself is undeniable, as it has lodged itself in everybody's lives— whether for education or entertainment. Sumana pointed to a lack of studies on the media effects on children in Indian scholarship, and strongly urged that we focus on children's agency when it comes to media practice, even as we consider traditional media, like books.

In the second presentation by B.V. Suresh, the idea of media or medium was further engaged with, as he noted that while we always talk about the medium we're using, it is also important to ask *who* we are addressing with *what* medium. He described his choices when it comes to children's artwork; if he's dealing with young children for example, he would use pastel crayons for the images of the book. In terms of how artists might incorporate critical ideology into their work, Suresh's belief is to think of how one may re-position oneself rather than worry about representing "the other correctly". This would go a longer way towards empowerment and social change, he asserted, than anything we can expect from education boards. According to him, storytelling is the most powerful vehicle for making change.

Kanak Shashi spoke about her work and engagement with children, particularly as part of a children's magazine called *Chakmak*, where children could submit their own stories and artwork—

stories that were completely unfiltered: “about their life as it is and how they see it”. She described a project she worked on where they were making English learning books for slum children in Bhopal: Kanak’s modus operandi was to make drafts of drawings that she would confer with the children, in order to confirm that it was intelligible to them. For a sentence: “we eat chicken”, she made a drawing of leg pieces but they rejected this— “we eat intestines and the feet” of the chicken, the children told her and she had to adjust the image accordingly. Thus Kanak argued for the importance of distinguishing between “illustration” and “artwork”, preferring the latter, because the former serves a mere (hegemonic) explanatory function, converting word to image in the most unimaginatively mainstream way whereas the latter provides scope for particular and alternate understandings.

One important point raised in the discussion after the first session was the question of appropriateness in children’s images: Uma shared how one of the initial responses to the Telugu books in *DT* was that these were “not children’s stories”. Given our current context of an increasingly digitalised world, she noted that there seems to be greater anxiety over the question of ‘what is appropriate’.

Session 2 (‘Shifting Norms’) began with Deepa Sreenivas asserting that there is a thirst and a need for new images. She briefly spoke about how many of the people who worked on the *DT* project or were used as referents, were not necessarily theorists or writers of children’s literature. Nevertheless, she wished she had stories like these growing up, back when there was no language to talk about something like sexual harassment for example, which one might encounter as a child. [In Shyamala’s *Tataki Wins Again*] How did Tataki survive, how did she have the wherewithal to fight off a sexual advance by a very powerful man? Where did the courage come from? There is a collective wisdom (and strength), a collective history of what a woman’s position in the land and caste relations in a village is, which can be contrasted with the narratives in *Amar Chitra Katha*— stories that don’t perhaps have the same kind of popularity that they did in the 1970s and 80s but whose carefully constructed ethical norms continue to animate the present and remain foundational to the liberal technocratic common sense i.e. the Narayan Murthy work ethic which firmly links entrepreneurial success with talent, hard work, and professional excellence— a meritocracy that is completely untethered to inherited wealth and contributes to the delegitimisation of caste and class as barriers. Deepa is not necessarily pitting the protagonists of *DT* to be opposites of the individualist Brahminical heroes of *Amar Chitra Katha* but it’s important to note the kind of family/ community that emerges in *DT*— something that is in the making, embedded in occupational histories, caste histories, and which becomes a source of strength for children in times of crisis; to serve as a reservoir of resilience that they can draw from.

Deeptha Achar began her presentation by giving the audience some updates on what the new phase of *DT* has in store which included the tie up with Eklavya, the entire set of *DT* being reprinted in English and Hindi, four Kannada books republished with some getting sold out in the space of four months, Urdu books going into publication in December-January, and Gujarati and Bangla as the new languages to be included in the series.
Her presentation continued the conversation begun by Sumana’s, on the question of addressing the new reality of children in the all-pervasive media landscape. With particular reference to social media, Deeptha pointed to how both consumption and production has changed, given the speed with which digital images travel and the ease with each anyone with a smartphone can create content. “There is an observable new self-consciousness that children have about themselves”, she argued,

in terms of their sense of body, the way they position themselves in and for the camera, their sense of image. As compared to 2008, “it’s a different psychic and media landscape today”. Thus it is important for the new phase of *DT* to think of ways to re-situate itself in this context, of exploring multi-modal media such as audio books for example, and for developing a strong social media presence for its dissemination.
Furthermore, she acknowledged that as Kanak did in her projects, it is important for *DT* to engage much more with children both in terms of testing and circulating the stories with them pre-publication and then following up with responses and reviews post-publication.

Being one of the writers’ of the *DT* stories, Jayasree Kalathil picked up this last point during the discussion, where she underscored the importance of finding out what happens to the books once they reach the bookshelves— who is reading them? Are they being read at all? How are children responding to them, how do they discuss it amongst themselves? “We have not heard back from the people for whom the books were made”.
Reflecting on how the *DT* project was first conceptualised, Susie wondered if perhaps too much of the focus had been on who the protagonist was and how to frame a non-normative heroism, rather than who the reader is. The idea was always to challenge what was presented as the mainstream in a multicultural liberal framework, to make an intervention with regional stories in regional languages, but possibly not enough attention had been paid to how this addressal would be communicated with readers— what their position was in this conversation.

Ziya Zayid suggested looking into bringing out books that represent children with disability, and B.V. Suresh added that other modes of engaging and understanding the “other” could also be through theatre and body workshops, where one is asked to enter into the body of another— as acting exercise and performance.

Deeptha Achar agreed that more meetings and workshops are certainly required, especially with teachers and librarians so as to collate responses to *DT*. She mentioned a recent study that was undertaken in and around Baroda, on libraries in private and government schools— except for one school, all the others had locked their cupboards of books.

Session 3 (‘Dissemination and Outreach’): In this session, both K. Lalita and R. Srivatsan, continued the thread of a lack of feedback from children. Lalita gave a brief background as to how she understood the project to have come about, how the initial aims were about the possibilities of introducing the world of reading to children as organic to their joys, desires, and conflicts rather than being driven by overarching morals and values. There was a need for more reading material that might help provide non middle class children with a positive image of their worlds and their lives. However, except for Kerala where the *DT* books are still in demand and widely circulated, Lalita feels that there is very little feedback from AP, Telangana, and Tamil Nadu— that the schools of these states are not so concerned with regional languages and there seems to be a concerted focus on English. The lack of feedback is further complicated by the fact that many of the organisations that bought the books over twenty years ago do not seem to exist anymore. Post Covid, where all education had to be taken online, what everyone has access to now is smartphones. Even TV watching has come down because children would rather play online games, watch videos or be on social media on their mobile devices— so much so that one increasingly hears of suicides related to phone addiction. The collective setting inherent to classrooms, where one learns with and through one’s peers has become extremely individualised as learning now happens at home through a

screen. Moreover, the addiction to social media, racing games etc has inculcated in children a need for speed and subsequently a lack of attention and focus when it comes to more deliberate activities like thinking and writing. Children's access and hyper-fixation with the digital world is inarguable — now we have to enter into this world to access children.

Srivatsan succinctly explained the issue of dissemination that the *DT* project faced using a concept called the 'last mile problem'. He spoke of how he and Lalita managed to get schools in AP and Telangana to buy 20,000 sets of the *DT* books but they have no idea of what happened to the books after this— far from knowing how children responded to the books, one doesn't even know if the books made it to the library or are still lying in godowns. "If somebody can carry out a pilot study, just looking at what happened to the books in five cases even, it would be useful input." This is the last mile problem— in the beginning all execution happens as required, but when it comes to the last stretch, everything fails. "It is important for us to follow up on what happens to the books once they are circulated— did it go to the library? Why did it not go? If it did, what is the next step? Is it a passive failure (of books simply lying in godowns) or is someone looking at these books and saying 'why should children have books like these?'". In addition, Srivatsan suggested that for *DT* phase 2, writers and artists work together on stories rather than the latter encountering the work as a fully formed text, which possibly makes the relation between image and text not as seamless and synergetic as it could be.

Sujata Noronha's intervention in the Consultation was particularly uplifting and hopeful. She was able to share with the group her first hand experiences of using *DT* in her work with children. She found that the stories resonate, delight, excite, and provoke conversation in children: Khadeer Babu's *Head Curry* is one of the most popular books as it is immediately relatable in the Goa context as well, where the fish head becomes a much sought after part in a meal. She describes how one young child picked up *The Sackclothman* and when Sujata told her the story, asking in between if she thought the friendship between the child and the sackcloth man was strange or weird, the child said "Why? Not at all". She was pointing to the fact that children's minds are often far more open and accepting than that of adults; they are not so burdened or hindered by pre-conceived notions of how the world is or what it should be. At her library based NGO, in Goa, Sujata said that all the 130 educators part of Bookworm have a set of *DT* in their libraries because the training process includes how to use these books with children. One of the conversations that they keep having with children is how you cannot be a reader without knowing about as many varied experiences as possible. From the practitioner perspective, her feedback comprised of three main points:
1) some difficulty in procuring the books online, especially if there is a bulk order 2) children's difficulty with language in the English translations of *DT*, given that English is often their second or third language— perhaps that could be looked into, by making the sentences shorter, and by using simpler words and expressions, for example and 3) what is required is not so much a reformatting of the books into newer mediums but rather more strategy in the way we promote and disseminate them for children's reading.

Both Aparna Thota and Chaithanya Pingali focussed on questions of what children want to read and how they often get undermined when we decide what kinds of stories and genres are made available to them. If one makes the claim that children are not reading, or not reading as much, we also have to ask why that is. "Yes there are challenges with distribution, issues with the government, lack of access" said Aparna, "but are we thinking about the reader? Are the books interesting?" Chaithanya concurred, arguing that children know what they want and what they like far better than what we

presume to know on their behalf. There are a variety of reasons why children may struggle with written narratives— it may be a lack of literacy, of language, or it could be challenges like ADHD and dyslexia. Both speakers stressed the importance of engaging with new modes of storytelling, of using digital platforms and delving into the oral and aural via youtube, podcasts, and radio for greater outreach.

Session 4 ('New Directions'): The last session of the day neatly flowed from the previous one in a discussion on the potential and possibilities of audiobooks. Ziya Zayid, who is already working with Jayasree on the *DT* project argued that audiobooks, unlike animation and films, requires very little money and is hence quite cost effective. The primary work involved, as it emerged in discussions, was choosing the right people to tell the stories, of finding the right voice and tenor. Nithesh Kuntady spoke of the benefits of audiobooks when it comes to learning, how his own child first encountered a story aurally, listening to the same audiobook for a week and later 'read' the book, i.e. a retroactive reading from memory because he was as yet learning to string words together. One of the aspects of language that the *DT* project had struggled with, and what many speakers also mentioned in their presentations, was of the difference between written and spoken language in regional contexts and the dilemma of choosing one over the other or trying to create a balance between the two. This challenge is more easily negotiated in the audiobook medium as it is able to foreground spoken language and communicate cultural mannerisms/quirks in tone of voice, sounds etc.

The second day of the Consultation began with a discussion by the language editors of the *DT* project. Each speaker provided an insight into the process and conversations they had in their specific translation languages which included Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Telugu, Urdu, and English. Vinatha Viswanathan (Hindi) spoke of the children's magazine under Ekalvya, *Chakmak*, and her experience of working closely with children. "When you ask children about their experiences, they are much wider than what we think is going on with them." She saw how children are much more interested in each other's work, not just in content but also the style of writing.

For Sukanya Kanarally (Kannada), having the *DT* published in very specific regional Kannada dialects was crucial. "Using standard Kannada to homogenise such a diverse collection would have been totally unfair", she said. When we talk of the readers of children's stories, we only mention age group but that's hardly all there is to it— urban, semi-urban, rural, caste, class, gender— all of these are key demographic factors. In the context of Karnataka, urban and semi urban readers wouldn't even know there are different dialects, notes Sukanya, let alone cultural specificities. She provided a comprehensive background to Kannada children's literature— a background that was both historical and autobiographical, as she described how it took almost a decade to find a publisher for the Kannada *DT* books.

Uma Bhrugubanda (Telugu), in a moment of lighthearted candour, began by confessing her frustration in the early stages of the project, of declaring to Susie that "we are never going to find the stories we want, we will have to write it ourselves!". She spoke about the difficulty of conceptualising what is normative and what is marginalised because "there is nothing formulaic about a Dalit or Muslim child or childhood". In her experience, when it comes to the Telugu reading public, the ~~thoughtfulness and quality of~~ criticism has not kept up with the richness of storytelling;

she recalls one critic dismissively commenting that “everybody seems to be going back and writing about their childhood”— which she found to be a tragically “limited” view, not in the least because the critic made no note of how these childhoods were not part of the mainstream, that Shyamala was not writing in the standard Telugu but in a dialect that is specific to a south Telangana district. The marginal and the centre are mutually constituted, Uma asserted, and need to destabilised / interrogated in conjunction, rather than thought of us distinctly separate and fixed categories.

Asma Rasheed (Urdu) echoed this point as she contemplated the dual nature of Urdu— a language entrenched in systems of power (law, governance), as well as poetry and revolution. She reflected on how she and Moid were confused about the selection of Khadeer Babu’s ‘Head Curry’ story because it felt very normal to them: “I remember getting these things done, going to the butcher shop at age 6 or 7”. She noted that in the ‘Tataki Wins Again’ story, the fact of Tataki winning is what is enjoyable and memorable for the child; the added politics of subject location perhaps only comes later.
Similarly, in discussing the political underpinnings of the project, Uma pointed out that the stories were not specifically written for children at first; they had a larger politics meant for a general readership (“which is why adults are so thrilled by it”) that was later reframed for children.

Taking forward Srivatsan’s point from the previous day about thinking more carefully about the relation between text and image, both Asma and Uma felt that the artwork of *Head Curry* was not in tandem with the light hearted, ironic tone of the story— there was a heaviness to the choice of crimson colour in the text.

Asma went into the details of the Urdu translating experience, explaining how they chose to change the title of ‘Bahadur Badeyya’ to ‘Shabhash Badeyya’ upon reflection, realising the story is much more about skill and accomplishment than it is about bravery.

Deeptha asserted that children’s literature is always pedagogical— whether through overt moralism, or what it chooses to make visible, or in the way parents and librarians choose books for children. In addition, given that English language learning has become compulsory in primary school as well, the *DT* project must look at how to work with pedagogical frameworks so as to facilitate learning of English (bilingual texts, audiobooks) along with the larger ideological goal of working towards a fairer more heterogenous world.

The National Consultation came to an end with the official book release of the latest addition to the *Different Tales* project: *The Mat* and *Write Every Day, Ajji* by Md. Mujeebuddin and Du Saraswathi respectively. Mujeeb spoke fondly of teaching the *DT* stories to his students (who are now in turn teaching it to another generation); how some of the students were inspired to cook head curry and bring it to class, after reading Khadeer Babu’s story! In contrast to the stories he read growing up, stories of far-off lands filled with magic and fantasy, Mujeeb wanted to write a story that was closer home— where real issues are represented, where the language spoken is the one we speak.

Shyamala introduced Du Saraswathi as being not just a writer but a theatre artist and activist as well. *Write Every Day, Ajji* paints an idyllic rural scene with evocative nature imagery, ensconced in the nostalgia of growing up in the 1980s. This nostalgia however is not only to do with personal memories and feelings but also a deeply intricate co-relation with the forests and environment— something that is steadily eroding today.