

Research Article

Intersectional Imprints on Identity Politics: Charting Representation of Caste in Indian Picturebooks in English

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Abstract: Among many identity markers in India, caste plays an important role in propagating the binary of inclusion versus exclusion. The intersection of caste and age proves to be further marginalising in the case of children from communities on the fringes of society. The investigation, portrayal, and reimagining of such marginalised identities in Indian English-language picture books have grown since the 2000s. This paper traces the representation of child protagonists whose identities are interpellated by caste-based marginalisation in English-language Indian picture books over the last two decades. It analyses these picturebooks through the lens of identity politics to understand how such narratives hold the potential to drive social change in future generations through holistic representation. The paper observes that the growth of such Indian picturebooks has re-centred the position of young members of such communities, thereby providing a space to document and disseminate their ways of life.

Keywords: Indian Picturebooks in English; Identity Politics; Caste discrimination; Intersectionality

Introduction

Identity politics refers to a broad range of social and political activities and theories grounded in the collective experiences of injustice and marginalisation faced by members of certain groups, based on their affiliations with particular classes, genders, sexes, races, nationalities, and abilities. Satya P. Mohanty states that “Identity politics involves joint political action by individuals who feel themselves united by membership in a marginalised social category (ethnicity, gender, class, religion) that gives them common political interests”. Identity politics impacts research and ideologies developed in the social sciences and humanities. Increasingly in the literature, the exploration, representation, and reimagination of marginalised identities have become a means of contesting and critiquing hierarchical practices and dominant social structures. Such literary texts may reinforce or contest ideas about identity.

Picturebooks, as one of the first forms of knowledge that children encounter, provide space for complex discussions of themes of diversity, inclusion, and resistance. Looking at Indian picturebooks in English, the format lends itself to addressing the politics of identity through sensitive portrayals of characters from marginalised groups. Through their unique blend of verbal-visual storytelling and depictions of cultural elements and social reality, Indian picturebooks narrate the lives, living conditions, and livelihoods of children on the fringes of society due to their intersectional identities. The child characters live at the intersections of caste, class, gender and ability, thereby rendered marginalised and subjugated. Young minds are empowered by awareness of the marginalisation and injustice experienced by the underprivileged characters in the book. There has been a steady increase in the number of Indian picture books over the last two decades that aim to help child readers position themselves in the place of the represented character. Even this slow-changing scene in the Indian picturebook arena is a concerted effort by indigenous publishing houses such as Tulika, Tara, Pratham, and Karadi Tales.

Intersectionality, Caste and Marginalisation

‘Identity politics’ emerged as a critical term in academic circles in the late twentieth century. The rise of the second wave of feminism and subsequent politically charged movements in the US gave rise to the concept of identity politics. To comprehend the phenomenon of identity politics, it is necessary to grasp the concept of ‘identity’. James Tully, a political philosopher, who calls it ‘the practical identity’, describes it thus:

[Practical identity is] a form of both self-awareness and self-formation in relation to and with others... A practical identity is always relational and intersubjective in two senses. It is acquired, sustained and renegotiated in dialogical relations with those who share it and those who do not. (520)

The above definition implies that identity is constructed in the most vulnerable space through negotiation between the self and the other. Additionally, identity is not a singular facet of the self but rather pluralistic, with several overlapping categories shaping a person’s identity. This is understood as intersectionality. Oxford English

Dictionary defines Intersectionality as “[t]he interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage; a theoretical approach based on such a premise” (“Intersectionality”). In an Indian’s identity, intersectionality is embedded in the nation’s diverse social, political, cultural, and economic contexts. These crisscrossing identities form the nexus for identity politics in India.

In India, caste emerges as one of the most important and socially marginalising identity markers that has been politicised to a great extent. The idea of caste is historically intertwined with the practice of the *varna* system (societal hierarchy based on occupation) in ancient India, which gradually led to a discriminatory practice called untouchability. Though abolished in India after independence, the caste system continues to grip the nation in its vicious talons. Indian society was organised into four castes: Brahmin (the intellectual class), Kshatriya (the warrior class), Vaishya (the merchant class), and *Shudra* (the labour class). Additionally, “There was also a fifth category of people who existed outside the varna system and were referred to as *panchamas* (the fifth varna) or *achhoots* (the untouchables)” (Sahoo). The propagated idea about this section of the society was that these “[i]ndividuals from this lowest stratum of castes were considered to be impure and polluting since their inherited occupations often involved tasks considered to be physically and ritually polluting, such as working with dead bodies and animals or removing human waste” (qtd. in Goghari and Kusi 2). These outcasts, known as Dalits, include the indigenous tribes and ethnic communities at the margins of society, without whom many of the everyday routines would stand disturbed. From barbers to washermen, snake-catchers to cattle herders, sanitation workers and house helpers, the people from these diverse communities form an integral part of the Indian social fabric. The marker of a low caste is, in itself, marginalising. The category of the ‘child’ is seen as an ‘Other’ to the adult, often associated with animals, toys, and inanimate objects. Intersecting with age, the identity of low-caste children suffers a greater disadvantage. They are most often triply marginalised and neglected as non-existent or insignificant beings.

Many contemporary Indian picturebooks challenge conventional social stereotypes and prejudices regarding intersectional personhood and foster awareness among young readers by kindling their curiosity. On browsing the catalogues of major children’s literature publication houses in India, such as Tulika Books, Pratham Books, Karadi Tales and Children’s Book Trust, I noticed that the representation of children from marginalised castes is minimal, though not unavailable, compared to the presence of generic urban middle-class representation. This is a vital gap in the spectrum of diversity representation and inclusion in English-language Indian picturebooks.

Methodology

This paper traces the representation of marginalised child characters in English-language Indian picture books over the last two decades and analyses these texts through the lens of identity politics. The paper, through qualitative content analysis, explores the intersection of caste and age in English-language Indian picturebooks. It aims to examine the diverse caste-based representations in Indian English-language

picturebooks and how these narratives foreground crucial social issues of mutual respect and inclusion.

Representation of Caste in Indian Picturebooks in English

As a country which thrives on the idea of 'Unity in diversity', it is expected that children's literature in India would imbue this national ideology. The idea of Indianness "must be considered multi-faceted, constructed, and ever-changing" (Superle 106). Considering the ancient caste system in place in society, alongside the diverse situations of economic class, gender affiliations, ability, religious faiths and linguistic belonging, which create a complex fabric of Indian identities, a wholesome representation would be a gargantuan task for any writer or artist owing to the sheer multitude of categories that need to be accounted for. However, concealing the deplorable state of the lower rung of society while consistently presenting the upper and middle-class life as the Indian reality would give a disproportionate picture. With a wave of modernism and globalisation, the representations of these identities have improved considerably in Indian children's literature. The Indian picture book of the twenty-first century consciously includes representations of caste's intervention and effects on children and their lives. The literariness of picturebooks facilitates discussions of identity across various intersections.

Representation of Indigenous communities

Searching the early years of the advent of the Indian-English picturebook, Tulika's *Kali and the Rat-snake*, written by Zai Whitaker and illustrated by Srividya Natarajan (2000), is identifiably one of the first picturebooks dealing with a Dalit child protagonist. Kali is a young boy from the *Irula* tribe of Tamil Nadu, who is known for their proficiency in snake catching. The book's title page depicts a boy wearing only a pair of trousers, with a snake coiled around his neck. The boy, Kali, as his name suggests, is dark-skinned, has a shabby mane and is visibly malnourished with protruding ribs. The boy's shirtless body on the cover can be interpreted as a caste-coded marker, with the privilege of wearing upper garments historically restricted to dominant castes. In the story, Kali feels alienated in his school and is almost ashamed to associate with his father's profession as a snake-catcher. However, the picture book subtly shifts the power scales. As a snake enters the classroom, only Kali bravely captures the rat snake. His peers acknowledge his bravery, and the book concludes with an optimistic denouement that conveys a message of inclusivity. At this point, Kali's caste-aided ability is brought to the centre, and the incapacity to tackle a reptile pushes the other children to the periphery. Kali's depiction as dark-skinned with a shabby mane is particularly distinctive among the book's characters. This could be an illustrative strategy to represent how children from such marginalised communities find it challenging to integrate into mainstream society. The illustrator's choice is a move to play with the stereotypical perception of such children as unclean, unkempt and dark. However, the narrative reconstructs Kali as a possessor of agential power, as evidenced by his skill at snake-catching, an art passed down to him by his community. While the necessity of recognition by the children posits Kali in an 'othered' position and as not part of the centre, the narrative is an effort to challenge centre-margin autonomy. In

this manner, this picturebook subverts stereotypical representations of children from marginalised communities by empowering them with skills and indigenous knowledge.

In a similar line, a few years later, Mahaswetha Devi's *The Why-Why Girl* (2003) traces the story of Moyna from the *Shabar* community. The picturebook is based on a biographical account recorded by Devi during her stay with indigenous communities, primarily the Shabars of West Bengal. It presents Moyna, nicknamed the why-why girl, curiously questioning discriminatory practices and injustice meted out to her alongside caste discrimination, such as gender norms, class hierarchy and so on. In the context of caste-age discrimination, Moyna's employment as a child labourer tending to the cattle of higher caste masters shows how exploitation of such children exists in India. Kindled by curiosity, Moyna pursues education as the only means to find answers to her questions. Devi's decision to present the fact that Moyna grew up to become a teacher at the local school becomes pertinent in the context of her marginalised identity. For children from such communities, Moyna's feat exemplifies how to perceive one's limitations as stepping stones and to push through barriers toward emancipation and empowerment. An inspiring tale, *The Why-Why Girl*, in both its storyline and craft, is a site of realistic representation of children from the marginalised communities. The illustrations are raw and hard-hitting, reflecting the harsh realities of such children's lives.

While Indian picturebooks in English attempt to reflect the harsh realities of marginalised lives, they also present positive glimpses through the beautiful and inherently valuable lifestyles of some ethnic communities. CBT's *The Gujjars* by Lisa Gammel (2001) beautifully depicts the life and lifestyle of the nomadic community native to the northwestern parts of the nation. Their food, clothing, livelihood and relationships are realistically portrayed through the perspective of the youngest child in the family. The picture book depicts the idyllic life of the Gujjars and fosters in the child reader an appreciation of alternative lifestyles to those of the metro city. In a similar vein, the recent picture book, Mamta Nainy and Niloufer Wadia's *Sadiq Wants to Stitch* (2020), subtly explores the intersection of gender and caste conventions in a young tribal boy's life. Depicting the lives of a fast-disappearing community of the *Bakharwal* tribe in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, the picture book also raises questions about traditional gender norms, which are dismantled within the narrative. The illustrations in the picture book intricately depict the setting and living conditions of nomadic life. The depiction of the hard toil that goes into the making of colourful rugs, an important cultural marker, affords young readers a peek into the life of nomads, and their creativity that adds to the diversity of the nation. Such picturebooks bring to light the diversity available across the country, along with stories that will delight while allowing the child to think and imbibe the ideals of inclusive living.

Representation of Untouchability

Lower-caste sanitation workers are the least respected. Contrary to their professional roles as cleaners of human society, their presence is considered a pollutant, owing to their association with impurity, dirt and waste. Tackling this stereotype and dismantling constructed ideas about children of sanitation workers, Puu by C.S.

Salamander and Samidha Gunjal (2018), published by Scholastic, uniquely weaves a narrative that covertly reveals the lonely and excluded lives these children lead. The narrative subtly portrays the internalised caste oppression in Dalit children. The use of a first-person narrative provides an authentic account of Dalit children's lives through the protagonist's voice. The picture book's title cleverly plays on the word 'Poo/Puu', wherein the former is a childish synonym for human excreta, and the latter refers to a flower in Tamil. In this context, Dandapat and Tripathi (2024) note that "Without the cultural understanding of 'puu' meaning flower and also poo, the central aspect of the book becomes implicit and open to misinterpretation". The pages are covered with pink flower petals in an attempt to revise the dirty reality of manual scavenging. The girl in the book is portrayed as clever, curious, and independent, even inventing tools to facilitate manual scavenging. Her act of saving the dog that fell in the sewer can be understood as the narrator's way of claiming her agency in the very same space where she felt discriminated against and bullied.

Along the same lines, *My Name is Gulab* by Sagar Kolwankar (2021) is an exceptional work that treats the intersectional experience of caste in children with critical intensity. The titular character, Gulab, is the daughter of a manual scavenger. Due to her father's profession, she becomes the victim of constant bullying by her peer group. The identity of Gulab as a girl child of a manual scavenger renders her untouchable and detestable by her peers. The title of 'stinky Gulab' that the bullies constantly throw at the girl concretises her intersectional identity, which leads to her marginalisation. The picture book seeks to challenge such constructed images by presenting Gulab as a bright, curious, and intelligent girl who invents a machine to help her father in his work. Undeterred by insult and oppression, Gulab establishes her identity as an intelligent girl who defies the labels thrust on her. Gulab's story, closely resembling Moyna's in *The Why-Why Girl*, establishes education as a powerful means of gaining power and asserting one's agency.

Representation of Empowerment

The discourse on caste in India was radically transformed by the defiant efforts of Bhimrao Ambedkar, the first Law Minister of independent India, who fought for equality and the eradication of caste. It took long enough for his story to be recorded for children as a picture book. *The Boy Who Asked Why*, written by Sowmya Rajendran and illustrated by Satwik Gade (2015), published by Tulika, is a biographical account of Ambedkar's life and his struggles against caste-based discrimination. The book's main section focuses on Ambedkar's childhood and youth, which is most suitable for the target audience. The book vividly illustrates Ambedkar's personal experiences with caste-based discrimination, showing how he faced exclusion and humiliation in various social spaces such as his school, where he was segregated from other students, the railway station, where he was denied help, and even his workplace, where caste hierarchies dictated everyday interactions. The final spread of the book depicts the varied experiences of low-caste people, such as gutter cleaners, ragpickers, construction workers, and child beggars. The 'Why?' stands high on the page, questioning the propagation of such a cruel and rigid system by the dominant powers of society. The

picture book ultimately prompts the young reader to reflect on social norms. If such thoughts are ignited, they may become appreciative of differences, thereby valuing inclusiveness and mutual respect.

Another biographical picture book, *Kali Wants to Dance*, written by Aparna Kartikeyan and illustrated by Somesh Kumar (2019), was published by Pratham. It tells the story of Kali Veerapathiran, a small boy from the fishing village of *Kovalam* who goes on to learn the elitist art form of Bharatnatyam and achieves his dream of becoming a renowned dancer. The picturebook delves into Kali's childhood and details his journey to Kalakshetra, the world-renowned dance institute founded by Rukmini Devi Arundale. Before deciding to become a dancer, Kali had faced many apprehensive questions from his community. Kali's unwavering commitment and enthusiasm for dance enabled him to overcome social barriers and rigid caste rules, illustrating the power of talent and endurance to transcend caste and class limitations. The story also highlights the systemic injustices embedded in cultural traditions by demonstrating how marginalised people can create spaces for themselves even in the most elite fields. His success story stands as evidence of the power of passionate pursuits in overcoming barriers. These picturebooks help build a positive self-image among children who face similar struggles. It also sheds light on the opportunities enjoyed by the privileged class, which are often taken for granted.

Conclusion

There are some other books like *Anand* (2018), *Turning the Pot*, *Tilling the Land* (2019), *The Keepers of Darkness*, *Finding Tree* and *Secret Wild Vet Kalyani* (2024) which bring forth intersectionally tangled identities of children and adults who lack privilege owing to their caste identity in a gripping and conspicuous manner. There has been considerable momentum in representing marginalised communities in children's literature over the last three to four years. The sensitivity of depiction of children from such marginalised communities has created a space within the Indian Picturebook arena that subtly addresses such important social issues. The representation has become more nuanced and powerful by re-centring on children who live in the margins of society. These picturebooks not only aim to raise readers' awareness of the presence of these communities but also encourage them to question these social conditions. A subtle shift is evident from 2000 to 2024, in which Indian picture books in English have become more active in creating space for diverse representation, yet there remains a long way to go. There are many beautiful customs, traditions and valuable indigenous knowledge that lie in these marginalised communities. They hold the key to a functional, ergonomic and innovative future. The paper observes that, when coupled with the extensive and accurate representation of intersectional identities, the Indian picture book will become an adequate reflection of Indian identity. Thus, Indian picturebooks in English hold immense potential to drive a change in the mindset of the country's future generation, not through tokenistic depictions but through holistic representations of intersectional identities that can instil values of inclusivity, acceptance, and mutual respect in young minds.

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