



Designing for Children

- With focus on 'Play + Learn'

Children Storybook - Weaving Contemporary Stories with Traditional Artforms.

A play + learn self-educative book series on personal hygiene, etiquettes, values and creativity for ages six to nine.

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Abstract: Young minds need information; not teaching but motivating them. Children acquire knowledge through listening, imitating, observing and reading. Books play important role in their knowledge expedition. Many Indian books have western-style influence. If exposed to Indian Artform-style at early ages, children can develop sense of appreciation to Indian ethos. This paper describes project designed as M.F.A. research (2005), with an intension at revealing six to nine-year-old children to Indian Artform with contemporary situations. The paper also studies same age group's reaction, fourteen years later, over-exposed to visual aids through digital media. The paper documents self-educative storybooks from conception to execution, primarily identifying child psychology and storytelling essence. The paper explores children and their liking for pictures, colors, simplicity, form, space, perspective, line and situation perception. In conclusion, paper proposes that physical storybook reading experience and Indian Artforms have great appreciation value even today to this modern fast-learning generation.

Key words: *Children Publication, Indian Artforms, Indigenous, Illustration, Instructional Material, Learning, Psychology, Reading, Storytelling, Storybooks, Teaching.*

1. Introduction

It all started fifteen years ago, when the researcher's niece, was a teeny-weeny six-year-old. As apple of the eye, researcher filled her 'little' mind with lots of colorful, bright picture books. Books of all sorts - Tell-me-why series, Nursery rhymes, Story Books, Short stories, Amar Chitra Katha series and lots of foreign publications as well! Of course, she was choosy then. Trying to satisfy her hunger with a variety of books, the researcher wondered what made her so choosy when reading books. The researcher speculated what

was the need for variation. Was it the content - story, characters, or was it the look, colors used, or some other related factor?

This thought just remained a thought, until the researcher had to execute an illustration design project for M.F.A. research soon. One fact that the researcher stumbled upon then, there was a lot of foreign influence in a child's education that eventually ended up in a brain drain out of India. Many books available then, had foreign concepts and promoted stereotypes like fair is pretty, blue eyes are beautiful. There was a crucial need to introduce more books with Indian ethos. More content, which introduced richness of Indian Artforms both classic and quintessentially Indian. Maybe by exposing children in their early ages to a wealth of culture India has to offer, Indian touch books could encourage this generation to develop pride in what is Indian. A six-to-nine-year old age group living in an Indian (urban) metropolitan city with a normal IQ was focused for the study.

The need for Indian design exposure, hunger for better variety to breaking boredom and educative, informative happy reading motivation became main argument in designing the M.F.A. (Applied Art) project.

1.1 Psychological Setting of Children

Children are fascinating as they are like adults, yet different. Adults, because they have the potential to develop human capabilities like mature individuals. And different, because they have their own abilities and requirements specific to each age range, that adults need to acknowledge, respect and cater for (Spock 1992). Children study from each other by sharing ideas (Bandura & Walters 1968). The educative system is totally based on child psychology. Children books are enhanced with better designs keeping in mind their interests and habits. These books have short messages, colorful pages and bold pictures which attract children attention.

1.2 Six-Year-Old Child Behavior

There are visible changes in a child at age six. They become independent of their parents' views. They are anxious more with what other broods say or do. Children this age develop a stronger sense of responsibility about matters that they think are important (Schaffer 2004). They are at the beginning of their job of liberating themselves from family and taking place as responsible citizens of the outside world. From being less reliant on their parents, they turn to reliable folks other than family for ideas and knowledge. Children at six, shift to own age as their models of behavior. They no longer believe in make-believe without any plan (Hurlock 1978). Children at six years become old enough to decide and buy their own comics or literature of their choice. There is a remarkable intellectual

development from this age; systematic reasoning, logical problem-solving, effective and flexible thinking process, explorative and investigative curiosity. This stage of psychological organization completes experience by age nine. Through this age bracket of six-to-nine years, children play a passive role while reading. At first, they simply look at pictures. Gradually, they attempt to read shorter stories. They enjoy observing or listening to others as much as they adore 'seeing' books.

1.3 Visual Impact of Pictures

Pictures, just like a word or a toy, is a symbol that represents the real thing. Studies suggest that pictures do better than harm (Arlin, Mary, & Webster, 1978-79). At age five-six, children want their pictures to be recognizable. They identify and relate better to the characters they see. They find pictures beautiful when they find familiar people and animals doing familiar things. Pictures aid memory, encourage curiosity, provide temporal links and extend the text (Carney, 2002). Realistic, yet simplified flat pictures appeal to children. Storybooks with larger central characters, less attention to backgrounds, minimal light and shade effects, minimum lines and lesser detailed pictures appeal to children. Children prefer bright bold colors in pictures, with very little attention towards perspective or depth. In fact, children enjoy looking at same pictures over and over as it encourages them to focus their thoughts, seek new meanings and discover something new. Along with this, the entire activity of 'looking' and 'reading' makes the child learn and associate meanings with words. Picture books encourage interchange between child and adult mutually creating meaning (Price, Kleeck, & Huberty, 2009). Thus, they develop an interest in reading. Reading is one of the healthiest forms of play and pictures are one of the primary methods of reading.

1.4 Effect of Storybooks on Children

Storybooks are the easiest mode of inculcating a reading habit. Storybooks give children something to look forward to. The characters in storybooks often do or say things children themselves dare not to do. Through identification with such characters, children have an excellent opportunity to gain insight into their personal and social problems. Storybooks act as a source of emotional boosting as children try to imitate and adopt habits or traits from the characters. Storybooks aid parents, teachers in explaining concepts to children through simple pictures and easy language. Pictures in such books reduce the boredom of reading in this age group.

2. Research Foundation

When the research was conducted fourteen years ago, there were more western publications as compared to Indian counterparts. The western printed storybooks had good attractive shelf life. They had variety in terms of content, illustration application and also good paper quality, gimmicks and innovative book finishing. Many foreign publications attempted to illustrate Indian themes in their style; as a result, the books looked neither western nor Indian. One of the primary reasons for such books could be multiculturalism. In an urban household, there was a major western or far-eastern influence. Parents had a cosmopolitan social background, which the children were exposed to in their early ages. Storybooks then had Indian themes but lacked the Indian-ness in it. A need to develop values of Indian cultural awareness, cultural interaction was identified in spite of the cross-cultural dialogue.



Figure.1 Magic Carpet Tales, Graphic Ramayana and Festival of Colors - Three Indian Theme Storybooks Illustrated by Different Artists with Western-Style Influence.

2.1 Visual Storytelling

Stories are a composition of events, characters, emotions and dialogues. Stories offer a constant source of ideas, vision and guidance to our lives. Every story is remembered for the moral it tells. And a story is better if it is opened further to the audiences. Stories are universal and storytelling is never-ending. Children prefer stories that appeal to them; like home life, school life, animals, about children, about neighbors, about adventure, and imagination. Visual Storytelling defines the societal action of sharing and inculcating moral values. It is an effective communication ability because it helps to effortlessly recollect, visualize creatively and relate to one another. Visual Stories make conversations lucid, engaging, meaningful and organized.

2.2 Indian Visual Storytelling

India has a huge legacy of storytelling; almost every state has its own artform defining visual storytelling. Chitrakathi from Maharashtra, Kavaad from Rajasthan, Pichwai from

Gujarat, Pattachitra from Orissa to name a few. These artforms have a raw look but they are simple in form and bold in colors. The research chose Patachitra Artform as it best suited a six-to-nine-year old psychology and perception.

2.3 Pattachitra

Pattachitra, meaning 'painting on a cloth', is an ancient Indian storytelling Artform of Odisha dating back to the 11th century A.D. An act used to be performed in front of an audience where, a Pattachitra was adorned in background and a bard narrated stories illustrated in these paintings in foreground with minimal instruments. The themes depicted then ranged from mythological stories of Lord Jagannath, Ramayana, Mahabharata to everyday scenes, street life, marriage processions, war scenes, and evenings on swings.

The painting style has a traditional impact with figures in rustic surroundings. Figures stand in a typical posture and are limited to well-defined ones. The figures are stunted with eyes painted large and elongated, sharp beak-like nose, pointed chin and faces mostly in profile. The lines are bold, no landscape or perspective or distant views. Backgrounds have repeated patterns throughout and paintings have beautiful decorative borders. A story is divided into frames on the same canvas and each frame is marked with a different border. Bright, flat colors are used with delicate, sharp black borders.



Figure.2 Pattachitra Painting by Artist Maguni Mohapatra

3 Project Design

3.1 Purpose

Key purpose of the research was to study Indian Artforms and specifically learn Pattachitra as an illustration style. The tool designed was a series of three self-educative storybooks for six to nine-year-old children based on values, manners, etiquettes, hygiene and imagination. The entire purpose was to communicate stories less commanding, giving a strong message, making reader learn from the stories, changing their behavior and relating to characters portrayed in the stories.

3.2 Objective

The key objective was to create interesting storybooks by blending Indian Artforms (Pattachitra) into a teaching-learning environment. The designed tools' goal was to study child psychology and the essence of storytelling. Sole objective of the research was to combine education and storybooks within a contemporary context yet maintaining the classic, authentic Indian style.

3.3 Execution

The storybooks were premeditated keeping in mind kids' penchant to pictures. The book size was well-thought and every story was treated as a double spread page. This enabled child to patiently read the story in one flip and avoid turning pages to finish it off. This also maintained the 'painting on canvas' look like a true Pattachitra.



Figure.3 Entire Double-Spread Treated as Single Canvas

The storybooks illustrated simple situations and characters that the children would want to be in or as. Thus, the conditions were substantial enough to recount with characters in the stories.

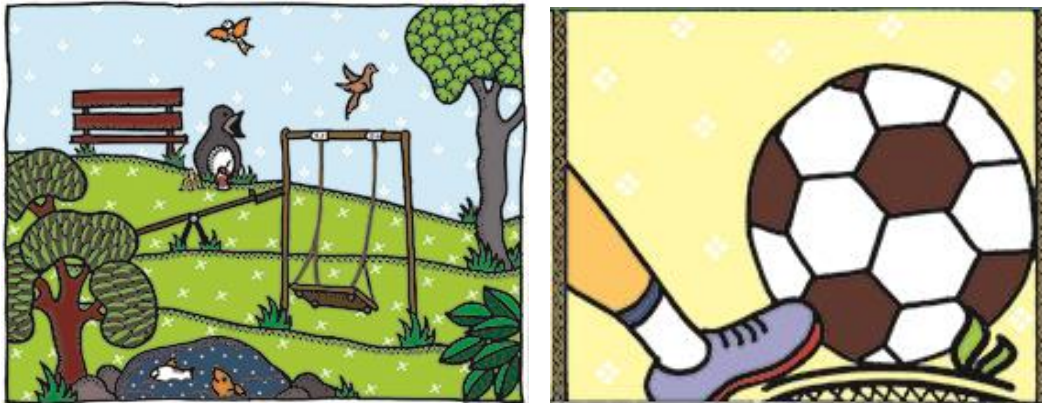


Figure.4 Places and Situations Children Would Relate to Today

The storybooks were illustrated keeping in mind children appeal to bold, simple, no perspective, definite bold black outline, flat bright vibrant colors to attract six-year-old's attention. This also maintained the original Patachitra color palette of red, yellows, greens, blues and black.

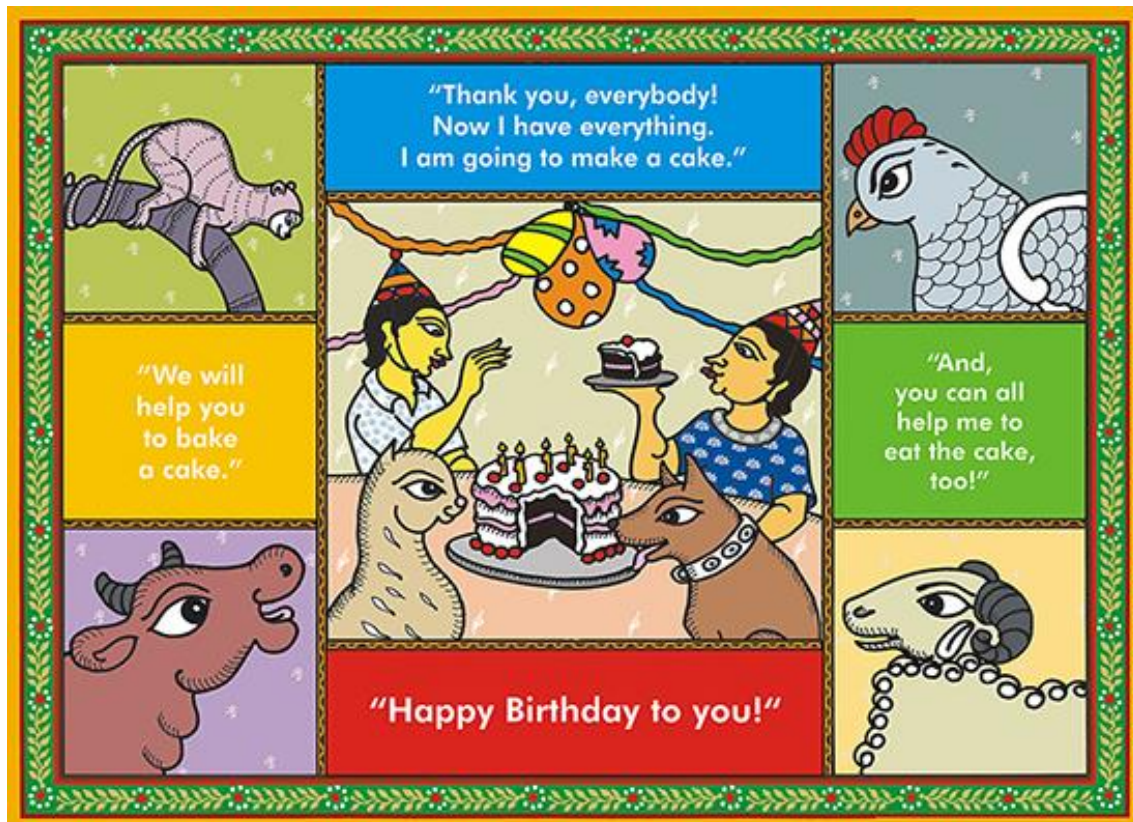


Figure.5 Bold Outlines, Bright Colors and No Perspective Appeal to Children

The frames were well thought of, cropped and composed keeping in mind that children like close-up views of pictures they see.

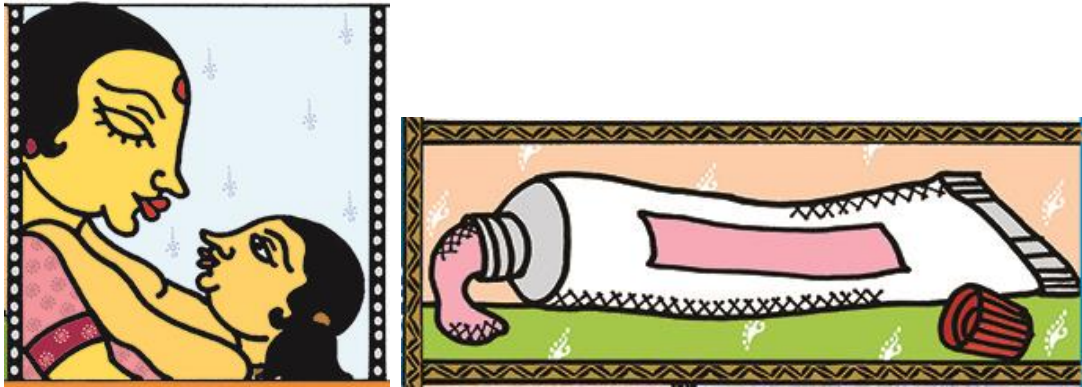


Figure.6 Cropped Images and Close-Up Views Justify Actions Better

The stories had to connect with contemporary reader, therefore the traditional attire of dhotis and sarees was changed into modern attire.



Figure.7 Shorts-Shirts and Toys Connect with Contemporary Children

The traditional surroundings and rural locations were adapted into modern urban background so as to connect with the contemporary age group.



Figure.8 Modern Household Settings Appeal to the Metropolitan Children

The stereotype postures were at times made to stretch or bend, thus bringing variation to traditional static poses.



Figure.9 Creative Liberty Taken in Changing Static Postures

Overall, the Patachitra look was maintained by using design motifs and patterns everywhere. Decorative borders were used like in the original paintings which maintained the authentic look.



Figure.10 Maintaining Borders, Patterns, Motifs

4 Generation Leap

(Fulford, 1999) has rightly said, “A story that matters to us whether ancient or modern becomes a bundle in which we wrap truth, hope and dread. Stories are how we teach, how we explain, how we entertain, and for those reasons they are central to civilization.” He explains the importance of storytelling in modern situation; and elaborates upon cultural and technological developments that have altered our communication.

In this very context, this non-instructional teaching tool led by example and initiated activity for children. The large storybook size made physical (traditional) book-reading an

interesting exercise for children. Turning the pages over, curiosity to see the next situation and concern for the subsequent characters' ordeal; everything made the teaching-learning activity fascinating. All this transpired in the year 2005.

Over the past fourteen years, computer instruction is considered as a powerful resource medium in the teaching-learning environment. Every school now-a-days teaches through various digital platforms. Parents too encourage their children to learn and play with innumerable apps. The technical and cognitive barriers then, no longer exist today. Digitization has opened unlimited access to information, quick search, communication and also, collaborative learning.

In the traditional book design sector too, there are lot of innovations today. Many publishing houses, both Western and Indian, today are exploring the Indian-inspired visual styles. Artists from various parts of country are helping artisan reach the current audiences through various book-design projects. The exposure to Indian Artforms in today's milieu has risen tremendously compared to a decade ago.

In this current developing scenario, researcher wanted to study the power and importance of some storybooks designed fourteen years ago. Also, the research expected to gather reactions about Indian Artform style (Pattachitra) of the same age group of six to nine-year-old in today's multicultural, more internet-savvy digital generation.

4.1 Field Trial

The storybooks designed in 2005, were in 2019 tried out in first and second grades of three boards (ICSE, CBSE and SSC) from Mumbai-based schools. One creative or drawing class from every school was engaged in the book-reading activity. Students were asked to read the stories in a group or individually, and interact with their peers vis-à-vis the messages from stories.



Figure.11 Students Engrossed in Reading the Storybooks

Teachers were requested to read aloud a story from the storybooks provided; for both aesthetic and educational purposes. Teachers were encouraged to make the reading and classroom environment interactive and also, to assist students in gathering information and learning more about the Indian Artform.



Figure.12 Teachers Interacting with the Class

4.2 Outcome

It was observed that the teachers reading the stories aloud engaged the children and encouraged them to be imaginative and responsive. How the teacher held the book, turned pages and read from left to right and top to bottom of page; the class mimicked. The storybooks provided a measure of control over their learning and brought out a sense of ownership and belonging because of the characters. Reading aloud together and group-reading activity was an effective way of making children learn and have fun together. It was an effective way of building peer-learning experience. Shy learners in the class too had a lot of fun-reading experience.



Figure.13 Students' Reaction with the Storybooks

Children readily accepted the actual storybooks (traditional physical form), instead of a digital projected version. They eagerly handled the storybooks with a lot of curiosity and

excitement. Children were attracted to the colors and simplistic style of illustration. Some students confessed to have seen something as Indian as these storybooks. They either owned storybooks printed with other Indian Artforms or had seen animated versions. In entirety, children promptly appreciated what they saw in class that day.

What they liked the most about these storybooks was that, none of the stories taught them anything directly; but made them think twice about their behavior in actual life. The whole activity had the original Patachitra painting style of storytelling; the teacher projecting or showing the story to the class (background) and reading aloud or enacting the dialogues (foreground). This indeed was a modern-day version of the olden days' concept of Pattachitra painting storytelling performance.

5 Conclusion

Combining Indian Artform of Patachitra into a self-educative storybook series as a learning material for six to nine-year-old children created a playful learning atmosphere. Even after fourteen years, children perception and creative imagination were at their peaks. Children were more aware of Indian style drawings now compared to a decade ago. Yet, they were open to another Indian drawing style storybook as it was simple, traditional and different than the major digital stuff they handle today. They were ready for a change in the visual monotony. The class agreed that the storybooks looked Indian and classic, yet had a modern-day touch. The innovative storybooks inculcated a value of learning about Indian culture and the teachers agreed to it as a step towards reviving lost traditions.



Figure.14 Happy Readers - Happy Teachers

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