Invisible Childhoods

SREEDEEP BHATTACHARYA

The effects of the media in the last two and a half decades have become increasingly screen-mediated, interactive and user-generated. Sustained media exposure—literally at our fingertips—has broken several social boundaries and benchmarks. Characterised by an "ease-of-access" in the "era-of-excess," various forms of new media have succeeded in doing something that would have been absolutely unimaginable even in the beginning of this century (Bhattacharya 2020). The democratisation of the medium, and its unprecedented and astounding scale in such a short span of time, has not allowed us to reflect sufficiently on it. Indian academia has been mostly indifferent towards theorising the lived experience of the contemporary consumption of born-digital content and the overflow of vernacular content. The obliteration of the boundaries between the creator, the distributor, and the consumer has immersed us in multiple miniaturised gadgets capable of multitasking. Yet, we have not shown enough eagerness to address our media-saturated engagements.

Challenging Stereotypical Portrayals

In this grand global scheme of rapid digital transformation, *Childscape, Mediascape: Children and Media in India,* edited by Usha Raman and Suman Kasturi, locates the children and media discourses; prejudiced representations of childhood in media; children and everyday interactions; and children's creative practices and negotiations with (new) media. Typically, there is a dearth of academic interest in the issue of childhood, unless it is a matter of abuse, violence, abandonment, oppression, malnutrition, or child mortality. There is a great deal of invisibility of children unless they are in a situation of crisis. The popular representation of

childhood often remains confined to the model of domesticated inferiority and innocence of children. The sociopolitical construct of childhood has often dehumanised children as unruly beings to be socialised and fixed into socially desirable normative models. The model is often repressive, upholding the moral patriarchal authority of family—where parental oppression is often normalised as parental benevolence. That sort of authoritarianism thrives on robbing the subjectivity and agency of children—to be fixed or managed by adult-superiors—and is premised on the severe negation of child rights (Bhattacharya and Roy Choudhury 2024).

In such a context of othering of children, the book does some justice to the under-representation of children. With an inclusive agenda, it challenges some stereotypical portrayals. It studies children as users, agents, influencers, capacity builders, and producers, and not just as passive recipients. Part I, "Discourses," with chapters by Manisha Pathak-Shelat and Devina Sarwatay, question some of the Western tendencies to overlook cultural specificities, homogenising observations on children. It also lays emphasis on children's interactions with social networking sites and their risks.

In Part II on "Representations," the problematic nature of class bias in several children's fiction is explored. One of the best chapters, titled "Transgressing Innocence: Childhoods from the Margins" by Deepa Sreenivas, foregrounds narrative representations of marginalised childhoods from non-mainstream quarters. When "childhood

is ideologically produced and implicated in questions of race, caste and gender" (p 92), it is likely that any deviation from that norm would be disapproved as inferior or pathological. Going against the grain, Sreenivas traces the agonies of and discrimination against Dalit, tribal and Muslim children. Prejudices against them, both inside and outside the classroom, and their struggles and aspirations, contest and contradict the "heavens of innocence" built around children's popular representation. In Chapter 4, Aditya Deshbandhu examines child characters and their ability to rethink children's agency, beyond regulation and protection. Chapter 5 by Mehek Siddiqui raises the issue of under-representation of children in mainstream news coverage during three crucial political events, and their social impact on them—the pandemic, the protests against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, and the abrogation of Article 370.

"Interaction" with mobile technology has become an important pedagogic tool, playing a vital role in the mass dissemination of knowledge, nuisance, and fake information. Kamala Mukunda's chapter, "To be or Not to Be … with Technology," explores the advantages and disadvantages of the (ir)responsible usage of smartphones in a residential school. In Chapters 7 and 8 on digital usage, Anita Sareen Parihar and Archana Kumari address a range of issues concerning everyday cyber perceptions, cyber fears, and cyberbullying of adolescents. In Part IV titled "Constructions," Samina Mishra and Vasuki Belavadi explore the creative and participatory social potentials for wider and useful digital coverage. It is well complemented by Part V on "Negotiations" by Nimmi Rangaswamy and Kiran Vinod Bhatia, who explore specific cases of construction of digital selves and digital identities among children.

Room for More

The edited volume, however, often leaves the reader craving for more additions. A lot remains unsaid about young

selves as visual currencies that use media to make the private self public, and the ephemeral flow of instantly consumable audio–visual content generated or received by children. It is not unreasonable to expect more children's voice on the issues of the virtual intimacies or on body-device intimacies. A chapter on the parental surveillance of children's online activities would also have added to the discussion.

Though it does not fulfil the promise, the beginning of the book sets an expectation that one would find a stronger critique of the hegemonic family as an institution. Nandy (1984) argued that the child is a savage that requires civilising according to the prescription of Western modernity, is often considered to be unreliable and incapable, and is associated with underdevelopment. Kumar (2016) presents a thick analysis of the dual infantilising and subjugation by the family and the state that imposes different sets of expectations, prohibitions, and sacrifices on children's agency (or

the lack of it), given the nature of society-state constellation.

Possibilities of digital remediations involving children are not devoid of sanction and submission towards parental authority, which leads to a series of reconciliations or reformations in the formative years. There is a severe dearth of a consistent critique of familial authority and its oppression on matters related to children's interaction with mediascapes, as seen from the perspective of children. Narratives of trauma and anxiety of control and restrictions could have been valuable additions to the converging terrain of children and media studies. Marginality alone cannot challenge the stereotypical representation and analysis of childscape, unless it is complemented with complex narratives of childhood repression and resistance against parental vigilance, even in privileged families in South Asia.

Consistent disapproval over choice-making and denial of the decision-making

power, shape an inequality that is often initiated and institutionalised in the family, where children grow up listening to elders that they "know what is best for you." The structure of domination is such that subordination is internalised and naturalised from the beginning, so much so that emotional abuse passes off as an act of endowment. Or, one learns to emulate the model of oppressive parental punishment—supposedly geared towards the purpose of disciplining and well-being of children—only to reproduce it further. As Nandy (1984) would rightly observe: "If violated men and women produce violated children, violated children in turn produce violated adults" (p 373). No discourse of childscape can ever be complete without addressing the adult fear of a child's agency and freedom. Or conversely, the child's own dilemmas, anxieties and coping mechanisms while dealing with an authoritarian family need to be incorporated in a volume like this. And that

discourse can justly be dealt with, if and when it is narrated from a child's own perspective.

Children are also often victims of parents' unfulfilled aspirations. They become mere tools to rectify or reclaim one's own failed missions. This could be extremely limiting, violating and confining. While parental indifference to children's preferences could be a subject matter of a different book, one needs a deeper engagement with the neo-liberal platforms of social media, not merely as spaces for ephemeral virtual outlets but also as new means of child control and surveillance. The edited volume is fully devoid of that possible angst visible across the childscape, and in their interactions with the mediascape and its attention economy.

Sreedeep Bhattacharya (*sb514@snu.edu.in*) teaches sociology at Shiv Nadar University, Delhi NCR.

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