



Beyond National Narratives: Broadening Perspectives through Transnational Non-fiction for Indian Children

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Abstract

This paper examines the potential for transnational non-fiction literature to broaden perspectives and move beyond narrow national narratives in children's education in India. Drawing on postcolonial and globalization theories, this analysis examines a selection of transnational non-fiction texts for Indian children, exploring how they present diverse global perspectives while maintaining cultural relevance. The paper argues that carefully selected transnational non-fiction can play a crucial role in developing more cosmopolitan worldviews and critical thinking skills among Indian youth, thereby preparing them for an increasingly interconnected world. At the same time, it considers some of the challenges and tensions involved in incorporating transnational perspectives within the Indian educational context. The findings have implications for curriculum development, children's publishing, and approaches to global citizenship education in India and other postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: Children's literature, Cultural diversity, Global awareness, Indian education, Non-fiction, Transnational perspectives.

Introduction

In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, there is a growing recognition of the need to move beyond insular national narratives and expose children to more diverse global perspectives. This is particularly relevant in postcolonial contexts like India, “where colonial legacies and nationalist ideologies have heavily shaped educational curricula and children's literature” (Superle 3) While fiction has long played an important role in children's literature, non-

fiction texts are increasingly seen as valuable “for developing critical thinking skills and engaging with real-world issues”. (Mallett 15) This paper explores the potential for transnational non-fiction literature to broaden perspectives and move beyond narrow national narratives in children's education in India.

“The concept of transnational literature refers to works that cross national or cultural boundaries, often addressing themes of global relevance or presenting multinational perspectives.” (Seyhan 10). For children's non-fiction, this could include texts that explore global issues, present multicultural viewpoints, or make cross-cultural connections. By exposing young readers to diverse global perspectives, transnational non-fiction has the potential to foster more cosmopolitan worldviews and nuanced understandings of both local and global realities.

At the same time, incorporating transnational perspectives within national educational contexts is not without challenges. “There are valid concerns about maintaining cultural relevance and avoiding neo-colonial impositions of Western-centric worldviews”. (Tikly 22) Additionally, deeply entrenched nationalist ideologies in many postcolonial education systems can create “resistance to more global perspectives”. (Kumar 8)

This paper seeks to examine how transnational non-fiction for Indian children navigates these tensions and opportunities. Through analysis of selected texts and consideration of relevant theoretical frameworks, it explores the following key questions:

1. How do transnational non-fiction texts for Indian children present diverse global perspectives while maintaining cultural relevance?
2. What are the potential benefits of incorporating more transnational non-fiction in Indian children's education?
3. What challenges or limitations exist in using transnational non-fiction to broaden perspectives for Indian children?
4. How can transnational non-fiction be effectively integrated into curricula and publishing to support more globally-oriented education in India?

By addressing these questions, this research aims to contribute insights on the role of transnational children's non-fiction in fostering more cosmopolitan worldviews and critical engagement with both local and global realities. The findings have implications for curriculum development, children's publishing, and approaches to global citizenship education in India and other postcolonial contexts.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on postcolonial theory and globalization theory to examine the role of transnational non-fiction in broadening perspectives for Indian children. Postcolonial theory provides a lens for critically examining the legacies of colonialism in education and literature, while globalization theory offers frameworks for understanding increasing global interconnectedness and its impacts on culture and identity.

Postcolonial Theory and Education

Postcolonial theorists have highlighted “how colonial ideologies and power structures continue to shape education systems and curricula in formerly colonized nations like India”. (Tikly 18). Scholars like Gauri Viswanathan have demonstrated how English literature education in colonial India was used as a tool of cultural imperialism, shaping Indian perceptions of both British and Indian identities (Viswanathan 2). In the post-independence era, nationalist ideologies often simply replaced colonial narratives in curricula and textbooks, perpetuating similarly “narrow and essentialist views of national identity and culture”. (Kumar 12)

Postcolonial approaches advocate for "decolonizing" education by critically examining these legacies and developing more diverse, inclusive curricula that validate indigenous knowledge systems alongside global perspectives (Tikly 24). This provides a useful framework for considering how transnational non-fiction might contribute to broadening narrow nationalist narratives in Indian education.

At the same time, postcolonial theory cautions against uncritically adopting Western-centric "global" perspectives that may perpetuate neo-colonial power dynamics (Rizvi 257). This highlights the importance of carefully considering how transnational texts are selected and framed for Indian audiences.

Globalization Theory and Cosmopolitan Education

Globalization theorists have examined how increasing global interconnectedness is reshaping notions of culture, identity and citizenship (Appadurai 5). Scholars like Kwame Anthony Appiah have proposed cosmopolitan approaches that seek to balance universal ethical principles with respect for cultural difference (Appiah 15). In education, this translates to fostering "global competence" - the ability to examine local, global and intercultural issues, understand others' perspectives, and take action toward collective wellbeing. (OECD 4)

Will Kymlicka's concept of "rooted cosmopolitanism" is particularly relevant, proposing that global orientations can and should be grounded in local cultural contexts (Kymlicka 238). This provides a useful framework for considering how transnational non-fiction might broaden perspectives while maintaining cultural relevance for Indian children.

“Globalization theory also highlights the growing importance of developing media and information literacy skills to critically navigate an increasingly complex information landscape”. (Luke 4) This underscores the potential value of non-fiction texts in fostering critical thinking and engagement with real-world issues.

Combining these theoretical lenses allows for nuanced analysis of how transnational non-fiction can contribute to broadening perspectives and fostering global competence, while remaining sensitive to postcolonial contexts and local cultural groundings. This framework will guide the textual analysis and discussion in subsequent sections.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative content analysis to examine a selection of transnational non-fiction texts for Indian children. The texts were selected based on the following criteria:

1. Non-fiction works intended for children aged 8-14
2. Published in India within the last 10 years
3. Address themes of global or cross-cultural relevance
4. Present perspectives from multiple national or cultural contexts

Based on these criteria, the following texts were selected for analysis:

1. "One World, Many Stories: Folk Tales from Around the Globe" by Deepa Agarwal (2015)
2. "Children Just Like Me: A Unique Celebration of Children Around the World" by DK India (2016)
3. "The World in Your Plate: Exploring the Global Diversity of Food" by Shalini Srinivasan (2018)
4. "Our Beautiful Earth: Young Environmentalists Speak" edited by Geeta Dharmarajan (2019)
5. "Incredible Indians: 75 People Who Shaped Modern India" by Ashwitha Jayakumar (2020)

The analysis focused on how these texts present diverse global perspectives while maintaining relevance to Indian contexts. Key areas of examination included:

- Selection and framing of content
- Representation of cultural diversity
- Connections made between local and global contexts
- Promotion of critical thinking and perspective-taking
- Use of visual elements and design

The analysis aimed to identify common themes and strategies used in these texts to broaden perspectives and foster global awareness. The findings were then considered in light of the theoretical framework to draw insights on the potential benefits and challenges of using such transnational non-fiction in Indian children's education.

Analysis and Discussion

The analysis revealed several key themes and strategies used in the selected transnational non-fiction texts to broaden perspectives for Indian child readers. These are discussed below, with illustrative examples from the texts.

Connecting Local and Global

A common approach across the texts was to make explicit connections between local Indian contexts and global issues or cultures. This aligns with Kymlicka's concept of "rooted cosmopolitanism," grounding global perspectives in familiar local realities (Kymlicka 240).

For example, in *"The World in Your Plate,"* (2018) Srinivasan traces the origins of common Indian foods to different parts of the world, revealing the long history of cultural exchange through cuisine. She writes: "The humble potato that goes into your aloo paratha actually comes from South America, brought to India by Portuguese traders in the 17th century" (Srinivasan 24). By connecting the familiar (aloo paratha) to the global (South America, Portuguese trade), the text encourages readers to see their everyday realities as part of broader global narratives.

Similarly, *"Our Beautiful Earth"* (2019) features stories of young Indian environmental activists alongside peers from other countries, demonstrating how local actions connect to global issues. One chapter pairs the story of 11-year-old Ridhima from Uttarakhand fighting deforestation with 13-year-old Nikita from Russia campaigning against Arctic oil drilling (Dharmarajan 56-59). This juxtaposition helps readers see commonalities in environmental challenges and youth activism across diverse contexts.

Representing Cultural Diversity

The texts generally strive to represent a diverse range of cultures and perspectives, moving beyond simplistic East-West binaries. "*Children Just Like Me*"(2016) is particularly notable in this regard, featuring profiles of children from 36 different countries across all continents. The book consciously avoids "stereotypical representations, showing the diversity within countries and emphasizing both differences and similarities between children's lives." (DK India 4)

However, the representation is not always even. There is often greater emphasis on Western countries and East Asian nations like China and Japan, with less coverage of African and South American perspectives. This reflects broader global power dynamics and access to information, highlighting the ongoing challenge of truly diverse representation.

Promoting Critical Thinking

Several of the texts employ strategies to encourage critical thinking and perspective-taking rather than simply presenting information. *One World, Many Stories* (2015) includes "discussion questions after each folktale, prompting readers to compare the story to Indian tales or reflect on its themes" (Agarwal 87). This approach aligns with globalization theorists' emphasis on "developing critical media literacy skills". (Luke 6)

"*Incredible Indians*"(2020) takes an interesting approach by including figures who have been controversial or criticized alongside universally celebrated icons. For example, "the profile of B.R. Ambedkar notes both his role in drafting the Indian constitution and the ongoing debates about caste that his work sparked". (Jayakumar 112) This nuanced presentation encourages readers to think critically about historical figures and national narratives.

Visual Representation and Design

The use of visual elements plays an important role in how these texts represent diversity and make global connections accessible to young readers. "*Children Just Like Me*"(2016) makes extensive use of photographs, allowing readers to visually connect with children from different cultures. "*The World in Your Plate*" (2018) uses colorful illustrations and maps to trace the global journeys of foods, making complex histories visually engaging.

However, the visual representations sometimes risk reinforcing stereotypes or exoticizing other cultures. Some images in "*Children Just Like Me*" (2016) focus on traditional costumes or rural settings that may not reflect the everyday realities of modern life in those countries. This highlights the challenge of representing cultural diversity without resorting to simplistic or outdated depictions.

Maintaining Cultural Relevance

While presenting global perspectives, the texts generally strive to maintain relevance to Indian readers through familiar framing, languages, and cultural references. "*One World, Many Stories*" includes several Indian folktales alongside international ones, providing points of comparison. "*The World in Your Plate*" (2018) uses Hindi and regional language names for foods alongside English terms.

This grounding in Indian contexts helps avoid the pitfall of presenting global perspectives as foreign or disconnected from readers' lives. "It aligns with postcolonial theorists' emphasis on validating local knowledge systems alongside global ones". (Tikly 26)

Challenges and Limitations

Despite their efforts to broaden perspectives, the analyzed texts face several challenges and limitations:

1. Linguistic constraints: All the selected texts are in English, limiting their accessibility to English-medium educated children. This reflects broader issues of language and class in Indian education. (Ramanathan 8)
2. Urban bias: The texts often assume familiarity with urban, middle-class Indian realities, potentially alienating rural or economically disadvantaged readers.
3. Technological assumptions: Some texts reference internet use or digital technologies that may not be accessible to all Indian children, particularly in rural areas.
4. Balancing depth and breadth: In attempting to cover many cultures or perspectives, the texts sometimes sacrifice depth of engagement with any single issue or context.
5. Navigating sensitive issues: Topics like politics, religion, or social inequalities are often approached cautiously or avoided entirely, limiting critical engagement with important global issues.

These challenges highlight the complexity of creating truly inclusive and critical transnational content for diverse Indian audiences.

Implications and Recommendations

Based on the analysis, several implications and recommendations can be drawn for incorporating transnational non-fiction into Indian children's education:

1. Curriculum integration: Transnational non-fiction texts could be effectively integrated into various subjects beyond just English or Social Studies. For example, "The World in Your Plate" could complement science lessons on nutrition or geography lessons on agriculture.
2. Teacher training: Educators need support in effectively using transnational texts to foster critical thinking and global awareness. This includes developing skills to facilitate discussions on potentially sensitive cross-cultural issues.
3. Diverse formats: Publishers should explore diverse formats beyond traditional books, including digital platforms, to increase accessibility and engagement.
4. Local-language translations: To reach wider audiences, transnational content should be translated into major Indian languages while maintaining cultural nuances.
5. Student-created content: Encouraging students to create their own transnational non-fiction content (e.g. through pen-pal exchanges or collaborative online projects) could deepen engagement and perspective-taking.
6. Critical media literacy: Transnational texts should be used alongside explicit teaching of critical media literacy skills to help students navigate diverse information sources.
7. Balancing perspectives: Care should be taken to include diverse global perspectives beyond dominant Western narratives, particularly amplifying voices from the Global South.

Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates that thoughtfully crafted transnational non-fiction has significant potential to broaden perspectives and move beyond narrow national narratives in Indian children's education. By connecting local and global contexts, representing cultural diversity, and promoting critical thinking, such texts can foster more nuanced understandings of both Indian and global realities.

However, creating truly inclusive and critical transnational content remains challenging, particularly in navigating linguistic constraints, socioeconomic differences, and sensitive cultural

issues. Effective use of such texts requires careful consideration of local contexts and support for educators in facilitating critical discussions.

As India continues to negotiate its place in an increasingly interconnected world, exposing children to diverse global perspectives through engaging non-fiction is vital. When thoughtfully integrated into curricula and combined with critical literacy skills, transnational non-fiction can play an important role in preparing Indian youth to engage ethically and effectively as global citizens while remaining grounded in their local cultural contexts.

Further research could explore the actual impacts of such texts on students' perspectives through empirical studies. Additionally, examining how digital technologies might facilitate more interactive and collaborative approaches to transnational learning could yield valuable insights for the future of global citizenship education in India and beyond.

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