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# Children and Media in India

Narratives of Class, Agency  
and Social Change

Shakuntala Banaji



# Children and Media in India

Is the bicycle, like the loudspeaker, a medium of communication in India? Do Indian children need trade unions as much as they need schools? What would you do with a mobile phone if all your friends were playing tag in the rain or watching *Indian Idol*? *Children and Media in India* illuminates the experiences, practices and contexts in which children and young people in diverse locations across India encounter, make or make meaning from media in the course of their everyday lives. From textbooks, television, film and comics to mobile phones and digital games, this book examines the media available to different socioeconomic groups of children in India and their articulation with everyday cultures and routines. An authoritative overview of theories and discussions about childhood, agency, social class, caste and gender in India is followed by an analysis of films and television representations of childhood informed by qualitative interview data collected between 2005 and 2015 in urban, small-town and rural contexts with children aged nine to 17. The analysis uncovers and challenges widely held assumptions about the relationships among factors including socio-cultural location, media content and technologies, and children's labour and agency. The analysis casts doubt on undifferentiated claims about how new technologies 'affect', 'endanger' and/or 'empower', pointing instead to the importance of social class – and caste – in mediating relationships among children, young people and the poor. The analysis of children's narratives of daily work, education, caring and leisure supports the conclusion that, although unrecognised and underrepresented, subaltern children's agency and resourceful conservation makes a significant contribution to economic, interpretive and social reproduction in India.

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# Preface

2016 is almost over, and life for some in India has never been so good. Real estate prices in metropolises are booming. If one owns industry, property, or significant amounts of land, if one has already achieved a top corporate job (or imagines oneself as being in possession of these) some 'red tape' will have been cut, some bureaucracy eased. Families have been reassured that they can employ children under the age of 14 in 'family businesses'. Some transactions can be carried out online. In 2014, the Bharatiya Janata Party and Narendra Modi's campaign team used Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, holographic projections, online chat and other applications to great effect. They constructed and deployed a potent narrative of strong leadership, anti-corruption, lightning-speed development and (Hindu) nationalist pride. 'Bad news' stories about incitement to hatred and party members' connections to recent pogroms were shrugged off with 'What about ...?'. Hundreds of trained volunteers in dozens of cities both at home and abroad tweeted, canvassed forums, commented on YouTube videos, uploaded vlogs and blogs. Despite rumbles of discontent about fraud and intimidation-as-usual, electronic voting machines were touted as a sign of modernity. Modi came to power in an election campaign that relied on the ability of new and emerging media technologies to spread propaganda to an exceptional extent.

In 2015 and 2016, and the Indian prime minister's Twitter feed has updated anyone who is able to view it about his travels across the globe. We see images of Modi hugging and shaking hands with key leaders. Television commentators have revelled in his promotion of 'Make in India' to adoring crowds. In conjunction, there has been increasing repression against people who research, draw attention to, or speak out about the Gujarat pogroms, corporate greed, poverty, structural injustice and violence in India. Young people have been recruited as de facto storm-troopers of the Hindu right. Some occupy middle caste positions that are of strategic use to the ruling party; others are pitted against dissident young people, who have different and more inclusive visions of democracy, or who do not conform to the narrow version of Indianness and nationalism being enforced. Systematic atrocities abound. They are usually targeted at religious minorities, lower castes and women, as they have been under successive governments. They

cluster in greater numbers where the Indian government has historically been used to suppressing critique or dissent – in Kashmir, the North East, amongst tribal populations, feminist activists, and other critical or dissenting groups and individuals. In many states, it is no longer legal to consume beef or sell cows. Ground water levels in significant swathes of the country are at an all-time low, yet stories of flooding also abound. Crops are failing; farmer suicides are at an all-time high.

Meanwhile, under the banner of ‘Digital India’ plans to roll out encompassing digital infrastructure are being promoted and implemented, even in rural areas. The smartphone is advertised as personal companion, banking-aide, broker for jobs, conduit to civic participation, teacher and confidante. Advertisements for Google glasses and Apple watches are eclipsed only by policy rhetoric about the advantages that will flow from the spread of mobile technologies around the country. In the Indian and international media, narratives of technological change intersect optimistic visions of globalisation and economic development. The notion that via the internet ‘India’ has joined the ‘global public sphere’ has taken hold. Social media commentary is now a familiar part of middle class Indian life, though many of these comments and debates are less interesting, less civil and more filled with abusive hate-speech than desirable. Following Modi’s election, trained and independent supporters of the new regime have trolled liberal commentators in the English and vernacular media, using social media liberally to celebrate a ‘new era’; journalists who ask even mildly critical questions about corporate wrong-doing or government policy have been smeared or lost their jobs. Journalists and academics with connections to the Hindu right have been promoted.

Yet, staggering numbers of children in India remain invisible to national and international policy-makers, and to national and international adults. They are not yet significant enough as a ‘market’ or an ‘audience’ to warrant consideration by corporate media. And they are almost invisible too, to the vast Indian middle classes. Photojournalist Javed Iqbal, whose photographs illustrate this book, posted two original images on his Facebook page in 2012, depicting Adivasi (tribal) children in Jharkhand, in tattered clothing, dangling twitching butterflies threaded onto thin strings.

While what is visible in the frame hints at the lack of almost everything from infrastructure to tools, much not displayed including the entrenched, state-fuelled violence against this population. Some of the comments under these photographs are reminders of the extent of adult, middle class and upper caste insensitivity, prejudice and hubris especially in urban areas: the children and their mother in these images are labelled cruel to animals. One commenter writes: ‘Sweet Little Sadists’; another opines: ‘No! This is cruelty. These kids are deprived of toys & the joys of childhood, but that doesn’t mean that they shouldn’t learn to be compassionate towards all life forms, especially those weaker than themselves. I hope you pointed that out to them, kindly & compassionately?’ The photographer explains the context, to bring some reflexivity into a discussion of the lives he is portraying. But



*Figure 0.1* Children with insects on strings.

to no avail. The family depicted in the picture is decried for its primitivism. The mother is berated for her inability to live in tune with nature and the environment. Lack of education is blamed for the cruelties they are said to have inflicted on helpless creatures. The tone of some of the comments is patronising, that of others is hostile, aggressive or contemptuous. A tussle ensues between those who equate the lives of poor young humans with those of insects, and those who do not. Phrases like ‘lack of empathy’ are applied to the butterfly toys and to their creator, the children’s mother: ‘this is just so traumatic i’m not sure i want to delve any deeper into their messed up lives’. Despite evidence of the hundreds of millions with too little food, no healthcare across India, and no access to justice, albeit some ingenious toys made from insects or discarded syringes, life in India is often depicted the pinnacle of successful development because people are able to communicate on social media.

It is within this bleak and prejudice-ridden context of media portrayals and actual lives that my book sets out to examine and contextualise the neglected area of children’s everyday life, media use and representation in India. It also proposes a framework for interrogating and conceptualising the varieties of agency deployed by different groups of children in India in response to the circumstances, environments, tools and media in their everyday lives. I examine their agency, media use, identity and childhoods through a range of original qualitative material. These data were collected and generated over

the past decade and includes: participant and non-participant observations of children's lives; content analysis of children's television content; analysis of extended interviews with children from urban and rural backgrounds; and interviews with adults who have worked on children's rights, and in children's media production in India. Throughout the book, I consider my evidence of media experience and use in light of the findings of scholarly studies of family life, childhood, gender, caste, class, labour, and schooling.

I conducted the research for this book over the course of a decade, during which unprecedented changes in communication technologies took hold in most urban and small town areas of India. When I began this research, I did not have in mind that I would write a book, or that this book would be mainly about children. I had completed my research on the role of Hindi film discourses about gender, politics and religion in young people's lives, and wanted to pursue questions about children's agency, and to examine further media forms. I was, however, determined that whatever I was doing should extend over time and not be a brief glimpse. I gleaned insights from discussions with young people about issues of participation in political processes, and their uses of new media, in European and Turkish contexts (Banaji, 2008; Banaji & Buckingham, 2013), which led to a further sense of the need to de-centre media and technologies in studies of children and young people's socio-political participation. My ideas never seemed to be in sync with those of the time.

When colleagues were writing diatribes about the retrograde ideologies in Hindi films or paeans to films' *joie de vivre*, I was interested in the ways in which these ideologies played out in young people's everyday feelings, prejudices, desires and actions. When some educationists were discovering 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2010) and clamouring about the changes social networking would bring to learning, I was disconcerted by the fragility and naiveté of new media literacy, particularly amongst internet users, and by the persistent assumption that experiences online would be so different from experiences of life in every other context. When commentators in India were opining that the younger generation was voting for authoritarian politics, I could see little evidence that rural working class youth or a majority of the urban poor were supporting such politics, either online or at the ballot box. The term 'younger generation' seemed misused. What I did and still do see, are a lot of generally middle class folk – practitioners, charity advocates, journalists, technologists and academics who use technologies all the time, and perhaps feel a sense of excitement and pride in their possibilities for networking, connection and creativity. Many commentators also evidently have some form of investment in asserting and assigning a particular role to new media technologies – making assertions and assumptions about how smart phones, tablets, and internet-connected computers substantively change the lives of children everywhere.

Many Western-based studies of childhood, youth and media (Berson & Berson, 2010; Boyd, 2014; Gardner & Davis, 2014; Ito et al., 2010; Livingstone,

2009) and the rarer global south-based studies (Arora, 2008; Barnett, 2004; de Block & Buckingham, 2007; Lemish, 2008; Mitra et al., 2005; Pecora, Osei-Hwere & Carlsson, 2008; Prinsloo, 1999) explore key aspects of social change and of children's learning, and creativity in relation to media as an agent of learning, meaning-making and change. While many of these studies yield insights about the role of media in children's identities and relationships, only one or two connect such discussions to questions about the relationships between the media tools or texts and the surrounding social structures which constrain children's lives as part of their communities (cf. de Block & Buckingham; Prinsloo, 1999). In this context, my central aim in this book is to provide a descriptive and conceptual analysis of the complex life circumstances, media encounters, meaning-making and agency in the nine- to 17-year-old age group in India without centring media from the outset. A wider objective of this study is to illuminate the ways in which discourses about the contemporary world interconnect with discourses about children and definitions of childhood, and are socially shaped. 'Agency' and 'risk' have played an interesting role in orienting scholars towards a universalised or differentiated notion of childhood and in flattening out or highlighting the peculiarities which adhere to different class locations. The empirical chapters are based mainly on participant observation and interview data collected with 76 children (41 girls and 35 boys aged nine to 17 who were interviewed on research visits between 2008 and 2015). I took great care during these interviews to allow children's own experiences and perspectives to guide my thinking about labour, everyday life, learning and media, and to give their felt theories (Million, 2009) space to emerge.

Further brief interview data were collected on numerous occasions through peer interviews and focus groups. All the children I encountered, or who were present during interviews, did not necessarily fall within the nine to 17 age range. Nor are all the children and young people in this study representative of the multitudes of different regional and classed childhoods India contains. Representativeness of the kind sought after in large multi-variate surveys is not my aim here. Inevitably, children often disagree about the significance of events and processes in their own lives and those of other children. While some have different perspectives from most adults, many children's narratives and values have more in common with those of adults they live amongst than with those of children from vastly different regions, classes, or castes. However, what came as a surprise to me, and might come as a surprise to some readers, is the consistency of certain narrations by the children and young people interviewed for this book.

## Map of the book

This book is concerned with a number of research questions. First: in what ways do the historical debates which frame childhood in relation to development, media and communications, and risk, represent children's diverse and



changing realities, feelings and capacities? Second: how do academic and practitioner conceptualisations of childhood, social class, agency, and subalternity inflect attitudes and behaviours towards, and scholarship about, children? And third: what can we learn about media and communications, childhood, agency and social class from an analysis of the ways in which children from diverse social classes in India encounter, experience, use and communicate with available tools and technologies? Chapters often address more than one question at the same time as well as branching into further sub-questions, and are unashamedly long. Apart from chapter three, which is relatively brief, earlier chapters catalogue and analyse conceptual and historical literatures as well as extant empirical studies, and later ones present and analyse my original empirical data. This format suited the topics I was working on by allowing me to connect them to each other in ways that felt intuitive. If it does not suit you, then by all means, pick and choose the sections that you are most interested in, and avoid ones that you feel familiar with.

Chapter 1 aims to outline and problematise, several of the potentially ethnocentric, class-centric and/or media-centric conceptualisations of childhood, risk and agency which dominate this field. The chapter falls broadly into two parts: part one examines historical accounts and conceptualisations of childhood, including connections to discourses of international development and risk. Children, as we now recognise them, or think that we recognise them, feature in every society, although they are relatively seldom seen in certain social milieus (such as seats of government, boardrooms and universities) where knowledge receives official seals of approval. Part two focuses on the questions: in what ways are children subalterns? Do they have agency and how is this recognised and manifested?

Chapter 2 focuses on the connections between social class and everyday life in India. The assumption that caste is a largely religious (or even largely Hindu) practice is discussed. Since caste cuts across religion and region, and is a widely used means for maintaining the distinction and domination of certain groups over political power, rituals, land and other resources, it inflects and overlaps with class. Taking the relationship between social class and childhood in India as the nexus of religion, region and caste, then, class is central to understanding how children's agency is suppressed or supported. This chapter concludes by examining the implications of studies about the leisure/media, pedagogic and labouring contexts Indian children inhabit for the exhibition and embodiment of children's agency.

Chapter 3 presents the ethical considerations and methodology which guided the research. It reflects on the challenges of ethnographic and qualitative research with children from impoverished and vulnerable backgrounds, and on the critical value of applying structural conceptual frames to data collected in more phenomenological ways. The conceptual location of this work on children and media is within a class- and geography-based rather than a generation-specific frame. This gives rise to epistemic questions about

whether, and in which ways, work practices and media cultures arising out of a limited number of contexts in India can shed light on children and young people's social positioning and agency in other countries across the globe. Recollect that were the research in this study situated in Europe or North America, the title of the book would most likely be not *British children and media* but, merely, *Children and Media*.

Chapters 4 through 6 are the book's core data chapters. Chapter 4 details mass media texts and representations produced for and about children, which are accessed by a significant minority of children in India, and situates them against discourses about digital media and the younger generation. A content analysis of Hindi films and children's television is included. In the second part of the chapter, I draw on original interviews with 12 adult experts who are producers and stakeholders in children's electronic and print media, and child-related non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Chapters 5 and 6 draw on extensive field notes and interview transcripts to interrogate children's own narratives about their social relationships and routines of leisure, learning, labour and media use. Chapter 5 concentrates on accounts arising from children in middle class households, and Chapter 6 focuses on working class children. The findings and analysis provide a fresh perspective on the relationship between situated and universal theories about childhood, labour, learning, media and agency in the fields of social geography media and communications, development studies and Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D). The analysis interrogates and decentres technology, media content and 'middle-class consciousness' which are present in many discussions of childhood, class and media. This is achieved by re-examining conceptualisations of children's agency in relation to the use, meaning and value of technologies in their lives, including media and communications, and the social structures within which these operate.

Chapter 7, the conclusion, discusses the way in which my analysis offers a challenge to media-centric analysis via concepts of ephemeral agency, contaminated agency and resourceful conservation. This challenge emerges from the juxtaposition of insights into children's social identities, their routines and everyday media practices, the work they engage in, the spaces and boundaries of their education and their access to technology in communities across social classes.

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# Acknowledgements

I have carried the subject of this book around with me since I was a child. The faces, voices and experiences of my young peers in the incredible Indian working class lodged like splinters, and years of hunger – not even the devastating kind, but just the tiring, frustrating kind – do not go away. Readings of history, narratives of Indian modernity, political economy, global capital, technology and communication over the years have eddied and swirled around such splinters, sinking on invisible rocks. Where are these Indian working class children now? How do most children's lives fit into such erudite tomes? Jairus Banaji, Rohini Hensman and Ammu Abraham's work with trade unions and women's groups from the 1970s onwards, and Rohini's research on working conditions for women workers, started a life-long interest in the intersections of gender oppression and class struggle (and a lifelong horror of balance sheets). I was fascinated by the absence of children's perspectives, or of any affective rendering of wider struggles within the minutiae of children's lives, in the fascinating bulletins and pamphlets brought out. Encountering Franz Fanon, Eduardo Galleano, bell hooks and Toni Morrison, I began to conceive of people's narrative constructions of and reflections on the pleasures and exigencies of their everyday lives as a way of situating and reconceptualising personhood, history and theory. They asked: how does a person come to understand and know themselves as human when narratives are written by colonisers? Through which tools does history and fiction play a role in changing the balance of psychic and material power between peoples? Theirs seemed a method that might allow children's subjectivities and experiences space. Since none of my research with children in India has been funded, and I have no research councils or charitable foundations to remember, I thank these four magnificent thinkers for their continuing inspiration and 'thinking-feeling' commitment to people's struggles.

A number of people assisted me in researching and writing this book. Neeta Shah, my childhood friend, provided companionship, gossip and access to communities of children I would not otherwise have met; her daughter, Drashti, proved herself a reliable peer-interviewer. Aarthi Gunnupuri in 2015, and Chetasi Kane in 2013, were both wonderful research assistants; their independent findings, data and accounts of research corroborated and

nuanced mine. In the face of scepticism from some established media scholars for whom emerging communication technologies remain salient and, dare I say it, fetishized social forces, my young colleagues gave me confidence that the themes and patterns I was seeing in relation to childhood, media use and social class in the global south were accessible to others who chose to look. Seeing such things can be a matter of ideological perspective.

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# 1 Historical accounts of childhood

## Subalterns between structures and agency

This chapter is concerned with two of the book's central questions: *In what ways do the historical debates which frame children and childhood in relation to international development, communications and risk, represent children's diverse and changing realities, feelings and capacities?* And: *How might different intersecting theorisations of agency and subalternity inflect understandings of attitudes and behaviours towards children in different academic fields, geographic locations and social classes in India but also more widely?* The second question in particular motivates several enquiries: Given children's generally subordinate status within adult-run technologies of power (Amaya, 2012), might agency for children just as for some subordinate and oppressed adult groups, appear in ways which normative definitions of agency do not recognise? And second, if we accept that agency can also be expressed and embodied through actions which have an instrumental, but no necessary normative value – i.e., they can be expressed through bullying or consumerism, or through self-harm – then which concepts can be used to move the discussion beyond a celebration of agency in and of itself?

Discussions of universal rights for children, particularly of the United Nations (UN) convention on the rights of the child, emphasise the need to reduce generalised risks and harms to *all* children whether they reside in Mombasa, Mangalore or Manchester. These discussions also categorise proper treatment, rights, risks and harms, and presume that all children, in all circumstances, should be equal. Pragmatic policy-makers and employers in impoverished countries, however, continue to act on the basis that economic imperatives for survival or profit trump children's human rights. Definitions and discourses of risk and development, subalterns and agency, thus become clear points of divergence between different ideological schools of thought on children, media and the global south. Discussions of these concepts and their attendant narratives, myths and disputes animate this chapter, and this book.

### 1.1 Historicising the rhetorics of childhood

Children have not always been defined as being less competent than adults. Nor have they always been considered equally worthy of adult care and protection. The claim that there is such a period or phase of



## 2 *Historical accounts of childhood*

childhood, and therefore that a concept of childhood is philosophically and practically applicable has been made across at least the past three centuries, and in different geographical locations. It can be found intermittently in literary, historical and archaeological sources dating back up to 4,000 years and has always been associated with leisure objects and media of various sorts. As some historians of childhood have pointed out, objects which are assumed to be toys and some which appear to be tools made for smaller humans, appear to provide evidence of children's cultures of leisure, although the ages of these smaller humans or if and when they were expected to transition to adult behaviours and values, remain obscure. Radical changes in the ways in which children were and are conceptualised can be unsettling for contemporary adults. During a discussion of 'media/childhood' with a group of media educators in 2010, a colleague suggested that if clothing, footballs and bags – everyday items in Western daily life – were being stitched by children in the global south, it might be worthwhile asking the children's opinion about child labour bans. The responses were immediate and uniform: such work deprives children of their access to childhood; it deprives them of adult protection, literacy and schooling. Whether children choose to do such work or not was regarded as a question that arises from a 'profoundly dangerous place which ignores children's right to a childhood' and to 'convert an exploitative imperative into a choice'. One participant, a teacher from Sheffield argued: 'societies which do that to children ... are stuck in the *middle-ages*. Development is meant to change that.' This statement generated some support and a critique, and is probably a worthwhile starting point for the discussion which follows.

### 1.1.1 *Defining childhood, fashioning children*

Ariès claims, in *Centuries of Childhood*, that 'in medieval society the idea of childhood did not exist' (1962: 125). Cunningham (1995: 7) reminds us that 'ideas about childhood radically affect experiences of childhood'. He notes that the word 'idea' is translated from the original French word '*sentiment*'. Ariès's claim can be read not as an assertion of the non-existence of *any conception* of childhood prior to modernity, but as a refutation of the notion that the *ideological cluster* of emotions, sentiments, values and attitudes implicated by the word 'childhood' in relation to the late twentieth century, Western nuclear family are ahistorical and fixed.

Adults' proximity to a given discourse of childhood makes it difficult to identify the discourse as bearing ideological weight. The ideological construction of children as innocent, fun-loving, and vulnerable and in need of instruction and protection appears in the 21st century in vocabularies linked to media and digital technologies. 'Geeks', 'nerds', 'gamers', 'flamers', 'trolls', 'hangouts', 'pinging' and 'poking' apply to adults; but observations that childhood is 'digital' or that children are 'digital natives' have infiltrated