CHAPTER-V

CHILDREN’S READING HABITS :
A SURVEY.
5.1. READING RESPONSES OF CHILDREN.

Research in child studies is mainly concerned with the nature of a child's mental growth as s/he progresses through school. After mastering elementary language skills and basic precepts, and having acquired an adequate vocabulary, the child is ready for a range of reading material.

The social, economic and cultural background of the child reader being divergent in nature, her/his expectations may vary accordingly. It might be difficult to extract a universal literary response.

Despite such controversies, there have been certain fairly predictable patterns perceived in the reading responses of children to certain aspects of fiction. Nicholas Tucker comments on the popularity of certain archetypal plots in literature for children,

"The existence of archetypal plots and fantasies in literature augurs for some sort of uniformity in what can best capture and spur the imagination". ¹

Although children always fancy a good tale, there seem to be specific literary patterns such as adventure and mystery motifs, which are particularly popular with young people. As D'arcy puts it, "If the child is allowed to choose what he wants to read and allowed further to make his own undirected response to such reading, the nature of that response will be subjective rather than objective- felt rather than thought". ²
Accordingly, children's individual responses will be varied in nature although it is possible to trace similarities in their reaction to certain archetypal situations; but their ability to communicate their feelings will be totally subjective and cannot be crystallized into a premise.

Booksellers and publishers as well as librarians and academicians have tried a number of ways to study the reading interests of children. The collection of accurate information is not always possible because children may not remember titles and authors they have read and may feel conditioned by the circumstances in which they are asked about books:

Sometimes they give answers they think the questioner wants to hear, or they may simply be unable to formulate or articulate the reasons for their choice. In some countries large scale surveys are undertaken to assess national or regional readership and compare possible geographical sex, age, social status or ability differences.

5.2 Role of gender and age factors in formation of reading habits among adolescents:

Since the reading habits of children are conditioned by variables like age group and gender difference, these have also been taken into consideration while making such a survey.

However, earlier research shows that each year in a child's growth sees a decline in interest in imaginative literature in favour of
the more realistic." Research from time to time has indicated a change in interest from early animal stories to adventure or school stories and science fiction to diversified adult tastes.

Regarding gender difference, earlier surveys made in the West have indicated that girls in the age group between 13 to 15 show "a distinct preference for school stories, horse stories, animal stories, works of fantasy and imagination, history stories and nature books." It is now that distinct preferences between sexes begin to appear.

Boys, according to survey reports, prefer adventure stories, funny books and have a strong growing preference for non-fiction in the form of books on technical and science subjects and hobbies such as sport or stamp collecting. In the 16+ age range, young people in many countries read less than ever, and boys marginally read less than girls.

Sudhir Kakar, in his book *Indian Childhood*, says that in the "advanced stage of early childhood... the cultural expectations of boys and girls begin to diverge radically." Arbitrary judgments cannot be arrived at from the results of the present survey, which was by no means exhaustive. However, certain tendencies seemed obvious as the data became codified, which could serve as guidelines for further work in this field.
5.3. Codification of Data:

Once the data has been entered, the analyst is ready to examine the characteristics of the sample and begins to look for relationships. The next stage of analysis has been the production of frequency distributions or “marginals” which were the totals, which appear in the margins of a tabulation. Normally, two-way frequency distributions as presented in the computer output show both the numerical and percentage distributions. Questions 13, 14 and 15 were open-ended and elicited subjective responses which could not be tabulated.

Since 50 out of the 360 respondents opted for other hobbies in preference to reading, 310 respondents were chosen for the final analysis. The reigning advice has been to trust large obvious differences. Weaver in *Questionnaire Technique* has pointed out that it is wiser to be guided by large obvious differences that hold up across time.4

Questions and the Feedback...

Question 1

Do you prefer reading to other hobbies?

If not, which of the following do you prefer to reading?

a) Sports
b) Television & Video Shows
c) Other hobbies
Among the 360 questionnaires received, 50 prefer hobbies like watching television or playing games to reading. Accordingly, for the rest of the calculation 310 people who prefer reading to other hobbies are considered as representative of the segment of keen readers of fiction, or the actively reading population of children.

**Question –2**

Do you prefer fiction to non-fiction? Yes/No

Amongst those who prefer reading to other hobbies, there are a considerable number who prefer fiction to non-fiction. The aim of this question was to ascertain the proportion of fiction readers as well as those who read mainly non-fiction in relation to age group and gender difference. Irrespective of age group or gender difference the majority of children prefer fiction to non-fiction.

**Question –3**

How much time do you spend reading fiction?

a) Everyday at bedtime
b) Weekends and holidays
c) Rarely

The question aimed at finding out how much time children spent on leisure reading, and to determine whether age affected the time spent on books. The null hypothesis was that age and gender did not affect the time spent on books.
Question 4

How often do you go to

a) Libraries
b) Buy books
c) Borrow books from friends

The feedback indicates a healthy reading habit among boys and girls of all age groups. Most of them either borrow from libraries or friends as frequently as once a week.

Question 5

i) What kind of books do you like to read most

a) Adventure and Mystery
b) Ancient Tales and Classics retold
c) School life of boys and girls
d) Wildlife tales

ii) Give names of books and authors:

The aim was to find out category of fiction that is most popular with children in the chosen age groups. The question is asked mainly to find out whether age differences affect the choice of books and to learn which category is most popular with the children concerned. It was found that age does not affect the choice of books in this category, and all age groups prefer adventure stories.

Boys seem to prefer adventure stories in greater number and girls seem to prefer ancient tales and classics retold as well as school stories. Although the table shows a marginal difference, the test
positively indicates that gender differences do affect the choice of books in these categories.

**Question 6**

Amongst educational, informative books, name your favourites in order of preference; also give names of authors and books.

a) Science fiction  

b) Biographies of famous men and women  

c) Historical books  

The aim here is to find out which among these categories is most popular in the age groups considered. Age does affect the choice of books in the category of science fiction, historical and biographical fiction. Age seems to appear as a conditioning factor in these categories. The older age group seems to prefer science fiction.

Girls in greater number prefer biographical and historical fiction while a greater number of boys prefer science fiction to other categories.

**Question 7**

Do you choose a book you like or reject a book you dislike because of

a) The author  

b) The type of story and content (boring or interesting)  

c) The appearance of the book- binding, print and illustrations  

d) As attractive introduction to the story ?

The aim here was to find out the basis on which the respondent chooses or rejects a book. Age does not affect the choice of
books as far as author, story content, format and attractive introduction are concerned. Irrespective of the age group, story content seems to be deciding factor. However, the very young reader may be influenced strongly by the appearance of the book. "In addition to interest in subject themes, there are preferences for certain physical characteristics of the book, says Marshall, and adds that the surveys indicate that from the age of about 12 young people show a clear preference for the paperback."

The design, the cover, the size and the appearance of the book are factors which can influence the child into choosing or rejecting a book. Hazel Townsend says in *Books for Keeps* that a "manageable book" needs to look "manageable," for the first hurdle is to have it lifted off the shelf. She suggests a bright cover, an intriguing title and the slimness of the book itself as encouraging factors for the child. Besides these, a familiarity of a favourite author's name plus an interesting introduction to the story is an additional attraction for the child reader. This question was designed keeping in mind these ideas.

The majority of children in both genders seem to think of story content as the primary factor while choosing a book.

**Question 8**

Do you wish to receive books as gifts to make a collection for your own library or prefer other gifts?

The aim was to find out if the respondent preferred receiving
books to other gifts. The majority of children in all age groups seem to prefer books to other gifts. Both boys and girls seem to prefer receiving books as gifts. There seem a slightly higher proportion of girls who prefer books according to the frequency table. Again, the trend seemed too obvious to necessitate a statistical test. It is necessary to remember in this context that the respondents were from a group of keen readers who preferred reading to other leisure time activities.

**Question 9**

Do you re-read old favourites?

If so, please give the name of any three favourite authors, which you reread often. The first part of the question received fixed responses and could be tabulated. The second part of the question, being open ended, could not be tabulated as they received detailed information and incomplete answers. The names of popular books were noted for further use.

Since the aim of the question was to find out if children liked to reread old favourites, which, in turn, indicated possible number of serious readers, the figures proved satisfactory. The table indicates that most children like to re-read old favourites.

A similar table was constructed to find out if gender differences had any influence on this aspect. Since the table shows that girls marginally tend to reread more than boys, it may be right to assume
that girls in general prefer the ‘passive’ pastime of reading to more active ones. Girls may prefer the passive reading experience says Tucker in *The Child and the Book* and adds that the existence of these gender differences in behaviors “has important implications for the establishment of reading interests in boys and girls, and their perceptions of their own social roles.” Generally, girls have shown greater preference for such qualities as kindness and understanding and boys for being clever and good at sports. Girls tended to be idealistic, and exhibit a better understanding of human motives. These differences have been conditioned by biological, social and cultural factors.

**Question 10**

Do you like

a) Reading aloud

b) Listening to others reading aloud

c) Reading in privacy?

The aim was to find out whether children, particularly the younger age group, liked to hear the sound of what they read or whether they liked reading in privacy, for serious readers are disturbed by noise. Even the younger group of children opted for reading in privacy in large numbers. Although India has a strong oral tradition, the feedback indicates children of both genders and in every age group preferring to read in private.
**Question 11**

Do you read good translations of world-class authors?

a) In English

b) Do you read English translations of good regional (Indian) language books?

The aim of this question has been to find out if the children were familiar with translation of world classics in English as well as regional language classics of India in the English language.

The famous classics of the European languages, Russian, French, and German have been translated in English and are available freely in India. Regional language classics have just started appearing in English. While there seems to be a good measure of familiarity with English translations of the world classics among teenagers, the younger group of children seems undecided about the question. About half the number of respondents seem familiar with the regional language classics whereas a majority of children, boys and girls seem to have a familiarity with the world classics.

**Question 12**

Any marked preference for the following?

a) Indian authors

b) British

c) American

d) Any other write one two three in order of preference.

The aim was to find out if there was any awareness of Indian
authors among the children or whether the readership was confined to western authors. An overall glance reveals that British authors are most popular with all age groups.

Questions 13, 14 and 15 were open-ended and have been designed so that the respondents could feel free to give their opinions on the books they have recently read, liked or disliked or would like to possess in their school libraries. The questions have been designed with particular reference to their knowledge of Indian authors.

**Question 13**

Give the names and titles of any two good books which you have read in the last 6 months and enjoyed.

**Question 14**

What kind of books would you like as additions to your school library?

**Question 15**

Please name any book by an Indian author, which you have read and liked or disliked.

Among the recently read books, the most popular authors seem to be J.K.Rowling, Caroline Keene, Enid Blyton, Agatha Christie, Charles Dickens, Ruskin Bond, R.K Narayan, Sidney Sheldon, Alistair Mclean, Tagore and Shakespeare. Boys show a liking for Rowling, Dickens, F.W. Dixon, Woodhouse, Nehru, Blyton and Mclean. Girls seem to prefer Sheldon, Keene, Shakespeare, R.K Narayan, Ruskin
Bond, Blyton and Christie. Among Indian authors, R.K Narayan, Blyton and Christie. Among Indian authors, R.K. Narayan and Ruskin Bond seem to be the modern Indian author well-known to them, though some seem to have read Arup Kumar Dutta's Kaziranga Trail.

Since questions 5 and 6 also deal with titles and authors of books, some interesting feedback has been obtained. Among the adventure series, J.K. Rowling seem to reign supreme with most age groups, closely followed by Enid Blyton Franklin W.Dixon and Carolyn Keene. Agatha Christie and R.L. Stevenson are well-received as well. Enid Blyton's books have always enjoyed popularity among a wide range of readers and researchers have tried analyzing the reasons for this consistent demand for Blyton in libraries and bookshops. JK Rowling's Harry Potter Series have captured the imagination of the youngsters all over the world, due to wide publicity and the effective handling of the distribution..

In the science fiction category, H.G. Wells's Time Machine and the books of Isaac Asimov figure frequently among the responses of older children. The biographies of Nehru and Gandhi are considered classics by children, who seem to have a healthy regard for the country's freedom struggle and the subsequent patriotic fervor generated by our leaders.

Their knowledge of Indian books and authors seems somewhat limited; most of them have mentioned Swami and Friends
and The Blue Umbrella as interesting books but are quite in the dark about Indian writers for children in English

The questionnaires were sent out in the year 2001-02. Today, the trend is in favour of Indian authors writing in English as they can reach a pan-Indian reading. About 71% have considered the story content as the deciding factor while choosing a book. About 78% visit libraries regularly and like to buy or borrow books for leisure reading. Statistical surveys indicate that boys in greater number prefer the adventure category while girls enjoy classics and myth retold better. The younger group of children prefer animal stories and the science fiction category is popular with children over 12. With the increased professionalism manifesting itself in the art of book production in India, there is bound to be a well established readership for indigenous books.

5.4 The Questionnaire as a Survey Tool: Advantages and Disadvantages.

Survey research has been used extensively to gather information from the public in various disciplines. It is a useful instrument for those looking for large shapes of social geography, flows of information, opinion and feeling. Having found a niche in university culture, survey research has been an instrument of measurement, particularly in the spheres of sociology and psychology where measurement of attitudes is vital. Attitudes develop out of experiences in the social world and since human experience is
varied, attitudes have been regarded as variables, and therefore subject to measurement. Attitudes form behavior and public opinion (the verbal indicator of attitudes) can be gathered by the survey. A basic distinction exists between qualitative research and quantitative research. The former methodology implies a non-statistical approach, which is useful when the researcher wants to get an idea of the possible range of attitudes and behavior of the respondents, and undertakes a pilot or an exploratory survey. The quantitative approach relies on statistical methodology entirely.

Since the present analysis is basically concerned with the problem of creating literature for the young reader in India (children's books), a survey of the reading habits of urban children seemed a productive exercise. This survey purports to be qualitative in nature but tools of quantitative methods have been used when and where necessary.

In the present survey, the questionnaire has been used as a tool to survey the reading habits of urban children, who have a certain degree of proficiency in the English language. Unstructured questionnaires have been used for collecting qualitative material like spontaneous information. These are open-ended questions, informal in nature, inviting greater respondent participation.

The respondents are in the age group between 13 and 19 years. It was considered that by the age of 12, the respondent would have mastered the basic principles of the English language, to enable...
her/him to enter into a productive transaction with the full-length narrative in storybook form. Urban children educated in English medium schools in India have a certain degree of familiarity with the English language from early childhood. Whether they have been exposed to the best that has been written in the English language is a point of debate. The questionnaire has been designed for the purpose of assessing the likes and dislikes of children with regard to English language fiction. Nicholas Tucker remarks in his book *The Child and the Book* that 77% of children, according to school council researches, still prefer reading fiction to other kinds of literature and that was the reason why he had chosen fiction as a potential area for any examination of overall imaginative responses. He was concerned with broad trends rather than individual cases and "on the whole, working class children always emerge from such surveys as reading many fewer books than their middle class counterparts".5

The current survey is concerned with the existing awareness of English language books among child readers in India. The children who came within the scope of this study are from middle or higher income groups mostly, coming from an environment that is conducive to leisure time reading. This survey was based on the assumption that the response of the fairly representative member of a particular group regarding Children's Literature would speak for the experience of the rest of the group as well.

Questionnaires were distributed to school going children in
Delhi, Ghaziabad, Pune and Bangalore. In spite of the delay in waiting for successive questionnaire waves to come in, it was possible to get a considerable amount of data. Incomplete answers as well as elliptical answers as in the present feedback have always posed difficulties. Four hundred questionnaires were sent out in batches and 360 were returned, filled. Out of the 360 completed questionnaires, 40 children show a definite interest in sports, television and other activities as compared to reading and do not give adequate responses to the choice of reading material.

The respondent's willingness to answer has always been a problem for the survey researcher, people interested in the subject usually respond with more enthusiasm. Even among adult respondents, college lecturers and schoolteachers have answered with greater depth than housewives. Among the 100 adult questionnaires distributed, about 67 have been returned giving an overall view of the attitudes of adults as parents and teachers influencing children on the available reading material, the choice of books and the time spent on reading and television watching.

5.5 ADULTS ON CHILDREN'S READING HABITS

One hundred adult questionnaires were also sent out and 67 have been returned, completed. The answers are fairly uniform and predictable. Thirty respondents were teachers at various schools and colleges and most others were educated parents who have a well-established reading environment at home. Most of them have
read to their children when they were toddlers and discussed without passing valur judgements. Although the parents have not been the ultimate decision makers in the choice of books, they have exercised a certain amount of supervision and guidance regarding the quality of the reading material available to their children. Another important factor was the number of hours spent on leisure reading which has been in jeopardy ever since the electronic media became established as a part of our every day life. Most of the parents believe in some kind of restriction on television time; general knowledge programmes and sport were not frowned upon as long as they were viewed within reasonable limits.

The 12 questions in the adult questionnaire given to parents and teachers have been answered in a predictable manner. Among the 67 respondents, the majority have agreed on the same issues; hence there was no necessity to conduct tests of statistical significance to prove any hypothesis and even construction of frequency tables seemed redundant.

**Question 1**

Do you supervise and monitor your children's reading habits with regard to

a) Quality of reading material

b) Kind if reading material

i) Fiction

ii) Non – fiction
iii) Newspaper, Magazines

c) Time spent on reading (excluding schoolbooks)?

The first question tried to elicit information about the extent of supervision the average educated adult is likely to have on the reading time of her/his child. The majority of the answers have been concerned with the quality of the reading material and the time spent on reading; they have not been so concerned with the type of reading material that has been consumed—fiction or nonfiction or newspaper magazines. Among the 67 respondents, only two have declared that they did not supervise or monitor their children’s reading habits.

**Question 2**

Did you read to your children when they were toddlers to inculcate a whole some reading habit? Yes/no

The majority of the respondents have affirmed that they did indeed read to their children when they were toddlers, trying to instill in them a love for books in the form of bedtime stories, etc. This early interaction between the child and the adult is important in determining the formative influence of a strong reading habit in the later years. Since the present survey has been conducted to obtain information from children with a good knowledge of English books, it is obvious they come from a middle class background where there has been a certain degree of familiarity with the English language.
Question 3

Do you discuss books

a) Of which you approve
b) Of which you disapprove
c) Without passing any value judgments

Though the adults discuss books with their offspring's, they do not wish to pass value judgments on the basic worth of the book, thereby exercising a bias, which may remain throughout their lives. Ten adults have discussed books without passing value judgments while three have not discussed books at all with their children. The rest have recommended or rejected books while discussing them with their children.

Question 4

What do you think is worthwhile reading fare for your children in the following categories? Please give a few titles and authors favored by you or rejected by you as a parent?

a) Adventure, mystery stories
b) Science fiction
c) Ancient classics & myth retold
d) School stories
e) Wildlife tales & animal stories
f) Fictionalized biography & historical books

Parents and teachers appear to be in concurrence with their
children on most of the titles and authors. Apart from what they consider safe and healthy, there is a tendency among adults to recommend the classics of their own period to their children as suitable reading material for their children.

**Question 5**

Do you children seek your guidance while selecting a book?

*Yes/No*

Thirty-one respondents have answered positively, implying that their children sought their guidance while selecting a book. The others, more than half the number of respondents, have stated that the children freely chose according to their wishes.

**Question 6**

Are you deciding factor while choosing books for your children?

*Yes/No*

A good majority denied having to make decisions for their children and confirmed that they read whatever they wanted to without any adult influence but only with a certain amount of friendly guidance. Twelve adults have admitted that they were the deciding factor while choosing books for their children and three respondents have been in decided on the issue.

**Question 7**

Are the children encouraged to make a library at home?

*Yes/No*

Since most of the adults answering the questionnaire happened
to come from an academic background, the answers have been predictable. They all wish to encourage their children to make a library at home and collect literary books to improve their expression and language skills.

**Question 8**

Do you encourage your children to go to

a) Libraries

b) Buy books for a home library

c) Borrow from friends?

The cost of books being prohibitively high, children are usually encouraged to borrow from libraries, both from school and from public libraries.

**Question 9**

Is the television, video-watching time restricted in your home for children? Yes/No

What in your opinion is a fair amount of television time?

a) Total taboo

b) 1 hour a day

c) 2 hours on weekends and holidays

d) Rarely or when there is a children’s programme

Although 51 adults among the samples have agreed that television time should be restricted, each has her / his own conception of a reasonable amount of viewing time. The most
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Although 51 adults among the samples have agreed that television time should be restricted, each has her / his own conception of a reasonable amount of viewing time. The most commonly agreed time span seemed to be 1 hour a day which may incur protest from television buffs.
**Question 10**

What kind of entertainment would you like them to view?

a) Sports  
b) General knowledge  
c) Sheer entertainment

Some progressive parents approved of sheer entertainment while others earnestly advocated general knowledge programmes; almost everyone encouraged sports as a worthwhile programme. Thirty of the respondents were in favour of general knowledge programs and only four have opted for sheer entertainment programmes. Eight respondents favoured general knowledge, sports and sheer entertainment.

**Question 11**

Do you recommend the children to read the following

a) Indian publications in the regional languages  
b) Translations of good regional language publications in English  
c) Books in the mother tongue?

Most of them have confessed that their children were not proficient in their mother tongue and the rich heritage of the native tongue is as yet undiscovered.

**Question 12**

Name of few Indian authors for children whom you may consider suitable for your youngsters.
a) For entertainment

b) For inculcating moral values

c) For being a positive influence in enlarging their knowledge

Again, teachers of English have answered this question comfortably, earmarking Ruskin Bond and R.K Narayan for entertainment. Only a few considered reading by itself as a rewarding experience, and therefore wished to inculcate the much desired reading habit.

5.5 Analysis and Results

From the above data it has been found that the reading interests of children, in general, are affected by a number of factors.

1. The existence of a wide range of books exclusively written for children, and the availability of these books at home, in school libraries and in the book shops are indispensable conditions for a healthy reading habit to take root.

2. Adult as parents, teachers, librarians and booksellers have to make a selection on behalf of children, ensuring that they have enough leisure and opportunity to read. The books selected should be compatible with the needs and abilities of the children concerned.

3. The observations of the reading patterns of Indian children were confined to a limited section of the Indian population. How these observations aid the conditions of book
production is matter of further speculation. Being fully aware of
the problems "in making any generalizations on childhood in a
society as complex and heterogeneous as India, which has such
a welter of distinct regional linguistic, class, caste.... And
regional sub identities," it has been possible to arrive at a few
tentative generalizations. Arbitrary decisions cannot be arrived
at by accepting this feedback at face value. However, a few
patterns emerge which are relevant to our study.

a. There is a well-established reading habit amongst urban
Indian children, who prefer a wide range of fiction to non-fiction.

b. Although the library culture has not caught on a mass scale,
children individually are keen on collecting books for reading at leisure.

c. Adults are aware of the distractions of television and feel that
reading habits should be encouraged at all levels.

d. Regional language literature has to reach across state
boundaries and the best works should be made available in
English to make maximum impact. The knowledge of the
mother tongue, unfortunately, is inadequate among the respondents.

e. The epics and myths of our country have been retold many
times over in English as well as all the regional languages and
are extremely popular with all age groups.
f. Story content is the main attraction while choosing a book and British writers are best known. Indian writing in English is yet to make a significant impact on the leisure reading of Indian children.

Reference:


