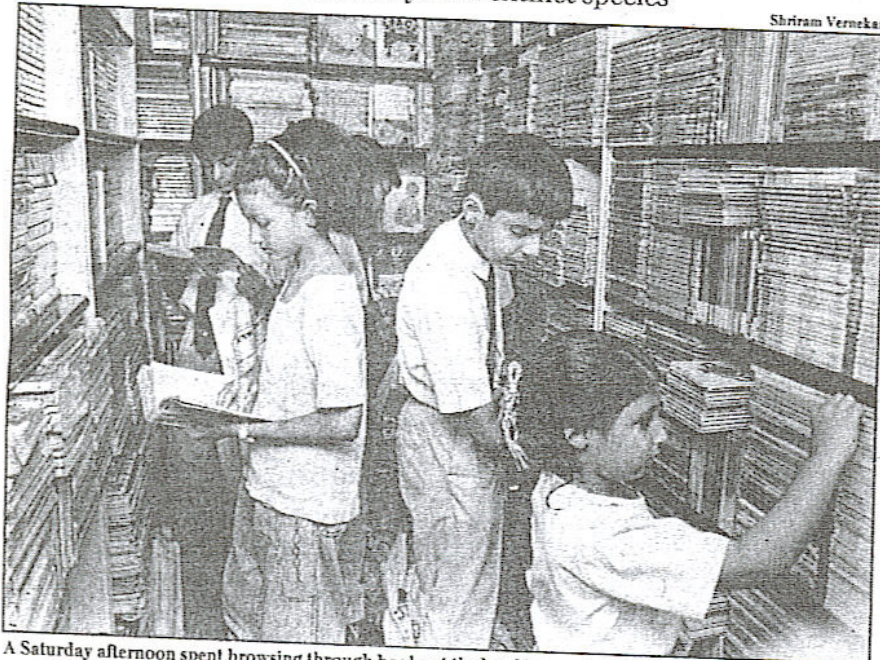


Surprise—children still read!

Contrary to the commonly held notion that the idiot-box has replaced the book and that today's kids would invariably opt for a seedy soap over a Secret Seven, Sandhya Nankani discovers that children who read are not yet an extinct species



Shriram Vernekar

A Saturday afternoon spent browsing through books at the local borrowing library

FOR Anisha's eleventh birthday, her mother has promised her a shopping excursion to the Crossword bookstore at Mahalaxmi. Anisha will soon be the proud owner of half-a-dozen new books, a number which matches her average weekly reading intake. "I love to read and would read all the time. But my mother does not let me," the child confesses.

Today, Anisha's gleaming eyes scan the shelves as she mutters, "Fear Street, Fear Street." Gossiping over the famous Enid Blyton, Nancy Drew and Hardy Boy series, Anisha is eager to discover her peers' new cult favourite, the Fear Street collection of horror stories by American author R. L. Stine.

Meanwhile, her mother peruses the wide selection of reading material, pausing every now and then to offer some suggestions to her preoccupied child. "Why don't you take a Ruskin Bond?" she says. "He writes nice stories about India." Anisha accepts the advice with a shrug and continues her search, picking up a member of the Sweet Valley Twins series and a Roald Dahl novel along the way.

"She reads so much that I have to stop her because I worry sometimes that she is living in a funny world," Anisha's mother explains as she watches her daughter's excitement. Her predicament contradicts the widely held belief that children, in the face of the television revolution, have turned a blind eye to the power of the written word.

Administrators at well-reputed high schools throughout Mumbai are usually pessimistic when questioned about children's reading habits. "Reading habits have definitely gone down. That's an accep-

ted fact, isn't it?" says one vice-principal. The principal of another school believes that the television habit has stopped children from reading altogether. "Nobody reads any more. During our weekly library period, they chat with friends or do their homework. This is a matter of great sorrow to us and we are going to implement a programme to force our students to read," she says.

Many students argue, however, that their behaviour in school libraries should not serve as an index of their reading patterns. "They do not allow Sweet Valley books in our library and I find classics too boring," says ten-year-old Neha who claims to read ten books a week. Karishma, twelve years old, complains that her school library does not meet her demands either. "It's had the same books for the past 100 years, so we are not interested anymore," she complains.

In such a situation, the general reading library is the substitute for a lot of children. Shruti, a student of Standard IX, admits that she never reads the books that she regularly borrows from her school library, but avers that she loves reading and would prefer to spend her time with a book rather than watch TV. "Books allow you to imagine," she says, "which is something that movies and TV can never replace." Ten-year-old Yashodan, who treasures his independent, bi-weekly visits to the Shemaroo library on Warden Road, agrees. "Even if I was allowed to watch more TV, I would still read," he says.

Contrary to popular opinion, then, children who read are not yet an extinct species. Indeed, they continue to frequent bookstores

and libraries, boosting profits for businesses. Crossword bookstore, with its spacious children's section, claims that children's books constitute 60 per cent of its book sales. "Parents are constantly amazed at the interest their children express in books," says store general manager R. Shriram. "I believe that if urban households gave their children direct access to books rather than TV, children would choose books."

P. M. Shenvie, manager of the Strand bookstall since 1966, is also convinced that diversions that result from technological breakthroughs are temporary fads. Even in this traditionally laid-out store, profits from children's book sales have been constantly rising — over 1,000 children's titles are sold per month at Strand. "I often see children crying for more books while their parents talk about their budgets," says Shenvie. "Nothing can replace the magic of books."

Current book sales demonstrate some shifts away from tradition. Sales of Enid Blyton books, the staple of generations, have decreased in the past three years, a trend that several book connoisseurs express regret about. The plight of the Amar Chitra Katha comic is similar. Whereas only 40,000 copies of 125 titles are presently published every fortnight, at its peak production in 1976, 1,20,000 issues of 432 titles were printed. Similarly, the sales of the once popular *Tinkle* magazine have dropped from 1,05,000 in 1986 to 80,000 copies per fortnight. Editor Anant Pai is optimistic that things are improving, however. "Five years ago, *Tinkle's* readership had fallen to 55,000. In the last two years, there has been an upward trend."

he remarks.

According to long-time manager of the Shemaroo library, such figures indicate an alteration, not a decrease in children's reading habits. He has observed children borrowing up to a dozen books per visit without any hesitation. "Children tell me that it takes them 30 minutes to finish a book," he comments. "I believe that's because the books they choose are more superficial and do not demand much of their attention. With so much school pressure, children are not eager to read heavy books today."

Shemaroo Library's manager wishes his clients would take more interest in the classics and Indian authors. He admits that his attempts have not had a high rate of success. "They do not want to experiment," he laments.

Experts on children's books all agree that today's popular reading material deals with stereotypical subjects. Indian authors are little read and books that do not clearly fall into children's categories are often overlooked. Kavita Shivdasani, a communication skills teacher since 1987, challenges this behaviour successfully through the weekly book reviews she conducts. "I have found that I can generate interest in all kinds of authors — Shakespeare, James Herriot, Rabindranath Tagore — by reading aloud to the children and conducting discussions on the issues that the literature generates," she explains.

Shivdasani warns that not all children should be expected to be avid readers. However, with the right type of exposure, enthusiasm and guidance, interest can be nurtured. "Parental involvement is a must. After all, how much can teachers do?" she asks.

Alternative forms of children's literature require such support in order to emerge. Sharada Dwivedi, author of *The Broken Flute*, complains that most Indian publishing companies recycle old folk tales or promote guaranteed favourites like boarding-school series to the detriment of local authors. In her opinion, the efforts of Penguin India, which recently published a series of children's books by Indian authors, are not enough. "More publishing companies should encourage fiction that includes local flavours and innovative material," she says.

Kamala Ramchandani, author of *Operation Deep-Sea*, a children's novel also published by Puffin, shares this frustration. "We need sophisticated, mature and original literature," she explains. "We need books that can straddle the Indian and Western cultures. But publishers do not want this."

Whatever the bias in children's reading, however — which can be corrected through guidance — there appears to be a case for contradicting the declarations of those who proclaim that children in the age of the electronic media are fated to be ill at ease with books. "On the contrary, I feel that parents, schools and other concerned people are making an even more determined bid to revive the reading habit," says an observer. "And that's definitely a healthy sign."