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BOOK EXCERPT

Researchers and children's educators study what it means to 'grow up digital' in 21st century India

An excerpt from 'Childscape, Mediascape: Children and Media in India', edited by Usha Raman and Sumana Kasturi.

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Mike Segar/Reuters

Education is the passport to the future, said Malcolm X, and the approach in educational systems provides a glimpse of how the future is being imagined. Today, the new buzzwords in education are “design thinking” and “entrepreneurship” with schools, that can afford to, creating maker spaces that encourage children to work with technology as creators, and not merely remain technology consumers. There is a growing emphasis on innovation fuelled by individual imagination, and so where maker spaces are not possible, this takes other forms; for example, government schools in Delhi introducing an entrepreneurship curriculum class nine onwards. In the last few decades, a push towards a child-friendly pedagogy has led to a greater amount of creative practice among schoolchildren and a transaction of the curriculum through creative projects.

Just as childhood was seen as tabula rasa to be written upon by adults, children’s engagement with media was, for long, considered a one-way process with children being the passive recipients of messaging that could either mould them into ideal humans or influence them in negative ways. The old ways of seeing – direct impact theories – have given way to more nuanced understandings of how children engage with media and while there are still those who believe that children, especially the very young, should be left alone and free of modern forms of media, namely television and the Internet, others recognise that such a pure space is difficult, and that what is required is engagement that allows children to negotiate their relationship with the media.

The work of scholars like Henry Jenkins on participatory culture emphasises the need to stop thinking of media as a simple, one-way communication in the 21st century, and instead see it as a system of interactive processes made up of several actions and activities. “Consumption becomes production; reading becomes writing; spectator culture becomes participatory culture,” writes Jenkins. Engaging with media is an everyday skill today, and with social media, the line between being a producer and a consumer of media is increasingly blurred.

The changing mediascape has also impacted the way the arts are perceived and practised. There is a greater degree of appreciation for creative work and where, in earlier times, children would have been told to put away the paintbrush and concentrate on “studies”, today parents are often the ones who post their children’s artistic endeavours on social media, seeking appreciation

and encouragement. This is also tied up with the impulse for self-promotion that marks the contemporary world of work that constantly needs the individual to present herself as a valuable worker. For creative practitioners, this translates to an expectation that the artist is responsible for not just creating the work, but also for its wide dissemination and publicity. Increasingly, the onus is on the individual to present the value of her work rather than on the structures of the creative industries, and social media becomes the tool to do this.

The creative arts and media landscapes are thus intertwined and inextricable. In this context, children, especially urban children, begin to learn skills for using media at an early age, outside of formal education. There is an instinctive understanding of visual language among children today. Among teens, this is reflected in the way they use social media platforms like Instagram and Snapchat, combining image and text to create stories from their everyday lives.

I have been doing different kinds of activities for several years, with children from the ages of five years to 12 years. Children have produced poetry, short non-fiction texts, even films. With the older children, I have begun the practice of doing a short reflection in the form of guided questions that I ask them, one of them being what prompted them to take part in the workshop. Their responses throw open a window into the world as they experience it, where even in childhood what is expected of them is adult-like. One 12-year-old who took part in a film workshop wrote, “I felt proud that I did something like this and used my holidays productively.” Another child wrote, “I normally watch Netflix and do social media on my gadgets, but I wanted to learn something more productive.” This emphasis on individual productiveness reflects an internalising of an environment that suggests it is up to the individual to make the most of the opportunities on offer.

That creative practice can develop self-confidence and skills is one part of the story; the other is that these will be needed by today’s children when they seek

work as adults. In contemporary global capitalism, the onus to be gainfully educated and employed is increasingly on the individual. Today's economic paradigm requires what Nina Power in *One Dimensional Woman* calls the "feminized worker" –adaptable, flexible, constantly networking, taking on part-time and contractual work. This draws from the idea of women being sensible, pragmatic and good at communication, able to juggle and create their own individual systems when a larger structure ceases to exist. This is what we are experiencing in the world of work today. The personal, Power says, is no longer just the political but has, in fact, become the economic. In this light, we cannot neglect to see that the recognition of children's creative practice is not about encouraging their ability to participate in cultural transformation, but about their future contribution towards reinforcing an economic paradigm that requires workers who can work efficiently on their own and think out of the box without much support – traits that creative practice encourages and hones.

In the adult workplace, there is a call to individual action and a celebration of those who opt to create their own jobs – start-ups that are promoted as going against the grain when the reality is that the grain of employment itself has changed. A similar highlighting of individual initiative and inventiveness can be seen in the way children are encouraged to demonstrate their creativity – as musical prodigies, through self-published books, as founders of start-ups.

While many of them may indeed have talent and may go on to choose work in those fields, what is to be noted is that there is a push towards demonstrating that talent at an early age. Thus, while children may well be participating in cultural production, this is still very much in line with the ethos of competition in the global marketplace. Another issue that the lens of work and labour throws up is the notion of the working child. From the child rights perspective, the popular perception is that child labour is exploitative, but the musical

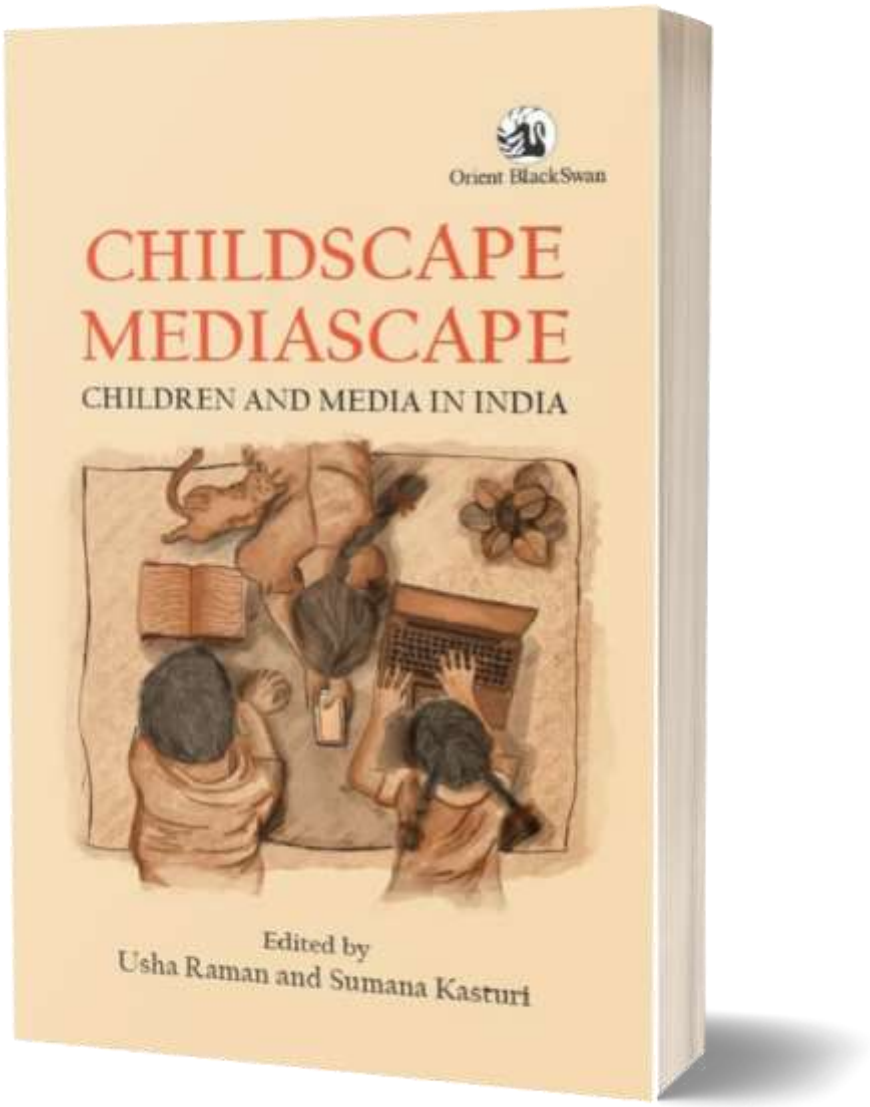
prodigy, the self-published child author or the child-founder of a start-up is seen as quite the reverse. This is not surprising because labour that is put into creative work is rarely identified as labour, even in the adult world. Thus, the scenario of children's creative practice is replete with contradictions, and while the neoliberal economic system may encourage creative practice among children to perpetuate itself, the development of the reflective citizen through the process means that the possibility of subversion is always present, precisely because those traits have been put to use by the system.

So many of the young people I interact with display fragile inner resources. Often, they come to creative practice because they have not been able to find a way to express themselves elsewhere. The possibility of differentiation in the school system is limited and opportunities to truly celebrate difference among children peter out once they move into high school. Not only is this a time of greater academic pressure, but it is also when their need to belong is the strongest. Creative practice and the arts in education offer a way to negotiate these challenges, a way to build resilience in young people that will serve them well in life. This is true not just for those who go on to become artists, but also for everyone who will join the workforce and face the challenges of a competitive work environment – knowing what you really want, being able to communicate clearly, collaborating in a team.

While these are strengths that global capital is looking for in its workers, it is in these very strengths that the possibilities of reimagining the workplace lie. It is these that lead to empathy, communication, and the ability to celebrate differences that are the foundation of forging community and building solidarity. Clearly, children are taking on the role of creative practitioners in a variety of ways. They are finding their own way to some of these strengths. The question is will they be able to hold on to these strengths and create a shift

when they grow up? Or will the system force an atomisation on them and co-opt the strengths for itself?

And while we wait, what does the grown-up do? Be an ally. Listen, observe, facilitate.



Excerpted with permission from chapter "Kids Make Art: Children, Creative Practice and the World" *in* Childscape, Mediascape: Children and Media in India, *edited by Usha Raman and Sumana Kasturi, Orient Black Swan.*

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