

INDIAN CHILDHOOD:
CULTURAL IDEALS AND
SOCIAL REALITY

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The maternity room in the southwest corner of the house, facing east, is light and airy. Two days ago, amid much ceremony—the trumpeting of conchshells, the playing of music and the beating of drums—the expectant mother entered this room accompanied by four older women of the family, all of them mothers of long standing. Together with the rest of the family, the women had worshipped the family priest and his apprentices before they had left for the room ritually prepared for imminent childbirth.

The room, its walls whitewashed and its floor freshly swept, is uncluttered. Simple mats, woven of bamboo reeds, are spread on the floor to be used as beds. Beside the expectant mother's mat, there is a clay pot containing the sacred *turyanti* plant, a jar of water, a mace, a spear and a sword—all of which help to ward off the evil spirits that threaten newborn infants. In one corner of the room, the *sutika* (impure) birth-fire burns brightly in a brazier; the flames fed with rice chaff and mustard seeds.

The woman reclines on her mat. As the labour pains begin, her limbs are massaged and rubbed with a herbal paste and she is addressed with comforting words of reassurance and practical instructions delivered in the calm voice of authority and experience. Outside, the rest of the family perform rites to ensure a safe delivery, and an apprentice priest goes around the house opening all the windows and doors and unlocking all the locks—practising sympathetic magic to loosen the foetus from its moorings in the womb. As the baby is born, one of the ministering women strikes stones near its ears while another dashes cold and warm water against its face to stimulate breathing. A third woman removes the mucus from the baby's mouth and throat with a lint of sterile cotton. *Ghee* and *Saindhav* salt are then given to the infant so that it will cough up any amniotic fluid it may have

swallowed. The father now comes in to look at the baby face. The paternal act of looking at a first-born son, the sacred texts assure him, will absolve him of all his debts to the gods and to the ancestors. But for a sensible man, and the father prides himself on being a sensible man, even the birth of a girl would have been only slightly less meritorious; her gift in marriage brings the father spiritual merit, and appreciably increases the store of his good *karmas*. Having seen the infant's face, the father goes on and takes a ritual bath. Accompanied by the priestly family elders the father then re-enters the maternity room for the birth ceremonies. The room is getting quite crowded.

The first rite is designed to stimulate the newborn's mental development. While a priest holds aloft a cup of butter and honey, the father alternately dips a gold spoon and the fourth finger of his right hand into the mixture and touches it to the infant's mouth. While the father recites the sonorous Gayatri *mantra* with its prayer for the growth of talent and intellect, the infant screams away lustily oblivious to the women's ineffectual efforts to hush it into a semblance of ceremonial seriousness. Ignoring the commotion, the father bends down and whispers the child's secret name (it will be known only to the parents) into the boy's ear. Prompted by the priest, he haltingly recites in verse examples of immortality—the immortality of the ocean, of nectar, of sacrificial fire, of ancient sages—so as to prolong the child's own life. His efforts are supplemented by the priests who stand around the child breathing forcefully and rhythmically—long-drawn out breaths intended to quicken and prolong the breath of life in the infant. The birth rites continue as the father kneels down on the floor and with folded hands says a prayer of thanks to the spot of earth where the birth took place. He turns toward the mother and, following the priest's lead, recites a verse thanking and praising her for having borne a strong son. The child is then washed and ceremoniously given to the mother.

The birth ritual is not yet over. Before the men leave the maternity room, the father places a jar of water near the pillow and says, 'O water, you watch with gods. As you watch with the gods, thus watch this our mother, who is confined, and her child.' The men now leave the room, the father taking away the birth-fire which he will place outside the room, ceremoniously fuelling it twice a day till the mother gets up from childbed and re-enters the family

Depending upon the mother's condition and the auspiciousness of the astrological constellations, this may happen on the tenth, twelfth, fifteenth or even the thirty-second postpartum day, and will be an occasion for yet another ritual. For the moment, at least, a relative quiet descends on the delivery room. The women busy themselves with various tasks while the mother sinks into an exhausted sleep with the baby snuggled against her breast. Outside, the sounds of the great feast in which family members, friends and community elders are taking part, slowly gather momentum and volume.¹

Once the birth ritual has introduced the baby to the family and the community, we arrive at the starting point of this inquiry: what are the traditional conceptions of the nature of children and childhood in India that inform the behaviour of the newborn's caretakers and influence their interaction with this new human being in their midst? Can we systematically identify a *cultural awareness* of the child that will help us to clarify our own adult attitudes toward the child before us? To answer these questions, I have looked at views of children expressed and reflected in various parts of the Indian cultural tradition. There are passages dealing with children in the law books, especially *The Laws of Manu*, and on the care and upbringing of infants and children in the three primary texts of traditional Indian medicine, *Ayurveda*. There are references to children and childhood in the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* although I have only focussed on the latter. And of course there are descriptions of childhood in ancient and medieval literature, although in this essay I have limited myself to the devotional poetry of Surdas and Tulsidas, which depicts the childhood of Krishna and Rama. The chief *samskaras* of childhood also contribute to the formation of an Indian consciousness and conception of childhood. These *samskaras* set temporal and behavioural limits to childhood and delineate childhood stages. In addition, their symbolic content and that of the traditional folk songs that accompany them, provide some indication of the

chief characteristics of a given stage of childhood.² Perhaps I also need to mention at the outset that large parts of the Indian tradition of childhood are solely concerned with boys and ignore, if not dispossess, girls of their childhood.

The Child in Law

In ancient Indian law, and here I specifically refer to the *Laws of Manu*, the child is located very near the bottom of a social pyramid at the apex of which stands the householder, an adult male belonging to one of the twice-born castes. At the bottom of the pyramid, the child finds himself in motley company: persons belonging to the lowest castes and those who have lost their caste by practising forbidden occupations, the mentally deficient and the mentally disturbed, slaves and hired servants, actors and vagrants, the old and the sick, newly-married women and those who are pregnant.³ The lower social status of the child is also evident in Manu's mourning prescriptions: the younger the deceased, the shorter the mourning period, and the otherwise elaborate funeral rites are minimal in case of a child's death.⁴

A close examination of Manu's injunctions reveals a sharp line of cleavage through the social pyramid, a line that divides the lower orders into two clearly differentiated groups. Toward one of these groups, comprising the casteless and the lowest castes, the violators of Brahminical social ethics and the rejectors of a brahminical pietistic life style, Manu consistently takes an authoritarian and punitive stance. Children, however, belong to the second group—consisting of women, the aged, the sick and the infirm—who deserve society's protection and claim its indulgence. Thus, even before serving invited guests (and guests, as we know, are almost on a par with gods in the Hindu tradition) the householder is enjoined to feed pregnant women, the sick and the young.⁵ Although a man may not quarrel with learned men, priests and teachers, he is also forbidden to speak harshly to the aged, the sick and children.⁶ Whereas the king is within his rights to exact retribution on those who questi-

his authority or inveigh against his person, he is required to forgive children (as also the old and the sick) who may be guilty of lese-majesty. Although punishments, including fines, are prescribed for anyone soiling the king's highways, children are specifically exempted; they are only to be reprimanded and required to clean up after themselves.⁷

The protective indulgence shown toward the child is manifested most clearly where it matters the most (at least to the child)—namely, in Manu's pronouncements on the chastisement of children. Children (and women) are only to be beaten with a rope or a bamboo stick split at the end. The split bamboo, as we may remember from circus clowns' mock fights, makes a loud noise without inflicting much pain. Moreover, even this punishment is to be carried out only on the back and never on a 'noble part'—that is, not on the head or the chest.⁸ To those who hold progressive views of child discipline, the beating of children may hardly seem like 'protective indulgence'. However, the extent of this indulgence becomes strikingly clear when we compare Manu's *Laws* with legal texts of other ancient societies. For example, there is evidence in the law codes and digests of ancient Rome to suggest that brutal forms of child abuse were common mistreatment, which the more enlightened emperors attempted to mitigate,⁹ it was only as late as A.D. 374, that infanticide was declared a capital offence in the Roman world.¹⁰

In short, though by modern standards Manu's *Laws* have been severely condemned as a repository of inequity, sanctioning the repression of the weak and the poor, their attitude toward children—one of protective nurturance—is unexceptionable, at least within the premises of the patriarchal society which gave the *Laws* their birth.

The Child in Medicine

The treatment of the child constitutes one of the eight branches of the traditional Ayurvedic system of Indian medicine. I hesitate to equate this branch of medicine (known

as *Balanga* in *Ashtangahridaya* and *Kumarbhutya* in the *Caraka* and *Susruta Samhitas*) with modern pediatrics, primarily because child development in the Indian system is thought to begin not with birth but with conception. Observations and speculations on foetal development comprise a large portion of the Ayurvedic literature on the child. The pre-natal period is considered equally important (if not more so) as the period of childhood proper, for the physical and mental development of the individual. This concern with the psychological development of the foetus distinguishes the content of *Balanga* from that of modern embryology. Clearly, the Hindu worldview has played an important role in defining the scope and content of Indian medical specialization dealing with the child—as doubtless Western images of the origins of life and the nature of man have informed the training of the modern pediatrician.

Since life is presumed to begin with conception, birth in the Indian tradition is a relatively later event that marks the end of the first stage of the life cycle rather than its beginning. According to the metaphysical doctrine of rebirth and transmigration of the soul, a doctrine shared by ancient Indian medics, it is at the moment of fertilization that the soul, in its 'subtle body' (which includes the mind) from previous life, enters the conceptus. The qualities of the sperm, the ovum, the *rasa* ('organic sap' or nutrition) and the soul's 'subtle body'—that is, its psychic constellation from its previous incarnation—are the determinants of the embryo's structural and functional growth.¹¹

The critical period for the psychological development of the individual is said to commence from the third month of pregnancy (the fourth, in *Susruta Samhita*), when the latent 'mind' of the foetus becomes 'activated' or 'conscious' (*chetan*). In this stage of *dauhrdaya* (literally, 'bi-cardiac'—where one heart belongs to the foetus and the other to the mother), the unborn child and the mother function psychologically as an unit, mutually influencing each other. The feelings and affects of the foetus—a legacy from its previous birth—are transmitted to the mother through the

channels of nutrition (*dhamanis*). For the future psychic well-being of the individual it is imperative—the texts are unanimous on this point—that the wishes and cravings of the pregnant woman be fully gratified and the unit of expectant mother and foetus be completely indulged. For these desires of the mother, Ayurveda claims, are but the mental strivings of the foetus, deflected and distorted through the prism of the mother's body and psyche. Of course, care should be taken while fulfilling the mother's desires that nothing is done or given to her which is harmful either to her or to her unborn child. If the pregnant woman's longing becomes overwhelming, it is better—the texts go so far in their indulgence—that she be given the desired object even if it is injurious to her health—care being taken to neutralize the object's baneful influence through appropriate countermeasures.¹² Finally, in the Ayurvedic tradition, the desires of the pregnant woman in *dauhrdaya* are thought to contain clues to the unborn child's psychological predispositions and character.)

For a student of human development, all this is quite fascinating, especially since Ayurveda claims, with much justification, to be a science of rational therapeutics based on the collected observations of a host of ancient doctors. Unfortunately, this claim to empirical validity cannot always be substantiated. Our credulity is strained, and the empirical likelihood of certain observations on child development becomes doubtful, when we read the predicted behaviour of the unborn child—predictions based on the longings of his mother during a particular period of pregnancy. Thus, for instance, the mother's desire to see a king means that the son will become rich and famous; her wish for fine clothes and ornaments signifies that the child will have an aesthetic nature; her desire to visit a hermitage suggests that the child will be self-controlled; and so on. There is a long list of traits presumed to correlate with the expectant mother's culinary cravings—each craving presaging that the unborn individual will have the traits ascribed to that particular animal or bird. For instance, the expectant mother's wish to

eat beef means that her child will grow up into a strong and hardy adult, the craving to eat partridge foretells a timid and fearful disposition, and so on. There are other lists too, cataloguing certain maternal activities and their influence on the foetus; many of the items on these lists have little or no possible basis in observation.)

The hypothesised relationship between the feelings and behaviour of the expectant mother and those of her offspring seem closer to the omens, auguries, prophecies and sooth-saying of the magical realm of thought. This mixture of genuine medical opinion based on observation and practice on the one hand, and speculations and attitudes deriving from the magico-religious realm on the other, are not only characteristic of the Ayurvedic literature on the child but are a feature of Ayurveda as a whole.¹³ However, my purpose is not the evaluation of the scientific merit of Ayurvedic observations on child development. Rather, let me note two prominent Ayurvedic notions that contribute to the Indian idea of the child.

The first is that the child, as a subject of study or treatment, cannot be viewed in isolation but must be understood as part of a larger matrix in which the mother-child unit, epitomized in the *dauhrdaya* stage of pregnancy, is fundamental. Measures to promote the child's growth or to alleviate its distress are thus to be directed toward this 'unit', whose centre shifts only gradually from the mother to the child. Thus, for example, even as late as the end of the first year after birth, while the child is still being breast fed, many of its diseases are apt to be diagnosed as due to the 'vitiation' of the mother's milk. Therapeutic measures, including the administration of drugs, are directed toward the mother to remove this 'vitiation'. (Whatever the medical rationale for these practices, their symbolic and psychological thrust is unmistakable; they emphasise the symbiosis of the mother and child and express the conviction that during the foetal period and for a while after birth, the removal of the foetal tensions and diseases is the key to the child's well-being.¹⁴)

(The second central idea in 'Indian child development' is

the belief that the basic contours of personality are laid down *in utero*.) In contrast with the Western, post-Freudian emphasis on early childhood as the vital period for psychological development, this period is relatively underplayed in the Hindu tradition, in favour of the embryonic period, especially the *dauhrdaya* stage. It is not correct, however, that the Indian medical tradition has little to say about childhood proper. In fact, the Ayurvedic texts contain detailed and copious instructions on the care of the young child. These wide-ranging instructions—on such diverse topics as the time when a child should be encouraged to sit up or the specification of toys with regard to colour, size, shape and texture—reveal great solicitude concerning the period of infancy and early childhood. The voices of ancient doctors, in spite of the archaic language through which they reach us, sound strangely modern and positively Spockian as they expound on the relationship between child-rearing practices and personality development. (The practice of persuading the child to eat or to stop crying by conjuring up threatening visions of ghosts, goblins and ferocious animals, they tell us, is to be avoided since it has a very harmful effect.¹⁵ The child should not be awakened from sleep suddenly, they go on to say, nor should he be snatched or thrown up in the air. He should not be irritated, and he should be kept happy at all costs, as this is crucial for his psychological development and future well-being.¹⁶)

In summary, Ayurvedic theory of optimal child development is an intriguing blend of the superstitious and the rational, the arcane and the modern. In its consistently humane attitude toward the child, however, ancient Indian medicine is irreproachable. With compassion and tenderness for the young, Ayurveda strives to develop the adult caretakers' capacity to comprehend the needs and emotions of the child—needs that are apt to be overlooked since they are articulated in voices that are frail and words that are indistinct.

Children in the Mahabharata

Of the three hundred and fifty odd references to children in the *Mahabharata*, many are mere records of birth, with perhaps a score having a supplementary verse that eulogizes the infant's physical and mental qualities. Later on in the epic, from the *Drona Parva* onward, 'children' are increasingly mentioned in the context of parental mourning as their sons die in the great war. In these descriptions, however, the child *qua* child is incidental—memories of his play and playfulness serving only to enhance the parents' grief at the loss of an adult son. Arjuna and Subhadra's distraught lamentations at Abhimanyu's death. Yudhishtira's grief when Ghatotkacha is killed, Dhritrashtra's poignant memories of the childhood of his sons, and many other instances of mourning are more evocative of the Hindu concept of death, and designed to help the survivors bear the death of their children with equanimity, rather than with giving us insight into the childhood of those who were slain in the battle.

For the rest, in the *Mahabharata* (if there is one predominant child-related theme it is the importance attached to, and the intense longing expressed for, the birth of a son. A number of myths and didactic passages repeatedly emphasise that begetting a son is one of man's highest duties and the only way he can discharge the debt he owes to his ancestors.¹⁷ Consider the story of Jaratkuru.

The renowned ascetic Jaratkuru, full of merit and great spiritual power derived from his sustained ascetism, was wandering around the world when one day he came across a deep pit. In this pit, the spirits of his ancestors—the *pitris*—were hanging head down, their feet tied to a tree trunk by a single skein of rope that was gradually being nibbled away by a large rat. It was evident that the *pitris* would fall down into the deep darkness of the pit. Moved by their pitiable condition, Jaratkuru enquired whether he could somehow save them from this fate, expressing his readiness to do so even if he had to give up all the rewards

to which his great ascetism entitled him. 'Venerable *brahmacharin*', the *pitris* answered, 'thou desired to relieve us! . . . O child, whether it is ascetism, or sacrifice, or whatever else there be of very holy acts, everything is inferior. These cannot count equal to a son. O child, having seen all, speak unto that Jaratkuru of ascetic wealth . . . tell him all that would induce him to take a wife and beget children.'¹⁸

Similarly, the sage Agastya, having failed to procreate, beholds his *pitris* in a like predicament.¹⁹ Another ascetic, Mandapala, is told in no uncertain terms that in spite of his most ascetic efforts, certain celestial regions will forever remain closed to him, for they can be reached only by those who have had children—'Beget children therefore!' Mandapala is instructed, 'Thou shalt then enjoy multifarious regions of felicity!'²⁰

Sons in the *Mahabharata* are not only seen as instrumental in the fulfilment of a sacred *duty* which, however agreeable and meritorious, still carries the connotation of religious necessity and social imposition, they are also portrayed as a source of emotional and sensual gratification. Listen to Shakuntala asking Dushyanta to acknowledge his son: 'What happiness is greater than what the father feels when the son is running towards him, even though his body be covered with dust, and clasps his limbs? Even ants support their own eggs without destroying them, then why shouldst not thou, virtuous as thou art, support thy own child? The touch of soft sandal paste, of women, of (cool) water is not so agreeable as the touch of one's own infant son locked in one's embrace. As a Brahmana is the foremost of all bipeds, a cow, the foremost of all quadrupeds, a protector, the foremost of all superiors, so is the son the foremost of all objects, agreeable to the touch. Let, therefore this handsome child touch thee in embrace. There is nothing in the world more agreeable to the touch than the embrace of one's son.'²¹

(In contrast to the joyous celebration at the birth of sons, girls generally receive a muted if not a totally cold reception. The religious merit reaped at the birth of a daughter is

minimal; her entry into the world is accompanied by forebodings on the part of the parents. Thus, Indra's charioteer Matali, father of the beauteous Gunakeshi, laments: 'Alas, the birth of a daughter in the families of those that are well-behaved and high-born and possess reputation and humility of character, is always attended with evil results. Daughters, when born in respectable families always endanger the honour of these families, their maternal and paternal families and the family into which they are adopted by marriage.'²² And though King Drupada, for very good reasons of his own, wishes for the birth of a son, he seems to go to ludicrous lengths to deny the sex of the daughter who is finally born, futilely begs Shiva to change her sex and (after her birth) conceals her real identity and performs the rites prescribed for a male child.²³

We find that the random remarks on children scattered throughout the epic, do not permit us to discern any single, consistent view of the child. In the rare passages where the ascetic mode prevails, the attitude towards the child, because of the child's strong association with the procreative act, is one of unrelieved disgust. 'In consequence of the keen desire that men entertain for women, offspring proceed from them, due to (the action of) the vital seed. As one casts off from one's body such vermin as take their birth there but as are not on that account any part of oneself, even so should one cast off those vermin of one's body that are called children, who, though regarded as one's own, are not one's own in reality. From the vital seed as from sweat (and other filth) creatures spring from the body, influenced by the acts of previous lives or in the course of nature. Therefore, one possessed of wisdom should feel no regard for them.'²⁴ As I have indicated above, however, such a life-negating and rejecting attitude toward children is a minor theme in the *Mahabharata*. (Most references to children in the text are positive, full of acceptance and a joyous generativity that is actively solicitous and protectively caring of the next generation. Indeed in a few passages the child is thoroughly idealized as a creature 'without

desires and aversions'—and thus nearer to God.²⁵ In other passages, where the Bhakti mode prevails, one of the attributes of God is that of his *being* a child: 'Salutations to thee that art of the form of the rising sun, and that art of the form of a child, that art the protector of attendants (Krishna's cowherds), all of whom are of the form of children.'²⁶

On the familiar problem of whether heredity or environment exerts a greater influence on the child's personality, the *Mahabharata* comes down firmly in favour of heredity. Heredity, we must remember, in the *Mahabharata* as in the rest of Indian tradition, is not simply a matter of biology. Together with the father's 'seed', the *karmic* balance from the previous life gives the child certain predispositions that are all-determining in their impact on individual behaviour. The *Mahabharata* thus holds the contribution of 'nurture' during the impressionable childhood years to be negligible, when compared with the influence of 'nature' which it conceives of in terms of a metaphysical biology.

In contrast to the Ayurveda, which accords some recognition to the part played by the mother's 'ovum', the *Mahabharata* is patriarchally imperious in granting legitimacy only to the father's 'seed' in the formation of a son's personality. There are many passages in the text with an identical refrain: namely, that the father himself is born as the son, and with the placing of his seed in the womb he has placed his own self.²⁷ Child-rearing practices and the environment of the early years cannot alter the basic nature of the child, which has received this strong 'biological' stamp. This view comes through clearly in the story of Matanga, who was sired by a Shudra but adopted at birth by a Brahman. The Brahman brought Matanga up as his own son and with due performance of all the rites of infancy and childhood ordained for Brahmans. One day, Matanga was asked by his father to fetch some materials speedily for a sacrifice. Matanga set out on a cart drawn by a young ass, who instead of obeying the carter, set out in the direction of its mother. Angry, Matanga began to strike the

animal on its nose with a goad. On seeing these marks of violence on her offspring's nose, the she-ass said: 'Do not grieve, O child, for this treatment. A *chandala* it is that is driving thee... He is simply proving the order of his birth by conducting himself in this way. The nature which he hath derived from his sire forbids the rise of those sentiments of pity and kindness that are natural to the Brahmana.'²⁸

We may then conclude that the *Mahabharata* elaborates and deepens our understanding of the two themes in the traditional Indian view of childhood encountered in ancient law and medicine. First, there is an intense parental longing for children, and their upbringing is characterized by affectionate indulgence. This 'child-centredness,' however, as the *Mahabharata* makes clear, is limited to boys: the Indian tradition is indifferent, if not overtly hostile, to the developmental fate of girls. Secondly, the Indian tradition subscribes to an ideology that downgrades the role of the environment and nurture in the development of a child, and instead emphasises a deterministic conception of mystical heredity. Whereas in *Ayurveda*, this mystical heredity is still loose and composed of many factors, in the *Mahabharata* it is reduced to the *karmas* of the previous life and the attributes of the father (especially his caste) transmitted through his 'seed'.

The Child in Literature

In classical Sanskrit literature, children rarely figure as individuals in their own right, with activities, reactions and feelings separate from those of their all-powerful parents. The child usually appears as a wish—that is, in the context of a couple's, or more often a father's longing for offspring—or as the fulfilment of the wish—in descriptions of parental happiness when a child is born and in lyrical accounts of parental love, usually of a father for his son. Thus, to take two well-known examples, Bhavabhuti describes Rama's love for Lava and Kusha, while Banabhatta

rhapsodises over Prabhakarvardhan's love for his son, Harsha.²⁹ The greatest of all Sanskrit poets, Kalidas, both follows and deviates somewhat from this pattern. He too is lyrical about the father's feeling for his child, for instance, in his descriptions of Dushyanta's feelings for his son Sarvadamana and of Dilip's love for Raghu in *Raghuvamsha*. Here is Dilip's response to Raghu's birth:

He went in immediately [on hearing the news] and as the lotus becomes motionless when the breeze stops, he gazed at his son's face with the same still eyes. Just as tides come into the ocean when it sees the moon, similarly the King [Dilip] was so happy on seeing his son that he could not contain the happiness in his heart.³⁰

However, in addition, Kalidasa sensitively portrays, with much empathy, the sage Kanva's love for his daughter Shakuntala.

Classical Sanskrit literature is not a living tradition in the same sense that classical law and traditional medicine are; rather, its influence is indirect and hard to pin down. For an account of children and childhood in the Indian literary tradition, we must turn to the classics of the regional languages. Here, however, I will tap only one literary stream, the medieval Hindi literature associated with the Bhakti movement, and look especially at the poems and songs of Surdas and Tulsidas. My reasons for choosing Bhakti-inspired literature (in addition to its accessibility) are not hard to comprehend. First, this is the most powerful surviving literary tradition in the Hindi-speaking belt of northern and central India. Through the continuing popularity of its songs and poems, it has moulded folk consciousness in a way that is rare for any literature. Second, this literature in general, and the poems of Surdas in particular, are unique among the literary traditions of the world (as far as I know) in that children and childhood—Krishna's childhood in Surdas and Rama's childhood in Tulsidas—are placed close to the centre of poetic consciousness and creativity, rather than at its periphery. Surdas, in fact, composed five hundred verses on Krishna's

childhood alone!³¹ Apart from their religious significance, these verses are a rich source for Hindu ideals of childhood and for delineating the topography of a culturally approved utopia of childhood.

A concept such as the 'utopia of childhood' suggests that I will treat the literary material on the child somewhat differently from similar material in legal and medical texts. Whereas with law and medicine the effort was to summarise and rearrange the scattered textual material on the child into unified and coherent constructs, here with the literature, I propose to add, and *consciously* emphasise a point of view. This point of view is frankly psychological. It is based on the assumption that poetic descriptions of the infancy and childhood of Krishna and Rama also contain certain desires that both *relate to*, and *derive from*, the period of childhood. These desires, often not conscious, constitute the *fantasy* of childhood, which is not idiosyncratic to the poet-creators but instead, by virtue of being widely shared by audiences through the centuries, has acquired the status of an Indian child-utopia. Before we consider the main themes of this child-utopia, however, let us look at its genesis and position in the Bhakti literature more closely.

The religious poetry of the Bhakti—the devotional approach to the Divine—is chiefly of two types. In one, the poet (and through him, the devotee) places himself in relation to the god-head as a child to his parent; he seeks forgiveness for transgressions and tries to evoke the parental response of nurturance. This is, of course, a common theme in the religious literatures of the world, although Indian Bhakti poetry differs from devotional literature in other societies by the fact that it conceives of the Divine in terms of a maternal rather than a paternal matrix. To give two brief illustrations: the first a short poem by Kabir (fifteenth century):

Mother I am your child
Why not forgive my faults
The child misbehaves on many days.

They are not the days the mother remembers.
He catches her hair and hits her.
She does not reduce her affection.
Kabir says, it is evident.
A child's unhappiness is the mother's pain.³²

The second is by the Bengali religious poet Ramprasad (seventeenth century):

O Mother! my desires are unfulfilled; my hopes are ungratified
But my life is fast coming to an end.
Let me call Thee, Mother, for the last time;
Come and take me in Thy arms.
None loves in this world;
This world knows not how to love;
My heart yearns, O Mother, to go there,
Where Love reigns supreme.³³

Both these songs mirror a widespread, and perhaps universal, pattern of spiritual longing for a transcendence of separation from the godhead. The attributes of the child (devotee) emphasised in this poetry are his yearning for infinite and unconditional love, the wish for a forgiving acceptance of his imperfections, and his search for the caretaker's responsive face.

The uniqueness of Bhakti poetry, however, lies more in its second school, where we find a surprising reversal. Here the poet (devotee) is as a mother toward God, who is the child. The celebration of the Divine, as in Surdas's poems of Krishna, takes place through the metaphor of celebration of the child. The aspects that are admirably emphasised as divine attributes, as Kinsley has pointed out, are the child's freedom and spontaneity, his simplicity, charm and delight in self.³⁴

Krishna is singing in the courtyard.
He dances on his small feet, joyous within.
Lifting up his arms, he shouts for the black and white cows.

Sometimes he calls Nandababa, sometimes he goes in and out of the house.
Seeing his reflection, he tries to feed it.
Hidden, Yashoda watches the play that makes

her so happy.

Surdas says, to see Krishna's play every day
is bliss.³⁵

Tulsidas sings:

Self-willed he [Rama] insists on having the moon.
He sees his shadow and is frightened.
Clapping his hands, he dances.
Seeing his child-play

All mother-hearts are brimming over with happiness.
Becoming angry, he is obstinate.
And remains stubborn till he gets what he wants.

Tulsidas says, the sons of the King of Ayodhya live
In the temple of his heart.³⁶

In an adult-centred world that overvalues abstractions, prudence and reason, it is refreshing to find Bhakti poetry celebrating such childlike virtues as intensity and vivaciousness, capacity for sorrow and delight, mercurial anger and an equally quick readiness to forget and forgive injuries. In the Indian child-utopia these qualities are not seen as 'childish', to be socialized out of existence, but valuable attributes of human beings—of all ages—since they are but an expression of the Divine.

The second theme in the child-utopia of Bhakti poetry is the rapt play between mother and child. In poem after poem, we see Yashoda and Krishna, Kausalya and Rama, playfully, even blissfully absorbed in each other. They are portrayed as oblivious to their surroundings, existing in a temporary world within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.³⁷ In this world, nothing exists for the mother but the child; the smallest expression of his being enhances the mother's erotic and affiliative leeway. Yashoda, for instance, is so full of joy at seeing Krishna's milk-teeth that, absorbed in her love for him, she loses consciousness of her own body. It is in these scenes of mother-child interplay that the Bhakti poets come into their own.

Surdas writes:

O Nanda's small Krishna, leave the butter-churn.
Again and again says Yashoda, Nanda's queen.

Move to one side, my life, my wealth, I'll give
you the butter.

My priceless treasure, do not be obstinate.
He [Krishna] who is meditated upon by all beings
Is kissed on the face by Yashoda and lifted upon
her shoulder.³⁸

Similarly, Tulsidas:

Queen Kausalya, with the beautiful Rama in her
lap, is gracing the bed.

Her eyes turned into *chakros*, they fly to Rama's
face like the moon.

Sometimes she lies down and gives him her breast.
Sometimes she presses him to her heart.

Singing of his child-play, she is happily absorbed
in drinking the nectar of love.

Behind the clouds, Brahma, Shiva, sages and the
gods look on with happiness.

Tulsidas says, no one but Kausalya even had such
bliss.³⁹

Analogous to the mother-child interplay, or rather as its extension, we find a third theme in Bhakti literature, in which the child is at the centre of an admiring circle of adults. If the mother is in the foreground, then the background consists of the adults in the community—the *gopis* of Gokul, the citizens of Ayodhya—milling around him. This particular theme reveals the child's primary need to be central to his world, rather than exist forlornly at its outskirts, to cause a glow in the eyes of adults rather than be looked at with indifference.

In medieval Bhakti literature then, the child is truly an exalted being. To grow up at the centre of his human world, absorbed in interplay with the mother, admired for his spontaneity and self-delight, seem to be the poet's conception of a child's 'birthright'—the utopia of Indian childhood.

Stages of Childhood in the Indian Tradition

The conceptualization of the human life cycle unfolding in a series of stages, with each stage having its unique 'tasks'

and the need for an orderly progression through the stages, is an established part of traditional Indian thought, best exemplified in the well-known scheme of *ashramadharma*.⁴⁰ *Ashramadharma*, however, focuses largely on the period of youth and adulthood, and neglects to assign any formal importance to the stages of childhood. For an understanding of how these stages have been envisioned in the Indian tradition, we must turn to *Ayurveda* and the ritual literature that describes the childhood *samskaras*—the expressive and symbolic performances, including rites and ceremonies that are so to speak held over the child and mark his transition from one stage to another. Parenthetically, I should perhaps add that the concept of a child developing through a series of stages requiring differential treatment by his caretakers, a notion that some historians of Western childhood consider 'modern', has always been a part of Indian folk-consciousness. It is expressed through such proverbs as 'Treat a son like a king for the first five years, like a slave for the next ten, and like a friend thereafter.'

The contribution of *Ayurveda* to the Indian image of childhood stages lies in its formal recognition of different periods of childhood and its assignment of 'appropriate' ages to each period. Consistent with the belief that life begins with conception rather than at birth, *Ayurveda* identifies five such childhood periods: (1) *Garbha*, or the foetal period; (2) *Ksheerada* (0-6 months), when the infant lives entirely on milk; (3) *Ksheerannada* (6 months-2 years), the period of early childhood in which weaning takes place; (4) *Bala* (2-5 years); and (5) *Kumara* (5-16) years.⁴¹ As we shall see, this division of childhood is reflected and affirmed by ritual literature, insofar as the major rituals of childhood take place at ages that mark the transition from one period to another.)

Looking at the timing and content of the various childhood *samskaras*, it appears that one of the major thrusts of these rituals is the gradual integration of the child into a society, with the *samskaras*, as it were, beating time to the measured movement that takes the child away from the

original mother-infant symbiosis into full-fledged membership in his community. Psychologically, through their periodic ritual reassurance of familiarity and mutuality, the *samskaras* seek to counteract the child's regressive longings and primal fears of abandonment and separation, which are invariably activated in the transition from one stage of life to another. By ceremoniously marking the transition points of a widening world of childhood and placing the child at the centre of rites that also command the intense participation of the whole family, the *samskaras* heighten a sense of both belonging and personal distinctiveness—that is, they strengthen the child's budding sense of identity.⁴² Let us look at the major *samskaras* that mark the critical points of social development more closely.

A month after birth, in the naming rite of *namakarana*, the mother and infant emerge from the seclusion of the maternity room into the bustle of an expectant family, as the mother ceremoniously places the baby in the father's lap for the name-giving ceremony.⁴³ From the family, the mother and infant move into the wider world in the third or fourth month with the performance of *nishakarna*, the child's first outing or 'looking at the sun' and 'looking at the moon', as the texts poetically describe the infant's ritual introduction to the world and the cosmos. Between the sixth and ninth months, there is the important rite of *annaprasana*, the first time the child is given solid food, thus marking the onset of weaning and its psychological counterpart—the process of the child's individuation and separation from the mother.)

If these rites are any guide, the process of individuation is deemed complete by the third year. At three, the child's 'psychological birth' is marked by the important rites of *chudakarana* or tonsure. The child is generally taken to the temple of a mother goddess (to the bank of a river in some regions) and his baby hair shaved and offered to the goddess. He is then dressed up in new clothes, which are a miniature replica of the clothes worn by adult members of his community. The symbolism of death and rebirth—in our terms, the death of the mother-infant symbiosis and the

psychological birth of the child as a separate individual—is at the heart of the many rituals connected with *chudakarama*. Thus, for instance, in the Bhojpuri region of northern India, before the child's head is shaved and he is dressed in new clothes, the women of the family take the child to the Ganges and ceremoniously cross the river in a boat.⁴⁴ Moreover, the folk songs sung at the time of *mundan* (as the *samskara* is called in north India) are the *sokras*, the songs that are also sung at birth. In the popular tradition, it is only after the child's tonsure that he is considered ready for the process of discipline and the family's socialization efforts.

The rite of *vidyarambha* between the fifth and seventh years, when the child is supposed to be old enough to learn to read and write, is followed by the major *samskara* of *upanayana*. *Upanayana* marks the culmination, the grand end of childhood. Traditionally performed (depending upon the caste) anywhere between the eighth and twelfth year, *upanayana* initiates the child's 'social birth' into the wider community. As a text puts it, 'Till a boy is eight years old he is like one newly born, and only indicates the caste in which he is born. As long as his *upanayana* ceremony is not performed the boy incurs no blame as to what is allowed or forbidden.'⁴⁵ The initiation ceremony is elaborate, its preparatory rites designed to drive home the fact of the child's separation from his family and the final break with his mother. In its traditional version, the child is smeared with a yellowish paste and expected to spend the whole night in a pitch-dark room in absolute silence—a re-creation of the embryonic state—before he emerges the next morning for one of the most moving and poignant ceremonies of this *samskara*, the sharing of a meal with his mother, which is the last time the mother and son will ever eat together. Thus although as an initiation rite, *upanayana* contains many rituals symbolising a hopeful beginning, it nevertheless also clearly marks the regretted end of a familial and familiar world—the world of childhood.

The question of the extent to which this traditional image

of the stages of childhood remains part of modern consciousness is difficult to answer with any certainty. We do know that most of the childhood *samskaras*, especially those of birth, tonsure and initiation, are performed in the case of boys of the upper and intermediate castes in the same order and at approximately the same ages as outlined above.⁴⁶

In fact, the omnibus reference to the 'child' in the discussion of the stages of childhood in the Indian tradition conceals two omissions: girls and children belonging to the lower castes have been largely excluded from this tradition—as indeed women and the lower castes have been excluded from most of the prescriptions and formulations of the Hindu tradition. To take just one example, the *sokras*—the joyous songs of celebration sung at the birth of a child in the Hindi-speaking belt—are almost never sung for newborn daughters. Indeed, many *sokras* express the mother's relief that this has not been the case and her worst fears have proven to be unfounded: 'As the *turijyan* leaf trembles with a gust of wind, my heart trembles at the thought that I may give birth to a daughter.'⁴⁷ With the proviso that 'child' primarily refers to a boy belonging to one of the upper castes and that the ages shown under each stage of childhood are only approximate or, more precisely, that they are the 'usual' ages,⁴⁸ the Hindu scheme of social development of the child can be schematically presented as in the chart below.)

Traditions of Childhood: Indian and Western

Considering its fateful implications for the lives of children—and adults—the highlighting of a society's traditions of childhood, the historically derived pattern of deprivations and compensations offered to its children, becomes an important task. For this task to be properly fulfilled, one would also expect that the Indian tradition of childhood would be compared and contrasted with the childhood traditions of other societies. Such a comparative perspective,

Stages of Childhood: The Hindu Scheme of Social Development ?

Childhood period	Stage	Central mode of relationship	Central mode of Rite marking transition into following stage
I. <i>Garbha</i>	1. Foetus	Symbiotic (' <i>dauhridya</i> ')	<i>Iatakarna</i>
II. <i>Ksheerda</i>	2. Early infancy (0-1 month)	Dyadic intimacy	<i>Namakarana</i>
	3. Middle infancy (1-3/4 months)	Dyad in family	<i>Nishakarmana</i>
	4. Late infancy (3/4-6/9 months)	Dyad in world	<i>Annaprasana</i>
III. <i>Ksheerannada</i>	4. Early childhood (6/9 months-2/3 years)	Dyadic dissolution (psychological birth)	<i>Chudakarana</i>
IV. <i>Bala</i>	6. Middle childhood (2/3-5/7 years)	Familial	<i>Vidyarambha</i>
V. <i>Kumara</i>	7. Late childhood (5/7-8/12 years)	Familial dissolution (social birth)	<i>Upanayana</i>

besides highlighting specific elements of one's own tradition can also be socially therapeutic insofar as it shows us the range of human caretaking patterns that lie between the necessary minimum to keep the child physically and emotionally alive and the anxious maximum beyond which the child's development is apt to be stunted. Such a systematic comparison with other traditions cannot be attempted here, especially since for most societies (including the Indian) the histories of childhood still remain to be written. In conclusion, therefore, I shall content myself with noting a few impressions of the contrast between the Indian and Western traditions of childhood.

For an Indian, the most striking aspect of recent Western scholarship on childhood is its depiction of an enduring ideological conflict between the rejecting and accepting attitudes toward the child.⁴⁹ Some Western scholars of childhood have discerned a definite movement within this conflict, a steady evolution that has made the Western ideology of the child increasingly humane and nurturant.⁵⁰ In Western antiquity and till perhaps the thirteenth century, adult attitudes toward children were generally dominated by an ideology that had little empathy for the needs of children. This ideology looked upon the child as a nuisance and an unwanted burden, perfunctorily tolerating brutal treatment of children by their parents as well as such associated phenomena as infanticide, the sale of children and their casual abandonment.⁵¹ It is, however, also demonstrable that there has been a gradual progression in the Western ideology of the child. From the earlier external suppression that permitted the grossest physical torture and when sexual abuse of children was commonplace, by the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the ideological emphasis was decisively shifting toward an *internal* suppression in which child training and discipline were stressed. Here, for instance, is how an eminent scholar of the American family describes attitudes toward the child in colonial America: 'And what of the young in colonial America? There remain from the period various books and essays on

the proper deportment of children, which convey some impression at least of what was expected. A central theme in these works—especially, but not exclusively, in the writings of the Puritans—is the need to impose strict discipline on the child virtually from the beginning of life. Here is the advice of Reverend John Robinson, a leading preacher among the Pilgrims just prior to their departure for America: "Surely there is in all children . . . a stubbornness and stoutness of mind arising from natural pride which must in the first place be broken and beaten down, so that the foundation of their education being laid in humility and tractableness, other virtues may in their time be built thereon." The key terms are "broken" and "beaten down". The child was regarded as coming into the world with an inherently corrupted and selfish nature, and this created the central problem for parents.¹²

(From parental efforts aimed at conquering the child's will, the Western ideology of caretaking progressed further towards according the child a greater freedom, as in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries awareness of the sensibilities and needs of children increased appreciably. This movement towards the fostering attitude continues unabated. The spate of recent books on the rights of children, the effect of working mothers on the development of children, "The Year of the Child" announced by the United Nations and so on, are some of the expressions of this progress; current manifestations of an old movement towards evolving an ideology of childhood which makes the child and its needs central to the caretaking process.)

(The conflict between the rejecting and fostering attitudes towards the child, so marked in the Western tradition and which perhaps provides it with its evolutionary impetus, is simply not a feature of the Indian tradition. As we have seen in this essay, the evidence from textual sources is overwhelming that the child in Indian tradition is ideologically considered a valuable and welcome human being to whom the adults are expected to afford their fullest protection, affection and indulgence. Consider, for instance, the

reflection of this ideology in linguistic usage where the notion of the child being autonomous and self-directing is much more pronounced than in English or German. In Hindi for example, what adults do to children is *palna* *posna*—protecting—nurturing; they are not 'reared', 'brought up'. With its implications of training the child, teaching him to conform to social norms and 'channeling his impulses', the model of *socialization* (which governs contemporary Western caretaking) is a logical next step in a historical evolution where the preceding model was that of disciplining and conquering the child's will. In its general orientation and focus, such a model is necessarily foreign to the Indian tradition that did not have to overcome an original burden of rejection of children. In fact, as we saw in our discussion of the child-utopia that is reflected in Bhakti songs and poems, there is a specific stream in the Indian tradition of childhood that values precisely those attributes of the child which have not been 'socialized'. In this tradition, it is the child who is considered nearest to a perfect, divine state and it is the adult who needs to learn the child's mode of experiencing the world. Here the proper form of interaction between adults and children is not conceived of in terms of socialization but *interplay*. Closer to that Indian tradition, interplay as a paradigm of growing up would emphasise the *adult-child unit*, concern itself with their *mutual* learning and mutual pleasure in each other. It would thus sharply differ from the socialization model that concentrates solely on the child and his movement toward adulthood.)

Before losing ourselves in any self-congratulatory panegyrics, we must also note the gravest drawback of the Indian tradition—its relative rejection of girls. By rejection I do not mean to imply that the texts we have considered show any great hostility or contain instances of dramatic and overt violence toward female children. Even in the myths of abandonment of children in the *Mahabharata*, Menaka's abandonment of her new-born daughters Pramdavara and Shakuntala is counterbalanced by Kunti abandoning the

infant Karna. It is more in its exaggerated emphasis on sons, in the joyous din at the birth of male children, that the silent rejection of female infants stands out so clearly and has had such grave consequences for Indian women and society.⁵³ Again, by 'grave consequences' I am not alluding to the failure of Indian tradition to erect an ideological bulwark against female infanticide among certain castes at certain periods of history. Infanticide by sheer violence has probably always been exceptional all over the world. Rejection, or at best, ambivalence toward girls has always worked (and continues to do so) in a more subtle and insidious manner. It is reflected in statistics that show a higher rate of female infant mortality and underlies the crushed spirit of countless women for which no statistics but only folk-songs are available. Without the removal of this ambivalence toward the female child, without an ideological change that will ensure society's protection and nurturance to *all* its children, the Indian tradition of childhood, with all its dazzling 'achievement', remains gravely flawed.)

Indian Childhood: Contemporary Reality

The question now arises whether the nurturant ideology, generally characteristic of the Indian tradition of childhood, still informs adult relationships with (male) children in India today and the exact way Indian 'child-centredness' manifests itself in the process of socialization.

I should first note that I am 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, caste, class and regional sub-identities. Many social scientists might argue that in such a situation generalizations should not be attempted at all without a national sample survey of parental beliefs, attitudes and actions. Other observers, both Indian and foreign, impressed by what seems to be a hard-core unity in the diversity of Hindu culture, have argued that national sample statistics may be helpful in such an

effort but are not essential.⁵⁴ Indeed, there are a number of accounts of childhood and child rearing practices in different castes and classes from all over India—anthropological studies of growing up in villages in many parts of the country, sociological studies of child-rearing practices in a few towns and cities (including a psychoanalytic study of slum children in the metropolis of Bombay)—which lead to the conclusion that certain tentative generalizations on childhood in traditional India, in the sense of describing a dominant mode in a variable range are indeed possible.⁵⁵ Parenthetically, I must also add that in the following observations, by 'Indian' I am primarily referring to Hindu India, although, in fact, other religious groups in India have been profoundly influenced by the dominant Hindu culture.

Almost all the above-mentioned accounts of child-rearing in India are unanimous in pointing out the great amount of nurturance and indulgence given to the child by his mother and other caretakers in the first years of his life. Constantly held, cuddled, crooned and talked to, the Indian infant's experience of his mother is a heady one, his contact with her of an intensity and duration that differentiates it markedly from the experience of infancy in the western world. At the slightest whimper or sign of distress the infant is picked up and rocked, or given the breast and comforted. An Indian mother is inclined towards a total indulgence of her infant's wishes and demands, whether these be related to feeding, cleaning, sleeping or being kept company. Moreover, she tends to extend this kind of mothering well beyond the time when the 'infant' is ready for independent functioning in many areas. Thus, for example, feeding is frequent, at all times of the day and night, and 'on demand'. And although breast feeding is supplemented with other kinds of food after the first year, the mother continues to give her breast to the child for as long as possible, often up to two or three years.⁵⁶

(Similarly, without any push from his mother or other members of the family, the Indian toddler proceeds at his

own pace to master the skills of walking, talking and dressing himself. By and large, then, minimal demands are placed on the Indian infant to master the world around him and to learn to function independently of the mother. The main emphasis in the early years of Indian childhood is avoidance of frustration and the enhancement of the pleasurable mutuality of mother and infant, not encouragement of the child's individuation and autonomy.

(The predisposition of an Indian mother to follow rather than lead in dealing with her child's inclinations and with his tempo of development does not spring from some universal component of maternal pride. In par, it reflects the facts of life in traditional India; given the infant mortality rate which used to range above twenty per cent, a surviving child (especially a son) was accorded by his mother and the family the most deferential care, for he would become the parents' source of economic support in later life and through his participation in the rituals of death and mourning, their guarantee of religious merit and righteous passage into the next life.) But above all, this quality of deference and indulgence in Indian motherhood has its origins in the identity development of Indian women which is strongly influenced by the cultural idealization and emphasis on motherhood as the predominant constituent of feminine identity. As I have described in detail elsewhere, an Indian girl is but a sojourner in her own family, and with marriage she becomes less a wife than a daughter-in-law. It is only with the all-important motherhood (especially of sons) that society recognizes her as a woman and accords her a respected place in the family, community and the life cycle.⁵⁷ This too accounts for her unique sense of maternal obligation and her readiness for practically unlimited emotional investment in her children.)

(Another source of the relaxed indulgence accorded to the child lies in the traditional Indian concept of the child. As noted earlier, the child in Indian tradition is not seen as a *tabula rasa* but as entering the world with 'innate' psychic dispositions from its previous life which have al-

ready been further shaped in a certain direction by its foetal experience. Because Hindus do not view infant nature as universal, or infinitely malleable, there is little pressure and no urgency to try to 'mould' a child in one or another parentally desired image. Insofar as even the new born is considered partially autonomous—in the sense of having been born with a specific psychic constellation—there is little social pressure to foster the belief that if only the caretakers were good enough, and constantly on their toes, the child's potentialities would be boundlessly fulfilled. With the cultural emphasis on the child's inner limits, the caretaking can afford to be relaxed and not be propelled by the sense of urgency which expects sudden metamorphoses and great achievements just around the corner.)

It is thus evident that in India the process of ego development takes place according to a model that differs sharply from the normative model of Western psychology. Relatively speaking, Indian children do not have a gradual, step-by-step experience of the many small frustrations and disappointments which would allow them to recognize a mother's limitations harmlessly, over some time. Rather her original perfection remains untarnished by reality, a part of the iconography of the Indian inner world. Thus, the detachment from the mother by degrees that is considered essential to the development of a strong, independent ego, since it allows a child almost imperceptibly to take over his mother's functions in relation to himself, is simply not a feature of early childhood in India. Elsewhere, I have discussed in detail (from a psychoanalytic perspective) the consequences of such an early childhood experience on Indian identity formation, its contribution to both the positive and negative aspects of his identity and its linkage with the predominant cultural and social concerns of Hindu India.⁵⁸ Here, I shall remain at the descriptive level and go on to describe a second characteristic feature of Indian childhood which, too, has important developmental consequences.

(In a psycho-social sense, the world of Indian childhood widens suddenly from the intimate cocoon of maternal pro-

tection to the unfamiliar masculine network woven by the demands and tensions of the men of the family. This 'entry into society' occurs in late childhood—anywhere from the fourth or fifth year onwards, and for the male child especially, involves a virtual reversal of everything that is expected of him. The most striking feature of this change is the *contrast* between an earlier, more or less unchecked benevolent indulgence and the new inflexible standards of absolute obedience and conformity to familial and social standards. As an anthropological account of a Hyderabad village describes the male child's 'second birth': 'The liberty that he was allowed during his early childhood is increasingly curtailed. Now the accent is on good behaviour and regular habits. The child is more frequently spanked for being troublesome. As he grows older the discipline becomes more and more difficult. At first he was punished for being "troublesome" or "crying without reason" but now he has to distinguish clearly between things to be done and things not to be done.'⁵⁰ This is the 'slave' stage referred to in the North-Indian proverb cited earlier.

Whereas until this time, the male child is enveloped in, and often overpowered by, his mother's protective nurturing and love—a love abundantly lavished (and ideally unconditional)—whatever approval or appreciation he can now hope to receive from the men in the family who now take responsibility for his care and instruction is much more qualified. Relationships become more businesslike, and affection is a token in each transaction. It is conditional upon the boy's behaviour, something he has to earn by learning the formalities of correct relationships with each member of the family according to his or her rank and status, and by conforming to the norms of family and caste behaviour. 'Interplay' is replaced by 'socialization'—with a vengeance.

This critical shift takes place, of course, in a psychosocial dimension; it is one of the emotional frontiers of the inner world of experience. Insofar as the daily logistics of eating, playing, sleeping and taking care of himself are concerned, the four-or five-year-old Indian boy retains for a while

longer the leeway to be with his sisters and to seek out his mother. Although he must spend even more time in the exclusive company of boys and men, going back to his mother less and less for reassurance, he begins to learn to dilute his need for emotional support and succouring and to turn for these things to one of the grandparents perhaps, or to an uncle and aunt, since emotional access to the father is generally limited. This is due to the fact that the strength and cohesion of the extended family (the dominant family type in India—at least ideologically) depend upon a certain psychosocial diffusion; it is essential that nuclear cells do not build up within the family or at the very least, that these cells do not involve intense emotional loyalties that potentially exclude other family members and their interests. Thus, the principles of Indian family life (deriving from the extended family and strongly influencing even the nuclear families) demand that a father be restrained in the presence of his own son and divide his interest and support equally among his own and the others' sons. The culturally prescribed pattern of restraint between fathers and sons is widespread in India, sufficiently so to constitute a psychosocial norm.⁶⁰ For a boy, this results in a process of intimacy diffusion, the replacement of an intense nurturing attachment to the mother with a variety of less intense relationships with any number of others in the extended family circle, and marks this stage of masculine identity development in India.⁶¹

Female Childhood

As in other societies, it is at this advanced stage of early childhood that the cultural expectations of boys and girls begin to diverge radically. The Indian daughter is not severed from the company of her mother and the other women in the household, although like her brothers, she is given new, 'grown up' household tasks and responsibilities. But unlike her brothers, she continues to be cared for by her mother, albeit more casually than before, as she gradually learns to

be like her mother by taking care of herself as well as the other younger children in the family. Late childhood also marks the beginning of an Indian girl's deliberate training in how to be a good woman, and hence the conscious inculcation of culturally designated feminine roles. She learns that the 'virtues' of womanhood which will take her through life are submission and docility as well as skill and grace in various household tasks. M. N. Srinivas, for example, reports on the training of young girls in Mysore in Southern India:

It is the mother's duty to train her daughter up to be an absolutely docile daughter-in-law. The *summum bonum* of a girl's life is to please her parents-in-law and her husband. If she does not 'get on' with her mother-in-law, she will be a disgrace to her family, and cast a blot on the fair name of her mother. The Kannada mother dins into her daughter's ears certain ideals which make for harmony (at the expense of her sacrificing her will) in her later life.⁶²

In the *bratas*, the periodical days of fasting and prayer which unmarried young girls keep all over India, the girl's wishes for herself are almost always in relation to others; she asks the boon of being a good daughter, good wife, good daughter-in-law, good mother and so forth. Thus, in addition to the 'virtues' of self-effacement and self-sacrifice, the socialization for the feminine role in India also crystallizes a woman's connection with others, her 'embeddedness' in a multitude of familial relationships.

Perhaps this is also the place to examine the influence of the culturally sanctioned devaluation of girls—the traditional preference for sons over daughters—on female childhood in India. The discrimination against girls is certainly reflected in the statistical documentation that calls attention to the fact that whatever health care and schooling is available in India, daughters are the last to receive it.⁶³ Yet the available data—chiefly from clinical and anthropological accounts—also points to the conclusion that there are certain important factors that considerably mitigate the effects of this cultural inequity on the emotional development of girls.

(First, from anthropological accounts and other sources, we know of the special kind of lenient affection and often com-

passionate attention bestowed by mothers on their infant daughters.⁶⁴ 'I turn the stone flour mill with the swiftness of a running deer; that is because my arms are strong with the mother's milk I drank.'⁶⁵ This, and other couplets like it, sung by women all over India, bear witness to the daughter's memory of her mother's affection for her and to the self-esteem and strength of will this has generated in turn. Thus, in infancy, the most radical period of emotional development, Indian girls are assured of their worth by those who really matter: by their mothers.

In addition to her mother's empathic connection with her, as an Indian girl grows up her relationships with others within the extended family further tend to dilute any resentment she may harbour against her brothers. Among the many adults who comprise an Indian family there is almost always someone in particular who gives a little girl the kind of admiration and sense of being singled out as special that a male child more often receives from many. And of course when a girl is the only daughter, such chances are increased immeasurably. Thus in folk-tales, however many sons a couple may have, there is often one daughter in their midst who is the parents' favourite.

Finally, in traditional India, every female is born into a well-defined community of women within her particular family. Although it by no means always resounds with solidarity and good will, the existence of this discrete sphere of femininity and domesticity gives women a tangible opportunity to be productive and lively, to experience autonomy and to exercise power. It also allows a special kind of inviolate feminine privacy. Getting along with other women in this sphere, learning the mandatory skills of householding, cooking and child care, establishing her place in this primary world: these relationships and these tasks constitute the daily routine of girlhood in India. Moreover, the activities that transpire in this feminine sphere are independent of the patriarchal values of the outside world. And when necessary, other women in the family—her mother, grandmother, aunts, sisters and sisters-in-law—are not only an Indian girl's tea-

chers and models but her allies against the discriminations and inequities of that world and its values. Often enough, in the 'underground' of female culture, as reflected in ballads, wedding songs and jokes, women do indeed react against the discriminations of their culture by portraying men as vain, faithless and infantile. All these factors help to mitigate (if not to prevent) the damage to a girl's self-esteem when she discovers that in the eyes of the culture she is considered inferior to a boy, a discovery which usually coincides with the awareness of gender identity in late childhood. From my own clinical experiences, I find that the effect of 'sexism' is perhaps more marked on the emotional development of girls growing up in urban nuclear families who do not have the shield of the traditional feminine 'sub-culture' to protect them from the patriarchal values of the surrounding society.

Concluding Remarks

In this essay, I have attempted to describe the traditional Indian ideas concerning the child and how these ideas have influenced the contemporary reality of childhood. We saw that cultural prescriptions relating to childhood possess an enduring continuity that informs the behaviour of adult caretakers to a considerable extent. However, we also noted that 'what ought to be' does not always coincide with 'what is'. Thus, for instance, the postulated norm of complete and total indulgence of the child is at best limited to the period of infancy and early childhood and gets replaced by vigorous efforts at socialization once the child has crossed a certain age. Similarly, the relative rejection of girl children in the Indian tradition does not have markedly deleterious effects on the identity development of girls, mainly because of certain mitigating factors present in the reality of female childhood.

In conclusion, I must re-emphasise that my observations on Indian childhood were confined to the traditional sector of India's population. Changes in family structure, parental beliefs and attitudes that may have taken place in the small

'modern sector' or may be taking place in the larger transitional sector have been beyond the scope of this paper. The information on the nature and extent of these changes is largely absent and their possible effect on children and childhood is still a matter of speculation.

Notes and References

1. I shall be greatly surprised if *jatakarma*, the Hindu birth ritual, has ever taken place exactly in the same way as I have described it above. I have constructed the birth and the ritual from the texts of Ayurvedic medicine and the elaborately detailed instructions given in the *Grihasutras*, the ancient texts which contain directions for the various *samskaras*—the mandatory nexus of ceremonies, sacraments and rites which accompany a Hindu from the moment of his conception in the womb till the hour of death, and even further through the funeral ceremonies beyond death. In actual practice, of course, depending upon the region, the caste and the historical period, many of the prescribed *samskaras* including the one at birth, have been shortened and condensed, blended with others or omitted altogether.
2. Excepting the folk songs, this material essentially belongs to the literate traditions of the upper castes. Yet, as Kosambi has pointed out in another context, such traditions are basically much the same in many lower groups; their continuous and continuing survival in large sections of society being one of the most distinctive features of Indian culture. See D. D. Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical Outline*, New Delhi: Vikas, 1970, p. 16.
3. See George Buhler (tr.), *The Laws of Manu in Sacred Books of the East* (F. Max Mueller, ed.) Vol. XXV, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1886; III, 114; VIII, 66-71; IX, 283.
4. *Ibid.*, V, 67-71.
5. *Ibid.*, III, 114.
6. *Ibid.*, IV, 179.
7. *Ibid.*, IV, 282-3.
8. *Ibid.*, VIII, 299-300; IX, 230.
9. See Jerome Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940, Chapter IV on 'Marriage, Woman and the Family'.
10. Richard B. Lyman, Jr., 'Barbarism and Religion: Late Roman and Early Medieval Childhood', in L. De Mause (ed.), *The History of Childhood*, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1975, p. 84.
11. *Caraka Samhita* with Hindi translation by Jaideva Vidyalkar, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1975, Sarira 2: 33-6.

12. *Caraka, Sarira* 4: 15-9.
13. See Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, *Science and Society in Ancient India*, Calcutta: R.I. Publishers, 1977, who has emphasised this fact.
14. The Ayurvedic view is identical to that of modern psychoanalysis which holds that in early life the infant must be thought of, 'not as an individual but only as a part of a nurturing unit, from which he gradually differentiates, as an individual, with the mothering partner serving as a catalyst and a living buffer': Margaret Mahler, *On Human Symbiosis and the Vicissitudes of Individuation*, New York: International Universities Press, 1968, p. 229.
15. *Caraka, Sarira* 8:96.
16. *Susruta, Sarira* 10:38.
17. See, for instance, *Mahabharata* (M. N. Dutta, tr.), 12 vols., Calcutta: Oriental Publishing Co., n.d., vol. 1, pp. 107-8; vol. 2, p. 217; vol. 11, p. 4, p. 55, p. 87.
18. *Ibid.*, vol. 1 (*Adi Parva*), pp. 107-8.
19. *Ibid.*, vol. 2 (*Sabha Parva*), p. 217.
20. *Ibid.*, vol. 1 (*Adi Parva*), p. 510.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 177-8.
22. *Ibid.*, vol. IV (*Udyog Parva*), p. 210.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 374-5.
24. *Ibid.*, vol. IX (*Santi Parva*), p. 105.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 349.
27. See for instance, vol. 1 (*Adi Parva*), p. 177; vol. IX (*Santi Parva*), p. 267, p. 269.
28. *Ibid.*, vol. X (*Anusasna Parva*), p. 155.
29. Bhavbhuti, *Uttara Rama-Charita*, 6:13 and 6:22; Banbhattacha, *Harshacarita*, 5:99.
30. Kalidasa, *Raghuvamsha*: 3: 45-6.
31. Srinivas Sharma, *Adhunik Hindi Kavya Vatsalya Rasa*, quoted in Chandrabhan Rawat, *Sur Sahitya*, Mathura: Jawahar Pustakalaya, 1967, p. 230.
32. Rawat, *Sur Sahitya*, p. 229 (my translation).
33. Jadunath Sinha (ed.), *Ramaprasad's Devotional Songs*, Calcutta: Sinha, 1966, p. 7.
34. David R. Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute: Kali and Krishna, Dark Visions of the Terrible and the Sublime in Hindu Mythology*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975, pp. 12-19.

35. Surdas, *Sursagarsar*, Verma, D. (ed.), Allahabad: Sahitya Bhawan, 1972, p. 59 (my translation).
36. Goswami Tulidas, *Kavitavali* (R.P. Tripathi, ed.), Allahabad: Bharati Niketan, n.d., p. 3 (my translation).
37. This is Huizinga's phrase to describe human play; quoted in Erik H. Erikson, *Toys and Reasons*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1977, p. 43.
38. Surdas, p. 57.
39. Tulidas, *Gitaavali* (translated in Hindi by V.N. Prasad), Gorakhpur: Gita Press, n.d., pp. 30-40 (my translation).
40. For a comparison of *ashmadharma* with a modern scheme of psychosocial development see my 'The Human Life Cycle. Traditional Hindu View and the Psychology of Erik Erikson', *Philosophy East and West*, 18(3), 1968.
41. V.B. Athavale, *Balaveda*, Bombay: Pediatric Clinics of India, 1977, p. 1.
42. For a discussion of the psychology of rituals and ritualization see Erik H. Erikson, 'Ontogeny of Ritualization in Man' in *Psychoanalysis—A General Psychology* (R. M. Loewenstein et al. eds.), New York: International Universities Press, 1966, pp. 601-6.
43. The contents of the *samskaras* have been extensively described in Raj B. Pandey, *Hindu Samskaras*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidas, 1969.
44. See R. Sankrantyan and D.K. Upadhyaya (eds.) *Hindi Sahitya Ka Vrihat Itihas*, Kashi: Nagaripracharni Sabha, vol. 16 (part 3), 19, p. 111.
45. P.V. Kane, *History of Dharmashastra*, Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, vol. 2 (part 1), 1933, p. 180.
46. In a study of growing up in 700 families in the urban complex of Poona, Champa Aphale tells us that *namakarana* was generally celebrated except in some families in the case of girls; *nishakarmana* was confined to the children of upper and intermediate castes, *annaprasana* was omitted in the case of lower castes and *chudakarana* (*caula munda* in the local language) was universally performed except for girls of the upper castes. Girls were also excluded from the rite of *upanayana* which is not performed for boys belonging to the lower castes either. See Champa Aphale, *Growing Up in an Urban Complex*, New Delhi: National, 1976, pp. 53-6.
47. *Hindi Sahitya Ka Vrihat Itihas*, p. 16.
48. In the literature on the *samskaras*, the age at which a particular *samskara* should be performed is not laid down with great

rigidity but is flexible within certain, albeit wide limits. Chronological flexibility, however, is characteristic of all schemes of 'stages of development'—Freud's stages of psychosexual development, Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, Piaget's stages of cognitive development and so on. As with these schemes, the Hindu ritual literature too gives us the earliest possible age for a given transition, the latest possible one and, sometimes, the optimal one.

49. In this connection, see the various contributions in *The History of Childhood*, and especially de Mause's review essay 'The Evolution of Childhood', pp. 1-73.
50. de Mause identifies the following childrearing models: 1. Infanticidal (Antiquity to 4th century A.D.); 2. Abandonment (4th-13th century); 3. Ambivalent (13th-17th century); 4. Intrusive (18th century); 5. Socialization (19th-Mid-20th century); 6. Helping (Begins mid-20th century): See de Mause, 'The Evolution of Childhood', pp. 51-4.
51. For example, as William Langer has shown, infanticide (contrary to the popular assumption that it was solely an Eastern practice) of both legitimate and illegitimate children was a regular practice in Western antiquity: See William L. Langer, 'Infanticide: A Historical Survey', *History of Childhood Quarterly*, 1 (3), pp. 353-65. In fact, it has been established that the killing of legitimate children in Europe was only slowly reduced during the Middle Ages and that illegitimate children continued to be regularly killed right into the 19th century: See de Mause, *Evolution of Childhood*, p. 25.
52. John Demos, 'The American Family in Past Time', *American Scholar*, 43 (3), 1974, p. 427.
53. I have discussed some of these psychological consequences in *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1978, Chapter III.
54. Thus, for instance, David McClelland in his study of Indian attitudes to power observes: 'To me a culture is a shared cognitive system. Members of the culture learn to operate in terms of this system often quite unconsciously, in much the same way as they learn to speak the language correctly—that is, according to the implicit rules of the linguistic system—they may be quite unable to formulate those rules and describe them to an outsider. It is the job of the behavioral science observer—the anthropologist, sociologist or psychologist—to try to discover those rules and formulate them as simply and parsimoniously as possible.'

See D. McClelland, *Power: The Inner Experience*, New York: Vintage, 1975, p. 125.

See for a select bibliography of these studies, which have been considered in my own work on Indian childhood, *The Inner World*, pp. 204-10. For two other important studies not included in the above bibliography see D.M. Bassa, 'From the Traditional to the Modern: Some Observations on Changes in Indian Child-Rearing and Parental Attitudes, with Special Reference to Identity Formation', in E. J. Anthony and C. Chiland (eds.), *The Child in this Family: Children and Their Parents in a Changing World*, New York: J. Wiley, 1978, pp. 333-44 and Champa Aphale, *Growing Up in an Urban Complex*.

In his Bombay Study, Bassa, p. 337, observes: 'In one sample of 25 slum children, 18 were still at the breast at 15 months. The average age of weaning from breast or bottle was 17.3 months. Full switch-over to solids had not taken place at 20 months and was delayed in some until 30 months. Experience with most other children except perhaps those from very Westernised families was similar.' Bassa also comments on the relative infrequency of child abuse in this economically deprived group.

Kakar, *The Inner World*, pp. 56-79.

Ibid., pp. 103-12.

S.C. Dube, *Indian Village*, New York: Harper & Row, 1967, p. 149.

See D.G. Mandelbaum, *Society in India*, vol. 1, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970, p. 60; A.C. Mayer, *Caste and Kinship and Central India*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970, p. 218; A.D. Ross, *The Hindu Family in its Urban Setting*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962, p. 100.

For a psychoanalytic discussion of some of the consequences of the 'second birth'—fragmented male identifications, the lifelong search for specific kinds of relationship to authority figures and so on—see Kakar, *The Inner World*, pp. 126-39.

M.N. Srinivas, *Marriage and Family in Mysore*, Bombay: New Book Co., 1942, p. 195.

Indian Council of Social Science Research, *Status of Women in India: A Synopsis of the Report of the National Committee on the Status of Women*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1975, pp. 140-75.

See Kakar, *The Inner World*, Chapter III, Footnote 22, p. 194. Karve, *Kinship Organization in India* 3rd ed. Bombay: Asia, 1968, p. 205.