

The Child as Knowledge-Bearer: Childhood, Education and Ethical Formation through the Lens of Indian Knowledge Systems, with Special Reference to the Bhāgavata Purāṇa

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Abstract

Childhood Studies has increasingly challenged the assumption that childhood constitutes a universal, homogeneous and purely biological stage of human development. Scholars have instead demonstrated that childhood is culturally, historically and socially constructed, and that children should be examined not merely as passive recipients of adult care but as participants in social, cultural and epistemic processes. Such approaches, however, have comparatively underexplored pre-colonial South Asian textual traditions. This article examines the construction of childhood through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), with particular reference to the Bhāgavata Purāṇa. It argues that the text presents childhood not simply as a period of biological immaturity preceding adulthood but as a distinctive ethical, epistemic, relational and spiritual condition. Through close readings of the narratives of Dhruva and Prahlāda, the article investigates childhood agency, pedagogical relationships, knowledge transmission, ethical formation and the child's relationship with adult authority. Dhruva's transformation from an emotionally wounded child into an autonomous spiritual seeker demonstrates the relationship between vulnerability, mentorship and self-cultivation. Prahlāda's educational experience is even more significant: although formally positioned as a pupil, he becomes an interpreter and transmitter of knowledge and teaches his fellow children. The article proposes the concept of 'epistemic childhood agency' to describe this textual configuration. By bringing the Bhāgavata Purāṇa into dialogue with contemporary Childhood Studies and IKS discourse, the study argues that Indic textual traditions offer a culturally situated model in which education seeks not merely cognitive development but the integrated formation of knowledge, character, discernment and ethical responsibility. The paper nevertheless avoids romanticising the pre-modern past and acknowledges the plurality, hierarchy and exclusions present in historical Indic societies.

Keywords: Childhood Studies; Indian Knowledge Systems; Bhāgavata Purāṇa; Dhruva; Prahlāda; child agency; education; pedagogy; ethical formation; epistemic agency; Sanskrit literature

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1. Introduction

Childhood is frequently treated as a self-evident category. A child is commonly imagined as a human being who is biologically immature, dependent upon adults, undergoing cognitive development and preparing for the responsibilities of adulthood. Contemporary Childhood Studies has demonstrated, however, that such a conception is neither timeless nor culturally neutral. Childhood is also a social institution, a cultural representation, a legal category, a pedagogical construct and a field of relations between children and adults. Martin Woodhead's influential mapping of Childhood Studies emphasises the multidisciplinary character of the field and the importance of understanding childhood within particular social and cultural contexts rather than treating it as an invariant biological condition (Woodhead 2008).

This conceptual shift has significant implications for the study of pre-colonial South Asia. If childhood is culturally constituted, then the categories through which modern scholars understand childhood cannot automatically be projected backwards onto Sanskrit, Pāli, Prakrit, Tamil, Persian or other pre-colonial textual traditions. The question is not merely whether ancient or medieval societies possessed a concept corresponding exactly to the modern category of 'Childhood.' A more productive question is how different textual cultures represented young persons, what capacities they attributed to them, how they regulated their relationships with adults, and what forms of knowledge, responsibility and agency they associated with different stages of life.

Karín Lesnik-Oberstein's critique is particularly relevant here. Her work demonstrates that the figure of the 'Child' is itself constructed through adult cultural discourse, and that apparently natural understandings of childhood may encode particular educational, psychological and ideological assumptions (Lesnik-Oberstein 1993; 1998). Paula Fass similarly demonstrates that even within Western history there is no single, continuous history of childhood; childhood has been differently configured according to period, social class, gender, family, labour, education and political institutions.

The problem becomes especially important in the Indian context. Krishna Kumar has pointed to the limitations of studying Indian childhood through conceptual frameworks largely inherited from European intellectual history. His discussion of childhood in India draws attention to the significance of gender, caste, family, education and cultural practices and warns against treating 'the European child' as the implicit universal standard against which other childhoods are measured. Sarada Balagopalan similarly demonstrates how colonialism transformed the conceptual and institutional conditions through which particular Indian childhoods came to be represented, particularly in relation to education and labour.

The study of pre-colonial Indian childhoods therefore requires a methodological approach capable of taking textual representations seriously without assuming that literary narratives provide transparent historical evidence about the everyday lives of children. Religious and literary texts do not simply document social reality. They construct ideals, dramatize conflicts, encode values and imagine possibilities. Nevertheless, they can reveal how a culture conceptualised age, maturity, learning, authority, vulnerability, moral responsibility and personhood.

Within this context, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) offer a productive interpretive framework. IKS is understood here not as a monolithic or historically uniform body of knowledge, but as a broad designation for the diverse intellectual traditions that developed in India across philosophy, education, language, logic, medicine, mathematics, arts, ethics, spirituality and other domains. Contemporary Indian educational policy has encouraged the integration of IKS into curricula, while UGC guidelines describe Indian Knowledge Systems as knowledge traditions developed systematically in India over generations and emphasise engagement with primary texts, philosophical foundations and their application to contemporary educational contexts.

The present study does not claim that the Bhāgavata Purāṇa used the modern institutional term 'Indian Knowledge Systems.' Rather, IKS is employed as a contemporary analytical category through which the epistemological, pedagogical and ethical resources of the text can be examined. This distinction is essential to avoid anachronism.

The central argument of this article is that the Bhāgavata Purāṇa offers a complex construction of childhood in which young age does not necessarily imply epistemic incapacity. Children can be vulnerable and powerful, dependent and autonomous, learners and teachers, recipients and transmitters of knowledge. Through the narratives of Dhruva and Prahlāda, childhood becomes a space in which emotional experience, knowledge, ethical choice, spiritual practice and social relationships interact.

The paper consequently proposes the concept of epistemic childhood agency: the capacity attributed to children within a textual tradition to receive, interpret, evaluate, embody and transmit knowledge, and to act upon that knowledge in ways that affect themselves and others. The concept does not imply that children possess unrestricted autonomy. Rather, it recognises that agency can operate within relationships of dependence, pedagogy, family authority and social regulation.

2. Childhood as a Culturally Constructed Category

The emergence of modern Childhood Studies has substantially altered the scholarly understanding of children. Earlier approaches frequently treated childhood primarily through developmental psychology, biological maturation or adult-centred institutions. Contemporary approaches have expanded the field by asking how children participate in the production of their social worlds.

Woodhead's formulation of Childhood Studies as a multidisciplinary field is particularly useful because it prevents childhood from being reduced to a single disciplinary object. Childhood can simultaneously be studied through history, anthropology, sociology, literature, psychology, education and cultural studies. The implication for textual traditions is that literary representations of children deserve examination not merely as illustrations of psychological development but as cultural constructions of personhood and social relationships.

Lesnik-Oberstein goes further by questioning the apparent transparency of the category 'child.' Her analysis demonstrates that representations of childhood are produced through adult discourse and therefore require critical interpretation. This insight is particularly important for

pre-modern religious literature because the majority of textual sources were authored, transmitted and interpreted within adult institutions. The absence of children's own written voices cannot therefore be interpreted straightforwardly as evidence of children's social absence.

The category of childhood is also internally differentiated. Gender, caste, class, religious affiliation, geographical location, family structure and economic circumstances produce different childhood experiences. Kumar's analysis of Indian childhood demonstrates that gendered and caste-based processes of socialisation complicate any attempt to construct a homogeneous Indian childhood. Contemporary scholarship on children's labour in India likewise cautions against universalising models that separate childhood categorically from productive activity, arguing that children's lives must be situated within particular socio-economic and cultural contexts. This plurality is crucial for interpreting Sanskrit texts. A royal prince, a forest-dwelling child, a student in a teacher's household, a divine child and a child born into a socially marginalised community cannot automatically be assumed to inhabit the same childhood. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa itself presents multiple childhood configurations. Dhruva is a royal child whose experience is shaped by palace hierarchy and family conflict. Prahlāda is the son of a powerful asura king and is placed within a political and pedagogical system designed to reproduce his father's worldview. Kṛṣṇa's childhood, by contrast, unfolds within the pastoral environment of Vraja and combines play, labour, danger, affection, divine power and community. The category 'childhood' therefore becomes plural rather than singular.

This insight corresponds with the broader methodological movement represented by Vanessa Sasson's *Little Buddhas*, which brought children and childhoods into sustained academic discussion within Buddhist Studies. The volume demonstrates that Buddhist textual and cultural traditions contain diverse configurations of children: child monastics, abandoned children, ideal sons, precocious children, girls undergoing education and children participating in religious institutions. The significance of this intervention extends beyond Buddhist Studies. It demonstrates that religious traditions should not be assumed to be indifferent to childhood merely because children do not occupy the centre of their doctrinal discourses. The same methodological principle can be applied to Sanskrit Purāṇic literature.

3. Indian Knowledge Systems and the Question of Childhood

The contemporary category of Indian Knowledge Systems provides an opportunity to revisit pre-colonial Indian intellectual traditions without reducing them to antiquarian objects. The UGC's Guidelines for Training/Orientation of Faculty on IKS explicitly emphasise the importance of engaging primary texts and understanding their underlying philosophical foundations. This orientation is relevant to childhood because education occupies a central position in many Indic intellectual traditions.

However, IKS should not be understood as a single pedagogical method or a homogeneous civilisational doctrine. The Indian subcontinent has historically contained multiple philosophical schools, religious traditions, linguistic communities, social formations and pedagogical institutions. Consequently, an IKS-based analysis of childhood must remain pluralistic and textually grounded.

Several concepts nevertheless provide useful analytical coordinates. First is Vidyā, knowledge understood not merely as accumulated information but as a transformative mode of understanding. Secondly, Jñāna may denote knowledge or insight whose value extends beyond instrumental utility. Thirdly, Dharma introduces an ethical dimension into education by linking knowledge with appropriate action and responsibility. Fourthly, Saṃskāra suggests processes of formation, cultivation and refinement. Finally, the Guru–Śiṣya Relationship presents learning as relational and transformative rather than exclusively institutional.

The Bhagavad Gītā's formulation of learning is instructive:

तद्विद्धि प्रणिपातेन परिप्रश्नेन सेवया ।

उपदेक्ष्यन्ति ते ज्ञानं ज्ञानिनस्तत्त्वदर्शिनः ॥(Bhagavad Gītā 4.34)

Knowledge is approached through humility, questioning and service, and is transmitted by those who have realised the truth.

This model is not simply a teacher-centred model. The presence of Paripraśna, sustained questioning, is significant. The learner is expected to inquire. The educational relationship is therefore dialogical, even though it remains asymmetrical in terms of experience and authority.

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa develops this educational imagination through narrative. The question is not merely how adults educate children but whether children can themselves become sites and agents of knowledge. The answer is emphatically affirmative in the cases of Dhruva and Prahlāda.

4. Dhruva: Childhood, Vulnerability and the Emergence of Agency

The narrative of Dhruva in the Fourth Skandha of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa begins with an intensely recognisable childhood experience: a child desires affection and recognition from his father.

Dhruva is presented as a young child. His stepmother Suruci rejects his attempt to approach the king and explicitly invokes his status as a child. The textual description is important because the narrative does not deny childhood vulnerability. Dhruva initially does not possess the social power of an adult. His position is dependent upon family structures and royal hierarchy. The text describes Suruci's words:

बालोऽसि बत नात्मानमन्यस्त्रीगर्भसम्भृतम् ।

नूनं वेद भवान् यस्य दुर्लभेऽर्थे मनोरथः ॥ (Bhāgavata Purāṇa 4.8.12)

Here the term Bāla explicitly marks Dhruva as a child. The episode therefore provides evidence that the text recognises childhood as a socially meaningful category.

Yet the narrative immediately complicates the implications of being a child. Dhruva's response to humiliation is neither passive acceptance nor merely emotional withdrawal. He seeks an alternative source of authority. He approaches his mother Sunīti, receives counsel and eventually encounters Nārada.

The movement is significant:

Family Vulnerability → Emotional Response → Maternal Guidance → Mentorship → Self-Directed Quest.

Dhruva's agency is relationally generated. He does not become autonomous by escaping all relationships; rather, his agency emerges through new relationships of instruction and guidance. This challenges an overly individualistic understanding of child agency. Agency need not mean independence from adults. A child can act meaningfully while embedded within networks of care, instruction and authority. Nārada's role is particularly important. He initially attempts to moderate Dhruva's determination, but eventually recognises the child's extraordinary resolve and provides him with a disciplined spiritual path. The child therefore moves from emotional injury to intentional practice.

The pedagogical process is transformative. Dhruva does not simply receive information from Nārada. He undertakes practice, disciplines his body and mind, concentrates his attention and transforms his original desire for recognition. This corresponds closely to the broader Indic understanding of education as self-formation. Education here is not merely the accumulation of external knowledge. It is the transformation of the learner. Dhruva's childhood therefore cannot be described adequately through the binary of 'dependent child' versus 'independent adult.' His agency is developmental, relational and ethical. His story also illustrates an important distinction between vulnerability and incapacity. Dhruva is vulnerable because he depends upon adults and occupies a subordinate position within his family. But vulnerability does not prevent him from making meaningful choices.

This distinction is highly relevant to contemporary Childhood Studies. Children's dependence should not automatically be equated with absence of agency. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa presents a young person whose vulnerability becomes the starting point of an extraordinary process of self-cultivation.

Dhruva's childhood thus contains at least four dimensions:

1. **Affective vulnerability** - the desire for parental recognition.
2. **Social dependency** - his position within the royal family.
3. **Epistemic development** - instruction received from Sunīti and Nārada.
4. **Transformative agency** - the decision to undertake disciplined spiritual practice.

The narrative consequently constructs childhood as a formative but not empty stage of life.

5. Prahlāda: The Child as Learner, Critic and Teacher

If Dhruva demonstrates the emergence of childhood agency, Prahlāda represents an even more radical configuration: the child as knowledge-bearer.

Prahlāda's story in the Seventh Skandha is structured around education. Hiranyakasipu, his father, is concerned about the formation of his son's mind. Prahlāda is placed under the care of

teachers who are expected to educate him according to the ideological requirements of the royal household. This is crucial because education here is explicitly political. The child is not simply being taught literacy or intellectual skills. He is being prepared to inhabit a particular social and political order.

The teachers instruct Prahlāda in the conventional objectives of political life. The narrative identifies the educational curriculum associated with Dharma, Artha And Kāma, while the political context of the asura court gives these categories a particular ideological orientation. Prahlāda, however, possesses another source of knowledge. When Hiranyakasipu asks his son what he considers the best thing he has learned, Prahlāda responds:

तत्साधु मन्येऽसुरवर्य देहिनां
सदा समुद्विग्नधियामसद्ग्रहात् ।
हित्वात्मपातं गृहमन्धकूपं
वनं गतो यद्धरिमाश्रयेत् ॥

(Bhāgavata Purāṇa 7.5.5)

The child does not reproduce the ideological curriculum of the court. He offers an alternative conception of the good life.

The reaction of Hiranyakasipu is revealing. He attributes the child's intellectual independence to external influence and declares that the minds of boys can be altered by others. The child is consequently returned to the teachers to be controlled and corrected.

The narrative therefore makes control over childhood knowledge a central political issue. Who controls the child's education?; Who determines what constitutes valid knowledge?; Can the child evaluate the knowledge transmitted by adults?; Can a child reject an imposed curriculum?

Prahlāda's narrative answers these questions through dramatic conflict. The child is simultaneously an object of education and an epistemic subject. This is the key distinction. The teachers consider Prahlāda someone to whom knowledge must be delivered. Hiranyakasipu considers him someone whose mind must be ideologically regulated. Prahlāda, however, demonstrates that learning involves interpretation and evaluation.

He does not merely remember information. He judges it. He does not merely repeat knowledge. He transforms it into ethical instruction. Most importantly, he teaches other children. The narrative describes how Prahlāda addresses the sons of the asuras and instructs them in the principles he has understood. The other boys receive his teaching and are persuaded by it.

The pedagogical direction is therefore reversed:

adult → child

becomes

child → child,

and ultimately

child → adult challenge.

This reversal is one of the most significant features of the narrative for Childhood Studies. Prahlāda demonstrates what may be called epistemic childhood agency. His agency is not simply the ability to make choices. It is the capacity to participate in the production and transmission of meaning.

6. Kaumāra and the Temporal Revaluation of Childhood

The conceptual importance of Prahlāda becomes clearer in the famous verse:

कौमार आचरेत् प्राज्ञो धर्मान् भागवतानिह ।

दुर्लभं मानुषं जन्म तदप्यध्रुवमर्थदम् ॥

(Bhāgavata Purāṇa 7.6.1)

The verse explicitly places ethical and spiritual practice within *kaumāra*, the period of childhood or youth. The instruction is not to postpone meaningful ethical life until adulthood. Rather, the formative period of childhood is itself an appropriate and valuable period for the cultivation of *dharma*. This produces an important conceptual shift. In a simplistic developmental model, childhood is frequently represented as a stage of not-yetness: the child is not yet mature, not yet rational, not yet socially responsible and not yet fully capable.

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa does not completely reject developmental difference. Prahlāda is clearly a child. Yet it refuses to make chronological youth synonymous with ethical or spiritual incapacity. The child can begin the pursuit of meaningful knowledge precisely because life is transient. The verse therefore does not merely offer a religious injunction. It expresses a philosophy of time and human formation. Childhood is valuable not because it is an innocent interval outside ethical responsibility, but because it is a formative period in which dispositions and values can be cultivated.

The concept of *saṃskāra* is relevant here. Although the Bhāgavata Purāṇa does not present childhood through a single systematic theory of *saṃskāra*, the broader Indic intellectual tradition repeatedly treats human formation as a process involving habituation, discipline, learning, ritual, reflection and ethical practice. The child is therefore not an unfinished adult in an exclusively deficit-based sense. The child is a being-in-formation. Formation, however, is not equivalent to passive construction. Prahlāda participates in his own formation, interprets what he receives and subsequently contributes to the formation of others.

7. The Child–Adult Relationship: Authority, Care and Contestation

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa does not idealise every adult–child relationship. Instead, it presents a spectrum ranging from affection and mentorship to domination and violence. Dhruva's relationship with his mother demonstrates supportive adult care. Sunīti does not simply dismiss his emotional injury. Her counsel becomes part of his subsequent development. Nārada represents another form of adult authority: the mentor. His authority is pedagogical rather than coercive. He guides the child toward a disciplined mode of self-transformation.

Hiranyakasipu represents a contrasting model. His relationship with Prahlāda is dominated by

political authority and ideological control. He does not recognise the child's independent epistemic position. His question initially appears affectionate, he takes his son onto his lap and asks what he considers good, but the conversation soon becomes a conflict over knowledge and authority. The narrative thus distinguishes between authority that enables formation and authority that seeks control. This distinction has contemporary pedagogical relevance. Education can be understood as transmission, but it can also become ideological reproduction. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa dramatises what happens when the learner's capacity to interpret knowledge conflicts with the authority of the institution.

Prahlāda's resistance should therefore not be reduced to a modern liberal concept of individual freedom. His agency is grounded in a competing conception of dharma and spiritual truth. He does not reject authority altogether. He accepts the authority of knowledge, teachers and the divine, while rejecting what he considers ethically and spiritually defective authority. The narrative is not advocating unrestricted childhood autonomy. Rather, it presents a hierarchy of authorities and asks the reader to evaluate those authorities according to dharma and knowledge.

This is one point at which an IKS reading becomes particularly productive. The question is not simply whether the child is obedient or rebellious. The question is whether the child develops viveka, discernment. Prahlāda's significance lies precisely in his discernment.

8. Education as Ethical Formation

The modern educational system often distinguishes between cognitive learning and moral education. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa does not sharply separate these domains. Knowledge is valuable when it transforms conduct. Prahlāda's characterisation emphasises truthfulness, self-control, compassion, friendship and humility. The text describes him as one who is benevolent, truthful, self-controlled and compassionate toward beings. Education therefore becomes an ethical process.

This corresponds to a broader Indic conception in which vidyā is closely connected with vinaya, discipline and humility. The famous formulation vidyā dadāti vinayam, although deriving from a broader Sanskrit proverbial tradition rather than specifically from the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, captures an educational ideal in which knowledge should transform the character of the knower. The child is consequently educated not merely to succeed in an examination or acquire occupational competence but to become a certain kind of person. Prahlāda's teaching to his peers is significant because he does not merely communicate abstract doctrine. He presents a way of life.

The same can be seen in Dhruva. Nārada's instruction is not exhausted by conceptual explanation. Dhruva must practise. This combination of śravaṇa (hearing), manana (reflection), practice and transformation is consistent with major strands of Indic pedagogical thought.

The educational process is therefore:

**Hearing → Reflection → Practice → Internalisation → Transformation →
Transmission.**

Prahlāda embodies the final stage because the learner becomes a teacher.

This model challenges a strictly hierarchical image of education in which knowledge travels only from expert to novice. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa allows knowledge to travel through unexpected agents. A child can become such an agent.

9. Child as Knowledge-Bearer: Towards Epistemic Childhood Agency

The phrase ‘Knowledge-Bearer’ is deliberately stronger than ‘Knowledge-Receiver.’ A receiver receives knowledge. A knowledge-bearer embodies, preserves, interprets and transmits knowledge. The distinction is particularly useful for Prahlāda. He receives knowledge through his religious formation, but his significance lies in his capacity to articulate it independently and transmit it to other children. This suggests three dimensions of epistemic childhood agency.

9.1 Receptive Agency

The child receives knowledge from parents, teachers, mentors and cultural traditions. Reception itself is not passive when the learner actively attends, interprets and internalises what is taught. Dhruva exemplifies this dimension through his interaction with Nārada.

9.2 Interpretive Agency

The child evaluates knowledge and distinguishes between competing claims. Prahlāda represents this dimension most clearly. He has access to multiple educational discourses and refuses to accept the court's ideology as ultimate truth.

9.3 Transmissive Agency

The child communicates knowledge to others. Prahlāda's teaching of his fellow children constitutes the strongest example. He becomes an educator within the same age group.

These dimensions allow childhood to be analysed without assuming either complete dependence or complete autonomy. The child remains situated within relationships but is capable of epistemic action.

This model also has implications for the study of other Indic childhood narratives. Kṛṣṇa's childhood in the Tenth Skandha, for example, presents another configuration in which the child simultaneously depends upon caregivers and exceeds ordinary expectations of childhood. The pastoral setting provides a world of play, friendship, animals, nature and community, while the child's divine identity complicates ordinary distinctions between vulnerability and power. The importance of Kṛṣṇa's childhood in Indic devotional traditions has also been noted in scholarship on Hindu religious culture. His childhood creates an unusual devotional relationship in which the divine becomes approachable through parental affection, friendship and play.

Thus, childhood in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa can represent not only formation but also a distinctive mode of relationality.

10. Childhood, Play and the More-than-Human World

The CFP's emphasis on non-human and more-than-human agents is particularly relevant to Indic childhood narratives. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa does not confine childhood to domestic or institutional spaces. Kṛṣṇa's childhood is deeply embedded in the ecological and more-than-human environment of Vraja. Cows, rivers, forests, animals and supernatural beings participate in the narrative world. This has implications for an IKS-based interpretation of childhood. Human development is not presented exclusively as an interaction between individual child and human institution. The child exists within a wider relational cosmos. This is particularly visible in the pastoral childhood of Kṛṣṇa, where play is connected with landscape, animals, food, water, friendship and community.

The significance of play should not be underestimated. Modern developmental psychology frequently recognises play as an important dimension of childhood, but Indic literary traditions can also present play as a mode of relationship and knowledge. Kṛṣṇa's childhood play establishes social bonds, transforms the meaning of space and creates forms of intimacy between human and divine. The child therefore occupies a liminal position between categories that adults frequently keep separate: human and divine, dependent and powerful, playful and purposeful, ordinary and extraordinary.

The study of pre-colonial childhoods should consequently examine not only institutions such as family and school but also landscape, animals, ritual, play and sacred space. Such an approach would expand Childhood Studies beyond an exclusively anthropocentric model.

11. Childhood and the Question of Universal Development

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa should not be used to claim that modern developmental psychology is invalid. Nor should Indic traditions be romanticised as uniformly child-centred. Rather, the text demonstrates that the meaning of childhood cannot be exhausted by biological development. Contemporary Childhood Studies has already established that children inhabit diverse social worlds. Woodhead's multidisciplinary approach and Lesnik-Oberstein's cultural critique both resist a simple universalisation of childhood.

The Indic textual material adds another dimension: spiritual and ethical personhood. The child may be physically young but ethically significant. This distinction is important because a purely developmental framework can unintentionally reproduce an adult-centric hierarchy in which the child's value is primarily future-oriented. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa frequently assigns significance to what the child can become, but it also gives value to what the child is capable of doing now. Dhruva is not important merely because he will become a great king. Prahlāda is not important merely because he will become an adult devotee. Their childhood actions themselves matter. Their choices matter. Their learning matters. Their relationships matter. Their voices matter. This creates a conceptual space in which childhood possesses present value, even though it remains a formative stage.

12. IKS and Contemporary Educational Thought

The contemporary revival of interest in IKS creates an opportunity to reconsider these textual resources in relation to education. The UGC's IKS guidelines explicitly recommend that faculty

engage with primary texts and develop pedagogical applications based on IKS literature. This policy direction is consistent with the broader objectives of NEP 2020 concerning Indian languages, culture and knowledge traditions.

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa can contribute to this conversation not as a ready-made school curriculum but as a source for educational reflection.

Four principles are particularly relevant.

1. **Education as Self-Formation** Dhruva demonstrates that education can transform emotional experience into disciplined self-cultivation.
2. **Education as Ethical Formation** Prahlaḍa demonstrates that knowledge without ethical orientation is incomplete.
3. **Education as Relational** Nārada's relationship with Dhruva illustrates the importance of mentorship.
4. **Education as Participatory** Prahlaḍa's teaching of his peers demonstrates that learners can become contributors to the educational process.

These principles resonate with current discussions of holistic education, experiential learning and culturally responsive pedagogy. Recent scholarship on IKS and pedagogy has similarly emphasised experiential, relational and holistic dimensions of Indian educational traditions, while also warning against superficial or tokenistic integration. The last point deserves particular emphasis.

IKS-based education should not consist merely of inserting a few Sanskrit verses or mythological stories into an otherwise unchanged curriculum. Such an approach would reduce a complex intellectual tradition to cultural decoration. Instead, the pedagogical question should be: What educational assumptions become visible when the child is understood as a potential knowledge-bearer? This question could influence contemporary educational design by encouraging children to become interpreters, questioners, storytellers, researchers and transmitters of cultural knowledge.

13. Beyond Romanticisation: Limits and Contradictions

An academically responsible reading must also recognise the limitations of the textual evidence. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa is a religious and literary text, not an ethnographic record of children's everyday lives. Its child figures are often extraordinary. Dhruva and Prahlaḍa are not statistically representative children. They are exemplary narrative figures whose lives communicate theological and ethical meanings. Therefore, it would be methodologically incorrect to infer from their stories that all children in pre-colonial India enjoyed comparable agency. Similarly, the text's representation of childhood cannot erase the historical realities of caste, gender, labour, family hierarchy or social inequality. Contemporary scholarship on Indian childhood has demonstrated the importance of these categories.

The absence or relative marginalisation of girls in the two principal case studies is also significant. A paper that claims to represent 'Indian childhood' as a whole would be seriously

incomplete if it relied exclusively on male child figures. The present study therefore makes a narrower claim: it examines one influential Sanskrit textual tradition and two particularly significant male child figures in order to explore the epistemic construction of childhood.

This limitation also points toward future research. Comparable analyses should examine: girlhood in Sanskrit and regional traditions; children in Buddhist and Jain narratives; child labour and apprenticeship; child marriage and life-cycle rituals; children with disabilities; caste-specific childhoods; child monastics; childhood play; pedagogical practices in śāstric and vernacular traditions.

The goal should not be to construct an idealised "Indic childhood" but to recover the plurality of Indic childhoods.

14. Toward a Plural Theory of Indic Childhoods

The analysis of Dhruva and Pahlāda suggests that Indic textual traditions may be approached through a model of childhood containing at least five dimensions.

1. **Childhood is embodied.** Children experience hunger, emotion, physical vulnerability and dependence.
2. **Childhood is relational.** Parents, teachers, peers, communities and more-than-human beings shape children's worlds.
3. **Childhood is pedagogical.** Children learn through instruction, observation, practice, discipline, storytelling and participation.
4. **Childhood is ethical.** Children can be represented as capable of moral discernment and responsibility.
5. **Childhood is epistemic.** Children can receive, interpret and transmit knowledge.

The fifth dimension is particularly important.

Modern childhood discourse has increasingly recognised children as social actors. The Bhāgavata Purāṇa enables us to extend this discussion into the domain of knowledge. A child is not simply a social actor but may also be an **epistemic actor**.

This is the significance of the phrase 'child as knowledge-bearer.' The knowledge-bearing child does not necessarily challenge the existence of teachers. On the contrary, the child often becomes a knowledge-bearer precisely through meaningful pedagogical relationships. Dhruva needs Nārada. Pahlāda's formation is connected with teachers and prior religious instruction. But the learner's final achievement lies in the internalisation and articulation of knowledge. The pedagogical relationship therefore has a transformative endpoint: the learner becomes capable of contributing to the knowledge tradition. This is a particularly valuable principle for contemporary IKS education.

Implications for Contemporary Childhood and Education

The study has several implications for contemporary educational theory.

- First, children should not be regarded merely as future citizens. They are present participants in knowledge communities.
- Second, education should create opportunities for children to question, interpret and communicate rather than merely reproduce information.
- Third, mentorship should be distinguished from authoritarian control. The narrative of Nārada and Dhruva suggests that effective guidance can cultivate rather than suppress agency.
- Fourth, ethical formation should not be treated as an ornamental addition to academic education. In the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, knowledge becomes meaningful through transformation of conduct.
- Fifth, cultural education should involve primary texts and critical interpretation. The contemporary IKS framework can benefit from placing children in conversation with Sanskrit and other Indic textual traditions rather than presenting these traditions only through simplified moral stories.
- Sixth, the digital age creates new possibilities for such engagement. Digital editions, multilingual repositories, audio recitations, annotated Sanskrit texts and interactive storytelling can allow children to encounter Indic knowledge traditions directly.

Such initiatives should nevertheless preserve textual accuracy and historical complexity. The purpose should not be to reproduce pre-modern education unchanged. Rather, the objective should be to translate principles across contexts.

For example,

Prahlāda narrative could be used pedagogically to discuss: competing sources of information; media literacy; authority and evidence; ethical reasoning; peer learning; responsible disagreement; cultural inheritance.

Dhruva's story could facilitate discussion of: emotional resilience; mentorship; goal-setting; disciplined practice; transformation of adversity; self-knowledge.

Such pedagogical applications would treat Indic narratives as intellectual resources rather than merely devotional material.

Conclusion

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa provides a rich textual field for rethinking childhood beyond a universal developmental paradigm. Its representations of Dhruva and Prahlāda demonstrate that young age can coexist with vulnerability, agency, learning, ethical discernment and spiritual capacity. Dhruva's story begins with dependence and emotional injury but develops through mentorship, disciplined practice and self-transformation. His childhood is therefore not simply a period of deficiency. It is a formative space in which agency emerges through relationships. Prahlāda presents an even more striking configuration. He is placed within an institutional educational system designed to shape his political and ideological identity, yet he evaluates the knowledge

transmitted to him, rejects what he considers erroneous and becomes a teacher to his peers. His example demonstrates that the child can occupy the position of learner and knowledge-bearer simultaneously.

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa thus provides a textual basis for distinguishing chronological age from epistemic capacity. The proposed concept of epistemic childhood agency captures this distinction. It refers to the capacity of children, within particular cultural and relational contexts, to receive, interpret, embody and transmit knowledge. Such agency does not imply unrestricted autonomy; rather, it exists within networks of family, mentorship, pedagogy, ethical norms and spiritual commitments. Read through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems, the text also reveals an educational philosophy in which knowledge, ethical formation and self-cultivation are interconnected. Vidyā is not merely information. Education is not merely institutional instruction. Learning is connected with character, discernment and transformation.

At the same time, the analysis must resist the temptation to construct a romanticised image of an inherently egalitarian 'Indian childhood.' The Bhāgavata Purāṇa is a theological and literary text, and Dhruva and Prahlāda are exceptional figures rather than statistically representative children. Gender, caste, class and material conditions require separate investigation. The appropriate conclusion is therefore not that pre-colonial India possessed a single superior model of childhood, but that its textual traditions contain multiple and sophisticated constructions of childhood that deserve independent analysis. The larger contribution of this study is methodological. Childhood Studies need not remain dependent upon modern Western categories when examining pre-colonial South Asia. Nor does engagement with Indic traditions require rejecting contemporary childhood scholarship. A productive dialogue is possible.

The Bhāgavata Purāṇa demonstrates precisely why such dialogue matters. It presents the child not only as someone who is growing toward adulthood, but as someone already capable of learning, questioning, discerning, practising, teaching and transmitting knowledge. The child, in this sense, is not merely the future bearer of knowledge. The child can already be its bearer, interpreter and transmitter. This insight provides an important basis for reimagining childhood within the broader intellectual horizon of Indian Knowledge Systems and for developing educational models that recognise children not merely as recipients of inherited knowledge, but as active participants in its preservation, interpretation, renewal and transmission.

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