

## From *Rabīndra Saṅgīt* to *Doraemon*: The Inheritance and Globalization of Children's Leisure Culture in Kolkata

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### Summary

This article looks at some aspects of the contemporary leisure culture of middle-class children in Kolkata, based on interviews conducted with the current generation of children and two older cohorts — in the main their parents and grandparents. It argues that although this leisure culture has been influenced by globalization — particularly by the so-called “mediatization” of childhood — the historical context of a region is crucial to understanding the contemporary leisure culture. The article attempts to substantiate this assumption of specific historical contexts informing contemporary children's cultures by exploring the present landscape of popular children's culture in West Bengal, and thereafter relating it to some of the values that are integral to a “good childhood” in the Bhadralok imagination. Against this backdrop, the relationship between a leisure culture and the changing contours of childhood is also addressed.

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### Introduction

The act of reminiscing about earlier leisure cultures of children is invariably accompanied by the recalling of images of children's games, which are sometimes untidily juxtaposed with each other within the framing of a past that is ambiguous. The Flemish painter Pieter Bruegel<sup>1</sup> provides one of the most detailed images of leisure activities of children in 16th century Flanders — or, perhaps more importantly, of the way one thinks about earlier leisure activities — with his documenting of many games and artefacts that no longer appear in the worlds of contemporary children. Like with his painting *Children's Games*,<sup>2</sup> which although abstruse is meticulous in its details, turning attention to the idea of a leisure culture for children in the past

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1 Also known as Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525/30–1569).

2 This painting depicts over eighty different children's games. The work is considered a reflection of Bruegel's “thinking in images” (Snow 1997), rather than as just an inventory of children's leisure activities. The analysis of this work by Edward Snow will be discussed further at the end of the article.

evokes images of children playing games in groups or in pairs, with others amusing themselves with playthings ranging from spinning tops to wooden hoops. Any discussion of a leisure culture evokes memories of only half-remembered games, played at different times of the year, and conjures up visions of other games that were lost to some generations as well as of toys and other kinds of playthings that have either lived on or were not known to succeeding generations of children — with these recollections all arising within one frame.

Over the last three and a half decades the realm of children's leisure culture in different parts of the world has significantly changed. Whether or not it has been fundamentally altered by the introduction of electronic media into children's cultures continues to be a matter of fierce debate. Sociologists of childhood, particularly in the past two decades, have spoken of a "mediatized childhood" (Drotner 2009). This empirically evidenced mediatization<sup>3</sup> has meandered its way as an undercurrent through the past three decades in some countries, while new styles and forms of entertainment continue to be introduced every year across the globe. In some contexts, the ageing of particular genres of a mediatized childhood and the afterlife of certain cartoon figures or video games have been a popular theme of research. For example, Nintendo games or Disney figures continue to exist in contemporary leisure culture for children around the world, but could also be read as being generationally coded items (Giroux 1999: 9). These phenomena of ageing and afterlife, as the researchers cautiously specify, apply mostly to children's leisure cultures in Europe, Japan, and the United States. The different forms of mediatized children's culture can also be said to move across national and linguistic boundaries. One prominent example of this is the impact of Japanese media on children's culture in the US and in some European countries, as reflected in most of the contributions to the edited volume by Mark West (2009) — particularly those of Hiroaki Hatayama and of Brent Allison, who both interviewed anime fans and addressed the popularity of animes and manga in the US.

Though the impact of electronic media on children's culture is undeniable, it would be premature to speak of an afterlife of manga heroes and television shows in a setting like India where the television itself arrived much later than it did in some of the "Western" countries; also, the country only opened itself to non-Indian investors from the 1990s onward. Nevertheless, for a good section of the middle and lower middle classes there, the affordability of the television set and other electronic goods in the years that followed has to a certain extent served to sculpt the character of Indian children's leisure culture. Though material culture has at times been emblematic of a particular generation, and in this regard served as a marker of the childhood

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3 Drotner (2009) claims that contemporary childhood in "Western" societies are "mediatized" in both the empirical and discursive sense — a useful distinction to make. The notion of empirical mediatization refers to children's dramatically increased use in the last three decades of media, information, and communicative technologies.

of a particular period — as in the case of the Disney generation —, it is not as easy to say that is true for some forms of leisure pursuits, even within mediatized childhoods.

The transformation of children's leisure culture has generally been accompanied by a discourse of loss, articulated at times as the departure of the simplicity of childhood — and often, as is the case in India, as the waning of cultural heritage. In the context of that country, where television in general and children's television in particular have had a shorter history as compared to in some industrialized societies, it is not uncommon for the contemporary leisure culture of children to be contrasted with that of the pre-television era. In West Bengal, the pedagogical ideals of the middle class — or the Bhadralok<sup>4</sup>, many of whom were inspired by or active in the social reform movements of the 19th century — had an undeniable influence on some aspects of children's leisure culture, most notably in the domain of literature (Mitra 1999). With the advent of the television and its gradual percolation among the different sections of the middle and lower middle classes of Bengal, the cultures and languages of other regions — and particularly of Hindi-speaking North India — began to make inroads into the lives of children there.<sup>5</sup> This deepened the feeling of loss among the older generations to some extent, as reflected for example in the discussions in the print media about the erosion of Bengali culture.

The transformation of children's leisure culture over the years implies that there are wider sociohistorical contexts within which lived experiences of childhood are inscribed. The implications of a changing leisure culture for the nature of a Bengali middle-class childhood in Kolkata<sup>6</sup> is explored here, though the middle class is not considered a homogenous category; rather, it is seen as having disparate factions that vary not just in their socioeconomic contexts but also in the educational histories of their ancestors. This paper has emerged from my fieldwork interactions with children of ages ten to twelve years in Kolkata, in the period from 2009 to

4 The Bhadralok (*bhadralok*, literally “gentleman”) class has sometimes been considered more a status group than a “middle class” (Broomfield 1968). Though there are differing opinions about its actual composition, the social stratum of mostly property-owning, upper-middle castes that emerged in colonial Bengal is considered to be the Bhadralok. This stratum has a strong association with education, which has earned it the self-evident moniker of being the “educated middle class.”

5 The Bengal middle class of Kolkata has ever since the colonial period onward insulated itself from the influence of the North Indian, predominantly Hindi-speaking, culture. One might speculate that this choice is related to the association of that culture with the migrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh who formed a considerable proportion of the nonagricultural working class in colonial Bengal, and to the status of manual work in the Bengali middle classes' worldview. Instances of the Bengali middle classes considering the North Indian culture inimical to a “proper” childhood can be found appearing as late as the 1980s, in documented incidents where parents reacted strongly to their children being influenced by Hindi film culture — no comparable reactions have been documented in the context of Bengali films, however (Sen 2013).

6 I have used the anglicized spelling of *Kal'kātā* — i.e. “Kolkata” — in this article instead of the earlier “Calcutta,” which was changed in 2001, as the former has been the official spelling of the city since my adolescence and is the one that I have consequently used most when writing in English — particularly for addresses on envelopes.

2011. I spent a considerable part of this time with children in different settings — schools, homes, in private tuition. Furthermore, I had the chance to interview many of the parents and grandparents of these children, whom I refer to as members of cohorts who grew up in the 1950s and 1970s. Though the term “leisure culture” could be taken to refer to many different things, given the scope of this paper two specific areas have been explored under its auspices. One is the realm of what are now known as “the leisure careers of children.” The other concerns children’s television — in particular the popularity of certain animated shows of Japanese origin, which are immensely fashionable among fifth and sixth graders in Kolkata.

I argue that exploring the relationship between the contemporary leisure culture in urban West Bengal and that of its predecessors shows that some significant structural changes have occurred in middle-class childhoods in Kolkata, ones that a discourse of “the globalization of culture” alone does not quite manage to explicate. Undoubtedly, contemporary childhoods and children’s leisure cultures in many social contexts — including that of urban India — can be understood through discourses about the emergence of a transnational middle class along with attendant anxieties, about the increasing use of information and communication technologies in children’s lives, and about the emergence of a global media. But, these at certain points run the risk of overlooking children’s leisure culture, as well as the “leisure careers” that have to some degree been inherited from preceding generations.

The contemporary leisure culture is not just that which has emerged in recent decades, but rather is a hybrid entity that continues to grow in continuous dialogue and synthesis with historical forms of children’s leisure cultures and childhoods. This link cannot be equated with the debate about the hybridization of the local and the global — an argument that has enjoyed some prominence in the discourse about the globalization of culture in the last few decades. The article thus looks at this link between leisure cultures that are emerging and inherited, specifically in the context of middle-class Bengali children in Kolkata. By doing so, it counters any misperceptions about the “sameness” of contemporary middle-class childhoods across nations. Furthermore, it traces former children’s leisure cultures not just as “pasts” but rather as elements that have influenced the structure of middle-class childhoods in ways that feed into contemporary contexts — done by sometimes facilitating, and at other points resisting or mutating the practices, cultural artefacts, and motifs that inform children’s leisure cultures. In taking this approach, a possible broader framework for sociologists of childhood has been proposed here, one within which contemporary leisure cultures of children elsewhere in the world might be analyzed in future.

### **Inherited and emerging leisure careers**

In the past three decades an increasing number of researchers working on childhood or education — particularly those inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of capital

(Bourdieu 1986) — have come to draw attention to the practice of engaging children in so-called “enrichment activities”<sup>7</sup> (Vincent and Ball 2007: 1062). Also known as “leisure careers,” these activities are interpreted as a mechanism by which parents can ensure the educational success of their children and furthermore guarantee their social location once they become adults. This growing concern and preoccupation with enrichment activities encompasses a good part of children’s leisure hours (particularly for those who go to school), the hours prior to and after school, as well as the holidays. This has been attributed primarily to the middle classes in different social contexts, though predominantly to those living in “Western” countries. Implicit in this is the understanding that, owing to large scale processes of socioeconomic transformation unfolding across the globe — and particularly in the labor market —, educational qualifications have become integral to securing jobs. These accomplishments have also become devalued to some extent as well, leading to even greater competition between the different sections of the middle class as they seek to protect their own social position as well as to maintain their distinctiveness from other groups.

Even though from the second half of the 20th century onward social anthropologists and sociologists have been emphasizing the diversity of childhood experiences (Frønes 1993; Mead 1961; Nieuwenhuys 2009; Zinnecker 1995), there is a chance that children’s everyday lives in different countries will begin to increasingly look similar to each other. There is the possibility that this happening is strongest among the middle classes, who are responding to the frenetic changes of the global market by now making different educational choices. With the increasing encroachment of enrichment activities into the leisure hours of children, the lives of the offspring of middle-class families from across the world appear to be converging within the domain of a global leisure culture. That said, as things stand, ethnographies on children’s lives — and particularly for those from middle-class families living in South Asian countries — at least in the English-speaking academic literature are currently sparse, as compared to what research exists on childhoods in some of the industrialized countries.

A leisure culture for children must have existed in Bengal prior to the expansion of schooling, as the numerous references made in children’s and adult fiction of the early 20th century to little girls playing with dolls and to boys and girls indulging in courtyard games imply — though the setting must have been quite different. Those

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7 Carol Vincent and Stephen Ball (2007) refer to “extracurricular, creative, and sporting classes” as enrichment activities that children from middle-class families in Britain are engaged in. I have used the term here to refer to those afterschool activities that children “attend” in the belief that they “enrich” their education and upbringing. What might set apart the afterschool activities of children in Kolkata from those in Britain is the phenomenon of “private tuition,” or after school lessons in subjects like Bengali, English, and Mathematics. The private tuition prevalent among children of school-going age in Kolkata is different from the German *Nachhilfeunterricht* offered in the context of a child’s school performance. Private tuition is not limited to subjects the children are not “good” at, but imply evenings or weekends being put to good use so as to “enrich” a child’s life.

practices that have been described as enrichment activities — for example singing lessons, playing a musical instrument, or learning some form of sport in a supervised context — are, however, an integral aspect of “scholarized” childhoods. Both, the encouragement of children playing and taking lessons in music or sport, stem from the notion of childhood as a distinct biographical phase and from pedagogical ideals. It has been documented by social historians of colonial Bengal that education, particularly formal education, was extended to girls only long after it had been first made available to boys in the traditional schools like the *ol*<sup>8</sup> and *p h l*.<sup>9</sup> Schooling for girls was to a great extent the consequence of the social reform movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and was for a long time restricted to only certain sections of Bengali society — notably the upper caste, land-owning stratum.

In the memoirs of Haimabati Sen (Haimabatī Sen), a child widow who grew up in pre-partition Bengal in the late 19th century, the author narrates how she would slip out of the inner quarters and listen to the boys of the family doing their lessons with the *pa it* — the teacher in the traditional schools —, being allowed to do so because of the indulgence of the teacher (Sen 2000). There were certainly many little girls in Bengal, contemporaries of Haimabati Sen, for whom the lessons were completely out of bounds and only very few girls received, like Haimabati Sen, some degree of education. Even in the 20th century, and from 1947 in post-partition East and West Bengal, the school continued to be an exclusionary space. Sunandā Sik'dār, who grew up in East Bengal in the 1940s, writes about the village school in her autobiography:

True, there was a junior high school, it had neither a teacher, nor books, the number of students were also few. There was no clock in the school. School started when the sun moved to the right. Everyone in the village would hear the multiplication tables, additions, subtractions chorused in the tender voice of the students. [...] Worst off in studies were the girls. Some among the girls could read, they could not write. But they could form the consonants and vowels by arranging tamarind stones. They could not write because they did not know how to hold the pen. They did not get any help from their male guardians in this regard. Even my mother would form all the alphabets when she cut tamarinds. But if she tried to write with a pen made from bamboo stems, the pen would fly out of her hand. (Sik'dār 2010: 39f.)<sup>10</sup>

Although conjectural, one could assume that where education for girls was either frowned upon or seen as something wholly beyond consideration, enrichment activities would not likely be a predominant feature of girlhoods for the greater part of the colonial rule in Bengal.

There is little academic literature available on children's leisure cultures in either pre- or post-independence Bengal, though some impressions can be gleaned from

8 The term *ol* refers to a traditional school in which education was imparted in Sanskrit.

9 A *p h l* is an elementary or middle school found mostly in the country's villages.

10 This quote was translated from Bengali by the author of this article.

autobiographical narratives and from local fiction. In the winter of 2011, when I conducted my fieldwork interviews in and around Kolkata with those who grew up in the 1950s, a number of women — particularly from the upper middle classes — talked about learning something “other” than school-related topics in their leisure hours. One respondent, a woman who grew up in South Kolkata, talked about the music lessons she had when she was eight:

They weren’t because I wanted them or anything [...] but because my mother [...] it was my mother who told me, because she loved music, singing. That was why I had to do it. I learnt [...] hmm how to play the guitar [Her mother, in her eighties, who was listening to the interview, says: “She would play to some of the programs on the radio — *i umahal, Galpa d dur sar*”]. I learned only the guitar [...] although somewhere in between I tried learning the sitar. There was someone nearby called Bimal Kānta Rāycaudhūrī who taught me [...] I went to him to learn the sitar for some days, but it really hurt my hands [...] the strings. So after some days I couldn’t do it. But for a guitar one has a bar. You pluck the strings with a bar. It wasn’t a Spanish, ours was a steel guitar, you played it with a bar. Which is why there was no question of hurting the hands. (Gita Haldar<sup>11</sup>, born 1946; “[...]” signifies a pause in all interviews quoted here and henceforth)

Similarly, other women from the same cohort talked about having lessons in music or singing, particularly following the classical music of Rabīndra Saṅgīt<sup>12</sup> or Naj'rul Gīti<sup>13</sup>. Compared to the high occurrence among women of middle-class households, only few respondents from lower middle-class families and from some conservative upper-caste families mentioned having participated in any enrichment activities after school. Only one male from among the respondents took singing lessons, and the other men did not even talk about enrichment activities of any kind. Nonetheless, a majority of the male respondents did say that they had had extra lessons after school, though these were schoolwork-related — wherewith a tutor helped them with subjects like English and Mathematics.

Among the cohort who grew up in the 1970s — many of whom were children of the respondents from the older 1950s cohort — enrichment activities had been widespread among girls. The flourishing popularity for learning classical dance — for instance Kathak or Odissi — represents one of the marked shifts from the previous cohort, possibly because by the 1970s dance had gained some degree of respectability among the Bengali middle classes. However, music and dancing remained, as for the older cohort, the preserve of girls — only a few boys engaged in such activities.

11 The names of the respondents have been changed for reasons of anonymity.

12 The songs composed by Rabindranath Tagore (Rabīndrañāth Thākur) are known as the Rabīndra Saṅgīt. The practice of giving lessons to children in this specialized genre had been prevalent among the Bengali middle classes even prior to independence. Although the central concern was probably the cultural transmission of a genre that has hitherto been integral to a middle-class Bengali identity, knowledge about Rabīndra Saṅgīt and being skilled in the genre were probably valued cultural capital for girls from middle-class Bengali families — crucial to a girlhood culminating in the emergence of a properly brought up young woman.

13 The songs composed by the poet Kazi Nazrul Islam (Kājī Naj'rul Is'lām).

In the interviews I conducted over a period of two years with the current generation of children every single one of them was engaged in enrichment activities of some kind. While some of the earlier pursuits like music and singing continued to be popular, there was a tangible shift in the realm of leisure careers. Lessons in sport were a part of the lives of some children, both girls and boys, though the forms of sport varied. Swimming was a common choice among a larger section of children, while lessons at cricket schools were attended by many of the boys aged between 10 and 12 years old. Tennis was another sport that was mentioned by some of the fifth-grade girls that I interviewed.

The older cohort that grew up in the 1970s talked about some forms of sport — particularly cricket, football, and also occasionally hockey. However all the respondents who talked about playing were male, and the narratives pointed to the fact that it was not until they were older — about 14 years or so of age — that they took up these sports, beyond what they had previously played in school. The distinction between sports and other games is crucial in this context, and the lack of adult supervision of the former — which often required open spaces such as a street or playing grounds — possibly accounts for the later age at which boys from the 1970s cohort played sports outside school, compared to the contemporary generation of 10–12 year olds in Kolkata or other urban areas.

The inclusion, as part of enrichment activities, of lessons in certain forms of sport is a striking feature of the contemporary Bengali cultural context, given that a culture of physicality long found only limited patrons among the educated middle classes there. As I have previously discussed elsewhere (Sen 2013), at one such sports club in South Kolkata I interviewed the mother of a 12 year-old boy, who said both she and her husband had been active in sports and that her husband had, after completing his Bachelor in Commerce, secured a job with the revenue department as part of the sports quota.<sup>14</sup> It was only afterward, when consulting the detailed forms submitted about the family backgrounds of respondents from all of the cohorts, that it occurred to me that almost all the children at the sports club had at least one parent who had previously been active in sports and who now had one of the different government (mostly state government) jobs, particularly in the revenue department or with the railway services. Though one can only speculate, it is likely that the promise that athletic abilities hold for families with lower cultural capital (in terms of access to institutions) — as a skill or talent that might help secure a particular government job aspired to even if college grades were not good enough — put these enrichment activities on a par with the music and art lessons wherein capital (cultural or athletic) is invested, so as to ensure the claiming of a niche in a highly competitive labor market.

<sup>14</sup> Sports quota refers to posts reserved for categories of candidates in government service. Posts are also reserved according to the caste, gender, tribe, physical disability, and/or relation of the applicant to a family member currently serving in the Indian Army.

Dance and music lessons — particularly the playing of instruments rather than singing — continue to hold a strong affinity with the female domain. By virtue of being perceived for over a century and a half as favorable qualities for young women to possess, and being expedient for matrimonial purposes, instructed lessons in singing — namely a certain school of songs — or playing musical instruments,<sup>15</sup> and later dancing — but, again, only classical forms of dance —, have for a long time been part of the staple offering in the upbringing of little girls in middle-class Bengali families. This perceived expediency sets apart the preference or interest in music and/or dancing on the part of the child from the supervised “lessons” that are found to be to some extent necessary for a twelve year-old girl. This gendered appraisal of some skills — in other words singing for girls and sports for boys — typified the ordering of the leisure hours of girls and boys in Bengal up until a decade ago.

While in recent years the divergence of sports and athletics as the reserve of boys and music and the fine arts as that of girls has become blurred, so has the class associations of certain forms of enrichment activity (Sen 2013). A large number of female respondents from the 1970s cohort and an even greater number of those from the 1950s cohort who talked about lessons in Rabīndra Saṅgīt or classical dance were from families with higher cultural capital, and particularly from families where interest in Rabindranath Tagore’s works was considerable — as discussed by some of those older respondents who mentioned their early introduction to his work. But between the 1970s and the present day — and I am inclined to assume that it began happening at a point later than midway through this period — the influence of, or, more than that, the “access” to Tagore, to his songs, to a particular school of dance that was inspired by them broadened, and sections of the lower middle classes who were previously not as besotted with “culture” as the upper sections of the Bhadralok started staking a claim to a repertory of his work.

That children’s leisure activities are less categorizable according to gender in contemporary Kolkata becomes also apparent from this account of the contemporary daily routine of an eleven year-old girl:

I’m in school the entire day [...] and then [...] like after school is over there’s swimming. That’s like all of the day with school and swimming. And there are tuitions every day. Like, just after I swim, around seven or half past seven teacher comes. Teaches. And Fridays I don’t have to come here [sports club]. No, Tue [...] Thursdays are off and Fridays I don’t come because I have two tuition teachers. One is a language teacher. And the other teacher is for everything. And then there is another activity I have [...] dancing: Bharatnātyam and Rabīndra Nr̥tya Nātya. It’s near my house. I’ve

<sup>15</sup> The association between music and a middle-class Bengali childhood dates back to pre-independence Bengal. One of the respondents I spoke to in 2011, a woman in her eighties, said that her childhood began after marriage (Sen 2013: 257). She clarified that her marriage to a “liberal,” cultural music-inclined husband gave her some degree of freedom that she had not had in her parents’ house, and so she associated her childhood with the life she experienced after her marriage at 14 — thereafter she was encouraged to learn to play an instrument.

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been learning dancing and swimming for three years. But I joined this this year itself. There was a swimming pool near where I lived [...] where I still live. I used to swim there before. Close to Adarsha Pally. (Priyanka Bose, born 1998)

This account, though distinguishable from those of some of the eleven year-old boys with regard to the dance class that she takes, does not actually present a stark contrast with their experience — as most of the boys of the ages of ten to twelve take lessons in a sport as well as in music, with singing lessons for younger boys, as well as musical instruments, and frequently with guitar lessons for the twelve year-old boys (Sen 2013).

### **The home, the street, and *Doraemon*: changing contours of childhood**

At the time of my interviews, and afterward once I had become acquainted with it, I would often encounter a blue, round-faced cat in Kolkata — by dint of imagination one could recognize it as a cat. It could be found in different parts of Kolkata, the inflatable blue, round-faced dolls that hung from shop beams in the Gariahat Market or were sold on the streets as wall hangings by vendors. One November evening while talking to a respondent about what she watched on TV, she said *Doraemon*; realizing I was unfamiliar with that show, she asked her mother to fetch her pencil box. Within minutes she returned, placing a cat-shaped pencil case before me by way of explanation. This was one of the first ever times I heard of *Doraemon*, although in subsequent months and phases of fieldwork I would hear the name several times — in homes, at the sports club, at a school. The children almost never referred to another of the show's central character — Nobita Nobi — by name, the boy from whose desk the robotic cat emerged. *Doraemon* takes him on adventures that often but not always revolve around a plot of skipping private tuition or fixing the boy's grades by travelling in time.

*Doraemon* the cat is a character from the Japanese cartoon series of the same name, one which has made its entrance into Bengali culture via the television set. It thus can be regarded as one example of how TV has come to influence childhoods around the world and across cultures. Since the 1980s an increasing volume of literature has been exploring the impact of the television set on children's lives in the US (Elkind 1989), and specifically how it has been gradually replacing earlier forms of entertainment such as playing outdoors. From the 1990s onward concern about the increasing mediatization of childhood became common to many countries. In India as well as in some other South Asian countries, the term "Americanization" of culture would not be uncommon in the 1990s — even when not applied specifically in the context of children's leisure culture. Marvel comics and popular music would be the two predominant emblems of this "Americanization" of youth culture.

From the 1990s the "Japanification" of children's culture would also become a familiar term, weaving its way into Culture Studies and the repertoire of phrases

recognized by sociologists of childhood as signifying the transformation of children's culture. The popularity of shows like *Sailor Moon* and *Pokemon*, of *Hello Kitty* accessories and video games produced by Japanese companies in Europe and the US, has been well documented (West 2009). This crisscross of "Americanization" of the non-“Western” world and the “Japanification” of America, and by and by Europe and South Asia, has hitherto been the staple theme in the discourse on the globalization of culture that crested over a decade ago. The implication of these processes appears to be a threat to turn the leisure culture and everyday lives of children the world over into one of sameness. The popularity of children's programs in India — many of which are animes or North American shows dubbed into Hindi, broadcast nationwide by channels like Hungama TV and Nickelodeon — is a byproduct of this globalization of culture, wherein children's lives are being increasingly mediatized. But the discourse about the conquest of “good” outdoor childhoods by television gives rise to a certain discomfort, particularly in the context of Kolkata.

Talking about changes in US households in the 1980s, David Elkind in *The Hurried Child* (1989) relates the societal shifts in the United States of America at this point to the transformations ensuing from the Industrial Revolution. The impact of the labor market on the American family, and particularly of the entry of women into the labor market, was noticed in the emergence of so-called “latch-key children” — those who would be home most of the time while their parents were out. In Bengal, particularly in the smaller towns where playing space is more abundant than in Kolkata, parents I interviewed sometimes compared their childhoods with those of their children, saying they themselves had spent less time at home watching TV. But accounts of having played outdoors were remarkably lacking among the older cohorts, and predominantly among women. Such female respondents often emphatically stated that they had not “played” (but would then qualify that perhaps with dolls) when they were young, but the games one did play took place mostly within the home. As a respondent from the 1950s cohort recalled:

No, I did not really have much of this business about playing. And who would I play with? If I talk about when I was a child, like if someone came over, then perhaps a bit [...] just [...] like [...] instead of playing, I'd do a bit of skipping, that's all. And apart from that [...] who would come over? It was like everyone was in their own houses.

There wasn't a lot of it [...] not a lot of it. (Gita Haldar, born 1946)

In contrast, some of the male respondents of this cohort talked about playing outside, although more once they were older and allowed to go to a playground that was not in their neighborhood. A male respondent who grew up in South Kolkata thus noted:

We wouldn't play on the streets then, then [...] we'd go to Deshapriya Park to play. Football. Cricket wasn't that popular [...] there was a playground at school. (Biswajit Sen, born 1948)

A number of games like *Ekk Dokk*, *H u u* and *Goll chu* that were versions of hopscotch — with marked “courts” drawn in chalk on a cement floor or a courtyard — were mentioned by both women and men, particularly those from the 1950s cohort. The terrace was a space utilized for this purpose, as was the street in front of the house (unless it was on a main road). But according to these accounts boys, particularly after the age of 12, disappeared from these spaces once they were allowed to explore other neighborhoods or to utilize the school gymnasium (if it was a boys’ school).

A move from unsupervised outdoor childhoods, referred to as “street childhoods” in the German context (Behnken et al. 1991), to domesticized<sup>16</sup> childhoods has been previously documented by some researchers. In the context of Bengal, this historical progression cannot be said to apply to members of the educated middle class. But while one might say that the spatial dimension of the leisure culture has not changed from the pre-television era, a bifurcation did occur for the older cohorts between girlhoods and boyhoods. This bifurcation has become less stark among the contemporary generation of Bengali children. With the popularity of shows like *Doraemon* and of TV channels that primarily broadcast for children, the old domesticization of childhood might have disappeared from middle-class Bengali households, and in its stead a new leisure culture has emerged — one that, despite the gendering of some of its icons,<sup>17</sup> recognizes no distinction between girlhood and boyhood.

The antics of Doraemon the robotic cat were clearly popular among the fifth graders, irrespective of their family backgrounds and gender. In one household three children jostled with one another to best describe Doraemon’s time travel. After I started watching some of the episodes of this show whose appeal lies in the realms of fantasy, I was reminded of the interviews with the children about their weekdays of private tuitions, fretting over grades, and the mountain of schoolwork that seemed to dominate their leisure hours. The popularity enjoyed by *Doraemon* in particular South East Asian countries, as compared to in Europe or the US, has been considered to be due to it having a specific cultural appeal (Peters 2002) — as the plots of private tuition and academic stress are considered themes that children in South Asia can also easily identify with. It still remains a matter of speculation as to whether the show’s prominence in terms of the amount of broadcasting time given to it or

16 Behnken et al. use the term *verhäuslicht*, to which the closest appropriate translation I found is “domesticized.” The domestic in this context is not a binary opposite to a wild, untamed childhood, but is meant to reflect a change from a comparatively less supervised “outdoors” childhood to one which is primarily located in the precincts of the house — the drawing room in which the television is kept, the child’s bedroom, and — in the context of the fieldwork in Kolkata — in the car spaces or precincts of the apartments in which the children lived.

17 US actress Miley Cyrus was, for instance, a familiar figure for most of the little girls I interviewed in Kolkata, though there were no comparable US male celebrities known among the boys. However, the children did identify some of the cartoon characters by gendered traits. This was, for example, true of the mischievous characters in the Japanese animes, who are identified not as troublesome children but as mischievous “boys.”

whether, rather, the fact that it has struck a chord with the frenzied, exam-centric school life of the fifth- and sixth-grade children account for its popularity — especially when reading tastes are still markedly divergent.

Being familiar with this show or others on Hungama, Pogo, or the Disney channels, without necessarily liking them or watching them, was a form of currency in my interviews. In her essay about childhoods and media in the US, Allison Pugh (2011) talks about “economies of dignity” — a concept whose implications are applicable to the context of urban Bengal as well. Here, most children of ages ten to twelve from middle-class families — irrespective of whether they were in Bengali or English medium schools, boys or girls, or whether their parents were professors at a college or owned a small business — knew about *Doraemon*. This finding goes hand-in-hand with Pugh’s own observations:

a limited experience of the leisure culture that might in contemporary society be called the “mainstream” one.<sup>18</sup> To quote Bourdieu and Passeron, “[i]t is not space as such, but a regulated, temporally structured use of space that gives a group a framework for integration” (Bourdieu and Passeron 1979: 32). The experience of spending leisure hours at home, and particularly the marketing of the show as one primarily directed towards children, creates a mold for childhood irrespective of how those who occupy it diverge. Thus children from middle-class families that are separated in space do actually share a childhood through their participation and enmeshment in a common media. Although one cannot — at least in the absence of any relevant historical research on childhoods in India — speak of “street childhoods” in Bengal, the transformation of children’s leisure culture across the cohorts reflects the contours of a middle-class childhood that is, even on the domestic front, constantly being transformed by external influences.

### Conclusion

In the 1980s and 1990s bookstalls at many railway stations across India would have paperback comics stacked up amid the magazines and newspapers. Their protagonists from Archie to Pinki to Suppandi the idiot would be displayed on the front cover, aiding the young purchaser to make her/his decision before the train was boarded. Children of ages ten to twelve absorbed in an issue of *Tinkle Digest* or *C c Caudhar*<sup>19</sup> even before the train left Howrah was not an uncommon sight during the summer holidays. Kiosks at railway stations have not altogether disappeared. Neither have the figures of Cācā Caudharī, Sābū, the long-faced Suppandi, and other *Tinkle Digest* characters from the worlds of the contemporary generation of children in India. But on their own these days they are no longer the unmistakable emblems of contemporary popular culture for children in India.

*Doraemon* might well have taken over the evenings of twelve year-olds in Bengal, just as it and other shows seemingly indiscernible from one another have taken over the teatime and weekends of children elsewhere in India, Europe, Japan, and the US. The discourse of a globalization of culture that asserts that there is a sameness of media across the world also has its detractors, however. The challenge to this assertion has sometimes been raised in the context of transnational media, including in the field of transnational media culture for children (Bignell 2011). Addressing questions of hybridity and transnationality in the exchange of a culture of children’s television between the US and the UK, Jonathan Bignell remarks that:

Working with largely unstated conceptions of children as a market and an audience category, national and transnational television cultures borrow from and exchange

<sup>18</sup> It would be mistaken to assume that children from these groups have no leisure culture of their own. The possibility of alternate forms of leisure culture existing is not disputed here, although they are obviously not explored in this particular context.

<sup>19</sup> A comic which was created in Hindi and was thereafter translated into other languages.

with each other, at the same time as they resist structures, modes of address and representations that are seen as uncomfortably other and unacceptable. (ibid.: 182)

Sometime after my interviews were conducted with the children, an animation show called *Chhota Bheem*<sup>20</sup> created by a Hyderabad-based company became immensely popular in Kolkata among younger children of ages five to seven. The show delves into some of the well-worn motifs of storytelling for children in India — the village, the kingdom, the twins who play minnows to the village bully. Additionally, the influence of manga on the physical appearances of the characters, as well as the borrowing of motifs of children's storytelling from other cultural contexts such as witches on broomsticks talking in midair, are apparent in this show. Shows like *Chhota Bheem* thus exemplify Bignell's argument in this regard.

The societal transformations occurring across the globe in the last three decades have wrought immense changes when it comes to the continuity of traditions in contemporary children's leisure cultures. One way of expressing these three decades of transformation would be to use the term "globalization." The image of Chhota Bheem, who in the eponymous show dances with a Balinese crown on his head is emblematic of this. Even the weary cultural anthropologist would be enthralled once more upon discovering the transformation of children's leisure cultures in cities as far apart from one another as Bucharest, Cologne, and Kolkata, and even more if, hypothetically speaking, comparable patterns such as the TV shows watched or the video games played were to be found. Scholars like Paula Fass assert that "many of the starker images of globalization's costs take children as their subjects" (Fass 2003: 964). The same could be said in the context of the "new generation" of children sculpted by contemporary children's leisure cultures. The argument advanced in this article has not, however, been employed so as to either validate or reject the notion of a globalization-induced hybridization taking place in such leisure cultures. Rather, it has strived to draw attention to how the changes brought about in and by an evolving Bengali children's leisure culture have implications for structural changes in childhood, and in the experiences of childhood in that locale.

Bengali middle-class children of today are heirs to the century-old legacy of Bhadralok culture, whose manifestations in their everyday lives are found in the local importance placed on schoolwork and on the classical arts, on music and dancing — as well as in the absence of a well-established culture of playing outdoors. In this context, it has been the social inequalities existing among the different factions of the Bengali middle class and the processes of their perpetuation that has determined what is inherited — and to what extent — by contemporary generations of Bengali children. The popularity of singing lessons and US comics

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20 *Chhota Bheem* is a children's animation show in India currently broadcast in English on the Pogo channel. The show centers around the antics of a young boy, Chhota Bheem, and its underlying motifs are clearly influenced by and drawn from certain aspects of Indian mythology, as well as the narratives of the *Amar Chitra Katha* comics.

from the 1970s onward, as well as of Japanese animes, affirm the “contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous” (Mannheim 1952: 285). This expression is not inappropriate to the local context, as Bengali children’s leisure culture is — as elsewhere — also a domain in which childhood experiences and the leisure culture of different generations dialectically interact with one another. The Japanese boy with whom children in Kolkata perhaps feel some camaraderie in their grades-related worries is an emblem of the contemporary leisure culture which, in Bengal as in other places, changed the rules of inheritance vis-à-vis childhood entertainment.

One considerable influence on Karl Mannheim in the formulation of his concept of “generations” was the art historian Wilhelm Pinder — a figure who is not, however, mentioned in most sociological commentaries. Pinder talks about time periods having colors — “*Zeitfarben*.” I find the metaphor a compelling one in the context of children’s leisure cultures. Mannheim quotes Pinder as saying that:

Periods have their characteristic colour — “such colours do in fact exist, but somewhat as the colour-tone of a varnish through which one can look at the many colours of the different generations and age groups”<sup>21</sup>. (Mannheim 1952: 284)

Leisure cultures, like childhoods, have a past. The changes that have occurred in the domain of children’s culture in Bengal have not, as the discourse about globalization of culture often asserts, draped a curtain over past traditions. The different layers of children’s culture, like Pinder’s colors, shine through the varnish. The courtyard stays, as does the drawing room and the playground. And groups of children become visible or invisible in certain spaces of amusement and enrichment activities through history. This reminds us of the technique employed by Bruegel in his painting *Children’s Games*, analyzed by many scholarly works — among which Edward Snow’s (1997) is one of the most widely known. Snow identifies in the painting an internal syntax wherein contrasts between paired images exist, as they do within a single image as well.

The present article began with the imagery of Bruegel’s painting, and it is on it that I would like in part to reflect as part of the closing analysis. As has been argued, the past leisure cultures experienced by children in Kolkata and West Bengal have not lineally been replaced by the emerging leisure cultures of today. Some practices and conventions that formed a part of the earlier order of the leisure culture might have become outdated, but nonetheless can be identified in contemporary society — in this sense they are not past. It would be equally incorrect to assume that a “local” leisure culture has been hybridized due to the influence of a dominant “global culture.” To do so would be to attribute an “authenticity” and cultural homogeneity to earlier forms of leisure culture that themselves have to be equally considered as imagined rather than innately given. Sociologists of childhood could benefit from a framework in which a syntax of leisure cultures for children can be uncovered —

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21 According to Mannheim (1952: 322) the quote is of “Pinder: *Das Problem der Generation in der Kunstgeschichte Europas*. Berlin, 1926, 159ff.”

one wherein earlier forms and structures of childhood also become a part of the contemporary leisure culture. Like those scholars who have analyzed Bruegel's art, so can the leisure culture of children be "thought" of as existing in oppositions. The wooden hoop stays, as does the television set. Similarly Bruegel, in the context of 16th century's children's culture, has a place for all sorts of activities on his canvas — none central, every one of them equally sized, most of them children's games.

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