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Crime as a Grand Adventure: Nation-Building and the Empowered Child in Arup Kumar Dutta's *The Kaziranga Trail*

Rizia Begum Laskar*

Abstract

This article investigates the contradictory function of children's detective fiction as a medium for nationalist discourse. Taking Arup Kumar Dutta's, The Kaziranga Trail as a case study, the paper examines how the genre simultaneously depicts crime with a conceived serious treatment while framing the detection efforts of child protagonists as an exciting adventure. The paper contends that this duality is not an inconsistency but a purposeful narrative technique aimed at fostering "governmental belonging" in young readers, thus positioning them as active participants in safeguarding a post-globalization nation.

The analysis focuses on how the genre is employed not merely for entertainment but to explore profound themes of ecological preservation, national identity, and the brutal reality of crime, thereby challenging the typically sanitised portrayal of wrongdoing in children's literature. The narrative illustrates how an innate desire for adventure can be transformed into a profound commitment to the nation. By framing the defence of national symbols as an exciting and intellectually stimulating quest, the paper highlights the narrative strategy to nurture a future generation of proactive and vigilant citizens who see themselves not as passive recipients but as active guardians of their nation. Significantly, the article discusses how this empowerment is ultimately transient, serving to uphold, rather than challenge, adult authority.

Keywords: National Identity, Governmental Belonging, Adventure

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*Rizia Begum Laskar, Assistant Professor, Department of English, M.D. K. Girls' College, Dibrugarh-786001, Assam, India.

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Introduction

Children's literature has long been conceptualized as a powerful medium as well a pedagogical tool for shaping the malleable minds of children. It is a means through which values, traditions, customs and beliefs are transmitted in an understandable and pleasant manner. However, an interesting paradox emerges when the genre of detective fiction involving solving of crime engages with children's literature. The narratives frequently explore serious and mature themes, including theft, violence, and even murder, but they present the child protagonist's experience with these crimes as an adventure, a leisurely pursuit, or a thrilling quest. The primary conflict exists between the ostensibly serious handling of the crime itself and the often lighthearted, adventurous way it is resolved. Depiction of crime through detective fiction generally transforms the graveness associated with crimes - transgression, threat, and societal rupture – into a riddle which engages the intellectual capacity of the young protagonist(s), albeit the crime is portrayed with a gravity that acknowledges its real-life implications, it is ultimately reframed as an intriguing puzzle for the child to unravel, an intellectual challenge that promotes a journey of exploration instead of a plunge into hopelessness. This paper will interrogate this narrative duality through the context of Indian children's detective fiction, particularly Arup Kumar Dutta's *The Kaziranga Trail* (1979). Dutta's exposition of the crime is very grave in nature and of profound national consequence—the poaching of rhinos, a national symbol. The author, in a notable shift from certain Anglo-American customs, does not hesitate to present the gruesome details of the act, illustrating it with a stark and raw reality that underscores the seriousness of the threat right from the beginning. Conversely, the initial shock and awestruck wonder is gradually replaced with a relaxed investigation of three village boys during their summer break. The adventure highlights courageous feats, impeccable reasoning and more importantly a core aspect of children's detective fiction, a sense of enjoyment despite the apparent mortal danger. The paper will argue that this contrast is not a narrative flaw but a purposeful and impactful tactic aimed at fulfilling a specific nationalistic goal. Dutta employs the engaging format of children's detective stories not just to entertain, but to thoughtfully explore themes such as ecological preservation, national identity, betrayal, and the genuine, brutal repercussions of crime, questioning the genre's typically sanitized portrayal of wrongdoing. The so-called adventure is supported by a strong sense of seriousness and consequences from the very beginning.

Review of Literature

Arup Kumar Dutta's *The Kaziranga Trail* despite being published in 1979 and winning the prestigious Shankar's Award in 1979, conferred to mark the "International Year of the Child" has very little academic analysis done on it. There have been stray mentions of the work here and there but relatively few thorough analyses. Navin Menon and Bhavana Nair edited volume titled *Children's Literature in India* (1999) applauds the work as "an excellent work of fiction" (30) and Manorama Jafa in her entry titled "The Indian Subcontinent" in *The International*

Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature (2004) makes a passing reference to *The Kaziranga Trail* as the "first adventure story in Indian setting in English for teenagers" (809). Mohini Rao in "Children's Books in India: An Overview" terms the work as "one of the best books written on the subject" of mystery (72). Michelle Superle in her work titled *Contemporary English-Language Indian Children's Literature* (2011) makes a detailed analysis of children's detective fiction and also includes Arup Kumar Dutta in her analysis but incidentally she does not take up *The Kaziranga Trail* for her analysis. Jintu Borah in Arup Kumar Dutta's Novel- *The Kaziranga Trail*, - As A Juvenile Detective Novel" (2023) does try to interrogate the work from the perspective of detective fiction but is rather a generalized overview of the poaching scenario in Assam and Dutta's portrayal of it in his work. Varna Venugopal and Swarnalatha Rangarajan in "Mother Trees and Memory Keepers: Botanical Life in Recent Indian Children's Climate Fiction" (2024) make an analysis of *The Kaziranga Trail* but it is from an ecological perspective rather than as detective fiction. Margrit Pernau in "Asghari's Piety" (2014) surprisingly argues in a brief reference to *The Kaziranga Trail* that the novel fails to uphold any patriotic piety and any reference to the nation is absent (71).

Children's Literature as a Nationalistic Instrument

Children's literature serves as a potent tool through which the construct of the nation can be effectively portrayed and imbibed. As Peter Hunt in *Children's Literature: The Development of Criticism* (1990) says, literature for children works as an effective medium for the reflection of "society as it wishes to be, as it wishes to be seen, and as it unconsciously reveals itself to be" (2). Pat Pinsent says that, in examining children's literature, one important aspect to be noticed is that "no text can be written without the author's values being in some way significant in it" (23). What are these values and how can they be translated in the context of imbibing values of the nation? In conceiving the idea of a nation, there are two facts that need to be considered–firstly, how does the nation belong to the child, and secondly, does the child have any role to play in the formation of the nation? Ghassan Hage's distinction between two modes of national belonging is instrumental in understanding this concept. The first is a mode of "passive belonging," where an individual feels they "belong to a nation" in the sense of being a part of it, expecting to benefit from its resources, and feeling "at home" within its borders (45). The second, more active mode, is what Hage terms "governmental belonging" (45). This involves a belief that one has a right over the nation, the right "to contribute (even if only by having a legitimate opinion with regard to the internal and external politics of the nation) to its management such that it remains 'one's home'" (Hage 45).

Children's literature often attempts to position children in this role of "governmental belonging," providing them with agency to move from a passive to a dominant position. This shift is designed to help the child realize the nation's potential and to forge an identity rooted in nationalistic beliefs upheld through their own endeavors. This transformation is intended to aid the child in recognizing the nation's potential and to establish an identity anchored in nationalistic ideals

cultivated through their own actions. The necessity of this narrative approach becomes evident when examining the threats to national identity in the era following globalization. In the context of a third world, developing nation like India, the post globalization era has led to a mushrooming of fast food chains, shopping malls, multiplexes and so on leading to a stark demarcation between the have and the have-nots. In such a cultural milieu, it becomes increasingly difficult to attune children to a particular discourse of the nation. In this cultural milieu, the distinction between Hage's two modes of belonging becomes particularly salient. The nation, increasingly visualised through a sense of "passive belonging" in the context of global consumerism becomes a source of goods and entertainment rather than a home to be protected and managed. Children's literature especially like Dutta's *The Kaziranga Trail* provides a counter narrative by placing children in the active role of investigators and protectors of national interests. The genre becomes a pedagogical tool for national resilience in the face of global cultural homogenization.

The Child Detective: Agency and the "Toning Down" of Authority

The genre of detective fiction provides a compelling narrative architecture through which to explore the themes of national identity. The genre is fundamentally "structured around the distance between an event, most often a crime, and the revelation of secrets surrounding that event by the end of the story. Mysteries function by suspending knowledge, prolonging the uncertainty for pleasure" (McGee 44). As defined by Caroline Reitz, its most basic characteristic is "a mysterious event or crime. . . at first concealing the solution from the reader but finally revealing it through the successful investigations of the detective" (xvi). The knowledge, once it is revealed, proves to the seekers of knowledge and also to the reader, that the enemy is most often from within rather than somebody from outside and this knowledge is useful in guarding and protecting a nation. If the members of a family revolt or conspire against their own then the family's doom is inevitable. The outsider can always be treated with mistrust and held accountable for conspiring against the family but its own members are neither mistrusted nor necessarily held accountable always. This trope, though not universal to all detective fiction, forms the foundation for the text analyzed here, emphasizing the necessity of identifying and protecting the nation from its own disloyal and greedy people.

A central and seemingly paradoxical aspect of children's detective fiction is the use of children as detectives, bypassing competent government authorities. While the crimes that are committed are very grave in nature, yet the mode of uncovering the criminals is followed through a very leisurely manner where children are the agents of perpetuating justice rather than the competent government authority. Hage's concept of governmental belonging comes into play here, where the children imagine and actively engage in an attempt to belong to the nation and make it their own. Two things need to be considered here if we have to answer the discrepancy between the graveness of crime and the nature of detecting the crime. The first is the explanation given by Caroline Reitz when she speaks in the context of Victorian detective fiction. She proposes that the detective story is a means through which the

aggression of the police or other government authority is toned down. The police, as a force, faced vehement opposition in Victorian England because of its brutal methods in the context of crime detection and also of regulating social control. As reformers laid down rules to be followed by the government in terms of use of violence, the defensive use of violence necessitated a different means of policing. It is here that the "detective story transformed archaic aggression into a more modern, benevolent authority by offering detection as the way of avoiding despotic displays of government authority" (Reitz xv). The answer to the second question as to why children are used in detection is given by Christopher Routledge in "Crime and Detective Literature for Young Readers", where he says that children "have an advantage in that they are invisible to the adults at the center of the plot" (325). He refers to *Sherlock Holmes' Baker Street Irregulars,* also Holmes' comment about children is significant in this regard:

> There's more work to be got out of one of those little beggars than out of a dozen of the force . . . The mere sight of an official-looking person seals men's lips. These youngsters, however, go everywhere and hear everything. They are as sharp as needles too; all they want is organization. (qtd. in Routledge 325)

This attitude is reiterated by Mr. Neog, the District Forest Officer in charge of wildlife, in *The Kaziranga Trail* where he asks the three children to become the eyes of the department and ask questions to the villagers regarding the poachers. He says that the poachers will be alerted if officials ask questions but children can easily do that without alerting the poachers.

This decision to challenge official authority by giving power to children is not simply a matter of convenience. It serves as an assertion regarding the true locations of power and justice. By employing a Western genre such as detective fiction, a genre that typically reinforces a centralized, state-oriented justice system and then undermining its fundamental mechanism, postcolonial writers deliver a significant message. They navigate around the deficient state framework and propose that genuine "governmental belonging" emerges from the community, from the citizens themselves, beginning with the children who symbolize the future of the nation. Thus, the Indian adaptation of the genre transcends merely incorporating local details; it signifies a crucial transformation in the origins of moral and judicial authority. This method enables Indian authors to not only rewrite the stereotypical representation of formerly colonized nations in western detective fiction but also to create a fiction which is true to the Indian cultural moment and milieu (Chambers 33). While certain Indian English children's detective fiction has faced criticism as being an "Indian Blytonnade" (Superle 111), a mere superficial copy of Western styles, writers like Dutta have dedicated themselves to establishing a unique identity for the genre by embedding a sense of Indianness.

Arup Kumar Dutta's The Kaziranga Trail

The novel *The Kaziranga Trail* provides a compelling case study for the theories

outlined above, perfectly demonstrating the duality of a serious crime framed as a thrilling adventure. The narrative begins not with a leisurely scene but with a grim and graphic depiction of the crime itself. The poaching of rhinos, a national symbol, is presented in all its grisly detail, with the author refusing to shy away from the repugnance of the act. Dutta thus makes it clear from the very beginning that though the work is children's fiction he is not going to make it childish by glossing over the actual crime and the way it is carried out. The gravity of the crime necessitates that its details should not be shrouded from readers and any attempt to do so would only make the whole situation seem farcical. He thus describes the actual process of the cutting of the rhino's horn:

> The leader of the gang moved into action . . . He lifted the dao and began to hack away at the animal's snout to remove the horn.
>
> The rhino cringed in pain. Blood spouted from its snout like a fountain. The man went on hacking. After a while he stopped and picked up the horn, covered with flesh and blood . . . .His hands were bloody. On his face was a triumphant, fiendish smile.
>
> The rhino stood in the pit, life ebbing out of its body. By morning it would be dead. Vultures would swoop down to feed upon its carcass. (8)

The very stark narrative at the beginning itself therefore makes the reader aware that this is neither going to be a glorification of the natural beauty of the sanctuary nor an easy adventure for enjoyment. As the three boys are introduced into the narrative, Dutta's portrayal swerves back from the grimness of reality to the easy-going nature of three boys out for adventure in their summer holidays. But it also emphasizes that the boys are at one with the landscape and are aware and alert for any change in it, small or large. This is evident from the detailed description of s a particular morning in the sanctuary in the following terms:

> Usually, the sanctuary is alive with sounds, the twittering of birds, the chirping of crickets and the occasional grunts of a rhino. But this morning a strange silence prevailed. Herds of deer stood still, sniffing the air. The atmosphere had suddenly become warm and sultry. Thick, black clouds were gathering in the western skies. (9-10)

Their deep connection to the land is a crucial element of the narrative, as their motivation is not just adventure but the protection of their land and their home that is being encroached upon.

As Mr. Neog, the District Forest Officer, says in a powerful moment, "These boys are not tourists coming for a visit. Their village was here long before this became a sanctuary. *Kaziranga and its animals are a part of their lives*" (emphasis added) (15-16). This statement succinctly summarizes the premise of the nation and its national property being an extension of the home, justifying the boys' active, 'governmental belonging'. Conversely, the narrative also employs the usual tactics of detective fiction and thus, when the boys find the dead rhino, Bubul suggests that it would be better to hunt for some clues first before reporting the matter to the

forest authorities, as suggested by Dhanai. There is a storm brewing and if they are not quick the rain would not leave any clues for the forest authorities to come and search for. The observant power of Jonti is also stressed upon in the very beginning and, in their search for clues, it is Jonti who discovers the impression of the footprint with the big toe missing and this proves an important tool in their later detection process. The children's observational powers are also put to use when they deduce that the poachers are not outsiders but locals, based on the leftover food. This focus on logical reasoning, rather than brute force, is what makes them effective detectives.

The story then reveals the 'enemy within' through Phukan, the chief forest ranger. Dutta's nuanced portrayal of Phukan as a 'tall, thin man with narrow eyes' during his initial introduction serves as an intentional hint toward his treacherous character, a common element in detective fiction. The boys' logical reasoning allows them to pinpoint Phukan as the betrayer, whose motivations stem from gambling debts and financial issues. This supports the previous claim that a nation's most significant dangers often arise from its own citizens, motivated by avarice and ethical decay. Moreover, the novel successfully 'Indianizes' the genre by incorporating local traditions and beliefs. The boys' ingenious strategy to capture the outsider, Mr. Bose, involves using a local berry juice to induce illness and then exploiting the local superstition surrounding a *birra* (ghost). The identical twin brothers, Babul and Jonti, frighten a waiter with their similar looks, leading him to spread the ghost tale. This incorporation of local mythology adds a unique taste to the narrative and illustrates how the genre can be tailored to fit a particular cultural context. Nonetheless, the empowerment of the children is ultimately fleeting and contingent. As the boys draw closer to solving the mystery, they find themselves in serious peril, and their efforts to reach Mr. Neog are thwarted when his wife unwittingly reveals their secret to Phukan. For the narrative to progress, Mr. Neog is safely removed from the scene of action and thus narratorial freedom is given to children to take the investigation as they wish to do so. But their freedom is curbed at the end where the authority is brought back into the scene to neatly tie up the loose ends. Adult-like powers rest on young shoulders only to be removed later on to relegate children to their state of powerlessness.

Maria Nikolajeva in *Power, Voice and Subjectivity in Literature for Young Readers* (2010), says that, be it the fictional world of children's literature or the real world, adults will always retain their superior position. In circumstances where the child is allowed to be triumphant, it happens only through the support of at least one adult. The empowerment of children takes place in the carnivalesque space where power is handed down for a temporary phase to be taken back at will. Thus, children's writers portray child characters in an empowered state but only on certain conditions and for a limited time period (203-204). Children's literature, especially the genre of mystery and detective fiction, therefore is a transient means for empowerment of children where they play out adult roles and even enjoy those roles which take them away from the innocence of childhood. The danger that is involved

in this role play is neither childish in nature nor child-like in its execution. The ample references to violence or violent tendencies that the narrative displays further corroborates the standpoint that Arup Dutta intended the text to highlight the reality of children's engagement in adult activities. Consequently, the references to instances like - "Phukan gave the two poacher instructions to guard them. 'Shoot them if they try to escape,' he said harshly" (*Kaziranga Trail* 63) or "A long-bladed knife thrown by one of the poachers whizzed past his head, missing his scalp by inches. Dhanai heard a sharp plopping sound and the elephant's grunt of pain as the knife streaked through the air and embedded itself in Makhoni's body" (66) make it crystal clear to the reader that the narrative is neither childish nor childlike in its treatment of violence.

The Necessity of Adventure: An Analysis

Does a mere desire for adventure warrant the actions of the three boys in the face of serious peril? What motivates ordinary village boys to put their lives on the line? And is patriotism and a sense of nationhood a strong enough driving force for such risks? To answer these questions, it is important to understand how nation or nationality is performed in the everyday life of people. Jon E. Fox and Cynthia Miller -Idriss in "Everyday nationhood" explore the idea of nation as constituted in the daily life and nation and try to find out how nation and nationalism is performed through the mundane activities of routine life. Using Hobsbawm's idea that though nationalism is constructed from above yet it is necessary to analyze it from the standpoint of the hopes and aspirations of the common people, they look at the construction of nation from the perspective of everyday life and how various studies ranging from Herzfeld and Billig to Edensor describe people's associations with nation (537). Researchers have shifted the focus from elitist discourse on nationalism to the commonsensical understanding of nation by the ordinary man and the necessity to approach nationalism from the perspective of the common man as "active producers" and not "passive consumers" of national discourse. The question that arises is as to how and more importantly when is the common man can call upon to display his understanding of and solidarity with the nation? Very often, the man in the street is not called upon either to enact or to express his association with a heavily theoretical concept of nation. Some of the ways identified by Fox and Miller-Idriss are national calamities, wars and sporting events which makes the common man one with the nation (540). At the same time, some of the choices made by people regarding their national sentiments can become a marker of nationhood. When faced with "national menus of options", nationhood acts as deciding factor in choosing from the options. And if these people have already internalized nationally defined institutions, then nationhood structures or shapes the choices taken up by them (545). They also recognize certain symbols of nation which define people's association with the nation and also attract and display the public conception of national pride and honour. For the Kaziranga boys, nation does not necessarily imply India or for that matter even Assam. Nation is a much-localized concept encompassing the surroundings where they spent most of their lives and which in

return nourishes and cares for them. Nation is visualized in an ecological sense and the necessity to show their solidarity to it arises only when this balance between their life and nature is threatened by some external element. But the threat comes not in the shape of any direct encroaching of or a literal attack on the inhabitants. The threat is more to a symbol of nationhood – the rhino. The children could recognize any act which desecrates its significance and thereby the necessity to protect it at any cost.

Significance and Scope for Further Research

The significance of the present analysis lies in its discussion of how *The Kaziranga Trail* redefines the detective fiction genre. Rather than trivializing crime, Dutta intertwines serious national issues (such as rhino poaching viewed as both an ecological and cultural danger) with the exciting elements typical of children's detective narratives, while also placing the novel within the context of nation-building. It illustrates how children's literature serves as an educational instrument to transition young readers from 'passive belonging' (merely being part of a nation) to 'governmental belonging' (actively safeguarding and shaping the nation). By examining Dutta's fusion of local traditions, environmental concerns, and cultural beliefs, the paper reveals that Indian English children's detective fiction is not simply a reproduction of Western examples (like those of Blyton), but a distinct genre with its own identity and purpose on a national level. The paper adds to critical discussions by highlighting that the tension serious crime presented as 'adventure' - is intentional rather than a flaw, serving as a narrative technique aimed at fostering ecological consciousness, patriotism, and alertness among young readers.

The potential for further investigation lies in broadening these insights through comparative and thematic analyses. Future researchers might look into how various Indian children's detective stories engage with themes of nationalism, ecology, and identity in comparison to Western influences such as Enid Blyton or Nancy Drew. Ecocritical frameworks could further investigate the depiction of wildlife conservation and environmental ethics within these narratives. Moreover, studies could examine how children's agency is shaped and constrained in diverse cultural settings or how these works can be incorporated into educational practices to foster environmental and civic responsibility. Lastly, an exploration of postcolonial identity development in modern Indian children's literature can illuminate how it navigates the complexities of globalization and consumerism.

Conclusion

The examination of *The Kaziranga Trail* reveals that the seeming contradiction between the serious depiction of crime and its representation as a child's adventure is actually a calculated and nuanced narrative choice. The stark portrayal of rhino poaching aims to underscore the seriousness of the crime and its significant repercussions for the country as a symbolic 'home'. This seriousness lends the moral grounding required to validate the children's actions. Concurrently, the story frames the investigation as an adventure, leveraging the exciting elements of the detective

genre to make the idea of national safeguarding appealing and relatable for its young readership. The temporary empowerment of the children within this carnivalesque space serves an important function. It enables them to operate as agents of change, transitioning from a position of passive national belonging to one of active, 'governmental belonging'. However, this empowerment is not enduring, and the resolution of the narrative, which sees adult authority reestablishing control, reinforces the existing social hierarchy. Thus, the genre fulfills its educational role without entirely disrupting the societal power dynamics.

The analysis indicates that the pursuit of adventure serves as the initial spark, but the deeper, and ultimately more motivating factor, is a profound sense of patriotism. The narrative's intent is to illustrate that a feeling of national pride and duty is a sufficiently powerful emotion to inspire individuals, transforming a child's inherent desire for adventure into a significant commitment to serving the nation. By presenting the defense of national symbols and the revelation of internal corruption as an exciting and intellectually stimulating endeavor, these tales effectively nurture the forthcoming generation of citizens to be more than mere recipients of their nation's benefits, but rather its proactive and vigilant guardians.

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