

Smell Without Scent: Olfactory Evocation in Indian Children's Picture books and India's Foundational-Stage Curriculum

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Abstract

India's National Education Policy 2020 promotes storytelling-based pedagogy and, in the same document, the digital delivery of learning materials, while its curriculum frameworks ask children in the foundational stage to differentiate smells and tastes. This article examines how these commitments bear on stories about smell. It reads three openly licensed picture books published by Pratham Books and circulated in print, digital and audio editions through Story Weaver: *Peacocks and Pakodas!*, *Singing in the Rain* and *The Nose of All Noses*. In these ordinary text-and-image editions, odour is not physically transmitted, so their olfactory meaning depends on the interaction of words, images and the reader's prior sensory associations. Distinguishing the transmission of an odour from its representation and its evocation, the study combines comparative close reading of text-image relations with qualitative analysis of NEP 2020, NCF-FS 2022 and NCF-SE 2023. Where the frameworks operationalise smell primarily through sensory discrimination, the selected stories give it additional narrative and mnemonic functions. The illustrations depict the act of smelling, its visible sources and, through two recurring conventions (closed eyes and a drawn trail of scent), the passage of odour itself; verbal narration specifies which odour is meant and connects it to particular experiences, memories and places. *The Nose of All Noses* offers a culturally specific instance of olfaction functioning as a narrative hinge between geographical settings, historical time and familial memory, a function that existing typologies do not identify as a principal category. The findings concern what the texts make possible, not what children experience. As a pedagogical implication, the article proposes the adult's question about what a smell recalls as a point where curricular and literary approaches to smell can meet.

Keywords: olfaction; children's picture books; sensory literacy; NEP 2020; NCF-FS 2022; digital reading; text-image relations; Indian children's literature

1. Introduction

Early in *Peacocks and Pakodas!*, a picture book for beginning readers, the narrator Meenu says, "I love the smell of wet earth" (Kumar & Chaudhry, 2012). The sentence reads the same in the printed booklet, on a phone screen and in the recorded versions through which the book also circulates. None of these editions' releases scent. A child who meets the sentence either brings the smell of wet earth to it from memory or meets only the words and the picture. This ordinary situation is the starting point of the article, because Indian school policy now places stories, screens and the senses side by side without asking how they bear on one another.

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) makes storytelling-based pedagogy part of standard practice in every subject and asks that local traditions of story, song and play enter early childhood curricula (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 2020, paras. 1.3, 4.6). The same document places foundational literacy resources on the DIKSHA platform and anticipates digital libraries, smart classrooms and digital pedagogy (paras. 2.6, 2.8, 4.46). The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS), which carries the policy into classrooms for children aged three to eight, names smell directly: one competency expects children to differentiate multiple smells and tastes (National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2022, C-2.4), and the later framework for school education reproduces it word for word (NCERT, 2023, pp. 198–199). What the documents do not consider is what a story can do with smell when it reaches a child in editions that do not deliver scent.

Research on smell in children's reading has grown quickly. Kucirkova and Tosun (2024) surveyed 102 popular English-language picturebooks about smell and 87 scratch-and-sniff titles, and identified three principal ways in which olfaction is embedded in them: as an addition to the depiction of objects and places, as a device for humour, and as a means of engaging children in the story. They recognise that a book can invoke smell in immaterial as well as material form, through a textual description that calls up olfactory memory. Their coding of books about smell, however, drew on titles and selling or publisher descriptions rather than close reading, and they note that their English-language, marketplace-based sample left other languages and traditions unexamined. Løkken et al. (2025) found that a digital book releasing odours raised the engagement of sixty-five Norwegian four- and five-year-olds but not their vocabulary or comprehension. Searches carried out in October 2026 through general and scholarly search engines, combining smell, olfaction or odour with picturebook, children's literature, India and StoryWeaver, returned no study that reads closely how Indian picturebooks make smell meaningful through words and images alone, or that relates such books to Indian curricula. The search was not exhaustive, and the gap is claimed within that limit.

The article addresses three questions. First, how do NEP 2020, NCF-FS 2022 and the National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023 (NCF-SE) address smell in early learning? Second, through what verbal and visual means, and what relations between them, do three Indian picturebooks make smell narratively meaningful without delivering scent? Third, what does the relation between these answers suggest for storytelling-based pedagogy, now that the same texts reach children on screens and in recordings as well as in print?

The argument is that stories can make smell narratively meaningful without transmitting the odour itself. Where NCF-FS and NCF-SE operationalise smell primarily through sensory discrimination, the selected stories give it additional narrative and mnemonic functions: smell marks a season, reports what happens out of sight, sets a direction and, in one book, moves characters between places and times. The illustrations show the smelling body and the visible source, and sometimes draw the odour as a trail between them; the narration names the odour and connects it to particular experiences, memories and places. The claims concern what the texts make possible, not what children perceive or learn, which would require a reader-based study.

2. Transmission, representation and evocation

Discussions of multisensory reading often treat “engaging the sense of smell” as one thing. This study treats it as three. *Transmission* is the physical arrival of an odour at a reader's nose, as when a scratch-

and-sniff panel is rubbed, or a device releases a scent. *Representation* is the presentation of an odour within the book: verbally, by naming or describing it, and visually, by depicting its source, a body in the act of smelling, or the odour itself through a drawn convention such as a curling trail. *Evocation* is what a representation may set going in a reader: a remembered or imagined smell, and the feelings and scenes attached to it. Because words and pictures in a picturebook contribute jointly to meaning (Kucirkova & Tosun, 2024), representation is here a matter of text-image relations, not of language alone. It can fail to evoke when it finds nothing in the reader to answer it. The books studied here represent smell with evocation in view, in editions that do not transmit it.

Representation is harder for smell than for sight. Speakers of Jahai, a language of the Malay Peninsula, name odours as readily as colours, while English speakers struggle and fall back on long descriptions (Majid & Burenhult, 2014); Thai, spoken by tens of millions, also has a sizeable set of dedicated smell terms (Wnuk et al., 2020). English mostly names a smell by its source (the smell of rain, of frying) or by an evaluation (nice, bad). Where an English text names a smell by its source, it relies on the reader already knowing what that source smells like, a point that matters for books which also circulate in several Indian languages.

Studies with adults have found that odour-cued memories tend to come from the first decade of life, earlier than memories cued by words or pictures (Willander & Larsson, 2006), and that they are more emotional (Herz & Schooler, 2002). Two studies bear more directly on smell without odour. When participants were given a printed word such as “lily” and asked to imagine its smell, the memories they retrieved were older and richer in sensory detail than memories retrieved from the word alone (Willander & Larsson, 2008). When adult women were asked simply to imagine a pleasant or unpleasant odour, olfactory imagery called up personal memories more often than visual imagery, although it was rated as less vivid (Schlinter et al., 2023). These are adult studies and say nothing certain about children reading stories. They do suggest that an imagined smell prompted by language can do part of the work of a real one, which is the possibility on which the stories examined here depend.

The third element comes from Vygotsky's account of imagination in childhood. Vygotsky (1930/2004) argued that imagination recombines elements of what a child has already experienced, so the richer the experience, the more material imagination has to work with. For olfactory evocation, this suggests that a story works most readily with smells a child already knows, calling them up, combining them and attaching meaning to them; a smell named only by an unfamiliar source gives imagination less to work with. Evocation is therefore unevenly distributed: a child who has stood near a kitchen where pakodas are frying brings more to that sentence than one who has not.

Finally, the study engages the typology of Kucirkova and Tosun (2024), derived largely from English-language books, many of them scent-bearing. They also propose, for future books, that abstract odours might stimulate fantasy and imagined travel in time. Section 5 asks how their categories fare in books that work through representation alone, and whether one book here already achieves something close to that proposed movement.

3. Corpus and method

The study combines comparative close reading of text–image relations in three picturebooks with qualitative analysis of three policy documents. The picturebooks were published by the not-for-profit Pratham Books and are distributed through its StoryWeaver platform under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 licence: *Peacocks and Pakodas!* (Kumar & Chaudhry, 2012), *Singing in the Rain*

(Kumar & Chaudhry, 2015) and *The Nose of All Noses* (Ganapathi, 2019). Each exists in print and as a free digital book and has also circulated as an audiobook, a narrated read-along or a recorded storytime on the TISS CLIX school platform; none of these editions releases scent. The publisher grades the first two at Level 2 (children who read new words with help) and the third at Level 3 (children ready to read alone), roughly the end of the foundational stage and the start of the preparatory stage. I read the English StoryWeaver PDF of each book page by page, text and illustration together; page numbers follow the publisher's illustration credits.

The three books were chosen to form a graded sample rather than a representative one. In *Peacocks and Pakodas!* smell is one sense among many in a catalogue of the monsoon. In *Singing in the Rain*, it appears once, at a turning point. In *The Nose of All Noses* it organises the whole plot. Reading them in this order makes it possible to observe how the means of representing smell change as smell moves from the edge of a story to its centre.

Each olfactory moment was read against four questions. What is smelt, and is it named by its source, by an evaluation or by a dedicated term? Who smells, and is the act rendered by a verb, a bodily description, a sound or an image? What does the smell do in the narrative: describe, direct, transport or recall? And what does the illustration on the same page present (the source, the smelling body, the odour itself, or none of these) in relation to what the words specify?

The policy corpus comprises NEP 2020 (MHRD, 2020), NCF-FS 2022 (NCERT, 2022) and NCF-SE 2023 (NCERT, 2023). I read the early-childhood and curriculum chapters of NEP 2020 in full. For NCF-FS, I examined the curricular goal and competencies concerning the senses (CG-2), checking their wording against NCF-SE, which reproduces them. I searched the complete text of NCF-SE for smell, odour, scent, fragrance and aroma and read each occurrence within its section. Each passage was interpreted by asking under which developmental domain smell is placed and to what activity it is attached, whether discrimination, concept formation or something else. The aim was to see how smell is framed, not how often it is named.

Three limits should be stated. The study reads English editions, although each book exists in several Indian languages on StoryWeaver. It does not compare print, screen and audio editions systematically, so what it says about digital delivery concerns only the textual and visual features examined. And it makes no claim about readers: whether these texts evoke smell for particular children can only be established by working with children.

4. What the curriculum asks of smell

The three documents do not address olfaction in the same way, and none of them connects smell to storytelling or to digital delivery.

NEP 2020 does not mention smell in its account of early childhood care and education. Its list of what such education should contain includes colours and shapes, puzzles, drawing, painting and other visual art, craft, drama and puppetry, and music and movement (MHRD, 2020, para. 1.2), a generous list whose sensory range is visual, auditory and kinaesthetic. The same chapter asks for local traditions of art, stories, poetry, games and songs (para. 1.3), and storytelling-based pedagogy later becomes a standard form of experiential learning (para. 4.6). Alongside these runs an expansion of digital provision: foundational literacy resources on DIKSHA, digital libraries, and smart classrooms (paras. 2.6, 2.8, 4.46).

Under the curricular goal “Develops sharpness in sensorial perceptions”, NCF-FS 2022 lists the competency “Differentiates multiple smells and tastes” (C-2.4), and NCF-SE 2023 reproduces the goal and its competencies unchanged, in a table headed “Domain: Physical Development” (NCERT, 2023, pp. 198–199). The neighbouring competencies concern telling shapes and colours apart, visual memory, and the discrimination of sounds and of touch; the last asks children to begin integrating sensory perceptions into a holistic awareness of experience (C-2.6).

Two features of this framing matter. Smell is defined by discrimination: as the competency is worded, the child’s task is to tell one smell from another. And the goal sits among the competencies of physical development, beside the sharpening of sight and hearing, rather than among those concerned with language, memory or imagination.

NCF-SE 2023 returns to smell in its account of concept formation. Perceptual concepts, it says, are formed through the senses, and very young children can begin to tell objects apart by colour, shape, texture “and perhaps even taste and smell” (NCERT, 2023, p. 55). The qualifier places smell at the uncertain end of the list. On the next page, the framework gives language a central role in such concepts: language lets children check their experiences against those of others and arrive at shared meanings and accepted words for what they perceive (p. 56). It also asks that foundational-stage content be sensorially engaging and drawn from children’s life experiences, and names picture books and audio-visual materials among the materials for multisensory activity (pp. 210–211). These passages come close to the concern of this article, since naming a perception and sharing its meaning is what a story does with a smell. The framework does not, however, extend the link to smell’s associations with memory and place, or ask what picture books can do with a sense they cannot transmit.

5. Reading smell in three picturebooks

5.1 *Peacocks and Pakodas!*: smell among the senses

Peacocks and Pakodas! belongs to a five-book series in which a girl named Meenu narrates the seasons of the Indian year. The monsoon volume opens with two perceptual reports: “I can see big, black clouds in the sky and I can hear BADABOOM, the roll of thunder” (Kumar & Chaudhry, 2012, p. 2). The next sentence about the senses changes its verb. Meenu does not say that she can smell the earth; she says, “I love the smell of wet earth”. Sight and sound are reported as capacities, smell as an attachment. The illustration shows her running through the rain with arms flung open and face turned up to the clouds. Rain, clouds and fields are drawn; the smell of the earth is not. Here the words alone carry the odour, while the picture carries the delight that “love” names.

The next sentence extends that attachment beyond the child: “After a long hot summer, the soil also loves the first raindrops I think”. The closing “I think” marks the thought as Meenu’s invention; she lends the ground a pleasure she knows from her own body. This is a small instance of what Vygotsky (1930/2004) described as imagination recombining elements of experience, and a smell prompts it. The smell itself is named only by its source. English has no common single word for the odour of rain on dry ground, and the book’s own back cover renders the moment differently, as “the lovely scent of moist soil”. A Hindi-speaking reader might reach for *sondhi*, an adjective often used for exactly this earthy odour, which suggests that the home languages NEP 2020 favours for early instruction (MHRD, 2020, para. 4.11) may hold resources for smell that an English text lacks.

The second olfactory moment returns to the verb of capacity: “I can smell the pakodas being fried in the kitchen” (p. 6). Smell now joins sight and hearing as a way of knowing, and “being fried” places the

odour in the present and in another room. Through a doorway in the background, a woman stands frying in a large pan, and a pale, wavy trail rises from it, crosses the room and ends at Meenu's nose. Meenu's eyes are closed and her hands clasped at her chest, while the boy beside her turns toward the kitchen with his arms spread. The picture represents the odour itself, as a trail linking source to smeller, and shows smelling as an act that shuts the eyes. What it cannot say is which odour this is or what it belongs to. The sentence names the pakodas, and the lines that follow tie them to the household's food and to Amma, who prepares it: corn, hot milk, puris to come.

In this book, smell also marks time: the wet earth announces the season and the frying pakodas the household's response to it, both part of the seasonal calendar the series sets out to teach.

5.2 *Singing in the Rain*: smell as direction

Singing in the Rain began as six wordless illustrations made for a Pratham Books campaign; Mala Kumar and Manisha Chaudhry wrote a Hindi story to fit them and translated it into English themselves (Kumar & Chaudhry, 2015). The story is almost entirely acoustic. A celebrated Rajasthani singer, Sukhiya Kaka, walks to a neighbouring village singing *raag Malhar*, the raga traditionally associated with rain; a dinosaur arrives with thudding footsteps, the two sing a duet, and the clouds respond.

Smell appears once, on the last narrative page: "Then off they went to Jhalaura following the smell of yummy pakoras" (p. 7). The illustration on that page shows the singer and the dinosaur sharing an umbrella in heavy rain; it contains no food, no village and no trail of scent. Because the six images preceded the words, the olfactory source was never part of the visual sequence. The pakoras exist only in the narration, which extends the scene beyond the frame and gives the story a direction. The smell is named by its source and by "yummy", an evaluative word that belongs more properly to taste, a borrowing typical of how English talks about smell.

A closing page then asks the reader, among other questions, "What do you like to eat when it rains?" (p. 8). This is participation, the third of Kucirkova and Tosun's (2024) principal uses, achieved through a question rather than a scented panel: the child is asked to supply from memory what the text has only named. Yet the question asks about eating, not smelling. Even here, smell becomes appetite.

5.3 *The Nose of All Noses*: smell as passage

In *The Nose of All Noses*, smell is the subject rather than a detail. Zahra's grandmother, Dadima, has a large nose that "picks up scents that others cannot even imagine" (Ganapathi, 2019, p. 3). Her first demonstration names three smells: Zahra's mother is about to cook biryani, a neighbour is crushing henna leaves, and the cat has urinated (p. 4). The illustration sets the three sources in cloud-shaped bubbles beside Dadima, whose eyes are closed and nose raised, so that what she smells appears as scenes she imagines rather than objects in the room. Food, a plant used on the body, and waste set the pleasant beside the unpleasant, which is the material of the curriculum's discrimination task. The story stages that task, but to a different end. Dadima's nose tells her what others are doing out of sight, and the cat supplies the humour that Kucirkova and Tosun (2024) identify as a principal use of smell.

The book's most distinctive device is the way it renders the act of smelling. Each deep sniff follows the same formula: eyes close, the nose swells, the nostrils flare, the chest puffs up, and the text prints the sound "HUMMMM HAR HUMMMM!" (pp. 4, 8, 12). Since the book cannot release a smell, it prints the sniff as a bodily posture and as a noise. The illustrations add their visual equivalents: closed eyes on most smelling faces, and thin curling lines that rise from bottles towards noses (pp. 7, 8, 17, 18). An adult reading aloud has to perform the sniff, and a listening child can join in. Smell is represented here through enactment as much as through naming.

Dadima also explains how such a nose is made. Her own, she says, was trained in her father's attar shop, and with effort Zahra's can be trained too (p. 6). She gives two instructions as she uncorks an old bottle: "Take a whiff and see where your nose takes you", and, after Zahra sneezes on the dust, "Be gentle, take your time and imagine" (p. 7). The second instruction joins smelling to imagining and to slowness, and it reads almost as a pedagogy. Inside the fiction, a real scent is transmitted. For the reader, it remains words and a drawn curl of scent.

The first attar smells of flowers that remind Zahra of festivals. She is drawn lying with closed eyes in a whirl of pink petals (p. 8), and on the next page she opens her eyes in a rose garden at dawn; it is "no longer a Mumbai afternoon" (p. 9). The pictures move from the odour's source, drawn as a cloud around the smeller, to the place that source comes from. The words name the perfume, *ruh-e-gulaab* from Kannauj (p. 10), later glossed as "the soul of roses" (p. 18), and attach it to Zahra's memory. A second attar reminds her of the first monsoon shower; she is drawn among large green leaves (p. 12), and the text says the attar "transports" them to a Nawab's palace in Awadh. The image gives that word a form: the two float inside a swirling ring of colour (p. 13), and the same ring carries them home at the end (p. 21). In the palace, the Nawab sniffs bottle after bottle and throws each away because it smells like the rain (p. 14), in effect the smell that brought the visitors there. At last, Dadima asks which scent reminds Zahra of home; Zahra answers, "Biryani!" (p. 19), and a spoonful kept in a copper box returns them to a table where her mother is setting down a steaming pot (pp. 21-22).

Three of these olfactory moments are explicitly memories (festivals, the first monsoon shower, home), and each is followed by a change of place. The book contains all three of Kucirkova and Tosun's (2024) principal uses, but its central use of smell is different. Olfaction functions as a narrative hinge between geographical settings (Mumbai, Kannauj, Awadh), historical time (a present afternoon and a Nawabi past) and familial memory (the grandmother's training in her father's shop; biryani as home). Kucirkova and Tosun anticipate something related when they propose that abstract odours in future books might carry readers across time, but they offer it as a design possibility for scent-bearing books, not as a principal category of existing ones. *The Nose of All Noses* is a culturally specific instance of that movement, achieved through words and images alone, and I refer to this function as *smell as passage*.

5.4 Across the corpus

Smell is named mainly by its source (wet earth, frying pakodas, biryani, roses), and a dedicated name appears only where a craft tradition supplies one, as with *ruh-e-gulaab*. The illustrations rely on two recurring conventions: smellers close their eyes, and odour is drawn as a curling trail from source to nose. Pictures can therefore show that something is being smelt and where it comes from, but not which smell it is or what it recalls; the narration supplies that. The balance shifts across the corpus. In *Peacocks and Pakodas!* the wet earth is carried by words alone and the pakodas by both; in *Singing in the Rain* the source exists only in the narration; in *The Nose of All Noses* image and text share almost every olfactory moment. Across these three books, smell's narrative function deepens from description, to direction, to passage, a pattern of this selected corpus rather than a typology of Indian picturebooks, and each book returns smell, in the end, to food and home.

6. Discussion: what words can do, and what they cannot

The first finding is that where NCF-FS and NCF-SE operationalise smell primarily through sensory discrimination, the selected stories give it additional narrative and mnemonic functions: smell recalls a season, places a mother in her kitchen, leads a singer to a feast, and carries a child to a rose garden and

back. But because the competency names only discrimination and sits under physical development, a teacher reading these stories under its guidance has no prompt to use them for anything else. The stories' linking of smell to memory, place and relationship falls outside the framework that is meant to make use of storytelling.

The second finding concerns the screen. It is tempting to describe digital delivery as a sensory loss, and this study began from that assumption. The corpus does not support it. The editions examined here release no scent in any format, so their olfactory meaning lies in words, images and what readers bring to them. The words pass unchanged from booklet to screen to recording, and the images, with their drawn trails of scent, from booklet to screen. With respect to these textual and visual features, then, the digital form takes little away. Whether children read the editions differently is a separate question, which this study did not test. Dadima's "take your time and imagine" names the condition on which evocation depends, and whether a child is given that time depends on how a story is used as much as on the medium.

The third point is a pedagogical implication rather than a finding. *Singing in the Rain* ends by asking what the child likes to eat when it rains. Asked aloud by an adult, a question of this kind is where representation may become evocation. A teacher who pauses at Meenu's wet earth, or at the trail rising from Amma's pan, to ask what rain or frying smells like where the children live, what it reminds them of, and how they would say it at home, is applying NCF-SE's own account of perceptual concepts to the sense it names most hesitantly: the child tells a smell apart, and language lets her check that experience against others' and find shared words for it (NCERT, 2023, p. 56). Because NEP 2020 favours the home language for early instruction (MHRD, 2020, para. 4.11), such a question may draw on words, like *sondhi*, that the English text lacks. Whether it does so in practice needs testing with teachers and children.

One limit follows from Vygotsky's (1930/2004) account: evocation is unequal. A book relying on wet earth and frying pakodas speaks most fully to children whose monsoons and kitchens resemble Meenu's; children in other regions, in crowded cities or in households with different foods meet the same words with different stores of experience. NEP 2020 asks for stories rooted in local contexts (MHRD, 2020, para. 4.29), but the evocative power of a smell word cannot be assumed to travel with the digital file that carries it.

7. Conclusion

The curricular answer is that the documents differ. NEP 2020 does not address smell in early childhood; NCF-FS 2022 and NCF-SE 2023 operationalise it primarily through discrimination, and NCF-SE links perception to language in general terms without extending that link to smell's associations. The literary answer is that the stories make smell narratively meaningful without transmitting it. They name smell mainly by its source, share its representation between pictures and narration, and use it to describe, to direct and, in *The Nose of All Noses*, to join geography, history and family memory. That last function, smell as passage, is not a principal category in the existing typology, which was built largely on English-language books that release scent.

The practical implication is modest. In the features examined here, digital delivery does not remove smell, which was never present as odour, only as words, images and the reader's associations. Whether these evoke anything depends on the reading around them: time to imagine, as Dadima puts it, and a

question that turns the text toward the child's own remembered smells, ideally in the child's own language.

Three lines of further work follow: a comparison of the Hindi and other Indian-language versions of these books on StoryWeaver; a reading of the complete seasonal series to which *Peacocks and Pakodas!* belongs; and, most necessary, work with children and teachers to test whether the evocation these texts make possible actually takes place.

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