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# BRUNCH

## The Next Chapter

Aged 26, David Davidar almost  
kickstarted English language  
publishing in India. 26 years later, the  
industry has exploded – and  
Davidar is back for more

### INSIDE

Explore Kashmir  
with native son  
Vikramaditya Singh



In his first stint as a publisher, David Davidar almost singlehandedly changed India's literary scene. Now, the former head of Penguin India is back with his own firm. What can we expect?

I was hired by Penguin in August 1985. I was working as executive editor with *Gentleman* magazine at that time and I was bored. I was at a loose end. I decided to do a book publishing course from Harvard since it was very highly rated. It was six weeks on campus and then some months internship at a publishing house. But I had no money to pay for the course. Luckily that year Penguin was offering a sponsorship and I got that. Peter Mayer, who I consider my guru, delivered the keynote lecture and I was introduced to him. We talked. I was the only Indian in a group of about 85 people. Peter said that they were starting Penguin in India, would I like the job?

I was 24 years old. I said yes immediately. I took a small flat in Gulmohar Park in Delhi which had a teak boardroom table, easily the most expensive thing in the house!

At that time, general book publishing was almost non-existent. Oxford University Press was doing a few books. Vikas was doing a bit. Rupa were mainly distributors.

I remember R K Narayan telling me, 'You'll be done in two-three years.'

I was very young. I didn't know any better. I was very excited. That enthusiasm and lack of knowledge carried me through. This was the late Eighties. It was when the greatest writers of our time had their beginnings. Salman Rushdie had just the *Booker*. There was Upendranath Chattopadhyay, Arunima Ghosh, Vikram Seth.

Papad Jayakar was part of the first

# The Next Chapter



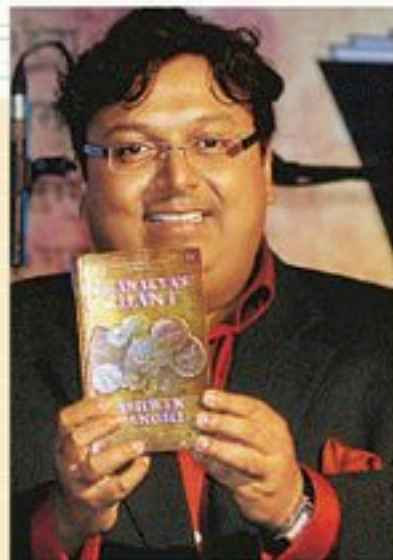
ures. Because both of them, when they sent their books to publishers here and abroad, were rejected repeatedly. Ashwin sent out hundreds of manuscripts to publishers and literary agents and heard from only about 15 of them (the answer was a resounding no). Anish says he lost track of the number of rejections he got after 20. "My literary agent had told me publishers are a rather fractious lot. No one ever agrees on anything. But in my case, there was a rare unanimity. No one wanted my book," Anish says.

That could have been that for the two of them, but they were stubborn. Both Ashwin and Anish decided to put their money where their hearts were and self-publish their books.

In 2006, which was when Ashwin finished the Dan Brownish thriller, *The Roshal Lim*, he went in for a publish-on-demand option on Amazon.com. The idea was that if any reader wanted to buy the book, one copy would be printed for her or him. If no one wanted it, nothing was printed.

Marketing the book himself, Ashwin managed to sell about 1,000 copies this way on Amazon. "I blogged furiously at the time, and offered other bloggers free copies of the book if they'd review it," he says.

And then one copy of Ashwin's self-published book landed up in the hands of Hemu Bansal, then the owner of the landmark chain of bookstores, and head of the books distribution agency, Westland, which now also owns a publishing firm with the same name. "I got a call from her and she said she would pass the book on to Westland," says Ashwin. "She also said that it would need a little work, and I said, sure."



**'I blogged furiously after I self-published my book and offered other bloggers free copies if they'd review it'**

—ASHWIN SANGHI, AUTHOR

So Westland re-published *The Roshal Lim* and also published Ashwin's second novel, *Chandigarh's Child*.

In 2009, when Anish finally finished *The Immortals of Mohenjo*, the first book in what was meant to be a trilogy based on an imagined life of Lord Shiva as a mortal, he was luckier. After all the rejections from publishers—which included discussions in which Anish was asked to sub-

stantly change his book—his agent, Anuj Rishi of the bookshop Rishi Sons in Delhi, decided to publish the book himself, with Anish responsible for the marketing.

"In four months, we'll sell 1,500 copies of the book and then many of the publishers would turn me down before even book," says Anish. "But I decided to go with Westland because they had been our distributors."

Neither Ashwin nor Anish hold grudges against the publishers who turned them down. "Publishers and literary agents get hundreds of manuscripts every week," Ashwin says. "So where do they have the time to read everything they get? You have to be very lucky to have your manuscript picked up and read." Anish agrees. "Publishers don't really have the bandwidth to deal with the number of manuscripts they receive."

So both of them are gang-bro about self-publishing. "I see nothing wrong with putting your money where your convictions are," says Anish. "The concept of quality control by a supreme council of editors is not important. Did you know that Jane Austen was rejected by publishers and self-published her books? Suppose she hadn't. Can you imagine a world without *Pride and Prejudice*?"

Self-publishing will become more prevalent in India in the next five years or so, says Ashwin. "Soon, people will be able to directly publish for e-readers like Kindle and so on," he says. "There's a huge difference between 2006, when I self-published, and today. Now, social media is much more available, and new authors can build up their own readership. For instance, I have 2.25,000 friends on Facebook and 55,000 followers on Twitter. Those numbers were impossible to get in 2006. Self-publishing will just get easier."

## FORTRESS

years ago, there were one-third the number of bookshops in India than there are now," he says. "But readership hasn't gone up three times."

Given that basic situation, independent bookshops feel threatened by online bookshops, he says. For instance, you'll go to any particular independent bookshop because you know you will find certain kinds of books there. "But two things have happened in the last 10 years," says Singh. "The one, as more international publishers set up in India, the variety of books we're allowed to import has reduced. Earlier, we were getting parallel editions of books—the UK edition and the US edition. Lots of US books are cheaper than their UK editions. Also, the US is a much bigger market, so there are more books to choose from. But now, the international publishers in India have stopped the

import of books from the US."

Online bookstores have no such restrictions. And they have low overheads. The retail space that any physical bookstore needs is expensive. But aside from space for their offices, online bookstores are out there in the ether.

And the ether is where much happens these days. No one with business sense can ignore it. That's why Sachin and Bhang Bansal founded Flipkart.com in 2007. Because "it looked like India was ready to shop online, and not just for books," says Sachin Bansal, CEO, Flipkart.com.

Selling six books every minute, according to Bansal, Flipkart can offer its customers discounts because of the sheer volume of sales. "The online business model directly means savings in the form of low overheads," explains Bansal. "We sell in large volumes and therefore

receive deep discounts from our suppliers. This means cost savings, which we are able to pass on to customers in the form of discounts. And the fact is, discounts do play a large role in determining choice of shopping destinations for a lot of customers."

This doesn't mean that online bookshops will completely kill independent bookshops, as even Bansal acknowledges. "Online is not a substitute for people who love the experience of browsing through books / titles before they make a purchase," he says. "That is still best done offline."

**'We started Flipkart because it looked like India was ready to shop online'**

**SELL, SELL, SELL:** Authors use online social media to market their books

**BUY, BUY, BUY:** E-books have begun to cut-sell physical books on Amazon.com

**COSTS, COSTS, COSTS:** Online space is cheap compared with physical retail space

**CONVENIENT TRUTH:** Customers find online shopping simpler and cheaper



## WHAT ARE THE TWO BIGGEST CHANGES YOU'VE SEEN IN PUBLISHING IN THE LAST 20 YEARS?



**MERU GOKHALE**,  
Editorial Director,  
Vintage India  
(Random House India)

1. The pool of talent among writers and publishing professionals is much larger now, which has made a healthier creative environment, and more choice for readers.  
2. Also, I think Indian readers experiment more with the kind of books they read.



**MILEE ASHWARYA**,  
Editorial Director,  
Liberty India (Random House India)

1. The first major change since the early '90s would be international publishers like Random House, Hachette, and so on expanding their sales and distribution business, and setting up shop in the country. With more players in the market, the business is more competitive.  
2. The second significant change for me is the surge in demand for commercial non-fiction books, be it diet, fitness, health, lifestyle or business. Readers have lapped up authors like Rujuta Diwekar, Rashmi Bansal and Payal Gidwani Tiwari. And I feel this is just the beginning.



**UDAYAN MITRA**,  
Publisher - Allen Lane and Portfolio,  
Penguin Books India

1. The huge growth in readership for mass market publishing, expanding to B and C towns and reaching segments of the population who are not traditional book buyers. This market was always there for textbooks, but for trade publishing to have reached it is a major achievement.  
2. The clear growth of general non-fiction, business and self-help books which have become the preferred form of reading for a majority of readers, rather than fiction.



**VK KARTHIKA**,  
Chief editor,  
HarperCollins India

1. The biggest change is the growth of mass market books, reaching readers who have never been part of the traditional book-buying market.  
2. Then there's the growth of online bookshops. It's changed the way people buy books. And if I can sneak in a third change, there's also the growth of lit fests and new prizes that are making things exciting for us publishers!

PHOTO: KUNJADY GOSWAMI

lot of books we did. I got Dant Monies who was an old friend to do a book of poems. Then I published Shiv K. Kumar who did a novel for us. In the first year we did six or seven books. There was no one on the staff but me and an assistant. I was the only editorial employee. I got a lot of attention.

Slowly things started picking up.

I met Vikram Seth at the Austrian Embassy. I didn't know him. I asked him to give us a book of poems. He said, "Why should I give it to you?" So I said, "Because I will give that personal touch, passion to publishing it." I sent him an offer in a sonnet form. He replied likewise. (Vikram was very loyal. Actually once upon a time authors were loyal to their editors. And over time, all of Vikram's books came to Penguin.)

I asked Vikram what he intended to do next. He said I could come to his house and read his new novel but I couldn't take it along. So I went to his place, he took me to this shed-like room which had cartoon after cartoon of his new book. It was *A Suitable Boy*. I read enough of the book to know it was a work of genius. In the history of publishing there is no book which has achieved perfection. But there are great books, exceptional books. Then there are the good books and mediocre books.

It's all subjective of course. There's no objective criteria. There's no formula.

*A Suitable Boy* was exceptional. If you get an exceptional book, you must grab it at all costs.

We made a very generous offer to Vikram.

The book was a huge success. It got great reviews, sold very well. It created tremendous buzz.

You know, you can have a great book launch (and India has the grandest book launches in the world!) but there's only one surefire way for a book to do well - word of mouth. Reviews don't matter. They're addressed to people who are already converts.

*A Suitable Boy* was a turning point, I think. Then we published writers like Arundhati Roy, Chimamanda. We wooed all of them.

In non-fiction, there was *Maximum City* by Suketu Mehta and P Sainath's *Everyone Loves A Good Drought*.

In the case of Shobha De, I went to her and asked her to write a book. Publishers must have copies which move very fast. She wrote *Sociable Drowning* and it sold in six figures.

The market was growing very slowly. But you must remember, we had started from a very small base. In the first six or seven years, nothing much really happened. But then things started picking up.

I hired Ravi Singh from *Delhi Diary*. Then I hired V Karthika. Meru Gokhale and many others. They have all done so well subsequently. I enjoyed building my team. I never had a problem hiring smart people.

By '97, other publishing houses had started com-



ing up, such as Harper Collins. I became CEO of Penguin when I was 39 years old. I was increasingly doing things like running Penguin India, DK India, etc. For the last 12 years I have had very little to do with actual publishing. I realised that, I wanted to get back to making books. I love publishing. That's why I decided to set up my own company Aleph, along with Kapur (they have the best distribution network in the country). I'm 52 years old now - another 15 years and I will have no standing to do the things I want to.

At Aleph, I want to do brilliant books and sell them to their potential. I want to keep it small and beautiful. If you grow too big, you start getting into problems. You can't pay attention to your books. I want to do about 15 to 20 books in the first year, take it up to about 40 in year two and 60 to 70 in year three. We will do fiction and non-fiction. Also borderline commercial. Like, I would like to publish books of the sort Stieg Larsson wrote. See, the US is a very mature market so you have a lot of genre fiction. India is a very young market, but it will happen.

Right now, I have just hired an editorial assistant. I borrow ideas off Kapish Mehra, of *Rupat*, my wife, my friends. I'm thinking of hiring people by the end of the year.

Though I've been away for many years, I've been keeping track of the growth of the market here. So it's not a shock at all. Today there are tons of young, new writers. There are so many festivals, which didn't

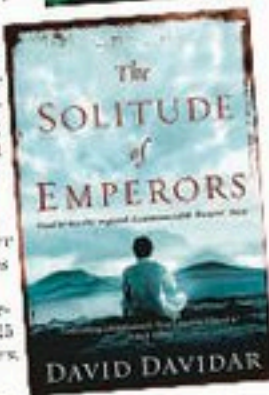
exist back then. I had attempted to start something of the kind, but it didn't happen. There is a time for everything. If you're too far ahead of the curve, it won't happen. But hats off to Namita (Goldstein) and Willie (Dalyrymple) for having organised the Jaipur Litfest so successfully.

How you buy books today has also changed so much. The chain bookshops are big well-lit spaces but they don't have the range that indie bookshops do. In the US, once Amazon came, the chains were in trouble. Indie bookstores need to be 50 per cent of the market, today they account for only 12 to 15 per cent. They were first destroyed by the chains, then by online buying. But I think indie bookstores will come back. Online buying can't replicate the human touch. Chain bookstores usually have very ignorant staff. Everything is in a state of flux right now. It's difficult to say how things will settle down in the next two or three years.

But I've always liked change - I see it as an opportunity, not a threat. People are reading and that's not just a notion. Sales are up.

India is the only English language market that is growing. Here it's growing at 15 per cent, so there's room for many players. The other thing is digital publishing. Anyone can upload a book and become a writer even if only two people read your book. All you need is a computer and an internet connection.

(As told to Poojama Saxena)



**WRITE CHOICE**  
David Davidar is also the author of two books. A third, *Itasca*, will soon be out

## THE DIY NOVELIST

Meet Anish.

He's a financial services professional and the author of *The Immortals of Melaka*, the first book in his Shiva trilogy, which has sold 1,35,000 copies since it first hit the bookshelves in early 2010. His publisher has just placed an order of another print run of 50,000.

Also meet Ashwin Sanghi.

He's a businessman and the author of *The Poisoned Line* and *Chavak's Ghost*. The latter has sold 50,000 copies since it got to the bookshelves in February 2011.

If it wasn't for their strong belief in the stories they had to tell, chances are you'd never have heard of these two authors, let alone read about their pretty impressive sales fig-

**SELF-BELIEF**  
Best-selling novelist Anish published his first book himself

## DIGITAL

First there was the bookshop. It was usually independently owned and had just one outlet. By the '90s, some of the big bookshops had expanded into chains. Now online bookshops, such as Flipkart.com, weed.com and others, let you order online and deliver to your doorstep. So even if there are no bookshops worthy of the name in your city, you still have access to the books you want. Books have become more easily available than ever before.

However, there is a 'but'. And it comes from what you - the reader - want. Internationally, over the last few years, first chain bookstores began putting independent bookstores out of business. And now chain bookstores are themselves being put out of business by online bookstores - and by e-books.

In India, the situation is not quite as dire but it is headed that way, says Ajit Vikram Singh, owner of Fast and Fiction, an independent bookshop in Delhi. "Ten



PHOTO: THINKSTOCK