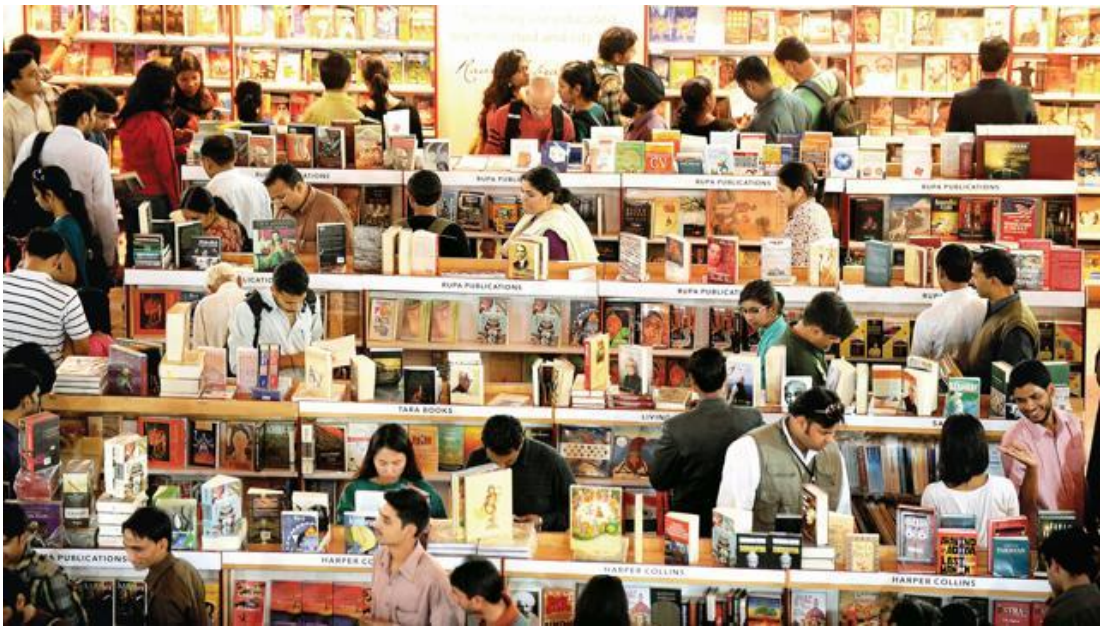


Visitors at the 2012 World Book Fair.

So here's the thing about Indian publishing: for all of this year, it's been in the news – and it's made big news.

In January, the Jaipur Literature Festival declared that it was going to expand beyond the Pink City to travel all the way to London and Colorado, and it did. In April, publisher Chiki Sarkar and four others resigned from Penguin Random House India to launch a new publishing house, Juggernaut, which will introduce pay-by-chapter reading on mobile platforms. In October, in addition to the countless (and counting!) literary festivals in the country, another one was held in – no, really – cyberspace.

Yet, through the year, there have been news reports about bookstores shutting shop in several parts of the country: the 65-year-old AA Hussain & Co in Hyderabad; the last (and sprawling) Landmark in Mumbai; the most beloved Fact & Fiction in Vasant Vihar, the old ED Galgotia & Sons in Connaught Place and the niche Timeless Art Book Studio in South Extension, Delhi.

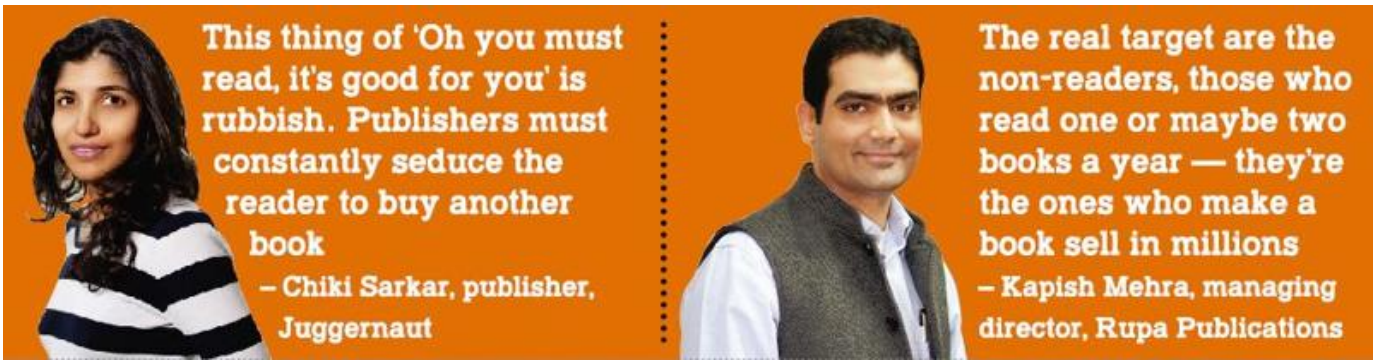
Meanwhile bestsellers are breaking records for the number of books sold in India, but the average book still sells only a few thousand copies.

India's books publishing history spans 200 years, right from 1800 when an assortment of English-language texts appeared in India as a way to facilitate colonisation, writes Arvind Krishna Mehrotra in An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English. These included dictionaries, teaching books, translations of literary works and more. In the mid-to-late 19th century, several novels were published in Indian languages as well. O Chandu Menon's 1889 masterpiece Indulekha, the first major Malayalam novel, was one of them. Many of these books were modelled on English novels.

In the late 1970s, the average book sold around 2,000 copies, writes veteran publisher Ashok Chopra in his memoir A Scrapbook of Memories. This, he says, is roughly true even of today, four decades later. Complaints persist that India's reading habit is dismal. And yet, there is an unprecedented rise in the number of homegrown books and authors.

So, really what is happening in the world of books? And more importantly, what is happening to the world of books?

Most successful books sell not more than 3,000 copies in India. This is a low number for anywhere in the world – especially considering the size of the Indian middle-class (estimates vary, but range from 100 million to a quarter of the total 1.2 billion population).



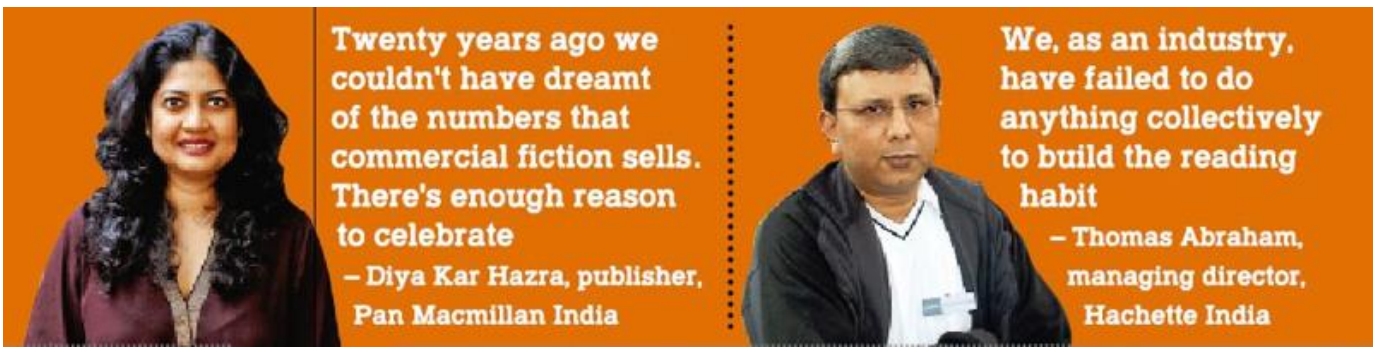
"The way middle-class Indians see books isn't strong enough [to drive sales]," says Chiki Sarkar. "Indians don't read for fun. They read for a job, they read purposefully. So educational books have grown massively." The act of reading for pleasure is still not widely endorsed. So publishers are up against: millions of potential customers who simply don't read.

What India has had instead, is the great tradition of storytelling. "Even the most illiterate grandmother would come up with the most imaginative stories," Ashok Chopra writes, "However, with the sharp deterioration in the standards of language today, this rich oral tradition is bereft of all meaning because we no longer have a language to express it in. It is invariably a mixture of the regional language and a smattering of English. What the grandmother speaks is little understood by the grandchildren. Sadly, the limits of a language are the limits of thought and when language is so restricted, reading and thinking are the first casualties." The death of the language has hindered the blossoming of the novel.

And so Indian publishing strategy is evolving in order to fit this new reality.

Of course there's that sliver of a demographic: a "traditional reader" who has grown up with books, is already sold on the idea of reading and seeks out new titles. That reader still exists, points out Kapish Mehra, managing director of 80-year-old Rupa Publications, one of the oldest surviving English-language publishers. "But the number of non-traditional readers is also growing."

Who is this reader? Mehra uses a pyramid to explain. "People like you and me, are at the top of the pyramid, but we're a small number. We buy 28-40 books a year but that amounts to, at the most, 20,000 copies sold. Then there are people who read four to six books a year, they can take the sales up to 2,00,000 copies." But the real target, he says, are non-readers, those who read one or maybe two books a year. "They're the ones who make a book sell in millions."



These are the readers that first made a bestseller out of the unknown Chetan Bhagat, in 2004. A class of newly educated Indian millennials, born or brought up in a liberalised, privatised and globalised India, were in their teens or old enough to go to college. Most of them had never considered reading anything other than their textbooks before. Bhagat's campus novel Five Point Someone appealed to their sensibilities: the language was simple, the setting realistic, the characters rebelled against India's education system – within a year, it had sold lakhs of copies.

Publishers hoped that they would eventually graduate to other kinds of books. Or, at least, read voraciously within the category.

Eleven years since Bhagat's success, India has certainly devoured more books – and produced innumerable books as well. But only a handful of writers have sold in big numbers – there is Amish Tripathi's mythological fiction, Ashwin Sanghi's thrillers, the romances of Ravinder Singh and Durjoy Datta and a few others.

People reading books at an open reading room at the Jaipur Literature Festival in 2013. (M Zhazo/Hindustan Times)

If these books had indeed hooked the masses on to reading, there would have been far more bestselling writers and lakhs more books sold. But that hasn't happened. "I don't know why that is so," says Ajit Vikram Singh, who ran Delhi's indie bookstore Fact & Fiction. "Perhaps they don't enjoy reading but did so because their friends were. If you enjoy reading a book, you want more books."

We noticed it first-hand at the Brunch Book Challenge. We began the initiative on Twitter, asking Brunch readers to read books and keep us posted. One of the hundreds on the challenge, Anusree Menon, 24, was a bit apprehensive about reading 24 books in a 12 months last year but managed to reach the goal. This year, she's already read 42 books. "I started reading late – in high school," admits the digital strategy executive from Mumbai. "Although people around me complain about how reading is a constant struggle [after they begin working, for instance], I consciously keep at it."

"I think this notion of 'Oh you must read, it's good for you' is rubbish," says Chiki Sarkar. "Publishers should find subjects that all kinds of people want to read. You have to constantly seduce the reader to buy another book."

And so the Indian publishing industry works on that exception rather than the rule. "The biggest erroneous supposition is that 'any sort of reading is good because it will widen the market and lead to greater reading in the future'," says Thomas Abraham, managing director at Hachette India. "Look at it like this: How many people who enjoy watching Salman Khan's Kick today, will end up as fans of Akira Kurosawa? They're reading these books [commercial fiction] like magazines – because they're buzzy, or maybe because their friends are. After reading it, they're going to go back to the Internet or whatever else captivates their prime attention."

So clearly commercial fiction is drawing non-readers, but the numbers show that the books themselves aren't enough to keep them reading more, or even make them like reading enough to buy more books, the way a reading public usually grows.

The big failure of Indian publishing, he says is that "We, as an industry, have failed to do anything collectively to build the reading habit. We have done nothing to propagate serious reading. In the West, they have a designated Reading Day when the government and publishers come together. In Chicago, for instance, everyone on that one day will read Anna Karenina or whatever. You need to create something on TV, like Oprah Winfrey does with her Book Club. We have nothing."

Bookstall inside the new main line station building at Victoria Terminus, Bombay, (now Mumbai). (SSPL via Getty Images)

It's not like we have nothing – we do have the literary festivals.

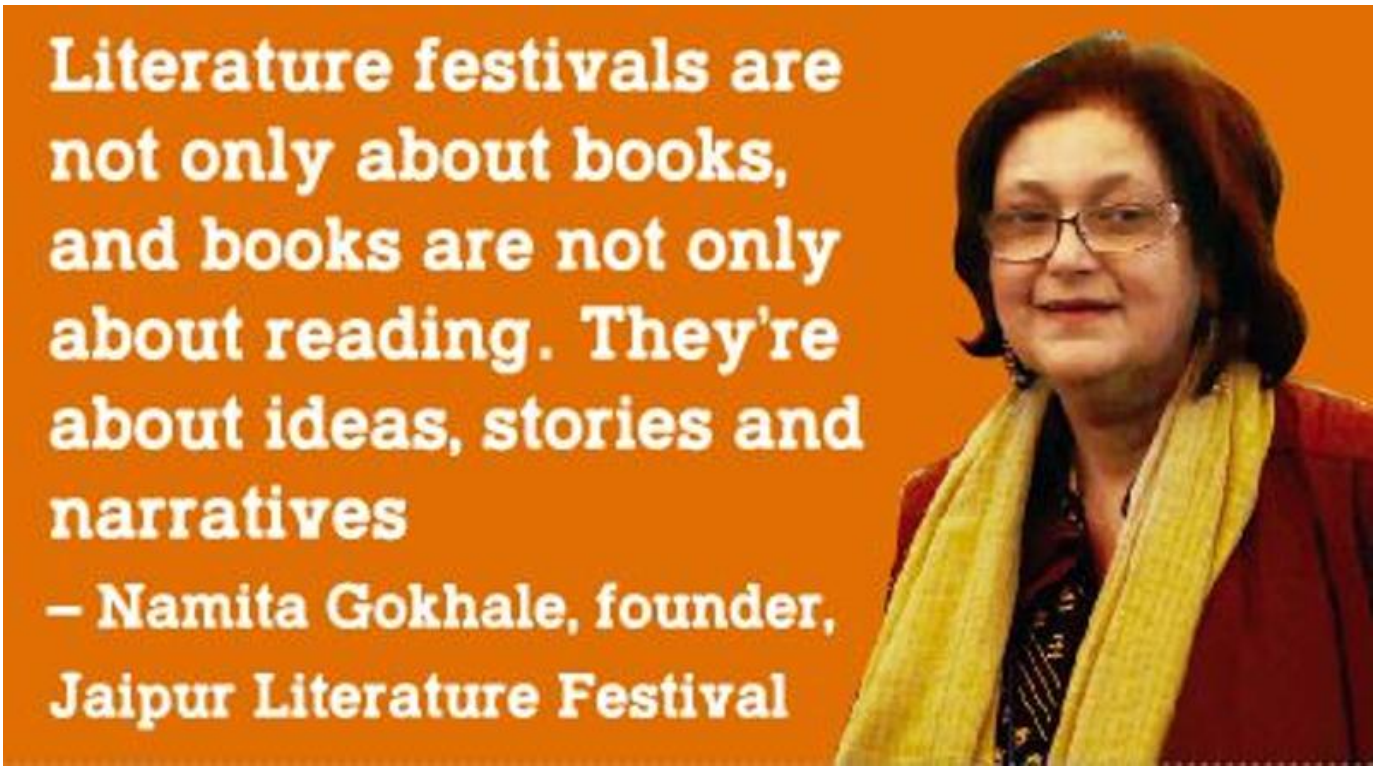
There are now more book festivals in and around India than we can possibly keep track of (one magazine article counted more than 60). Every major city has its own – as do smaller towns and even tourist destinations. "But literature festivals have nothing to do with books," argues Chiki Sarkar. "They're about performance. Books don't really sell at litfests in India. People go to them like they go to Comic Con – not because they read graphic novels but because it's a fun thing to do."

Still, many writers attend them. "Most want to and even demand it," says Diya Kar Hazra, publisher, Pan Macmillan India. "Writers are far more accessible now than they ever were. It's a great platform to talk about their work and to sell copies."

And the festivals show even the non-readers who walk in because it is fun or trendy, that books are things to celebrate. The Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF), attracts more than two lakh visitors and has actually begun to influence India's publishing calendar.

"Literature festivals are about ideas, stories and narratives," points out the festival's founder Namita Gokhale. "It's not just the hard act of buying a book that creates a festival, it is the atmosphere: people reading and interacting. And in that sense, all literature festivals around the country are contributing enormously to the growth of reading."

Sometimes, after a stimulating session, sales do indeed follow. "This year, when Anita Anand spoke about her biography of the suffragette Indian princess Sophia Duleep Singh at JLF, many people went to pick up a copy of the book," says Kar Hazra. Gokhale adds that many Indian publishers now time their major book releases around January to coincide with JLF. "Other festivals have positioned themselves around it."



In 1994 Amazon began as an online bookstore. A year later, at a book expo in America, Jeff Bezos, its founder set up a booth calling it "Earth's Biggest Bookstore". In fact, Amazon had begun with selling books, Bezos has said, only to gather data on educated buyers, so they could figure out how to sell other things on the Internet. A decade later, Flipkart seemed to follow a similar model: cheap books first, cheap everything else later. A means to an end.

It's spelling the end for traditional bookstores. At Fact & Fiction, owner Ajit Vikram Singh says that "people would walk in, look at the selection, take photos of books and buy them online."

The death of physical bookstores has larger repercussions for the industry: the inability to discover books. Online stores offer deep discounts, but lack the personalised attention essential to creating a long-term book buyer. You have to know what you want to read when you shop online, you have to be specific. You will not see a pile of books on the left hand corner of your screen, you will not stumble upon a new book by your favourite author. Discovering a book you may want to read in the vast directionless space that is the Internet can be very challenging.

Indian challenges are very different. We were never a country of great bookstores – we had, and continue to have some, wonderful bookstores, but mostly in cities. A large part of the country did not have access to bookstores – online retailers changed that.

The status of bookstores varies from country to country. In the United Kingdom, a third of independent bookstores have not been able to survive the online competition. In France, they have, because the prices of books are fixed by law. In the US, there has been a resurgence of indie bookstores. Even Amazon is going retro: it just opened its first brick and mortar bookshop in Seattle.

Reading, it seems, has always been under threat from new forms of entertainment. In the absence of television, it was the most popular leisure activity. "There is no data, but when I spoke to people in publishing in the 1960s and 1970s," says Thomas Abraham, "they told me that Alistair MacLean, Perry Mason and all those series would easily sell 30,000-50,000 copies. "

As is wont, other forms of entertainment did – and will continue to encroach on the reading habit. First came the TV, then came the Internet. But what is exciting is the surge in readership or the buzz around books at certain times. In the Eighties and Nineties, Indian literary fiction got upgraded with a stamp of approval from the West. In these two decades, Salman Rushdie, Rohinton Mistry, Amitav Ghosh and Vikram Seth emerged. And then came the turning point in 1997, when Arundhati Roy won the Booker Prize. "I've never seen a book sell like Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things, it sold like hot jalebis," says Ajit Vikram Singh.

The decade to follow would see the rise of different kinds of books – and the mass market. Says Kar Hazra, "20 years ago we couldn't have dreamt of the numbers that commercial fiction sells these days, initial print runs of 1,00,000; Indian authors dominating bestseller lists in the country. There's enough reason to celebrate."

So you must celebrate – but what book are you celebrating with?

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