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# The Prophecies of Ashwin Sanghi

"I always avoid prophesying beforehand, because it is a much better policy to prophesy after the event has already taken place," quipped Churchill famously. I am quite like that. I hate predicting anything for fear of being proved wrong but this article requires me to do precisely that. Given my anathema to predictions, let me simply convey to you a five broad trends in the Indian writing space. These trends should give you a fairly good idea of where we're headed, both in terms of writing and the business of writing.

First, youth will play a vital role in demand creation for writing. Some years ago, a national survey by the National Book Trust of India, found that a quarter of the country's youth population (around 83 million) identified themselves as book readers. Books that strike a chord with India's youth will perform better than those that do not. Also, academic titles will continue to increase in popularity. Given that India is obsessed by exams, it is but inevitable that a substantial chunk of business will continue to be dominated by academic titles.

Second, consolidation is inevitable. Given that India's publishing market was estimated at around US\$ 2 billion a couple of years ago (growing at around 15% annually) with around 90,000 titles being published each year, it is evident that India remains an exciting place to be in—for writers, readers, and publishers. The problem, as I see it, is that this volume is spread across 19,000 publishers. Like every other industry, the 80:20 rule applies here too. Eighty per cent of sales are from twenty per cent of the players. Consolidation has to happen—among writers and publishers both. The blockbuster effect will also happen among authors. By blockbuster effect, I simply mean that authors will effectively become brands in themselves. In the west, there are publishing houses that only focus on a few select authors because those authors are industries in themselves.

Third, eBooks will become much more significant but don't write off the brick-and-mortar stores. Until now volumes have essentially been driven by low-priced paperbacks. When I consider the fact that India has 933 million mobile phone connections, it tells me that there is a huge untapped demand for eBooks across multiple platforms. Over time, we should expect eBooks to account for a very substantial chunk of sales. The growth in the book publishing business has led to dramatic changes in the book retailing space also. Brick-and-mortar bookshops have been finding their margins under pressure from online retailers. There have been several exits from the industry as a consequence. What is interesting to note, however, is that several independent bookstores have been springing up over the past couple of years. What this tells me is that we may see an interesting mix of retailing formats emerging and that we should not write off traditional bookstores.

Fourth, cross-platform and cross-language sharing of stories will soon become commonplace. India has a very old storytelling tradition. Even when we did not have a writing system, we still conveyed stories orally. Increasingly it is being realized that a good story can be conveyed in any number of formats. I believe that there will be much more sharing between languages and formats. There is no reason why a good book shouldn't make a good film. There is also no reason why a good Gujarati story cannot be retold in English or a Hindi novel translated to Tamil. There are multiple ways in which a story can be told—books, comics, films, television series, video games... the possibilities are endless.

Fifth, Indians will continue to discover their Indianess. There used to be a time when best-seller lists were dominated by foreign writers. Over the past decade, this has undergone a sea change with most of the slots occupied by Indian writing. This is primarily due to the fact that publishers have begun encouraging commercial fiction rather than literary fiction. It's about time that genre fiction by Indian writers—mysteries, adventures, romance, thrillers—must become mainstream. Self-publishing will become the new talent discovery mechanism for the publishing industry with new and innovative writing being tested in the self-published world and subsequently getting adopted by traditional publishing.

I recently saw a cartoon in a magazine. It showed a mother and her little daughter sitting on a couch. The mother was reading a romance paperback while the daughter was reading a fairy tale on an iPad. The daughter was pointing at the mother's book and asking inquisitively, "What is that, mom?" The mother seemed to think for a moment and reply, "It's an iPad made from trees!"

The good news was that both were reading!