

THE DREAM MAKERS

As Shiv Khara's best-seller 'You Can Win' turns 20, Lounge decodes its enduring success, and looks at the current crop of writers and books changing the landscape of self-help publishing in India



ANIRUDDHA CHOWDHURY/MINT

Somak Ghoshal

Shiv Khara's eyes light up as I pull out a well-thumbed copy of his first book, *You Can Win*, from my bag. It's late afternoon on a bleak February day and we are sitting in the basement office of his multi-storey home in the South Delhi neighbourhood of Vasant Vihar, waiting for coffee to be served.

"Had more hair then," Khara, 36, says, looking at the cover, which shows a much younger version of him beaming at the camera. Next to the photograph is his trademarked aphorism: "Winners don't do different things. They do things differently." In case you aren't convinced, there's a catchline at the bottom, in colourful, bold letters: "OVER TWO MILLION COPIES SOLD IN SIXTEEN LANGUAGES." These numbers, though long out of date, should dispel any doubts about Khara's wisdom on matters of winning. The proof of the pudding, as they say, is in the eating.

In 1998, Khara introduced the self-help genre in English to Indian readers with *You Can Win*. Twenty years later, the book remains a personal bible for millions (he is releasing a sequel, *You Can Achieve More: Live By Design, Not By Default*, this month). Khara claims *You Can Win* has sold nearly four million copies so far; Bloomsbury India, his current publisher, adds that the English edition sells 100,000 copies every year. There are over 20 editions in different languages. The Hindi, Bengali and Gujarati do better than the others, according to Yogesh Sharma, vice-president, sales and marketing, Bloomsbury India. "But the exact numbers, factoring in the pirated copies, must be close to half a billion," Khara asserts, his voice rising by a few decibels.

The numbers are so mind-boggling that for a minute we both sit in silent contemplation. For trade publishers in India, a book selling 10,000 copies is a best-seller—one that hits 50,000 is a jackpot.

When it comes to their own sales figures, authors are usually not the most trustworthy sources. Indian publishing is also notoriously cagey about details. But my edition of *You Can Win*, published by Macmillan Publishers in 2011, claims on the copyright page that the book was reprinted 22 times between 1998-2012. From 2003-10, it went into 29 more reprints, twice in 2009 alone. My "special edition," which I picked up from a used bookshop on Kolkatta's College Street, was reprinted twice in 2011.

Even now, in 2018, you can spot Khara's smiling mugshot in the self-help section of any decent bookstore or e-tailer.

You Can Win has what in marketing jargon is called "brand recall". Even the most jaded attendant in an airport bookshop needs vigorously to flog it for you. Street vendors come bearing it to your vehicle as you wait for the traffic lights to change. It's ubiquitous, especially in Hindi *Udaan*, at the Wheeler shops at railway stations (fittingly enough, Khara went on to write another book called *You Can Sell* in 2010). "*You Can Win* is perhaps the only book I've seen being read by the doorman of a hotel and CEOs flying business class," says Rajiv Beri, managing director, Bloomsbury India, who acquired it when he was working at Macmillan in the 1990s.

Yet, there's also a catch in the success story of this King Kong among best-sellers. And it pertains to Khara's track record of having a CV riddled with dramatic failures.

THE WORD

In Khara's counter-intuitive logic, losing was his key to winning, failure a pillar of his success. There's a steady buzz of activity around his new book in his office, where, between greeting us, including his excitable pug Lilly and dictating his thoughts (this preferred mode of "writing") to his secretary, Khara is a busy, but content, man. At least for the moment.

In the busy landscape of Indian English publishing, where hundreds of books appear in the self-help segment every year, and just as many sink into oblivion after a few weeks, Khara is a unique phenomenon. No writer published in India has sold as much, as consistently, and for as long a time (Robin Sharma's *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*, another monster seller, is imported from the US, and doesn't originate here like Khara's books).

Self-help books occupy about 5% of the market share in Indian publishing, says Ananth Padmanabhan, chief executive officer of HarperCollins India, quoting from Nielsen Bookscan, which tracks industry trends for those in the business. Most of the successful titles are imported from abroad, with Paulo Coelho and Rhonda Byrne leading the segment.

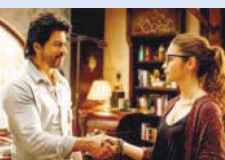
The numbers may not seem much. A report in the *Forbes* magazine in 2015 estimated that the self-help industry in the US, including television shows and motivational speaking, amounts to \$11 billion (around Rs71,439 crore) now per year. But considering

Mental floss

Self-help may be able to heal emotional distress—especially if healthcare isn't easily accessible

Could self-help literature fill a gap in a society like India, where awareness of mental health problems is far from evolved, and help isn't easily available? Shyam Bhat, a psychiatrist and an author of a book on how to overcome heartbreak, says, "The idea that we can turn to literature to heal is ancient." If our ancestors reached out to the scriptures in their hour of need, people now turn to tracts by spiritual gurus like Osho and Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev for solace. Beyond individual misfortunes, there are larger questions to reckon with too, the most pressing being: "How do we live an authentic life in India today?" Dr Bhat adds.

If the Miss Malinis and Mr Bhagats provide comfort to the millennials and millennials of this era, the *Chicken Soup For The Soul*



series catered to the youth of the 1990s. Curated as personal narratives, these volumes were targeted at specific readers: *Chicken Soup For The Adopted Soul*, *Chicken Soup For The Bride's Soul*, *Chicken Soup For The Breast Cancer Survivor's Soul*, and so on.

Tales of personal redemption were meant to inspire cathartic thoughts in the reader. No wonder Raksha Bhargava, co-editor of the 13 titles comprising *Chicken Soup For The Indian Soul* (published from 2008-12), started Bonology, a web portal for people to post about relationships and love. With "50,000 page views and at least 10 queries a day" (according to Bhargava), it is essentially self-help 2.0.

Pop culture can play a major role at the intersection of self-help and mental healthcare, adds Lucy Beresford, a London-based writer, psychotherapist and broadcaster. In an email, mentioning movies like *Jaan Zindagi*, and actor Deepika Padukone's involvement in raising awareness of mental health problems.

ing India's demographic dividend, its literacy in English, and buying power, the figures do add up to tell a fascinating story about the Indian Dream.

"If we can earn around \$100 million and go down to the bottom, we are supposed to guide our miserable lives, why would we shut our books?" says Suhel Seth, brand consultant and author of *Get To The Top: The Ten Rules For Social Success* (2011), in an email interview. "We need to understand that India has more than just routine competitiveness. At times it is fascinating, what with so many people and so few opportunities. A lot of the time, people believe that books (and not people) can be their guides and mentors."

Unlike the US, roughly 50% of India's 1.3 billion population is below the age of 25, and 65% below 35. A report by the International Labour Organisation predicts India's unemployment rate to be at 3.5% in 2018. Much of this youthful demographic seems hungry to figure out new ways to win, achieve more—then perhaps sell their coveted Ferraris, write a book about it, and sink deeper into their neo-capitalist dreams.

Khara's rise to stardom, following a typical rags-

to-riches curve, fits into this aspirational narrative neatly. After moving to Canada in his early 20s to seek his fortune, and later to the US (he is an American citizen now), he sold vacuum cleaners and life insurance policies. Later, he launched several businesses, went bust, had properties confiscated, and recovered again (the misfortunes and comebacks are worthy of an independent story).

Along the way, there was a plagiarism controversy in 2004 and unsuccessful attempts at contesting parliamentary elections. In 2008, Khara launched the Bharatiya Kshatrawadi Samanata Party to fight corruption, but it turned out to be a dud. Now, he is not an inspirational speaker who is much in demand and a best-selling writer of self-help books, but also the founder of Qualified Learning Systems USA, a business consultancy. "A person with a positive attitude cannot be stopped. A person with a negative attitude cannot be helped," he says, when I ask him if self-help books can really change fortunes.

A FOR ATTITUDE

Presumably, the mantra works for, or convinces, enough people to justify Khara's fandom. Kailash Mota, a Kenya-based chartered accountant, told me on email that reading *You Can Win* helped him revive his dwindling business in 1998. He has read it at least 10 times since. "Shiv Khara understands what we need," Santosh Dev Thakur, a 23-year-old motivational speaker from Ranchi, tells journalist Singdha Poonam in her book *Dreamers: How Young Indians Are Changing Their World*, published earlier this year. "Not something other motivational writers from abroad will get. They take spoken English and confidence as granted. But Khara starts with these things. In his book, there are three chapters on confidence."

Almost everyone I spoke to, whether authors or publishers, said good self-help writing was about communicating simply, in a voice and vocabulary that the target reader could quickly relate to. It helps to have a framing narrative, usually via autobiographical anecdotes, to give it a hook. A sharply pitched self-help book should make the life story of an individual resonate with society's collective desires.

In 1998, the talent pool of such writers in India was much smaller. As Khara burst on to the scene that year, Spencer Johnson published *Who Moved My Cheese?*, a path-breaker in the self-help segment, which sold over 28 million copies worldwide. A year later, Robin Sharma's "business fable," *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* (1999), broke records too, selling 12 million copies—a third of these, says Akash Shah of Jaico Publishing House, which publishes Sharma's books in India, were sold in this country alone. Over the last two decades, however, with the proliferation of literary festivals and the deepening cult of the author, owing to the spectacular success of mass-market writers like Durjoy Datta, Ravinder Singh, Sachin Garg or Preeti Shenoy, led by none other than Chetan Bhagat, India's publishing ecosystem has been on the lookout for local voices to write self-help for a new generation of readers. "It helps to have an existing public profile to become a writer in this segment," says Mice Ashwarya, editor-in-chief, commercial and business books, Penguin Random House India. "However, we are never averse to a crackling idea, even from a newbie."

Prowling among the shelves of the non-fiction section on the third floor of Bengaluru's Blossom Book House, I recently overheard two men, most likely in their 20s, chitchatting over Mark Manson's best-seller, *The Subtle Art Of Not Giving A F*ck: A Counterintuitive Approach To Living A Good Life*. "I'd rather get this one than that," one guy said to the other, pointing at the engineering textbook he was holding. Is it likely he'd get the title would induce him to act on that impulse?

The dilemma of making choices—and at what cost—is increasingly becoming the tipping point for self-help, both for readers and writers, in India. Young India, poised to enter the big bad world, is struggling with one overwhelming question, says Malini Agarwal, famous for her fashion and film blog, *Miss Malini*, and the latest entrant to the self-help scene. Her first book, published in January, hinges on that one question that's giving millennials and self-help devotees sleepless nights: "How do I know I am good at something?"

#ToTheMoon: How I Blogged My Way To Bollywood looks back on Agarwal's trials as a newcomer



(clockwise, from top) Shiv Khera at his home in Delhi; Malini Agarwal at Andaz Hotel, Delhi; a still from the movie 'Dear Zindagi'; and the Title Waves book store in Mumbai.

All self-help writing, whatever the demographic or age group it is addressed to, begins with that most fundamental of questions: What do we want in life?

in Mumbai, with big dreams of celebrity. When she arrived in the city two decades ago, she writes, she had two suitcases, one friend, and shared an apartment with six other girls and a pigeon. Her share of the rent was Rs625, and Facebook was unheard of. In the three months her book has been out, it has sold 15,000 copies, according to HarperCollins India, her publisher. "In the self-help segment, the writer needs to be someone who really knows the subject they are advising readers on. It also helps if they enjoy a large following that may translate into immediate sales," says Shreya Punj, Agarwal's editor. "Who better to tell you about blogging and internet success than Miss Malini, a disruptor, herself?"

"Till the 2000s, life was all about waiting for opportunities and working hard," Agarwal says on the phone, "but millennials are now besieged with options and workspaces, where almost everything is digital." Her book is more of a guide than strictly self-help, she adds. "I had to lose all my fear and try out at least 15 jobs before I got here."

Agarwal's story will resonate with today's youth, who spend hours fretting about leading the life that Instagram celebrities seem to, and even more time obsessing about looking adequately cool in public. Yet Agarwal hasn't really moved too far from the premise that put Khera on the path to becoming a

writer 20 years ago.

NUMBERS DON'T LIE

All self-help writing, whatever the demographic or age group it's addressed to, begins with that most fundamental of questions: What do we want in life? Money, love, God are the usual answers.

If books on wellness and memoirs on spirituality, health and fitness comprise a bulk of the Indian self-help market, the Indian chapter of the US publisher Hay House caters primarily to this mind-body-spirit segment, the rest of it is filled with confidence-boosting manuals, tricks to setting up successful businesses, and climbing up the corporate ladder. A handful of exceptions are able to straddle two extremes with ease: Devdutt Pattanaik's *Business Sutra: A Very Indian Approach To Management*, which led to three related books (*The Talent Sutra: An Indian Approach To Learning*, *The Leadership Sutra: An Indian Approach To Power* and *The Success Sutra: An Indian Approach To Wealth*), derives useful corporate lessons from mythology. In a similar vein, Radhakrishnan Pillai, popularly called Chamaika Pillai, is known for books based on the teachings of Chamaika, the economist of the Mauryan era.

For the second subset of readers, the ideal self-help package deal should include, to quote Bhagat,

the self-styled guru of Young India's dreams, *naadri* and *chholeri*—job and romance. Like Khera, Bhagat, who set love stories on the campuses of the IITs and IIMs, speaks to the young reader who doesn't have the English skills or disposable income to appreciate titles imported from abroad. It won't be far off the mark to think of Bhagat's books, especially his collection of newspaper columns anthologized in *What Young India Wants*, as self-help spun into fiction or pep talk. For the price of a cup of coffee, readers get a glimpse of life inside the hallowed temples—top engineering and management institutes—as well as lessons in finding love. It's the best finishing school you can get for a few hundred bucks.

But to find employment, or to become an entrepreneur, they have exams to pass first—in the real world—which is a self-help market unto itself.

In a recent book titled *Exam Warriors*, drawn from his monthly radio address *Mann Ki Baat*, Prime Minister Narendra Modi presents a manual to help young people combat academic stress. The path to redemption is mostly through yoga (the book doesn't tell you, though, what to do in case of a question paper leak), but also via practical advice: Don't cheat, don't judge yourself by your classroom performance, don't forget to have fun and—once again—don't forget your daily yoga. Lecturing, preaching and goody by turns (the last signalled by the periodic invocation of puns: "The Present is God's Greatest Present," for instance), it is designed like a workbook, as many self-help guides are.

For the vast majority of literate Indians, the desperation to crack exams is as urgent as finding love (reports say Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have thriving cheating rackets for cracking competitive exams). According to the "Amazon India Reading Trends Report 2017," the highest-selling book on the website last year was M. Laxmikanth's *Indian Polity*, an 852-page tome that is friend, philosopher and guide to millions of civil service aspirants. On its heels comes *Word Power Made Easy*, a staple for anyone who wants to crack interviews and exams. Additionally, Nielsen BookScan found that 70% of the titles in the Indian market are textbooks, including the ubiquitous "guide books", supplementary aids to the rote learning demanded by India's various school boards. As Chandan Deshmukh, author of *Five Lies My Teachers Told Me: Success Tips For The New Generation*, puts it, the rise in literacy rates doesn't mean Indians are being taught how to study for exams. Or, for that matter, being adequately prepared to face the sea of uncertainties that awaits them in the job market.

SOUL CURRY

Twenty years ago, young Indians usually did their parents' bidding and aimed to enter professions like

medicine, engineering and the civil services, which would keep them solvent, if not set them on the path to success. With the opening of the economy in 1991, and globalization hitting Indian shores, the youth are besieged by choice. Best-selling writer Rashmi Bansal, who founded and edited *Last Letter Magazine* (LAM) for young readers in 1995, says it's possible for today's youth to aspire to—and achieve—things that weren't imaginable for earlier generations. When Bansal started her own venture in 1995 after completing a master's in business administration (MBA)—a move that left her traditional business family puzzled—she never envisioned a career as a writer. "The key is to find what you're good at and love to do," she says on the phone. "Then have the courage to follow that path."

Add to that advice dollars of patience and fortitude. "In the days I was sending out my first manuscript and receiving a stream of rejection, a family friend told me not to be morose," writes Ashwin Sanghi says. "Remember, 99% of any venture is good luck." He said. And the remaining 1% is bloody good luck." The advice came in handy when Sanghi conceptualized the *13 Steps* series, published by Westland, which teaches readers tricks to find "bloody good marks", and so on.

Known for his mythological thrillers, self-help was uncharted terrain for Sanghi. Rather sensibly, he decided to rope in "vertical domain experts" to get the best perspectives on the subjects he wanted to cover. "I helped turn their hard knowledge into a compelling story," he says. Those who scorn self-help as purely instrumental writing forget that it requires special sophistication to be able to capture the attention and imagination of readers whose relationship to buying and reading a book is probably also instrumental. And the most successful books in this segment, as evident from the record, combine an element of creative ingenuity with hitting the right populist notes.

For Khera, with whom it all began in India, self-help writing has involved turning himself into the hero of his story. "I set a goal for myself when I was 20, to write an international best-seller one day," he says, taking us up to the plush living room of his Delhi mansion for a second round of photo shoot. "Goals act like magnets, they pull you to what you want." The look on my face must have betrayed some lack of conviction, for he quickly throws in a provocation: "Positive thinking without positive action is wishful thinking."

With this, Khera turns away to compose himself for the camera.

✉ lounge@livemint.com

SHELF HELP

A rough and ready guide to books that have inspired Indian readers over the last 20 years

Shiv Khera

Don't miss: *You Can Win* (Bloomsbury India, first published in 1998.)

Get your fix: The Dale Carnegie for the Indian reader, Khera's first book was pitched as a manual to boost the confidence of youngsters entering the job market, and also to inspire professionals facing mid-career crises to take calculated risks, instead of remaining stuck in a rut.



Malini Agarwal

Don't miss: *#ToTheMoon: How I Blogged My Way To Bollywood* (HarperCollins India, 2018)

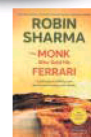
Get your fix: Aimed at India's new-age workforce of millennials and the zillennials, who are entering workspaces dominated by digital labour and its changing dynamics.



Robin Sharma

Don't miss: *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* (Jaico, first published in 1999)

Get your fix: At the age of 25, Sharma, who is a Canadian national, quit his high-stress job as a lawyer and decided to shift gears. His "business fable" has sold by the millions since then.



Ashwin Sanghi

Don't miss: *The 13 Steps Series* (Westland, The first book appeared in 2014)

Get your fix: Best known for mythological fiction, Sanghi co-wrote this series, along with experts from different fields, as guides to a good life.



Rashmi Bansal

Don't miss: *Stay Hungry, Stay Foolish* (Westland, 2008)

Get your fix: Founder of a youth magazine, best-selling writer, and motivational speaker, Bansal made a mark with her first book, which had stories of 25 MBAs who left lucrative jobs to pursue their dreams.



Devdutt Pattanaik

Don't miss: *Business Sutra* (Aleph Company, 2013)

Get your fix: Not strictly self-help, this is a unique take on management, based on the wisdom distilled in India's mythologies by one of the country's most beloved writers.

