

The Politics of Contemporary Publishing in India — Ought we to be Excited, Concerned or Despairing?*

URVASHI BUTALIA**

Abstract

The Indian publishing scene is widely acknowledged to be vibrant and dynamic today, and indeed, it is both complex and varied. After having adopted a policy of self reliance and indigenism in the years after Independence, the publishing sector today, like much else in the country, has opened up to foreign investment and some of the largest publishing houses in the world have a presence here. Is this a new form of colonialism? Should we be concerned about it or should we take it as inevitable? What will the presence of multinationals mean for indigenous publishing in India, and will English publishing, which seems to be dominant, outstrip Indian language publishing? How can Indian publishing hold its own, and should it do so at all? Where, if at all, do the excitements lie? Do independent publishers have anything to offer? Tracing her own entry into the world of publishing more than three decades ago, Butalia will focus, in this talk, on what has changed, both within the industry, and in the external conditions that impinge on it, and make an examination of whether this change has been positive or negative or a mix of the two. She will argue that the production of knowledge is a political act, and that the Indian State has done little or nothing to help the publishing industry produce books, and therefore knowledge, in order to reach the continuing hunger for it among Indians. She will further show how it is here that the contributions of the small independent publisher need to be recognised and supported.

A little over three decades ago I made my first, accidental entry into the world of publishing in India. A friend and I were playing a desultory game

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** *Publisher and Writer* based in New Delhi

of table tennis while talking about what we were going to do with our lives. I was just finishing my Master's and wanted to make a decisive move away from English literature to something more 'relevant' to my life in the thriving, bustling, politically alive city of Delhi. The university was a hotbed of furious political debate, the women's movement was just taking off—surely, I thought, there has to be more to life than Spenser and Milton (much though I loved them—or Milton at least). My friend then worked as a secretary in the Oxford University Press in Delhi. Why didn't I, she suggested, try to do some freelance work there and see how I liked it. I thought her suggestion was brilliant.

At the time, a great deal of publishing activity in Delhi—and many of the larger Western publishing houses had moved to Delhi by then—was concentrated on two roads, a longer one called Asaf Ali Road that lay just outside the wall of the old city; and a shorter strip, Ansari Road, that lay just beyond. Ansari Road housed large and small publishers, and during the lunch hour many of them (almost all males) could be seen at the *samosa* and *paan* stalls, exchanging gossip or news, while small lorries and hand-drawn carts loaded with packets of books made their way to publishers' warehouses, often in the basement of their offices. While printing establishments lay some distance away, many of the other services were close by and a

system of point-to-point travel by cycle or auto-rickshaw had sprung up to service the needs of publishers.

Those were the days when typesetting was still done by hand, using hot or cold metal, and the nearby main road in Daryaganj, or further along Bahadur Shah Zafar Marg, you could find hand-setting, as well as monotype or linotype machines. When phototypesetting made its appearance, units offering this service sprung up closer to Ansari Road. Block makers were concentrated at the northern end, going right up till Kashmiri Gate, where the best of them were to be found. And the paper market lay in between, in Chandni Chowk. Bookshops were few and far between, and generally not much to write home about, and most were filled with remainders purchased at heavy discounts from abroad. Most of us bought our books from the second hand stalls that sprung up on pavements in different shopping areas of the city—but even they sold mainly Harold Robbins and Mills and Boon.

I remember walking into my first job in the Indian branch of the Oxford University Press (OUP) in fear and trepidation. I was a young 21-year-old, straight out of university, and was going to fill in time by working in the OUP for a while until I decided what it was I wanted to do. The OUP was at that time adapting (they called it Indianising) a series of English textbooks called Active English, for

Indian schools. I was employed in the inglorious role of someone called a 'paster upper'—my task was to paste Indian names (at the time—our imaginations were a bit limited—we used the names Ram and Sita) over Western ones (John and Mary)—while an artist called Dean Gasper was employed to colour blond hair and blue eyes black, and to chop off the top halves of double-decker buses! That first experience with art pulls and rubber solution (things people in publishing will probably not recognise today) was enough to make all fear vanish without a trace and to start a love affair that has lasted until today.

The OUP in those days was a rather special place to work in. The remnants of British domination still existed in the shape of some individuals who worked there. A gentleman (and he was, and remains, a gentleman) called Charles Lewis ran the place, and two eccentric men (also British) ran the production and editorial departments. As well, a young, Oxford-returned man who chose to look different by wearing Indian kurtas and smoking thin Ganesh beedis, was the head of academic publishing. His name was Ravi Dayal. Ravi was slated to become the Head of OUP, along with a Bengali gentleman called Santosh Mukherjee, and the British directors were on their way out. In the post-independence scenario, publishing, like everything else, was required to 'Indianise' and ex-patriate employees

of foreign companies had to leave, with the companies themselves reducing their shareholding to a maximum of 49 per cent (this did not apply to the OUP because it saw itself as a department of the University of Oxford, rather than the Indian branch of an overseas company, although, in the fullness of time, the OUP lost the battle to convince the Indian government of this).

One of the early projects I worked on in the OUP was the translation and publication, for the first time, of the Oxford School Atlas (OSA) into Hindi and Punjabi (Gurmukhi). Somehow the bosses had managed to bag a contract to provide 475,000 copies of the OSA to the Punjab government (the Punjab School Education Board) for use in schools in Punjab. At that time, such government and private sector collaborations were possible and could take place without any apparent corruption. I mention this history also because the process of 'Indianisation', so crucial to India's post-independence years, had already begun and this particular project was part of that. The project to publish the Atlas in Indian languages would also bring this money-spinner book to India for the first time, thereby keeping its income largely in India, and providing business to Indian printers. I was young and green then, but this project early allowed me to see how negotiations were done with governments, how important it was to get clearances on everything, and yet, despite this, how all of this could

so easily be thrown out the door by a political change or development. We used to have to travel to Chandigarh almost every week to meet with government officials who would check and recheck everything, and we did so royally, being driven there in the then OUP limousine (there were no SUVs then!), a battered old Standard Herald with no air-conditioning. We thought it was the height of luxury!

It was on the last of these drives, when we were heading to Chandigarh in a mild state of euphoria with the first few copies of the Atlas to show to the Punjab government, that we noticed, for the first time, advertisements on walls and roadside bunds for Atlas cycles, Punjab's most famous bicycle brand. And we noticed, to our horror that the word Atlas was spelt differently from how we had it on the copies we were carrying. What would happen now? The copies were all printed. Would they notice? We hoped not. But of course we were wrong. They noticed, not because they were vigilant, but only because the officer in-charge had changed and the new one had his own views on the Gurmukhi script, views that were in direct contrast and contradiction to those of the previous officer who had okayed the cover! It was that that made me realise that the legacy of colonialism was not so easily removed. It wasn't just a matter of Indianising the structures of business, we needed also to look at things like how our languages had been structured, whether or not their

scripts and systems of spelling, put in place initially by the British, were free of political power struggles. And whether or not we wanted to simply work with those inherited systems or create our own.

The process of Indianising was not easy: the state had to create a fine balance of openness (based on the belief that knowledge should be free and easily available) and protectionism (based on the understanding that the Indian book trade should be allowed to develop). So, for example, while there were restrictions on almost everything else in terms of imports—you could not bring in a refrigerator, or a car, or even clothes—books were notoriously free of such restrictions, and the conditions governing their import were liberal. Liberal, that is for individuals like you and me who may have wanted to import books for our personal use, but within the book trade, there were some restrictions and booksellers/distributors were allowed to import up to 1000 copies of a particular title in one calendar year. However, booksellers are a notoriously clever lot and for those for whom ideology meant nothing and money meant everything, this and other such restrictions were there only to be got round somehow. So if you could bring in 1000 copies of x or y book in one year, under one name, many booksellers ended up opening three or four companies, which would import a thousand copies each of a particular book, usually at the

end of a calendar year, so that the moment the next year started, they could immediately start again. This, and the existence of something called remainders—heavily discounted unsold books that were dumped into India and that sold largely not only on pavements but also in stores—ensured that whatever bookshops there were had mainly imported books on their shelves. Of course this was the case with English, not with other Indian languages, some of which, like Malayalam, had their own distribution structures.

Publishing has changed beyond recognition since. It's not only that technological changes have transformed the practice of publishing, and metal typesetting, letterpress printing, blocks and galleys are now a thing of the past, but the change is so much more profound, so much more wide-ranging. A new entrant walking into Ansari Road today will see many of the same names—DK, Manohar, UBS, Oxford, Macmillan, Frank Brothers or, on Asaf Ali Road, Orient Longman (now called Orient Blackswan)—but much of the action has also moved elsewhere, to other parts of the city, and indeed across the border, to neighbouring Gurgaon (in the state of Haryana) and NOIDA (in the state of Uttar Pradesh). Ansari Road is no longer the only home for publishers in Delhi, there are just too many of them to fit in there. More importantly, Delhi isn't the only home either: Indian language

publishers have always been located in the particular state to which the language belongs, but in the seventies, many English language publishers moved to Delhi. Today though, location doesn't mean the same thing, and publishers choose to work from Chennai, or Mumbai or Kolkata, or Thiruvananthapuram, or Kottayam, or up in the mountains and down in the plains, and they work with typesetters who are located in other cities, printers who might even be in other countries. The old rickshaw point-to-point system is no longer necessary—all you need is a computer and an internet connection.

The change isn't only geographical. In the early days when I began working in publishing, there were only two or three kinds of books that got taken seriously. These were school textbooks, academic books for use at the university level (which included social sciences, the natural and applied sciences, engineering, architecture and a whole host of other subject areas) and the odd novel, usually destined to take the textbook route. Trade publishing, or the publishing of books of general interest, hadn't yet made its presence felt. Very few publishers—in English at least—were publishing fiction, and although reasonably priced editions of classics by Western authors could be found in the market, they were not among the books that made money. It was around the eighties I think that things began to change. 1984 the

Orwellian year—was when we set up Kali for Women, India's first feminist publishing house. Having cut our publishing teeth mainly in academic publishing, my then partner Ritu Menon and I focused mainly on that even in Kali, although we tried to do so innovatively (publishing books on the Indian women's movement for example). But we also slowly began to publish fiction.

India's always been a large—and generally stable—market for exports of books from the U.K. and the U.S., so it wasn't surprising that our bookshops carried so many titles published outside the country. With the decline of the rupee against the dollar, however, this began to change a bit: dollar priced books became more expensive, with more rupees going out for each dollar, and bookshops began to look at other alternatives to fill shelf space. Enter Indian trade books in English: the late eighties and early nineties were the time when the profile of English publishing in India began to change, and trade publishing made its way into this market. (I should explain here that the term 'trade' in publishing jargon, is used to denote the general book, read by the general reader. So this can include fiction, biography, autobiography, non-fiction, books for children, etc.) Rupa, Kali for Women, Stree Publishers, Ravi Dayal, Orient Longman were among the pioneers in this field, but the big change actually came with the entry of Penguin India, who brought scale,

size, marketing skills and a general 'sexiness' to trade publishing.

Nonetheless, over the next few years, the market still remained predominantly educational and predominantly Indian. The next big change came about in the nineties when India began to open up to foreign investment, and very quickly, as things became increasingly liberalised, large multinational publishers started to look towards this market – one of the few in the world which still shows considerable potential for expansion. Today, India is home to a variety of international publishers, many of whom are in joint ventures with Indian companies, and others who are fully owned by their parent corporations. While the real profits come from the scientific and technical, the medical and legal aspects of publishing, it's trade that gets much more attention. This isn't surprising for it's here that the excitement is palpable, as Indian writers get known both at home and abroad, the demand for their books grows.

But, while the large and medium sized 'foreign' actors worked hard to open up the space for Indian trade publishing in English, it was the Indian actors who actually often took the initial step of experimenting with new things. Rupa, a publisher and distributor, was one of the first to look at mass market books in English, moving away from the literary work, to the more popular one. The success of some of its young authors such as

Chetan Bhagat, whose books sell in hundreds of thousands, is by now well known. If Rupa made the initial foray into the mass market, publishers like Tara and Tulika broke new ground where children's books were concerned, just as Kali did where women's books were concerned. It wasn't only in content that you see the change. It's also there in how publishers position themselves. One of the most interesting and exciting experiments in recent years has been carried out by Seagull Publishers in Kolkata who have chosen to position themselves not as Indian publishers based in India, but as international publishers based in India (in their second avatar I mean). So they consciously publish non-Indian authors, distribute their books all over the world and are slowly making a name for themselves. This is an exciting development—if successful, it could begin, in a different way, the process of reversing the flow of information that has traditionally been from the West to the East, the North to the South.

In response to the growing numbers of books being published all over the country, large and small bookshops began to make their appearance, and at least half their shelves are stocked with Indian books by Indian authors. In fact, the difference in the retail trade is significant. Several years ago the British Council brought out a book which was a listing of 100 bookshops in India. They were hard put to it

to find enough shops to make that number. Things are different today with three major bookshop chains—include Crossword, Odyssey, Landmark—and many individual stores that may well develop into chains. In the early days there were really only two 'chains' worth speaking about, and one of these was mainly concentrated in the south – Higginbothams, while the other, AH Wheeler and Co. was a railway station chain and therefore stocked only the kinds of things people pick up to read on long train journeys. But although the retail sector has considerably expanded today, it is unfortunate that its development has been somewhat slowed down because of the recession, so plans by Tatas and by the Future Group to add many more bookshops to the existing ones, have been put aside for the moment. Nevertheless the increased space meant that Indian books—initially only in English but then, over time, also in Indian languages—began to find their way into bookshops so that the profile of most shops today is very different from what it was, say, twenty years ago. I should add that I have mentioned only those bookshop chains that stock principally English books—and indeed that is what my lecture is mainly concerned about—but there are other chains that are important in different languages, one of these being the bookshops run by Deecce books in Kerala. With bookshops stocking books, publishers also put much more

attention to the marketing of books—something which, with textbook publishing being predominant, was not a particularly developed area of publishing. Today, author tours are common, not a week passes without a major book launch—in fact there probably isn't a five star hotel in the major cities that hasn't been host to a book launch in recent years, and many publishers put their attention into smaller, less high profile, but nonetheless important ways of marketing their books. And the publishing world is peopled increasingly with young, smart, intelligent, professional people, many of them women. And Delhi's not the only place where this is happening: change is visible across the many different languages in which India publishes.

Among the many changes in Indian publishing, is another one that hasn't received enough attention. This is the entry of increasing numbers of women into the profession. Years ago, when I made my hesitant way into the portals of the OUP, my Dad came with me. Unknown to me, he took my then boss aside and told him in no uncertain terms that he expected all the men in the office (and there were MANY of them) to behave, and if he got the slightest hint of anything wrong, he would see to it that they were taken to task! In turn, my boss, when offering me the job, said I needed to behave (by this he meant not get married immediately and become pregnant!) because,

according to him, 'We have never employed a woman in an executive position before because women usually go away and get married'. He made it sound like a crime!

The situation is very different today. Not only are increasing numbers of small and medium-sized publishing houses headed by women—for example, Yoda, Yatra, Stree, Katha, Tara Books, Tulika, Karadi Tales, Women Unlimited, Zubaan—but women are the decision makers in many of the larger houses as well, such as, India Book House, Westland Books, Niyogi Books, Ratna Sagar, Random House, HarperCollins, to name only a few. Several of the bookshop chains are headed by women (Oxford Bookstores, Strand and others), and there are women printers, designers, typesetters—indeed the feminisation of Indian publishing is remarkable. And recently, when we set up India's Women in Publishing group, and decided to have a welcome party for its members in Delhi, we found ourselves sending out over 250 invitations, and nearly a hundred women turned up! And this was only in Delhi – if the numbers from other parts of India are added here, things will look very bright indeed!

In the seventies and eighties the focus on textbooks and educational publishing also meant that there wasn't much happening where translation was concerned. And given that, India has 23 official languages and publishes in 22 of

those, with many having rich, and strong literary traditions, you'd think translation would be a natural. But it wasn't—and when there were translations, they were seldom direct from one Indian language to another, rather they often went via a link language, such as Hindi or English. Today, translation forms a vibrant and lively part of Indian publishing. Rights are being bought and sold between Bengali and Hindi, Tamil and Telugu, Gujarati and Marathi, and all of those and more.

And then there's the entry of the adventurous young—long years ago when I left my job to think of setting up my own publishing house, people thought I was a bit mad. But today, young people are doing this all the time: a few years ago a group of young men and women came together to set up Blaft, a wonderful, dynamic publishing house that focuses on translations of pulp fiction; there's Navayana, set up by two men, to publish works by marginalised people, Phantomville which focuses on graphic novels, Kalachuvadu which publishes both fiction and non-fiction in Tamil, New Horizon, set up by two Silicon valley entrepreneurs who sold their stake in an enormously profitable website, Cricinfo, to concentrate on books, Panther Books, set up by one man (and his family) to bring the best medical knowledge to the world in electronic form, Ratna Sagar, a quality publishing house doing textbooks and books for children

that is providing strong competition to the OUP... and the list goes on.

It's in recognition of these developments that Indian publishing now has such a strong profile internationally. Not only do Indian writers figure among the best international writers—and indeed recently, walking through the lanes of Venice, I was struck by the fact that virtually every small bookshop had at least one or more Indian (and not necessarily Diasporic) writers in their windows—there isn't a book fair in the world where you don't see a significant Indian presence. There are publishers offering books, printers offering print services and even—as was evident at the Abu Dhabi book fair recently—Indian entrepreneurs offering distribution services.

Let me turn now to another aspect of Indian publishing. Almost every piece of writing on Indian publishing tends to turn its attention now to trade publishing, rather than educational publishing. Trade is the new sector, it's where the growth is—some say it is as high as 30 per cent a year, while others put this figure at 10 (which is a high enough figure). Further, almost every piece of writing then attributes this growth, and the changes in Indian publishing to the entry of the big western giants – Penguin, HarperCollins, Random House, Hachette, and so on. There's no doubt these houses are publishing new and interesting titles, but I think it's important to recognise that the real innovations are coming from

elsewhere, that it is the independent, small (sometimes not so small) Indian publishers who are really the ones who should be credited with putting Indian publishing on the international map. They may not be making money hand over fist, but they're doing something they believe in, and something that actually is the change. Here are some examples:

Tara, a publishing house set up by Gita Wolf, and based in Chennai, began publishing some 20 years ago. Initially focusing on books for children, Tara chose to create beautiful, handcrafted, sometimes screen printed, illustrated books. It wasn't easy, they did not have pots of money—what they did have was a commitment to quality and a great deal of original thinking. Tara's books were, and are, expensive, but over the years, they have found a loyal audience and each year, they take their innovation a bit further. Beginning with books for children, they soon expanded their repertoire to begin to do visual books, bringing in tribal artists and illustrators whose works they showcased the world over. During the Salon du Livre in Paris in 2007 when India was the focus country, it was Tara's books and their illustrations that were displayed in libraries in the city of Paris, and Tara now regularly wins awards at Bologna. Yet, it was barely two decades ago that they began to attend international book fairs, in the early days looking for subsidies to make it possible for them to do so.

Another entrant into this field was Tulika, of about the same vintage and also based in Chennai. Tulika focused on children and worked hard to make connections with publishers in the Indian languages: today, several of their books are simultaneously translated into four or five Indian languages. Few international publishers have this kind of reach.

If Tara and Tulika tried one kind of experiment (and a smaller publisher, Karadi Tales, also from Chennai, took this further by publishing audio and 'touch' books), Seagull in Kolkata tried a different sort of experiment. Set up initially to publish books on the performing arts, Seagull rapidly expanded its list and recently positioned itself as not merely an Indian publisher, but an international publisher based in India. Today, its list boasts names such as Slavenka Drakaulik, Andrei Tarkovsky, Tariq Ali and a host of others, and it holds the world rights to well-known writers like Mahasweta Devi, who will only publish with Seagull first, and then look elsewhere.

Some years ago the OUP found it difficult to continue to employ two of its senior academic editors because they decided to marry, and Company policy did not allow for married couples to be employed. This became the catalyst for Anuradha Roy and Rukun Advani to set up Permanent Black, one of the most prestigious academic imprints in India today.

The history of feminist publishing in India is by now well known—Kali for Women, founded in 1984 by two women, Ritu Menon and myself, was the trailblazer in publishing books by and about women, an area that was all but ignored but that today forms one of the most profitable parts of most publishers' lists. Combining both academic and trade publishing, Kali, and its two later avatars, Zubaan and Women Unlimited, continue to hold their own in a market that is increasingly dominated by the big players. Navayana, a young publishing house set up recently, focuses on the area of caste, another area that has not seen much attention in Indian publishing. And of course there is Ravi Dayal's own imprint, set up under his name, that has published some of the finest books in India and that continues to be run after Ravi passed away, by Penguin.

This is only a taste of the richness and variety of independent publishing in India. I have not even begun to speak of the work of several others, such as Roli and Rupa, or Westland and New Horizon. More, these publishers have not remained inactive in terms of distribution and one of the most interesting aspects of such publishing is the kinds of connections that publishers are making. A few years ago, Penguin India and Zubaan set up a collaboration which has today become a model to be followed by others—the publication of a joint

list to which both houses bring their unique strengths. It would be difficult to find in the world of publishing this kind of collaboration where the actors recognise their strengths and weaknesses and pool together their resources to explore the same market. There are already four such collaborations in place and several more in the offing (the four are the Zubaan-Penguin list, the Mapin-HarperCollins list, the Ravi Dayal-Penguin list and the Ratna Sagar-HarperCollins list). As well, a group of independent publishers have come together to set up a collective to work on distribution and marketing. Will they give the big players a run for their money—it's difficult to say, but what is certain is that so much that is exciting in the market is because of the independents.

But although the independents are at the cutting edge of change, there is no denying that in the present day scenario, the entry of large foreign companies is something to contend with. When the publishing sector began to open up, like everything else in India, publishers' associations fought hard to prevent this, and even today there are petitions pending with the government in which publishers who see themselves as 'Indian' have questioned the presence of foreign publishers in India, and many have accused them of being here illegally. The illegality or otherwise of multinational presence is a thing for the courts to decide but the questions that lie behind this age-old

debate are important. Can we really, as publishers, prevent the entry of multinational publishers into India? Can markets remain protected in these days? Patently not, and the more so because some of our own houses are now expanding into international arenas. If we want our presence to be strong outside, we cannot exercise different standards for people within India. But this brings then another question: is the presence of foreign houses a new form of colonialism? Will Indian publishing be able to hold its own in the face of competition from people who have established reputations and whose resources are much more abundant? One of the things that has already begun to happen in Indian publishing is the offering of an advance. While there is nothing wrong with this per se, the fact of the matter is that advances make sense in well-developed publishing markets, not in what are called 'emerging' markets. Here, if you have publishers who are able to offer large amounts of money to authors (and I am not saying authors should not get this money but simply that not everyone can make such offers), you are pushing up the bar to a point where the local, small, independent publisher will inevitably be pushed out and the old colonial pattern be set again. Further, foreign direct investment, foreign businesses are now a reality in India, so the real questions should be: how do we deal with them? This question is

complicated by the fact that many of these businesses are in joint ventures with Indian companies, for example, India Today with HarperCollins, Penguin with Ananda Bazar Patrika, and so on. So Indian publishers need to be clear about whether they are against the *foreign* part of the business or whether they are against all *big* businesses. The Tatas, for example, recently entered into a joint venture with Landmark Bookstores and Westland Publishers, and the question is: is a totally Indian partnership (and the Tatas, though an Indian company are very much a multinational company) better than a foreign-Indian one?

A further issue complicates this picture. Much of the material being published by the foreign publishers, in fact virtually all of it, is by Indian writers, and although they began by publishing Indian writers in English, that has now expanded and changed. Penguin publishes in three or four Indian languages, Harper publishes in Hindi and English, all of them translate writers from Indian languages into English, and increasingly, they, and other smaller, independent publishers, have begun to work together with Indian language publishers to share and exchange rights on their books. Plus, with their resources, they are able to take Indian writers out of India to international book fairs, etc. which helps to put Indian writing on the international map although it has to be said that the exposure remains

limited mainly to authors writing in English—for the most part.

So the questions become more and more complicated as we go on. There is no doubt that the international recognition for Indian writing (even if it is mainly for Indian writing in English) has come about largely—though not wholly—as a result of the presence of many of the ‘foreign’ publishers. But equally, there is no doubt that in the international arena the interest in India will last only until it remains the flavour of the month or the year. For publishers within India, however, Indian writers and their works are what they are committed to, and the commitment is not temporary, and there needs to be both a recognition of this and a way to provide support to Indian publishing so that it can develop to its full potential. There are very few countries in the developed or developing world today where book markets are not saturated, and where there is still potential for expansion. India is one of them—all statistics tell us that the middle classes are growing and expected to grow at a phenomenal rate, literacy is on the rise, and if this is combined with the availability, at suitable prices, of good books, there is no reason why the book market in India should not become healthy.

While the growth of the middle classes provides some reason for hope, there are other things that are important to note. R. Satyanarayan, a Chennai-based publisher, on

a post on his publishing house’s website (www.newhorizonmedia.com) reminds us that the per capita book title output for the whole of India is about 8 titles per 100,000 population, far lower than what it ought to be when compared to the per capita book title output in the mature publishing markets like U.K., U.S.A., France and Germany. Of all the Indian languages, English tops at 23 titles per 100,000 speakers of English in India followed by Tamil at 11, Malayalam (8.7), Marathi (6.9), Bengali (6.3) and Gujarati (6.2), are all higher than Hindi at 5. Kannada (4.8) is higher than Telugu (4.2) and Urdu (3.9). Assamese at 7.7 is much higher than most other languages.

He goes on to remark that while Hindi may top the list in terms of the number of titles published (and there is no guarantee that these figures are indeed correct—they come from a publication by the Federation of Indian Publishers, and relate to the year 2004 and we are now in 2010) in terms of the potential size of its market, Hindi publishing needs to do much more than is currently being done. Tamil and Malayalam are the most active of the Indian languages with the other larger languages (in terms of speakers) like Marathi, Bengali, Telugu, Gujarati and Kannada lagging behind. Despite the number of titles published in Assamese being lower than all other major languages, Assamese publishing seems to be far more active than one would expect given

the fewer number of speakers. Sanskrit, Sindhi and Kashmiri have too few speakers compared to the other languages for their per capita output to be comparable.

Long years ago, Robert Escarpit, researching on book reading habits across the world, defined India as a region of 'book hunger'. Exciting

though the publishing scene in India is today, as we stand poised on the brink of many changes and new developments, it's worth remembering that in a country where there are still millions of people who can't read, and millions who do not have access to education, there's much that remains to be done.