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The Ecological Relationship between Capitalism of Publishing Units and the New Literature

Abstract

Today, the numbers of celebrities who write, discuss, and debate through books is steadily rising. Be it the Natwar Singh vs. Sonia Gandhi debate or the Sachin Tendulkar vs. Greg Chappell debate, both of which were triggered through publications of their respective book excerpts. While on the one hand, Arvind Kejriwal created a wave through his book, on the other, Ram Gopal Varma built a new fan base through his. This rise in celebrity literature, quite evidently, benefits the big publishing houses. However, the absence of celebrities and the presence of emerging local talent in literary festivals also co-exist. Be it the recent Shillong Book Fair that encouraged local authors or the recent Tata Literature Festival in Mumbai that held contests for the slowly reincarnating the Japanese poetry forms Haiku and Haibun. Amazon, a major player among other self-publishing models, has created a wide market for self-publishing authors and its capitalism by providing democratic powers to the technologically sound writers is unquestionable. Amazon has changed the way we read, think, and publish. It has paved way for new literature as artists and writers climb up the ladder from being mere participants to being share holders in the publishing scene. This essay is an analysis of the ecology between publishing capitalism, the festival organizers, and the emerging online avenues of publishing and consequently, the emergence and recognition of new writing talent. The analysis pursues three aspects, namely, (1) the emergence of celebrity literature, (2) tapping of local potential through literary festivals/meets, and (3) the impact of Amazon and its Kindle-based model of self publishing.

Keywords: Celebrity literature, Literary festivals, Kindle Direct publishing, KDP, Amazon.com, Self-publishing

1. Introduction

The Indian publishing industry was estimated to be a Rs.12,000 crore business as of April, 2013.(Aggarwal 2014) The industry was seen to be growing at a fast pace primarily owing to the creative energies of celebrities and members of the general public who viewed the opportunity as the best time to write (Mukherjee 2014). Publishing avenues for the general public, especially the

first time writers, who, hitherto encountered difficult access, have now opened up owing to the response received for the works of authors like Chetan Bhagat and Ashwin Sanghi (Tiwari 2014).

However, the routes of publishing still remain different for different people. While celebrity authors bank on publishing houses and contracts, young and technologically literate authors pave their own path via self publishing avenues, wherein Amazon is perceived as the most preferred option. Furthermore, the literary festivals that have grown over a period of time have served as a platform for authors to publicise their work as well as create opportunities to boost their sales. Literary festivals are hosted mostly in the metropolitan areas, and India is host to the world's largest literary festival – the Jaipur literary festival. In smaller spaces, festivals and meets run by smaller groups are changing the way writing and publishing is taking place today. Today, authors' work is being followed. With social media and direct access to individuals, the audience has grown mature. As the publishing houses and the festivals grow, so do the indie writers who attract their own audience. Hence, there is provision of space for a traditionally published author, a self published author as well as the celebrity author.

2. The Emergence of Celebrity Literature

In the constant battle where self-publishing, print and electronic publishing are seeking to gain foothold in the publishing market, celebrity literature, i.e., works of or for celebrities, as well as books based on public figures have seen a rise in sales. In contemporary times, two factors are seen as especially contributing in this context:

1. Books authored by political figures that include controversial claims or anecdotes.
2. Books that aim at spreading awareness on matters of current media interest.

2.1 Controversial Claims or Anecdotes

With celebrities and popular figures writing books on their lives and experiences, the publishing industry has been booming. In April 2014, Sanjay Baru's book, *The Accidental Prime Minister*, created controversies over its content after a release of few excerpts. The book was released during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government's regime as Sanjay Baru stated he wanted to release the book to defend the Prime Minister. One of the excerpts of the book states:

Dr Singh's general attitude towards corruption in public life, which he adopted through his career in government, seemed to me to be that he would himself maintain the highest standards of probity in public life, but would not impose this on others. In other words, he was himself incorruptible, and also ensured that no one in his immediate family ever did anything wrong, but he did not feel answerable for the misdemeanours of his colleagues and subordinates. (Baru 2014)

Sanjay Baru had written about several office bearers in the book. Sonia Gandhi called the book a farce and said that Sanjay Baru had only used their office to write a book. The arguments also lead to debates and discussions in the mainstream media (Swami, 2014). The controversial remarks over the timely release of the book to defend Mr. Manmohan Singh and other remarks reflected in the sales of the book which was estimated to cross 10,000 copies on the very first day of its release (Laskar 2014).

A week before Natwar Singh's book, *One Life Is not Enough*, was released in July, 2014, the mainstream media released a chapter on his book about Sonia Gandhi. An excerpt from the book read:

Sonia Gandhi has been treated like royalty and has behaved like a prima donna. Her transformation has been from a diffident, nervous, shy person to an ambitious, authoritarian and stern leader. Her authority in the Congress party is more firm than that of Jawaharlal Nehru and every dissent in the party is smothered. But beyond all the posturing, Sonia Gandhi is an ordinary and insecure person (Chowdhury 2014).

International and national news coverage, which presented excerpts of the book, went on to create much anticipation over the release. The public mood over the UPA government also served as a trigger to boost the sales of the book that was published in July, 2014.

An average sale for a non-fiction book is 3,000 to 5,000 copies over six months. But the sales for Natwar Singh's book crossed 75,000 copies in its very first week of sale (Gupta 2014). The book that was known after the ban — *The Red Sari* — a dramatised book on Sonia Gandhi by the Spanish author, Javier Moro had created a ruckus on the streets of Delhi when it was first announced to release in 2010 under the UPA government's rule. The ban of the book, followed by protests by Congress workers made the book popular ("Controversial book on Sonia Gandhi 'The Red Saree' to be released in India."). With millions of copies selling, more than half a million copies in Italy and Spain, the book is now released in India in 2015 by Roli books. Moro writes that "Sonia did not understand why she had to learn a language only spoken by the servants." Not finding a book on Sonia Gandhi in any of the book shops, Javier Moro decided to write one. He gathered information for his book from friends and people close to Sonia Gandhi and the Nehru-Gandhi family. Moro did invite Sonia Gandhi to read his book but she refused (Sharma 2015).

The author had previously written a book based on the Bhopal gas tragedy, *It was Five Past Midnight in Bhopal*. The book had not done well in India despite its content because the incident was not afresh in public memory. The book was banned in India and the west in 2009 (Rao Jr. 2009). Despite lawsuits, the book has been received very well and amongst the top selling books in France where there has been empathy towards the victims of the Bhopal gas tragedy (Nayar 2001).

A couple of days before the release of the book in November, 2014, *Playing it My Way*, the autobiography of Sachin Tendulkar, a few excerpts of the book were released. Though the strained relationship of the then cricket coach Greg Chappell with the Indian players and the Board for Cricket Control in India (BCCI) was well known, it created news when Tendulkar shared it in his autobiography. “Together, we could control Indian cricket for years”, Tendulkar writes about the Australian telling him during a visit to his home in Mumbai, while offering ‘help in taking over the reins of the side’ from Dravid (“Sachin Tendulkar vs Greg Chappell”). While Tendulkar’s huge fan base in India may have been a primary driver for the sales of the book, the controversies that ensued from the excerpts ensured the sales figures jumped much higher. The book received pre-orders to the tune of 150,000 copies even prior to its launch (“Sachin Tendulkar Races Past Steve Jobs in Book Sales”).

2.2 Debates and discussions increase book sales:

Naseeruddin Shah’s book, *And Then One Day*, has been reviewed in DNA India as an honest autobiography emerging from the cinema industry. The book reveals several aspects of the Indian cinema industry that are judged as inappropriate from an industry insider’s perspective. The actor, who has played several critically acclaimed roles, released a book on his experiences. “When Naseeruddin Shah ran away to Mumbai!” a headline reads in *The Hindu* attracting people to the article.

Debates and discussions over news channels have boosted the sales of the book. A book is not only a printed text of one’s thoughts but a reservoir of discussions and Naseeruddin Shah has written the book with honesty and achieving more than satisfactory sales volumes. In an interview with Economic Times, Shah reveals:

The corruption is far deeper. For many people, these films are a part of their concept of reality. It’s a very scary concept. Look at the monetary corruption, the things it [fame] does to your [actor’s] head...this business of stardom. It may sound cruel but when you die [referring to an established actor], you don’t want anybody to see you [as a corpse] because you don’t want them to see what you look like. There are stories of actors who have gone completely insane because of their living in this make-believe world. The kind of manipulations and backstabbing that happens...it’s an unreal world. It’s more unreal than Fellini. (Kumar 2014)

2.3 Spreading awareness and personal opinions through books:

Swaraj, written by politician Arvind Kejriwal was released in 2010 by Swaraj Abhiyan Prakashan. The book questions the framework of the government and suggests that self-rule or providing democratic powers to the people results in better governance. The book however rose in sales when Arvind Kejriwal’s government was formed in December 2013. It was released in September 2012 when Kejriwal’s political movement gathered speed in Delhi. Sameer Mahale,

national sales manager at Harper Collins publishers said “In the first year, we had sold 25,000 English versions and 40,000 Hindi versions of the book. In the last six months we have sold 30,000 of the English and 60,000 Hindi versions, taking the total number to more than 1.5 lakh” (Roy, 2014). The book’s sales rose as orders began pouring in earlier from the northern part of India and, as Kejriwal’s popularity and ideas grew, from the southern part of the country as well. Kejriwal has changed the way a common man looks at politics. By encouraging people to move away from the television sets in their drawing rooms onto the roads for *dharnas* and other social actions, he has revolutionised Indian politics through involving the populace. Kejriwal’s book served as the timely and relevant channel to propagate his beliefs and ideas further. It encapsulated all his ideologies and thoughts and, furthermore, was priced within the affordability of the middle-class reader.

Ram Gopal Varma (RGV), a popular director who has shared his opinions on various controversial subjects that affect the cinema via social media platforms has gained recognition and followers through his comments as much as he has gained through his genre of movies. His honesty and views have earned him attention. Thus, when his book, *Naa Ishtam*, was released in 2012 its sales crossed 10,000 copies in its very first week of release (“Varma’s ‘Naa Ishtam’ Sales Shocks Publishers!”). The book was also displayed at the Hyderabad Book Fair in 2013, where 60% of the market is dominated by Telugu books, and the book’s sales have seen a spike.

In March, 2014, Pawan Kalyan, the Telugu actor who founded Jana Sena Party, released his book, *ISM*. The book speaks of his ideologies and his thoughts on governance. The book co-authored with his friend Ravi, has made sweeping sales of 10,000 copies on the release day and will be available for online sales (“Latest Best Seller Pawan’s ISM.”). In December 2014, a book on Pawan Kalyan had been released questioning his political ideology. The book titled “*Politics Bachao .. Pavan Kalyan Hatao*” had created furore among his fans and the author B. Srinivas has received death threats (“Interview with Boggula Srinivas”).

3. Literature and poetry festivals/meets that tap new potential

The absence of celebrities and the presence of emerging local talent in literary festivals co-exist. Be it the Shillong Book Fair that encouraged local authors or the Tata Literature Festival in Mumbai which had contests for reincarnating the Japanese poetry forms, Haiku and Haibun, saw a growth in the number of writers — both traditionally and self-published.

Since the emergence of Indian publishing, literary festivals have been instrumental in helping authors connect with their audience. With 90,000 books and 19,000 publishers, India has the world’s sixth largest publishing industry, booming after the year 2000 when the Indian government allowed 100 per cent equity in publishing. Like most Indian festivals, the literary festivals are a perfect marketplace to meet like-minded people and revive diminishing art forms. Some benefits of literary festivals include:

1. Preserving diminishing languages

2. Learning about new writers and writing forms
3. Meeting the author/poets in person

Since 2006, the number of literary festivals is on the rise. From October to February every year, book fairs and literary festivals don the diary of a litterateur. The Jaipur literary festival, which began as an 18-member writer's forum, is now a 221-writers' festival with multiple rooms at the Diggri Palace and hosts various sessions. In 2010, Hyderabad literary festival joined the bandwagon too. While the festivals are host to celebrity authors, a number of local artists and authors benefit from the literary festivals as well. With local authors and celebrity authors sharing the dais, the recognition for the local talent increases.

3.1 Preserving diminishing languages

Every year, the Hyderabad literary fest (HLF) introduces a guest nation and a language to focus on. In the year 2015, it focused on Urdu – a language widely spoken in various quarters of Hyderabad. Though the book stores do not see a huge sale in the Urdu books, the book stalls at these festivals and fairs tell a different story. A book store owner says: “There needs to be proper outlets for promotion of Urdu books. During exhibitions there is a huge sale of all sorts of Urdu books which proves that there is a huge demand for Urdu books among people. The only thing is that they should be made more accessible. Also, if Urdu writers are given more respect and their due royalty, this language would flourish” (Jain 2008).

The Shillong book fair 2015 organized by Sahaki Society saw the attendance of both local and national authors. Paulami, a one-book author found that the audience was eager to learn about different poets, authors and discuss about literature. Sessions like promotion and dissemination of Khasi literature aimed at resurrecting the dying language. The area had immense scope and there were interesting ideas on the growth and reach of the language. Even the Shillong book fair organizers plan to have a section on Khasi Literature and hope that they will sell more than 10,000 copies. (“Shillong has healthy reading culture: Organizers of Book Fair” 2012)

3.2 New writers and new forms: Who publishes poetry?

Publishing poetry a decade ago was an expensive task. The book stores do not stock it. The readers were not willing to purchase it. Even today, poetry publishers are indie publishers (Daftuar 2014). But the poetry festivals have changed this perception. They have encouraged poets through online groups and the print-on-demand model that enable printing of their books after editing it at a low cost.

Focussing on providing a platform to amateur writers, Poets Corner, an indie publishing group, based out of Delhi, hosts the Delhi Poetry Festival annually since 2013. The festival aims

to educate and engage amateur poets in its one-day festival that focuses on various aspects of poetry. "I began writing at the age of 14 but did not find a proper forum for my work. I found most of the existing groups on poetry were either outdated, not ready to accommodate new entrants or may be exploitative, to extract money," says Anwar, founder of Delhi Poetry Festival ("First Poetry Festival in Delhi that Offers Platform for Amateurs"). Also seen is the rise of the forgotten Telugu poetry due to the initiative of professors like Kavi Yakoob who have taken up the role of Telugu poetry evangelists. Kavi Yakoob organizes "Kavi Sangamam" – a confluence of poets every month in Hyderabad. These meetings have also lead to poetry festivals which hosts local poets and a celebrity poet. This is highly encouraging for the poets who write in Telugu language (Humayon 2013). His and others' poetry books have done well in the monthly meetings as well as the festivals where poets come from districts to attend these festivals. Tata Literature Live (TLL), that started five years ago, engages authors and poets through various media. From contests, musical performances to engaging book launches. TLL has also conducted contests to engage amateur writers by organizing a haiku contest. The poems of the best haikin would be published in an anthology too (Gupta 2014). Haiku and Haibun have not been popular forms till recently. With awareness of these forms and efforts by online groups like InHaiku, these forms have been gaining popularity.

Paresh Tiwari - Organizer, In Haiku Festival, Hyderabad, says "Every workshop that I have conducted and the one haiku festival that I organised, I have been amazed to see how well the audience reacts to this poetry form. There is something undeniably disarming about haiku, haibun, tanka and haiga, that makes the poet inside us wake up and smell the earth." The group, InHaiku, has also come together to publish an anthology of their best haiku and haibun in an anthology called *Journeys*, published in 2014. Similarly, the Prakriti Poetry Festival, held every year since 2007, hosts poets across different genre in December when the music season in Chennai begins. It was the vision of Ranvir Shah who felt that if in Chennai's winter cultural season, music and dance had the poetics of lyricism and line, why not the spoken word? Ever since, poets from different countries meet for two weeks. They read poems in streets and colleges and cafeteria, IT parks and green public parks and spaces, and select shops and commercial establishments. The idea is to bring poetry back to the public.

Rochelle Potkar, a poet who read at the Prakriti Poetry festival said "We met college students who were enthusiastic about poetry. We would not have known them unless we went to these colleges." Rochelle who has read at many festivals now plans to come out with her first collection of poems soon. She says, encouraged by the response at these festivals has encouraged her to bring out my own collection. The festival mostly attended by middle class public saw poetry as a medium of expression of social issues as well. The 100 thousand poets for change initiative changed the way poetry was consumed and was written. Poetry, sometimes called as 'soft diplomacy', is being used to speak of issues and to call for action. The meets and the event have helped many poets to discover their voice. The anthology 100TPC publishes poets across the globe who have read at their event. Its Indian version in Bangalore started in 2012:

<http://100tpcbangalore.wordpress.com/> has seen poets from different backgrounds. The annual event was also held in New Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata (John 2012).

3.3 Meeting the authors at the festivals

Bangalore literary festival, started in 2013 via crowd funding, today has grown into one of the top literature festivals in the country. Over 200 authors were present in the 2014 edition. The festival aims to be a global literary fest, and carried a few sessions focussing on the Kannada language. The release of books, like “Have you seen the Soul?” – The Craft Of Poetry; Two Friends In Conversation: Gulzar and Pavan Varma, which have not been stored in bookstores and are yet to be uploaded online. At the literary festival, due to huge discount, the distributors offer a good percentage to the publishers too. This is profitable for the publishing houses which otherwise suffer due to the fewer profit margins that they receive.

Every city has its flavour and the literary festivals are a festival in its truest sense. The Lucknow literary festival that commenced in 2013 has gained prominence by focusing on its local literature and writers alongside celebrity writers. With languages like Awadhi and Urdu being celebrated alongside mainstream English, the books spoken about or talked about see a rise in the sales.

The physical presence of the author is always an advantage. With Lucknow-based first-time authors present at the book sale counter, the sales were boosted. The young readers could connect to the writing as well as with the author. Publishers say, the physical presence of an author is always an advantage. The revenue generated had crossed three crores and is expected to go higher.

"An author's presence serves twin purposes. First, people can directly interact and second, the writer can convince the reader to pick up his book over others," says Abhinav Chabhra, a book seller (Jain 2013). Today a new author can create a social media avatar for himself/herself even before the launch of a book. The boost in the sales and the credibility by in-person meeting leaves a lasting impression. Literary festivals are a place of gathering for writers and a marketplace for young authors who want to create an audience by personal meeting apart from the online presence that they have created.

4. Amazon and its impact on self-publishing

The role of Amazon.com, a major player among other do-it-yourself publishing models, in creating a wide market for self-publishing authors and its capitalism by providing democratic powers to the technologically literate writers is significant. Amazon has changed the way we read, think and publish. It has paved way for new literature, as artists and writers climb up the ladder from being mere participants to being shareholders in the publishing arena. The internet

gives us access to a market place which otherwise would have been physically impossible to reach – the global market of books, prices, printing, distribution and marketing. With information in hand and the will to reach out to the audience on one's own, the new age writers are now experimenting with e-markets and distribution. As such, the biggest do-it-yourself market Amazon seems to be the perfect fit. Amazon makes the books reach the global audience with its wings spread globally (US and UK being the biggest markets). For a new author who is technologically literate, this works like a major enabler for testing the markets. In the self-publishing and eBooks arena, the author is responsible from conception of the story to its online reach.

With its Kindle direct publishing (KDP) - easy to upload the cover page and eBook online - all one has to do is send across a signed undertaking for tax purposes and within a week the account with Amazon is setup. It takes only one day for the book to be available online. Also one month of free participation in KDP Select program, where they promote your book, is offered. It is much easier to promote a book in the era of internet where one can share a link with friends who can then easily download the eBook rather than hoping that they will visit a bookstore and buy your book. It is also easy to replace the Online copy as and when you want to, in case any changes/corrections/updates are required to be made. It is almost impossible to do this in case of a physical book. With urban India spending almost 8 hours per day online, of which about 3 hours include reading and browsing, online books has gained importance. With global exposure, net-savvy people now resort to self-publishing because of three major factors.

1. The time factor
2. The control factor
3. Global audience

4.1 The time factor

On an average only 10-15 percent of the manuscripts reach the editor's desks. It opens a huge market for authors with ready manuscripts. The average time for an Indian publishing house to respond is between six months and one year (Mookerji 2015). In the virtual world where every minute, multiple activities take place, six months translates to a lot of time. Thus, to save time and to eliminate the ambiguity of whether their book will be published or not, the authors opt for the self-publishing model. The 'disappointment' with the literary agents - the costs involved with the literary agents and then the low royalty received has urged the writers to take up self-publishing.

With social media platforms like blogging and social networking posts which focus and highlight an individual's skill set, it has become evident that no longer does the fame of a writer only depend on the traditionally sold books. An author can promote his/her work online and build an audience and then self-publish a book.

4.2 Control factor

Most self-published authors in India prefer Amazon as:

- 1) It covers 60% of the market of the entire self-publishing market.
- 2) Its payment gateway is convenient.
- 3) Easy to navigate through the services it provides (Jacobs, 2014)
- 4) The royalties paid via Amazon are higher as compared to those received via traditional publishing model. While it makes it exciting for being in control at the same time one should be wary of the content and the design processing. Through its various features, Amazon also allows the authors to incorporate images and other graphics which would have been expensive if publishing through traditional model.

On an average, youngsters spend 70 minutes surfing the internet, 44 minutes reading a magazine and 32 minutes with a newspaper. That would add up to an average of almost five hours a day consuming one form of media (Pokharel 2010). Hence, the market for eBooks holds immense potential. With zero monetary costs involved, KDP is a gaining popularity. Rasana Atreya, a self-published author says, "I had won the DSC prize for my story. I felt if the judges like my book and so will the readers." Rasana had rejected a traditional publishing contract as she felt she would lose control over the book.

4.3 Global audience

Despite Indian authors publishing through Amazon and Kindle, there is a huge gap between the number of authors and the number of readers from India. Amazon launched its self-publishing wing in India in August, 2012. Amazon's New York-based director (author and publishing relations) Jon Fine says "Amazon saw that India has a rich tradition in storytelling" (Mookerj 2015).

There is a stigma attached to self-published and eBooks in India and Indian reader still prefer print books as compared to eBooks. However, the number of eBook readers from India is slowly growing. The growth of eBook devices and eBook readers in India is only 12% as compared to the US and UK markets where the eBook readership is much higher. KDP is now publishing regional literature where the global growth of NRIs reading the regional literature to go back to the roots proves that Indians are accepting eBooks as a strong segment of literature.

5. Conclusion

Celebrities who have a ready-market and publish their books and speak about their life and experiences or discuss or debate through books have a large market and the publishing houses can bet on this immensely as the number of modes of publishing has increased. However, smaller groups and general public can engage with their readers at festivals and meetings to

create and maintain their audience – the personal interaction with the authors is certainly a viable option to increase sales of the books too. Literary festivals are certainly a market place for selling literature that is otherwise not sold in the regular bookstores. The capitalisation on Amazon as a self-publishing model establishes the fact that the readers, and not the publishing houses, maintain control over the literary publications. This is a boost for the authors who want to publish without the interference of a publishing house in the decisions about their book.

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