

Indian publishers wake up to new generation of home-grown thrillers

Readers increasingly swapping Agatha Christie and Dan Brown for compatriots with a focus on fast plots and happy endings

At the Om bookshop in a mall in southern Delhi, Prabeen Kumar has been watching the browsers for years. There are the young people who usually head directly for the love stories. There are the “mature” readers who go to the classics. And now a new category has arrived, in search of India’s new wave of thriller writers. “It is a big thing now. There are more and more liking. All sorts of people ... gentlemen and ladies,” Kumar enthused.

The new wave of homegrown writers are climbing the country’s bestseller lists, challenging the dominance of international heavyweights such as Dan Brown, John Grisham and Tom Clancy, and even affecting the tenacious local taste for Agatha Christie.

“Indian thriller writing still hasn’t fully arrived but it is taking off. There’s huge potential,” said Ravi Subramanian, one of the bestselling authors.

Some thrillers sell more than 100,000 copies, a huge number in a country where, despite its size, relatively few books are bought. They combine swift-moving plots that stretch the bounds of credibility, some violence, very simple language and occasional sex scenes that are explicit by conservative local standards. Enough are now being published for a series of sub-genres to emerge: set in the worlds of crime, banking, journalism, politics and, of course, war.

“There was a huge gap there. It was long thought that Indians don’t like the action thriller,” said Mukul Deva, who has two books coming out and was a pioneer of military thrillers in India.

Deva’s first book, *Lashkar*, was a bestseller and is one of many works that deal with the hostilities, covert and overt, between India and Pakistan. The style is gritty, fast-paced and unsubtle, and the Indian heroes always win over dastardly foreign enemies.

A former soldier who left school at 16, Deva admits there is an “element of jingoism” in his work. “I wore uniform, I shed blood, and I know what we are capable of if the political will was there. Indian people need the reassurance that we can do almost everything I described in the book,” he said. Other works by Deva describe corruption, human trafficking and organ trading. His most recent is “a very dark techno-thriller.”

Some attribute the rise of the thriller to publishers being more willing to take risks in what was once a very conservative market; others to the hundreds of millions of young, literate people in India who for the first time can afford books priced at about £1.

There has also long been a strong pulp fiction tradition in local languages, particularly Bengali, Urdu and Tamil.

The thrillers also provide a sense of accountability, which resonates with readers in a country of deep inequality where systems of justice are profoundly flawed. Many feature investigative journalists on the trail of corrupt big businesses or politicians in league with the police or judges. One recent release describes a “stark and unsettling multidimensional chronicle of tiger-poaching, big-game hunting and the international mafia.”

Namita Gokhale, a publisher and author who is organising India’s first festival of crime writing in January, said the thrillers touched on Indian preoccupations. “These are all locally set, identifiably local situations and characters. They describe events which simply couldn’t happen anywhere else. Thrillers everywhere are symptomatic of a society,” she said.

Two other genres have emerged in recent years to challenge the belief that the only books which sell in India are classics, and self-help and management manuals. Hugely popular books which mix reimagined ancient Hindu myths, history, and narrative and works drawing on the everyday experiences of middle-class Indian youth in simple language have radically changed the landscape of English-language publishing in the emerging economic power.

Some of the new thriller writers consciously focus efforts on a specific readership who, they say, “can understand this kind of a book.”

Kulpreet Yadav, whose new book describes the “life-threatening journey” of a young reporter investigating the death of a country lawyer, said that he wanted to create a character “who reflects the young Indian male today.”

However, the new wave’s focus on India could make them less likely to find an international audience, warned Subramanian. Another problem could be India’s love of happy endings. “If evil wins in a Bollywood film it is bound to flop. A lot of people here want to change society so they like to read about it being changed. And that means good usually triumphs,” Subramanian said.

Deva, the military thriller specialist, said this was not a purely Indian phenomenon: “It’s the same in every country. Whether it’s Jack Ryan or James Bond, the good guy wins.”

(766 words)

Annotations

- line 15: **Dan Brown, John Grisham, Tom Clancy, Agatha Christie** – famous British and American thriller/crime writers
- line 17: **tenacious local taste for** – *here*: persistent, unending local desire for
- line 35: **covert** – secret ⇔ open
- line 37: **gritty** – *here*: realistic, unpleasant, violent
- line 38: **dastardly** – evil and cruel
- line 40: **jingoism** – nationalism, believing that your country is best
- line 53: **pulp fiction** – fiction dealing with sensational subjects often printed on low-quality cheap paper
- line 56: **accountability** – being held responsible for one's actions
- line 56: **to resonate with** – *here*: to appeal to
- line 58: **profoundly flawed** – *here*: not working correctly
- line 60: **in league with** – making secret plans with
- line 68: **preoccupations** – *here*: interests
- line 102: **Jack Ryan, James Bond** – cult figures/characters in Tom Clancy's and Ian Fleming's novels

Tasks

1 Content/Comprehension

- a) Outline the points which have contributed to the increasing popularity of Indian thriller writing in India.
- b) Describe what is meant by “a new category [of Indian readers]” (ll. 8f) and briefly outline the type of books they read.

2 Form/Analysis

- a) Analyse the reasons for the increase in the market share of new wave thrillers and their potential for further growth on the Indian book market.
- b) Analyse the style, tone and register of the text and point out to whom the article is addressed.

3 Comment/Text production

Choose one of the following tasks:

- a) “[Novels] can serve as promising textual vehicles on the difficult path towards the achievement of ‘intercultural’ understanding.” (*Peter Freese*) Comment on this statement with reference to novels you have dealt with in class about India.
- b) Write a synopsis of a novel you want to write about India. In doing so, state the genre and point out what aspects of contemporary India you wish to portray in your novel. Remember to use appropriate literary terms.

Erwartungshorizont

Textinformation

Autor	Jason Burke (Delhi)
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Textformat (Textlänge)	Zeitungsartikel (766 Wörter)

1 Content/Comprehension

a) Outline the points which have contributed to the increasing popularity of Indian thriller writing in India.

- ♦ publishers are more willing to take risks (they used to believe Indians didn't like action thrillers) (ll. 30–31, ll. 47–49)
- ♦ there has been an increasing number of literate people in India who are able to afford cheap books (ll. 49–51)
- ♦ pulp fiction is a tradition in local languages (ll. 52–54)
- ♦ thrillers "provide a sense of accountability" (ll. 55–56) which appeals to readers in a country where corruption thrives
- ♦ the local setting and characters and plots deal with typically Indian events, which appeal to Indian readers (ll. 67–72)
- ♦ some new thriller writers have focused on a specific readership and reflect what these readers think and the type of people the characters represent in Indian society today (ll. 83–90)
- ♦ Indians love happy endings – good triumphs in the end (cf. Bollywood film)

b) Describe what is meant by "a new category [of Indian readers]" (ll. 8f) and briefly outline the type of books they read.

- ♦ division of readers into those who love romance and those who love the classics; all sorts of people like the new category of Indian thrillers
- ♦ features of new wave thrillers include swift-moving (implausible) plots, some violence, very simple language, occasional (relatively explicit) sex scenes and elements of jingoism
- ♦ sub-genres have emerged including crime, banking, journalism, politics and war/military
- ♦ themes deal with corruption, human trafficking, organ trading, technology, tiger poaching/big-game hunting and the international mafia

2 Form/Analysis

a) Analyse the reasons for the increase in the market share of new wave thrillers and their potential for further growth in the Indian book market.

- ♦ Indian writers are rivalling international writers; they have huge potential.
- ♦ India's first festival of crime writing took place in January 2015, which indicates the genre's growing popularity.
- ♦ Reasons for rise of the thriller = publishers are more willing to take risks; large number of young, literate Indians have money to buy cheap books; pulp fiction is a tradition in local languages; there is a sense of accountability; the books include local settings, plots and characters (readers can identify with them).
- ♦ Other types of books are also emerging (reimagined Hindu myths, history and narrative and everyday experiences of middle-class Indian young people) which compete with traditional genres (the classics, self-help and management manuals).
- ♦ The books are unlikely to reach an international audience; Indians love happy endings (cf. Bollywood films).

b) Analyse the style, tone and register of the text pointing out to whom the article is addressed.

Style:

- ◆ source = the *Guardian*, a respected national daily newspaper (print and online)
- ◆ the author writes for an educated reader who has a general interest in the subject but little or no knowledge of Indian writers
- ◆ the author assumes the reader is familiar with famous international thriller/detective story writers (such as Dan Brown, John Grisham, Tom Clancy and Agatha Christie) and characters/cult figures (Jack Ryan and James Bond)
- ◆ information is included about Indian writers
- ◆ formally correct grammar and varied syntax is used, such as complete and complex sentences
- ◆ the choice of vocabulary is formal, rich and diverse; e.g. “tenacious”, “to stretch the bounds of credibility”, “covert/overt”, “dastardly”, “accountability”, “to resonate with”, “to radically change” etc.
- ◆ the text and the argumentation is well structured
- ◆ the author uses a conversational style as he seems to be chatting to the reader even though the reader is not directly addressed

Tone:

- ◆ objective, serious
- ◆ numerous quotes (both direct and paraphrased; e.g. ll. 39–46) from India’s bestselling authors (knowledgeable people) gives the text credibility and makes the arguments convincing
- ◆ numerous quotes in the article convey the impression of it being well researched

Register:

- ◆ mostly formal with a few informal elements
 - sentences start with conjunctions (“And ...” [l. 8])
 - there is an informal Indian English in the quote from Prabeen Kumar: “There are more and more liking. All sorts of people ... gentlemen and ladies.” (ll. 10–12) = incorrect grammar/incomplete sentence/inversion of ladies and gentlemen → local colour

3 Comment/Text production

a) “[Novels] can serve as promising textual vehicles on the difficult path towards the achievement of ‘intercultural’ understanding.” (*Peter Freese*) Comment on this statement with reference to novels you have dealt with in class about India.

- ◆ Novels can indeed provide the reader with an insight into and an understanding of the culture in which the novel is set. On the one hand, the reader is confronted with possible cultural differences – often previously unknown to him/her – on the other hand, he/she has the opportunity to compare the features of the novel’s culture regarding things such as behaviour, social norms, traditions and aspects of everyday life with his/her own culture. In the following essay I would like to comment on four different novels dealing with life in India.
- ◆ Firstly, Tarquin Hall’s *The Case of the Love Commandos* portrays the problems associated with inter-caste marriage when a girl from a high-caste family is forbidden to marry an untouchable. Furthermore, the reader gets an insight into life in rural India, where local politics are shaped by caste prejudices. However, the novel also depicts aspects of everyday life including its chai stands, bamboo scaffolding and its pickpockets.
- ◆ The second novel *The Accidental Apprentice* by Vikas Swarup presents the chaos, the heat and the noise in downtown Delhi together with glimpses of religious life and what life is like for a prisoner in an Indian police station. He broaches the subject of organ trading too, which could be a topical theme in the reader’s home country.
- ◆ Religion plays a part in Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide*, the third novel, but it also paints a picture of the Sundarbans, a vast archipelago of islands in Bengal with its forest and its wildlife. In this part of the world, fishermen eke out a living and all the islanders live in fear of monsoon flooding.
- ◆ Finally, Aravind Adiga illustrates a vivid picture of life in a Mumbai slum in *Last Man in Tower*. Not only does the reader get an idea of how a slum dweller lives, but the reader also learns about corruption and the slum dwellers’ daily struggle to survive.

- ◆ It is novels such as these which really do confront the reader with the lives of those who live in a completely different culture. Since the reader can potentially identify himself/herself with one of the characters, the descriptive passages bring home the cultural differences and, consciously or unconsciously, might contribute to intercultural understanding.

b) Write a synopsis of a novel you want to write about India. In doing so, state the genre and point out what aspects of contemporary India you wish to portray in your novel. Remember to use appropriate literary terms.

Individual answers expected:

- ◆ detective story, thriller, romance ...
- ◆ deals with topics related to gender roles, caste, religion, IT/business, the poverty gap etc.
- ◆ uses literary terminology related to fictional texts: setting, characters, plot, narrative point of view etc.