Dotting the ‘i’ of Indian Publishing

... while measuring its length and breadth

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To be a part of the Indian publishing industry is to be a part of many markets at the same time. The industry is punctuated by the fact that the country lives in many eras at the same time—from as far back as the 14th century to the cutting-edge 21st. It takes years of experience to overcome the unique challenges that the gargantuan, but fragmented publishing sector in India presents.

The country positions itself today as a global hub of publishing, with a claim of 90,000 titles published in a year by an estimated 19,000 publishers. It is also acknowledged as being the sixth-largest book-producing country and the third-largest producer of English books in the world. Combined with the advantage of using the global language of English and access to technology, among other factors, publishing in India is growing. Serving both as a market and as a service provider to global publishing, the sector is garnering attention from around the world. The number of publishers, books, and readers are all growing. With the economy developing at 8.8 percent and a middle class waiting to enter the consumer sector,
domestic publishing is thriving in India.

This paper aims to knit a composite view of the publishing industry in India today, positioning it within its socio-cultural and historic settings. Although statistics on the industry are hard to find, and the little available being unverifiable, the next few pages make an attempt to bring together trends and challenges facing this industry in India today.

An overload of unverifiable figures, and the cosmetic touch of award-winning writers in English notwithstanding, there are figures that show much activity and success in the publishing sector in India:

- Reading choices are more varied today than ever before. Management books, cook books, self-help, and self-improvement books have sold well in 2009–2010.
- Publishing in Indian languages is a growing sector: where, during the late 1990s, English publishing was half of the industry pie, today its share has reduced to one third. At the same time, the translation segment is growing.
- Organized retail (format stores) accounts for handling 7 percent of book retail sales. The retail industry is growing at 15 percent each year.
- Digital publishing and ebooks are capturing the attention of Indian publishers.
- There is greater awareness of copyright matters, thanks to government interest.
- Outsourcing to India is a growing business, with revenues projected at $1.2 billion (€0.88 billion) by 2012.
- India has a share of 6.46 percent in global exports of printed and published products.
- The youth of India are one third of the country’s population, and 25 percent (83 million) of them are book readers, according to a recent survey published by the National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER).

The publishing industry is expanding and buoyant, and this is palpable at every event where publishers come together. They look to share and absorb new ideas, explore new partnerships, and extend their businesses. Most of all, they wade through a complex set of historical and socio-political realities.

**The demographics of readership**

Among the 1.1 billion people in the country, the rate of literacy is 65 percent (among youth it is 82 percent). Although far from desirable, this rate is moving up each year (compare it to the 19 percent of the 1950s), adding new readers for books. Nevertheless, the web of traditional social stratification of caste and class continue to have a deep impact on people’s access to resources. Nearly three quarters of the country is rural, where basic infrastructure continues to be out of reach, let alone a bookshop. This, compounded with severe caste rules of social behaviour governing access to education, has meant that a large part of the Indian population is waiting in the wings to become a book reader.

Thankfully, literature and scholarship have always been integral to the Indian civilization. It is a country with rich mythology and a body of literature found in classical texts, and the pursuit of knowledge is deeply etched in the Indian psyche. A strong oral tradition prevalent in the 6,000 and more ‘mother tongues’, documented in the epics and treatises, has survived for centuries and is deeply rooted in the social fabric. Knowledge is deified in the form of the goddess Saraswati, and it isn’t unusual to find an Indian making a gesture in apology to the goddess if he or she ever accidentally steps on a book. In many ways, India’s colonial history stunted the dynamic growth of the country’s traditional scholarship modes; but it introduced the idea of a schooling system that was open to all castes. The mobilization of people during the Independence Movement also helped.

Enrolment disparities seen in schools and colleges reveal the urban–rural divide that persists in India. The ‘Report to the Nation 2006–2009’, presented by the National Knowledge Commission, states that there are 12.2 lakh schools, 16,818 vocational training institutes, 18,064 colleges, and 355 universities in India. (A lakh equals 100,000.) Most of these are located in cities and big towns. Gender, caste, and transportation access are...