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# Publishing | A book of your own

Self-publishing, once dismissed as a vanity project, is scripting the future of writing and reading

Somak Ghoshal



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Amish with copies of the 'Shiva Trilogy'. Photo: Yogen Shah

In the four-and-a-half years that journalist **Paranjoy Guha Thakurta** spent working on his new book, *Gas Wars: Crony Capitalism And the Ambanis*, he lost one co-author and two publishers. To top it, on its publication last week, the book was greeted with a legal notice from Reliance Industries Ltd (RIL).

"After Alam Srinivas, who was supposed to write the book with me, dropped out, our publisher, Penguin, did not want to rewrite the contract," says Guha Thakurta. He signed a fresh deal with HarperCollins India in 2012, but failed to submit the manuscript by the agreed date of delivery. "There were developments every week on the case involving RIL and the government," says Guha Thakurta. "And I did not want to hand it in just yet."

Ending the agreement amicably, he published the book on his own from the self-publishing imprint, AuthorsUpFront (AUF). "Work that could stretch over months, had I chosen to stay with a mainstream publisher, was completed in weeks," says Guha Thakurta, who has previously published with Sage India and Oxford University Press India. In the bargain, he had to be responsible for every minute detail—from copy editing to marketing—which he could have left to his publisher, had he decided to not step off the beaten track. He must be glad that he did.

"In this day and age, every citizen is empowered to publish if they have access to technology," says Guha Thakurta. Self-publishing, once a phrase that inspired scorn, is becoming the new byword for control.

In the US, Amanda Hocking and Hugh Howey are its legends, earning millions of dollars from their books published on Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) platform, and wooed by mainstream publishers—with limited success. The creator of the successful *Wool* series, Howey rebuffed Simon & Schuster repeatedly until he agreed to give it print rights while keeping e-rights, from which he was making six-figure profits every month, to himself.

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Author Rasanna Atreya with her children, Aamani and Sunaad Gurajada, at their Hyderabad home. Photo: Harsha Vadlamani/Mint

create a basic one free of cost), and a once-over to make sure there are no howlers. And *voilà*, you can be a published author!

"We offer possibly the highest industry royalty on e-books," says Fine—a staggering 70% as opposed to the standard 25%, for books priced at Rs.99-399. Authors can choose a band that feels right to them, though first-timers are best served by not being too ambitious.

Last year, Amazon India had over 20 KDP titles in its top 100 titles on Kindle. Rasana Atreya, a homemaker and mother of two based in Hyderabad, is one of KDP's success stories.

"Even when I was working as a systems administrator in the IT (information technology) sector, my manuals were always the best written," says Atreya. After her children were born, she found it difficult to keep up with the erratic work hours, and decided to take time off. "One day, the moderator of a mailing list I am part of challenged us to write a story based on key words," she recalls. "Soon, I was hooked."

Although she came to writing fiction by chance, for two years Atreya worked on the manuscript of her first novel, *Tell a Thousand Lies*. When the book was done, she submitted it for the Tibor Jones South Asia Prize 2012, where it reached the shortlist of six and lost to Srikumar Sen's *The Skinning Tree*, which was published by Pan Macmillan India.



Author Paranjay Guha Thakurta at his office in New Delhi. Photo: Priyanka Parashar/Mint

find it difficult to publish through the usual channels," she adds, "but the quality of what gets out worries me a great deal as a publisher."

While Atreya had several readers go through the manuscript and a designer

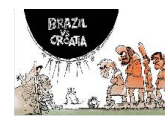
From this month, *The Guardian*, the British newspaper, will be giving a monthly prize for the best DIY book, in association with publisher Legend Times. Self-publishing is putting authority back into authorship.

"Technology has unleashed a pre-existing desire to tell stories," says Jon Fine, director of author and publishing relations for Amazon, who was in New Delhi for the World Book Fair earlier this year. "Unlike what is traditionally described as 'vanity publishing', those who opt for KDP don't have to pay anything upfront," he adds. All you need is a manuscript, a serviceable cover (KDP helps you

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Atreya, too, managed to score a publishing deal—she doesn't want to disclose with whom—but decided not to go ahead with it. Instead, she chose to put her book out on KDP. "As a self-published author, I was glad to have full control over my work," she says.

"While it is a good thing for authors these days to be in control of their work and actively promote it, the role of an experienced editor cannot be underestimated," says Urvashi Butalia, feminist publisher and chair of the jury for the Tibor Jones South Asia Prize 2013. "I am glad self-publishing exists as a viable alternative for those who

to take care of the cover, many popular writers on KDP are not exactly fussy about writing deathless prose or impeccable presentation.

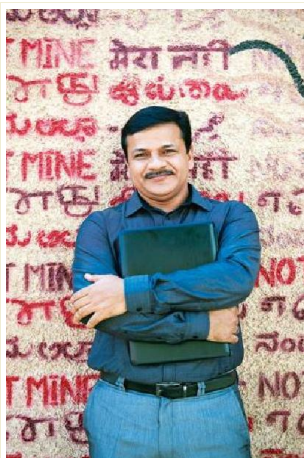
Sri Vishwanath, author of self-help and spirituality books on KDP, has hit No.1 on Amazon US several times. "I am not a big reader," says Vish, as he is known. "I read the works of Swami Vivekananda and Ramakrishna Paramahansa Dev, as well as the *Bhagavad Gita*." Traditional publishers are unwilling to take chances with the kind of books Vish likes to write: quick-reads, 50-60 pages long, and released every few months. "Most people who read on gadgets want to consume fast and not preserve what they read," he says, "On KDP, I can keep changing the title of the book and the keywords in the metadata to draw in more traffic." The word "heaven", for instance, comes up repeatedly in searches for books on wellness—just a hint in case you are scratching your head over what to call your spiritual masterpiece.

The KDP model is by no means unique. It has been tried and tested by click-and-publish websites—Nook.com, Lulu.com, CreateSpace.com, our very own Pothi.com—but Amazon's version is technologically more sophisticated, accessible on a range of devices in various formats, and enables authors to be exposed to a global market.

"Nearly 30% of the top 100 US titles on Amazon are self-published," says Fine. "Ninety-eight per cent of my fan mail comes from the US and the UK. I even had readers writing to me from Mexico," adds Atreya, who has helped her six-year-old daughter, Aamani Gurajada, publish short stories on KDP, designed and illustrated by her 11-year-old brother, Sunaad.

The publishing industry's reaction to Amazon's DIY business model is a variation of what literary agent Andrew Wylie said in a recent interview with German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine*. Amazon's publishing programme, Wylie said, stands out for its idiocy: If you have a choice between the plague and Amazon, "pick the plague".

But there is no escaping, or ignoring, the plague of titles that have flooded online and retail markets since the explosion of self-publishing platforms in the last five years.



Techie-turned-author Pankaj Misra in Bangalore. Photo: Aniruddha Chowdhury/Mint

Self-publishing companies such as Cinnamon Teal and Power

Publishers claim they are besieged with clients who prefer the less risky and economically sound print-on-demand model. "We publish 20-30 books a month," says Pinaki Ghosh, co-founder of Power Publishers. Except for plagiarized, pornographic and libellous content, almost everything is published by them—*Hell's Children*; *With Love, Candy*; and *India..A Country of Trojans??*, to name a few.

"We recommend a paid editorial package to improve the language of certain books," Ghosh adds.

Print runs vary according to the

market response to a title and publication time can be as little as a few weeks. "We must be doing something right," says Ghosh, "Why else would corporate publishers like Penguin rush in with their own self-publishing units?"

Partridge India, Penguin's self-publishing chapter, is a small but rapidly growing enterprise. It has existed since February 2013, publishing more than 500 titles, says Tracey Rosengrave, vice-president, marketing, Author Solutions, which owns Partridge worldwide. Aparna Jain, who took over as its India head this month, says its pricing and distribution models are being standardized for the Indian market. Harper Vantage, of HarperCollins India, publishes a select list of sponsored books.



A bit worryingly, self-published titles from big publishers also have the company logo on them, which may be misleading for readers who are not conversant with imprint cultures, especially in a market like India. Karthika V.K., publisher of HarperCollins India, does not agree that sharing the logo dilutes the brand of the company. "On the contrary, it strengthens its value," she says. "It sets the publisher apart from the thousands of others trying to provide the same services." Those who opt to self-publish with well-known trade publishers, Karthika believes, are assured of better quality all-round.

The sentiment is echoed by Arpita Das, publisher of Yoda Press and co-director of AUF. "As publishers, we will have to reinvent the role of producer and gatekeeper of knowledge," she says. "But we are not mechanical service providers either. We bring our long experience in publishing to suggest ways in which our authors can improve their books—be it editorially or in terms of design and layout." AUF has recently entered into a tie-up with Pubslush, the New York-based crowdfunding platform for publishing. One of their forthcoming titles, says Das, is "a tiny photo book on being homosexual in Delhi"—she does not name it.

Authors who have known both worlds feel that the difference lies in their levels of engagement in the process of bookmaking.

Sumana Khan, who finished "a supernatural thriller" in 2008, *The Revenge of Kaivalya*, found no takers for it. "I wanted to see my book out in my lifetime, so I self-published with Cinnamon Teal," she says. "I had a greater say in the presentation of the book—its cover, layout, design, size," says Khan. "When I moved to Westland with my next book, it was pretty much hands-off."

Time was of the essence for Pankaj Misra as well—not the vagrant writer of *Butter Chicken in Ludhiana: Travels in Small Town India*, but a Bangalore-based techie with Infosys Ltd. "Traditional publishers want new authors to wait for six-nine months before they can even hope to get a response," he says. "During this time they are also asked not to submit to others—which can be frustrating for someone just starting to write."



Jon Fine at the 2014 World Book Fair in New Delhi. Photo: Priyanka Parashar/Mint

Misra self-published his first book, *The Himalayan Revelation*, an adventure novel, with Power Publishers—an unhappy experience for him, primarily because of the shoddy delivery

and poor distribution. He was proactive about promoting it though and created his own website and book video. For his next project, a science-fiction fantasy, he is planning to choose the quicker and more efficient route by opting for KDP.

"It all boils down to instant gratification," says Kanishka Gupta about self-publishing. Founder of the New Delhi-based Writer's Side literary agency, Gupta adds that "most wannabe writers are in a hurry to get published because they think it will give them fame and money". In his six years in the business, says Gupta, he is yet to meet one author who wants to self-publish from the start instead of first trying to find a mainstream publisher.

Anuj Bahri, who runs Red Ink, another literary agency in New Delhi, agrees. "It's mostly disgruntled authors, or those with no hope of ever being published, putting out their books in the market at their own expense," he says. "Self-publishing is a good way of keeping money in circulation, that's all." Bahri had the satisfaction of saving one of India's most successful authors from self-publishing.

Before he became the darling of Indian publishers, Amish Tripathi was a successful banker and author of a book nobody wanted. "Everyone was hesitant to take on a story with what they thought was a 'religious' theme," says Amish (he goes by one name now). "They wanted me to come back with college romances."

"We offer possibly the highest industry royalty on e-books,' says Jon Fine—a staggering 70% as opposed to the standard 25%, for books priced at Rs 99-399"

After 20 rejections, he stopped counting and decided to go ahead on his own. "I was making a virtue out of necessity," says Amish. He had privately printed 300 copies of the book when he met Bahri, who persuaded him to have those copies pulped and go for a fresh round of editing and rewriting. The result was Part 1 of the *Shiva Trilogy*, which was launched for a 40,000 print run. The rest is history. The blue god, it seemed, had intervened and turned Amish into the blue-eyed boy of publishing overnight.

"It is always better to be published by a mainstream publisher," says Amish. "Even if you are a talented writer with excellent marketing skills, you will get nowhere without a wide distribution network, which is what an established name brings to the table." The most important thing, says the writer who has signed million-rupee deals, is to not write for the sake of money. "A vast majority of writers have day jobs," he says. "They write because they want to give voice to their soul." Self-publishing, Amish believes, comes in handy when a writer cannot find an outlet to express his views. "In this day and age, you can upload a PDF to present your ideas," he says. "No one has the right to shut you up."

Gupta agrees. "There is a good deal of self-censoring among publishers these days," he says. "Two of my top titles are stuck with lawyers," he adds, without naming names. "The changes they suggest are unreasonable and unwarranted." In cases such as these, Gupta feels, "self-publishing can be an attractive option".

Does this mean that platforms like KDP will allow unfettered freedom of expression, not just to learned, if flawed, writers but also to any rabble-rouser? Avoiding a direct answer, Fine assures that KDP will not violate laws in territories where it is available.

"As publishers, we will have to reinvent the role of producer and gatekeeper of knowledge,' says Arpita Das. 'But we are not mechanical service providers either."

"Last year I taught a course on publishing at the Ambedkar University in Delhi, where I spoke about the Samizdat movement in the Soviet bloc," says Das. The group of dissident individuals involved in it in the 1950s-1970s reproduced censored publications by hand and disseminated them at great risk to their life and liberty. Such activities persist in a different form in the work of intrepid bloggers and others who are, and will be, forced to self-publish to make their voices heard.

Vladimir Bukovsky, a Samizdat leader, famously summarized his struggle: "I myself create it, edit it, censor it, publish it, distribute it, and get imprisoned for it." The statement could be the motto for contemporary self-published authors too, with one modification—chances are, they may end up getting paid, often quite well, in the bargain, rather than be condemned for their endeavours.

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