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New breed of writers take to digital self-publishing

Manoj Sharma, Hindustan Times New Delhi, July 20, 2014

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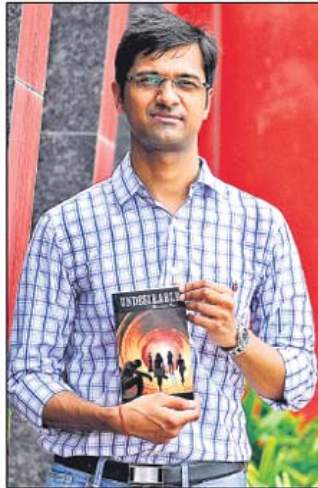
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A former IT professional, Rasana Atreya always wanted to be a writer. When she finished writing her first book, she was quite lucky to immediately get a publishing contract. But she chose to self-publish her book 'Tell A Thousand Lies' through Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP), an e-book self publishing service.

The novel turned out to be a bestseller in the West, with about 800 downloads every month since it was published in 2012. It got rave reviews on Amazon and was referred to as one of their five favourite tales from India by the UK's Glam magazine.



■ Rasana Atreya (left) self-published her first book through Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing. Noida-based IT professional, Prasoon Agarwal, too self-published his book 'Undesirable: That's what I'm', under the pseudonym Aman. KODAM HARIAND BURHAAN KINU/HT PHOTO

Atreya, now a full-time author, self-published another e-book last week, 'The Temple is Not My Father' through KDP.

"I decided to self-publish because I had been inspired by the stories of self-publishing stars such as Amanda Hawking and Joe Konarth. Besides, there was also the attraction of 70 per cent royalty and a global audience," says Hyderabad-based Atreya. "What gave me the confidence to venture out on my own was the fact that my manuscript was shortlisted by the likes of Amit Chaudhuri and Urvashi Butalia for the Tibor Jones South Asia award, for unpublished manuscripts in 2012."

Today, Atreya gets fan mails from as far as Uruguay and Mexico. Atreya is not the only one. Amazon's KDP platform has produced several writers like her in India in the past two years. They may be little known on the country's literary landscape, but are bestsellers in the West.

Take for example, Delhi-based Ajay Jain, Bangalore-based Parvathi Ramkumar and Mumbai-based Sri Vishwanath, who is an author with 13 books to his credit and is ranked among 50 most popular authors in mind, body and spirit section by Amazon USA. Both Atreya and Vishwanath have also published the books of their children through KDP.

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"We are very excited by the response we are seeing from India-based authors. KDP is a big win for authors and readers. Authors who use KDP get to keep their copyrights, get to publish globally on their schedule. In 2013, KDP books accounted for about a third of the top 100 Kindle books on Amazon.com each week on an average. Even on Amazon India, out of top 100 kindle books, 20 were KDP titles by India-based authors," says Jon P Fine, director of author & publishing relations, Amazon.com.

In fact, KDP's growing popularity in India seems to have given a new fillip to online self-publishing in the country. In the past two years alone, a number of self-publishing imprints have come up, catering to aspiring authors who find it difficult to be published by traditional publishers. NotionPress.com, ebooksutra.com, Quills Ink, Zobra Books are some of them.

NotionPress, launched two years back, offers what it calls 'guided publishing packages' where a writer is assigned a project manager to help during the process of publishing the book — editing, cover design, fixing the retail price, etc., for a fee ranging from ₹24,990 to ₹79,990 depending on the 'package'. And with self-publishing beginning to enjoy the respectability it did not have earlier, there are many takers for these packages. Most of these self-publishing companies insist they are not vanity publishers and the books they publish go through rigorous editorial processes.

"E-books are the main drivers of our sales and 90 per cent of them are sold in the West. The books in the Rachel Markham Mystery Series by PB Koller are best selling books so far. There have been 50,000, downloads of each of the three e-books in the series. We have just released the fourth book in the series. The buyers of these books priced at \$3 each are mostly Westerners. Like Koller, we have several writers who are not so famous in India but are bestsellers in the West. The market for e-books is growing steadily in India too," says Naveen Valsakumar, 27, co-founder of Notionpress, a self-publishing imprint. Valsakumar claims that his company has already brought out 4,000 self-published titles, and presently has a database of 28,000 authors he is working with or plans to work with in the future.

Most of their authors, say these publishers, are young tech-savvy people from varied backgrounds: doctors, IT and management professionals, chartered accountants. "Most of our authors are in the 20-30 age group. For a lot of them, being a published author is a means for professional growth and enhancing their social status. Being a published author looks nice on a CV and their social media profiles," says Shalini Gupta, co-founder of Gurgaon-based Zorba Books, which help authors publish both e-books and print books. "Besides, for many of them, self-publishing is a stepping stone to becoming the next Chetan Bhagat and Amish Tripathi. Everyone has a right to be a writer."

Noida-based IT professional, Prasoon Agarwal, 31, too believes so. In December 2013, he self-published his book 'Undesirable: That's what I'm', under the pseudonym Aman. While his book is far from being a bestseller despite his best marketing efforts through a specially created website and social media, his LinkedIn profile does mention him as a 'published author' along with his other professional qualifications.

"In fact, being an author helped during a job interview, where my novel figured prominently. I got a lukewarm response from all top publishers, but I love to write and was keen to be an author. So, I published my book with a self-publishing imprint. In fact, now I am writing my second book," he says adding, "The biggest disadvantage is that most of self-publishing imprints do not have a good marketing and distribution system, which affects the sales."





A Delhi-based self-published doctor, who does not wish to be named, has a similar view. "Many of these new self-publishing imprints help you during the process of publishing, but leave you to fend for yourself after the book is out. Their marketing and distribution network is very poor. So, it is better to publish only an e-book with them, which does not take much investment," he says.

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