

The new authors are able to connect with younger readers

SMS AUTHORS

No awards and no fat advances but a new breed of authors are creating a parallel literary world. By RAVI SUBRAMANIAN

Ever since my two books did well in their respective genres, my visits became more frequent to bookstores. My trips would be aimed at figuring out what made books tick. What was the “in” thing in book cover designs? What is written on the back covers of books? Do all books carry pictures of the author? I sought answers to such questions.

During one such visit, I was standing in the aisle talking to the store manager at Mumbai's Crossword. My attention turned towards a bunch of youngsters hanging out on the periphery of the book store. It was a motley teenage crowd – loud, brash, cellphone-totting. Suddenly one of them moved away from his friends, walked to the nearest supervisor and asked, “Do you have *Mediocre but Arrogant*?” Cash exchanged hands and the young

customer walked out with the book.

Had I bumped into him any other day, I wouldn't have associated him with the book reading types – the literary jhola guys – made popular by Amol Palekar in many films. That stereotype was shattered that day. The elitist impression I had in my mind about Indian readers was flushed down the drain.

Not too long ago Indian authors were synonymous with NRIs and PIOs – either educated overseas or there for generations. I am talking of people like Salman Rushdie, Amitav Ghosh and Kiran Desai. Their language is pretty much American, serious and heavy. The writing style is formal, at times endearingly so.

However, the new breed of emerging authors is different. Over 40 of them have made their way into the market through the three biggies in Indian publishing – Rupa, Harper Collins

and Penguin. Not only did they make it to the stores, but some even set the shelves on fire, their books becoming best-sellers.

The bookshelf space occupied by the hitherto neglected ‘Indian Fiction’ section in bookstores more than doubled. You could now find *Above Average* by Amitabha Baghchi, *Anything for you Maam* (Tushar Raheja), *Jokers in the Pack* (Ritesh Sharma and Neeraj Pahlajani), *The Funda of Mix-ology* (Mainak Dhar) as well as my two best-sellers, *If God Was a Banker* and *I Bought the Monk's Ferrari* jostling for space, not with works of classic writers like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle or thrill masters like John Grisham but with those of Chetan Bhagat and Anurag Mathur.

The response to the work of this new brigade is typical. Puritans smirk at their liberal use of Hinglish. The blogspace is littered with posts

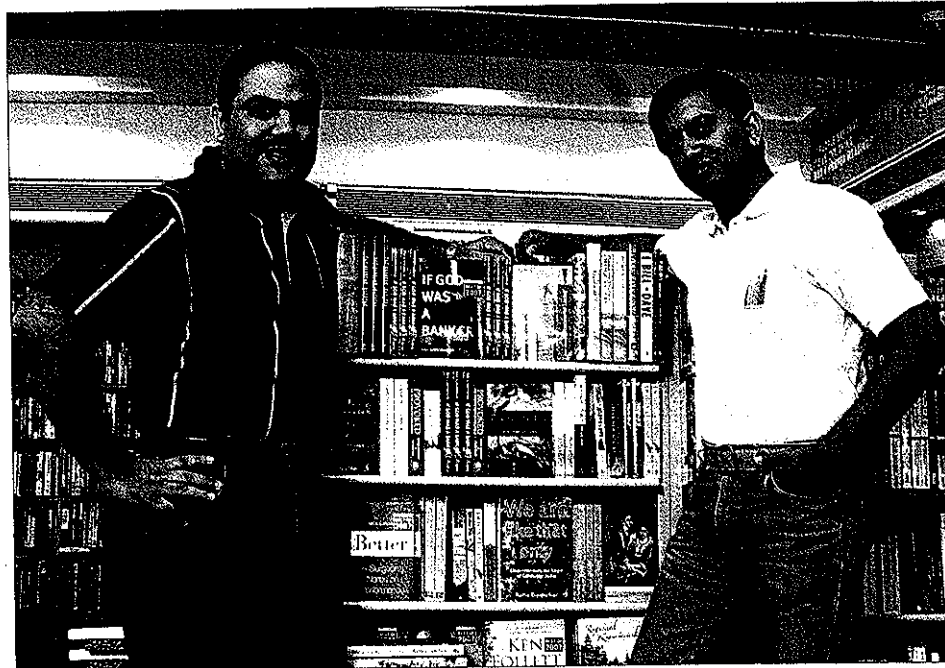
deriding the new writers. But talk to executives at book stores and the story is quite different. These are the books that are actually moving. They top the charts all over. Five of the top 10 best-sellers at Landmark Book Store in Mumbai are by the new age Indian authors. So were seven of the top in the 15 Rediff Best of 2007 list. So what is it about these books that make them so popular with the masses? "Time is the reason why I prefer to read these kind of books," says Rakesh Makkar, CEO of Future Money, "When I get back home late at night after a stressed-out job, the last thing I want to read is something that is heavy, takes lot of time to go through and requires concentration."

"When you want to relax, would you watch a Govinda flick or endure a Satyajit Ray classic?" asks Archana Shiroor, Head of Human Resources at Barclays Bank. "That's the difference between a Jhumpa Lahiri and these newer Indian writers. I read books to unwind. I rarely get beyond 10 pages of serious literature." Reading has increasingly become a means of de-stressing for the younger generation.

The new breed of readers belongs to the SMS generation. They have their own lingo, everything for them has to be snappy and fast, including reading. And these new authors cater to their needs very well. "You might be pardoned for being under the impression that the young crowd has all the time in the world. Unfortunately that is not the case. Career, work, travelling, college, exams, Internet, all these rob them of valuable time, forcing them to live life in the SMS mode. They have high aspirations and want to do things quickly. If you think they will have time to read a literary masterpiece over 15 days, just forget it," says Siddharth Banerjee, author of *High on Life*.

Kapish Mehra of Rupa Publications has an interesting perspective. "The profile of readers in India is changing rapidly. Twenty years back, income levels were low and a book was relatively expensive. Today the cost of the books has not moved much, but the income levels have gone up significantly thereby increasing affordability. Reading has now become a common man's pastime. The younger generation too reads more than what it used to in the past."

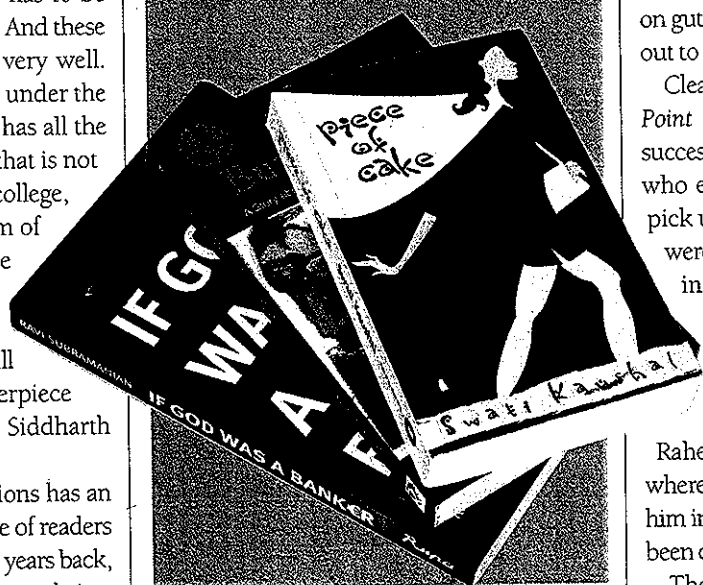
"If I can speak their language, I can write it too!" Tushar Raheja remembers telling a few of his friends who couldn't come to terms with him writing a book, when he had just begun



THE BEST-SELLERS IN BRIEF

ABOVE AVERAGE (Amitabha Bagchi)
Halfway into his course, an IIT student ponders on the vagaries of life.

PIECE OF CAKE (Swati Kaushal)
A 29-year-old marketing professional deals with another bomb on finding her husband and an obnoxious colleague at work.



writing *Anything for you Maam*. "I wanted to deliver something which connected with the masses. I didn't have to struggle to connect with my universe. I was one of them."

That these authors are very business savvy is demonstrated by another point. "I knew that my target segment was the younger generation. To appeal to them, I pegged the price of my book at the cost of a movie ticket - Rs 100. And don't we have a precedent in Anurag Mathur, whose

The Inscrutable Americans has gone past 40 reprints in 14 years... all at Rs 95 a book? Remember, book buying is an impulsive decision. The price should not deter the readers from picking it off the shelves."

How true! None of the books by these new authors is priced beyond Rs 200. All this to enable the young breed of readers to pick it up on gut and not feel bad, even if the book turns out to be straight out of the junkyard.

Clearly the fad that Bhagat started with *Five Point Someone* is far from subsiding. His success encouraged a number of new authors, who earlier did not have the confidence to pick up the pen and write. Not because they were bad story tellers, but because they were intimidated by the intellectual diversity and literary depths of the books which went on to be called best-sellers.

Bhagat changed all that. He inspired a new breed of authors, including me. Raheja idolises Wodehouse, though somewhere the success of Mathur and Bhagat made him introspect. So have many others who have been catalysed by these phenomenal successes.

These young guns have identified the change in the market... a gap in the literary space waiting to be filled. These are the authors for the new generation. I fondly call them 'SMS Authors'. Not only do they write for the young crowd but bond with them emotionally through their books.

These writers successfully connect with today's SMS generation - the generation that gave them their success, fame... and their moment of glory.