

Books are Youth's Best Friend

The distribution of books in the country needs to be improved drastically to make ours a well-read society



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Although the government leaves no opportunity to remind the masses how committed it is to the objective of inclusive development, it does not seem easy unless the growing hiatus between the educated, competitive minority and the drop-out-yet-literate economically-backward classes is bridged. It is depressing to note that even in the seventh decade of Independence, the rural population continues to have a marginal presence on the functional educational map of the country.

Although the political aim of spreading literacy is achieved by driving children into schools in their infancy, little thought is spared to ensure their climb up the ladder of schooling and later to the college level is accomplished.

The coming years might see an explosion of a new area of literary pursuit: online reading, particularly in urban India. A plethora of websites are now making world-famous books available for download via the internet. While some of these sites do charge nominal amounts,

others provide the content free. It is hoped that valuable jewels of literature, which have long gone out of print, would be available at the click of a mouse. This holds out exciting possibilities for India.

Though the National Youth Readership Survey (NYRS, 2009, conducted by NCAER) has reported that Internet surfing is the preserve of just 1% of the literate youth population, and that too mostly for accessing emails and chatting, there could be a dramatic explosion of interest soon for reading books on the net. The authorities should make it possible to upload books in regional languages on to Indian sites so that the culture of leisure reading gets a boost through online books at communication and information centres (CICs) operated by PRIs as part of the information and communication technology (ICT) projects of the government in rural areas.

A point that came out in an earlier, landmark NCAER study, India Science Report, 2005, is that while 44% of information pertaining to science and technology is obtained from the internet in the US, the figure is just 0.2% in India. Even five years later, this potential remains untapped. Modern channels of information need to be harnessed and the role that ICT penetration could play towards this end cannot be overstated. Internet hubs are presently the luxury of

urban schools, catering to children of the rich. This facility should be extended with government backing through state education, information technology and, most significantly, library affairs departments of state governments.

Meaningful policy formulation has to depend on accurate and insightful data. This ought to be a continuous exercise, examining the finer points left uncovered by broad-sweep studies. Youth, especially Indian

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youth, is a huge area of research, and NYRS 2009, in the course of its long and hard journey, discovered many exciting details that hold out possibilities of future probes. For instance, what about the reading tastes of children?

If the reading habit has to be inculcated at an early stage, what inroads are to be taken into the hearts of the youngest section of the population so that these could be tapped for future national progress?

Secondly, literature is a vast universe by itself, and in India, its definition is not as specific as in the West. For instance, numerous oral and folk art traditions are passed by word of mouth and recited from memo-

ry. Could there be possibilities for book publishing in, for instance, *nautanki* themes from Uttar Pradesh that have great social relevance?

The *nautanki* case-in-point could apply to numerous other centuries-old art forms spread across south Asia, especially in the north-eastern region where there was no written language till recently. After all, the Mahabharata and Ramayana were passed down in non-written form through the spoken word for millennia before movable presses intervened to convert them into books.

There is reason to believe that the future of India's ancient art forms is exciting. In that case, proper research should be conducted to examine the prospects of converting these oral traditions to popular literature. That would be one way of making literature and, by extension, leisure reading material, less esoteric for the masses.

NYRS 2009 clearly indicates that the publishing sector of the country needs to pull up its socks to meet the growing hunger of our literate youth. The per-capita number of book titles published in the country is about 8 per 1,00,000 population. In the US, the growth in per-capita book title output went up from 8 per 1,00,000 in 1950 to 43 in 2000. In this period, the corresponding figures for Britain were 20 and 212. In Germany, it was 100 and France, 87 in 2000.

What is most disconcerting for India is the disproportionate share—more than 35%—enjoyed by English-language publishing. This means we are not only publishing little, but publishing less in Indian languages, which is inconsistent with the grain of national preference as revealed in the survey.

NYRS 2009 has opened up a new horizon for the country's youth. With one out of four literate youth declaring themselves as readers, the task of the government and the agencies working for book promotion is cut out. More than lack of interest in books and reading, it is the availability of books and information about them that impacts the reading habit in the society. It is eye opening that a majority of the readers get information about books through informal channels like friends, family and teachers, and this shows that the publishing distribution system needs to be systematised and institutionalised on a much larger scale.

Considering the size of the diverse readership, avenues must be opened up to encourage the book trade to flourish on a larger scale in the country in order to increase per-capita publishing, which is quite low at present. The right to education would have to eventually take the form of right to full and functional education.

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