



Entrepreneurial Turn of the Indian Publishing Industry: Assessing the Arrival of Literary Agents and Marketing of Literature

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Abstract:

The paper attempts a critical study of the entrepreneurial turn in the Indian publishing industry at the turn of the twenty-first century, with a special focus on the emergence of literary agents and the marketing of literature. It examines the proliferation of literary agency, the rising popularity of literary agents, and the construction of celebrity among authors, agents, and publishers in India. The paper further evaluates their significant contribution to the expansion of the professional setup, the incorporation of business strategies, and the adoption of promotional tactics in the Indian publishing industry. Literary agents have been instrumental in bridging the gap between an author's artistic merit and maximizing the economic potential for authors, publishers, and associated sponsors. Literary agents are a new phenomenon in the Indian publishing industry, and this paper discusses why they are an absolute necessity and integral part of the flourishing of Indian commercial fiction. They guide commercial authors, promote their books, and strategize marketing campaigns for authors and their works. The paper critically examines how literary agents carefully navigate the direction of authors in the current context, when they must not only pursue artistic excellence through cultural production but also ensure a healthy commercial prospect to sustain and flourish.



Received: 31.10.2025

Accepted: 02.12.2025

Published: 31.12.2025

CJHSSC, Volume: 1

Issue: 2, December 2025

Page: 150 - 159

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18259755>

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Published by: Seth Soorajmull Jalan Girls' College,
Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

Available at: www.ssjalangirlscollege.org.in/journal.php

Email: confluence.sjgc@gmail.com

Keywords: Literary agent, publishing industry, Marketing strategy, literature, economy.

Introduction

The book publishing industry in India has come a long way. It is now considered one of the largest global markets, producing close to 90,000 titles a year, generating crores in revenue, and providing livelihoods to thousands of employees. Various stakeholders, including editors, publishers, reviewers, sponsors, and readers, have played a significant role in the unprecedented growth of this industry. They have duly been part of academic discussion for this reason, but “no figure is more influential - and less studied by scholars - than the literary agent” (McGrath, 2021). Literary agents are representatives of independent literary firms or “self-employed actors who work for and with authors to place their manuscripts advantageously with publishers in a particular national or linguistic setting” (Norrick-Rühl and Razakamanantsoa, 2023). Literary agents assume the responsibility of editors, business advisors, and legal counsellors for authors. They provide “editorial feedback on manuscripts” in preliminary stages of draft development, “often manage author royalty payments” while developing promotional guidelines and marketing strategies, and they also “handle contract negotiations with publishers for territorial, language, and subsidiary rights” (Noorda 2025). The concept of a literary agent is a relatively new entrant in the vocabulary of an established ecosystem that revolves around well-recognized terms such as author, reader, editor, and publisher. The concept emerged from a necessity of the time, a demand of the neoliberal world order in which the recognition of art and its flourishing depend on the commercial prospects it can generate. Literary agents have become a vital cog in the commercialization of the book industry by bridging the gap between an author's artistic merit and maximizing the economic potential for the author, publisher, and associated sponsors.

Emergence of Indian Literary Agents:

In 2012, Westland offered a record sum of 5 crore as an advance to Amish Tripathy, a young author at the time, and it created a stir in the Indian media because Tripathy did not even have a concept for what he would write when the sum was offered to him. The Indian publishing industry had never made such a significant advance to any author, which is reflected by the words of Westland's CEO, who claims “it's the largest advance we've ever paid, and the largest Indian deal” (Wire, 2013), and what is more startling is that this whopping advance is offered to a commercial writer. Indian authors were previously offered massive advances. However, they had all been literary writers, and mostly international publishing companies acquired the rights: “previous advances that made waves are a reported £1million (approximately Rs. 8 crore) for the worldwide rights to Vikram Seth's sequel to ‘A Suitable Boy’, and a Rs. 97 lakh pay-outs for seven of historian Ramachandra Guha's books, both by Penguin. In 2007, Amitav Ghosh reportedly received about Rs 55 lakh for his Ibis Trilogy, and Nandan Nilekani Rs 25 lakh for ‘Imagining India’” (Wire, 2013). Ananth Padmanabhan, CEO of Westland, credits the changing landscape of Indian publishing, along with new readership and the emergence of writers with diverse tastes, for the economic health of the Indian publishing industry. The hullabaloo regarding Amish Tripathi points to a significant transformation of the Indian market, with certain emerging scenarios: the rise of literary agents, entrepreneurial output, and the marketing of literature in the Indian publishing industry over the last 10 years. It must not be forgotten that Amish Tripathi's first fiction, *The Immortals of Mebula*, was rejected multiple times by publishers, and it was Anuj Bahri, a literary agent working for Red Ink Literary Agency, who helped to get

the book published. Anuj has played a pivotal part in securing the recent massive deal with Westland, too.

Although literary agents have been an integral part of the publishing industry in the West for a long time, in India, literary agenting is a recent phenomenon. Jacaranda, established in 1997, is considered the first literary agency in India. The floodgates of literary agencies opened in 2007, when Renuka Chatterjee established Osian's Literary Agency and Mita Kapur founded Siyahi in Jaipur, setting the journey of literary agencying in India. Red Ink Literary Agency and Sherna Khambatta Literary Agency also made their mark by representing several high-profile bestselling authors in the years ahead. Young Kanishka Gupta, who predominantly handles debutant authors, established Writer's Side in 2010. Shruti Debi, who has extensive experience working with Picador India, founded The Debi Agency (Reyzer, 2023). In the past five years, Anish Chandy has founded Labyrinth Literary Agency, Dipti Patel has established Word Famous Literary Agency, and Lalitha Ravindran has started First Forays (*All About Book Publishing*, 2020).

Literary agenting as a profession has only flourished in India over the last few years. Unlike in the West, the Indian publishing industry was not organized, and professionalism in this field was lacking until 10 years ago. Literary agenting did not have recognition or economic reward. Kanishka Dutta, the founder of Writer's Side, opines, "In India, literary agents are just about beginning to come into their own. For a long time, one could not have imagined making a living as an agent here because of the money involved: the advances usually ranged from zero to a princely Rs 10,000. Publishers acquired all their books by reaching out to potential authors directly or through references from their existing authors and journalist friends" (Gupta, 2016). In post-millennial India, there has been a rapid proliferation of authors due to the flourishing of commercial fiction and the increased young readership. There has been an increasing tendency among people in contemporary India to become bestselling authors. Publishers are flooded with innumerable manuscripts every day, and the majority of the manuscripts' "quality is mostly terrible" (Santhanam, 2016). That is why the importance of literary agents is increasing more than ever. "Agents are kingmakers" (Gupta 2016) because they "mediate between publishers and authors" (Santhanam, 2016), and they are absolutely necessary for authors since they have knowledge about the publishing industry, the pulse of readership, and they look after the promotion and administrative works like managers. According to Jeet Thayil, "a literary agent is a blessing, since s/he is responsible for all the nitty-gritty administrative work, including the tedious follow-up required in signing a book deal, releasing precious time for the author to focus their energies on a constructive and creative output, rather than be exhausted by paperwork" (Rose, 2012). Jaya Bhattacharji Rose further elaborates on the significant role an agent plays and why they are slowly becoming indispensable in the contemporary, busy Indian publishing industry. She argues:

An agent has specialist knowledge of different publishing houses and is aware of the personal tastes of editors and is able to sell written material to them, matching the writer with the right stable. Agents are also able to provide an author a range of services – reading a raw manuscript, assessing if it is fit for publication, if it is then helping them tidy it up before selling it to an appropriate publisher or if there is interest from more than one publishing house, setting up an "auction" and selling it to the best bidder, negotiating terms and contracts and collecting payments and royalties. Today, agents are expected to be a filter between the publisher and the

writer but also be the author's agony aunt and professional advisor, rolled in one. They also network with agents and publishers in other territories, across the world — ensuring that the book gets published across the globe, and increasingly in different languages. (Rose, 2012)

Literary agents work day in and day out to promote authors and their books. They play a massive role in the creation of celebrity status and in the publicity of authors. They guide authors to stay afloat on social media and remain relevant; they edit manuscripts, offer valuable suggestions for shaping them, find suitable publishers, and, most importantly, negotiate economic deals. Manju Kapur, the founder of Siyahi Literary Agency, spells out the primary objective of her agency:

Siyahi works in tandem with the publishers to ensure the best publicity for the books we represent. This includes liaising with the publishers for a detailed-oriented marketing and promotion plan for the books, and constant follow-up with the publishers to ensure its execution. We suggest authors for various national and international festival. We also cross promote our titles and authors on our social media pages. Siyahi also works towards the dramatisation, film rights for our authors' works. We work with film agents, to pitch for creative film and television adaptations, and are also in direct touch with leading independent and mainstream production houses. We actively help production companies source authors and books that fit the genres they are looking to work in. (*All About Book Publishing*, 2020).

Historical Growth of Literary Agents:

Literary agents help popularise an author and their body of work through active promotion and maximise the author's economic health through appropriate negotiation. However, literary agency is only 150 years old, and before the advent of agency, authors had to resort to other methods to reach their audience. Homer chanted "his verse to the assemblies of nobles and warriors" (Woodcock, 1982), and they were his only target audiences at his time. With the development of civilization, the concept of writing emerged, opening a new perspective. By the time Pindar, Simonides, Sappho, and Anacreon arrived, the process of writing for the purpose of storage in books had started deviating from the earlier tradition of only oral citation. Although the method and purpose of poetry writing differed at this stage, they mainly wrote for a small audience, which comprised their patrons, and they could not, even in their wildest dreams, think about selling a number of copies and making an economic fortune.

Publishers appeared only after the advent of printing technologies. Prior to that, "manuscripts were copied and passed on", which was a laborious and time-consuming work, and "writer lived, if he had no means of his own, mainly by the patronage of rich or powerful men. From the distribution of his actual works he earned little, if anything" (Woodcock, 1982). Once the middle class started achieving economic prosperity, and literacy grew, mass readership increased along with the mass production of books. At this point, the significance of literary agenting came into existence. Writers needed someone to help them get their manuscripts to publishers, and publishers, on the other hand, needed agents to avoid the buildup of unwanted trash manuscripts. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, literary agents made their presence felt as their demands grew.

A. P. Watt is considered to be the first person who assumed the role of literary agent towards the end of the nineteenth century, at the insistence of his friend George MacDonald, when he requested Watt to promote his stories. Watt was a professional advertising agent, and he quickly sensed the future promises of literary agenting when MacDonald urged him to promote his book. He grabbed this opportunity and soon started promoting himself as a literary agent. According to John B. Thomson,

He began by charging his clients a fee for specific tasks but soon decided to switch to the system he used as an advertising agent, charging a 10 per cent commission on the money earned by his clients for the transactions he completed. For two decades Watt had the field pretty much to himself, and by the end of the nineteenth century he was representing some of the leading writers of the time, including Walter Besant, Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling and Arthur Conan Doyle. (Thompson, 2012)

His success as a literary agent encouraged other notable literary agents of the time- Albert Curtis Brown, J. B. Pinker- to pursue this profession. To this point, publishers enjoyed unprecedented autonomy and believed in dealing with authors in person. Authors had to live at the mercy of publishers because they could dictate who would be published and who would not. Moreover, because the authors lacked knowledge of the economics of book publishing, publishers could get away with exploiting authors at the negotiation table.

The emergence of literary agents changed this practice, and agents started diluting the publisher's autonomy. Watt, Brown, Pinker in England, and Henry Holt, Paul Revere Reynolds in America changed the game altogether, and the power of publishers and the authors had been brought into balance, albeit authors, with the help of agents, started wielding more power as time went by. Mary Ann Gillies writes, "they challenged the existing hierarchy: they threatened the power and authority of publishers and editors; they helped writers in their quest for empowerment; and they participated in the creation of new literary marketplaces" (Gillies, 1993). By approaching multiple publishers, literary agents often started bidding, and the book was published by the publisher who would offer more money. It drove the economy of book publishing upwards, and authors ended up earning more money. Although initially publishers could resist this practice of agents, they slowly had to give in for the fear of lagging behind other competitors. Publishers also had a tough job to do by maintaining a fine balance between producing quality literature and making enough profit to stay in the business. In pursuit of this balance, the relationship between authors and publishers stumbled at times, but it was not more than a part of business as usual. Siegfried Unseld elaborated on the tough job of publishers of the time:

The discontent that rises to the surface from time to time in the relationship between author and publisher is due to the strange, Janus-headed nature of the publisher's activity. He must both produce and sell the book, that "sacred commodity" as Brecht called it. That is, he must combine intellectual stature with business acumen so that the person who writes literature can make a living and the one who publishes it can remain in a position to publish it. Alfred Doblin put it this way in 1913: "The publisher casts one eye on the writer, the other on the public. But the third eye, the eye of wisdom, rests unflinchingly at the cash register". (Woodcock, 1982)

Changing scenario of the Book publishing industry on the arrival of Agents:

Literary agents perform “three basic business functions: valuations of publishing businesses; sales of serial, translation, and foreign rights for editors and publishers; and sales of literary property for writers” (Gillies, 1993), along with assessing the quality of manuscripts. Literary agents not only take care of authors but also manage to keep a healthy relationship with publishers, and at times, they negotiate rights deals with other publishers on behalf of any particular publisher. Having said that, it must be noted that literary agents work primarily as clients of authors, so they always prioritize the interests of authors. Literary agents, according to Curtis Brown, stand

between the author and the publisher, and he ought to uphold better than either of them the importance of the greatest truism in trade, viz., that no bargain is ever really sound and honest without being profitable to both parties to it. If the agent deceives the publisher in his client's behalf, he has not only wronged the publisher, but in the long run it will appear that he has wronged his client too. On the other hand, if he “plays fair,” and scrupulously tells the truth about his wares, and has sufficient intelligence to know approximately what the truth is, every publisher with whom he deals is certain to recognise the fact sooner or later and to look upon such an agent's opinion and goodwill as well worth having. (West III, 1968)

Empowered by literary agents, authors started creating a mess in the traditional business model of publishers as they “demanded larger advances, higher royalty rates, and more advertising than had been customary in earlier decades” (West III, 1968). Aggressive bidding process initiated by agents introduced new perspectives in the publishing industry because “advances went higher, and publishers were obliged to tie up capital in unfinished manuscripts. Subsidiary rights became more important, and publishers were sometimes required to depend on percentages of these rights for their profits on a given title” (West III, 1968). These business practices were completely in contrast to the traditional practices that were followed by established publishers. Emboldened authors and new business models of literary agents clearly annoyed traditional established publishers, for it diluted their autonomy and challenged their way of doing business. Owing to these reasons, publishers of this time would resent literary agents. Publisher Heinemann termed this period “the age of the middleman” (Hepburn, 1968) and Watt was subjected to fierce indirect criticism by him when he imploded: “he is generally a parasite. He always flourishes. I have been forced to give him some little attention lately in my particular business. In it he calls himself a literary agent” (Thompson, 2012). Henry Holt, in his article *The Commercialization of Literature* in 1905, let out his irritation with the new approach of publishing undermining the established methods, and he made it clear that literary agents were the reason for much of his annoyance. Although he admits that agents can be beneficial for new authors, as they can find suitable publishers and they can play an intermediary role between publishers, he still feels they are creating chaos in the publishing industry. James L. W. West III succinctly put Holt's argument:

Holt admits that the agent can sometimes have a legitimate function, even a “beneficent” one, especially when he can find a publisher for a beginning author or help an experienced writer dissolve an unhappy publishing relationship. Holt also recognizes that agents are sometimes useful intermediaries in dealings between

British and American publishers and that they are often helpful in disposing of serial rights. But when agents go beyond these tasks, when they “break down the old relation between authors and publishers” and “make the connection mainly a question of which publisher would bid highest,” they damage the entire industry. The publisher in such situations becomes “a *corpus vilum* to be exploited for money” and “a ‘golden goose’ to be killed for immediate profit.” Holt is quite explicit: “I unhesitatingly say that in carrying his functions farther, the agent has been the parent of most serious abuses, has become a very serious detriment to literature and a leech on the author, sucking blood entirely out of proportion to his later services; and has already begun to defeat himself.” (West III, 1968)

Paul Revere Reynolds does not endorse Holt’s sentiment and differs when he says that publishers should help the new authors, but should let them deal with it thereafter. Holt’s argument tries to revert to the old custom in which Publishers had the upper hand and authority to finalize the publication and economic deal. But Reynold objects on the ground that it leaves authors vulnerable, and this practice might leave authors being exploited and thrown out when their books do not do well. Therefore, a fierce rivalry ensues between publishers and literary agents. Reynolds argues:

The assumption that publishers will always take all of an author’s output is a mistaken one: they won’t. Almost any author’s work is uneven. When he puts out a less successful book the publisher leaves him. He probably says to the author “This book will hurt your reputation.” The author says to the agent, “I must live.” The agent, knowing that he will have the author’s future work and having faith that some of it will be good, sticks to him. (West III, 1968)

In spite of being subjected to utter contempt by publishers, literary agents forged their way into the publishing industry, and they are well-liked by authors. They have been instrumental in unearthing literary talents and making the economic fortune of writers. Thompson argues:

By acquiring a specialist knowledge of the different publishing houses, newspapers and periodicals that were interested in acquiring written material and willing to pay for it, agents were able to provide a range of services to authors - including placing material with suitable publishers and periodicals, negotiating terms and contracts and collecting payments and royalties - that were valued by many authors, including some of the leading writers of the time. (Thompson, 2012)

Role of Literary Agents and Marketing of Literature in India

Literary agents are a new phenomenon in the Indian publishing industry, and they are an absolute necessity and integral part of the flourishing of Indian commercial fiction. Literary agents guide commercial authors, promote their books, and strategize marketing techniques for the promotion of authors and their works. They play a vital role in the publicity and popularity of authors and their commercial success.

Promotional activities of authors and marketing of their artistic output necessitated the “professionalization of the author” (Ramdarshan Bold, 2012). Literary agents played a significant role in turning authors into celebrities, “solving intricate copyright issues” and “boosting a publisher’s list of authors” (Cossu-Beaumont, 2023). In collaboration with publishers, literary

agents maximize the economic potential of the author in overseas locations through translation of books and business strategies. Translations of French and American authors have been published in different countries through popular publishers (Cottenet, 2017), Swedish crime fictions have been popularised around the world through translation thanks to the efforts of Swedish literary agents (Berglund, 2014), and literature produced by some Romanian authors travelled to the overseas audience (Culea, 2013). International readers got the taste of Swedish and Romanian literary excellence primarily through the engagement of literary agents who wanted to inflate the symbolic value of their client authors and maximize profit.

The profession of literary agent has grown leaps and bounds in 21st-century India for various factors. One of the primary reasons is the expansion and growth of the commercialization of the book industry. The celebritification of authors has made the profession of authorship attractive and lucrative. Having been influenced by this factor, a greater number of authors are sending their manuscripts to publishing houses, and many of them are unrecognized first-time authors. It increases the workload of editors to proofread and curate a pile of manuscripts that keep pouring in every passing day. This “overabundance of literary production necessitates another level of curation and gatekeeping to make editorial selection manageable for the publishing industry” (Noorda, 2025). Curation of manuscripts is an “act of selection and arrangement (but also refining, reducing, displaying, simplifying, presenting, and exploring) to add value” (Bhaskar, 2016). Publishers and editors trust literary agents as they carefully filter and select their clients’ manuscripts before approaching the editors. They have professional expertise, experience, and a thorough understanding of the publishing domain, and they apply their knowledge and wisdom in curating and selecting manuscripts from their client authors. Literary agents are “directly related to the success or failure of that curation. [Their] careers [are] defined by what may be understood as micro or individual curatorial paradigms; in essence the agent is a maximally concentrated version of a publisher’s curatorial paradigm. Agents ... function as a vital part of solving publishing’s abundance problem” (Phillips and Bhaskar, 2019).

“Although books are of major cultural and educational significance, they are, almost without exception, produced in an entirely commercial context” (Feather, 1993). Feather’s argument points out a precarious situation the book industry finds itself in the current scenario, when it must not only pursue artistic excellence through cultural production but also ensure a healthy commercial prospect in order to sustain and flourish. Literary agents understand this vulnerable crisis of the book industry, and they maintain a fine balance “to include both more commercial titles and debut/literary authors to manage cash flow and to have big books that can pay for the small ones (Thompson, 2012; Noorda, 2025). Culea put it in a nutshell, “The literary agent is the link between the art of writing and the business of selling and making a profit. He knows best how to improve, promote, and sell a writer’s book” (Culea, 2013).

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