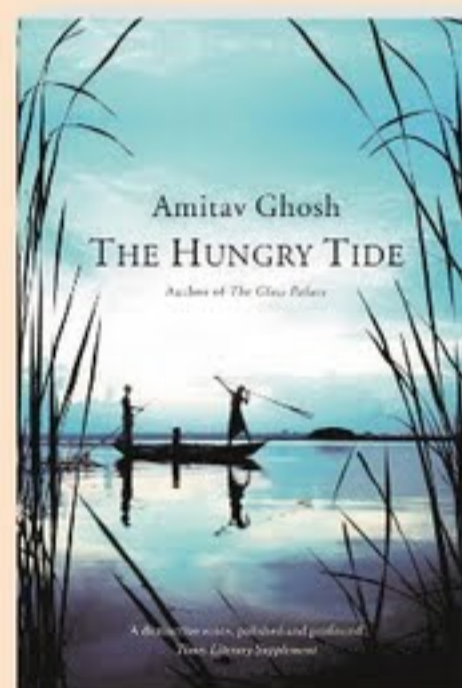
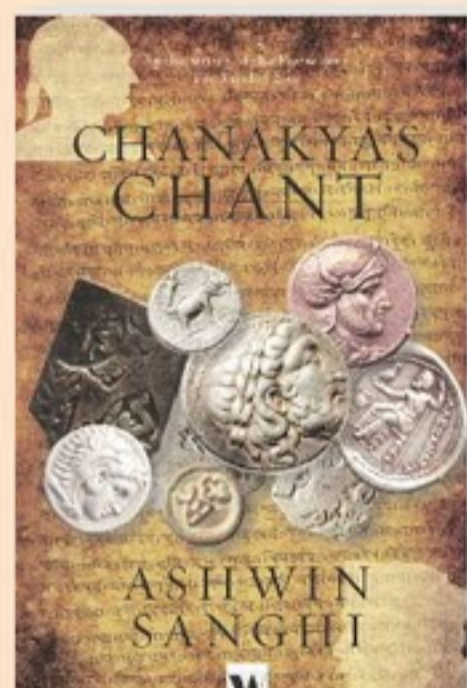


MULTIMEDIA

From the bookshelf to the BOX OFFICE



With the output of Indian writing in English increasing, film industry is taking baby steps to exploit this rich source of material

Sudipta Datta

WHEN production house UTV recently announced that it had acquired the feature film rights of Ashwin Sanghi's *Chanakya's Chant*, which has been on the bestseller lists, it didn't come as a surprise. Stories are in short supply in Bollywood.

For UTV, which had tasted success with a political drama like Prakash Jha's *Raajneeti*, the story of *Chanakya's Chant* with its political overtones seemed a perfect second film on the subject of politics. "*Chanakya's Chant* is one of those rare books with a storyline that has the potential to be translated into a superbly cinematic and immensely entertaining screenplay. The tale is about the underbelly of national politics, which the book superbly exposes, where strategies developed by Chanakya thousands of years ago are still valid in the modern day political scenario," says Siddharth Roy Kapur, CEO, UTV Motion Pictures. At UTV, the film is currently in its scripting stage and talks are on with top writers and directors to work on it.

And yet, it's not that often that Bollywood adapts stories from literature, and while Indian writing in English has increased, films have not really exploited this rich source of material. In fact, works of contemporary Indian writers have hardly been seen on screen, though we have seen many interpretations of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Devdas* and *Parineeta*; and Satyajit Ray has done justice to Rabindranath Tagore classics like *Ghare Baire* (*Home and the World*) and *Nashta Neer* (*Charulata*). Recently, there have been *The Namesake* (Jhumpa Lahiri), filmed by Mira Nair, or *3 Idiots* loosely based on Chetan Bhagat's book *Five Point Someone*, *The Blue Umbrella* (a Ruskin Bond story filmed by Vishal Bhardwaj) or even *Black Friday*, based on S Hussain Zaidi's eponymous book on the Bombay serial blasts of 1993 and brilliantly adapted by Anurag Kashyap.

Recently, Aparna Sen adapted Kunal Basu's short story *The Japanese Wife* for the screen, but it didn't do well at the box office. Bengali director Suman

WORKS OF CONTEMPORARY INDIAN WRITERS HAVE HARDLY BEEN SEEN ON SCREEN, THOUGH WE HAVE SEEN MANY INTERPRETATIONS OF SARAT CHANDRA CHATTOPADHYAY'S DEVDAS AND PARINEETA, AND RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S GHARE BAIRE AND NASHTA NEER

Mukhopadhyay is adapting Amitav Ghosh's *Hungry Tide*, set in the Sunderbans, but big production houses, too, are now, albeit cautiously, tapping literature for stories.

"We should do it more often, and lean on literature," says Ram Mirchandani, chief creative officer of Eros International. Mirchandani, who has been working in the industry for the past decade has been looking at literature as source material for films. While nothing really has been working out in the past, Mirchandani adds that his production house is very close to signing the rights of a chapter of Zaidi's book on Mumbai underworld queens. "All the 13 chapters lend themselves to film, but we will be signing the rights for one," says Mirchandani.

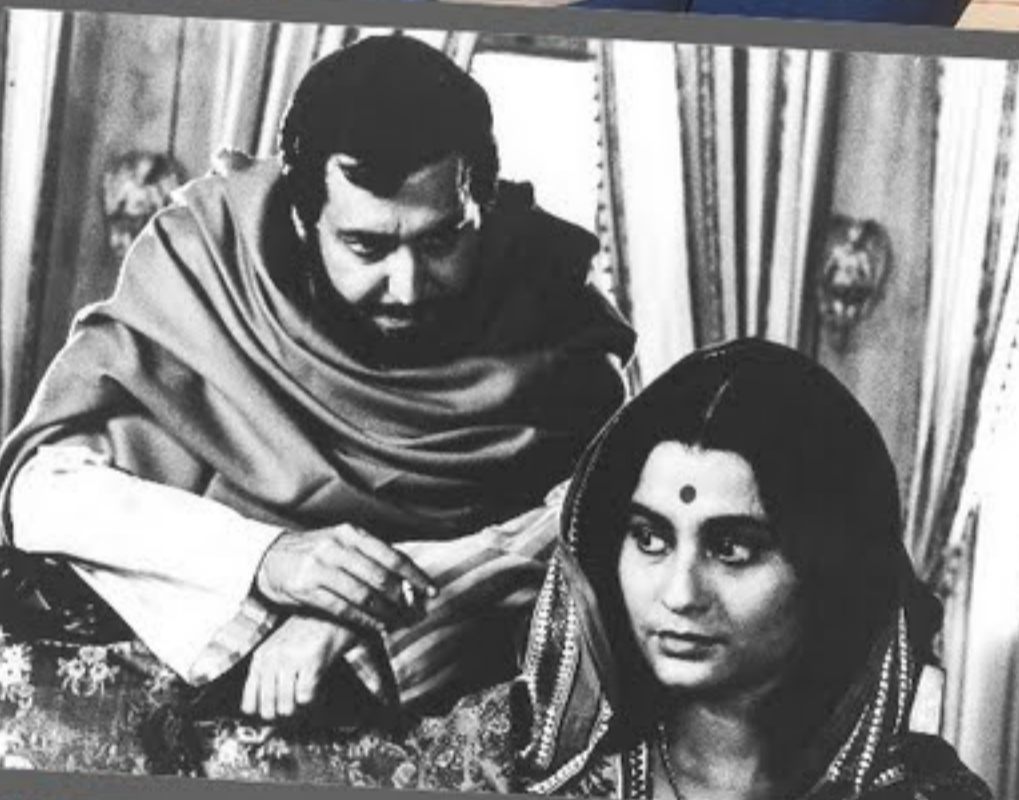
Also up for sale is Westland published, Amish Malhotra's *Immortals of Meluha*, a story of Shiva. Westland says Los Angeles-based Creative Artists Agency (CAA), one of the largest entertainment and sports agencies in the world, has signed a contract with Malhotra, to the movie rights for his entire *Shiva Trilogy* (*The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of the Nagas* & *The Oath of the Vayuputras*).

Industry watchers pointed out that with producers now making sequels, prequels and remaking old Hindi and Tamil films, there's obviously a lack of stories. But while literature is a ready source of material, Mirchandani also pointed out that it's not easy to adapt a screenplay from a book. "It helps to involve the writer upto a point, but we need a team of three to four writers to think through the process. In the final process, I'd rather have someone detached from the book," he adds.

Vikas Bahl, former chief creative officer of UTV, says, "While books are a tempting option, it is a challenging because converting a book into a screenplay is very difficult." Bahl says that though one feels 50% of the job is done if you have a bestseller at hand, the fact is you have to recreate the film from scratch. Then there are issues about comparison with the original. "At a basic level, we haven't cracked the screenwriting part of the process yet," admits Bahl, something that Hollywood does so well across genres.

It's important to create an environment of trust, said an insider. Something Sanghi seemed to be certain of while dealing with UTV. "UTV has a robust creative team capable of pathbreaking marketing campaigns and has a strong network in both domestic and international markets. UTV has always backed content that they believe in and I believe that it is the only studio that will do justice to the terrific story presented in this novel," he says.

Chanakya's Chant, a political thriller, was re-



(From top) Stills from *The Namesake*; *3 Idiots*; *Ghare Baire*; and *The Japanese Wife*

leased by Westland in January and narrates two parallel political tales, one in Chanakya's times thousands of years ago and the other in post-independent India. While the ancient story is based on Chanakya's rise to power and the tactics he uses to install Chandragupta Maurya on the throne, the modern story is fictional and follows Kanpur's Pandit Gangesagar Mishra who draws inspiration from Chanakya to get his protégé Chandini Gupta appointed to the highest office in India.

With *Raajneeti* a success, UTV is confident of a second political drama with *Chanakya's Chant*. But ask the players if Bollywood will pick stories from books rapidly, and most admitted adapting from books is still a tricky prospect and that the industry hasn't yet nurtured a robust screenwriting process, which is key to adaptations.



Still from *Devdas*