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Corporate honchos are also writing popular fiction

Anusha Subramanian October 11, 2011

Until recently Amish Tripathi was National Head, Marketing and Product Management at IDBI Federal Life Insurance. Ashwin Sanghi is an entrepreneur with interests in automobiles and real estate. Ravi Subramanian is President and CEO, Shriram Finance (Non Chit). Vikas Rathi is Finance Manager for the Asia Pacific Region with Procter & Gamble Healthcare. Jvalant Nalin Sampat runs Cross Pollinate, a consulting firm that helps NGOs raise funds from industry.

What do these five top executives have in common? They are all successful novelists as well. During the day and they are busy officegoers with high pressure jobs. They spend about 12 to 14 hours daily at their work stations dealing with clients, employees and crunching numbers. But back home they seamlessly put on their storytelling hats.

Their novelistic concerns are diverse. Two of them, Tripathi and Sanghi, have the Indus Valley civilisation or even the mythical Puranas as the backdrop of their stories, Sampat uses World War II, Subramanium tells intriguing contemporary tales of love, corporate politics and money laundering, while Rathi's is a coming of age work - a youngster stepping out of university to join the real world.

Although, Tripathi has recently bid good bye to his corporate life after the success of his second book - 'The Secret of the Nagas', a sequel to his debut novel 'The Immortals of Meluha' - and taken to full time writing, the others are happy to keep their day jobs and write as the night sets in. "I have to take care of business and I have no issues with it," says Sanghi.

Similarly, Ravi Subramanian says he aims to be known as the 'John Grisham of Banking'. He has spent 16 years working with various banks. "Writing was not an escape route from my day job," he says. Vikas Rathi, a chartered accountant and also an alumnus of Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore, and first time author of 'Resident Dormitus', a campus fiction, echoes the same sentiments as Subramanian and says that he thoroughly enjoys his day job. Jvalant Nalin Sampat, is also a first time author of the historical fiction 'The Tenth Unknown', set before and during World War-II in India, Asia and Europe.

Sampat is very clear that he cannot live off his writing alone. With an MBA degree from

Copenhagen University, he currently runs a community social responsibility consulting firm called Cross Pollinate that helps NGOs raise funds from industry.

How do they manage their hectic work schedule and still find time to write? While Tripathi says he wrote most of the two books while being driven to his office and back by car, Subramanian and Sanghi maintain they write after the family is off to bed. Sampat also writes till the wee hours of the morning. Rathi, who is based in Singapore, wrote his debut novel 'Resident Dormitus' largely in coffee shops after work. "I am okay with all the chaos and noise around me," he says.

Why did they choose to write fiction? A close look at bookshop shelves seems to indicate that most debut writers focus on what is called commercial fiction - books that make for light reading. Fiction always sells, says a book shop attendant at Crossword book store in South Mumbai.

"First time authors come with fresh ideas and diverse writing styles. The market is also changing and readers do not come with baggage," says Gautam Padmanabhan, CEO of Chennai based publishing firm, Westland. Westland has published both Tripathi and Sanghi. Padmanabhan claims that Westland has managed to get Tripathi 3.5 lakh copies into print and a total of about 80,000 copies for Sanghi's two books.

Adds Rupa's Kapish Mehra, who has published Subramanian and Rathi: "Fiction allows you to write what you want to write. There are no restrictions. There are emotions, there is power, money and crime in banking and these four elements when brought together are a brilliant recipe for a pot boiler."

Subramanian is now considered a specialist in corporate fiction with the completion of his banking trilogy. Totally, his four books together have managed sales of 4.5 Lakh copies.

These bright young writers have something in common - they know who their target audience is and they write in a language which appeals to many. Nandita Jaishankar, editor of Delhi based, Niyogi books explains: "Fictions writers today are proactive and enthusiastic. We sometimes get submissions of manuscripts from people as young as eighteen"

Historical fiction too is seeing some traction. Three of the authors have written well researched historical fictions. For Tripathi, an alumnus of IIM-Kolkata his quest and fascination for ancient history, philosophy and the future of human civilization has led him to write historical fiction. Tripathi's interest in history also emanates from the fact that he although was born into a priests' family, his parents were very liberal and he heard a lot of discussion on religion and history as a child.

Sanghi's two books are historical based fictions as well. The first one 'The Rozabal Line' is a religious conspiracy and the second 'Chanakya's Chants' is a historical political thriller that recently won the Vodafone-Crossword Popular Choice award 2010. He is currently working

on his third book, which is historical business thriller.

Sampat says he always had an interest in history but this interest got further fuelled while he was studying in New York. "I learnt more about Indian history while I was working as a computer assistant in a library in New York. I had access to lot of books and press archives of New York Times and Washington Post," he adds. Sampat is thus thinking of a prequel to his debut novel that will be set in 1857-the first war of Independence.

Tripathi, too is not short of ideas in this genre and says, "I have my own version of Ramayana and Mahabharata. I also want to write about Akbar, Lord Manu and Rudra. I hope I can write all of them."

"It is very clear that there is a market for re-telling history or re-telling myths. Also the younger audiences of today are open to reading history fiction which is written in an entertaining manner," says Padmanabhan. Authors writing stories set in historic times seem particularly keen to use the past to interrogate the present. They are able to take the best of the past and juxtaposition it with the present.

"Their work is well researched, easy to read and often contains a lot of interesting historical information," says Jaishankar of Niyogi Books. "For instance 'The Tenth Unknown' is filled with WWII trivia and anecdotes from around the world which would fascinate the average reader. 'The Immortals of Meluha', with its perfect balance of mythology, spirituality and action turned out to be a whopping commercial success. There is definitely a loyal and growing audience for the genre of historical fiction, and there seems to be no dearth of writers in India either," she adds.

A lot of the success these authors have achieved has to be attributed to the extensive and innovative marketing tactics and the authors' involvement in promoting their books.

Tripathi can be considered the guru of book marketing among this new breed of authors. To begin with, he came up with a novel idea of printing the first chapter of 'The Immortals of Meluha', that was distributed for free at cash counters of bookshops. "Displaying the sample copies like advertising brochures helped me make it visible and build the curiosity," says Tripathi.

Who had ever heard of book trailers until Tripathi got an advertising filmmaker to make a trailer of his debut novel and uploaded it on YouTube. Then subsequently he used social media like Facebook to promote his book. The experiment worked and the book has sold over 1.75 lakh copies so far. So much so that a Hindi version of 'The Immortals of Meluha' called 'Meluha ka Mrutyunjay' has also been launched.

According to Jaishankar, the kind of opportunities first time fiction writers have today are quite different from writers in the past. "Many are extremely tech-savvy and are capable of doing very effective publicity for themselves, be it through social networking, blogging,

YouTube clips and the like," she adds.

Today, each of these authors has a separate page on his book where he is personally involved and connects with readers. And making trailers has become a norm. ubramanian has made four different trailers for his latest book 'The Incredible Banker'. Apart from making a YouTube trailer for Chanakya's Chants, Sanghi also made an MP3 track of a Shakti Mantra, a chant, which is the central theme of the novel. "My approach is pretty business-oriented when it comes to marketing my books. As an author I benchmark myself on the basis of the numbers of copies I sell," says Sanghi.

The aggressive marketing and promotions undertaken for 'Immortals of Meluha' and Chanakya's Chants has worked well for the two authors. While, Tripathi has been signed on by one of the leading LA-based entertainment and sports agency-Creative Artists Agency (CAA), to sell the film rights of his best-selling debut novel. Ask him if anything has materialised yet and he shrugs, "They're speaking to a few Hollywood and Bollywood producers." He says he is in no hurry.

Meanwhile, his second book, 'The Secret of the Nagas' has already sold 1.5 lakh copies. Tripathi is aiming for an audience beyond the bookshop regulars. He is ready with a 50-second video trailer made by Thinkwhynot, an advertising agency to be aired in multiplexes in Mumbai and Delhi next month. "The idea is to take my book to a whole new audience. I think it will work as the audience that visits theatres is the same that reads my books," says Tripathi.

Sanghi has been lucky too with UTV Motion Pictures having bought the rights of his second book 'Chanakya's Chants' for an undisclosed sum. It is understood that the production house is currently working on screenplay.

Publishers too are collaborating with the authors to chalk out innovative marketing plans. "I don't believe in the purist definition of marketing that books should only be launched in five-star hotels and book shops," says Mehra. The publishing house also holds contests in colleges to introduce first time authors, besides selling books through hypermarkets like Big Bazaar. Authors say they also vie for a front page positioning on flipkart.com and most of them also have a presence in librarywala.com.

The market for mass-market fiction has grown exponentially. According to BookScan India, the adult fiction market in India is worth Rs 28.7 crore and accounts for 11,37,000 copies in volumes. The growth percentage of the adult fiction market for the last two quarters of the year 2011 has been 13 per cent. Hence there is fierce competition among publishers to make sure that their books get noticed.

However, getting to this stage has not been easy though for the authors. The biggest of all the challenges for most has been getting a good publisher. First time authors Rathi and Sampat had to wait for long before they got publishers who accepted their story the way they

had written it. "It took me two years to write the book and thereafter three years to find a publisher. Most wanted changes that I wasn't willing to carry out. I had a job so did not mind waiting. Later Rupa agreed to publish the book," says Rathi. Similar was the case with Sampat who found his publisher in Niyogi Books. "My draft went through 11 revisions in terms of editing but no changes were made to the story line," says Sampat. Tripathi too had a struggle initially as most publishers were sceptical of publishing his debut novel. Later, it was his agent who published his book initially and only then Westland came on board as his publisher.

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