

The words took wing

EVENT The second day of the Bangalore Literature Festival had animated discussions on the demands of children's and South Asian writing, marketing, and bestsellers

As South Asia celebrates more than 60 years of freedom from direct and indirect colonial rule, and the issue of a separate South Asian identity is being discussed, a panel at the recently concluded Bangalore Literature Fest held discussions on *The South Asian Voice Writing* for courses. The session was moderated by Laxmi Murthy. The panelists included the editor of *Vivant* magazine, Karan Mard Diksh, Sri Lanka author, Ashok Ferrey, Pakistani journalist turned author, Babur Fayaz, Bangladeshi author, Faraz Ghaznavi and Pakistani film critic Mira Hossain. The discussion dealt with the colonial influence on writing in English in South Asia. Karan Mard Diksh-in talked about the need to question the establishment on all issues and called for an end to churning down of English writing. "We should ensure that lines describing old as lentil soup must be avoided. We should not talk down and must write for our people as well, not the western audiences alone."

Babur Fayaz, author of the book, *What's Wrong With Pakistanism*, "It is very resistant, especially when you are writing non-fiction about South Asia, to question the establishment view. We must not be afraid of our national identities. I feel that writers such as Salman Rushdie and V.S. Naipaul are western authors, who write for western audiences."

Faraz Ghaznavi talked about her journey into writing in English. "I feel that what we should ensure while writing about South Asia is to bring out the positive facets as well."

Ashok Ferrey talked about the manner in which the focus on writing for the masses was devaluing the language. Mira Hossain quipped that she writes for people who appreciate good cinema. "I feel that film writers write for people who enjoy movies and also will like to know more about the various facets of filmmaking."

Money talks

In recent years, the literary debate in India has mainly concentrated on a fault-line between bestselling commercial authors such as Aravind Singhvi, Chetan Bhagat and literary fiction represented by writers such as Shashi Deshpande and many others. How does one classify as a bestseller? Is the younger generation a best-seller generation alone? That was the crux of the discussion that saw the participation of Jan Jack, a journalist and author Shobhas Deshpande, Aravind Singhvi and Shashi Deshpande. Shashi said, "When we are talking about bestsellers, it is important to know which books we are talking about. Any book can be a bestseller. I have never thought of serious writing. You write a book in the best of your ability and let the rest be said." Singhvi added, "No one wants to write a dud. I feel the notion that bestselling authors cannot write well is ridiculous. It is a little like the debate over good art and bad art. Who gets to decide? Some books turn out to be a flop. No one starts off thinking about writing a bestseller. The content is decisive. The best marketing cannot save a bad book."

Jan Jack quipped, "I feel that no one can write a bad book. Marketing is also very important in the publishing industry, more so with the rise of the internet. I feel that at times, literary fiction is overrated. A P.G. Woodhouse could never have been a bestseller."

Aravind Singhvi said, "I feel book plays a



SPEAKING OUT ON THE ISSUES OF WRITING FOR CHILDREN AND MARKETING

critical role in determining the success of the book. Marketing a book is also very important. You need to try all tricks in the trade.

Deshpande said, "Good books can be bestsellers. I think the language must be succinct and must not be destroyed. Marketing must not be the only thing that should determine book sales."

NEHRA VARMA

The power of imagination

Writing for children can be one of the most challenging tasks authors face. But veteran lyricist and now script-writer Praseem Joshi put it pretty succinctly when he spoke of what kids will be willing to read. "Kids are ruthless. If they are not interested in your writing, it means you're not interesting enough."

He was responding to a question from a parent-turned-writer on what one should be writing for kids, and the market for children's writing. Post-Bharatkeri Gairola too responded with, "First start writing. The market will come to you if you're good enough."

While it may sound harsh, it didn't come across that way when the two poets spoke of

the Bangalore Literature Festival's second day. Because it was all said in goodwill, because the audience was just willing to receive any advice given by the veterans, and because the occasion and atmosphere was festive. It was the launch of *Gulzar's All Raha Aar Chhale Chor*, a dramatized version of the classic, as part of the Potti Bahadri Khasi series published by Scholastic India. "Kids these days don't get enough stories that are ready to be staged. That's why this book is written as a play. It also introduces them to their culture early," observed Gulzar. A young student made a brave attempt on stage to read lines from the book in front of an overwhelmingly large crowd, which cheered him on. Joshi too read from the book.

The venue was brimming over with enthusiasm, children, eager parents, and teachers. Gulzar and Joshi engaged the audience in an easy conversation on the scene as well as on the need to adapt folk tales to today's lingo.

"The discussion moved to a parents' concern about lack of enough indigenous Indian books, bad translations, and having to inevi-

tably turn to English literature for kids, and the nagging worry about kids stuck to gadgets."

Joshi accentuated on the need of tapping in on the trend of kids playing consistently with iPads and iPhones, saying, "Literature shouldn't depend entirely on paper. Narratives are what matter, and they should, and will, survive." We should get our children to go beyond the standard fare of 20 cartoon characters, he said while someone spoke of characters getting their psychological and cartoon characters mixed up, giving the example of Chota Bheem. "It's a parenting issue. How you raise your kids matter when it comes to their perception. You must nurture both reality and imagination in a child."

Gulzar too took this thread of thought, when a parent commented on the evergreen-ness of his songs like "Lakhi ki khatti" and "Jungle jangle jangle chala hai chakki phun ke phool khila hai". The beauty of these songs lies in the fact that you're not giving the kids information, he said. "Kids are playful. To get them interested, you should let them sing, dance, give them something to play with." Joshi concluded definitively, "You need to leave something to their imagination."

BHANNA K.