

# think!

# BIGSTORY

## DEAR READER...

**SHELF LIVES** Millions are crossing the literacy line in India each year, with no subsequent guidance on what to read. So they turn to their peers, and to bestseller lists, for help. A look at how this moulds their reading habits, and why that matters

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They were both pleasure-lovers, but they were not cowards. Political feelings had decayed inside them. Why should they die for the badshah? But there was no shortage of personal courage. Both assumed their positions, the swords gleamed and clashed. Both fell wounded, and both writhed to their death. From whose eyes not one tear was shed for their king, the same two gave up their lives protecting their chess queens. Darkness had come. The chess board was spread. Both kings, seated on their thrones, seemed to be mourning for the death of the two heroes!

A new 'historical' novel on the lines of Amish Tripathi's mythological-fantasy 'Shiva' trilogy? Not quite. The passage above is from 'Satranj ke Khiladi' (The Chess Players), a short story written in 1924 by Munshi Premchand. It is a story of 19th-century imperial Lucknow, captured by the British but with the city's upper classes totally unperturbed by the tragedy. They continue to be engrossed in their pleasures, whether these be music, opium, fine clothes or love. The two noble heroes of the story are constantly playing chess. Premchand writes in a simple style, punctuated by dialogue.

'Satranj...' isn't quite the stuff readers would consider rushing to bookstores to pick up. Even this brief extract from the end of the story, for all its 'action', bears clues to how it requires its reader to think. Chetan Bhagat's Revolution 2020, on the other hand, asks very little from the reader except that it be read. It is a story of a love triangle set in contemporary Varanasi. It has social issues such as corruption, rising aspirations of the middle-class and the rich-poor divide as its backdrop. And yet it skims the world that it describes, providing a simple chain of incidents that many readers enjoy for its lack of emotional depth. Here's a passage from near the end of the novel:

'Apologise to her on my behalf,' I said. 'Raghav let out a sigh. 'Okay, I will. But our wedding is in two months. On the first of March. Please be in town then.'

'Of course, I will,' I said and circled the date on the calendar.

'I'll let you attend to your staff. Take care, buddy,' Raghav said.

'Instinctively, I composed a 'congrats!' message to Aarti and sent it. She did not reply. I looked around my big house as empty as my soul.'

### FEASTING ON BOOKS

As with writers, there isn't one kind of reader. It isn't about reading tastes, which is another matter, but rather about *how* one reads. Alberto Manguel, in *A History of Reading*, writes: 'Just as writers speak of cooking up a story, rehashing a text, having half-baked ideas for a plot, spicing up a scene or garnishing the bare bones of an argument, turning the ingredients of a potboiler into soggy prose, a slice of life peppered with allusions into which readers can sink their teeth, we, the readers, speak of savouring a book, of finding nourishment in it, of devouring a book at one sitting, of regurgitating or spewing up a text, of ruminating on a passage, of rolling a poet's words on the tongue, of feasting on poetry, of living on a diet of detective stories.'

### youngvoices

**Though I studied literature** in college, I don't remember the last time I read a book. I'd rather play a football video game. I spend between 5 and 10 hours a week reading newspapers and news websites. If I had to read a book now, it would be Chetan Bhagat, given his popularity. I have seen the movies based on his books and liked them. There is a lot happening in the world. I prefer to stay updated through news than literature.

**SHRAVAN THADANI, 30,**  
Delhi-based businessman

**I'm a keen learner** though I've rarely understood anything through books. The last book I read was on Buddhism, one my elder brother gave me. I prefer to explore, travel, interact. I am an impatient person, always on the go. When I am old and have nothing else to do, I might sit down and read.

Sitting still doesn't come naturally to me now.

**RUCHIKA ARORA, 27,**  
Delhi-based event management executive

**I have barely read** any books in the past year. College is hectic and tiring, so in my free time, I prefer to play games on my phone or watch movies. When I do read, I opt for fast-paced, entertaining fiction or short stories. I've never thought of reading literature, because I just don't have the time.

**NAZIYA NOORANI, 20,**  
Mumbai-based engineering student

Studies: '[Non-literary] fiction arose in Britain] in the latter half of the 19th century, primarily in response to the unprecedented boom in the periodicals market and a sharp rise in literacy following legislation which made primary education compulsory... The expanded market also meant that the reading public would become less and less homogeneous, with writers and critics periodically invoking an entity called the 'unknown public' living in urban working-class areas and comprising a vast new army of readers, hungry for reading matter which was cheap and easily accessible.'

Replace the 'urban working-class' with 'a new aspirational middle-class' and 'periodicals market' with 'prime-time TV, mobile phones and the internet' and you're in 2013 India.

Gone are the days when only a tight circle of Anglophones read RK Narayan, Agatha Christie and Mills & Boon (the last of which, incidentally, will be available in regional languages soon, with Hindi editions already available). Now we have all kinds of readers reading all kinds of books. And in India, while English-language publishing may be a small slice of the ₹10,000-crore-and-growing publishing industry pie, it is a lucrative one and a far less scattered one than regional languages publishing.

But in a country where most school and college syllabi offer little guidance, and many readers are the first generation in their families reading in English, what are these readers reading? And how do they decide what books to pick?

The answer is simple: Many read what is most accessible. Bhagat, one of India's best-selling writers, himself brags that he is not interested in writing 'prize-winning literature' but in writing books that young aspiring Indians can 'identify with', in a 'language' that 'they speak in'.

'This is very much a chicken-and-egg kind of thing,' says Gupta of Jadavpur University. 'Media and advertising houses like to pretend there is a public out there with a well-defined taste that they merely cater to. This is fiction. These media or ad houses create a style and then manufacture a *notion* of public taste. It is the same with publishers.'

Mass-market 'populist' books will always be the mainstay for most readers. In non-fiction, as the HT-C fore survey shows, the category that most readers choose to read is of the 'self-help / health / spiritual books' variety. As Swapan Chakravorty, former director general of the National Library of India, says: 'Write textbooks! That's where the real money is. There are people making crores just in royalties.'

### WELL-LIT

So why worry about 'quality' fiction and non-fiction at all?

The truth is, we are what we read. And by developing a reading habit, by hook or by peer pressure, we discover the world in a way not possible without it. 'Good books' is a notoriously subjective term that means different things to different readers. But it nonetheless means *something* to those who know when they read one, unlike to those making a virtue out of reading 'non-high-funda stuff'. In the end, it all boils down to one thing. As Argentine-born writer Manguel put it, 'All writing depends on the generosity of the reader.' The question is: How generous a reader are you?



### INDIA'S LITERACY RATE

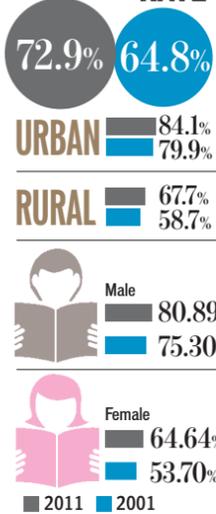
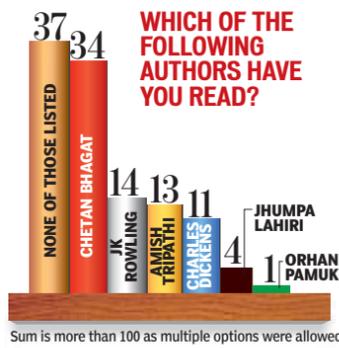


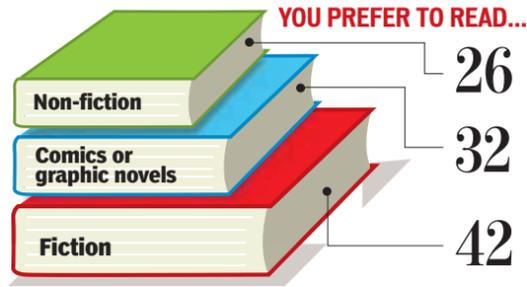
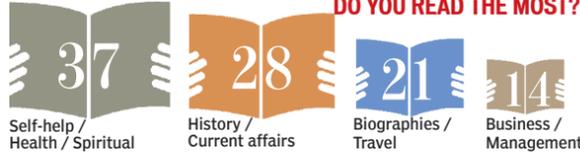
ILLUSTRATION: SIDDHANT JUMDE



### WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING AUTHORS DO YOU INTEND TO READ IN THE NEAR FUTURE?

Chetan Bhagat	31
Jhumpa Lahiri	18
Amish Tripathi	15
Charles Dickens	14
JK Rowling	11
Orhan Pamuk	07
Don't intend to read any of the above	32

### WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING TYPES OF NON-FICTION BOOKS DO YOU READ THE MOST?



### HOW MUCH TIME DO YOU SPEND READING EACH WEEK?



### DOES THIS COMPRISE MAINLY...



### METHODOLOGY

C fore conducted the survey in Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai and Bangalore between 27th and 30th, July 2013. A structured questionnaire was administered to a statistically selected sample of 986 persons in the age group of 18 to 35 belonging to SEC A segment in these cities; 48 per cent of the respondents were women. The survey has a margin of error of 3% at 95% confidence level.

**I don't get time** to read books at all. But I don't see why the idea of literature should be restricted to books. Our generation may have a short attention span, but I am not unmoved by literature. I get it from cinema and music - many Bollywood scripts today are good enough to qualify as literature, and so are songs by lyricists such as Amitabh Bhattacharya.

**KEEGAN PINTO, 33,** advertising professional from Mumbai

### THE BESTSELLING AUTHORS

#### RECENT BESTSELLERS IN INDIA

- Fiction**
- The Shiva Trilogy - Amish Tripathi
  - Fifty Shades of Grey - EL James
  - Like it Happened Yesterday - Ravinder Singh
  - Inferno: Robert Langdon - Dan Brown
  - And the Mountains Echoed - Khaled Hosseini
  - Shoes of the Dead - Kota Neelima

#### Non-fiction

- Come on Inner Peace! I Don't Have All Day - Sachin Garg
- Faster: 100 Ways to Improve Your Digital Life - Ankit Fadia
- An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions - Amartya Sen & Jean Drèze
- Lean In: Women, Work & the Will to Lead - Sheryl Sandberg
- What Young India Wants - Chetan Bhagat
- Dongri to Dubai - S Hussain Zaidi

#### RECENT BESTSELLERS IN THE UK

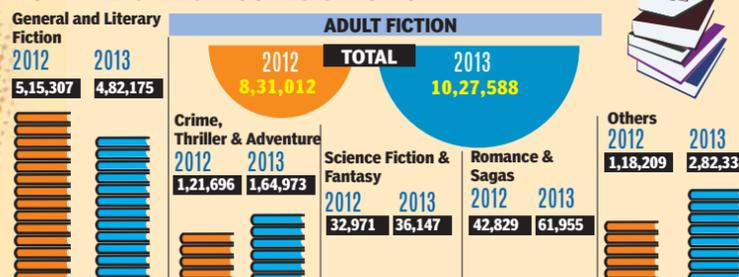
- The Casual Vacancy - JK Rowling
- The Cuckoo's Calling - Robert Galbraith
- The Racketeer - John Grisham
- Gone Girl - Gillian Flynn
- Guilty Wives - James Patterson

#### RECENT BESTSELLERS IN THE US

- Hidden Order - Brad Thor
- Bombshell - Catherine Coulter
- Inferno: Robert Langdon - Dan Brown
- Second Honeymoon - James Patterson and Howard Roughton
- And the Mountains Echoed - Khaled Hosseini

BASED ON DATA FROM HT-NIELSEN BOOKSCAN, AMAZON.COM & THE NEW YORK TIMES

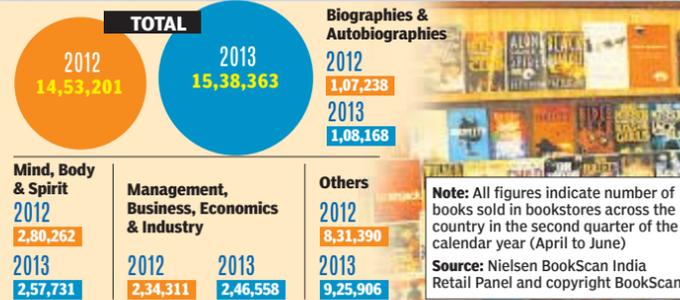
### HOW THE SALES FIGURES STACK UP



### CHILDREN YOUNG ADULT FICTION



### ADULT NON-FICTION



Note: All figures indicate number of books sold in bookstores across the country in the second quarter of the calendar year (April to June)

Source: Nielsen BookScan India Retail Panel and copyright BookScan