

# Reading it right

Westland has prospered by making book publishing its priority, by backing a new breed of writers and by understanding the inclinations and sensibilities of today's Indian reader

**T**hese are good times for book publishing in India — strange as that might seem to those on the Western side of the world — and Gautam Padmanabhan is intent on making the most of it. The chief executive of Westland, the publishing and distribution enterprise that has been part of Trent since 2007, is busy reinventing a business with traditional roots to reflect the changing reality of the relationship between readers, writers and the books that bring them together.

Internationally, book publishers are having to live with static growth or worse as a decline in the reading habit, shifting cultural mores and even technology conspire to drive sales of their titles further south by the day. Not so in India. Book publishing in the country is growing at an estimated 15 per cent a year — in a market sized at ₹35-40 billion annually — on the back of a band of

bright and savvy writers, bold ideas and an enthusiastic reading public.

Westland's primary interest is the space occupied by trade books (the inexplicable terminology under which works of fiction and non-fiction are classified). The market here is in the region of ₹10 billion and Westland, with revenues of nearly ₹400 million in 2010-11, expects to garner a more substantial share of it in the years ahead.

Book publishing constitutes 33 per cent of Westland's revenues; the rest comes from the distribution of books, the business its parent company, East West Books, began with as a Chennai-based, family-owned firm. East West Books tied

up in the mid-1990s with Landmark, a retail player and another family concern, to form Westland.

## THE TATA ADVANTAGE

As long as Westland remained a family-run company, the focus was on distribution and publishing comprised less than 5 per cent of the business. The arrival of Trent transformed the picture and with it, Mr Padmanabhan, a bibliophile who remembers working in the family's office during school vacations. "I recall opening consignments of books that came in," he says. "It was like Father Christmas had arrived."

The acquisition by Trent saw Westland fixing its gaze on publishing, and with good reason. "What we did earlier was import and distribute books from publishing houses like Harper Collins and Penguin," explains Mr Padmanabhan. "But over the last decade every such publisher ➤



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*Gautam Padmanabhan, chief executive, Westland*



**Gautam Padmanabhan (standing left) with his editorial team, (from left) Paul Vinay Kumar, Renuka Chatterjee, Dharini Bhasker and Shalini Krishan**

has taken control of the distribution of its own titles. That has added another level of distribution to the existing chain and, consequently, our margins have got squeezed.”

Despite such pressures, distribution continues to contribute 67 per cent to Westland’s turnover, but the bet has been made that publishing is the future. “There was a conscious attempt to grow publishing from the day of the Trent acquisition,” says Mr Padmanabhan. “Over the last couple of years, particularly, we have consciously cut back on the distribution of other publishers’ books to focus on publishing. Our aim is to exit distribution completely at some point and work towards becoming one of the top three trade book publishers in India.”

That focus has begun to pay off. Westland has emerged as one of the fastest-growing publishers of trade books in India, not least because of the financial heft that Trent brings to the table. “It gives us an opportunity to dream big,” says Mr Padmanabhan.

“If one has a sound business plan, there is the financial backing and the encouragement to go out and achieve those dreams. That aside, I have earned an MBA on the job.”

Having Landmark for a compatriot is an added bonus. It enables Westland to better understand trends and get market feedback, not to mention eye-catching display space. “But we consciously don’t want to be seen as driven through Landmark because, ultimately, a publisher needs to have his books available in all bookshops,” says Mr Padmanabhan.

**THE TECH CHALLENGE**

A more pressing concern is how to cope with the technology, as in electronic books or e-books, that is affecting book publishing. “I believe 2012 will be a watershed year in this context,” says Mr Padmanabhan. “It is quite possible that the prices of devices on which you can read e-books will drop to about ₹3,000. That would be a game changer.”

Nobody has as yet set up a proper website in India offering a selection of both Indian and foreign e-books, but that will happen sooner than later. “E-books are here to stay and it is only a question of when they will start making an impact in India,” says Mr Padmanabhan. “As a first step we have ensured that we have the rights for e-book sales as far as possible. We have already released 20 of our titles as e-books abroad and we are now in the process of digitising the rest of our titles so as to be ready when this wave hits our shores.”

Mr Padmanabhan, however, reckons that the physical book, the one readers can touch and feel, still has some legs on it, at least in India. Either way, this is a development that will hit booksellers, rather than book publishers, much harder. “For us it is just about adapting to, and selling in, a different format.”

Where the equation on e-books will differ is with the royalties that an author can command. “With e-books it probably will end up in a model where there is a 50:50 sharing between the author and publisher.” That’s a long way forward from the 7-15 per cent royalties that a writer gets on a paper book.”

**TRACKING TRENDS**

Where Westland has succeeded, especially over the last year, is with its commercial fiction and non-fiction titles, and this has happened partly because it was quick to understand the potential of a wave of young authors who are writing new rules on how to pen a bestseller. It was just as quick to gauge the sensibilities of an evolving readership that is more inclined towards stories of the kind churned out by Chetan Bhagat, the

poster boy as well as patron saint of this publishing phenomenon.

“What we have managed to achieve — and this hasn’t ever happened in India — is create a niche for Indian authors writing popular stuff for Indian readers,” says Mr Padmanabhan. This is not the norm for Indian publishers, who are often slammed for being a conceited lot, hardwired to favour the literary Brahmins of English rather than writers with a feeling for the pop pulse.

#### READER FIRST

Mr Padmanabhan is free of such pretension. “I approach all the books that come to me for publishing as, first, a reader,” he says. That approach led Westland to place its cards on writers like Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghi and Rashmi Bansal, all of who are part of a singular trend in English-language publishing that banks on middle India’s taste for a kind of fiction and non-fiction that has little in common with the intellectual outpourings that preceded them.

That’s why Westland pushed to publish Mr Sanghi’s *Chanakya’s Chant*, which has been on the bestseller list for several weeks, and Mr Tripathi’s *The Immortals of Meluha*, which has thus far sold more than 150,000 copies. *The Secret of the Nagas*, the follow-up to *Immortals* — both part of a trilogy of novels based on the legend and mythology of Shiva — has crossed 100,000 in sales since its August 2011 release. “There was a time when we sold 3,000 copies and thought we had a bestseller; now even 10,000 is seen as just about okay,” says Mr Padmanabhan.

For the writers themselves, ▶▶

## A Tranquebar kind of book

Casablanca... Zanzibar... Kalimpong... Rio de Janeiro... Alexandria — some places have the most splendid names, laden with the promise of history and heroes, romance and adventure, spectacle and surprise. Tranquebar, a tiny strip of land on the Tamil Nadu (a state in South India) coast, rolls off the tongue with just as much dazzle, and it has the story to back up the appellation.

Tranquebar takes after a settlement (now called Tharangambadi) where Indian publishing and printing may have actually originated. In 1706, Bartholomew Ziegenbalg, a Protestant missionary from Holland, established a printing press here. This pioneering set-up saw the first English tracts to be published in India, as well as a version of the New Testament in Tamil. Printing, according to this narrative, spread from Tranquebar to the rest of the country.

That’s one reason why Tranquebar Press, Westland’s imprint for literary fiction and non-fiction, has much to live up to.

“We called it Tranquebar to differentiate our offerings in the literary space,” says Westland chief executive Gautam Padmanabhan. That space has seen an erosion in the face of the ascendancy, in recent times, of popular prose, as represented by Chetan Bhagat and his band of bestselling writers. “This makes the environment for literary fiction very tough.” And it’s not made easier by the pricing straightjacket in which so-called literary works seem trapped.

“My contention is that somewhere down the line publishing has got it wrong with the pricing of such books,” says Mr Padmanabhan. “Chetan Bhagat sells a million copies at ₹100 each. And we are selling, say, 20,000 units of the new Amitav Ghosh title at ₹699 a piece. Why should a literary work cost so much? By doing this we are closing the doors on a large part of the market.”

Tranquebar Press is trying to turn that high-cost equation on its head by pushing the price of its literary fiction and its travel, biographies and other non-fiction titles to a point where it becomes much more affordable. Mr Ziegenbalg, with his Protestant work ethic, would have approved.



There is a fair mix of fiction and non-fiction in the top-selling titles from Westland's publishing stable

the Westland experience has been enriching. “My first book, *The Rozabal Line*, would never have been published had it not been for the call Gautam was willing to take at the time,” says Mr Sanghi. “Westland is like family. What is truly unique about them is that they are not shy about taking inputs and advice from their authors. You have a great marketing idea? Pick up the phone and speak to them.”

“There is a new generation of readers whose reference points are not necessarily Jane Austen or William Shakespeare or Arundhati Roy, for that matter,” says Mr Padmanabhan. “These guys have been growing up with a lot of commercial media and the language they speak, and like to hear, combines all manner of influences.”

That the Indian publishing establishment has faltered in comprehending these influences, and what emerges thereof, is down

to the cussedness of old-fashioned English-language editors, says Mr Padmanabhan. “These writers are coming from a totally different direction and that’s putting off a lot of editors. That said, editors are learning new skills; they realise now that they need to go past the first 10 pages of a manuscript and see if there is a story that can sell.”

**PUBLISHING PUSH**

For Westland — which has Delhi as its publishing hub and Chennai for distribution, as well as a presence in Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Mumbai — a bigger challenge than comprehending readers and authors is moving more and more of its business towards publishing. With its publishing numbers growing rapidly (growth is upwards of 50 per cent a year) and its distribution business in almost inversely proportional decline, it has to continuously

look at cost-cutting measures.

Another challenge is cracking the Indian-languages market. All indicators point to an opportunity here, but this has proven a bridge too difficult to cross. “The distribution channels are different and then there is a lot of price sensitivity,” says Mr Padmanabhan. “We have to find a way of bringing the price point much below what we would sell an English book at.”

Persistence and zeal, in the circumstances, are as important as business smarts to be an accomplished book publisher. “I don’t think publishing professionals in general are all that commercially savvy,” says Mr Padmanabhan. “What we have learned from the last five years is to look at the commercial side, to strike a balance between our passion for books and writing, and the realities of this business.” □

— Philip Chacko