

Agatha Christie falls victim to homegrown Indi-noir

New wave of Indian writers tackling crime, politics and war find growing audience

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At the Om bookshop in a mall in southern Delhi, Prabeen Kumar has been watching the browsers for years. There are the young people who usually head directly for the love stories. There are the "mature" readers who go to the classics. And now a new category has arrived, in search of India's new wave of thriller writers. "It is a big thing now. There are more and more liking. All sorts of people ... gentlemen and ladies," Kumar enthused.

The new wave of homegrown writers are climbing the country's bestseller lists, challenging the dominance of international heavyweights such as Dan Brown, John Grisham and Tom Clancy, and even affecting the tenacious local taste for Agatha Christie.

"Indian thriller writing still hasn't fully arrived but it is taking off. There's huge potential," said Ravi Subramanian, one of the bestselling authors.

Some thrillers sell more than 100,000 copies, a huge number in a country where relatively few books are bought. They combine swift-moving and unlikely plots, some violence, simple language and occasional sex scenes that are explicit by conservative local standards. Enough are now being published for a series of sub-genres to emerge: set in the worlds of crime, banking, journalism, politics and war.

"There was a huge gap there. It was long thought that Indians don't like the action thriller," said Mukul Deva, who has two books coming out and was a pioneer of military thrillers in India.

Deva's first book, *Lashkar*, was a bestseller and is one of many works that deal with the hostilities, covert and



A bookstore in Kolkata. Below, two books by Mukul Deva, a pioneer of military thrillers
Photograph: Alamy



overt, between India and Pakistan. The style is gritty, fast-paced and unsubtle, and the Indian heroes always win over dastardly foreign enemies.

A former soldier who left school at 16, Deva admits there is an "element of jingoism" in his work. "I wore uniform, I shed blood, and I know what we are capable of if the political will was there. Indian people need the reassurance that we can do almost everything I described in the book," he said. Other works by Deva describe corruption, human trafficking and organ trading. His most recent is "a very dark techno-thriller".

Some attribute the rise of the thriller to publishers being more willing to take risks; others to the hundreds of millions of young, literate people in India who for the first time can afford books priced

at about £1. The thrillers also provide a sense of accountability, which resonates with readers in a country where systems of justice are profoundly flawed. Many feature investigative journalists on the trail of corrupt big businesses or politicians in league with the police.

Namita Gokhale, a publisher and author who is organising India's first festival of crime writing in January, said the thrillers touched on Indian preoccupations. "These are all locally set, identifiably local situations and characters. They describe events which simply couldn't happen anywhere else. Thrillers everywhere are symptomatic of a society," she said.

Two other genres have emerged in recent years to challenge the belief that the only books which sell in India are classics, and self-help and management

manuals. Hugely popular books which mix reimagined ancient Hindu myths, history, and narrative and works drawing on the everyday experiences of middle-class Indian youth in simple language have changed the landscape of English-language publishing.

However, the new wave's focus on India could make them less likely to find an international audience, warned Subramanian. Another problem could be India's love of happy endings. "If evil wins in a Bollywood film it is bound to flop. A lot of people here want to change society so they like to read about it being changed. And that means good usually triumphs," Subramanian said.

Deva said this was not a purely Indian phenomenon: "It's the same in every country. Whether it's Jack Ryan or James Bond, the good guy wins."