

Surviving As a Publisher in India: 'Anything is Possible'

Article from SfogliaLibro Magazine, Italy

By Gita Wolf

In a country like India, literally anything is possible. On a normal working day, any or all of the following can happen: the electricity can snap off every few minutes – so among other things, the computers can burn up. The telephone might die without warning. The road to the office is dug up overnight and likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. The water tap is dry. The post-office puts the wrong stamps on an important letter. The printers' assistant walks all over freshly printed sheets, and they are bound into books ... (Now and then, we joke at Tara that foreign publishers who work with us should serve a term in India. If all goes well, it will breed a certain calm and choiceless optimism.)

More seriously, these minor torments chart the two greatest obstacles we face as publishers in India: one, the absence of a reliable infrastructure. The second – if there is a rationale to the printer's assistant walking over the sheets – an indifference to quality.

Poor infrastructure is not just a problem of day-to-day functioning. It is very much part of the book trade as well. With a serious lack of professionalism, marketing and distributing a book can turn out to be a very ad hoc exercise. In the absence of library buying or systems of pre-ordering, we just send a book out into the unknown, and hope that people will somehow see it in a bookstore and want to buy it. Our books are generally created with the Indian reader in mind, yet there is no 'ideal' readership that we can identify – and approach – for particular books. So our publishing decisions tend to be instinctive, rather than tactical.

All this sounds terribly bleak, but surprisingly, it isn't. It is not so much that we practice cheerful self-delusion – there is no getting away from the fact that it is very tiring to work under such conditions, and we would far prefer to be able to take much more for granted. But the truth is that our situation is something of a mixed blessing. It is an ironic twist, but indifferent circumstances actually free us of conventional pressures.

A lack of structure allows fluidity. Seen another way, an unstructured set up and an insouciant trade neither responds to nor cares about what we put out. So we can publish what we like, without worrying about the kind of market pressures which drive publishing all over the world. The fate of a book launched in this way is admittedly still at risk, but it is a choice we can afford to keep open. After all, anything is possible – because, as we reason, how can the public already have an opinion on something it hasn't even seen yet?

This is our basic modality, and probably the key to how we function. When it comes to originating a book, though, it's obviously not as easy to be so definitive about causes. But it wouldn't be untrue to say that many of our books are sparked off by a wild idea, usually in combination with a need to find a way out of some dead-end situation.

The way our handmade books came about is a good example. Offset printing in India is expensive – and what is more unfair – also of poor quality. At one stage we were actually being reprimanded by the printer for comparing the printed work with the original, and he could not understand that we had nothing else to compare it with. And unless we turned completely avant-garde and requested his assistant to leave his footprints on every single page, things were clearly going from bad to worse. Under Indian conditions, we could never hope to come anywhere near the crisp four colour offset printing from elsewhere.

We needed desperately to experiment with other options available to us, where we had far more control over the process and quality of production. This meant finding those things we could do well traditionally, and putting them to new uses. A chance meeting with a skilled silk-screen printer brought up the idea of making a book entirely by hand, printed on handmade paper, where each sheet was an original print. It would not only bring back the tactile quality of books, but for us, also the luxury of experimenting with form.

Of course, the handmade book is not a completely new concept. It has been done before, mainly as limited edition artists' books. Our challenge was to give it a new form – to combine a fine quality of bookmaking with affordable pricing. We had to 'mass' produce a handmade product – all the while maintaining accuracy and a high production quality, despite the number of times a book needs to be handled at various stages before it is completed.

The greatest asset of our silk-screen printer was his motto: Nothing is Impossible. He was unmoved by the enormous task, and soon had a system going, training other young men from his village to work with him. After the first successes, we rewarded him with more challenges, creating books which went through ever more production steps. His team has so far produced a total of 50,000 handmade books. They are the steady staples, in a way, of our publishing endeavour.

Over the last year, our situation has changed gradually: we now distribute our books in the UK and will launch our titles in the US from spring 04. This has brought in far more structure into our publishing plans. To be honest, there is a great deal of satisfaction in working this way. We enjoy the feeling of being able to achieve results through direct means and careful orchestration – and to see financial rewards.

But the real exhilaration will always be in the creation of the books, and the touchstone for this remains India. Our material and resources are all here. In many ways it is a frustrating country to work in, but it is always dynamic, and the one thing we never feel is boredom. But surviving and succeeding honestly demands a great deal of ingenuity. One of the most important insights gained through dealing with such a system is to remain flexible and not to accept dead ends. There is always a way out, and unorthodox means can lead to original ends.