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Book Value

The fairytale success story of a publisher who promises to live happily ever after.

Vaishna Roy, Intelligent Investor (Outlook)

"We applaud those out there on the frontlines, exhibiting the courage and creativity it takes... to impress readers in a world of superstores and publishing conglomerates. The Ten Outstanding Books of the Year were chosen for exemplifying that kind of independent spirit."

– *Independent Publisher Book Awards '02.*

And Tara Publishing, a tiny Chennai-based publishing house bagged the award this year for its Sophocles' *Antigone*.

When you pick up the book, you know just why it got the award. It feels and smells the way you imagine books ought to—all earthy and crinkly and deliciously textured. Tawny handmade paper with brilliant screen-printed red-and-black illustrations, a taut script that takes nothing away from the original power of the Greek tragedy, a large format that would look lovely if simply framed and hung... mmmm.

But then, since the very first book— *The Very Hungry Lion*—originality and vibrancy have been Tara hallmarks. That first book, again hand-crafted, was rendered entirely in the Warli style of folk painting, while the later *Hen-Sparrow Turns Purple* opens out long and colourful like a scroll and can be hung up. These are children's books: that's where Tara Publishing began and where its heart is.

Or should we say, that's where Gita Wolf's heart is. The founder of Tara is passionately in love with books, but even more so with children's books. She started off as a lecturer in English literature in a German university, and returned to India wanting to be in publishing.

Prologue. Like all best-sellers, this one has an interesting start. Wolf was on her way to the Frankfurt Fair with a story. To make the presentation compelling, she decided to screen-print two pages on handmade paper. This in hand, Wolf flew off to network and, hopefully, impress. Sure enough, Canada's Annick Press loved what it saw of *The Very Hungry Lion* and placed an order for 8,000 copies—in the same format.

Wolf returned, wondering if she could do the job. Reams of Pondicherry handmade paper and one year later, her first export consignment was shipped off to Canada. It won the Alcuin Citation for Excellence in Book Design. "That launched us," says Wolf, and gave her the confidence to invest Rs 8 lakh into setting up the printer permanently, store handmade paper, and start hiring.

Next came the scroll book, which also got an Award for Best Illustrations at the Biennale of Illustrations Bratislava, and the trend has since been set, with several tributes coming in.

Making it. Happy as all this sounds, the truth is surviving in Indian publishing is tough, and to make it big in the genre of children's books is tougher. Poor production values, a price-conscious market, no government benefits or library buybacks, highly taxed paper— these are just some of the handicaps. In fact, Tara doesn't make a profit here. Instead, Wolf has ensured that she conquers the export market; she uses her export sales to survive, even while growing the Indian market.

Publishing has fixed costs like salaries or film; and variable costs like paper or ink. Wolf uses her export sales to subsidise the Indian market, and buyers here pay just the book's variable costs. This allows something like the handcrafted *Hen Sparrow...* to be priced Rs 250 compared to \$15 abroad. And yet the book has sold about 9,000 copies here and 20,000 abroad. "The Indian buyer, especially for children's books, places too low a value on books. He will pay a fortune for pizza or shoes but not for a well-produced book," says Wolf.

Her other obstacles: poor distribution and delayed payments. When bookshops don't settle bills for a year, it's difficult for small publishers like Tara to hold up.

Out of the box. You cannot export if you don't have quality—so how has Tara managed? Simply by sticking to handcrafted books. "It's what we do best and where we can rigidly control quality," says Wolf. And it's also why, when it comes to non-handcrafted books, Tara opts to sell rights abroad rather than the books. "We can't risk poor binding or bad paper," she says.

Tara is one of the few Indian publishers to have sold rights in the international market; over 50 per cent of its titles are available internationally. France's Gallimard, Germany's Hanser Verlag, Australia's Spinifex, The Netherlands' Kit Publishing are among publishing partners. Italian publisher Adelphi recently bought the rights to its *Mahabharata*, which is due to be published in Greek.

Tara's turnover from books alone was up from Rs 13 lakh in 1999 to Rs 26 lakh in March 2001. Total turnover: Rs 45 lakh. "We have averaged a growth of about 40 per cent a year so far," says Wolf. She is busy formalising distribution tie-ups in the UK and the US, as well as within the country. "This will bring in the money; we expect to soon touch 60 per cent growth." Almost 75 per cent of the turnover is from exports, to which the sale of rights contribute 25 per cent.

Tara is also starting an adult fiction and non-fiction section, with original work as well as translations of regional authors. Talks are on with leading publishers to sell rights for publication abroad. But "we can't afford the marketing hype fiction needs," says Wolf.

Setbacks. Not that handcrafting has been all hunky-dory. An early shipment of 20,000 copies to Holland was ruined when they found fungus growing from the vegetable glue. "Working in monsoon, the binders did not dry the pages fully; I lost Rs 8 lakh," says Wolf. Since then, the glue has been changed and formes are dry-pressed. While Wolf is trying to revive old skills, including letterpress printing, she knows she has to work hard to get top-class production values. "It puts us at great risk internationally; we're always instilling quality consciousness in our craftsmen."

The company has consciously stayed small: "We restrict ourselves to five to 10 titles a year so we can maintain quality," she says. When an order comes in, the production advance is used to pay the way, and establishment costs are kept to about Rs 60,000 a month. Most work, like typesetting, is done in-house and they experiment with single and two-colour jobs. The permanent team is only about six people; the rest are freelancers or students who work on a stipend. "I've managed only because I've had talented people working for me way below market rates," confesses Wolf.

Up there. This team is constantly pushing the envelope in book design and content so that Tara competes globally on its own terms, and not just as a representative of the exotic. That was Wolf's challenge from the first—to make and sell excellent work: "I'm in the business of culture but I'm not a non-profit NGO; I have to be viable."

When she started out, the project was so quixotic that most sensible businessmen would have warned her off. Now, with turnover set to cross Rs 1 crore in two years, she's made her point rather tellingly. As she says, "Innovation is always high-risk, but that's the challenge."