

Book Fair

Not Selling Volumes

It was a browser's dream come true—kilometres of books that took hold of the bibliophile's heart-strings and did not stop tugging for hours. For eleven days last fortnight, Delhi's Pragati Maidan became a meeting-place of minds. From a distance, as the Fifth World Book Fair moved to its finish in a welter of paper, printer's ink and binder's glue, it even seemed as though hundreds of people were practising to be cricketers, as they bent in classic fielding crouches before the beckoning shelves.

More than anything else, however, the bookfest symbolised the dilemma facing India's literate minority. Rising book prices and a cruel foreign exchange rate have long back reduced the avid reader to frustrated window-shopping. And the nation's publishing industry too has been under siege. Production costs have shot up, paper prices continue to balloon, and worst of all, the sales have been going down.

There are paradoxes too. With an average production of 20,000 titles annually, India ranks seventh in the world in book-publishing. But when the population is taken in account, it produces an average of 27 titles per million people, which is less than the Asian average of 48 per million, and way below the international average of 127 per million. Strangely, though, 40 per cent of Indian publishing is in English, and so the average for the miniscule English-reading population works out to 360 titles per million people.

Unenthusiastic Participation: Predictably, the National Book Trust (NBT), which organised the fair, claimed that it was a great success. But the NBT did not possess details of the business transacted during the fair—either in terms of sales to individual buyers, or the volume of trade deals. Participation was not all that enthusiastic. Against 449 Indian publishers and booksellers and 58 foreign participants at the last fair in 1980, this year's show attracted only 450 Indian participants, and 65 from abroad. The NBT offered free display space and local hospitality to Third World countries, but those sections seemed the least visited.

Foreign publishers were not allowed to sell books; most did so through their local agents. No foreign publisher seemed to be particularly happy with the market conditions. To add to decreasing sales volumes, there have been severe cutbacks in library budgets in recent years—and library orders form the staple for the lucrative hardbound market.

Three years back, for instance, the British firm of George Allen and Unwin

(GAU) chalked up sales in India of £150,000 (Rs 26.25 lakh) last year, that figure had dropped to a dismal £60,000 (Rs 10.50 lakh). GAU's Sales Manager, Colin Gower, said that library budget cuts had contributed the most to this drop. GAU has six distributors in India, the largest being UBS Publishers' Distributors Ltd. Gower complained of non-payments and pilferage. "Moreover, books aren't ordered soon enough," he said. Nearly 70 per cent of GAU's titles are academic hardcovers: paperbacks comprise only 20 per cent. India contributes only 2 per cent of GAU's worldwide sales. "I'm here mainly to generate business," said Gower, "and to meet booksellers, wholesalers, librarians, and lecturers." Evidence of the growing interest in Oriental literature lies in the fact that Mandala Books, a GAU division, does a good bit of business in the West with its philosophy, mysticism, and religion titles.



Browsers survey a multitude of titles: tempting but costly

But those synonyms for paperbacks—Penguins—aren't doing too badly. In 1980, says Regional Manager Zamir Ansari, sales of Penguins amounted to £160,000 (Rs 28 lakh) and of Ladybirds, the children's books, to £30,000 (Rs 5.25 lakh). Last year the Penguin turnover had increased to £300,000 (Rs 52.50 lakh), and Ladybird sales had jumped to £60,000 (Rs 10.50 lakh). Even Kestrel and Allen Lane hardcovers sell more than £10,000 (Rs 1.75 lakh) worth. But, points out Ansari, the volume of sales has been coming down.

Exports: Last year, exports of Indian books crossed the Rs 10 crore mark. And this has come about in spite of the fact that Indian publishers offer discounts of only 40 per cent to foreign buyers, whereas publishers elsewhere offer discounts of between 50 and 60 per cent. Current figures of imports of books into India are around the Rs 8 crore mark, but importers complain of large-scale pilferage if they order books through bulk post or ocean freight. Only

books imported from the United Kingdom enjoy a 'special commodity rate', and so can be cheaply airfreighted. And for those buyers who feel they are always being made to pay more for books because of sterling rates that are higher than the bank rates, Penguin's Ansari has some news—a Good Offices Committee, consisting of representatives from the Union Ministry of Education and the Federation of Publishers' and Booksellers' Associations of India, meets every month to monitor the movement of sterling and dollar rates. "What is then fixed at the committee's meetings," says Ansari, "is the actual bank rate prevailing that month plus a 5 per cent margin to take care of credit periods."

All these problems do not seem to affect one foreign publisher: Mezhdunarodnaya Kniga, the gigantic Soviet purveyor of propaganda, which sells in India through the USSR Book Centre. Last year the Soviets sold books worth Rs 40 lakh throughout India, in English and 13 Indian languages. The figure is not high, but then the Soviets believe in ignoring high paper prices: a three-volume set of *Das Kapital* costs only Rs 15.

Between the trade deals being made behind the scenes, and the numbing succession of seminars and group discussions organised by the NBT and bodies like the Federation of Indian Publishers, authors' guilds, and librarians' associations, the fair rapidly acquired the contours of any government-run show. The organisers' office was usually deserted, with officials scurrying after visiting VIPs, and the information and publicity division complaining that stall allocations were switched around without warning. "This often results in angry outbursts from visitors," read a pained note from the I & P division, "and the receptionists at the information counters have to bear the brunt." And, hanging over the five main pavilions housing the books was a low, angry murmur as sales people translated dollars and pounds into rupees and books suddenly receded from reach. In the end, the fair lent itself to storage in memory because it was a feast for the eyes—a surfeit of manna from the heavens of print.

—CHAITANYA KALBAG