

THE NEW TREND OF LITERATURE FESTIVALS IN INDIA

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Abstract: The Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF) has been proved a trailblazer for the mushrooming of literary festivals all across India. From big cities to small towns, these festivals are not only celebrating Indian literary giants and their works but are also bringing the biggest literary names from different continents of the world to the Indian soil and the audience. The boom in literary festivals has also helped the Indian book market and publishing industry to flourish and grow manifolds.

Index Terms: Literature Festivals, Jaipur Literature Festival, Indian Book Market, Publishing Industry

Who would have imagined Nobel Laureate author, J.M.Coetzee, would read out his celebrated short story, *The Old Woman and the Cat* on Indian soil, that too for 45 long minutes? This, sort of miracle, was made possible by the organizers of Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF) in 2011. William Dalrymple, one of the organizers of JLF calls it a literary game changer as it gave an instant fillip to the popularity of the event. The literature festival, which started in 2006 soon became the biggest literature festival in Asia-Pacific and now the fifth most popular literary festival in the world.

From 18 writers and 100 attendees in 2006 to about 181 writers and 245,000 footfalls in 2015, JLF has come a long way. Last year, in 2019, the festival had 200 sessions and 250 national and international speakers and was visited approximately by 4,00,000 people. Little did the organizers of the JLF know that they are paving the way for the boom of literary festivals in India. Recent statistics shows that India now produces about 60 literature festivals every year and the number is constantly increasing. There is The Hay Festival of Literature and Arts in Kerala, Tata Literature Live! Festival in Mumbai, while Kolkata boasts of its Apeejay Kolkata Literary Festival. Other prominent literature festivals, which are attracting large number of crowds, are The Winter Literary Festival at Mussoorie, the Spring Fever Festival in Delhi, Bangalore Literature Festival, The Times Literary Carnival, The Kala Ghoda Arts Festival, the largest children's book festival Bookaroo, the largest comic book and graphic novel festival Comic Con etc.

George Wilkinson and John Moore organized the world's first literature festival, The Sunday Times Cheltenham Literature Festival in 1949. But it was Edinburgh International Book Festival, which stormed the literary world in 1983 and led the mushrooming of literature festivals across the world. According to www.literaryfestivals.co.uk, there are about 350+ literature festivals throughout England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, about 80+ in Australia &

New Zealand, 60+ in USA and Canada. Today India too organizes around 200 annual literature festivals. Other Asian countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, China, Singapore and Hong Kong are not far behind.

According to the recent study by Nielsen titled ‘India Book Market Report 2015,’ Indian book market is worth Rs 261 billion and is the seventh largest in the world. The study estimates the market to touch Rs 739 billion by 2020. The boom in literature festivals is the testimony to the fact that the book market or publishing industry is thriving in India. These festivals not only are increasing in numbers but also slowly becoming sellable brands, thus taking the industry to greater heights. Festivals allow the book lovers around the country to gather and interact with their favorite authors. Renowned and upcoming authors from different parts of the world are willing to participate in such festivals for the immense scale of popularity they provide to their books. Authors, writers around the world want to be seen at literature festivals like JLF as it has become a status symbol and an immediate ticket to popularity.

Every small and big festival in India today is branded successful because of the packed grounds buzzing with famous authors, publishers, agents, and excited booklovers. Big names such as Sir V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Orhan Pamuk, Paul Theroux, Shashi Tharoor, Ben Okri, Gulzar and many respected names in the field have graced one or the other festival organized around the country. In one of its annual shows, JLF had invited the celebrated author Margaret Atwood, along with Marlon James, Ruskin Bond, Stephen Fry and Thomas Piketty. To add to the glamor, movie stars, celebrity lawyers, politicians and musicians also join the bandwagon luring the crowds to throng in large numbers. Namita Gokhale, one of the organizers of JLF says, “The festival has succeeded in creating a new and young line of readers, and this indeed spells hope for literature in the future.” Undoubtedly, it is a win-win situation for everyone—publishers, authors, and readers.

Literature festivals in India are free and open to all. In other countries listening to a Nobel Laureate is expensive but Indian literary festivals allow booklovers to listen to their favorite literary Nobel Laureates, Booker winners, and Pulitzer winners for free. Alongside, they help build communities of readers, which is evident from the growing queues to buy books at festival sites. In 2006, books worth Rs. 90,000 were sold at JLF and the figure rocketed to Rs. 49 lakhs in 2013, giving tremendous boost to India’s book market. William Dalrymple, one of the founders and co-director of JLF, says that there is a sell of 10,000 books everyday at the JLF. They also provide platform to new authors by bringing in immediate attention from readers and media. The established authors like Vikram Seth, Salman Rushdie or Shashi Tharoor use such festivals for the marketing of their books. Apart from books in English, festivals also help books in Hindi and 24 other regional languages to get a platform on big scale. Turned into a major industry, these festivals are creating new readership, boosting book sales, popularizing new as well as established authors, and upgrading publisher brands.

Another major contribution of literature festival, apart from bringing people closer to books, is mirroring India’s culture and literature to the world. In fact, JLF is regarded as the cultural catalyst within India and around the world. With Diggi Palace as its location and Rajasthan’s rich heritage, as its major attraction, JLF draws people around the globe resulting in great upsurge in the state’s tourist economy. Similarly, travel and hospitality industries in Kerala, Bangalore, and Hyderabad also are seeing huge increase in business during the festival season.

There is, however, a section that thinks that there is another side to the hoopla around literature festivals. The section feels that the boom of festivals in India is a bubble and is soon going to burst. The author of the book, *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century*, Beth Driscoll calls contemporary literature festivals as the middlebrow mixture of art and commerce. Even Indian Literature festivals are being termed more of extravagant spectacles than the congregation of serious writers and readers. Noted Hindi writer Late. Manglesh Dabral had refused to be a part of JLF citing it to be a market driven event. There are voices against the presence of non-readers in large numbers who gather at festival sites just to have a look at their favorite celebrities and be a part of musicals and entertainment shows. There is criticism that festivals are turning authors into glamorous celebrities and thus taking away the sense of seriousness of reading culture. In past, there were accusations that sponsors of some of festivals had dubious background. Tainted corporates and political parties too showing vested interests in them. Also, festivals have seen their own shares of controversies. Authors like Ashish Nandi and Salman Rushdie got embroiled in controversies when they spoke against the then ruling Governments. Even the renowned movie director Karan Johar also stirred up a controversy by talking against the growing intolerance in the country.

From 2005 to 2016, it has been a decade of literature festivals in India and that too a glorious one. Controversies or sans them, literature festivals are here to stay. A country, which is essentially known for its festivals and their celebrations, literature festivals have not only added to its reputation but also helped creating the new readership. At a time when world over bookstores are shutting down, in India we see a boom in publication business. The role of online book shopping cannot be denied but the contribution of literature festivals also cannot be overlooked. The beauty of these festivals is that they are bringing the world together by bringing writers, novelists, poets, authors, bloggers, agents, publishers and readers under one roof. Those writers who were introduced as new and upcoming writers in first few literature festivals are now the seasoned writers and old readers are fast replaced by the new ones. The sheer number of young readers is the most heartening thing about these festivals. They are growing in numbers and so is growing their budgets. They have become successful business enterprises. The trend has not only provided a platform for writers but also allowed discussions on wide ranging local and global socio-political, and cultural issues. They are also being successful in bringing writers from Indian regional languages, and sessions on Dalit writing, Sanskrit, and the life of the queen of Burma get tremendous response from the crowd. In a small span of a decade the trend has certainly uplifted the dying reading culture of India.

Before the spread of the pandemic of Covid-19, this year's JLF did large number of celebrated authors and crowd but most of the festivals have had to be cancelled. The impact of the pandemic is harsh on the national book market as well as the publishing industry. The lockdown and restrictions on interstate transportation affected the delivery of books to clients and book houses. "There has been a virtual standstill on production, sales and distribution of books," says Ananth Padmanabhan, CEO, HarperCollins India to Indian Express. The world's third largest book market, India has around 16,000 publishing houses which Publish more than 80,000 books but the pandemic has forced the industry to stop production and announce austerity measures. The industry's poor attempt at salvaging the losses came from its digital content, which saw a little surge in the beginning of the lockdown but that is not enough to sustain the huge losses that Industry has suffered. The cancellations of Literature festivals too are going to impact the industry furthermore as they worked as the catalyst to attract readers and compel them to buy the books. The humanity is waiting for the Corona free world and the business of literature festivals to resume again.

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