

21st Century self-help gurus go Desi

A small but growing tribe of Indian authors is writing self-help books that tout desi values as the key to success in the workplace, and in life

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When Monideepa Sahu picked up Rajat’s photograph with “trembling fingers”, she couldn’t help but take in the “sword-sharp nose, menacing moustache and sinister grin”. She writes: “Was I really going to meet THAT?” Over the next four pages, the reader drowns in Sahu’s stream of consciousness as she talks about her mustachioed man and how she came to love and marry him. The story is just one of more than 100 short vignettes that you’ll find in *Chicken Soup for the Indian Spiritual Soul*, a self-help book that promises to uplift the desi soul.

The cult-like status of the popular *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series—it has spawned books that address the souls of parents, Indian brides, pre-teens, Americans, golfers, cat and dog lovers, entrepreneurs and the career-driven, to name a few—speaks about the human need to constantly improve oneself or find a deeper meaning of life. Whether it is climbing the career ladder, or attaining spirituality, or even developing fruitful romantic relationships, the desire to improve is inherent. It is what makes humans, human.

In the US alone, self-help is reportedly an \$11 billion-a-year industry, one that is not limited to book publishing; it also includes motivational speakers and television shows.

Capitalising on this power of self improvement, the industry has made huge inroads within India by encouraging home-grown authors as well as importing foreign brands and reinventing them to suit local tastes. *Chicken Soup for the Indian Bride’s Soul*, for instance, was published in 2011 after its international version made waves abroad.

That said, international titles such as Robin Sharma’s *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*, Rhonda Byrne’s *The Secret* and Napoleon Hill’s *Think and Grow Rich* continue to dominate best-seller lists. “That’s because Indians are attracted to foreign names and brands, and are enamoured with tried-and-tested theories churned out by international best-selling authors in the management and career space,” says Mita Kapur, founder and chief executive officer of Jaipur-based literary consultancy agency Siyahi. But there’s plenty of room for made-in-India content, she adds.

India's self-help publishing industry has grown exponentially over the last 14 years and coincides with the entry of foreign publishers in the local market. Kapur estimates that Rs 1,200 crore worth of books (written in English) are sold every year in India. "The market size of the self-help industry is about \$27,702,000," she says.

Retailers and booksellers such as Landmark, Crossword and ecommerce giant Amazon estimate that about 9,500,000 self-help books are sold annually across the country.

Sivaraman Balakrishnan, senior manager (marketing and communications) at Landmark, says there is a growing demand for self-help books. It's a reflection of the urban Indian's desire to be successful, be it at work, at home or even at play. And unlike self-improvement classes, which require high capital and rigid schedules, self-help books are cost effective.

The Indian market is ripe for 21st century gurus who claim to know the secret to success, or can at least convince their audience that they have stumbled upon a foolproof formula. And publishers are actively seeking out new, but experienced voices.