

THE OXFORD HISTORY OF THE NOVEL IN ENGLISH

Volume Ten

The Novel in South  
and South East Asia  
since 1945

EDITED BY  
Alex Tickell

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## Genre Fiction in India

PRIYA JOSHI

At its simplest, genre fiction refers to clearly identified popular forms of the novel with well-established conventions. Detective fiction, thrillers, horror, romances, school and adventure stories—with origins in the nineteenth century—along with Westerns, science fiction, fantasy, chick and lad lit, and offshoots such as vampire novels—which emerged in the twentieth century—provide a range of forms that comprise genre fiction today. Genre fiction's formal protocols bring some stability to an otherwise fickle marketplace where the attraction to novelty collides with a desire for predictability and the familiar. The presence of recognizable conventions in genre fiction reassures readers, writers, and publishers: all know what to expect and to provide. Booksellers and librarians, too, appreciate genre fiction's taxonomic categories for the convenience they offer in categorizing titles. The wide popularity of genre fiction and the sales that its bestsellers achieve thus provide an economic bedrock to help publishers eliminate the guesswork from unpredictable markets. What the critic Q. D. Leavis has called 'the publisher's mainstay' emerged because of readerly enthusiasms that sustain the market for genre fiction. Rather than being straitjackets, genre fiction's conventions, according to the detective novelist P. D. James, inspire an 'extraordinary variety of books and writers which this so-called formula has been able to accommodate' (James 2009, 10).

Increasingly, the distinction between genre and popular fiction is hard to discern or to sustain. The persistence of conventions does not always predict the popularity of a form; likewise, being popular does not always mean that the form or novelist belongs to genre fiction. Yet, the tendency to conflate popular with genre fiction persists in many critical accounts and provides a conundrum especially evident in the case of India. In a definition provided by the scholar Tabish Khair, the two terms are used interchangeably, with the definition of 'pulp' deploying categories typically used to explain genre fiction: 'pulp fiction is fiction that uses largely fixed generic features to satisfy the largely fixed reading expectations of as large a market as possible' (Khair 2008, 61).

In general, the story of genre fiction situates the Anglo American world as its *locus classicus*. Prevailing theories of genre fiction base their understanding on publishing and

readerly practices in Britain and the United States during the early years of the twentieth century. Applying this history to India obscures what is unusual about Indian publishing and the very recent—twenty-first century, not nineteenth or twentieth century—proliferation of genre fiction in the subcontinent. Genre fiction in India includes forms such as crime, romance, and science fiction that are familiar in the global marketplace. It also includes forms that appear largely indigenous: crick(et) lit, IIT novels (set in the prestigious Indian Institutes of Technology), and call-centre romances. With their relatively recent arrival, these forms have had to compete for consumers and their discretionary time and income in an already well-established ecosystem that includes popular cinema, on-demand content, and social media as well as imports from global anglophone publishers.

The present chapter analyses the insights that Indian publishing provides for a theory of genre fiction in the context of the contemporary novel. The emergence and consolidation of India's genre fiction in English has occurred in the early years of the twenty-first century, and the story continues to break, with emerging writers and a new publishing algorithm in the works. The chapter, thus, focuses on broad trends and practices to help frame what remains an ongoing narrative. It proceeds in three parts. The first section outlines the nineteenth-century arrival of the novel in India and the early appetite for popular forms among Indian readers. The second section uses the figure of Chetan Bhagat to plot the changes in demographics and publishing in which genre fiction has emerged and thrives today. The final section concludes with remarks on the social future of genre fiction in India.

### The Arrival of Genre Fiction

When the novel arrived in India as part of the British colonial experiment in cultural engineering, the titles that inspired Thomas Macaulay to extol the virtues of a 'good European library' in his 1835 'Minute on Indian Education' (Macaulay 1972, 241) were hardly those that Indian readers selected for their leisure reading. Rejecting drama and poetry for the novel, realism for melodrama, Charles Dickens for G. W. M. Reynolds, Indian readers exercised a considerable degree of independence in their reading preferences. The emergence of the Indian novel, however, took two different paths: one in Indian languages and the other in English. In Urdu, Bangla, Hindi, and Tamil, for instance, genre fiction proliferated in the early decades of the twentieth century: detective fiction (*jasusi kahani*) was a mainstay in Urdu and Hindustani; romances (*prem katha*) in Bangla, Marathi, and Tamil. Genre fiction in English during this period, however, was hardly prolific or popular, and it could never capture markets to consolidate itself. Instead of genre fiction, India's 'literary' novel in English became a major publishing phenomenon in the last quarter of the twentieth century, with writers such as Salman Rushdie,

Arundhati Roy, Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Seth, Kiran Desai, and others capturing major international prizes and global cultural capital. Starting in 1981 when *Midnight's Children* won a coveted Booker Prize, India became known as a country that produced literary unicorns, and Western publishers and critics flocked to it accordingly. Indian literary fiction in English was a cultural export par excellence that commanded overseas readers who largely neglected other Indian publications altogether.

Then, in or around 2004, something changed. Elite Indian publishers who had long vied to discover major literary titles rejected a campus novel written in his spare time by a banker. A minor publishing firm, known for reprints and inexpensive mass market productions, accepted Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone: What Not to Do at IIT* (2004), and Indian publishing changed. Bhagat persuaded his publisher to pursue a daring new marketing model. Rather than pricing his novel at Rs.500 or above as was customary for literary titles, Bhagat proposed an economy of scale: Rs.95 for each copy, with the provision that titles could be vended not just in bookstores but also on the streets, in petrol stations, grocery stores, and elsewhere. Rupa & Co. accepted the terms, and a new era entered Indian publishing marked with 'BC' for 'before Chetan', and 'AC' for 'after' (as quoted in Kapoor 2014, 2).

All of Bhagat's novels to date have sold a million copies each (a major threshold in Indian publishing in English), some reaching that milestone in three months, as *Revolution 2020* did in 2011. *Half Girlfriend* (2014) reportedly had an initial print run of 2 million. According to Amazon India, *One Indian Girl* (2016) beat all pre-order records since the site launched in 2013, scoring even beyond that summer's hit, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*. Bhagat has been hailed as 'the biggest-selling English-language novelist in India's history' (Greenlees 2008). His novels are targeted at India's twenty- and thirty-something readers who, he argues, prefer a 'Bollywood comedy sort of format' in line with what they have grown up with (as quoted in Greenlees). Hailed as the 'paperback king of India' (McCrum 2010) and 'Midas of the Bibliosphere' (Sargam 2012), Bhagat's popularity remains largely unacknowledged by the keepers of literary prestige. He was only grudgingly included in the Jaipur Literature Festival, an annual pilgrimage for India's highbrow global novels, which reluctantly scheduled a public conversation with him. 'Should the words "Chetan Bhagat" and "literary" even be in the same sentence? Was there absolutely nobody else they could get?' commented one irate figure online, capturing the broad sentiments of literary readers toward popular but downmarket writers (as quoted in Singh 2009). Yet, the event with Bhagat in Jaipur drew so many that the main venue in the eighteenth-century palace could not accommodate his fans, most of whom had never attended a literary festival before. 'He's talking to my generation; we connect to him', enthused one eighteen-year-old in Jaipur (MacRae 2009).

Two things stand out immediately: first, the neglect, even contempt, Bhagat faced and still faces from mainstream Indian publishers hoping for a crumb from the discovery and sales of a Great Indian Writer ratified by a global symbolic economy of Western prizes

and publishers. Bhagat's work is emphatically not highbrow enough to attract their attention, and his production was once scorned as a sport of nature, unlikely to persist. Second, in contrast to the 'literary' novel with its global readership, Bhagat's ambitions were and remain largely local. His sales and readership are robustly Indian, with an enviable hold on the youth market of eighteen- to twenty-five-year-old readers from around the country, including what marketers call Tier II and Tier III cities far from metropolitan hubs such as New Delhi and Mumbai. As one journalist explains:

regardless of what you think about the quality of his books, their success has much to tell us about the nature of a fast-growing market, and about a base of people who wouldn't normally list 'reading' among their hobbies but who might just pick up a Chetan Bhagat novel from a second-hand stall in a railway station. (Singh 2009)

In the decade and a half since Bhagat published *Five Point Someone*, six other novels and two essay collections have followed. Bhagat's presence is felt in numerous other nodes of India's cultural apparatus. He has a regular column in daily newspapers (both in Hindi and English), appears on primetime television as a frequent commentator on national policy matters, is active on the campus lecture circuit, and is a lively presence on social media. His *oeuvre* has seen successful adaptation into Bollywood blockbusters. *Five Point Someone* was remade as *3 Idiots* (2009, dir. Rajkumar Hirani), the second highest grossing Hindi film of the decade, with adaptations of other novels following.

The brief sketch of Bhagat's career highlights numerous elements that vex critical assumptions of how genre fiction is indigenized in India. Bhagat's popularity and sales mark him a phenomenon to acknowledge. His output in 'genre' forms such as the campus novel (*Five Point Someone*; *Half Girlfriend*; with moments in *Revolution 2020*), call-centre fiction (*One Night @ the Call Center*, 2005), romance (*2 States: The Story of my Marriage*, 2009; *Half-Girlfriend*), and crick lit (*The Three Mistakes of my Life*, 2008) is largely based on producing single titles in each form. In contrast to genre fiction writers such as Dashiell Hammett or Barbara Cartland, Louis L'Amour or G. W. M. Reynolds, for instance, who sustained a large body of genre titles in their *oeuvre* (hard-boiled detective fiction, romance, Westerns, and urban crime stories, respectively), Bhagat's production is wildly promiscuous. Hopscotching across multiple forms, innovating within them, all with a compelling brew of short sentences, dynamic first-person narration, and extensive dialogue in simple English liberally mixed with Hindi, Bhagat established just how successful fiction such as his has become in 'a land of a billion sparks' (the title of a 2008 motivational speech that went viral on YouTube; Bhagat 2012, 102–8). Yet, his popularity also marks the Rubicon facing the consolidation of genre fiction in India.

Bhagat's writings are directed at readers with limited fluency in English, which keeps them away from highbrow offerings. His works appear in a variety of popular forms that roughly parallel a putative reader's life cycle. The campus novel (*Five Point Someone*) gives way to the job novel (*One Night @ the Call Center*) to the sports and leisure novel

(*The Three Mistakes of My Life*) to romance and marriage (*2 States*) and so on. The works are immensely popular by all metrics. But what can they tell us about genre fiction in India? A lot, it turns out.

Genre fiction is a form of repeated production. Arthur Conan Doyle wrote fifty-six stories and four novels featuring Sherlock Holmes; Agatha Christie published forty-five detective novels and seventy-four stories featuring Miss Marple or Hercule Poirot; Dashiell Hammett published several dozen crime stories and half a dozen detective novels featuring detectives such as Sam Spade, Nick and Nora Charles, and the Continental Op; Raymond Chandler published seven detective novels, several dozen short stories and collections, many featuring Philip Marlowe or a hard-boiled figure indistinguishable from him. In short, the sheer volume of production in a single genre by these writers consolidated both their popularity and their status as genre writers. In this feature, Indian genre fiction is different.

Bhagat's production previews a major difference between Indian genre fiction and its proliferation in Britain and North America. Because of the vagaries of the Indian book market and the myopia of Indian publishers toward readers and their imagined tastes, there is a tendency to fetishize artisanal production—a single great school novel—rather than a mode of mass production—a *series* of school novels (as Enid Blyton obligingly churned out in the 1940s, or J. K. Rowling did in the 1990s and early 2000s, both to great acclaim in India). Though there is now a critical mass of authors who publish genre fiction in English in India, there are few who seem to sustain mass production in a singular form as Conan Doyle or Christie did in other centuries and contexts. While genre fiction enjoys a presence in Indian publishing, it is difficult to observe wide or deep penetration. Writers move into and out of it rather than developing independent niches in it. The award-winning, Oxford educated, *New Yorker* publishing Amitav Ghosh dabbled in science fiction in a single novel, *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), though he remains best known for his 'serious' writings including a Partition novel, *The Shadow Lines* (1988), and the environmental series inaugurated by *The Glass Palace* (2000), hardly genre fiction by any means, though 'cli-fi' has a clear presence in contemporary speculative fiction of environmental dystopia. The Man Booker Prize-winning Aravind Adiga, renowned for *The White Tiger* (2008), a dense dystopian novel about corruption in neoliberal India, turned recently to crick lit in *Selection Day* (2016), a novel set in the slums of Mumbai from which two brothers hope to escape by nothing less than selection into the national cricket team. At the other end of the spectrum, popular writers such as Chetan Bhagat and Anuja Chauhan write in numerous forms of genre fiction: both have published single cricket novels (Chauhan's *The Zoya Factor*, 2008), both have produced romances (Chauhan's *Battle for Bittora*, 2010), and both claim a hand in chick lit (Bhagat's *One Indian Girl*, 2016, and Chauhan's *The Zoya Factor*) and so on.

In short, the emerging ecosystem of genre fiction in India is inhabited by many, rather than owned by a few. In contrast to the Anglo-American fiction industry's model where writers define a specific form of genre fiction and own it (such as Christie, Hammett,

Cartland, and Isaac Asimov), in India it appears that genre fiction entices visiting writers who move between and away from it at will. As Bhagat exemplifies, the Indian author is the 'brand' that readers follow, rather than the form itself underwriting markets and securing readers. India in this emerging moment reveals a modification of the Anglo-American model of genre fiction. It is less mass products that matter in India than their producers—and loyal readers—whose sales and purchases in mass numbers propel the market.

### Forms and Figures

Mills & Boon's romance novels enjoyed great popularity in India in the post-Independence decades and established an enduring presence in the subcontinent with a steady run of titles put out by the imprint's publisher. (Mills & Boon, a British firm, was acquired by the Canadian company Harlequin Enterprises in 1971.) Stories of muscular heroes named Dominic wooing independent-minded young women named Aurora with grinding kisses as they sweep them off their feet sank deep in India's otherwise decorous narrative landscape. Mills & Boon's monthly output of one-hundred-odd titles with clearly defined plot treatments ('yes, these guidelines are prescriptive but, importantly, there are eighteen different prescriptions', observes the scholar Kim Wilkins; 2012, 38) created ample variety within the genre. For readers comfortable in English, there were plenty of romance novels to keep them company at any given moment. Yet, the Australian outback or the hospital ward where romantic encounter and opportunity thrived aplenty for Mills & Boon's heroines hardly resembled the social world of metropolitan India with its hypocritical sexual mores and limited opportunity for romantic encounter or female independence.

All this changed in 1971 when a twenty-four-year-old intern landed a column in the Bombay film and society magazine, *Stardust*. Shobha Dé's writings incubated a racy, gossipy style of Hinglish for young working women in fast-growing cities that consolidated a base of readers who followed her into her novels a decade later. *Socialite Evenings* (1989), *Starry Nights* (1991), and *Sisters* (1992) were followed by almost a dozen titles, all beginning with the auspicious 'S', and all perfecting Dé's formula of sex and stuff, or men and materialism. They became a major success for Penguin India, the Indian imprint of the mass market British firm that arrived on the subcontinent in 1985. Dé's novels depict a sophisticated, aspirational world of the upper middle classes who speak English well if carelessly, who understand the opportunities available to lissome women navigating the dogs and gods of urban workplaces. Dé packaged the heady ingredients against the backdrop of Bombay's commercial cinema whose tropes and ambitions her protagonists share (here, her time at *Stardust* serves the novels especially well in the traffic of innuendo and reference back and forth).

Dé's romances, once daring for their salacious content, have been superseded by writers such as Anuja Chauhan, who have scooped the attention of younger readers with romances set in Mumbai among women in a world where everyone is born digital, where a fast-paced everyday includes regular ad shoots, mobile phone text messages, cricket games, and high school boyfriends that characterize the lives of women lower in the class chain than Dé's socialites and stars. Chauhan's novels develop the familiar romance plot (girl-gets-man) into chick lit (gal-probably-loses-dude-but-has-friends-who-commiserate) and combine it with quite possibly India's most abiding national passion: cricket. *The Zoya Factor* absorbs the story of an advertising employee turned cricket mascot for the Indian national team. *Battle for Bittora* transports the conventions of romance and chick lit into a contentious local election in a small town in northern India. Like other genre fiction writers from India, Chauhan's work hopscotches across romance and other forms (in one case, cricket; in another, politics) and uses the love plot to bring major social preoccupations into focus. Other writers such as Swati Kaushal have also followed a successful launch in chick lit with experiments in other forms. Kaushal's debut, *A Piece of Cake* (2005), was followed by the young adult novel, *A Girl Like Me* (2008), and a police procedural, *Drop Dead* (2012). To date, each appears to be a one-off production in a different form of genre fiction.

Meanwhile, India's move toward speculative fiction includes a wide spectrum of 'other-world' narratives including science fiction, fantasy, horror, mythological, and futuristic fiction—with an august precursor in Salman Rushdie whose first novel, the sci-fi futurist *Grimus* (1975), was a notable flop in the genre. Set in an imaginary Calf Island where Flapping Eagle, the Indian man who cannot die, washes ashore, *Grimus*'s sales languished at about 800 copies in its initial printing before being pulped by the publisher shortly after release. Speculative fiction has since done better in India, mutating from using myth as a component in 'literary' magical realism (à la *Grimus*) to myth as a template for fantasy fiction in the writings of Amish Tripathi and Ashok K. Banker, both of whom retell stories from Indian mythology. Amish (his preferred name) was a banker, like Bhagat. Like Bhagat, he turned to fiction late in life, producing a trilogy of novels based on the life of the Hindu god Shiva (set in 1900 BCE, *The Immortals of Meluha* appeared in 2010) followed by a series on the life of the Hindu god Ram (inaugurated by *Scion of Ikshavaku* (2015) set in 3400 BCE). The stories of Hindu gods take a particular edge in the country's ongoing tilt toward Hindu first (Hindutva) priorities, and they often read as thinly veiled celebrations of Hindutva. Banker's substantial *oeuvre* spans virtually every form of genre fiction, including young adult, crime, and historical romance, though he is best known for an eight-volume modern retelling of the *Ramayana* cycle with *The Siege of Mithila* appearing in 2003. Meanwhile, though graphic novels are typically not categorized as genre fiction, it bears mentioning that the popularity of mythologicals in India's speculative fiction has a robust history in the immensely popular form of graphic novels devoted to Indian religion, mythology, and

history under the Amar Chitra Katha ('eternal picture stories') imprint (see Chapter 14 in this volume).

Far from the gods, Mumbai's fabled criminal underworld with its glamorous representation in Hindi films such as *Company* (2002, dir. Ram Gopal Varma) also features in the thriving genres of detective and crime fiction. Crime surrounding the city's cinema industry had its first showing in the British novelist H. R. F. Keating's *Filmi, Filmi, Inspector Ghote* (1976), a Bombay-based novel that first coined the term 'Bollywood'. Vikram Chandra's highbrow novel *Sacred Games* (2006)—with portions first appearing in the *New Yorker*—reveal the city from its tentacular underworld where *Bhais* (or gangsters) and cops (represented by Inspector Sartaj Singh) appear in the thousand-page work, called by some an epic treatment of the genre. The Mumbai crime reporter S. Hussain Zaidi, whom Chandra frequently credits as a source in his own detective novel, himself writes about the international networks of Bombay's organized crime in titles such as *From Dongri to Dubai: Six Decades of the Mumbai Mafia* (2012) and *Byculla to Bangkok* (2014). Zaidi's work, like Dé's, is an extension of his journalism. His writings take 'true crime' picked from his investigative work that he morphs into gritty narratives with their vernacular speech and confident knowledge of Mumbai's extensive crime networks, that stretch from the slums of Dongri to the extradition-free haven of Dubai.

Detective writings such as Chandra's and Zaidi's were notably successful in the decades following Bombay's 'Black Friday' bombings of March 1993. A 2004 film *Black Friday* (dir. Anurag Kashyap) brought Zaidi's true crime narrative of a police investigation around Bombay's terror suspects to the big screen. Meanwhile, Anita Nair's *Cut Like Wound* (2011), featuring Inspector Gowda, and *Chain of Custody* (2016) delivered more local treatments of both detection and criminals, moving from Mumbai to Bangalore and from 'true crime' to psychological thriller.

Blaft Publications, a quirky independent publishing house in Chennai known for its translations into English, merits mention for making available a range of genre fiction from the previous century. Notable are its reissues of a number of Ibn-e Safi's Urdu *jasusi dunya* ('detective world') novels from the 1940s and 1950s featuring Inspector Faridi, along with two admirably curated anthologies of *Tamil Pulp Fiction* (ed. Rakesh Khanna, 2008 and ed. K. Chakravarthy Pritham, 2012) with romance, sci-fi, and detective stories featuring 'Mad scientists! Desperate housewives! Murderous robots! Scandalous starlets! Sordid, drug-fueled love affairs!' according to the jacket covers. Blaft's publications reveal the domestic contexts in which detective and speculative fiction have thrived in India, far beyond English. Ironically, the English translations convey a certain retro capital that the Tamil pulp fiction did not command in the original. Akashic, the Brooklyn publishing firm, has brought Indian crime fiction to new audiences in anthologies such as *Delhi Noir* (ed. Hirsh Sawhney, 2009) and *Mumbai Noir* (ed. Altaf Tyrewala, 2012).

## The Future of Genre Fiction

Observing the United States during the 1940s, the German refugee writers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno noted the extensive commercialization of art around them. 'Automobiles, bombs, and movies keep the whole thing together', they despaired about the country, a remark that develops their claim that 'culture' in the United States—exemplified for them by Hollywood movies—had become increasingly industrial in scale and production (Horkheimer and Adorno [1944] 1988, 121). The mass culture that resulted was, for them, also a form of mass deception, shorn of the subversive powers embedded in 'high' culture. Moreover, mass culture revealed little variation: it could be endlessly reproduced like any other industrial commodity such as automobiles or bombs.

Horkheimer and Adorno's was an influential argument that further consecrated the cleavage between high culture and low. It became particularly resonant with critics of genre fiction who noted that the latter's persistent conventions provided readers with the addictive pleasures of repetition at the cost of disruption or subversion. Yet, a closer look at long prominent forms of genre fiction—detective novels and romance—reveals that rather than containment, the very repetitions of genre fiction's formal features also provides ample room for subversion and dissent.

Sherlock Holmes's fabled boast, 'I am the last and highest court of appeal in detection' (Conan Doyle, *The Sign of Four*, Chapter 1), celebrates the detective's singular powers of deduction (an exercise that Raymond Chandler called 'a series of simple operations, like assembling an egg beater'; [1944] 2005, 213). More than a boast, however, Holmes's claim reveals the menacing presence of a 'court' that only he can contain. 'If we are pretty quick in catching our men, we are not so quick in condemning them', purrs Inspector Athelney Jones to the suspect in the Holmes novella (Chapter 11). Yet, much detective fiction involves innocents caught in a dragnet by the police who are actually 'out of their depths—which, by the way, is their normal state', Holmes notes (Chapter 1). The detective becomes a masterful figure rescuing innocents, regulating a social world, and exposing its incompetence. The detective's ability to contain social power comes with some regret, a theme echoed over a century later in Vikram Chandra's detective novella 'Kama' (published in the collection *Love and Longing in Bombay*, 1997), when Inspector Sartaj Singh ruefully notes: 'I arrested a man for a crime he didn't commit [...] and to call it justice is only half the truth.' Detective fiction's conventions—whether in Holmes or his heirs—walk a tightrope between entertainment and social commentary, skilfully disrupting the fantasy of a stable social world, even while they appear to affirm it with airtight endings. The very repetition of formal conventions such as closure embeds opportunities for subversion, a practice that Chandler called detective fiction's 'quality of redemption' ([1944] 2005, 219).

In romances, another prominent form of genre fiction that enjoys sales in the millions, the manifest conventions appear to uphold heteronormative (or straight) priorities of what Jane Austen might name 'the marriage plot'. Yet, as the scholar Janice Radway has

documented in an extensive ethnography of romance reading among middle-class middle-American women, rather than subjecting women readers to patriarchy, romance novels assure them of their self-worth and provide resources to contain if not frontally oppose patriarchy. Other feminist scholars such as Tania Modleski expand on the unexpected satisfaction that even formulaic straight romances offer lesbian readers: 'even with the most retrograde romances one should not condemn the novels so much as the "conditions which have made them necessary"' (Modleski 1997, 27).

An array of scholarship on genre fiction that includes Radway and Modleski on romance, Michael Denning on late nineteenth-century dime novels ('they can offer new metaphors for [...] divisions of the social order and contest the received and enforced metaphors of the dominant order'; 1987, 78–9), and Paula Rabinowitz on American pulp fiction of the 1920s and 1940s reveals the many ways in which genre fiction becomes a space to ventilate social anxieties. 'Pulp's cascade of stories', writes Rabinowitz, voices wide-ranging concerns of the day (2014, 47). Many worlds 'overlap' in these forms, which serve as 'the glue, the matrix, the interface of social preoccupation' (61). The earlier misgivings about genre fiction as mass culture without social purpose seem increasingly remote from findings by scholars trained in cultural studies, feminist, gender, and queer studies, and Marxist work. As the Marxian philosopher Antonio Gramsci noted in his influential remarks about popular literature: 'it has enormous value precisely in this respect because the success of a work of commercial literature indicates (and it is often the only indication available) the "philosophy of the age", that is, the mass of feelings and conceptions of the world predominant among the "silent" majority' (1985, 348).

Gramsci's remarks about the work of popular fiction are especially resonant for India. The country's social and economic organization in the decades following the 1991 liberalization of the economy sharpened its incomplete and uneven modernity that today more closely resembles that of pre-war Italy than Germany or the United States. Where Horkheimer and Adorno's suspicion of mass culture derived from observing the US's quiescent, affluent middle classes lulled by automobiles and movies, Gramsci's came from reviewing an economic landscape with newly literate readers turning to fiction in order to make sense of Italy's rapidly changing economic order. For readers noted by Gramsci or enticed by Chetan Bhagat, separately aspiring to working- or middle-class security but often removed from it, pulp and popular fiction are the cultural forms that effectively express a range of preoccupations largely ignored by or inaccessible in literary fiction. Genre fiction joins the portfolio of popular forms in India's media landscape where readers can embrace their own modernity and encounter lives tinged by social concerns similar to their own. The dense, psychologically complex literary novels about the British Raj or India's Independence have given way to popular novels about acquiring English, preparing for cut-throat entrance exams, following dreams, exiting dead-end jobs in the call-centre economy, evading intrusive family expectations, and so on.

In contrast to the short-lived, sensorial pleasures of popular cinema, or the immediate and even shorter-lived networks of social media exchange, popular fiction penetrates an expanding contact zone that ratifies readers' concerns in print. Readers migrate to genre fiction as genre fiction migrates into readers' backpacks, handbags, and commutes, infiltrating and entertaining, escaping and eluding the everyday. Genre fiction's internal variety, its mash-up of languages, forms, and competing priorities, helps to negotiate the fabrication of identities at a moment when India's emergence as a major economic power coincides with profound domestic social transformation.

In an important reader-based account of genre fiction, the librarian Joyce Saricks explains that 'while knowledge of a genre's conventions is vital in understanding its appeal to readers, the ability to see beyond the boundaries [provides] an even more valuable resource and guide' (Saricks 2009, 3). Saricks's grouping of genres looks beyond their formal features and instead focuses on their particular appeal to readers since 'genres continue to blend and overlap'. Her groupings are broad in order to 'illustrate how appeal works across genre lines': Adrenaline Genres (including thrillers and suspense), Emotion Genres (incorporating horror, romance, women's lives), Intellect Genres (including literary fiction, mysteries, sci-fi), and Landscape Genres (including fantasy, historical fiction, Westerns) (Saricks 2009, 3). The focus on the reader that such groupings provide underscores that, publishers and authors notwithstanding, it is readers and their tastes that determine the success and longevity of genre fiction even as the forms mutate and transform to accommodate the blurring of genre boundaries.

The arrival of genre fiction in India serves to index the economic and social changes in the decades since the country liberalized its economy and engaged more fully with the opportunities and perils associated with globalization. The wide accessibility of genre fiction attests to the increasing leisure and literacy of India's readers. The topics and themes covered in its diverse forms address, and even possibly subvert, long-standing social and ideological priorities in a traditional, hierarchical, caste-based society. Forms such as romance and detective fiction are notable for enticing new readers and aligning their internal aspirations with the outer world. Speculative forms such as sci-fi and historical fiction repurpose myth to the contemporary social and political world in compelling ways. Genre fiction is dramatically transforming publishing in India. It urges renewed attention to a marketplace where readers and their preferences define how ideas circulate and consolidate social priorities.