

The World Humanities Report

# Staying Relevant, Staying Committed: Publishing Margins in India

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Safwan Amir



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# Staying Relevant, Staying Committed: Publishing Margins in India

Safwan Amir [Ahmedabad University](#)

This essay examines the role of English-language independent academic publishing houses in the dissemination and outreach of the humanities in India since the 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Reading a book is typically a solitary or private exercise. Whether one flips through pages carelessly or scrutinizes a book cautiously, what goes into making the reading experiences is rarely given much thought, but reading and writing are just two nodes—however important—in the broader assemblage that is book publishing. Within that assemblage, I will examine the special role that independent publishing houses play in India as mediators between writers and the public. In particular, I focus on those who publish regional literature by marginalized writers in the English language.<sup>2</sup>

Since the 1980s, India has witnessed the widespread mobilization of Dalit and other marginalized groups such as women, Muslims, and Adivasis. After the implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission in the 1990s,<sup>3</sup> their activism intensified and proliferated along caste, gender, and class lines. The activism of these groups has had a critical impact on modern academic disciplines, especially in the humanities and social sciences. Operating from

<sup>1</sup> I thank Bishnu Mohapatra, Mary Murrell, and Samira Junaid for their extensive comments on and edits of previous drafts of this essay. I am grateful to Muhammed Afzal P, ESM Aslam, and Mahammad Ali Jauhar for their help and insight during the course of this research, and to publishers S. Anand, Auswaf Ahsan, and Maitreya Yogesh for sparing their valuable time to speak with me.

<sup>2</sup> I specifically focus on English-language Indian independent publishers because English remains the dominant language of the university-based humanities in India such that English language publishing is the most influential. India is of course also home to a vast number of publishing houses in Indian languages, and their stories deserve more attention. For a discussion of publishing in other Indian languages, please see other essays in the South Asian region's contribution to the World Humanities Report, especially J. Devika, *Beyond Aesthetic Education: The Malayali Engagement with the Humanities* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2022), Badri Narayan, *Dalit Ideas: The Politics of Knowledge in North India* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2022), and V. Geetha, V. Senthilselvan, and S. Sivalingam, *From Theology to the Arts: Dalit Resistance Culture in Tamil Nadu* (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> The Mandal Commission report was introduced to identify socially or educationally backward classes. The report recommended that groups identified as Other Backward Classes be given reservations in jobs the public sector, including the central government.

the margins, these newly emergent “subaltern” groups, communities, or counterpublics have challenged the existing bases of knowledge and power, and in this contest the independent publisher has played a crucial role. The publisher of the margins, as I show here, performs not only the role of creating both author and audience but also the role of ensuring persistence of subaltern discourses.

New discourses typically struggle to find an audience and to survive in a competitive intellectual and publishing environment. Publish while maintaining particular political, intellectual, and moral commitments, and doing so in difficult market circumstances, presents the publisher of the margins with difficult ethical dilemmas. This essay investigates these dilemmas, how publishers of the margins grapple with them, and the discourses that determine them. It becomes clear how independent publishing is not, in fact, “independent” of the structural conditions that constrain the humanities and their operation. The essay also attempts to demonstrate how the struggles of publishers and publishing houses in South Asia illuminate the struggles of the humanities themselves.

I provide short profiles of six independent publishing houses that share a commitment to narratives and perspectives from the margins. With the help of the example of these publishing houses, I then discuss the historical shifts that have taken place in the publishing industry in the past couple of decades. These shifts center around how the humanities and their networks of distribution have themselves undergone transformation. Finally, after examining the strategies publishers of the margins employ to navigate the publisher’s dilemma, I argue for a distinction between “marginal discourses” and “discourses of marginality” in the South Asian humanities.

Socially and politically committed independent publishing houses provide a unique vantage point to observe knowledge dissemination by the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, on the one hand, and by activists and their deep social engagements, on the other. Studying the various ways these publishers interact with academia requires close attention because the dynamics of these interactions determine the nature of the discourses that we become familiar with as trained academics in the humanities and social sciences. Indeed, it is ironic that the humanities develop with the help of publishing houses—through reading, rebuttals, criticisms, engagements, and so on—and yet there is little acknowledgment or analysis of their influence on the humanities. This essay seeks to initiate such a discussion of the significance of publishing houses in the larger story of the humanities in India. While from the outside the processes of publishing might seem merely mechanical, the humanities as we know them would hardly exist without its many processes of editing, distribution, and marketing.

## Publishing (In)dependently

Let me begin by explaining what I mean by independent publishing. As opposed to corporate and large institutional publishers—whether Jaico, Random House India, or Oxford University Press India—independent publishers lack the financial resources available to these larger players that publish hundreds of books every year. These large publishers seek to maximize their profits. Independent publishing houses, on the other hand, derive their priorities from a sharp sense of purpose, represent a particular worldview, and specialize in specific genres of writing.<sup>4</sup> They also ally or collaborate with other publishers who share their ideological commitments. Examples of such independent publishing houses outside of India include: the Feminist Press (New York), Madhouse Press (New Mexico), Neon Books (Edinburgh), Penned in the Margins (London), Tavern Books (Oregon), Underground Voices (Los Angeles), and Verso Books (London). The focus of independent publishing runs contrary to the very foundation on which mainstream publishing is built, namely, publishing all kinds of books as long as they are judged to have commercial appeal. In the race to publish on all topics and themes, a general publisher thus dilutes its focus.

Although the label “independent” might suggest a freedom from constraint, independent publishers (specialized and general) exist within larger systems that have a direct bearing on their work and identities. In what follows, I build on sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s work to tease out the figure of the publisher as a distinct modern subject working within what he called an “ethos.”<sup>5</sup> In his study of symbolic capital and cultural production, Bourdieu noted that a work of art could not be understood on its own, in a *l’art pour l’art*, or “art for art’s sake,” fashion, because it is always the product of multiple actors involved in different capacities in the field of art.<sup>6</sup> Bourdieu himself was familiar with French publishing, and his work contains some profound, if passing, insights about the subject. Bourdieu’s career also coincided with momentous transformations

<sup>4</sup> In a compilation of pieces about publishing in India during the COVID-19 pandemic, I found nearly fifty instances of the word “committed” (or derivatives thereof) from March 21, 2020, to September 16, 2022. See “Publishing and the Pandemic,” accessed December 20, 2023, <https://scroll.in/topic/56265/publishing-and-the-pandemic>.

<sup>5</sup> For Bourdieu “ethos,” distinct from ethics, means those unconscious, internalized predispositions that govern one’s everyday practice. Pierre Bourdieu, *Sociology in Question* (London: Sage Publications, 1992), 86.

<sup>6</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

in book publishing, not only in France but globally.<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu's work helps us understand how publishers are caught up both in cultural production (aimed at an accumulation of symbolic capital) and economic production (aimed at immediate profit and financial gain), or, put another way, between works they are committed to and market feasibility.<sup>8</sup> I term this conflict the “publisher's dilemma” and show below how independent publishers in India since the beginning of the twenty-first century have cultivated both a disposition of indifference toward utilitarian and monetary ends and a propensity for market astuteness.

## Opening New Worlds

In this section, I introduce six relatively new independent publishing houses in India that stand out for their commitment to amplifying marginalized voices as well as for their demonstrated ability to open up new avenues for scholarly interrogation and interpretation.

### adivaani

Founded in 2012 in Kolkata, adivaani is the brainchild of Ruby Hembrom, an Adivasi cultural practitioner, documentarian, writer, and publisher. She describes it as “a platform for indigenous expression and assertion” and “an archiving, chronicling, publishing and disseminating outfit of and by the 104 million indigenous peoples of India.”<sup>9</sup> Hembrom started adivaani as a project to collect the stories of the Santals,<sup>10</sup> which have been passed down orally over generations and which were in danger of being lost. In a society that constantly tries to silence Indigenous peoples, Hembrom pushes back: “From typeset text we have to speak, our voices loud, clear, unashamed and our brand of knowl-

<sup>7</sup> In 1975, Bourdieu established a French quarterly journal of social science, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, and remained its editor in chief till his death in 2002.

<sup>8</sup> “[The] publisher [is] a simple businessman or a bold ‘talent-spotter’ who will succeed only if he is able to sense the *specific laws* of a market yet to come.” Here the publisher is not merely entrapped within structures, but his robust subjectivity moves beyond the confines of a stagnant reading. Pierre Bourdieu, “The Production of Belief: Contribution to an Economy of Symbolic Goods,” *Media, Culture & Society* 2, no. 3 (1980): 284 (emphasis in original).

<sup>9</sup> “About adivaani,” adivaani, accessed December 20, 2023, <https://adivaani.org/about/>.

<sup>10</sup> *Santhals* are one of the largest tribes in India and live mostly in the states of West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand, and Assam.

edges standing the test of time and critique. Silence is not our mother tongue.”<sup>11</sup>  
The adivaani logo depicting heads of two geese (see figure 1) takes inspiration



Figure 1. adivaani's logo,  
[adivaani.org](http://adivaani.org).

from a creation story of the Santal tribes of West Bengal, with one of the geese looking to the past, while the other looks to the future.

Since its founding in 2012, the desire to preserve the deep roots that connect Adivasi to their ancestors motivates adivaani to address the world with its own words and its own forms of expression. Two compilations of mythical stories about the Santal people that it published in 2013, *We Come from the Geese* and *Earth Rests on a Tortoise* (both written by Ruby Hembrom and illustrated B. Jain), include not only text but illustrations and the graphics that present new forms and practices of reading.

### Critical Quest

As the name suggests, Critical Quest is a publishing house on a quest, publishing critical studies that focus on the dispossessed, the marginalized, and the subaltern. Its publishing strategy is to help readers gain perspective from exposure to ideas from across the world, which they can use to rethink theoretical models within India as their readers also deal with specific issues of religion,

<sup>11</sup> Ruby Hembrom, “Reclaiming the Reproduction of Adivasi Knowledge: The Lens of an Adivasi Publisher” (paper presented at Inequality and Poverty Conference, “Ground Down by Growth: Tribe, Caste, Class and Inequality in 21st Century India,” London School of Economics, London, December 9, 2017).

caste, class, and gender. Founders Gnana Aloysius and Josna T. Jacob established Critical Quest in the 2000s as a nonprofit in New Delhi with the intention of disseminating existing social science literature as well as new publications to



Figure 2. Critical Quest's logo, [criticalquest.info](http://criticalquest.info).

students, activists, and academics at affordable prices. This comes from their deep commitment to the belief that critical social sciences have the ability to transform society. Now into their fifteenth year, their simple logo featuring the interlocking letters C and Q (figure 2) captures this connection between critical analysis and the quest for social transformation.

The founders are involved in every stage of the publishing process, from commissioning, reviewing, editing, rewriting, and designing to overseeing the printing process, packaging, and finally distributing the books. The pair, deeply committed to “people-oriented social transformation,” have worked for many years among tribal and oppressed groups in Jharkhand, including retrieving, recording, and distributing the stories and traditions of tribal people. Their work at Critical Quest relies on their many supporters across the country, who assist in the distribution of books across the country. For authors and publishers from marginalized sections of Indian society, the major challenge is not necessarily the postcolonial question of the power relations between the colonizer and the colonized. While colonial modernity does indeed continue to influ-



ence the Global South, important questions often go unasked.<sup>12</sup> For instance, Aloysius' own work, *Nationalism without a Nation in India*, brought to the fore a rereading, from within, of nationalism, where Brahmanism is the primary force of domination and hegemony.<sup>13</sup> He argues that India's upper castes are equally responsible for the particular form of nationalism that India took up. Such insight and attention to questions around caste, without reducing them to a mere "internal" matter or conflict, has helped academic scholars and activists voice their concerns at multiple levels. Critical Quest continues to stay committed to such organic ways of thinking and publishing.

### Navayana

Navayana is inspired by B. R. Ambedkar, the thinker, economist, reformer, anthropologist, lawyer, and shaper of the Indian constitution. Founded in 2003 by S. Anand and D. Ravikumar, the publishing house, currently in New Delhi, is committed to Ambedkar's philosophy and political outlook. It takes its name from the word *navayana* (new vehicle) that Ambedkar used to describe his interpretation of Buddhism, the religion he embraced after moving away from the casteism of Hinduism. Navayana the publishing house has come to be a recognized name among intellectuals and activists for its catalog of anti-caste narratives. In an interview, S. Anand told me that a deep connection with Ambedkar is the inspiration of the publishing house. He told me the story of how, once Navayana had become an established brand, an investor had insisted on meeting him. He wanted to convince Anand to push the firm to the "next level," with an eye toward future acquisition by a conglomerate. The agent came in for a shock when he entered the Navayana office and saw multiple Ambedkar portraits gazing at him and made a quick exit. One Navayana publication, *Bhimayana: Experiences of Untouchability* (2011), a graphic biography of Ambedkar, has sold over 20,000 copies and has been translated into nine languages, including Korean, French, and Spanish. Especially since the push by Dalit nongovernmental organizations for the inclusion of caste-based discrimination in the 2001 World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa, the anticaste movement has sought to sever "Indianness" from the hierarchizing caste system and to force the Indian state to address and be accountable to the international community about continuing caste-based atrocities. By

<sup>12</sup> See also Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), and Srirupa Roy, *Beyond Belief: India and the Politics of Postcolonial Nationalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> G. Aloysius, *Nationalism without a Nation in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997).

publishing Dalit narratives that find resonance with other marginalized voices across the globe, Navayana furthers these aims. The seriousness with which the publishing house takes its commitment to progressive caste politics may also be seen in the way they advertise when looking to hire interns. With ads that proclaim that “beef lovers” are welcome, Navayana directly counters “Brahmins only” advertisements that continue to circulate in the public domain and are emblematic of the caste-based discrimination that continues throughout India. In 2021 Navayana also established a Dalit History Fellowship, intended specifically to help authors writing about Dalit history. Inspired by poet and writer Aravinda Malagatti’s autobiography in Kannada language, *Government Brahmana*, Navayana’s logo of two buffaloes kissing (see figure 3) has a tale

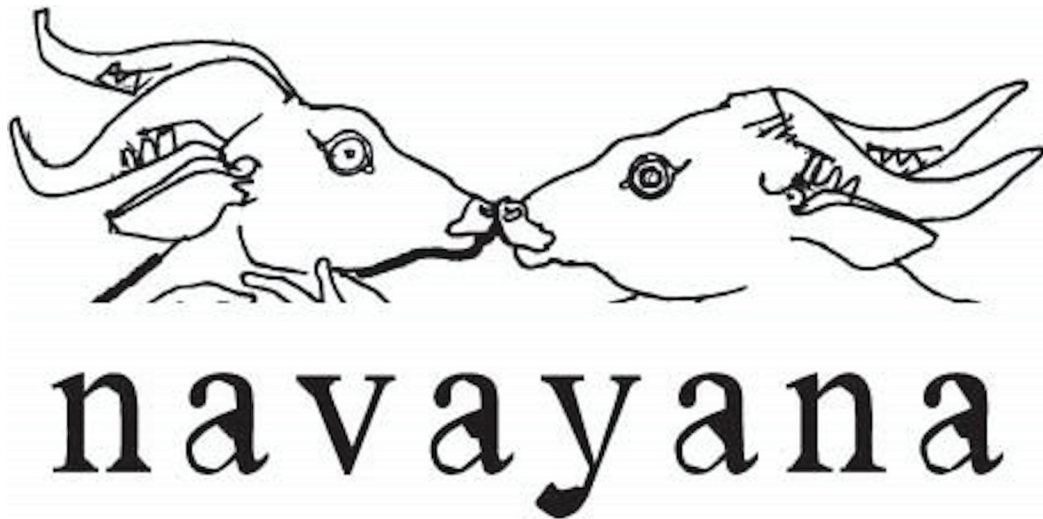


Figure 3. Navayana’s logo, [navayana.org](http://navayana.org).

of its own.<sup>14</sup> The author narrates a tale where Dalit-owned buffaloes are not allowed to mate with upper caste-owned buffaloes. Although the tale addresses the deep-seated caste prejudices within Indian society, the “Dalit” she-buffalo and “Brahmin” he-buffalo manage to find ways to be together, sending out a strong message that there is hope in challenging the caste system.

### Other Books

Based in the southern state of Kerala, Other Books publishes minority narratives,

<sup>14</sup> See “About the Logo: Five Years of Buffaloes Kissing; S. Anand,” Navayana, accessed December 20, 2023, <https://navayana.org/logo>.



Figure 4. Other Books' logo, [otherbooksonline.com](http://otherbooksonline.com).

especially but not exclusively from the Islamic tradition, and runs a bookstore by the same name in the city of Calcut. Their logo (figure 4) features the tagline “Book is a relationship,” which captures the publisher’s intention to help people from diverse settings connect and transcend their differences both through the mediation of print and in person.

Auswaf Ahsan, the managing editor of the firm, is an expert on the people of Malabar. On the status of minority publishing, Ahsan told me that they do not fit in the categories of “Left, Right, or Menon” (upper-caste Malayali), and that their position as Muslims also sets them apart from the mainstream. But the publishing house is hardly limited to Muslims; many Dalit-Bahujan groups find it easy to communicate with and feel at ease within Other Books (both as a publishing house and a bookstore). Furthermore, because they often publish titles with no obvious sectarian affiliation, Other Books attracts the suspicion of all sectarian groups. According to Ahsan there is a shared “we-feeling” among these individuals, and many books published by Other Books in the past decade reflect similar anticaste perspectives. Other Books has published around a hundred titles since its inception in 2003, no mean feat for a publishing house that utilizes a business model that requires new investors for each title published. Other Books also takes up the task of distribution and thus has built strong networks both locally and internationally.

### Panther’s Paw Publications

Established by Yogesh Maitreya in 2016 and based in Nagpur, Maharashtra, Panther’s Paw Publications takes its name from the Dalit Panthers, a political, social, and literary movement, founded in 1972 and inspired by Ambedkar, that sought to combat caste discrimination.<sup>15</sup> The “paw” refers to the inspiration they

<sup>15</sup> The Dalit Panthers in turn took their name from the Black Panther Party in the United States.

draw from the Panthers as they follow in their footsteps, while also expanding into new areas as every new era requires new means and methods to fight injustice. Using the concept of “publication as a movement,” Maitreya says he is invested in publishing books with a distinct ideology of optimism. Focused on translating Dalit literature from Marathi to English, Maitreya aims to move away from victim narratives (without denying their importance in the larger struggle) toward stories of hope and love (which, he believes, serve to sensitize larger audiences). Maitreya explained to me that it is in the nature of people not to change radically and that he wants to take simple steps instead of setting hard-to-achieve goals. Stories can have a huge impact on the lives of people, and he believes there is a need for thousands of stories to illuminate worlds people have never seen. Currently, he funds his book projects by appeals to people to prebook orders in advance, using social media as his primary medium. The small profit he makes is put back into publishing the next book. The logo, as the name suggests, is both a panther’s paw and, on closer observation, a clenched human fist symbolizing resistance, strength, and solidarity (see figure 5). The logo represents publishing as a tool to carry forward the movement to uproot caste.



**Figure 5.** Panther’s Paw Publications’ logo, [instagram.com/panterspawpublication](https://www.instagram.com/panterspawpublication).

## Zubaan Books

Finally, Zubaan Books is a feminist publishing house and leading independent publisher in India. It was founded in 2004 by Urvashi Butalia, who had cofounded the feminist publishing house Kali for Women in the 1980s. After dissolving Kali for Women, its cofounders went their separate ways, and Butalia started Zubaan, whose list focuses on women’s issues as it “tackles cutting edge issues such as assisted reproductive technologies, sex selection, gender and caste-based violence, and queer theory.”<sup>16</sup> Its logo (figure 6) depicts a woman immersed in reading a book, her back resting against the word “zubaan.”

The name reclaims the Hindi word *zubaan* (lit. “tongue”) that refers, often



Figure 6. Zubaan’s logo, [zubaanbooks.com](http://zubaanbooks.com).

pejoratively, to “women’s talk” or gossip. The firm has also made a name for its principles, both editorial and business. As Butalia put it, “You cannot be a feminist publisher and exploit men and women working with you. You cannot expect them to accept low salaries simply because they endorse the cause.”<sup>17</sup> Zubaan is also one of the few publishing houses (or private companies) that has reservation employee quotas for women as well as trans and nonbinary people from Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi, and other Tribal communities.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> “The Lists,” Zubaan, accessed December 20, 2023, <https://zubaanbooks.com/about-zubaan/the-lists/>.

<sup>17</sup> Somak Ghoshal, “Urvashi Butalia: I Want to Prove that Feminist Publishing Can Survive Commercially,” *Mint*, June 14, 2013, <https://www.livemint.com/Companies/595QfEIEltDLfuvgNqTiOI/Urvashi-Butalia--I-want-to-prove-that-feminist-publishing-c.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Zubaan Books official website usually list these under jobs and internship: <https://zubaanbooks.com/work-with-us/>.

## Dissemination

Having observed in the previous section the various ways in which publishing houses create an identity, through names, logos, and from particular traditions, I now consider how the publisher is located within various transformations involving the social practice of reading, knowledge production, and dissemination technologies.

## Technologies

Social historian A. R. Venkatachalapathy has highlighted two broad changes in the history of the book in the Indian subcontinent. First, with the strengthening of print technology by the late nineteenth century, reading practices underwent considerable change. Whereas traditionally people had read aloud, printed books brought new habits and practices, such as private, silent reading. Second, after the First World War, the popularity of the novel facilitated a shift in literary production from earlier forms of patronage—from zamindars, native princes, local men of influence, and caste headmen—to those of the colonial elite, who supported literary works on a subscription basis.<sup>19</sup> In the latter half of the twentieth century, universities, exclusive book clubs, and other new spaces became centers of reading and reflection for a rapidly growing literate middle class, for whom reading books became a virtue to be cultivated and cherished. As book club members, people would gather to discuss the reading they had done privately. These clubs were often closed to the general public, with English fluency and fashionable clothing being the prerequisites. These were elite gatherings, and people from the margins (even when well-off and part of a larger reading public) did not always feel welcome or comfortable.<sup>20</sup> Points of association were drawn along the lines of class (and caste), and the clubs produced and reproduced social standing. Taken together, the practices of silent reading and exclusive reading groups cultivated and perpetuated habits of reading, thinking, and discussing. This type of socialization created stan-

<sup>19</sup> See chapters 1 and 7, respectively, in A. R. Venkatachalapathy, *The Province of the Book: Scholars, Scribes, and Scribblers in Colonial Tamilnadu* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2012).

<sup>20</sup> They would nevertheless have their own reading and discussion groups. See chapter 5 in Venkatachalapathy, *The Province of the Book*; also compare with Matthew Rosen, “Ethnographies of Reading: Beyond Literacy and Books,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 88, no. 4 (2015): 1059–83, and Benjamin Cohen, “Servants and Staff,” in *In the Club: Associational Life in Colonial South Asia* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2015), 100–121.

dards of behavior that were within the reach of only particular groups.<sup>21</sup>

Independent publishing houses employed book clubs differently. Operating on a subscription model, they would provide particular sets of books to members of a club who had paid an advance. This sort of buyers' club allowed the publisher to gather enough capital in advance of publication to finance their operation. Although this financial model worked for small publishers for many years, it has recently become unsustainable. In the mid-2010s, when one independent publishing house<sup>22</sup> discontinued its book club, which had once been an integral part of its operations, it marked the end of an era. In a letter sent to its members, the publisher explained that over the course of ten years membership had dwindled to just forty members and the simultaneous increase in shipping costs had made running the book club unsustainable.

The end of the book club model might have looked like a major threat to independent publishing houses. However, the same forces that brought about its demise also brought about new modes of circulation, new forms of reading, and new reading publics. The internet and online shopping have made books from across the globe readily available to any person with purchasing power. The growth and expansion in independent publishing houses, including those we are considering here, is part of this new publishing landscape. Not only have people from the margins been able to read and purchase books, but they also now discuss them in spaces beyond the elite and exclusionary book discussion reading clubs. Social media, blogs, and other platforms have allowed people to create solidarities like never before. This shift in reading from exclusive to democratic has ushered in a new age of thought and freedom of expression for people and groups located on the margins, and it is here that independent publishing houses have made their most significant interventions.

## Public Discourse

Independent publishers of the margins have had immense significance in the intellectual and political life of India. Despite their size, their commitment to their causes has led to slow but certain change in the narratives that shape Indian society. In an address given as part of the planning for the World Humanities Report–India/South Asia, Urvashi Butalia of Zubaan spoke of how feminism, through its various activist and academic engagements, has helped secure

<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the possibilities of literary clubs are best seen in the case of Kerala. Libraries and clubs went hand in hand even in rural parts of this southern Indian state, which played a major role in attaining 100 percent literacy. See K. S. Ranjith, "Rural Libraries of Kerala" (Discussion Paper No. 78, Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, India, 2004).

<sup>22</sup> I have been asked to withhold the name.

concepts like *patriarchy* and *gender* in the public sphere.<sup>23</sup> Whereas the two terms were descriptive categories in the past, they have now become essential critical analytical concepts after continuous, relentless challenges from feminist scholars and activists to install them in our political discourse. The same can be said for *caste*. For a very long time, academics and intellectuals, especially among the Left, were reluctant to accept the category. It was either understood as being an issue of the past or an issue to be studied by disciplines that dealt with the rural India. S. Anand of Navayana Books told me that until not so long ago the Ambedkar's name was rarely mentioned. However, the situation today is very different, with many groups wanting to appropriate Ambedkar for their own purposes. Similarly, the term *savarna* (upper caste Hindus) was exceptionally rare, even among Dalits, but is widely used today. These transformations in the acceptance of terms like *gender*, *patriarchy*, *caste*, *anticaste*, *savarna*, *Dalit*, and others as core analytical concepts is part of the story of independent publishing in India.

## Networks

Another recent transformation that has taken place in the book publishing industry in India is that conglomerates have taken over the vital function of distribution. Many publishing houses used to distribute their own books, but today things are much different. The larger publishers know the Indian book market well and have established new networks beyond the traditional ones that small publishers had built over time based on mutual trust and goodwill, preferring some bookstores and vendors over others. To understand the differences, let us look at one of our publishing houses, Other Books, and the ways they used to distribute before relying on conglomerate distributors. As noted above, the logo of Other Books includes the tagline “Book is a relationship.” Its director, Auswaf Ahsan, explained to me that when they began in the 2000s, distribution had involved transporting books to particular bookshops with whatever help was available. Autorickshaw drivers would even take their books and sell them through their own channels. There were no full-time distributors—the very concept was unheard of. People from different walks of life would help distribute books because they themselves believed that these were important books to be read—a point Ahsan stresses. Such direct distribution also meant building close relationships with bookshop keepers and readers. S. Anand of Navayana Books told me that present-day distributors hardly touch books beyond the

<sup>23</sup> The World Humanities Report–India/South Asia meeting took place on September 28, 2019, in Chennai, India. For the World Humanities Report case study featuring Urvashi Butalia, see WHR video: [https://youtu.be/Sgqa6PF\\_KDU?si=SaV6j1nIa3I80az3](https://youtu.be/Sgqa6PF_KDU?si=SaV6j1nIa3I80az3).



cover and that the barcode has come to replace the content of the book because focus is merely on cataloguing alone. However, by the time Other Books made a name for itself, greater demand had made it difficult to rely solely on the prior means of distribution. Relying on conglomerates for distribution has become a necessary trade-off.

### Navigating the Publisher's Dilemma

We now turn to the everyday strategies and practices that our six publishers employ to address the dilemmas that they face in their professional and intellectual work. Maitreya Yogesh of Panther's Paws describes publishers as being in "the story business," with finances integral to the enterprise but not to the end goal. Ambedkar, he points out, was both an economist and a pragmatist and instructed people to strengthen themselves financially. Producing more stories is good for the larger public because it makes the experiences of people from diverse backgrounds accessible to the wider society. By entering into these stories, one enters the worlds of others, which can have a significant transformative impact. "Readers are sensitized, and made sensible," Yogesh concludes. Similarly, S. Anand of Navayana Books describes himself as a "bad capitalist." The "good" capitalist seeks monetary gains, but Anand, in running his business, seeks something else. With Navayana and the other publishing houses considered here, what matters is not the money but the mission. Thus, our six publishers navigate through the binary of money and meaning each in their own way.

One major problem that these publishers face is how to make their books as *accessible* to readers as possible. The average middle-class Indian reader prefers a price point between 200 and 400 rupees for paperback purchases.<sup>24</sup> Based on this, most Indian publishers price their books at 199 or 299 or 399 rupees. Our independent publishers, however, operated differently. Many readers, including students and those from marginalized sections of society, are unable to afford these "average" prices and are served by publishers committed first and foremost to knowledge dissemination. Critical Quest is an excellent example of this. They use inexpensive paper and a chapbook-like format and are thus able to keep prices as low as 15 and no higher than 80 rupees. Another aspect of accessibility is making authorship accessible to new or young writers. Many writers are insecure and doubtful of the quality of their work. Approaching an established

<sup>24</sup> Porter Anderson, "Coronavirus Impact: Nielsen Book India on Readers in the Pandemic," *Publishing Perspectives*, July 15, 2020, <https://publishingperspectives.com/2020/07/coronavirus-impact-india-publishing-industry-nielsen-book-impact-study-pandemic-covid19/>.

publisher is difficult or nearly impossible. Publishers (independent or otherwise) have their own commissioning rituals: the more exclusive accept submissions only from agents, and others accept queries directly from prospective authors only when they have credentials and a publication record. The publishers I am highlighting here, however, often play a dual role of publisher and literary agent, making a concerted effort to develop authors. To ease matters for potential authors, Zubaan Books has a simple format for receiving book proposals, easily accessible on their website. Other Books encourages prospective authors in pertinent WhatsApp groups to send in their proposals, and they have recently launched an Introducing Scholars series devoted to publishing first-time authors.

Another challenge for independent publishers of the margins is how much is involved in staying committed. In pursuit of manuscripts, Auswaf Ahsan has traveled the length and breadth of the subcontinent, often finding himself in peculiar situations. To procure one manuscript, for instance, he met with an eccentric scholar who also happened to be a Sufi shaykh. When he entered the scholar's house, he was reprimanded for not having gone through the right rituals and was told that he might have to face an angry shaykh. When he gave his reasons for the visit, however, he was warmly welcomed and given rights to the manuscript. But acquisition is just one of the difficulties that publishers face. S. Anand describes the criticism faced after publication. Whatever publishers do, he told me, "reeks of *savarna* privilege." In such a case, accepting one's calling and staying committed regardless of the obstacles faced is, according to him, key to countering accusations of caste privilege. It is, perhaps, for this reason that Maitreya Yogesh considers publishing a "movement." Subaltern narratives have the potential to transform those who read them by instilling empathy. Such publishing is not steeped in bounded rationality but moves toward infinite commitments.

That said, the six publishers do run successful businesses. They make use of the minimal resources they have to sell and distribute via all possible networks and channels. Gnana Aloysius and Josna Jacob of Critical Quest transport books to various conferences and stalls in their own car to such an extent that their old vehicle serves almost as the publishing house's warehouse. Auswaf Ahsan spoke about one sales tour across Kerala during which he hauled around a great number of books. Utilizing social media to publicize his tour, he and this team not only sold all the books they had, but they also received invitations from strangers to dine and reside at their homes during the trip.

Publishers think not just locally but globally. On every August 9 (International Day for the World's Indigenous Peoples) since 2013, adivaani has

administered the “Adivasi Pickle: A Prize for Indigenous Ideology, Thought and Knowledge.” The prize is meant not only to bring Indigenous stories to the larger public in book form but also to instill community among Adivasi. The unique rooted flavor of the “pickle” on a day of international significance connects the global and the local. Such an approach believes in a world that is hopeful and deeply embedded in tradition. Other publishers use distinct international approaches as well. *Embodying Difference* by Timothy Amos, which came out from Navayana in 2011, serves as an example of a global strategy. Published in association with the University of Hawai‘i Press, the book was about the Burakumin, an oppressed minority group in Japan. This book, which originated in India, sold more copies outside the country than inside it. Similarly, both Zubaan and Other Books associate with international publishers such as the University of Chicago Press in the United States and the Islamic Book Trust in Malaysia. Through these partnerships, they are able to market their books globally, when appropriate.

### Marginal Discourses and Discourses of Marginality

In this final section, I attempt to show that though marginal discourses may undergo transformations and receive some attention or appreciation, they do so only if they remain within the ambit of the largely “unwritten rules” of a discourse.<sup>25</sup> In the case here, knowledge production vis-à-vis academics and publishing, the subject learns and acquires how to speak within a discourse without necessarily recognizing rules as rules. I make use of three examples to talk about discourse formation around marginality: the reaction to Arundhati Roy’s foreword to B. R. Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste*, published by Navayana Books in 2014; the ill-disposed reception of Muslim discourses in India; and, finally, the distinctive strategies of adivaani and Panther’s Paw to influence public discourse.

When Navayana published a new edition of Ambedkar’s 1937 *Annihilation of Caste* in 2014 with a foreword by Indian novelist and activist Arundhati Roy, many questioned choosing Roy above other leading scholars of caste in India. Anticaste platforms like Round Table India and Dalit Camera as well

<sup>25</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

as a number of Dalit-Bahujan intellectuals criticized the new edition.<sup>26</sup> Their concerns resulted in another book, *Hatred in the Belly: Politics behind the Appropriation of Dr Ambedkar's Writings* (Ambedkar Age Collective, 2015), which consists of the original Ambedkar speech “Annihilation of Caste” (1936) and a number of essays and speeches by activists, students, writers, poets, and academics. The book was also the inaugural publication of a new publishing house called the Shared Mirror Publishing House.<sup>27</sup> Critics’ concerns were not so much about the content of Roy’s introduction as they were about appropriation: Who should represent Ambedkar in the public domain, given Roy’s upper-caste background? These two books then are not counternarratives to each other but are vying for the same space. They differ in their attempt to gain access to existing public platforms, that is, the processes by which discourses are conducted. The correct response, modes of articulation, narrative-placing, argument style, and so forth are already given. Responses, then, cannot be read as a separate set of marginal discourses unto themselves, but must be seen as part of, and in negotiation with, existing discourses. These discourses are not merely about publishing houses—however important nodal points they are—but about the humanities, in the largest sense, in which a discourse finds life. Once the humanities have accepted a particular discourse and laid claim to it, then, arguably, they are no longer marginal discourses per se, but are “discourses of marginality.” Publishing houses can be identified as the crucial link between the material, philosophical, theoretical, and practical discourses in operation within the humanities. The difference between the two kinds of discourses discussed here—marginal discourses and discourses of marginality—is that the former exists on its own, typically held in low esteem, while the latter succumbs to the vocabularies of mainstream discourses.

Let me further explain this with the help of the second example: Indian academia’s reluctance to engage with Muslim discourses on their own terms. The works of Muslim authors never achieves their own collective voice but are assimilated into other discourses, finding it difficult to prosper in the

<sup>26</sup> See for instance “An Open Letter to Ms. Arundhati Roy,” Round Table India, March 14, 2014, <https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/an-open-letter-to-ms-arundhati-roy/>, and “Bojja Tharakam on Arundhati Roy’s Introduction to ‘Annihilation of Caste,’” Dalit Camera, March 23, 2014, <https://youtu.be/eZ2QL8T0Y-w?si=YcRE3RbBRxIWV4z4>. Also see Arundhati Roy’s response, “Arundhati Roy replies to Dalit Camera,” Round Table India, March 15, 2014, <https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/arundhati-roy-replies-to-dalit-camera/>.

<sup>27</sup> The name may be a response to the book *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory*, by Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018), which discusses who can represent whom in Indian humanities and social sciences.

presence of a larger Brahmanical-liberal discourse.<sup>28</sup> How is it that discourses are selectively disseminated within Indian humanities and social sciences? To answer this question, let us revisit Other Books. Predominantly devoted to publishing Muslim narratives (varied as they are), this publishing house has the least presence in the media compared to the other five publishing houses, whose books often receive reviews in newspapers and win literary prizes and authors appear on TV shows. Other Books works in a similar fashion as the other publishing houses, and yet the only prestigious recognition that it has received was for a book that does not deal with Muslims (it was a biography of the Kerala social reformer Sahodaran Ayyappan).<sup>29</sup> It is as if their books are refused acknowledgment. Muslim discourses in contemporary India, as this case shows, exist only as marginal discourses and cannot become “discourses of marginality.” The reluctance of Indian intellectuals to engage with Muslims (and their narratives, vocabularies, concepts, everyday experiences, philosophies, epistemologies, and ontologies) is part of the discourse of the humanities in India, which validates certain narratives (Brahmanical/liberal), positive trends (social movements/activism), methods of writing (novel/academic), and modes of thought (largely Enlightenment rationality). Not only does it dictate what kinds of narratives can be included, but it also decides what should be discussed, what is worthy of debate, and, most importantly, what fits into the larger trajectories of liberalism and the neoliberal order. Here the Muslim always falls short of being recognized, which may not be the case with other marginal groups. The Hindutva variant of Brahmanism ensures that the Muslim remains the eternal other in India, and liberalism is unable to reconcile the Muslim as anything other than an aberration.<sup>30</sup> The humanities in India, even with the advantage of having one foot in academia and the other in activism, fall under the influence of these constraints of discourse. Publishers are part of this, and the situation raises two questions: To what

<sup>28</sup> While Brahmanism and liberalism are different systems, their convergence needs to be seen as illustrative of the main discourse in Indian humanities and social sciences. See for instance Ajay Guduvorthy, “Brahmanism, Liberalism and the Postcolonial Theory,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 51, no. 24 (2016): 15–17. Dalit critique that attacks Brahmanism often finds its grammar in modernity and liberalism. For an attempt to move out of this conundrum, see M. S. S. Pandian, “One Step outside Modernity: Caste, Identity Politics and Public Sphere,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 18 (2002): 1735–41.

<sup>29</sup> Ajay Sekher, *Sahodaran Ayyappan: Towards a Democratic Future; Life and Select Works* (Calicut, India: Other Books, 2012).

<sup>30</sup> Unless the Muslim validates the liberal order by attacking Islam, which then receives heightened attention. Such attacks need to be seen as different from Muslims critiquing Islam from within. See for instance Irfan Ahmad, “Immanent Critique and Islam: Anthropological Reflections,” *Anthropological Theory* 11, no. 1 (2011): 107–32.

extent are independent publishers part of this problem; and what alternatives can they offer to the dominant discourses of the humanities?

That brings us to the final example: the new publishing houses *adivaani* and *Panther's Paw*. These two publishers take an approach different from *Other Books*. By focusing on stories, both old and new, they are trying, simultaneously, to build new worlds (and new discourses) and to seek out how best to work with present discursive forms and institutional contexts. This strategy is best represented by *adivaani's* showcasing of oral forms of storytelling in a new medium (graphic novels) to produce ethical repositories of the past but in new forms. Readers who are distant from tribal worlds not just learn about other lifeworlds, but they also begin to interpret their own worlds through the new lenses. Further, these new forms of old stories are also reinterpreted by Indigenous people.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, *Panther's Paw* looks to new stories to offer hope and aspiration in a world not limited to pain and suffering. Here, the attempt is to bring about a change (whether slow or fast, successful or otherwise) in the very discourses that the margins are caught within. It is through such enterprises that the transformation from “marginal discourses” to “discourses of marginality” can challenge prevailing discourses with epistemic confrontation. Other independent publishing houses, too, might consider these strategies.

## Conclusion

The focus of this essay has been the independent publisher and the publishing house in an attempt to show how their struggles are symptomatic of how the humanities circulate in India and South Asia. Studying publishing houses allows a glimpse into the crucial labor that is involved in making subjugated knowledges visible in the humanities. Margins are tricky terrains. To completely understand how they are subsumed into mainstream academia, one can gain insight by closely observing and comparing publishing houses and the different responses that they receive from media and academia. Attention to the “publisher's dilemma” allows us to appreciate how publishers, as intellectuals in their own right, are responsible for bringing certain discourses into view, while also giving shape to an author and her audience. This is meant not to ascribe to the publisher a super-author status or to tie discourses to authors and their audience

<sup>31</sup> “As indigenous peoples we are living documents ourselves, so as a publisher I was and am confronted by the dilemma of transmitting, translating and reproducing what's organic and breathing into a form that in many ways is limiting. How do you after all project and market insight, experience, memory and traditions?” Hembrom, “Reclaiming the Reproduction of Adivasi Knowledge,” 2.

alone, but to show how publishers and authors come together to confront the specific sociopolitical challenges of India. Using a variety of everyday strategies, publishers of the margins learn to wade through the challenges they face. The relevance of any book may only be decided by the future, but without studying the publisher and publishing houses, the story of the humanities in India will remain incomplete.

**Safwan Amir** is an assistant professor at the School of Arts and Sciences, Ahmedabad University. He was a Senior Research Associate with the World Humanities Report–India/South Asia between 2019 and 2022, and a Fulbright visiting doctoral fellow at Columbia University between 2017 and 2018. His research interests include anthropology of religion, Islam, and ethical possibilities of the margin. He is currently working on a book manuscript that draws on his PhD dissertation “The Muslim Barbers of Malabar: Histories of Contempt and Ethics of Possibility.”