



Webinar

Brief 94:2022

LITERATURE AS A

Creative Industry

Pakistan Institute of
Development Economics





VIRTUAL SESSION

Literature as a Creative Industry



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Author, Translator, Storyteller
Founder of publishing house, Kitab



Meher F. Hussain
Co-author of Pakistan: A Fashionable History
Manager of Zuka, a social platform



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2:00 PM

MODERATOR

Dr. Nadeem Ul Haque
Vice Chancellor,
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Development Economics



Key Messages

Musharraf Ali Farooqi, Author, Translator, Storyteller, Founder of publishing house, Kitab

- We have a huge book industry (if you look at paper import figures) – but most of the market is concentrated in religious/moral texts, largely because it is heavily subsidized by special interests; this leaves little room for creative literature.
- The biggest problem is the generation of demand, which is always a policy issue. Are we as a society invested in literature? Are we thinking that stories are important for our emotional/mental wellbeing? Unless that is the case, we cannot expect authors to 'make it' purely on their own because that approach can only go so far.
- Literature should be promoted at the indigenous level, and policy makers should try to inform aspiring writers to develop their own work or to even curate existing work – which can then inform a whole entertainment industry in the form of performing arts, films, music, etc.
- We should also be careful not to promote toxicity in the pursuit of entertainment. There is no reason for profanity, violence, and vulgarity simply to appeal to the lower instincts of audiences because that has detrimental effects on the prevalent culture.
- The goal of literature should not be to inform readers about what to do in their lives. It should be to tell a compelling story that resonates with them in an organic way and activates a sense of curiosity.
- Our private school system, which caters to people who have some buying power, is the only option for authors to market their publications particularly stories. This is a small restricted space that is ad-hoc and without any formal distribution mechanisms in place.
- We have a society with children that are open to reading if provided good quality books that weave narratives that they can resonate with in an organic manner.



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- Initiatives such as GitzPharma are working to incubate the literature industry through public lecture series, storytelling workshops, translation workshops, editing workshops, and guides to classical literature in particular. On the other hand, we have StoryKit which is a gamified platform to inculcate a spirit of reading in children through active participation in storytelling.
- Literature festivals are good platforms that need to continue. However, the nature of their focus (currently revolving around narrow topics to do with politics) and the fact that they are generally inaccessible to the vast majority of Pakistan's population needs to be rethought.
- The Pakistan Academy of Letters' job should be to encourage research, provide facilities for writers/academics, easy access to resources, etc. It has moved away from these objectives in recent times due to their reorientation to profit-generation, which has destroyed its purpose.
- Books on scientific subjects, and with an international focus, dwindled during the '70s or so. One way to revive this is to translate them into the vernaculars and make them easily available.
- I would caution writers who have chosen to pursue full time writing at an early age to be extremely careful – especially in terms of the content of their output. My advice would be to have several streams of income just to be on the safe side.
- A lot of Urdu works had been translated into Chinese about 20 years ago – and this is a great avenue which will promote relations and literary exchange between the two countries, both of which have huge populations.

Meher F. Hussain, Co-author of Pakistan: A Fashionable History, Manager of Zuka, a social platform

- Writers in Pakistan have traditionally focused on non-fiction, mostly in politics – leading to the saturation of the market. People are fed up of that sort of literature which has certain strategic imperatives which people can see.
- Pakistani authors have found it difficult to reach the international market, which prompted them to focus on India – but now, with the book ban, even that option is cut off.
- The publishing industry is a wasteland. There is no infrastructure to support authors, to give them royalties, to give them encouraging sales figures, or to offer them platforms to expand their audience.
- Most authors in Pakistan have to support themselves with their own money, which they must earn through avenues that aren't exactly based in writing, simply in order to survive and try contributing to the industry in some meager capacity.
- Ultimately, we must ask why people in Pakistan don't read. Why don't they expand their horizons and explore themes and genres that go beyond their narrow interests? The culture is fairly conservative.
- Our writers have tremendous amounts of talent and potential, but we still need support from a policy point of view. The Pakistan Academy of Letters is a dormant organization; they do not offer any support to emerging writers. Rather they have a fraternity that prioritizes old writers that have been affiliated with them for a long period of time.
- I'm an independent publisher. Whatever I earn from my 9-5 job, I invest in my publishing business. The state of our English language market is in such dire straits that if you are able to sell 500 books, you are considered a bestseller. How can anyone be expected to sustain a business in this state?
- Bookstores charged 40-54% commission on books, which leaves little room to pay writers royalties for their hard work – this restricts the incentives for stocking up on books.
- Libraries and public spaces provide work/employment to people and inculcate a spirit of reading by bringing like-minded individuals together – whether they are young people, aspiring writers, academics, and published authors themselves.
- A comprehensive platform should be established that can function to bring writers from all backgrounds and thematic focuses together. For instance, literature festivals originally had that objective.

Shandana Minhas, Storyteller, Author, Columnist, Honorary fellow of the International Writing Programme, University of Iowa

- We have a massive market, but it is a risk averse one. The printing and publishing industry are two different things. Former is focused around religious literature because it is risk averse.
- Legislation is also a major hurdle. Authors are required to sign affidavits that state that no sentiments (religious or otherwise) will be hurt by anything that is said in the work – leading to a restrictive culture of self-censorship.
- The English language market within the literature landscape is an overwhelmingly small one and writers operating in the area are a small minority who aren't able to earn enough for the process to be sustainable.
- There is no need for any new policy per se, just to review current policy. The Copyright Act of Pakistan has so many deterrents to creative expression that writers might as well give up. I'd argue if this is our conceptualization of policy then we would do better without it.
- We also need accurate data collection. People are less likely to invest into something if there is a dearth of data to demonstrate market conditions/opportunities, and there are no central regulatory authorities responsible for this.



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- Stories are value capsules – they are how societies cohere and figure out who they are. This is even more important in the context of Pakistan which contains plenty of identity based confusions.
- If parents and teachers are not in the habit of reading, and spend most of their days glued to their phones, naturally their children will follow suite. Our adults need to take an active interest in inculcating the spirit of reading and exchange in their children.
- As aspiring writers, you need mentors and coaches to learn about the dynamics of design, distribution, etc.
- In order to obtain ISBNs, which are necessary for getting books published, you need to undergo a painful and cumbersome process at the Islamabad Public Library. This bureaucratic hurdle needs to be rethought and simplified in order to make things easier for writers.
- The Pakistan Academy of Letters needs a drastic overhaul due to the favoritism and nepotism that generally tends to prevail there. They prioritize writers that have prior connections with them rather than creating room for new faces.
- Writing is a lifelong apprenticeship – so the idea of getting published immediately is a recent one and has more to do with celebrity status than the art of writing itself. We need to inform our aspiring writers to be patient and not see the process as a series of accolades to be collected.
- Columnist positions do not pay well and are largely based on personal brands and only cater to non-fiction in the English language.
- Traditional publishing in Pakistan involves granting publishers the right to publish your book in print and also as e-books, audiobooks are also part of this process. However, the important point here is that the writer always has little to no say in any of the decisions that are taken in terms of distribution.
- Rather than resorting to foreign funding, which is a somewhat viable opportunity, we should try to have local government authorities to take an interest in offering funds to writers and supporting them financially. For which organizations like the Pakistan Academy of Letters ought to take a leading role.
- Writers themselves, through a governing body, can take on the role of translating one another's works into the vernaculars in order to expand the outreach of all. Pakistan has a rich linguistic heritage and we should preserve it as much as possible.
- We should allow children to be children, and to be exposed to all relevant languages in order to make books/literature accessible to them from a young age.



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