



From Margin to Hashtags: A Study of Forgotten Indian Literary Voices through Bookstagram and BookTube

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Abstract:

The rise of digital media platforms has transformed literary promotion and consumption globally. In India, Bookstagram (Instagram's literary niche) and BookTube (YouTube's book community) have emerged as powerful forces, significantly impacting the visibility, engagement, popularity, and literary merit of Indian authors. This research paper explores how these platforms shape the Indian literary ecosystem by democratizing discourse, creating vibrant communities, and enabling direct connections between authors and readers through. The paper takes case studies of authors such as Jerry Pinto and Vivek Shanbhag. The number of posts on popular hashtags related to book communities and views on reels and videos helps in gaining an insight as to many people are engaging with these online and helps in understanding their reach and popularity. It concludes with recommendations for a more inclusive and ethical literary community online.

Keywords: Bookstagram, BookTube, Algorithm, Marginal, Mainstream, Hashtag, literary, popular,

I. Introduction

The literary world has experienced a paradigm shift with the integration of social media into reading and publishing cultures. Reading is a dynamic activity that produces meaning shaped by the time and place in which the reader reads. Digital cultural intermediaries exercise a significant degree of influence on the development of reading cultures and are key figures in the development of digital communities of readers (Davis, 2017; Fuller & Rehberg Sedo, 2023). Bookstagram and BookTube,

two influential digital subcultures centered on Instagram and YouTube respectively, have redefined how books are marketed, reviewed, and discussed. There are creators solely dedicated to reading and recommending books. Globally #bookstagram has more than 117M posts, which demonstrates how big these book communities have grown. Though much less in number, such communities in India have also grown in the past few years. In India, where traditional publishing often faces barriers related to language, geography, and access, these platforms provide alternative avenues for authors to reach readers. It helps to promote representation and inclusion. It challenges stereotypes and refuses to be defined by them. Social media celebrates diversity promoting a culture of inclusivity and respect. This research examines the multifaceted impact of Bookstagram and BookTube on Indian authors and creators by focusing on their literary merit and engagement. In the digital age, it was seeming as if readers are decreasing in numbers, but the case seems to be not quite so. In fact, social media has made it easier to locate people with like-minded interests and be a part of the communities they like. Book communities have not grown but thrived in the recent years. From book blogging to YouTube discussions to Instagram reels, different mediums have aided the readers and authors alike and aided in their popularity. The offline book culture has simply shifted to 'online book culture' - there are online book clubs, where books are decided through polls. Creators make reels ranging from a wide variety of content- from simply recommending books at a glance to some in depth review, using sentences like- 'books I couldn't put down', 'must-read books of 2024', 'books with plot twist you didn't see coming',



etc to encourage individual to engage with their reels. Algorithm plays a huge role on social media, and it impacts one's feed will show.

Theoretical Framework

The digital humanities perspective treats social media as both data and method. Digital humanities scholars encourage us to analyse online cultural practices using both qualitative and quantitative tools. Here, we conceptually apply DH ideas by viewing hashtags and posts as nodes in a network of literary advocacy. As Tolstopyat (2018) notes, electronic media have created "new opportunities" for readers and publishers to collaborate (uni-muenster.de). In practice, a digital humanities approach might involve tracing the spread of a hashtag like #ownvoicesIndia or analysing the network of tags around Dalit literature. While the study is primarily interpretive, I acknowledge this DH dimension in suggesting future analytics research.

The study engages digital literary studies to understand how algorithmic visibility, hashtag activism, and platform aesthetics shape the reception of Pinto's and Shanbhag's work. Scholars such as Franco Moretti and Kathleen Fitzpatrick argue that the digital age reconfigures literary circulation and canon formation. On Instagram, hashtags like #IndianLiterature or #translatedfiction help readers discover books beyond the mainstream. These mechanisms give visibility to regional language authors like Shanbhag, whose *Ghachar Ghochar* achieved global acclaim partly through digital buzz around its English translation.

The digital humanities also encourage us to see Bookstagram and BookTube not merely as promotional tools but as archival and interpretive sites, where literary discourse takes shape through multimedia formats, emotional resonance, and community curation. For example, visual posts of *Em and the Big Hoom* often frame the novel with domestic, intimate imagery, signalling themes of care and emotional labour. Meanwhile, BookTubers might discuss the ethical ambiguity in *Ghachar Ghochar* within broader debates on social change and economic liberalization.

Reader-response theory, particularly as developed by Stanley Fish and Louise Rosenblatt, emphasizes the role of the reader in constructing textual meaning. Rather than existing as fixed objects, literary texts derive meaning through the subjective experiences and interpretations of their readers. On Bookstagram and BookTube, this interpretive process becomes social and visible: readers share emotional reactions, contextualize texts within their lives, and encourage others to engage.

This theory is especially relevant when examining how readers respond to the psychological realism in Pinto's exploration of mental illness or the claustrophobic moral ambiguity in Shanbhag's novella. For instance, *Em and the Big Hoom* elicits deeply personal responses, particularly around family, mental health, and Catholic identity. Likewise, *Ghachar Ghochar* provokes discussions about patriarchal control, economic anxiety, and moral complicity. These reactions are frequently documented in captions, comments, and YouTube discussions, allowing readers to collectively negotiate meaning. The participatory nature of these platforms transforms reading into a communal experience, enabling diverse interpretive communities to shape the reception of these texts. This approach not only affirms the centrality of the reader in meaning-making but also empowers underrepresented voices to contextualize literature in their own terms.

The Rise of Bookstagram and BookTube in India

BookTube and Bookstagram have emerged as influential digital communities that reshape how readers engage with literature. BookTube, a subcommunity on YouTube, features creators—known as BookTubers—who produce videos such as reviews, reading vlogs, and book hauls, fostering a sense of connection among viewers through interactive content and discussions. Bookstagram, on the other hand, thrives on Instagram's visual platform, where users share aesthetically curated images of books, often accompanied by personal reflections and thematic props, creating a vibrant space for book lovers to connect and discover new reads. Instagram is a visual medium and as such the content on the platform relies heavily on the aesthetics of the content shared. It relies heavily on the visual appeal of books. In India, this has led to a proliferation of themed feeds, bookshelf tours, and colourful flat lays that appeal to a younger demographic. Indian Bookstagrammers often use English and regional languages, blending global trends with local sensibilities. Often readers with engage with hashtags to find their niche, different hashtags are created to gain traction. The platform's visual format allows creators to package content in creative, digestible formats. For authors, this means their work can be featured in ways that transcend traditional jacket blurbs and reviews. Book trailers, quote cards, and cover reveals build anticipation and create buzz, particularly for debut authors. As literary scholar Kathleen Fitzpatrick observes in *Planned Obsolescence*, "Social media allows us to shift scholarly conversation from fixed outputs to ongoing



conversations,” a phenomenon equally applicable to literary promotion.

BookTube: BookTube complements Bookstagram with more in-depth discussions. The number of Indian Booktubers have increased in the last few years and have grown by reviewing Indian authors alongside global bestsellers. BookTube allows for long-form content that can dissect themes, writing styles, and social commentary in books. The length of the videos differs from individual to individual, some offering short reviews while some offering more insights. The platform’s versatility supports diverse content types, including book hauls, wrap-ups, reading vlogs, and TBR (to-be-read) lists. For Indian authors, this means their work can receive sustained attention over time rather than being a one-time feature. As scholar Henry Jenkins notes in *Convergence Culture*, “Media convergence fosters participatory culture,” wherein audiences and authors collaborate in shaping narrative reception. Youtube has a plethora of author interviews and discussions which can provide key insights into the author’s perspective and help the readers understand their work better.

Impact on Visibility

In traditional Indian publishing, access to visibility often depends on well-established literary circles, endorsements from prominent critics, or inclusion in elite media outlets. Bookstagram and BookTube bypass this by allowing anyone with an internet connection to become a literary influencer. For instance, self-published authors and those working with small presses often find it difficult to secure bookstore placements or media reviews. Social media offers a level playing field. In fact, Instagram in recent times has become somewhat equivalent of a cv, in the case of creators. Authors have also started taking advantage of that by posting their content, updates about book, doing giveaways, etc. Reviews from influencers can place lesser-known authors or emerging authors in the spotlight. Kanchana Banerjee, for instance, gained significant visibility for her thriller "Nobody's Child" through Instagram reviews and BookTube recommendations.

The Role of Algorithms and Virality

Instagram and YouTube use engagement-driven algorithms that reward posts with higher likes, shares, comments, and viewing time. When an Indian author’s book resonates with readers or aligns with a popular trend—such as feminist fiction, mental health themes, or regional stories—it often gets amplified. The virality of book-related content is also

facilitated by trends like #BookstagramIndia and collaborative challenges like #ReadTheWorld. When readers tag authors, use branded hashtags, or share themed posts (e.g., #IndieApril), the content gets additional exposure. Bookstagram and BookTube have increasingly accommodated regional language content. Channels such as "Marathi Granth Jagat" and hashtags like #HindiReads have introduced regional authors to wider audiences. Reading challenges like #ABAM-A book a month challenge or #25in25 signifying the goal of reading 25 books in the year 2025, or #bookchallenge are some common examples of hashtags are used to be a part of community and engage with others of similar interest. However, there is a downside to this. Algorithms often cause one to see what is popular and trending and this leads to cycle of popular authors getting more popular while the others though equally good miss out on views and social media engagement, increasing the gap between the mainstream and other further.

Reader Engagement and Community Building

One of the defining features of Bookstagram and BookTube is the breakdown of hierarchical barriers between authors and readers. Unlike traditional print or broadcast reviews, these platforms foster two-way communication. Indian authors frequently participate in live Q&A sessions, virtual book launches, and giveaways. For instance, writers like Nikita Gill and Meena Kandasamy have built significant followings by engaging directly with their readers. This fosters a sense of intimacy and loyalty that is difficult to replicate through conventional media. There are many celebrities and influencers who recommend books or are interested in reading. Some even have their own book clubs.

Book Clubs, and Collective Engagement Reading challenges, themed months, and virtual book clubs are significant modes of community building. Using hashtags like #womeninfiction, #dalitliterature, have created collective reading experiences that amplify marginalized voices. Book clubs hosted by BookTubers or Instagram influencers often feature live discussions, polls, and author interviews. This communal aspect enhances engagement and encourages sustained interest in Indian authors, especially those writing on caste, gender, and identity. Bookstagrammers and BookTubers act as micro-influencers. Their recommendations often carry more weight than traditional reviews because they are perceived as more authentic and relatable. This influencer culture has created new metrics for success: a book’s



popularity on social media can be as significant as its sales numbers.

Social media Hype often serves as a sales catalyst. In India, several books have witnessed commercial success following social media hype. For example, "The Henna Artist" by Alka Joshi gained momentum among Indian readers after widespread praise on Bookstagram and its inclusion in Reese Witherspoon's book club. Influencers often collaborate with publishing houses to promote new releases. These campaigns may include unboxing videos, pre-release reviews, and countdown posts. Such coordinated efforts generate anticipation and positively impact book sales. Online visibility also helps debut authors get noticed by publishers and agents. A well-received BookTube video or viral Instagram reel can lead to publishing contracts, media interviews, and speaking engagements. Some Indian authors have embraced these platforms as part of a larger authorpreneurial strategy. They use Instagram and YouTube to share writing tips, behind-the-scenes content, and personal anecdotes. In turn, they monetize their presence through affiliate links, writing workshops, and paid collaborations. This model has been particularly successful for authors in the self-help, romance, and YA genres, where audience connection is crucial.

Literary Merit and Critical Discourse

Bookstagram and BookTube have redefined what constitutes "literary" work. The democratization of literary discourse allows for engagement with themes and genres often overlooked by traditional critics. Books on mental health, LGBTQIA+ experiences, caste discrimination, and contemporary feminism now find platforms for serious discussion. They help in bringing out the authors who talk about serious contemporary issues plaguing our society and provide platform for discussions, increase awareness around political and social issues. For instance, Yashica Dutt's memoir "Coming Out as Dalit" gained visibility through these platforms, enabling critical engagement with caste identity in ways previously restricted to academic circles. These platforms have not been accepting but encouraged diverse voices to thrive, not only authors but readers too. Often the popular books on social media are considered as less intelligent or not worth the time, however, as will be demonstrated by the case studies undertaken, usually only those books get popular which are really good, in terms of their theme, content and writing. The virality of the book is often pitted against its literary

merit. The word popular should not mean a work is not intelligent. As there is discourse about the hit and sensational books or the known authors, there is also discourse about the 'under-rated' books and authors that often get streamlined but are equally good. Thus, demonstrating that these communities have a space for every voice, no matter how distinct or understated.

Case Studies

Em and the Big Hoom Jerry Pinto was published in 2012 and received wide critical acclaim for its raw and empathetic portrayal of mental illness, not only on the person who goes through it but also the people around them. However, it only remained popular in the academic and literary discourses. It was not until later when discussions about focus on mental health were gaining traction and it was being taken more seriously, book communities started gravitating towards books that were about mental health and a lot more people discovered this underrated gem again. The book struck a chord in its readers, perhaps because of the very realistic portrayal of mental illness and the family dynamics it portrays. Jerry Pinto has weaved a complex narrative and dealt with a sensitive topic with sincerity.

In chapter 12, the narrator observes, "But it seemed as if all psychiatric medicine was aimed only at the symptoms. Mute the paranoia. Calm the rage. Raise the endorphins. Underneath, the mysteries continued, unchanged. Underneath, somewhere in the chemistry of her brain, there was something that could not be reached." The novel is eccentric at times, laced with humour, perhaps to counter the gravity of the Em's condition. A way of coping for the narrator, an unnamed teenage boy. It shows the dynamics of the four-member family who along with Em are also suffering and trying to make sense of everything. The themes of the novel, one could argue, are more relevant than ever in the present times.

#jerrypinto, #emandthebighoom, #indianauthors, #booksonmentalhealth, are some of the few among many hashtags that one can engage in to find posts about *Em and the Big Hoom*, where readers have shared their reviews, opinions, and recommendations regarding the novel. A popular YouTube channel Kitaabi Cabins' does ABAM- A book a month to encourage readers to read at least one book in one month and this was their pick for



ABAM August 2023¹. Not only this, but they also have a video discussing the book with Jerry Pinto². BookTube and Bookstagram was quick to pick up this book and rightly so and amplify its relevance which was perhaps dwindling a little in the past years since its publication. Many people adding it to their TBR and picking it up years after only to appreciate it even more. It only further demonstrates the power social media has, not only in terms of making a book “viral”, “hit”, or an “overnight-sensation” but also in terms of highlighting and bringing to the forefront long-lost gems.

The Instagram account ‘manavkaul19’ is well known actor and writer Manav Kaul’s second account where he posts frequently about the books he has read and shares updates related to his own works, made a post about *Em and the Big Hoom* dated 19 August 2021, mentioning his regret of not having read the book sooner and praising the work as beautiful and honest and tagged it as #mustread. The post has over 1k likes. The book which was earlier known only to a few gained massive popularity, especially during pandemic where discussions around mental health had become a focus point because of isolation and economic factors and the uncertainty and danger regarding Covid-19. Book communities on Instagram and Youtube have contributed in helping the book reach a wider audience and talk about sensitive issues related to mental health.

Another case is of *Ghachar Ghochar*; Vivek Shanbhag. He is a well-known face in the Kannada Literature and originally published in 2013 in Kannada was translated in 2015 by Srinath Perur. Its journey is quite different from Jerry Pinto’s *Em and the Big Hoom*, ever since its publication it has remained popular and garnered high critical acclaim. The reason for selecting this text is because of its popularity which by extension has garnered an interest in Indian Literature. It packs complex storytelling with leaving many things unsaid and is a notable work of psychological fiction. The novella critically explores the transformation of a formerly struggling family after the success of the narrator’s uncle spice business. While material comfort increases, so do moral compromises. The family shifts from solidarity to complicity. A significant

strength of the novella lies in its ambiguity and things left unsaid. The title is very telling and apt as the narrator admits his thoughts at the end; “ghachar ghochar” meaning something tangled up beyond repair.

The translation brought international attention to the novella. *Ghachar Ghochar* never really disappeared from the literary consciousness, but BookTube and Bookstagram significantly expanded its readership, especially from 2020 onwards. It became part of many Bookstagrammers lists, leading to new readership and audience for the same. #ghacharghochar has more than 1k plus posts. It can be found under many tags such as #translatedfiction, #indianliterature, #indianauthors and so on. Not only it is quite popular on Instagram, even on YouTube, it is recommended by many creators and part of books you must read. #indianbookstagrammer has over 189k posts and #indianbookstagram has over 77.3k posts. These posts however are not exclusively for Indian authors, but they incorporate a significant number of Indian Literature in these hashtags. These numbers suggest the growth of indianbookreading communities. The YouTube channel, ‘AwaniSharmaOfficial’ has around 40.7k subscribers and her book review of Shanbhag’s *Ghachar Ghochar* has more than 3k views, published in November 2018³. On Instagram, digital creator ‘frenchflaps_and_deckleedges’ made a post, dated February 2020 about the novella sharing her opinion of it and asking her followers how they feel about it. The post has more than 2k likes.

There are many promising emerging authors from India who are gaining due recognition on these platforms and Several other Indian authors have seen their work appreciated and amplified by social media book communities:

- **Yashica Dutt** – Her memoir *Coming Out as Dalit* has become essential reading during anti-caste reading campaigns on Instagram.
- **Meena Kandasamy** – Books like *When I Hit You* are frequently spotlighted in feminist reading lists and BookTube wrap-ups.

1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQQf8TWZFF0>

2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uLppmilqjQ8&t=1s>

3

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3vk_sm19keo&t=297s



- **P. Sivakami** – Her novel *The Grip of Change* gained renewed attention during #DalitHistoryMonth discussions.
- **Tanuj Solanki** – His work on contemporary urban issues has been praised for its sharp realism and is often recommended by BookTubers focused on Indian fiction.

These authors represent a cross-section of literary voices—ranging from marginalized identities to genre experimentation—that have found resonance in the digital reading public.

II. Conclusion

Bookstagram and BookTube have significantly altered the literary ecosystem in India. By enhancing visibility, facilitating engagement, and promoting both commercial and critical success, these platforms have empowered Indian authors in unprecedented ways. However, their full potential can only be realized through ethical practices, inclusivity, and a balance between entertainment and literary depth. As digital spaces continue to evolve, they offer a promising future for Indian literature—one where diverse voices are not just heard but celebrated. The book community online is flourishing and thriving. Social media has given a platform to not only readers to engage and participate but to authors from around the places, irrespective of their socio-economic background and has emerged as an ecosystem of its own. It has helped in bridging the gap between readers and authors, who can now directly engage with each other through these platforms. Book communities have succeeded in enhancing the reader experience and encouraged reading, not only as a good hobby to have but to make it a part of one's lifestyle. There is no right or wrong opinion, everyone including the creator and the reader is entitled to their views about the book and are not trying to force their opinions on their followers. Readers are the one who give meaning to the text and Bookstagram and Booktube serve as a testament to this statement. There are different often conflicting opinions regarding the text, but in the end it doesn't matter who is right because that is never the point. "The participatory culture of BookTube and Bookstagram not only democratizes literary criticism but also fosters a sense of community, allowing diverse voices to influence reading habits and literary discourse". The social media hype of the books helps increasing sales and by creating reels, posts, they remain relevant for a long period of time. In conclusion, these online communities serve also as a new form of culture preservation: social media users collectively determine which "forgotten" books are worth remembering. The interplay of hashtags, visual

culture and audience engagement transforms reading into a participatory performance. The authors have benefitted from the book communities online, in terms of increased popularity and increased sales and the readers too have been benefitted by utilizing social media for good and enriching their experience by getting familiar with compelling, diverse, and new voices from India and around the world.

Challenges

As Bookstagram and BookTube become monetized, concerns arise about the authenticity of reviews. Paid promotions and affiliate partnerships can bias content. Platforms and creators are increasingly urged to disclose sponsorships to maintain transparency. This will ensure the integrity of the content posted.

These platforms though immensely helpful in encouraging regional languages, are still dominated by English-speaking urban users. This excludes many regional voices and non-English readers. Bridging this gap requires more inclusive content strategies, language diversification, and support for regional creators.

Creator Burnout- The pressure to maintain engagement, post regularly, and stay relevant can sometimes take a toll on creators' mental health. Burnout can lead to reduced content quality and disengagement. Sustainable content practices and community support are essential for long-term impact.

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