

## Beautiful books to make Hindi appealing to a new generation

LIZ GOOCH



---

**Fostering a love** of reading in children is a challenge facing parents and teachers the world over but imagine the struggle of grabbing youngsters' attention without the aid of colourful, eye-catching books.

Coonor Kripalani, an Indian mother who raised her children in Hong Kong, confronted just such a predicament when trying to teach her two young daughters to read Hindi.

With a shortage of attractive Hindi books to spark their interest, Ms Kripalani's children were constantly turning to the more appealing English books.

"I tried to assign an hour where I would sit down and teach them Hindi but they were very distracted. It was hard to hold their attention," she said.

Fifteen years later, after moving to Singapore and sending her children to university, the honorary research fellow at the University of Hong Kong's Centre for Asian Studies is making it easier for today's toddlers to learn Hindi and ensuring those who leave India's shores retain their national language.

She has created a series of four books to help children aged between two and five learn the Hindi alphabet, numbers, colours and shapes.

Printed on brightly coloured paper and with a sturdy ring-binder to withstand eager young hands, each book includes an English and Hindi glossary.

Launching the series in Hong Kong earlier this month, Ms Kripalani said the books were designed to supplement formal learning in the classroom and for parents to read to their children.

"I felt it was necessary to have beautiful books like we have in any other language. A child who has no language bias will gravitate towards a book that's bright, colourful and beautiful. It doesn't matter if it's Hindi, French or English," she said.

Ms Kripalani believes the shortage of such books in the Hindi language is the result of a push by the Indian government to boost literacy rates by distributing inexpensive, poorly printed materials. In India, Hindi books can be bought for

as little as 10 or 15 rupees (HK\$1.76 to HK\$2.65).

"I think that's laudable. You should get the materials out to everybody but India has moved past that stage of development," she said.

The next challenge was to make reading attractive for children with materials that will stimulate learning.

"We need to excite children. We need to grab their interest to make them want to learn, want to have a book," Ms Kripalani said. "I think to create that joy of learning and instill a love of books, a love of reading, the first impression is important for bringing these sorts of sentiments about."

Her publisher, the Global Indian International School in Singapore, has begun using the books in its kindergarten and Primary One classes, and several other schools in Singapore and India use them as teaching aides.

Ms Kripalani wants to introduce the books to more rural and municipality schools across India.

"The Hindi teachers are really resourceful because there aren't that many terrific materials, not just in terms of textbooks but also in terms of work books," she said. "There's a huge need and this is just a small drop."

As the Indian diaspora continues to fan out across the world, Ms Kripalani believes ensuring Hindi lives on in the next generation is vital.

"It's very important because Hindi is a live language. It's widely spoken, it's evolving. It's the language of Bollywood, all the popular Indian films are in Hindi and it gives an individual - especially those who live overseas - an identity," said Ms Kripalani, who spent 20 years in Hong Kong before moving to Singapore a decade ago.

In Singapore, where Indians make up about 7 per cent of the population, students can choose between studying Tamil, Chinese, Malay or Hindi as their second language.

Despite Hindi being India's national language, Ms Kripalani said people would often approach each other in English, due to the vast array of languages spoken in different parts of the country.

For some students, Hindi may even be a third language. For example, if a student is attending a Tamil school, they will study in Tamil, English will be their second language and Hindi their third. But Ms Kripalani believes sustaining the Hindi language is important. "I think it's very important for any Indian to know. It gives you a sense of national identity."

The dearth of attractive materials applies for all Indian languages, not just

Hindi.

"The smaller your population that speaks the language, the smaller your market is so it's much harder to produce materials in that language," Ms Kripalani said.

She is planning to publish three more titles this year. The story books will focus on broadening children's vocabulary. She has received feedback from parents who say it is refreshing to have story books that are not religious or based on traditional stories.

Under her other hat, Ms Kripalani critiques and writes academic pieces about Indian films. But for anyone who believes that writing for young minds is child's play, Ms Kripalani says they better think again.

In some aspects writing for children was more challenging than academic writing, she said, adding that the series of four books took two years to produce. "I think one has to apply oneself a bit more. You can't assume that your reader necessarily knows or will understand what you're trying to put across," she said.

"Academic writing is straight up but for these books one needs to think it through. You have to be very specific about what you're giving children. It mustn't be confusing."

To ensure her writing will have the desired effect, Ms Kripalani tests her stories on children before going to print.

While her daughters may not be as fluent as she would like them to be, Ms Kripalani hopes her contribution to the genre of children's language books will make learning Hindi more enjoyable for today's children.

The reward for the countless hours Ms Kripalani spent refining the series was delivered when she visited a Hong Kong book store earlier this month and saw children eagerly taking her books from the shelves. "The most rewarding thing is when you have a child who is impatient for the book," she said.

*Akshar (k, kh, g), Ginti (ek, do, teen), Rang and Aakaar* by Coonoor Kripalani are published by the Global Indian International School.