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The Kerala Literature Festival in Kozhikode in January, a four-day event, boasted two Nobel laureates. India, which has dozens of languages, is said to have as many as 150 book-focused festivals.



Left, on Jan. 24 at the Kerala Literature Festival; right, the musician Hrishi performing on Feb. 1 at the Jaipur Literature Festival.



By ANUPREETA DAS

JAIPUR, India — Mizoram, a state in India's remote northeast that shares boundaries with Bangladesh and Myanmar, has one. Surat, a city best known for its diamonds and textiles, has one. Bengaluru, the country's tech hub with a touch of hipness, has one. Kolkata, whose residents take their reputation for erudition seriously, has at least three.

And then there's the big one: the Jaipur Literature Festival, which calls itself the "greatest literary show on Earth" and recently celebrated its 18th year.

While India may appear consumed by Bollywood, cricket and phone screens, literature festivals are blooming, bringing readers and writers together in hill-top towns and rural communities, under the cover of beachside tents or inside storied palaces.

Some of the festivals, like the one in Jaipur, attract tens of thousands of people. The Mizoram festival, held for the first time in October in Aizawl, the state capital, was a more intimate affair with around 150 guests.

The boom has been driven by young people who, in a country of dozens of languages, are increasingly reading literature in their native tongues alongside books written in English. For these readers, books open worlds that India's higher education system, with its focus on time-consuming preparation for make-or-break examinations, often does not.

The events' appeal has widened as organizers have begun promoting Indian writing in languages other than English. The five-day Jaipur festival, which early on focused almost entirely on English-language writing, has in recent years invited more authors who write in languages like Telugu and Malayalam, two south Indian tongues.

To Namita Gokhale, an author and a co-founder of the Jaipur fair, the surge in book-focused festivals — by some estimates there are now as many as 150 — signals a more confident nation.

"There's a new generation, people who are more naturally bilingual," Ms. Gokhale said. "A love and respect for the mother tongue is returning."

The festival season typically runs from October to March, when the weather is pleasant in much of the country. Most are free to attend. For college students, they are venues to explore new topics, meet a favorite author or simply check out the scene.

From self-improvement books like James Clear's "Atomic Habits" to the best-selling debut novel by Ravi Mantri, who writes in Telugu, young people are reading. And they are eager to expand — and advertise — their literary experiences, meandering through festival book stalls, attending panel discussions and

often posting their intellectual "cred" on social media.

"It's a badge of status for many," said Harish Bhat, an author and formerly a top marketing executive at Tata Sons, an Indian conglomerate, who has attended at least 15 literature festivals in the past decade.

Readers like Neelam Shrivani, a 23-year-old management student, are at the core of the events. In January, Ms. Shrivani attended all four days of the Kerala Literature Festival, held in the beach town of Kozhikode, "purely for the love of books."

She did, however, come with a plan, picking panel discussions based on the authors she most wanted to hear and researching her picks carefully to make her questions "more in-depth." Listening to Nobel laureates, of whom there were two at the Kerala festival, was of particular interest.

The festival started in 2016, when its founder, Ravi Deece, the managing partner of DC Books, which publishes literary works in Malayalam, assembled a

small army of volunteers to clean up stretches of the beach where trash had been dumped to host a gathering of readers and writers.

The bulk of festival attendees are young people. "It's a promising thing," Mr. Deece said.

This year, half of the festival's 354 sessions were conducted in Malayalam, and the rest in English and other languages, including French.

Literary classics in regional languages aren't the only ones selling; new writing is also having a moment.

In 2023, Mr. Mantri, the author who writes in Telugu, released his first book, a love story called "A Few Pages From Mother's Diary," expecting to sell a few hundred copies. His publisher, Swetha Yerram of Aju Publications, says it has sold more than 185,000 copies, after young readers created memes about how moved they were by the book. Based on her sales analyses, a majority of its readers are between 25 and 35 years old. It will be translated into English and other Indian languages this year.

Mr. Mantri, who quit his job as a business analyst in Dublin to pursue a literary career, embodies an aspirational Indian for the country's growing middle class — a successful professional who is both at home in the world and proud of his roots.

"No matter how far you travel, your mother tongue keeps you rooted," he said. "That is the only language you can speak with your mom, that brings you back to your home."

Mr. Mantri said he had received daily emails from first-time readers saying they had touched little other than academic texts before picking up his novel. His book, he said, has acted as a gateway to Telugu literature — and literature more broadly.

"Reading is an addiction," he said. "If you start reading, you cannot stop at one."

Prarthana Manoj, a 24-year-old who has moderated panels and volunteered at literature festivals, said that young attendees were more curious about topics like class, caste and gender.

Where Young Indians Go for Fun: Increasingly, It's Book Festivals



The Cubbon Reads meetup, above last month, is a gathering for silent reading at Cubbon Park in Bengaluru.

"Even if they haven't read a lot, they are trying to be more inclusive," Ms. Manoj said. "They have these genuine questions, and you're like, OK, this is a beautiful crowd."

Many organizers have borrowed the Jaipur festival's playbook, which includes panel discussions, book signings, a festival bookstore and other cultural events, but put their own spin on it.

The four-year-old Shillong Literary Festival, in the scenic northeastern state of Meghalaya, celebrates local poetry and traditional storytelling by Indigenous communities, with a backdrop of cherry blossoms. Wayanad, a district in the south Indian state of Kerala, distinguishes itself by hosting India's "largest rurally held festival." The Vidarbha Literary Festival in the city of Nagpur in the western state of Maharashtra says it is "dedicated exclusively to nonfiction writing in English in India."

Srikrishna Ramamoorthy, a venture capitalist and co-founder of the Bangalore Literature Festival, said the fairs had taken off after governments and cultural organizations embraced them as a way to showcase regional writing and culture. "People saw merit to the model," he said.

For the festival in Mizoram, in the hilly and forested northeast, the intention was to keep it small and invite people to explore the history and culture of the state, which has the second-highest literacy rate in India.

The event connected well-known literary figures among the Mizo ethnic group with the largely Mizo audience, and introduced others to the language and complexities of the region, said Sanjoy Hazarika, a journalist and author who helped put the festival together.

It was "both looking inward and reaching out," Mr. Hazarika said.

For authors, book festivals are a gift. They have a chance to talk about their work onstage, meet admirers and fellow writers, and sign books.

At the Jaipur festival, fans of the author Sudha Murty stood in line for more than an hour to have her sign copies of her new book. Ms. Murty is the wife of N.R. Narayana Murthy, the billionaire co-founder of Infosys, and the mother-in-law of Rishi Sunak, the former British prime minister, both of whom were in the audience.

Many authors, especially those with new books out, end up hopping from festival to festival. Mr. Bhat, the former Tata Sons executive, said that in the past six months, he had attended the festivals in Bengaluru, Kozhikode and Jaipur to promote his book "Jamsetji Tata: Powerful Learnings for Corporate Success," which he co-wrote.

"I feel a little bit like a nomad, but a happy nomad, going from one festival to another," Mr. Bhat said.