BookTok and Social Media in Popularizing English Translations of Indian Classical Texts

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Abstract: *The emergence of BookTok on TikTok, alongside other social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube, has transformed book discovery and dissemination in the digital age. This paper examines the role of these platforms in popularizing English translations of Indian classical texts, such as the Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Upanishads. Drawing on secondary data, including TikTok hashtag analytics (#BookTok with over 200–370 billion views as of 2025), sales trends, and content analysis of viral videos, the study finds that while BookTok primarily drirves fiction and romantasy sales (with up to 600% spikes), it also boosts engagement with Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) through accessible English translations and quote-based explanations. Creators like Deepak Chopra and youth influencers explain Gita chapters or share 108 quotes, reaching millions and making ancient concepts like dharma, karma, and non-dualism accessible to Gen Z globally. Retellings by authors such as Amish Tripathi further bridge classical texts to modern readers. Challenges include simplification and authenticity debates. The paper argues that social media democratizes IKS under NEP 2020's decolonization push, recommending strategic publisher collaborations. This synthesis of quantitative sales data and qualitative video trends highlights a shift from elite academia to participatory digital culture.*

Keywords: BookTok, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), English translations, Bhagavad Gita, social media dissemination, digital reading culture, mythological fiction, NEP 2020

I. INTRODUCTION

Indian classical texts form the core of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), encompassing philosophy, ethics, ecology, and spirituality documented in Sanskrit epics and scriptures. The Bhagavad Gita (part of the Mahabharata), Valmiki's Ramayana, and the Upanishads have been translated into English since the late 18th century—Charles Wilkins' 1785 version of the Gita being the first direct Sanskrit-to-English rendering. These translations historically served colonial scholars or diaspora communities, circulating through print and academic channels with limited mass reach.

The digital revolution, particularly TikTok's BookTok community (launched globally around 2018 and exploding post-2020), has changed this landscape. As of 2024–2025, #BookTok has amassed 200–370 billion views and over 36–52 million videos, driving measurable sales growth: up to 600% for featured titles, 59 million print sales tied directly in 2024, and a 9% overall print book uplift in some markets. In India, fiction sales grew 30% annually, fueled partly by social media.

This paper investigates how BookTok and allied platforms (Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, TikTok Shop) popularize English translations of these texts. Unlike Western YA or romance virals (e.g., Colleen Hoover or Sarah J. Maas), Indian classical content spreads via short explanatory videos, quote recitations, and modern retellings that embed IKS concepts. Examples include Eknath Easwaran's accessible Gita translation appearing on TikTok Shop and viral videos under #bhagavadgita (64.3K posts) explaining chapters or linking to dharma in daily life.

The relevance is heightened by India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which mandates IKS integration for decolonization. Social media fills the gap where traditional academia lags, reaching 71% under-30 users. Research questions include: (1) What quantitative engagement metrics exist for IKS-related content? (2) How do creators adapt translations for virality? (3) What are the implications for authenticity and global access?

Prior studies on BookTok focus on Western genres or general reading revival (Dera 2024; Steiner 2025), with limited attention to non-Western classics or IKS. This paper addresses that gap through synthesis of 2025–2026 data, arguing that social media acts as a modern guru-shishya parampara, democratizing IKS while risking oversimplification.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

BookTok's impact is well-documented in publishing literature. Forbes (2025) reports #BookTok's 370 billion views driving sales, brand awareness, and engagement, with publishers allocating 35% of marketing budgets to influencer campaigns (3–5x ROI). Publishers Weekly notes 59 million print sales linked to BookTok in 2024, reviving backlist titles and boosting YA/romance by 30% in the US and fiction by 30% in India (Nielsen BookData 2025).

Academic reviews (Dera 2024; da Silva 2025) describe BookTok as a "digital book club" fostering emotional, participatory reading. Videos prioritize relatability—crying, hype, or life lessons—over literary analysis, leading to 500–600% sales spikes for viral titles. Classics like The Song of Achilles or even older works revive through this ecosystem.

For Indian texts, direct data is sparser but growing. TikTok Shop lists multiple Gita translations (Stephen Mitchell's literary version, Eknath Easwaran's spiritual one), with sales tied to platform visibility. Hashtag #bhagavadgita shows 64.3K posts, including Deepak Chopra's video on "108 Inspiring Quotes" and youth creators (@niteshxgor, @maaltoks) breaking down chapters for modern relevance (e.g., Chapter 16 on divine vs. demonic qualities). #ramayana and Indian Mythology BookTok exceed 1.2 million posts, often featuring retellings.

Mythological fiction—rooted in classical translations—thrives: Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy and Ram Chandra Series (inspired by Ramayana/Mahabharata) achieved massive sales (over 5 million combined in India), amplified by social media even pre-BookTok, now extending to TikTok recommendations. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's feminist retellings (The Palace of Illusions) and Devdutt Pattanaik's illustrated IKS interpretations circulate via Instagram Reels and BookTok-adjacent content.

IKS-specific scholarship (Nithish 2025; IKS Division guidelines) highlights media's role in bridging tradition and modernity under NEP 2020, but rarely quantifies TikTok. Broader digital reading studies (Steiner 2025; Birke 2025) note shifts from intensive (repeated deep reading) to extensive (quick, viral discovery) modes—mirroring how short-form videos introduce Gita verses before full translations.

Gaps remain: few studies isolate English translations of pure classics versus fiction; authenticity concerns (simplification for virality) are underexplored. This paper synthesizes these threads.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods secondary research design, suitable for rapid digital phenomena without primary access to proprietary TikTok algorithms.

Quantitative Component: Analysis of publicly reported metrics from 2024–2025 sources (Forbes, Publishers Weekly, Nielsen, TikTok Shop listings). Key indicators: #BookTok views (200–370 billion), sales uplift percentages, TikTok Shop listings for Gita translations, and hashtag post counts (#bhagavadgita: 64.3K; Indian Mythology: 1.2M). Indian fiction growth data (30% in 2025) proxies IKS-related dissemination.

Qualitative Component: Content analysis of 50+ representative TikTok videos (sampled via search results for #bhagavadgita, #ramayana, #BookTok Indian Mythology). Categories: quote recitations, chapter summaries, translation recommendations (Easwaran/Mitchell), and retelling tie-ins (Amish Tripathi). Themes coded: accessibility, IKS application to modern life (karma in stress management), emotional engagement, and global vs. Indian creators.

Case Studies: Three focal texts—Bhagavad Gita (multiple translations), Ramayana (Valmiki/Dutt prose versions + retellings), and Upanishads (Easwaran). Sales and engagement traced via Amazon/TikTok Shop cross-references and viral video examples (e.g., Deepak Chopra's quote video, youth chapter breakdowns).

Secondary Sources: Peer-reviewed articles (Dera 2024; da Silva 2025), news (Forbes 2025), and IKS policy documents (NEP 2020, IKS Division). Limitations: Reliance on public data (no internal TikTok analytics); algorithmic bias favors emotional content; underrepresentation of non-English or regional translations. Ethical note: All examples are public-domain trends; no user data collected.

This approach ensures replicability and alignment with digital humanities methods for platform studies.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

BookTok's algorithm rewards emotional, bite-sized content, perfectly suiting IKS dissemination. #BookTok's scale (370 billion views) indirectly lifts Indian classical content: while romance dominates, spirituality/mythology niches thrive. TikTok Shop directly sells Gita translations (Easwaran's edition frequently listed), correlating with video virality.

Case 1: Bhagavad Gita — 64.3K #bhagavadgita posts include Chopra's "108 quotes" video (promoting his book) and explanatory series (@maaltoks: "Hinduism 101"; @niteshxgor: Chapter 16 adventures). These reach 30K–millions of views, driving searches for full translations. Easwaran's readable version (emphasizing practical spirituality) and Mitchell's literary one appear in "must-read" lists. Engagement metrics show Gen Z applying verses to mental health—nishkama karma for burnout—aligning IKS with wellness trends.

Case 2: Epics (Ramayana/Mahabharata) — 1.2M mythology posts favor retellings over literal translations. Amish Tripathi's series (modern Ramayana reinterpretations) benefit from cross-platform hype, contributing to India's 30% fiction growth. Bibek Debroy's complete translations gain secondary visibility via "epic summary" videos. R.K. Narayan's shortened prose versions appear in BookTok-adjacent recommendations.

Broader platforms amplify: Instagram Reels for aesthetic quote graphics; YouTube for long-form chapter breakdowns. This multi-platform ecosystem creates a "funnel"—short TikTok hooks lead to full-text purchases.

Impact on IKS: Democratization is evident. Traditional access required gurukuls or academia; now, a 15-second video makes Atman-Brahman relatable. Global reach (71% under-30 users) exports IKS, countering Orientalist stereotypes. Sales data indirectly supports: spirituality books on TikTok Shop see steady demand amid fiction boom.

Challenges: Virality favors simplification—complex Mimamsa hermeneutics reduced to "life hacks." Authenticity risks arise (e.g., selective quoting ignoring context). Misinformation (Western creators misinterpreting dharma) appears occasionally. Publishers must balance: TikTok Shop partnerships succeed, but deeper annotations in translations are needed.

Comparison with pre-digital era: Wilkins' 1785 Gita reached elites; today's videos reach billions. BookTok revives "intensive reading" ideals (repeated verse reflection) via extensive discovery. Under NEP 2020, this supports curriculum integration—educators can assign viral videos alongside translations.

Overall, social media transforms passive consumption into active, participatory IKS engagement, with measurable cultural and commercial effects.

V. CONCLUSION

BookTok and social media have emerged as powerful, unprecedented forces in popularizing English translations of Indian classical texts, making IKS globally accessible and relevant for the digital generation. While direct sales spikes mirror those in fiction (hundreds of percent for virals), the true impact lies in engagement: millions discovering Gita philosophy through quotes, chapters, and retellings, then purchasing translations like Easwaran or Mitchell.

This phenomenon aligns with NEP 2020's vision of IKS mainstreaming, bridging ancient wisdom with Gen Z's short-attention, visual culture. Challenges of simplification and authenticity demand responsible creator guidelines and publisher annotations. Future research could involve primary TikTok analytics or reader surveys on knowledge retention.

Recommendations: (1) Publishers launch official BookTok campaigns for new IKS translations; (2) Educators curate playlists linking videos to full texts; (3) Platforms enhance fact-checking for classical content. Ultimately, BookTok does not replace traditional scholarship—it revitalizes it, ensuring the Gita's eternal message reaches new Arjunas worldwide. In an era of information overload, social media has made timeless wisdom viral again.

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