

# WHEN A IS FOR AUTO, NOT APPLE



It's yet another alphabet book, but one that has been designed to reflect the imagery of India, notes Gargi Gupta

**A** Bharatnatyam dance performance at the launch of a book of alphabets meant for young children may be unusual, but Anita Ratnam's impromptu act at the launch of Priti

Paul's *ABC Desi* — *We ♥ India*, was entirely apposite. Dance, she told her mostly young audience at the event in Kolkata, also had alphabets, proceeding to demonstrate what these were with the movements of her hand and feet, and how these came together to construct something. To Paul, who has conceptualised and executed the book with the help of street hoarding painters, Ratnam's dance was an instance of how *ABC Desi* has brought together several art practices and practitioners.

The idea, she says, was to have a book of alphabets with a "graphic identity that is uniquely Indian". And who better than the hoarding painters, whose kitschy, larger-than-life paintings of filmstars have come to define popular Indian visual culture today? It helped too that Paul, who owns the Oxford chain of bookstores and is an avid art collector, has been



working with a group of these painters in Delhi and Chennai for 15-20 years now, getting them to paint an ambassador car, a fleet of scooters, children's furniture, a 3D wall in her home and so on, helping keep alive their hand-painted art at a time when it's dying out, thanks to digital presses that churn out film posters these days.

Thus, unlike the usual alphabet books where the words and images both reflect a 'foreign-ness', *ABC Desi* is uniformly *desi* — A for auto, G for Gandhi, T for tiffin and so on. The colours — yellow, mustard, red, saffron, green — and the visuals, too, have a *desi* flavour — the car in C is the familiar Ambassador, D is illustrated with a dancing girl doll and a *dhol*, the queen in Q looks like

Rani Jhansi rather than Queen Elizabeth, etc. The result is a book that will attract children as much as adults for the artwork's unpolished, hand-made aesthetic.

Paul says the idea for *ABC Desi* grew out of her own struggle to find a book for her sons which reflected an Indian imagery; Paul is married to Moroccan businessman Jaouad Kadiri, and has three sons. "This is obviously a book meant for the diaspora. It makes for a very attractive gift," she says. But she also felt, she says, that it would "be useful to create a book that would teach English to little Indian children using a uniquely Indian vocabulary, images and style of rendering."

But Paul was also hoping to battle the impression that "books that come out of India look cheap. The intent was to produce something that looks familiar and sumptuous." She's succeeded with the handsome, large format book with the smiling face of a blue-hued boy Krishna on its attractive cover. The ₹6,000 price tag helps too.

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