

LOUNGE

Business Interview

PRITI PAUL

The optimistic book-seller

The director of the Apeejay Surrendra Group on living in three cities, the need for attention to regional literature, and selling books in this age

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For the last one and a half years, Priti Paul, 47, has been tackling fiction from Bengal, its sequential order—17th, 18th and 19th centuries. “I stopped when I got to the fourth best book or the fifth best book of a writer,” says the director of the family run Apeejay Surrendra Group who grew up in Kolkata.

At the same time, Paul had her reading eyes fixed on another world: Morocco. The history-soaked city of Marrakech has been one of her three homes around the world since she married Moroccan hotelier Jaouad Kadiri in 2004. They have three sons, aged 10, 9 and 5.

When she’s next in Morocco or India, she may be found in the London office of the conglomerate’s shipping line. Paul says she spent an entire year finding all the fiction books she could featuring Morocco. “I was quite rigorous about it.” Until, understandably enough, this just got too tiring for words.

Next up are French and Russian classics. This choice, of course, has been inspired by the fact that she wants her children, who go to school in Marrakech, to

start “atacking” the classics. She may just decide to do this century-wise too. “It’s interesting when you see a movement come about,” says Paul.

Since Paul is also learning French, that too is on the year’s list. Besides, of course, books by authors who attended the Apeejay Kolkata Literary Festival, which she sponsors “as a way to do something for the city she grew up in, this January.

Hold your breath, we’re not done here yet. Every morning, before her children go to school, she reads them a book. “And how much research goes into that is unbelievable. We did *Fed Riding Hood* recently, which is difficult to do with them because they are three boys (every princess book I had to chuck into the dustbin far away). Then we did *Fed Riding Hood* with a twist, where *Fed Riding Hood* is a boy. And then from the boy’s perspective; they were fascinated by that.” So far, this school year they’ve read 80 books, by the time school breaks, they would have reached 250. “Books by numbers,” laughs Paul. “You know why I know it, I have a tally board in office. And just before flying down to Delhi, I counted.”

It’s on a pleasant Friday afternoon that I walk into Paul’s office in New Delhi’s Connaught Place. I pass Statesman House; this is where Oxford Bookstore, which she runs, started off in the city in 2004. “That’s exactly the time I got married and went outside the country, so I didn’t pay much attention to it then,” Paul would tell me a little later.

The book store was started by her family in Kolkata 96 years ago. The business, which started as a steel manufacturing unit in Lalazar in 1919, now includes shipping, tea, financial services, real estate and retail and hospitality—the last being the Apeejay Surrendra Park

Hotels chaired by Priti’s sister Priya.

In 1990, when their father was killed by militants in Assam, Paul, then 21 and pursuing a bachelor’s in architecture at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, US, returned to join the business along with her mother Shirin, sister and brother Karan, who is now the group chairman. There have been study breaks: In 1994, Priti Paul got a diploma in architecture from the UK. In 1997, she completed her master’s in design studies from Harvard University, US.

The group is now worth 76,000 crore, according to a company spokesperson. Paul, however, focuses on the retail wing over the years, she has taken the Oxford Bookstore to 30 locations in India and one

in Marrakech and opened a new gallery in New Delhi, the Apeejay Media Gallery. She also spearheads the group’s real estate division, which develops property and owns real estate equity, and oversees its CSR, or corporate social responsibility, activity—the Apeejay Anand Children’s Library for underprivileged children, which is named after her younger brother, who died in a car accident.

A subway crossing close to Statesman House takes me to the present location of Oxford Bookstore, on the first floor of one of the renovated white buildings in Connaught Place’s outer circle. Sitting opposite Paul in her office is a strangely distracting experience—not because of the bright orange sari that she is wearing, but because of the large mirror behind her chair in which I can see myself.

Thankfully, Paul soon offers me a personalized tour of the book store. We use the back entrance to reach the landing where her friend, writer Aatish Taseer, has installed a multilingual light installation.

As we enter the store, Paul is shy in the way-laid by the well-known London gallery, Ben Brown and his family, who had arrived in India just that day and stopped by to have lunch at Cha Bar, the eatery at the store which has created quite a buzz. “They’ve known each other for 25 years and have shared many experiences. For instance, when their children were born, Brown arranged for a photographer to come down from New York to shoot six newborns in London, including Paul’s, since it would not be worth the photographer’s while to come for just one child.”

Brown wants to know what new Indian writers he should be reading. “Vikram Seth?”

“Yes, that’s old India,” Paul laughs, steering him towards the regional writing section.

“There’s no balance, and I don’t divide my time,” Paul chortles at my question on how she balances home and work. At different points, she says, different things become more important. “For instance, the time when she got married and ignored the Delhi book store, or when her children were born, Brown was her main priority. Now she is focused again on the books business, at a time when the shutters are coming down on so many others worldwide.”

Paul says she met a lot of her writer friends and read what people were saying about bookshops. “I don’t think anyone wants bookshops to disappear and I don’t

Multidimensional: Paul organizes events in literary, lifestyle, wellness, food—to ensure the stream of visitors to the stores doesn’t flop.

think they should. People are fighting to keep book stores open and one of the reasons is because you want your kids to grow around them, picking up their own books. Everything is not going online. Right now we would be living in some robotic age,” she says. It’s reassuring, she adds, to see people back in book stores in Europe and the US. “We’re moving into a multi-channel type of retailing something you can access online, something you can purchase or discover physically. That’s the world we’ll move to.”

Paul has been conducting small experiments with the bookshop from the time it existed only in Kolkata. “There’s a full story of how you bought books (at the Kolkata shop at that time). You pick the book, then you go to the cash counter and pay, then take the book somewhere else and get it stamped. And worse, the woman at the cash counter would even shout at you for not having change or something. You’re the customer, and you’re really scared,” Paul laughs.

Paul introduced an art space at the shop in Kolkata, exhibiting the work of Satyajit Ray, Deyanira Singh, Sula Janah and Pamela Bondes, among others. She also opened a tea corner—an idea she took forward with the tea bar concept. And now, her mainstream book store is concentrating on doing its bit for India’s regional literature.

“Regional language needs a bit more attention, to be honoured more, exposed more,” she says. There is a huge amount of literature in languages like Urdu, she says, and it’s painful for writers when their books aren’t stocked in book stores, or are just pulped. “Not only do their stores now stock these books, they hold events on translations and Indian literature. Apparently, the vernacular section accounts for 6% of the revenue generated by Oxford Bookstore.”

While attempting to be in tune with the latest market trends, Paul’s store happens to be Dalt literature currently. Paul has an entire team dedicated to organizing events—literary, lifestyle, wellness, food—to ensure a regular and increased stream of visitors to the store. The events range from talks by lifestyle coaches to a sari-draping workshop by Rita Kapur Ghisla and tarot-reading sessions. It’s certainly not a business in which one can afford to take it easy any more.

Just before leaving the shop, I ask her what she misses in the three countries she resides in. “Definitely India,” says Paul. “When I landed right now (from Marrakech), I felt a sense of relief.”

Having children, she adds, “forces you to root yourself even more so that the kids have a sense of belonging.” In fact, Paul says, she tries to give them a sense of being from each of the places they live in. “It shouldn’t be an abstraction, that they are from everywhere and nowhere. All that Jhumpa Lahiri kind of stuff. I don’t want them to be like that. All that angst gets translated into great literature, but I don’t want my kids to be in that situation.”



IN PARENTHESIS

An architect by training, Paul was a month away from graduation and had a job lined up in New York to work for an architect when her father died, and the course of her life changed. Paul continues to keep her architectural muscle active. “Every year, I try to do one project,” she says, though these are now mostly personal undertakings. Two years ago, it was the bookshop in Marrakech; last year, the house in New Delhi; this year, it’s the turn of their apartment in London. In her 20s, Paul not only designed a nightclub for fashion designer Malini

Ramaji, but also her first store. “But I don’t want to have any regrets about it. If I have to let it go, I have to let it go.”