



The iconic Oxford Bookstore on Park Street has been a must-visit for not only book lovers, but also tourists, for 98 years now. The owners have applied for a heritage tag, which could be the stepping stone for getting Unesco's 'City of Books' title for Kolkata, writes **Subhro Niyogi**

For nearly a hundred years, it has regaled, enthralled, enlightened and captivated lakhs of bibliophiles. Now, a 'heritage' tag beckons the Oxford Bookstore on Park Street. The Apeejay Surrendra Group, which manages the store, is seeking heritage status for the 98-year-old repository of books. It's remarkable, really, because the heritage tag is rarely pursued by owners of old buildings, who feel the provisions restrict future options rather than add to prestige and value.

Speaking to **Kolkata Xtra!**, Apeejay Surrendra Group director Priti Paul said the family-run business would definitely seek the heritage tag for the bookstore and use it as a stepping stone to then pitch for Unesco's 'City of Books' title for Kolkata. The store has featured as a standalone chapter in British Council publication

### THE OXFORD JOURNEY

- > **1919** | Bookstore set up by Primlanis of Sindh
- > **1987** | Jit Paul of Apeejay Group purchases store
- > **1990** | Priya Paul takes over reigns of store
- > **1995** | Oxford Bookstore & Stationery refashioned as Oxford Bookstore Gallery
- > **2000** | Starts selling books online

'Kolkata: Book City'.

"Getting Oxford declared a heritage bookstore will be the perfect start to create a momentum for declaring Kolkata as the City of Books. The city already has a rich literary history and has been home to many authors and movements," Paul explains.

In the book trade, the Oxford Bookstore is regarded as the second oldest in India after Higginbothams in Chennai. The city, though, housed several other bookstores at the time like Thacker, Spink & Co in Esplanade, NewMan's in Dalhousie and Dasgupta & Co on College Street.

Oxford Bookstore started modestly in 1919 on the very sidewalk where it exists today. The Primlani family of Sind, which had migrated to India,

# Tome Trove



(Clockwise from top) Customers browse the shelves; an iron beam dating back to the Raj; Usha Uthup at a book event; the Cha Bar; the children's corner; a bird's-eye view of the store. (Below) The store in the 1960s

set up the business and was entitled to Royal warrants that is related to households of three members of the British royal family — the Queen, the Duke of Edinburgh and the Prince of Wales.

The store at that time was very different, with old-world shelves and white broad pillars. There were few Indian publishers and writers. Most of the books were imported. Foreigners who came to the city made it a point to visit two places: the Kalighat temple and Oxford Bookstore. Even those with no interest in books walked in to buy stationery.

"In the 1970s, during the Naxalite rising, the store was used as a message drop-off point by activists, who would slip notes into particular books for other members of their group to find,"



recounts author Shankar.

When Jit Paul bought the bookstore in 1987, he saved it from closing down. "There are enough restaurants on Park Street to eat. We need a place which feeds the mind and the soul. The store must be that place," He would say. Priti Paul took over in the early 1990s and took the store to other cities. The most challenging time came a few years ago, when e-books became the rage and bookstores began to down shutters.

"This bookstore is like the book on its shelf that contains an idea," says Priti. "It was a seed, an idea which has, through strong advocacy, evolved into a brand that celebrates the word and promotes book-reading. It has provided a platform that has brought together individuals and institutions, partnerships that

have helped achieve the mission of growing the habit of book-reading and keeping alive the allure of the printed book. It has adapted to customers' changing needs. Instead of being bogged down with challenges of the modern era, it innovated and evolved, keeping the store relevant to successive generations of book-lovers," she adds.

An architect, Priti says she feels heartbroken every time a beautiful house is torn down in Kolkata and hopes Park Street will fight the greed of builders to retain the buildings that make up the city's character. "We want to inspire others to preserve the good things that we have. The bookstore is part of Kolkata's legacy and heritage. It will be its pride and privilege to get and maintain the heritage tag. Indeed, we look at the age of our bookstore with awe. We respect the heritage in our care but what we work really hard at is making sure the store stays ahead of the curve as a book retailer and maintaining its unique aura. That's the only sustainable way in which this legacy will live on, delighting generations of Kolkatans," she adds.