

# A BORN ENTREPRENEUR

It's important to enjoy  
the little things of life.

By Suman Bajpai

**P**riti Paul serves as a Director of Apeejay Shipping Limited and Apeejay Surrendra Group. She has been at the forefront of managing the business of the century-old this group post her father's assassination in 1990. She is also the creative force behind the iconic Oxford Bookstore, the best equipped 'base-camp' for journeys of the mind established in 1919. She has launched Apeejay Arts, India's first gallery of 'new media' art, among other initiatives.



Priti Paul is a member of prestigious organisations like Royal Institute of British Architects, Women in Shipping and Trade Association (WISTA), England, India Committee of American Bureau of Shipping, USA, FICCI Committee of Art and Business of Art, India, Harvard Club India, MIT Club India. In 2013, she was conferred with an honorary degree of Doctorate of Business Administration by the Rai University, India.

Having conceptualised, designed and launched a range of projects in India and abroad, Priti Paul's latest initiative is her children's alphabet book ABC Desi. A lovingly created alphabet book with a difference - where English alphabets and Indian imagery meet drama, beauty and uniqueness. It is illustrated by film poster artists from Delhi and Bangalore.

#### Excerpts from an interview

**There are very few women who get a chance to run a business, how do you feel being a woman leader since the Indian society is primarily male-dominated in terms of leadership roles. How has your experience been as female entrepreneur with such stigmatism prevalent in the society?**

I come from a family of entrepreneurs and will always be one, no matter where I am. Being a global citizen who has lived and worked in four continents - Asia, America, Europe and Africa, more by chance than design, it has not occurred to me that I am constrained as a woman entrepreneur. I have absorbed influences and ideas from all these places to evolve as a person.

When it comes to being an entrepreneur, I consider that entrepreneurs are born, not created, and it doesn't matter whether you are a male or a female. As I mentioned above, I grew up in a family of entrepreneurs but we never talked business at home. However, the core values of hard work, integrity, humility, common business sense and teamwork were

instilled in me in that atmosphere even though I didn't realize it when I was young.

**Could you enlighten us on your views with the debate surrounding the topic of feminism?**

Feminism is a much-debated issue. Sometimes groups get divided into 'for' and 'against' factions on opposite sides as if playing with a ping pong ball in a table tennis game. Actually, feminism per se is not a 'woman' issue; it's a human rights issue. In the late 70s and 80s when the Feminism wave created ripples across the world, many mistook it as an extreme view unleashed by a so-called male-bashing brigade. In fact, the feminists and believers in their outlook were demanding equality in the society where women have been facing discrimination for centuries (not that everything is fine now).

**Are you a firm believer of female empowerment?**

Definitely. Today, a woman plays many roles - as a mother, educator of her children, and a bread earner too on equal footing with her partner. She has empowered herself already, stepping out from the traditional role the social order had bestowed on her for ages. Now, it's the duty of the society to extend

**HAVING CONCEPTUALISED, DESIGNED, AND LAUNCHED A RANGE OF PROJECTS IN INDIA AND ABROAD, PRITI PAUL'S LATEST INITIATIVE IS HER CHILDREN'S ALPHABET BOOK ABC DESI - THIS IS A LOVINGLY CREATED ALPHABET BOOK WITH A DIFFERENCE.**

support in her journey of discovery and recognise her worth.

**You trained at MIT in architecture and economics. You ran Apeejay's shipbuilding division. Now, you're crafting art galleries and cha bars - your response to those who distinguish between 'masculine' business orientations and 'feminine' arty qualities?**

I was actually trained to be an architect and passed out from MIT,



Harvard, Architectural Association School of Architecture, UK, and Royal Institute of British Architects. Before taking over as a director of the Apeejay Surrendra Group, I was totally involved in the academic field around architecture and economics. In 1990, from an aspiring architect I had to shift attention to other areas. Like real estate, shipping, etc. I set up the London office of Apeejay Shipping Limited.

Personally, I feel that there's no scope for gender bias in the business environment or there are

segregated areas like 'masculine' business and 'feminine' one, the latter sometimes associated with 'arty' qualities. I have been overseeing different sectors of business as an entrepreneur now for about three decades. If I have been able to bring in my interest in art, often regarded as a feminine quality, to enrich the hardcore business arena, well and good. I am happy for that.

**You handle one of the leading bookstores in India. Who is your favourite author/novel and why? Tell us about your favourite's artists/authors?**

My current favourite is Elena Fuentes as the four novels span the lives and friendships of two Italian girls from Naples, from birth to death. Her novels are gripping reads about the rich and complex lives of women.

**Tell us about your love for Indian traditional attire and Indian craft?**

In India, we have a history and culture going back to thousands of years. Our arts and crafts have evolved through many influences. India has always been a playground of people coming from many corners of the world. Thus, it has been a melting pot of cultural ethos. The country's indigenous arts and crafts have an amazing variety and depth and are admired across the world.

I love to wear a sari, the typical Indian attire for women, adorn jewellery and other accessories rooted in our tradition both as a matter of taste and a reflection of my admiration for the work of our craftsmen and women. Often, I wear a bindi with my saris, to me bindis symbolise Indianism, wisdom and power, said to be situated between the eyebrows.



**How do you balance your work life and personal life?**

My role as a mother overrides all other aspects of my life. At the same time, I must say there is no balance, frankly, it's extremes all the way. Either I am working so single-mindedly that I can't focus on the 'balance' aspect or I am relishing a particular moment in my own way. I believe that life is made up of moments and for me these moments are made up of simple joyous experiences with my boys like enjoying the beauty of my spectacular rose garden where I planted 3,000 rose bushes last



February in my home in Marrakesh or one of our businesses fetching a great deal or an award. It's important to enjoy the little things of life. Like flowers, I also enjoy the first warmth of spring, a cup of steaming tea and a great book. I am focused and manage my work and personal life even though I am

travelling across the continents at some time or the other.

**You run one of the leading bookstores in the country. What approach do you take to maintain and increase the footfall?**

While attempting to be in tune with the latest market trend, at Oxford Bookstore we have an entire team dedicated to organizing events like, literary festivals, lifestyle talk sessions, wellness sessions, food talk sessions, etc which ensure a regular and increased footfall at the bookstores and the popular Cha Bar.

**Now, you yourself have written a book. What inspired you to write 'ABC Desi'?**

Over the course of the last 12 years while I have been discovering and reading children's books to my boys. It became clear to me that the books being used to teach Indian children written in English were the same that were used by my generation and even generations before. Yet, we are living in a uniquely Indian moment and the English alphabet could reflect objects and experiences that Indian kids could identify with. ABC Desi came out of my strongly rooted cultural values. It reflects how I can morph, assimilate and cherry-pick the best of everything that comes my way.

**How has your journey been as an entrepreneur?**

My journey as an entrepreneur has been a learning process each day. Entrepreneurship is a continuous process. It doesn't mean that you stop once a goal is achieved. You keep reinventing yourself to realize what you want to create or achieve. The goal post keeps shifting and it's exciting and challenging to move towards each goal.

The intelligence is proved not by ease of learning, but by understanding what we learn.