

# THE ALPHABET OF DESI LIVING

Director Apeejay Surrendra Group and the force behind Oxford Bookstores, Priti Paul talks about the importance of our vernacular with the launch of her book *ABC Desi*.

By Malini Banerjee

## Q. How did you come up with the idea of *ABC Desi*?

It's an idea that came to me while bringing up my children Jad, Kais and Jai. When they would go through the ABC books, I realised that they were just same as they were six years ago that my husband and I read. The imagery was not particularly Indian and I felt as if it would be hard to relate to for Indian children. And even for NRIs, the images were not something that they could use to learn about India or Indian culture.

That is why I thought of *ABC Desi*, in which C could still stand for car but the image would be that of an ambassador. P for panda is common but why not have a peacock and T for tiger or Tiffin. My children incidentally did not know about the concept of a tiffin box.

The pictures in my book have been painted by commercial artists who paint posters for Bollywood films—an art that's been dying out in this digital age.



PRITI PAUL  
ENTREPRENEUR



The colours used are also recognisably Indian, such as parrot green, rani pink and so on.

## Q. How important do you think it is for your children to hold on to that Indian connect being global citizens?

I think it's imperative because it serves as an access point to where you are from. I caught with one of my

classmates from Loreto (House) recently, and her children growing up in New York don't know Hindi. I think it's important to know where you come from and speak the language, know the values and rituals and respect the pujas because you would need all of these things were you to function, work or run a business here. But I do think I am more conscious of this because I'm from Kolkata.

## Q. Is it important to read in the vernacular for that to happen?

One of those access point to the culture has to be through reading. My children are learning four languages right now Hindi, English, Arabic and French, and the only way to get forward and to learn it is through reading. I find a huge gap in terms of what is being done by international press and what is happening there in regards to vernacular mediums as well Indian writing for children. Take for example a simple matter of the English classics taught in classrooms which are adapted for different ages brackets. Why should one have to wait to read a book till one is twenty? Children's books need an attractive packaging especially in terms of the language, content presentation and pictures.

## Q. Speaking of books, what is your preferred medium—ebook readers or physical books? And what is the future?

Physical books definitely. And I am not just saying that because I run Oxford Bookstores. Bookstores in London still see snaking queues before Christmas and it has been proven that people tend to only read a certain kind of books on their e-readers. My children, who in fact learnt to read on online mediums, prefer books to computers and electronic devices. So that's why bookstores will survive.

## Q. Coming to your other passion, architecture, there's a movement to protect a lot of buildings from being pulled down in a bid to hold on Kolkata's architecture. What are your thoughts on that?

One of the reasons I decided to take up this field was because I was exposed to Kolkata's architecture from when I was very young, and I hated seeing the beautiful buildings being pulled down to create ugly modern facades. In fact, restoration is always on my agenda when I come to Kolkata. We have restored Park Mansions and I am currently looking at restoring a section for the Goethe Institute. We have made it a point to hold the Apeejay Kolkata Literary Festival at important architectural spots in the city.

**THE WRITER HAS MOVED FROM BEING AN ESOTERIC CHAP IN THE SHADOWS TO AN CHAP IN THE SHADOWS TO AN OMNIPRESENT CREATURE.**