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Calcutta is a buzzing city right now, believes Priti Paul, daughter of late Surrendra Paul and director of Apeejay Surrendra Group. Her entrepreneurial streak began, perhaps, at the age of 16 when she started a festival called Karma Yatra in her school, La Martiniere for Girls.

On her way to being an architect, she had to take up the reigns of the business at 21 due to the untimely demise of her father. She has been managing the Oxford Bookstores and Cha Bars across the country and her beloved Calcutta store turns 100 next year.

We caught up with Priti over a cup of *cha*, of course, and she spoke about juggling work and home, with three kids, and the relevance of a bookstore in a city's landscape. She, however, remained secretive about the 100-year celebration plans of Oxford Bookstore, with a glint of excitement in her eyes.

What is your favourite genre of books?

I like experimenting with different genres. I like strong women-oriented books, I like mystery edging towards Swedish noir, I like travel writing also, and I love reading about places after I've visited them, to give me a perspective of the place afterwards. I read 18-19th century Bengali literature. One year I read only about Morocco. Depends on the moment and the mood. I like a lot of Japanese fiction as well. I grew up in Calcutta, so we had all those things we read, like Agatha Christie.

Which is your favourite Oxford Bookstore?

I think I would choose Calcutta for its history and Delhi for its relevance in the modern age. We created Delhi in a very beautiful, old part of Connaught Place and that was an interesting period. When the Calcutta store was created, it was an important point in history. It was a place in India where all the important book publishers and writers were.

When we created Delhi there was a huge discussion going on around the validity of bookstores in the era of technology. There were a lot of debates, so I spent at least a year just researching, visiting bookstores, talking to people. Now we have crossed that point and there is a little more clarity. No one asks now 'Are bookstores going to die?', instead they understand their place in history and time and how they connect the city and become a cultural point in a city.

I spent a long time conceptualising, then there was restoration of the building, and I was adamant that I wanted it to not mimic the past and instead have a modern interpretation of how a bookstore should function in this multisensory, multichannel age.

Do you have a favourite spot at the Calcutta Oxford Bookstore?

I love sitting on that bridge in the Cha Bar. Obviously, as a child I used to hang around in the kids' section. We had a Kamasutra section and we would find older children hanging out there!

How do you deal with the impact of technology on book sale in

PRITI PAUL ON WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A BOOKSTORE OWNER IN TODAY'S WORLD OF TECHNOLOGY



Priti Paul. Picture: B. Halder



Oxford Bookstore on Park Street, a favourite with the young and old alike, turns 100 next year.

stores?

One really has to believe in the impact of a bookstore in the cultural fabric of a place. One needs to understand that a bookstore is not just a place to buy books, one can do that online, it is about exploration and discovery. It is a place to connect

the business. I was already working in the business but obviously there were other things that I was interested in. Then I met B.V. Doshi and he told me something very nice — "Use your position and your canvas to move things and do the work that you want to do."

My job as a bookstore owner is not only to support the champions but to find those who need to be exposed, developed and supported

ideas and institutions. Like each city needs a park, open space, you need a bunch of things to make the city work. And I think if you don't have a bookstore, you are missing a large chunk of it.

So what do you feel is the impact of technology on the publishing industry?

I think people now want to read more. Technology has made people more curious and thorough. People read up about a book and then they want to read more, so they buy more books and technology ends up acting like an enabler.

How do you juggle a business empire and your home life?

I don't juggle! (*laughs*) I end up giving maximum to something or the other at any given point of time. When you have kids, you realise there is no balance. Giving 70 per cent here and 30 per cent there is something that doesn't work with me. I will give my 90 per cent to a festival and 10 per cent to kids and then I will give my 300 per cent to my kids and do no work! But yes, somehow, I manage to keep all the balls in the air.

How do you think your life would have panned out had you not taken up this mantle at 21 years of age?

I was in my last year of architecture school in MIT when I heard the news (her father's demise) and rushed back to India. No one told me to but I decided that I wanted to come back to India and help out with

recreate yourself, I think that's great.

You have always been a champion of translated works of literature. Have you seen any change or improvement in translated works?

This is a very important question because it's a whole area that I have to still attack. I started working in the book trade 30 years ago and Indian writing in English had just started. Writers weren't so savvy as they are now. Nowadays writers are super savvy, easily published, they know how to market themselves, they know which lit meets to attend. They don't need any help.

But obviously the writers who are writing in regional languages do not know how to market themselves... the publishers push them around, the translations are bad. My job as a bookstore owner is not only to support the champions but to find those who need to be exposed, developed and supported.

In our Delhi bookstore, right beside the cash counter is an entire section of translated works, which is a pride of place and it took me a year and a half to curate. We have about 500 to 1,000 titles depending on the season. So I think this is an area that we all should collectively work on — bookstores, publishers, writers. All of that is in a state of disrepair. The translators are not good, there is no fixed catalogue one can refer to.

We are looking to translate some books in international languages to Indian languages. Effort has to be constant, and you never know in a few years, Bengali text might become the biggest seller.

Being a woman in a workforce, did you ever feel you had to put in more effort than a man would have to, to get the same work done?

No, never. I was 21 when I became the boss and I was running a shipping company in London and there were no Asians, no women and nobody who was 21 years old. And I was studying for my masters where I couldn't tell my professors because they would have chucked me out of the course. I had all the cards stacked against me for seven-eight years. If I had to make a decision, I just did.

What are you working on next?

There is a project we are doing with the French government... a restoration project in Chandernagore. The registry building with a library where people will be able to borrow Bengali and French books. I think it is a great way to bring together architecture, which is my field, and urban regenerations and literature. All little dreams come together in that one building (*laughs*).

Shrestha Saha