

A penguin that plans to fly, The Daily Penguin, January 25



You may soon see a quaint orange-and-cream Ambassador trundling into your city, filled with books, quirky mugs and other paraphernalia. And you will find this car parked wherever there is a literary event.

Flagged off in Jaipur last Saturday during the literary festival, the car is one of Penguin India's mascots for its year-long 25th anniversary celebrations. 'Follow the Penguin' will be the car's theme song as it tours various cities in the country.

As it enters its silver jubilee year in India, the publishing company founded in 1935 by Sir Allen Lane and V.K. Krishna Menon in the UK and bought out by Pearson Inc in 1970 is attempting to write a new chapter on the way books are marketed in this country. Aggressive marketing is the new mantra.

More showrooms will be added to the two existing Penguin stores in Bangalore and Kochi; the Spring Fever festival, which is held every year in Delhi, will be expanded to more cities. There will be nationwide author tours, social media contests, a mobile phone application that gives you a preview of a book on your handset, and a revamped Web site that launches next week.

Not just that. The Penguin story from here on will be more than books as it gets into the merchandise game as well. Mugs and bags with a cheeky play on Penguin titles (A Suitable Mug or A Suitable Bag, for instance), diaries, and postage cards that the crowds at Jaipur have already had a peek at, will soon hit stores across the country.

“For two years we have been showcasing the stuff at Jaipur. Now, we are ready to launch the merchandise in a large way,” says Himali Sodhi, Head of Marketing, Penguin India, describing how the goods will soon be available in lifestyle stores and book stores.

Penguin is also going retro with a vengeance, bringing back its memorable vintage jacket designs (see box) and playing the nostalgia card to woo old readers. “There will be brand initiatives, contests, engagement activities with the reader — activities around the year-long celebration are, in fact, going to be dedicated to the reader,” says Sodhi.

So, finally, quite apart from these gimmicky, attention-grabbing promotions, the publishing house also promises to turn over a new leaf by paying serious attention to what the Indian reader wants. And, if it happens to be pulp fiction or diet books so be it.

Take Ravinder Singh's *Can Love Happen Twice*, a title that Penguin with its ‘intellectual slant’ might have viewed with disdain a few years ago but proudly promotes today — boasting about how it is flying off the shelves and is on the top of the popular charts. It has no choice — ever since Rupa changed the rules of the publishing game here by scripting a runaway success with its Rs 99-priced Chetan Bhagat series, stodgy MNC publishers such as Penguin, which chased critical acclaim, have all had to rewrite their strategies. It's a serious question of profitability as well now.

Rudrani ‘Chiki’ Sarkar, the new Publisher of Penguin, admits that while on the literary side it will get pickier, “at the same time, we are also going to do more commercial stuff — both fiction and non-fiction.”

So, Metro Reads, the commercial fiction imprint started last year, under which Ravinder Singh's bestseller was launched, has had its logo and look redesigned, and will see more titles being pushed out.

Booking its place

At Jaipur, Penguin's top brass, including global movers and shakers such as parent Pearson's Marjorie Scardino networked busily, throwing a glittering party and wooing authors. The attention being lavished on India and the massive brand-building exercise this year is not surprising.

At a time when the publishing industry globally is facing a crisis, with the digital word fast replacing the printed word, India's books market is one of the few that has a healthy growth curve. Nielsen BookScan, the international books sales monitoring service, which since 2010 has been tracking the publishing industry in India, says 2011 saw the release of almost 24,000 titles in India across the genres of adult fiction, adult non-fiction and children, young adults and education — a pretty significant volume.

And the growth rate is impressive too. “We at Nielsen Bookscan India peg the growth at 40 per cent in value and 45 per cent in volume for the period July to December 2011 as against January to June 2011. The growth can be attributed to subjects that lend themselves to easy reading that are growing in popularity, ease of online access and purchase of books, further complemented by online conversation and buzz on authors and their books,” says Vikrant Mathur, Associate Director, Nielsen Bookscan India.

Obviously, global publishers want to ramp up their India operations — and this is the reason the last few years have seen a rash of MNC publishers entering the country. Many have been quicker than Penguin at spotting the gaps — in paperbacks, health books, business books, educational offerings — and are quickly filling it.

As brand strategist Harish Bijoor points out, the organised publishing industry has been a bit lax in capitalising on what India wants — a market that smaller Indian publishers have tapped beautifully.

“Paperbacks are an exciting category that have so far been underexploited by the major publishers,” he says, “and very thin paperbacks even more so.”

The reality is that for every one hardcover you sell in India, you sell 4,000 paperbacks and 40,000 very thin paperbacks (the kinds you see in Tamil Nadu), he says. The formats have to be reinvented, he suggests.

Nielsen figures on which categories led the growth also tell their own story. Adult fiction grew by 49.1 per cent in value, points Nielsen's Mathur.

Sarkar admits there are, of course, challenges that Penguin has to surmount — Penguin's turnaround time on books (sometimes it takes years to push out a book in the market) is notorious. She claims she will be changing all that. “I respond to e-mails within 20 minutes,” she boasts and says she has instructed staff at Penguin that every e-mail and query from a potential author has to be promptly answered. “It's the new rule in the company,” she says.

She also says that every author is going to be looked after. Some including Katherine Boo, she is personally championing with a deafening publicity blitzkrieg. “Not every author will get that from me personally,” she admits. But she promises that every author is going to be promoted with the assurance of a good jacket, a publicist, and so on. “Every book has its own life,” she declares.

Bijoor does say that Penguin in India has a positive brand equity. “The brand has an image that is very retro in the country. If the peacock is our national bird, I would say in book publishing terms, it's the Penguin that is the national book publishing icon of India,” he quips. Now, it's up to the publisher to keep that equity going.

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