

Browse no more

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Dileep Padgaonkar in Talking Terms | TOI

Sad but inevitable aftermath of the closure of a great bookshop

Two iconic bookshops – one in Pune, the other in Paris – are the latest victims of sweeping changes that have wrecked havoc in the retail book trade in recent years. Rampant book piracy, escalating rentals and fewer footfalls had already rendered them vulnerable. The emergence of e-books and heavily discounted and home-delivered hard copies purchased online drove them to the edge of despair. Countless numbers had to down their shutters even in rich countries with high educational levels. The ones that survived did so by the skin of their teeth.

One such survivor was the International Book Service, located on Deccan Gymkhana, a busy commercial junction in Pune. Established in 1931, its founder, V N Dixit, had a sharp eye for quality books published in India and abroad. That attracted not only the most stimulating minds in Maharashtra and Indophile scholars from around the world but also the likes of Osho (well before he metamorphosed into a spiritual teacher), J Krishnamurti, S Radhakrishnan, Dr B R Ambedkar and, above all, Jawaharlal Nehru.

The prime minister visited the bookshop four times. After the first visit, in the late 1930s, he encouraged his young daughter, Indira, to note its address since “it keeps books which cannot be obtained elsewhere”. The last visit was in July 1961 soon after a dam burst and flooded the city. As his cavalcade passed in front of the shop, Nehru ordered it to stop, hopped out of the car and crossed the road submerged in ankle-deep slush to commiserate with Dixit, whose work of a lifetime had been reduced to rubble, and later sent him a letter with moving words of comfort.

‘International’ Dixit, as the popular Marathi writer Pu La Deshpande had named him, passed away in 1975. His son, Upendra, who had joined the establishment a decade earlier, continued to uphold the shop’s legacy for close to four decades. But he couldn’t cope with the forces that battered his business.

The establishment shut down last January. But unlike bookshops that faded into oblivion, it reopened a few weeks later under another owner – Mandar Joglekar, a successful techie entrepreneur with a passion for books – in an ultra-chic avatar. However, as a mark of respect for its founder, the new management retained its old name.

The same fate awaits an even more exquisite bookshop, La Hune, that has been operating from the heart of Saint-Germain-des-Prés on the Left Bank of Paris since 1949. Until 2012, when it had to shift to another location nearby to make way for a Louis Vuitton luxury store, it was the haunt of students, habitués of two famous cafés next door – Le Flore and Les Deux Magots – and members of France’s artistic and intellectual feisty elites.

This is where the Surrealists, led by their guru, André Breton, congregated. On any given day you could spot celebrated writers, painters and filmmakers – Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Marguerite Duras, Françoise Sagan, Picasso, Max Ernst, Truffaut, Godard, etc. – intently turning the pages of a book. La Hune’s collection consisted of some 60,000 volumes on French and foreign literature, essays on various social sciences, books on art, architecture, design and cinema. Also displayed were original paintings and lithographs by reputed modern and contemporary artists.

While the owners of La Hune – the prestigious publishing house Gallimard – basked in its glory, they had to heed a harsh fact: its finances had been in the red for years. On 13 February they announced its takeover by Yellow Corner, an international firm that sells photographs by masters. La Hune will shut down in December but reopen

with the same name later.

The reactions to La Hune's demise echo those heard in Pune after the old International Book Service folded up. Some lament the 'emasculatation of culture' and the 'cancerous growth of commercialism'. Others stress the 'inexorable logic of the market' and the 'democratisation of reading' in a digitalised universe.

What the closure of a good bookshop portends though can hardly be denied. It deprives us of one of the gentler pleasures of life: Serendipity. This allows you to browse through books at leisure in the hope of discovering, quite by chance, one that captivates your fancy.

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