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## The Other India Bookstore and Press

### 1. GENERAL INFORMATION

#### 1.1 Title of practice *or* experience

The Other India Bookstore and Press

#### 1.2 Category *of* practice/experience and brief description

The Other India Bookstore (OIB) is a unique social institution set up ten years ago by a group of Indian intellectuals to put serious effort into South-South interaction in the areas of book publishing and distribution.

Despite years of political independence, citizens from India can rarely procure books from Africa, South America or even other countries in South (including Pakistan and Sri Lanka) and Southeast Asia. Neither can the citizens of those countries procure titles easily from India.

All countries, North and South, however, continue to be flooded with the output of the publishing and distribution houses based in a few centres in the Western world. It is certainly not the case that all the intellectuals of the planet are only to be located in London and New York, but this **is** in effect what the North's publishing industry implies when one is faced with its prolific output. OIB was set up to undermine this dominance and control of Western publishing houses over the intellectual life of the people of the South.

In the process of building bridges between publishing houses in the South, the Bookstore has not only survived, but found new niches to explore as well. One of these is the successful distribution of the vast quantities of non-governmental organisation (NGO) literature unavailable in commercial bookstores. Another **is** the publication of the entire range of alternative literature from the continent of India.

*1.3 Name of person or institution responsible for the practice or experience*

Other India Bookstore

*1.4 Name and position of key or relevant persons or officials involved*

Jerry Rodrigues, Manager, Other India Bookstore

Claude Alvares, Editor, Other India Press

*1.5 Details of institution*

(a) Address: Above Mapusa Clinic, Mapusa 403 507, Goa, India

(b) Telephone: ++ (91) (832) 263306,256479

(c) Fax: ++ (91) (832) 263305

(d) E-Mail: oibs@goatelecom.com

*1.6 Name of person and/or institution conducting the research*

Claude Alvares, Editor, Other India Press

*1.7 Details of research person/institution*

As in 1.5 above

## **2. THE PROBLEM OR SITUATION BEING ADDRESSED BY THE PRACTICE/INNOVATIVE EXPERIENCE**

When the Other India Bookstore (OIB) was set up by the Third World Bookstore Society in 1988, it set itself the limited objective of establishing interactive links between the book trades of India and those of Africa, South America and Southeast Asia. The Society was set up by committed Indian intellectuals who felt it a scandal that nearly 50 years after independence, one still could not access books from Africa, South America or Asia. All the books one could get in the Indian market from publishers outside India were restricted to titles from publishing houses based in the **UK or** the USA.

The dominance of the Western book trade naturally implied the domination of intellectual culture as well and the continued influence of Western ideas – whether such ideas were appropriate or not – over activities carried out in different regions of the South. Either in various syllabi prescribed by

the universities or through conditioned response, there remains even today a near-total dependency on the foreign, specifically English and North American, written word. Even academic scholarship focused on or around the so-called “Third World” is dominated by the word as proclaimed from the West.

The result of this dominance is that an author feels his/her work is recognised only if it is published in Europe or America, since those are the places where it gets recognition and from where its importance slowly filters down to other countries. When a book is published in the West, the so-called leading intellectual journals might review it, some colleges might prescribe it as recommended reading for students, quotes from the book might appear in other publications and the author thus feels he is recognised as an intellectual, poet, novelist, scientist, etc. by those who matter.

The dominance extends to marketing practices as well. More than 30 to 40 years after political independence, all the ex-colonies are still flooded with books, magazines, and journals from powerful Western publishers and their outlets. Ask in an Indian bookshop for books published in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nigeria or Kenya and you will draw a blank.

Ask in those countries for a book published in India and you will receive a similar negative response. But ask for a book published by Harper and Collins, USA or Oxford University Press, UK, and chances are that the title is readily available for sale.

The domination of the book trade by Western publishing houses is so powerful that literature generated in countries of the South eventually find their way to other countries in the South only through the North. A good example is the African Book Collective in London which dominates and controls the flow of literature from Africa to the rest of the world. To read, for instance, the Kenyan writer, Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s outburst against his former rulers, in *Decolonising the Mind*, Indians had to first obtain it courtesy of a publishing house in London. Due to the stranglehold exercised by Western centres, African writers are unable to trade their work directly with their counterparts in other parts of the South. The same situation holds true for hundreds of other writers from the South.

Efforts to change this wholly undesirable scenario have not borne much fruit, despite the emergence of “South-South” political institutions like the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), or, for that matter, a greater awareness than ever before that the “world information order” is highly distorted as it tilts in favour of the countries of the West.

### **3. DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICE/INNOVATIVE EXPERIENCE AND ITS MAIN FEATURES**

OIB was formally set up in October 1988 by a registered Trust called the Third World Bookstore Society. Prior to that, for a period of nearly two years, there was only an informal arrangement for the distribution of books in order to gauge the Indian book market and ascertain the viability of such an operation. These two years (1986-88) saw a limited distribution of books and monographs from well-known and significant institutes and NGOs sympathetic to the idea and which, fortunately, also had several publications for sale. Chief among these were the Consumers' Association of Penang, Malaysia, and the International Organisation of Consumer Unions, Malaysia, both of which had a voluminous amount of consumer literature unknown and therefore unavailable in India at the time, even though these are extremely important and well-known organisations in Southeast Asia. Another institute which readily sent its monograph series to India for distribution was the Third World Studies Centre, based in the University of Manila, Philippines.

The groups named were even prepared to sell at a loss to start with, provided they could develop a market and an audience in India. But to everyone's amazement, there were plenty of takers for the Malaysian titles in this country, particularly among the NGOs, who were pleased to find other like-minded Asians. The prices were also affordable despite their being "foreign" books and this enhanced their attractiveness. Thus, confident that the idea was not merely feasible but that it also made good business sense, the Society was registered and plans laid out for implementing the objectives.

In 1988, after wrangling a travel grant, Bookstore staff visited bookstores and publishing houses in Southeast Asia, including Thailand, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Singapore and Malaysia. Titles selected from these countries were then featured in an annotated printed catalogue sent out by mail to about a thousand addresses within India. These included NGOs and libraries as well as individuals. The response was tremendous.

A similar exercise was tried out with Africa. Here, Bookstore staff visited West Africa: Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya and later, the Zimbabwe Book Fair at Harare. The result of these reconnaissance tours was that a large inventory base of bookshops and publishers in these countries became available to the Bookstore in India, for purposes of importing attractive titles produced by such publishers for sale in the Indian market. The face-to-face contact with Southeast Asian and African publishers created the trust necessary for such operations.

The sale of books from Africa and Southeast Asia in the Indian market was a fairly successful operation and the Bookstore found itself repeatedly making fresh orders for titles it had promoted through its mail-order catalogues.

The Bookstore also took a policy decision not to market each and every book available in the South. It set up selection criteria. First and foremost, for a book to be marketed by OIB, it had to be written and published in some country of the South. Books on the South written by intellectuals and academics living in the South but published in the North were not eligible for distribution through the Bookstore's network of mail-order or direct sales. The subject matter of a book must naturally be of some interest to a book buyer in India. And in addition, every book that OIB selects for distribution must be well printed and produced.

Today, the present stock of OIB's books includes 1,200 titles: none of these titles comes from the UK or from the USA. Instead, OIB has much to offer on what Asia thinks, Africa feels or Latin America writes. It markets a wide range of titles, which runs the gamut from literature from Kenya and children's tales from Bhutan to a Malaysian lawyer's analysis of Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS).

OIB soon found that bringing other regions into contact with NGOs, research centres, activists and other interested individuals was not enough. Indian NGOs themselves were strangers to each other. An environment organisation in Gorakhpur did not know what a group with similar interests had done in Kerala, because nobody was marketing their publications. OIB confidently stepped into this new niche. Having a vast array of potential buyers easily available on its computerised mailing list, OIB now proceeded to tap the vast market in NGO literature within the country.

It wrote to NGOs offering its services to help market their publications. A deluge of publications followed. Applying its own criteria for good publishing, OIB now selected relevant titles and placed these also within its printed catalogues.

Perhaps the most important feature of OIB today is that it is the only outlet in the country marketing the entire volume of publications brought out by voluntary groups, NGOs and environmentalists – the ultimate “one-stop shop” for whatever is produced in India by non-commercial publishers, activist groups and alternative thinkers.

The titles marketed fall under a broad range of categories, like environment, women's issues, natural and traditional resources, human rights, alternative children's stories, health, tribals and dalits, development: the list is endless. Environmental titles include subjects like water management, Himalayan earthquakes and a hundred practical ways to lead a greener life-

style. Consumer literature is always popular, as are practical how-to-do-it books on health, alternative medicine or cooking.

OIB helps act as a clearing house for books presenting the reality of the “other”, disempowered and much neglected India and its aspirations for a better life. In its ten years of operation, OIB has managed to position itself as a leading outlet for books on just about any “alternative” subject on India. It is even good business, simply because people are seriously looking out for alternatives and are willing to pay to be guided along this path. Books on subjects like the environment and alternative-health options are at an absolute premium today and OIB sells its books without having to push them too much. In fact, very often, people come a long way searching for OIB.

The Bookstore today operates from a tiny office in the small commercial town of Mapusa, Goa, best known for its colourful Friday market which is a great tourist attraction. It operates chiefly as a mail-order bookshop although it has adequate facilities for the book buyer to browse through the shelves as well. Each day, the postman and office staff shuffle in and out with piles of letters, papers and neat packages. Letters and orders for books come from different parts of India, several from small towns, like Dhulia in Maharashtra, Hazaribagh in Bihar or Assam and occasionally even from the Andamans.

Anyone who writes to OIB for a book automatically gets on to OIB’s mailing list, which ensures that he/she receives OIB’s annual catalogue regularly.

People from small towns are in fact the main reason why the mail-order service works and continues to bring in business. But orders also come from abroad, especially now that OIB’s catalogue is also on the Internet. There are also school and college teachers, librarians, tourists and visitors to Goa who make it a point to visit OIB and place orders for books they can use back home. The fact that OIB operates as a mail-order service and guarantees that the parcel will reach its destination in mint condition is a great help for it saves the visitors the burden of carrying the parcel themselves.

Initially, OIB’s clientele was restricted to NGOs. Later, OIB found a market in universities and colleges. Facing a dearth of material for contemporary studies, the academic network turned to NGO publications, which were small, up-to-date and offered useful insights. Booksellers too started to examine the commercial viability of such publications and began to place orders. A fairly substantial percentage of OIB sales is now routed through the book trade, though the largest chunk still comes from its mail-order service.

In many ways, the OIB style of functioning has also remained unconventional. Contrary to normal business practice, this outlet does not necessarily demand advance payment from its distant and unknown clients. In its experience, people always pay. OIB trusts its customers and has rarely been cheated

out of its dues.

Conscious that books must be cheap if they are to be read widely, the Bookstore decided fairly early on to see to it that its books were priced at reasonable rates. In importing its books from other countries of the South, OIB also makes sure it is able to purchase books from the exporting country at local rates and not the rates charged for dollar exports. That way, OIB does not fall into the export-price circuit and is able to keep its prices down.

But this does not mean that OIB is run like a charitable outfit. Far from it; OIB's operations are fully professional and commercially viable. In fact, unlike several other successful initiatives from the South, the Bookstore decided to operate on a professional and commercial basis from its very inception and without depending on grants. OIB does not put a book in the catalogue unless it gets a commission, however small. It is the profits from the minimal commissions charged which enable OIB to survive and function as a fairly well-established business activity, operating within its means.

In 1990, the Bookstore added a publishing wing to its operations. There are far greater profits to be made in publishing when compared to distribution and retail. The Bookstore continued to develop its distribution arrangements, but its publishing house also became a runaway success. The titles published reflected the major strands of alternative thinking within India, for which there was an eager and steady market.

Today, the publishing wing of the Bookstore, the Other India Press (OIP) is already India's largest publisher of alternative titles covering topics ranging from animal rights to environment, organic farming and alternative schooling. Books published by OIP are professionally produced and no compromise is made with regard to any element of book design. The Press operates to international standards of printing, binding and publishing. OIP comes out with 10-12 publications a year and expects soon to increase this tally to 20 books a year.

OIB's unusual methods have also brought in cheap capital. Under a unique scheme called the Social Investment Fund (SIF), supporters voluntarily loan their money to OIB to enable it to undertake its publishing programme without having to resort to loans from commercial banks. Individuals loan money to the Bookstore for periods ranging from one to five years at rates of interest set by the donor, subject to a maximum of 10% per annum, with simple interest. Some opt to take no interest returns at all. This is also acceptable but the **principal** amount contributed is always returned.

Sticking to its green concerns, the Trust has recently begun to levy an environment tax on all books produced through OIP. The environment tax, collected from OIP and the buyer of the book, is handed over to organisations involved in the successful regeneration of forests.

OIB, launched a decade ago to promote the availability of literature from other countries of the South, alternative ideas and publications of non-profit organisations, has proved that there is a formidable niche for titles that do not originate from the well-established publishers of the West. It has also established that grassroots ideas sell. The strength of the organisation can be gauged from the fact that it has been able to make a concept like this work without the infusion of funds from aid agencies or grants.

#### **4. DESCRIPTION OF THE INSTITUTION RESPONSIBLE AND ITS ORGANISATIONAL ASPECTS**

The Third World Bookstore Society which was formed in 1986 under the Indian Societies Registration Act 1860, has approximately 15 trustees.

They come from different parts of the country. The Trust oversees the work of the Bookstore, the SIF, the OIP and other related activities.

Though the Trust carries out commercial activities through its bookstore operations, income from the activities cannot be allotted as dividends to any individual trustee, but is placed instead at the disposal of the Trust for improving and enhancing the range of activities.

#### **5. PROBLEMS OR OBSTACLES ENCOUNTERED AND HOW THEY WERE OVERCOME**

The principal obstacle to its operations the Bookstore has faced is the continuing inferiorised mentality of many intellectual centres in Asia, Africa and South America. In several African countries, the book trade is still controlled either by whites within the country or by publishing and distribution circles based in the UK. Such centres will brook no opposition or competition. It is hard to persuade book publishers in Africa to sell their books directly to OIB because they are fearful of violating their contracts with their distribution house in the UK which may be purchasing their books in bulk.

Many people, particularly intellectuals and academics, are still firmly hooked on the belief that good ideas can only emanate from books imported from the West. Many writers in the South feel it is far better to publish in the North than in the South, thus reinforcing existing habits of intellectual dependence on the North.

Pricing policy is another area of concern. To keep prices low, books from abroad have to be received by seamaile. However, it can take several months before the books arrive and sometimes these are held up at customs in Mumbai

on some pretext or the other. This has meant that OIB staff have had to sometimes even visit Mumbai to clear the packages. Fortunately, this does not happen too often.

There is also the problem of currency conversion rates fluctuating quite drastically, necessitating major price revisions which are naturally not seen favourably by customers who have placed orders based on prices quoted in the printed catalogue. To surmount this problem, OIB usually tries to buy in bulk and also make immediate payment so that the price stays fixed even if the currency value fluctuates.

The initial OIB policy was to charge the same price for a book to any customer, whether an individual, a library or an institution. Special reduced rates were, however, given to students, activists and those who genuinely appeared to be financially in need. For all the others, whether they were from India or abroad, the same rate applied.

However, when a reputable university in the USA which had sent in an order for books not only insisted on paying according to strict currency conversion (which meant that several publications had to be billed in decimal points) but also wanted a refund of one US dollar since the title could not be supplied, OIB decided to revise its policy of uniform prices. It now has an export rate (in US dollars) for books sold to customers in the Western world only. The export prices, however, are marginally higher than the equivalent rupee rates and constitute a more satisfactory arrangement.

Even though OIB provides an efficient distribution service for NGOs, dealing with them is not always easy. Most NGOs know next to nothing about invoicing, billing discounts etc. and they are very casual about such matters. They also have very little idea about packaging their books and care little about using cheaper forms of transport to save costs. Very often, the books arrive at OIB frayed and dishevelled, with their spines damaged, pages dog-eared and *so on*. No self-respecting customer would purchase such copies.

Sometimes, an NGO would despatch its consignment of books by courier or letter post, which is frightfully expensive, and OIB would be expected to reimburse the NGO its forwarding costs.

In its own interests, therefore, OIB set about educating the NGOs it dealt with on matters like packaging, postal rates for despatch, discount structures, invoicing, and book-trade terms like "Consignment Basis", "Sale or Return", "Approval Memos" etc. OIB printed a detailed information circular which it now routinely mails **to** all its NGO suppliers. Most of those who have received this circular have expressed their thanks for the service.

Often, NGOs would insist that the selling price of their books was as per costs incurred and there was no room for giving discounts. Once again, it was left to OIB to explain **to** them why it **is** necessary to have a proper pricing

policy, particularly if one wants to enter the mainstream commercial bookshops which, unlike the NGOs, do not get free spending money from donor agencies but have to watch their balance sheets all the time if they are to survive. Similarly too, OIB would survive only if it received its commissions. The message was not only understood but implemented by NGOs when they brought out and priced their new publications.

In fact, commissions have been one of the reasons why regular bookshops initially expressed reluctance to stock NGO publications. NGO publications are generally low-priced and their discount margins are minimal. This results in very small earnings for the bookseller when he does make a sale. This is a genuine problem, especially for booksellers, for which there are no easy solutions since OIB, like other NGOs, aims at reasonable prices for books. However, OIB has persuaded booksellers to stock these titles too by agreeing in turn to list the bookshop in its catalogue and promote it among buyers from that region.

University librarians, OIB discovered, sometimes expect personal commissions in return for placing orders. When OIB did its first mailout to libraries, the response was a poor 5% as compared with the rather high 40 to 45% response it was generally receiving from its regular mailing list. That was when OIB became aware of the kickback system that was in operation. OIB refused to pay personal commissions to anyone and this meant losing a large chunk of the library market.

**Fortunately, however,** OIB discovered an ingenious way of overcoming this problem. It sought out interested lecturers and professors who would place their requests for OIB's titles with their librarians who then could not refuse to buy the books even though personal commissions were not paid.

This has not wholly taken care of the problem and there are still several professors, teachers and students who do not have access to OIB titles simply because the librarian does not circulate OIB's catalogue as well as the others.

Finally, keeping abreast with the new publications produced abroad (i.e. in the countries of the South) has been difficult since it is expensive to mail brochures. Moreover, due to staff changes, the new staff have to be briefed all over again on OIB's philosophy and ideology especially since it is not the standard way of doing business. This can be time-consuming and quite frustrating too at times.

Even within the NGO community in India, activists sometimes fail to inform OIB of new publications or whether the earlier ones are out of print. Such errors invariably come to light only after, say, 5,000 copies of the new catalogues have been printed and mailed out. However, OIB continues to try out new ways of overcoming these hurdles. Since the Bookstore's work represents a new thinking within countries in the South which many people em-

pathise with, there is always adequate support and sympathy from the people across the counter, making it all that easier.

## 6. EFFECTS OF THE PRACTICE/INNOVATIVE EXPERIENCE

OIB can trace its origins to an idea floated in 1986. Today, as a result of its operations, books from Africa, South America and South and Southeast Asia are now available within the Indian subcontinent. This is the Bookstore's unique contribution. One of the most profound consequences of the Bookstore's operations is thus making available hundreds of books and titles from Africa and Southeast Asia in India and vice versa.

The fact that the Bookstore can operate a major commercial outlet with not a single book on the shelves originating from the UK or the USA is an eye-opener to most people who hitherto never raised such questions. Lonely Planet, the guidebook for alternative international travellers, recently labelled OIB as "the best book-shop" in Goa. It specifically noted that all the books in the store were published in Asia, Africa or Latin America.

For serious readers of fiction in English and for the small but growing number of scholars interested in fresh and different view-points and perspectives in the humanities and social sciences, OIB is a much-valued bookstore, since it provides access to what has been written, printed and published in English in many countries of the South.

OIB has also persuaded other bookshops to emulate its example. Less than a decade after the inception of OIB, Indian mainstream bookstores are stocking and selling books and periodicals published in English from South-east Asian countries and Africa. They also now stock the publications of several NGOs on their shelves, something that was thought impossible just a few years ago.

Today, OIB has built up a network of outlets that stock its books. Together with its partners, it also organises exhibitions coinciding with any alternative seminar and participates routinely in several of the book fairs organised within the country and abroad. A couple of years ago, OIB was invited to take part in the international fair at Frankfurt. Booksellers there were surprised at the quality that alternative publishers in India were capable of achieving.

In August 1997, just under a decade from the date it was founded, OIB was awarded a Distinguished Bookseller's Award by the Federation of Indian Publishers, India's apex federation of book publishers. The award was given in the category, "Unique Bookshop for Specialised Books". The award was instituted for the first time to coincide with the occasion of the 50th year of

India's independence. It carries a citation which states that the award was given to OIB "for dedicated and distinguished services to the book-reading society".

## **7. SUITABILITY AND POSSIBILITY FOR UPSCALING**

Not applicable.

## **8. SIGNIFICANCE FOR (AND IMPACT ON) POLICY-MAKING**

The impact of the Bookstore's work on policy-making has yet to be felt. Though there is a great deal of talk about South-South cooperation, the government's commitment to the actual movement of books and other products of the mind across the South has been fairly minimal despite the fact that much would change if a country as large as India could take some sensible initiatives.

## **9. POSSIBILITY AND SCOPE OF TRANSFERRING TO OTHER COMMUNITIES OR COUNTRIES**

There is no reason why the organisation of the Bookstore and of its publishing house with its present emphasis cannot be replicated in other parts of the world. No great skills, funds or even support is required.

What is essential in ample measure is dedication to the idea of intellectual freedom and to the idea of decolonising the mind, combined with a firm decision to work hard and produce quality work. If these qualities are available, OIBs can sprout anywhere.

The Other India Bookstore is a fiercely principled idea put into practice which proves that a new "information order" is not only desirable, but also possible.