

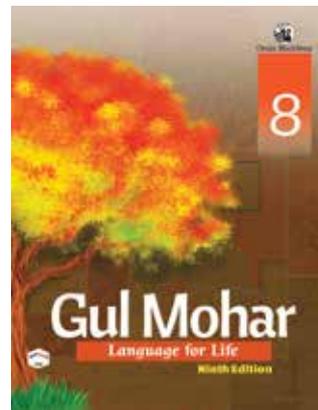
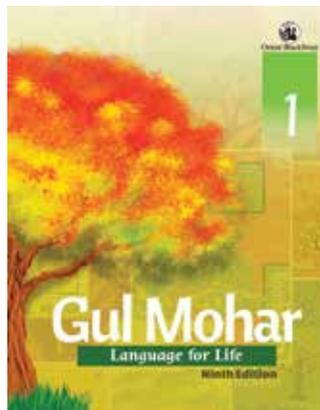
Orient Longmans (as they were known then) was incorporated on 7 Jan 1948, when it took over the Indian operations of the erstwhile British publishing firm Longmans, Green & Company.

J Rameshwar Rao, a man of many parts and persuasions—King, Diplomat, Member of Parliament— but a staunch nationalist at the core, took over the company and ensured that it became a springboard for Indian authorship, with Indian content for Indian readers and learners. They continued to be associated with the Longman Group as a small part of the business but when Pearson took over Longman and came to do business in India as Pearson Longman, they disengaged completely from Longman and renamed themselves Orient BlackSwan in 2008. With the tremendous goodwill and deep relationships they had built, and with their strong lists in the School, Higher Education and Trade publishing programmes, they established their Indian identity and consolidated their presence in the market. Some of their new school titles such as *Buzzword*, *Dialogue*, *Maths Ahead* and *Getting Ahead with Social Studies* have gone on to become extremely popular.

Their *Gul Mohar* series of textbooks has been enjoying the success for last 47 years. Here, Dr Vani Vasudevan, Director, Orient BlackSwan, shares more about this series and about developments in school education.

AABP: When was *Gul Mohar* launched?

Dr Vani: *Gul Mohar* was first published way back in 1974, forty-seven years ago to be exact. The primary



GUL MOHAR : “A GRAND YOUNG LADY” REMAINS AGELESS WITH GENERATIONS OF STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

With the ninth edition robust and active, Orient BlackSwan is looking ahead to the next edition and to the golden jubilee year of *Gul Mohar*. Here's more on this bestseller for the past 47 years.



Dr Vani Vasudevan

readers for classes 1 to 5 were published first, followed soon after by the middle school readers for classes 6 to 8 in 1975. One could

say that the series was a forerunner in many ways. The idea of *Gul Mohar* was impelled by the bold vision of our founder Chairman, J Rameshwar Rao, who wanted to bring Indian authorship and content to Indian readers. You may be aware that until then, children across the country had grown up on a staple diet of imported textbooks from British publishing companies, written by British authors. *Gul Mohar* changed that forever—a pioneering series of textbooks for the teaching of English, written and edited by Indian experts

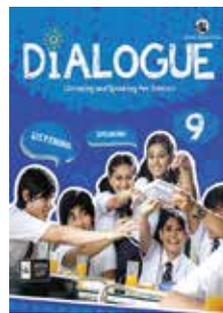
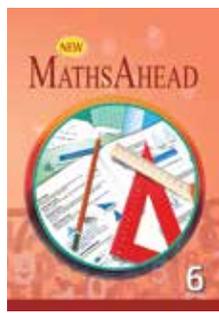
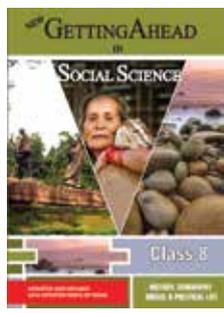
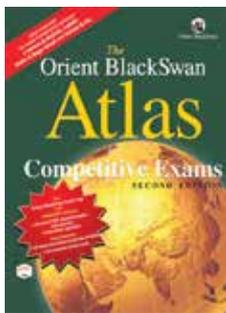
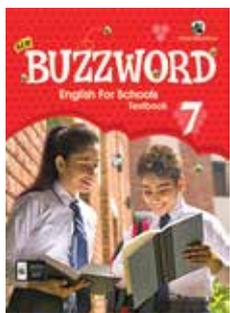
for our schools, our context, our children.

AABP: Who all were behind the success story?

Dr Vani: It was inspired team work all the way. Usha Aroor, our former Publishing Director, who collaborated with the authors and editors across the conceptualizing and making of the series, always described the project as both exhilarating and daunting in turn. We were fascinated by the host of *Gul Mohar* legends that she and other senior colleagues shared with us, and through those stories we understood what a monumental challenge it had been to develop the blueprint, brainstorm, create, edit and ratify something as nuanced as this and give it its final shape. *Gul Mohar* was without doubt a synergy of the best minds in the Indian ELT scene at the time—series editors M P Bhaskaran and Dr M L Tickoo at the primary level, and Dr N S Prabhu, who came on board for the middle school books. The team of authors too included the finest—Prof V Sasikumar and Dr V Saraswati, among others. Along with our in-house project team, they gave *Gul Mohar* its unique identity, its charm, its rigour, its quality and its enduring thought-leadership.

AABP: What was the initial response?

Dr Vani: You would think that a product like this would be a runaway success, wouldn't you? But, no. Like any idea that is way ahead of its time or iconoclastic, it was not received with unconditional acceptance. It took the marketing and sales teams seven long years to establish *Gul Mohar*. Or shall we say *Gul Mohar's* roots finally caught the soil after seven years of unflinching



first as students and later as teachers.

AABP: What are the future plans for this series?

Dr Vani: With the ninth edition robust and active, we look ahead to

team effort. In a sense, I would emphasise that the success of *Gul Mohar* is also attributable to this collective heave and perseverance.

We need to note here that the on-the-ground effort was backed by consistent and effective strategies—one of the biggest outcomes of the *Gul Mohar* campaign was that we pioneered the very concept of teacher training workshops in the country as early as 1978-79. What has now become customary—even ritual and commercialised—teacher support, began with handholding teachers through the method of the textbooks until they became champions of *Gul Mohar*. Then there was no looking back. *Gul Mohar* went on to become a great, spreading, flowering tree. It is now a formidable brand in itself, with a hugely loyal following among teachers of English in all our markets.

AABP: How has the legacy of *Gul Mohar* been taken forward in all these years?

Dr Vani: Quite simply, on the strength of belief in its proven efficacy. We are now nine editions down the road, and we can still say with pride and confidence that it is the most sought after English Language course. With every revision, we have worked consciously, and with something bordering on reverence, to ensure that it remains a standard-bearer and therefore an aspiration for schools across the country. Teachers are drawn

again and again to *Gul Mohar* for its rich selection of texts, its inimitable matrix, the range and strength of language practice, the innovations we bring to every revision, and the formidable teacher support we offer. We have taken care not to tamper with what teachers have perceived as the “essence” of *Gul Mohar*—its teachability and its relevance to changing times and needs. With ear to the ground, we have kept *Gul Mohar* agile and responsive, yet rooted in the publishing values of the very first edition. It is an overwhelming responsibility to carry forward the work of stalwarts such as Bhaskaran, Tickoo and Prabhu. With *Gul Mohar* spanning five decades, we have sadly lost some people along the way but the editorial team in-house has worked with belief and great care to keep it vibrant, with the invaluable support and trust of the series editors thus far.

AABP: How do you ensure that it is at par with changing times and syllabus?

Dr Vani: That is more easily explained than actually done! In principle, we undertake to revise (by that, we do not mean token or cosmetic revisions) every four years or so. That has been the case, at least, since the 1999 edition—we have had five editions since then. Every time we revise, we address the feedback of user teachers. We respect

and value feedback, and sift judiciously to see what we need to address. For example, we have consistently taken on board their suggestions for the grammar sequence and grading, while we have retained our best formats for practice. We have also accepted their suggestions to reinstate their favourite classic stories, while we continue to imbue *Gul Mohar* with freshness by way of texts on current themes and issues. We are very aware that what children read must resonate in their lives today. And, yes, we have gone far along the digital curve, and even offer AR (Augmented Reality) events for children, not to speak of a wealth of digital resources for the teacher and learner. Keeping pace with trends in educational technology is imperative in the context of the twenty-first century classroom/learner.

As for the scope, *Gul Mohar* has its own comprehensive ELT matrix, which includes and goes beyond prescribed syllabuses. So it is fairly effortless for us to cover anything new that may surface in a curriculum or syllabus change. In fact, we are very likely to have it covered already. Sometimes our teachers have described *Gul Mohar* with affection as “a grand young lady”, while they recall with fondness and pride how generations in their families have literally grown up with *Gul Mohar*,

the next edition and to the golden jubilee year of *Gul Mohar*. We would like to surprise everyone.

AABP: What changes do you foresee with the new Education Policy? What are your plans for the same?

Dr Vani: The new NEP is far-sighted, and very powerful in its intent. If the implementation on the ground happens in the manner envisaged, it is certain to transform the entire landscape of education in our country—we can make that leap. The changes that are particularly crucial are the emphases at the Foundational Stage; the focus on critical thinking and experiential learning vis-à-vis rote learning; the enriching integration urged across the curriculum; the stress on language and heritage; the reforms planned in the assessment system. These have been a long time coming, and they augur well for our children.

At Orient BlackSwan, we actually feel confirmed and endorsed by the NEP. Our publishing philosophy (reflected consistently in all our textbooks) has been to foreground these very values that the NEP asserts—we have always sought to focus on higher order thinking or critical thinking skills and on an activity-based, learner-centric approach rather than on rote learning to ace the exams. We were the first to pioneer the bilingual approach in an English course, with help in

regional languages, nearly twenty years ago. Our books and digital content have highlighted richly the value of our heritage and culture by way of bringing Indian authors and writing, Indian themes and case studies to our classrooms. The importance of context cannot be overstated.

We look forward to playing our part as trusted industry partners and as Indian publishers deeply entrenched in our context. We will help implement the NEP in our spheres of influence and interaction with teacher development and will extend our support to students, parents and school leadership in making the transition, as spelt out by the NEP. When the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) is announced, we will be at the ready to contribute because we need to make no course correction; in fact, we have been ahead of the curve.

AABP: Brief us about how Orient BlackSwan connects with teachers?

Dr. Vani: We promote our school books into nearly 20,000 schools in India, and they continue to nurture the minds and sensibilities of millions of children. We engage with thousands of our teachers by way of workshops—face to face and online. We take our commitment to education very seriously and across the last fifteen months of the pandemic, we have steadily extended our support to teachers, who have worked so hard to keep classes engaging and effective online. We have plied them with resources and training in pedagogy, with easy access to content and support material; we have brought them some of the finest professional development webinars across these months

on topical issues and challenges.

Our journey has brought us to the crossroads and we are having to re-invent ourselves, just as others in our industry are doing right now. The focus is on resilience and innovation at the present time. Readiness is all.

AABP: Please share your thoughts on pandemic and its effect on education?

Dr. Vani: The last fifteen months have been fraught for everyone everywhere. It is no exaggeration to say that children, teachers and parents have, in particular, suffered a great deal of uncertainty and frustration during the pandemic. Schools are faced once again with the prospect of online classes for what looks to be an indefinite duration. While they have all shown great tenacity and resilience, and have upskilled themselves diligently, we have also been empathetic and agile, and adapted to a fast-changing scenario. Our priority has been to constantly reach out to teachers and user schools and extend every kind of support—from a plethora of online teaching tools and resources to webinars and online workshops. We are more than happy to be of service at a time like this but we do hope fervently that education will not be stuck in the “new normal”—regardless of how skilled we may have become—and that children will soon go back to school in the physical space, learn and play with their friends, enjoy their sports and games, their drama activities and excursions, and truly reap the benefits of a holistic education. These formative years are precious and children deserve the most enriching experiences. ■

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