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## Back to school via Bunder Street



### Special Arrangement

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### The Hindu

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## **As another academic year opens, here's what Chennai's book and stationery terrain has to offer**

The statue of King George V still lords over this raucous part of town. He is the monarch of all he surveys — the visual, aural and olfactory kaleidoscope of rickety roadside shops, pedestrians and carts weaving between vehicles.

It's a searing hot afternoon and the air is clingy with sweat and the acrid stink of urine as I pick my way to Bunder Street, Parry's Corner. Hundreds of stationery shops, some with antiquated signboards, stand huddled in the dense, walkable locality. There is only a couple of days before schools reopen and Bunder Street, the city's book and stationery terrain, is spilling over with people, pencils and pocket guides.

Old books on George Town refer to the street having got its name from 'Bhandar' or 'warehouse' for merchants during Colonial rule. Some of the buildings still retain a mid-century flavour and their cellar-like spaces are chock-a-block with crisp notebooks, colourful erasers, maps, busy shop assistants and taciturn proprietors.

At Navrang Agenices, a small ceiling fan bravely tries to keep the heat at bay, as J. Kuppusamy serves his customers. He has been with the store for 40 years. "Most of the old bookstores are owned by families. Our shop is 75 years old," he says, pulling out bundles of notebooks with the year and the name emblazoned on the cover. "We print our own books, source them from Sivakasi, and are distributors for ITC's Classmate range of notebooks. Different things sell well at different times of the year — diaries and daily sheet calendars in January, fireworks during festivals, the wedding season and elections — but its books and stationery in May-June that bring in our maximum business. We also print books for colleges."

Navrang's dim lights illumine the shelves of stationery that draw excited children. Eight-year-old Monisha runs her fingers through the trays of colourful erasers and chooses Winnie-the-Pooh.

“Ben 10, Dora and Barbie pouches, bags and bottles are favourites among school-goers. Some of these items are China-made, though most come from small units in Mumbai and Delhi. Fountain pens and ink-wells are no longer messy affairs. Adults prefer fountain pens fitted with ink cartridges or the vast range of gel pens that brands like Cello, Montex and Flair offer. Those who still swear by old-fashioned fountain pens choose Parker. And they are so much more inexpensive here than at city shops,” says Kuppusamy.

Across the street, at M.K. Stores, the tall shelves are laden with books on philosophy, accountancy and exam guides. Behind the musty smelling desk lined with brown paper sits the owner’s son, Rafiq Raja. He’s so busy counting the fresh bundles of books that have just arrived that he barely looks up to speak. “Our specialty is guides. And our sales swell gradually as the academic year progresses. Few students buy guides in the first few months, but as the final exams near, guides literally fly off the shelves,” says Rafiq. M.K. Stores also supplies books to schools such as the Avvai Home School. “This is the busiest time of the year for us — we work long hours from 10 a.m.-10 p.m.,” he says. At the four-year-old Golden Book Centre a little further, picture charts some with school names printed on them sway gently in the breeze. There are the ubiquitous alphabet charts, flags of the world and charts on national leaders, among others. The shop is crammed from floor to ceiling with notebooks, textbooks printed by the Tamil Nadu Textbook Corporation, NCERT and CBSE books, rhyme books, guides, files and pens. Twenty-year-old Shyam flips through a French language book for college and says this is one of the few stores that stocks foreign language guides.

Amid a jumble of staplers and boxes of A4 sheets stands Siddik Khader Mohideen, one of the brothers who owns the store. He directs several young men loading newly-minted books for a school in Anna Nagar on to a rickshaw. A man wraps clear plastic around the books tearing the sheets with an old wooden ruler. “No one asks for those wooden rulers anymore,” Siddik laughs. “People are willing to shell out so much more for durable plastic stationery. Classmate’s geometry box uses high-grade plastic and is priced between Rs. 300-350. Nataraj (Rs. 40), Camel (Rs. 75) and Faber-Castell (Rs. 90) cost less. All our stationery is bought from wholesale dealers at Narayana Mudali Street, Sowcarpet. There is a huge variety in the market. The only difference is in the cost. We offer a 20 per cent discount,” he adds.

There’s no turning back the clock at these quirky bookstores, with their multiplicity of stationery and customers. Bunder Street is a good place to begin the new academic year. It is also an old-world antidote to the sameness of modern life.

Suresh, an engineer who’s browsing through the pencil boxes, recalls the annual expedition to Bunder Street as a child. “Now, I come here to pick up stuff for my children. I’ve done well in life....I hope they do so too.