

[Honoring a Century of Excellence in Publishing](#)

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BOOKS

Honoring a Century of Excellence in Publishing

Five brothers face the age of the Internet with an unwavering commitment to a scholarly readership

Rajiv Malik, New Delhi

In 1903, a man named Moti Lal Jain established a small religious bookshop in a portion of Punjab which is now part of Pakistan, with his son, Banarsi Dass. It was an unusual business venture for these two gentlemen from a distinguished family of jewelers well established in the court of the Sikh king, Maharaja Ranjit Singh. But the store was immediately successful, and the two men were quite happy until Motilal passed away just a few years later. When Banarsi Dass also died shortly after that in 1915, the responsibility for running the bookstore went to his younger brother, Sundar Lal Jain. Sundar Lal was soon joined by Shanti Lal, the only son of Banarsi Dass. It was this uncle-nephew team that built that small bookshop into the towering empire that came to be known even beyond the shores of India as Motilal Banarsidass Publishers.

The first branch of the business was established in Patna (Bihar) in 1937. After Partition in 1948, when the Jain family home and publishing house were burned to the ground during the riots, the Jains moved their headquarters to their branch office in Patna. Three years after that, they relocated to Varanasi. In 1958, they moved one final time to New Delhi.

Sundar Lal was a scholar of Sanskrit, an educationist, a philosopher and a philanthropist. When he took over the business, he began publishing serious works authored by respected scholars and attracted the cultured friendship and assistance of such eminent Indians as Dr. Rajendra Prasad and Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, both

champions of Indian culture and heritage. In New Delhi under Sundar Lal's distinguished leadership, Motilal Banarsidass flourished as never before.

By featuring serious literature, the book company has earned the respect of universities, researchers and historians around the world. Its books fill the libraries of virtually every institute of higher learning where Indology is studied. The Motilal trademark is a unique combination of scholarship, quality production and moderate costs, something major universities and struggling professors worry about. The Motilal book list covers a wide gamut of subjects: Indian languages and linguistics, literature, art, drama, music, history, religion, epigraphy, iconography, social themes, astronomy, astrology, ayurveda and yoga. The catalog is so extensive--over 2,000 titles--that more branches have come up in Patna, Chennai, Bangalore, Delhi, Banares, Mumbai, Kolkata and Pune to handle distribution. Now there are sales offices in London, and the US Library of Congress has made Motilal their authorized dealers for supplying Indological works from India. Sundar Lal Jain passed away in 1978, Shantilal in 1997. Shantilal's five sons--and now, two of his grandsons--currently handle different aspects of the family business.

N.P. Jain is the Managing Director of Motilal Banarsidass. At 65, he is the oldest of the five Jain brothers. Hinduism Today talked with him about the way it was and is, good books and bad, spiritual life, worldly life and the future of publishing in the age of the Internet.

Are you training anyone to take your place as the Managing Director of Motilal Banarsidass Publishers? The person who will take over from me is my youngest brother, Rajeev. When we sit together, we discuss what is to be published and how many copies. Now, he is learning which authors are to be picked up.

Do all of the five brothers work harmoniously together? There is no power struggle going on in our organization. If there were, we would be living in five different houses with five different businesses. By the blessings of our ancestors and our gurus, we are united. We all love and respect each other very much.

In your estimation what are the finest books published by Motilal Banarsidass? The criterion we currently follow in choosing books to publish is that they should feature the teachings of Hinduism, Buddhism or Jainism. Of these three main streams of knowledge, Buddhism is the most popular for us, because Buddha ventured beyond India. Today, we are the largest publisher of Buddhist teachings in the world. If you ask me which of our books is best, my choice may not have been our best seller. It may not have sold at all.

How do you feel about New Age literature and music? We have been selling New Age publications for about five years now. While it is true that they are currently popular and have an unlimited potential for growth, our financial stability is already established. For more than 100 years, Motilal Banarsidass has featured books that are scholarly and academic. Our sales are consistent in this market.

Most of these New Age books are also paperback, which makes them very economical. Popular books are always reasonably priced. The people of India will buy books only when the price is reasonable. Now, the youth are turning to these New Age publications.

Do you get many requests for publication? We receive so many manuscripts. We try to select the best ones for publication. Out of ten submissions, we might publish two. I am the first one to go through these, but I do so with the help of specialists on the topics of books submitted. Sometimes when I think that a book is of an outstanding nature but needs some work, I will commission an author, an editor or a scholar to come in.

What are your views on the changing world of book publication? As businessmen we should expand. But we like to think of ourselves as publishers who are scholarly and academic. We are more concerned with quality than quantity. In India, the general emphasis is more on quantity. If you go through our catalogue, you will find that most of our authors are Western scholars. When Western scholars start a project, they put their body, mind and soul into it and take the work very seriously.

Does book publication have a future? There was a time, not too long ago, when book publishing all around the world was suffering. Today things are looking a lot better. Trends start overseas. Then India copies them. When television came into

the world, people stopped reading books. Then there was the Internet. For a time, it seemed all but lost. Yet miraculously, people are now slowly starting to read books again. As usual, this started in the West and is only just now coming to India. Even the youth are coming back to books. Look at Harry Potter.

Our sale of educational books will always be secure, but scholarly and academic publications have never been lucrative. This is why scholars seek grants for publication. They cannot raise the necessary funds from book sales alone. About twenty percent of the books that I publish are by authors who are working on grants.

It is generally understood that your family approaches publishing almost as if it were a spiritual mission of sorts. Is this true? Publishing as a spiritual mission has been a tradition in this family. Actually, we think of it more as the dissemination of Indian culture. We have even been recognized and honored with awards for this work. We can maintain this attitude of service because we keep our personal requirements limited. This is part of the philosophy of Jainism. We follow the path of aparigraha, which means non-possessiveness. Gandhi followed this path. His spiritual guru was a Jain whose name was Shrimad Raj Chandra.

Can you talk a little about the joint family structure? Running a family requires a lot of sacrifice. Most of the problems that occur in a joint family are not because of the men, but because of the women. This has my mother worried. She says that women under the influence of modern culture want freedom but no work. I believe that the division of this family will occur eventually. It might have happened quite some time ago, if it had not been for my father. He wanted to keep the family together. When he passed away eight years ago, my mother and I inherited the responsibility for running the family. Finally, when we thought we could not wait any longer, we bought five houses in a colony. But now nobody wants to shift. Everyone is saying, "We are happy here." God is great, you see! We are still together.

There is another reason why we are still together. Many spiritual people come to our home as guests. They bring stability and unity.

Do you have any special interests as you prepare to retire? I am now only interested in spiritual life. If I come to know of some spiritual person traveling through, I try to

meet him. I do not claim to have realized God, but I am clear in my understanding of my soul and my life. I know who I am, where I came from and where I am going. I firmly believe that what we are supposed to do is live a selfless life. While good deeds bring joy and bad deeds bring suffering, selfless deeds bring liberation. This is my belief.

I feel that if one goes deeply into the study of Jainism, one will find the spiritual path. Likewise, if one goes deeply into Hinduism or Buddhism, one will also find nothing but the path of spirit. People generally do not go into this kind of depth. For this reason, most of us are more religious than spiritual.

As a respected elder advisor, do you have any advice for the youth? Our youth of today need to get the right type of education. Modern education is not complete. We must seek a type of education that improves the quality of life. This is my message to our youth. The entire curriculum of our schools has to be changed so as to include an instruction from our ancient literature. Unfortunately, I do not see this happening.

Rajeev P. Jain is heir apparent to the Motilal Banarsidass dynasty. At 45, he is currently in charge of exports and the New Age books division. Hinduism Today talked with him about ages new and old, making money and the future of their family business in the hands of the young.

How has the Internet affected reading habits in India? More and more Indians are getting educated now, and the level of education is rising. More education is bound to have a positive affect on the reading habits of people. It is interesting to note that this is due in part to the Internet. Although our whole catalogue is available on the Internet, I have no interest in making the books we publish available on the Web in the shape of E Books.

Do your plans to expand include featuring New Age publications? New Age books and music are a part of our expansion plans. It fits right in with what we are already doing, because actually, there is no "New Age." There is ancient wisdom coming to this age. What is being called the New Age is really just a repackaging of ancient wisdom--like old wine in a new bottle.

When we talk of New Age publications, we are talking about esoteric material made easily understandable and accessible to the masses. These books are meant to inspire the common man and act like a catalyst in teaching him the art of living.

New Age books have been my passion for the last 20 years. Now that our children are joining the business, I am promoting the sale of New Age books. If I can make this new division of our operation successful, our next generation of family members will be able to eventually handle it independently. I will then be free to move on to something else.

New Age books have more scope for growth than our more academic works. Motilal Banarsidass did 2,000 titles in one hundred years. Now in just five years, our New Age division has already produced 250 titles. About 60 to 70 percent of the content of new age books is based on Hinduism. There is also the chance that our New Age book readers will gradually become interested in our other books.

Where do you make your most money today? We are surviving today due to the international markets. Scholars and institutions outside India are supporting us. Thirty percent of our sales go to institutions. For them, Indian books are cheap. America is one of the largest buyers. England, Germany and France are also good. We also have a large number of people buying from us through the Internet and our online bookstore.

Is publishing a commercially viable business today? Publishing is in our blood. We are not interested in any other business. However, I cannot say that publishing is a commercially viable business. In publishing, your stock has to be at least three times that of your turnover. When you print, you don't just print one book, you print a thousand or more. Whether you are able sell them or not, your money is already spent on production. Then you need places to store these books--and more places to sell them. So there is this huge cost for infrastructure. To start a publishing house

like ours in today's times would be an act of foolishness.

How do you see the future of Motilal Banarsidass Publishers? My own dream is that our younger generation should be groomed so that they are happy, healthy and wise. Our parents and elder brothers have worked much harder than we have and left us a structure which is now profitable and growing. I would like to do the same for our next generation.

I would hope that our growth would be slow and steady, but not extravagant.

Though I am not a very spiritual person, I go to our Jain temple almost every evening. This gives me peace. I do not want to be an aggressive and angry person. Our whole family is vegetarian and we are teetotalers. It is my belief that any success we enjoy is only a reflection of the good and wholesome life we try to live.

Here we have 27 people living under one roof. The five brothers all share a blood relationship whereas their wives all come from different families. So far, everyone agrees that the advantages of the joint family far outweigh the disadvantages. Now my grandchildren are getting married and the family is expanding even more. I feel that the time has finally come for us to start planning to live separately. But this separation should take place while I am alive. Otherwise, who will solve the disputes.

Leelavati Jain, 75, wife of the late Shanti Lal and Jain family matriarch

Because of our tradition of living together and working together, we enjoy the warmth and security that only a family can provide. If even one of us became overly ambitious, we might not be able to live together like we do. So we all share the same ambition. This is probably the secret behind the miracle of us remaining united. For us, what is most important is working and living together with one equal mind. To us this is more important than money. And because of this we are happy. Our forefathers started this company with 27 rupees. If we had invested in some other business the same amount of time and money we have put into Motilal Banarsidass through the years, we might be much richer by now. Our first priority has always been to stay together and get along well with each other. Contentment and satisfaction are the key principles by which we live. Living this way, we may move slowly but we move together in mutual support. One of the reasons we are more easily able to take this leisurely approach could be that in the field of Indology, we don't have much competition. I can proudly say that, so far as the books on Indology are concerned, we are the number-one publishing house in the world.

Ravi P. Jain, 47, Director of Finance