

[Book Barons of Delhi](#)

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PUBLISHING

Book Barons of Delhi

Decades-old publishing dynasties protect, promote and preserve dharma

Interviews and reporting By Prabha Bhardwaj, New Delhi

Speaking of things transcendental and divine, an Indian sage once advised, "It's not in books, you fool." True enough of Truth, but when it comes to matters of culture and history, books are the surest repository of a nation's intellect and identity. While other nations publish tons of trash, India, in keeping with her conservative soul, seems to prefer a more traditional style. Witness the leading book publishers in Delhi, each and every one committed to preserving the Hindu literary legacy, ancient and modern. The religious resolve of the six publishers that Hinduism Today spoke to in February is more than superficial spiritual fervor. It is a family covenant. Within each clan exists an unspoken contract that gently binds sons to continuing the patrilineal trade.

The pious publishing giant Motilal Banarsidass traces its heritage back to 1903, and Munshiram Manoharlal tracks their family printing tree back to 1870. Both companies were begun in Lahore prior to India's partition, and both have set the

admirable Indian printing standard. "We could publish any meaningless trash to turn a profit," suggests Naresh Gupta of Indian Books Centre and Sri Satguru Publications, which began in 1976. "After all, it is the same paper, the same ink and the same technology. But we choose to publish serious, religious and useful books." Explaining the inception of the Sanskrit specialization of Nag Publications, Surendra Pratap recalls, "My father had a deep love of Sanskrit. And because original texts in Sanskrit were largely unavailable, he decided to publish them himself, fully knowing that the volume of sales would be very low."

Indeed, high volume sales is not an expectation of any of these publishers. Sunil Gupta points out, "The books are mostly in English. But the masses are not English literate." Only eight percent of all Indians speak any English. Also, until the recent upsurge of India's middle class, book prices generally precluded sales to any but libraries, wealthy individuals and foreigners. If a survey was conducted in Delhi, Gita Press would likely show the greatest sales and prove to be the publisher that most people read from daily--that is, a chapter from the Gita or Ramayana. Suruchi Prakashan, the publisher managed by a trust set up by the Rashtriya Sevak Sangh, also produces cheap books for the masses. Both publish many works in Hindi.

The publishers described here have a distinctly different outlook. As we spoke, each exuded a sense of poise, dignity and pride of achievement. In response to the idea of "missing the mass market," Abhinav's Shakti Malik countered that "Quality and long life is the key to salability. Our buyers look for quality, and price does not bother them. That is how we are

able to sustain ourselves."

In the spirit of objective reporting and disclosure, it should be noted that Himalayan Academy, publisher of this magazine, has on-going projects with four of the publishers reported on in this article.

QUALITY CONSCIOUS

Munshiram Manoharlal

The road from devastation to consummation

Munshiram, oldest of the six publishers we profile, literally rose like a Phoenix from the ashes. The company was begun by Manohar Chand who named it Meherchand and Laxmandas. Chand, a widely-respected literary figure, had translated the Granth Sahib, Sikhism's holy book, into English. The British decorated him for his ground-breaking work, and the company slowly expanded. Soon his books were being sold at the premier bookshops all over the country. Munshiram's current director, Mr. Ashok Jain, relates his family's remarkable tale of loss and recovery. "Lahore was the center of education, and our publishing house and bookshops specialized in Indology. Books were produced with meticulous quality consciousness. We did not care for quantity, but aimed only to make beautiful books. It remained a flourishing family business until the partition.

"Then, on the eve of Pakistan's independence, August 14, 1947, our business premises and house were completely burned down. That day we lost everything. Luckily, we all had been evacuated earlier to Amritsar. Later kindly Muslim neighbors helped our father to escape safely across the

border. Our family was again united, but with no business or assets.

"In 1948, we sold the jewelry my grandmother had brought with her from Lahore, and with that money steps were taken to re-establish the business. Because we were well-known publishers with a good reputation, it was easy to restart. Our services to the literary world were recognized, and the business flourished once again.

"In the 1950s my father reestablished the family business under the banner of Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd., the present name."

In the '70s the older sons joined and a new strategy was fashioned whereby 19th century texts whose copyrights had expired--J.N. Faraqurhar's Modern Religious Movements of India is an example--were reprinted in fresh editions. It worked, and such classic resources became their bread and butter. In recent years Munshiram has put together some truly extraordinary works, among them Bhisma's 17-volume Indian history, a 5,000-page, four-volume English Mahabharata, the complete works of Tulsidas and dozens of linguistic and Buddhistic tomes (the latter following Buddhism's global surge of popularity). The family is on a roll. Ashok's brother's two sons, Ashok and Pankaj, have joined the business. His third son is in the US, training to be a graphics designer. Ashok told us, "We expect him to join us on his return. My own son is 18 now and seems inclined towards the business. Let us wait and see what he decides. Children must enjoy full freedom. In any event, I have no doubt that the books will continue to flourish."

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WORLD RENOWNED

Motilal Banarsidass

India's religiously rooted book-making
magnate

Through the past thirty years we monks at Hinduism Today in Hawaii have amassed so many books that we recently had to buy a used 40-foot shipping container to serve as a library annex. Browsing there in preparation for this article, no name flashed before our vision more often than Motilal Banarsidass, the largest of Delhi's publishers, serving up the creme de la creme of Indian wisdom, especially scripture, through the world's widest distribution network for Indian books. Printing in India is an arduous process, done mostly by hand. So each volume is a treasure, and in this case, one of love.

Motilal was founded in 1903 by Mr. Motilal and son

Banarsidass in Lahore. At Motilal's transition at an early age, his younger brother, Lal Sunderlal Jain, stepped in. Later, Mr. Shantilal Jain joined the effort. After partition, the Punjabi family started fresh in Varanasi, then moved headquarters to Delhi in 1958. Shantilal's five sons now each handle different aspects of the business, with the youngest looking after exports. Senior son and head of the firm, Rajeev Prakash Jain, says, "Our mottos are 'Do not diversify' and 'Do not spoil the long-established reputation.' Commercial viability is not our primary concern. The company has a firm policy: if we think a book should be published, we do not worry about the cost. The company is able to absorb the extra expense."

"Because our books are scholarly, our main clients are researchers and universities," Rajeev explains. "Indian scholars are dependent upon libraries because they cannot afford to buy personal copies. It is a pity that people who have the money do not wish to read, and the serious readers do not have the means to buy books. The country has an interesting pattern. In Western India, Maharashtra and in the South, most people are voracious readers. Calcuttians are real book

lovers. When we have exhibitions, if they cannot afford to buy a book, they will come several times just to see and feel them. They start saving, maybe for a year, and then buy the book during the next exhibition."

Publishing, Rajeev affirms, is "in our blood. It's in our genes." It's a family effort. "We all live under one roof and eat from one common kitchen. You may term it as the family culture or hierarchy, but only the males work in the business. Our daughters get married and go with their husbands, who have their own businesses. They all are married into very well-to-do families. My son, trained in London in printing technology, has started his own company, Excell Publishers, which produces books on management. I think we have a bright future."

He explains, "We follow the Jain religion, but this is not reflected in our publishing. Rather, we are known the world over for our specialization in ancient Indian and specifically Hindu culture, religion, tantra, art and philosophy." But, "We publish a lot on religion in general, which includes

Jainism and Buddhism. Hindu sacred literature is in Sanskrit, Buddhism is in Pali, and Jainism is in Prakriti. So we have earned a name for ourselves as publishers of those three languages. Lately we have covered Buddhism extensively. Our largest selection is Tibetan."

From behind his desk amidst stacks of books, Rajeev told Hinduism Today, "We distribute in the US, South Asia and the UK. There is a Motilal Books Ltd. in Oxford to whom we have given full autonomy. For the last 25 years we have had Indian shops operating in Calcutta, Chennai, Bangalore and Mumbai, in addition to our branches at Patna and Varanasi." Motilal is a significant supplier to the Delhi office of the US Library of Congress, which procures Indian books for distribution to libraries and institutions around the world. Praising Motilal, Honorable Chief Justice Mohan of Karnataka said while opening the Bangalore branch, "I will not call them mere publishers. They are explorers who find the gems of Hindu thought and present them to the world."

Reflecting on trends he hopes their books will

counteract, Rajeev offered, "Today, Indians are religious only at face value, not from within. Life is going at such a pace that nobody stops to think about it. Poverty and the Western influences are definitely ruining our culture. Modern women are no longer humble. They wish to carve their own niche in society, with their own style, which is far removed from the traditional way."

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ART'S ARCHIVISTS

Abhinav

Beginning his own tradition of excellence

With a little sole searching, that is, plodding along the back streets of Delhi's Hauz Khas Market, if you know where to look and whom to ask, you can find the ramshackle building that houses the humble offices of Shakti Malik, proprietor and managing director of Abhinav Publications. With one look at an Abhinav book, however, you would never believe that it came from these hidden headquarters. Each Abhinav opus is a stylish and vivid Indian cultural archive, and Malik makes no

disclaimers for his standards. "We are not aiming at the man on the streets," he certifies. "Our readership consists of scholars, libraries and specialized organizations. Our books are meant to be used by numerous readers. Most go to collectors or to reference desks."

Malik is a graduate of mathematics who later specialized in arts and religion. His career began at the Indian Institute of Public Opinion. During this time, his interest in ancient history developed, and he became a partner in the Young Asia Publications company in 1965. In 1972, he quit his job and became a full-time independent publisher. Although he has had no formal training in publishing, his success has been explosive, and he has never doubted his decision. He feels that his venture into publishing is "God's will" and maintains that "The customer is God."

Certainly, God was smiling on Malik when his first book, *Iconography of Vishnu*, was launched in 1973. It was priced at ₹75, which was quite high at that time, but 400 copies sold on the first day. Although record sales like that have never been

repeated, Malik has also not been disappointed. "Whatever we choose to publish sells well," he rejoices. Another reason Malik is a satisfied salesman is that, as he proudly declares, "There is no black money. All our income is accounted for, and we pay accurate taxes. We have peace of mind and contentment, unlike some businesses."

Questioned on the profitability of his plethora of titles on specialized Indian and Hindu topics, such as *The Yoga Tradition of the Mysore Palace*, *Zardozi: Glittering Gold Embroidery*, *Costumes of the Rulers of Mewar* and *Secret Power of Tantrik Breathing*, Malik conceded, "True, there is not much monetary gain in this genre--but I am fully committed to it." He was silent for a moment, then added, "I have strong faith in religion in all its forms, and therefore I expect our titles to be successful. At least, we do break even with our publications on Hinduism."

Malik stresses that Abhinav is "purely a family business," and he takes great pride that his son, Ateev Malik, a commerce graduate, is contributing his talents to the team. The father remembers his recruiting, "I was in dire need of help due to expansion, and it was perfectly natural to have him join me."

But as soon as he was put in charge of Abhinav's exports, Ateev implemented innovative ideas that unfolded new directions for the ongoing publishing activities. Ateev introduced a line of handmade paper products which were specifically designed and marketed for export. The products include writing paper and matching envelopes decorated with various Indian motifs, including iconographic depictions of Hindu Gods like Ganesha. A very popular series

carries symbols of the different rasis (astrological birth signs). Ateev's division has won prizes from the government of India and awards from the Federation of Publishers.

Shakti Malik himself is impressively tall and stocky, but holds a demure countenance. He radiates a profound satisfaction with his station in life. Along with the security of having a thriving business, of being his own boss and of having the sure support of his son, Shakti Malik is also enjoying personal edification. He couldn't resist telling how he learned about the Tamil saint, Tiruvalluvar. "I had never heard of him," Malik revealed. "But he is immensely popular among Tamilians. In his Tirukural, he has written extensively about the various duties and responsibilities of the different stages of

life--something like Manu's works in the North. Careful inquiry on the thesis of Tirukural reveals that the primary aim of our life is to realize the divine inner self and simultaneously to be able to lead our mundane life without misery and difficulty. I have published two translations thus far. First is Readings from Thirukkural, by G.N. Das, and the second is Ambrosia of Thirukkural, by Swamiji Iraianban. All this work enhances my status, and I am becoming known as a specialist in this field. What would you call this, if not the providence of God?"

Shakti Malik's faith in Hinduism holds his hope for the future. He told Hinduism Today, "I am a born-Hindu, and I believe that Hinduism is not changing. For centuries, the teachings have endured, and the religion is advancing. Its

traditions and teachings insure its survival. So there shall always be opportunity to prosper under its umbrella."

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DHARMA DRIVEN
Indian Books Centre
Men with a mission to make
meaningful books

Religious fervor fuels the two erudite and gregarious brothers who pilot Sri Satguru Publications, the publishing arm of Indian Books Centre. "God willed us into this business," Naresh and Sunil Gupta, the proprietors and managers, concur conclusively. "We are religious, and this is our destiny," adds Naresh. "Our wish is

that our books will in some way uplift, inspire or educate the reader. But at least we know that they are not leading anyone astray." Sunil chimes in, "We fully expect that they will help people to follow the right path."

True to their calling, their debut book was the Shiv Samhita. Later, they released major works such as the 7-volume anthology of Mimamsakosah, by Swami Kevalananda Saraswati, and the complete Encyclopedia of Indian Philosophy. "As we are Hindus," explains Naresh, "we publish about Ayurveda, Vastushastra and all the sacred sciences which are allied to Hinduism."

While they look to their Lord for inspiration, they rely on God-given

management skills for success. "We are in business to publish books for sale, not to fill shelves in our stores," asserts Sunil. "It is our policy not to accept subsidies, so the title has to be absolutely saleable," Naresh elaborates. "In the beginning, we had to look for titles, but now that we have our reputation, authors approach us. We consider the novelty, content and language and ask ourselves, would this be suitable for the general reader or academicians only? Thus different criteria are used for different subjects."

Being the newest publisher in Delhi, it is fitting that they have taken the lead in the freshest market--internet sales. Their home page on the world wide web--www.ibcindia.com--has greatly enhanced their export sales. But, according to Naresh, the brothers have

noticed that "In the last two to three years the Indian market has grown substantially, and there is vast potential. Earlier, we never concentrated on sales in India."

When asked if their parents lived with them, Naresh, in a sudden break from his cool corporate composure, quipped a terse "No." Then he sallied, "We live with them, and there is a vast difference. They are the head of our family, which is one unit. We do not worry about the future in heated competition with others. For we wish to maintain a religious household. We believe that we each have our karmas to live through and dharma to fulfill. Thus we are content."

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TAPPING TRADITION

Nag Publishing

Where Sanskrit has become the
family specialty

When my father died in 1994 at the age of 75, the whole responsibility for the family and the business fell on me," recalls Surendra Pratap of Nag Publishers. Surendra and his brother Narendra now guide the company. "Our field of concentration," Surendra states, "is the Vedas and Vedic epics, such as the Puranas, Smritis, Brahmin Granth, as well as works in astrology, dictionaries, literature, philosophy and ancient Sanskrit. We do not limit ourselves to Hinduism alone but include Buddhist and

other religious works."

Nag publications include all of the Mahapuranas, Vedas, Nine Gems of Sanskrit Literature, Siddhanta Darpana and Complete Plays of Bhasa in their original Sanskrit as well as Geographical Survey of the Puranas, Science and Technology in the Vedas, Medicinal Plants of India and several Sanskrit-English dictionaries.

There was no hint of hesitation for Surendra to take the helm after his father's passing. He relates, "I am a graduate in commerce, and from my early days I was interested in what my father was doing. I joined him when we started this new business and have had no regrets and have never looked back. I

knew I had to hold everything together," he told Hinduism Today over a cup of Indian tea. "That is the meaning of family and business. Otherwise, our father's forty years of experience would be lost. My goal was to move ahead with the family. I understood that in any relation, coordination and compromise is a must. If you think for the other party and not for yourself, there is no problem. I am very happy that we two brothers, with our families, are working and living together. Our biggest wealth is our sanskars: manners, tradition and culture."

The Nag publishing family hails from Mirzapur district of Uttar Pradesh. Surendra's father, Nagsharan Singh, was born on the festival day of Nag Panchami. He worked with Leader Press at Allahabad, then moved to Patna where he

printed the daily Search Light. Coming to Delhi, he worked as a manager with Motilal Banarsidass for 20 years. In 1975, with his two sons, he started Nag Publishing, naming it after the auspicious day of his birth.

"My father," Surendra explains, "wanted to publish Sanskrit text, fully knowing that the volume of sales would be very low. It took two to three years before any returns came. Our enduring strategy is that Sanskrit texts never get outdated." The brothers have a Board of Editors who advise on new titles. "Additionally there are four or five professors who write," says Surendra.

There is a gracious comraderie among all the Delhi publishers. Surendra confirms,

"There are many publishers in our field, but we maintain a healthy competition and have cordial relations." It was a sure sign when a representative of Motilal Banarsidass escorted us from their headquarters to the Nag Publishing offices.

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HINDU ADVOCATES
The Voice of India
Lifting the long siege surrounding
Hinduism

I started voice of india in 1989 be-cause Hindu society was under siege," Sita Ram Goel, 76, told Hinduism Today. "Hindus have a damaged psyche. They find fault

with themselves. They have no pride. Voice of India is one individual's effort to counteract that." This small publishing house has produced a remarkable series of books relatively free of biased information despite their provocative topics. They deal with the Muslim and Christian presence in India, the impact of communism and secularism and historical issues, especially the "Aryan Invasion." Foremost among the authors published by Voice of India is Sri Ram Swarup, perhaps Hinduism's most cogent analyst. Goel, who writes five hours a day, N.S. Rajaram and Arun Shourie are other great Indian authors represented here, along with Vamadeva Shastri (David Frawley) and Koenraad Elst. Their collective efforts have substantially impacted resurgent Hindu organizations such as the RSS, VHP, the political party BJP, and Hindus and Hindu friends outside India. 1Ã4

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