

## [Motilal](#)

Category : [February 1991](#)

Published by Anonymous on Feb. 01, 1991

## Motilal

### India's Masterful Book Merchant

Sinha, B.M. Looking for a rare Puranic text? Can't find that obscure yoga sutra or a good Pali-English dictionary? You'll find it all at Motilal

Computers may one day change the publishing world, but for now books are the prime storehouse of human knowledge. If it is knowledge of India's arts, literature, history, philosophies or languages that you seek and a post-holiday trip to Waldenbooks or Coles turns up only yuppie fodder, then you want a small family-operated business called Motilal Banarsidas. It is the premier indological publisher in the world, known for its classical works and wide-ranging booklist. It is also India's only private company specializing in texts from India's glorious past.

The story of Motilal begins in the Punjab (today's Pakistan) in 1903, the year Mr. Moti Lal, assisted by his son Mr. Banarsi Dass, opened a religious bookshop in Lahore. They belonged to a family of jewelers in the court of the Sikh king Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Business grew, but in 1915 Banarsi Dass died, leaving responsibility in the hands of his brother, Mr. Sundar Lal Jain.

It was Sundar Lal Jain who really laid the foundations of the family publishing house. He was a scholar of Sanskrit, an educationist, philosopher and philanthropist. It was he who started the publication of serious volumes authored by eminent scholars of Lahore. Among his projects was the 22-volume "Punjab Sanskrit Series."

Scholar Jain honed his business skills and Motilal flourished. Then came 1947 and the partition of India. It was a serious blow to the family. Riotous mobs burned their shop to the ground. Sundar Lal Jain fled, taking his large family to Banares. Though penniless, he set up a bookstall and began to rebuild the institution. His efforts

attracted the help of eminent Indians, among them Dr. Rajendra Prasad and Dr. S. Radhakrishnan, both champions of Indian culture and heritage.

Ten years passed, and the family decided to expand, moving their main offices to New Delhi. In the early 60's they undertook to reprint Max Muller's 50-volume "Sacred Books of the East," and produced the prestigious Harvard Oriental Series. The list grew, scholars gathered around, eager to see their works in print. Outside of India academics were watching and buying. Exports became the backbone of sales and by 1989 reached US\$ 350,000.

Sundar Lal Jain died in 1978, but not before he had trained his son, N.P. Jain, to carry on the family tradition. Originally Mr. Jain preferred to pursue a career in science. But his father persuaded him to explore Indology, which led the son to do post-graduate work in Sanskrit. N.P. Jain is the managing director of Motilal today, and Mr. Shanti Lal is chairman.

Most publishers seeking their fortunes focus on romance novels or popular books. But Motilal has kept the faith with its founders. By staying with serious works, it has earned the respect of universities, researchers and historians around the world. Its books fill the libraries of virtually every institute of higher learning. There is a small popular side of their work, mostly trade books such as the thought of J. Krishnamurthi and a new 13-volume Sufi series on the discourses of Hazrat Inayat Khan.

New releases include such titles as The Aesthetics of Wonder. Aspects of Hindu Morality. Buddhist Monks and Monasteries of India, Laughing Matters, The Doctrine of Vibration: An Analysis of Kashmir Saivism and Folktales of India. Surprisingly, most of the present work is not only sold outside India, but starts there. Mr. Jain told HINDUISM TODAY, "We not only sell abroad most of our books, but the majority of our authors hail from the West."

The Motilal trademark is a unique combination of scholarship, quality production and moderate costs, something even major universities and struggling professors worry about. Then there is the Motilal booklist. It covers a wide gamut of subjects: Indian languages and linguistics, literature, art, drama, music, history, religion, epigraphy, iconography, social themes, astronomy, astrology, ayurveda, yoga,

dictionaries and concordances. The catalog is so extensive - over 2,000 titles - that branches have come up in Patna, Madras, Bangalore, Delhi and Banaras to handle the distribution. Now there are sales offices in London.

Lately the US Library of Congress has taken note. They have made Motilal their authorized dealers for the supply of Indological works from India.

A well-known Indian author noted, "It is a great honor for us to get our works published by Motilal Banarsidas." Each year scholars of repute submit over one hundred manuscripts, of which about twenty are selected for publication. The process of selection is tough. A team of experts in each area is impaneled to examine the manuscripts and to make the decision. Mr. Jain, himself a fine scholar, seeks out potential contributors as he travels to conferences and seminars on Indology. Recently he corralled Mr. Samraj Gupta, a professor of English at Delhi University, commissioning him to put all the works of Adi Sankaracharya into English. It will run to several volumes and be the first of its kind.

Other notable scholars who are part of the Motilal team are Dr. R.C. Majumdar, Dr. P.N. Bose, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, Dr. A.S. Altekar, C.H. Tawney, George A. Gierson, Lewis R. Lancaster, Sir M.P. Stein, Sir John Marshall and Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty.

In 1988 Motilal bought rights to the Ramacharitamansa (Holy Lake of the Acts of Rama) of Tulsidas in English. They produced a masterful 900-page edition of the classic, exquisitely typeset and bound with color illustrations. Though worth much more, the \$ 100 price tag kept it out of many personal libraries, so Motilal is now issuing a smaller, more affordable edition.

Another achievement is the 45-volume English translation of the Puranas. This first complete English series (scheduled to run 100 volumes) is a major contribution, for these stories constitute the backbone of Indian mythology, philosophy, character and culture.

Professor N.G. Barrier of South Asia Books in Missouri gives Motilal high marks. He told HINDUISM TODAY that "This is a firm with more continuity in the field than any

other, and the largest international clientele. Their strength is in keeping all the basic teaching tools in print, especially the classics and earlier Oriental studies. They maintain a balance of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain works, all well done and affordable." Prof. Barrier stocks almost the entire Motilal list in the US, and offered to send our readers a free copy of Motilal's large, illustrated catalog. Write to Prof. N.G. Barrier, South Asia Books, P.O. Box 502, Columbia, Missouri 65205. But hurry, there are only 150 left.

To the family that runs Motilal Banarsidas, books are not just a business. As N.P. Jain told us, "We look on publishing as a sacred duty we believe we are doing by bringing everything about India's heritage and culture to the notice of the world."

Article copyright Himalayan Academy.