

The challenging life of alumnus Rajendra Prakash Jain

On a spiritual trail, publishing house builds a storehouse of ancient wisdom



Rajendra Prakash Jain runs Motilal Banarsidass with his four brothers. His son and nephew, the fifth generation of the family, have joined the business that started in 1903.

One of India's oldest publishing houses, 113-year-old Delhi-based Motilal Banarsidass, is famous world over for books on Indology

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It is one of India's oldest surviving publishing houses and the largest publisher of Indology books. Along with Gorakhpurbased Geeta Press, MLBD is one of the few old publishers that still have their own printing press. Jain's office-cum-bookshop on Bungalow Road in north Delhi is a storehouse of treasures from India's ancient pool of wisdom. A pleasant fragrance from a burning incense stick welcomes you, the walls are adorned with miniature paintings, and the shelves are stacked with books on Sanskrit, philosophy, religion, astrology, ayurveda and yoga. "You can find our books in any reputed institute in the world where Indology is taught," says Jain.

Interestingly, Jain's family were jewellers in the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh before they turned to bookselling and publishing in 1903. "Our ancestor Lala Bute Shah was the chief jeweller in the court of Maharaja Ranjit Singh and tested the Kohinoor diamond when it was in the custody of the Sikh king," says Jain.

The family's tryst with publishing began when Motilal Jain, great grandfather of RP Jain, decided to convert his personal library into a bookshop. "It soon became famous for its excellent collection of Sanskrit books, encouraging the family to get into publishing," says Jain, a director in the family business where his four brothers are partners.

His son and nephew, the fifth generation of the family, too have joined the business. "Our company can be a case study for business schools on how family enterprises can run successfully for generations without divisions," says Jain.

Exports constitute 50pc of MLBD's sales with the maximum demand coming from UK and the US. "Ironically, a lot of our Indology books became popular in India after they did well in the West. 55pc of our authors are westerners. I am afraid Indians will soon have to go to western countries to learn Sanskrit."

Talking of the firm's best-selling books, Jain says people have had unwavering faith in astrology through generations. In the past few years, books on yoga, ayurveda and vedic mathematics have been bestsellers. "There is a renewed interest in vedic maths. Recently, we partnered with James Glover, a London-based well-known proponent of vedic mathematics who conducted a series of workshops in schools in Delhi and NCR," says Jain.

Now the publishing house, which has so far been popular with scholars and academicians, is turning its attention to children. "We have, for the first time, published a series of Vedic mathematics and Sanskrit books for children and will soon be publishing new tales for children from our scriptures, especially from Buddhism and Jainism," says Jain.

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Manoj Sharma