



Clockwise from centre: Leela Jain, Rajeev Jain, Ravi Jain, Rajendra Jain and Jainendra Jain

HERITAGE PUBLISHERS

Text * Lipi Mehta

Photograph * Arkaprava Ghosh

Apart from being the world's largest publisher of philosophy, religion and Indology, Motilal Banarasidass Publishers is a company whose roots are embedded in a rich legacy, while its day-to-day operations embrace latest trends.

IN THE YEAR 1903, Motilal Jain and his son Banarasidass, parted ways from their family business—they were reputed jewellers in the court of the Sikh maharaja, Ranjit Singh—and started a small bookshop with a meagre capital of ₹27 at Said Mitha Bazaar in Lahore, erstwhile Punjab.

The books were varied and represented the keen interest in religion and philosophy that the two men harboured. Unbeknownst to them, the coming century would see this bookshop transform into Motilal Banarasidass Publishers (MLBD), the world's largest publisher of books on religion, philosophy and Indology.

The years after the Partition saw the major operations of this business being divided among the five grandsons of Banarasidass, and the eldest, Narendra Jain, headed the business until his unfortunate demise in March last year. Today, the four brothers work from their sprawling 5,000-sq ft flagship store in Delhi while matriarch Leela Jain serves as chairperson of the company.

Writings of value

In most bookstores today, academics and lovers of literature discover that books which catch their attention are few and far in between, what with fast-selling, generic reads and a gamut of electronics and stationery taking up a majority of the space. In such a scenario, the nine MLBD bookstores across the country provide a novel experience to earnest readers.

Since its inception, MLBD has published approximately 5,000 books, with 60 new titles being published each year along with around 100 reprints. In an age where the Internet is the preferred source of information, this publishing house has proven to be an example of unfazed tradition. Educational institutes and universities across India stock its titles aplenty in their libraries. The Library of Congress (USA) has made MLBD its authorised dealers for supplying works on Indology. Other noteworthy clients such as South Asia Books (Columbia), Jagdish Sanskrit Pustakalaya and Vedic Books stand testimony to the publishing house's varied and supreme quality of content. A typical MLBD bookstore is characterised by wooden shelves and panels upon which the books have been

carefully segregated into sections such as health and medicine, 'tantra', 'astrology' and 'Geeta'. According to director of publishing, Rajeev Jain, scrupulous attention to detail is paid in sifting through and selecting content for new releases. Out of the 50–60 manuscripts which are received each month, only five or six are published. With writers such as Vedic scholar David Frawley and Paul Dundas, a member of the renowned Pali Text Society, MLBD's repertoire spans countries and continents. Prints of texts such as *Shri Ramcharitmanas* are in demand while coveted titles include a 100-volume translation of the Maha Puranas and a 28-volume encyclopaedia of Indian philosophies.

Embracing the present

While their niche content would be perceived as an anomaly by masses at large, the Jain brothers treat it as their USP. "I still feel there is scope and opportunity for the topics we publish. Books on yoga, Ayurveda, meditation and related fields are constantly in demand because of which our industry cannot decline completely. Slow yet sustained growth can be seen at MLBD as a result of our fair dealings with customers

A timeline for the MLBD empire


1903

Motilal Jain and his son Banarasidass set up a small bookstore in Lahore, erstwhile Punjab.


1915

Banarasidass' brother, Sundar Lal, and his son, Shanti Lal, take charge of the fledgling business, calling it Motilal Banarasidass Publishers.


1937

Two of India's oldest bookstores are set up in the form of the MLBD's branches in Patna and Varanasi.


1957

The Jain family inaugurates its flagship store in New Delhi during the All India Oriental Conference.


1965

MLBD takes over the distribution rights to the first edition of Vedic Mathematics from the Banaras Hindu University, the subsequent editions of which have been their bestselling titles till date.


1989

MLBD publishes a copy of *Shri Ramcharitmanas* in Avadhi, with translations in Hindi and English, and accompanied by paintings, making it the first of its kind to be published in India.


1992

Shantilal Jain becomes the first publisher in the history of Indian publishing to be awarded the Padma Shri.

and patrons worldwide. Honest and ethical business practices form our core strengths," says Rajendra Jain, an authority on Ayurveda and one of the directors of the company.

While they are proud of championing a legacy in Indian publishing, the Jain family nurtures a realistic view about their company's future. They are aware of decreasing readership and receding consumer sales, and agree that establishing a new bookstore today isn't profitable. However, in the spirit of keeping up with changing buying patterns, MLBD's imprint, New Age Books, aims to burgeon sales by focusing on topics such as reiki, self-healing and *pranik* healing, which are sure to draw the interest of diverse age groups. Moreover, the company is diversifying its exports by supplying high-in-demand products such as yoga and puja accessories and Tibetan and Buddhist handicrafts. A web portal for the promotion of Ayurvedic cosmetics and organic foods is also in the pipeline. While the Jain brothers are assured of their foothold in publishing, they aren't shying away from peripheral industries as well. After all, MLBD is more than just a commercial venture today—it is a symbol of a century-old passion, which has been handed down generation after generation. Managing director Jainendra Jain elaborates with an interesting

metaphor, "Just as wine tastes finer with age, MLBD's worth increases with each passing year. This is a company whose value cannot be measured just in terms of money."

Following tradition

Owing to such an attitude, the Jains work harmoniously; property disputes and feuds are strangers to them. Their joint family tradition, they say, is the reason why MLBD has stood the test of time. A typical Jain family photograph comprises 27 members! Not surprisingly, the company's employees stand testimony to the owners' ethical practices and respectful dealings. There are some employees who have worked with MLBD for more than 50 years and they were duly recognised at the company's centenary celebrations in 2003. Presidents S Radhakrishnan and Rajendra Prasad have been patrons of the company—in fact, Ravindra Jain, director of finance, even reminisces about an uncashed cheque which lies at the Jain household. Signed by President Abdul Kalam, this cheque serves as memorabilia for the regard that the president had shown for the books he was gifted.

In the last 110 years, this publishing house has not only traversed borders, but redefined the importance given to the written word, as its beliefs internalise the fact that truly, knowledge is power. *