

Snaking through the years

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The Hindu Carrying forward a tradition: The Owners of Manonmani Vilasam Press. Photo : R. Ravindran

Meet the family that has been coming out with the Pambu Panchangam since 1884

It looks straight out an R.K. Narayan novel. A lazy *pyol* for siestas, cows sauntering around, small doors leading to long passages, and a large joint family scuttling in and out of the office. Manonmani Vilasam Press, run by the four Kumar brothers, has been the only printer of the 28-page *Pambu Panchangam*, which their forefather Konnur Manicka Mudhaliar started in 1884 for the sole purpose of printing the almanac. And the brothers, Ganesh, Jayakumar, Uma and Sivakumar, continue to honour that tradition.

The press, which now only formulates and dispatches the *panchangam*, while letting out contracts for the printing, brings out about three lakh copies every year, during the Tamil New Year.

But, all this was possible after much groundwork and toil by their great-great-grandfather.

Chronicler of events

“In those days, paper was always in shortage. My forefather would walk up and down the TNPL office to get a contract for more. This was the reason we couldn't expand and print more copies for a really long time. And, as far as the events in the *Pambu Panchangam* go, I was told that he went to every temple to collect information about the festivals. As years went by, people began sending them in on their own,” reminisces Ganesh Kumar, MD of the press, and the eldest of the four brothers.

By 1947, the press had shifted home twice, going from Seven Wells Road to Purasaiwalkam, before moving to its present address near Kondithope market.

The almanac has covers in three colours — green, yellow and pink; the content remains the same though, *panchangams*.

The content is written by a team of scholars, headed by T. Vijayaraghava Iyengar from Madurai. His family, too, has been making the calculations for the *panchangam* for generations.

“There is a team of scholars who research the Aryabhata books, on which our calculations are based. The princes of the Tanjore Royal Family — Babaji Raja Bhonsle and Shivaji Raja Bhonsle — have helped us in this endeavour. Not only have they given us access to their library, but also donated generously to bring out the *panchangam* every year. It takes four months to create the content; the temples then intimate us about the festival dates. Finally, around November or December, the almanac goes into print,” informs Sivakumar.

The almanac still has a loyal readership of 75,000 in Chennai alone, and the brothers attribute it to its accuracy.

The family is engaged in this business full-time and hopes to carry it forward to the coming generations. “We don't work elsewhere and the research that goes into the almanac keeps us busy throughout. But, what motivates us is the backing of people who return to us at the beginning of every year,” the brothers say.

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