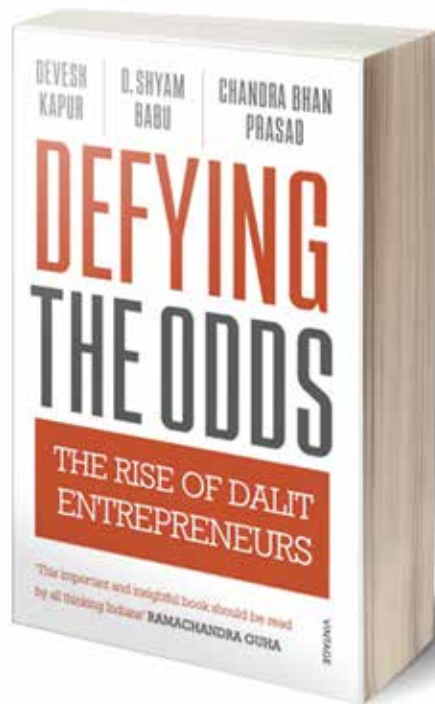


DEFYING THE ODDS

BLAKE COLE

In *Defying the Odds: The Rise of Dalit Entrepreneurs*, Director of the Penn Center for the Advanced Study of India (CASI), Madan Lal Sobti Associate Professor for the Study of Contemporary India, and Associate Professor of Political Science Devesh Kapur relates the underdog story of 21 Dalit (previously known as “untouchable”) entrepreneurs in India who overcame the stigma of their caste to achieve financial success. The book is part of a larger CASI research project that has identified a thousand Dalit entrepreneurs whose cumulative sales reach over \$2 billion.



Take, for example, Kishan Lal Singla, the head of his own multi-million dollar metal tubing company and one of the Dalit entrepreneurs profiled in the book. Orphaned at the age of two, Singla was not permitted to drink from the same water container as his peers in school and, at age 15, he was sold into bonded

labor working in a brick kiln. From there, he was taken to clean the floors of a metal tube-making factory. Over time, Singla was able to learn machine maintenance and eventually became the supervisor of the factory, where he came up with the idea to start his own metal-tube company. Now he has several.

“Like the other entrepreneurs, Singla’s story combines grit, ambition, drive, and hustle—and some luck,” says Kapur. “His story can be an important source of inspiration for young Dalits in India today who need new and additional avenues for social advancement.”

Manju Rani, another entrepreneur featured in the book, employs seventeen workers and runs a factory producing 250 cotton shirts a day. Rani grew up in a slum, often without enough food to eat. When her family could no longer afford the kerosene needed to cook their food, she was sent to find a job at a local shirt-making unit. Later, she was inspired to become a street food vendor and quickly began to turn a profit. It was this entrepreneurial mindset combined with her previous experience at the factory that eventually led her to launch her own manufacturing business—starting with a single sewing machine. Rani now dreams about one day manufacturing shirts under her own brand.

The changes in the Dalit community are reflective of a greater shift in Indian society towards embracing markets and middle-class mentality over caste-based thinking. The May 2014 Lok Sabha (parliament) elections were largely seen as a vote for economic growth. CASI had predicted this attitudinal shift before the election, when they published findings from their pre-election Lok Survey. CASI’s “Lok Surveys” are a multi-year panel study sponsored by the Lok Foundation and carried out in conjunction with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. The Lok Surveys aim to track the attitudes of Indians as part of a

significant new effort to understand the social and political reconfigurations taking place across India today. The pre-election Lok Survey revealed that three of the four most important issues for voters were economic.

In a December 9 article in *The Hindu* called “Being Middle Class in India,” Kapur and Carnegie’s Milan Vaishnav, C’02, present new findings from the second round of Lok Surveys focused on the aspirations and anxieties of ordinary Indians. They explain that “structural changes occurring in India—service-sector-led economic growth, rapid expansion of urbanization and higher education—are undoubtedly resulting in a massive expansion of the middle class” and reflective of a weakening of the status of caste. It is these structural changes which have allowed some enterprising Dalits, like those highlighted in the book, to break into the middle and upper classes.

“India has, until now, eschewed the transformational possibilities of entrepreneurship as a tool of social empowerment,” says Kapur. “The stories in *Defying the Odds* illustrate that this needs to change, not just for the Dalit community, but for all of India.”

Defying the Odds was co-authored by D. Shyam Babu, CASI Spring 2009 Visiting Scholar and Senior Fellow at the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi, and Chandra Bhan Prasad, CASI Fall 2007 Visiting Scholar. The book was made possible by a multi-year grant awarded to CASI by the John Templeton Foundation.

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