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DEFYING THE ODDS

Political Science's Devesh Kapur examines Dalit entrepreneurs.

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In recent years, and especially since the 2008 economic crisis, capitalism has been under siege in the West for its structural role in increasing income, and, even more so, wealth inequality. But indicators of income or wealth as measures of inequality are inadequate in societies where social inequalities—servility, humiliation, lack of self-respect—are important. There capitalism is a force for eroding social inequality, as evident in changes underway in India, one of the world's most hierarchical societies, argues Madan Lal Sobti Associate Professor for the Study of Contemporary India and Associate Professor of Political Science Devesh Kapur, in a July op-ed in *Financial Times*. It is a theme that resonates with the release of the Director of the Penn Center for Advanced Study of India's new co-authored book *Defying the Odds: The Rise of Dalit Entrepreneurs*, a collection of short biographies of 21 Dalit (previously known as “untouchable”) entrepreneurs. Kapur's book is part of a larger research project that has identified a thousand Dailt entrepreneurs—almost all first-generation—with sales totaling around \$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 spotlighted 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 was sold into bonded labor working in a brick-kiln. From there, he was picked 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 decided to start his own metal-tube factory. Now he has several.

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

The changes in the Dalit community are reflective of a greater shift in Indian society towards embracing markets, as evident in the May 2014 Lok Sabha (parliament) elections. In a historic landslide election, Indians voted out the Congress-party-led government in favor of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which had previously been seen as the party of the upper castes. For the first time, a plurality of Dalits, especially the young, threw their support behind the BJP and its leader, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who himself comes from humble beginnings. The elections are largely seen as a vote for economic growth as demonstrated in the results of CASI's social attitudes survey (the “Lok Surveys”) conducted before the election, which found that three of the four most important election issues for voters were economic, led by economic growth.

Kapur argues that capitalism has been a “wrenching force in human history,” eroding social hierarchies from serfdom to feudalism. “India has, until now, eschewed the transformational possibilities of entrepreneurship as a tool of social empowerment. 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 from the John Templeton Foundation.

Defying the Odds is available in bookstores in India and on [Amazon India](http://www.amazon.in/Defying-Odds-Rise-Dalit-Entrepreneurs/dp/8184005709/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1404876581&sr=8-1&keywords=defying+the+odds+dalit+entrepreneurs) (http://www.amazon.in/Defying-Odds-Rise-Dalit-Entrepreneurs/dp/8184005709/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1404876581&sr=8-1&keywords=defying+the+odds+dalit+entrepreneurs)

The Kindle version of the book is available at [Amazon.com \(http://www.amazon.com/Defying-Odds-Rise-Dalit-Entrepreneurs-ebook/dp/B00LPJ8T76\)](http://www.amazon.com/Defying-Odds-Rise-Dalit-Entrepreneurs-ebook/dp/B00LPJ8T76).

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