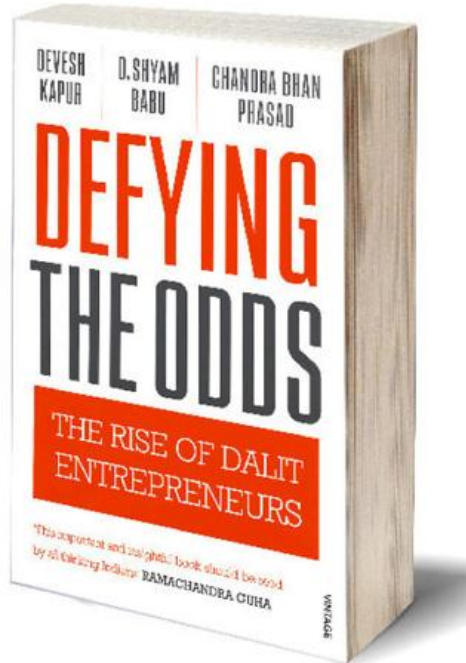


Inspirational tales of economic mobility

Preeti Mehra

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Dalit narratives tend to focus on exclusion. This one's different

In May 2011, a magazine raised several eyebrows when it put 'Dalit Crorepatis' on its cover. Readers' responses ranged from "Why be condescending?" to admiration of how people from a marginalised community had come up in life. The magazine had then identified 10 in the crorepati club and 20 emerging businessmen from the community waiting to join the eight-figure bracket. Some of these crorepatitis profiled four years ago have found their way into *Defying All Odds*, a compilation of success stories.

Changing perceptions

The insightful book not only looks at the lives of the entrepreneurs but also the societal and intellectual transformations in modern India, changing perceptions, at least to some degree, of a community that has been denied their rights and discriminated against for centuries, courtesy the caste system.

Climbing the ladder of success was never easy. Take the story of Ashok Khade from Ped village in Sangli district of Maharashtra. His father earned his living as a cobbler. Being Dalits, the family saw discrimination from early on. Khade's mother had to go far to fetch water as Dalits were denied access to the village well, village ground and the temple. (It is another matter that Khade recently contributed ₹15 lakh for the renovation of the very temple that denied him entry).

Today, his company DAS Offshore, which he set up in 1992, employs 4,500 people, including 150 engineers, and is currently constructing Asia's largest fabrication facility in Raigad district. Over the years, the company has worked on oil rigs and helipads for ONGC's Bombay High operations. Khade's success has led to a change in his lifestyle — he moves around in a swanky BMW.

How did this Dalit whose family could not afford three square meals a day work his way up? Khade completed his schooling and went to Mumbai where his brother was an apprentice welder at Mazagon Dock. The brothers struggled, living in slums. Ashok joined college but could not clear his 12th standard. So when his brother found him a job as an apprentice at Mazagon Dock, he grabbed the opportunity. Through sheer hard work, Ashok impressed his superiors who gave him a job in the quality control division in 1975. In 1983, he was sent to Germany to supervise a ship that was being built for India.

That changed his life. He came back convinced that he could launch a company with his two brothers. "It's God's gift,"

he says of his success. But it was his determination, skill and help from others that made him what he is today.

Breaking free

In the introduction, the authors recall how, through the last century, the Dalit community has tried to break free from the old order through religious conversions and by association with anti-Brahminical movements. They have supported political parties that have an egalitarian approach and have also formed their own political outfits such as the Republic Party of India and the Bahujan Samaj Party.

This and supportive affirmative programmes of the state in education and employment have been leveraged by Dalits to move up the ladder. Things have certainly changed from what was their predicament when India attained Independence in 1947, although much more has to be done to bring the community into the mainstream. The good news is that the journey has slowly begun.

As for Dalits becoming entrepreneurs, the community was for years wary of stepping into business to facilitate social empowerment. It was believed that it was better to access privileges offered by the state. Also the “broad intellectual ethos in India, which looked at markets and entrepreneurship with suspicion, seeing it as an instrument of oppression than empowerment,” made many eschew that option. If at all Dalit entrepreneurs have emerged in recent times it’s because the overall business environment has changed with the growth of the Indian economy and its integration with global markets.

As a result, India’s attitude and approach to marginalised communities have come under international scrutiny, creating a new paradigm for empowerment which has seen the old order slowly but surely corroding. Simultaneously, employment in the organised sector has shrunk — now there are more jobs in informal sectors such as transportation, construction and service. And hence, the option of becoming self-employed became an option to be considered. That saw the beginning of entrepreneurship.

Perhaps, the changed perceptions of society towards successful Dalit businessmen is reflected in the Marathi newspaper *Lok Satta* choosing Milind Kamble, founder-chairman of the Fortune Construction company, as its brand ambassador. It was rather unusual for a Dalit businessman to be asked to promote a mainstream newspaper. But Milind’s picture was there in the 2012 ad promoting *Lok Satta*, the punchline of which read — ‘Shaping the Way Maharashtra Sees the World’. Milind is a second-generation learner — his father was a school teacher who owned a patch of land in Chobli village, Latur district, Maharashtra. His family, therefore, could afford his education. But his startup, which employs 14 engineers and 200 employees, required his own vision and perseverance.

Faces of change

The 21 narratives of success in this book are from across the country. Among others, there is Thomas Barnabas from Sriperumbudur, Tamil Nadu; Rati Bhai Makwana from near Ahmedabad; Raja Nayak from Bangalore; and Sukesh Rajan from Balia district Uttar Pradesh. The authors tracked down several thousands of Dalit entrepreneurs before drawing up the final 21. The research apparently took several years with initial seed money coming from Chip Kaye of the US global equity firm, Warburg Pincus, and Nandan Nilekani. Later the Templeton Foundation also provided a grant.

One unfortunate fact — and one can’t blame the authors for it — is that there is only one woman entrepreneur who figures in the book. It, perhaps, reflects the fact that Dalit women’s empowerment has not evolved at the same pace as that of men. The lone woman is Manju Rani, who runs a shirt-making unit in the Bapanagar business hub near Karol Bagh in Delhi. Her business has grown enough for her to pay ₹20 lakh annually to her workers. Manju provides finished products to larger garment manufacturers. It has indeed been a long march for this woman who grew up in a Delhi slum. Her dream is to own an apparel brand of her own.

Most Dalit narratives are about oppression and inequality and the need for inclusion. *Defying The Odds* has stories of struggles which ended on a positive note. Each protagonist emerges the better from his or her experience. These inspiring biographies bring out the testimonies of Dalits who have overcome several testing economic and social hurdles to carve their imprint in the mainstream.

All the testimonials prove that the protagonists followed the famous words of Dalit educationist Savitribai Phule: “Go, get education/ Be self-reliant, be industrious/ Work, gather wisdom and riches...”

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