

Simply Fly: A Deccan Odyssey by Captain G.R. Gopinath*

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Gopinath, G. R. (2009). *Simply Fly: A Deccan Odyssey*: Collins Business, New Delhi, pp. 400pages. Price: Rs. Rs. 499.00, ISBN 9788172238421

This book, a story on Captain Gopinath as an entrepreneur narrated over 370 pages, is organized into 13 chapters. The book has a foreword by Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam and a special endnote by Henry Mintzberg, a well-known management professor.

What is this book?

This book is a story of a serial entrepreneur. It takes the reader through the journey of a village boy (born in Gorur located 23 km away from Hassan on the banks of the river Hemavathy). After an initial schooling in the village Gopinath, he moved to a Sainik school and then eventually to the National Defence Academy in Khadakvasla, Pune. He served in the Indian Army for a brief period of time and decided to quit to set up his own organic farm on the land given by the government as a part of a rehabilitation package. He started his organic farm with a small investment of Rs. 6,000/-. Gopi, with the help of a 15-year-old boy Raju, converted the 30 acres of barren land into a viable organic farm by his hard work. Over a period of 10-15 years, the farm became a successful venture and won several awards (Rolex award for Enterprise in 1996).

When the farm activities stabilised, Gopi started a motorcycle dealership in Hassan. Motivated by his popularity he also contested an election on a BJP ticket. Given the untapped tourism potential opportunity of India, Gopi started a helicopter company. Subsequently he formed the India's first visible low-cost airline (Air Deccan). This was subsequently sold to his competitor. The book describes the story of the entrepreneur so far.

The book is extremely well written in terms of content, style, and flow. The chapters are well organised. The description is detailed and vivid.

Each chapter starts with an impactful quotation. The chapters do not have a title. However, every chapter is organised with several subtitles. The flow of book is uninterrupted. There are several self-contained essays related to the political situation in India, organic farming, untapped tourism potential of India, the executive education program of Mintzberg, travel experience from Singapore to Bangalore via the Southeast Asian Arc, and the economic reforms in India. These essays are comprehensive and informative. However, they distract the attention of the serious reader from the main story.

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Profile of Captain Gopinath

Based on the information provided in the book, the emerging profile of Captain Gopinath is challenging the existing situation, constantly driven by a sense of urgency, willing to do everything that is possible to get things done on time, an individual in a great hurry, and a dominant leader. He is hardworking and a tough negotiator. There is an element of pride and self-motivation in whatever has been attempted by him, as discussed in this book. It is a matter of great interest whether these are defining attributes of an entrepreneur.

Experiences Narrated

There are number of experiences that are explained in this book, which will provide valuable experience and insight to a potential management student, professional, and an entrepreneur. Some of them relate to the farming experience, the election process underwent by Capt. Gopinath (interfaces with Shatrughan Sinha and Atal Behari Vajpayee based on professional expectations), buying the first helicopter, chance meeting with the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, meeting with Richard Branson, decisions related to IT infrastructure for Air Deccan, experience in the stock market by the first IPO offering, negotiations with Reliance, take-over proposal by Vijay Mallya. While each of these incidents provides a meaningful insight into an entrepreneur's journey, the reader would have enriched by more descriptions of similar kind of the entrepreneurial journey of Captain Gopinath.

Chance and Luck

The book is incomplete on patterns related to several coincidences. Captain Gopinath has met several personalities who have been able to help or support his cause throughout his entrepreneurial journey. There are a number of such incidents to believe that all this happened by chance. Obviously, Captain Gopinath had a strong network of contacts and used it effectively to build his business. The important lesson for an entrepreneur is to identify and build social contexts, and leverage them towards their entrepreneurial objective. The book provides almost no information about the performance of Air Deccan in terms of growth, market share, profitability, and valuation. Similarly, no specific information is available on Captain Gopinath's farm and his political adventure. In the absence of any basic information on the performance of these ventures, the reader is constrained in his ability to assess the effectiveness of the ventures and its impact on the entrepreneurial journey of Captain Gopinath.

Business Models

Air Deccan Business Model has always been controversial. The core issue is, in an industry where the input costs are driven by global prices, how to sustain a business in which the revenue model is not even adjusted for purchasing power parity of the local currency. This would remain as a controversial issue and perhaps explain the decline and lacklustre performance of Air Deccan. The expectation of Captain Gopinath in the political arena seems to be a decision based on opportunity. It underlines the importance of an

entrepreneur in managing the challenges of his expectation. It is an acknowledged fact that Air Deccan is an airline that changed the landscape of the airline industry, made more people to fly, and followed several innovative practices. Unfortunately the business was based on an unsustainable model. Often as narrated in the book, business opportunities are combined with pleasure trips along with family and friends. This is a unique advantage enjoyed by entrepreneurs, who operated in a private domain.

Lost Opportunities

Capitan Gopinath had remarkable success in organic farming. He was globally recognised (won the Rolex price) for this initiative. Possibly an opportunity was lost in not furthering organic farming to global scales. The contribution from such an initiative would have been dramatic in the Indian context. Focus on tourism and helicopter services is again an opportunity that was not explored fully. Air Deccan, which was driven by ambition and innovation, became a casualty of unplanned growth and unsustainable business model. While the series of entrepreneurship initiatives are laudable for an entrepreneur, the book provides a valuable lesson in terms of opportunities lost.

Relevance of this work

This book is a classic example (with the most familiar situation) where the business fails and the entrepreneurs add value to themselves. The disconnect between the entrepreneurs and the business is too obvious from this book. The book also provides an experience to move from one opportunity to another opportunity for a creative and determined entrepreneur. Some ventures succeed and others do not.

The book is a worthwhile contribution in the Indian business context. The reasons are several fold. India, as a country, needs to encourage entrepreneurship in several sectors of its economy including agriculture, services, business, and governance. This book will provide the much-needed gap in professionalising entrepreneurship in the context of Indian society. The book is likely to enthuse several young men and women who want to do something that excites them. The book provides an account of a colourful life over a period of 40 years. It also provides a perspective on life by documenting several initiatives undertaken by a serial entrepreneur.

Reflections

1. What is entrepreneurship? Is it manifestation of an individual's personality in social and business space or is it an individual's ability to generate wealth based on opportunities identified
2. When does or should an entrepreneur change his domain of operation?
3. What prohibits an entrepreneur in building global scales?

4. While entrepreneurship is an important wealth creation or societal enhancement mechanism, is there a social cost to entrepreneurship?
5. If business results do not correlate with entrepreneur's wealth, who should pay for the social cost of the entrepreneur's venture?

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