

TATA Log: Eight Modern Stories from a Timeless Institution

Gunjan Tomer

Harish Bhat (2012). TATA Log- Eight Modern Stories from a Timeless Institution. Penguin Books: India, Price: Rs. 313, Pages 599, ISBN: 9780670086672.

Tata is more than a business group in India. We Indians see them with curiosity, awe and pride. We have ample amount of chronicles recording the transformation of Tata group from a small trading company in Mumbai to a business giant. There are memoirs and stories from the insiders, starting from R M Lala to S Ramadorai. The recent addition to the list is Harish Bhat.

Tata group keeps coming into news for so many reasons be it the launch of Nano, acquisition of brands like Land Rover and Jaguar or the Singur incident. The author has very cautiously avoided retelling of these stories and that makes this book a worth read. I read the book for the sheer admiration for Tata people or Tata Log.

The book will bind your attention and can be read in one go. The author has done a commendable job in collecting the data regarding incidents and the decision making processes. Close recollections from the persons involved and then recording the actual conversation has given this book authenticity and charm.

Through a narrative style this book tells the grand stories about the Tata group in a simple language. These chapters or stories hold value in terms of capturing rich corporate experiences. It has dealt with many critical issues of modern management ranging from new product development to acquisition; from corporate social responsibility to operation management. This book gives a peek into the working of the top business leaders of our times from the eye of a stalwart himself. The explanations are vivid and are full of details which make these stories more interesting. The author has given a hint of the background to every story. His candid writing style with facts and the sequencing of the illustrations of events make these chapters a modern day Panchtantra, which holds learning in each unfolding of the story.

The opening story of the book, which is dedicated to India's first indigenous car-Indica -accounts for the painstaking effort of Tata group in developing their own car. There are many parts, which shows the human side of the Tata group, be it compassion for Indian consumers to develop a bigger sized car or putting an automation system in their assembly line so that their employees need not to bend their backs. There are many such incidents, which reveal that hard work, discipline and empathy are integral part of this large and successful business group.

The second story about Tata chemicals establishes a path that other corporate houses can follow in order to contribute to the society. That is one of its kind to perform corporate social responsibility in a meaningful manner. Tata chemicals have gauged the social issues and tried to uplift the social conditions in their operating region. The efforts were consistent and never faltered by the hurdles such as mistrust and the established norms among people in the group. The most interesting aspect of these stories is that they never provided grants or donated money but empowered the villagers to overcome their problems and march towards the path of growth and development. They acted as enablers, and this is what should be done, helping our citizens to stand on their own feet.

The third story recites the failures of one of the Tata group venture - Tata Finance. The whole episode was triggered by a whistle blower whose identity is still unknown. This chapter is important, not for accepting the mistakes but for the way Tata Finance recovered and how the image of Tata group remained unscathed after the fiasco. The decision of Tata Sons to provide the backing support to all the customers, despite limited legal liability was a critical and remarkable decision. This grand gesture tells a lot about what Tata is made of.

The story of Tanishq gives valuable lessons on how a new product is developed and more importantly how a new brand evolves. The perseverance of Xerxes Desai, which eventually brought success to the new business, is laudable. It also highlights the fact that Tata group extends a great deal of trust on its employees, which is an essential ingredient of these new ventures. All these stories underline the fact that the management team across all Tata companies identifies very closely with the organization and for them the success of their organization translates into their own success. This kind of identification is vital for shared dreams and shared vision which through these stories, Harish Bhat has been successful to express.

The stories of Tetley acquisition and Tata steel demonstrate how Tata group has placed itself on the global business canvas. The fact that Tetley was worth more than thrice Tata Tea makes the deal more astonishing. Again the stories talk about perseverance and long term vision that is shared by all the members of Tata group. Both stories show how respectfully failures are accepted in Tata group and how these failures become the strongest motivator, for example, the Deming award or the case of once failed Tata-Tetley acquisition.

EKA gives the emotion of pride. This is interesting to know how a private business group has invested in something of national importance and won accolades at international level. It was amusing to know how China responded to EKA's performance in global rankings. The possibility that EKA might have triggered the whole supercomputing business in China is equally amusing. The story of EKA also highlights the kind of support Tata Group extends to its employee, in this case US \$ 20 million.

The initiative of second careers is worth admiring. The Tata group has taken a ground reality, understood its gravity and then attempted to make a difference. This

effort can be emulated by other houses to improve the participation of women members in their corporations. The initiatives of this type, which may not have any positive impact on returns on investment, indicate the commitment of Tata Group to its mission of making a difference even if it is the first dent on the mountain.

Apart from the great narratives, the additional attraction of this book is the limited use of management jargons. The chapters are full of learning that can guide our young managers. It strongly paves the path of honesty and respect for ethics which, the author says, has always been the Tata's way. The way the story of Tata is told, is a living example that fight against corruption can be long and painful but can be won with accolades. The incident of a possible Tata airlines brought down by the ministry demonstrates the infallible trust of Tata group on the righteous path.

All the stories narrated in the book undoubtedly bring out the greatness of the Tata group. The stories sometimes feel idealistic, but that might be the loyalty of the author towards the Tata group. However there are many incidents, which invoke national pride in the readers. I felt the elating emotion while reading the stories of the launch of EKA and the winning of the Deming award. Vivid stories of Okhamandal depict the courage of our fellow citizen, living in the far end of our country. The dreamers of Tupni, the weavers of Okhai and their struggle to achieve, provide the hope that India will have its way soon. The writing style of the author is full of hope, spirit and motivation. The book in its way reinstates faith in India and its potential to become a leading nation in coming years.

Gunjan Tomer is a doctoral candidate in the Information Systems area at Indian Institute of Management, Indore. She can be reached at f10gunjant@iimidr.ac.in.