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Book Review: Avinash Kirpal, Womentrepreneurs: Inspiring Stories of Success

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which may often lead to impropriety and misconduct for the accomplishment of self-interests. However, the recent global crises have somewhat pointed at being more cautious. Some positive steps such as hefty penalties, disclosure of modus operandi, imprisonment and introduction of whistle blowing mechanism have been taken to eradicate the corruption and malpractices all over the world.

The book leaves a lingering impact of the theme on the minds of the reader. It presents a well-rounded perspective of the message it seeks to deliver in a concise manner through a plethora of cases. To me it is *Truth Well Told*....

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Avinash Kirpal, *Womentrepreneurs: Inspiring Stories of Success*. New Delhi: SAGE Response (SAGE Publications India Private Limited), December 2015, 176 pp., ₹ 345 (ISBN: 978-93-515-0554-9) (Paperback)

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Womentrepreneurs is a brilliant compilation of 10 simply written stories, each capturing a journey of a woman towards founding her own venture. The book tells inspiring stories of women entrepreneurs in India. These stories, based on material collected through personal interviews, show that the motivation for starting entrepreneurial ventures no longer arises from the need to supplement income but increasingly from fulfilling a need for creative expression and individual growth.

The book features women entrepreneurs who could strike it out on their own, despite the societal prejudices, and at times challenges they faced in their personal lives. The stories inspire the readers at multiple levels. One is the novelty of the ideas around which the various ventures have been designed. Recognizing the success of the enterprises set up by these women in an unexplored space helps us appreciate the role of innovative ideas in leveraging opportunities in a resource-constrained environment, especially in emerging economies like India. The book illustrates how entrepreneurial behaviour is about identifying opportunities and putting useful ideas into practice. At another level, these stories reinforce the need for women to realize their potential. The common perception that women are required to be focused on family and, therefore, attention to their professional career tends to be divided, while it is true in most cases, does not necessarily deter them from seeking a fulfilling career and also managing enterprises. Intrinsically motivated people work for the challenge and enjoyment of it. They are creative because of their interest and the satisfaction they are seeking from the task. Gender is irrelevant. The book also interprets the mind of an entrepreneur as a strategist. Gaining knowledge, understanding the environment and building capabilities along with taking measured risks is important for designing and setting up new ventures. Proactive stance and hard work is integral to an entrepreneurial mindset. Entrepreneurs have a strong desire to be independent and to do something meaningful while seeking flexibility. They have no inhibitions in venturing into unknown paths. Putting in long hours of hard work is a way of life for them.

Each story has an important message for the young and growing entrepreneurs. The power of ideas that runs throughout the book, unfold important insights to the entrepreneurial process, as one moves from one story to the other. As a reader, one is inspired by the extraordinary acts of courage shown by the women featured in the book, in fighting against the society or by their pioneering actions. One can

analyze each protagonist as a successful entrepreneur, or a woman with courage to move against the tide or a citizen with a strong conviction of righteousness. Evoking a mix of reactions, the book leaves one admiring the young women featured in *Womentrepreneurs* by Avinash Kirpal.

For Shailja Dutt the choice of setting up 'Stellar', a boutique search firm, was triggered by the knowledge she gained in her first job at Amrop, a leading worldwide executive search firm. But more importantly, it was the flexibility that she was seeking while raising her two children. Shailja identified the gaps in the talent search industry, which was growing at a rapid pace during the 1990s, and filled those through Stellar. The idea of a boutique search firm addressing very specific needs of the firms, mostly for leadership positions, was unique in the early 1990s. Shailja's assumption that clients will come easily because of her background with Amrop was proven wrong. She soon realized setting up a name in the industry, nurturing professional and social networks, and having a good team backup were crucial. She invested in technology to develop proprietary software for knowledge management which helped Stellar to stay ahead of the competition. There were instances when Shailja considered quitting the firm due to personal distress. But with encouragement from her husband she got back and devoted herself to rebuilding the business. She created Stellar Foundation to encourage her staff to do social work. With a conservative funding strategy based on internal accruals for expansion, Shailja has grown Stellar Search to a premium executive search firm with offices in many countries and a client list of large multinationals.

The second women entrepreneur featured in the book, Merry Barua, is the founder and president of the National Center for Autism, a pioneering institution that has been instrumental in raising awareness on autism in India. The story narrates Merry's agonizing experience of raising her son who suffered from autism, in the absence of professional help and very little understanding of the disorder. The first diagnosis of the disorder was made when he was already six years of age, which left Merry shocked. Optimism prevailed, and she decided to learn about autism by subscribing to foreign journals, buying books and collecting as much information on autism from all possible sources. Her experience at Nambikkai Nilayam, a special needs school at Christian Medical College at Vellore in 1985, went a long way in helping her create a network of parents wanting to share their concerns with autism and provide mutual support. This resulted in setting up of a society, Action For Autism, in 1991. Her pursuit towards learning more on autism and sharing that knowledge with others, who were going through a similar experience, grew even stronger. She launched a journal, *Autism Network*, started conducting counselling sessions through home programmes and set up a small school at her residence to help autistic children. Open Door School, set up in 1994, became a nationally acclaimed school specialized in helping autistic children and their parents. Her outreach efforts culminated in setting up of The National Center for Autism, which brought together persons with autism, families, professionals and researchers in a single location. By 2005 the centre had its own building in NCR, with facilities for diagnostics, counselling, teaching and training. NCA collaborates with the government for guiding autistic children studying in government schools. After receiving so many national and international recognitions, Merry's motivation to do more on issues related to autism has not lessened. Creating teams of dedicated and trained parent specialists who can manage autism support units in dispersed parts of the country is her dream. This probably is the most important trait that an entrepreneur needs—perseverance to fulfil their dreams. Resources are not a constraint when the will and passion to accomplish ones goals drives the intent.

Lakshmi Krishnan, a social worker by qualification and having vast experience in child welfare, founded the Society for the Protection of women and Children (SPOWAC). Had it not been for the rich experience she gained while heading Udayan, the SOS child adoption centre for rehabilitating destitute children, Lakshmi would not have discovered the acute need to help adolescent unwed mothers and their children. Such girls are condemned to a life of shame and stigma, which also holds true for their

helpless children. Lakshmi not only gained knowledge in those 20 years with Udayan, she also gathered the confidence in her capabilities to build an organization, to help the vulnerable sections of the society. She had developed the right links with the government and social networks for mobilizing resources and funds to set up the society. SPOWAC launched many welfare programmes to empower the young unwed mothers by making them economically independent. Lakshmi also continued with the child adoption programme, finding homes for the destitute children. SPOWAC broadened its scope of activities to undertake baseline surveys and research in its area of work. Lakshmi is respected as a thinker, activist and an advocate on family and child welfare issues. She has been a keen learner on best practices related to welfare of disadvantaged children and is always keen to share that knowledge with students interning in social work at SPOWAC. She dreams of replicating SPOWAC across India, particularly in rural areas, and is working towards finding sponsors.

Hailing from a family of highly qualified professionals, Sudha herself is an HR graduate from IIM Kolkata. After working in the HR and organization development role at various firms, especially in the IT sector, Sudha gained decent understanding of the various human resource development specific practices. Seeking flexibility in raising her two children, Sudha started her own enterprise, 'Inputs', an HR solution firm for the small and medium-sized enterprises to overcome challenges of recruiting, retaining and nurturing talent and implementing change for growth. Finding a good team for the start-up was rather difficult. She was not in a position to offer high salaries. The resource constraints proved to be a boon, as she came up with the idea of tapping talented women like herself who needed flexibility of working from home. This unique organizational structure enabled Sudha to tap into a big reservoir of talent, with few full-time employees on the rolls of Inputs. Her ability to embed high standards and values in her enterprise were a direct outcome of the rich experience she gained prior to starting Inputs. Looking back, she feels her flexible stance towards going for the next best opportunity that came her way has paid her well. And she could not think of doing anything better than what she is doing as the CEO of Inputs.

Story on Ritu Prasad is truly inspirational in demonstrating how important is the role of determination, confidence and ability to perform against all odds in shaping the success of an entrepreneur. Having highly contrarian views, Ritu often made decisions which saw little appreciation from her close family members. She needed excitement and creativity in her work. After graduating from Sydenham Institute of Management, Mumbai, Ritu helped her father in his business and later worked for O&M advertising agency as an accounts executive. Post marriage her plans to pursue an independent career were met with serious reservations from family members. With support from her husband, Ritu started looking out for a business opportunity, which resulted in setting up of 'Spirit', a restaurant offering Middle Eastern cuisine, in Connaught Place, the heart of New Delhi, in 2001. Coming from a Jain background, a strict vegetarian and a complete teetotaler, and no experience in food and beverage management, starting such a venture was quite a challenge. Managing corrupt petty bureaucrats and food inspectors was an additional headache. She took utmost care in bringing on board the best of the chef, designing the interiors, selecting the menu and training the staff. While Spirit was picking up well with the corporate customers, in 2005, Ritu started looking at another business opportunity of setting up a mountain resort at Ramgarh in Uttarakhand. Unfortunately Ritu met with an accident while driving down to Ramgarh, and permanently damaged her spine. With support from her husband she got back to looking after 'Spirit', but was dependent on a wheelchair. The setback did not diminish her enthusiasm to constantly look for new ideas and improve the quality of service. She continues to be as energetic and creative as she was when working with advertising agencies on various accounts for new product launches.

Ayesha Grewal's engagement with organic farming started when she was still a little girl. Her fondness for farm life and country side was obvious from her love for animals and gardening in her

father's farms. Little did she know then that she would one day become the founder of The Altitude Store (TAS), a socially motivated company that helps small farmers in remote hill areas grow and sell sophisticated organic food. TAS was conceived as the enabling bridge that would serve both the producers and the consumers of organic food. With masters in global finance from the University of Denver, Ayesha had a stint at Winrock International India, an NGO that encourages use of renewable energy, where she met John Ryan. In partnership with John, Ayesha set up E3V, a consulting company for projects related to sustainable rural energy and organic agriculture. She also started an organic fruit processing company which sourced fruits from Kumaon hills for selling processed products in urban markets. Soon she decided to switch from consulting to building TAS which promoted sustainable production and marketing of organic foods in 2009. TAS arranged loans through William Grant Donation funds for its associate farmers to build the required green houses. TAS also conducted research on growing sophisticated imported vegetables and passed on the knowledge to associate farmers. TAS started dealing in meats, dairy products, fruits, vegetables, oils and many more natural products, which supported low income small scale organic farmers to become commercially viable. Reducing the influence of middle men in the rural supply chain was a major challenge. By 2014, TAS annual sales had reached INR 3.5 crores. Building trust with farmers and convincing them of reliability, integrity and intentions of TAS was crucial. On the other hand building a reliable brand for organic and natural products was equally important to gain the confidence of buyers. Travelling to the remote areas of Uttarakhand and talking to the village folk was never a problem for Ayesha. She continues to explore new areas of artisanal organic foods such as Californian cheeses, Cumberland pork sausages and cider making from New Forest Cider Company. The new projects have given Ayesha the encouragement to develop more activities related to organic food. Many more new business lines are in the realm of her dreams.

Saloni Malhotra, a city-bred girl, having doctor parents had every opportunity in the world to go for the medical profession or seek a comfortable job in a multinational. Instead, she chose to explore rural India and wondered why technologically advanced jobs could not be taken to villages. She felt that this approach would not only reduce the problem of migration to cities, it would motivate youth in the rural and backward areas of India to go to schools and complete their college education. After finishing her engineering from Pune she worked for a start-up in Delhi. Inspired by the work of Professor Ashok Jhunjhunwala, at IIT Chennai in creating technology-driven social businesses in rural areas, she proposed to start an outsourcing business that combined rural workforce with modern communication technology. Her project was incubated at IIT Chennai which helped her get the initial seed fund, office space, basic infrastructure, mentoring and contacts for partnerships. This was the start of DesiCrew in 2005, a BPO company that provided IT-enabled services from its delivery centres in villages, which finally got registered as a private limited company in 2007. The business model helped save DesiCrew the real estate cost and high attrition rates that it would have incurred had it been operating BPO services from cities. The first few centres were in villages near Chennai and Coimbatore. The work started with basic services such as data entry, conversion, digitization, updating data bases and transcription involving English and Indian languages. Finding and training staff for its delivery centres in the villages, creating multiple facilities having adequate infrastructure and power backup, marketing to new customers, managing quality standards and negotiating reasonable pricing were the major challenges Saloni faced. The real boost to offer higher end services happened with the assignments from HDFC Standard Life and Google India R&D. With angel investing coming in from a mentor, an Ex Infosys BPO head, the company planned to scale up. The IL&FC assignment for Rajasthan state government welfare programme was a test for DesiCrew in ramping up its scale for handling e-Governance work on a massive scale. With growing demand for skills in Indian languages and large untapped educated youth in rural India, opportunity for the growth for DesiCrew was immense. Saloni felt that it was time for a more

experienced hand to take DesiCrew to the next orbit. She brought on board VenturEast, an equity fund investor that made substantial investment in the company and stepped down from the CEO position. Saloni contributed to the National Rural BPO policy and has become advisor to many innovative start-ups. She continues to serve on the board of DesiCrew as a director.

High instances of militancy in the state of Manipur resulted in killing of men, leaving families in a distraught condition. Binalakshmi Nepram set up an NGO for widowed women, 'The Manipur Women Gun Survivor Network'. The network helps women victims of armed violence, whose lives get shattered due to the killings of their husbands, brothers or sons and, therefore, suffer from emotional and socio-economic shock. The network provides assistance in terms of providing sustainable income stream by arranging to start small businesses for the widows. Opening of bank accounts and interest-free micro-finance facilitates activities like weaving, silk reeling, mushroom cultivation, rearing poultry, etc. Binalakshmi was born in Imphal and grew up in a hostile environment of protests against the Armed Forces Special Powers Act. Growing up in a family which valued reading, writing, art and culture, Binalakshmi was devoted to high ideals. Hard working and intelligent, she completed her post-graduation from University of Delhi and PhD in International Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University. She systematically researched the armed conflict situation in Manipur and travelled there to collect primary data. She penned her thoughts while she was growing, which she brought out in the form of a novel *Meckley*. She cofounded first civil society dedicated to disarmament in 2004—Control Arms Foundation of India (CAFI). It advocates control of small arms trade so that criminals cannot obtain guns. Binalakshmi also played an important role in Northeast India Women Initiative for Peace which brings together women from the Northeast to work together for building peace and influence policies that affect their lives. She is recognized for creating higher awareness about north-eastern states of India and their history and culture. Binalakshmi has authored four books and earlier published a journal called *Borderlines*, which looked at wars and insurgencies in the region and ways of bringing peace there. She was awarded the WISCOMP Peace award by the Foundation of Universal Responsibility of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Sean MacBride Peace Prize, The CNN IBM real Heroes Award, Indian of the Year Award and Ploughshares and Ashoka Fellowships. She is amongst the 100 most influential people in the world working on armed violence reduction.

Urvashi Butalia is the pioneer of feminist publishing in India as well as a prominent activist and writer on women's issues. Her mother who was a teacher and a strong supporter of feminist issues, such as the anti-dowry movement, left a deep impression on Urvashi's thinking and ideology. While doing her masters in English literature from University of Delhi, she became deeply involved with student activist groups. Later she also pursued her masters in South African Studies from the school of Oriental and African Studies in London. Urvashi unexpectedly got an opportunity to work as a freelancer with Oxford University Press (OUP). An experience she immensely enjoyed. OUP offered Urvashi a job as an assistant to the production manager. She was becoming deeply involved in feminist activism. The anti-dowry and anti-rape campaigns were gathering momentum, but not much research had been done to understand the fundamental issues leading to such violence against women. After a brief stint in teaching at University of Delhi and working with Zed Books in England, Urvashi founded Kali for Women in 1984. Kali was India's first exclusive feminist publishing house. She partnered with Ritu Menon, a publisher with similar value and ideas. With the initial investment from founders and grants from donor agencies, Kali sustained for few years. In two decades, Kali had become a nationally acclaimed publishing house. The partnership ended due to lack of harmony in the management styles of the two partners, and both started their own publishing houses. Urvashi started Zubaan. Later in 2011 both Urvashi and Ritu were awarded the Padma Shri for their contribution to Indian publishing. Zubaan encountered tough competition, financial resource crunch and distribution challenges. It brings out books written by subaltern writers who had no formal education or training. Zubaan encourages women to write about their

experiences, to deepen the understanding of women's issues, provide material on historical and cultural backgrounds of contemporary debates and to help connect with feminist movements internationally. Urvashi has written several books and has authored, *The Other Side of Silence*, based on 70 interviews conducted over 10 years, as well as study of letters, diaries and memoirs of people who were displaced and affected during the Indo-Pak partition. The book is used in literary courses in Indian universities and has become a key work about the partition of India.

Manisha Gupta belonged to an affluent traditional joint family from Kolkata, which was deeply traditional and conservative in its outlook and beliefs. She lost her father in her early childhood, the only person who had liberal views in the entire family. After stiff resistance to arranged marriage proposals, Manisha resolved to build her own life and take responsibility for it. This flared the desire to step out and create her own identity. She decided to work with issues concerning women's rights. During these times of distress, Manisha derived solace from growing belief in Nichiren Daishonin Buddhism. In her search for institutions that could help her achieve her objective of bringing about change in the Indian society, particularly for women and the underprivileged sections of the society, she came across Ashoka, a global organization working to promote social entrepreneurship. She joined Ashoka and worked there for 10 years in various positions. There Manisha built a collaborative community of social entrepreneurs in the country and edited the in-house magazine *The Changemakers*. She got married to Shubho from a liberal Bengali family, against the wishes of her family. She was strongly contemplating starting her own social enterprise StartUp which was formally launched in 2009. StartUp was conceived as an angel investor, incubator and consultant to social entrepreneurs. It helped launch, strengthen and scale up ventures that worked for social development and on issues concerning women. Her partnership with two consultants who she had brought on board for their technical and management skills went sour in two years of founding StartUp. She learnt her lessons through this bitter experience. She also learnt that work-life balance is a myth. Manisha continues to be a hands-on mom and an entrepreneur. Manisha is driven by her desire to create multiple social enterprises which can drive social change. Despite resource constraints, Manisha is committed to the long-term mission of her venture, which for her was larger than making money.

Story of all the 10 women entrepreneurs featured in the book strongly resonate the need to live a life less ordinary. They all struggled to meet tough challenges in their personal lives and have made distinct difference to the lives of others through the services they provide. Most of the ventures aimed at benefiting the society, especially the less privileged section. These stories definitely reflect on this promising trend in the country and a glimpse of India as it evolves. The book will be a good source of anecdotal evidence to the teachers of entrepreneurship. Each story in its own way reinforces the various tenets of practising entrepreneurship, right from boot strapping to people management and the ability to deal with uncertainty. The entrepreneurial journey has its share of challenges at each stage including that of scaling up the venture once the basic structure is in place and functioning. Passion and perseverance has its own special spot in the larger canvas of entrepreneurship as a discipline. Novelty of ideas has an important role to play in new venture creation.

The book also reflects on the importance of the support of the immediate family members for people who want to venture out on their own rather than seeking a secure job. This is an important learning if one were to treat entrepreneurship as a secure and respectable choice. But this strikes out to be a factor most crucial to the success of women entrepreneurs as shared by all the women featured in the book. Support of family is important, especially if one is married and has children.

None of the entrepreneurs felt that being a woman was a handicap in setting up or running their enterprise. But there were glimpses of societal barriers to easy acceptance of women as a CEO, business partner or a person in a leadership role. Certainly, it is not easy in a society which has traditionally looked at woman's role primarily as a homemaker. In fact women themselves are the greatest victim of

this self-fulfilling prophecy, as they end up believing that they are not meant to be the bread earners for the family. Education is fundamental to achieving gender parity and increasing women's contribution to India's GDP. The commonality one finds amongst all 10 entrepreneurs is that they had good education.

Avinash Kirpal's book on women entrepreneurs gains even higher significance in the backdrop of a recent McKinsey study on women equality in India. The study states that women are currently particularly under-represented in India's economy compared with their potential. McKinsey's estimates suggest that at 17 per cent, India has a lower share of women's contribution to GDP than the global average of 37 per cent, and the lowest among all regions in the world. In comparison, China's women contribute 41 per cent, those in Sub-Saharan Africa 39 per cent, and women in Latin America 33 per cent. India's position on share of women in workforce is on a par with countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), where, unlike India, legal provisions can restrict many forms of female employment in many countries. India's economy would have the highest relative boost among all regions of the world if its women participated in paid work in the market economy on a similar basis to men, erasing the current gaps in labour-force participation rates, hours worked and representation within each sector. Another significant finding worth sharing is that there is a wide variation in gender equality among India's 32 states. The states which score high on gender parity are Mizoram, Kerala, Meghalaya, Goa and Sikkim. In contrast, India's bottom five states on gender parity are Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Assam, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh. The top five states account for just 4 per cent of India's female working-age population, while the bottom five comprise a much larger 32 per cent.

The book should be of immense interest to budding entrepreneurs as a source of experiential learning. Teachers of entrepreneurship can use the book as a great source for anecdotal evidence. The businesses discussed in the book can also be of interest to students studying innovation and business model generation in designing new venture. There are numerous insights for people who have interest in social entrepreneurship.

To sum it up, Urvashi Butalia's lines from the book capture an important lesson for the aspiring women entrepreneurs:

Too often, girls in India are told what will be good for them instead of encouraging them to apply their own minds. But it is important for young girls to be able to dream, to look at what they really want to do, to believe in themselves and to let their imaginations roam free. A strong belief in what you do is the first step towards achieving it. And if you do succeed in setting up something, bear in mind that the enterprise is more important than you and that it deserves to continue after you.

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Arie Ruttenberg and Shlomo Maital, *Cracking the Creativity Code: The Zoom in Zoom out Zoom in Framework for Creativity, Fun and Success*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications India Private Limited, 2014, 157 pp. ₹ 425 (ISBN: 978-81-321-1986-5) (Paperback).

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In the book *Cracking the Creativity Code*, authors Arie Ruttenberg and Shlomo Maital had divided the book into eight chapters and tried to explain the truth of two simple words 'Everyone Can', meaning that