

Book Review: Start-Up City: Ten Tales of Exceptional Entrepreneurship from Bangalore's software miracle by Moloy K. Bannerjee, Siddharth Bannerjee and P. Ranganath Sastry



Entrepreneurship has become one of the globe's most potent forces for transformation and an attractive career path in the space of a few short years. This book is based on interviews with ten pioneering entrepreneurs who carved a new path to establish successful start-ups in Bangalore, the technology capital of India. Ankita Mukhopadhyay finds the book to be a light, accessible read with plenty of lessons for aspiring entrepreneurs in India and beyond.

Start-up City: Ten Tales of Exceptional Entrepreneurship from Bangalore's Software Miracle. Moloy K. Bannerjee, Siddharth Banerjee and P Ranganath Sastry. Collins Business. December 2014.

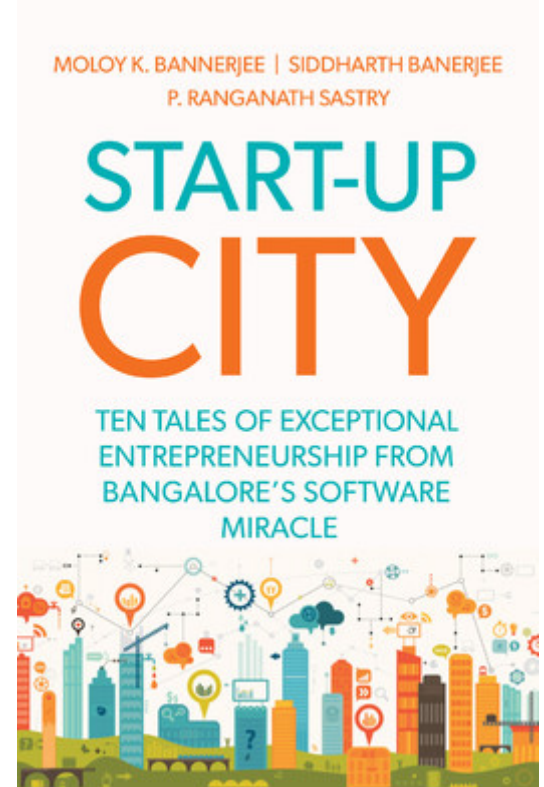
A hub for tech companies, the south Indian city of Bangalore is leading the boom in the software sector. *Start-Up City: Ten tales of exceptional entrepreneurship from Bangalore's software miracle* is about how this boom came about and who made it happen. Authors Moloy K. Bannerjee, Siddharth Bannerjee and P. Ranganathan Sastry, who themselves have a wealth of experience in the software sector, private sector enterprises, social innovation and leadership, have chronicled the life of ten successful Indian software entrepreneurs, tracing how these individuals successfully navigated an new path in India.

A brief history of entrepreneurship in India

The first three chapters of the book seek to understand the situation and conditions for the rise of an entrepreneur, from the software boom in India to a social context that fosters entrepreneurial minds. The foundations of the boom can be traced back to the 1980s, which saw massive liberalisation of the technology sector. Under Rajiv Gandhi's leadership tariff rates were slashed and government monopolies were revoked. However, before the wider liberalisation of India's economy in 1991, entrepreneurship was a challenging venture. Initial attempts to set up businesses in India were often hampered by a socialist-minded, centrally planned form of post-Independence government, a bureaucratic landscape that was unresponsive to emerging sector needs and a business environment marked by numerous licenses and permits (and bribes).

Today the software industry in India is developing at a previously unimaginable pace. The book's authors attribute this to advances in telecommunication and the availability of cheap data storage options which opened up the gates to global competition. Business process outsourcing (BPO) took off to become a significant contributor to the growth of India's economy. This has even led to the coining of the term 'Bangalored' to refer to jobs outsourced to a centres in India's software hub.

The boom therefore looks set to continue with new opportunities emerging from India's rapidly evolving economy and social challenges. In 2014, the new BJP government under Narendra Modi unveiled an ambitious project of a technological platform that puts Information Communication



Technology (ICT) at the heart of urban regeneration. This so-called '**smart city**' initiative seeks to integrate the various urban systems – transport, electricity, water etc. – into a centrally controlled smart hub. E-commerce is also making a splash in India, with companies like Flipkart competing with global giants like Amazon to cater to a growing cohort of middle-class consumers.

What makes a successful entrepreneur?

According to the authors, self-confidence coupled with determination and perseverance is an essential attribute in fostering a successful enterprise. All the interviewees started out when the software phenomenon in India was either at its transformative stage or was seeing a boom and needed someone to capitalise on consumer needs. Capital investment was scarce and these individuals had to demonstrate flexibility, capacity for teamwork, the ability to take risk in a socially conservative society and an eye for quality control. Each entrepreneur's story is unique in its own way, and the book covers not only big players like Bharat Goenka, but also the founders of smaller but equally impactful companies, like Srikant Rao and Ravindra Kini's software company Affordable Business Solutions.

Bharat Goenka's company Tally Solutions is the market leader in software-based financial risk management products with an astonishing market penetration of 80%. Chapter Four offers an insight into his enduring passion for customer-oriented solutions, an innovation for financial risk management and endless perseverance which facilitated his success. Goenka's journey is influenced to large extent by his father, who wanted Bharat to embark on a business strategy that put the consumer before the company. Tally solutions' success today is based on the combination of this approach, combined with Goenka's ability to create usable software solutions.

N.V Krishna is the accidental entrepreneur- he stumbled into it when he was asked by his friends from IIT and IIM to join their venture, Microsense. N.V found that this was the perfect combination of enterprise and familiarity that he was seeking in his career. Microsense began as distributors for data communication products from companies like US Robotics and Samsung and grew to become authorised agents for Videsh Sanchar Nigam Limited (VSNL), the first and only government run Internet service provider in India in the 1980s. Today, Microsense provides specialised Internet services to hotels and the hospitality industry. According to Krishna, Indian start-ups typically start small and don't have many frills because simplicity is an intrinsic part of Indian culture. This is even more so in the case of entrepreneurs from South India, where "we think, act and live simply" (p.54). Krishna's counsel for the younger generation is to develop a curiosity and affinity for technology right from a young age. Read, absorb and innovate. Anything you do must be rewarding for you on a personal level. After all, if you have Saraswati (goddess of learning) with you, can Lakshmi (goddess of wealth) be far behind?

B.V Venkatesh of Majoris embarked on his career in entrepreneurship later in life, having spent years working in companies like ECIL, Wipro and Tata Elxsi. He had an enduring urge to work in software, but employment opportunities at that time were few and far between. In 2000, he started **Majoris**, a software delivery firm. The timing was not auspicious, as the bubble of the dotcom boom in India had burst by 2000-01. Majoris felt this downturn and painful decisions had to be taken, like reducing the staff strength from 200 to 90. This proved key to the survival of the company, which was acquired by Valtech, a French company, in late 2004. According to Venkatesh, if Indian software entrepreneurs can move up the value chain, they can do better, and there is absolutely no doubt that India can handle high level software development projects.

Conclusion

Start-Up City is a light read, ideal for the layman as well as the computer scientist. Complex issues in software faced by the entrepreneurs are accessibly explained in detail. While concentrating on the lives of the entrepreneurs, the book in some instances does miss out the work done by their respective companies. It also doesn't explain the lack of representation of women entrepreneurs in the industry and how the social system was not conducive enough to let women flourish. Instead it

tends to look the specific metrics of Indian society that weren't conducive enough for male entrepreneurs.

The book also looks at the entrepreneurship angle in a very different India, where capital investment was scarce, and the social conditions and government policies weren't supportive of the budding entrepreneur. The book may not be contextually relevant to those looking for entrepreneurship tips and ideas in today's India but it maintains an inspirational touch. While there is more support for entrepreneurs nowadays, it is still a challenging path, particularly given that job security is a concern for young people across the country. There are therefore plenty of lessons that aspiring entrepreneurs – in India and elsewhere – can take from the diverse experiences of the ten leaders featured in *Start-Up City*.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the India at LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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