

# Designing the way forward for business history: Contribution of Dr. Dwijendra Tripathi

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'The task (of writing business history) be better left to the businessmen themselves,' remarked one historian at the Indian History Congress in 1965. Till 1960s, exploring the business past was 'somewhat beyond the historian's legitimate function'. Business history wasn't developed as a separate area of research then and historians seldom chose to delve into the business past. Non-availability of business records in absence of carefully preserved business archives was also another factor that restricted scholars to explore the field

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of business history. In midst of these adversities, business history made its beginning in India in 1960s. The man who designed the way forward for business history was Dr. Dwijendra Tripathi, who joined IIM, Ahmedabad as an assistant professor of business history in mid-1960s.

In early 1960s, business education laid its foundation in India. Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad that was established in 1961 had initial collaboration with Harvard Business School. This collaboration greatly influenced the institute's approach to education and the institute followed Harvard tradition of the case study approach that necessitated management students to probe into past business dealings to understand the evolution of business operations and strategies. A new course in the subject of Business History was introduced in the post-graduate curriculum under the able guidance of Dr. Dwijendra Tripathi.

The inclusion of business history in the postgraduate course at IIM-A in a way provided the necessary impetus to the growth of the discipline as the need was felt to study the character of Indian business historically. There are very few scholars who can legitimately say that they founded a discipline and Dr. Dwijendra Tripathi is certainly one of them. He played a pioneering role in establishing Business history as a distinct area of research in India.

Educated at Allahabad, Dr. Tripathi did his doctoral research on 'The United States and India: Economic

Links 1860-1900' at the University of Wisconsin in 1963. After completing a diploma in International Teachers' Programme specialising in Business Administration history from Harvard University in 1965, he returned to India to take up a position of Assistant Professor at newly established IIM-A where he later became the Kasturbhai Lalbhai Professor of Business history. Before his arrival on the scene, business history was still under the shadow of economic history. The literature available on the subject focused mostly on pre-British economic history with only peripheral references to business. The other literature mostly consists of biographies, memoirs of prominent businessmen and souvenir volumes of companies. These works written in most cases by either businessmen themselves or authors commissioned by the company or a firm were highly celebratory and hagiographic in nature.

In his early seminal article 'Indian Entrepreneurship in Historical Perspective: A Re-interpretation' published in the Economic and Political Weekly in 1971, Dr. Tripathi called for 'a new line of enquiry' to understand Indian entrepreneurship, writes Dr. Medha Kudaisya in her Anthology of Indian Business. He emphasised the need to look at varied forces that 'may consist of an interaction of the ever-changing economic, political, and social environments on one hand and personal influences of caste, family affiliation, nature and level of education, contact with and impact of the activities of others on individual decision-makers on the other' for better understanding of Indian entrepreneurship. He firmly believed that scholars should examine the Indian context rather than to simply apply Alfred Chandler's approach to business history. This was to shape a future of research in business history.

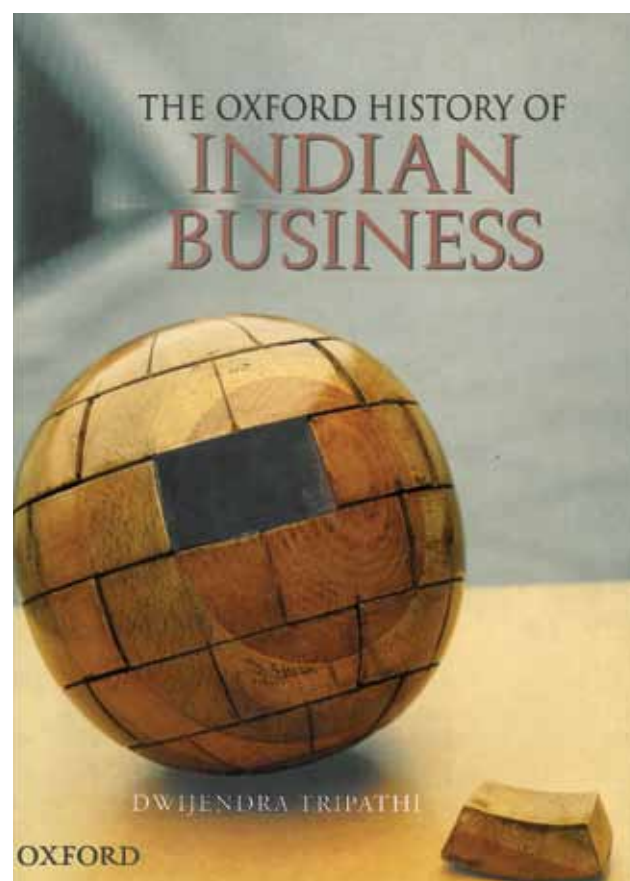
His starting the IIM-A Seminar Series on Business History in 1980s proved as an important landmark in journey of business history in India. Four seminars held between 1982 and 1989 stimulated discussions on variety of themes exploring evolution of business communities, socio-cultural aspects of business behaviour, influences of macro situations on business practices at micro level, relationship between the state and the business etc. This seminar series opened up new areas of research for business historians and Indian scholars.

Apart from his scholarly pursuits that put the business history on firm footing in India, his major contribution

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came in form of encouraging businessmen and business houses to preserve their records. His constant efforts in this direction led to a passage of a resolution in 58th Session of Indian Historical Records Commission (Resolution VI) stating all necessary steps should be taken to identify and list Business Houses that may be willing to make their records available for research and/or that require help in the matter of cataloguing and preserving their holdings so that these holdings are easily accessible by researchers. Though it took many years for businesses to realise his vision, today many corporate houses including Godrej are now committed to the preservation of business archives that will facilitate further probing into Indian business history.

[Image: Cover Page of Dr. Tripathi's book 'Oxford History of Indian Business with a caption about the book: Published in the year 2004, 'The Oxford history of Indian Business' authored by Dr. Dwijendra Tripathi is considered to be the first authoritative history of Indian business in the modern period that charts the course of the transition of business from mercantile capitalism to industrial capitalism.]



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