The Scale Debate

by **Benedict Paramanand**

There's been a spurt in business and motivational book publishing industry in India in the last five years. Interestingly, while **reading books in print form is dying in** the rest of the world, in India, it seems to be growing briskly. Many reasons are attributed to this trend. One is **the demographic dividend – a section** of the thousands of new job entrants are beginning to read. It's also an **indication of the search for insight and** inspiration among the aspiring youth.

Increasingly, business books are being written by successful entrepreneurs and business leaders who are role models for aspiring Indians. Indians **are entrepreneurial by nature and therefore love stories by and about** entrepreneurs. Perhaps the more important factor is the new approach to book writing by the new-age writers – generous with credible anecdotes **and the use of easy conversational** language. Also, the cost of books has not gone up, relative to cost of most other things, making them accessible to a larger audience.

Subroto Bagchi may well be the leader of the pack of new-age business book writers. He already has a few best-sellers up his sleeve, the prominent one being 'The High Performance Entrepreneur.' 'Go Kiss the World' is a moving personal life story of how he beat all odds to make it where he **is today – a founder of a $400 million** IT solutions company, Mindtree Ltd, after a successful career with Wipro.

His books can be enjoyed, digested and shared by a 25- year old budding **executive out of a business school as** much as a mid-career executive who is seeking answers for his state of being. The young IT, ITES, mobile app and e-commerce entrepreneurs relish **Subroto's books as he speaks their** language. Subroto has mastered the art of blending almost a perfect brew of business reality, high performance imperative with integrity and soft spirituality. This is working well both for him and his readers.

His latest book 'The Elephant Catchers – Key Lessons for Breakthrough Growth' meets a dire need in India where millions of entrepreneurs, especially in the SME segment and in B-towns, are gripped with morbid **fear of going from small to medium** or from medium to large. They have big dreams but are weighted down by too many constraints – labor, capital, red-tape, corruption and more. It is **easier in India to start a business and** stay small than grow to any significant size. The ones that have done, with liberal exceptions, are well-established family-run businesses who recklessly diversify into everything around them.

Scaling the intellect

It's great that the Confederation of **Indian Industry is taking Subroto** on a B-town circuit to mentor **entrepreneurs out of their 'small is** beautiful' world. Subroto is clear that **small can still remain beautiful – but this has to be by conscious choice**
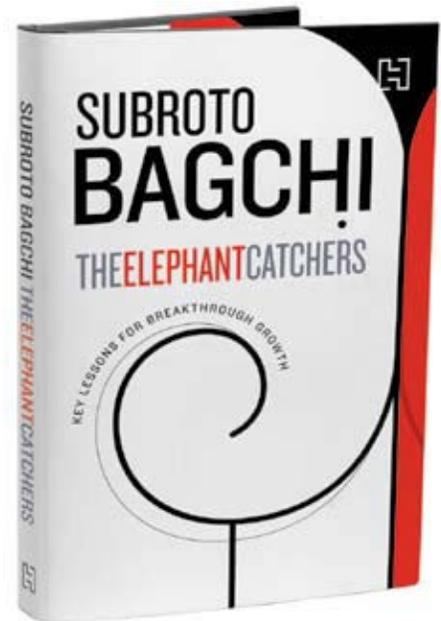
just as going after scale is also about informed choice. The common factor between the two is how comfortable one is with either of the two.

The book touches almost all aspects of scaling through real-life examples, especially the intangible ones. Helping people to scale through a framework will be very useful since **Indian entrepreneurs are yet to realize** the power of happy and engaged employees. Often entrepreneurs **think scaling is an external exercise of** money and influence. Subroto's key **focus during his circuit may have to be** 'scaling of the intellect' of the leaders themselves.

It's a fact that a majority of **entrepreneurs in India are comfortable** with vernacular language – which is reflected in the robust growth of regional and Hindi language newspapers and magazines, as against declining growth of English **publications – it could be a good idea**

to launch translated versions of 'The Elephant Catchers.'

Not sure if the exact translation of the title in Indian language will work considering the class and religious symbolism attached to the gentle creature. Subroto may have to wear his thinking cap for once since it looked like he didn't have to when he wrote the book – it flows effortlessly just like the way elephants swim across a river.

Does India love scale?

India is a country that has been not just comfortable but efficient with the concept of scale for several centuries. Starting from Asoka, the Guptas to the Mughal Empire – Red Fort, Taj Mahal – India has managed scale in mammoth proportion. In modern times, Dirubhai's Reliance, the Tata Steel, TCS, the Amul story, the Kumbh Mela, the general elections, the Adhaar program are all massive and successful scale stories.

Subroto's book is relevant largely to small entrepreneurs who are scared of scale not so much because they cannot but the system does not allow them to. IT and ITES, which Subroto represents, has scaled because the governments agencies did not put spokes into them. What most Indian entrepreneurs need today is liberal and non intrusive business environment and scale could happen on its own. Scale and entrepreneurship, as late Prof. C K Prahalad said, is more to do with imagination and less with constraints.

Purpose can drive scale
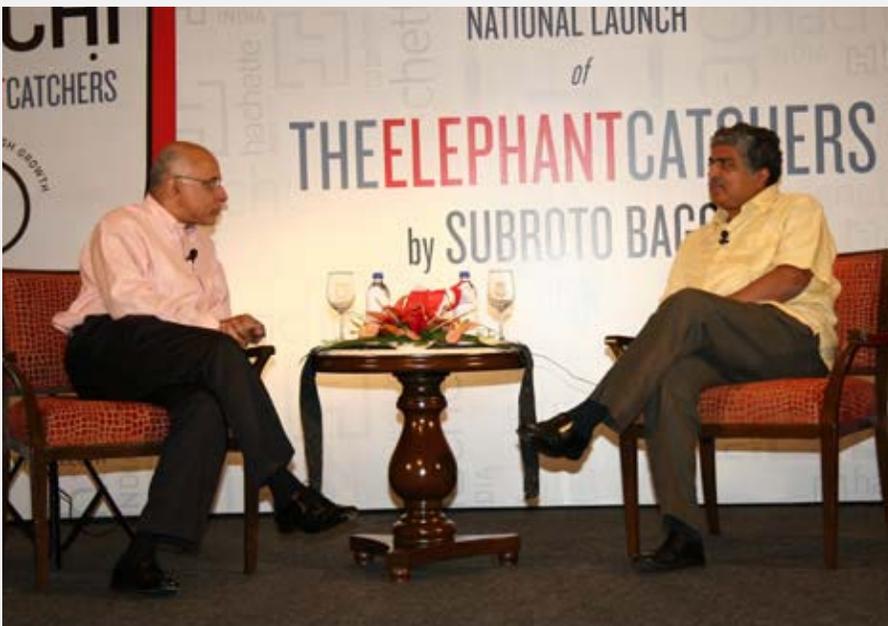
Q&A between **Subroto Bagchi** and **Nandan Nilekani** during the book launch at Taj Westend, in Bangalore

What does it take to scale as an individual, as an organization and how do you look at scale at the level of government?

One of the things that you talk about in the book is being comfortable with the idea of scale, I think that's the key thing - you can't scale unless you are comfortable with scale. Scaling is not about implementing growth. What I have learnt in both my private sector and government life is that you must be comfortable to scale and have a mental model of what is the point of arrival, where is this leading us to. When we were a small company in the 90s we thought of being a billion dollar company and that was a huge task.

Similarly when we started Adhaar project we decided right from day one that we will give 1.2 billion people an identity and visualizing

their future, visualizing that in terms of extricating details is the key to expanding your mind and once you do that the rest follows.

I have seen how purpose plays a crucial role in one's ability to scale...

I think what happens is we tend to underestimate the power of passion of people. Everybody wants to be a part of something bigger than themselves and therefore when you set a very audacious goal, it really looks incredible when you think about and when people realize that that is the end game, then they get very energized. Setting these audacious goals is a great way to unlock people's passion and potential. People will be much more passionate, ordinary people will do extraordinary things because the vision will unlock the passion. I think the combination of thinking scale and having a set of people who are energized by this scale, that's what will work.

What brought you here will not get you there. How relevant is this for entrepreneurs in B towns, especially.....

In business it boils down to how many customers you have and how much revenue you are able to get. When you realize that if a customer is going to give you $10 million of business then you are not on the radar screen of the top guy, you

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are probably on the radar screen of the IT manager. But if you want to be so important to him to get after $100 million of business then you have to be on the radar of the CEO. Once you realize that the sales guys you have at that point may be good enough to sell to the IT manager but not good enough to sell to the CEO. It is only when you think of scale you will realize the short comings of the current model.

Scale your business only if you scale your intellect; how do you scale a construct in your mind. Tell us from your Adhaar experience

If we have to solve the problem of giving 1.2 billion people their identity and people don't have the patience for waiting for this to happen, you need to add scale and speed. You will realize you can't do it the old fashioned way - start an organization and hire thousands of guys. The way to do that is collaboration and partnerships. We created a whole ecosystem, the whole Adhaar team is just 280 people, the ecosystem is 100,000 probably. They don't work for us, they work for our

partners, agencies, post offices, state governments. All the eco-system partners are playing to the symphony that we have written.

How does the symphony work? Each guy is reading his script. The question is how do you manage this synchronization, how do you scale in public space, by creating a group partnership where everybody is playing to the same tune. Today, we have 400 million Adhaar cards. We do a million a day, that's happening because in 25,000 locations in the country people are landing up for enrolment.

How do you deal with frustration?

It's not that everybody is comfortable with scale. If there is somebody who is very comfortable doing something at a particular level I think we should respect that. As long as individual has a sense of awareness about it, it's fine.

One thing I must say is that people in the government are very comfortable with scale. But execution is a big part of scalability. Indians are good with details and all that but I think in some sense, they see it (execution) as somebody else's problem. May be it's a part of the caste system. Some people think people down there will do it but unfortunately there is nobody down there who can make it work and then the whole thing doesn't work.