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In the Atelier

Subroto Bagchi

Co-founder of Mindtree Ltd and author of five management books. Subroto Bagchi is known for his pearls of wisdom in the start-up sector. He borrows his enterprising skills from real life lessons. He applies elephant catching to the world of start-ups in this book. "I have seen the catchers and the storytellers. Though I haven't caught an elephant, I have chased a bear, got hens to hatch ducklings, caught fish by emptying water from ponds in summer, explored bee hives and milked goats and cows," he says. Parts of his book *Go Kiss the World* have been included in Delhi University's English Undergrad Course. Lessons from *The Professional* are taught in B-Schools in India, WHU Germany, Nyenrode University in Amsterdam, and this year Florida State University and Luther College in Iowa will add it to their list too. He manages to read four books a year on the recommendation of his wife.

Scaling business peaks

In his latest book, *The Elephant Catchers*, Subroto Bagchi talks about life lessons in scaling up for entrepreneurs and how it can contribute to the Indian growth story

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When it is about management mantras, he is the go-to guru. Subroto Bagchi's sixth book, *The Elephant Catchers*, Key Lessons For Breakthrough Growth articulates a six-part growth chart for start-ups and mid-level companies. The book, writes Bagchi, is not to glorify scale, but to tell you how to scale. Not just for businesses, it's a must-read for individuals too.

What prompted you to write on this topic?

As we lived through the challenges and opportunities that followed when Mindtree went public in 2007, I started distilling a few key lessons. I got an enormous opportunity to look at the world. India has no dearth of entrepreneurship. But of the many organisations that are born, few attain the critical momentum and the mass to sustain. Unless we are able to crack that issue, we will not be able to create jobs for a billion people. We need to scale educational institutions, non-profit organisations, government departments, towns and cities too. The Elephant Catcher fills this critical need. The conversation is important to build India.

In the book you mention 'growth is imperative and is no longer an option'. Do you think companies in India have made

peace with this idea?

Though there are great examples of scaling up like the Tatas or the TVS group, IT Cand Aravind Eye Hospital in the not-for-profit sector or Amul in the cooperative sector and lesser-known examples like Shree Krishna Sweets and Suguna Chicker, India needs a lot more scaling up. Most people have not figured out a framework for building



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scale; many promising ideas hit the glass ceiling because of that.

'As an adult, you don't have the luxury to make mistakes repeatedly' is a covert theme that runs through the book.

Yes, we all learn from mistakes. But we can't repeat them, because someone is paying them. These are customers, shareholders and my own people. I need to be respectful of that fact.

What research did you do?

I am a very observant person. I like to make note of people, organisations and situations. I am also a good journal keeper; I write things down and file them. I have done that for the last 14 years. In writing *The Elephant Catchers*, I ran through these notes. But, I am not an academic researcher; I am more of a journalistic researcher. My source is not reading, it is being constantly staying connected.

In 2009, when you met Erwin de Pont, chief of Dutch Telecom giant KPN, who was looking at a partnership with either Accenture or Infosys, you made a bold statement—"It is the dog (referring to Mindtree) that fetched the newspaper for you all these years, but when it is time to feed milk, you are choosing the cat (referring to Accenture and Infosys). Bagchi's Mindtree had worked with a company Pink Roccade that had been acquired by Getronics, which in turn was acquired by KPN).

I was being honest, truthful and spontaneous. I told Erwin de Bont how I felt and respected him to appreciate my position and eagerness. It worked. Too often, we are not ourselves, particularly is dealing with people. We try to be logical, rational and appropriate. In the process, we lose something worthwhile—emotions.

When there is so much to learn about management from other sources, why the need for B-schools?

That argument could be extended to any school. When life can teach us, why send kids to school? Yet, we go to school. We do so because we need "formal education" but we also need the "non-formal" education. We need both and need them richly. While the formal part stops, the non-formal part never does. To remain relevant, we must not turn that tap off. That will stop scaling intellect.

Twenty years from now, can *The Elephant Catchers* still be applied for growth in business?

I don't think so; at least not in its entirety. Some things will not change. Many will. Many metaphors will look archaic in twenty years. If the essence is relevant, the story must be told differently.

You say you have no social life and write for 16 hours every week.

You have to give two of my favorite avenues — being stuck in traffic and locked in an airplane. I convert these to productive time by reading or writing. My wife Susmita Bagchi and I are not members of any club, we socialise very little, and we are given to writing as a blessing.

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2