



ROUND TABLE

Reviving business history in India – The way forward

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KEYWORDS

Business history;
Entrepreneurship
history;
Economic history;
Social history;
Total history;
Business groups;
Business families

Abstract In order to revive the focus on business history, a group of eminent scholars discussed the contribution and importance of business history, the status of business history in India, the interesting research questions and methodologies, the challenges in pursuing business history research and the adoption of business history into the business education curriculum, in a panel discussion held at Indian Institute of Management Bangalore. This paper revisits the discussion by presenting the key ideas and directions that emerged, and seeks to stimulate further research and interest in business history.

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Academic perspective

Introduction

Business history as a discipline has made modest progress over the last few decades, particularly in India. It is well acknowledged by scholars that business history has an important role to play in developing and clarifying our understanding of the evolution of business – be it industries, individual companies, business families and groups – and

how it has, in the process, been influencing and been influenced by the social and economic environment in which it has been evolving (Tripathi, 2004, p. 1–10). However, the scholarly attention paid to this important subject has been inadequate of late. This paper attempts to build a case to revive this important discipline and outline a plausible roadmap for the revival and progress of the discipline.

Business history – its emergence and early progress

There is a broad consensus that the tradition of business history can be attributed to the early initiatives of Harvard Business School in the early 20th century (Kudaisya, 2011; Tripathi, 2004). The term “business history” is reported to have been used first in 1920 by the Dean of Harvard Business School, Wallace B. Donhan, in his report to the President of the University, arguing for its importance in business education (Tripathi, 2004). Since then, the progress of the study of business history is seen to have been in tandem with the progress of business education in the U.S.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Indian Institute of Management Bangalore



Production and hosting by Elsevier

Following on from the early scholars, the seminal works of Alfred D. Chandler are deemed to have earned a distinctive identity for the discipline of business history.

The initial efforts to study business history were mainly responding to the call for “business history written primarily not from mass data... but from the study of specific situations as they come to businessmen and their communities in the past...” (Tripathi, 2004), and tended to be company histories. Chandler’s efforts during the middle of twentieth century did serve to extend the frontiers of business history, by extending the analysis beyond individual company stories and viewing the evolution of American business as a whole, shaped by the various forces influencing the companies from within and outside, and the impact of these forces both at the macro and micro level. Thus the expansions of the frontiers of progress of business history, beyond economic history, can be seen to have been propelled by the felt need to understand the business system as a whole, and its linkages with society at large (Tripathi, 2004).

The role of history as an essential input in understanding causation in a larger economic context has been emphasised by researchers (McCraw, 2006; Morck and Yeung, 2011). Accordingly, there have been consistent calls to incorporate concepts, tools and techniques from the social sciences to further the methodologies of business history research (Hidy, 1970; Hansen, 2012). The need to adopt the cultural and narrative perspective in business history, particularly in the context of developing a historical understanding of entrepreneurship and globalisation has been highlighted. Business history as a discipline is also seen to provide an enormous potential for multidisciplinary work that could improve our understanding of capitalism and its development (Hansen, 2012).

Business history in India

Some of the early explorations of business behaviour in India were triggered by the interest in explaining the economic backwardness of India (see Tripathi, 2004, for some examples of these works). Many of these works coalesced their arguments around the two dominant themes of “cultural determinism” and “imperialist exploitation”, and had not made significant efforts to develop more holistic explanations, that went beyond these themes. Though not addressing the question of economic backwardness directly, many other works emerged later which tended to support either of these explanations. Examples of such studies would include treatises dealing with castes and tribes in India, studies on growth of certain industries, or those pertaining to industrial organisations such as a managing agency system. Empirical support of some sort was provided to these studies by biographies, autobiographies, or souvenir volumes of firms, which expectedly lacked in academic rigour (Tripathi, 2004).

Just as in the U.S, the emergence of business management education in India had a role to play in the furtherance of business history research in India. The early support came from the then newly established Indian Institute of Management Ahmedabad (IIMA), followed by works of professional historians. These included publications on firm histories or careers of business leaders, community related

studies, approaches to business strategies, integrated views of business behaviour and interface between business and society. The increasing realisation by big business of the need to present a positive image of itself to the society at large also helped to sustain interest in business history (Tripathi, 2004).

Challenges to the study of business history in India

Scholars setting out to study business history in India have to overcome certain challenges. These challenges have been well documented by Tripathi (2004) and can be summarised broadly into a few critical factors. Firstly, there is a paucity of documentary sources, particularly those pertaining to the colonial period and to the operations of small and medium level traders who flourished during that period. Secondly, barring a few exceptions, companies continue to be reluctant to share records – even those records that are insignificant and are well past their commercial utility. Thirdly, the information available in the public domain, from sources such as the company law board or the registrar of companies, is both inadequate and incomplete. Apart from these challenges, there are larger issues, identified by Kudaisya (2011, p. xi–xxviii) that have to do with the lack of institutional support for the study of business history in India. Pointing out that business history has not entrenched itself in the Indian university system, Kudaisya also contends that the institutional links between business research and business enterprise have continued to remain weak.

Business history in India – the way forward

Indian business has traversed a very interesting course in the last few decades. The socio-political environment in which Indian business is embedded has witnessed a few path-breaking changes during this period. The first few decades after independence saw Indian business rooting itself in the newly independent and aspiring nation. This was followed by a couple of decades of government led development with a prominent role for the public sector. The globalisation and liberalisation trends of the 90s and beyond have brought in their wake significant changes in the composition and functioning of business organisations. Such a dynamic and fast paced transformation of the socio-political environment has very interesting lessons to offer – both for business organisations and to society as whole. A renewed effort to document, understand, and assimilate business history becomes a pressing need and a worthwhile endeavour.

It is encouraging to note that there have been increasing attempts all round to develop a broader appreciation of business history in India. For instance, some leading business houses and corporations – the Tatas, Aditya Birla Group, Godrej, State Bank of India and Bank of India, to name a few – have set up archives to preserve materials of historical significance and make them available to all those interested. Some of these archives are even being digitised and made available in electronic form (Ganguly, 2013). There are also recent instances of companies and institutions supporting oral history projects to ‘narrate’ their history (Doctor, 2013). Also, books have been published

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