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Mario Rutten and Carol Upadhy, eds, *Small Business Entrepreneurs in Asia and Europe: Towards a Comparative Perspective*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1997, pp. 334.

Scholarship in the sphere of entrepreneurship has had its blinkers. Works which look at the phenomenon purely from the enterprises' point of view tend to take a procedure orientation; works which look at the phenomenon from the entrepreneurship development point of view tend to take a prescriptive approach; studies from the social and psychological approaches tend to psychologise the phenomenon by looking at the motivational orientations of entrepreneurs. Few studies try to interpret entrepreneurial processes in terms of larger politico-economic and socio-cultural perspectives, and even those few studies tend to look at large national level conglomerates and massive multinational corporations and their role in the progress of capitalism. The authors point out that there have been studies on the spread of capitalism in the Asian region where again the focus has either been on advancement of capitalism in East, South-East and South Asia. Studies have also focused on the relationship between business interests and the agencies of the state. It is within this framework that the authors lament the fact that the rise of regional and rural entrepreneurs appears to have been largely ignored in reconstructing and interpreting the march of capitalism. The collection of case studies in this book combined with the forays into developing conceptual frames of reference to understand entrepreneurial phenomena makes this work a significant contribution to the advancement of scholarship in this sphere of human activity.

The threefold objectives of this study as spelt out by the authors are:

1. To develop case studies of intermediate-level entrepreneurs in Asian countries in order to be able to build a database for possible conceptual explorations for advancement of the process of conceptualisation related to entrepreneurial phenomena.
2. To try and come up with a new perspective on capitalist development by looking at the growth of intermediate entrepreneurs. As the authors have stated, there are already several studies of peasants and urban working classes but hardly any study of local and regional entrepreneurs and their social, economic, political and business behaviour. As a corollary to this objective, an attempt has also been made to look at the role of intermediate entrepreneurs in the process of capitalist transformation and their possible linkages with larger social and political processes through the instrumentality of intensive case studies.

3. Yet another objective of this study flows from the authors' observation that most studies on entrepreneurs have been region- or country-specific, leading to very narrow perspectives and conclusions which are extremely 'localised' in their orientations. Again, variations in analytical emphasis highlight differences and tend to obscure similarities. Hence, the attempt which is being made in this study to develop a comparative perspective based on the insights gathered through the case reconstruction route could help not only in capturing differences but also similarities in entrepreneurial behaviour across stages in capitalist development and also across cultures.

Seven intensive case studies have been carried out in six Asian countries—India (west and south), Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, South Korea and Thailand, in order to fulfil the research objectives of the study. Besides, three case studies of entrepreneurs in the European context have also been included in the selection—one Dutch study of entrepreneurship in the 17th and the 18th century and two case studies on present-day entrepreneurs in Italy and Holland. The cases are rich in ethnographic detail providing a database for insightful conceptualisation. The ethnographic intensity of the cases could also enable independent analyses by other case researchers in order to relate meaningfully to the conclusions.

As the authors state, 'The section on European entrepreneurs' cases is included because of the fact that writings on Asian entrepreneurs are often based on unexamined assumptions about the origin and nature of the capitalist class in Europe, with which they are implicitly compared—mostly in a derogatory kind of way. By showing the parallels between similar business classes in Europe and Asia, this section should provide a wider frame of reference for the study of Asian business classes. The ultimate goal of such a comparative study is to develop a broader theoretical approach to the study of entrepreneurship which encompasses both East and West' (p. 15). While the objective of comparing Asian and European entrepreneur classes in order to further the cause of conceptualisation by comparison is a laudable objective, the reference to cross-border comparisons based on assumptions leading to a perception that the comparisons have been made in a 'derogatory kind of way' is debatable. What is perceived as derogatory could well be a certain cultural myopia in the phenomena reconstruction process and also could well be due to conceptual superficiality in interpreting reconstructed phenomena on the part of the cross-cultural entrepreneurship researcher. It might also be worth bearing in mind that cross-cultural comparisons of social phenomena

like entrepreneurship, while worth an attempt, may also be subject to cultural myopia on account of deep-rooted cultural differences which are difficult to decode on account of superficial exposure and limited insight.

According to the authors, scholarship in entrepreneurship can be broadly classified under two broad categories of theories—the Weberian-cultural and the Marxian-structural. The cultural perspective flows from the Weberian perspective of explaining capitalism in terms of cultural orientations and the consequent motivations and behaviour patterns of entrepreneurs leading to capital formation. He based his interpretation of capitalism on the Calvinist Christian interpretation in which individuals work hard and with a sense of duty, live austere lives on account of adherence to Christian principles of self-abnegation and avoidance of luxurious living, and have an eschatological orientation to life and reward for righteous living. The Marxian approach interprets entrepreneurial behaviour in structural terms with a focus on explanations based on the stages in the evolution of capitalism in political and historical contexts.

Studies within the cultural school have tended to look for parallels to the other-worldly asceticism of the Christian ethic in Hindu scriptures and Hindu practices. Entrepreneurial studies in this genre also tried to see the relationship between entrepreneurial behaviour and elements of the Indian social organisations like the joint family and the caste system and often look at these elements as inhibitors to be overcome or transcended by entrepreneurs in order to set up businesses. South-East Asian studies of Chinese and Muslim business classes have focused on their distinctive wealth creation strategies. Recent studies following the Weberian tradition have tried to interpret Chinese business practices in terms of the Confucian culture and mindset.

Studies within the Marxist perspective tend to utilise concepts like class and bourgeoisie rather than socio-cultural constructs like caste or religion to represent the entrepreneurial phenomena. Business behaviour is explained in terms of the evolutionary stage of the markets and in terms of the business–state relationships and the consequent interests, institutions and incentives which get created in dynamic interaction.

The authors, however, take the view that instead of an either–or approach, what is needed is an attempt to synthesise the insights contained in the two perspectives for a more robust and authentic interpretation of entrepreneurial phenomena in a comparative perspective revolving around the vibrant potential of human agency. They have come to this conclusion drawing upon evidence from cases spanning diverse social, cultural, political and economic contexts.

The case studies in this volume point to the fact that entrepreneurs in diverse settings seem to be manifesting similar behaviour. For instance, as the authors point out, studies have shown that entrepreneurial behaviour is determined by the diffusion and development of transnational corporations and the concomitant growth of small business in subcontracting relations with these multinationals. The South Korean rural textile industry case and the Java iron founders case point in this direction. Italian industrial districts are really networked businesses. Italian and Korean business networks are founded on oral and informal premises based on trust rather than on legally crafted contractual relationships.

The authors also point out that business entrepreneurs tend to participate in social networks in order to further their business interests. The case of the Malaysian Chinese businessmen provides a potent illustration. They tend to become members of social, religious and educational associations in order to further their commercial interests. The basis of networks may be kin, caste, religion, but they are harnessed to play business interests irrespective of context. Such social networks in a sense provide value addition to the entrepreneurs in terms of relationships, status and influence. Several cases also point to political networks, especially where the state is interventionist in an activist kind of way. These networks also have ethnic and cultural undertones, although the cases also provide evidence that entrepreneurship flourishes even where there is greater 'space' for human agency free from state intervention, lending credence to the view that structural and cultural dynamics notwithstanding, individual entrepreneurs do come into being and thrive.

While some of these findings about business networks or entrepreneur participation in networks are said to apply to both European as well as Asian contexts, there are some questions worth asking from a sociological as well as a methodological point of view. Is the Italian context an appropriate context for drawing conclusions based on comparison with Asian contexts? Is there not a body of sociological knowledge which would posit that 'Latin' cultures have certain characteristics which are akin to those found in the Asian cultures—especially on the nature and meaning of relationships as experienced by the interacting subjects? Are they really 'different' to be able to justify conclusions by comparison? Besides, are there intrinsic differences in the meaning of networks as experienced by different cultures which remain uncoded (or at best, a decoding which is ethnocentric in its conclusions due to cultural myopia referred to earlier) in the academic discourse on networks in the entrepreneurial context? For instance, in sociological terms, could there

by networks which are intrinsically 'associational' and networks which are intrinsically 'communitarian' in nature? In that sense, these sociological relationship categories could be more potent bases for comparisons rather than mere 'nationality status' (Italian, Korean, Malaysian, Indian, etc.) of entrepreneurs as a basis of comparison. This will also take care of the problems associated with a situation in which the nationality status may be different but the meaning of relationships underlying networks as experienced in community might really be similar in a broad sense as in the case of Italian entrepreneurs and Korean entrepreneurs. Such a question is far from deterministic, as the cases themselves demonstrate. The entrepreneurial urge, passion, activity, process and outcome are unleashed within the framework of the underlying meaning of networking. While doing so, there is also a multi-pronged transformation taking place at the individual, social, economic and political levels which in turn supports the human agency perspective being proffered by the authors for comparative study of entrepreneurship. The difficulty comes when the three perspectives—structural, cultural and human agency—are seen in mutually exclusive terms or in a tone of superior–inferior terms.

The attempt to review conceptual perspectives in order to develop a sharper understanding of comparative methodologies in entrepreneurial research is a major contribution of this volume. But perhaps the most fascinating part of this book could well be the individual case studies which provide an insight base for readers to independently interpret the myriad meanings underlying the turbulent, transforming world of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship.

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Madhukar Shukla, *Competing Through Knowledge: Building a Learning Organisation*, New Delhi: Response Books, 1997, pp. 334.

In these days when we seem to be bombarded by the latest thoughts from international management gurus, or critiques which dismiss the offerings of these same gurus, it is refreshing to come across Shukla's book. In his discussion on this most interesting and timely topic, Shukla manages to practise what he preaches—he at once enthuses and empowers the reader with his own visioning, energising and enabling skills.