

**BOOK REVIEW****Changing Tracks: Reinventing the Spirit of Indian Railways****Sushanta Mishra**

**Nilakant, V. and Ramnarayan, S. (2009). *Changing tracks: Reinventing the spirit of Indian Railways*. Collins Business: An imprint of HarperCollins India. Price: Rs. 399; Pages. 222.**

The book is a great example of restructuring in a government-owned organisation, which is amongst the largest organisations in terms of size (second largest Railway network in the world under a single management), and is about 150 years old. The book reveals that with political support, strong and willing leadership, organisations can make the turnaround possible. Through the exploration of various innovative models, examples and stories, the book provides a vivid description of how Indian Railways was able to make a shift from a cash surplus before dividend of Rs. 1,071 crore in 2000 to an estimated Rs. 25,000 crore (may be around Rs. 13,000 crore after accounting for all the expenditures, receipts and depreciation) in 2008. Whilst describing the turnaround process of Indian Railways, the authors explain how the change in the Indian Railway is different from the change models practiced in Western context. The book comprises of eight chapters and depicts the turnaround process in the Indian Railways that took place between 2004 and 2008. The first chapter provides a snapshot of change and lays the ground by arguing that the turnaround is real. The second chapter talks about the protagonist of the book and the leader in the turnaround process of the Indian Railways, Mr. Sudhir Kumar, an IAS officer from Bihar. This chapter mainly describes the learning of Mr. Sudhir Kumar as an IAS officer of different levels and positions at different locations in Bihar. The next three chapters talk about three vital principles of successful renewal. Chapters Six and Seven talk about another vital element of renewal, that is, focusing on results. Finally, the book concludes with the way forward for the Indian Railways.

During the period 1999 to 2000, Indian Railways was near bankruptcy with a fund balance of Rs. 358 crore. Even the Rakesh Mohan Committee declared the Railways as a sick unit and recommended radical surgery in terms of restructuring the Railway Board and converting the organisation into a corporation. The book praises the Railway minister Mr. Nitish Kumar and argues that the foundations laid by Mr. Nitish Kumar helped the Indian Railways to march ahead with the turnaround. Nitish Kumar started the renewal of assets in the Railways and took actions through initiation of public private partnership, so that Railways dependency on the Central Government was minimised. He abolished the involvement of politicians in the Railway Recruitment Board. The book does not lose focus of the economic environment, and by the time the new minister Mr. Lalu Prasad Yadav came, the economy had started reviving. Mr. Lalu Prasad was greeted with suspicion, derision and contempt due to the allegations of corruption and mismanagement, but he showed interest in bringing Indian Railways back on track. The Minister travelled by second class, observed the loading and unloading of freight, talked to workers and managers and inspected the trains and railway

stations. The book on occasion describes the Minister as 'like Gandhi' and attributes the success of the turnaround to the 'wisdom and common sense of the Minister'. The Minister appointed Mr. Sudhir Kumar as the Officer on Special Duty. Chapter Two of the book mostly discusses about the childhood, early career and the learning's Mr. Sudhir Kumar got from the administrative responsibilities. His past learning's helped him explore the positive core of the Indian Railways. Whilst reviewing the reports and documents he observed that various committees have looked at Indian Railways' weaknesses and ignored its strength. The book projects Mr. Sudhir Kumar as a leader who approached the change keeping in mind the strength of the organisation.

Through a series of examples, the authors carve out the positive core of Indian Railways in Chapter Three. The authors explicate technical excellence, execution capability, system of check and balances, values of professionalism and a sense of pride amongst the people as some of the positive core of Indian Railways. In subsequent chapters, the authors mention how change agents are able to foster positive emotions through fostering confidence, trust and pride in the organisation. From arranging gloves, shoes and proper tools for the gang men to travelling with the loco drivers and making coolies as permanent employees are some of the measures taken by the Minister to foster positive emotions. Humility, coupled with patience and continuous persuasion on the part of the leadership were some of the elements that helped in mobilising support and fostering positive emotions amongst the people. The leadership realised that connecting to the soul and fostering positive emotions is not sufficient to bring about a turnaround. Focusing on outcomes and becoming business savvy seemed essential to make turnaround happen. The next few chapters talk about different activities adopted by the leaders to enable the Indian Railways to become business savvy and outcome oriented. In a vivid manner the book describes the leadership actions to orient the attention of the Indian Railways to pricing, freight loads, passenger amenities and train turnaround times so that freights can be 'heavier, better and faster'. The introduction of 'Garib Rath', differential pricing (through introduction of Tatkal facility), commercialisation of Railway Inquiry and increasing train lengths are some of the steps taken in that direction. Towards the end, the book concludes with the four principles for successful renewal: connecting with the soul of the organisation, fostering positive emotions, developing business knowledge and focusing on outcomes.

The book explains that the renewal in the Indian Railways came about as a result of three types of changes. One, fostering a commercial mindset; two, making certain technical changes to enhance carrying capacity of wagons and reduce time taken for loading/unloading activities; and third, taking steps to enhance interdepartmental collaboration, sensitivity to passenger concerns, improved cleanliness, safety and punctuality. The book claims that fostering commercial mindset was most successful followed by initiating technical changes to enhance carrying capacity of wagons. However, the book mentions that the third type of change was not as successful. The book also mentions some of the steps to be taken by the Indian Railways to continue being a success story.

This is a good informative book if one wants to know about the Indian Railways. The book provides a lot of facts and stories which describe the evolution, growth and functioning of the Indian Railways. Although the researchers mention that the book is research based,

some statements seem to be arising from the authors' experiences/hunch; for example, the authors hold the system of management education responsible for the ills (page 53) without any prior discussion or argument in support of it. The authors describe three types of changes and categorise them as successful, moderately successful and not so successful; without describing them in detail or by providing any evidence. The book talks about the three sets of actors involved in the change process; but most of the discussions were confined to one or at the best two sets of actors. The involvement of the rest of the Indian Railways is not as clear as it is in case of other two sets of actors. This is a well-written piece of work, although some repetitions could have been avoided.

### Author's Profile

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**Sushanta Kumar** Mishra is a faculty in OB and HRM area at Indian Institute of Management Indore. His research focuses on micro aspects of organisational behaviour and issues pertaining to diversity. Some of his work has been published/accepted for publication in Academy of Management Best Paper Proceedings, Human Resource Management and Journal of World Business.