

# Family Narrative as Business History

THOMAS TIMBERG

Normally *Economic & Political Weekly* (EPW) does not review novels but this is a deserving and valuable exception. Based on the personal and commercial record of his Marwari Bania family over more than a century, author Sujit Saraf recounts the family members' commercial and personal fates. There are, he reports, 502 descendants of the family firm founder, who died in 1960 at the age of 80. The novel reports the family members' changing sets of values, professions and orientations responding to commercial community traditions, business opportunities, secular education and political movements.

## Family and the Firm

Though it is a novel and not a history, it follows the trajectory from Harilal, the firm founder, who moved from his home village in Shekhavati to become a child clerk in a big Marwari firm in Bara Bazaar (roughly modelled on Tarachand Ghanshyamdas, an iconic "great" firm of early 20th century) (Timberg 1978, 2014). While doing the work of a humble teenage clerk, fetching and delivering cloth and payments, he surreptitiously began to speculate on the Kolkata "rain bargain" (*fatka*) market with initial success and then loss (Hardgrove 2004: 270–333; Birla 2008: 143–98). There is also a story, this one fictional, of how teenaged Harilal and his speculator partner attracted the affection of and some business from David Yule, whose personal engagement with Indian business persons was legendary and atypical for a resident British business person in Kolkata.

Then Harilal moved to Bogra in East Bengal and settled, first as a store-owner and later as a sub-broker supplying jute to Tarachand Ghanshyamdas. Soon Harilal and his children had stores dealing in soap, cigarettes and similar products. They developed ties with other Marwari business persons and local landowners, including the nawabs of Bogra. One of the nawabs became the Prime Minister

**Harilal and Sons** by Sujit Saraf, *New Delhi: Speaking Tiger, 2016; pp 316, ₹699.*

of Pakistan, and his brother, a supporter of Bangladesh and a memorable Dhaka figure until his death (Chowdhury 1979; Hoque 2006; Nascir 2006). After partition, Harilal moved to Bihar where he and his sons re-established his business and where it continues until the end of the novel (Timberg 1978, 2014). But by this time various sons and grandsons had split off in different directions, one becoming a leading barrister and political leader in Kolkata.

Just as the Tarachand Ghanshyamdas "gaddi" in Bara Bazaar in Kolkata is depicted based on historic records, the nawabs of Bogra and their complex family history is also recounted. It involved extensive litigation among claimants to the title and complex political roles in pre- and post-partition India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh (*Habibur Rahman Choudhury and Another v Altaf Ali Chaudhury and Others* [1918]). Though a novel, there are historical bases for many of the characters and incidents. The partition itself was more complex and its process more drawn-out in East than West Pakistan, and this is also reflected in the novel. Branches of the family stayed behind in East Pakistan for longer or shorter periods depending on their relations with local protectors and their remaining commercial connections. But by the time of the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war, they had all left.

The elderly Harilal has to flee from Bogra in the wake of a riot, to the home of his son—a leading barrister in Kolkata—from whom he is culturally, if not formally, estranged. He marshalls his business network, relatives and employees, sending family members to sell off the Bogra properties, albeit at low prices. Another son is sent to relatives by marriage in Bihar where he begins to reconstruct the family business.

The final chapter finds Harilal returning to his birthplace in Shekhavati, after

the death of his wife and long-time associates, living out his days with people, including a friend with whom he had speculated in rain bargains in Kolkata in the early part of the century. The friend had returned home thereafter and not been a business success. Harilal eventually makes his old speculative partner from his teenage years the caretaker of the haveli (mansion) that he has built. He reunites with his old primary school headmaster, who renews the traditional teachings from primary school about "varnashrama dharma," the requirements including that everyone do his mandated caste and generational duties, but soon the old primary teacher dies. Finally, there is a massive family reunion for the wedding of the Kolkata barrister's daughter, who is entranced by Harilal's haveli reconstruction project.

The progenitor Harilal returns to his renovated village "haveli," but, this becomes a haveli in which until the day of his death he never lives—again one of the side eddies in this epic-like novel. In this strange behaviour, Harilal parallels the great seth of the village of his youth, who similarly built a now ruined haveli and never lived in it. The story of how Harilal located the last craftsmen who knew how to paint and plaster in the old style using natural ingredients is itself an interesting tale. It is an example of digging out people in Jaipur and Sikar who were children of those who did the last traditional haveli now standing in ruins. The one built by the previous great seth of the village.

There is a marvellous bit of dialogue with the "chittera" (the relevant craftsman) tinting the walls of the new haveli:

He asks: "What shall I draw?"

Harilal answers: "A train as long as the wall, with a black engine and a dozen red cars. Let the engine send up smoke. Draw sahib looking out of the windows, smoking cigars and pointing at the tibbas [sand dunes] of Shekhavati. Draw a memsahib too. She leans out, one hand on the edge of the window, the other pressing down on her hat so it will not fly off. And she smiles."

The chittera frowned, "I have not seen a memsahib."

"I will describe one to you," said Hari thinking of the portrait of Mozelle Cohen in the Nawabari in Bogra. [She was connected with an early 20th-century nawab's wife,

whose role was the center of a famous litigation which made its way to the Privy Council in London.]

### Not a Business Novel

Despite the fact that this novel is an inside account, it cannot be accused of exonerating the family members, including Harilal himself, from engaging in sharp business practices and even outright fraud. It also contains examples of moral courage, mutual loyalty and commitment from and to employees and partners. It is certainly a heroic effort to have written such a book about one's own family. Some sense of the relation of the novel to actual history and the research the author conducted can be gathered from several pages at the end.

The book is not precisely a "business" novel in the Japanese sense in which business problems such as how to market, where to invest and so forth are the central themes (Prindle 1989, 1996), but it does address some of these questions

as well as the more complex problem of reconciling family (read personal) and commercial dynamics. But, it is the kind of family Bildungsroman that enables us to follow both overall and socio-economic changes through time of a prosperous business family like John Galsworthy's *The Forsyth Saga*, or Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*.

Nor is it focused on the particular problems of young Marwaris, as are many of the works surveyed in Rahul Parson's still unpublished Berkeley thesis on the literature written by Marwaris themselves in Hindi (Parson 2012). But, it does try to chart the trajectory of a business family and the changing values it embodied.

Thomas Timberg ([thomastimberg@gmail.com](mailto:thomastimberg@gmail.com)) is an economist and business historian based in Washington, DC, United States.

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