

The Inspiring Life Of Kalpana Saroj: A Multi-Millionaire Dalit Woman Who Was Married Off At 12!

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By **Aparna Wanchoo**:

India's caste system is an ancient social hierarchy, which places people into different categories by birth. Those born into the lower castes have historically faced discrimination. More than 160 million people in India are considered "*Untouchable*"—people tainted by their birth into a caste system that deems them impure, less than human. Human rights abuses against these people, known as Dalits, are legion. A random sampling of headlines in mainstream Indian newspapers tells their story: "*Dalit boy beaten to death for plucking flowers*"; "*Dalit 'witch' paraded naked in Bihar*"; "*Dalit woman gang-raped, paraded naked*"; "*Police egged on mob to lynch Dalits*". But one woman has managed to change this existing status, the multi millionaire Dalit woman, Kalpana Saroj.



Photo by Amey Mansabdar

The dark horse, Kalpana Saroj is one woman whose story begs to differ. Hailing from Murtizapura, a hamlet in the interiors of Maharashtra and being born in a low caste Dalit family, she has had her shares of agony and misfortune. But she was one of the rare individuals, who by her sheer hard luck and perseverance, managed to turn the tables around. Today, she is a multi-millionaire. At the helm of a successful company, she rubs shoulders with prominent businessmen and has won several prestigious awards for her professionalism.

The early distressful years of her life:

Even though her father allowed her to get an education, wider family pressures saw Kalpana become a bride at the age of 12. She moved to Mumbai to be with her husband who was 10 years older, but was shocked to find herself living in a slum. But that was not the only hardship she had to endure. She underwent unspeakable torture at the hands of her brother in law and his wife. She finally abandoned the alliance with support from her father, and was taken back to her village. Driven to despair by her wretched circumstances, she attempted suicide, but survived. At that moment, she decided that she would achieve something, and live life on her terms. Determined to make it big, she returned to Mumbai a few years later and stayed with an uncle. Working in a hosiery company, she eked out a living earning a meager Rs 2 a day. But it was in the rough and tumble of Mumbai's underbelly that she acquired her raw aggression, determination and earthy approach to conducting business.

Her advent in the world of business was born out of misfortune. In the mid-1980s, her second husband passed away, and she inherited a fabrication unit for making cheap tin and steel almirahs. It wasn't much of a business, but she quickly learnt the ropes. The unit helped her to make ends meet and raise her two children. She even managed to put some money away. It was in the construction industry that Saroj really honed her business acumen. It was a tough business, and she had to frequently confront shady elements and opposition of all hues.

Carving a niche:

Kamani Group's case was a historic one in India. In 1988, the Supreme Court had decided to make the workers the owners of the company. Due to issues between the workers, union and management, Kamani Tubes went bankrupt and was facing liquidation. Kalpana came into the picture only in the year 2000 when the company had a debt of Rs. 116 crore, 140 litigation cases and two workers unions.

Kamani Tubes had no significant assets to its name. The factory in Kurla (Mumbai) was not operational. Machine parts had been stolen. The office

space was occupied by tenants who had been there for years. The four-acre land the factory stood on was divided between Kamani Metals and Kamani Engineering.

She met with representatives of the banks, the Board for Industrial and Financial Reconstruction (BIFR) and the government. Their brief to her was simple—if she wanted to help, she could pay Rs. 2.5 crore and take charge of the company. That is what she did. She had studied the company's problems and realized that the debt had built up because of interests and penalties. She approached the Finance Minister around 2005 and requested that these be waived off. Her grounds for the request were that if the company goes into liquidation, the banks would get nothing. But since she was trying to turn the firm around, if they were waived, it would be possible for her to pay the debt back.

Her good intentions were noticed. The minister called up the chairmen of all the banks and got them to waive the extra charges off and the liabilities came down to about Rs. 45 crores. This was just one part of the problem with this firm. The other was the 140 litigation cases. They were tackled systematically and the company was finally released from the BIFR in June 2011. She restarted the factory on her own land in Wada (Thane). Gradually, the company limped back to normalcy with a better production and distribution network. It paid off the workers and was able to give back the dues of the original owner, Navinbhai Kamani.

Her awe inspiring, ever increasing progress:

Today, she presides over varied businesses. The single factory Sai Krupa Sakhar Karkhana in Ahmednagar, in which she holds a substantial stake, is graduating to an integrated sugar complex. Capacity has been enhanced to 7,500 TCD (tonnes of sugarcane crushed per day), and a 60 KLD (kilo litres per day) distillery is coming up. They are also building a 35 MW co-generation power plant.

A diversification into steel manufacturing and mining has come about recently. Initial investments of Rs 10 crore for a 100 tonnes per day steel plant has been made at Wada, on the outskirts of Mumbai. A bauxite mining initiative across 1,230 acres in Udgir, along the Maharashtra-Karnataka border, is being drawn out.

Meanwhile, she has also resurrected the Kamani brand in the Gulf through Al Kamani in Kuwait and Kalpana Saroj LLC in Dubai to cater to the huge demand for copper tubes, especially from the water and sanitation sector.

In a nation where Dalits are even now looked upon by many strata of the society, her success story fosters the belief that nothing can stop a person who is willing to fight through all the odds.