

Raja Nayak | When caste became irrelevant

Raja Nayak, 53, runs several businesses, the largest with an annual turnover of Rs60 crore, but his childhood memories revolve around going to bed on an empty stomach

Live Mint

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Nayak, the Karnataka president of the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, says as you move up to a higher strata of society, nobody looks at your caste. Photo: Hemant Mishra/Mint

Bengaluru: Even by the soaring standards of rags-to-riches stories, Raja Nayak's thrills.

His duplex house, spread across 3,000 square feet in an upscale neighbourhood in Bengaluru, has four bathrooms. Each bathroom is bigger than the entire house his family of five lived in before 1990.

Nayak, 53, runs several businesses, the largest with an annual turnover of Rs.60 crore. He owns a BMW, a Mercedes Benz, a Skoda and two Ford cars.

“I wanted to make money. But 20 years ago, I never thought I would reach this point in my life. I didn’t even know how many zeroes a crore had,” says Nayak.

Nayak was the eldest child in the family. His father had no regular work and so most of his childhood memories revolve around going to bed on an empty stomach, having to walk bare feet, and being thrown out of school for not paying fees on time.

Realizing that the only way to survive was to start working early, Nayak spent his teenage years, in the 1980s, selling export-surplus shirts bought from Tiruppur, near Coimbatore, famous for its textiles industry. He sold the shirts at twice the price he bought them.

One day in just an hour—between 2pm and 3pm—he sold his entire stock and made a profit of Rs.5,000. “I had never seen so much money, not even in a month,” says Nayak. “I knew I had to earn. I didn’t have much of an option.”

The depth of India’s poverty means its rags-to-riches stories are almost always gripping, but few are as dramatic as Nayak’s—all the more so because, as he says, he is not educationally qualified. He had only just completed his Class XI when he threw himself into the world of business.

It was hardly formal business when he started out and he was mostly on the streets for two years, but 1990 was when he started flourishing. “I had a logistics company and that is where I got lot of business because after liberalization a lot of exports and imports started happening. Everywhere business openings were there. A lot of multinationals came in. So, there were no qualifications required or caste discrimination. If you were capable of doing it, you could do it.”

In pre-liberalization India, for several decades, the upper castes monopolized the world of licences and permits—needed to start a business in what was known as the Licence Raj years.

But the decade after liberalization saw many Dalits overcome societal resistance to leave behind their “traditional” occupations—jobs no one else would do, like cleaning toilets and leather work. Many in these communities decided to become entrepreneurs—“become job givers, not job seekers”, as Nayak says.

Nayak, who is the Karnataka president of the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (an umbrella organization of Dalit entrepreneurs) says, “Caste is there in the smaller world. When you go up into the higher strata of society, nobody looks into your caste.”

Recently, Nayak launched a business of packaged drinking water under the brand name Jala Drops.

“When an MNC (multinational corporation) comes in, it doesn’t ask who made this water—a Nayak or an upper caste (person). If they sell it for Rs.10 per bottle, I give it for Rs.9.50. That is business. That is what liberalization did. Caste became irrelevant—at least in a certain class,” he says.

This is the fifth part in a series marking the 25th anniversary of India's liberalization.