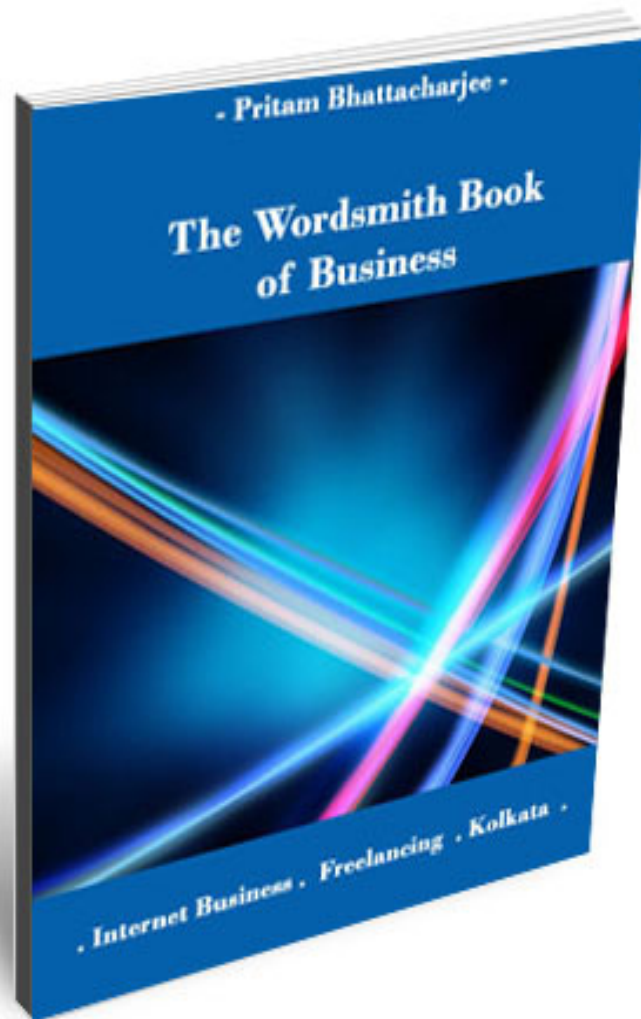


# The Wordsmith Book of Business



An e-book by a small, obscure but surviving business owner for his tribe in office cubicles, homes and classrooms

## Preface

Like all my books, this book is actually addressed to me. In this book, I have tried to recount and tell my story – a story of surviving in business for last four years [2005 – 2009], having left my *naukri* of ten years. I found out, after four years and having paid quite a price for the learning that I should not have been an employee at all. If I would have resisted the temptation ten years back – the temptation of security, self-image, peer-pressure and especially the sweet and charming *siren* of my own ‘programmed’ mind, the learning would not have been that costly.

Traditional business inspiration books, Case Studies tend to focus on successful, numerical miracles (Rs 500 to 5 crore saga) and larger than life areas. Since I am neither big, nor have achieved any miracle of that sort yet, still I think that to me the experience has a worth – not less than a miracle story.

I also hope that this story, if I am able to tell simply, sincerely and powerfully, many men and women will be *empowered*. The word has been misused so much but I could not find any other word. They will be empowered because it will not be intimidating. Greatness, Success, Win, Great Ideas, Great Visions all of these seldom come without a sense of intimidation. In many cases, they make you feel small instead of empowered.

I have lived and worked in Calcutta and Eastern India all these four business years with frequent travels to meet and listen to my client’s stories. This is important to keep in mind because no business can ignore its external environment completely. Nor it can accept it completely.

The whole motivation of doing business came to me, in short, in defying the environment. It sounds grand, but it is not.

The innovation called fire came in the ancient caves of our forefathers not after power point presentations or brainstorming or from Hominid Innovation Centre – it was to defy the natural tendency hitherto to be dinner of wild beasts in the night.

### **Background and Possibilities:**

Being born in mid-seventies in India and in a salaried, middle class family in North East, I had no idea of business. I don't remember my parents ever discussing – *business is/is not good* in whole of my teen years. What I knew that one need to study well, get oneself admitted to a good school/college and from then the auto-pilot of state will take over. The virtues mostly taught was hard work, sincerity, being respectful to *authorities* and not failing in anything – be it mathematics or language classes. Failure was considered a no-no. Nobody ever told us that it pays to fail.

In this background, the possibilities of understanding or even being aware of business were pretty bleak. I was no genius and hence I missed as well. It never occurred to me to enquire as how some shops in the neighbourhood remain open for decades as some close and re-open. What was once a glossary became a hair-cutting saloon, then remained closed for two years, re-opened and became a pretty busy ladies beauty parlour and again after few years – a mobile top up store. We were asked to read and master *states of matter* in physics and *metamorphosis of cocoon into butterfly* in biology rather than these *business* transformations in the neighbourhood.

My aunt was married in a business family in Calcutta. They were printers and were a Government supplier. The interaction with the cousins provided me with an idea that business means perpetual stress about finance, union issues (something more pronounced in Bengal than elsewhere), keeping the *babus* in good humour and greasing the palms from peons to president. Naturally, these felt and received notions were not helpful in providing conceptual ideas. Learning: *We can never conceive anything even in close touch if we don't look at it objectively and without pre-judice.*

Looking back into this part of my life – after some two decades made me aware as how axioms, truths, beliefs gain status of immutable truths from the habit of mind. Our society stamps us with a habit of mind since childhood which is mostly a majority consensus. We are taught to read the lives of great men and memorize well but social incentives work in the way where the social consensus works.

I think I now seem to grasp the reason as why business never touched me during my teen years. Our society, at least at that time was relatively more closed, low-information circulating, a huge and all absorbing public sector and a morality which made a short-circuit of *business-wealth-bania-profit-retail shops-bribe- licence-permit-risk* into a mental structure of a hotch-potch or hocus-pocus which is very close to anything called yoga/spirituality that many of our countrymen sell to the eager *students* of West. With a huge bureaucracy and its attentive *sufarish-process*, secrecy was a competitive advantage to advance one's career. Business on the other hand was the most public, most clear message of undertaking the path of highest risk where chance of failure remains overwhelmingly higher than being successful.

A businessman in India will do him a great service if he remembers this aspect always and this would help him in avoiding the following common follies while operating in India:

- a. **Localization:** Due to the historical evolution of our society, we have an unseen, intangible and palpable social regulator. This regulator has powerful impact in our society. Models and processes of other climes, however efficient cannot be expected to deliver results here simply because it worked there.
- b. **Social Recognition:** In India, social recognition is a high incentive. As an employer, one has to be always conscious of the perceived value of this in one's employees. An Indian, unless he/she is completely *de-natured*, economic recognition minus social recognition will be counter-productive.<sup>1</sup>
- c. **Risk:** Indians are not risk-averse *per se*. They undertake highest risk when they are *convinced* that there is no risk. I would like my readers to note the huge debate of the performance of Indian National Cricket Team and its Coach's philosophy. A section of very talented cricketers told that they are paralyzed in fear and cannot deliver their performance because of constant, mathematically precise measurement.
- d. **Power:** Indians don't behave easily and naturally with power. As a business owner, you have all the temporal powers except the power of sovereignty. Hence, you need to understand, appreciate and use this very very sensibly.

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<sup>1</sup> I had offered a young man to be a freelancer with the option of working from anywhere and his average income per month would be INR 25,000 with a fixed one of INR 15,000. He joined a firm in Central Calcutta at INR 5000 with an hour of commuting in one of the most hellish city traffic in the globe – since the discovery of wheel and internal combustion engine. In this case, as a freelancer, economic recognition was three times higher but in the latter, the social recognition was higher: going to office, coming from office, party in office!

1. Don't be shy. The best banker you have is your customers and suppliers. They have a stake on you because if you succeed, they succeed.
2. Please understand that banks are not interested whether you succeed. They are interested whether *your failure* still covers their risk. This attitude is fundamental and is more applicable for small borrowing. I remember an adage, *if you borrow one hundred thousand from a bank, you are fucked. If you borrow 1 billion from the bank, the bank is fucked.* Moreover, there are many businesses in the line for that fund from the bank. They can afford to be very choosy. You cannot.
3. Don't be in debt if you are interested to start a business with no fund. Debt will enslave you – literally and you have to borrow the peace of everyday. Remember that sun shines every day, birds sing and they are looking at you while you work in peace and with an honest resolution. Debt clutters that.
4. Work for your clients and customers, suppliers. You are not working for your success, but that of your customers. The more you think of them the universe will think of you.
5. Be brutally honest and ethical. Be absolutely vocal and clear that you don't have much money or resources but you have pledged that you would succeed. How? You don't know even. Ask the passing wind, ask the stars.
6. In India, such a decision may tend to create huge unrest among your family and social circles. At times of weakness, remember

that as a leader and architect of a new thing, you belong to whole humanity.

7. Please understand that there is only a *wall of time* between you and your success or failure. You are here to climb this wall of time. Rest are all diversions.
8. While there is real trouble of money, don't talk about it. This silence will activate cosmic forces and if your resolution is sincere and strong, the cosmic connection will happen. You will be breathless to see this happen. You will be simply awe-struck. This is the most sacred cosmic law<sup>2</sup>. Respect that Law. Ancient called this deep silence as prayer.
9. Observe the small businesses around: the small tea-shop, small roadside shop selling provisions. Observe closely the freelance shoe-polishwallahs, the ice-cream vendors, and the hawkers in the street and trains. If you observe with respect and patience, you will see those survival instincts which your career-oriented professors in business schools never knew nor communicated to you. You will suddenly find that you are part of a great community. You will be empowered<sup>3</sup>.
10. This is particularly for Bengali origin readers and is quote from one of the greatest un-Bengali of Bengali origin: চালাকি দ্বারা মহত্ কাজ হয় না । *No great work is ever achieved through petty tricks* – Swami Vivekananda.

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<sup>2</sup> The Gita

## 11. The Circuit of Threat : Gradual may mean overnight

Every person who has worked in present corporate has the experience of hearing words like *continuous improvement*, *gradual development* and so on. Ironically, in many cases these words and resulting exercises are like farts – signalling core process going wrong and a casue of discomfort for any corporeal being and people around.

By mid 2008, global outlook on business was ominous.<sup>4</sup> Anglo-Saxon world was definitely undergoing recession of worst category, if not a depression far deeper than that of 1929. We started some thinking where we asked very uncomforatble questions and tried to be as sincere and candid in answering them. Here is a summary of that exercise which precipiated into some decsion, followed by implementation plan and some implementation.

### Excersise 1: Extinction by overnight

We started with a thought-experiment again. Consider this fact: We provide a service where people anywhere logged in can the online/offline status of people they are interested to know. Suppose we are doing well in the business and we are getting steady revenue. Now imagine, tonight, at around 2100 hours India time, we sleep to see another day. Imagine, at the same time yahoo and google announce the feature which is standard now: *the online status pane at the left*. Within next 10 hours, before the sun shines in Japan, there will be millions of users of these services in other hemisphere. And within the day of the next closes, this single event has crushed many

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<sup>4</sup> I have tried to tell what I was feeling in my successive editorial of this period in [www.pentasect.com](http://www.pentasect.com)

verticals, many business models, and many supply-chains and without any whimper... Our unfortunate business has gone, if not completely, but quite substantially.

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