

## ‘Breaking Barriers: The Story of a Dalit Chief Secretary’ by K. Madhava Rao

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The book *‘Breaking Barriers: The Story of a Dalit Chief Secretary’* published by Emesco Books Private Limited in 2022, and edited by D. Chandrasekhar Reddy, is a powerful account of a journey from fear to fearlessness, from subjugation to assertion and from being no one to becoming a revered exemplary civil servant. Authored by the former IAS officer Kaki Madhava Rao, the book explores the inner mechanism of the civil service at the ground level and casts light on micro policies and governance. Rao was a 1962 batch Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer who superannuated as Chief Secretary of Andhra Pradesh. He also served as a Director at the Reserve Bank of India and as a member of the Board for Financial Supervision. He was born in 1939, in Pedamaddali village in the Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh. This book is an inspiring account of an astonishing journey of the son of a *Parelu*,—a farmhand from a Dalit family who breaks the shackles of demeaning existence and challenges posed by the social systems and economic conditions, and emerges successfully to reach the highest echelons of bureaucracy.

### **Core Element of the Book**

The author discusses his experiences and observations as a member of the civil service, with a particular focus on the dynamics of governance and policy making and implementation. The author also touches on his personal journey from rural Andhra

Pradesh to the national stage, and his interactions with various political leaders during this period. It is likely to interest those in civil services, governance, and policy making, as well as those interested in the personal journey of the author from his childhood to that of an adult. Kaki Madhava Rao and his observations on civil service entwined with governance and policy-making; and implementation, is a rich account of the system, vividly showcased with its perils and safeties. It is a powerful book informing how policies are made and governments function. The book is spread over 14 chapters, showcasing the remarkable life of the author which enliven the proverb, 'Where there is a will, there is a way', albeit difficult, in this case. Against all odds, the author continues his journey as a child who was hampered from going to school by his father who in turn was made to believe by the dominant privileged people in the village that he and his children were meant to be farm hands, and therefore education was of no use to them. So he, unlike his wife, considered education as futile for his children. But his wife was determined to save the children from the clutches of penury and impoverishment caused by working as farm labourers. In defiance of her husband's belief, she started sending the children to school stealthily, at the cost of being beaten up by the adamant father of the children. While the beatings scared the author and his sibling, it did not deter the mother. It was her fortitude that led the little boy to educate himself and attain the highest office as a bureaucrat can aspire to reach in his career. This narrative from the author's childhood, highlights the grit and courage of a Dalit mother to fight the social (and economic) evils prevalent against Dalits to the extent of remaining undeterred by her spouse's wrath.

## Early Days

The tone of the book is set in the initial chapters that describe author's childhood. Starting with his struggles against a social practice where the sons were to follow the father's occupation, and obey him with no right of choice or agency. Against this backdrop, the author experienced the tension between the father's authority and pride in being the 'best *Paleru*',—farm hand in the region, and the desire to make his sons emulate him; and the mother's resolve to free the boys—the author and his sibling, from the clutches of inhuman compulsions perpetrated by privileged landlords. Madhava Rao's mother aspired to educate her sons—the author and his elder brother, Raghavendra Rao, to break free from the shackles of daily subsistence and that of his father who was determined to ensure that his sons follow his example of being the best farm hand in the area.

The first sentence of the first chapter reads: "*This is the story of the persons, authorities and events that made me who and what I am.*"—appropriately summing up the theme of the book. The first chapter titled "Village Days" is the core of the book. In recalling his early days, the author narrates some significant events. The most impactful being the thrashing he got from his father when he was seven years old for going to school stealthily at the behest of his mother and against the will of his

father. It made him fall silent but not condone that act of injustice. He endured living a frugal life in dirty, insanitary conditions, and often combating hunger, to pursue his ambition to study that taught him the values of self-discipline, self-control and single-mindedness.

## **Making of the Civil Servant**

The initial chapters of the book describe in simple, yet lucid language, the almost impermeable constraints, and struggles of overcoming them. They also inform us about the values that Madhava Rao cherished most and followed diligently in all his official and personal dealings, subsequently as he held various offices. Chapters 2 to 5 give details on his exposure to the national stage of governance and functioning of the government. This was a realm different from the rural Andhra Pradesh of his childhood. These chapters are an account of a provincial young man maturing into an adult bureaucrat ready for the nation and world at large. These early years made the man he became, imbibing the dominant traits of his parents—from his mother the zealous sense of fairness and justice, and from his father belief in oneself to achieve the set goals through hard work. However, his years as a senior civil servant tested his stubborn commitment to his values and beliefs.

The subsequent chapters 6 to 9 cover aspects of administration such as pressures, politics and economics, formal and informal facets of manoeuvring the strings of governance. The strengths and weaknesses of state-level political leadership are used to represent the story of change in the country. These chapters traverse the author's journey as a Collector of Warangal district in Andhra Pradesh, to becoming the state's chief secretary. His work for the welfare of toddy tappers, tribals, Dalits and other labouring communities in Warangal district made him a hero of the marginalised. Madhava Rao was not only noticed but also marked when as the District Collector he stood by the marginalised groups against powerful political forces, resulting in his transfer. But he continued to fight for the rights and the welfare of the most marginalized social groups—the scheduled castes and tribes. In these endeavours, he was supported by another iconic officer, Shri S.R. Sankaran, enforcing the rule of law that often meant disrupting the status quo of caste hierarchies. Implementing the law banning bonded labour and freeing them from the landlords, who, for generations, thrived on such social exploitation, was a work of mettle which could be materialised only by the officers of his merit.

## **Political Complexities**

Chapters 10 and 11 deal with the political economy of the country. They contain interactions with several leaders like Chenna Reddy, Vijaya Bhaskar Reddy, N.T. Rama Rao, N. Chandrababu Naidu, and N. Janardhan Reddy, to name a few. Drawing from his various postings, Madhava Rao reflects on the times when he worked in politically sensitive posts of State's Finance Secretary, Secretary in the Chief Minister's office and

later as the Chief Secretary of the state. This phase has been written in an exciting way as it is perhaps the most riveting of all. These chapters enable the readers to understand the dynamics of policy making, agenda setting, role of bureaucracy and the tensions that a bureaucrat goes through in navigating a toxic environment while holding onto and not compromising with one's principles. The chapters covering the periods when he worked as the Principal Secretary to N. Jananardhan Reddy and Chief Secretary under Chandrababu Naidu provide rich insights into the minds and thinking of the two leaders. These chapters elicit how IAS officers can solve problems, address tricky issues, and the extent to which a bureaucrat can accommodate political compulsions, without necessarily having to compromise on integrity, principles or the Constitution. The author remained uncompromising on principles, yet he did not hesitate in being flexible to suit the situation. The accounts of his association with Chandrababu Naidu reflect this aspect of his personality. In the interactions with the leadership, he proves his own mettle as a decision-maker. This characteristic is also evident in his role as State Election Commissioner. He went to the Court against the government and did not invite any adverse criticism, proves his righteousness and mature confidence. As evident in the book, all the offices he occupied like the Reserve Bank of India, Board for Financial Supervision, State Election Commission, etc., benefitted by the prudence of Madhava Rao as he engaged in the functioning of democratic processes during his tenure.

Through the meticulously arranged chapters the author provides numerous pertinent insights into the political, social, cultural, artistic and humanitarian aspects of our country. Besides understanding the events, people and the circumstances that shaped and defined him as a person, the author collates a firsthand account and a deep understanding of the social, political and economic transformation that the State was undergoing during that time period. This autobiographical account has its merit embedded in the remarkable simplicity and affirmation in the narratives. Despite the title announcing it as a story of a '*Dalit*' bureaucrat who reached the highest office of the chief secretary, the author refrains from seeking the readers' sympathy or kindness. On the contrary, the book reveals the grit required to earn every achievement of the author, not on the basis of his caste, but his sheer merit, competence and belief in self. A supportive, understanding and collaborative style of working with colleagues earned him respect and admiration. The book is nuanced in a firm narrative suggesting subtly and often upfront, what is required of those in bureaucracy and governance. It places clearly, that it is courage and belief to live by the constitutional values that Ambedkar gave India, to which they are bound, regardless of consequences.

## Summing Up

This book is invaluable reading to understand that policy making processes are not easy. The policy environment is hard and calls for the effectivity of the officer in the form of being accessible and helpful. Perhaps for this reason, when the author was

first approached to pen down his memoirs, he was reluctant and tried his best to not get persuaded. But for the benefit of the generations to come, particularly of civil services officers, the persuaders prevailed. In the Preface, the author candidly reports on friends and family who were by his side in writing, editing and finalising the book in the form that it is today available to the readers.

He recounts the persuasion of Vijaykumar, Chairman of EMESCO who convinced him to write as his 'social and economic background' and his work experience was "Public Property". He was finally convinced to write when Ramachandra Murthy, senior Editor of multiple Telugu dailies too resonated the idea of Vijaykumar. In fact he also recalls how he persuaded P.S. Krishnan, fondly called PSK, the legendary and the first IAS Officer to identify with the poor and marginalized groups. The author also acknowledges three others who urged him to write his story—Kancha Ilaiah, who wrote 'Why I am not a Hindu?', Y.V. Reddy, former Governor of RBI and Gita Ramaswamy of Hyderabad Book Trust. It took him a while before he could agree to writing his memoir. The unfortunate demise of his wife of 61 years left him shattered and feeling terribly lonely. Then COVID happened, taking away the option of engaging in public activities. And this eventually led to the penning of his memoirs. The book shall remain an exceptional and vivid description of the grit to fight against all odds. The author defied social discrimination and suppression and became also a source of inspiration for the oppressed. As a child he experienced every conceivable disadvantage associated with rural India of the mid twentieth century—poverty, inequality, social discrimination, which he overcame to eventually becoming the Chief Secretary of a state in independent India. This book is a realistic narrative of the blatant realities of our society, which makes it an essential reading for those who wish to understand the labyrinth of society, governance and policy with emotions.