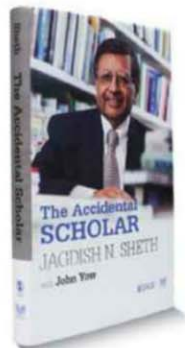


# Such a Long Journey

Sheth's book is a candid account of his life from a studious Marwari child to an authority on consumer behaviour and marketing



## The Accidental Scholar

By Jagdish N. Sheth with John Yow  
Pages: 296 (Hardcover);  
Price: ₹695  
Sage Publications

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In my view, autobiographies are generally boring. So I try not to read them unless they are of personalities like Mahatma Gandhi or Nelson Mandela or some such awesome person. But Jagdish is an old friend. So out of curiosity I decided to read *The Accidental Scholar*. The book traces the journey of Jagdish Sheth, one of the world's leading authorities on consumer behaviour and marketing.

It records incidents from his childhood in Chennai in a rather large Marwari family. Through a series of decisions that were made for him, he was able to complete his schooling, pursue his college education and move to the US for his Masters and Ph.D. The rest, as they say, is history. That should put the book's title in the right perspective.

Many things work in favour of the book. For starters, the prose is very tight. The narrative is lucid, clear and hearty so that you don't get bored with reading the chronology of events as they unfold. Secondly, Jagdish has recorded the personal milestones alongside the professional ones. Some of these personal anecdotes are quite hilarious and admittedly make for lighter reading in the middle of serious academic content, thereby retaining the reader's interest.

The third plus in Jagdish's favour is the 'lessons learnt' portion at the end of each chapter, which succinctly captures the essence of each chapter and creates a practical 'take-away' for the reader. The fourth point that I especially enjoyed is the candidness with which the book has been written. Jagdish has not only showered praise and admiration on many but also recorded with unbridled dislike, the things and people that bothered him.

The book chronicles very effectively not just the life of Jagdish Sheth, but also the environment that he was part

of. The reader gets glimpses of pre-Independence Chennai, USA of the 60s and 70s, the socialist movement in Kolkata in the late 60s, the student uprisings in the US against the Vietnam war, the research and development-oriented academic atmosphere in the US, the cultural upheavals in both countries and the impact of the Internet.

Jagdish has given the reader a picture of the shift in the life and living habits of people from the late 60s to the present in India and in the US. In fact, as a person who also lived the American dream (I did pretty much the same things that he did although I planned to be a scholar and my area was accounting), the book resonates with 'me' since I am able to also understand and appreciate the years of hard work and the euphoric sense of achievement. The US is by no means an easy place, but it is a place where hard work is rewarded, skill and talent appreciated and opportunities commensurate with merit do literally knock on your door. Success is directly proportional to effort and there are no hidden variables in that equation. That is perhaps the lure of the land even today. This aspect has been beautifully captured by Jagdish in his book.

In conclusion, the book is a decent read. It does not bore you with technical details that one would normally associate with an autobiography. It summarises the extraordinary journey of an ordinary man who may have perhaps been manufacturing and selling jewel boxes in Chennai's Sowcarpet, had fate (and his brother) not intervened! ♦

BALA V. BALACHANDRAN  
(The writer is J.L. Kellogg Distinguished Professor of Accounting & Information Management (Emeritus in Service), Northwestern University and Founder, Dean and Chairman of Great Lakes Institute of Management, India)



## INTERVIEW WITH JAGDISH SETH

Known for his seminal work on buyer behaviour and relationship marketing, JAGDISH SETHI, Charles H. Kellstadt Professor of Marketing at the Goizueta Business School of Emory University, Atlanta, was in India to launch his autobiography *The Accidental Scholar*. He spoke to SHAMNI PANDE on many topics, including the key influences in his life, about India and important trends, and the significance of the government's Make in India campaign. Edited excerpts of the interview:

### What made you write your autobiography now?

I have had such fascinating encounters that I was joking about writing a screenplay about the Americanisation of 'Jag', my nickname. The day I landed here I went to buy a formal white shirt – till then all my shirts were rather colourful – and like any other Indian started bargaining. It was unheard of in the US in the 1970s. But that is today being accepted here. I also have a lot to share about the people I have been fortunate to have worked with.

### Who are the people who have inspired you?

I first studied about Abraham

Harold Maslow's [US psychologist] 'Hierarchy of Needs' in my MBA behavioural class. I just

loved it; motivations of people have always fascinated me. I applied the same theory on how institutions go through a similar path of evolution. Take religion. When people struggle to survive, they pray, it then moves to love and affection. As the society and economy evolves, this moves to self-esteem and independence, and eventually it gives way to self-actualisation.

This behaviour also manifests at the workplace where organisations move from being feudal to providing a platform to employees for self-actualisation. My interpretation was well-received, including by Maslow himself. I even applied this to the evolution of Communist vis-a-vis the capitalists. In this context I would also like to mention about my mentor Professor John Howard with whom I co-authored the book on buyer behaviour. Peter Drucker's ability to forecast the future has always inspired me.

### What's your view on the 'Make in India' pitch?

It has a strategic intent. The world is looking for an alternative to China and companies would want to de-risk their reliance. It could also involve a foreign company making/manufacturing here for elsewhere. This does not compete

with domestic industry and has the potential to give us technology or know-how, the way China learnt from these firms.

### But is manufacturing the answer?

India is resource rich. Way back in 1800s David Ricardo had suggested that nations should concentrate on their comparative advantage. An idea where the British Empire did not focus on producing cotton, but sourced it from India and the US. British mills made textiles that were again sold back to these countries at a premium. India missed the bus when the US wanted India to manufacture; India refused then, influenced by its Non-Aligned Movement. China, however, embraced manufacturing. Today, India is a service-driven, growing economy that is labour-inflationary. We need more skilled labour. Service is not exportable. Be it for service or manufacturing, it needs infrastructure.

### Do you see relationship marketing undergoing a sea change?

The principle of connection and building a relationship does not change with the change in the platform. If you look at the companies and brands, the successful ones have built that connect with the local community. I call them the 'firms of endearment'. In India, take the case of Tata, Murugappa Group and Hindalco. Wipro's Azim Premji has sought to do the same.