

From Struggle to Achievement : An Entrepreneurial Journey of Tara Bahadur Kunwar

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Abstract

Entrepreneurship is taught in class rooms, and universities are putting in effort into producing entrepreneurs these days. *Entrepreneur* is most commonly interpreted as an individual who “does not work as an employee” and takes risks for future benefits. This article presents the story of an individual, whose journey towards the unknown future transformed him into a known personality of the present time in Nepal. He is successfully running his business. Hence, the purpose of this article is to present the struggle and achievements of Tara Bahadur Kunwar as an entrepreneur to inspire many potential entrepreneurs to become successful. Moreover, struggle and achievement of Tara Bahadur will serve as an example of how an individual can transform his/her fate with perseverance and hard work. Tara Bahadur is the person who had to leave his birth place while he was studying in grade two and took a journey to the capital city of Nepal, Kathmandu in the pursuit of his future. The unknown future, was this for better study or for better work? This article presents a picture of the society where persons like Tara Bahadur used to live. As a case, this article is expected to serve as a record of a society that existed in 1960s, the extent of an individual's struggle for survival, and the story of a person who was able to transform his life and has become a successful entrepreneur.

Keywords : Achievement, entrepreneur, entrepreneurship, heavy equipment, struggle

Paper Submission Date : July 9, 2019 ; Paper sent back for Revision : August 3, 2019 ; Paper Acceptance Date : August 5, 2019

Tara Bahadur Kunwar, a houseboy transformed his life passing through various difficulties and undertaking various risks. Finally, Tara Bahadur became successful in establishing himself as a businessman and is now running his own business as a successful entrepreneur, and is also leading various occupational and social activities.

This paper discusses the life, struggle, and achievements of Tara Bahadur as (a) successful entrepreneur, (b) source of inspiration for many others, and (c) case to study and analyze within the domain of entrepreneurship. Since this article has been written to describe Tara Bahadur's early childhood, struggle, entrepreneurial journey, and achievement, it has not followed conventional research methodology and for the sake of brevity, no literature review has been included. This is based on the autobiography of Tara Bahadur and a series of interviews by the author from September 2018 to March 2019.

Early Childhood

Tara Bahadur was born on March 3, 1966 in Kodaka, Chaubas village of Kavrepalanchok district of Nepal. His father was an ordinary man living with his wife, six sons, and one daughter. Poverty and illiteracy were there in the village and for about 3 months in a year, people of the village had to move out of the village in search of employment to support the family. In 1972, Tara Bahadur's father was working as a labourer in a coal mine in Assam (in India) and received a monthly wage of Indian Rupees 60, with which he supported his family in Nepal.

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DOI : 10.17010/amcije/2019/v2i3/148280

Though the environment was not so conducive for studies, Tara Bahadur was admitted to Seti Devi Primary School. The school was far away from his house. To reach the school, he had to walk for an hour. Students were punished harshly if they were late. There was no system of giving or doing homework. Wooden chalkboards were used to practice writing. Chalkboards were painted black by charcoals and pieces of limestone were used for writing. Since, there was no practice of carrying tiffin, students did not have anything to eat in break time. Hence, the students usually had only two meals in a day. Tara Bahadur did not get any money, so he had to steal turmeric roots, rice or fruits that were available in the house, and he sold these in the market to buy items like peppermint candy, biscuits etc. If caught, he had to be prepared for harsh punishment.

At the age of seven, Tara Bahadur visited the house of his married sister. There was a famine in the village and because of the famine, his sister sent some baked bread made from buckwheat, finger millet, and rice for her mother with Tara Bahadur. On the way, Tara Bahadur ate most of the breads sent for his mother and distributed some to the pedestrians. He had only two or three breads left for his mother, so Tara Bahadur had to lie to his parents.

In another event, Tara Bahadur and his elder brother quarrelled for a *Sel roti* (a deep-fried, ring-shaped and sweet Nepali bread) because both of them were hungry and both of them wanted to have the last *Sel Roti*. His elder brother was carrying *Hasiya* (a traditional semicircular household weapon used to cut vegetables, grasses and small bushes) in his hand. While quarrelling for the *Sel Roti*, inadvertently the *Hasiya* ran into the hand of Tara Bahadur, and there was a deep wound on his hand. There was no health post nearby and no medicines were available. Urine and mugwort leaf were considered as medicines for such wounds with which Tara Bahadur treated his wound. This was the environment in which Tara Bahadur spent his childhood. At the age of 10 or 11, he was sent to Kathmandu, the capital city, an unknown place for him to work and to study.

Education

After reaching Kathmandu, Tara Bahadur was kept in the house of an engineer as a domestic worker and was admitted to Nandi Ratri School in grade four. With great difficulty he was managing his studies, and domestic work as a houseboy. He had to change his job because of various reasons that were partly attributed to himself and his immaturity, and partly due to the behavior of the house owners. Therefore, his school life was not easy. He hardly got time to study. He was struggling to continue with his studies but the environment was very unsupportive. He had to read books sitting under the street light at the Baneswor junction.

In 1979 and 1980, there was a political upheaval in the country that led to the declaration of a referendum to accept either modified single party system (known as *Panchyat*) or a multi-party democracy. Tara Bahadur's brother was associated with a political party, and because of his involvement in political movement, he was arrested by the government and his whereabouts remained unknown. Tara Bahadur's elder brother was lost forever. This was another major impediment for Tara Bahadur to continue his studies. Despite all these, he was still struggling to continue his studies. At that time, he was about 13 years old.

He again worked as a domestic worker for another household, and accordingly he had to change his school. He was admitted to Vijaya Memorial School, where the son of his owner was also studying. This was a school where children of the higher-class families were also sent. Tara Bahadur was proud of this but during the course of time, he noticed that there existed a class division in the society. After school, the son of his owner could do homework and could relax or play, but Tara Bahadur had to finish the household chores.

He never got a new book to read. He always had to read reused books. As notebooks, he had to reuse old notebooks. Therefore, he had to erase the previous pencil writing to make space for writing. Similarly, he did not have opportunity of wearing a full school uniform. He only had a shirt, which was compatible with his school uniform. In his class, there was another houseboy, Shyam, who had trousers compatible with school uniform. Teachers insisted that both of them wear full uniform which was impossible. Hence, as advised by the teacher, Tara Bahadur and Shyam started wearing full uniform turn by turn by borrowing each other's shirt and trousers, so that at least one of them could go to school in full uniform. This happened when he was in grade six.

By the time he completed grade six, he again changed his job as he was lured by one of his own relatives, whose

motive was to take some money from Tara Bahadur for making a good job available to him. He took about Rs. 15 from Tara Bahadur. The new owner was a retired army officer. Along with the change of the house to work, Tara Bahadur had to change the school according to the convenience of the house owner. He was admitted to another school called Shivapuri School in grade seven. In fact, this school was farther than the previous one and was a morning school. Classes started from seven in the morning. Walking on the streets of Kathmandu in winter mornings was very difficult because of heavy fog, cold, and street dogs. He thought that he could not continue his study under this condition. Besides this, the environment in the house of the retired army officer was more feudal, and servants were not treated as human. This environment provoked him to revolt and finally standing on the neighbor's wall, he publicly criticized the behavior of his owner. After this event, he again demonstrated publicly when he noticed that a houseboy, whose name was Dilip, working in the house of the then Secretary of Home Affairs was not admitted to school. Subsequently, after public demonstration by Tara Bahadur, Dilip was sent to school. This gave Tara Bahadur a great sense of satisfaction.

One day, Tara Bahadur was taking a dog for vaccination to a Veterinary Hospital at Teku, where he met some of his villagers who were pushing *Thelas* (pushcarts) in Kathmandu. He found them happier than he was and that short reunion with his villagers made him change his mind. In fact, the environment was not favorable to study, because:

- (i) He had to wake up at five in the morning,
- (ii) He had no friends in school,
- (iii) He did not get time to do homeworks and
- (iv) Going to school early in the morning was a kind of torture because of the street dogs and cold.

Lack of healthy environment to study forced him to quit his studies, but he had no alternative plan, and he was not mature enough to take any decision. Meeting other villagers at Teku and seeing them happy acted as a sufficient cause for him to finally abandon his studies. He thought, "If my villagers could be happy by pushing *Thelas*, then why should I struggle to study?" Tara Bahadur's formal education ended at grade seven.

Struggles

(1) Towards the capital city

Tara Bahadur's elder brother was studying in a night school in Kathmandu working as a houseboy in the house of an engineer, who was working with Department of Roads. So, along with his elder brother, Tara Bahadur was sent to Kathmandu. To reach Kathmandu, they had to walk about four hours upto the place called Dolalghat, where they could find a bus to Kathmandu. At the age of 10/11, this was the first time in his life, Tara Bahadur had seen a bus and experienced people in neat and clean clothes who also looked educated. He felt that he was the poorest person in the world. After getting down from the bus in Kathmandu, he saw something that was moving on two wheels without any support. He was surprised to see bicycles and motor bikes on roads. He started exploring his future in the capital city of the country.

(2) Domestic worker

At the age of 10/11, Tara Bahadur started working as a domestic worker in the house of an engineer, who was working with Department of Roads. Besides daily house chores, he had to carry firewood from a depot to the house where he was working. Weight of the firewood used to be more than 35 kg. Tara Bahadur had never lifted such a heavy weight before while he was in his home in the village. Carrying such a load was very much frustrating for him. Finally, he had to leave that house after working there for about six months.

(3) Street Boy

Winter in Kathmandu is very cold, especially in the night. Therefore, he had to find something to cover his body to sleep in the night because he had already left the house where he used to stay as a houseboy. He used to collect, in fact, he stole cement jute bags from houses that were under construction to keep his body warm. With those stolen cement bags, he used to sleep under the traffic post. In the night, dogs kept on barking at him, and the next day early morning,

the street vegetable vendors used to look at him as a thief. He spent about 10 days in this manner on streets.

(4) Agriculture Labourer

He also worked as an agriculture laborer. He had to prepare the field, and harvest potatoes and onions. He received potatoes and onions as wages, with which he used to exchange tea and light snacks. This was a harder period for him. He had also stolen Rs. 20 from his friend when he was in grade four at Vijaya Memorial School. He stole it to buy some street food.

(5) Turning Point

The conditions Tara Bahadur had undergone and experienced while working as a domestic worker compelled him not to continue this work. He decided to leave the house where he was working. While leaving this house, he had another bitter experience. He had worked for 19 months with Rs. 5 per month salary. Tara Bahadur had thought that he would get Rs. 100 as total salary with additional Rs. 5 but he was given exactly Rs. 95 at the rate of Rs. 5 per month. Even the additional Rs. 5 were not given to him. This again made him frustrated and irritated with the overall conditions in which he was living. However, he was free now. With a small *tyanka* (a zinc box used to carry goods and clothes) in hand, he started a new journey as a turning point of his life. As stated in *Hujar lai Namaste* (Kunwar, 2016) in his own words:

“After stepping out from the house of ..., I became free. From this point, my life sailed into the ocean of labor. Not study, I chose the path of labor. Not education, I walked on the path of struggle. Not Jnyanayog [wisdom], I moved forward on the path of Karmayog [Action].”

Tara Bahadur went to meet his villagers, who were staying in a rented room, which was in a narrow street, a dark room, without light and ventilation. “It was like a pig's pen,” Tara Bahadur remembered his past. In the evening, all other villagers gathered in the room. For meal, all had to contribute 50 paisa (one Rupee is equal to 100 paisa) each to buy essential items such as rice, vegetable, and firewood for cooking. They used to cook food in a mud pot and food was served in aluminum plates. Despite all such adversities, he enjoyed the meal with his colleagues, and was satisfied with the feeling of high self-esteem.

(6) Porter and/or Thela Pusher

Next day, he had to look for work but he was very small to push a *thela*, which his villagers were doing. So, he had to work as a porter and loader. He got two pieces of six feet long CGI sheets to carry. This was his first independent work as a porter and he received Rs. 2 as wages. As a porter he had carried cement bags, bricks, and other construction materials. He remembered one event when while unloading glasses at the construction site of Russian Embassy at Baluwatar, a piece of glass dropped down on his body and injured him. He went to the hospital for getting stitches and had to remain idle for about one month until recovery. He did not get any compensation nor did he receive any first aid treatment. No one took care of him. This was another frustrating moment in his life. After this incidence, he struggled and despite his young age, he started pushing *thela*.

He had to pay Rs. 10 per day to the *thela* owner. From this *thela*, he started earning about Rs. 30 per day. This was a big achievement for a person who had to work for a month as a houseboy to get Rs. 5. At that time, 4 or 5 porters or pushcart pushers used to live together sharing a room and in case of a *buinal* (Attic), upto 20 people used to share it along with 5/6 *chulhos* (traditional oven for cooking food using firewood) for cooking meals. There were no toilets and bathrooms. The bank of the river, Bishnumati Khola was an open toilet for them and every Saturday they used to take bath and wash their clothes in the river. Tara Bahadur remembered the days, “The condition was pathetic but we were happy”. For about a year he worked as a porter and *thela* pusher.

(7) Rickshaw Puller and Tempo Driver

After *thela*, he started pulling rickshaw. He started with a platform type of rickshaw, which was used to carry goods. Thereafter in 1987, he started pulling Peda cab. He also organized rickshaw pulling training for other 40-45 fellow *thela* pushers, and helped in improving their lives. Tara Bahadur was never satisfied with what he was doing and always



Figure 1. Tara Bahadur with Breaker

remained vigilant, searching for something more and something better. Therefore, he worked day and night. Day time, he pulled rickshaw and, in the night, he worked as a night guard. In the meantime, one of his friends taught Tara Bahadur how to drive a tempo, and after this training he became a tempo driver. For about six months, he drove tempo and also trained other 80-85 fellow rickshaw pullers to drive tempos. He never worked for himself only. In his own words, “at that time, my qualities of organizing and leadership were revealed.”

Entrepreneurial Journey

Some of his friends were jealous of his progress and public relations. They conveyed some false statements to Tara Bahadur's tempo owner that he was misusing the tempo and as a consequence, the owner took back the tempo that Tara Bahadur was driving. He became jobless. As Warren Buffett said, Tara did not look to jump over seven-foot bars; he looked around for one-foot bars that he could step over (ValueWalk, n.d.). Waiting for another opportunity of getting a tempo, he simultaneously thought whether he could buy a tempo himself. He managed to collect about 100 grams of jewelry items from his wife and sister and mortgaged them for ₹ 20,000 and managed an additional ₹ 25,000 as loan for six months. With this money, he bought the same tempo that he was driving. In a five-month period, he paid back the loan at 36% interest rate. He operated the tempo up to 18 hours a day. With hard work and dedication, he started earning and saving money. In 1990/1991, he also started a small shop selling tempo spare parts at the Bajaj tempo workshop premises. He used to look after spare parts in the day and drove tempo in the night. These activities prepared a good platform for him in his entrepreneurial journey. At the same time, he could also build a simple shelter for himself. Because of his enterprising mind, he got involved in buying and selling tempos and by the year 1992/1993, he exchanged 27 tempos and retained seven tempos in his possession. At this point, Tara Bahadur thought, "I have become a big businessperson."

Tara Bahadur's second journey started in 1992/1993. He was involved in land business but he was deceived by his partner. Failure in partnership changed his mind and he started to become a truck entrepreneur. First, he learned truck driving with the help of a friend who was a truck driver. Then, he sold his tempos, mortgaged his house with a finance company, and took Rs. 2,00,000 additional personal loan at 36% interest. Finally, he managed money to buy a TATA truck - 608, and on September 6, 1994, he became a truck owner. At the back of the truck, he wrote *Hajurlai Namaste* (Greetings to you), which later became his signature. By the year 2001, he had a total of 17 vehicles including seven full body trucks, and about 50 workers involved in loading and unloading of goods. This was his major and remarkable transformation and marked his success.

In 2005/2006, the owner of Modern Tea Industry bought a backhoe loader to ease Tara's loading and unloading work because, by this time, youth of Nepal had started going abroad to work, and the country had started facing labour shortages. This event made Tara Bahadur realize that heavy equipment had more scope than trucks in Nepal. He started buying heavy equipments for which he used his own company Namaste Transport and Suppliers. In two years, he owned about 12 different heavy equipments. Tara was also involved in spare parts and lubricant business as a dealer through his company, Hajurlai Namaste Trading.



Figure 2. Tara Bahadur's employees

Tara Bahadur at Present

Tara Bahadur operates a company, Hajurlai Namaste Trade Link, which is the authorized dealer of GP and ITR brand of lubricants in Nepal, and is also a dealer of Korean Breaker. He also sells parts of ITR brand dozer. Currently, there are 50 employees (mostly women) working in his company.

Tara Bahadur took a lead in establishing Heavy Equipment Entrepreneurs Association of Nepal, which was established in March 2010, and he became the founder chairperson. With Tara Bahadur's continued leadership, the association became Federation of Heavy Equipment Entrepreneurs Association Nepal (FHEAN) under his leadership. Additionally, from the year 2015, Tara Bahadur initiated Clean Ring Road Campaign, which has received a good response from people. The campaign aims to keep roadsides of a 23 km long ring-road in Kathmandu clean. Every Saturday morning people gather at the designated area of the ring road and start cleaning.

On July 6, 2017, Tara Bahadur delivered his first and influential public lecture in Pulchowk Campus of the Institute of Engineering of Nepal to Masters level program in Construction Management. His autobiography *Hajurlai Namaste* was also published in 2016.

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