

Jamsetji Tata (1839-1904)

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Jamsetji Tata's business philosophy was enshrined in values that made the country and its people partners in and beneficiaries of the wealth-creation process



There are many reasons why India is beginning to shine on the economic front. One of the less-trumpeted ones can be traced to the late 19th century, when a band of homegrown entrepreneurs laid the seeds of indigenous industrialisation. The outstanding Indian businessman of the time was Jamsetji Nusserwanji Tata, industrialist, nationalist, humanist and the founder of the House of Tata.

The industrialist in Jamsetji Tata was a pioneer and a visionary. The nationalist in him believed unwaveringly that the fruits of his business success would enrich a country he cared deeply about. But what made Jamsetji Tata truly unique, the quality that places him in the pantheon of modern India's greatest sons, was his humaneness.

Jamsetji Tata rose to prominence in an era during which rapacious capitalism was the order of the day. America's 'robber barons' and their equivalents elsewhere in the world, including India, had come to define what the enterprise of moneymaking was all about: cruel to workers and uncaring of society, predatory in nature and ravenous in creed. Jamsetji Tata, though, was cut from a different cloth.

The distinctive structure the Tata Group came to adopt, with a huge part of its assets being held by trusts devoted to ploughing money into social-development initiatives, can be traced directly to the empathy embedded in the founder's philosophy of business.

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Born on March 3, 1839, in the sleepy town of Navsari in Gujarat, Jamsetji was the first child and only son of Nusserwanji Tata, the scion of a family of Parsi priests. Raised in Navsari, Jamsetji joined his father in Bombay when he was 14. The liberal education he received fuelled in him a lifelong admiration for academics and a love of reading. Those passions would, though, soon take a backseat to what Jamsetji Tata quickly understood was the true calling of life: business.

Jamsetji Tata joined his father's business in 1859. Less than 20 years later, he was ready to embark on the first of his fantastic business odysseys. On January 1, 1877, the day Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India, the Empress Mills came into existence in Nagpur.

The period following the establishment of Empress Mills was the most significant of Jamsetji Tata's busy life. In hindsight, it was also the most poignant. From about 1880 to his death in 1904, he was consumed by what has to be the three great ideas of his life: setting up an iron and steel company, generating hydroelectric power, and creating a world-class educational institution that would tutor Indians in the sciences. None of these would materialise while Jamsetji Tata lived, but the seeds he laid, the work he did, and the force of will he displayed in fulfilling this triumvirate of his dreams ensured they would find glorious expression.

Jamsetji Tata's philanthropic principles were rooted in the belief that for India to climb out of poverty, its finest minds would have to be harnessed. Charity and handouts were not his way, so he established the JNT Endowment in 1892. This enabled Indian students, regardless of caste or creed, to pursue higher studies in England. The objective of creating the Indian Institute of Science came from the same source, but here, as with the steel plant, Jamsetji Tata had to endure long years of heartburn without getting any tangible recompense in his lifetime.

Of the ventures that did bear fruit while Jamsetji Tata was alive, the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay has to rank highest. Legend has it that Jamsetji Tata set his mind on building it after being denied entry into one of the city's hotels for being an Indian. His sons, friends and business associates were sceptical. His sisters chided him by asking, "Are you really going to build a *bhatarkhana* [eating house]?" The Taj turned out to be far fancier than that.

Jamsetji Tata's business successes shrouded the assortment of passions and commitments that he carried and nurtured across a fascinating life. He had an abiding love for Bombay, for travel and, most of all, for new ideas. His was a mind constantly seeking knowledge and daring to push the frontiers of achievement, right up to his demise in Germany in 1904.

Chronology

Year	Event
1839	March 3rd, born at Navsari, Gujarat
1853	Joins Elphinstone College, Bombay
1858	Passes out as a 'Green Scholar' (graduate)
1859	Joins his father's firm Nusserwanji and Kaliandas, General Merchants, as co-manager of a new branch in Hong Kong
1867	On a visit to Manchester, hears Thomas Carlyle speech on 'The nation which gains control of iron, soon acquires control of gold'
1868	Starts a private trading firm in the Central Provinces
1869	The Alexandra Mill -- the first industrial enterprise commences manufacture of cotton goods
1874	Promotes the Central India Spinning, Weaving and Manufacturing Company Limited in Bombay. The first joint stock company in the Central Provinces
1877	Empress Mills opens -- the first cotton mill to be set up close to its raw material supply
1882	Reads a report by a German geologist Ritter Von Schwartz on the availability of iron ore in Chanda District in the Central Provinces - this leads to the idea of setting up a steel plant
1885	Present at the founding of the Indian National Congress
1886	Buys 'sick' Dharamsi Mills, later called Svadeshi Mills
1887	Tata and Sons formed -- in partnership with Sir Dorabji Tata and R D Tata
1892	Sets up J N Tata Endowment Scheme with a capital of Rs 25 lakhs
1893	The Gymkhana Chambers are built - provides housing for people of modest means industry
1894	Institutes the first organised silk farm in Mysore giving a fillip to the industry
1898	Foundation laid for the Taj Mahal Hotel in Bombay
1899	Initiates the Indian Institute of Science
1900	Purchases Advance Mills
1902	Visits US to study coking process
1903	Taj Mahal Hotels opens in Bombay
1904	Iron ore discovered in the Gorumahisani hills
1904	Passes away in Germany

Courtesy : Behram P. Dhabhar