

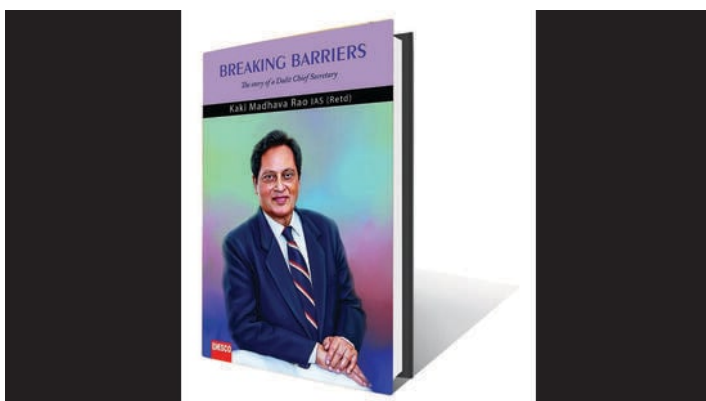
Review: Breaking Barriers by K Madhava Rao

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I'm in Hyderabad, and my host throws a banquet. He meticulously draws up a list of invitees ensuring that the gathering is diverse. With people from different age groups and professions, the event is a vibrant one. That afternoon, he interviews me, trying to gather as much information as possible beyond what he has read and heard from the media and my book, *Caste Matters*. After taking down notes, he passes them to his secretary to be typed up. Everything from my arrival to the details of my itinerary is also written down on paper and then shared on Whats App with all those concerned with managing things. Afterwards, he follows up to ensure the journey is happening as planned. My host was Kaki Madhava Rao, former chief secretary of the united Andhra Pradesh, a 1962 batch IAS officer born to a Paleru – a Dalit landless worker – in Andhra Pradesh.



With former president of India, KR Narayanan and former chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, N Chandrababu Naidu. (From *Breaking Barriers* by K Madhava Rao)



192pp, Rs200; Emesco Books

Now 84 years old, Rao's reputation precedes him. Among a handful of administrators who took his calling to heart and wrestled to deliver the promises of a free, independent nation, his multidimensional story cannot be viewed only through the singular prism of his identity as a bureaucrat. However, it was his work with the bureaucracy that made him a name to reckon with. Few chief secretaries have popular appeal or a mass following; even fewer stand by principles and embrace their own kind without being hierarchical. Madhava Rao is one of those very few.

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K Madhava Rao with former prime minister Indira Gandhi (From *Breaking Barriers* by K Madhava Rao)

I first heard of him a few years ago. I learned that he retired as chief secretary when I was 10 years old. At that time, he had already been in the public realm for more than six decades and was frequently mentioned with fondness by Telugu-speaking Dalits. The Officers Forum of Andhra Pradesh, much like the Castribe Association of Maharashtra, was famous and scheduled caste officers undertook many courageous initiatives under its auspices. Rao was at the forefront of such organizing.

A soft-spoken and humorous individual, Rao's interest in literature – he published the poetry of Gurram Jashuva in 1998 (*Gabbilam*) – kept him afloat through the turbulence of a hectic professional life. In his own writing, he treats words like cotton balls, softly pressing them together to create a story. His memoir, *Breaking Barriers* is a collection of experiences tied together by engrossing stories about people. The writing is so fluid that I can honestly say this is probably the first book I've reviewed that hasn't been defaced by my markings and marginalia.

Breaking Barriers will serve multiple purposes. The first is that it provides ample evidence of the merit and character of the Dalit community. It knocks the naysayers in the face and forces them to acknowledge the reality of Dalit merit. Second, it will inspire many in the civil services and help them overcome the psychological odds stacked against them by the Brahminical system.



K Madhava Rao with former chief minister of Andhra Pradesh, N Janardhan Reddy, and the former chief minister of Tamil Nadu, Jayalalitha (From *Breaking Barriers* by K Madhava Rao)

Madhava Rao, who lives an austere life, has chosen not to give up on certain things: his experience of poverty, and his identity. He still doesn't eat a full meal, a practice that reminds him of his poor days. Very much a grassroots leftist, he doesn't own property or a car. Indeed, he vowed not to own property because, as French anarchist philosopher Pierre Joseph-Proudhon said, "Property is theft."

Today, Rao's soothing tone and calm gestures invite others into the meditative space of building an anti-caste, Ambedkarite alliance. A sworn atheist, his house is adorned with photos and statues of the Buddha, Phule, BR Ambedkar and Kanshi Ram. This is in contrast to the many salaried hypocrites from the Dalit community who shy away from celebrating their ancestors lest it draw attention to their backgrounds. Madhava Rao challenges the reader to find such demonstrations of adoration on the walls of other Dalit officers. He is certain only about 5% are proud of their background.



Kaki Madhava Rao, former chief secretary of the united Andhra Pradesh and author of 'Breaking Barriers; The Story of a Dalit Chief Secretary'. (Courtesy the subject)

For general readers and for civil service aspirants, this book provides invaluable insider knowledge about what it takes to become an upright officer, one who sticks to his principles while dealing with diverse officials, political leaders, and colleagues. Always imbued with pure idealism, Rao confesses that his own son has been a casualty of his principles; he calls it "son-stroke" – conflict of interest prevented him from plugging his son's cause when opportunities arose. Some might wonder if he overdid it, or if these were the actions of a first-timer conscious of maintaining a record that's clean and ideal.

The author has worked with many chief ministers of Andhra Pradesh and during the course of the book, readers are taken into the CM's chambers and into collectors' offices to witness the excitement and back door talks that are an inevitable part of democratic politics. It is interesting to note too that the stern Madhava Rao did not always comply with the dictates of his bosses. His integrity and honesty also attracted similar people to his inner circle thus perpetuating a virtuous cycle. By penning his experiences and providing a vision, he has surpassed his contemporaries who might have achieved great heights in the civil services but have turned away from acknowledging their essential Dalitness. For his part, Madhava Rao has risen far above those who would cast their own people out into the wilderness.

Suraj Yengde, the author of Caste Matters, is a scholar at Oxford and Harvard Universities.

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