

Kalpana Saroj - India's real Slumdog billionaire and more

MUMBAI: You could call her India's real life slumdog billionaire. Kalpana Saroj, a Dalit woman who broke social shackles and left her ramshackle home in the poorest part of her village 26 years ago to begin life afresh, today heads a Rs 3,000 crore [business](#) enterprise.

On Monday, state Forests Minister Babbanrao Pachpute inaugurated the new plant of her company Kamani Tubes in Wada, around 75 km from Mumbai.

For the 48-year-old Saroj, it was a dream come true. Standing outside the factory premises with her husband Shubhkaran, pilot son Amar, 24, and daughter Seema, 22, she smiled radiantly -- and remembered her painful past.

"Born in a poor Dalit family, I was married off forcibly at the age of 12 to a man more than 10 years older to me," Saroj told IANS. "A year later, I came back to my parents' home. The following year, I tried to join the police force like my father, but I was rejected."

Her attempts to rebuild her broken life were thwarted by other residents of her village, Roparkheda in Maharashtra's Akola district. They accused her of "overstepping social norms and boundaries". She bore the insults for 10 years before leaving the rural slum in which her family stayed to come to Mumbai.

Saroj moved into Ghatkopar here, met a man and married him, but he died in 1989, leaving her to fend for their two minor children.

Undeterred, she began managing her husband's small steel almirah manufacturing unit, launched a construction company and with the realty sector booming, made profits. She ploughed this [money](#) into small steel and sugar units.

Her biggest challenge came in March 2006 when her firm, Kalpana Saroj and Associates, took over the ailing Kamani Tubes and turned it around to a profitable enterprise.

A brand leader in non-ferrous tubes, the company was started by Mumbai's well-known industrialist Ramji Kamani, a close associate of the country's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who visited the Kurla factory twice.

However, a family discord affected the firm adversely. By 1975, it was on a downslide and was declared "sick" after the owners abandoned it.

Later, a [court](#) allowed the workers' union to run the company.

The experiment failed. By 1997, the company had run into debts of over Rs.1.6 billion (Rs.160

crore).

Almost a decade later, in March 2006, as per a court directive, Kalpana Saroj and Associates were given charge of the company, its 560 [employees](#) and the total debt burden.

Saroj took up the challenge.

According to Kamani Tubes Managing Director M.K. Gore, in an effort to boost employees' morale, she cleared in one go Rs 85 crore in salary arrears totted up over 17 years.

"I was born, grew up and lived in poverty for the first two decades of my life. I know what a worker undergoes when salaries are not paid on time - the bills, the creditors, the fees and other expenses. So it was very important for me to gain my workers' confidence," Saroj said.

Gradually, production resumed and touched 3,000 tonnes of non-ferrous tubes and pipes.

Owing to disputes over the ownership of the 1.8 acre property in Kurla, Saroj withdrew from a long court battle and began scouting for another location outside Mumbai.

"With an [investment](#) of around Rs.3 billion, we decided to shift the plant to Wada. We are the first in the country to install two giant-sized Pilger machines of Germany, costing Rs.1 billion," Gore said.

Her next targets are taking up the Kamani production to 10,000 tonnes, diversifying to manufacturing 100 different alloys, and catering to defence and communications requirements.

"Since my son is not interested in managing my business, I may even launch a private airline for him," she laughed.