

Social entrepreneurs set out to change India

They call themselves social entrepreneurs and their business is to make the world a better place. Donning various roles and leading various organisations, these men and women are not only winning praise for their innovativeness but helping to change the lives of communities they touch with their altruism.

Pioneering Indian names like Stan Thaekkaekara, Milind Ranade, Vishal Talreja, Sunil Abraham, Anand Shah, Rahul Barkatky and Shalabh Sahai among others are building and sharing ideas on how entrepreneurs can help re-engineer society - even while earning profits.

A social entrepreneur recognises a social problem and uses entrepreneurial principles to organise, create and manage a venture to make social change. Unlike business entrepreneurs, they don't measure performance in profit and returns but assess success by the impact they have on society and often work through non-profit and citizen groups.

Stan Thekaekara of Just Change attempted a deconstruction of the concept of Social Entrepreneurship from the perspective of people who struggle to live every day. He shared his experiences of working with tribals of Nilgiris in Tamil Nadu.

For over two decades, Stan and his wife Mari worked alongside the Adivasis, or indigenous people, for their social, political and land rights. They began with helping the tribes people to reclaim the land usurped by the non tribals. Soon they had to begin working on issues of health, education and livelihood - issues critical to the growth of the Adivasi community.

Stan then talked about his latest venture, Just Change, which expands on the concept of fair trade and is working towards a system of production for the common man and by the common man.

Vishal Talreja of Dream a Dream gave up his career as a successful investment banker in [Mumbai](#) to transform the dream of his 12 young friends, from diverse backgrounds and united towards a common cause. Dream a Dream today builds life skills of over 500 children in Bangalore.

Shalabh Sahai and Rahul Barkatky of Mitra Technology Foundation have given up a lot of high paying jobs to pursue their dream of bringing about social change by leveraging on the very skills that help businesses succeed.

MITRA Technology Foundation owns and manages India's largest volunteer placement initiative, iVolunteer.

Milind Ranade of KVSS, the Waste Collectors and Transporters Union, began his journey while travelling in a bus and happened to notice a garbage truck that smelt awfully and workers eating their food sitting on the same garbage dump.

Sunil Abraham of MAHITI aims to help the voluntary groups with IT solutions. He feels though that social entrepreneurship is a western concept that is market friendly and places the spotlight on the social entrepreneurs.

Change Loom is an awards programme to encourage and support social action by young people

across India. Jointly launching the awards are Pravah and Ashoka Foundation with support from Youth and Civil society Initiative of Sir Ratan Tata Trust in 2005.

Anand Shah, co-founder of Indicorps www.indicorps.org, explains that the organisation was created to leverage Non Resident Indians (NRIs) for India's development. It provides opportunities for NRIs to dedicate one-two years volunteering with groups in India.

In recent weeks, the first international conference on social entrepreneurship was held at the Mumbai-based Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS). Coordinating it was a Britain-based body called, not without a touch of irony, UnLtd.

The 2000-formed UnLtd is a charitable group set up by seven leading bodies that promote social entrepreneurship.

UnLtd's development consultant Pooja Warier told IANS: 'As the first in a planned series of annual gathering, the conference aimed to celebrate social entrepreneurship as a tool for social change, encourage the development of social entrepreneurship in India, and create mutually beneficial links between social entrepreneurs and institutions.'

It brought together 85 individuals and organisations from India and Europe, including 'social entrepreneurs'.

UnLtd's Sarah Dodds says it 'strongly believes in the power of the individuals to change the community and eventually the world'. After working in Britain, UnLtd is now looking at resourcing social entrepreneurs in India.

Institutions like the Britain-based Oxford University's Skoll Centre, Anil Gupta's Honey Bee Network, Ashoka, UnLtd and NMIMS (Narsee Monjee Institute of Management and Higher Studies) support work of such individuals.

TISS director S. Parasuraman has argued that India is in a state of paradox with few individuals accumulating the wealth whereas a vast majority are losing livelihoods, are landless and continuously marginalised. From this arises the need for entrepreneurial approaches towards social change.

Some examples from India are already being pointed to as successful models of social entrepreneurship - SEWA, Just Change, Chidline, Fair Trade Forum, Barefoot College and Aravind Eye Care.

Scholars like Anil Gupta, of the HoneyBee network (which works to pick up and promote innovation from the grassroots and rural areas), argue that besides the 'natural capital' of natural resources, what is also important is social capital, intellectual capital, and ethical capital or 'the guiding forces from within us'.

He points to amazing stories of grassroot innovators, such as Mohammed Saidullah who invented a cycle that can be used in water and on the road, Dhanjibhai Karai who was behind a scooter for the handicapped, Ramya Jose who invented pedal operated washing machine and Appachan with an instrument to climb coconut trees.

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