
**Learning about Social Entrepreneurship:
Reflections from organizing National Conferences on Social Entrepreneurship**
Madhukar Shukla, XLRI Jamshedpur

Introduction

In January 2009, XLRI organized the 1st National Conference on Social Entrepreneurship (NCSE) in its campus in Jamshedpur. The purpose of this two day conference was to bring together some of the prominent social entrepreneurs and developmental professionals on a common platform to showcase their work and share their experiences and solutions to address critical social problems. The theme of the first conference was “Providing Access for Sustainable Development” and correspondingly we invited social sector professionals (from NGOs, social ventures, government agencies, corporate CSR/ foundations, etc.) which were using innovative solutions for providing access to education, to healthcare, to credit and financial services, to market, etc., to the under-served population.

The response to the conference was quite positive. It was attended by about 150 sector professionals, academics and students, and about twenty social entrepreneurs participated as speakers over two days. Some of the well-recognized names among speakers included Anshu Gupta (Founder, Goonj), Chetna Gala Sinha (Founder, Mann Deshi Mahila Sahakari Bank), Joe Madiath (Founder and ED, Gram Vikas), Rajeev Khandelwal (Director, Aajeevika Bureau), Samit Ghosh (Ujjivan Bank), Sushmita Ghosh (President Emeritus, Ashoka), and Vijay Mahajan (Founder, BASIX), etc.

Encouraged by the response and feedback, both from the participants and speakers, XLRI continued to organize the conference in the coming nine years¹. Each conference was designed around an over-arching theme, and individual conference sessions explored specific facets of that theme through the work of practitioners/ speakers (see Table 1). Over the years, the conference hosted about 1200-1300 participants, and more than 200 social entrepreneurs and sector professionals as speakers.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Theme of the Conference</u>
2009	<i>1st NCSE: Providing Access for Sustainable Development</i>
2010	<i>2nd NCSE: Solutions for Inclusive Development (Working Conference)</i>
2011	<i>3rd NCSE: Youth, Development and Social Entrepreneurship</i>
2012	<i>4th NCSE: Entrepreneurship for Rural Revival</i>
2013	<i>5th NCSE: Innovations in Livelihood Promotion and Skill Development</i>
2014	<i>6th NCSE: Rethinking Development: Strengthening the Grassroots</i>
2015	<i>7th NCSE: Young Changemakers: Youth and Social Entrepreneurship</i>
2016	<i>8th NCSE: Social Innovations: Changing Lives and Society</i>
2017	<i>9th NCSE: Entrepreneurship for Environmental Sustainability</i>

¹ After nine editions of the conference till 2017, the conference was not organized in 2018. We are still discussing if the conference can/ needs to be revived in 2019.

As the convener/ organizer of these conferences (and as a recent entrant into the sector), the conference was also a part of my personal learning journey. While organizing them, not only I had the opportunity to interact with and learn from some remarkable changemakers, we also experimented and fine-tuned the conference to make it an inclusive “learning space” for all. This note/ paper is based on personal reflections on designing, organizing and learning about the sector from these conferences.

Since the genesis and rationale of the conference is tied to my learning journey, I will briefly narrate the personal context of the NCSEs.

A Personal Note

Unlike many of my contemporaries, my professional engagement to social sector is rather recent. It was only in 2005, I got exposed to the social sector, and more specifically to the field of social entrepreneurship. This happened when a small team from *Ashoka: Innovators for the Public* visited XLRI as a part of their roadshow across some campuses to promote education of social entrepreneurship. During the interactions, they described how various Ashoka Fellows were using entrepreneurial strategies to solve critical social problems; I also got a chance of interacting with one of Ashoka’s recent fellows, Vineet Rai (Founder of Aavishkaar) who was part of the team – and to get to understand what social entrepreneurs do.

That meeting aroused my interest in the sector, and, besides starting a course on social entrepreneurship for our students, it also led to many other interesting forays in my career. These included compiling a list of social entrepreneurship courses in India for Ashoka, a couple of consultancy projects for social ventures, starting an online discussion group on social entrepreneurship, becoming part of the assessment team for India NGO Awards, etc. The idea of organizing a conference on social entrepreneurship came from one such exploration.

To understand the sector better, in 2007 (and then for next two years again) I decided to attend the Skoll World Forum on Social Entrepreneurship, which is organized every year at the Said Business School, University of Oxford. The Forum brings together more than 600 social entrepreneurs and sector professionals from 40-50 countries across the world to share their experiences, learn from each other and form partnerships. It is a large and stimulating three-day event packed with theme-based sessions, interactive workshops, keynotes by global leaders, felicitation of Skoll Social Entrepreneurs of the Year, etc. Besides the obvious intellectual take-away from attending the Forum, what struck me was that there were many Indian social entrepreneurs and changemakers among the speakers, awardees and resource persons. It was an irony that despite having so many globally recognized and felicitated social entrepreneurs, we didn’t have a similar forum in India where they can share their stories and connect and learn from each other. In our discussions, they also felt the need for such a forum in India, since it will help in strengthening the social entrepreneurship ecosystem. It was this observation and conversations which inspired the idea of creating a similar platform for the social entrepreneurs in India.

Reflections and Learning

In retrospect, organizing these conferences turned out to be an adventure. Designing the event around a theme (and sub-themes) required searching for social entrepreneurs whose work exemplified innovative perspective to the topic - and thus discovering more about the sector with each conference. Moreover, the conference also brought me in touch with other forums, experts, social ventures, consultative meetings, etc., which greatly facilitated helped me in learning and appreciating the contours of this emerging field of practice. Over the years, this journey gave me a sort of ring-side view of the sector as it kept on evolving and my own understanding of the social

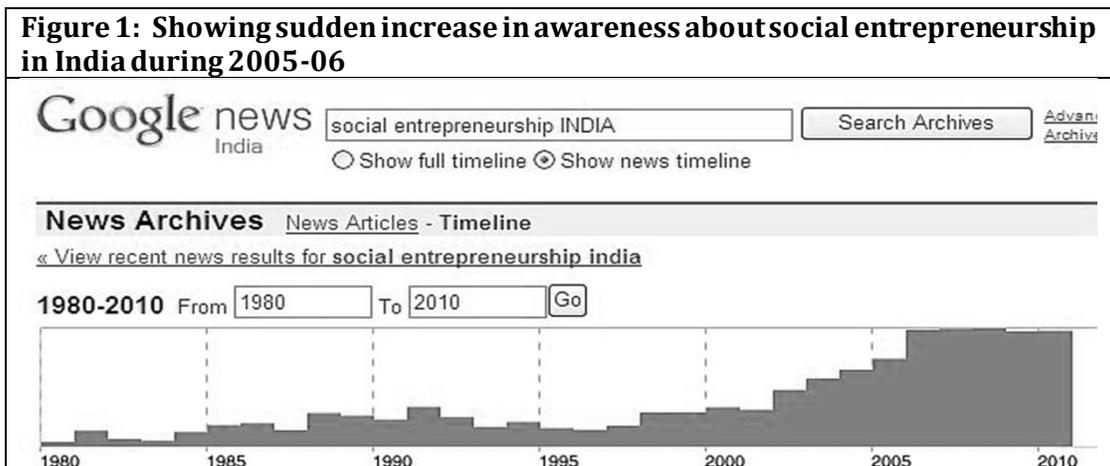
entrepreneurship became more nuanced. There were a number of things which I learned, but there were four major insights which I would share here.

1. Emergence of social entrepreneurship as a sector

In 2009, besides the 1st NCSE, three other national level conferences/ events on social entrepreneurship were also organized for the first time: Intellectap's *Sankalp Forum*, Khemka Foundation's *Social Entrepreneurship Summit*, and Villgro's *Unconvention*. While each had somewhat different design and focus, yet they had a common purpose of bringing the social entrepreneurs and sector professionals together in a common forum to build the ecosystem. This may look like a coincidence but clearly, even though planning independently, the organizers had come to the same conclusion: the social entrepreneurial sector had reached a critical mass and reach to require such forums for building and strengthening the ecosystem.²

In retrospect, it does seem that the period of 2005-2010 saw a sudden spurt in activities and initiatives related to social entrepreneurship in India (see Figure 1³). In their study of the landscape of social enterprises in India, Allen et al (2012) also noted:

“Nearly half of the enterprises in our survey have been operational for less than three years, and nearly 80% launched operations in 2007 or later. The take-off appears to have occurred in 2005-2006 (p. 12).”



Even prior to 2005, the social entrepreneurial sector was growing, but these were isolated initiatives with limited reach and visibility. However, during the 2005-10, one saw a sudden emergence of diverse initiatives and organizations which would form the support ecosystem for the sector. Besides the new funding and investing organizations (e.g., Elevar Equity, Ennovent fund, Acuman Fund India, etc.), there were four major areas of the social entrepreneurial ecosystem which saw significant growth during this period:

- a. **Incubation support:** While, some social incubators, such as *Dasra* and *Villgro* were already in existence by then, during 2005-10, many new incubation centers for social ventures started emerging. For instance, IIT-Madras launched the *Rural Technology Business Incubator (RTBI)* to provide incubation to start-ups which leveraged ICT (Information and

² It must be mentioned that earlier too, in 2006, TISS had hosted an International Conference on Social Entrepreneurship, co-organized with UnLtd., and the 1st Development Dialogue was organized by Deshpande Foundation in 2008.

³ Google News “Timeline” was a feature which allowed one to search for mention of a term/ phrase in news across years. It was suspended by Google in 2011.

Communication Technologies) to impact rural/underserved societal segments; UnLtd India started as an incubator for early stage social entrepreneurs to help them scale up and accelerate their impact; Deshpande Foundation was established in Hubli-Dharward to nurture social leaders and nurture and promote social enterprises based innovation relevant to local needs; IIM-Ahmedabad launched the Centre for Innovation Incubation and Entrepreneurship (CIIE) to incubate, mentor and fund innovative start-ups, which can bring about societal change in areas like energy, environment, agriculture, healthcare and affordable technology, etc.

- b. **Academic and non-academic courses and fellowships:** The “arrival” of the sector was also heralded in the launch of many initiatives to create a pipeline of talent by equipping young people with sensitivity, knowledge and skills required to solve social problems. On the academic side, during 2006 and 2007, courses in social entrepreneurship were added to the curriculum in XLRI Jamshedpur, IIM Ahmedabad, IRMA Anand, XIM Bhubneshwar and IIFM Bhopal; TISS Mumbai launched a 2-year full-time Masters program in social entrepreneurship, and in a unique collaboration IIT-Madras tied up with Villgro (a social venture and incubator) to co-design and offer a course on social entrepreneurship to the engineering students.

In addition, this period also saw the takeoff of many non-academic, hands-on programs to sensitize and equip youth as changemaker to deal with social problems. For instance, Piramal Foundation’s *Gandhi Fellowship*, *ICICI Fellowship*, Central Himalayan Rural Action Group’s *Swadesh Ki Khoj Fellowship* etc. were long duration immersion programs, ranging from one to two years with the aim of building a cadre of social leaders who can bring about change. Similarly, Pravah, a social venture and Ashoka’s Youth venture tied up to create the *Change Loom Program* to support young people which were actively promoting social change. The first *Jagriti Yatra*, a unique annual fortnight long train journey for youth across India also commenced in December 2010, which not only exposed the 350-400 youth to the social realities and role models, but also incubates their social ventures.

- c. **Awards, competitions and conferences:** Besides the conferences mentioned earlier, during this period, the sector also witnessed started greater visibility through other initiatives which identified and showcased social entrepreneurs. For instance, in 2008 the annual *TIE Entrepreneurship Summit* was on the theme of inclusive entrepreneurship with the key-note address on social entrepreneurship. Similarly, *Social Entrepreneur of the Year Award* and *India NGO Awards* were instituted during 2005 and 2006 respectively. Not only they searched and brought the work of many social entrepreneurs into limelight, the award ceremonies themselves were high-profile events, which widely covered in print and electronic media.

The other visible change was in the focus of “business plan competitions” organized by IITs and management institutions, which started inviting social business plans. For instance, ISB Hyderabad started organizing *GSVC (Global Social Venture Competition)* for India, and also launched an annual competition *iDiya*; IIT-Madras started organizing *Genesis social entrepreneurship competition* to identify socially relevant innovative ideas and ventures and provide them funding, incubation and mentoring support.

- d. **Media and publications:** A major role in “mainstreaming” of social entrepreneurship was played by boutique media and publications which had started emerging during this period. Some of the key developments, for instance, were the launch of three dedicated webportals, *The Better india*, *ThinkChange India*, *The Weekend Leader* and *YourStory*, which featured stories of little known social entrepreneurs and changemakers, information about the

upcoming events, emerging social initiatives, etc.; *CNBC TV18* started covering the social entrepreneur of the year awards, and featured stories of the finalists; *YourStory* and *CNBC-TV18* also partnered to create a regular show, *Sociopreneurs*, as a part of latter's popular Young Turks program; *Outlook Business*, a mainstream business magazine, started an annual issue covering social entrepreneurs and social enterprises in 2009, and so on.

2. There is no one model

Designing the conference also resulted in grappling with some conceptual dilemmas about the nature of social entrepreneurship itself. For instance,

- How does one differentiate between a regular NGO from social entrepreneurship, when some of the acknowledged social entrepreneurs (e.g., Ela Bhatt of *SEWA*, Bunker Roy of *Barefoot College*, Joe Madiath of *Gram Vikas*, etc.) had founded ventures which are essentially NGOs?
- Can social entrepreneurial ventures be both for-profit and not-for-profit?
- Do corporates who provide products and services which meet a social need (e.g., safe drinking water, solar energy products, etc.) also qualify to be called social entrepreneurial ventures?
- What about social activists such as Aruna Roy (for her efforts resulted in the *Right to Information Act*), Jockin Arputham (who has been advocating the *rights of slum dwellers*), or Arbind Singh (whose work with street vendors brought the *The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014*, etc.) - and who have been recognized and felicitated as social entrepreneurs? etc.

Exploring these questions led to two important insights: Firstly, social entrepreneurship, like any form of entrepreneurship, is a *post-facto* phenomenon. People are called entrepreneurs only when they succeed and are recognized – otherwise they are called failures. In fact, many of our speakers shared that they even learned about the term “social entrepreneur” only when they applied or got were selected for an award or felicitation.

The other realization was that much of the public and media discourse on social entrepreneurship focused more on the “social” part of the social entrepreneurship with little attention to what is “entrepreneurial” in social entrepreneurship. In fact, even when the entrepreneurial aspect was discussed, it was mostly narrowed down to establishment of a for-profit business venture with social impact. While a for-profit new business is one form of entrepreneurship, it is not the only form. As Drucker (1986) had observed:

“...all new small business have many factors in common. But to be entrepreneurial, an enterprise has to have special characteristics over and above being new and small. Indeed, entrepreneurs are a minority among new businesses. They create something new, something different; they change or transmute values (p. 36).”

In identifying social entrepreneurs for the conference we followed the wider definition of entrepreneurship as per the classical entrepreneurship theory of by Jean-Baptiste Say (Dees, 1998), Joseph Schumpeter (1934) and Peter Drucker (1986), etc. In a nutshell, the theory says that entrepreneurs create social and economic value/ wealth by bringing transformative changes in the society and economy - and they do this by doing two things:

- a. they shift resources from areas of low yield or productivity to areas of high yield or productivity (e.g., an entrepreneur who connects isolated rural artisans to more lucrative markets, or uses a ‘waste’ like rice husk to produce electricity), and;

-
- b. they identify gaps or unmet needs in the society/ markets, and then innovate new products/ services to address these needs (e.g., an entrepreneur who provides skill training to drop-out youth who are looking for jobs, or

Following from this understanding, our search and selection of social entrepreneurs for the conference was based on three basic criteria: (1) they created new value/ social wealth by addressing a critical social problem, (2) they innovated a solution to solve the problem, and (3) that solution had an impact which was sustainable.

Not only such wide-angle understanding of social entrepreneurship was validated by the profiles of individuals who were recognized and felicitated as social entrepreneurs (e.g., by *Ashoka: Innovators for the Public, Social Entrepreneur of the Year Awards, Schwab Social Entrepreneur Awards*, etc.), it also allowed the conference to witness a wide variety of manifestations of social entrepreneurship. Besides the diversity of their legal entity (for-profit private limited companies, society, trust, etc.), the social entrepreneurial ventures also differed widely in their strategies and innovations to address the social issues. Across the around 200 social entrepreneurs who participated in the conference, there were at least four different “archetypes” social entrepreneurship.

- a. **The for-profit social enterprises** which offered socially useful product or service to the under-served segments (e.g., *SELCO* providing solar lighting systems at affordable cost, or *Mother Earth* providing better livelihoods to rural producers by connecting them to the markets).
- b. **The social service providers** who provided essential services and provisions to those who needed them sustainably at a large scale (e.g., *Goonj* collects, sorts and distributes clothes across the country, or *Pratham* provides high-quality free primary education to out-of-school children through volunteers).
- c. **The social activists** who through their advocacy and social mobilization could change the system which was causing the problem in the first place (e.g., the work of Arbind Singh which led to The Street Vendor Act, 2014, mentioned earlier)
- d. **The ecosystem builders** who provided specialized support services (e.g., technical and advisory support, access to funds and resources, visibility through media, etc.) to other social entrepreneurial organizations – some of those examples are mentioned in the previous section.

3. Multiple meanings of “Scaling”

Given the size of the country, and the magnitude of its problems, it is logical to conclude that we need large-scale solutions. However, one soon realized that social entrepreneurs look at “scale” quite differently than the investors, funders, and even the award giving foundations. For the latter, scale of solution could be achieved only by *scaling of the enterprise/venture*. The focus of the social entrepreneurs, however, was on *scaling of the impact*, which could be achieved by a variety of strategies. Over the years, I learned/ created a mental vocabulary to distinguish among three broad kinds of scaling⁴.

- a. **Scaling-up:** For many social ventures it was possible to impact a larger population only by increasing their outreach to provide the relevant product or service – and they do so by managing their operations efficiently and leveraging their existing resources. A good example of this was the *Aravind Eye Care System* which started as an 11-bed hospital to

⁴ I am indebted to Sivakumar Surampudi, CEO, ITC e-Choupal for pointing out towards the nuanced meanings of the term (talk given on “Quest for Scale”, during Livelihoods India Conference, December 11-12, 2013, New Delhi).

eradicate needless blindness among poor, and grew into world's largest eye care facility with 11 hospitals, and performs 400,000 ophthalmic surgeries and laser procedures annually, besides attending to about 2.7 million patients in OPD. Two-third of these surgeries are provided free of cost.

- b. **Scaling-out:** Given the scarcity of financial, technical and human resources in many social ventures in India (and elsewhere), often it is not possible for them to scale up in the manner as described above. Instead, they scale out by promoting replication of their model through partnerships to maximize their impact. For instance, *SELCO India*, instead of expanding its operations across India, incubates, supports and partners with social ventures which provide solar lighting products to rural and marginalized segments.

Similarly, many social entrepreneurs are able to increase their impact by partnering with like-minded agencies with a larger outreach (such as government program or corporate sector organisations) who are able to replicate their models. For instance, *Digital Green*, which bridges the information-gap for small marginal farmers through locally-produced videos of good agricultural practices was able to increase its outreach manifold by partnering with government's National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM).

- c. **Scaling deep:** This stance of scaling actually turns the conventional meaning of scaling on its head. Among our speakers, there were also many (e.g., Satyan Mishra of *Drishtee*, Kalyan and Anita Paul of *Grassroots*, Rashmi Bharti and Rajnish Jain of *Avani*, etc.), who were content to remain a "local changemaker" for a specific community or region. Instead of reaching out to a larger number of customers/ beneficiaries, their focus was on engaging with the same community in more depth, and addressing the multiple (and often emerging) needs of the community. It was actually an insight when one of them remarked, "Shouldn't we look at the scale of impact from the eyes of the community we serve? If people from 10-20 villages, where hardly anyone has ever ventured beyond a radius of 50k, have now better access to healthcare, education, energy, sustainable livelihoods, etc., through community owned and managed institutions, we have managed to transform *their* world, even if not *the* world!!"

4. Ideological moorings of social entrepreneurs

In hindsight, it seems obvious that social entrepreneurs who are engaged in creating a "better future" would have a vision of that future, which is better than the present and from other alternative futures. And in committing to that vision they have to make a choice which is essentially ideological in nature.

This understanding evolved from the initial observations that a large number of our speakers had strong and articulated ideological anchors; they were either rooted in Gandhian or Marxist thoughts, or had actively participated in social movements such as JP Movement, labour struggles, etc. Even the younger and more urban social entrepreneurs, who may not have had this background, too had strong convictions about the vision they were following. Interestingly, not only these ideologies diverse in nature, but often (when the social entrepreneur could articulate it) they were also mutually contradictory. Nevertheless, it was clear that their actions were guided by this explicit or implicit ideology.

Searching for the commonalities across these ideological visions, I could identify two common strands across the social entrepreneurs:

- a. **Belief in possibility of change and human potential:** Underlying the somewhat "unreasonable" goals of the social entrepreneurs was a belief that despite adversities and lack of resources/ support, it is possible to create transformations in a social system. For

instance, almost all social ventures were based on the assumption that even the poor, marginalized, and illiterate have a vision of personal change, and have the capacity and resources to make it happen. This belief guides the social entrepreneurs to identify and leverage on the resources within the community, build capacities where they were lacking, and aim towards creating more empowered and self-managed institutions and processes.

- b. **Role of self as accountable to community:** Correspondingly, they saw themselves not as creators of change, but as participants and facilitators in the change process. Their actions and choices were mostly guided by a sense of obligation and accountability to the community.

There was perhaps another more practical reason for this sense of accountability. Unlike the business entrepreneurs, markets do not work well for social entrepreneurs in providing a feedback on their actions. When one is in the “business” of creating social value, it is difficult to evaluate and monitor the intangibles such as social improvements, public good (or harm), or benefits for the marginalized, etc. This made it imperative for most of them to seek regular feedback from the community they served, and to develop processes to assess the extent to which their efforts made the desirable impact in meeting the needs of the community.

References:

Allan S. *et al* (2012). *On the path to sustainability and scale: The study of India’s social enterprise landscape*. Mumbai, Intellectcap.

Dees, G. (1998). *The meaning of social entrepreneurship*. Retrieved from http://www.fuqua.duke.edu/centers/case/documents/dees_SE.pdf

Drucker, P. F. (1986). *Innovation and entrepreneurship: Practice and principles*. New Delhi: East-West Press Pvt Ltd.

Schumpeter, J. (1934). *The theory of economic development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.