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Social entrepreneurs set out to re-engineer India

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Bangalore • 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 Thaeckakara, 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.

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.

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