

SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN ASSAM- DRIVERS AND ROADBLOCKS

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“Business - small or large - has the opportunity and the responsibility to do good in a community”

- Richard Branson, Founder of the Virgin Group

ABSTRACT

Social entrepreneurship is an important tool to plug in the gap between socially desirable conditions and the existing reality and to offer realistic solution to them when the market and the public sector do not. Assam is a seriously unequal society that has become more unequal over the last few decades. This inequality is linked to extensive social problems, all of which create huge costs to society, both in economic terms and in terms of the quality of life in Assam and the well-being of its citizens. Although as one of the rapidly growing states in India, it has witnessed an impressive growth in social entrepreneurial activities. By recognizing the fact that social entrepreneurship is happening in the not-for-profit sector in Assam, this paper attempts to identify and understand the drivers that motivate and lead individuals to pursue social entrepreneurship in Assam. Also the paper uncovers the factors hindering the social entrepreneurial dynamics in the State. To answer the questions, the researcher collected information from various secondary sources. Social entrepreneurs in Assam need a systematic way to get to a business model most likely to work in the state.

Keywords: Social entrepreneurship, drivers, barriers, Assam.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social entrepreneurship is an important tool to plug in the gap between socially desirable conditions and the existing reality and to offer realistic solution to them when the market and the public sector do not. The government has done well to ease rules to allow a company to partner its peers for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities through a separate legal entity. It opens a window for promoting social entrepreneurship, businesses that serve people and communities (The Economic Times, 2015). A social entrepreneur implements practical solutions to address challenges in numerous areas including health, education, environment, access to technology and job creation and uses the ideology of private enterprise to organize, create and manage a commercial venture with the aim of bringing about social change (The Economic Times, 2007). The role of social entrepreneurship in solving major societal issues is very evident since last few decades and has set out to revitalize social growth through adopting entrepreneurial approaches to address social problems. It has been projected as a panacea for all social problems (Mair and Marti, 2006) and also, there is a noticeable increase

in the number of social enterprises in both the developing and the developed world (Seelos and Mair, 2007; Brooks, 2009). The growing attention paid to social entrepreneurship from both a practitioner's and an academic point of view can be explained by several general developments in recent decades.

2. THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

GEM (2009) in order to distinguish social entrepreneurs from “regular” entrepreneurs identifies three selection criteria: the predominance of a social mission, the importance of innovation and the role of earned income. The prominence of social entrepreneurship is mainly because of the result of the intensity and complexity of social and environmental problems. Social entrepreneurship covers a broad range of activities and initiatives, including social initiatives occurring in profit-seeking businesses, institutionalised entities explicitly pursuing a social goal, relations and practices that yield social benefits, entrepreneurial trends in non-profit organisations, and ventures developed within the public sector. Such initiatives can be undertaken by individuals, non-profit organisations, public agencies in partnership with for-profit enterprises in an attempt to balance corporate profit with a commitment to social responsibility. They are neither necessarily finalised to production, nor expected to remain stable through time. Larsen (2012) seeks to understand social entrepreneurship in the Danish voluntary or not-for-profit sector and finds social entrepreneurship to be occurring in the intersection between the three spheres of the economy; the private sector, the public sector and the voluntary sector. In general, social entrepreneurship is mostly viewed as an initiative undertaken by specific individuals or groups, without referring to the organisational features and constraints (governance models, non-distribution of profits, etc. backing the pursuit of social goals). It involves innovation to find sustainable solutions for communities and the environment. According to the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (2013) report, when it comes to beliefs about the attractiveness of being an entrepreneur, different patterns emerge based on two factors: does society favour entrepreneurs with high status, and how often and to what degree does the media cover successful entrepreneurs. Also the report finds entrepreneurs are among the happiest individuals across the globe when it comes to individual well-being and satisfaction with their work conditions.

The concept of entrepreneurship aiming at solving persistent and complex social problems has generated a great amount of interest in literature as being an innovative use of resources to explore and exploit opportunities that meet a social need in a sustainable way (Seelos and Mair, 2005). Social entrepreneurs look for opportunities to create social value, uncover the best approaches for realizing those opportunities, and build social “capital.” It has been on the rise in the private, public and non-profit sectors over the last few years and emerging as an innovative approach for dealing with complex social needs. The central driver for social entrepreneurship is the social problem being addressed (Austin et al., 2006). Like entrepreneurship, which even today lacks a unifying paradigm (Shane & Venkataraman, 2000); the concept of social entrepreneurship means different things to different people and researchers (Dees, 1998). But there is a consensus that social entrepreneurship has a social mission, and they try to solve social problems by innovative ways. They are also seen as

change agents driven by social goals. The social mission aspect is the core of what distinguishes social entrepreneurs from business entrepreneurs (Dees, 1998). Shaw and Carter (2007) echoed this sentiment noting that social entrepreneurs are like the business entrepreneurs only that what drives them is social improvement and not profits. Alvord *et al.*, (2004), add that making profits are means to a social end and not to the end in itself. Therefore, social mission is explicit and central for social entrepreneurs. Martin & Osberg (2007) defines social entrepreneurship as having the following three components: (1) identifying a stable but inherently unjust equilibrium that causes the exclusion, marginalization, or suffering of a segment of humanity that lacks the financial means or political clout to achieve any transformative benefit on its own; (2) identifying an opportunity in this unjust equilibrium, developing a social value proposition, and bringing to bear inspiration, creativity, direct action, courage, and fortitude, thereby challenging the stable state's hegemony; and (3) forging a new, stable equilibrium that releases trapped potential or alleviates the suffering of the targeted group, and through imitation and the creation of a stable ecosystem around the new equilibrium ensuring a better future for the targeted group and even society at large.

3. SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP: AN OVERVIEW OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE

Social entrepreneurs are not the creation of the modern society. Leadbeater (1997) highlights the need of looking beyond the boundary of traditional welfare state and non-profit or voluntary sector to provide solution to social ills. Brinckerhoff (2001) provides a social entrepreneurship readiness checklist where the hallmark of visionary social entrepreneurs, is the ability to develop a network of relationships which much depends on the ability to communicate an inspiring vision to motivate staff, partners, and volunteers (Thompson *et al.* 2000). GEM India Report (2001) highlights that Indian society does not encourage and support risk-taking as security and stability are important in Indian society. Thus, the inherent entrepreneurial capacity of the nation is low despite richness of human capital. For instance, in Romania and Hungary, there is a marked predominance of social enterprise activity in the sectors of health, social work and education, while countries such as Sweden or the UK show a more diverse picture, though with a common, significant presence of social enterprises providing community, social and related services. In other countries, the two main fields of activity are work integration and welfare service provision. Social entrepreneurship plays a pivotal role in the social and economic development of a nation. It is increasingly capturing the interests and imagination of all sections of the society. Although there has been little research on social entrepreneurship aiming to contribute to the conceptual understanding of its economic role (Santos, 2009) and its influence on prevailing concepts in management and entrepreneurship. Dominant theories in entrepreneurship have sought to explain entrepreneurship as a function of the types of people engaged in entrepreneurial activity. Social Entrepreneurship (SE) is increasingly recognized as an element of the economic, social and environmental contribution to society (Alvord *et al.*, 2004; Dees, 1998; Drayton, 2002; Mair & Marti, 2006; Peredo & McLean, 2006; Zahra *et al.*, 2008). Certo & Miller

(2008) identifies the ability of social entrepreneurship to combine elements of the business and volunteer sectors as the greatest obstacle to the definition of it. Zahra et al. (2008) addresses in their article the four key factors that led to the rise in social entrepreneurship as a global phenomenon. These are global wealth disparity, corporate social responsibility movement, market, institutional & state failures, and technological and shared responsibility. Nicholls (2008) studies the reasons for the growth of social entrepreneurship from both the supply and demand point of view and arranged them in the form of a table.

Table 1: Drivers behind the growth of social entrepreneurship

Supply side	Demand side
Increase in global per capita wealth/improved social mobility	Rising crisis in environment and health
Extended productive lifetime	Rising economic inequality
Increase in number of democratic governments	Government inefficiencies in public service delivery
Increased power of multinational corporations	Retreat of government in face of free market ideology
Better education levels	More developed role of NGOs
Improved communications	Resource competition

Source: Adapted from Nicholls (2008)

The supply side shows factors that make social entrepreneurship possible and the demand side shows factors that have given rise to social entrepreneurship (Nicholls, 2008).

Thurik (2010) explains the reasons for increasing attention to social entrepreneurship in recent period on a global scale by several mutually reinforcing economic, social, and political changes.

Trivedi (2010) points out that the efforts to define social entrepreneurs have conceptualized it in terms of the characteristics of a social entrepreneur (Dees, 2001); the process of social entrepreneurship (Martin & Osberg, 2007); and the outcomes social entrepreneurship generates (Mair & Marti, 2006). Bornstein (2004) argues the existing disequilibrium in the distribution of income level in both developing and developed countries has increased the need for a new paradigm and new business strategies. Social entrepreneurs address a social need that is being neglected or overlooked by other institutions (McMullen, 2011). Hartog et al. (2011) finds that there is limited knowledge about the drivers of social entrepreneurship although the interest in social entrepreneurship is on the rise.

Seth & Kumar (2011) suggest that various non - governmental organizations (NGOs), cooperatives, voluntary and governmental organizations and social entrepreneurs need to come forward to encourage further development of social entrepreneurship in India as social venturing landscape in India lacks appropriate sources of financing, proper regulations, societal recognition and suitable information systems.

Hechavarria et al (2012) suggests that social networks, availability of financing, and geographic attributes encourage entrepreneurial activity, but it is an individual's motivation that leads to entrepreneurship and explore and pursue opportunities.

Germak and Robinson (2012) present a model to identify a common profile of SE motivation. The model assumes that a need for personal fulfillment, the desire to help society, a non-monetary focus, achievement orientation, and closeness to the social problem drive social entrepreneurs to work.

Andres (2013) emphasizes that social entrepreneurship has captured the attention of governments, philanthropists, non-profit organizations, and individuals seeking to change the world. There has been a substantial growth of social enterprises over the last few decades across the globe and Asia is no exception which also has recorded a considerable growth in this phenomenon of late (Chan & Kuan, 2011).

Peredo & McLean (2006) highlighted the roadblocks and challenges social entrepreneurs face while carrying out their social entrepreneurial initiatives in India and that act as barriers to the entrance of new social entrepreneurial ventures. Rajendhiran & Silambarasan (2012) identify seven crucial factors that pose challenges to social entrepreneurs. They are earning profit, family and friends support, business people support, sustaining employees, promoting awareness, getting expert's assistance, improving quality of life.

Rajput & Chopra (2014) identify lack of government support, adequate capital, skilled and competent manpower as major impediments to the growth of social entrepreneurship in India. Within the complex ecosystem of the economic, political and cultural context of Assam, the emerging propositions of social entrepreneurship offer potential to address various issues and challenges people face in the state. So the society is considered to be low in entrepreneurship and more so in the case of social entrepreneurship. As a result many voluntary sectors, governments and cooperative organisations have embraced social entrepreneurship as a driver to employment generation and solutions to complex societal problems. Social entrepreneurship must be nurtured if our society and economy are to move hand in hand towards progress. By recognizing the fact that social entrepreneurship is happening in the not-for-profit sector in Assam, this paper attempts to identify and understand the drivers that motivate and lead individuals to pursue social entrepreneurship in Assam. Also the paper uncovers the factors hindering the social entrepreneurial dynamics in the State. In doing so the researcher aims to address the following research questions:

- 1) What influences and shapes social entrepreneurial motivation in Assam?
- 2) What are the significant roadblocks to pursuing social entrepreneurship in Assam?

To answer these questions, the researcher collected information from various secondary sources including books, journals, magazines, online resources, periodicals etc. Literature regarding social entrepreneurship in Assam was retrieved from the library at Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship & OKD Institute of Social Change and Development in Guwahati. Sources including various academic research papers and reports of various government agencies were also reviewed in detail. Also recent articles concerning social entrepreneurship were examined.

4. FACTORS ENCOURAGING SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN ASSAM

The opportunities for entrepreneurs in India are endless. India needs roads, ports, education, better healthcare, and more productive agriculture. So India is probably one of the better places to be an entrepreneur. There is no shortage of social issues in India and good entrepreneurs possess the passion and skills to solve the societal problems and thereby generate a business out of it. Branson (2014) highlights the fact that value or purpose driven entrepreneurs stand a better chance of succeeding in the long term. The rise of social entrepreneur is to provide good solution to solve the social problem not met by any public or private sector (Bornstein & Davis, 2010, Leadbeater, 1997). Cases of analysis of successful entrepreneurship across the globe reveal that the desire to help society and thereby changing the existing social structure is one of the drivers of social entrepreneurial venture.

Social entrepreneurship is emerging as a new and very significant phenomenon in India over the last decade. In essence, it brings together the business acumen and social motive of an entrepreneur to help with social causes and take our society forward. Although knowledge of this phenomenon in North East region remains limited in literature and so far has been unable to keep pace with the growth happening in rest of the country. Most people in Northeast India do not have the proper understanding of the role played by social entrepreneurs in uplifting the poorer section out of poverty by using social inclusion responsibly and at the same time alleviating their economic crisis.

As one of the rapidly growing states in India, Assam has witnessed a positive growth in entrepreneurial activities. Individuals are motivated to become entrepreneurs, partially due to the decline in employment opportunities in state-owned institutions, and partially due to their willingness to explore the business opportunities exist in the market. Entrepreneurship in Assam is very much influenced and moulded by the political context and political problems since creation of the state.

On 19th September 2014, The Chief Minister of Assam Shri Tarun Gogoi (The Assam Tribune, dated 23rd September, 2014) launched an Angel Fund with an aim to help the first generation entrepreneurs and skilled youths to set up micro and small enterprises in Assam. But even with the Government allocating specific funds every year for its development in infrastructure and other areas, the progress in social entrepreneurship has not been as per expectation. There are no networks platforms for social entrepreneurs, however there are sector specific conferences targeted at non-profits. Although efforts are on towards developing capacities among the people of Assam to address long term sustainable needs. Growth expectations and aspirations of early-stage entrepreneurs represent a key dimension of (potential) entrepreneurial impact. Studies have shown that a local culture of entrepreneurship is likely to be more conducive to social entrepreneurship than a culture that favours a 'job for life' in government or for a large corporate firm. However, where commercial entrepreneurship is accepted, there may still be a cultural bias against social entrepreneurship because it is associated with civil society and a lack of income. Assam is a seriously unequal society that has become more unequal over the last few decades. This

inequality is linked to extensive social problems, all of which create huge costs to society, both in economic terms and in terms of the quality of life in Assam and the well-being of its citizens. In other words, everybody suffers to some extent in a less equal society.

In Assam, traditional development frameworks are proving inadequate opportunities and are in need of transformation. Also the growing noticeable gap between the rich and the poor is emerging as a challenge to the government. In order to bridge this gap, many individuals and organizations with explicit social goals have come forward to bring change at the grass roots of the society and address a wide range of social needs and also to bring about economic equilibrium. The major drivers motivating social entrepreneurial activity in Assam are:

1. Social Entrepreneurial Aspirations

There has been growing interest among private, non-governmental/charitable or public sectors, which came to exist during last two decades, to come forward to address a wide range of social needs (The Economic Times, 2015). Aspiration is the foundation to drive strong action and impact on the society on part of any individual who intends to be a social entrepreneur. This aspiration leads to social entrepreneurial behaviour and further channelizes it towards social transformation in Assam.

2. Resource Competition

Assam is endowed with diverse natural resources, human resources, agricultural produce, forest products and rural market potential, capital formation are some of the resources, which are totally underutilized. It is essential to explore and utilize these vast untapped resources of the state for the social and economic upliftment of the state. Social entrepreneurs undertake activities to combine and utilize resources in new ways to bring about a change in the society.

3. Disequilibrium

Many individuals in Assam have taken up social entrepreneurship with the desire to help society facing noticeable disparity and unsustainable disequilibrium in the distribution of wealth and wellbeing across the state. Also the demand for social entrepreneurship arises as a result of a set of disequilibrium such as the slowdown in the public supply of social product and service, non-profit sector facing the increased competitive pressure etc.

4. State and market failure

Social entrepreneurship in Assam has emerged to fill the gap where state (where government involvement is limited due to shortage of resources) and market have failed. By emphasizing social returns, these social entrepreneurs have been serving the needs of poor, disadvantaged, and neglected communities.

5. Social networks

The rise of social network has enhanced the ability of individuals to identify and respond to the social and environmental needs. Along with this, the emergence of new social media accelerates and intensifies the interactions among social entrepreneurs, funders and other stakeholders. Social networks help in promoting innovation and reducing uncertainty in social entrepreneurship.

5. ROADBLOCKS TO SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURIAL ACTIVITY IN ASSAM

It is indeed true that in the Indian context, the notion of entrepreneurs setting up business for doing something good for the society is still considered to be a predominant part of the non-profit and volunteering sector. So it is really a difficult task for people to convince family and society about the sustainability and profitability of the social venture.

Social entrepreneurs seeking to combine meaningful impact with profitability face several challenges that are unique to the sector. Despite the opportunities, social entrepreneurs in Assam still face significant barriers to their development.

1. *Lack of Government support*

An increasing number of social entrepreneurs in Assam are struggling to identify the best possible way to engage with the government. Without government strong involvement, social entrepreneurs in Assam would find it difficult to engage with the society. Also social entrepreneurs are deprived of many sectors specific benefits as social entrepreneurship do not have a formal recognition as a sector.

2. *Lack of Visibility and Information*

Social entrepreneurs often do not have access to the information or awareness to know how best to set up their enterprises to generate social value, what vehicle to consider, the consequences of each etc. This lack of visibility acts as a roadblock to undertake social entrepreneurial initiative in Assam. Also lack of educational promotion programmes aimed to improve communication between local governments and social entrepreneurs as well as a general educational effort to inform society affect social mission of the entrepreneurs.

3. *Bureaucracy and regulation*

While non-profit organisations are exempted from taxes, tax authorities may be unsure as to how to treat social enterprises since they are not exclusively profit driven and are sometimes not sufficiently socially driven in their purpose. One of the biggest issues facing social enterprises in Assam on a commercial level is the fact they are often excluded from taking part in the activities they seek to promote because they have insufficient financial reserves and quality assurance measures in place. For small and medium scale social enterprises, the burden of regulation and bureaucracy is sometimes too much.

4. *Access to finance*

For majority of the social entrepreneurs, access to finance is difficult given the weak business model and the associated risks and the various studies have already proven this. Also the financial capital markets are often not as available to social entrepreneurial organisations. Although India, where social enterprise has developed over a long period of time, has seen the growth of micro-financing which is now widely recognised as an important source of funding for social enterprises in India. There are also private initiatives in the form of self-help groups (SHGs) which are encouraged by the government. But most of the existing

financial support mechanisms for social enterprises become available only after an enterprise has been operational for a few years. This problem is aggravated in Assam because of the scarcity of investors who are ready to invest and the non-income generating nature of some of the ventures as the beneficiaries or customers of social entrepreneurial organizations are less likely to pay the actual price for the services they receive.

5. Attitudes and perceptions

Supporting social entrepreneurial awareness and developing a positive approach and attitude towards social entrepreneurship are occupying a major place in the policy making of several developing nations and India is no exception. McMullen and Shepherd (2006) argue that individuals first react to opportunities when they see them – only afterwards are considerations about desirability and feasibility made.

Research indicates that parents can have a significant influence on their children's motivation to achieve, which could in turn lead to a propensity toward entrepreneurship for children of entrepreneurs (Maqsd & Coleman, 1993). In the context of Assam it is yet to be socially and culturally acceptable to set up a business with a social mission as services still carry the social pride. Parents' objection is also a major reason not to start a social venture. There's still some reluctance to accept failure in the society, which also deters an individual from exploring perceived entrepreneurial opportunities. In short, evolving attitudes and perceptions of people in Assam towards social entrepreneurship is a major roadblock in the scaling of social ventures.

6. Incentives

The entrepreneurial ecosystem in Assam in which social entrepreneurs operate is less likely to offer economic or financial incentives and investors may find the venture not to be worth funding.

7. Infrastructure

In Assam, it is rather difficult to have established infrastructures in place to enable and facilitate the growth of social enterprises as both the supply and distribution infrastructures often have to be raised from zero level and cannot be contracted or acquired.

8. Lack of success stories

Assam needs more social entrepreneurial success stories to motivate and drive individuals to embrace the difficult but rewarding social entrepreneurial journey. The ecosystem also needs to recognize, support and reward those individuals who have the propensity to take risks and promote social entrepreneurship in the state without discrimination or biasness.

6. CONCLUSION

Social entrepreneurship is an emerging area of research and investigation within entrepreneurship in Assam. Social entrepreneurs in Assam need a systematic way to get to a business model most likely to work in the state. One of the things that have not changed

about entrepreneurship in Assam, over the years, is the support that the families rarely offer to their children if they want to become entrepreneurs. The fundamental change that needs to start happening is the change in the mindset of the people and continue to happen for there to be a great growth in Assam's social entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Also it is important to find the right mentor, as a smart mentor can make all the differences in building and expanding entrepreneurship in social sectors. Entrepreneurial passion is a key constituent of the success of entrepreneurs. Although we are confident that challenges in the region can be overcome with a little support from local governments, who could also partner with social organizations to help more such organisations to grow and get funded. Now that the government is giving attention to the potential of the state in combining business excellence and socioeconomic impact, the future of social enterprises in Assam is on its way for a brighter future though many hurdles are still on the way and greater effort are required from all fronts to overcome these roadblocks.

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