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Social entrepreneurs

This term is not quite new; it has been around since the 1960s, but one hears it being used a lot more these days than earlier.

Simply put, a social entrepreneur is a person who brings an entrepreneurial outlook and approach to a social cause.

The entrepreneurial outlook and approach can include many, and perhaps all, of the following:

Clarity about the end result

Long-term vision

Concern about brand image and perception (of the social organisation among its “consumers”)

Professional management principles in marketing, HR, operations planning and all other functions

Maybe, corporate funding

Rigorous and transparent accounting guidelines

Proper financial disclosures

And, above all, tremendous personal commitment and drive

The causes could be varied — it could be about the education of under-privileged children, about rural women’s self-employment schemes, protection of the rights of domestic help, providing the unattended elderly with dignity and safety, and so forth.

Typically, a social entrepreneur’s organisation is a not-for-profit entity; this is not really a requirement but most such organisations register themselves as a trust or as a society.

The BBC, some years back, coined a term “for-more-than-profit” but it did not really catch on.

For-profit organisations such as a corporate or business entity can also take up social causes and — more often than not — do an excellent job of it. Such initiatives are commonly termed as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).

It is an indisputable that the world, especially poorer nations like ours, need social entrepreneurs. We all expect an entrepreneur to be someone who passionately believes in what he / she is doing, and is determined to do it well, often sacrificing personal time and money for it.

When a social entrepreneur takes up a worthwhile cause and brings passion and devotion into play, the initiative is better managed and leads to better results.

While the various Government bodies are also doing their bit, social entrepreneurship plays an important role in augmenting such activities.

We can all think of some well-known social entrepreneurs. It would not be wrong to say that Florence Nightingale was one, right? Mother Teresa was undoubtedly one of the foremost social

entrepreneurs of our times. The Bangladeshi Muhammad Yunus of Grameen Bank, who has done so much for micro lending, is another.

There are several more who are doing their bit, but in a smaller, less famous fashion.

Which sections of society do such people come from? Pretty much from all over; some are people who have faced their own share of problems and now wish to help others avoid such problems.

Others would like to do something for their hometown / village / school. And some who have had a long and fulfilling career in corporate or business life, are now keen to do something “more worthwhile” to quote one such entrepreneur — Usha Sridhar, of The Interface. Some of these have grown to be organisations of repute, such as The Banyan.

It is also encouraging that many of today’s youth have developed a keen social awareness.

Some of them are banding together and initiating activities aimed at helping specific villages or groups become self-sufficient or receive adequate medical attention, etc.

One last word; the drive, passion, and managerial skills of a social entrepreneur if allied with support from a prominent person, can bring manifold results.

Thus, when cricketers and film stars ally with a cause, they help by generating visibility.

Visibility leads to monetary contribution and the celebrity’s credibility provides the assurance that the money is used well.

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