

# SOCIAL INNOVATION LABS

## A TOOL FOR SOCIAL INTEGRATION

The Organisation for Awareness of Integrated Social Security (OASiS) has designed a different approach to innovation in India by creating social innovation labs to work across the social sector. **Pradeep Ghosh** describes the approach and the work of OASiS, and shows how social innovation labs can play an increasingly important role in creating solutions for the Indian society.



A rebel since childhood, **Pradeep Ghosh** always questions existing systems and practices. After testing out innovative approaches in his 15 years of corporate career as an Information Technology professional, he stepped into the social sector and in 2003, he formed OASiS, one of the first social innovations labs in India. His flair for innovations helped him develop the approach to innovate across the sector. He was named an Ashoka Fellow for his innovative work in 2004.

Social development programmes all over the world have existed for almost as long as the problems and issues they address. Yet, despite billions of funds being pumped into development every year, developing countries are still far from attaining the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)<sup>1</sup>, the set of eight international developmental goals set by the United Nations for 2015. In fact, some countries have veered off the parameters and are now worse off due to both internal and external disturbances.

A key reason behind this failure is the mindset that the “educated” know better than the “illiterate”, and that development can only be measured in terms of modernity and an increase in income. “The word “traditional” conjures up images of the primitive, meant only for the illiterate or those with little education.

Increasingly though, practices once considered primitive and backward are now receiving some attention. For the

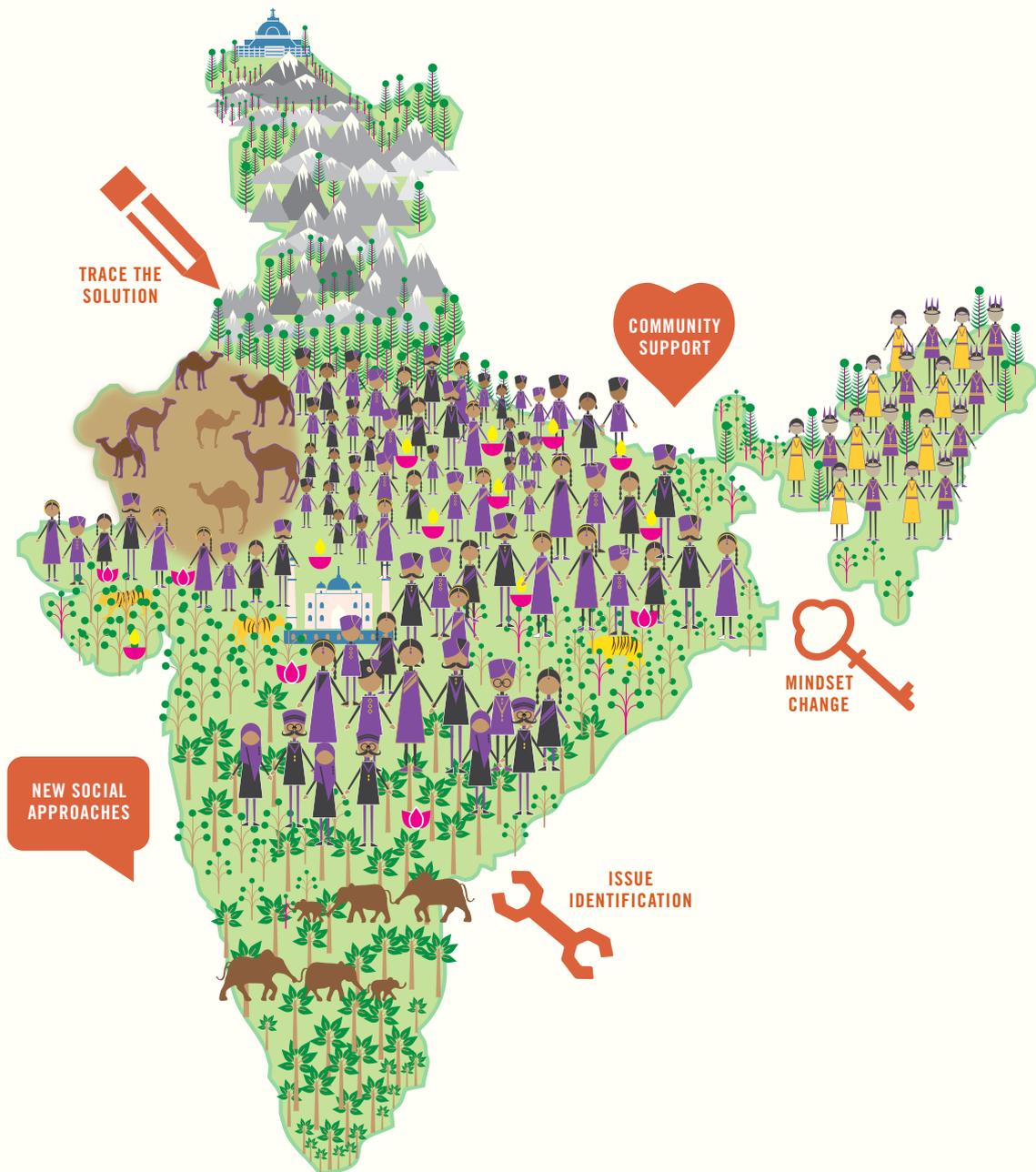
innovative mind, a new approach to traditional practices could lead to new solutions to problems. A very good example of this is the biometric identification system. In the past, illiterate people who did not even know how to write their names had to use their thumb impressions as signatures. A thumb impression became the symbol of illiteracy. After extensive research using modern technology, it was found that it is the most unique signature of an individual. Using the best technology available today, the traditional practice of using the thumb impression is now the key element in the biometric identification system.

### THE NEED FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION LABS

The social sector is dotted with issues and problems, yet, there is no platform where new ideas and approaches to solving these problems can be experimented, tested and developed into models for the sector. While both the private and commercial sector heavily fund finance research and innovation within, the social sector funds only research and shies away from the risks of financing innovative solutions.

Many youth and young professionals in both rural and urban India possess new ideas for development, but what they lack is a platform where there is guidance, motivation and support for experimentation. If youth are led to explore their forgotten traditions and systems, and taught to apply modern approaches, they can create a synergy between the old and modern, and innovate new practices and systems to overcome their problems.

Most countries have many ethnic communities with rich cultures. If we look deep into the ethnic practices, we may find many solutions to our modern-day problems. By dressing up ethnic practices with modern approaches,



we may not only find solutions to our problems, but even revive our fast disappearing traditions and cultures. Such entrepreneurial initiatives can help us find solutions for problems such as malnutrition, unemployment, economic insecurity, illiteracy and disease. This may even spark a different trend: one towards self-reliance and less dependence on the government and external agencies.

In our current society, young people are not taught to understand self-reliance. Youth from privileged backgrounds are brought up in a culture where they learn to guard their wealth and maintain the status quo. They see the importance in supporting those in power, and in return, expect the latter to solve their problems. In a similar but different way, youth from underprivileged backgrounds grow up in a culture where they and their families fear insecurity, but they too expect the government and those in power to solve their problems.

These young people from different backgrounds have great ideas and are capable of developing solutions for the problems they see. However, there is first, the need to draw them out of their comfort zones and insecurities. These youth need a platform to develop their creativity, and a space to test their ideas and innovate solutions to help the underprivileged in their community grow.

Once the seed of social innovation is sown among the youth, they will start viewing problems in their community not merely as challenges, but as opportunities for innovative solutions. The impact of such solutions can spark off similar initiatives among other youth within or outside their communities, who can then learn the social innovation approach and follow suit. This will create a ripple effect, growing the number of beneficiary communities exponentially.

## THE OASIS APPROACH

In India, the Organisation for Awareness of Integrated Social Security (OASiS) has designed a different approach to innovation. It created the first Social Innovation Lab (SIL) in the country to work across the sector. In OASiS, they constantly look out for gaps and issues in the sector. With experience, the members have come to believe that the solution to every problem lies deeply-rooted within the problem itself, like the cause. If the root cause and its path to the problem can be traced, the solution can be designed to follow the same track, and its effect could be longer lasting.

OASiS has produced innovative models across the social sector, addressing problems in the areas of disability, social security, urban education, rural education, and volunteering; and some of these models have been implemented and are being used across India. OASiS is now setting up SILs across the country, both at the university and grassroots levels, so that issues at the macro and micro-level can be addressed.

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### Course of action in the OASiS approach:

#### 1. Trace the Solution

The team studies the problem from the perspectives of all stakeholders. They pin down the issue and identify the root cause(s). They trace the path to the problem and try to understand the factors and events that have been responsible in bringing the problem to the present stage.

#### 2. Conduct "Negative Brainstorming"

The solution is presented to the stakeholders separately and criticisms are elicited. The team looks at the criticisms and converts them into lessons for design revisions and workarounds. They do not stop at this point, but examine the changes from the perspectives of the stakeholders with yet another round of critiquing. This process of brainstorming, critiquing and revision (or modification) continues until the proposed solution is well accepted.

#### 3. Encourage a sense of independence

While designing solutions, team members try to think that the government or administration does not exist. This helps them in designing solutions based on the existing strengths of the beneficiary community, rather than from external support. This results in better coordination and monitoring of the pilot schemes, and also teaches beneficiaries how to develop community systems enabling basic citizen rights, without demanding from the government.

#### 4. Engage the target community in implementation

Engaging the local community in the implementation of solutions helps reduce the likelihood of any resistance to change. This is because the ideas for change come from the people themselves, and they will try their best to make it work. If the target community is engaged from the start, there will also be less political interference from the locals in power. In addition, the right persons in the community can be identified to take the task forward after the pilot is over, and grooming and training can take place while they are on the job.

#### 5. Establish partnerships

It is important that there is collaboration between SIL groups and organisations that provide fellowships or paid guidance. As the SIL entrepreneurs move from pilot to replication or scale-up, they join the group of mentors of the SIL. This helps in creating a growing group of mentors within the SILs, who will in turn mentor other budding entrepreneurs. This ensures that the SIL work goes viral. In this way, the SILs will attract youth, both urban and rural, and provide them an enabling and support system to innovate for the betterment of society.



*Rural education training*



*Urban education for under-privileged children*



*Pradeep Ghosh and participants of GRAMODAYA, the rural education model*



*The Museum School Model*

### Social innovations born out of OASiS

- 1) A **Health Insurance Model for the Disabled** that was adopted and implemented by National Trust (Government of India) in 2008. In terms of coverage and premium, it is one of the best insurances of the world. Since 2008, the model has benefitted over five lakh (500,000) mentally-challenged individuals every year in India. These individuals have received complete medical services supported by the insurance. The model received the "Times Social Impact Award" in January 2013.
- 2) A **Social Security Model** that gives complete social security to all in the community, without any social security tax, duties, subsidies or savings. Since most social security systems are based on taxes and savings, they cannot be implemented in countries with a huge population living at the poverty line. OASiS took on a different perspective and helped build a model on expenses rather than savings. The model develops an organised structure for existing essential expenditure by people and from it, builds up a social security potential for them. The model was earlier implemented in two states in India, and is being implemented in two other states now. This expense-based model received the "Changemakers Innovation Award" in 2006.
- 3) An innovative urban education model for under-privileged children, called **The Museum School Model**. This is a collaboration between museums and teacher training institutes aimed at bringing quality education to these children without any additional infrastructure. The model has been implemented in two states in India. The model received the "Kubera-Edelweiss Innovation Award" in 2009.
- 4) A **Social Volunteering Model** that brings together people from all walks of life to contribute their knowledge, skills and experience, for the upliftment of the underprivileged. The model is independent of any financial support, and uses a novel way of resource sharing. The model uses a scientific method of assessment, through which it awards *social credits*, that volunteers carry for life and benefit their organisations, industry, and institutions in many ways. The model is being replicated by other NGOs in India.
- 5) A rural education model called **GRAMODAYA – A Rural Awakening**, that grooms rural school children in rural development, making them employable after schooling, to develop their own areas and community. The model received the "Education Innovation Fund for India" award in 2013, and is being piloted in four states.
- 6) Two models are on the drawing board, waiting for budding social entrepreneurs to take them to the pilot stage. One is a model to make cities environmentally friendly by eliminating polythene use and creating enough livelihoods for urban poor. The other is a Waste-to-Food model, making cities self-sufficient by converting urban organic waste to power and food, through a credit-sharing model.

### GROWING A NETWORK OF SOCIAL INNOVATION LABS

SILs should now be established in universities to bring students, academics, industries, corporations, and the community together in collaboration. A SIL can be a common interaction point and problem-solving platform for all. Communities will bring their social issues to the SIL.

Core groups of students and faculties at each SIL can define the issues as projects, and share them with fellow students and academics. Students across all disciplines, having common interests in social issues, can then form project groups. Each project group can have an academic liaising with the university and other SIL collaborators. The SIL groups will then research on the issue identified, interact with stakeholders, identify root causes to problems, develop innovative and simple solutions with the community, prepare proposals, source funding from industries, corporations and government, and set up a structure in the community for implementation. The group will further guide and monitor the pilot programme, document corrections and lessons learnt, analyse the impact, improve on solutions, develop the solutions into models, and add the models to the SIL repository for sharing with everyone.

In the context of India, OASiS has the capability to assist in the setting up of SILs in universities and teach the approach to problem-solving and innovation. The organisation is already helping McMaster University (Canada) set up an SIL in the university. Participating in SIL projects will give students an opportunity to understand the social and environmental impact of various industries, and explore community issues. This will better equip them for employment, and make them more sensitive to the community and environment. The SIL can serve as a place where university students receive practical education, and are given real-life case studies to work.

OASiS is also helping NGOs working in rural areas start SILs in village clusters to train and empower village youths towards creating their own solutions. Such village SILs will bring youth from different communities and villages, converging at regular intervals, to discuss problems and prospective solutions, using OASiS's method for problem-solving. The SIL youth groups can then implement their own solutions and be supported by the NGO for funding and other resources. In this way, SIL youths in villages can be self-employed in a purposeful way, while benefitting their own communities at the same time.

### CONCLUSION

SILs can play a crucial role in helping industries and the community come together to solve many social and environmental issues through simple solutions. A network of SILs across the country, at both university and grassroots levels, will enable us to find solutions to social issues at the macro and micro-level. SILs do not simply serve as platforms for innovations; more importantly, they bring together the new and the traditional, the young and the old, the urban and the rural, to form a connection for change. ■

### Endnotes

- 1 The Millennium Developmental Goals (MDGs) were officially established following the adoption of the United Nations Millennium Declaration. The target date is 2015 and the eight goals range from reducing extreme poverty by half to stopping the spread of HIV/AIDS and ensuring universal primary education. For more information, see [www.un.org/millenniumgoals/](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/).
- 2 Read more about the Social Security Model at <http://india.ashoka.org/fellow/pradeep-ghosh> and [www.changemakers.com/economicopportunity/entries/changing-face-poverty-and-peoples-lives-through-social-1](http://www.changemakers.com/economicopportunity/entries/changing-face-poverty-and-peoples-lives-through-social-1).