

Training for success

An Indian train odyssey is equipping young entrepreneurs with the skills to succeed in social business, says **Charukesi Ramadurai**.

When Delhi-born Ashmeet Kapoor, 28, returned to India after seven years in the US, he knew that he wanted to start a social venture based around energy or agriculture. However, this electrical engineer, with a master's degree in entrepreneurship from Brown University, an Ivy League institution, was also aware of his own ignorance about rural India, having only experienced it from a distance.

To remedy this he went on a 15-day, 8,000km train journey across India – the Jagriti Yatra, meaning 'Journey of Awareness'. For the past five years, this project has been taking 400-450 young people, chosen from thousands of applicants, to 12 destinations in India. On the journey, these *yatris* (translated as 'travellers') meet successful social entrepreneurs, in order to learn techniques which they can apply to their own business ideas. The role models come from a variety of backgrounds: Anshu Gupta of Goonj in New Delhi, for instance, works with clothing for the underprivileged, while Dr. S. Aravind of Aravind Eye Care in Coimbatore provides quick turn-around, low-cost eye surgeries.

Yatris on the learning journey



All mentors must have been running a commercially viable social enterprises for a minimum of 10 years to be selected for the scheme.

The Jagriti Yatra team argues that social enterprise is the key to long-term sustainable development in India. This is borne out by a recent report by WWF, 'Green Game-changers', which claims that small business and social enterprises in India and other parts of Asia are tackling local and international challenges in a variety of innovative ways, sending "ripples across the globe". In particular, many entrepreneurs are embracing a concept known as, "Jugaad", – the creation of innovative solutions to problems using fewer resources [see 'Frugal plenty' in the *Green Futures* special edition India: innovation nation, p4].

However, no matter how frugal they are, in the absence of mentorship and guidance many small businesses struggle to get off the ground. Byzantine bureaucracy, corruption and infrastructural challenges can all take their toll on fledgling operations. In fact, India ranks among the world's worst countries in terms of encouraging entrepreneurs: 166th out of 183 countries, according to World Bank figures from 2011. A poll conducted by Gallup in 2012 seems to bear this out: nearly half of the 5,000 Indian adults surveyed said that the Government was a significant stumbling block to starting a business, while only 37% of current business owners and 28% of those seeking to start a business said that they knew someone who can offer advice about business management.

This is where a project like Jagriti Yatra can make a difference. It helps young entrepreneurs to identify market needs and make business plans, and offers insights into the challenges of starting a social enterprise and the skills needed to keep it economically sound. This process often continues long after the train journey has been completed. In Kapoor's case, Jagriti Yatra set him up to spend six months at Deoria, a village in Uttar Pradesh, where he leased land and interacted with farmers to understand their lives and their problems.

This led to the creation of Jagriti Agro Tech (note the homage in the name), which supplies organic fruit and vegetables online under the brand

Photos: Jagriti Yatra



Jagriti Yatra: the fast track to success for social enterprises?

I Say Organic; the produce is sourced from farmers in five surrounding states, connecting them directly to markets. Kapoor received Rs.10 million (roughly £98,100) from his family to start the business, which now employs 20 people. The absence of middle-men has allowed him to pay farmers 25% more than market rates for their produce, and he is now in conversation with external investors, promising a five-fold growth of the business.

Extended placements like the one Kapoor benefited from are just one of the ways Jagriti Yatra provides follow up support. During last year's journey, participants were asked to form teams and present business ideas; 15 of these teams were then selected and called for a follow-up meeting session called Biz Gyan Tree (meaning the 'Tree of Business Knowledge') in February. Here, mentors helped the teams to refine their business ideas, trained them in formal business plan writing and provided leads for financial investment.

Ben Kellard, Head of Sustainable Business at Forum for the Future, says social enterprises need a wide range of skills and knowledge in order to be successful, from the kind of business planning advice that Biz Gyan Tree offers, to guidance in understanding consumer needs. "They also need to learn rapidly in order to refine their offer and business model to ensure it meets the need and makes money", he adds. "The Jagriti Yatra project is a great example of how to help social entrepreneurs gain these skills and apply them, setting them up for success."

In the last five years, over 225 yatris have started their own social enterprise, and roughly half of them are already established in small towns and villages. "By taking a national perspective, the 'travellers' will get insights into how they could grow their enterprises beyond their state borders", says Kellard.

Rema Subramanian, partner with Ankur Capital, an angel fund that invests in social enterprises, including Daily Dump [also featured in India: innovation nation, p7] is also enthusiastic about the scheme: "Most of us lead cocooned lives with our version of problems and solutions. A journey like this opens up our minds to the realities out there." She isn't worried about a lack of formal business

training among the aspiring social entrepreneurs, given that most do not come from business backgrounds. "A sleek PowerPoint presentation or Excel spreadsheets with fancy business plans have very limited value if the entrepreneur has not actually got their hands dirty", she adds.

Aditi Prakash certainly takes a hands-on approach to her business: she makes designer handbags from traditional Indian textiles that have been largely forgotten by modern generations. As Prakash began experimenting with her bags, a friend participating in a trade fair in New Delhi suggested sharing a stall. With the help of a local tailor she managed to make 100 bags, which sold exceedingly well. Prakash now works with three skilled tailors and provides livelihood to dozens of women from the village. Over 400 Pure Ghee handbags, each of them entirely handmade, are sold across the country every month.

Prakash's most recent collection of bags, called Allika ('weaving' in the local language), was made by weavers in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. The bags are made solely from organic cotton and organic dyes like indigo, and are one of Prakash's bestselling ranges. Another collection called Mashru – meaning 'permitted' in Arabic – uses a fabric popular among the Muslim community of Gujarat. Since the religion forbids them from letting their skin touch anything made from animals, the fabric is glossy silk on the outside and cotton on the inside.

Prakash, a graduate from the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, is also passionate about recycling and makes it work for her commercially. "In the name of recycling, people make and sell things which look dull and are poorly finished", she says. "When I cut the cloth for my bags, my women sort through the bigger pieces and create a colourful patchwork out of it." These limited edition bags – the Tutti Frutti collection – have also proved popular with her customers. "However," she adds, "I would never cut out cloth just to make a patchwork bag."

In Bangalore, the Information Technology capital of India, Kuldeep Dantewadia's organisation, Reap Benefit, works with school and college

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The Barefoot College in
Tilonia, Rajasthan, run
by Sanjit ‘Bunker’ Roy,
a Jagriti Yatra mentor

children to “make green a habit” from a young age. The aim is to encourage students to make an impact on their immediate environment by reducing and managing waste, while using natural resources responsibly. They also help educational institutions – and increasingly corporates who are taking their sustainability aims seriously – to go green. Dantewadia candidly admits that the young people Reap Benefit works with were initially cynical about their approach because “we were talking about concepts like global warming that they could not relate to at a personal level”. However, the enterprise is clearly doing something right: they have now worked with over 60 schools as well as numerous corporate clients.

Reap Benefit also designs waste/water management, carbon footprint management and energy optimisation solutions, and helps organisations with auditing. It acts as a consultancy for educational institutions too, training staff in waste, water and energy management techniques. Dantewadia claims his business has evolved in an organic not a planned-manner. Profits from work with corporates and private schools, and sales of environmental products like composting enzymes, are ploughed back into the business, making for a circular business model – an approach that Prakash has also adopted.

According to these entrepreneurs, exposure to a business ethos was one of Jagriti Yatra’s biggest contributions to their success. Prakash says, “When I went on the yatra, I was selling bags but

not really running a business. But we would come back every night and we would have to analyse the business plans of the enterprise we visited. That gave me an understanding of how successful entrepreneurs were doing it.”

The journey also gave them an insight into some of the most pressing needs in rural areas of India. “It opened my eyes to the fact that providing a livelihood was more the need of the hour than bringing in services to rural areas,” says Kapoor, “which is why I thought of I Say Organic.” While Dantewadia claims he “came across so many new conversations and perspectives about my country, which I kept thinking over, long after I got off the train. I realised that there was no one right approach to development work.”

There is considerable potential for social enterprises in India to foster change, but the problem has always been for such projects to sustain themselves commercially. This is compounded by a cultural hesitation to discuss money matters. However, by unapologetically focusing on this aspect, Jagriti Yatra has provided a platform for participants to see how a social project can work successfully as a business. As Prakash says, “In my business, I always wanted to balance the social and commercial sides because I never saw myself purely as a do-gooder. For the first time, I got a sense of how this is possible.”

Charukesi Ramadurai is a freelance writer and journalist from India.

Photo: Jagriti Yatra



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