

Thinking Social Seminar – Guwahati



The first “Thinking Social” seminar series, organized by IIM Calcutta Innovation Park (IIP), was held on 1 November 2014 at IIT Guwahati as the host Institution under the aegis of Tata Social Enterprise Challenge (TSEC). The primary objective of the seminar was to create awareness about social enterprises among the students and showcase the pioneering efforts of the social entrepreneurs in North East.

The list of speakers included noted social entrepreneurs like Mr. Anshu Gupta, the founder of Goonj, Ms. Hasina Kharbhih, the founder of the Impulse NGO Network and Impulse Social Enterprises, Mr. Neichute Doulo, the Founder of Entrepreneurs Associates in Nagaland, and a team from Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research. The speakers shared their immense knowledge on social entrepreneurship with the 85 strong audience representing the students, academia and NGOs/ institutions. It was heartening to note that some participants had travelled long distances (from Tezpur and Mizoram) to be part of this initiative.

In the inaugural session Mr. C.D. Mitra of IIM Calcutta Innovation Park introduced the concept of TSEC and the genesis of Thinking Social Seminar Series. Mr. Deepak Modi, Senior General Manager – Mergers & Acquisitions, Sustainability, Special Projects of Amalgamated Plantations Private Limited, the Tata Group shared with the audience the vision of the Founding Father of the company which was rooted in bringing about positive social change. He also talked about the various social enterprises set up by Tata Group for the benefit of the community and the country.

Prof. Devi Vijay of IIM Calcutta started the technical session by introducing the audience to the concept of social enterprise and set the trend for the day by sharing with the audience stories about some leading social enterprises. The speakers in the technical session challenged and inspired the audience and kept them captivated with their take on what is social entrepreneurship. Mr. Neichute Duolo discussed the importance of the availability of credit and other financial products to rejuvenate the local economy and fuel local entrepreneurship and also reminded the audience to “be committed and stay positive at the face of all odds and to learn to differentiate between your profession and your business”. Ms. Hasina Kharbhih enlightened the audience about how she became a social entrepreneur and how she and a group of like-minded people went on to set up the Impulse NGO Network and Impulse Social Enterprises and later the Empower brand. Her message to the young people was “Do not deviate from what you would like to do, even if you feel that you are not very clear at that moment about how to do it. If you remain focused on your objectives the ways and means will come to you.”



Mr. Anshu Gupta of Goonj kept the audience at the edge of their seats with his hard hitting and candid talk about why there is a need for organizations that are doing social good. He urged everyone to shake off their complacency and start asking questions about their rights. But he also reminded the audience that with rights come the responsibilities of the citizens towards the country. He highlighted the work of Goonj and how it touched millions of lives all across India. In answer to a question from the audience regarding acceptability amongst villagers while working amongst them he said that “the simplest way is to live amongst them and become part of them and not go with a donor’s pride but understand the receiver’s dignity.” The team from Centre for North East Studies and Policy Research showcased how a single person’s determination to bring healthcare to the people living in the river islands of the mighty Brahmaputra today is providing the last mile in healthcare over water. Prof. S R M Prasanna, of IIT Guwahati who also runs a software company called M/s. SpeechWareNet (I) Pvt. Ltd. which is being incubated at IIT Guwahati, talked about how the academic world

and social enterprise meshed together and he drew examples from his own life to illustrate this point.

At the end of the day-long seminar comments from the students included “a very hard hitting seminar”, “this is something we needed to shake us up” and “it is great to be a part of such an initiative”. For the organizers the aim was to provide an opportunity to the audience to learn about such ventures and initiatives that were talked about through the day and provide a platform for their replication through partnerships. This has already taken seed with groups of students planning to spend time with Ms. Kharbhih’s organization and with Goonj’s work in Assam to learn about social entrepreneurship, a NGO from Tezpur in Assam wanting to go into partnership with Impulse Social Enterprise, and the Impulse network seeking help from an incubatee company in the Technology Incubation Centre of IIT Guwahati in making a software which would be used to create a nationwide anti-trafficking database.



Market oriented entrepreneurship development whether by NGOs or organized businesses, is now starting to sweep over the north-eastern states of India, and it is the aim of the organizers – IIM Calcutta Innovation Park – to be an enabler in this movement through virtual incubation of these emerging businesses. Incubating social businesses that would aid in the development of the region and make the North East the new hub for social enterprise in the country is one of the motives for organizing the seminar.