Exploring the motivating factors for opportunity recognition among social entrepreneurs: a qualitative study

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper explores the motivating factors that lead to opportunity recognition among social entrepreneurs in India.

Design/methodology/approach – The study followed an exploratory, qualitative design based on thematic analysis of the interview data collected from 13 Indian social entrepreneurs.

Findings – The study identifies two aggregate factors that motivate social entrepreneurs: personal and contextual. Personal factors include life experiences, social awareness, social inclination since childhood, spiritual motives, the need for a meaningful career and entrepreneurial intention. Contextual factors included institutional voids, community development, the presence of a role model and volunteer experiences.

Research limitations/implications – This study contributes to the social entrepreneurship literature by providing a model for motivating factors that lead to opportunity recognition. This study enables policymakers and social entrepreneurship educators to identify aspiring social entrepreneurs and provide target-specific support to them.

Practical implications – This study enables policymakers and social entrepreneurship educators to identify aspiring social entrepreneurs and provide target-specific support to them.

Originality/value – The study uniquely contributes to the social entrepreneurship field by offering deep qualitative insights into the motivational and opportunity recognition patterns of social entrepreneurship.

Keywords Motivation, Opportunity recognition, Social entrepreneurship, Thematic analysis

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Human activity has reached a critical juncture where it significantly impacts the climate and ecosystems of our planet. In response, sustainable development has emerged as a vital policy focus, aiming to meet present needs without compromising future generations' ability to meet their own. Sustainable development promotes economic and social growth while safeguarding environmental and social equity. Globally, initiatives like the 2030 Agenda with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been adopted. However, experts argue that

traditional methods alone are insufficient to address these challenges, emphasizing the need for a collaborative approach involving governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), businesses and individuals. In this context, social entrepreneurship plays a crucial role in driving innovation and addressing sustainability challenges.

Social entrepreneurship combines market-based strategies with a mission to address global social issues, promoting sustainability by creating social and environmental value beyond mere profit maximisation. Social enterprises operate at the intersection of non-profits and traditional businesses, aiming to generate social value through commercial activities. Social enterprises rely on market revenues instead of donations or grants for sustainability and expansion (Dees, 1994; Diaz-Sarachaga and Ariza-Montes, 2022; Disi, 2018; Ebrahim *et al.*, 2014; Haugh, 2005; Wilson and Post, 2013). Understanding the reasons behind social entrepreneurship is crucial to learning how these individuals initiate transformative societal change. Social entrepreneurs prioritise creating positive impacts within underserved communities, thereby playing a significant role in both economic development and social improvement.

The existing literature emphasises the intricate relationship between motivation and opportunity recognition in social entrepreneurship. Studies have identified a range of motivating factors influencing social entrepreneurial activities, such as empathy, altruism and personal experiences (Yamini *et al.*, 2022; Tiwari *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, other studies offer valuable insights into how personal, societal and institutional factors influence social entrepreneurial motivation and opportunity recognition (Wanyoike and Maseno, 2021; Ghalwash *et al.*, 2017; Yitshaki and Kropp, 2016; Scheiber, 2016; Germak and Robinson, 2014; London and Morfopoulos, 2009). While these studies provide a foundation, more research is required to enrich the social entrepreneurship literature. Qualitative studies offer the depth and nuance necessary to understand how individual motivations and broader societal conditions interact to facilitate opportunity recognition among social entrepreneurs. This approach can also provide deeper insights into the link between motivation and the establishment of social enterprises. By incorporating more qualitative research, we can reinforce the findings of prior research and offer new perspectives on social entrepreneurship. This can enhance our understanding of how individuals identify and capitalize on social entrepreneurial opportunities. Accordingly, we addressed the following research question:

What are the key motivating factors that drive opportunity recognition among social entrepreneurs?

Our research contributes significantly to the field by delving into the motivations that drive individuals towards social entrepreneurship and how these factors influence opportunity recognition. By bridging theory and practice, we offer insights beneficial to researchers, policymakers and practitioners in fostering a supportive ecosystem for social entrepreneurship. Additionally, our study categorises social entrepreneurs based on their motivations and missions, providing a nuanced understanding of the diverse profiles within the field. Finally, by focusing on India, our research enriches the global discourse on social entrepreneurship, offering insights from the perspective of a developing country and promoting cross-cultural learning.

Literature review
Research on motivation among social entrepreneurs
Social action arises from the desire to contribute positively to societal needs. In social entrepreneurship, motivation leads to opportunity recognition and influences an individual's intention to establish a social enterprise. Research on social entrepreneurial motivation has focused primarily on the general antecedents of social entrepreneurial behaviour, such as empathy, altruism, moral obligation, prosocial motivation, proactive personality, compassion and intrinsic motivation (Yamini *et al.*, 2022; Tiwari *et al.*, 2022; Asante *et al.*, 2020;

Usman *et al.*, 2022; Yu *et al.*, 2021; Rambe and Ndofirepi, 2021; Kruse *et al.*, 2021; Urban and Galawe, 2020; Douglas and Prentice, 2019; Pittz *et al.*, 2017). Other research points to factors like workplace spirituality and creativity (Blaga, 2021; Shan and Tian, 2022; Miller *et al.*, 2012) and even cultural influences such as uncertainty avoidance and in-group collectivism as shaping social entrepreneurial behaviour (Canestrino *et al.*, 2020). However, the literature also suggests that possessing these motivations does not guarantee engagement in social entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurship is different from philanthropy as it focuses on sustainable, innovative solutions to social issues (Pandey and Sahay, 2022).

An alternate approach in social entrepreneurial motivation research emphasises the significance of personal and contextual factors in driving opportunity recognition. Personal experiences of social problems, direct interaction with target populations, social awareness, family involvement in social services, the need for a meaningful career and job dissatisfaction are key personal factors that motivate individuals and direct opportunity recognition (Wanyoike and Maseno, 2021; Kruse *et al.*, 2021; Weerakoon *et al.*, 2019; Ghalwash *et al.*, 2017; Wry and York, 2017; Yitshaki and Kropp, 2016; Scheiber, 2016; Germak and Robinson, 2014; London and Morfopoulos, 2009). Additionally, studies have highlighted that challenges like poverty and limited education can foster empathy, encouraging an inclination towards social entrepreneurship (Saebi *et al.*, 2019; Yiu *et al.*, 2014). Contextual factors, including dissatisfaction with existing social systems, cultural preservation and institutional voids, also significantly impact motivation (Gabarret *et al.*, 2017; Yitshaki and Kropp, 2016; Scheiber, 2016). These voids, often due to governmental inadequacy, underscore the need for social entrepreneurship in resource-limited settings (Saebi *et al.*, 2019). The interaction of personal and contextual factors motivates individuals towards social entrepreneurship and emphasizes its career aspect, driven by the desire to actively address social needs (Yitshaki and Kropp, 2016; Ghouse *et al.*, 2019).

Research on opportunity recognition among social entrepreneurs
Opportunity recognition is crucial in generating and implementing social entrepreneurial ideas (Halberstadt *et al.*, 2021; Halberstadt and Spiegler, 2018; Lehner and Kansikas, 2012). According to Saebi *et al.* (2019), it indicates the ability to identify solutions to social issues, focusing on addressing societal needs rather than future economic gains (Corner and Ho, 2010; Thompson *et al.*, 2000). These opportunities may arise from emerging societal demands or long-standing inefficiencies (Austin *et al.*, 2006). It is the recognition of unmet social needs that prompts the identification of opportunities and the formation of social ventures aimed at bridging these gaps (Yitshaki and Kropp, 2016). Social entrepreneurship distinguishes itself from other social activities through its emphasis on recognising and capitalising on opportunities. This perspective is influenced by Drucker's expansion of Say's concept, focusing on identifying and exploiting opportunities. Additionally, Stevenson's contribution of resourcefulness or the determination to overcome prevailing resource constraints, further enhances the entrepreneurial aspect of social entrepreneurship. This suggests that recognising opportunities, fostering innovation and demonstrating resourcefulness are fundamental components that set social entrepreneurship apart from other social activities (Peredo and McLean, 2006).

As social entrepreneurship gains attention, scholars focus on how individuals define opportunities, perceive their missions, access resources and address societal challenges (Zahra *et al.*, 2009). Understanding this concept involves recognising the motivations driving individuals to conceive, establish, launch and maintain new organisations and innovative business models. This field attracts individuals with specific values, capabilities and expertise, drawing them towards opportunities and creative organisational strategies to create social value. Social entrepreneurship encompasses a range of actions and processes aimed at identifying, clarifying and seizing opportunities, all with the aim of enhancing social

well-being through entrepreneurship. Zahra *et al.* (2009) classified social entrepreneurs into three distinct categories based on their approach to opportunity identification and resource utilisation. The first category consists of social bricoleurs, primarily concerned with addressing local social needs. The other two categories include social constructionists and social engineers, who are driven by the motivation to tackle global issues and drive significant social change (Janssen *et al.*, 2018; Zahra *et al.*, 2009). Though the researchers have provided a conceptual definition for social entrepreneurship based on motivation and opportunity recognition, they have called for more research to examine the characteristics of social entrepreneurs and their enterprises more deeply. They have also called for further research to explore the influence of personal, social and institutional factors on the recognition and exploitation of opportunities. This study aims to bridge this gap by exploring the personal and contextual factors that motivate and facilitate individuals to recognise opportunities for social entrepreneurial initiatives.

Relationship between social entrepreneurial motivation and opportunity recognition
Drawing on cognitive psychology and entrepreneurship theories, previous research shows that motivations steer entrepreneurs' ability to identify and leverage opportunities for social change. Motivations act as cognitive filters, influencing how entrepreneurs perceive and decide on opportunities (Madan, 2017). These motivations, often rooted in personal experiences or a drive to address social issues, help entrepreneurs recognise societal needs and opportunities for impact.

Maran *et al.* (2021) further explore how individual motivations, including intrinsic desires to contribute to society and external factors like community needs, drive opportunity recognition and exploitation. External factors also play a role as enablers for entrepreneurial ventures (Davidsson, 2016; Zettel and Garrett, 2023). These enablers require entrepreneurs to actively engage with them, using their motivations and knowledge to identify and exploit opportunities. This highlights the importance of motivation in perceiving and interpreting these external enablers, especially in social entrepreneurship.

Yitshaki and Kropp (2016) examined how motivation influences opportunity recognition among social entrepreneurs. They proposed model categorising motivational factors as "pull" and "push". Pull factors inspire individuals to address unmet societal needs through personal experiences, awareness of social issues, ideological beliefs and spiritual imperatives. Push factors involve individuals seeking meaningful career progression away from unsatisfactory jobs and viewing social entrepreneurship as a fulfilling career path. Their model highlights the interplay between personal motivation and the recognition of opportunities for social change. Their model highlights the complex interplay between personal motivation and the recognition of opportunities to affect social change. It emphasises that motivational factors are diverse, stemming from a blend of personal experiences, ideological orientations and spiritual beliefs. Hence, motivation among social entrepreneurs is multi-dimensional and driven by internal and external stimuli unique to each individual. This framework suggests that motivations act as cognitive filters, shaping perceptions and interpretations of the external environment, thereby influencing how individuals identify and evaluate opportunities for societal impact within their sociocultural contexts. It emphasises the critical role of individual motivations and contextual factors in identifying and leveraging opportunities for social change.

Methodology
Research context
India's complex entrepreneurial ecosystem presents an intriguing context to study social entrepreneurship motivations. Pandey and Sahay (2022) underscore the significance of social

entrepreneurship in addressing unmet societal needs, particularly in countries like India, where government and market efforts struggle to alleviate poverty and socioeconomic challenges. With India's evolving entrepreneurial landscape and increased youth interest in entrepreneurship (GEM India, 2021/2022), understanding the factors driving social entrepreneurs is crucial.

Sampling and data collection
The study was conducted using a qualitative design. We collected data from 13 Indian social entrepreneurs with a minimum of three years of experience. The social enterprises run by the participants focused on diverse sectors, including agriculture, venture capital, e-commerce, menstrual hygiene, tribal development and handicrafts. The participant's age ranged from 28 to 53 years, and their years of experience ranged from 3 to 19. Table 1 presents the participants' demographic details.

We used a purposive sampling method to collect data from participants. Purposive sampling entails selecting participants based on specific characteristics that are relevant to the research objectives (Etikan *et al.*, 2016). Only participants with registered social enterprises were included, while NGOs and other entity types were excluded. Additionally, a prerequisite for inclusion in the study was that the social entrepreneurs had to have at least three years of experience.

We collected the data using semi-structured interview schedules. Before data collection, interview schedules were prepared and expert validation was obtained. Based on their comments, the schedules were modified. The interviews began by asking the participants to briefly overview their social enterprise. They were then asked to reflect on their journey, what motivated them to become social entrepreneurs and how they recognised the opportunity for their social enterprise.

Once the interview schedule was validated, data were collected for the study. The interviews were 30–40 min long. The interviews were conducted either through face-to-face conversations, telephone interviews or virtual meetings through Google Meet. The participants were assured that their data would be confidential and used only for academic purposes. Before recording the interviews, permission was obtained from all the participants. Participants were assigned codes, and only those codes were used for data analysis. Therefore, anonymity was maintained.

Participant code	Gender	Age	Sector	Tenure and age of enterprise
SV	Male	53	Agriculture	7
SA	Female	33	Financial inclusion	4
MV	Female	35	NTFP and tribal development	7
SK	Male	50	Venture capital	19
SA	Male	50	e-Commerce	10
CMG	Male	25	Agriculture	7
SU	Male	25	Agriculture	7
JM	Female	36	Menstrual hygiene	5
SR	Male	45	Textiles	12
SC	Female	29	Sustainability	5
PA	Female	24	Menstrual hygiene	4
JP	Male	54	Agriculture	6
VP	Female	40	Handicrafts	15

Source(s): Table by authors

Table 1.
Shows the
demographic details of
the participants

We analysed the data using thematic analysis based on the guidelines provided by Braun and Clarke (2021). To initiate the analysis, the verbal data were transcribed into written form. Subsequently, both researchers engaged in a thorough review of the transcripts to identify the initial codes. To ensure reliability, inter-coder discussions were conducted. Further analysis involved a detailed examination of the codes, merging similar ones and aligning them with the research objectives. This was followed by the identification and cross-verification of themes.

Results

The data analysis revealed several motivating factors that influence social entrepreneurial behaviour. These factors were categorised into two aggregate themes: personal and contextual. Figure 1 shows a diagrammatic representation of codes, subthemes and aggregate themes.

Personal factors

The first aggregate theme identified in the study was the personal factors that motivated participants to pursue social entrepreneurship. The following are the subthemes.

Life experiences. Life experience has emerged as a critical motivating factor for opportunity recognition among social entrepreneurs. Either representing an underprivileged community or having a traumatic experience inspired them to begin a social enterprise that could avoid future struggles. For example, one participant mentioned that he came from an
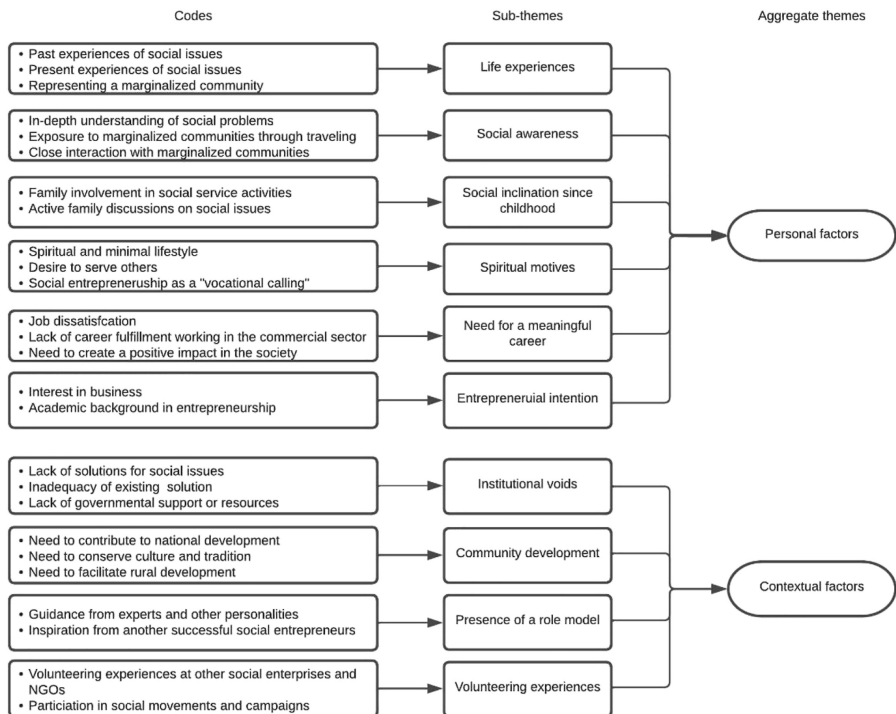

Figure 1.
Data structure

Source(s): Figure by authors

agricultural family with a rural background. He has seen his family and other community members struggle and face day-to-day problems. Those problems acted as a primer for him to venture into the agricultural sector.

Another participant's traumatic experience in the past motivated her to venture into social entrepreneurship. As a teenage girl, she experienced severe urinary tract infections due to the use of sanitary napkins. She experienced severe physical and mental pain during her school days. The stereotypes associated with menstruation and femininity made her struggle with her fate. The use of cloth pads cured the infection. Today, as a grown-up, she runs a social enterprise that produces cloth pads and provides awareness to women regarding menstrual hygiene. She ventured into it because she did not want her trauma repeated among other women. She said,

> I want more women to know about it. I do not want more women to go through what I have experienced (PA).

Overall, life experiences serve as reminders of the pressing social needs and challenges facing communities, motivating social entrepreneurs to identify opportunities for innovative solutions and transformative action. By drawing upon their personal journeys and intimate understanding of societal issues, social entrepreneurs are empowered to enact meaningful change and contribute towards a more equitable and inclusive future.

Social awareness. As a developing society, India is facing several challenges and social problems. Most participants were aware of such issues from their past and had always been inspired to provide solutions. Having a mindset to learn about social problems or insights from travelling around remote areas was one of the means through which they obtained awareness about such problems. Such awareness of social issues from the past is a significant factor that motivated them to launch social enterprises. One of the participants was a college professor who mentioned that the thought of being a social entrepreneur was always on his mind. He says,

> On the outskirts of any Indian city, you will see slum areas and small children without good educational opportunities. Therefore, I always ask the following question: What will your teaching do? The children sit and play near a drain, and how can we impact them? Therefore, I felt I should do something more. (SV).

Another participant mentioned that her travelling experience inspired her to identify opportunities. She said she always meets a potter or weaver whenever she travels and keeps a few days for local village travel. Such journeys helped her better understand their problems, which later motivated her to launch a social enterprise for tribal development.

Understanding social problems is not the only motivating factor in becoming a social entrepreneur. Before launching a social enterprise, people must extensively understand social issues in society and the impact they can create. As a participant said,

> Before venturing into social entrepreneurship, we must know what we can contribute. First, we want to consider what the need is. What is the gap? To understand that, you need to talk more to people, be in the community, listen, and understand what people are looking for and what the opportunities are (PA).

Overall, the narratives shared by the participants illustrate how social awareness serves as a catalyst for opportunity recognition, inspiring individuals to envision innovative solutions to address unmet needs and societal gaps. For instance, the participant who engaged in local village travel gained firsthand insights into the challenges faced by marginalized communities, which fueled her motivation to initiate a social enterprise for tribal development.

Moreover, the participants' emphasis on the importance of understanding social issues comprehensively before venturing into social entrepreneurship underscores the strategic role of social awareness in opportunity identification. By actively listening to community members, immersing themselves in local contexts and identifying unmet needs and opportunities, entrepreneurs are better equipped to devise effective solutions that resonate with the target beneficiaries.

Social inclination since childhood. Social awareness and mindset have been present in some participants since childhood. One participant said,

> In Class Four, I used to draw pamphlets to save water and distribute them to friends, family, and random people on the road. So, I think that the intention started there. Then, in sixth grade, I presented how to grow trees and generate less waste. Then, my friend and I started an NGO activity. We collected money from classmates, and with the funds raised, we bought stationery and gave it to people in slum areas. We do not know whether it was helpful to them, but we did. This has existed since I was a child; it is not new. (SC).

Another factor influencing social inclination from a young age was the family's active participation in social service activities. Some participants came from families that regularly engaged in social services and encouraged discussion about social issues. This helped them develop a sense of social responsibility at an early age. Additionally, observing their parents' involvement in social service activities and participating in discussions helped participants identify opportunities for their enterprises.

Overall, participants' recollection of engaging in altruistic activities from a young age highlights how intrinsic motivations for social impact can emerge early in life. Such experiences not only instilled a sense of social responsibility but also cultivated a proactive mindset towards addressing societal issues. Moreover, the influence of family involvement in social service activities further reinforced participants' motivation to contribute to social change. By witnessing and participating in these activities, participants were sensitized to the needs of their communities and equipped with the mindset to identify opportunities for impactful interventions. Thus, the early cultivation of social awareness and mindset serves as a catalyst for motivating individuals to recognize and act upon entrepreneurial opportunities aimed at addressing social challenges. This highlights the relationship between social inclination since childhood and the subsequent identification and pursuit of opportunities for social entrepreneurship.

Spiritual motives. For many participants, being a social entrepreneur had a spiritual component. They chose this profession as a vocational calling and considered it their responsibility to serve society. One of the participants, JM, was brought up in a spiritual community. She resides in the Auroville community in Tamil Nadu, a southern state of India. Their spiritual lifestyle in Auroville and interaction with like-minded people inspired her become a social entrepreneur. Active participation in the social service activities conducted in the Auroville community helped her to recognise opportunities for her enterprise. Her decision to launch an enterprise came as a sudden call, not a planned activity. Thus, spirituality could be a motivating factor influencing one's decision to become a social entrepreneur. Such spiritual engagement motivated them to follow a minimal lifestyle and focus more on serving others. As one participant mentioned,

> Social entrepreneurship is a spiritual journey (SV).

The relationship between spirituality and opportunity recognition among social entrepreneurs sheds light on the intrinsic motivations that drive individuals to pursue entrepreneurial endeavours as a means of serving society. For many participants, their spiritual upbringing instilled in them a deep-seated commitment to serving others and making a positive impact on society. Active participation in social service activities within

their spiritual communities provided them with opportunities to engage with pressing social issues and identify unmet needs within their surroundings. Spirituality serves as a transformative force that permeates every aspect of the entrepreneurial process, from ideation to implementation. By grounding their entrepreneurial pursuits in spiritual principles, social entrepreneurs are empowered to recognise opportunities for social impact and effect meaningful change in the world around them. Thus, spirituality not only enriches the social entrepreneurial motivation of individuals but also amplifies their capacity to create lasting, sustainable solutions to pressing social issues.

The need for a meaningful career. Some participants had experience working in the commercial sector or running commercial enterprises. However, years later, they became dissatisfied with their work in the industry. Their experiences and growing awareness of societal issues made them inclined to contribute to the community through their professions. This motivated them to pursue social entrepreneurship and explore the opportunities they recognised through their work experience or other means.

For instance, SC worked as a cabin crew member, giving her a luxurious and glamorous lifestyle. However, she felt that her luxury items were useless for her personal life and society. Thus, she left her job and instead started working to empower the underprivileged and improve the community. Her enterprise aims to reduce plastic usage and pollution by promoting environment friendly products and, at the same time, employing rural women. Similarly, SR worked in the IT sector and later ventured into social entrepreneurship. He said,

> After 12 years of my corporate career, I wanted to do something that could create a social impact. I firmly believed that technology could play a vital role in creating a social impact, and I was mainly looking at both the agriculture and craft sectors (SR).

His words indicate that his experience in the technology sector and the need to use it to create a social impact motivated him to become a social entrepreneur.

Another example is SA, a software engineer at a reputed IT company. Later, his interest in becoming an entrepreneur motivated him to become an entrepreneur, and he launched a commercial venture. However, after some time, he felt he should engage in more meaningful activities that could contribute to society. Thus, he ventured into social entrepreneurship. From the SA's experience, it can be observed that not everyone begins their career as a social entrepreneur. Dissatisfaction with their jobs and unfulfilling careers led them to seek more meaningful careers that aligned with their values and allowed them to impact society positively. This motivated them to search for social entrepreneurial opportunities, eventually leading to the establishment of their enterprise.

In essence, the desire for a meaningful career serves as a catalyst for opportunity recognition in social entrepreneurship, prompting individuals to leverage their professional experiences and expertise to address pressing social challenges. By realigning their career trajectories with a deeper sense of purpose and social responsibility, these individuals actively seek out and identify opportunities to effect positive change, ultimately driving the establishment of social enterprises.

Entrepreneurial intention. The majority of participants mentioned that they had wanted to become entrepreneurs since childhood. Some come from a business background in their family, some get their education in business administration and others have business acumen. Later, for various reasons, they were diverted into social entrepreneurship. For example, one participant stated,

> Having a venture was there in my upbringing, and because of my experience with the social sector, I have diverted to the social enterprise sector (SA).

She completed her post-graduation in rural development, which helped her understand the problems of rural communities and enabled her to recognise the opportunity for her

enterprise. Thus, she decided to focus on social entrepreneurship rather than engaging in commercial business.

SU had a different experience. He graduated as a business student, but later, his social motives influenced him to pursue higher studies in economics, where he worked for farmers and the agriculture sector. His experiences helped him identify the opportunity and thus, he ventured into social entrepreneurship. In all instances, it could be observed that they started with an interest in entrepreneurship in general and other motivating factors led them to social entrepreneurship.

Thus, entrepreneurial intention serves as a lens through which individuals perceive and interpret opportunities within their environment, influencing the identification and pursuit of entrepreneurial endeavours. This intentionality predisposes individuals to actively seek out opportunities aligned with their entrepreneurial aspirations, shaping their cognitive processes and attention towards recognizing potential avenues for venture creation. In the context of social entrepreneurship, participants' entrepreneurial intentions manifest as a driving force behind their engagement with social issues and the identification of opportunities for impactful change. From childhood aspirations to becoming entrepreneurs, participants exhibit a proactive mindset towards recognizing opportunities that resonate with their overarching goal of creating societal value. This predisposition towards entrepreneurship primes individuals to be attuned to social opportunities.

Contextual factors
The second aggregate theme identified in the study is the contextual factors that motivate participants to pursue social entrepreneurship. The following are the subthemes.

Institutional voids. The primary motive behind establishing social enterprises is the lack of solutions to the existing systems (Yitshaki and Kropp, 2016). This could have occurred because the government or responsible stakeholders failed to provide a satisfactory solution. Alternatively, this could be due to the inefficiency of the existing solutions in eradicating the problems. Such unresolved issues create a need for innovative and effective solutions. For example, one participant stated,

> The primary motive was that I started from the gap I felt in society. There is no practical solution for reducing the use of non-biodegradable cutleries (SC).

Another participant shared,

> When I started my venture capital firm to support aspiring social entrepreneurs, the government did not provide adequate support or resources to such individuals. This lack of support makes them hesitant to pursue social entrepreneurship. I saw this as an opportunity and started my firm to provide financial assistance (SK).

Thus, institutional voids play a crucial role in shaping the opportunity recognition process within social entrepreneurship by highlighting unaddressed needs or deficiencies within existing societal structures. These voids represent gaps or inadequacies in institutional frameworks, policies or services, signalling opportunities for innovative solutions and interventions. Individuals keenly observe and identify these institutional voids as potential social entrepreneurial opportunities.

Community development. Most participants agreed that Indian society still suffers from several social problems that require immediate attention. Some were motivated to become social entrepreneurs, mainly because they intended to serve humanity and contribute to national development. They believed that national development would be possible only by eradicating fundamental social problems and wanted to become social changemakers through their ventures. Moreover, even though social issues in India are challenging and

require persistent efforts, they believe that the country provides limitless opportunities for social entrepreneurs.

> India is a country where many grassroots innovations are possible, in which many wealth-creating opportunities can come, and either the urban or rural poor can be engaged (SV).

The participants mentioned that rural development was critical to the country's development. Along with focusing on economic development in urban areas, they ascertained that it is crucial to preserve Indian culture and heritage by securing the livelihood of local communities. They needed to empower farmers, weavers, artisans, tribal communities and other struggling people in remote areas of the country. The participants specified that securing their livelihoods could preserve indigenous culture and resources. As MV stated,

> You create livelihoods around the forests for local tribes, securing their livelihoods. Once their livelihoods are secured, half of their work is completed. Afterwards, they will care about their resources (MV).

This desire to preserve local communities motivated the MV to begin a social enterprise to produce non-timber forest products and empower tribal communities.

Thus, community development serves as a driving force behind social entrepreneurial opportunity recognition, as it underscores the importance of addressing pressing social issues and fostering inclusive growth and empowerment within local communities. Social entrepreneurs are motivated to identify opportunities for positive change and development within communities by leveraging their unique insights into the challenges and needs faced by marginalized or underserved populations.

Presence of a role model. For some participants, the concept of social entrepreneurship was inspired by role models. Discussions and guidance from these individuals helped them recognise opportunities and start their enterprises. Having a successful social entrepreneur as a role model inspired the participants to follow their path. These individuals encouraged them to think differently and to view entrepreneurship from a new perspective. For instance, one participant said,

> LA was like my sister. She taught me about the whole community of forest tribes and the work that they were doing, which could be modelled as a social venture. I was a little apprehensive about how I would do this because I came from a developmental background and had little experience with communities. However, she inspired and guided me during the process (MV).

Similarly, for another participant, his teacher served as a role model. Discussions and encouragement from his teacher motivated him and guided in identifying the right opportunity for his enterprise.

Overall, the presence of a role model plays a significant role in shaping the opportunity recognition process for aspiring social entrepreneurs, as it provides them with guidance, inspiration and a new perspective on entrepreneurship. Role models serve as sources of encouragement and support, helping individuals navigate the complexities of identifying and pursuing opportunities within the social entrepreneurship domain. By observing the successes and experiences of successful social entrepreneurs, aspiring individuals gain valuable insights into the possibilities and challenges associated with social entrepreneurship. Role models offer practical advice, share their own entrepreneurial journeys and provide mentorship to guide individuals through the process of opportunity recognition and enterprise creation. Through their guidance and encouragement, role models instill confidence and motivation in aspiring social entrepreneurs, empowering them to explore innovative solutions to social problems and seize opportunities for impact. For example, participants who cited role models as sources of inspiration and guidance were able

to leverage their mentorship to overcome apprehensions and gain clarity in identifying opportunities for their enterprises.

Volunteering experiences. While all participants agreed that social entrepreneurship is distinct from social services, some were motivated to become social entrepreneurs based on their experience with social services or volunteering. Volunteering for social causes, participating in environmental and sustainability protests and working for NGOs helped them recognise opportunities for their enterprises. These experiences allowed them to work with marginalised communities and better understand their challenges. Although the goals, motivations and skills required to become social entrepreneurs and social service workers differ, having experience in social work can facilitate opportunity recognition and the desire to become a social entrepreneur. For example, one participant mentioned,

> My experience working for an NGO to protect forest and tribal communities helped me understand their problems. This motivated me to begin my social enterprise, focusing on tribal development (MV).

Thus, volunteering experiences serve as a catalyst for opportunity recognition among aspiring social entrepreneurs, providing them with firsthand exposure to social issues, marginalized communities and environmental challenges. Through their involvement in social services, environmental protests and NGO work, individuals gain valuable insights into the needs and struggles of vulnerable populations. By engaging in volunteer activities, participants develop a deep understanding of the root causes of social problems and the systemic barriers that hinder progress. This hands-on experience allows them to identify gaps in existing solutions and envision innovative approaches to address pressing social and environmental issues. Moreover, volunteering experiences provide individuals with the opportunity to collaborate with diverse stakeholders, build meaningful relationships within communities and gain practical skills that are instrumental in launching and scaling social enterprises.

Discussion

Our study explored the motivating factors that lead to opportunity recognition among social entrepreneurs in India. The findings revealed two major categories of factors: personal and contextual.

Personal factors. Our findings emphasise the pivotal role of life experiences in shaping social entrepreneurs' awareness of opportunities. Direct exposure to societal challenges or personal adversities often fosters a keen sensitivity to social needs, inspiring individuals to develop innovative solutions (Germak and Robinson, 2014; Wanyoike and Maseno, 2021; Ghalwash *et al.*, 2017; Scheiber, 2016). Additionally, social awareness emerges as a key driver in recognising opportunities. Active engagement with communities and direct interaction with social issues enhance individuals' ability to identify and address challenges creatively. Participation in community projects and travel exposure provides invaluable insights, bridging gaps between different living standards (Omorede, 2014). Early social inclinations play a crucial role in opportunity recognition. Childhood exposure to social engagement, such as volunteering or community service, fosters proactive approaches to addressing societal challenges (Kirzner, 1997; Omorede, 2014). Spiritual beliefs also emerge as significant motivators for social entrepreneurship. Viewing entrepreneurial efforts as a spiritual calling drives individuals to contribute positively to societal betterment (Omorede, 2014; Scheiber, 2016; Gabarret *et al.*, 2017; Wanyoike and Maseno, 2021; Ghalwash *et al.*, 2017). Entrepreneurial intention is also a critical precursor to recognising opportunities. Individuals with a business background and a desire for self-actualisation through business ownership are drawn to social entrepreneurship. Such individuals go through a

transformative journey for those with entrepreneurial intentions, where personal, educational and social experiences gradually shift their focus towards social entrepreneurship. Moreover, a desire for a meaningful career emerges as a significant driver in recognising opportunities for social entrepreneurship. Individuals disappointed with traditional career paths and seeking fulfilment often turn to entrepreneurial ventures as a means to contribute positively to society (Gabarret *et al.*, 2017).

Contextual factors. Our study underscores the role of institutional voids in shaping opportunity recognition in social entrepreneurship (Nicholls, 2008; Zahra *et al.*, 2008; Saebi *et al.*, 2019). Gaps in existing systems or a lack of institutional support inspire social entrepreneurs to identify entrepreneurial opportunities, reflecting the catalysing effect of economic and resource scarcity (Omorede, 2014). Furthermore, an eagerness among participants to engage in community development and rural advancement highlights the importance of addressing societal challenges through entrepreneurship (Germak and Robinson, 2014). Role models and volunteering experiences also play pivotal roles in guiding individuals towards identifying opportunities aligned with their values and goals (Gabarret *et al.*, 2017).

Theoretical contributions
Our research significantly enhances our understanding of how motivation influences opportunity recognition in social entrepreneurship. Drawing on cognitive psychology, we elucidate how life experiences act as cognitive primers, directing attention towards societal needs and innovative solutions. Our study also highlights how social awareness and community development activities influence their identification of entrepreneurial opportunities. This sheds light on the broader societal contexts that shape entrepreneurial cognition and behaviour, contributing to the sociological perspectives on social entrepreneurial opportunity recognition. Furthermore, our research adds to the organisational behaviour theory by identifying the role of institutional contexts and social networks in facilitating or constraining opportunity recognition. We find that institutional voids and community development efforts create opportunities for innovative solutions. The presence of role models and volunteering experiences also influences individuals' perceptions and actions in the social entrepreneurship domain. These insights enrich our understanding of the complex interplay between personal and contextual factors that drive entrepreneurial action.

Implications
The findings of our study hold several managerial implications for both existing organisations and aspiring social entrepreneurs. Organisations seeking to collaborate with or support social entrepreneurs can gain valuable insights from our study by understanding the motivating factors that drive these individuals. By aligning their initiatives and resources with the identified personal and contextual factors, organisations can make more informed decisions about collaborations and partnerships, thus maximising the potential for mutual success and social impact. Moreover, this study provides insights for policymakers and educators in social entrepreneurship. Policymakers can use these findings to develop targeted programmes and policies that promote the recognition and exploitation of social entrepreneurial opportunities. Social entrepreneurship educators can utilise these findings to identify and nurture aspiring social entrepreneurs effectively. Overall, our study adds to the literature on social entrepreneurship in the context of a developing economy, offering actionable insights that can enhance the effectiveness and impact of social entrepreneurial initiatives.

Limitations and future directions

Our study has some limitations that may provide opportunities for future research. Firstly, our study had a relatively small sample size. While these participants provided valuable insights, their findings may not comprehensively represent the field of social entrepreneurship. Future studies should aim to include more diverse samples. Furthermore, our study was conducted in India. The findings could be generalisable only with a comprehensive exploration involving social entrepreneurs from diverse countries. In addition, our study adopted a qualitative, cross-sectional design. Future studies should consider mixed methods for a comprehensive analysis and a longitudinal approach to understanding how motivating factors evolve. Demographic factors, such as gender, age and education, can also provide a deeper understanding of social entrepreneurial motivation and opportunity recognition.

Conclusion

The present study explored the primary motivating factors among social entrepreneurs and how these factors facilitate their ability to identify opportunities. The findings indicate the necessity for specific support and policies to promote social entrepreneurship, with the goal of enhancing the global understanding of the field and inspiring further research.

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