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## An Empirical Investigation into the Dynamics of Social Entrepreneurship in Kerala: A Case Study of ‘Pure Living’

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### Abstract

This paper examines the significance of social entrepreneurship through a case study of Pure Living, a social enterprise based in Kerala. Pure Living integrates a social mission with economic sustainability. The study employs the Triple Bottom Line framework, which evaluates People, Planet, and Profit. It applies Social Innovation Theory to analyze how social enterprises address social and environmental challenges while maintaining financial stability. The research adopts a qualitative case study approach, drawing primarily on secondary sources such as organizational reports, media articles, and academic literature. Kerala’s distinctive social and cultural context is also considered to provide a comprehensive understanding of Pure Living’s operations. The findings indicate that Pure Living generates value by aligning ethical production, sustainable sourcing, and community engagement with its business objectives. By promoting responsible consumption, supporting local artisans, and implementing environmentally sustainable practices, Pure Living demonstrates how business can contribute to broader social and environmental objectives. The case illustrates that social entrepreneurship can transcend charitable models to establish self-sustaining enterprises with tangible social impact and economic benefits. The study further emphasizes that Kerala’s supportive environment, characterized by high social awareness, strong community networks, and enabling policies, is crucial for the success and expansion of social enterprises. By connecting theoretical frameworks to practical examples, this paper argues that social entrepreneurship in Kerala offers a viable and replicable alternative to conventional profit-driven business models. Overall, the study provides insights into the operation of social enterprises in a developing context and offers practical guidance for researchers, entrepreneurs, and policymakers aiming to foster ethical, inclusive, and environmentally responsible entrepreneurship that balances profit with social and environmental objectives.

**Keywords:** Social entrepreneurship, Pure Living, Triple Bottom Line, Social innovation, Hybrid models

### Introduction

Social entrepreneurship is an expanding field of research and practice that has gained global attention. Interest increased after Muhammad Yunus, the founder of the Grameen Bank, received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006 [1]. Grameen Bank exemplifies a social entrepreneurship model that provides microcredit to the poor. Social entrepreneurship is regarded as a powerful tool to fight poverty [2], empower women [3], promote social change [4], support inclusive growth [5, 6], and facilitate institutional reforms [7]. It is also considered a valuable resource for the recovery of areas affected by natural disasters [8]. The potential of social entrepreneurship emerges when society

questions whether governments and markets can effectively address critical social issues like poverty, social exclusion, and environmental degradation.

Social entrepreneurship has emerged as a distinct approach to addressing social and environmental challenges through market-based solutions. In contrast to traditional businesses that primarily pursue profit, social enterprises prioritise economic sustainability while placing social impact at the forefront of their objectives. They also differ from non-governmental organisations in that they employ entrepreneurial strategies, generate revenue, and maintain operational self-sufficiency, rather than relying on continuous donor or government funding. The GEM Report

on Social Entrepreneurship <sup>[9]</sup> identifies three defining criteria for social entrepreneurs: a commitment to social mission, a focus on innovation, and the generation of earned income. Consequently, social entrepreneurship constitutes a hybrid model that merges the efficiency and innovation of business with the mission-driven aims of the social sector, aiming to achieve enduring, measurable change.

Social entrepreneurship depends heavily on context and varies across cultural, institutional, and economic environments <sup>[10]</sup>. Kerala offers a particularly favourable setting for the development of social entrepreneurship. The state's high literacy rates, strong social development indicators, and long-established cooperative traditions have created an environment where collective action and community well-being are highly prioritised. Institutions such as dairy cooperatives, self-help groups, and decentralised local self-governance agencies have promoted participatory development and inclusive economic practices. Additionally, increasing consumer awareness of sustainability, ethical production, and environmental responsibility has opened opportunities for businesses that combine commercial goals with social missions. These socio-economic traits collectively make Kerala a distinctive ecosystem for exploring community-focused and value-driven enterprises.

Although social enterprises are increasingly prevalent in Kerala, academic research on the practical implementation of social entrepreneurship remains limited. This study addresses this gap by analysing 'Pure Living', a Kerala-based social enterprise that integrates livelihood generation, sustainable production, and ethical consumption. The paper pursues three primary objectives: to investigate the conceptual foundations of social entrepreneurship through the frameworks of the Triple Bottom Line and Social Innovation theories; to analyse how Pure Living balances its social, environmental, and economic objectives; and to evaluate its relevance as a model of sustainable enterprise within the Kerala context. Through this case study, the research enhances understanding of the operational dynamics of purpose-driven businesses and underscores their importance for inclusive and sustainable development.

### Literature Review

The field of social entrepreneurship lacks a unified and universally accepted definition, reflecting its interdisciplinary nature and evolving scope. Social entrepreneurship is commonly understood as the process of pursuing innovative solutions to social problems <sup>[11]</sup>. Expanding on this view, social entrepreneurship is defined as a process through which citizens build or transform institutions to address critical social challenges, such as poverty, illiteracy, environmental degradation, human rights abuses, and corruption, thereby improving collective well-being <sup>[12]</sup>.

In recent literature, social entrepreneurship is increasingly associated with the application of market-based approaches to address unmet social needs. It is argued that social entrepreneurship employs commercial strategies to create social enterprises that generate measurable social impact while maintaining economic viability <sup>[13]</sup>. This perspective aligns with the operational definition adopted for the present study, which defines social entrepreneurship as "any private

activity conducted in the public interest, organized with an entrepreneurial strategy, whose main purpose is not the maximization of profit but the attainment of certain economic and social goals, and which has the capacity for bringing innovative solutions to the problems of social exclusion and unemployment" <sup>[14]</sup>. This definition underscores the hybrid nature of social entrepreneurship by emphasising innovation, public interest, and sustainability over profit maximisation.

Conceptual scholarship consistently characterises social entrepreneurship and social enterprises as hybrid models that integrate social impact with economic sustainability. A foundational framework for social business can be established by distinguishing it from both conventional profit-oriented firms and traditional nonprofit organisations <sup>[15]</sup>. It emphasises reinvesting profits to generate tangible social outcomes, a principle exemplified by the Grameen model, which emphasises scalability, community trust, and long-term financial independence, in alignment with the Triple Bottom Line approach. Similarly, social entrepreneurship is conceptualised as a process of systemic change driven by innovation, leadership, and moral purpose rather than isolated charitable interventions <sup>[16]</sup>. The emphasis on idea diffusion, institutional partnerships, and sustainability provides insight into how locally grounded initiatives can evolve into scalable social solutions. Collectively, these studies frame social entrepreneurship as mission-driven, innovative, and financially sustainable.

In the Indian context, scholarly work emphasises hybrid value creation and the challenges of balancing social and commercial objectives within complex institutional environments. Indian social businesses are defined as hybrid ventures that aim to reduce poverty and promote social inclusion by deploying cost-effective, market-based technologies in emerging economies <sup>[17]</sup>. The findings illustrate how social enterprises bridge institutional gaps by combining entrepreneurial practices with strong social missions. A systematic review of social entrepreneurship research situates India within the broader global discourse and notes that developing-country contexts remain underrepresented in empirical studies <sup>[18]</sup>. Significant gaps in impact measurement, governance mechanisms, and ecosystem-level analysis are identified, underscoring the need for more context-sensitive research. Together, these studies suggest that India is a promising yet underexplored methodological context for examining dual value creation in social entrepreneurship.

At the regional level, research from Kerala provides empirical evidence of how social entrepreneurship principles are operationalised through cooperative and community-based models. The dairy cooperative ecosystem in Kerala demonstrates how cooperatives function as social enterprises by enhancing rural livelihoods, fostering collective ownership, and strengthening socioeconomic resilience, despite ongoing governance and innovation challenges <sup>[19]</sup>. Similarly, Kudumbashree is analysed as a state-supported social innovation that extends empowerment beyond income generation to include leadership development, agency, and social inclusion <sup>[20]</sup>. The study highlights how decentralised governance structures, capacity-building initiatives, and institutional support enable women to sustain long-term microenterprises. Collectively,

these studies underscore Kerala's distinctive sociopolitical environment, where cooperative traditions and state-led interventions foster a robust ecosystem for community-centred, sustainable social entrepreneurship.

### Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon two complementary theoretical perspectives: the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) framework and Social Innovation Theory. Together, these frameworks provide a structured approach to analysing how social enterprises, such as Pure Living, integrate purpose with profit while addressing local social and environmental challenges.

The Triple Bottom Line, explained through the dimensions of People, Planet, and Profit, broadens the definition of business success beyond financial results alone. According to this approach, social enterprises are judged by their ability to create social value (People), support environmental sustainability (Planet), and ensure economic stability (Profit).

In addition, Social Innovation Theory emphasises the development of innovative, context-specific solutions to address unmet social needs by integrating new ideas, stakeholders, and practices. The theory prioritises community engagement, scalability, and systemic change over isolated interventions. The initiatives undertaken by Pure Living exemplify this theoretical approach.

The integration of the Triple Bottom Line and Social Innovation Theory establishes a comprehensive analytical framework for this study. The TBL framework delineates the categories of value created by Pure Living. At the same time, Social Innovation Theory elucidates the mechanisms through which this value is generated via participatory, adaptive, and context-specific processes. This combined approach offers a holistic understanding of Pure Living as a social enterprise that operationalises social entrepreneurship in Kerala by aligning economic sustainability with social inclusion and environmental responsibility.

### Methodology of the study

This study utilises a qualitative research methodology to investigate the definition and practice of social entrepreneurship within a specific socio-economic and cultural context. The research is based exclusively on secondary data sources, including academic literature on social entrepreneurship, social business, and social innovation; journal articles, books, and policy documents relevant to Kerala; and publicly available materials concerning Pure Living. Data from these sources are systematically reviewed, and key themes such as social impact, environmental sustainability, community participation, innovation processes, and economic sustainability are identified and analysed to elucidate how Pure Living implements social entrepreneurship in practice. While the study does not claim statistical generalisability, it achieves analytical generalisation by linking empirical findings from the Pure Living case to established theoretical frameworks.

### Case Presentation: Pure Living

Pure Living was established in Cochin, Kerala, as a purpose-driven organisation responding to environmental

degradation, livelihood insecurity, and unsustainable consumption patterns. Founded by Lakshmi N. Menon, a professional designer, the organisation operates on the premise that everyday products can facilitate social and ecological advancement. Pure Living functions as a platform for designing, producing, and marketing sustainable alternatives while generating livelihoods for marginalised populations. Its mission emphasises ethical production, waste reduction, and inclusive employment, particularly for women, the elderly, and informal sector workers. Through a hybrid business model, Pure Living integrates market-based sales with community-driven production units. Products are crafted from locally sourced or repurposed materials and distributed through direct sales, partnerships, and awareness campaigns, thereby supporting economic sustainability alongside the organisation's social mission. The enterprise's initiatives are both practical and scalable, demonstrating the potential for significant economic and social impact.

Initiatives like 'Ammommathiri'/'Wicksdom' empower elderly women by providing respectful, home-based income opportunities that reinforce social inclusion and self-esteem. These showcase the "People" dimension of the TBL framework. Pen with Love ('Entrée') engages rural women in producing plantable pens made from recycled paper, connecting waste reduction with livelihood creation. 'Shayya' addresses both environmental and social issues by transforming textile and PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) waste into mattresses, creating jobs while offering affordable, sustainable products. Projects like Pen with Love (Entree) and Shayya focus on the "Planet" dimension. Simultaneously, these initiatives function as market-linked ventures, ensuring consistent revenue streams that support the enterprise and its beneficiaries, reflecting the "Profit" component. Thus, the TBL framework illustrates how Pure Living balances ethical goals with operational sustainability.

'Orange Alert', a road safety initiative that mobilises community volunteers to paint warning triangles on accident-prone roads, exemplifies low-cost, high-impact innovation rooted in collective action. The 'Chekutty dolls' (dolls made from handloom sarees that were soiled and damaged by floodwaters in the Chendamangalam weaving cluster in Cochin, Kerala) received international recognition and praise for their role as a powerful symbol of resilience and hope following the devastating 2018 Kerala floods. The dolls gained significant global attention when the World Bank placed a bulk order for their distribution at the UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Geneva, Switzerland. This initiative demonstrated how a community transformed tragedy into a story of survival and mutual support. Thus, a novel idea with a social mission at its core became a sign of recovery, hope, and confidence for the people of Kerala, in general, and for the Chendamangalam weavers, in particular. Both these initiatives – Orange Alert and Chekutty dolls – align with the social innovation theory by demonstrating how grassroots creativity, trust networks, and local knowledge produce sustainable social change.

Pure Living achieves a balance between financial sustainability and community benefit by embedding social objectives within its value chain, rather than treating them as supplementary activities. Revenue generated from

product sales is reinvested to expand initiatives, support producer groups, and foster innovation. Despite its positive social impact, Pure Living faces several challenges, including limited access to capital, scaling difficulties, competition from lower-cost, mass-produced goods, and dependence on consumer awareness for market growth. Additional operational challenges include managing decentralised production units and ensuring consistent quality. In response, Pure Living prioritises innovation, strategic partnerships, and continuous experimentation with new products and processes. The organisation leverages community networks, volunteers, and collaborations with aligned entities to broaden its reach and reduce costs. Through adaptability, grassroots innovation, and a strong commitment to its core values, Pure Living continues to address these challenges while upholding its principles of social entrepreneurship.

### Discussion

The Pure Living case reinforces established scholarship in social entrepreneurship by exemplifying a hybrid enterprise model that aligns closely with the Triple Bottom Line framework and Social Innovation Theory. Consistent with prior research, the case demonstrates how social enterprises can simultaneously generate economic value while advancing social inclusion and environmental sustainability. Pure Living illustrates that financial viability need not come at the expense of social or ecological objectives; instead, these dimensions can be mutually reinforcing when embedded within the enterprise's core mission and operational strategy. The case highlights the importance of community participation, reinvestment of surplus, and context-sensitive innovation as central mechanisms for sustaining long-term social impact. These findings support the existing literature, which posits that participatory governance and local embeddedness are critical drivers of legitimacy and resilience in social enterprises.

At the same time, the Pure Living case challenges dominant growth-oriented narratives within social entrepreneurship that prioritise rapid scaling and market expansion. Rather than pursuing aggressive growth, Pure Living emphasises local impact, decentralised production, and ethical consistency. This approach reflects an alternative pathway to sustainability, one that values depth of impact over breadth and prioritises long-term community well-being over short-term financial gains. Such a model challenges the assumption that scalability is the primary indicator of success in social enterprises, foregrounding qualitative outcomes such as trust, empowerment, and environmental stewardship.

Moreover, Pure Living's operational philosophy closely mirrors Kerala's broader development trajectory, which is shaped by high social awareness, strong cooperative traditions, and participatory forms of governance. These contextual factors play a significant role in enabling the enterprise's success and differentiating it from social business models rooted in purely market-driven environments<sup>[21]</sup>. While the direct replication of the Pure Living model in other regions may require adaptation to differing institutional and cultural contexts, the case offers transferable principles. These include community-centred governance, ethical production practices, and strategic

reinvestment of surplus, all of which provide valuable insights for developing sustainable, locally grounded social enterprises in diverse settings.

### Conclusion

This study demonstrates that social entrepreneurship can successfully integrate social objectives with economic achievement when grounded in strong ethical values and shaped by local contexts. The case of Pure Living illustrates the practical application of the Triple Bottom Line and Social Innovation principles through sustainable production methods, inclusive livelihood creation, and active community engagement. Rather than treating social impact and financial sustainability as mutually exclusive, Pure Living incorporates both into its core business model, showing that these objectives can be mutually reinforcing over time.

Located within Kerala's unique socio-economic environment, the enterprise benefits from high social awareness, strong community networks, and supportive institutional conditions. These contextual factors are vital to enabling community-focused entrepreneurship to address social and environmental challenges effectively. The case demonstrates how responsible sourcing, ethical production, and support for local artisans not only promote social and ecological well-being but also enhance brand value and long-term sustainability.

The findings of this study enhance understanding of social entrepreneurship by offering empirical evidence from a regional context within a developing economy. The results suggest that social enterprises aligned with local needs and values can provide scalable, viable alternatives to conventional, profit-driven business models. Furthermore, the Pure Living case demonstrates that organisations addressing environmental and social challenges are well-positioned for commercial success when they deliver measurable impact and long-term benefits. Overall, the study underscores the importance of fostering inclusive, ethical, and sustainable entrepreneurial models as essential contributors to balanced, resilient development.

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