

## Letting go, yet holding on: Paradoxes, Randomness and Spontaneity

Paradoxical ways of thinking often trigger a very contemplative mode of resolving dilemma. We do not solve the problem but the problem unknots itself. The trick seems to be: not to try too hard, not to hold on to a position or perspective too long or too stubbornly, remain open to surprises, including self-contradictions. But some confusion among various feelings of commitment, persistence, obsession, determination and arrogance is inevitable. At the Honey Bee Network, after completing twenty five years, we can say that several such knots have resolved themselves in a rather spontaneous manner. That is the point I wish to elaborate here. We did not know exactly how will we progress, what key institutional forms will be needed and whether we will go that way at all. I remember a question once asked by a school student at Manjil.in, a school for children of household servants run by my dear friend and former student, Ravi Gulati: "Professor, did you set up SRISTI, then GIAN and then NIF because the goals of each of the earlier institution had been achieved?" I was flummoxed; I had to sheepishly admit that it was not true. I answered in a way that spontaneity of institutional evolution could be better understood. Different roles were to be performed by each institution. Over time, these roles have been better defined, some have expanded but some have constricted too. After all, as I have often argued, 'one can not add without subtraction, when it comes to making a major breakthrough in life'.

Initially, we focused only on grassroots innovations, conservation and augmentation of biodiversity and associated traditional knowledge systems. Slowly we realised that many regions which had high biodiversity also had high poverty, high drop out rate and poor education level. We obviously did not want to pursue the goal of conservation by keeping people poor. So educational innovations became imperative. The creativity of teachers and that too in government schools in which the poorest children study became an important policy goal. The role of institutions in conservation of resource through common property management system came into focus as collective creativity and institutions were found important for sustaining individual propensity to innovate.

The role of technology and institutions in strengthening the ability of local communities to cope with environmental risks was highly complimented by cultural beliefs, norms and creativity. That's how the four vectors of SRISTI evolved: technology, institution, education and culture. The Grassroots Innovation Augmentation Network (GIAN) evolved to link innovation, investment and enterprises, the three corners of the golden triangle for rewarding creativity at grassroots and enterprises in Gujarat to begin with and later in the states of Maharashtra and Goa. It shared the best incubator award at the hands of the then President, Dr A P J Abdul Kalam with IIT madras. The National Innovation Foundation(NIF) took up the innovations of unorganised sector and children. Still, many other links in the innovation ecosystem remained to be addressed such as boosting innovations by college students, professionals, supporting start-up by both student and other innovative government functionaries for meeting the unmet social needs.

The emergence of new roles required now ways of empowering various new actors who got into the fold of the Network. When we had difficulty in adding value to scouted innovations and traditional knowledge, a Mumbai-based philanthropic trust Sadhbhav Foundation approached us through their member, Anil Bhai Kamdar and asked me, "Professor, we have found out every thing about you, how you raise or use resources for pursuing the mission of the HBN. What is the one wish that you want us to help you with?" That is how the natural product laboratory came about. By then the Ahmedabad Educational Society had generously allotted an old mess building in the student hostel complex, near Gujarat University, for housing the SRISTI and the laboratory. It managed to develop large number of herbal pesticides, veterinary medicines, human ointments etc. It also pooled thousands of microbial cultures isolated from soil samples collected during last 34 shodhyatras in different parts of the country. Only five states are left to cover viz., Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Goa and Andmans and Nicobar Islands. Sharing the knowldge about earlier scouted grassroots innovations and discovering new ones, learning about culture, biodiversity, and other resource management institutions in our vast country by walking has been very humbling experience. It all sarded during a conversation on collaborative learning from creative and compassionate communities. Did we know 25 years ago that we will walk through entire length and breadth of the country, surely not. We also did not realise that many young professional students and others who had good ideas are constrained to get even small financial support. Thus some of us pooled a small fund called the Sristi Social Innovation Fund (sif.sristi.org) to support students and others with good ideas who NIF could not support. A database of 187,000 projects by over 500,00 students emerged through techpedia.sristi.org but left the critical task of taking innovations forward except through SRISTI-Gandhian Young Technological Innovation Awards and informal mentoring. A crowdfunding platform is also being developed along with an online collaborative platform to encourage young innovators to work with each other and create both IP protected as well as open source solutions for social good.

There are still many gaps. I look forward to hear from you as to how do we connect corporations as well as executives in their individual capacity with communities? Such connections will trigger or transform the aspiration and culture on both sides, hopefully for a more reciprocal and responsive relationship. Maybe, now when even the large corporations are trying to learn from our experience of over 25 years in dealing with frugal green grassroots innovations, the hope of an empathetic eco-system emerging and dynamically balanced by creative paradoxical tensions, spontaneity and randomness will become stronger.



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