

Learning to create culture of celebrating innovations

Indian society has a great penchant for celebrations. There are rituals for celebrating seasonal changes, harvesting of crops, stages in life, festivals for all reasons and of course victories small and big, recent or eons ago. And in the midst of all festivities, when did we learn to celebrate innovations. Honourable President of India by starting a Festival of Innovations (FOIN) at Rashtrapati Bhavan has created a new ritual, a new idiom of festivities, a new reason for celebration. But will it percolate down to every town, village, school, college, industry or enterprise?

Let me ask a different question. What should we do to ensure that it percolates down to grassroots level. What are the institutional processes that must be triggered to create a new culture, so that inertia so evident in different sectors gives way to search for innovations in every sector and at all levels.

With the 900 million cell phones, nobody doubts Indian capacity to absorb and assimilate a new technology quickly. But then the same country also can live with thousand of year old cooking stove design, with three stones/bricks to burn the wood. Millions of houses still use such stoves. Many of the readers must have got their shoes mended by a cobbler sitting on a roadside. The tools he uses for mending shoes were designed when shoes had nails. But the shoe design changed, but not the tools. When new designs do emerge, we do often experiment and adopt the solutions, often good, sometimes not so good. Junk food is almost a habit with younger generation, but when have we celebrated Sattvik, or healthy food. We treat such foods often as a sign of being out of step with modernity. But when SRISTI started celebrating traditional food festival-Sattvik, its importance began to be felt. After 13 years, sattvik has become a ritual to be awaited and remembered in Ahmedabad city. So much so that when exhibition of innovation alone was organised, we did not get even 5-6000 people, by coupling it with food festival, numbers went up to 50000 in three days.

First lesson thus seems to be to couple or blend celebration of innovation with other celebration as well in places where there are such opportunities available.

Second lesson seems to be that innovations are likely to be treated with more respect when they are recognised, respected and rewarded in public functions. Ever since, Dr A P J Abdul Kalam, former President of India started giving grassroots innovation awards, these acquired much more importance than before. When Ms Pratibha Patil invited the innovation exhibition to the President House, its status went up. When President Shri Pranb Mukherjee converted it into FOIN, the

celebration went up to another level. May be every Governor of the states, and collector of each district should also organise FOIN at respective levels.

Third lesson is that while discussion on innovation has increased manifold in the recent years, sustained support for innovations, which too at early stages must also increase. Unless we support nascent ideas, occasions for celebrating small and big successes will not arise. Sometimes, we should celebrate failures too, after all don't we then signal that taking risk matters, effort is more important sometimes than the result. Have we not celebrated certain journeys in our life without caring about the result at the end.

Fourth lesson is that celebration should not require self-promotion and outreach. If we had to await the innovators, by now, we would have hardly received a few thousand entries. But the fact that the Honey Bee Network started reaching out to search innovators in slums, villages, small and big towns, we could reach tens of thousands of innovators all over the country. An authentic culture of celebrating innovations must not let innovators seek recognition, instead it should pro-actively seek them out and celebrate their contributions.

Fifth lesson points to a very major weakness of Indian society. For long, ideas awaited national recognition unless outsiders, i.e. foreign countries recognised their potential. This has changed to a great extent after HBN but still a lot more remains to be done. Indian society must be the first to recognise good ideas, innovative contributions before others notice them. Many innovators recognised and supported by the Network and National Innovation Foundation first have later got global recognition, Murgunandan, inventor of sanitary napkin machine is a good example. Similarly, Mansukh Bhai Prajapati of Mitti Cool fame got global recognition only after the Network recognised and supported him. But are not these exceptions?. May be if hunger increases in Indian polity, more cases of this kind will occur.

Sixth lesson is that national recognition must be preceded by recognition at all levels in society. There are several cases where grassroots innovators recognised by SRISTI or supported by GIAN or NIF was recognised by the respective community or village. It should have been otherwise. It was proposed by the Network once that on republic day, every village should recognise outstanding achievers and innovators from outside. On Independence Day they should recognise local innovators.

Seventh lesson is that at all levels, leaders should take some time off every week or fortnight to have lunch, dinner or

tea with innovators, listen to them and leverage their ideas. Be it Prime Minister, Chief Minister, sectorial heads, secretaries, or other head of private or public enterprises, everyone should listen to, learn from, and leverage inclusive innovations. Once we came across a school in Nashik while pursuing Shodhyatra where names of those who had achieved distinction after studying in that school were written on the wall at the entrance. Why cannot we write

the name of local, regional and national innovators at public places as appropriate so that need for exploring innovative solution to problems all around us is felt by everyone.

I hope that readers will send more suggestions by which culture of celebrating creativity and inclusive innovations grows in India in near future in every school, college, farm, firm and enterprise. How else we can conserve

natural resources better, and improve the quality of life of common people. We have to shed the habit of living with problems unsolved indefinitely. Inertia will give way to innovations, once we start celebrating small and big innovations joyously, and innovation become subject of every day conversation.



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Rajiben knows that times have changed and people don't follow many customs prevalent then. She still gets amused, annoyed and, at times, surprised. "Things have changed. The way people eat, talk to elders, dress and live is very different from how we used to live," says the 106-year-old.

Rajiben was born in Bapupura village of Mansa taluka in Gandhinagar to Jeeti-

ben and Dalsangbhai. She never went to school and had always been engaged in farming and related activities, like taking care of the cattle or collecting fodder. At the age of 10 years, she got married to Mangjibhai. The couple was blessed with five daughters and three sons. In those times, there were no dairies and they would prepare their own buttermilk and ghee. The present dairy was established after all their children got married.

Rajiben has used traditional medicines throughout her life. Earlier, women used *ardusi* (vasaka), *tulsi* (basil), *arni* (wind killer) and *goli* (ivy gourd/*coccinia indica*) leaves. If a child fell ill, ash was applied on his/her entire body for treatment. "If anybody was hurt by a grass cutting tool, the bruise or wound would be bandaged after applying *arni* leaves. When buffaloes would fail to come in heat, they would be fed *sava* and *gol* (dill seeds and jaggery)," shares Rajiben. She laments the fact that in olden days, buffaloes never fell sick. People took good care of them and healthy, unadulterated fodder was available. These days, buffaloes fall sick due to toxic wastes in the fodder. For preserving food grains in olden days, they used to mix grains with ash or add *neem* leaves.

In earlier days, Rajiben had financial constraints. She did farming, labour and cattle-rearing all her life. There were no machines to grind food grains. "The household income was limited. We sold *bajra* (pearl millet) to earn extra income. The times were such that we did not have enough money to pay fees for our children's education," reminisces Rajiben. During drought, people dug up new wells if the existing ones dried up.

Untouchability was strictly followed. "If we had to go out with people of a lower caste, we had to purify ourselves by sprinkling water before entering the house." In those days, parents fixed the match for their children and got them

married at an early age. "The husband and wife could see each other only after marriage. These days, children approve prospective bridegroom and only then, the marriage is arranged," a slightly miffed Rajiben says. She also shares that she never sat with or talked to the elders, be it at her father's house or her in-laws. "Women always covered their faces with a *dupatta* (stole) in presence of elders."

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