

## Disrupting Dalit destinies through inclusive innovation: transforming social relations

Institutional inertia many a times reinforces technological inertia as well. When social relations are based on extreme drudgery involved in tasks performed by disadvantaged community, the dominant groups consider perpetuation of such relations almost obligatory. Technological innovations which may obviate the need for those tasks don't evolve. The affected people lack tools and opportunities and the dominant section finds existing arrangements quite convenient for maintaining the power asymmetries. In many countries, even the slaves during colonial times ventured to innovate in order to overcome inertia. We have examples of Dalit farmers like Dada Khobragade, developer of HMT variety of paddy, having transformed the lives of millions of growers without getting much return. He did get life time achievement award at the hands of the President of India through National Innovation Foundation . Can we have more Dadas and more innovations like HMT variety so that change comes from within and for larger social good. The Dalit innovators and entrepreneurs like George Washington Carver, a black scientist in USA, famous for developing peanut butter and many other technological innovations, created as public goods or as open source solutions for the benefit of even those white farmers who had dominated blacks for a century.

The history of injustice with Dalit communities has not subdued their spirit. There are thus several instances of some of them having come out of low self-image, debilitating belief systems and breaking free from the culture of subjugation and learned helplessness, both voluntary and involuntary. Sometimes, extreme events are a historical necessity to break institutionalised inertia, even if they impose huge pain and inflict completely-avoidable shame on the affected people. Most constructive outcome of the Una incident of flogging Dalits and similar happenings in various parts of the country— Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra or Karnataka, etc., is the resolve of the Dalit community to abjure the processing of animal carcass and other such menial tasks. Till we put an end to such practices, technological innovations will not emerge to add dignity and efficiency to these tasks. So many *safai karmcharis* (sanitation workers) still clean human excreta manually and carry it on their head, despite ostensible ban on such practices. Likewise, the fact that sewage workers who die while clearing our muck, get no insurance or other compensation is too well known to merit repetition. No amount of condemnation will mask the pain of those who are affected by the persistent negligence of their working conditions for centuries.

One way is to struggle for restoration of rights of the Dalits to process carcass or pursue other such menial profession safely and with dignity. Though, I don't agree in principle with that approach, I realise that till new alternatives emerge, some people might continue with these. They need to be provided security and dignity else a crisis of public health is already in the offing. It will

not happen only through police or public pronouncements.

Collective tax has been used in the past as means of punishing communities which fail to rein in the extremist elements, and when need arises, they don't give evidence against the culprits despite knowing them. Maybe, invoking such provisions may act as a deterrent against a small fringe which takes law into its hand. Alternatively, one can trigger discussions among the leaders of these communities and get a joint public pronouncement that amity will be restored and discrimination will be stopped. Mutual respect will be restored through Gandhian methods. National polity is quite clear on the subject that nobody can be allowed to take law in their hands. But, it is also known that police alone can't provide protection. Social amity is must for long-term peace and tranquillity in the society.

Why should we not let diverse social aspirations influence the evolution of technologies and social and professional roles? If we need to set up small-scale, hygienic, high value-adding flaying and carcass-processing units, anyone should be welcome to set up a start-up. Attractive challenge innovation award should be announced urgently to invite innovators from all over the world to submit their entries to mechanise these functions, make them dignified, safe, affordable and amenable for operation at small, decentralised level. The Atal Innovation Mission should come forward and announce call for both manual and powered machines for the purpose. Special incubators need to be set up for virtual in-situ and physical incubation of enterprises by Dalits and other disadvantaged SC/ST youth.

There are several other things that we all can do. We should stop giving our caste names to our children. Sadhana and I decided this about our children 38 years ago. We had no idea how our life would shape up. But we were clear that our children should not get any advantage, if at all, because of their association with us or our surname. I hope more young people will come forward and stop flaunting their caste identity. I am sure that inclusive, innovative and entrepreneurial India will rise above these narrow identities and choose to identify themselves with bigger and more pervasive, inclusive identities. Dalits deserve dignified opportunities to make quantum jump in their social and economic aspirations. We are all collectively responsible for their plight. We will all have to join the struggle for their liberation from the demeaning destiny assigned to them for centuries. Innovations in not only technologies but also institutions are the need of the hour. Inclusive development may then become a reality for historically excluded ones in near future.



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