

Knowing Differently

Innovation and Sustainable Development

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If the production and transmission of new knowledge is to have a genuine innovative edge, it must be recognised that this is intrinsically a political act: inherently critical and subversive. There must be discontent with the social status quo. Spaces for such an attitude to be nurtured are fast vanishing. As social scientists, can we postulate any form of innovation that is desirable, which can meet these contemporary global challenges?

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The word innovation has two popular usages currently. In the first place, it is used within the context of science and technology. Here, it refers to the act or process of introducing something new: a new idea, method or device. However, it is subtly different from two similar words – invention and discovery. The difference is in its political usurpage: something merely new (invented or discovered, as it were) is irrelevant, useless; unless the idea can be translated into profits on the market. It is only the latter – a new something that can, by implication, be conferred with ‘intellectual property rights’ – the right for some corporate entity to seek profit privileges, that is called an innovation.

What then are we to make of the term ‘social innovation’ and similar usages, which are the second form of the term fast gaining popularity? The idea of ‘social innovation’ is being marketed as diligently and thoroughly as the other incongruous term, somewhat an oxymoron – ‘social entrepreneurship’. With both these coupled words, it is the same underlying politics of the market hegemony that is delivering odious, insidious messages.

These terms are problematic. In the first place, the idea of social innovation seems to suggest that the problems of society – be they economic, political or social, are all amenable to correction by application of clever and intelligent new ideas, methods or devices. Use the new technology of the internet (say, the online market or the social media), for example, and you can instantly bridge hitherto unsolved social problems of resource distribution/ access or various iniquities and divides (social, political or economic). The challenges of development, hitherto the forte of social scientists, are *reduced to* mere techno-managerial challenges. They are now the domain of young upstarts from technology or management schools, whose internet or social enterprise ‘start-ups’ are going to deliver instant nirvana where decades of development planning, State and social sector intervention and the thoughtful efforts of social scientists have failed.

Now, no one can make the naïve case that the new technologies are neutral. The internet and social media can foster hatred and divisiveness, or encourage communications within inbred social networks that reinforce existing thoughts and tastes. This reduces the chances that one’s favourite ideas, formulations and prejudices are challenged by other perspectives.

Online markets can foster large players and aggregators who crowd out others, not on the basis of actually owning any tangible resources or providing any tangible services themselves, but solely by leveraging information and connectivities and deploying sophisticated informational technologies to perform arbitrage between buyers and sellers of products and services; often gathering supernormal profits into the bargain. Control and access to information about private individuals has led to serious concerns about individual privacy and freedom, as in the case of Facebook's experiments with tweaking news reports and posts or with regard to the government of India's Aadhar scheme.

Conversely, the new technologies can give shape to alternative economic and social philosophies such as the sharing economy, the thrift economy, gifting, recycling, transactions based on trusting strangers; they have also given us the Wikipedia and WikiLeaks. Clever start-ups and aggregators are disrupting inefficient established markets, such as in publishing or radio call taxis or home services like plumbers or maids, and delivering great value to customers as well as sensible incomes to service providers. For example, many engineering graduates are taxi drivers with Ola, which is enabling them to earn decent monthly incomes that are often three or four times what their professional qualification would fetch on the job market. (At the same time, it is not to be forgotten that e-commerce platforms can aggressively crowd out other forms of relationship and even target to draw the poorest peoples at the bottom of the pyramid into market based transaction networks, not necessarily to spend on the right things).

In such a mixed scenario, it is not the case that there is no place for 'social innovation' or 'social entrepreneurship'. The mixed scenario obtains at the manifest level of social and economic forms. But there is one specific, important ideological trend underlying this phenomenon, which it is necessary to characterise and expose. Many a time, 'social innovation' or 'social entrepreneurship' can be a masquerade for techno-capitalist encroachment on valuable social aspects like individual freedom, privacy, agency, or community. I mentioned Facebook and Aadhar earlier. Let's look at another example in some detail.

Sometimes, a scheme may deliver value to several customers and suppliers; yet it may insidiously be introducing market principles into areas not previously mediated by the market. For supporters of marketization, this is valorous and desirable. But as social scientists, we may ask, is it so? For example, a portal may be set up to enable people at the bottom of the pyramid to seek assistance in the form of very small loans to shore up their activities. This is typical social innovation and entrepreneurship; it creates new possibilities – new people can access resources and capable people (who did not previously provide charitable assistance) will now support them. Previously, church agencies and other traditional fundraising outfits raised money and channelled them through professional social workers and charities. Now, a new breed of intermediaries helps the cause of writing and posting about the needs of the aid seekers; other players similarly mediate the conversation and the process.

What is this doing to ideas the aid seekers have about themselves; to the ideas of those involved in the mediation; to the new supporters; to the very process of development? In

short: to other possible conversations about why and how the aidees have come to be dispossessed and on what terms should their integration into the ‘developed’ mainstream be negotiated. Should this mean that artisanal fishermen, forest-dwelling tribals, sex workers, and other subjugated people should no more take to the streets to bring attention to the continued processes of marginalisation and discrimination they face? Often, underlying the brave new idea of enabling a ‘first step on the economic ladder’ that fancy social innovation and entrepreneurship represents, is hidden a patronising stance built on assumptions about market and development, which support the quelling of troubling questions or activism that challenges mainstream notions. There are two levels at which there is a masquerade here: one, innovation in mere technology or management will not always or necessarily recast vexing social issues of conflict or divides; two, the extent to which the pursuit of nirvana through the means of market and techno-managerial savvy is the very creator of these divides and conflicts, is being papered over; and a false assurance about these approaches being able to solve problems they have, created in the first place, perpetuates a vicious cycle of increased divides and misery.

Social innovation often means that the terms of integration or development are already cleverly and firmly set. (It does not matter that they are made available through fanciful apps, tablets or platforms, which offer the dazzle of choice that the market usually does – a choice of six colours, flavours or wallpaper themes). The terms imply that choices about technology, market, other key factors of production and its social forms of organisation, have been designed into the developmental growth path being offered (sorry, no dazzle: only one, not six). Engineers should stop asking why there are no jobs available to them at decent wages when the brave new world offers them the opportunity to drive Ola cabs for good pickings. The highly valorous Indian middle class can blithely shrug responsibility for farmer suicides or the dozens of other compelling social disasters punctuating our newfound national impatience to count in the ranks of the developed: with a few clicks, I am able to wipe off those concerns and conscience pricks with small aid donations.

A Deeper Inquiry

I have picked on the terms social innovation and social entrepreneurship to create an opening for a deeper inquiry. It is a peculiar hocus of the times that a Potus can be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for making some sound bites, and then go on in his actions to wage the largest amount of war in history. I am not going to dwell on all the conundrums and incongruities besetting the current scenario of development. We are familiar with the broad story: at a time when enormous material and informational wealth has been created, disparities have grown massively, at an even faster rate. The social and political barriers to overcoming these disparities appear to be stronger – the UN is totally ineffectual; the control of a very few super-rich capitalists over governments, media and private information about you, me, and every individual; along with their links to the dubious economy (think Panama papers and London parties), stands exposed. Seen from another perspective, it appears to be a rash of institutional failures – the global economy is spluttering to a halt; modern medicine seems to be at an impasse where superbugs resistant to all antibiotics have emerged (with no new

generation of antibiotics on the horizon); the educational system seems to be producing disaffection amongst all sorts of people, and so on. Civil strife, hunger, war and immigration have all reached new highs, while efforts to coordinate a global response to climate change appear rather feeble. Against the backdrop of such massive, complex multidimensional problems, it would be foolhardy to expect 'social innovation' to deliver the goods.

At the bottom of this argument is a very simple truth that Einstein stated many years ago – you cannot solve a problem by using the same kind of thinking that created it.

If, for that reason, technological innovation and 'social innovation' are somewhat suspect, where does that leave us? As social scientists, can we postulate any form of innovation that is desirable, which can meet these contemporary global challenges? In his 1999 Presidential Address to the American Sociological Association, Alejandro Portes (2000) offers a typology of alternative goals, means and outcomes, illustrated by sociological writings and research. Let me quote from his speech to the American Sociological Association:

... [If my analysis is correct] sociology's chance at helping rebuild society at century's end does not hinge on the elaboration of grand engineering blueprints, but instead in careful analyses of social processes, awareness of their concealed and unintended manifestations, and sustained efforts to understand the participants' own reactions to their situation. Without this painstaking effort, any organizational blueprint no matter how well devised, is likely to yield unexpected outcomes, this following the fate of so many failed interventions of the past. (Portes 2000: 14-15).

Cautioning against building institutions and programmes "grounded on grand blueprints" Portes calls for emphasizing the "dialectics of social life" by taking into account the situations of relevant actors (p. 15). He defines the principal challenge for the discipline at the century's end as analysing and understanding the 'contrary-to-expectations' family of outcomes. These assertions apply to several state interventions in the developing world. Interventions designed by the state and/or international agencies are typically grounded on 'blueprints' overlooking social processes and social relations being constructed and reconstructed within inequality structures. State programmes and interventions in the developing world often target the poor by typically focusing on economic change as the sole basis for addressing inequality. Changing global conditions, attempts at synergistic efforts, and increasing role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have, however, created new possibilities.

An essential dimension of interventions is design per se. How does one design a developmental intervention so that it delivers against the promise of its designed goals? The most vexing problems seem to be unintended consequences that crop up somewhere down the line, totally unforeseen because they pertain to aspects and links in the chain of interconnections that were not imagined or taken into account in the models used to make/design the intervention plans. We must take note that 'design' is not a one-time event, like a grand blueprint, but something that is an ongoing, adaptive, evolutionary learning-and-application sort of process.

Practitioners at various levels, unlike theorists, are not so much confounded by these conundrums and situations. Whether they are breasting the problem at micro or macro levels, good and experienced practitioners usually have a strong feel for what works and what does not, to create genuine lasting improvement in a situation. They use their tacit knowledge, gained through deep years of experience, to intuit and foresee patterns and connections that are not so obvious, and to make judgements about design choices. However, tacit knowing has its downsides too: it is based on perceptions and mental models that cannot be communicated, compared or validated with another person; it may fail to give a handle on an entirely new situation; and maybe unable to engage with rapid or radical changes as opposed to familiar ones.

Indeed, tacit and explicit is just a simple categorisation of ways of knowing. John Heron and Peter Reason (1997) have provided a powerful framework to understand these: they talk about four essential ways of knowing, which they term experiential, presentational, propositional and practical¹. This is a very deeply considered and complex model and it will not be fair to attempt a summary here. All I can do is to provide a one-line glimpse of the essential and thereby distinctive feature of each of these four modes of knowing.

Experiential knowing refers to the immediate impress of the raw encounter, unmediated and unprocessed, which “articulates reality through inner resonance with what there is and through perceptually enacting its forms of appearing”. **Presentational** knowing emerges from and is grounded in the experiential; it is “...an intuitive grasp of the significance that is symbolised in graphic, plastic, musical, vocal and verbal art forms... These forms symbolise both our felt attunement with the world and the primary meaning embedded in our enactment of its appearing”. **Propositional** knowing is our conceptual knowledge by descriptions “...that come with the mastery of concepts and classes that language bestows”. **Practical** knowing is knowing how to do something...it fulfils the three prior forms and brings them to fruition in purposive deeds.

In detailing this extended epistemology of the four ways of knowing, Heron and Reason have provided a powerful bridge between theory and practice. Indeed, all forms of mastery and excellence, in any field, arise from marshalling and harnessing multiple ways of knowing, into a long-term praxis. Heron and Reason’s extended epistemology was formulated as part of developing and decoding a particular approach called Cooperative Inquiry (similar to action research). There are many other contemporary approaches to successful engagement with complex scenarios. For example, one is the home grown approach (based on Indian cultural ethos and understanding) to inquire into processes in human groups at the Sumedhas Academy for Human Context (www.sumedhas.org).

Elsewhere, I have built a detailed argument showing how various approaches to deep inquiry and meaningful action, providing scope for alignment and consensus amongst fractious contenders, all are united in their harnessing of these multiple ways of knowing. Often, the trick is in finding deliberate ways to conflate and triangulate between our embedded conceptual models and the impress of the moment, as well as with models (propositional

knowing), tacitly significant symbols (presentational) and dispositional elements (experiential) carried by other actors in the situation.

Across centuries and ages, human cultures and civilisations have realised the frailty and fungibility of purely rational knowing, and developed sophisticated methods and practices to enhance this with extended ways of knowing. It is the pole position accorded to rationalism, the foremost theology of modern times, which has disdained all other forms of knowing and elevated rational-analytic logic alone to the status of dependable knowledge. This is ascribed to the way of Science, and social sciences have feebly tried to stay within these bounds. Innovation, then, is today limited by definition and market consensus to the new that can be rationally or logically adduced.

However, philosophers of science like Michael Polanyi (1946) and Bruno Latour (1991) show that while science offers a disciplined approach, innovation and discovery within science do not arise solely from the pursuit of logical and rational thinking. Innovations are strongly propelled by intuition and by unclear sources of creative knowing. Social scientists like John Heron and Peter Reason, Richard Sennett (2008), Matthew Crawford (2008), David Abram (1996), Hugh Brody (1981), and Pranee Liamputtong and Jean Rumbold (2008) have meticulously detailed the value of other ways of knowing. Action research methodologies integrate practical knowings. These, and some schools of psychotherapy, recognise such integral knowing, which they term variously as meta-rational or postconceptual knowing.

As a practitioner in community development a few decades ago, I was impressed with the way a team from NADEL University conducted multidisciplinary research across continents to come up with a significant model about rural livelihoods (Högger and Baumgartner 2004), that was later amalgamated into the DFID Sustainable Livelihoods (Farrington et al 1999) framework. The Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) approach (Chambers 1983), a simple toolkit of methods to come to grips with the contours of a rural situation, and Tushaar Shah's (1996) framework for the design of self-governing cooperatives, are other examples that represent sophisticated pieces of theoretical development with heuristic beginnings. This proves my earlier point that practitioners can learn to handle tacit and multiple ways of knowing, and develop sophisticated ways to model reality and shape their responses. Of course, the examples quoted are the rarer instances when these have been teased and developed into more explicit and shareable propositional models.

Tushaar Shah has purposively employed design thinking to develop his model for the governance of cooperatives. Design thinking refers to an approach, which employs the cognitive methods and processes used by designers to solve problems in other realms or situations. Among other things, it relies on visual play as well as repeated development of prototypes which may fail but provide insights toward a better solution. Another relatively new but powerful approach is Systems Thinking. This term, in fact, refers to a wide array of approaches, all of which emphasise common principles that characterise real world and living systems. It is therefore sometimes called the 'science of organisation', referring to the principles by which biological and social systems are organised or ordered, which

distinguishes them from the reductionist and mechanistic thinking of traditional science. Examples of such principles of organisation could be interconnectedness and feedback. The Viable Systems Methodology developed by Stafford Beer (1985) is an approach to designing viable organisations that depends on intrinsic universal principles of organisation, such as the management of complexity, which provides a powerful tool to analyse any scale of organisation or design a new one.

One factor that distinguishes these various contemporary approaches – whether of the action research sort like Action Inquiry (Torbert 2015) or Cooperative Inquiry (1996) or the Sumedhas approach (<http://www.sumedhas.org/index.php/management-people/sumedhavin-perspective1>), or design thinking, or systems thinking – is the degree to which they have developed theoretical frameworks that make explicit their approaches to using multiple ways of knowing to delve deeper into the reality and thereby, obviate the gross errors that can result from an overdependence on purely rationalistic or purely tacit ways of knowing. As I previously mentioned, the extended epistemology of the four ways of knowing was articulated alongside the approach called Cooperative Inquiry.

Most of the extant theory dealing with systems thinking approaches (systemic practice) makes it appear that systems thinking is a cerebral, rational way to understand interconnections, feedback and the like. This is dangerous; as a matter of fact, like most sensible interventionists, many experienced systemic practitioners rely on their tacit understanding and multiple ways of knowing to get closer to the complex reality. In order to make explicit this aspect, this author has developed a framework called Immersive Systemic Knowing (2016), which offers a broad ontoepistemology that incorporates multiple ways of knowing. In particular, it adds to Heron and Reason's extended epistemology by postulating a mode of consciousness and a fifth way of knowing called the Deep Intelligence Field, as the true origin of insight and innovation.

If the production and transmission of new knowledge is to have a genuine innovative edge, it must be recognised that this is intrinsically a political act: inherently critical and subversive. There must be discontent with the social status quo. Spaces for such an attitude to be nurtured are fast vanishing. The mass media and the universities are being possessed by fundamentalists of the market or other varieties; and thus, the very definition of innovation has been totally masculinised and de-potentised. It stands for market domination, grand posturing, great blueprints, and other tumescent alpha male pursuits; rather than the true, abiding, persistent, gentle, nurturing creativity, which is required to solve the problems for which humanity needs innovation.

To achieve this sort of innovation, social scientists must, first of all, stand up and fight for an education that demands the teaching of multiple ways of knowing and thinking, and reverse the epistemicide that colonisation and the spread of English language engendered. A good start has been made with many new institutions exposing students to real life experiences, either connected with their chosen professional stream (project / internships) or, sometimes, a

foray into something different (rural exposure; semesters abroad). However, this is done with a dim realisation that practical exposure, immersion and learning counts; not with an adequately clear understanding and conscious deployment of ways of knowing and its pedagogic implications. More nuanced versions being experimented with are to be seen in (for example) the Azim Premji University; the Development Management Academy, Patna; the Barefoot Academy at TISS, Swaraj University, Udaipur; Samvada-Baduku, Bengaluru; and, most interestingly, in several new online MOOCs for practical learning such as the University of the Third Horizon, and the veritable explosion of how-to videos on sharing sites like YouTube and Vimeo. We need a movement that now begins to discount purely rational and abstract theorization in favour of one that values practically situated and verified learning.

The other serious implication for the politics of development, by logical extension, is that the knowings held in the margins – the knowings held by the dispossessed and the outcast, might actually represent the knowings that are required to get us out of the messes that the mainstream knowing of the merely literarily qualified experts have created.

Conventional innovation is usually at the level of theory (propositional, thinking) alone, or practice (practical, doing) alone; but unless these are harmonised with one another and also with essential being (experiential) and re-learning (aided by the presentational), it remains of limited value. Of course, such conventional innovation is obviously simpler to deliver in the realms of technology or management theory; rather than in social realities of human institutions and developmental challenges. But sticking to what is easy is why we are caught in this vicious vortex of extended maldevelopment. This is a major argument that needs much more space to establish effectively than available here; I have detailed it elsewhere with my model of immersive systemic knowing (2016).

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