

A hive of ideas

By Peter Day
Presenter, BBC Radio 4 and BBC World Service

The Honey Bee Network is one of the most remarkable organisations on earth, and if you have never heard of it, then you probably ought to have done.

I first encountered it in full poignant, passionate flood in the city of Ahmedabad just after the 2001 earthquake in the province of Gujarat, which killed almost 20,000 people.

The damage caused by the earthquake was still evident in the litter of bricks at the Indian Institute of Management at Ahmedabad, where the Network's founder Anil Gupta is a Professor.

His subject there is entrepreneurship, but his speciality - and the thing that makes the Honeybee Network so extraordinary - is that this is grassroots entrepreneurship; ideas produced by village entrepreneurs.

It all started some 15 years ago, when Professor Gupta started thinking about the ideas of other people that he was exploiting in his work on sustainability and renewable resources. Into his head popped the metaphor of the honey bee: collecting its pollen from the flowers, but benefiting them rather than impoverishing them.

Under his inspiration, researchers have found first hundreds and then thousands of inventions, ideas and applications of age-old folk wisdom in rural India. The professor and his friends realised that the countryside was full of ingenious people without the education or connections to spread their ideas or to profit very much from them.

So he found ways of capturing inventions, writing them up for a worldwide Internet audience; getting the most ingenious ones manufactured so that the inventor can benefit financially from an idea which previously might have helped only friends and relatives.

This is the Honey Bee Network, which now has over 10,000 inventions and discoveries on its website.

Bottom up

The day I spent with some of the networkers has stayed with me as one of the most memorable of my life.

In a cool dark room on his Institute campus in Ahmedabad, Professor Gupta had gathered a dozen or so village people to talk about what they had invented.

Much of the wisdom being gathered by the network is agricultural, with biodiversity and sustainability as top priorities.

(Some people call this intermediate technology, suggesting that it will do until developed industrial practices eventually take over. Professor Gupta is opposed to the "intermediate" tag; these innovations are about appropriate technology, he says.)

I heard about the bullock cart with an innovative slow tipping platform that enabled a tractor driver to distribute dung over a whole field on his own, without extra help.

One proud farmer told the story of how his genetic observations had bred a new kind of drought-resistant peanut. It was delicious, too.

Amrutbai Agrawat told how he invented a catch for the rope on the village well, so that women forced to send down the bucket ever deeper as the water table shrunk could rest the full bucket half way back up the well, whereas before they had had to haul it the whole distance at one pull.

But the most moving was a simple device thought up by the serial inventor Kimjibhai Kanadia.

Women nursery workers on piecework were filling plastic bags with soil for seedlings, when he thought up a quicker way to do the job. He cut the bottom off a plastic funnel, pushed it into the mouth of the bag, and in one scoop (and in five seconds) the bag was full; it had taken a minute of handwork before.

The women cried when they saw the new idea for the first time. "If only you had invented it 20 years ago," they said.

Owning the ideas

The Honey Bee Network is now linked with another Indian non government institution called GIAN, the Grassroots Innovation Augmentation network. It develops new ideas and finds venture capital to back them.

At the heart of the Network is the importance of intellectual property.

The ideas and innovations protected by expensive patent machinery in the developed world are of ever-growing importance in the 21st century economy. Professor Gupta says the poor should benefit as well as the rich from patenting and licensing their very good ideas, so that the impact can benefit everyone.

The Honey Bee website is packed with stories of local heroes and ideas that others can use - from weather forecast wisdom to soil improvement to "non-violent" silk, in which the worms emerge from the cocoons before the silk is spun from them, rather than being killed in the cocoon, as normally happens.

This last is looking for investment to proceed.

The Honey Bee Network is now 15 years old, and it seems like an idea whose time has come. It stands alongside other advances for poor people elsewhere in the world: programmes such as microlending, cheap computing, and the great mobile phone revolution in Africa and India, which use information to create small business opportunities, at the ground roots.

And now the Honey Bee inventors have formed an alliance with one of the most inventive institutions on the planet. It is a twist in an age-old story I will explain in the next Work in Progress.

Work in Progress is the title of this exploration of the big trends reshaping the world of work as we steam further into the 21st century; and it is a work in progress, influenced and defined by my encounters as I report on trends in business and organisations all over the world.

Story from BBC NEWS:

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/business/4603108.stm>

Published: 2006/01/11 17:34:10 GMT

© BBC 2011