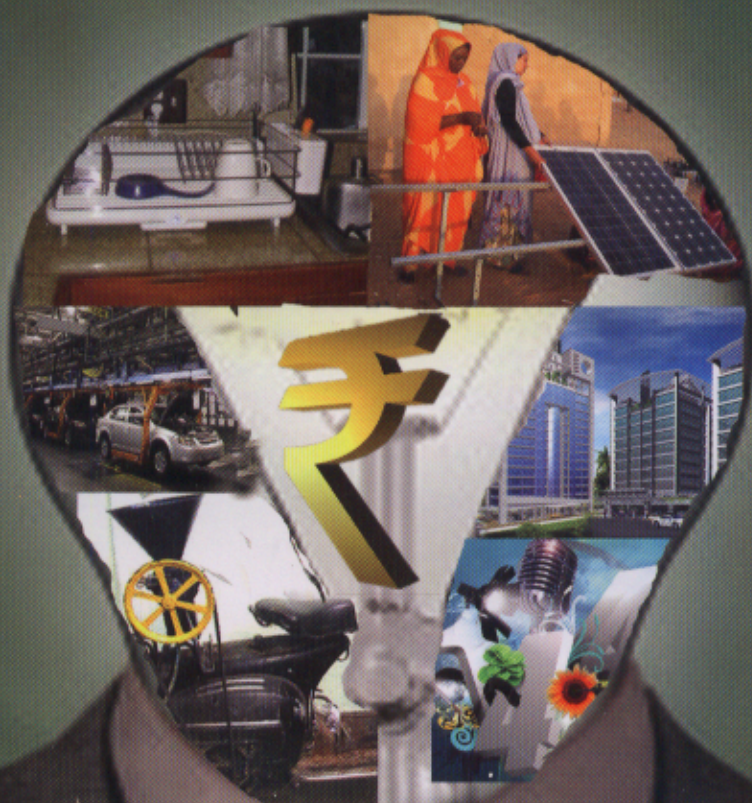


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THINKING OUT OF THE BOX

**Get grassroots innovations
to the forefront**

Ideas whose time has come

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**Ajanta & Ellora:
Monumental wonders of India**

FACE TO FACE

M. N. Kutty Nair

Grassroots innovators go unrecognised

The journey to make India innovative is a long one. But just how much time will this journey take? Prof. Anil Gupta and his team at Honey Bee Network do some collective thinking.

AFTER more than two decades, Honey Bee Network could convince the Government of India (GOI) to institutionalise NIF (National Innovation Foundation) as an institute of Department of Science and Technology, GOI. It is most noteworthy that almost 90 per cent or more of the ideas, innovations and traditional knowledge practices at grassroots (not all unique) are scouted through volunteers. The remaining entries are received at NIF. The current decade declared as 'Decade of Innovation' by the Prime Minister and the President signifies a transformative phase of India's destiny. Many of us being very close to this situation may realise only after a few decades or a century. One of the major reasons is an aspirational revolution being experienced in different parts of the country.

Encouraging grassroots innovations

It all began with Honey Bee Network started in 1988-89 which led to establishment of SRISTI (Society for Research and Initiatives for Sustainable Technologies and Institutions) in 1993. As a follow up of an international conference on 'Creativity and Innovations at Grassroots' held at IIMA during January 1997, Grassroots Innovation Augmentation Network [GIAN] was set up in

collaboration with Gujarat government. The purpose of GIAN was to reduce transaction costs of innovators, investors and entrepreneurs by linking them with each other. It was also the first attempt to provide micro venture capital support to grassroots innovations. NIF came about in 2000 with the help of Department of Science and Technology and has become grant-in-aid institution this year.

Investing in ideas

In 2003, based on an idea mooted by SRISTI in 1997 IIMA conference, a Micro Venture Innovation Fund [MVIF] was set up with the help of SIDBI (Small Industries Development Bank of India). It has invested more than 2.5 crores in ideas and innovations by common people without collateral or guarantor. More than 60 per cent people have paid back and barring one or two cases, there is none who made profits and did not pay. More than 70 technological licenses have been given mainly to small companies and

individual entrepreneurs with benefits going back to the innovators. In about two dozen cases, small entrepreneurs chose to license technologies after paying money even when patents had not been granted. This has shown an



extraordinary ethical value on their part. If they had copied and commercialised, nothing could have been done against them legally. But, they chose to do otherwise. Probably the values of the network have created wider social capital.

The journey to make India innovative is a long one and thus will take time. But just how much time, is a question we must ask ourselves. Here, we mention our wish list about the changes that Honey Bee Network triggered more than two decades ago but in many respects, has not made as much difference as we should have. Recently, in the context of remembering Gandhi, it was observed that, when burden becomes responsibility and when concern triggers creativity, we encounter Gandhian spirit in action. From *Samvedana* (internalising somebody else's pain as one's own) to *Srijansheelta* (creativity) seems to be one of the core principles of Gandhian way of developing technological solutions.

The 7 Es at the core

The seven Es that form the core of Honey Bee Network philosophy: ethics, excellence, equity, empathy, environment, efficiency and education, have been blended in various proportions over the last two decades. Let us look at some less familiar aspects of what SRISTI does to support honey bee network.

- **Education:** Identification and recognition of primary school teachers who have innovated in pursuing the goals of universalising primary education was started by IIMA and SRISTI in mid 90's. But till date, *there is not a single lesson in any text book about innovations by common people*. How will the mind set change in the long run? Innovative teachers do try to bring children closer to nature or society or even themselves but then an eye for appreciating creativity and innovation by common people is also very critical for instilling respect for them.
- **Institutions:** Evolving norms and rules which bring out collective action in the larger interest require tremendous foresight. SRISTI has developed a database of indigenous common property resource institutions in different sectors from more than 25 countries. Should not there be a renewed interest in learning from such local institutions? Should not this database reach local communities in local languages? So many resources are spent on talking about CPRs (Common Pool Resources) but not even a fraction of those resources are spent on disseminating what we learn from such institutions

Shodh Yatra

For the last 13 years, SRISTI has been organising *Shodh Yatras* every summer and winter. We celebrate the creativity and the outstanding local knowledge systems at the doorstep of knowledge holders. NIF also joins the effort and supports the dissemination of the local innovations and outstanding traditional knowledge. When outsiders honour local initiatives, the local respect for the same also goes up. It is a part of the institution building effort in the country. Indian aspiration to be a knowledge society will not be fulfilled without recalibrating the worth of local knowledge. We also organise biodiversity, recipe and idea competitions in the villages



Prof. Anil Gupta (second from right) awarding a child innovator during a Shodh Yatra

to demonstrate the spirit of excellence and collegiality. We try that those recipes which have some uncultivated plants as ingredients get special attention. In the wake of climate change, we might need new sources of food if the present one succumb to new diseases or pests. We have started preparations for any such catastrophe in the foreseeable future. The eighth traditional food festival (*Sattvik*) was held at IIMA new campus in December 2010.

We also take the blessings of centenarians on the way and try to learn from their life. Many times innovators are discovered serendipitously on the way. The biodiversity competitions provide a way of speeding up the knowledge transfer from grandparents to grandchildren. It is an open book quiz where children can learn from anybody in the village about plants and their uses and bring their collection to the meeting. Sometimes the children who excel in this domain may not be very good at studies. Our society has not yet figured out a way of respecting multiple intelligence, skills and perspectives and thus enabling such children to grow as conservators of nature. This is a task still incomplete. The cultural creativity on the way is also celebrated. The purpose is to create markets for the creativity of unsung heroes and heroines of our society through e-commerce and other mechanisms. We share what we know and learn what we don't. People from all over the country, walk through local villages trying to revive the Gandhian method of learning, sharing and growing. Living with common people may help us to uncover the uncommon wisdom and values of communities whose struggles for survival need to become the central concern of policy and institutional design. But have not so far. The 26th Shodh Yatra is in Meghalaya from January 3-9, 2011 (see www.sristi.org).

among the communities. Institution building among communities to create a knowledge network also has remained understudied.

- **Cultural creativity:** During various *Shodh Yatras* we have come across enormous diversity of cultural creativity. Few years ago, while going through Ghosjiya village in Dahod district of Gujarat, as a part of 23rd *Shodh Yatra*, we met Kanu Bhai Kagu Bhai who had made an extraordinary wish. He had resolved that if his particular wish was fulfilled, he would get his wall painted. Pratap Bhai Dhira Bhai Lakhara, a tribal artist of Jipatiya village was then invited to paint the wall with stories, traditional and modern motifs and a commentary on social evils such as wife beating etc., The *shodhyatris* were wondering why did Kanu Bhai get his house painted when he had hardly any belonging in his house? This way of fulfilling his wish not only made his own life colourful but also provided employment to an artist. Under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme (NREG), only work that planners in Delhi can think for Pratapbhai is breaking stones and digging earth. If art can be conserved by people who don't have enough to meet their basic needs, does it not show that high order goals can indeed be pursued without meeting the basic needs (not to mention, how wrong could Abraham Maslow, the noted Professor of Psychology, be, and what a pity, we have taken so long to realise it!). What a great emancipatory effort it could be if we create e-commerce enabled platform for creating markets for such cultural innovators and traditional knowledge and skill holders!
- **Culinary creativity:** SRISTI has been organising traditional food festival viz. 'Sattvik' since eight years to trigger incentives for conservers of agro-biodiversity, create market for organic food and bring consumers and producers together. Not many people realise that the food rich people eat is often poor and vice versa. Should we not educate children about the nutritional properties of some of the traditional foods which are going out of fashion?

Ignite: Unleashing creativity and innovation of children in or out of school

NIF in collaboration with CBSE, Navodaya Vidyalayas, Honey Bee Network including SRISTI and others, scouts for creative ideas and innovations from children around the country. Children have to send just the ideas, or may be proof of concept innovations if possible and NIF gets these converted into products, files patent for them if they are eligible, and also helps in commercialising them if feasible.



Young innovators being felicitated by Prof. Gupta

Every year, October 15, the birthday of Bharat Ratna Dr. A P J Abdul Kalam is celebrated as Children's Creativity and Innovation Day. The awards are given by Dr. Kalam soon after. These entries are also eligible for biennial competition that NIF organises for rewarding grassroots innovations and outstanding traditional knowledge. These national awards are given by Hon. President of India. If children readers of this article can help those children who may not be able to afford a copy of this magazine or are unable to read English mobilise entries from the disadvantaged children in rural or urban areas as well, we will greatly appreciate. Who knows, the so called drop-outs may teach a lesson or two to those who failed to bring them to, or keep them in, school. Ideas or traditional knowledge collected by children which are unique or provide an affordable way of solving any problem in our life or society around us are prototyped by involving senior engineering students networked through a SRISTI initiative www.techpedia.in.

Why wait, send in your entries at ignite@nifindia.org

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Maxim

There are some parts of the world that, once visited, get into your heart and won't go. For me, India is such a place. When I first visited, I was stunned by the richness of the land, by its lush beauty and exotic architecture, by its ability to overload the senses with the pure, concentrated intensity of its colours, smells, tastes, and sounds... I had been seeing the world in black and white and, when brought face-to-face with India, experienced everything re-rendered in brilliant technicolour.

– Keith Bellows, Editor-in-Chief, National Geographic Society

(Continued from 7)

- **Technological innovations:** Honey bee newsletter (www.sristi.org) has been publishing the newsletter for more than 20 years and an open access database is also available at its website. Yet, we wonder, why there is such little data on farmers' innovations on the web from all over the country.

May be we have to redefine the communication strategies and try to understand the ways of connecting creative people all over the country with the ethical markets and support institutions. Recent MOU between Future Group and NIF

will pave the way for taking many more ideas from grassroots to market. The herbal growth promoters, pesticides and other products made in SRISTI lab have been doing well but much more scope exists for popularising them. Volunteers are invited to join hands in making India an inclusive, innovative, collaborative and compassionate society. ■

The writer is President, SRISTI and Professor at IIM, Ahmedabad.

(with inputs from Vjay Sherry Chand, Ramesh Patel, Hema Patel, Purushottam, Chetan, Nirmal Sahay, Riya Sinha Chokakula, Chinzah, Nitin Kumar, Vivek Kumar, Vipin Kumar, Deepa Moni, Rakesh, Vivekanand, Sunda Ram, T. N. Prakash, Balaram, James, Ganesh Pogula, Azhar Ansari and other members of Honey Bee Network)