

# The illiteracy of innovation

Shiv Visvanathan

**The formal economy and the scientific sector deal with advanced technology, while the informal, the world of biomass, craft societies, are treated as lesser worlds with a separate logic. It is a dualism of thought which is quietly destroying huge parts of our culture**

Key words in policy frameworks have erratic careers. Some survive with a long shelf life, others sputter out after an initial promise. One thinks of the contrasting fate of two sibling words, planning and governance. Planning is now treated as nostalgia, an outmoded way of coping with federalism, while the concept of governance glows in mint condition, inviting people to make their careers out of it.

There is another word which is older, even more pervasive, which reincarnates itself frequently and haunts the progressive mind. It is all-pervasive, invidious and dominates the technological horizon. It is the word innovation. The power of the word is such that it creates its own folklore, its own coterie of in-words like science-induced innovation, the Schumpeterian innovator, the Kondratieff cycle, the baroquisation of technology. Innovation and ideas of innovation almost dictate the state of literacy of a regime, summoning us to a Darwinian world where only the fittest survive. So powerful is this need for the new, that C.S. Lewis, a classics scholar, better known for his *The Chronicles of Narnia*, once introduced himself, during one of his inaugural lectures at a university by claiming, "Gentleman, I offer you myself, the dinosaur."

## **A forgotten society**

A classics scholar or a language professor might state with comfort his ease with tradition, but modern governments are obsessive about innovation or the lack of it. This creates its own politics of anxiety. Innovators are seen as positive, while those who oppose it are dismissed as Luddites.

**“The laboratory is no longer the centre of the universe. The slum and the city also become innovative sites”**

The world view of innovation chains has no place for the defeated, the obsolescent, the outdated. There is no ethics of the defeated other. We have an ethics for the cyborg, an ethics of the robot,

but no ethics of alternative worlds, ecological niches. A.K. Coomaraswamy cites the case of a housewife who refuses a washing machine, asking “what will happen to my washer man?”

Innovation is a form of forgetting, of erasure in the name of improvement. To the West, what justifies innovation or revolution is museumisation, a process of embalming cultures which are dead or dying. The cultures which could not survive or adapt are subject to the objectifying gaze of science. Innovation as progress has its charms, but as erasure, obsolescence, waste and ecocide raises a whole gamut of questions about the violence of science and technology. India, unlike the West, cannot eliminate defeated cultures. They do not belong to the reservations. The handloom weaving community includes 13 million people. Shifting cultivation as a practice caters to a few million. But vulnerable communities are not just marginal groups, but include even the middle class, many of whom are dumped for being outdated. In the global regimes of today, an obsolescent society is a forgotten society. Worse, it is a dispensable society.

### **Living traditions**

The illiteracy of an innovation chain stems from the impoverishment of time, the indifference of history to defeated cultures. From an Indian viewpoint, tribes and crafts are not defeated cultures but living traditions. The question is this: how is technology looking at such livelihoods? How does policy respond to an Ikkat weaver? I remember Syeda Hameed of the now defunct Planning Commission asking this: “do we go in for Chinese stuff, or ask whether the Chinese can weave an ikkat like this, where every weave of cloth is like the flow of a river?” Or do we, as George Fernandes once did, declare the use of clay *khullars* compulsory in railway stations, banning thermocol and plastic? Of course, today, we might have to face the fact that the soil from which the clay comes might be contaminated. Do we ask, as my friends in Dastkar do, how can we sustain the breathtaking Indigo blue of a Yellappa, working with primitive vats where he uses his sensorium as a substitute for instruments? What do we think of a scientist who celebrates Bakelite but has nothing to say about the wondrous world of Lac that it destroyed? Or think again. Are people who defend traditional seeds backward or are they trustees of seed as memory and a collective commons in the age of genetically modified seeds? Do we save the Varanasi weaver or prefer the Surat power loom?

### **Dualism of thought**

Our current discourse deals with these questions in a fragmented, absent-minded way. The formal economy and the scientific sector deal with advanced technology, while the informal, the world of biomass, craft societies, are treated as lesser worlds with a separate logic. It is as if the third world in us is treated as the third class, or third rate, that the poor have to be content with a third rate science. It is a dualism of thought which is quietly destroying huge parts of our culture.

The task before policy, the state, in fact all democratic societies, is how we mediate between different technological traditions which are also different cultural traditions. As the late chemist, C.V. Seshadri, said, these are not just ethical questions but constitutional ones. Our science laboratories and governance groups have to answer these: do we prioritise nanotechnology and biotechnology or are we as a society plural enough to arbitrate between different worlds? These are practical questions. Do Irula tribals who are knowledgeable about snakes have a place in our

biodiversity policy as trustees and custodians or do they have to be treated as poachers, intrusions into the scientific world? Similarly, are scavengers, *kabbadiwallas*, who are geniuses of waste, a part of the dream of policy or do we make their classificatory genius alien to the Linnaean cosmos? How do we create a frame to adjudicate conceptually between such worlds?

One of the concepts proposed which developed out of the battle of social movements was cognitive justice. This referred to a world where the right of different knowledges to coexist was recognised. The world of innovation chains was no longer science-centred but included the innovative world of citizen inventors, where ordinary people solving problems in innovative ways was recognised. The honeybee initiative captures thousands of such innovations. Once we see democracy itself as problem-solving, we have to work for the democratisation of knowledge systems. The laboratory is no longer the centre of the universe. The slum and the city also become innovative sites. In such a world, the informal economy and its innovative styles are treated as epistemologies, theories of knowledge. The scavenger, the hawker are seen as experts in survival, inventing their way through the problem sets of the city. Such an opening of the innovation chain beyond the control of scientific experts, opens up innovation to ideas beyond the professional, to ideas which stem from all forms of practice. The Silicon Valleys of the mind emerge in the slums and villages where new forms of city-making, garbage clearance and recycling are being worked out. Innovation sounds more open-ended and inclusive now. I am not denying the power of a Monsanto and a Microsoft; I am only testifying to the existence of the other worlds. Hindustan Lever is huge but the entire network of the Khadi and Village Industries Commission (KVIC) or the garbage industry is not modest either. All three provide value for money in different ways.

### **Rethinking innovation**

Our nation is at a stage where we are rethinking the very nature of institutions and institutional building. We are rethinking the very process of planning. At this stage, we need to rethink the categories of innovation. If we were to imagine a national innovation council, one cannot think of a Xerox Park and a Silicon Valley alone. One has to locate them within a culture, juxtapose scientific innovation to linguistic and musical innovation and learn how other traditions also innovate with rigor, yet have ethics of memory. An innovation council which represents dyes, bamboo, weaving as well as biotechnology and IT would be more representative. One has to realise that an authority on crafts like Laila Tyebji or Uzramma is as crucial to innovation as a TCS or an Infosys. A friend added that he is a new form of scavenger. "Innovation theory," he said, "needs both the iconography of technology and the iconoclast as innovator but without this balance, the disruptiveness of innovations can be disastrous." He claimed that he cleaned up after the consequences of the innovations providing solace, alternatives, employment and possibilities for survival. I cannot see the current regime adapt this way but maybe society can accept this challenge.

*(Shiv Visvanathan is a professor at Jindal School of Government and Public Policy.)*