

Through the Doors Within: Network, Institutions and Movement

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Abstract

[To be completed]

Many grassroots social movements have spawned institutions to support various day to day activities. The birth of institutions in some cases may be mediated by the creation of networks. For the long-term growth of social movements and for the achievement of their objectives, their relationships with institutions and networks have to be synergistic. Institutions mobilise resources, provide logistical and infrastructural support and look after the implementation of the decisions taken by the networks as well as their own structures of governance. A network mobilises the participation of people with different ideas, resources, innovations and with backgrounds in different knowledge systems but with more defined responsibility to carry the social movement forward. This presupposes that a network has a higher order function. There is highest autonomy in social movements. It may be little less in networks and still less in institutions because of the nature of membership and mandates. Barriers to entry and exit are least in social movements, higher in networks and highest in institutions. However, the energy for social movements emerges primarily from the synergy between institutions and networks. But this synergy is under strain if the induction of new members into networks and institutions does not take place smoothly. Induction may require an understanding of the philosophy and a sharing of the broad missions. It is inevitable that different people will share these goals with different intensities. The classic struggle between means and ends permeates every social network and institution. It will be useful to understand that the same actor will have different roles in different arenas. When I am a part of social movement to make India innovative, I have much higher degrees of freedom. I will work with innovators from formal sector also, may be through IIMA or individually. When I am articulating my views as a member in Honey Bee Network, I am mainly focussing on creativity in informal sector, at grassroots level, and pursuing the goals through general consensus among the network collaborators. These collaborators may publish a local language version of Honey Bee newsletter, or help in scouting of innovations of traditional knowledge or may just help in mentoring or incubating innovations into enterprise. When do they acquire the status of collaborator, when their contributions start making an impact on the movement and are recognizably significant in making difference to the lives of grassroots innovators or traditional knowledge holders, who have solved problems through their own genius. An innovator can be a member of the Honey Bee Network, just as a professional staff of NIF or SRISTI or Seva or GIAN can be or any other volunteer can be. Activities in the network or movement are more or less voluntary. These are paid for in the institutions. But paid employees can also volunteer in certain functions. And they often do also.

Some professionals in institutions may believe that the *ends* justify the *means*. Network members which may include professionals but also innovators or lay persons, or farmers or artisans, may stress the *means* a little more. But the people who comprise the social movement may have all kinds of persuasions. Let me discuss the challenges before the Honey Bee Network in sustaining the social movement to make India innovative. In the process, the role of the institutions it has spawned will also be discussed. My major contention is that the success of the advocacy and policy reform functions pursued by a network hinges on the efficiency with which the institutions operationalise their mandate and support the network. If the flow of ideas between institutions and network is impeded by any structure or process, efficiency of both is bound to suffer.

When the Honey Bee Network began to evolve, the norms of accountability and transparency were inherent in the way new members joined. Those who did not agree either with the agenda or with the instruments chosen to pursue implementation, often left without any rancour. This was and is one of the most fundamental strengths of the network. Being inside or outside should not injure basic trust and mutual respect. There may be exceptions, but by and large, this has been the case. One can perhaps attribute this to the generosity of those who did not allow disagreements to turn into

disrespect. There are several other factors which have contributed to the effectiveness of the network so far. Each of these factors also points to our vulnerabilities. After all every strength can easily become a reason for our weakness. Taking colleagues too much for granted can erode respect. But not taking each other for granted at all may indicate lack of trust. How much trust should guide relationships is a matter that has to be calibrated by the opportunity the network provides for asking fundamental questions and debating various policies.

The leadership of the network and the social movement ought to be polycentric. Let me recall some lessons I learnt long ago when I visited a settlement of the chenchu tribe members in the Sri Salem forest in Andhra Pradesh. This tribe was one of the few remaining food gathering and hunting tribes which had evolved very interesting rules to govern their social and ecological functions. After studying the pattern of allocation of resources and responsibilities, I found that three general principles guided their activities: (a) leadership was iterative. The person who was leader in a honey collection group could be a follower in a hunting or food gathering group. (b) leadership was linked to skills and not to social or cultural status. The traditional leader did not necessarily have a say in every matter. (c) pooling was independent of redistribution. Those who went on a particular hunting or food gathering expedition, did not share their finds or game only with the members of the expedition. All the members of the band or larger social group got their share of the food or game. The implication is that we should realise the need to evolve norms, which respect individual specialisation or expertise, and generate responsibility among sub group members for the larger group. It is natural that those who are expert at deciphering animal footprints may not be equally good at identifying edible tubers or other foods. How we create a similar iteration and differentiation in responsibilities without losing the cohesion of the larger group, is a challenge. It is imperative that those who mobilise financial or physical resources do not acquire any more power than those who mobilise social or knowledge resources.

In the context of the Honey Bee Network, every member who volunteers to contribute his or her energy to scout grassroots innovators or traditional knowledge holders, to document their knowledge, to add value, or to convert innovations into enterprises and/or to protect their intellectual property rights, expects other members to value the contribution. How do we convey how much we (the network members, professionals in institutions and grassroots innovators) value such contributions? Perhaps by frequent consultations, periodic reporting of outcomes and recognising that failures are not intentional and successes could be collective and take time. There could be other ways as well. Each one of us will have to discover portfolio of incentives that will motivate us to remain in loop. I recall a piece of advice my grandfather gave me once when I was very young. He said whenever anyone does you some good, treat an inch of obligation as worth a mile. One always remains in debt. But the unredeemed *I owe you (IOUs)* will provide the glue for keeping the relationship intact. The network grows when different members value the benefits of affiliation, collective achievements and social capital more than the individual contributions they make. Therefore, every gain in the national and international reputation of the Honey Bee Network may genuinely contribute to the satisfaction that each network member may draw from his/her membership. But different members are vulnerable in different ways. For a herbal healer, a small farmer, a road side mechanic, mere affiliation may not be enough. He may also expect an opportunity to learn, share and improve his livelihood. The reality, however, is that economically poorer (though rich in knowledge) members (farmers, artisans or herbalists etc.) are generally more generous and also more forgiving. It is not to suggest that they draw satisfaction only from material gains. In fact majority of them have offered to share their innovations or traditional knowledge with others without any reciprocal obligations. But their generosity should not make us complacent.

The institutions spawned by the network such as the National Innovation Foundation (NIF) and others have an important role in fulfilling the expectation of the network and advancing the social movement. There is no doubt that what the network could do with its limited resources in 15 years, the institution like NIF, by building upon its legacy and lessons, could surpass several times within last five years. Resources played only a small role. A larger role was played by the synergy between the network and the institution. This synergy can come under strain if mutual roles, responsibilities and respect are not calibrated from time to time. The institution has to perform several functions: (a) it should provide support to the networks, bring in new members and encourage collegiality (b) it should be transparent in the allocation of resources within and outside so that the trust of different stakeholders increases, (c) it should balance the interests of those who are less articulate, assertive and aggressive in making demands than the more well endowed ones, (d) it should generate new opportunities for

the members to learn from each other. Respect for those who are more creative in discovering the grassroots innovators and adding value to their aspirations should increase with the passage of time regardless of their age, seniority or experience, (e) it should ensure that resources spent on establishment and actual support to the people are balanced and (f) it should reassess, rejuvenate and realign its own goals and missions with that of the social movement and the network from time to time.

The social movement to make India innovative needs a whole range of stakeholders. Having scouted innovators or traditional knowledge holders, it needs the support of professional scientists, technologists, designers, entrepreneurs, investors, marketers and communicators, etc. Each of these stakeholders belongs to different professional cultures and organisations. One cannot expect always voluntary help from all of them (though some will do) even if the network collaborators have voluntarily scouted the innovations to which these stakeholders have to add value. Some tensions are bound to emerge in making a transition from the knowledge chain to the value chain. The former is still possible through voluntary help. The latter requires dealing with markets with well-established norms and processes. However, exceptions can be created. For instance, almost all the patents for grassroots innovators or traditional knowledge holders have been filed in India or abroad through the *pro bono* help of the attorneys. However, this is a very small activity compared to the other major goals of value addition and diffusion through commercial or non-commercial channels sharing benefits at the same time. In that respect, the network has to reach major milestones in the years to come. Formal collaboration with the CSIR (Council of Scientific and Industrial Research), the ICMR (Indian Council of Medical Research), the NBRI (National Botanical Research Institute), the BSI (Botanical Survey of India), etc., has heralded a process of blending or fusing formal or informal science.

The successful social movement requires support from and for professional individual innovators as well. But, the institutions such as NIF spawned by the Honey Bee Network is generally responsible for supporting materially only grassroots innovators and traditional knowledge holders. The network does appreciate the contribution of the professionals and others in solving the problems of grassroots communities. We can not maintain the focus on valorising the contribution by the unsung heroes and heroines of our society without maintaining the motivations of all others actors in the value chain.

The relationship between network, institutions and social movements has to evolve continuously in the context of a changing policy, market and social environment. The response from some of the younger members indicates that they seem to have more faith than older colleagues in the goals ahead. But they will also be less patient. Can we build upon this quality to make an *innovative* India also an *impatient* India. We have been living with many inefficiencies, inertia and iniquities for long. The effort to make India inclusive, imaginative and innovative cannot be pursued without imbibing the same traits in our personal lives and relationships. I hope that colleagues will advise on the ways in which these relationships can generate creative tensions so that we listen to each other more carefully, continue to be concerned towards the disadvantaged and look for the light through the doors within. But are these doors open yet. After all, should we wait till we become vulnerable? Or should we court uncertainty, become vulnerable so as to listen to inner voices, open the doors and search the light with in. Tender is the life, after all, at the tether's end.