Innovation: The Problem of Memory and Erasure

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What constitutes Innovation?

What constitutes innovation and how do we recognise and register it? This issue dawned upon me as a problem during an interaction with students of Basic Teacher Institution, in a small town called Dungargaon in Chhattisgarh. These are barely 12th pass students who go through a two year diploma course which entitles them to take a job as a primary school teacher. They had just returned from doing their practice teaching in the schools and were all excited about it. One girl talked about how she found two students totally silent in the class and unable to read or write; how she decided to find out more about them and see if she could get them involved in the learning in the class; how she went to their homes and found about some tragic family situation and how just this act of going to their homes and sharing their miseries changed the relationship with the students and how they now got very involved in the class… In teacher education courses practice teaching consists of preparing ideal lesson plans for teaching specific contents with the help of micro teaching methods. Now this girl had broken this mould and instead of executing a preconceived plan chose to address a very specific problem faced by two children and found immense satisfaction in it. I thought this was at the very core of the change we have been trying to bring about in teacher education. Later when I asked them for their 'diaries' and reports of school work, I first took up the report of this girl but to my surprise there was not a word about what she was so excited about. It had a routine description of aim of the lesson, activities done, assessment of learning … So I asked her why she did not write in this what she told us. She said, 'our teacher told me that this if I write all that I will not get any marks and I had to write how I executed my lesson plan only.' It hit me that the humblest teacher in the course of her work constantly innovates but is forced to erase the memory of that innovation or at least not bring it into public memory by recording.

In a general sense all of us as teachers or education administrators and are constantly 'innovating'. We have no other way as we do not repeat what we did before. The students before us change, the knowledge we seek to transact changes, our own understanding and disposition keeps changing. All these force innovations upon us. To put it briefly, to be innovative is to be creative and hence to be human.

However, every little change or creative solution we work out does not get the status of being an 'innovation'. What attributes does it need to qualify as innovation? Frankly this is a difficult question to answer. But I have a solution which comes from the age old dialect-language debate. This is a favourite theme of discussion and usually yields the following markers of language – it has a grammar, it has a script and its area of influence is not local. Now we spend considerable time busting these three myths to show that all languages or dialects have grammar (whether written or unwritten), no script is exclusive to a language, (any script can be used to write any language) and the territory in which a language is spoken is not a linguistic function. Shorn of niceties, 'Language' is a dialect with political clout. I would argue that likewise what gets the status of 'innovative' educational practice is also politically determined.

A creative educational idea or practice becomes 'innovative' when it is structured in a particular form and gets a theoretical articulation which is shared with a larger practicing community. Thus the three defining principles of 'grammar, script, and territory' come to play here too.

Every teacher or education administrator has to constantly address the changing realities and come up with creative solutions and hence innovate all the time. However, these areseldom treated as innovations and are usually seen as truancy of a teacher at worst and as good practice at best. In fact most innovations of teachers are actually criminalised or trivialised. We seldom accept the legitimacy of choices made by teachers without being judgemental nor do we study the meaning behind those choices. Teachers and for that matter educational administrators make choices and work out solutions based on the very limited agency they posses, hemmed in as they are by structural and institutional constraints. These choices and solutions when adopted on wider scale by other teachers facing similar situations, add to form a trend. Usually tend to bemoan these trends as undesired departures from the ideals but never to be celebrated as innovations. But these illegitimate departures or innovations have an uncanny ability to succeed while the legitimate innovations usually tend to fail or end in a tragedy.

My entreaty thus is to look at the choices being made on an everyday basis and enable it to be recorded and studied without being judgemental. As a committed practitioner, of course I differentiate between what to me is good and unwelcome innovation. I work to strengthen some and against others. But as a practitioner I also need a distanced view of why other practitioners make different kinds of choices and what does it all add to.

Memory and Erasure

The second point that I want to take up also comes from my work with SCERTs in reforming teacher education courses. In designing the curriculum one would insist on giving an exposure to major innovative educational programmes. However, when it came to detailing which programmes should be studied, looking for material on them, we came to a dead end. To begin with our state education departments or the SCERTs have no memory of even major innovative programmes undertaken in the state let alone their critical appraisal. For example when we were working with Rajasthan SIERT, we discovered that they had virtually no material on ShikshaKarmi project or even the LokJumbish project. There were individuals who knew something of them, but no records or literature. The immense wealth of experience and innovative practices that they generated appear to be entirely lost. This was particularly surprising since these happened to be one of the most well documented programmes in public education with independent academic studies which had been conducted on them. In fact LokJumbish had set up an independent research wing in the NGO called Sandhan to research and document the programme. It turned out that when the government decided to close down the programme, it confiscated all the papers and documents with Sandhan and dumped them in some unknown government godown. So all that we have are some publications available in a few libraries or individuals associated with the programme. True if some influential researcher were to set about recovering the history it may be possible to access some documents with the government, but the fact is that memory of the programme within the school education system of rajasthan has been erased.

Let me go to an even more tragic example, that of NaiTalim or Basic Education which is easily one of the most influential innovations in Indian educational history, something which was tried out across the country for a period extending from 1945 to at least 1965. Once again we are faced with a complete loss of memory of the actual experiences of the programme. This programme too generated vast amounts of literature and official records and journals. Yet when we set out to write about them we have little more than what Gandhi had to say before the programme began or at best some government reports. Most of the writings on NaiTalim continue to talk about the conception of the programme rather than its actual working in different states on the ground level. This despite the fact that in its time it was studied and written about extensively.The education

departments of the government of course have no memory of them. Even more tragic is that Sevagram which was the hub of the programme has no documentary remains of it today. One can still locate in remote libraries extremely fascinating publications arising out of the programme, addressing problems, discussing experiences, sharing ideas etc, to which teachers and teacher educators from remote corners of the country contributed enthusiastically. Some institutions may still have old records relating to the working of the programme. But all these, printed or written on cheap paper, are now disintegrating and being consumed by white ants in unused corners of the libraries or dumps.

Fortunately for us apparently Gujarat Vidaypeeth has collected and digitised the materials from surviving Gandhian institutions. I have not seen it, but I hope it is substantial.

There are three inter-related issues in this: first the formal education system's inability to retain memory of its own innovative programmes and build upon them; second our collective inability to preserve and study the records and literature generated by those programmes; and finally a severe paucity of critical academic studies of these programmes. What we usually have in terms of publications are self adulatory reports of the programmes which only give a very limited glimpse of the complexity of the reality.

Record keeping, publication and printing may be essential to the building of memory, but it is neither sufficient not a guarantee that it becomes a part of systemic memory- to be drawn upon when we undertake new tasks.

The result is that when we conceive a new innovative programme, we don't climb on to the shoulders of our predecessors but tend to start all over again. Unfortunately I don't have any solutions to these, but I place them before you all in the hope that we can at least understand them better.

So as not to end on a dismal note permit me to show you two examples of 'memory building'. One relates to an effort by a humble residential school called Adharshila started for the children of Narmada BachaoAndolan activists in a remote village named Sakad. Some 17 years ago the villages faced severe drought and the children were asked to find out from the village elders about drought and famine and how people coped with them. Note books got filled up with what they said. Then the students put together a report based on all this for the school. When I chanced upon it during a visit, I thought it should be published not only as a record of how social sciences can be taught or learnt, but also for a unique record of how marginal communities survive calamities like drought and famine, the kind of food they ate, what happened to the animals and birds and plants, who benefitted from the famine and who lost, how people turned to migration, banditry etc for survival etc etc. The manuscript lay with Eklavya for many years as we could not find the right kind of person who would spend time with the school to design and illustrate the book. Eventually it did get published a few years ago.

The larger question before me is, how does this work enter public memory and become a part of educational history, beyond the circle of admiring friends?

I will return to this question after we see a short video clipping from another such experiment, this time documented on the initiative of a government department.

'Young Historians' a film by ESE &DSERT part 1.

Memory is a shared function of human communities and not that of books or computers. Thus both remembering and erasing are conscious human actions. It is ultimately our choices or rather choices

made by social groups that determine it. It is our conscious effort to keep alive certain memories, learn from them, spread them to others so as to enlarge and make inclusive the group to which it is meaningful that sustains memories of innovations. Diversifying the groups which share a memory and keeps it alive by drawing upon it is a complex process for it involves both dialogue and also a preparedness to allow criticality and diversity in the memory itself. If we insist on holding on to a particular version of the innovation, we run the risk of keeping it within the confines of a small group and permitting the others to erase it. It is here that the distanced academic study of innovations becomes important. It enables us to widen the reach of the innovations just as much as the efforts at constantly dialoguing with other people with the four principles of *prajna, sheela, karuna* and *maitri* as Ambedkar recalled the Buddha's teachings.