

Striking a balance

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Over the years I have learned to respect the design of nature. I have learned that the structures and behaviors of events, species, and materials around us that have survived the test of time can be better understood by studying the rules of nature. I sometimes fear that the human race will face extinction sooner if, through our inventions, we try to reverse or control the rules of nature. In our pursuit of modern living, we seem to become increasingly insensitive to what nature has endowed in us. Nature endowed in us an appetite so we could survive. Unlike other animals that eat only as much as they need and kill only for survival, humans eat more than we need and kill for reasons other than survival. We are creating a material world that is out of step with the rhythm and flow of nature. The social, political, and economic systems we invent are increasingly driven by the greed for power and dominance. It appears that technological advancement has allowed people to overcome the barriers of time and distance; however, with this change there is also an increase in the craving for speed, efficiency, and instant gratification. We are unwittingly enslaved by the technology that promised liberation. (Ericson, 2005) The need of the hour is to understand human nature, harness human energies, and regain a balance with nature.

It is very important to examine the social implications of the systems that are driving the pace of modernization. Ivan Illich points out that “our imaginations have been industrially deformed to conceive only what can be molded into an engineered system of social habits that fit the logic of large-scale production.” The danger before us is that the tools we use to support our lifestyles are becoming increasingly complex and are exhausting human energies. The imperative is to redefine the innovation process and align it with the skills and energies of the vast majority of people who are being forced to the sidelines. In our eagerness to be faster and more efficient through refined means of production, we are shrinking the size of people involved in the building of the modern world. Greater numbers of people are being deprived of the opportunity to participate productively in the economy that must support their sustenance. There is a need to recognize that branches of a tree can reach out to the sky only so far so that the trunk does not buckle and the roots do not uproot. In our eagerness to reach out to the sky, we are neglecting to nurture the roots and the trunk that hold society together.

Today we are faced with a challenge of building “a modern society of responsibly limited tools” (Ivan Illich 1973), where those who are alienated from the fast track of development and innovation have the opportunity to live a life of dignity and self worth. If we do not recognize the growing deficit of dignity in the world today, arising from the sense of alienation from the fast track of development, we will risk increase in crime, terrorism, and mass depression. The need of the hour is to make a small adjustment in our lifestyles so that the process of innovation and development maintains a focus on the human capabilities endowed on us by nature. Social habits and economic planning must take into account the need for every individual to have the opportunity to participate productively in the affairs of his or her community. Progress should not be allowed to

make people obsolete. There are an increasing number of people who feel either exhausted by or excluded from the forces of modern and hi-tech living.

A small number of manufacturing companies worldwide are today realizing the need for people-centered innovation. A number of such organizations are regularly engaging sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists to help their engineers gain empathy for the needs of ordinary people who will ultimately live with their inventions. While on one end there is a recognition amongst some of the players in the industrial-manufacturing system for the need to humanize the process, there are others, such as the Amish communities, living in 20 American states, a Canadian province, and some Latin American nations, whose philosophies of life teach people to live as naturally as possible and to work with the forces of nature rather than attempting to master them.

There is also a clear lack of awareness amongst the consumers about the social implications of their choices as consumers. There is a need to spread the awareness that there are an increasing number of people with meager or outdated skills who need to participate productively in the economy. Every individual needs to take responsibility as a consumer for supporting an economy which creates work and an opportunity to live life with dignity for people of every skill level. Nature has entrusted in each one of us the responsibility to create conditions for peaceful co-existence. Peaceful co-existence is not possible without co-creation. We need to engage the imagination and the creativity of ordinary people in driving the direction of modernization.

Thomas W. Foster, a sociologist, criminologist, teacher, and author, in an article written for the December 1981 issue of *The Futurists* magazine, has quoted the well-known author of the classic book, *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered*, “the hallmarks of an ecologically balanced conserver society must include: self-government; community self-sufficiency; escape from fossil-fuel dependency; population decentralization; freedom from consumer-oriented education; and freedom from structural unemployment.” In addition, Schumacher emphasized the importance of appropriate, or people-centered, technologies for the existence of a balanced and humane social order. “These technologies are designed to serve the needs of small decentralized producers rather than big industries; they are labor- rather than energy-intensive; they are cheap enough to be accessible to the masses; and they do not violate the human need for creativity nor pose a serious threat to the environment.” (Foster 1981)

Schumacher argues for the “therapeutic value of real work” and for a profound sense of spirituality. Work is a joyful activity and is necessary for the well-being of man’s body and soul. Work and leisure are “complementary parts of the same living process and cannot be separated without destroying the joy of work and the bliss of leisure.” We cannot allow technology to take away the joy of work from the hands of people.

During India’s struggle to earn independence from the British rule, Mahatma Gandhi popularized the use of Khadi, the hand-woven cloth made with hand-spun thread. By popularizing Khadi as the attire of India’s freedom fighters, Gandhi sowed the seed of a sustainable economy. Even today, millions of families in India earn a life of dignity by

spinning Khadi cloth. Over many decades, a number of innovations have been introduced to improvise the processes of making Khadi. Though in the past Khadi was perceived as a rustic cloth, these innovations have led to Khadi evolving into a very fine material. Today, Khadi has the aesthetic of a fine cotton or silk-based fabric. Additionally, Khadi is emerging as a symbol of an ecologically conscious and socially responsible citizen. Hopefully the story of Khadi will continue to inspire people to use other products made with hands.

It is possible to make a small adjustment in our lifestyles and start using products made by hand. There is a need to support creation of a parallel economy where people who are excluded from the process of modernization, globalization, and technological advancement have the opportunity for entrepreneurship through appropriate training and market development efforts. We as consumers need to support the creation of such an economy. We need to repeat the story of Khadi in every sector of the economy.

Establishing such an economy is a social engineering challenge. There is a need to:

- Spread appreciation for the aesthetic of handmade products amongst consumers;
- Cultivate awareness about the social and economic importance of using handmade products;
- Help people marginalized by the process of modernization, globalization, and technological advancement by creating entrepreneurial opportunities that match their skills;
- Provide encouragement and opportunities to children whose social and economic conditions impede their ability to complete traditional education, and provide them with appropriate creative and entrepreneurship training at an early age;
- Promote the idea of consumers' social responsibilities in building an economy that supports people who are not caught up with technological advancements.

Through our behaviors as consumers we influence the direction of innovation. Therefore, when we go shopping, it is important to think about the people who make the products we use. It is important to recognize that many of them are struggling to catch up with the process of modernization and are losing their jobs and their dignity. In many western societies, consumers have become vigilant against the practices adopted by some of the leading brands of achieving cost efficiencies by outsourcing manufacturing to suppliers who employ child labor. Consumer activism in this area has brought about significant change in the behaviors of these companies. We must make a similar commitment to putting aside some of our money to purchase products that are made by hand.