

# Beyond codified knowledge

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THE future of traditional craft depends on the children of the artisan communities. But, in my view the present drive to send all children to school will ensure the death of all traditional skills – craft, farming, healing, folk arts and other specific knowledge systems that artisanal and village communities hold within. ‘Education’, as exemplified by the system that we are all part of, and which is institutionalized, structured, instruction-oriented and expert-dependent will make extinct all other ways of knowing. The reason for this, very briefly, is that the process of ‘knowing’ in ‘non-codified knowledge societies’ (instinctual, biological, unselfconscious, relating to senses) is very different from the process of ‘knowing’ in ‘codified knowledge societies’ (memory, text and digital codification). And these present-day systems of learning tend to create blinkers that do not allow an understanding of the earlier systems.

Before I go in to the specificities of knowledge, I would like to talk at little more about my own journey in search of authenticity and originality. It illustrates the dilemma faced by most of us when thrust into the mould of today’s education.

It was during my study at NID, a premier design institute, that I began to explore certain fundamental questions regarding beauty, aesthetic sense, spontaneity, creativity, culture and so on.

What sparks spontaneity? Does culture indeed help in keeping one’s own sense of beauty intact? And can creativity be intellectualized? Can creativity be conditioned?

At NID, the dichotomy was that the process of learning design is completely and clearly West oriented. After a period of conflict, the three years I spent at the institute became an intense period of self-exploration. What came sharply into focus and was exemplified in the ‘education system’ at the institute was the direct relationship that existed between colonized minds, cultural and spiritual alienation and formal schooling/education. The outer manifestations of any culture –architecture, craft, food, music, dance and ritual – are imbued with the aesthetic sense of the people who belong to that culture. When year after year students are subjected to a western design process and learn design through western history and western sense of aesthetics, is it any wonder that generation after generation gets estranged from their own history, culture, individual sense of beauty and their very being?

**L**ooking at this issue closely I developed complete faith in the fact that the best way to redeem the self would be to work with culturally rooted, rural and tribal artisans. It was the only way to de-colonize myself. I began working very closely with many artisan communities within the country. I started with the Ao-tribe of Mokukchung district of Nagaland and later with many artisan communities in Bengal, Orissa, Bihar and Tamilnadu. I experimented with diverse crafts like pottery, brass, kantha, embroidery,

bamboo, stone, horn etc. I settled down finally in Aruvacode, a colony of potters in Kerala where most of my work in the last decade has been done.

I want to make it clear that my journey into the world of the rural artisan communities was not with the intention of ‘developing’ or educating them. I went to them to regain that which I had lost in the process of getting educated. I went to learn from them. My strong feelings were that having escaped ‘education’ and ‘development’, they were still original and authentic and were holding on to a culture and worldview which had sustained them for centuries.

While these interactions helped me distil myself in many ways, they also made me understand the numerous hurdles confronting the artisans. From lack of availability of raw materials to the lack of demand for their products, there is a pattern to the problems faced by the artisans. These remain discernible problems and need direct solutions. Some problems or should I say consequences, are insidious in nature and spring from interventions that come in the guise of ‘*helping them*’ out. I view this as the *uprooting of the rooted*. ‘Development’ and equally ‘education’ remains the *mantra* of the interventionist agencies. Vital issues related to culture, lifestyle and ethos of artisan communities are completely ignored. The primary fallout of such approaches, be it by governmental or non-governmental agencies, undermines the confidence and self-esteem of the concerned communities.

**T**he do nothing method: In the potter’s community in Aruvacode, I started experimenting with some programmes to overcome these problems.

A fundamental premise of the training interventions at Aruvacode is the cultural, aesthetic and creative superiority of the trainees, compared to the ‘developed’ mainstream of Indian society.

Through a range of efforts at recovering creativity, we realized that what was actually happening in the name of teaching and training of rural and artisan communities was the corruption of their sense of knowing. The basic attempt, therefore, at the training programmes is to help the individuals regain the wisdom and confidence, which lies embedded within their own communities and culture.

My interventions at initiating creativity among the artisans proved beyond doubt that the trainer’s interventions, if at all, need to be limited to erecting a fence against outside influences that corrupt the genuine aesthetic sensibility and sense of perfection of the craftspeople. The ‘do nothing method’ accepts that each person is creative and intelligent and, therefore, the need is only to initiate a process by which the trainees get inspired to use their subdued potential.

**W**orking with the potter’s community in Nilambur for over a decade, my focus began to converge on the children of the artisans. Highly misplaced notions of admitting children to schools in order that *they learn and become something in life* is rendering

children misfits within their own environment. This prompted me to attempt to develop a method for initiating a programme in which school dropout children could learn pottery again. Six master craftsmen, who genuinely believed that a secure future for the craft was possible if only the children of the community were infused with faith and pride in the traditional work, came forward to take on the apprentices. The training programme started off with seven boys, all school dropouts and in their early teens.

The key guiding principle for the training programme was to preserve each child's individuality and independence – prerequisites to creativity – while at the same time providing inputs that sharpen their senses. The training itself consisted of a daily joint session where they learnt mathematics and language alongside inputs in communication skills and observation; and a session under their guru or master potter. The 'teaching' under the *gurus* wasn't a formal method – it included helping in packing, fetching sand from the river, mud for the clay and helping the gurus in pottery. The idea was that the entire range of activities related to all aspects of the pottery craft be introduced to the children.

**N**atural learning process: While I was in the process of developing exercises and activities to help children learn pottery, I was intrigued by the way with which the master potters arrive at a form which is so innately beautiful. Mulling over it for several days I felt that there could be a biological instinct that instinctually guides our sense of beauty. People un-defiled by modern ways are far more open and receptive to this biological guidance. The interaction between this internal capacity and the external natural systems collaborate in some manner to produce a distinct aesthetic quality to their lives. The rural, tribal or non-literate communities seem to act holistically, endowing each act with an aesthetic quality. What we understand as culture is a result of this collaboration. It is clear that this cultural element is totally absent in modernity. Therefore, the modern artist, architect or a designer anywhere appears to be creating with a uniform and almost regimented aesthetic sense.

In traditional societies every situation is a learning situation. Here to live means to know. It is a rhythm followed from birth to death. So the visible aspect of this learning process was the total knowledge of the outer environment with which people associate. This requires the use of all the senses. Senses, therefore, play a very important role in the process of learning and work as a reciprocal device that helps create and establish communion with the inner self. All the games children play in these communities have to do with sensitizing the senses, planning, balancing, guessing, developing the mathematical sense etc.

This is the process of knowing the world. In contrast, the use of senses is totally absent in modern educational environment. Reading is not the same as seeing and experiencing actual things. They activate different aspects of the brain.

**N**ow I would like to elaborate more on this aspect of knowledge since it is essential to our understanding of the whole problem. In my view, knowledge and process of knowing

has undergone fundamental cognitive shifts depending on the process of knowing and accessing knowledge – non-codified (experiential) and codified (memory codified, text codified and, most recently, virtual which includes photographs, radio, movies, television and computers.

The first shift from the experiential paradigm to memory and the textual paradigm was so compelling and spread so rapidly and with such ease that the consequent ill-effects on the human psyche went almost unnoticed. Once knowledge got textualized, feelings and emotions were dropped. The tragedy of modernity, represented variously as alienation, boredom and rootlessness, is a direct result of textualization of experience. Texts make sense only as a tool of experience, they cannot be a substitute for the experience itself.

Text denotes the absence of the real. It removes the need for communion. Communication, if at all, happens in the absence of the ‘other’ and without using the ear. The senses cease to function in the act of making sense of the world.

Knowledge became separated from the knower, if anything preceded the knower. The over-use of reason and logic and the neglect of intuition is due to textualization of knowledge. The textual experience itself is always linear and fragmented, possibly the only way a text can convey meaning. At several levels one can see the fragmentation in textual cultures. The self is fragmented as male and female, as body and mind and as childhood, youth and old age. Textual experience being personal and independent of others has separated the self from the community.

This internal fragmentation has led us to compartmentalize and reorder the world to suit our textual notions about life. Thus beauty and knowledge are divided into art, science and language, and into artists and scientists. Politics, ethics and religion are also separated. Spontaneous activities are broken up into planning and doing and entertainment and boredom have become the new polarities.

**E**ducation through textualisation has been the most powerful tool of conditioning and colonizing people. It has replaced religious superstition with scientific superstition, turning us into believers of a different kind. Effectively it has turned us from active creators and inventors of knowledge to passive believers of text and experts. We no longer use our senses and feelings and experience to know the world. We are taught everything, including beauty. Textual experience is abstract, and by its very nature, second-hand. Experience (by senses) is authentic and original. It cannot become second-hand.

The spiritual state of being here and now becomes difficult and even impossible with textual culture. A total act of being in the present encompasses both past and the future. Our relationship with the text is itself an absence of the present. Textualization removes the present and creates only the past or the future.

The crisis in modern schooling is primarily due to this conflict in these two (experiential and textual) paradigms. If we consider knowledge to be a biological response to sustain

life, then the present level of estrangement between man and nature is unimaginable. How could knowledge and destruction go hand in hand to the extent that the very survival of the earth now edges on the brink of cessation? Textual knowledge, devoid of the experiential and biological content, has fostered the grounds for this depredation.

**K**nowledge as a biological response to sustain life is inbuilt in the knowledge of experiential cultures. Indigenous knowledge is the result of collaboration between people and their surroundings, guided by nature's need to preserve all life. The biological element in knowledge is what has led the indigenous communities to create 'life-sustaining' knowledge, guided by the autonomy of the senses. The so-called indigenous knowledge (a term invented by the textual world) is knowledge of the experiential paradigm.

The classical forms in human culture came about by this process. The pyramids, the tombs, the ancient places of worship all over the world, the folk dances, traditional music, food and traditional healing systems have all evolved through a very different process than that adopted by modernity.

Now with the coming in of information technology, text is being replaced by the computer. The computer's criterion for dropping various elements from textual knowledge would depend on manageability and software-ability. Like text, it would also bring in new elements to the realm of what is claimed as knowledge.

The implications of this virtualization of knowledge will be far more destructive than the textual paradigm. The ultimate loss will be that of human creativity and life at large. If our experience and experiential knowledge is forgotten or destroyed, our behaviour will be distorted and destructive.

The natural state of being is to be authentic and original. And in this state one is creative in a continuum. This brings in concrete and first-hand experience as the basis for what is knowledge. Senses are tools that connect us to the concrete experience as well as our inner nature. This demands that we sharpen or sensitize our senses as those are our primary tools for knowing. When all our senses are awake and we receive life in its totality, the experience and experienced become one, however momentarily.

**S**ince we belong to the codified knowledge paradigm we have assumed that knowledge is transmitted rather than created. The truth is that each living being has to re-live and re-create knowledge. After all the 'education' we have gone through how much do we truly 'know'. Will believing in authority automatically become knowledge? Is the purpose of schooling to produce human labour, a citizen worker or to enhance the true human potential? Are we, the so-called 'educated', original, independent, creative and spontaneous?

By educating our children what is that we want out of them? Do we want them to be mediocre, insensitive, imitative, non cooperative, unhappy, stressed, tensed, dependent,

citizen workers. If we want our children to be creative, sensitive, intelligent, cooperative, original, loving and happy, independent, self-disciplined we have to reexamine and reassess our notions of what knowledge is and how it is created etc.

I feel that the idea of 'education' itself stands challenged.