

**Critiquing Social Innovation: What is it? Does
it matter? Cases from India and China**

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Abstract

In this report submitted to the India China Institute I direct a review of the concept of social innovation (SI) towards two set of questions to do with ecology and politics: *how* can local actions strengthen ecosystem response to crises? Through *what* shared arrangements are ecosystem responses coordinated?

This report presents cases from southwest Rajasthan and west Yunnan on social innovation, based on field work conducted as an India-China Institute Fellow in January and August 2011. The cases describe SIs that vary in scale and technology: beehives, improved wood burning stoves, pump sets; working groups to raise funds and share technology; working groups to clean shared water sources; community forest wardens; village councils for water sharing, commons access; and seed banks, land regeneration, child care, night schools. I argue that these cases can be read as not only demonstrating social innovation but in terms of critiques of the agency offered by neoliberal governments for their citizens, and in terms of narrative ruptures, puzzles that reveal the push and pull of agential interests.

I then step back from these interpretations and argue for a focus on the politics of social innovation. As a term SI signifies the possibilities for shifting power structures through networked engagement. Networks including of NGOs must work with state governments to mobilize local people with their own interests. This requires a variety of groups, such as village councils, state-mandated bodies, registered NGOs, networks, to negotiate and mobilize around ecological response. Such political engagement makes a unique contribution to ecosystem resilience, towards long-term learning and adaptation at the level of an ecosystem.

Social innovation-- what is it? does it matter?

Cases from India and China

“A mankind which no longer knows want will begin to have an inkling of the desultory, futile nature of all the arrangements hitherto made in order to escape want, which used wealth to reproduce want on a larger scale”.

-- Theodor Adorno: *Minima Moralia*

“Never again will a single story be told as though it's the only one”.

-- John Berger: *G.*

A story makes the rounds of the social sciences and the humanities, and pleads for ambiguity, equivalence, even equivocation in terms of appreciating varieties of experience. A terrible attack takes place in a forest near the ruined city of Kyoto during an unspecified period in the early history of Japan. A woman is raped, her husband murdered, a bandit arrested. Each explains what happened (the husband's ghost speaks through a medium). Yet their stories differ and we are left unclear how to proceed. Each has a tale to tell, the tales do not tally. The story I am referring to is of course *Rashomon*. The *Rashomon effect* (Heider, 1988), a term in itself, taking its name from this well known mid 1950s film of Akira Kurosawa, reminds us there are different perspectives to a story, of the value if you wish, of different narratives. At times rather than asserting certitude or the ‘truth’ or a scientific means of reaching it, equally valuable if not more, may be an approach that allows the sharing of different perspectives, in the hope of moving towards some sort of gradual resolution of the incompatible qualities of individual narratives.

Rashomon was made at a time when univocal narratives seemed evident and acceptable (of capitalist modernities, or socialist worker states to consider two grand narratives). The movie was therefore disturbing: it offered multivalent, discordant and conflicting narratives of a shocking event. Even in moments of such utter and terrible destruction, the truth seemed elusive. However the film today evokes a different experience. We live in a time where grand narratives are distrusted; relativism is nurtured instead as a

more appropriate ideal. The means offered by scientific methods to ascertain facts, is counterpoised by efforts to explore alternative meanings, to forestall the violence of any severe imposition of clarity on what can seem frequently interpretive ambiguity.

One area today where such a Rashomon effect seems apparent is the state of the environment itself. Does global warming exist? How should we narrate the story of the environment and human response in India and China? What are different perspectives, and what would recognition of such perspectives entail? A related question is less regarding the environment per se, and more the manner in which the particular recognition of an environment crisis generates different responses, requiring a sensitivity in considering these responses; a Rashomon position if you like, would be sensitive to the multiple interpretations and reactions in such a context of crisis.

It seems common place to assert tolerance and relativism in social life; many urban areas of the globe have clusters of like-minded people willing to espouse a form of soft tolerance, where divisive views, harsh assessments, and frank appraisals of enduring character, are best avoided in social life, and relegated to safer more private locations. In this sense, unfortunately, the concern with avoiding grand narratives has also led to a profound dilemma in terms of adjudicating crises, and locating vocabulary and practices that can handle them. To put it more directly, it is hard to represent the multiplicity of views on the environment and its crises, when some of these alternative views can seem irresponsible, even traitorous, in asserting that such a crisis exists or does not.

How does one then proceed?

In this paper I seek a Rashomon like sensibility towards a term increasingly used in discussions of the environment and crisis, social innovation (SI). I wish to offer three interpretations or readings of SI. These interpretations will not cohere together, and are in fact contradictory. The first is a straightforward definition of the term itself, using contemporary sources. What is social innovation? Why does it matter? Here I

review the term, track its different contemporary meanings. This is a mainstream reading if you wish, of SI. It is mainstream in that I rely on dominant and influential sources, and will be less interested in questioning the motivations of these sources, nor the inconsistencies in their meanings. I will treat SI as a stable concept with a consistent meaning. Treating SI as a term pointing to empirical artifacts, my attention is on credible instances of it, observed during fieldwork in India and China. I also present some of the ecological contexts in these locations.

Using these cases I could pose and answer the following question: how do we define social innovation? What does it offer? In short, what is social innovation and does it matter? However this is not the only story I wish to tell. I wish to push this discussion further in terms of concerns of social theory and development studies. How do we interpret this attention to social innovation, in this contemporary moment? How do we characterize it? What does such attention tell us about the tacit and explicit positions regarding the environment? What does such attention signify in terms of questions of development? Is it unique and distinct in what it offers us to understand and make tractable contemporary problems of the environment and development?

In the second narrative, I will problematize SI. I will track changing meanings of SI, and question what a focus on the innovative and the social tells us about those who seek such a focus. In short, I turn the gaze inward. Rather than ask how SI matters I will instead ask for whom and why? Care needs to be exercised in terms of who and what is represented as socially innovative. These terms have a particular force within a neoliberal setting, where marketization has conferred considerable legitimacy to both the spirit and actual use of SI and similar terms (such as social entrepreneurship and social enterprise).

To acknowledge a Rashomon effect may appear to be also to acknowledge there is not one 'true' story only multiple ones. At worst it is to take up a position of solipsism, to recognize human life as irretrievably perceptual and that there is not much more one can do about it. At best it is to take these multiple views and have them speak to each

other as it were, attempt a form of reconciliation that can lead towards a shared if modest sense of amelioration, redressal, healing, and in this strict sense, advancement. In fact Kurosawa's movie itself does end with the possibility of such healing, of a manner in which the telling of these different and painful stories, itself presages a capacity to slowly reconcile them. This then is the final reading I offer in this paper, the possibility of politics I witnessed during my field work, a possibility that does not fit well either into the narrative of social innovation or of neoliberalism at their extremes. Instead it points in the direction of nested decentralized politics, a force that may be of greater significance in the future. In this final section I present this alternative reading of SI as politics, and elaborate on its conceptual implications.

The report proceeds as follows. I begin by setting the scene for my research, noting trends of alarming environmental degradation in India and China during a period of climate change and global warming. After presenting this context I turn to my first reading of social innovation (SI) and some examples from field work that illustrate its potential to challenge the environmental trends described. I then present a genealogy of SI, tracing its meanings over the past two centuries. My purpose here is to identify how the contemporary moment shapes our conventional understanding of SI. My genealogy notes the term's propinquity to trends of neoliberal governance. In the third reading using field notes I point to ambiguous information that fits neither a narrative of social innovation as progress nor as neoliberal governance, contradictions that muddle the previous two readings of SI. These moments are better understood as ruptures, moments of puzzles and crisis that shift interpretive frames and offer a potential for changing existing situations. The final section of this paper returns to the classical focus on SI and attempts to resuscitate it in terms of contemporary ecological concerns, arguing for a renewed and reconstructed presentation. I offer three concepts, related to structural holes, tacit knowledge, and heterarchy, that could support a critical project centered on social innovation in this sense, one more attentive to power and conflict, sensitive to questions of representation and knowledge, and committed to a politics that reduces material and ecological inequalities.

A context of environment degradation, climate change, and decentralization

It is common today to speak of environments, the physical and material worlds that human beings inhabit, and ecologies, the nested interrelationships between human beings, other animal and plant species, in registers of pessimism. A note of gloom and a bleak picture contribute to a recognition that the world we inhabit at present is one that is despoiling, overexploiting and destroying the forest cover, species biodiversity, and the natural resources needed for human and planetary survival. Nowhere is such pessimism more apparent than in the context of India and China. These two large countries have enjoyed high levels of industrial growth and material prosperity over the past three decades, but a prosperity offset by significantly increased levels of environment depredation and degradation. Leaving aside the obvious fact that a concept as complex as the environment demands more nuance than registers of pure pessimism or optimism, it is worth noting it is possible to be both pessimistic and optimistic about it. A particular aspect of this complex accommodation (for want of a better word) is in the context of social innovation and the natural environment. Social innovation constitutes a form of agency, a response by people to the rapidly endangered and deteriorating state of their environment. Such responses also reveal increased sensitivity to the complex inter-relationships of ecology, societies, markets, technology and organizations. We could discuss social innovation in registers of optimism, as part of the capacity of human beings to resist deterioration of their natural environment, to find ways of responding in a manner that strengthens the environment, and themselves.

The epigraphs that preface this report bring out these registers of pessimism and optimism, and in particular ways. The quote from Theodor Adorno (1951) is a bleak assessment of the world we inhabit. Writing *Minima Moralia* in a post-war United States and Europe, accepting the vigor of industrial capitalism, recognizing the growth of consumerism, Adorno was prescient in noting the environmental costs of such an era. His observation can be read as a comment on the link between personal lack (human want), societal inequality (the replication of human want across a society), and

the manner in which human want is to be overcome (through forms of capitalism that exacerbate inequality). However the use of the adjectives *desultory* and *futile* hint at the environmental costs of such “arrangements” that they help us defer the consequences of our human actions as capitalists and consumers. His pessimism gestures towards human selfishness and self destructiveness.

In contrast the quote from John Berger (1972) offers a note of optimism, if at least defiance. Berger declares a commitment to plurality, to the recognition that story telling offers a possibility of recognizing multiple interpretations, rather than demanding adherence to only one set of characters and their causal relation. “Never again will a single story be told as though it's the only one” can be interpreted as a commentary on strongly held views of a particular kind, views that close off other possibilities. In this sense a commitment to the market in its extreme, at the exclusion of the state or society, is a narration of a single story as if it is the only one, as if alternative stories do not exist. Berger’s comment can also be understood in terms of other stories, such as of the rise of nations and nation states, of corporate firms and their employed, and the stories within these stories, obscured in the telling. Obviously the stories I allude to here are of the environment and our ecological interdependence. In this sense Berger’s remark is a reminder to be attentive to multiple tellings of a story, to what may be obscured in a telling, and what can be retained. His optimism points to the possibilities of resistance, of a commitment to multiplicity that can weather human beings through the storms around them.

Adorno’s pessimism gestures towards the dire state of the natural environment today, globally. It points to the trends of global warming and the manner in which the natural world is changing and the demands made on those who rely on it absolutely, to adapt to these changes. As some livelihoods become precarious, social inequalities also worsen, since changing environments differentially affect the poor and those better able to insulate themselves from such changes. Berger’s optimism gestures instead towards agency and the manner in which human actors are resisting these trends. One such arena of agency is in social innovation and in terms of ecological response. In

what follows I present a contemporary account of what constitutes SI and flesh out this definition in terms of its ecological implications.

Social innovation as currently defined

A well known definition of SI describes it as “new ideas that work in meeting social goals” (Mulgan et. al., 2007). A variety of foundation reports, journals, university research groupings and even government initiatives have emerged that coalesce around the assertion that social innovation describes ideas that are practical, tractable and new. On this basis all of the following are examples of social innovation: fair trade, the Open University, the Grameen Bank, other non-governmental organizations, and linux software (Mulgan et. al., 2007: 47). Similarly, the Obama administration’s newly created Office of Social Innovation and Civic Participation can claim that it is about “engaging individuals, non-profits, the private sector, and government to foster innovation and work together to make greater and more lasting progress” (White House: Office of Social innovation and civic participation). In this instance the dominant tenor is one less of ideational content and more about an engaging process with an end goal of innovation.

A more nuanced and precise definition of SI specifies that it is “new concepts, strategies, initiatives, products, processes, or organizations that meet pressing social needs and profoundly change the basic routines, resource and authority flows, or beliefs of the social system in which they arise” (Biggs, Westley, and Carpenter, 2010: 3). This definition expands the content from not only ideas to also organizations, and their social interactions; it also clarifies the end outcome as one of transformative and expansive change (in terms of the social system). The definition brings out the relevance of authority, resources, beliefs, and organizational outputs and internal processes in terms of social innovation.

Through these three quotes we can identify the following definitional elements:

- anything new in terms of ideas, concepts, strategies, products, or organizations
- a transformative and expansive end outcome, affecting multiple levels of a social system
- involving processes of engagement that affect multiple actors

Ecological management

How can we understand social innovation in terms of resisting ecological degradation? Ecological management has often been understood in terms of three guiding principles, ecosystems, stewardship, and diversity. The dominant interpretations of these principles have been towards sustainability, regulation and bio diversity. Here I wish to argue for an alternative set of concepts that better bring out the potential of SI for ecological management (See Table 1 and Table 2).

Ecosystems: Sustainability or resilience?

How do local actions strengthen an ecosystem? Questions of ecosystems are frequently discussed in terms of sustainability. In a well-known definition from the 1987 Brundtland Commission Report, sustainability is described as being about meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations (Campanella & Godschalk, 2012: 224). Such a description is striking in its anthropocentrism – the environment is cast in terms of a resource to be sustained for future human needs. However an alternative way of understanding questions of ecology is in terms of ecosystem resilience. Such an understanding moves away from a concern with human needs, to recognition that human needs are nested relationally, within clusters of natural and social systems through which natural resources are exploited. The question then becomes in what ways we understand ecosystems and what is needed to strengthen them. Questions of degradation are no longer questions of how to return to an existing relationship to the environment (which is what concerns maintaining sustainability). Rather the question is how to strengthen an

ecosystem, so that it is resilient, able to withstand well changing climates, and natural disasters.

Stewardship: Regulation or co-management?

Discussions of the environment are also discussions of who will be responsible for its governance. Who stewards it? One way of discussing such stewardship is in terms of the state, and what it can do to maintain an amicable level of human use of the natural resources within the environment. However an alternative way of considering this question of stewardship is in terms of shared governance. This would mean recognizing that multiple actors reside within ecosystems, and therefore questions of stewardship are also questions of identifying these actors and holding them accountable towards environmental impact. This moves the question away from the state and towards those residing within an ecosystem (including humans but not restricted solely to them) and their forms of governing environment use. So, co-management refers here to the implicit and explicit partnerships between state actors and non-governmental actors especially in terms of those residing with an ecosystem. Through what arrangements are these responses coordinated? Who is involved? What is the role of the local state actors?

Diversity: Biological or associational?

Finally discussions of the environment are discussions of two linked forms of diversity. An important aspect of the environment is biological diversity, in terms of the variety of plant and animal species present. Such diversity is in fact closely evoked by concepts such as resilience and ecosystems; *pace* claims of sustainability advocates, ecosystem governance must literally acknowledge the interlinked nature of the question of the environment. This interlinked nature is what a question of biodiversity evokes, since it notes that the diversity of a particular ecosystem embeds the interdependence of its constituent parts. That is, the ecological value of diversity is in the flow of energy between these actors, a flow that regenerates the ecological setting. One example of such diversity is brought out in the well-known book of Clifford Geertz's (1963) *Agricultural involution*, when he describes the ecology of a paddy field in

terms of how much rice yield can be squeezed out of it. Such fields are periodically flooded with water; ducks are released and they navigate the water, and eat pests that would otherwise attack the crop. They also consume frogs that live in the paddy field and survive on insects including the pests. The interlinked consumption of the ducks, the frogs, and insects returns nutrients to the paddy fields. Studies have shown the age of these fields, and how they have supported paddy cultivation across centuries through this agriculture (Lansing, 1991).

In a similar manner we could imagine the diversity of associational society. Where biodiversity signifies the diversity of natural and human species that exist within an ecosystem, associational diversity signifies the diversity of groupings through which these actors are represented. The greater the variety of such groups the higher the diversity. To some theorists of civil society (Edwards, 2004; Srinivas, 2009), higher variety signifies greater public discussion, possibilities for disputation and transparency of those who hold power. It offers a potential for a particular kind of politics (Srinivas, 2009), where citizenship is exercised by seeking an expansive engagement with the ecological question. What forms of civil society are important for such ecosystem response? Does one type of organization prevail, for instance, NGOs? What is the consequence in terms of stewardship of diversity and lack of it?

These three areas are summarized in the following table.

Table 1: Typology of ecological management

Core concepts	The Dominant interpretation	An Alternative interpretation
Ecosystems	sustainability	resilience
Stewardship	regulation	co-management
Diversity	biological	associational

Field study information

In fieldwork in India and in China my interest was understanding the role of social innovation in ecological degradation. I directed research towards a set of concepts: resilience of ecosystems; co-management; and associational diversity. My information gathering focused on: characterizing ecosystems and their boundaries, identifying dangers of degradation, and of forms of stewardship. I studied the impact of climate change; responses of local communities, civil society groups, and the state; and the modes of shared governance between these actors. The following table summarizes the information gathered using the following categories: description of the ecosystem, problems of degradation, responses of civil society, and forms of shared governance.

Table 2: Key findings from field work

Region	Ecosystem	Degradation	Key Responses	Shared governance
South-west Rajasthan, India	semi-arid, hilly terrain with forests and shared rangelands; concentrated and sparse groundwater reserves	deforestation, forest encroachment, polluted water reserves	creating village bodies; subsidized pumps; cleaning water sources	NGO-led: <i>Seva Mandir</i> working with village groups; no state ministries involved
Telengana, India	arid scrubland; limited groundwater	desertification, depleting water reserves	village government; rainwater harvesting	NGOs such as the Deccan Development Society with village groups; selective state involvement

Lashihai, West Yunnan, China	semi-humid, sandy soil around a lake	farming and tourism is reducing water size	creating alternative incomes, community monitoring of resources	NGO led: Green watershed; sporadic and tense relationship with government
Gaoligong Shan, West Yunnan, China	semi-humid, mountainous and thickly forested; very high biodiversity	deforestation, encroachment	community monitoring; alternate income sources (beehives, carpentry)	government led: state ministries create local bodies with aid agency help

Telengana

Located in the south-central Deccan this is a deceptively arid region. There are water reservoirs, greenery, and fields. But it is difficult terrain: water is scarce, irrigation not plentiful. What appears green includes thorn bushes, and groundwater is limited. Over the past two decades water reserves have further depleted, and fragile lands teetering on the edge of aridity have desertified due to limited water supply and greater resource demands. At the same time the region has become charged by a struggle for state-hood. Politicians claim the region's enduring poverty is due to its people being deprived of natural resources by competing regions. Similar claims have been made in other areas of Andhra Pradesh, notably Rayalaseema which remains the poorest part of the state. Both Rayalaseema and Telengana suffer periodic droughts, and assertions are made at such times of severe biases in state allocation of resources and investments, including water sharing. But another way of studying this matter would be to acknowledge that growing population, urban and industrial pressures, and possibly, shifting trends in climate, have exacerbated an already fragile ecosystem.

In this context a unique trajectory of social innovation is associated with the Deccan Development Society (DDS). It works with village-level organizations and promotes nested policies that strengthen community level food autonomy and control of water resources. These village organizations, sanghams, are encouraged to develop

conservation strategies that accommodate internal inequalities. Such accommodation occurs in part because the DDS' focus is on historically underprivileged groups in these localities. So it focuses on dalit communities that lack the land and irrigation facilities available to more powerful ethnic groups. But the other aspect of such accommodation is the nature of the sangham itself. Following a democratic process, with a focus on dalits, it is inevitable that its chosen process of conservation will have to be sensitive to internal inequalities.

The staff I interviewed at the DDS emphasized specific practices and technologies. Sanghams reduce water needs by planting a wider variety of crops, and by avoiding water intensive crops such as rice. In part this requires not only different planting cycles but also change in diets. Millet is a traditional and hardy cereal that has lost prestige to more resource intensive crops such as wheat and rice. In promoting such an alternative crop the DDS is confronting current food policies of the Indian government. The government offers subsidies for low-income communities for cereal purchase. Policies are skewed towards the production of wheat and rice, and steer the local people away from food production. They are encouraged to plant cash crops, use the money earned to purchase subsidized cereals. Alternately, following the DDS model, they can change their eating habits, and become less reliant on this distant supply chain, and become more autonomous as a result. Besides water conservation through different crop planting, the DDS also encourages rainwater harvesting. Being an arid region, the farmers seek to store water during the monsoons for later use. Traditional ponds have been used in this region as a form of harvesting of rainwater, and the DDS promotes their use.

Udaipur

Located in the south western part of Rajasthan, and on the southern slopes of the Aravalli ranges, the region around the city of Udaipur, is quite different from Telengana. The terrain is hilly, with dispersed villages separated by hills and forests. Ground water is concentrated and not easy to access. Like Telengana this is a region marked by severe enduring resource inequalities. Once part of a kingdom, the royal

class and attending nobles offered some infrastructure to reduce inequalities. Tanks were dug to store rainwater and to share groundwater. But due to the region's topography the reach of irrigational canals is limited. Farming has typically taken place close to water sources. The region is also marked by forest-lands that were historically royal hunting preserves. These preserves are today government controlled revenue forests. They have gradually been encroached, some of their fringes transformed into cultivable land. As a consequence forest cover is decreasing. These encroachers include poor tribal communities, the adivasis, as well as wealthier members of villages.

In this context the NGO Seva Mandir works in various communities, offering a variety of services. A well respected venerable NGO, Seva Mandir's work includes a distinct ecological aspect. Its focus is on decentralized governance of local resources; like the DDS it too encourages village level institutions that can conserve local resources. However unlike the DDS its focus is on following existing state regulations, which means it discourages any form of encroachment regardless of the community involved. And unlike the DDS its village institutions are not defined by ethnicity and are instead expected to serve all local level members. This position has opened the NGO to some criticism. To writers such as Kashwan & Lobo (forthcoming) such a policy lacks sensitivity towards encroachers whose actions stem from economic desperation. At the same time its efforts are hard pressed to tackle existing social disparities which in turn influence selective enforcement of existing laws. In short the NGO has found it hard to actually implement a consistent non-encroachment policy in the first place, given the vested interests in these locations.

During field visits I was impressed by the engagement and dedication of staff, and the variety of work accomplished. Maintaining a matrix structure of operation, where managers simultaneously report to an area coordinator and to an expertise coordinator, the organization expects and institutionalizes a high capacity for negotiation. Such negotiation is apparent not only within the organizational structure but also in strategies of outreach and resource conservation. The delivery of results is closely connected to village assemblies. The offices have neat organization charts in

local languages, typically with the conventional hierarchy reversed (that is the actual senior managers are represented at the bottom of the chart, implying their expected accountability to clients). Organigrams show circles of engagement, not a top-down chain of command. In these ways the iconography emphasizes the effort to move away from hierarchical to collaborative, relatively egalitarian, work arrangements. And indeed matrix structures work well when staff are offered a high level of autonomy and expected to follow their own judgment in the novel situations confronted. In a sense having two bosses simply means having no boss at all, when possible.

However conversations and observations also showed a pattern of conflict: the effort to develop consensus could blur severe differences. A staff member informed me bitterly, in Hindi, that English speakers were paid much more and enjoyed senior responsibilities unavailable to equally experienced Hindi speakers. The staff also told me that English speakers benefited from the experience and insight available to the Hindi speakers, while their titular work superior. Senior leaders were admirably open to discussing these issues. Their response was pragmatic, labor markets were what they were, in the NGO world English was at a premium. However a larger question worth posing is not solely about whether such inequality should exist. Rather it is *how* such inequality should be acknowledged in their line of work?

Seva Mandir's work shows a variety of social innovations, notably in terms of user groups, intermediate technology, and reclaimed/improved water sources. The innovations require a high level of cooperation across resource-unequal actors. Farmers at a groundwater reservoir displayed account books; they had formed a user group as part of the conditions for a Seva Mandir grant. The NGO paid for the pump set in the expectation farmers would cooperate in funding fuel costs. The account books listed the names of each subscriber, time usage, and fuel costs calculated for such use. When I asked how the time of use was decided, I was told it required much negotiation. Farmers often need water at the same time: they have to work out turns, preferences must be fair and appear just. Again the expectation was that Seva Mandir's grant would encourage members to work together, find a way to handle internal

differences. (But of course it is not clear to what extent such an effort actually respects these differences and ameliorates them, or simply smothers their expression). There are ecological implications of such an innovation. Now able to farm through access to water, user group members need not cut down nearby forests to sell the timber. They need not encroach on reserve forests. Importantly they work together, and strengthen skills to handle conflicts, to share existing scarce resources.

At another village, Deelwara, a well known Jain pilgrimage destination, I was shown village tanks drained, cleaned and repaired by village assemblies. The assembly had hired cleaners to collect garbage, separate the compostable refuse. In this way the clean up had created a network of obligations, both monetary and social, with virtuous ecological consequences. They now enjoyed cleaner water, and had streets with functioning garbage collection.

In Sisvi an assertive village elder refused to share a water source. The meeting became heated. His declarations were made to an audience that included Seva Mandir staff visiting from the Udaipur office as well as village level staff, and the village assembly. The latter's leader as well as the NGO staff responded politely and vigorously during the discussion. Again the emphasis was in negotiating between actors with very different resource entitlements. And indeed the staff with whom I had made this visit, informed me as we left, they expected the village elder to accede, to share his water source with the rest of the village by offering them some access to it.

Lashi Hai

The visits to China involved two locations in Yunnan, a south-west province bordering Burma, Vietnam and Laos. The first is a lake situated outside Lijiang, an ancient city reconstructed after a severe earthquake in 1996. Favored by domestic as well as international tourists, it wears a festive and souvenir oriented air. Tourists visit the town for its unique ambience, a preserved quality to the architecture that marks it different from the larger, bustling and more anonymous urban landscapes elsewhere in China.

Outside Lijiang is the lake Lashi Hai. This is a large highland lake at 2200 meters. The lake is an important site for Himalayan migratory birds. The wetland ecosystem comprises semi humid sandy soil, and a variety of forest species and migratory birds. I visited the fringe of the lake and one of the villages located there. The ecotourism group with whom I traveled brought bicycles for our use. Biking was frequently interrupted by groups of tourists from Lijiang, who visit the lake to ride horses. Tourism is an important source of local income but also a severe threat to ecological balance. The incursion of horses, dumping of animal waste in lake waters, have caused problems. Government officials have also dammed parts of the lake to increase water availability for Lijiang. Therefore the key environmental problems are degraded water reserves and encroachment of lake borders. The increase in tourism as well as damming of upstream waters have reduced the lake's size and affected water quality.

Key environment related solutions at present involve alternative income sources and community monitoring, led by an important local NGO, *Green Watershed*. The NGO has developed a strategy of multi-pronged engagement: conserving existing tree cover in villages and planting fruit trees, locating alternative livelihoods for villagers including fishing and relying on participatory methods. The NGO in this sense is a partner with local level actors seeking to maintain their ecosystem. Green Watershed has become quite visible, receiving numerous awards, increasing the prominence of its leader and founder Yu Xiaogang. The NGO is featured in prominent press releases as an exemplar of engaged environmental work. It has been an advocate for participatory watershed management; it has also criticized provincial government plans for further damming of the Salween river (Nujiang). Its approach is community based, focused on long-term change, not immediate short-term impacts. For instance planting fruit trees, and shifting villagers towards alternate livelihoods is not amenable to immediate dramatic results. But in time it shifts human actors in this ecosystem away from activities that further exacerbate the deteriorating water quality, and towards activities that increase ecological strength.

Gaoligongshan

I also visited three locations in the Gaoligongshan region of Western Yunnan, a high altitude forest. The Gaoligongshan is a 'hot spot', with one of the highest levels of biodiversity on the planet. Walking through its forests is a special experience. You see an expanse of misty tall trees. There are weird echoes of birds and insects. The calls resonate in the otherwise silent surroundings. The three sites visited were in different parts of the Gaoligongshan. The first location is close to Baoshan, on the Eastern fringe of the Gaoligongshan and away from the border with Burma. Here I met with staff of an Center for Mountain Eco-systems project in the Yang Liu watershed. This showpiece project seeks to regenerate tree cover and strengthen village autonomy. I then crossed the Gaoligongshan by bus to Tengchong on the Western side of the forest reserve, closer to the Burma border. Here a government project helps villagers find alternative income sources, while maintaining the ecological codes that govern the forest reserves.

The Gaoligongshan is a semi-humid mountainous forest ecosystem. It has thick forests, a high variety of plant and animal species. It also covers differing altitudes, being a series of peaks with villages on the plateaus below these peaks. The heights look down on rivers that flow onward to become the most important in countries that neighbor the region, including the Mekong (Lancang) and Salween (Nujiang) rivers. When driving through this region it is hard to imagine it is under threat. The forest cover is incredibly thick. At times the sun seems to have set and the road flows below clumps of trees. However you also notice trucks laden with timber, areas of stark muddy plains where trees have been cut, gorges from which rocks and minerals have been mined, and these indicate another story. The core environmental problems are deforestation and encroachment. It is hard to monitor the use of forests and in some areas local officials have cut down trees for profit, as informants told me. The communities within the Gaoligongshan are governed by laws that mandate the borders of villages. Villagers can cut trees for their use or sale within a certain boundary of the village. However they cannot cut down trees further in the forest, although they can enter these areas for activities such as bee keeping or mushroom

farming. Therefore the interaction of human beings with the natural environment is especially sensitive here and calls for a nuanced approach to environmental governance.

The solutions to these environmental problems have emphasized community level monitoring of the ecosystem while providing alternative income sources to reduce dependence on timber. These include technological solutions such as improved beehives, energy efficient stoves, to encourage villagers to not only pursue alternative income sources but reduce their energy footprint in doing so. The co-management is led by government ministries working closely with Dutch aid agencies, and, through such funding, Chinese NGOs. Through such work the Ministry has promoted environmental solutions, and created village level committees to lead these efforts.

The first story: Learning about social innovation from these field visits

What do these field visits tell us? Using the definition we have surveyed earlier, we can identify a variety of social innovations that vary in scale and technology. They include beehives, wood burning stoves and pump sets, technological solutions customized for local uses. They include working groups to raise funds and share technology among members. At times these two forms of social innovation overlap, such as the user group that operates pump sets and allocates costs internally. But there are also working groups at a larger scale of operation such as in Deelwara to clean up water tanks and dispose garbage. These are not technological as much as institutional innovations, new forms of organizations to better respond to the ecological setting. Other such innovations include community forest wardens in the Gaoligongshan, village councils in all the sites studied to monitor access to the commons and for resource sharing. It includes the seed banks and night schools established by the DDS in Telengana and the schools of the Green Watershed in the Lashi Hai. Finally one can also at a higher scale of operation recognize policies or strategies that are innovative, including the approach to ecological stewardship of the Green Watershed and at the Gaoligongshan project, and of land regeneration and watershed management of the DDS and Seva Mandir.

While these SIs vary in scale and use of technology, they do share three characteristics noted earlier in the typology of ecological management. First they contribute to the local environment in a specific way, to ecosystem resilience. Resilience points to the long term learning and adaptation of an ecosystem. In the immediate sense it points to the ecosystem's capacity to withstand shocks; in an important sense it also points to the ways in which inhabitants of the ecosystem withstand shocks.

Secondly these innovations rely heavily on principles of co-management of natural environments. The ecosystems are managed by networks and not by a single actor. The networks are led by NGOs, state ministries, and often a combination of both, and require the efforts of local users, to be successful. They signal a shift in environmental governance, away from a reliance on state policy alone, to a more complex and subtle set of incentives and mechanisms. However, crucially these innovations do require state actors to be willing to commit to such co-management. Research has shown the drawn out negotiations required in China to work with government ministries (Gilley, 2012; Hsu, 2010). Without such support it would not be possible to consider co-management. In India by contrast government cooperation is not a pre-condition; however to be successful there does have to be some explicit mechanism for government and NGO actors to cooperate.

Thirdly these SIs demonstrate associational diversity. By this I mean a variety of associations that do not share organizational characteristics. Like biodiversity this variety maintains a high diversity of organizational forms and encourages unusual pollination and cross-breeding that could signal future ecological adaptation. A variety of groups mobilize for ecological response in these cases, from village councils, state-mandated bodies, state ministries, registered NGOs, formalized networks, aid agencies, traditional councils, and indeed parallel government bodies (in Telengana and in Udaipur).

Is it enough to locate social innovation in field work this way, as contributing to change, in terms of groups, organizational arrangements, or technological process? One response would be no, we should interpret the term social innovation more closely. Rather than stop this paper at this point, I wish to argue for a closer reading of social innovation, that troubles the simple listing of innovations offered above. Let us examine the term more closely.

A genealogy of social innovation

In fact social innovation is *not* a contemporary term. What is remarkable is that it is deemed to be a contemporary notion, whether in terms of the conceptual expectation or the usage. In an invaluable series of reports the Québécois scholar Benoît Godin (2002) has explored the history of innovation. He has been especially interested in the ways concepts of innovation were understood over the past three hundred years, and earlier; the ways concepts have traveled from one language to another, and how over time attendant meanings changed through such travels.

As Godin shows the phrase social innovation has existed for over a century, and been used in that time to describe and characterize social change. In 1858 the Englishman Sargent in *Social innovators and their schemes* and the following year the Frenchman Guizot in a book on the worker insurrection in Lyons, both used the phrase to describe significant social change. Their particular perspective on these social changes is brought out well in a quote from Guizot's work: "tous les partis politiques, tous les novateurs sociaux, toutes les passions, toutes les idées, tous les rêves révolutionnaires, apparurent dans cette anarchie" (cited in Godin, 2012: 12). Roughly translated the quote states that "all the political parties, all the social innovators, all the passions, all the ideas, all the revolutionary dreams, appeared in this anarchy". The quote glosses social innovation as revolutionary change, and places it in the context of a worker insurrection and expectations of socialism. Thus the early use of the term social innovation was in terms of socialist goals and the revolutionary changes needed to achieve these projects.

Parallel to this rather forbidding meaning of social innovation existed a more neutral understanding of it, as social reform. This is brought out in different texts of the time, such as Horace Greeley's *The idea of social reform* in 1845, and an anonymous contributor to the *National Review*, who declared a distinction between social reformers and social innovators. Where the former attempt to improve society "without aspiring to reconstruct it", social innovators "propose to create society, if not human nature, anew" (cited in Godin, 2012: 17). In slight contrast Victor Considerant in 1842 offered a similar meaning of social innovation, in terms of a spreading set of reforms. He noted that "...l'Épreuve d'une Innovation sociale...est juge de la valeur de l'Innovation, et c'est l'Acceptation libre du Procédé nouveau, l'Imitation spontanée de la Combinaison nouvelle, qui expriment le Jugement de l'Humanité" (cited in Godin, 2012: 17). Roughly translated it reads as "the proof of a social innovation is judged by the value of the innovation, and is the free acceptance of a new procedure, the spontaneous imitation of a novel combination, which expresses the judgment of humanity".

As we can see by the mid 19th century the phrase social innovation was being used by both French, English and American scholars to denote dramatic socialist change and gradual social reform. Within another half century these initial meanings would become obscured, as interest grew in the impact of technology on society. By 1922 Clifford Ogburn and Thorstein Veblen both assessed society as ill-adjusted to technology. There was a social lag: technology was changing rapidly and society could not keep up with these changes. Social innovation was therefore what was required for society to adapt to these technological innovations. Social innovation now began to approximate what would become its contemporary meaning, connoting what ever is new. In 1957 Peter Drucker said social innovation "aims at using traditional values, beliefs and habits for new achievements, or to attain old goals in new, better ways that will change habits or beliefs" (cited in Godin, 2012: 28). His definition signals two aspects of the newness of social innovation, the new ends attained through traditional means, and the new means used to attain existing ends. Jean-William Lapierre in 1977 declared social innovation as the changing of an entire system. "Le processus de

transformation des rapports sociaux par l'action collective de groupes... par imposer à la fois de nouveaux rapports de production, de nouveaux besoins, un nouveau discours, de nouveaux codes, un nouveau régime politique, une nouvelle organisation de l'espace social" (cited in Godin, 2012: 33). Roughly translated "the process of transformation of social relations by the collective action of groups... by imposing new relations of production, of new needs, a new discourse, new codes, a new political regime, a new organization of the social space".

Within 150 years the meanings of social innovation had shifted from socialist change, to gradualist social reform, to social adjustments to technological change, and then a dramatic process of social transformation connoting the shock of the new. Therefore social innovation is best understood as "part of a semantic network of terms, all of old origin... resurrected from time to time to put emphasis on the social" (Godin, 2012: 42). (However such a network of terms also has a moral connotation. The term originated in a concern with the perils of socialist change and culminates in an exhortation of the new, both in terms of benefits for society). Rather than treat social innovation as having a definitive meaning, it may be wiser to treat it as an ongoing constellation of meanings, or words uttered in seeming assonance, and to treat it as a constellation that has shifted in semantic emphasis over time from one register to another.

The term originated in a socialist impulse and reactions to that impulse. This socialist impulse can be characterized as the recognition of how capitalist growth creates and relies on social inequality. Socialist projects sought to curb the market to reduce the impact on inequality, and in varying ways. However side by side to the socialist reformer was another type of reformer, less enthusiastic of interfering in social processes, less critical of the market, more eager to acknowledge personal responsibility for social plight. In 1858 Sargant reminded his readers where the responsibility for poverty lay, that "the dignity of the working classes is principally in their own hands, and that without industry, frugality, and self-restraint, on their part, no measures of Government, no organizations of society, can raise their condition...".

Therefore “...it is not to the direct action of legislation on wages and charitable relief, but to an improvement of the men themselves, that we must look for amelioration” (cited in Godin, 2012: 10-11). Only the poor could help themselves, and implicitly such efforts would require “industry frugality and self restraint”, in short the capacities required to engage with the industrial markets. To an author like Sargant social innovation in the socialist sense would have made little sense except as a hindrance. However social innovation in the more recent sense, as the shock of the new, was quite correct and would require a stronger effort of adjustment. And so we have come full circle in fact. Initially SI was what was anti-capitalist and what was socialist. It was also rapid and violent change and to many who named it such, to be abjured. But today SI stands for the opposite, for efforts supportive of capitalism, celebrating the shock of the new, while seeking to moderate the negative effects the change causes, in the hope such amelioration strengthens adjustment to capitalist systems. In this contemporary sense SI seeks balance, to counter the extreme effects of marketization, in the hope of a more harmonious accommodation to capitalist shifts.

By whom? How is this accommodation to happen?

The second story: Social Innovation and governmentality

What we are witnessing is a contemporary moment in this constellation of meanings that constitute social innovation. Rather than treat social innovation as an unproblematic identification of a set of innovative actions and to champion, we should treat it instead as a political project. We should ask the question: *what does this manner of defining SI generate?* Who gains? Who loses? And as we shall see, especially, what is the work involved, and who does it?

In 1978 Michel Foucault (1978/2010) presented a series of lectures at the Collège de France. These lectures were intended to be on a term that Foucault had scantily used before, *biopolitics*. Accordingly the lectures were titled *The birth of biopolitics* and under that title are now available for general reading. Ironically Foucault was not able to discuss biopolitics within the lectures, since to do so, he had to first present what he

argued was a unique arrangement of power, *governmentality*. The term is a neologism, based on two French words: gouverner + mentalité. Added together these two words now described a manner of governing that was internalized, as a mentality if you will. Governmentality was Foucault's concept for explaining the ways of governing citizens, in particular to delineate the "neo-liberal forms of government (that) ...characteristically develop indirect techniques for leading and controlling individuals without at the same time being responsible for them" (Lemke, 2001: 201). To Foucault what was especially unusual about neoliberal forms of governing was the responsibility they placed on citizens to govern themselves. Neo-liberalism "encourages individuals to give their lives a specific entrepreneurial form" and "tries to render the social domain economic and to link a reduction in (welfare) state services and security systems to the increasing call for 'personal responsibility' and 'self-care' " (Lemke, 2001: 202). *Le souci de soi*, the care of the self, became necessary for inhabitants of these new forms of governance to function. To function well they had to take care of their self, in order to accommodate to the new alliances of the market and the state.

It is this care of the self that is alluded to in the contemporary and ringing declarations of social innovation. They ask for a manner of engaging with the problematic of environment degradation where those confronting it at its extreme margins, are also those asked to take up the heaviest burden, in terms of responding to it. A subway advertisement currently reads "the more of us who walk the more of us survive", for the *Avon walk for breast cancer*, set for New York, October 19-20, 2013. That day people will walk in support of funding to reduce breast cancer, supplemented perhaps by the Avon corporation and foundation whose name undergirds the effort. But surely walking does not allow more people to survive? And why is the word funding absent in the advertisement? No, what is implied here is that walking offers a symbolic impetus for more funds to be raised, funds that can be directed towards prevention of breast cancer. A question could be asked: what if more people walked towards the addresses of state institutions and demanded greater state funding for such research? Would it be more effective? Would it appear more politicized? The advertisement exemplifies a simplistic assumption of marketization, and a depoliticized engagement with society.

Similarly in November 2012 the India China Institute hosted a conference on religion and environment conservation. A movie was shown, *Himalayan Meltdown*, funded in part by UNDP and broadcast on the Discovery Channel. The movie documents the ingenuity of those suffering from melting glaciers in the Himalayas, who are building small-scale dams, adapting to errant river movement, and in these ways responding to climate change. What is striking is the film's silence on the *causes* of global climate change, the increase in carbon emissions for instance. Rather this grim situation is shown in an optimistic and paternalistic light, where the causes of climate change are ignored and the poignant and heroic efforts to respond made more apparent, for us to celebrate such actions. The optimism demonstrated by the film is not in the cheeriness or delight of those filmed, but rather their purposive enterprise. It is their ability to take control of their lives, protect themselves from dire consequences, that is showcased. It is this sort of enterprise, to be espoused and internalized as a reminder of the indomitable human spirit, even in the bleak face of stark climate change, and with scarce acknowledgement of state or market responsibilities, that Foucault glossed as governmentality.

Social innovation is a mobilizing device, part of a project of interpellating not just neoliberal citizenship but especially a particular relationship between the self and nature. There is a performative quality to its contemporary usage, as is the case in fact with a variety of other efforts to identify the innovative (Fougère & Harding, 2012). Imagine you watch a group of men pool money to operate a pump set. Now imagine you name this group as “social innovators”. You perform social innovation in its contemporary sense, by naming them as new, exciting, doing something unusual, worth replicating. It is in this sense that social innovation has a performative quality. Judith Butler (1993: 171) defined the performative in terms of “statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power”. An example of a performative utterance is *I do*, as in response to the question, *Do you take this woman to be your wife?* In a specific sense, the utterance literally brings the historically gender unequal relation of the marriage to being.

Such binding power can be understood as both an exhortation and an enjoining. Citizens are exhorted to be more vigilant in safeguarding their ecosystems, especially those that are fragile and endangered. Foundations offer funds for this purpose, governments aid, and NGOs their expertise. But the ultimate effort required will be of the citizens themselves, those closest to the looming ecological crisis. Inhabitants of ecosystems are also enjoined to follow ecologically sensitive rules of usage, enabled through co-management regimes. However throughout this performative effort, liberalized markets, the urban middle class, its consumption patterns, industrial pollution continue, in some areas further increase. Such binding power is really in terms of enabling citizens to better bear the costs of the market.

I could end this report here, as well. If I did so, I would have offered the reader two stories of social innovation. In the first story SI is evident in field work and examples demonstrate the ingenuity of inhabitants of these ecosystems, the ways in which deterioration is being slowed. The second story casts doubt on the coherence of the first, and offers an alternative reading, in which SI is really a binding device, enabling a variety of actors to commit to practices that further the neoliberal state, and do not credibly reduce the causes of deterioration. While the first story is optimistic and simple, the second story is pessimistic and offers no readily identifiable hero or solution.

If I end this account here I would leave little doubt which story I choose.

Let me share a third story. It is not all that different from the second. But it describes an aspect of my field work not mentioned yet, their moments of dramatic rupture.

Telling the third story: The ruptures in studying social innovation

Berger's epigraph reminds us of the necessity of epistemic openness, that power functions by suppressing multiple stories. In this sense, resistance requires nurturing the multiplicity of interpretations that shape our world. But if that is the case, it inevitably troubles the reading offered in the second story above, asking us to be more careful in taking up a theoretical position as glum in its consequences as that of governmentality. Despite Foucault's subtle presentation, it is tempting to render those inhabiting an ecosystem as objects of a discourse of neoliberal reason, vainly buffering the forces of the market, scrabbling through what is left for them, while it is still available.

In following Berger as in the second epigraph, we are forced to acknowledge multiple stories, the interests that underlie these different stories, and the politics of acknowledging these stories in the first place. Each story has a purpose, and its purpose is to shed light on a set of goals, naturalized within its narrative. Our purpose, to follow Berger, is to consider ways of pushing against these closures of possibilities inherent in a narrative. To do so, to challenge the ways in which stories close certain possibilities while retaining others, is an act of politics. It is to challenge the structure of power that underlies these stories and the possibilities offered and those foreclosed. But it is not only that. Such an approach to story telling is also about something else: a recognition that stories are told among people, a means of creating meaning, of avowing certain forms of relationships. Stories are what Walter Benjamin (1969/1936) in his essay *The storyteller* recognized as an ancient means of fostering a community, as in the classic image of a story teller by a fire. Benjamin recognized that story telling in this sense is partly contingent: Homer narrates the *Odyssey* not quite the same way each time.

These two features, of relationality and contingency, are crucial in the political sense to story telling. Storytelling offers an opportunity to commit to a particular notion of politics. To Jacques Rancière (1999), politics has been commonly understood in terms

of what he terms policing. In his words “Le politique par rapport à la police”, politics is in relation to the police. To him, the term *politics* recognizes the contested nature of what is held in common. It is what is born out of sharing a common space, and the inherent antagonisms that emerge from such sharing. In contrast the ‘police’ signifies a different arrangement of power, it envisages a fixed distribution of the common, an ordered distribution, that defines what is appropriate to such spaces (Chambers, 2011). It is policing rather than politics. Another way of understanding this is to recall an interview of Foucault. “Relations of power are not in themselves forms of repression. But what happens is that, in society, in most societies, organizations are created to freeze the relations of power, hold those relations in a state of asymmetry, so that a certain number of persons get an advantage, socially, economically, politically, institutionally, etc. And this totally freezes the situation. That’s what one calls power in the strict sense of the term: it’s a specific type of power relation that has been institutionalized, frozen, immobilized, to the profit of some and to the detriment of others” (Foucault, 1988: 1) . What Foucault is distinguishing here is, on one hand, a productive quality to power, that power relations exist and therefore what is at issue is not whether there is power but what kind of power. On the other hand he is also distinguishing a state of *freezing* power, when a power relation becomes fixed, and now signifies a static and disparate allotment of influence. It is similar to the distinction Rancière makes between politics and the police.

I wish now to tell a story that could complement the two just narrated, but which is more attendant to the telling of the tale, to its relationality, its contradictions and contingency, to its politics rather than the fixing of power. To do so I revisit two locations and details already narrated earlier in this report.

One afternoon in Rajasthan, I was in the village of Sisvi in the hills near Udaipur, with four Seva Mandir managers, Roanak, Himmat, Shivji and Dinesh. Sisvi like the region around it faces severe water shortages. Water is hauled manually from wherever it is found to its place of use. The means to find and use water is through tube wells, from where all water is hauled. The area obviously has ground water, and historically local

hakra, traditional hydrologists, have been able to find it, aware of the rocks, their history, and layout. But the village lacks the plumbing needed for water to be harvested at the point of use. Those without access to tube wells may rely on a shared hand pump at the village center. But the pump takes thirty seconds before water runs out of its mouth. Therefore any available tube well is worth sharing, given the arduous efforts needed to locate ground water sources and to use alternative means.

That day the managers were visiting the village to establish the status of an existing water well. It was one of many tasks on their agenda. When I say *they* I should be more specific – Himmat’s attention was on drinking water, Shivji was the Zonal manager and Dinesh the Block manager, and in that sense one of his bosses. Because of Seva Mandir’s matrix structure managers report simultaneously to subject and block experts. Subject experts are responsible for external linkages and management issues related to their subject areas; block experts are responsible for coordinating with zonal managers and integrating their work across multiple subject domains, and working with village level institutions.

After visiting a site for wet toilets, I met a woman leader of the local assembly, the Gram Vikas Committee (GVC). The meeting began. Members took time to arrive. It was now late afternoon, the sun hot. Slowly the members collected by the verandah of the GVC office and creche. We sat in one corner, the women in another, and the men filled up the rest of the circle. A naked infant played in his father’s lap, a dog walked by, a collection of young children squealed in amusement from the crèche, watching us. The meeting agenda included: could local water tanks be allowed for communal use? What sort of toilets should be built? How could private land be afforested as public land? And how would work for such planting and maintaining of trees be shared by Sisvi’s villagers? How much grass could each family cut from Sisvi’s shared grasslands?

Gradually they reached the end of the meeting where the item that had already been raised, was now formally stated: there was a private water source in the village that was

being shared informally on an ambiguous basis. Would its owner like to share it more formally? The owner who had been invited along with his partners sat silently while the matter was raised. His position was a delicate one. On one hand he could not easily refuse: in this close knit community such a refusal would lead to vocal disagreement, and fights with neighbors and the attendant risks. If in the future he needed help would he get it, given such a refusal? However, eventually, the owner did object to a tank being built over the well. What if he and his partners needed to irrigate? Anyway he would need all his partners here to check they all agreed to the building of a tank. The members challenged him, including the village GVC leader we had met. She suggested he was buying time, a tactic of deferral to reduce conflict. No he declared, he would “face a bullet” if he was lying. But it did seem (to my colleagues) that it was indeed a tactic of refusal, since he appeared confident his partners would not agree to the tank. The topic shifted after further tension, some gesticulation, and laughter to defray the tension, to the village hand pump and why it was jammed. Once the meeting ended we walked to inspect the proposed water tank site, and found the owner there. He spoke to us politely and insisted we join him for a cup of tea, which we did. We parted affably. The managers conferred on the jeep ride back to Udaipur, agreeing that a compromise could be reached.

This account that I have written from my field notes of that visit offers information that does not fit all that well into either of the two stories just shared, that is, a narrative of SI as the amelioration of ecological crises, nor as a conditioning of neoliberal subjectivity. In the village council the landowner basically challenged the woman leader, declaring “I will part with the water only at the point of a gun”. This declaration, the negotiations that no doubt continued after our visit, do not seem an affirmation of ingenuity in the face of climate change, of locating innovative solutions. Nor do they seem to show individuals rather blindly following the market imperatives set by a neoliberal state. In fact what they seem to show is a working through, a political process of establishing the limits of what is possible within the setting shaped by the NGO, its managers and the attendant state.

Similarly I recall a discussion between a forestry official and villager, when visiting a village in the Gaoligongshan. The villager raised the matter of beehives. The forestry official had in an earlier meeting confessed that they did not have the budget to offer beehives to everyone in the village. These were built to an improved design: you did not destroy the comb to remove the honey. Traditional beehives require removal of the comb and the hive for the honey. Since the forestry official could not give enough beehives to everyone in the village he had suggested a few receive the improved designs. But this effort had been interpreted within the village differently. Rather than a collective they were now having individuals identified for support or largesse. So this villager informed the official, “if you cannot give us more funds then we prefer to receive none, it is causing disharmony”. I sensed that day the villager’s response was meant to gently, diplomatically, pressure the official to find a better means of resolving the problem. But it did make clear that the villagers were not servants of the state forestry department, and that they had interests larger and more complex than individual commercial gain. Again this anecdote does not sit well with the two dominant narratives just shared. The villagers were refusing an innovative design in the interests of social harmony, hardly indicative of social innovation as the emergence of the new, or of the internalizing of a market imperative.

I would prefer to treat these recollections which make up this third story, as slippages. They are moments of rupture where an existing narrative (such as the first two stories shared) simply does not fit that moment. Instead these moments signify the possibilities available within the prevailing market friendly setting of these two countries, and in that sense they signify the potential and limits of the political in that context.

Returning to Rashomon and a final story

I could conclude this report at this stage as well. If I did so, we would be left with three stories and strands as it were, that dangle, incomplete, uncertain yet refreshingly open. It may make sense to do so.

But how to include the genealogy of social innovation discussed earlier in terms of these three narratives? Would my implication be that *all* is relative? If so then climate change is also relative, and we are left with a solipsist problem. The implication becomes that the world is an invention, and that each of our perceptions remain simply that, and we lack a means of verifying if there is a shared perception. Global warming becomes a conjecture, and we are left with an empty tolerance of each and other's belief. Surely that cannot be correct? Even *Rashomon* did not end simply with a shrug, as if all the versions of the original story were equally valid. In fact the movie ends with a witness, a woodcutter, who contradicts the versions shared of the three protagonists, the bandit, the samurai and his wife. After contradicting these accounts, he takes up the samurai's infant child and declares it will be raised as his own. The ending is a certain affirmation, that while stories contradict, there is still hope for both the redemptive quality of story telling, and the ability to distinguish between these stories, however modest, so as to establish a criterion to assess them.

I would therefore prefer to not leave an impression of extreme open-endedness, of equivocation. Climate change continues and those lacking the material means continue to bear the worst of it. I met and studied the lives of some of them, the herders and farmers in the Aravali Ranges, in the Deccan, the foragers and bee keepers in the Gaoligongshan, and the villagers around the Lashi Hai. It would be grievously improper to imply the struggles of these people are simply a matter of opinion. It would be unfair and reductive to imagine their complex lives can be somehow made to sit in only one of the narratives offered here. So I would like to conclude this report by presenting a final, more comprehensive, understanding of social innovation. To do so I return to the *ur*-meaning of social innovation, to its genealogy. I argue that this

meaning continues to be vital and relevant, and that it offers purchase in responding to the serious questions raised in terms of neoliberal policies and the potential of politics.

Social innovation in its classic sense, in its original meaning, represented something very specific. It represented no less than a dramatic change of political structures, a revolutionary shift of power, and the ruptures that indicated such change. This is why commentators wrote of it in the context of worker insurrections, and socialist aspirations: the term emerged in a ferment of agitation against the prevailing capitalist systems of that time, and sought an alternative. More formally we can define social innovation as involving a transformation of social relationships, such that an existing circuit of social relations is transformed, through ideas, materials and politics.

Schematically we could depict it thus:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{circuits of relations (a)} &\equiv \\ &[\text{ideas (a)} \rightarrow \text{materials (a)}] + [\text{materials (a)} \rightarrow \text{ideas (b)}] + [\text{ideas (b)} \rightarrow \text{politics (b)}] \\ &\Leftrightarrow \text{circuits of relations (b)} \end{aligned}$$

That is, social innovation is the transformation of an existing circuit of social relations through a combination of ideas, materials, and politics, into a new circuit of social relations. Note the emphasis in this understanding is on changes in social relations. Let me illustrate this through a contemporary and neutral example. My purpose is to demonstrate that this definition is not ideological but analytical. I am not claiming social innovation has to be socialistic, as much as that the term historically names an ambitious effort of transformation in social behavior.

The *zero rupee* bill is a currency bill distributed by a Chennai based NGO, the 5th Pillar (Mohiuddin, 2010). It is intended to be used by villagers in a public setting to shame corrupt officials. Such shaming in turn is expected to make officials more responsive to client needs, less willing to wait for unlawful inducements to perform their job. This is a project of social innovation in the manner defined here. The analytical elements involve circuits of relations, ideas, materials and politics. This is an Indian currency note with no monetary value. It is displayed in front of elected officials to imply a bribe is being asked. In this sense it is not being credibly offered, but is rather an ironic

gesture. To offer such a note requires training; it is not all that easy to wave a fake note in the nose of a recalcitrant official and publicly. This is why the NGO offers training so that the note becomes part of a repertoire of tactics to mobilize resistance to corruption.

This is not just a note. Latent in it are ideas, ideologies, tangible materials, networks that mobilize it, and power relations that currently exist and which are sought to be changed. In fact the currency note symbolizes a circuit of relations; it is a circuit in that ideas and materials are shared in a transformational loop. This transformation of relations can be understood in the example. A corrupt set of public officials functioning in a village, an NGO, government offices, are the existing set of relations. Now consider the ideas, materials and politics. There are ideas that generate materials: the design of the zero rupee as a shaming concept, and then creating a currency note on that basis. These materials in turn generate further ideas. Displaying the currency note offers an experiential sense of its materiality, and an imbricated set of ideas, on empowerment, accountability. So the ideas shape materials, the materials in turn generate new ideas. The overall consequence is a disruption of local power centers, and a set of networks through which these ideas and materials cycle, and get further transformed. The ideas in this way shape politics. The consequence sought is a new circuit of relations, one of less corrupt official, a more active and vigilant citizenry, and an accountable government. This is one end of social innovation. Social innovation is the way in which a circuit of relations transform, such that (a) becomes (b).

More precisely social innovation has the following elements. First, it is designed. It is conscious, planned, thought out, though there can be unintended consequences. Even if it relies on the routine and unconscious, there is still an element of conscious agency in using such processes. Second, it is based within multiple sets of structured relations (what could be called formal and informal organizations). In the example social innovation relies on the interplay of the formal processes within the NGO, those within formal village and state level organizations, and a variety of informal processes, from face to face negotiation, sharing of wisdom and insider knowledge, and so forth.

In this sense social innovation is correctly defined as across organizations and not bounded within any one of them. That is precisely what makes it innovative, that it is not bounded organizationally and spills over in unpredictable ways that portend revolutionary change. Social innovation therefore exists *across* these organizations, not within any of them but shared across them. Finally it requires negotiating between these different levels of structured relations (from face to face, small groups, between departments of a local office, between groups and an NGO, between NGOs and foundations, between foundations and think tanks and so forth). What is innovative here socially speaking is in fact these complex and unpredictable shifts in social relations, and the sharing of knowledge across them, the inferring of meanings, shaping of ideas, the generation of materials and the creation of a multifarious jagged politics.

For these reasons SI is seriously misunderstood when seen as synonymous with innovation, social entrepreneurship, or the work of nonprofits. Or when it is reduced to an opportunity for citizens to become entrepreneurs, substitute for the state and so forth. Its historical scope has been far more ambitious than this, it has been to change the very nature of society at that point in time, and in that locale, on the terms of those within it. Instead SI is better understood as a historical trajectory that has gradually become depoliticized, so that today it can stand for vapid endorsements of change without substance.

SI remains characterized by three distinct features that require a conceptual clarity. Firstly it is social. The focus is on social relations, what they are and what they should be. Therefore we require middle-range concepts that can help us better understand the interplay between ideas, materials and social relation. One such useful concept is tacit knowledge, customary skills and practices that are hard to formalize, and which enable the daily life within a locale (Scott, 1998). Such tacit knowledge generates opportunities for codifying, that is for making such knowledge more explicit. In terms of the sites I studied the social innovation entailed in water harvesting by the DDS, which requires reducing water usage, and building water cisterns, is an example of the

use of tacit knowledge. These localities in the Deccan, like their counterparts in Rajasthan, have for centuries used their knowledge of traditional water harvesting techniques, traditions that are now gradually becoming codified.

Secondly it requires networks through which these ideas and materials are advanced. These are multifarious networks not controlled by any one entity. They are better imagined, metaphorically, as a set of loosely knitted ropes, pulled and pushed by a range of actors, and simultaneously; this makes it quite hard to expect force exerted over say one rope to have always the same needed effect. There is a reason why Seva Mandir functions in a matrix structure. The NGO has two axes of authority based in sphere of expertise and region of operation. At any given time a manager simultaneously reports to (say) the Head of Natural Resource Development as well as the zonal manager for Deelwara. In a sense this is an internal network. At the same time the NGO's work relies on external networks including ones it has formally organized. This external social system is unusual since one could argue that the goals would be better achieved without it. For instance if Seva Mandir wished it could regularly audit the villages, locate water wells and hand pumps that do not function, and repair them. But its managers insist on local committees holding meetings where such an audit is reported and transmitted to Seva Mandir. The organization's commitment to democratic institutions perhaps explains the endurance of this externally formalized social system. Yet there is also a functional reason at play here. Through such networks the NGO can better adapt to the demands of clients, and ensure their responsibility in implementing some of the proposed avenues for change.

A helpful concept in this regard is that of structural holes (Burt, 1992), areas of disconnection, where complementary information is latent but not shared. Think of someone sipping a coffee, seeking an apartment, and another in that restaurant who has one to rent. Such structural holes generate opportunities for brokering, for locating information gaps and bridging them. A considerable focus of much NGO work today, is precisely this. Consider the use of social media to offer real time information, such as on water availability, or disaster relief supplies. Technology is

used here to plug structural holes. In the process however something interesting happens: the information shared acquires a capacity to re-order structures of power. For instance disaster specialists, flown in for expertise by governments and aid agencies, now find their role must accommodate the information from these shifting and emergent forms of sharing.

Thirdly these networks themselves share an internal feature of importance. They are hard to fit within an image of a hierarchy. Yes Seva Mandir has organizational charts that explicitly identify internal responsibilities. Yet they do not list the village assemblies within these charts. The assemblies are part and yet apart of the organization, linked to the NGO's staff in varied ways, but legally and in reality separate from the organization. This model of engaging with localities cannot be understood in terms of hierarchies alone. It is closer to an image of heterogeneous, unequal, autonomous actors that find ways of linking with one another, in ways that may not be enduring. A helpful concept here is of heterarchies, cross cutting interdependent networks (Stark, 2011). While such networks generate opportunities for collaboration, they function well in terms of negotiating heterogeneous information and shared goals. They function poorly when order is enforced, similarities demanded, that is when imagined as hierarchies.

Conclusion

If we are to discuss social innovation, stating it as new ideas, a transformative outcome, or process of engagement, it is insufficient. We need a deeper reflection on the history of such terms and on the political ends sought through such work. We also require better middle-range concepts for a nuanced understanding of the transformative quality alluded to, even implicitly, in such performative phrases.

Governments do less, decentralize further, spend less. The question of ecology gets further marketized. Ecological management is seen increasingly in terms of market based incentives that will somehow (at the same time) allow for conservation, livelihoods as well as current rates of global resource exploitation. Social innovation

in this context is a word that brings groups together, that generates a particular affinity, one between those with foundation funds seeking a visible impact, those seeking a way of curbing and challenging an authoritarian state through Tocqueville style citizenship activism, and those wishing to ground technological growth in social norms that adapt to them. Corporations are willing to fund it, government become interested in it, and on this basis the term generates a normative pull on these actors. This is the space we occupy, and in this space the politics that I just described, nested, decentralized, dialogical, will thrive, while environmental degradation continues. This is the politics of the current neoliberal moment.

I began this paper recalling *Rashomon*. Let me close with another Kurosawa film, *The Seven Samurai*. In its final scene, three samurai who have survived savage battles with bandits threatening the village, watch villagers plant the rice fields, whistling, content. They have served these villagers well, trained them into a disciplined band, fought with them. They have suffered the loss of men. Of seven only three are left. They look at the graves where their comrades lie, the swords marking these graves, their swords. Their leader, Kambei, turns to the other two: “Again we are defeated. The winners are those farmers. Not us.”

Kurosawa seems to be asking us to reflect on a poignant fact: warriors live by a stable code but are itinerant, have no home equally stable. The farmers lack a similar code of honor, but have a home, and seek to endure, despite who rules them. In a sense the samurai have won the battle but on behalf of the farmers. The warrior class the samurai represent, are outsiders seeking a cause, compensation and fighting accordingly. Now, imagine NGOs, the do-gooders who serve on behalf of farmers, urban dwellers, of residents in varied localities. Like the samurai they too are itinerant, they wander between locales, they have or claim a code that governs them, often a code of expertise. Kambei’s words are a reminder that the film, despite its focus on these dashing warriors, is ultimately about the majority of humanity, those who do not always possess the skill or the will to fight but do wish to endure, whether under their own rule, or that of bandits, samurais, shoguns who lead them, or indeed of global

corporations, the marketized state, and the contractor NGO. A commitment to social innovation, in the historical sense, will require a focus on those within these locales, increasingly endangered by climate change, and a credible effort to understand their battles and ensure they are not the defeated.

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