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Incongruities—a source of innovation

Recently I bought a couple of costly management books at a bookstore in South Mumbai. It cost me a minor fortune. As I walked out of the store something struck me as very strange. This store was situated right in the midst of a locality with several business schools and headquarters of many companies including MNC's. The incongruity of the situation as I saw it was this. The neighborhood was full of students who needed to read management books extensively. Corporate sector executives were roped in by these B-Schools as visiting faculty. The neighborhood was home to many management consultants, executives, teachers and students. Yet the B- schools themselves were crying about shortage of funds to build a library. It struck me that if only we tapped the incongruity of the situation a creative solution was waiting to be implemented. .

For instance a number of the companies could donate a small sum each to the B- schools to build a library. In return the executives of these companies could be given the privilege of using the library for a small fee. The others wishing to use the library, which includes management professionals, could be allowed to use the facility at a reasonable cost. This cost would definitely be much less expensive than buying books at rates that are admittedly unaffordable to most people.

Cataract operation is as common in hospitals and clinics as headaches, For over three centuries doctors had developed precise procedures for this operation but there was one area which seemed to defy improvement—the cutting of the ligament. Doctors had mastered the procedure but dreaded it since it was incongruent with the rest of the sophisticated procedure.

Doctors had known for many decades about an enzyme that could dissolve the ligament thereby obviating the need to cut it. The trouble was that this enzyme was highly unstable and could not be preserved. Bill Conner of Alcon Laboratories came up with a preservative that prolonged the shelf life of the enzyme to six months Eye surgeons quickly accepted this compound and Alcon had a money spinner in its hands.

Incongruities in logic are one possibility. There are instances of incongruities in economic realities also.

About three decades ago the steel industry saw an incongruity—a steadily growing market but declining profit margins. The creative solution—mini steel plants.

Sometimes the gap between what a manager expects and what really happens throws up a possibility for innovation, The ship building industry furnishes one example, The beginning of the 20th century saw amazing technological advances in ship building. — Faster vessels consuming far less fuel were invented. But the shipping industry continued to suffer losses. Here was an incongruity—the ships were more efficient than ever before but the losses were mounting. The industry was about to die. . Here was a variance between the industry's assumptions and realities. . It was left to innovative managers to discover that the real costs of the industry did not come from the running of the ship but from the time when the ship was not running! Here was an incongruity that led to the innovation of the roll-on and roll-off ships and to containerization. This drastically

reduced the turn around time of ships. This idea was not really novel one; it was an adaptation to the shipping industry what the truck industry was doing for years.

All that took place was a shift in viewpoint not technological breakthroughs.

Closer home some incongruities come readily to mind .I list some of them :

- ⇒ Population is rising and people's desire for higher standards of living is growing, .yet the FMCG sector for example complains of falling demand.
- ⇒ We have perhaps one of the longest coastlines in the world but suffer from acute water shortage.
- ⇒ We have made a major contribution to the world's heritage of knowledge but are today the least learning country in the world—judging by the illiteracy as well as the poor standards of education including in the business schools
- ⇒ The prevalence of mosquitoes and malaria is too well known to us, yet manufacturers of mosquito coils complain of fall in demand. Some coil manufacturers have not even looked at the rural market!
- ⇒ Diabetes is a disease of epidemic proportions in our country but yet there are hardly any products in our shops aimed at diabetics

To be sure some enterprising people and organizations are responding innovatively to such incongruities.The Tamilnadu Government for example has noticed one such situation and come up with an innovative response. Noticing the urge among the youth of that state to have IT education, and the need to spread IT education at an affordable cost the state government has come up with a scheme—the private sector IT education majors will be allowed to use the government school premises after school hours as centres of IT education at low rentals in return for offering IT training at low rates to poor students..

.. Some of the incongruities pointed out above offer opportunities for creating vast markets. Unfortunately many managers almost always restrict their thinking to increasing market share It is time they thought of creating new markets. The poor are a market waiting to be exploited . . Capitalising on the urge of low income people to enjoy the goodies of life, a businessman saw in this an opportunity.. His innovative response--shampoo-in-a- sachet! A villager in Tamilnadu offers a few drops of shampoo just right for one application to people for a small fee---on their way to the well for a bath. !A woman in Bangladesh rents out her mobile phone for a one off call..

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