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## The innovative Indian: Common man and the politics of *jugaad* culture

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The idea of *jugaad*, or frugal innovation, has gained wide popularity within policy circles and business schools as a breakthrough formula – from a quick-fix solution grown in adverse conditions to a six-point business principle – for economic growth generation. I argue that the new *jugaad* innovation narrative offers an uplifting, potentially emancipatory discourse of mobility in a setting where even after two decades of economic reforms, wealth gap and poverty stubbornly persist. Central to this shift are two processes. First, a dramatic re-signification of the *aam aadmi* (common man), within a new conceptual scaffolding of India in relation to modern science and technology, where the ability to innovate is portrayed as a natural gift, a deeply ingrained collective Indian trait that even the unlettered common man possesses. Second, the conditions of adversity and absence of public services for Indian citizens are turned on its head to position India as an ideal laboratory condition within which a culture of innovation takes birth. In short, *jugaad* enables a dramatic transformation of what was once considered unchanging, static and immobile mass into a source of innovation, inspiration and ultimately socioeconomic mobility.

**Keywords:** innovation; common man; inequality; neoliberalism; social mobility

### Introduction

The bestseller *Jugaad Innovation: Think Frugal, Be Flexible, generate Breakthrough Growth* (Radjou, Prabhu, and Ahuja 2012) opens with a journey towards a village 250 miles outside Ahmedabad in Gujarat. The air-conditioned jeep, the readers learn, carrying three foreign visitors, leaves the wide metalled highway to follow a narrow cratered road amid searing, oppressive desert heat. Accompanied by the founder of Honey Bee Network, Anil Gupta, a professor at the International Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, the team finally makes its way to the home of Mansukh Prajapati, a potter by profession, who welcomes them at the door. The team has run out of drinking water and when their host asks them if they need water, they readily say yes. He reaches out to a tap and then hands them cups filled with water saying ‘Please, have this cold water – from my fridge.’ The visitors are baffled as they cannot see any fridge, but what lies in front is a clay box with a tap and a glass door. The product is called Mitticool (cool earth, clay) that Prajapati had designed. They look closely and find no electric cords or batteries – just clay, 100% biodegradable, and zero waste during its lifetime. Or ‘an ingenious invention’ as the puzzled visitors observe especially when

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Prajapati doesn't work for NASA or Whirlpool, and he doesn't have a PhD in quantum physics or an MBA from Stanford. In fact, he didn't even finish high school. His R&D lab – a simple open-air room with clay in different shapes and forms arrayed on the floor and an oven tucked in corner – is a far cry from the sprawling campuses of GE and Whirlpool which swarm with hundreds of engineers and scientists. (Radjou, Prabhu, and Ahuja 2012, 3)

Instead the readers are told that Prajapati's invention happened in 'adverse circumstances', or rather precisely because of adverse circumstances. He got the idea to make a clay fridge when he saw photos of devastation caused by the 2001 earthquake. One of the images was of a broken clay pot used for storing drinking water across various parts of India with a caption 'poor man's broken fridge'. After experimenting for several months, he finally produced an eco-sustainable product that used no electricity, required almost zero maintenance and costs an affordable Rs. 2500. In a setting where electricity is still not frequently available to over one-third of the population especially in the rural areas, including Prajapati's village, the product acquired immediate popularity, so much so that he was unable to keep up with the demand. The visitors conclude this story of vernacular innovation with the observation that 'Prajapati is both driving environmental and socio-economic sustainability in his community and ensuring financial sustainability of his own business. Prajapati embodies the true spirit of *jugaad*' (Radjou, Prabhu, and Ahuja 2012, 4).

The expression *jugaad*, a Punjabi variation of the Hindi *jugat*, derives from the Sanskrit word *yukti*, root *yug*, *yog* or union, joint (see Whitney [1885] 2006) which carries multiple meanings ranging from skillful reasoning, argumentation, trick, cunning device, adaptability, adjustment, being inventive, dexterous and clever. In northern India, *jugaad* has long been a popular vernacular expression for improvisation, quick-fix, intermediate solutions that allow everyday life to somehow function even in the absence of permanent, durable infrastructures. *Jugaad* is, thus, both a process and a product. Examples include simple tractors turned into large-capacity passenger vehicles, bicycles that are modified so as to enable them to float on water, improvised pulleys attached to two-wheeler scooters that carry heavy load in the absence of industrial cranes, and portable smokeless stoves, to name a few. More recently, the idea of *jugaad* has been promoted as a disruptive modern business and management practice inspired by grassroots, vernacular ingenuity of Indian origin that challenges the traditional business models prevalent in the West.

In this paper, I explore when and how the notion of *jugaad* became a sign of hope, aspiration and potential prosperity within the narrative of investor-friendly post-reform India. What was for long a vernacular expression for quick-fix, temporary, and often illegal and shadowy solutions among the less resourceful is now increasingly identified as the 'Indian system of innovation' or the 'Indian way of manufacturing' that can be branded as something the West can learn from. If this shift in the sign of *jugaad* tells us the story of transmutations of the vernacular practice, it also reveals the ongoing reconfiguration of the social-economic landscape as India pitches itself as the 'land of limitless opportunity', and since Narendra Modi's electoral victory in 2014, has taken to inviting the world to 'Make in India'.<sup>1</sup> The question I ask is what the extrication of *jugaad* from the vernacular, or its recovery from the shadowy world of illegality to its modern creative packaging as a disruptive practice of innovation in respectable policy circles might signal in a setting where the logic of economic growth has gained broad political consensus (Kaur 2015). Or more specifically, what does the makeover, or rather the rehabilitation of *jugaad* as vigorous state policy on the one hand, and a celebrated feature of post-reform India on the other, tell us about the larger transformations taking place within the Global South.

At its very core, I argue, the new *jugaad* innovation narrative offers an uplifting, potentially emancipatory *discourse of mobility* in a setting where even after two decades of economic reforms, the wealth gap and poverty stubbornly persist (see, e.g. Alkire and Santos 2010; Corbridge, Harriss, and Jeffrey 2012; Gupta 2012; Hariss-White et al. 2013; Kohli 2012). It is noteworthy that the official discourse of *jugaad* as creative disruption gained prominence post-2008, during the second term of the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government. This is when the efficacy of economic reforms as a means of poverty alleviation was being challenged. If the rapid expansion of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme Act 2005 (NREGA) to counter rural poverty constituted one set of official responses, the other was the re-imagination of the poor as entrepreneurial innovators, allowing the state to somewhat cede its responsibility. For long the presentable ‘face’ of the economic reforms, in all its contradictions, had been the increasingly prosperous, techno-friendly middle class that was known for conspicuous consumption in the ‘world class cities’ of India (Brosius 2010; Fernandes 2006; Lukose 2009; Philip 2016). The poor, constituting the dark underbelly, had to be kept outside the spectacle of reforms. The entry of *jugaad* in the transnational circuits of business schools and policy-makers altered this equation. In the ever-accelerating ‘India on the move’ story (Kaur and Hansen 2016), as I will show, the poor now appear as resourceful, self-reliant indigenous bearers of innovative disruption.

Let us begin with the question of the slow pace of economic progress that has often been articulated within the popular sphere as the struggle between ‘two Indias’ where the nation’s forward march is deemed to be stemmed by those ‘holding back’ the aspirations of those who want to accelerate into the future (Kaur 2012). The part that ‘holds back’ the progress of the nation, here, signals a state of immobility, the inability of the poor to aspire and dream a better future. The function of *jugaad* in this fractured landscape, I propose, is to enable the dramatic transformation of what was once considered an unchanging, static and immobile mass into a source of innovation, inspiration and ultimately socioeconomic mobility. In short, an ordinary feature of everyday life lived by proverbial *aam aadmi*, or the common man – of improvising quick-fix solutions – has been turned into an extraordinary feature of the Indian nation. This transformation, I will show, is predicated upon two inter-related requirements.

First, it anticipates a dramatic re-signification of the *aam aadmi*, or the common man, within the prevalent neoliberal discourse, where the vast population is primarily looked upon as an untapped market (see, e.g. Prahalad 2014). To be sure, the notion of common man in this narrative refers to the poor, marginal, the less resourceful and often rural citizens. This becomes clear when one considers the examples of *jugaad* innovation that are almost entirely sourced from the marginal sections of society. The *aam aadmi*, here, is the one who acutely lives in the adverse circumstances of everyday life, the lacks and absences of public infrastructure that the middle class is able to privately source and profit from.<sup>2</sup> With what can only be called an ironic twist, the experience of the marginalized is used to re-signify Indians as innovative creators rather than mere consumers of Western technology and products. Thus, a new conceptual scaffolding of India and Indians in relation to modern science and technology is erected, where the ability to innovate becomes a natural gift, a deeply ingrained collective Indian trait that even the unlettered common man possesses.

Second, the question of poverty, deprivation and absence of public services for Indian citizens is turned on its head to position it as an ideal laboratory condition within which a culture of innovation takes birth and continues to flourish. In other words, the most obvious critique of postcolonial India – its failure to provide opportunities and access to social goods

to all its citizens – is presented as a positive force that enables innovative Indian citizens to retain their agency and be makers of their own destinies. In what follows, I lay out an account of the transformation of *jugaad* from the vernacular into a national policy and often a celebrated concept within government and management circles.

### **Making an Indian model of innovation**

The idea of ‘innovation’ has a long shifting intellectual history. An improvisation of previous notions of imitation and invention, innovation indicated renewal or newness of existing contracts rather than creation or creativity as such when it first appeared in the thirteenth-century law texts (Godin 2008). Through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, innovation, especially of the doctrinal kind, was hurled as a charge, even heresy, that called for imprisonment in the face of rising religious tensions. It was only in the nineteenth century that the word became associated with science and technology during the forward march of the Industrial revolution. Here, it was linked very specifically to technical inventions that positioned it as a positive and valuable quality to be possessed. The shift from invention to innovation was enabled in the twentieth century, when the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter (1939) differentiated the two. While invention in his eyes signified artistic creativity without any consideration toward its practical utility, innovation was the art of incorporating technical inventions into business models. This thinking was further entrenched in the decades to follow as innovation became more the mode of ‘bringing to market a new technology’. This development has indeed much to do with the contemporary funding models of research and collaboration with industry. Innovation has become a key ingredient in the borderlands between research and industry, a ubiquitous term whose presence is taken as a staple in R&D initiatives. It is this existing model of institutionalized innovation that the everyday *jugaad* is said to be challenging.

The *jugaad* innovation phenomenon has already garnered sufficient attention not only in business schools, but also in scholarly debates. The commentaries range from celebratory interpretation of *jugaad* as a quintessential Indian way of doing things smartly and cost-effectively in business schools focused on innovation models (Radjou, Prabhu, and Ahuja 2012), to *jugaad* being categorized as ‘systemic risk’ that ‘impacts on society in negative and undesirable ways’ and therefore found ‘wholly unsuitable as both as a development tool and as a business asset’ (Birtchnell 2011). *Jugaad* in the form of ‘frugal innovation’ is viewed as disruptive not only in terms of technical breakthroughs, but as an alternative that challenges the Western paradigm by turning attention to ‘below the radar’ innovation practices in the developing world (Pansera 2013). Others like Jeffrey and Young (2014) have shown how the discourse of *jugaad* inhabits a gray zone between legality and illegality, as a creative space taken to be the potent sign of entrepreneurial culture in the rapidly transforming re-structured economy. Clearly, the notion of *jugaad* is now intricately woven in multiple discourses of neoliberal enterprise, risk and even the resurgent agency of the global South. What is less clear in the current literature is why *jugaad* needs to be *recovered* from the gray zone in the first place by the policy-makers and business schools. What symbolic purpose and function does it serve in the larger scheme of the makeover of post-reform India as a desirable emerging market? These questions are central to our understanding of the emergence of *jugaad* as a lens into the current moment of history. But before we proceed, a description of this fresh shift in the genealogy of innovation via *jugaad* would be in order.

*Jugaad*, as is evident by now, is pitched as a disruptive shift in the contemporary model of research and industry-led innovation. Two parallel processes seem to be underpinning this

shift. First, the re-conceptualization of innovation-as-*jugaad* in its bare form as a creative force found outside the laboratory environment, that makes everyday life possible for the poor. That it is shaped in conditions of lacks, absences and shortages where the ability to do the most with the available materials is what has drawn the attention of policy-makers and management experts. This ability to survive, to negotiate or even circumvent the absence of public goods and services is the attractive feature of *jugaad* that is found to be worth replicating. Second, the actual conversion of this creativity born out of survival needs into a new vernacular formula that can be used for innovation worldwide. Thus, the common man's survival tactics are rearranged neatly as principles that can be popularized in business schools as fresh innovation practice. Ironically, *jugaad* is currently being celebrated as a vernacular, authentic practice born outside the shackles of Western institutions, even as it is being institutionalized and legibly framed precisely for institutional consumption.

In its popular business school framing, the basic idea of *jugaad* innovation is built around an almost lyrically composed guide that is said to capture its spirit (Radjou, Prabhu, and Ahuja 2012). The readers who wish to imbibe this creative model of innovation are instructed to (1) seek opportunity in adversity, (2) do more with less, (3) think and act flexibly, (4) keep it simple, (5) include the margin and (6) follow your heart. The principles are user friendly in that they help integrate *jugaad* into corporate organizations to enhance their efficiency and profitability. As would be evident, it is the condition of adversity that is central to this six-step dramatic reconfiguration. The adversity in its multiple forms appears here as a source of rich possibilities and attributes – opportunity, flexibility, optimization, simplicity, inclusion and passion – that promise to change the model of laboratory-based innovation. The no-frills, back-to-basics approach, at once, is a critique of the North as well as a creative solution emanating from the South in a world constrained by the financial downturn. The success of *jugaad* as an innovation practice lies precisely in this dual marketing approach: its packaging as an assertive product of a Southern mode of being and thinking, and a challenge to the prevailing Northern model of innovation.

In a very short span, the idea filtered down from NGOs and business school discourse to actual government policy in India. Already in 2011, under a more policy-friendly label of 'frugal innovation', *jugaad* was highlighted as a prominent feature of the 12th five-year plan (2012–2017).<sup>3</sup> It advocated innovation as 'the engine for the growth of prosperity and national competitiveness in the 21st century'.<sup>4</sup> The kind of innovation India needed, the document suggested further, was 'more frugal, distributed, affordable innovation that produces more "frugal cost" products and services ... frugal in terms of resources required ... and frugal impact on earth's resources'. The idea of frugality underpinned innovation that was both low cost as well as environmentally sustainable. These policy measures were now backed by a newly instituted government agency called the National Innovation Council that aimed to bring together corporations, scientists, policy-makers and a range of other stakeholders in society. The roadmap for innovation included 'evolving an Indian model of innovation with focus on inclusive growth; developing and championing innovation attitudes and approaches; creating appropriate eco-systems and environment to foster inclusive innovation among others'.<sup>5</sup> Toward this purpose, the second decade of the twenty-first century in India was declared as the 'decade of innovation' with the aim to develop 'a national strategy on innovation with a focus on an Indian model of inclusive growth'.<sup>6</sup> It is noteworthy that the word *jugaad* was dropped from the policy document quite early, given negative connotations with compromise and poor-quality products and solutions.<sup>7</sup> The English word 'frugal' became a substitute for the idea, even as it displaced the original expression.

Even as language was reworked, a key aspect of the policy-making exercise was the desire to seek vernacular modes of innovation rooted in ancient Indian heritage. The 2011 annual report of the National Innovation Council stated at the very outset that

while India has a significant legacy of innovation evidenced in its imagining the ‘city’, the earliest ‘university’ and path-breaking ideas in mathematics, there has been a disjuncture in the recent past in its quest for knowledge and failures in its education system to sustain the spirit of innovation.<sup>8</sup>

The reference is clearly to the ancient city of Mohenjodaro in the Harappa civilization, and to the famed Buddhist center of learning in Nalanda, located in modern Bihar. This account revives a popular theme in contemporary Indian politics, built around pride in India’s ancient legacy in science and technology, and regret at its historical decline.<sup>9</sup> The new innovation policy was aimed not only at rectifying these lapses, but also at reclaiming India’s reputation as a global leader in innovation. The report concludes that India’s ‘complex challenges cannot be addressed through incremental approaches’. Instead it calls for massive change – in fact, ‘tectonic shifts that only innovation can enable’ and therefore ‘the challenge before India is to develop an inclusive model of innovation that will move the country to become not merely a knowledge-producing economy, but a knowledge sharing society that will have relevance in many parts of the world’.<sup>10</sup> These global ambitions to reclaim its position at the apex of science and technology were aligned with the agenda of poverty reduction on the one hand and the desire to harness the entrepreneurial spirit among ordinary Indians on the other.<sup>11</sup> For this to happen, as we will see, two key elements in the policy had to be reconfigured – the territory and its population – as bearers of innovative and entrepreneurial spirit.

### **India: laboratory to the world**

I begin this section with an account of a documentary called ‘India Rising: One Billion Reasons to Care’ (2007), made by an American news channel on the occasion of India’s 60th Independence anniversary. The documentary was part of a series that addressed the theme of India’s ‘amazing’ great transformation for an American audience. The narrative was precisely pitched at those viewers who might associate India with poverty and deprivation but who were now increasingly being confronted by words such as ‘outsourcing’ and ‘backroom operations’ that connected aspects of American economy to that of India. The documentary was an invitation to take a fresh look at a country that was ‘emerging’ in the eyes of the West not only as the new destination for outsourcing services but also as hope for the future of the West as such. The story is built around a buoyant narrative provided by two American experts – Thomas Friedman, the author of runaway bestseller *The World is Flat* (2005) that first brought Bangalore into global prominence, and CK Prahalad, the management guru who coined the term ‘bottom of the pyramid’, emphasizing the potential that poor consumers represented to global investors.

A dramatic moment in the documentary occurs when CK Prahalad guides the American news anchor through the chaotic streets of a Mumbai slum. The camera records the sounds and sights of everyday life in the slum – unkempt makeshift hutments, streets littered with garbage and children in ragged clothes looking curiously at the foreign visitors. As the camera zooms on the children picking and sorting garbage, CK Prahalad informs the viewers that ‘every kid who is walking around is getting trained to be an entrepreneur, to hustle and to get a little bit more than what he or she has’. He then points to a hut with a

small red and blue sign in Marathi. As the camera moves inside the hut to show a colorful computer screen, Prahalad turns to the anchor, 'If you look at this then you are unlikely to see that this is the place where people are going to be get educated on how to use a computer.' The anchor looks around and nods with a smile, 'yeah, it doesn't'. Prahalad continues, 'in other words, this can be a metaphor for India – what you see outside, is not what is inside. (On the) outside this could be shanty, but inside is a Pentium PC'.

As the camera moves in and out of the slum dwelling to focus on the computer screen inside and the poor surroundings outside, it attempts to capture what is deemed to be invisible to the untrained foreign eyes: the hidden store of intellectual curiosity, knowledge and entrepreneurship even in the depth of poverty and deprivation. If this inside–outside visual movement allows the viewers to make sense of how a poor nation can be the center of high-technology processes like outsourcing, it also underscores the *limits of the Western gaze* itself, failing to cut through the exterior to actually witness the wealth of intellect and strong grit that forms the rich interior. It also proposes India as an exciting place, where the unexpected takes place within different folds. What is firmly established in this visual narrative is not just the obvious theme of contrasts (so beloved by foreign observers), but the enigmatic re-discovery of India, albeit in a new global context. One might even say that the narrative recalls the old Orientalist associations of India as a magical place that confounds, deceives and tricks visitors, where everything is not how it appears to be. It is also, then, a place where hidden wealth and intellect reside, to be reached only by those who have patience and ability to dig beneath the surface.

The second related work of the inside–outside visual movement is to re-envision the slum *not* as a territory of lacks and absences of basic amenities for the poor but as a challenging training ground for entrepreneurship. Or as Prahalad formulates it, the slum kid is training 'to be an entrepreneur, to hustle, to get a bit more'. The slum, here, is no longer a dystopic sign of deprivation and hopelessness; it has been re-worked to signal enterprise and raw hope that cannot be manufactured in expensive business schools. This understanding of slums as sites of industry, productivity and neoliberal entrepreneurship, and the poor as purveyors of hidden fortune, follows a now familiar path (Campana 2013; Prahalad 2014; Wilson and Wilson 2006). In the world of policy-making, this theme of social inequity/inequality has been incorporated as a rich, productive opportunity. Here, the uneven terrain constituting neoliberal India is renamed as the 'laboratory to the world', where 'the bottom of the pyramid, the 800 million Indians, can become major source of breakthrough innovation'.<sup>12</sup> In this oft-repeated phrase – India as laboratory to the world – commentators and policy-makers present India as a vast open-air laboratory filled with creative people solving not only their own problems but also, eventually, those of the world at large. The 'lacks' and 'absences' that make up everyday life for a vast majority of Indians become a productive condition: the fuel that keeps the engine of innovation up and running. The logic shaped in Prahalad's 'bottom of the pyramid' thesis is explicit here. If the poor were imagined as a specific and vast consumer segment often neglected by manufacturers, and an untapped business opportunity at the 'bottom of the pyramid', now poverty itself is presented as a laboratory condition for innovation and entrepreneurship.

A particular feature of this discourse of India-as-laboratory is its overall framing as a critique not only of the Western model of innovation, but also social welfare models as such. Consider this report produced by UK-based Indian origin consultants which suggests that

within Western economies, bureaucracy has impeded creativity in public service design over the last 20 years ... taxpayer's money has been used to develop and design structures and



services from a standardized template, resulting in little or no incentive to reform the system from within.

The report then goes on:

the story in India is different. Citizens rarely receive public services free of charge and many times have to survive in an environment where only a few services are publicly available on equitable basis. This stark contrast with the developed world has provided the impetus for local people to embrace these challenges in a way that not only improves public services but also helps to build social capital. Absent legacy systems provide opportunities that further encourage innovation and allow new models to emerge. (Singh et al. 2012, 6)

The double layers of this policy prescription are clear. The availability of sufficient public services is posed as a limitation to further innovation in Western societies on the one hand, and the lack of services as an incentive to Indian citizens to be innovative on the other. The ideal conditions for an innovation culture to flourish, then, are adversity and constraints, which India appears to possess. It is noteworthy that this discourse of innovation and economic growth has strengthened especially during the financial crisis, when the durability of the social welfare schemes in several European nations came to be questioned openly. The cracks in the West-led economic system meant that emerging markets were now pitched as the future of global growth. Against this background, the conditions of adversity that produce *jugaad* have gained a certain market value as an alternative and more authentic way of steering Western economies in a positive direction. Consider this oft-quoted 2011 'drive to succeed' speech given by David Cameron to the Conservative Party conference, where he suggested 'when you step off the plane in Delhi, Shanghai or Lagos, you can feel the energy, the hunger, the drive to succeed. We need that here'.<sup>13</sup> The speech was laced with a critique of the welfare state and the associated culture of benefits, and was aimed at invigorating a British population supposedly lacking the hunger necessary to get ahead. This speech prompted a British businessman to remark how

David Cameron wants some 'Delhi drive'. In his speech he called for Britain to find its inner energy and to start a national fight back, with all the fire of those in the developing world. But having lived and run companies in India, I know that this fight is going to be knock out with us on the canvas, as we British lack the reason to be driven. (Singh et al. 2012)<sup>14</sup>

The critique of the welfare state in this quest for 'Delhi drive' is obvious. The reason to be driven is explicitly linked here to the condition of lack, against which the welfare state safeguards its citizens. This line of argumentation and reasoning reiterates the logic of *jugaad* and establishes India as the laboratory to the world, where things are still unsettled, and where aspirations and dreams have not yet been leveled by the welfare state. India is presented here as a raw territory where potentials and possibilities have still not been exhausted. What is not so obvious in this India-as-laboratory narrative, and yet remains a potent theme, is the old East–West debate, albeit in a completely reconfigured form of economic growth and innovation. The question 'what can the West learn from the East' has been discussed endlessly over the past century or so, during the East–West colonial encounter. In many of these debates, the West has been positioned as more material, scientific, rational and modern in relation to the East, represented as more spiritual, attuned to nature and humanity.<sup>15</sup> Although lacking material wealth, the East was projected as possessing a moral and spiritual wealth that the West could learn from.<sup>16</sup> In this new paradigm of frugal innovation, however, the superiority of the East instead lies in its ability to innovate

even in adversity and in the absence of material abundance, and that too in a people-centric mode, grassroots and inclusive in its approach. The scientific temperament is now incorporated as a national trait – a raw energy, un-spoilt, unblemished and honed in insulation, away from the prying eyes of the intrusive state – a condition that the West could learn much from.

The other end of this axis is the re-imagination of the population that inhabits the nation conceptualized as the laboratory to the world. Integral to this development, thus, is the making of the figure of innovative common man, who embodies and lives the spirit of *jugaad* in everyday life. Within the official Indian policy discourse on innovation, this figure is manufactured upon fault lines of what is called the ‘mind vs. mindset’ dichotomy. The innovative common man is positioned both as symptomatic of problems facing the Indian nation and the possible solutions. This position is clearly articulated by Ramesh Mashelkar, the former director general of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), who is often called the father of Indian Innovation, or ‘Indovation’ for affordable excellence, a concept that describes the creative Indian ability to do ‘more for less for more’ (Mashelkar 2015; Prahalad and Mashelkar 2010). In a speech called ‘Mind vs Mindset: The Grand Indian Challenge’, he articulated this problem as a ‘huge battle’ between the ‘Indian mind that is taking us to the 21st century ... and the Indian mindset that is drawing us back to the 14th, 15th, 16th century’ (Mashelkar 2009). To make this distinction, Mashelkar invites the audience back to ancient India imagined as *vasudhaiv kutumbakam*, literally the world is home, or the global village where innovation is the way of life. Examples include the invention of *shunya* or the value of zero, without which the digital revolution could not have happened in the present global economy. What is obvious in this articulation is an essential notion of the ‘Indian mind’ and Indians who according to Mashelkar have ‘clever minds, more intelligent minds, more observant minds, more analytical minds, better minds’ but who are held back by a mindset shaped by narrow selfish interests.

This imagination of the Indian mind as a natural trait is the foundation upon which the idea of *jugaad*, or frugal innovation, is built. The common man, here, is the inheritor of this ancient Indian tradition of innovation and excellence that long precedes the Western model of innovation, shaped in expensive laboratories. It is not the community of scientists who innovate in exclusion as in Western nations, but the entire Indian society, even its unlettered constituents, who also possess the ability to innovate. This wide encompassing mode of innovation is what in Indian policy circles is called the ‘laboratories of life’ approach, where a naturally imbibed intellectual capital is positioned as the major asset of Indian society. According to Anil Gupta, the founder of Honey Bee Network, a database of ordinary innovations that shape everyday life, such innovations represent a

silent revolution going on in the countryside and in small towns, slums and in other disadvantaged regions. The stirrings of this revolution would transform the victim’s perspective that we seem to suffer from in India to a victor’s perspective by recasting the Indian mind. The seeds of discord have been sown, the vote of no confidence against the inertia of centuries has been passed and a small step to shift the scientific discourse in favor of creative genius at grassroots has been taken.

The ongoing revolution, thus, shows that

a new model of poverty alleviation and generating of power awaits a bold and meaningful exploration. What has been demonstrated so far only demonstrates that one can ignore the urges of creative people for long time and over large area, but once the imagination has been unlocked, the power so unleashed can break the biggest barriers. (Gupta 2002)

*Jugaad* signifies this revolutionary shift in the Indian mindset. It precisely signals the moment when the Indian mind *overcame* the mindset of a passive victim who had been dominated over centuries. The allusions to India's history of colonization, underdevelopment and persistent poverty among a large section of the society are apparent here. *Jugaad*, under the label of policy-friendly 'frugal innovation', is what is meant to upset the historical imbalance, where India has always been the subjugated one. The weight of history that shapes the notion of *jugaad* and its manufacture into a national policy integral to India's development and aspirations is evident here. Yet the emphasis on changing the *mindset* – following the old modernization theory – is an easy diversion from the structural problems that cause lacks and absences, and unevenness in the social landscape. By harping on the mindset, the problem is attributed to the people rather than the structures of governance that enable inequity and inequality to persist. *Jugaad* – dressed up as revolutionary force (but one that barely questions the structures of inequality) – precisely occupies this uncomplicated space within the official policy-making discourse that allows for circumvention.

Another key aspect of this manufacture of official policy on frugal innovation is how it is interwoven with personal biographies of the policy-makers as such. The key ingredient is the experience of adversity and lack that led to success through sheer perseverance and brilliance. Consider the biography of R. Mashelkar, the chief scientist at CSIR, as frequently recounted in his speeches (2009). Mashelkar was born in an impoverished household and faced hardship through his young years. It was his natural gift and curiosity for scientific enquiry, we are told, that won him scholarships, awards and ultimately the honor of receiving the Fellowship of the Royal Society. Also following this familiar pattern is the story of Sam Pitroda, the chief architect of frugal innovation within the state apparatus, who became a leading figure in techno-policy circles. An oft-recounted episode in his speeches and talks on Google Hangout dates to the 1980s, when Pitroda came to India from Chicago, where he worked as an engineer.<sup>17</sup> He recalls his attempts to make telephone calls to his wife from the hotel, which were frequently abandoned because of the outdated telecom systems. This failure or lack is what made him vow there and then to change the system. And this personal resolve, we are told, eventually is what led to the telecommunication revolution in India under the Rajiv Gandhi regime.

While many would find these biographies structured around lacks and adversity difficult to grasp, given that both Pitroda and Mashelkar belong to the national elite – both from middle-class backgrounds, well-educated professionals, former an engineer and latter a high-ranking scientist – I would instead suggest that they serve a different purpose in the larger discourse of Indian innovation. The emphasis on the condition of adversity creates a form of *symbolic unity*, where Indians from divergent backgrounds – Prajapati, the unlettered maker of the clay refrigerator, Sam Pitroda, the techno-friendly policy-maker, and Mashelkar, the high-ranking scientist – come to share innovation as a defining feature of Indianness. The unevenness and inequality in the social structures that produce these divergent life worlds and career paths are at once obliterated. What is also effaced in this insistence on a shared condition of lack is the very difference in the nature of lacks; the lack of an efficient telecom system becomes the same as the lack of clean drinking water supply. The practitioners and official promoters of *jugaad* become inheritors of the same innovative tradition, said to characterize the Indian mind. The point here is not about the fictitious nature of this unity, but rather how a standardized and compelling narrative of innovation as a natural feature of Indian public life is established and circulated.

### Adversity, mobility and the ordinary

I return here to the question of social mobility and the promise of progress that frugal innovation – the celebrated form of *jugaad* – represents within the broader politics of economic reforms. After more than two decades of reforms, the scholars largely agree that the social landscape still remains unequal in India. The promise of prosperity – reflected in the 2004 ‘India Shining’ campaign, and a decade later in the 2014 electoral assurance of ‘good times’ extended by Narendra Modi – continues to enchant and elude both those within and outside the privileged folds of the middle class. The differences in the scholarship emerge not over the claim that inequality persists, but over its extent and forms of redress. While some scholars argue for greater distribution of economic growth and investments in human development sectors, such as health and education (see Sen and Dreze 2013), others argue for ‘enlarging the pie’ of economic growth in order to reach a wider population (Bhagwati and Panagariya 2012). The question is how those outside the reach of the benefits of economic growth, that is, the poor, now loosely encompassed within the category of common man, are brought within the neoliberal fold, while we still wait for the growth to ‘trickle down’ all the way to the masses. The celebration of *jugaad* as a vehicle of mobility, here, becomes instructive in the ways in which the neoliberal state turns the discourse of lacks, absences and adversity on its head. In short, its own failure to deliver public goods effectively to all its citizens is turned into a rich opportunity.

The work of adversity as a prime condition for innovation is central here. The invocation of adversity – misfortune, distress, calamity or unfortunate events – suggests a landscape of hardship and dejection that defines the life of its inhabitants. It is also an admission of the postcolonial state’s failure to fulfill the promise of development after more than six decades of independence. Yet this is far from an introspective gesture undertaken by policy-makers. It reimagines adversity as a kind of raw, unfinished landscape of potentiality, upon which creativity appears in a forceful way – not as a luxury but as a mode of survival. To survive in adverse circumstances is to take recourse to creativity, negotiations and recalibration of one’s plans on a daily basis. *Jugaad*, then, becomes a permanent feature of one’s everyday life. This may be what David Cameron meant by the ‘drive to succeed’, the hunger that can be witnessed in Delhi or Lagos but not in the developed world. The developed world appears here in concealment, never mentioned specifically but always present as a measure of contrast. Yet this time, the developed world is not the image of the future for a developing world caught in the ‘waiting room of history’, to use Chakrabarty’s (1999) apt description. Instead, the developing world via *jugaad* is positioned as an image and promise of the future that the developed world needs to imitate in order not to be left behind. This is the vision of the future that the Global South now holds out for the developed world (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). India as the laboratory to the world appears at this critical juncture where a utopic future is formed out of dystopia.

The other, somewhat subtle, function of the celebration of adversity is to enable a critique of the welfare state. The implicit understanding of the ‘drive to succeed’ remark is that the availability of public goods impedes the will and ‘hunger’ to be innovative, ambitious and entrepreneurial. This aligns with the general critique of social welfare where state support is seen as a contributing factor to laziness, lack of productivity, and even moral corruption among the poor.<sup>18</sup> In the neoliberal discourse, the minimum provision of shelter, health services and nutrition for the poor is seen in direct correlation to the erosion of the entrepreneurial spirit. In fact, social inequality is often seen as a necessary condition to increase competitiveness, the risk taking behavior that inherently shapes capitalist enterprise. The lacks and absences, in this context, appear as precursors to growth and enterprise in

developing societies. *Jugaad*, then, is symbolic of this spirit born of hunger that separates the aspirational Indian poor from the British poor, whose spirit is said to have been decimated by the welfare state. In short, *jugaad* constructed out of adverse circumstances signals potential for mobility, whereas the availability of public services is seen as closure of that mobility.

The intellectual genealogy of *jugaad* shows how two very different impulses have come together under this arch of innovation: Gandhian *swadeshi* and neoliberal enterprise. Consider the Honey Bee Network founded by Anil Gupta that aims to collect and help market innovative products and processes from rural India. This endeavor is very much shaped by the Gandhian belief in the potential of ordinary people, the indigenous creativity and craftsmanship that can stand its ground in the face of Western industrialization. Gandhi's belief in the *charkha*, the hand-operated spinning wheel, symbolized a resistance to the mechanization that was threatening the livelihood of artisans; it was a symbol that eventually came to represent nationalist resistance itself. The Honey Bee Network reaffirms that faith in the ordinary to innovate, even as it has overcome the Gandhian fear of mechanization. Rather than resisting, the Honey Bee Network seeks to align frugal innovation with structures of modern enterprise, by helping inventors to get intellectual property rights, finance for manufacturing and appropriate product marketing. What the idea of *jugaad* enables is a sense of holding on to one's roots even in this fast-moving global economy, of celebrating one's indigenous skills, and ultimately the feeling of being able to *give* one's creativity to the world. For long a persistent source of irritation among Indian elite has been their representation as 'recipients' of Western technology and education. *Jugaad* offers a chance to India to reverse the situation: to become givers instead of recipients.

What I have attempted to show in this paper is how *jugaad* or frugal innovation presents a discourse of mobility at two interconnected levels – the national and the global. The poor – individuals and nations – as creators of *jugaad* here are reimagined in unexpected ways. The invocation of *jugaad* as a grassroots revolution unsettling multiple peripheries – the rural on the one hand and the global South on the other – conjures an image of change, progress and mobility in a setting that continues to be unequal. The poor not only appear to be moving upwards in this landscape of inequality, but they also disclose the potential to move a world stuck in financial stagnation too. In this sense, the poor in the garb of *jugaad* innovators become the ideal neoliberal subjects, who not only take responsibility for themselves as autonomous individuals, but also, as entrepreneurs, generate additional value in society. Poor individuals, like poor nations, are now positioned differently – they are no longer symbols of dejection, but symbols of hope and even the future of neoliberal capital. *Jugaad*, the common man's quick-fix, is what enables this dramatic shift.

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### Notes

1. The slogan 'land of limitless opportunity' was launched in 2013 at the India Adda, World Economic Forum, Davos. The electoral victory of Narendra Modi in May 2014 led to a new

- campaign called ‘Make in India’ that hoped to establish India as the manufacturing destination for the world.
2. This notion of *aam addmi* is in contrast to the elite character of the 2011 anti-corruption movement, and since 2013 the Aam Aadmi party, where the common man was the central figure, with whom the protestors affectively identified. In this formation, *aam aadmi* came to represent the highly educated professionals, prosperous and aspirational middle classes who saw themselves disempowered and ‘held back’ by the professional political class.
  3. ‘Technology and Innovation’, 12th Five Year Plan, Planning Commission of India, Government of India. [http://12thplan.gov.in/forum\\_description.php?f=13](http://12thplan.gov.in/forum_description.php?f=13), accessed February 2, 2015.
  4. ‘Sibal, Pitroda pitch for growth’, National Innovation Council Website [http://innovationcouncilarchive.nic.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=217:sibal-pitroda-pitch-for-indian-education-and-growth&catid=14:news&Itemid=13](http://innovationcouncilarchive.nic.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=217:sibal-pitroda-pitch-for-indian-education-and-growth&catid=14:news&Itemid=13), accessed February 2, 2015.
  5. ‘Terms of Reference, National Innovation Council, [http://innovationcouncilarchive.nic.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=4&Itemid=4](http://innovationcouncilarchive.nic.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4&Itemid=4), accessed February 2, 2015.
  6. ‘Introduction’, National Innovation Council, [http://innovationcouncilarchive.nic.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=26&catid=5&Itemid=5](http://innovationcouncilarchive.nic.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=26&catid=5&Itemid=5), accessed February 2, 2015.
  7. ‘Time for India to move from “Jugaad” to “Jhakas”’, *Business Standard*, 18 August 2014, [http://www.business-standard.com/article/management/creating-a-culture-of-innovation-114081700497\\_1.html](http://www.business-standard.com/article/management/creating-a-culture-of-innovation-114081700497_1.html). Also ‘Must all mid-sized companies remain content with Jugaad?’ *Forbes India*, 22 September 2014, <http://forbesindia.com/blog/middle-india/have-we-irreversibly-overglamorized-jugaad/>, accessed February 11, 2015.
  8. ‘Foreword’ by Sam Pitroda, 2011 Report to the People, National Innovation Council.
  9. The most recent examples include claims of having perfected the technology to build aircrafts in ancient India. Similarly, fields of plastic surgery, reproductive genetics and stem cell technology have also been mentioned. See, for example, ‘Genetic Science existed in ancient India: Modi’, *The Hindu*, 30 October 2014, <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-in-school/genetic-science-existed-in-ancient-times-modi/article6545958.ece>, accessed February 2, 2015.
  10. ‘Foreword’ by Sam Pitroda, 2011 Report to the People, National Innovation Council.
  11. See for example, ‘Ordinary Indians, Extraordinary Enterprise: India’s Dynamic entrepreneurial ecosystem spawns a second generation of startups’, Special Theme, *India Now*, February–March 2013, Volume 3, Number 6, India Brand Equity Foundation.
  12. CK Prahalad Speech, India@75 event organized by Confederation of Indian Industries, <http://www.indiaat75.in/document/CKP%20Speech%20India@60.pdf>, accessed December 12, 2014.
  13. ‘Full Text: David Cameron’s Conservative Conference speech, 5th October 2011, Manchester BBC Website <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-15189614>, accessed December 12, 2014.
  14. Quoted in ‘Frugal Innovation: Learning from Social Entrepreneurs in India’, The SERCO Institute Report, 2012 [http://www.serco.com/Images/FrugalInnovation\\_tcm3-39462.pdf](http://www.serco.com/Images/FrugalInnovation_tcm3-39462.pdf), accessed on December 15, 2014.
  15. East–West differences and the need for unity is a constant theme, for example, in the writings of Rabindranath Tagore. See Alam and Chakravarty (2014).
  16. An interesting outcome of the Google auto-complete function, that predicts your search while you are still typing, is that these days a ‘what can the West learn from ...’ query results in the following completion option: ‘what can the West learn from ... jugaad’, replacing the familiar ‘East’.
  17. Conversation with Sam Pitroda and Nandita Das, National Innovation Council, 24 November 2013 [http://innovationcouncilarchive.nic.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=347:join-the-conversation-with-sam-pitroda-a-nandita-das-24th-nov-at-3-pm&catid=98:join-the-conversation&Itemid=122](http://innovationcouncilarchive.nic.in/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=347:join-the-conversation-with-sam-pitroda-a-nandita-das-24th-nov-at-3-pm&catid=98:join-the-conversation&Itemid=122).
  18. See, for example, Hills (2014) for a contemporary critique of the welfare state.

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