

**Issues in the Workso**  
**On**  
**Dialogues on Knowledge in Society**  
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**Social Reorganization**

During the past two decades all of us have witnessed a massive change in the order of things around us. Not a single aspect of public life is untouched. Systems and structure of trade, commerce, markets, finance, administration, governance, transport and communication have changed drastically. People have ceased to expect of governments, political parties, organizations, banks, and courts the way they did just a few years back. Many have found their occupations rendered unviable almost overnight. In small production units, as in agriculture, even short term planning of production activities has become increasingly hazardous – no one knows the possible turn of the market or the official policy, nor of the demands of WTO. Large sections of self employed artisans serving needs of local populations are on the brink of a total loss of livelihood. Salaried employment is witnessing total restructuring towards a bottomless top-heavy incarnation in whose service the consumer markets have transformed. Genuine demands of large sections of the people fall on deaf years. Many are stifled if only for the reason that those affected have lost faith in the erstwhile mechanisms of redress. One after the other, peoples' organizations have found themselves at a loss to convince people of their need and efficacy. Meaningful public activity has dwindled. Unsure of their occupation and trade, of the future of their children and of prospects of a meaningful life, more and more individuals have withdrawn into their own private sanctums. The polity has changed for the worse. Assured of absence of all public accountability, political parties have thrown to the winds each and every norm of political discourse. Rank corruption and complete disruption of civic structure prevail.

A colossal social reorganization is on. What does it hold in store for large sections of population already adversely affected by it? How are they to respond? From where do they derive their strength? These are the concerns leading to the Workshop.

**The Knowledge Society**

What is the other face of the changes taking place? Without doubt there is such a face. There is a vast transformation in services like railway reservation, maintenance and use of administrative and other official records, customer services in banking and other commercial activities, official procedures and so on. Many see a credible promise of transparency in government procedures and working and of release from arbitrariness of the license-permit raj, Many cities wear a new look. Far-reaching changes in modes of communication have

taken place. There is now an easier and greater access to information. The Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) have brought about a change that is very tangible, and seemingly very promising. At the same time, it is true that all the magical consequences of ICT affect a relatively small section of the population. Moreover there is a large overlap between those who gained out of the old order and those who gain, or stand to gain, in the changing world. Moreover, the march of the new order is conceivably an outcome of considerable and decisive state intervention. And this is true just as much of so called free societies as of those traditionally accused of statism. However, all this is not to deter from the fundamental nature of changes taking place. The new society has been dubbed information society, and even more poignantly, knowledge society. The epithet sticks. It is the single argument for many to stomach the devastation unleashed. It also transforms the terms of public discourse, catapulting the idea of knowledge in human societies to the center stage. The Workshop intends to confront this discourse and to seek ways to mould it in the interests of the people. It intends to take the bull by the horns.

### **The Knowledge Paradigm**

The footprint of knowledge society is the internet. It is the most visible organ of the knowledge society. A half of the US population, and more than a third in all major western countries, uses the net. The net has created a new duality – that between the netizens and the citizens. To enter a third of US homes the net took a fifth as long as the radio and about a third as long as the television. The net is thus the most conspicuous advertisement of the knowledge society. It goes a long way to popularize the paradigm of structured knowledge born out of the advance of the ICT. In the ultimate analysis, the popularization demands acceptance of new criteria for what is called knowledge at the popular level. The Workshop is concerned with the ramifications.

In the beginning the discourse initiated by advance of ICT focussed on organization of knowledge. The world over a large number of individuals and organizations concerned themselves with structuring various kinds of knowledge in ways amenable to exploitation by ICT. Witness the across the board initiatives by national governments and the United Nations in areas ranging from region specific data banks, GIS to crisis management to community cultures. Has the discourse now progressed to claiming that ‘organizability by ICT’ is the only organizability, and ‘organized knowledge’ is the only knowledge. Is the globe into an era which will see organizability under ICT as the sole criterion of legitimate knowledge? And, therefore, as the sole basis for human social welfare?

## **The Knowledge Economy**

The Knowledge Economy is the economy of the knowledge society. Economists in rich countries recognize the challenges that the spread of ICT and its influence on economic activity throw up. Economics has hitherto been preoccupied with production and distribution of physical goods. Its concern has been factors of production, i.e., capital and labour. Knowledge now joins this list. In fact, it gains a position sidelining labour and capital. Economy becomes knowledge-based. There arise new forms of activity woven around knowledge as a product. Codified knowledge as opposed to community knowledge, or knowledge with artisans, farmers, women, or also knowledge with scientists and engineers, somehow becomes more significant, more secular. It gains value economics never earlier contended with. Also recognized is the decisive dependence of these phenomena on ICT. What is the new meaning the term value is acquiring? Is established economic theory moving closer to the knowledge paradigm of the knowledge society?

It is understood that the sweep of ICT gives rise to large scale reorganization of existing societies. Such reorganization at present, by its very nature, is probably much deeper in western societies, the breeding grounds for knowledge economy. It has had its victims. Real wages even in US have gone down. The other countries have till now only seen disruptive phenomena resulting from a mixture of reform, globalization and application of ICT. What does the future hold for them? From the point of view of large sections of the people all over the world several questions should hold our attention.

The first follows from the particular exclusive, and remote, nature of the frontline ICT. It conjures up the possibility of an evolved form of the virtual community with a kind of independence from the civil society never seen before. The scenario, dubbed neo-Orwellian by some, seems more real than ever before. A second is suggested by a possible differentiation within knowledge workers. Presently, such differentiation is a consequence of the vastly divergent wage levels in different parts of the world. Witness the large number of such workers serving abroad, and within their countries on outsourced contracts, for wages high by local standards but meager compared to international standards in these areas. Witness also the transformation of the education system into a high cost commercial enterprise in response to these changes. How is the situation likely to evolve? Is it that the spaces opened up by ICT for distributed initiative create also a possibility that the differentiation may shape in other ways? Or, is the writing already on the wall?

The most important question, however, is the status of producer communities and the nature of their relationship with the emerging virtual community. These communities are engaged in household, small and ancillary production and in agriculture. Their activity flows from traditional skills and knowledge. However, their life is subject to depredations of remote

finance and commodity markets. In what economic relation will they stand in knowledge society? Are the new spaces opened up accessible to them as they conceivably are to those professionally educated? Or, is their creativity doomed to a fate worse than today?

### **The State**

The State is in transition. Since the time international trade negotiations began and reform policies were initiated, the State has systematically spurned several of its erstwhile responsibilities in areas related to infrastructure such as manufacture, natural resource exploitation, banking, public transport, agricultural markets, communications, education, health and environment. The Third World State is supposedly moving towards its free-society counterpart, which concerns itself with general administration, law and order and national defence, and not in other areas, particularly economy. Everyone knows that nothing is farther from truth. It is ironical that this idiom continues and is reinforced by intermittent demands of World Bank and WTO concerning matters like government subsidies and budgetary deficits.

The larger question is the way the knowledge enterprise is transforming the State. It seems that the nature of transformation engendered by globalization only lead to a much more far reaching metamorphosis of the State? What do the American Wars on Afganistan and Iraq portend? Anybody who knows, in spite of embedded journalism, of the cluster bombs used by Americans in Iraq, knows the façade that the rhetoric against weapons of mass destruction is. Is there a common logic to these and the knowledge phenomenon? Is a Global State emerging to function as arbiter of knowledge in society?

### **The Virtual Community**

The virtual community is one of the more striking consequences of the internet. It has been seen as the medium, which rediscovers community life thought to be lost beyond recovery due to the modern lifestyles of in rich nations. It creates a *maya* of civil communities. The thesis is of communication liberated from geographical, ethnic, cultural, political and community shackles. It is

### **Philosophy**

### **Lokavidya**

