

Dialogues on knowledge in Society

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The sweeping changes occurring in society seem to demand a fresh and radical return to the first principles today. The human engagement must grapple again with the fundamental question of where lies the strength of the people. Dialogues such as these may be expected to contribute to the logic of this rediscovery. A first stretch of thoughts is given below to start a discussion.

Dialogues on knowledge in society

It is an exploration of the place of knowledge, its role, function, content, organization, methods of production and communication etc and its relationship with everything that there is both in the world of thought and in the material world.

Society

The modern society has been divided into two worlds named differently by different ideological pursuits. Some of the names are rich and poor, West and East, Center and periphery, industrial and non-industrial, capitalist and pre-capitalist, imperial and colonial etc. The emergence of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) has given birth to a further new language perhaps reflecting a new reality, the two worlds now being those of netizens and citizens or the net society and the civil society.

Discussion of knowledge in society seems to require liberation from the framework of the industrial society and development of new paradigms in accordance with the emerging realities of the knowledge society.

Exploration

Since we are at a transition from the industrial to knowledge society and not only that it is not known what future holds in store for the human kind but that future is a matter of what and how men and women build it, define it, imagine it and actually shape it, therefore the exploration in the sphere of knowledge, the dialogues themselves must constitute a mode of transcendence, a method of incessant booting theoretically. This is to say that the exploration is not towards a known ideal but itself constitutes an ideal dynamic. It is not to build theories of present and future but to assist individual, collective, social etc. transcendence from one's own theoretical constructs.

Science

The industrial society created in 'Science' the new God. It was, with its method, the supreme form of knowledge and also the only legitimate source of knowledge. It was declared value-independent and culture-free; these characteristics tending to assume the status of criteria of legitimacy, universality and even absoluteness. Method of production of knowledge and its content assumed singular importance. The world of the poor and the colonised seldom mustered enough strength to question all these in the public domain and therefore he developed ways of not accepting any of this in his own world. The processes of real life still give him enough opportunity to practice his own methods and develop his knowledge further in integral relationship with his culture and his system of values. This was survival with an intrinsic strength which would some day serve a challenge. Gandhiji was that phenomenon in India.

With the emergence of the knowledge society, from within the first world itself there is a questioning of the absoluteness of science. The characteristics of value freeness and culture

independence may not enjoy the same status now. Sanctity of 'the method' may go overboard in due time; production of knowledge is not the chief concern of the knowledge society. ICTs are methods of organization and communication of knowledge. It perhaps does not matter now how knowledge is produced and who produces it and the status as knowledge may be determined by its organisability by ICTs. So knowledge society transforms the relationship of man's epistemic activities with truth. Science in the industrial society was imagined as a pursuit of truth. Knowledge related activities now have an explicit connection with pragmatism. Not that industrial society did not have such connection but then it was part of truth seeking where as now, at least at present, it is part of management activity.

Last quarters of the 20th century witnessed a method of challenge to science with a new critique based in a fresh appreciation of the logic and content of traditional knowledge, living traditions of knowledge among peasants and artisans, the colonized and the poor. Such basis seems now to require the inclusion of the method of organization and communication of knowledge among the people which may be reflected in various institutional forms and methods of struggle in the other domain.

The Shift

The shift from content to organization and production to communication has taken the world of thought by a storm. For all philosophy hitherto (from Des'carte to Popper and Chomsky) survival is at stake. The world of things and forces is being replaced by a world of representation, structure and meaning. The world (ontology) of the natural sciences may become one of the many possible worlds. The ICTs may know how to organize the knowledge content of different social formations legitimizing their ontologies in the process and carrying out an epistemic reduction, a price that the diverse civilizations shall pay. Dialogues on knowledge in society must recognize both the new spaces that this shift creates and the epistemic reduction that the other domain suffers. The new spaces are structured against the industrial society and therefore in a definite sense also against the forms of domination in the old world. These spaces on their own are not emancipatory and are favourable to building new structures of domination and deprivation. However in so far as the shift must dismantle the old world, it must provide space for organization and communication of knowledge from a people's standpoint also. Dialogues on knowledge in society may clearly focus on the nature and type of this space and the kind of initiatives that enhance the strengths of people and their capacity to wage a battle against (the price of) epistemic reduction being thrust upon them.

Lokavidya Standpoint

What is generally referred to as people's knowledge, people's standpoint etc. are partial ways of referring (prevalent in the old world) to what is a wholesome epistemic stand of the other domain. This is the lokavidya standpoint. Lokavidya philosophy is a comprehensive understanding of knowledge in all its aspects, functions and relationships which is the genuine subject matter of dialogues on knowledge in society. However given below are a few distinct points strongly relevant in the present discourse.

Lokavidya means those methods (philosophy etc.) of organization and communication of vidya which place vidya in the midst of the people. Being in the midst of the people means (a) the strings of control should be among the people that is in their social organisations, (b) the values of the other domain should actually be the guiding principles, (c) it must measure upto the criteria of ordinary life and (d) ensuring its role in the processes of construction and reconstruction of truth.

Thus lokavidya provides a different meaning to knowledge than provided by the knowledge society. It is completely opposed to the epistemic reduction by the ICTs and further provides a wide enough aperture to comprehend the emancipatory aspects of

knowledge in the net-domain. Dialogues on knowledge in society may develop tools of disaggregation and hedging of knowledge in the net domain and the domain of ordinary life. It can develop, with the help of lokavidya standpoint ways of meshing the knowledge in the two domains in the interest of human life, both contemporary and future.

Lokavidya standpoint helps us understand people's initiatives and possible initiatives in practically every sphere, economic, social, cultural etc. Lokavidya pervades the activities that sustain a sphere of economic exchange in ordinary life, it is there in how people combine with their brethren to produce desired forms of solidarity, it provides the criteria for social values governing the cultures of people's lives and in most palpable form it is seen in the improvements and innovations by the people in their practice according to need and based on their experiences and genius.

The Dialogue

Drawn into this dialogue are people who recognize, often not explicitly, the centrality today of organization and communication of knowledge, and this in both the domains, the net-domain and the domain of ordinary life. At one end therefore are ICTs and at the other lokavidya. These dialogues are not just theoretical or philosophical; they can be on very concrete issues like market, solidarity among the people, energy, industry, organization, administration, communication, education, health-care; in fact, on anything.