

The Current Conflict in Knowledge Societies

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Technology and Society

The advent of IT heralds a new phase in the history of mankind and the changes it has wrought in the social and economic fabric are as, if not more, far reaching and decisive as those that modern science, engineering and technology ushered in at the beginning of the 19th century.

The changes of that era were marked by concerted efforts to free nations and peoples from foreign rule (decolonisation) and / or despotic rule. Those changes were also marked by migration of labour from agriculture, a large scale expansion of centralised factory production and the creation of industrial classes- workers and capitalists. They signified new freedoms – from restricted production and markets to large scale production for markets, from localised labour based on hereditary occupations to skills acquired in new training institutions - the workshops, technology schools etc. The overall belief among social scientists was that that transition was progressive, in that they seemingly marked a forward step in societal development through increased degrees of freedom of man. The contradictions and conflicts that were thrown up such as loss of identity and large scale deprivation; were to be resolved in the struggle, for newer freedoms, between the main contending classes, namely, the rich - industrial capitalist-control class and the disinherited-industrial proletariat -oppressed class .

The resolution of the contradictions were seen leading to a better, freer society – economically in terms of better terms and wages for labour, socially in terms of equality of labour, politically as democracy versus oligarchy/despotism and a challenge to archaic authority.

Knowledge Society

The society that is emerging is a knowledge society, i.e., it is characterised by new structures in the organisation of knowledge, new methods of dissemination and a technology that permits and sustains seemingly unrestricted access to knowledge and control over it. Therein lies the basis of the classes constituting this society. The dominant classes constituted by those that have understood and have access to this technology and would want to rule and guide the destiny of the world and the subservient classes who are marked by their limited access and control over this new technology and knowledge, in short, those seen to be on the other side of the digital divide.

If knowledge (the different kinds and their organizability) constitutes the basis of the emerging class division, and, since every class does inherently possess and use knowledge, then class hegemony is based on quality marking of knowledge. By quality marking and promoting some (forms of) knowledge to the detriment of other forms, a hierarchy of knowledge-categories has emerged, characterised as structured/ordered versus fragmented, patented versus open/free, universal/global versus localised and so on; and class hegemony is built on this categorisation.

Since ALL human activity is based on and uses and creates knowledge; the rural, semi-urban societies (the so-called traditional societies) are also, in this sense, knowledge societies. Each society would be characterized and identified by its knowledge-base (Lokavidya) and the structure of this knowledge -base, the methods of its dissemination, its development, the societal forms required for its efficient propagation etc would be – recognizably - a unique feature of each society. In short, a society draws its identity from its Lokavidya.

Indicators of the hegemonistic process

The advent of globalisation, since the late 80s, saw the emergence of new political formations such as the Confederation of Independent States (CIS), European Union (EU) to name a prominent few. These formations were not militaristic, they were more economic and partly social. They however, gave a go-by to the old concept of nation states based on national identities. The new identities were based on the emergent techno-scientific knowledge base of the post industrial era. It was as if their Lokavidya had given way to a new identity.

On the economic front too, changes in the knowledge arena, perforce led to various organisational changes. In order to manage the emerging global market new organisations were put in place- G8, WTO etc. These organisations were transnational and largely comprised the developed nations who could take advantage of the new marketing possibilities in the underdeveloped and developing world- thrown up as a result of the opening up (liberalisation) of their economies. New standards were put in place – ISO, IPR, Patent laws etc – to safeguard their control. International (World Bank, IMF) and direct monetary assistance was tied to adherence to these standards. Intellectual Property Rights (IPR), in particular, assumed a crucial role in subjugating and undermining the genius of native knowledge.

The stranglehold on the agricultural sector – in seeds, pesticides, fertilizer prices has led to the almost total destruction of native knowledge and practices in agriculture. The monopoly of genetically engineered seeds has been ensured through dubious ways. The massive protests of farmers in the underdeveloped countries (and even in some developed ones) mark this aspect of globalisation.

The Internet is the largest self-governing organisation-it is all pervasive,. Even those opposed to the adverse effects of globalisation depend on it to exchange ideas and mobilise support. While the Internet facilitates exchange of ideas, access to knowledge, communication between diverse peoples etc it also prescribes the modes of knowledge exchange and proves advantageous to those who have better access and to it.

Information Technology in prospect

The question now being posed is – does the advent of IT signify a progressive phase leading to increased degrees of freedom, throwing up its own contradictions - the resolution of which can lead to , what we may call , a New Democracy or is it just an adjunct to the industrial revolution phase ?

We notice that information – its access, dissemination and control – is at the core of this technology and has led to a digital divide. While there is perceptibly more centralization and control of production, production itself appears much more decentralized. Though unbounded access to information through increased communication facilities is, in principle, an accepted hallmark of the IT revolution; this does not automatically imply betterment for ordinary people.

As human knowledge increases i.e the knowledge-base expands, the space available to Lokavidya will get restricted, if the current trend continues, by disuse and through constricted or limited dissemination. This process is marked by the withering away of traditional societies. Modern life steps into the space vacated by traditional society and often appears as new found knowledge based on new standards. Lifestyles are sought to be altered to meet the requirements of this knowledge-base and concomitant social demands. [The Internet has also largely influenced the culture of its users – netspeak, netslang, advertisement spam, on -line trading etc.]

The destruction and de-legitimization of such Lokavidya; through hegemonistic

assimilation/supplantation is a very visible process today. And we are supposed to be heading towards a global village and a seamless society.

What is to be done? Lokavidya as the basis of a New Democracy

The revalidation and legitimisation of Lokavidya is therefore the need of the hour. The imposed hierarchy on knowledge should be dismantled. Some concerted action needs to be initiated on the following:

- i.** A movement in academic and intellectual circles for giving due recognition to traditional knowledge and practices.
- ii.** A movement to bring about legislation for the protection of traditional knowledge and practices by curbing the jurisdiction of international IPR and patent regimes.
- iii.** A cultural movement to show the incongruity of modern life styles and consumersim.
- iv.** A movement to enable, through legislative action, and sustain local markets so that the economic support for the above movements is ensured.
- v.** Efforts to confederate with other similar (Lokavidya) movements worldwide.

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