

Traditional knowledge - or 'Natures' knowledge?

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I have been living with rural and tribal communities for the last 12 years now. I did not go to them with intentions of 'developing' them or educating them. I went to them to recover my own cultural roots which I had lost in the process of getting educated. I went to learn from them. For having escaped 'education' and 'development' they are still original and authentic and are holding on to the culture and world view which sustained them for centuries.

This unique stand point gives me a different picture of the rural tribal communities as being wise and evolved and it is only by learning from them that we can learn to lead sustainable life. Of course, Understanding the traditional knowledge has been very difficult task for me as my frame work or categories for understanding itself is western. So in the process of de colonizing and recovering my authenticity I have been able to get glimpses of the traditional knowledge process. This has been like the peeling of the onion. I am getting to know more and more as I continue my de-colonization process.

In the process of rediscovering myself I had to remake and redefine new meanings of several words and concepts the colonizer had instilled in me. I realized that the biggest tragedy of the people of this country was they are being colonized, culturally uprooted and spiritually alienated by the process called schooling and the more we spend time in the educational institutions the more dangerous it is, and the more elitist the institution, the more uprooted and colonized one becomes. We are taught the western notion of knowledge, western world view and even the western sense of beauty. *If ones sense of beauty is conditioned, then what is left of that person?* I have been exploring the relation between conditioning and creativity, and asking what role does culture play in all this. What sparks spontaneity? What is sense of beauty? Is it an intellectual process? What is intuition? What does it mean to be original, authentic ..?

Here I look at four issues in the context of traditional knowledge: An experiment in initiating creativity in a traditional potters' community, notion of waste in traditional communities, children in traditional communities, natural learning process or traditional knowledge.

An experiment in initiating creativity

A fundamental premise of the training interventions at Aruvacode is the cultural, aesthetic and creative superiority of the trainees, compared to the 'developed' mainstream of Indian society. Thus the basic attempt at the training programme is to help the individuals regain their wisdom and confidence which lies embedded within their own communities and culture.

During the first training conducted in 1993, it was very difficult to convince the women about their abilities. The hang over of my NID days did not help matters either. But subsequent training programmes showed marked improvements. And the latest of my interventions at initiating creativity among the village children proved beyond doubt that the trainers interventions, if at all, in natural learning processes need to be restricted to erecting a fence against outside influences that corrupt the genuine aesthetic sensibility and sense of perfection of the craftspeople. Through the series of efforts at recovering creativity, the realization also dawned that what is actually happening in the name of teaching and training of rural and artisan communities is the corruption of their sense of knowing.

Initially when training methods were introduced with a group of women, we began with drawing straight lines, circles, etc. in free hand and moved on to exploring clay and making objects giving free vent to their imagination. We then sat together and started improvising on the designs to make them functional. In 1995 again there was a formal 6 months 'training' programme. This time most of the trainees were of the younger lot - 13, 14, 15 year olds. While the method was the same- freehand drawing, colours, clay work etc. my confidence about minimalist interventions had indeed grown and I deliberately kept myself away from the scene as far as possible. Their creations were simply superb. Several new designs emerged and an entire product range – coiled tiles was the result of the exercise.

The training programme which began during the KRLLPD (Kerala project was a major turning point. It is through this exercise that I re-assessed my understanding of the indigenous/traditional process of transmitting skills more closely. As coincidence would have it, I came across during the period a potter girl in Mana Madurai scooping out in perfect circle the opening of a smokeless choola. I realized the futility of importing to the artisan milieu, training methods – drawing of lines, shapes, etc. – that suited urban alienated people.

Well after 8 months of conducting the program to develop a methodology for training artisans children I had to re-look at many of the assumptions I had made regarding the craft,

traditional learning process etc. Suffice it to say that the Do Nothing natural farming philosophy of Fukuoka would find ready application here.

'Do nothing' training method

This method assumes that every one is creative and intelligent and hence initiates a process by which the trainees are encouraged to create things using their authentic aesthetic sense and making their own tools etc

Notion of waste

Waste is a modern phenomenon. It is a by-product of technological system. Notion of waste is non-existent in traditional cultures. They always are used till it disappears or disintegrates. Often all their technologies made use of bio degrading materials. Most craft have evolved from utilizing "waste". I remember reading a "sloka" on the use of materials in one of the books on traditional architecture. It said that it has taken millions of years for a rock to evolve. That was the reason why traditional cultures used rock, only to build temples which for them symbolized permanence, continuity of culture and sanctity. Even the palaces were made of mud. Traditions have always responded creatively to challenges thrown up by time. To give an example, after the earthquake of the 19th century in Kutch the traditional way of building changed to round shaped houses to counter the effects of the earthquakes on buildings. The testimony to their genius is in the fact of their survival in the recent earthquake that brought down every other type of buildings. How did this knowledge happen? In traditional cultures the very act of living is learning they are constantly observing their surroundings making use of what ever comes in their way. The worldview of the traditional cultures did not allow them to waste and sustainability was part and parcel of their life style.

It is worth while to look at how traditional societies have responded to the waste generated by the result of modern knowledge. Plastic in various grades and forms. All around the country side one can see interesting reuse of plastic. The potters in my village use plastic to burnish their wares. In the farm one can see the carry bags hung to keep the birds away. Due to wind the bag flutters and keeps the birds away. Plastic buckets etc are reused by sticking with another piece. I have seen the milk packets turned in to chattayi for sitting on the ground. There are several types of chattayi's depending on the type of plastic. My mother uses it to plant seeds. This is seen all over. The reuse the modernity's waste is seen all over the traditional communities all over the world. The modernity creates the waste and the tradition clears it.

Children in traditional communities

Children in natural learning cultures are like any other newborn animal. The nature has its ways to make them grow and all the skills of an adult world are introduced in the games, toys children make. The way they explore the world of senses is by interaction with nature and the world of nature through the senses. Senses are a two way tool - to know the out side *and* the inside.

Toys

Children from sustainable cultures make their own toys. Toy need not be anything in particular but any thing that catches the interest of the child. The toy is most often incomplete without the toy maker. Most of these toys are made from materials found around the place. Children's world in the traditional communities are always populated and mixed with the adult's world unlike the modern culture where every category is fragmented and compartmentalized. Child, adult, men, women are all strictly segregated and compartmentalized and so are Learn, play and work. In traditional communities using senses are still very common. Children are usually left somewhat free to explore the nature in the surrounding areas. Most children in Aruvacode knows the sounds of the birds, their behavior etc. Their ears are very alert to the sounds of nature. They are familiar with all the berries and the leaves that can be eaten and which are not edible. As regards smell children are always after flowers and are also familiar with smells of various leaves. Sight is the most powerful sense. Children go for hunting or for catching birds or even dragon flies they need to observe with total attention. They are watching all the time. Most of the games children play is for developing the senses. Leave children alone Children are potential geniuses Doing and experiencing is the key to learning Memorizing is harmful Authentic and original capacity for experiencing is possible if parents respond sensitively to children's needs.

Natural Learning Process

While I was in the process of developing exercises and activities to help children learn pottery, I was intrigued by the way with which the master potters arrive at a form. I wondered how the things they make could be so beautiful. I was keen to know what at first guides them to arrive at a particular form and then a perfect proportion. Mulling over it for several days I realized that there is a biological assistance that guides our sense of beauty. People undefiled by modern ways are far more open and receptive to this biological guidance. This insight opened up a

complete new dimension in my search to understand the traditional and indigenous knowledge systems.

In fact, delving a little further into the biological aspect of knowledge, I soon realized that all the games children play in the villages is a kind of a response to *their individual* biological needs. Children in natural learning cultures are similar to *any newborn living being* and nature has its own precious pace to make them grow.

Senses therefore play a very important role in the process of learning and are a sort of a reciprocal device that helps creation establish communion with the inner self. In the traditional societies every situation was a learning situation. It was a rhythm followed from birth to death.

If we consider knowledge to be a biological response to sustain life, then the present level of estrangement between man and nature is unimaginable. How could knowledge and destruction go hand in hand to the extent that the very survival of the earth now edges on the brink of cessation? Knowledge, devoid of the biological content fostered the grounds for depredation. As I closely observe the primal ways of the indigenous people I find every connective tissue an extension of nature. Their dwellings, their artifacts all seem sprouted from the earth. Inspiringly concordant - like the bird, the branch, the nest, the twigs. It is imperative that we re-institute the traditional knowledge systems and restore the earth its pristine beauty.

The more I reflect upon, the more I see the diametrically opposite direction in which education has led us from nature. 'Western' no longer confines to the west. The ripples of western knowledge have far reaching consequences. Their world view or the lack of it has proved catastrophic to the entire humankind.

In a particular region with specific climatic, geographic and ecological conditions a particular life form emerges and survives. Similarly knowledge must evolve naturally without any external thrust of shammed theories and counter theories. The fundamental difference, in the evolution of knowledge systems in the modern and traditional cultures is about revering nature in its totality. Indigenous cultures have for generations honored nature's sanctity and their quest for knowledge was armored with tools of intuition, sensitivity and creativity which bestowed a sense of un-intrusive and peaceful existence to every pulsating entity.

Traditional knowledge and modern knowledge

Modern Education has shifted the center of knowledge from Nature to human, from collective to ego, from heart to intellect / mind, from intuition to reason, from experience to information, from holistic to compartmental. The effects of the modern education on the individual are compartmentalization, Alienation, Intellectualization, Conceptualization etc. The Larger and more dangerous effects of modern education on the planet are that we have destroyed its ecosystems, finished non-renewable wealth, made extinct many animals, plants etc. In traditional cultures the very act of living is learning they are constantly observing their surroundings making use of what ever comes in their way. Words like heritage conservation, sustainability, holistic, waste, documentation, boredom, alienation are all modernity's creation. These are not the issues of intuitive cultures at all. The fundamental difference between indigenous cultures and the western culture is that the indigenous cultures uses intuition as framework for creating, transmitting and sustaining knowledge and the west uses reason. Through the present educational system this shift is being brought about thus cutting us off from our roots in a very fundamental way.

So, recovering indigenous culture lies in recovering our intuitive abilities consciously. Only from this state of being can we begin to address our problems and to search for solutions? Other wise we will continue to the plunder, the reason dominated human beings have been doing for the past 600 years. The present destruction of the eco systems is a direct result of the domination of reason over intuition, conscious over sub conscious, individual over collective, self over self-less, materialism over spiritual, of anthropocentrism over nature centricism and so called scientific (western) knowledge over wisdom knowledge.

Recovering indigenous culture does not lie in getting back the artifacts from the western museums or doing all kinds of researches and documentation or sending our children to the present day schools. There is no true knowledge in the schools. It also destroys intuition, our very tool for acquiring 'life sustaining wisdom knowledge'. In-fact recovering indigenous culture might even mean doing away with the present school system, the present institutions/museums, documentation etc.

We might have to look at how to sensitize the intuitive cultures, how to become consciously intuitive and how to guard us from the noisy, glittering and dominating reason-culture, how to recover true creativity and the wisdom, *which will guide us to lead a wise life?* Our main obstacle will be how to get rid of the ghost of reason and intellectuality from our being.