

A Practical Approach to Dialogues on Knowledge in Society

Krishna Gandhi

Let me start my discussion with excerpts from the brochure followed by excerpts from the messages posted on the UNESCO Bulletin Board. This will make my task easier as this article is a continuation of the logic of the points already discussed above.

Excerpt from the brochure-

"...Some where very deeply both Globalization and America's war on Afghanistan and Iraq are connected with the development of Knowledge Based Society. Today's Third World paid the historical price, with life and resources, of the development of the Industrial World. Equally large sections of the world population seem destined to pay the price in terms of their life and resources of the development of Knowledge Based Society. This is the central concern of this workshop. It is our conjecture that in the liberation struggles in 21st century, knowledge is going to be a central concern, the chief opposition being between knowledge organizable by the ICTs and traditions of knowledge kept alive by peasants, artisans, workers and women all over the world. The workshop intends to debate the various aspects of this `opposition' with the participation of as many stand-points as possible.

Knowledge is changing its face today, a paradigmatic change is taking place. It is not smaller than the change that took place with institutionalization of science early in 19th century. Scientific method, the criterion of legitimacy in the sphere of knowledge, has already gone half overboard being replaced by the criterion of organizability by the ICTs. It needs no arguments to understand that this is going to lead to sweeping new forms of reduction of human knowledge turning human beings to reduced beings, alienated creatures of a new type.

Vast majority of peasants, artisans and workers are on the run with their families. Their staying power and fighting capacity depends on the strengths based in their knowledge traditions the techniques, practices, processes that are the most important in this respect. Issues related to logic, values, power, ontology, organization and communication including transmission ought to occupy the center stage if the dialogues are desired to open spaces of reconstruction of a polity to challenge the new empire.

Important questions we hope to address in the workshop include the following:

Is People's Knowledge the chief object of exploitation in the Knowledge Society?

Is the Virtual Community the new avatar of the Ruling Class?

How is Knowledge Enterprise transforming the State?

The Criteria of Legitimate Knowledge are undergoing a sea change! Is the Scientific Method giving way to the Criteria of Organizability of Knowledge?

People's Knowledge has been serving as their Survival Strategies for long. Can it now become the source of their strength and the basis of the politics of Challenge?"

This generated the following thread-

My message posted 28 November 2003 20:29 :-

I have three points to make:

1) The organizability of Knowledge by the ICTs is more a technical issue than a knowledge/philosophy of knowledge issue and therefore it becomes pertinent to raise the question: Is really the Scientific Approach to knowledge on the way out? I would rather welcome this development since to me the tyranny of the scientific method is more oppressive than the emerging dominance of the tools/techniques of organizability of knowledge. Further, it is not yet clear that the Empire has already won the war of the subjugation of people's knowledge through its hegemony over the ICTs. The possibility of alternative organizations of knowledge capable of encompassing peoples' native knowledge within the realms of the emerging ICTs cannot be totally ruled out. Can we with certainty say that the hegemonistic control over the ICTs by the Empire is unchallenged? Perhaps we need not be that pessimistic.

2) The scientific approach to acquiring knowledge as has been practiced so far is being perceived to be on the wane vis-à-vis the organizability of knowledge. This scientific approach was tyrannical in the sense that it left no spaces for the native traditional non-western "other" knowledge systems to survive and denied them a right to exist. If it (scientific approach) really is going overboard, then its tyranny will break down and this may enable at least temporarily the "other" knowledge systems some breathing space. Therefore a temporary phase of reemergence of plurality (democracy even) of knowledge systems cannot be ruled out. I see a silver lining, in short.

3) From the point of the Dialogs on knowledge in Society Workshop, there is a need to explore the possibility of peoples/"other" knowledge finding an expansion/expression in the spaces of a non-monolithic ICT.

Surendran's message posted 03 December 2003 17:14 :-

I would like to try to respond to the points which Krishna Gandhi has presented above.

1. In fact what one would like claim is that it is 'not a technical matter' that knowledge is identified and valued in terms of ITC organizability. May be, some simple analogies may be used. Consider the situation that clothes which can not be washed in washing machines are 'not considered clothes'. This is very easy to imagine, since in most rich nations it is already so. Or consider vegetarians considering European, American food as 'not eatable', though technically it is food and contains more calories and fat etc. Or for that matter, from the point of view of Indian Vastu Sastra or Traditional Chinese designs, a building without certain kinds of spaces are 'not houses', that houses without the pagoda arches pointing to the sky in relation to the motion of the sun are 'not houses' where people can live. We should not forget the fact 'mere 4-walled rooms' became technically houses only in the context of the industrial city scape with no space to live.

It is the same with non-formal education as 'not education', from the point of view of the empire, government, authority and organizations duly constituted within that authority. From the point of view of dominant western system of medicine backed by their Science and technology, Homeopathy (even though developed in Europe), Ayurveda, Unani, Chinese system are not medicines. Even though from the point of view of a patient whatever cures his illness is technically a medicine! And whichever is cheaper, more easily available, easily improved /improvised and easily learned etc. must be better medicine etc.

Further, the above logic of what constitute a better medicine is a piece of reasoning from ordinary life. It resides there and it is the logic and analytic scheme of lokavidya. They establish and seek equivalences of all knowledge with respect to life, and we understand that the above reasoning that it a matter of technicality is really a reasoning in Lokavidya, it is really a logic in Lokavidya.

In fact , in Lokavidya, many of the so-called irreconcilable alternatives will appear to be almost a technical matter with no real substance. So, it is with the differences in religious traditions, not to say matters of food, shelter and clothes. In Lokavidya the differences are only technical. Lokavidya always firmly stands rooted in the basics, and quickly identifies the knowledge that is for the good of all, just as it quickly settles a menu for a public meal, without worrying about the thousand expensive and perhaps harmful (to the stomach) food served in the King's durbar. And it is Lokavidya which is at work, in all the conflict resolutions saving the humanity from certain disaster.

What is truly significant is the way Lokavidya assimilates knowledge that comes its way. Perhaps, this assimilation and digestion is the test of Lokavidya being not under threat. But what we see is the so-called traditional society, which has apparently become regimented and militarized, dressed in fundamentalism of one kind or other. But what is the context? Thus Muslim fundamentalism or the Christian fundamentalism before the industrial revolution or the Strong Caste fundamentalism is the condition of combat or threatened survival. It is a mere reflection of the state of alertness of the people, whose lokavidya is threatened. In the face of the violent onslaught any Lokavidya will develop 'fundamentalism' or simply disintegrate and vanish. For, Lokavidya is autonomous, above any organization, even 'traditional' of society. It is as basic as the recognition of another living animal as a human being! It is simply beyond any system. It is like the top soil of the earth, where things grow which is beyond any chemical preparation.

The confusion of Lokavidya being identified with a traditional older existing system is indeed common, but it is an equivalence useful analytically combating invasion. A society threatened will struggle to identify itself with a tradition, just as an individual threatened with annihilation will identify with some technique of self defence. But, what ought to take place is the individual should identify with his soul at that moment, and the society should identify with its Lokavidya. And that is the essence of Mahatma Gandhi's politics, the politics of passive resistance and Satyagraha and the ideal of transforming the adversary is that identification with the soul by the individual and society. Lokavidya in some sense is thus the soul of public knowledge, and thus of a traditional society.

So also, all actions in the name of humanity and identity of human beings (all differences being technical) belongs to Lokavidya and so also is the means of resolution of all conflicts of systems by means of goodness, kindness, generosity and many other qualities which are in the human lexicon for eons, technically disappear from an aggressive society or military. A presentation of lokavidya along these lines was attempted in the essay <http://energyrealm.balasainet.com/eman.html>. Finally, to reiterate, your statement that it is a 'technical difference' simply means you are speaking from the lokavidya standpoint. And we are precisely involved in collecting friends who would stand by such a view. But this fact is not the same as not understanding the technical differences fully. But it always amounts to not succumbing to the logical axiomatic consistency of the aggressive system. It transcends that and prepares its own transformation and prepares to provide the basis for the struggle that is life! And the law appears to be : aggressor / conqueror / predator if learnt lessons from lokavidya will refine self, and the people with weaker system (traditional society or anything) transform itself to become stronger. Thus the above argument may be restated that Mahatma Ganhi's idea is to expose the aggressor to the influence of lokavidya, that he/ it may get a chance to transform and meet his/ its soul before his/ its end.

Girish Sahasrabudhe posted 06 December 2003 08:46 :-

This is in response to the discussion started by Krishna Gandhi and K. K. Surendran.

The point made by Surendran about 'food' and 'not food', 'house' and 'not house', 'education' and 'not education' and so on is self evident although it is not always admitted, explicitly or implicitly, with all its implications. It is indeed true that the differences between these are technical. But there are things to be said here. The teaching in lokavidya is that a single choice in any of such options is one experiment in life, is a practical choice, does not have space-time portability, cannot make or mar, cannot spoil the soul and is not enough to kill each other for. Thus, in concrete life lokavidya equalizes the options before picking one, reducing the act of choosing to exercise of technical wisdom. This is the assimilative sweep of lokavidya. An instance where it is most evident in countries like India, where agriculture is a mass occupation, is in the way the farmer confronts a situation of aggressive promotion of green revolution technology on the part of the state. He is enslaved by fiscal and economic arrangements institutionalized by the state, and not by the technology per se as many erroneously believe. The reason is simple. What he practices is not at all the technology that would pass the tests of an agricultural university. One can find any number of failure analyses stressing that the farmer did not sufficiently adapt the technology! This is after all a mere euphemism, served in order to deny the farmer even the credit of essential improvisation. That the assimilative sweep of lokavidya in this instance fashions only the survival of the farmer is, of course, true but another matter.

Thus again, is lokavidya not to be confused with this or that technique or process, or even with this or that type of techniques or processes. Nor can it be made into an aspect of traditional societies, or, for that matter, of any particular type of societies. So it cannot be an object of studies enquiring how much of it survives!

But, can the same be said about 'knowledge' and 'not knowledge'? As Surendran says, one would like to claim this is not a technical matter. One must remember that, in a sense, the choice making we talked of earlier is an exercise within this or that knowledge paradigm – that is to say in any healthy society the choice making is logically follows the choice of knowledge paradigm. The question between 'knowledge' and 'not knowledge' itself is, therefore, unlike the choices mentioned earlier. It is not a question of theory. It is a question of metatheory.

Nagarjun posted 08 December 2003 15:50 :-

ICT cannot be monolithic. What makes you feel that ICT could be monolithic? There are schemes of knowledge organization, but the scheme doesn't impose any specific ontology, which specifies one's world view. Using the ontology specifications it should be possible to represent any given world view. thus plurality can be preserved in ICT. In fact I think it is possible to compare and contrast different world views using KR tools, without passing any value judgments. However if one applies some criteria such as consistency, contradiction etc, which are more logical than epistemic in nature, then some evaluation of different worldviews should be possible.

I again, posted 18 December 2003 22:15 :-

Taking the thread of discussion a step forward, it appears to me that Surendran Girish and Nagarjuna are of the view that coexistence of different knowledge systems/world views whether traditional or modern is a fact of life that cannot easily be ignored. In fact, at the level of "knowledgeable persons" whether of the Empire or outside it, an acceptance of the inevitability of the coexistence of different systems of knowledge is highly desirable for the healthy evolution of society in a non-fundamentalist and non-violent way. At the level of the people(Lok), the conflicts of differing world views/knowledge systems are resolved in a "technical" and practical manner without any heart-burning about whether a particular piece of "knowledge" / "non-knowledge" belongs to this or that knowledge system, modern or traditional. On the other hand, the "knowledgeable" persons seem to be in an unseemly hurry to arrogate to themselves the power to pronounce judgments as to what is knowledge and what is not, basing their judgments on their particular world-views. They seem to be too much preoccupied with the self-appointed task of separating the "scientific" from the "superstitious" in the practices of the Lok, the people, forgetting, it appears to me, that for the healthy evolution of the society, dialogue(s) need to be established between the professors(advocates) of differing knowledge systems. In that sense, the workshop on Dialogues on Knowledge in Society has to take up the agenda also of promoting Dialogues among Knowledge Systems. Perhaps promoting such dialogue(s) among varied Knowledge systems may lead us to the answer of the question posed by Girish as to how to reconcile "Knowledge" and "Non-Knowledge".

The emergence of ICTs are, more than ever before, leading, some of us believe, to a heightening of the conflicts between differing Knowledge Systems/World Views. I believe increasing use of phrases like "clash of civilizations", "cultural imperialism", "eradication of fundamentalism" by "knowledgeable" persons point in that direction. But on the other hand, it would be interesting to imagine the scenario of the LOK(s), the peoples, of the globe initiating dialogue(s) on Knowledge in society, without the mediation of the "knowledgeable" persons. This possibility cannot be entirely to be ruled out, provided they get access to such ICTs as make such a dialogue possible. I am sure, that the native (indigen-ous) intelligence of the people will lead to situation of not only of no-conflicts, but also of constructive dialogues. My point is that there is a need to be careful about "knowledgeable" persons consciously/unconsciously sabotaging constructive dialogues on knowledge, in the name of irreconcilability of knowledge systems.

I see a parallel between the use of the word "know" when applied to persons and when applied to knowledge systems. Just as knowledge of the "other" person is made possible through an interaction based on love, respect, justice, truth - in short "putting oneself in the other's shoes"- so also an appreciation of a different knowledge system other than one's own would appear to require similar attitudes. Just as one's self-knowledge is made possible through the interactions with fellow human beings, so also an appreciation of a particular knowledge system is made possible when there is a dialogue between it and other knowledge systems. Just as a person cannot exist without a constructive interaction with other fellow human beings, so also it appears to me that a knowledge system also cannot exist in isolation, it needs other coexisting knowledge systems engaged in mutual dialogues to prove its self-worth. Just as mono-culture is killing in forestry, so also uniformity in looking at the world can be killing to the society where it is practised. Just as one man's poison is another man's medicine, so also one's(one's society's) science can be the superstition of another(society).

Despite all this, the constant and endless endeavour of self-discovery and search for truth goes on.

Dialogues between peoples and knowledge systems are possible. And a minimal set of rules have to be agreed upon to make possible such a dialogue.

The above thread of discussion points to, among other things, the importance of the answering the following questions: (1) How is knowledge to be distinguished from non-knowledge?; (2) What are the rules for constructive dialogues among knowledge systems?

With some trepidation I venture to propose a practical approach to discovering the answer to the above questions.

To me knowledge is inherently systemic in nature. That is Knowledge is about systems perceived to exist in a real sense (independently of the perceiver). Systems can said, naively, to consist of parts(alternatively elements, objects) and knowledge of the system concerns the articulation of the perceived inter-relationships between and among the objects of the system.(Here Inter-relationships imply the existence of laws that govern the interactions between objects. Objects themselves have attributes and actions associated with them.). Articulation of the knowledge means ability to represent the knowledge using symbols and mathematical/mental constructs in such a way that it can be understood by and communicated to others. Moreover those representations of knowledge that call for a minimum of hypotheses while being able to account for the maximum number of observed phenomena and even predict new phenomena are seen as better knowledge systems.

The question as to what constitutes knowledge and non-knowledge has two aspects: the objective aspect and the subjective aspect.

It is granted that different knowledge systems may arrive at different representations of the knowledge of a real system. For example, the different systems of health (Ayurvedic, Homeopathic, Allopathic, Tibetan, Unani, Siddha, Yoga..) may have different representations of the inter-relationships among and between the objects(attributes, actions) of the health system that they seek to understand, explain and deal with. It is quite possible that the systems of classification, methods of proof, of the different knowledge systems are quite different from each other. The treatments prescribed for the same symptoms exhibited by the same patient may be different in different systems of health. But there is a definite logic and methodology consistently followed by these different systems.

While the modern (western) science and along with it, the allopathic system of medicine (being a part of it) claims universality and scoffs at other systems of medicine, the fact is that at the level of the people, the Lok, all these systems are practised to varying degrees even today, despite all the backing that the establishment gives to modern medicine. Moreover, its limitations when it comes to holistic health both of the individual and of the community are being realized more than ever before.

Therefore it would be safe to say that there is lot of space for the different medicine/health systems to flourish. It appears to me that the simultaneous existence and survival of a number of health systems would provide us a remarkable opportunity to arrive at an answer as to what constitutes knowledge as opposed to non-knowledge at least in the realm of medicine/health. Comparing and contrasting the way knowledge of various diseases are represented and treatments are prescribed, perhaps one can try to grope towards an answer to the question as to what constitute a knowledge system of health.

Similarly, a knowledge system of music. A comparative study of music/musicology of different cultures, the structures and forms and aesthetics of music of the world, the underlying theories of music, the understanding of what is good music in different cultures...all these could perhaps lead us to an

understanding of the essential character of a knowledge system of music.

In fact, by limiting oneself to instrumental music, which maybe called a pure form of music, it may perhaps be possible to find common elements in the structures of music of the world. This may also throw some light on the way human mind perceives music and how it goes about organizing the music into certain structures according to certain rules of production.

Thereby it may be possible to understand whether there are some structures of music (mathematical models of music) universal to all cultures- the objective aspect to knowledge of music. The subjective aspect of knowledge has to be perhaps addressed to in an entirely different manner.

How much of the appreciation of music is a matter of cultural inheritance and how much is biological inheritance can perhaps be understood through comparative studies of the music of different cultures.

In fact the study of the music of remote communities which interact little or not at all with other cultures may be very desirable, as this will reveal the biological dimension to music. The same piece of music, can evoke entirely different moods in different persons. Not only that; even within a definite cultural milieu, different persons react differently to different ways of exposition of inter-relationships among objects. The subjective state of the perceiver of the inter-relationships has a great deal of influence on what he perceives. The same food would arouse different emotions in different persons depending on the state of their health and their sense of satiation. Interaction with the same person evokes different emotions depending on the personal histories, the ages, the culture and language of the persons interacting. So also a knowledge system may appeal to a particular community as being relevant/irrelevant to their common history, their cultural symbols, their aspirations, in spite of/in addition to how good it is a representation of the particular real system of the world. The water management practices prevalent in traditional societies in India before the advent of the modern systems of dams-building and irrigation canals are a case in point. The Tarun Bharat Sangh led by Sri Rajendra Singh Rana has been able to successfully articulate the knowledge systems of traditional village communities of Rajasthan. In his book on traditional tanks (Talab) Anupam Mishra has tried to paint a picture of the traditional wisdom of water management as it existed. Different systems of water management were/and still are prevalent in different parts of the country. For example in the Bundelkhand region, before the advent of the British, there were no systems of irrigation canals within the systems of Tanks (Talabs). These tanks were built in the pre-colonial period extending up to at least a millennium and were basically thought of as reservoirs ensuring availability of groundwater (itself extracted from dug wells using Persian wheels for irrigation purposes), and as safe-guards against periods of draught. Their waters were not to be used for irrigating fields directly and were supposed to remain filled with water throughout the year. These water management practices varied from region to region depending upon the geo-agro-climatic conditions also.

The above approach suggests that individuals/groups of individuals undertaking a comparative study of the different knowledge systems extant in India in any area of human endeavour like health, music, water management etc.. are likely to arrive at an understanding of what constitutes knowledge both from an objective point of view and a subjective point of view. By looking at the different representations of knowledge and also the reasons behind the acceptance of particular knowledge systems by particular communities and particular regions, the objective as well as the subjective aspects of knowledge (knowledge systems) can perhaps be understood.

Now with regard to the second question on the possible rules of constructive dialogues, let us see whether we are in a position to explore how dialogues on knowledge in society have been conducted historically to this day. It would appear to me that we in India are in a unique privileged position to study not only the question of what constitutes knowledge, but also the more important question of how dialogues on

knowledge in society were/are conducted.

To mollify, tolerance has been the hallmark of Indian civilization as opposed to other civilizations of the world. No other civilization, it can be argued, has been able to encompass so much variety of lifestyles, geo-climatic cultures, communities (castes and tribes), languages, etc ... as India. And the interactions among the different cultures, communities in India have been traditionally governed by certain rules of conduct which had left enough spaces for all the communities to survive and in some periods of history to flourish also. As a direct correlation it is reasonable to expect that there co-existed and survived hundreds of world-views encompassing hundreds or more knowledge systems. Of course the colonial rule and the post independent period has witnessed a drastic reduction in number and popularity of these knowledge systems, brought about by the forces of homogeneity/uniformity imposed from outside and above. The current phase of globalization will surely accelerate the process. But despite all this, we are in a unique position to study in detail and in a variety of situations what historically constitutes dialogues in society. I am saying dialogues in society to mean dialogues (interactions) between the different communities that coexist in India. These dialogues are necessarily based on the world views of the communities that engage in such dialogues and therefore imply a dialogue on knowledge in society also.

To sum up I wish to say the following. (1) We need to understand what constitutes knowledge as opposed to non-knowledge both from objective and subjective points of view (the objective and subjective dimensions to knowledge in society) and whether objective knowledge of a real system of the world corresponds to an ability to represent the knowledge in abstract terms using symbols/mental constructs and communicate it to others. (2) Further, we need to know what the rules are by which dialogues on knowledge in society are to be conducted in a constructive way. (3) We in India were historically blessed with a plurality/diversity of world-views / knowledge systems and this puts us in a unique position to study the dynamics of dialogues on knowledge in society (4) We need to undertake enquiries on how have knowledge systems evolved in India and how they have been/can be characterized and whether a comparative study of knowledge systems by groups of individuals will enable us to answer the question as to what constitutes knowledge and finally (5) A study of how historically dialogues on knowledge in society in India have been conducted may perhaps help us formulate the rules of conduct for dialogues on knowledge in society in a world globalizing (homogenizing) knowledge through the ICTs. Perhaps this is a naive/simplistic way of putting things without any substantiation or corroboration by/from authorities (?) on this subject. I shall be happy if my ideas are helpful in taking the dialogue even a faltering step forward.