

Knowledge, Human Society and Swaraj

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What is ordinary life?

From a Lokavidya standpoint, the true history of humanity is not merely a chronicle of conquests, monuments of glory or the wealth of its dominions. Instead, it is an account of the cultural, economic and social lives of its ordinary people and how they are encoded into the memories, beliefs and rituals of societies. In this story, the ordinary takes the center stage as the principal motive force of humanity for two reasons. One, it enriches society with a huge diversity and variety of thought, action and expression that are a species characteristic of humankind. Second, the extraordinary for all purposes may be considered a reduction of the ordinary through a systematic use of language, art, logic and reasoning on it.

Over time, the extraordinary takes the form of an inspiration and an ideal embedded into the myths, histories and cultural memories of a society propagated across generations through imitation, education and training. Viewed another way, it may be said that the extraordinary is a device that aids the replication of the ordinary across time and space and acts as a driver of change and progress. The specific forms and types of interplay between the ordinary and the extraordinary define the 'nature' of a society while also distinguishing one from another. Art, language, literature, poetry, music, the sciences, philosophy, technology, and much else that mark us as human are visible symbols of the interplay between the two. In this article, it may however be clarified that the term ordinary is not to be understood as assigning a lower status to it, but as a property of a majority of people.

Knowledge, power and the State

In the real world, the connection between the ordinary and the extraordinary is neither spontaneous nor autonomous but is determined by power relationships in society that define and specify conditions under which ordinary life is lived. However, power by itself does not have the ability to maintain a lasting command over ordinary life. To enable it, you need a narrative that creates a cohesive explanation and a set of rituals that constitute the rules of life in a society. Over time, the narrative distills principles for life that are claimed to be universal and true for all times. The past of a society, or its parts, is inspected, rewritten and celebrated through these core principles.

As with power, knowledge by itself cannot move the world. It is through an integral connection with power that it acquires the ability to organize and manage the visible aspects of social life while simultaneously governing human action through the invisible constructs of codes of conduct, beliefs, laws and appeals to reason or emotion. In other words, power expresses itself in two ways: control over distribution of physical and virtual resources in society, and management of the thoughts and actions of individuals in society. In this article, we use the term knowledge-power to indicate that effective power in the modern society cannot be separated from knowledge.

The State may be viewed as an accumulated system of beliefs and practices derived from the exercise of knowledge-power over hundreds of years or even longer. Knowledge-power change constantly to (re-)produces beliefs, rituals, productive forces and economic organization in a functioning society. The State provides continuity for the exercise of knowledge-power to help strengthen its legitimacy.

As in today's world, when the State is captured by a small number of people, it dilutes all norms of justice and equity to protect their interests while prescribing beliefs and practices for society. Therefore, the primary contradiction of human society today may

be seen not in the clash between capital and labor, but between labour and the State; as a conflict between the knowledge-power of the State and the majority, and also of ordinary knowledge and specialized knowledge.

The State in the modern era

The development of the modern State, starting in the 16th century CE, brought significant changes in the coupling between the State and knowledge-power. Previously, when the coupling was loose, the State tended to control or exercise power more judiciously and the society as a whole was, if not in great prosperity, more equitable and just. On the other hand, once the modern State tightened its hold on knowledge-power for conquest and subjugation, it devalued the status of ordinary knowledge, in turn leading to a serious erosion of dignity, sustenance and legitimacy of large numbers in society.

The expanding reach of knowledge-power

An important aspect of the new dynamic of knowledge-power in Europe in the modern era was its ability to separate knowledge from its context and location, implemented in a big way during and after the industrial revolution. By then, England had developed the capability to embed a progressively larger amount of complex knowledge into machines and the management of society. This capability gradually extended to different areas such as large scale manufacture of iron, textiles, steam driven machines and tools in the 19th century and to mass manufacturing of goods in the early 20th, forcing the gradual reduction of human effort to mere manual labor. These developments suggest that knowledge acquires a different character and dynamics once detached from its location and over time, reappears in the form of newer and more efficient technologies.

At the end of the 20th century, information technology and communication technologies (ICT) provided a new impetus to this process by connecting people, information and disparate productive systems across the globe. The resulting revolutionary changes in the speed of information exchange and communication accelerated the displacement of knowledge from its location and its incorporation into more and more complex systems. This has quickly created an intensified ability of knowledge-power to extract and manipulate natural and human resources on a vast scale across the globe. This in turn has resulted in the State acquiring strength of a kind not encountered ever before in history.

Reversing the tide: the State and knowledge-power in India

Across the world, the elite have achieved great success in acquiring power, profits and control over resources in recent decades. This is accompanied by the acquisition of excessive powers by the State leading to a vicious cycle of erosion of dignity, lack of sustenance and heightened inequity for a majority of people. Meanwhile, knowledge-power has taken big strides towards automating various aspects of people's lives, gradually reducing the need for skilled humans in a variety of tasks. In an environment where all instruments of the state are pitted against the majority, people's will and ability to fight has also become somewhat reduced. The struggle today is not merely against oppression by the elite, but against what enables it, i.e., the essence of ordinary life being extracted and shaped into a tool of the State for marginalizing their lives further.

A few questions that may arise at this juncture are: is this a universal phenomenon that applies to all societies for all times and dooms us to a karmic extinction that cannot be

defeated? Does it therefore mean that we are powerless to arrest the continuous immiseration of societies across the world?

The answer to these questions may be discovered by considering one of the greatest challenges to four centuries of colonial dominance of the world mounted in India under the leadership of Gandhi. This was not a mere challenge to foreign rule, but was directed against the foundations of Europe's hegemony at the level of ideas of life, politics and society, and notably focused on the relationship between the State and knowledge-power.

Historically, Indian society seems to have been successful for a long in separating power and knowledge, resulting in the development of a State that was not capable of exercising large controls on society. For example, early accounts of the British demonstrate the horror they felt when they saw the King of Awadh dining with commoners, or observed the simple tastes of 'royalty' across India in food, clothes, pomp and entertainment. Dharampal and other historians suggest that the relative inequality in society was not high, and the lives of the majority were not in great misery for much of India's past.

This is not to claim that war and conquest was unimportant or infrequent in Indian society. Our history indicates that war and violence were important instruments of statecraft in India. However, due to the weak link between knowledge and power, the State appears to have been incapable of inflicting crippling and lasting damage to the enemy, as Europe did since the 1600's. State power was weak enough to ensure that the rule of law was by and large fair, the taxes amounted to no more than 15-20% of the peasant's produce and technology evolved slowly, if at all, etc. The technologies of bullock cart, waterworks for agriculture, house construction, industry, medical systems,

martial tactics and education certainly changed over time, but very slowly. It seems that our past offers a convincing proof of how a loose coupling between power and knowledge leads to effective decentralization, relative peace, a rich diversity of life and the absence of slavery, famines and large scale violence, etc.

It is in this background that we may understand that the jati system of India acted as a bulwark against atomization of society, being an ancient political formation that has resisted a unitary and centralized structure of power across India for a thousand years. Jati constitutes a fundamental means for dealing with situations of injustice and inequity in several ways: negotiation, non-cooperation, migration away from a ruler's kingdom, hartal, hunger strikes, denial of services to a community, and in rare cases, self-sacrifice. In the face of such impediments to the acquisition of absolute power, it is likely that the State was rendered incapable of fusing knowledge and power together to create a more exploitative system. Possibly as a result of this, India seemed to the outsider as an ageless, timeless civilization where tolerance and plenty thrived amidst the worship of the transcendental and the simple.

Swaraj during and after Gandhi

Beginning in the second half of the 18th century CE, the demolition of India under colonialism proceeded along two paths. The first was the indignity, mass murder and violence inflicted on its people on an unheard of scale before. The second was the complete collapse of its elite that fell apart quickly when assaulted by the British. So compelling was the lure of the State-knowledge-power axis that the Brahmanas eagerly took to the task of replacing tradition by texts, the elite enthusiastically accepted British law over native justice and the laity stood in awe of the white man who seemed to personify a great combination of the Brahmana and the Kshatriya.

It was in these circumstances that Gandhi galvanized India through his calls for Ahimsa, Satyagraha and non-cooperation against the colonial regime. Gandhi's appeal to fight the British was not merely for attaining liberation from foreign rule. It was founded on a call to redeem the world from the dangers posed by the modern State, whose unbridled power produces large-scale propaganda, technology and weapons of war to subjugate men; and, in the process, enslaves the master too.

Gandhi's efforts to draw in the Indian elite and the British in his work may be understood as a strategy for making the battle easier through novel ideas such as ahimsa, personal discipline and collective non-cooperation. On the other hand, they may be regarded as an attack against the immorality and unchecked dominance of the State empowered by its nexus with knowledge-power. This is supported by his identification of the notions of progress and civilization as being the root-cause of all evil in our times while shaming the British who projected it as a civilizing mission. His rejection of nationalism also seems to have arisen from a fear that it will ultimately strengthen the State using knowledge premises to legitimize the oppression of our own people.

An excellent example of Gandhi's conceptualization of the future of Indian society is a great experiment in statecraft that he oversaw in the tiny principality of Aundh starting in the late 1930's. His recommendations of mechanisms for representation, locality of decision making, exercise of power by the legislature and oversight of its functioning may be understood as a first effort of great significance to delegitimize knowledge-power in the very domain of its operation – the State.

For Gandhi, Swaraj becomes a historic necessity to achieve through a drastic reduction of the State's role and a corresponding acceptance of responsibility by the individual in

his social life. This was an essential requirement for breaking the knowledge-power nexus that had empowered the State to exercise greater control over people's lives. This is what Gandhi seems to imply when he calls for the rejection of the civilization of the West, labeling it as evil and despotic. Gandhi's emphasis on the village may be therefore understood as a deliberate choice of a place where the State and knowledge-power are disempowered enough to provide a level playing ground for human initiative to flower.

In our times, if Gandhi can come to our rescue in this situation, it may be only through a reinterpretation of his life and work using terms similar to what we have described in this paper. Meanwhile, it appears likely that the current state of the knowledge-power nexus with the State will continue to create crisis after crisis across the world, till a determined opposition to it emerges. Where such a determined opposition can emerge from is not clear at the moment.