

## My Journey Through Lokavidya

GSRK (27 Feb 2023)

When I first heard about Lokavidya sometime in the late nineties and at the third Congress on TST held at Varanasi, it was like a whiff of fresh air. We were used to the 'wretched of the earth', 'oppressed', 'downtrodden' and the weak and the meek as expressions to describe ordinary people of India. To think that the weak and the meek are not all that weak and that the wretched of the earth are as knowledgeable as the university educated was so satisfying to a sagging morale. I was also happy because the indigenous / traditional knowledge we were championing in PPST had put us on a somewhat defensive wicket and left us struggling to take the argument to a higher level. Lokavidya also appeared to help us overcome the binary of the west versus the indigenous in which we were caught for quite sometime.

But soon doubts began to appear about the very concept of Lokavidya and lokavidya samaj. Is Lokavidya same as common sense? Is there a necessary hostility between Lokavidya and organised knowledge? Is organised knowledge always inimical to the interests of ordinary people? Are 'organised knowledge' and 'systematic knowledge' different or same. Can knowledge grow without systematisation? Is systematisation of knowledge similar to concentration of wealth or power? Isn't it true that knowledge is the only resource that does not diminish when shared or distributed. Why must we always think of knowledge as power. Perhaps knowledge and power were kept somewhat separated in our tradition, while the west had always(?) understood the power of knowledge and knowledge as power.

Even as many questions were troubling me, I felt Lokavidya did ensure we are with the very ordinary 'uneducated' people and can help them, with our arguments, realise their own strength as knowledge beings.

More than any other consideration I was quite happy that we have been able to identify the main contradiction of knowledge society as the management of information/ knowledge and its control. The meetings that I attended at

Vidyashram reinforced my initial enthusiasm about being on the right track. It is therefore with a lot of zeal that I went to Indore with Krish and Suresh to meet with the lokavidyadhars that Sanjeevji was working with.

We addressed several meetings of the practitioners of Lokavidya at Indore. As I was unable to speak in their language , only Krish and Suresh spoke at these meetings, with Sanjeevji making substantial contribution. At every meeting we began by telling them that each one of them is a 'jnani' and is in no way inferior to the university educated,' pada likha admi,'etc. My impression is that some of them must have felt a little embarrassed at our statements. It also struck me as rather patronising . In fact , I told Suresh that it looks patronising and that we might better avoid over emphasising it ! True, there was no reaction from the audience to our calling them jnanis. Perhaps some of them felt happy that persons from Bangalore, the IT capital of India , consider them knowledgeable

The publication of 'Lokavidya Perspectives' was in many ways very useful in providing answers to some of my questions. It was perhaps the clearest statement of our perspective. As I was engaged in teaching a course at NLSIU, Bangalore, I introduced some of our arguments in the courses that I was teaching. Later , I taught a full course almost entirely based on material from our book. It was received well by students, if one goes by the standards of NLSIU. Some girls had serious problems with Chitraji's essay on women and Lokavidya. I had asked them to get in touch with Chitraji to get further inputs. I don't know if anyone did actually write to Chiraji on this matter.

When I began regularly speaking with Suresh on Lokavidya and related matters a few years ago, I began to see more problems at the conceptual level itself. It seemed to me that by not precisely defining Lokavidya and lokavidya samaj we have almost been saying that all that ordinary people possess to navigate in this world is Lokavidya. It therefore becomes nothing more than the common sense with which we deal with the world. If we also maintain that even university educated experts make use of Lokavidya , it can only be common sense. How does this help ?

Then there is the question what is the role of Lokavidya in the life of the very people who are its principal carriers ? That most of them are not making a living with their Lokavidya is very clear from the decline of the population of artisans, craftsmen, and of service providers like the washermen, barbers etc. There used to be those who would come , some 40 years ago , offering to retrieve objects from our open wells! To day we have no open wells anywhere in Bangalore. Of course,we now have the danger of poor children falling into the abandoned tube wells and the subsequent rescue efforts mounted by the authorities. That most such rescue efforts end in tragedy is a different matter. If most of Lokavidya is becoming useless to people in a fast changing world and new Lokavidya/ knowledge cannot be created or easily acquired by them because it requires some formal training etc , then they can only survive precariously with their Lokavidya.

We have been arguing that we are opposed to knowledge hierarchy as also hierarchical social order. How can one ignore the well entrenched hierarchy in our society which perhaps does not allow anything to escape hierarchisation. Our food, clothing, shelter are valued in terms of a hierarchy internalised by our people over centuries. Our gods are placed in a hierarchy, not only in terms of whether they are 'local' or 'universal' but also in terms of the offerings made to them. We have 'vegetarian' as well as 'non vegetarian' gods! My father used to dismiss the 'Kavadi' taken to Palani Murugan and other places as 'inferior' ways of worship given only to shudras! I am sure no Brahmin has ever taken a vow to carry a kavadi to Palani. In fact , anyone with the name Murugan should tell us that person cannot be a Brahmin!

It is my feeling that there is a clear hierarchy in Lokavidya samaj between mental and physical work as also a fine hierarchy in terms of the material with which one works. For instance, those who work with wood are inferior to those who work with metals, especially gold and silver, iron smith is always inferior to gold smith. The lokavidya samaj is so steeped in caste hierarchy that any suggestion that they are all equal as knowledge beings would be dismissed outright. The moment someone from the lokavidya samaj gets

university education , not only do they avoid the traditional work, but their parents themselves tell them to keep off the dirty work with clay or bamboo or hand looms! This is not a criticism of the concept of Lokavidya but only a pointer to the immensity of the task of achieving a non hierarchical knowledge order in which a university graduate will be no superior to a farmer.

We generally eulogise the lokavidya samaj as an exemplar of interdependence and functional unity. But when we look around , we do not see any camaraderie between various sections of the lokavidya samaj. It appears that the products of our handloom weavers or potters or basket makers or black smiths are almost as a rule never bought or patronised by other sections of Lokavidya samaj. The only patrons of Lokavidya products appear to come from the environmentally conscious urban citizens or the US returned techies!

This brings me to a standard formulation we had in Marxist circles that any revolutionary transformation is possible only when the objective conditions, namely the forces of production and the subjective condition of the conscious preparedness of the proletariat coincide. Whenever an attempt at revolution fails, one of them would be considered as having not 'matured' enough! So the naxalbari movement failed because the objective conditions for revolution were not ripe. Now, it appears to me that in the case of Lokavidya movement neither the 'objective conditions' are met nor are the 'subjective conditions' fulfilled.

Objectively, the lokavidya space is shrinking alarmingly or is so shrunk that unless we term everything done by ordinary people as Lokavidya, I am afraid we do not have a contest between organised knowledge and lokavidya. We are being told that AI will soon render millions of jobs redundant and help reduce our population substantially. What was a dream of eugenics a century ago may be realisable in the coming decades. "Organise knowledge or perish" may be the slogan of 21st century. Ayurveda is a clear indication of what is in store for Lokavidya. Ayurveda is sought to be organised in such a way as to be called bio medicine in some centres and has pretty much

become a huge profit generating industry. The food industry will soon drive out all our local/ street vendors but retain the local names and flavours. It may already be happening as one can order Biryani online ,of any name and flavour, in all our cities.

What is the 'subjective' condition of the lokavidya samaj? Any Vidya that fails to help one feed one's own family / people is bound to be abandoned. It is said we are going to have a huge unemployment crisis and a riot like situation if our youth cannot be 'skilled' to prepare them for the new industries that have emerged. Of course we already have a few million employed as delivery 'boys' who keep running around in all our cities . Agniveers is one way to keep our youth calm and quiet. Any hint that our youth should take pride in their own ' family ' or traditional occupation will be met with angry remarks of reviving 'manuvad'. The condition of Lokavidya can be best understood by looking at the condition of weavers. They perhaps constituted the largest number , next only to peasant cultivators ,in traditional India. The skills of our weavers have not perhaps declined . But their ability to make a living has so declined over the years that they are worse than those who live by manual labour. Our friend Prasanna's effort at providing a decent living to weavers has been proving so difficult that every now and then SOS messages have to be sent to urban patrons to rescue the Charaka effort. That many traditional skills and occupations would continue to survive is not in doubt because they have found a niche market in metros across India. But they will make hardly a dent to the organised knowledge /production.

So , where does all this lead me and my romantic journey with Lokavidya?

Honestly, I don't know. My only concern is I must be with our very ordinary people and do what would make a better, dignified life for them. Lokavidya certainly gave them a decent, dignified life decades ago.

I am not sure if it can ensure that today. Perhaps we may have to find other ways in the coming decades.