

## Some Observations on Lokavidya

Krishna Gandhi (07 Mar 2023)

- 1) Knowledge cannot be divorced from the people or Lok. But then Lok is context specific - People living at a particular time and location. So Lokavidya is context specific too.
- 2) Similarly, ordinary life cannot be understood without specifying the context in which it is discussed.
- 3) Therefore, our discussions will be full of generalisations and without much substance, when we talk about Lokavidya and ordinary life without their contexts. Of course, when counterposed to organised knowledge, Lokavidya in a general sense, has meaning. But it is only when we place Lokavidya in particular contexts can we hope to gain a deeper understanding of it.
- 4) Since all knowledge, including Lokavidya, emerges during the search for better and better production processes and activities that sustain and enrich life, we need to relate Lokavidya to those processes and activities. Here, we need to make a distinction between the means or techniques of production and the social relationships wherein those processes take place.
- 5) Our discussions on Lokavidya will be more grounded and evidence based if we discuss specific communities and their vocations: such as, Agarias engaged in wrought iron production, weavers of Chanderi, fishermen of Vizhinjam coast, farmers cultivating basmati rice in Uttarakhand and so on. In the case of services, we have the Kalari tradition of Marma Vidya, the medical practices of Santhal tribes and so on.
- 6) Associating Lokavidyas with communities can help us explore the relationship between Lokavidya and Swaraj in greater depth.
- 7) Within each Lokavidya, various levels of proficiency are attained by its practitioners. Certain standards and norms that define excellence in that Lokavidya evolve among its practitioners. There will exist a range of expertise in any particular Lokavidya. Consequently, there will be master practitioners, or gurus, who are considered authority as far as the art, technique and craft of that Lokavidya is concerned. It will be totally unrealistic to consider Lokavidya as knowledge uniformly distributed among its practitioners. In the Indian context, guidance of a Guru or a master is considered absolutely necessary if someone is to learn a particular Vidya

- 8) This issue of master practitioner of a Vidya/Lokavidya, is related to the question of learning processes and institutions within communities. In most pre-capitalist societies, guilds of practitioners of various professions used to regulate the learning processes and institutions. The regulatory activities of such guilds could, for example, include setting up certain standards of proficiency/excellence in a particular Vidya. Thus even in Lokavidya the management and organisation of knowledge occupies an important and essential role, not unlike in the case of organised systems of knowledge. But the defining characteristic of community owned Lokavidya is that its organisation and management evolve through self-regulatory processes within the community. This self regulation is nothing but the expression of the Swaraj of the community.
- 9) In the Indian context, not only a learner must be guided by a Guru, but she must also self-learn by doing Sadhana. So Sadhana can be considered as constant and continuing efforts a learner (sadhak) is making to excel in her craft or vocation. In other words Lokavidya is being constantly enriched and innovated upon by the practitioners (sadhaks) of Lokavidya. Hence Lokavidya cannot be conceived of as knowledge that is static. On the contrary, Lokavidya is much more vibrant, live and innovative knowledge of the people as compared to organised knowledge as owned by corporations or universities etc., because organised knowledge is knowledge accumulated within rigid parameters laid down for its practitioners to follow.
- 10) The above discussion of production processes and their association with Lokavidya makes it clear that Lokavidya is community owned knowledge without any external imposition of rigid hierarchies of authority and power. Whatever institutionalisation takes place is part of the self-regulatory mechanisms, that is, the expression of Swaraj, of the community and is rudimentary in nature. This institutionalisation is often in the form of guilds of practitioners of Lokavidya, which institutions are not controlled or financed by the state or powers external to the community.
- 11) It is when we focus on community's well-being that the opposing roles Lokavidya and organised knowledge play become manifest. Whereas Lokavidya is knowledge distributed in society with negligible stratification and hierarchy, organised knowledge is patronised by the powerful and remains confined to hierarchical structures. The dominant powers use

organised knowledge as a tool to subjugate and exploit communities and control their resources. On the other hand, Lokavidya, owned and practised by the community as a whole, has the well-being of the community as its objective. It therefore becomes an integral part of the community's Swaraj dynamics.

- 12) The idea of individual ownership of property, as opposed to the precapitalist notion of communal or common property, is the hallmark of today's capitalist society. Competition among producers for maximising profit, as opposed to cooperation for the common good of the community has been termed the "natural" law by the advocates of modern capitalism. This has resulted in 'capital', in its role as private property, acquiring a dynamic beyond and outside the control of communities. This capital serves only the greed for profit of private individuals. Even in its expression as a public company,
- 13) capital serves only the craving for wealth of a collection of private individuals. This individualisation of wealth has resulted in the death of a communitarian life. Of course, this transformation of human society from collective communitarian existence to an individualised existence is not yet complete, but it is the dominant process human society has been undergoing for more than three hundred years.
- 14) This process of individualisation of wealth has given rise to capitalist markets where goods and services are commoditised. The old fair and complementary nature of exchanges of goods and services within communities and between communities has now been replaced by a form of exchange whose chief function is now the concentration of wealth and power in a few hands.
- 15) Organised knowledge is the weapon used by the powerful to achieve concentration of wealth and power. It has been claimed that knowledge increases when shared. But this claim no longer applies to organised knowledge, which itself has now taken on the character of capital/wealth. Knowledge that was the shared commons of human society has now been transformed into private property. So organised knowledge has become confined to structures of power that are far removed from the Lok and their ordinary lives.

- 16) But while organised knowledge and the institutions that harbour it are far removed from the Lok and their ordinary lives, the practitioners of organised knowledge like academics and scientists are in general not fully isolated from ordinary life as a result of their daily interactions with ordinary people. That is, even scientists take recourse to Lokavidya when they deal with situations where their specialist knowledge cannot be applied. In that sense, practitioners of organised knowledge can be said to share Lokavidya with the communities they are part of, even if it is limited.
- 17) Thus, while there may be an unbridgeable chasm between organised knowledge and Lokavidya, no such unbridgeable chasm exists between the practitioners of Lokavidya and organised knowledge. This creates an opportunity for the practitioners of Lokavidya and organised knowledge to communicate meaningfully with each other. That is, it would be unrealistic to think that the practitioners of Lokavidya (ordinary people) and the practitioners of organised knowledge (academics and scientists) are people belonging to mutually exclusive categories, with nothing common between the two.
- 18) This has implications to the future programs of Lokavidya Jan Andolan. We must create communication channels and dialogues between Lokavidyadhars/ordinary people and scientists/academics/students of university and other institutions of higher learning. Face to face interactions between these two streams of practitioners must get priority under our dialogues on knowledge in society program.
- 19) The central idea behind Lokavidya Jan Andolan is that knowledge should serve the people. This will be possible only when knowledge is shared among all without discrimination and private individuals/entities are denied ownership rights over knowledge. Our programs must move in this direction.