

Some Thoughts on Lokavidya and Contemporary Issues

GSR

09 Mar 2023

For Lokavidya movement to be relevant, we must start speaking on contemporary issues. Hence this note.

1. Let us take an issue on which there seems to be an amazing convergence of Lokavidya perspective and the modern scientific understanding. The climate/ environmental issues have perhaps brought the tribals and leading climate scientists to some sort of convergence. We may therefore feel justified that even though there may be difference in the idioms between lokavidya and climate science, the intuitive or traditional view on environment, climate , etc are now not only 'justified ' but can be propagated more vigorously. We need to be clear about how far do we go with 'carbon footprints' and similar approaches. Without calling for a total / radical change in life style or a rejection of what some call 'machine civilization', can we make our point on the climate question from a Lokavidya perspective?
2. In contrast to the above, the question of 'social justice' as it is formulated in our public discourse seems to run totally against the Lokavidya perspective which believes (?) that our villages/communities generally ensured greater degree of harmony between castes, groups, etc. That the whole question of social justice has been reduced to 'reservation' has to be dealt with from a Lokavidya perspective without being branded as 'anti-reservationist' or 'anti-Dalit'. Perhaps India is the only country where a policy of reservation of this size or magnitude in education and jobs has been implemented with no major opposition. Dharampal used to say that more than the wisdom of members of the Constituent Assembly it is perhaps a certain sense of 'nyaya' found in our culture/ tradition that must have ensured the smooth passage of the reservation policy. Perhaps the implementation of the policy in subsequent decades has been perceived as 'anyaya' by some sections of our society. Thus over the years there is some opposition to it at least in private conversations/ discussions.
3. There is unanimity across all groups, parties, classes, that the present system of dispensation of 'justice' is a perfect example of how justice can not only be

delayed but also denied. Yet it seems we have great faith in our judiciary, especially the higher judiciary. This is a puzzle. We also know that there is a disconnect between people's concept of 'nyaya' and the concept of 'justice' as understood in western jurisprudence. Mahatma Gandhi was perhaps quick to realise this. But our elite and the middle classes have fallen for the Anglo-American jurisprudence. We need to clearly articulate what might be the Lokavidya perspective of Nyaya, Neeti, etc. and the ways / means to bring back indigenous ways of resolution of disputes and dispensation of 'justice'. Marc Galanter, the eminent scholar, has written how the displacement of traditional law by the British system was achieved rather easily and with least resistance. Perhaps the 'imposition' of the British system of justice and courts played an even greater role in the enslavement of India than the imposition of land tenure or 'deindustrialization'. The belief that one might get better justice from the high court than from the lower courts, especially the village nyaya panchayats, seems to have been internalized pretty early by all sections of our rural society. Perhaps nowhere in the world has an alien, dysfunctional system of justice gained greater acceptance among people than in India!

4. How do we understand a certain 'revival' of the Hinduism and a politics associated with it? Was it waiting to happen as is usually said about many things that have overtaken us? Should we explain/ understand it as the successful manipulation by RSS, which was cultivating the soil through years of patient work in most parts of India? It is said that RSS is perhaps the only organisation that has made contact with about five lakh villages of India. Their 'victory' in the North East is the result of at least over fifty years of very "constructive" work coupled with the spreading of the message of the dangers of Christian proselytisation. Should we in Lokavidya feel 'happy' that western liberal democracy is after all proving to be unsuited to our culture/ tradition, values and mores? If there is an alternative to western liberal democracy, what can it be? Will it be Swaraj? If no political party ever wants to speak of Swaraj in any serious sense, what would be its prospects in this century. Similarly, how should we view the 'demise' of secularism as a discourse? Was it because secularism was an imposition, like many others, by an elite? What do we have to say about the oft-repeated claim that we in India have always, already been

secular? That in the entire Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi there is no mention of the word 'secular' or 'secularism' should tell us something!

5. What should be our attitude to developments such as AI and many technological marvels? Are they by definition anti people and therefore against Lokavidya? Or do we hope against hope that they might be 'liberative' under favourable conditions? Or as Ashis Nandy often says they are initially liberating but over time become oppressive?

One can raise many more issues that would need a Lokavidya answer or perspective. We must begin with the above to stay relevant is my belief.