

Imagining YouTube as a repository of Lokvidya

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With the spread of smartphones and the internet, except for those living in very remote areas, the vast majority of India's population enjoy a regular access to the net today. Of course, there may be the large variations in the scale and scope of its usage. Among all apps, maybe after WhatsApp, it is YouTube that is most used. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Youtube has attained ubiquitous status as a source of do-it-yourself (DIY) knowledge. We see children to grownups to the elderly looking up YouTube to gain practical knowledge of mundane aspects of ordinary life. Therefore, it is pertinent to ask the question: can we imagine YouTube as a repository of Lok Vidya?

Let us go through the arguments that support the above proposition:

- 1) Most of YouTube's contents are created by ordinary people, and not experts, scientists nor technologists belonging to Institutions of organised knowledge. Even when they are, the contents are hosted for the benefit of lay people who seek to gain practical knowledge of different subjects. YouTube is not the medium of exchange of knowledge among the experts.
- 2) The contents are free. Of course, they come interspersed with advertisements promoting products of the corporate sector. But these are mostly ignored by viewers.
- 3) There is no hierarchy or organisation of the contents in terms of superior versus inferior knowledge.
- 4) Women form a significant section of creators and viewers of content. One of the most popular subjects is cooking. Talented women with experience and creativity post many recipes which are widely followed by others. Details of preparation of many Indian dishes starting from a few basic raw ingredients are shared.
- 5) Women also share and view many posts related to tips on how to keep the house clean, how to block-print fabrics, how to design clothes, how to create beautiful rangoli (kolam in south India) and so on.
- 6) Men usually post contents on how various electro-mechanical machines and electronic devices work. Assembling such machines/devices from basic components that are readily available, and troubleshooting them is a popular

subject. Starting from information regarding where quality and affordable components can be procured to details of how to design circuits, connect the components and troubleshoot are shared.

- 7) Innovative ideas on masonry work, design and construction of houses using low cost and locally available resources like clay, bricks, and bamboo form another subject.
- 8) Content related to specific skills or occupations is abundant. Agricultural practices, use of specialised equipment for no-till agriculture, organic farming, hydroponics, aquaponics, horticulture are common. Design of drip irrigation, cold storages, solar pumps, and so on is another popular category.
- 9) Many channels exist on YouTube that deal with current national and international events and try to educate the public on the hows and whys of those events. Example - Dhruv Rathee. The loss of credibility of mainstream media, both print and electronic, owned by powerful corporate interests has forced the public to search for authentic information direct from the ground through channels on YouTube (Ravish Kumar). Their popularity has gone up exponentially.

We can continue to list numerous other subjects on which content is available on YouTube. Most of the content offers knowledge of various aspects of ordinary life and are posted by ordinary people. Their primary motivation is not making money; rather, it is sharing knowledge. Certainly, some of them ask for subscriptions to cover the costs of content production.

- 1) All the above positive features of the YouTube support the idea of YouTube as a repository of Lokvidya. However, the following negative aspects deter us from doing so.
- 2) The YouTube platform is owned by Google corporation of the USA. This goes against the Lok Vidya norm of knowledge being owned by the very community/samaj/people whose members use it in their daily lives. In this case, a for-profit corporate entity not answerable to the people controls who can watch and which content can be watched on its platform. Various algorithms are used to control and restrict access to content so that pro-corporate content finds pride of place. Ideally the YouTube platform should be operated in the interest of the people of the world, by an international not-for-profit body like the one that controls the Internet.
- 3) The YouTube platform is manipulated to market the products of corporate entities. Much of the content promotes the use of branded corporate products

in creating DIY items. For example, many recipes for cake would require the use of some or other branded product like Oreo biscuit, Cadbury chocolate and so on. When it comes to agricultural practices, use of branded pesticides and herbicides manufactured by companies like Syngenta or Bayer are promoted. In short, the YouTube platform is being used to directly and indirectly market the products of corporate entities.

- 4) The control governments seek to impose on the contents of YouTube and other social media is another negative factor that is assuming increasing importance. Most worrisome is the government's move to arrogate to itself the power to declare which contents are truth and which are fake. In fact, a separate govt body is being instituted that will have the power to examine social media contents including those of YouTube and ban those which are declared fake by it. This brings to mind the horrors of the Orwellian state and its Ministry of Truth.
- 5) Even before this latest move, the govt was already demanding that social media platforms take down content criticising it. Among all governments of the world, it is Indian government that is credited with demanding the maximum number of takedowns of social media contents.

In the ultimate analysis, Lok Vidya resides in the samaj whose members depend on it for their daily living. The collective control over Lokvidya should ideally be exercised only by the samaj. Corporate or government control over social media platforms and their content is the biggest negative factor that deters us from imagining YouTube as a repository of Lok Vidya. Unless this issue of corporate/government control over knowledge and its dissemination is resolved, imagining YouTube as a repository of Lok Vidya will be highly problematic.