

Study of Lokavidya Samaj – The Rationale

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As human beings we are largely products of our learning and the ability to transmit our learning to the next generation. Hence, it is a truism to say that all human beings are knowledge beings. This capacity to learn and transmit our learning to the next generation is perhaps what distinguishes us from all other animals. It is this which is responsible for the building up of human civilizations over millennia.

This trivial truth is in itself not very useful in understanding or explicating the nature and evolution of societies across centuries. Though as knowledge beings we all are equal, it must also be clear that there have been hierarchies in human societies and hence also of knowledge. No knowledge is innocent. Our knowledge has not only given us the power to dominate nature and control it to serve our needs but also to dominate other human beings. That knowledge is power is not only a Baconian or Western concept but was perhaps a larger understanding of human societies everywhere.

It is in this context that we have developed our present understanding of Indian society as having a huge knowledge divide between a small University-based/developed knowledge stream and a vast ocean of Lokavidya. It is our understanding that the knowledge of ordinary people which helps them navigate this world is in no way inferior to those who have formal University education and training. It is also a fact that those who have formal, institutionalized or University based knowledge have been the powerful, dominant ruling classes everywhere.

The pre-colonial India too had a divide between formal institutionalized knowledge practiced / propagated through its Sastras and Lokavidya.

It may also be true that our Sastric knowledge and Lokavidya are more compatible with our culture, ethos, etc. Perhaps it is equally true that there is an organic relationship between the two, one reinforcing the other. The colonial rule and the introduction of modern Western University knowledge nearly eclipsed our Sastric knowledge as there was no state patronage. It created a peculiar situation in which Sastric knowledge was almost frozen at the pre-

colonial stage of its development while Lokavidya 'survived' largely on account of their continued relevance to the vast masses in securing their material needs. The British too had no interest in replacing Lokavidya with their formal systems as they saw no threat or challenge to their economic interests from Lokavidya. Thus, Lokavidya Samaj continued without any serious threat to its knowledge base. But the impoverishment of the country as a whole under colonial rule meant the weakening of the Lokavidya Samaj. The coming of independence had very little impact on Lokavidya or its Samaj. The policy of industrialization pursued based on modern Western science and technology was without much challenge, except for some muted criticism by Gandhians. Of course, the Indian state/ government did create bodies to promote Khadi and Village industries and appoint some Gandhians to guide them. Similarly, there was great interest in promoting Sastric knowledge by including them in university curriculum. Artisanal crafts/skills do receive assistance from central and state governments.

The divide between organised/formal knowledges based on modern/Western science and Lokavidya based on centuries of experiential learning continues without much hostility. Just as the formal knowledge could exist without much contribution from Lokavidya except perhaps for the supply of labour to run industries, the Lokavidya Samaj has been 'autonomous' to the extent that it has its own innate skills / techniques to adapt itself to changes brought by the University based modern knowledges. The catch is, of course, the inferior status/position of Lokavidya in relation to modern University knowledge. This is clearly reflected in the pay a university degree provides and the wages that Lokavidya can command from the system. Suffice it to say then that Lokavidya survives as inferior to university knowledge in every respect. A question naturally arises how and why Lokavidya continues. The obvious answer seems to be that for vast masses of people there is no alternative to keep their body and soul together. Be that as it may.

The proposed study is relevant in this context as it seeks to answer further questions about Lokavidya Samaj. Firstly, we know that Lokavidya has been able to survive largely because of the existence of the Samaj.

How does the larger Lokavidya Samaj find itself today when many institutions / practices that have been supportive of this Samaj through centuries have either disappeared or are under severe strain? The vast kinship system and jatis

that have been responsible for the preservation of skills, crafts, or knowledge practices of localities or regions are under great threat from changes in the economy as a whole. The Lokavidya Samaj has largely been unable and powerless to determine the course of the economy or industry and is continuously expected to adapt itself to many changes that are exogenous. That even under constant and continuous pressure from external forces it has been able to survive, indicates the ingenuity of our people and culture or their instincts.

The study aims to identify the various support systems that are still in existence in the Samaj and their own strengths and weaknesses under large changes taking place in society, polity and culture.

If we find through the study that a major part of the support for the pursuit of Lokavidya that were available in the early part of the 20th century have all disappeared and changes in the economy, society have today no structures or functions that help in the transmission of skills, crafts, or practices, it means Lokavidya is increasingly becoming irrelevant to the future of Indian society. It is our hunch that such irrelevance or redundancy has already taken place in our agriculture at least since the introduction of GR which has transformed our agriculture irrevocably to a capitalist system. Thus, while it may be true that our farmers are still part of the Lokavidya Samaj, their mainstay occupation has very little resemblance to what their own fathers' generation practiced. It is also perhaps true that the knowledge of agriculture that may have come down to the present generation has no utility or relevance today. That is to say, even in terms of knowledge, the farmers of India are today more dependent on university produced knowledge and from the laboratories of modern science and technology. This can be seen not only in the production of food crops but in other crops as well as poultry and in the large dairy industry. We find through our cursory observations that most farmers who are in poultry industry want to have their sons graduate from veterinary colleges. In the town of Namakkal in TN there are more veterinary doctors than perhaps in most districts of India. Most of these veterinarians come from families that were traditional farmers in the previous generation. Namakkal today is the largest centre for broiler eggs in the country and decides the price of eggs every day. Similarly, the community of Thigalas who were known as gardeners in and around Arcot districts of TN

were encouraged to migrate in sizeable numbers to Bangalore and its surroundings by Hyder Ali and Tippu Sultan. They were the builders of the famous Lalbagh gardens of Bengaluru. Today many of these traditional gardeners have become big suppliers of exotic flowers to various parts of the country and abroad. They now depend on input from agricultural universities and research centres for the latest techniques of floriculture. Their big nurseries in and around Bengaluru today were the homes of simple Thigala gardeners only about 50 years ago. Thus, one of the aims of our study is to understand the increasing dependence on university based knowledge in what were strongholds of Lokavidya only about fifty years ago. Lokavidya has been understood by us as not only providing for the material needs of our people but also their aesthetic and cultural needs. We wish to understand how in the fields of arts, entertainment, sports and games, etc., the Lokavidya Samaj has undergone changes over the century. The impact of technology is very prominent in these fields as it is in economic activities. Perhaps the Lokavidya Samaj has been increasingly under the influence of formal, external structures for fulfilling its aesthetic, entertainment needs and thus is abandoning its own forms. Actually, the creative participation of the Samaj in all of them has reduced considerably and our people have been reduced to being mere consumers. This change from active participants in these pursuits to being mere consumers means our Lokavidya Samaj is already a 'mass society' as outlined by C Wright Mills and others in respect of the US.

When we are on the subject of our Lokavidya Samaj being reduced to consumers, the decline of home remedies in treating very routine and ordinary ailments has to be taken note. Again, our gut feeling/ cursory observations suggests that dependence on neighbourhood clinics or poorly run government hospitals have increased among the members of Lokavidya Samaj than perhaps among middle / upper middle class educated Indians. It would be revealing to know how Lokavidya Samaj handles illnesses that are of routine occurrence. If it is found that that they have abandoned their indigenous / home remedies and increasingly rely on ' scientific' medicine / doctors, it is yet another indication of the loss of autonomy of Lokavidya Samaj. Thus, an understanding of the present state of Samaj is necessary to imagine the shape of things in the coming decades of our society, polity and culture. Hence this study.