

# Narratives and Truth: My response to Budhey's take on Lokavidya Dialogues

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Budhey doesn't seem to appreciate that the essential difference between natural sciences that speak of truth, and social sciences that speak of meanings and interpretations, came from the very same West, way back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in German philosophy. Max Weber who was influenced by German philosophy defined sociology as the objective study of the subjective meaning of social action. What he meant was that unlike Nature, which has no intrinsic meaning, the social world is pregnant with meanings. And, while our actions are subjective, sociology has to be an objective study of the subjective meaning of actions. So it is not true that sociology wants to be scientific study in the same way in which physics is. One of the most widely read primers in sociology called "An Invitation to Sociology" by Peter Berger has a subtitle which is very telling. It is 'a humanistic perspective'. So social sciences in the West have not been advocating 'universal' theories or principles. On the contrary, they have generally been arguing for 'culturology', which means there is no general or 'universal' sociology. Therefore, we must not thus accuse the West of always promoting universalism.

That history is not 'truth' or very objective, etc. has been known for quite a long time. In spite of it, the search for a 'true' scientific history continues as a Western obsession. But it must be said to the credit of the West that it has also been very critical of the 'objective' or 'scientific' historiographies.

Budhey's take on 'Truth' and the assertion that history is only making myths and creating narratives with no intrinsic truth residing in them and that 'your narrative is no better than my narrative' is almost post-modern! Truth or Sathyam in Indian tradition has an exalted status. The entire spiritual journey is characterized by every Saint and thinker from the times of Upanishads as the seeking of Truth. When we graduated, the VC read out from the Taittiriya Upanishad the famous injunction "Satyam Vada, Dharmam Chara..." and ended it with the words that "this is the upadesha, this is the injunction you should always follow and never deviate from". That Mahatma Gandhi called his autobiography 'The Story of My Experiments with Truth' is no accident. His lifelong goal was to be truthful in word and deed. He even refused to differentiate between the public and the private. Budhey making the mistake of running down the importance of Truth is rather surprising especially when Sathyameva Jayate is our national motto. If there is no intrinsic truth in anything, then whatever triumphs should be considered as Sathya or Truth. Anything is fine as long as it succeeds cannot be a lokavidya point of view.

Budhey's reference to Trotsky and Permanent Revolution to highlight some of our attempts to talk about landless labour in pre British India and post-independence is troubling. If any attempt to talk about lokavidya samaj as having strata in terms of wealth or land or status is considered as smuggling in Western theories to explain Indian civilization, it is very problematic. There is a more important point to be noted here. Those who seek to preserve the order and harmony in society more than aspiring for change or transformation tend to invoke 'consensus' over differences. On the contrary those who want change or transformation highlight conflicts or differences. Further, conflict as a universal social process is invoked by a number of thinkers to explain how societies

change. There is therefore no surprise that those of us who feel the existing order has to change to benefit large sections of our society invoke points of conflict. Lokavidya Jan Andolan as a movement for changing existing social arrangements should therefore have no problem with conflicts. Denying potential conflicting situations or dubbing such exercise itself as Western theoretical bias is quite intriguing.

What is the problem with the existing social order in which the lokavidya samaj is prominent in terms of its numbers? If we are concerned with their relative poverty, then we must find answers for it. We may have to accept that in terms of skills and knowledge, the lokavidya samaj is very much behind the 'march of technological progress ' of the last two hundred years or so. That there is ' progress' over centuries in societies in all its aspects and the position of an ordinary man today is an 'advancement' over the conditions of man in the 19<sup>th</sup> century must be accepted. Therefore, we must minimally acknowledge that the lokavidya samaj is in need of progress in many respects. That people are knowledgeable cannot be an answer to all problems facing the lokavidya samaj. That the lokavidya samaj may be lagging behind in certain respects and therefore needs to be ' reformed' must be accepted. Gandhi is the best example to show how one can be proud of one's people and culture and also be critical of many aspects of one's own society or its people. Perhaps that is what is meant by being a critical insider. What is our criticism of lokavidya samaj? We have to seriously reflect on this at some time. Otherwise we may end up defending the status quo.