

A Summary of Discussions in Lokavidya Debates Online Meetings

[7th Jan, 21st Jan and 4th Feb 2026]

In the last three of our online meetings the focus was a possible VA program for the next 2-3 years and points of organization of the Office of the Trust. We decided to hold the Trust Meeting online on 18th March. In the first of these meetings Sunil suggested that we should decide upon a broad program for VA for the next two-three years, reconstitute the office accordingly as the current President, Coordinator and Treasurer complete three years in Office in March. The program outline may be prepared and discussed before the Trust Meeting. Ways of imagining Vidya Ashram other than this may also be discussed. The following is a summary of the discussions:

1. VA Program: General

- a. [Sunil] Global developments following Trump taking power in US have led to overthrow of old world-order as well as values and reality dominating the world since European Renaissance through to this day. New imperialism is taking shape with the idea of civilizational states in a multipolar world overriding old meanings of 'sovereignty'. In the new world, only the civilizational states are sovereign.
- b. [Sunil] The VA program should be aware of these emerging global conditions. Serious thought is needed on the interplay between knowledge and politics. The task is to fashion our dialogue and activities around Bahujan Darshan, Bahujan Swaraj Panchayat, Varanasi Gyan Panchayat, Sur Sadhna, Bauddhik Satyagraha, National/Global Dialogue on the interplay of Knowledge and Politics in order to reflect this. There is no reason to think that there is any necessary chronological order between national and global. We may think in global terms directly too. We are not a vanguard group, but we can be frontliners in a political dialogue. If Mandala idea can go to global stage, why not Swaraj?
- c. [Gandhi] We should foreground the discussion on Program and then discuss organizational aspects.

2. VA Program: Digging into Indian ideas of Swaraj older than the National movement

- a. [Sunil] Are there any ideas of swaraj older than the National movement, pre-British ideas? Languages of South may have different terms / ways of looking at this question of (self-) governance. A new imagination talks about the future - transformative ideas, possibly Swaraj. This helps change become imminent. Only then will Bahujan talk about it. I say this in response to what GSR said. That the Bahujan do not talk about Swaraj today is no reason for us to not talk about Swaraj, or work to create a public domain where we may talk about it and other allied ideas that we have been talking about. We may even take this up as a program.
- b. [Suresh] How one may interpret Swaraj in terms of pre-British governance structures is not clear. But I would like to take a look at extensive literature available for areas like the

Thunder Mandalam to see if there are concrete terms, terminologies, and practices which are associated with Swaraj.

- c. [Krish] Marx also referred to ‘village republics’ and maybe thought that the consciousness for 1857 came from them. Local units of governance, decision-making, even conflict resolution, etc. probably existed much earlier. We should look into these as well as ideas regarding progress, course correction in times of destabilization etc. in work of saints etc., and ideas regarding justice.
- d. [Avinash] I think it is worthwhile taking up this exploration of traditions of Swaraj that may have been there in various regions of India. There seems to have been a dynamic in society in consonance with the idea of Swaraj.
- e. [GSRK] About Swaraj and village republics, the literature authored by British probably reflects that here villages appeared strikingly different from those at home. The situation of the time – decline of central rule, many small kingdoms extending not much more than security in return to small taxes etc. – may be interpreted as swaraj-like governance (Dharampal), or as an appearance of self-governance in the absence of alternatives (Karashima). It can be seen as some assertion of the lost autonomy, or independence. But does it also tell us that there was this idea of Swaraj, central to this. I don't know. I'm not saying no empathetically. But it is difficult to see it as some kind of assertion of the spirit of Swaraj, which presupposes a certain feeling among the people that any rule other than their own is some kind of a burden.
- f. [Girish] The idea of looking at pre-British practices is in my opinion is really motivated by looking for ideas which may help us today in building a Swaraj narrative, and not primarily by a desire to show that some kind of ‘genuine’ swaraj existed then. For example, the interest in the fiscal arrangements brought out in Dharampal ji's work is to see if those ideas may trigger a Swaraj imagination among activists and members of the Bahujan Samaj.
- g. [Gandhi] Maybe we should look at old literature, for example, of the Sangama period in Tamil areas, and tribal practices for ideas on Swaraj. Perhaps also at Buddhist and Jaina literature – many Jaina libraries are there. But, apart from that, whether, or not such ideas from the past are found, we should build a Swaraj narrative for this time.

3. VA Program: Bahujan Darshan

- a. [Gandhi] While reading Sunil's Note, I thought that ‘Dharma’, which is related to social interactions between human beings, should be added to the cluster of ideas there. Samaj is needed if one talks of Bahujan, not if we talk of Bahujan Samaj. Large events are taking place in the modern world. When we talk of Bahujan Darshan we should be contending modernity. So, I have included several terms in order that we can do that.

- b. [Avinash] We have to relate the discussion of Swaraj with the contemporary situation. What Gandhi is suggesting is deeper. To go into the key points of what can be identified as modernity, and to present this whole thing of Bahujan Darshan as a kind of alternative imagination.
- c. [Krish] I can call Bahujan Darshan the belief system of the Bahujan. I have been calling it Dharma. There is an idea of Swaraj in it, which is directly, or indirectly captured by Lokavidya. It is not uniform across the country, and in that sense, Swaraj is local self-governance. Gandhi identified this with inner drive that may lead them to act to change Society.
- d. [Suresh] I do agree with Gandhi that there is a need to see how our ideas of Swaraj, in whatever form they have been expressed thus far, intersect with the reality of today, and try to find out which could be the points of intervention. If not already undone by modern civilization itself, what might constitute a possibility for intervening into this process unleashed by the idea of empire-building. I think it would be very interesting to follow up on what Gandhi says.
- e. [Sunil] What is called modernity is essentially a Western standpoint of a period, which is replicated at other places in the name of modernity. But the West is breaking up and some 4-5 centres of this break up are being seen. We do not need to argue against them. We need to work our way, in the space that is being made available because of that breakdown. With rise of information sciences and emergence of a new understanding of knowledge, there was space to talk about knowledge with the people. But now, it has gone a step further. If we start contending with the West now, politically, it will slow us down. We need to move with a certain speed that there is a Bahujan standpoint, that a civilizational state is something doable in India only by the Bahujan.

4. New Narratives / Bahujan Narratives

- a. [Sunil] There are claims on social media about Hindu places of worship grafted on original Buddhist establishments since 1860's. Can this develop into a contestation against the Hindu narrative?
- b. [Suresh] A lot of Buddhist / Jaina background of both our so-called scriptures, and the temples that is fairly well known, at least in Southern parts. Jaina influence is there not just in first millennium but even the second right up to 17th century. These are 'recessive' trends political weak. One may visualize them regaining strength like the Hindu trends nascent in the freedom movement did gradually. There are forces - the non-Lingayat. the non-Wokkaliga backward castes whose intellectual leadership seems to understand the hollowness of Hindutva. There is enough background of Buddhist records. It will be good to look at this and its association with Bahujan etc.

- c. [Avinash] In philosophy tradition my impression is you cannot pull out the Buddhist thing as independent. It is very much integrated into what's happening in the whole Indian context. So, I am skeptical of what Sunil ji said. But we will have to see.
- d. [GSRK] There is theory going around about all the temples in South India being originally Jaina, or Buddhist. Jain and Buddhist influence in Tamil literature is very well known. What is being talked about as the greatest Veda of Tamils is itself a Jain Work. But I am not sure this is a rising trend. Hindutva narrative here seems to be taking over lower castes into its fold.

5. Regional Knowledge Traditions

- a. [GSRK] I have seen the book. While the book lacks stylistic continuity because it is a collective work and includes a few statements that may sound ideological or critical of Brahminical traditions, it is largely suitable as an undergraduate-level introduction rather than a research text. The book's main strength lies in its "bottom-up" approach, highlighting non-Vedic, non-Sanskritic, and local knowledge systems—such as boat-building, architecture, martial arts, Ayurveda, and the contributions of lower-caste practitioners—that are often overlooked in mainstream narratives. It is a useful corrective and a model that other states could replicate, though I am not clear about the larger purpose, or long-term goals of such projects. There have been debates about whether the text implies ideological positions, such as countering dominant Indian knowledge narratives or privileging European Enlightenment influences, but it seems that these interpretations are mostly external criticisms and hardly explicit aims of the textbook, which ultimately should serve as a broad, informative overview of Kerala's diverse traditions.
- b. [Sunil] The key importance of the book lies in recognizing that traditional crafts, local industries, and artisanal practices embody genuine knowledge rather than mere practical skill, and suggests that the discussion should go further by examining deeper questions the book may not fully address—such as whether premodern knowledge systems explained *why* things worked (not just *how*), and how concepts like innovation, invention, and discovery apply to historical knowledge practices. These terms carry political implications, as interpretations of knowledge change influences how, that is using which terms, societies and governance systems—such as feudal structures or ideas like Swaraj—are understood. There is a long-recognized connection between knowledge and polity across philosophical traditions, and one may read the Kerala knowledge systems text as a way to explore how knowledge shaped social and political organization, what kinds of innovation existed, who drove change, and what governing systems enabled knowledge to flourish. I do not know if the book says anything about all this, but this kind of thinking should help our debates on

political imagination, including how concepts like Swaraj might be rethought. Maybe we can think of comparative work with other regional knowledge traditions to deepen the analysis.

- c. [Suresh] I think regional literature and small local publications in South Indian languages often contain rich material on folk arts, technologies, social history, and localized knowledge systems that reveal a diverse and distributed society with traditions of experimentation and cultural resistance. It appears to me that judging traditional knowledge through the lens of modern scientific methodology or Western notions of theory, innovation, and invention may not be the right thing. Historically Indian scientific practices may have pursued practical refinement rather than abstract theorizing, as illustrated through examples from mathematics and astronomy. The concepts like “innovation” have changed meaning over time and that trying to fit historical knowledge systems into modern frameworks may be misleading. Maybe we should explore folklore, literature, and artisanal traditions on their own terms. These systems evolved slowly, met the simpler needs of their societies, and reflected different relationships between knowledge, power, governance, and production compared to the modern world.
- d. [Girish] Key issues emerged in the discussion, especially thoughts on how to approach relationship between knowledge systems and social governance, and how concepts like innovation should be viewed, or understood. I think the modern notions of innovation are heavily shaped by revenue generation and market logic, particularly influenced by sectors like software. In whereas in localized or non-modern societies innovation likely had a different meaning rooted in social relations rather than economic conversion. The book under discussion appears mainly descriptive, focusing on documenting existing practices rather than analyzing how knowledge interacted with society, artisans, farmers, and social structures. We might take up this discussion again later. Studying regional knowledge systems could be valuable for broader political or Bahujan-oriented narratives.

6. Knowledge and Power, Politics

- a. [Girish] In talking about knowledge - power relation two terms come to mind: ‘morphology’ - forms, structures, organization etc., and ‘topology’ - nature of space, connectivities, neighborhoods, proximities, etc. in it. Different topologies imply different morphologies; example: lokavidya and modern science. Same topology may have different morphologies; example: political / power spaces of US and China. This may help understanding knowledge – power relation.
- b. [GSRK] May be interesting to look at this and explore further in this direction.
- c. [Abhijit] We need Hindi and other local terms for these. We have once talked about rhizomes when discussing organizations.
- d. [Krish] The example was appropriate and relevant. The topology of Lokavidya, the space in which it operates, is largely defined by ordinary life. It is quite different from the space of modern political economy, or politics, or modern science. The space of lokavidya bazaar is

not the space in which modern economic theory has been formulated. We are trying to make formulations in a space that is quite different from the commonly acknowledged space.

- e. [Chitra ij] नए शब्दों को चर्चा में आये. अलग अलग क्षेत्रों से इस तरह के की शब्दावली आ रही है. पहले हम लोग इसको कहते थे कि क्रिस्टलाइज हो रहा है समाज गांधीजी के इसमें. कला की दृष्टि से हमने देखा कि जब बिखराव हुआ तो अलग अलग समाज बेसुरे हो गए. ये तो समाज को देखने के अलग अलग तरीके हैं. शब्द जितने आए वह शायद स्वागत योग्य होने चाहिए अपने इसमें क्योंकि वह अलग अलग आयाम सामने आते हैं.
 - f. [Sunil] We have talked about this earlier in a different way. We talked about Lokavidya Tana-Bana, talked about creating a different dialogue location with terms not spoken in dominant public domain... that is creating a topologically different space. There are many examples of this, like Gandhi talking about self-sufficient village when there is none, Marx about a communist party when there is none. When spaces with new topologies are created like happened in the world of knowledge, we succeeded to whatever extent with popularizing the idea Lokavidya. A new imagination talks about the future. Transformative ideas like, possibly, Swaraj. This helps change become imminent. Only then will Bahujan talk about it.
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