

Session 11

SUNIL SAHASRABUDEY: LOK VIDYA

The topic of the discussion is Lok Vidhya (LV). LV is translated as ‘people’s knowledge’, ‘people’s wisdom’, ‘people’s way of thinking’, ‘people’s knowledge systems’ - whatever is appropriate in the context one may use. However, there is no equivalent translation for Vidhya and hence, no proper translation for LV also. LV in fact is not a term which has been used. So we are free to assign it any meaning we wish, bound of course by the terms Lok and Vidhya. Literally speaking these words should translate in Sanskrit as samas, which is Shastitapurush, Lokasyavidhya, Lok ki Vidhya, i.e. ‘knowledge of the people’. However, in the small circles where this term is being used at present, it is not being used as it is literally translated i.e as ‘people’s knowledge’, but as knowledge proper.

This is the first theoretical point I wish to make today: that what is referred to as ‘people’s knowledge’ is knowledge. It is not ‘traditional’ knowledge, it is not ‘practices of’ knowledge, it is not ‘accumulated experiences’. All kinds of adjectives have been used. But never has it been called just knowledge. The prime objective of the LV movement that we are trying to give shape to is LV Pratishta i.e respect for LV in society. At the moment it is an out caste, it has no recognition. The university does not recognize it. The governments do not recognize it. The industrial houses do not recognize it. This is one of the primary strengths of colonization that Vidhya, like Dharma and like many other creative traditions of these societies got privatized and fragmented, resulting in their becoming static to some extent. Privatized does not mean it belongs to families, or to some very narrow and small formations. Privatized only means that it has no space no place in the public domain.

The prime objective of the LV movement is that LV be given its due recognition. To start with, a recognition of equality with any other form of Vidhya. Also that proper, recognized, legitimate spaces in public domain be created for it. Whether they are political spaces or not we do not discuss at present because public domain tends to be seen as a political space but sometimes not so also.

I want to explain to you today some facets of the concept of LV because it is a different kind of engagement with knowledge that we desire, which this concept and reality of LV facilitates. The engagement with knowledge which we are here to fight against I presume, is the engagement with knowledge for domination and exploitation. The other engagement which is very common, the world over I would imagine but definitely so in India, is the engagement with knowledge for employment, for survival. We know that LV has been used in the past for survival. The time has come, an opportune moment is taking shape, (‘moment’ in human history meaning about 2 or 3 generations) when LV can transform itself from being a strategy of survival to becoming a strategy of challenge.

Entire anthropology conceives people’s knowledge as a strategy of survival. Even if it is a strategy of challenge, it is a challenge that is localized for survival. But that’s not the challenge I am talking about. When I say LV is a strategy of challenge, it is the concept of

political challenge that I refer to. It is dethronement and contention at the centre that I am talking about. There is some necessity to put this together in some structure. Not to structure it or provide it with a logic. Not to encase it anywhere, nor provide the notes and the interconnections and so on, none of which I am going to do because none of this is doable at all. But we can talk about a systematic comprehension of the idea of LV which is what I will now attempt to do.

1. Organisation of knowledge has a particular format, a pre-determined structure, a certain kind of internal logic, which in this age is called Western knowledge. It need not be Western knowledge alone. It is the Western logic of knowledge, the Western organization of knowledge. It includes Western knowledge proper also naturally. But it is the Western organization of knowledge which has infested all forms of organized knowledge. There must be any number of forms of organized knowledge which we know nothing about. Wherever they are not applicable, those who find themselves in those situations may not use them. But they may not destroy those concepts for people who can use them for effect, to proper effect.
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3. Sanskrit learning, the systems of traditional knowledge and traditional knowledge itself are organized in modern organizational forms. It is not only the data bases which are amenable to software. Other forms of organization, the western form of organization of knowledge is by and large softwareable. Remember, the transition we are going through is that very soon scientificity will not be the criteria of proper knowledge or legitimate knowledge. It's going to be softwareability.

It would not matter whether the knowledge comes from the Hindu tradition or the Islamic tradition, whether it comes from Finland or some remote corners of China or even India. The managers of knowledge can use it to equally fit. Softwareability, the organization of knowledge has a vertical expanse. From a scientific structure to software has a formal language structure. It doesn't have the paradigm of physics embedded in it. You can do all the software you want to do without knowing an iota of physics. You could do no science to date without knowing physics at all. You may not have been taught that in the name of physics but you were taught that basic science to be able to any science at all - biology, botany, whatever. But you can do this new science without knowing physics. It has a different form of organization, it has an American origin.

Some varieties of traditional knowledge will also be found to be softwareable and will also become organized knowledge. LV is knowledge which cannot be organized. It is important to understand this because organized knowledge in our period of history stands in an antagonistic relationship with LV. This is not to suggest that organized knowledge at all times, in all societies, stood in antagonistic relationship. No. But today's society has a specific characteristic namely, the inevitable basis of exploitation which makes the relationship between the westernized classes, not the ruling classes necessarily and the Swadeshi Samaj (SS), antagonistic. The closest translation of SS is indigenous social formations. If this relationship is antagonistic, then the relationship between LV and organized knowledge is also antagonistic.

SS is the indigenous social formation. Both the terms are such that they have a universal applicability. I would go to the extent of suggesting that Europe also has its SS. That America has a very large SS. SS is therefore not the traditional society. Swadeshi, if you go by Gandhi's formulation, is a concept of neighbourhood of certain kind, in cultural relationships, in economic relationships, in modes of political governance and so on. It creates a neighbourhood of certain kind, a local society where the criteria of human sensitivity, is the operative principle of defining to what extent you go to identify this. To all that you are sensitive towards an immediate sense, in the sense of neighbourhood, in the sense of first relationship, would constitute the SS. So this SS is the seat of LV.

In a country like India, it is peasants, the artisans, the adivasis, tribal societies, and, very important, it is women across these classes, and more. That is why a separate identity. Otherwise, one would not need the 4th category: women. You need that because peasants, artisans and tribal societies, the women of their households, the women of these societies do not cover all the women that one would like to include or that belong to a conception of or the reality that is referred to by the word SS. SS also is a term which has not been used. SS is a location.

Swadeshi has been used, misused, appropriated, misappropriated, the latter particularly by the Bharatiya Janata party. So people like us are also scared of using the word Swadeshi. We have insisted on using the word Swadeshi as SS. There is a little problem however. Because SS includes the Samaj, it talks about those people as well. Swadeshi is easily convertible into national. Swadeshi is also easily convertible into traditional knowledge. But when you talk about social formation, when you talk about those people, there is a little problem. SS is the seat of LV but it does not exhaust the seat of LV. There are people at present where we must look to find LV. But this is not to say that it is only the subaltern classes and the classes identifiable in this manner who possess LV. I am not suggesting that for a moment.

Let us take one step further now. There are a variety of ways in which different people or people from different societies would like to understand their LV. The features that are important in one society may not be equally important in some other society. The differences of different societies are different. Their seekings are different. Their memories are different. Their ways of thinking are different. To that extent they would understand LV quite differently, I should imagine. But an attempt at some general category has been made in the context of India where the variety provided is not too small but surely not large enough to claim on that basis that it is necessarily generalisable. The variety provided, through the scientific establishment, the political establishment, the bureaucratic establishment are so strong in India that the Westernised society in India provides a large opportunity to be able to see the West sitting in India itself. Not all of it naturally, but very large part of it can be seen sitting in India. This is being done even at present, largely in the context of India, except on one point, namely, the logic of the politics of LV.

So there are 5 or 6 major aspects that are identified to contrast LV with the body of knowledge with which we are familiar. We have all gone through the university and

however much we may lie, even when we actually decide to leave the university, we leave with a package. And we continually have to unlearn after that. But to unlearn what has been learnt from an age of 5 to an age of 23, when you are between 40 and 60, is a slightly difficult task. One likes to believe very often that he has unlearnt a lot but every time he goes out and meets different people he realizes he has unlearnt very little. So it is only in contrast - since it is only for our understanding this entire formulation is done, not to tell them what is LV is – that this exercise is being undertaken. Let us be very clear about it. It is to talk amongst ourselves about what LV is.

LV is a body of knowledge, a store of knowledge, which is different. The individual pieces will not pass as knowledge in the organized knowledge apparatus. Most definitely it will not pass as knowledge in Western knowledge apparatus because it has a different logic. Different SS may have a different logic of their LV, but necessarily different logic from the logic of the organized knowledge systems. It is quite possible that a people in Malaysia may have the same logic of their knowledge as a people in India. One cannot rule this out. But, it is not only unlikely but in my opinion impossible to find a LV space which has the same logic as the Western knowledge system has.

The LV body of knowledge, and its logic has different values which is very commonly understood and known. It has a different concept of political power that is not a concept of political power as is commonly understood. LV does not provide the basis of construction of political societies. LV, unlike science does not provide the basis of a state like a modern state. It provides the basis of governance of a different kind. It has a different anthology. So the philosophical upshot is also immediately apparent as you go anywhere near this phenomena.

I will briefly recount a specific case, namely the Agarya. Agarya is the iron smeltors of middle part of India, eastern Chattisgarh, Orissa, southern parts of Madhya Pradesh, some parts of Hyderabad and so on. The Agarya are the poorest in the area, the lowest, untouchables (even other tribal castes don't eat their food), living outside from the main settlements of the village. A small, two and a half feet furnace and you see the finest technology at work, the ferrous technological tradition kept alive by the Agarya tribe. This tribe still knows and smelts iron ore containing iron much less than the kind of ore which is thought fit for blast furnaces. It is a case of extraordinary science, real synthesis between science and art that one would like to imagine actually happens, in halls like this. You take the Agarya anywhere, change the humidity conditions, change the charcoal that he has, give him any ore that you like and, one or two trials, and he is able to smelt the ore and pull out an iron bloom with a long pair of thongs after two and a half hours, which contains 0.3 percent of carbon. It is malleable iron. Yet he cannot officially practice the art because the university does not recognize that he knows a science. Any change of conditions can be handled and yet he does not have a science. This is the stand point of university. This is the stand point of organized knowledge. That is why the contrast is absolutely necessary. Without the contrast there will be difficulty to understand this.

One or two points more only. One, the distinction between traditional knowledge and traditions of knowledge. Traditions of knowledge are contemporary phenomena. The

moment you say traditional knowledge, people start opening books to find out what all had been there. At LV, we don't want to open books to know what all had been there. We are not interested to know what all had been there, which is neither coming from popular memory nor is surviving. It may be there in some form in popular memory if it can be re-created and you can dig and dig, go deeper and deeper. Popular memory does not know any end. It is not possible to make a data base of popular memory by finite languages.

Last point. There is a LV stand point. It is related to the change of the function of LV from a survival strategy to a strategy of challenge. The LV stand point emanates through a construction of the logic of the politics of LV. The logic of the politics of LV will presumably provide the uniting concept of the SS all over the world. No one can be under any illusion that people in India or people in Malaysia can defeat the empire. They can fight till they are all dead or till more and more people start fighting. For all these struggles to come together a principle of unity needs to be conceptualised. That principle of unity emanates somewhere in the logic of the politics of LV.

DISCUSSION

Shao Lung: I think there is a very similar tradition in Taoism, about forms of skill or art of mastery which cannot be codified in articles or precise rational terms. Taoism teaches that we do not have to hack away at the problem. We have to work between the spaces and follow the line of least resistance. If we understand this and become part of the tool, part of the process you can apply the line of most efficiency in any situation. There is also common knowledge. There is a very similar ethic of criticizing formalized or state power that is not done simply in terms of a critique but it is also how the form in which that critique is conducted in which the counter power or the non power is conducted. That is why Taoism is not a systematizable logic. The ultimate document or statement of Taoism is not a foot noted, bibliographic piece but it is a very very long poem. This is the closest written way in which to describe that logic.

Gloria: Is Lok Vidya organized but not institutionalized? In other words is there organization of knowledge within it but it is not institutionalized?

Vimbai: You have said a number of things which are very important for us to keep in mind when we are communicating and redesigning our curricular. You have explained that Lok Vidya is untranslatable although the idea can be communicated. But when you try to communicate it especially if it is in writing, the reader is limited by the text more so if it is in another language. In Africa too, we do not have a word for religion which is different from a word for wisdom or world view. Lok Vidya fits very well into what we understand by religion / world view which means there is knowledge of creation there. That knowledge is not local but it is there, it is a given. So you have to know how to relate to that knowledge and how you use it morally in order to benefit mankind. We are also trying to go back to how to organize knowledge for social change or how to go back to our ways of knowing. Lok Vidya is very important in terms of the way we survive in

harmony with the whole universe. It's a supreme type of knowledge that our Western counter parts have tried to destroy. They looked at our religions, which is our way of organizing knowledge and then they destroyed that. Similarly, they destroyed our language and culture. Then they gave us their software. And now we are groping in the dark. I think what we are asking for is a home coming. We are not saying lets throw away what they did. If we see how they organized their knowledge we can take it without throwing away what we have in hand. You don't throw away what you have in the hand for the sake of getting something else.

Vinay: To some extent, Gandhi was a creature of the Western university and clearly someone who came from the realm of organized knowledge, in so far as he went to university, to law school, and he also practiced law. But it is also an indisputable fact that Gandhi was able to resonate with the huge number of people who fell outside parameters of organized knowledge. So, are there instances where you think Lok Vidya and organized knowledge can cohabit? You draw a contrast between the two. But is it really a contrast or some kind of dialectic that is also possible. Or, if I may pose it differently, what would some one like Gandhi have to say about a model of this kind?

Sunil: I would like to think of this enterprise in terms of Gandhian epistemology. I don't see the importance of the question other than in the context of what I said about unlearning. I could not have said unlearning is impossible, only how difficult unlearning would be for people like us or how difficult we find it and how we continually confront a situation which tells us that we have not sufficiently unlearned. Secondly, Gandhi said no violation of laws, no sabotage, no subversion, but he created a movement of civil disobedience even while maintaining as a proper part of his philosophy that we don't violate daily laws. There is no contradiction between the two. This kind of dialectic will have to be there in a creative act. There are no linear processes in society.

In response to Gloria's question regarding the distinction between organized and institutionalized I am not clear what difference you are making between the two. What I said is that Lok Vidya is not an organized knowledge system. I didn't say it was not organized. If we have no place for it in the public domain then all organization and institutionalization will be seen by actors in the public domain as a private phenomenon and therefore not institutionalization and not organization, insofar as it will be in the private domain, or organization only by courtesy, nothing beyond that. But if we recognize the proper domain of activity, which is not private domain, even if it is not this public domain, there are domains of other kinds. Just as there are sciences and history of other kinds we can surely imagine domains of other kinds. In fact the Western feminist movement has raised this issue of the different kinds of public domain.

Wasif: I would like to know how symmetrical Lok Vidya is to the traditional caste system. Is there a real danger of a movement like that reconsolidating the caste system or is there fluidity amongst various groups of knowledgeable local experts so that they can interchange and learn from each other.

Mariam: In Islam, we have traditionally a system where disputes are resolved. Similarly, the Chinese for centuries have had different modes of dispute resolution and even to this day the Chinese avoid the courts as far as possible. Now, dispute resolution has been institutionalized and it is taught in university. But not the Islamic or the Chinese forms. So just because they are not acknowledged by the West as being forms of dispute resolution and they are not institutionalized, aren't they organized in their own way?

Radha: When I look at Lok Vidya and Swadeshi Samaj, what comes to my mind is the neem campaign and the battle of IPRs that took place in India. The use of the neem was Lok Vidya. It was mainly in the unorganized sector. The coming together of people on the neem campaign i.e the Swadeshi Samaj brought the fact of Lok Vidhya into the public domain. A whole discourse was generated on other systems of knowledge and it ended with communities being recognized as keepers and custodians of knowledge. But side by side an appropriation also happened and much of knowledge systems started getting into the softwareable format and everybody started taking patents on it. My question therefore is, given the present kinds of discourse. can Lok Vidya be safe in the realm of the Swadeshi Samaj?

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