The *Lokavidya* Standpoint

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D o the people who grow or cook the food we eat “know” something? If so, did they acquire this knowledge at school or college? If not, what is the status of their knowledge? Is there more to their knowledge than skill, pretending for a moment that knowledge is something more than “just” skill? If yes, how did they acquire the knowledge? Do the conditions that generate such knowledge need to be nurtured? Do these conditions involve the living presence of a human community through which the experience behind the knowledge is imparted through multiple traditions, no less than serving as the receptacle for what is produced?

Such are the fundamental cognitive questions prompted by the volume under review. The book brings together a set of valuable contributions made at a conference of the Lokavidya Jan Andolan at Vidya Ashram in Sarnath in November 2011. The essays in the collection have been grouped under five themes: transition to knowledge society, epistemics and politics of lokavidya, economics of lokavidya, lokavidya and the university, and Lokavidya Jan Andolan.

In his lifelong search for clarity, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein had advocated ordinary language therapy for philosophy (and philosophers, of course). The authors in the volume under review advocate everyday life and livelihood therapy for those in search of a new philosophy and politics of knowledge (gyan *ki rajneeti*), appropriate for the challenges confronting India in the 21st century. The goal of the book is to offer a “comprehensive introduction to lokavidya darshan” (p 8).

**What Is Lokavidya?**

The “lok” in lokavidya is not the same as “working class” or “the poor.” The reference, the editor of the volume Amit Basole clarifies in one of the later pieces in the book, is to the social majority which repeatedly shows up in government surveys as “uneducated,” or lacking any formal training (p 455). The category is bound by the nature of knowledge held by people not generally regarded (often by illiterate, no less than by literate society) as “knowledgeable.”

Lokavidya points to a philosophy of knowledge and knowing which emerges from human communities in the course of their negotiation of the challenges of ordinary, everyday life. It is knowledge that lives in them, passed on by tradition, but family and neighbourhood relationships of mutual support. So while the informal economy is seen—if it is seen at all—as the political economy of the margins, when you put it all together, you can see it is not marginal at all.1

In India, the proportion of the overall population engaged in the informal economy is well over three-quarters. At least eight to nine working people out of ten belong here. It is inconceivable that any of them (or any of us able to read reviews like this) could survive for too long without the enormous labour performed by such people, not to forget in the present context the practical working knowledge that they must have to do what they do. If all the food critics in the country were to suddenly die, India will survive. But it cannot, if the same happened to all the food producers. And yet, such is the astronomical absurdity of the society we live in that the former get paid amounts which are orders of magnitude greater than those earned with so much blood, sweat and tears by the latter.

*Lokavidya Perspectives* is an urgent plea to acknowledge, nurture and reward the vast and varied range of knowledge embodied by the hundreds of millions of working people who enable India and the world to survive from one day to the next. “The cognitive foundation of a people’s strength in the ultimate analysis lies in the knowledge they possess to organise their lives, to understand the world, to resist oppression” (p 2).
“The modern university, instead of recognising _lokavidya_ and seeing that society is knowledge abundant, sees itself as being located amidst knowledge scarcity” (p 2). This comes with the “denigration of other ways of seeing, knowing and doing that belong to the ordinary people in the colonised countries,” victims as they are of cultures de-railed by imperialism. A _gyan andolan_ based on _lokavidya darshan_ is not only possible, the writers who have contributed to this volume call for it, “Unless the University is challenged alongside the State, restorations will recur” (p 2).

In deference to _lokavidya_, Basole writes in the Introduction “that huge store and variety of knowledge...may far exceed the total knowledge content produced and accumulated by universities so far” (p 4). This obvious fact has gone unnoticed because of the ease with which the complexity of the labour performed by hundreds of millions of people has been overlooked even by radical thought:

Radical social and political movements of the 19th and 20th centuries challenged every oppressive structure of the capitalist social order except one: the hegemony of modern science and modern knowledge over other traditions of knowledge. In particular, knowledge traditions of the ‘uneeducated majority,’ those millions of peasants, adivasis, artisans, small retailers, and women all over the world who are outside the modern economy, were considered inferior (p 1).

How might one view the politics and philosophy of knowledge at stake? “In the Gatesian age, knowledge itself is being redefined in terms of organisability by machines,” leading to dangerous conflations of information and knowledge, knowledge and wisdom, and so on (p 379). This “juggernaut of virtualisation”—which can only deal with knowledge that can be put down in text and images—can only be challenged by repeatedly asserting the significance of sites of knowledge that simply cannot be virtualised (p 380). How do you virtualise the complex know-how involved in _lokavidya_—referring not just to knowledge but to the associated and underlying ethics, politics, aesthetics, epistemology, ontology, a whole weltanschauung?

_Lokavidya_ does not allow “epistemic reduction” (p 16).

It is argued that _lokavidya_ is among the few “genuine hopes for a different future” (p 380). As Sunil Sahasrabudhey, one of the intellectual pioneers behind the volume under review, points out, “_lokavidya_ is what it is because it is not organisable through a paradigm acceptable to organised knowledge systems, both traditional and modern” (p 369). It is knowledge difficult, if not impossible, to abstract, commodify and sell. Besides, it is produced at multiple sites, by nature widely dispersed and decentralised.

The lead authors in the volume argue further that placing the significance of _lokavidya_ at the centre may just provide the necessary missing link between the many movements for social and economic justice taking place today. “The myriad ongoing struggles against displacement and dispossession, inequality and imperialism will acquire a new civilisational significance as well as a sense of solidarity with each other if they are seen as knowledge struggles, struggles for restoring legitimacy to people’s knowledge or _lokavidya_” (p 1).

The social dimension of _lokavidya_ is critical to this quest. “The crises of _Lokavidyadhar Samaj_ (that vast section of Indian society which bases its life and livelihood on _lokavidya_) is that traditional livelihoods have all but collapsed and the members of this _samaj_ (largely small and medium farmers, agricultural workers, artisans, tribals, small shopkeepers and homemaker women) are forced to live a life sans basic human dignity” (p 450). Most such people have not even had the misfortune of being exploited directly (in the organised sector) by the mainstream, globalised capitalist economy.

The holders of _lokavidya_ are in the overwhelming majority. This _lokvidyadhar samaj_ (the society of _lokavidya_-holders) is at once the _bahishkrit samaj_ (boy cotted society) and the vast informal sector in economic terms. Their everyday struggles and movements for survival would be sharper if they make bold and just claims for their own creative traditions of knowledge through a _Lokavidya Jan Andolan_, instead of merely attempting a modest defence of meagre livelihoods, risking being seen as “anti-progress.”

**Women’s _Lokavidya_**

Two of the most incisive pieces in the book (with as many as 36 contributions from 15 authors!) have been written by Chitra Sahasrabudhey.
In the first essay (published originally in Hindi in 2001), she proposes a lokavidya approach to the women’s movement. The main thrust of the essay is that the spread of imperialism (in independent India, through the destructive mechanisms of state-led development of markets) and the general dynamic of present-day modern society have continuously stolen from women a growing range of socio-economic activities which traditionally came within their domain of creative work. From domestic industries and textiles to agricultural work, healthcare and feeding the family, crores of women have been sidelined by the ascent of commercial and bureaucratic forces, rendering them “inactive, helpless and weak” (p 192). Domestic industry has fallen into disarray, while agriculture has been increasingly mechanised and modernised, turning women unemployed. To the extent that women have found work, they have to work outside familial contexts, in “alien conditions” (p 197). “Imperialism has made its roots firmer through democracies and development….the great misfortune is that women blinded by the shine and twinkle of modern development, saw this process as one which will make the poor and illiterate women self-dependent” (p 195).

A whole cosmos of valid women’s knowledge—lokavidya—has been repressed as a consequence of the fact that such knowledge has never found due recognition from the modernisers including very often, metropolitan feminists. She contrasts the experience of independent India with the freedom struggle under Gandhi when women’s knowledge was a “leading value,” resulting in far greater presence of women in public life across the country (p 198).

The Lokaviya Jan Andolan must fight then for beginning the process of retrieval of the traditional areas of women’s activity. Even if just food and clothing were to return to the realm of women’s control, “unlimited possibilities” can be envisaged (p 200). Thus, “the movement for reorganisation of the production and market of textiles and food materials on the basis of women’s knowledge can become the mainstay of emancipating women from the vicious web of exploitation and erecting a promising challenge to globalisation” (p 201). Advocating economic localisation, Sahasrabudhey argues that production by the family must find a just place in the local economy, reinstating the role of women and artisans as knowledgeable people. A sustained campaign for the dignity of women’s lokavidya can “initiate the reorganisation of society such that it gradually activates the greedy and exploitative imperialist system” (p 205).

In a related essay, Sahasrabudhey also proposes that the karigar samaj, duly restored, could become “the liberator of enslaved societies” (p 317). A resurrection of artisanal human creativity—entailing due recognition for the enormous wealth of lokavidya among the country’s myriad artisans, not to forget local control of resources—is called for in order to promote “a just and fraternal relationship between man and man and between man and nature” (p 318).

Underscoring the significance of karigar lokavidya, Sahasrabudhey writes:

...minute details of river and ocean waters, its fauna and flora are known to the fisherman but the university professor of hydrology holds the right to knowledgeability and the right to a fat salary. The knowledge of the potter is no less than that of the ceramic engineer, nor that of the weaver any less than that of the textile engineer. But it is not valued more than his meagre wages. This is the injustice that pervades society. The karigar samaj must break it in order to establish a position of honour for itself (p 334).

It must fight for an “autonomous social life” which can regulate an economy built around household industries and localised markets. “There is no escape from the shackles of globalisation without the liberation of the karigar samaj” (p 342). One thinks in this context of the importance Karl Polanyi assigned to “embedded economies.”

Echoing the visions of Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, Sunil Sahasrabudhey points out in the Afterword to the book that “there is no civilisation where there is no village…it is impossible to realise the Rights of Nature and Mother Earth in a world built around the city” (p 459). He calls for a gaon-shahar samvaad which would initiate the process of renegotiating the all-important, but terribly strained relationship between metropolitan and urban India on the one hand, and the ill-treated countryside on the other.

Conclusions

In a volume of this size (almost 500 pages) one wishes that the ecological dimensions of such radical proposals were explored further, since a renegotiated relationship between town and country and an alternative—small and dispersed—industrial system, shunned in India since the days of Jawaharlal Nehru, is surely a large part of the answer to the impasse of development in 21st century India. Re-embedding economies in a renewable ecology and culture is the key to any future worth contemplating for a world imperilled and defeated every day by, among other things, climate chaos. One hopes that many of the authors who have contributed to this volume will explore these themes in future work.

A few shortcomings of the book may be pointed out at the end. First, reading through it, I missed an index. Second, the volume could have been edited down significantly, given the repetition of ideas across essays, often by the same author. Third, verbal references to non-Hindi vernacular equivalents of lokavidya would have been helpful for non-Hindi readers. Finally, given an anglophone readership (but even otherwise), it would have been useful to offer many more examples of lokavidya.

Yet, the book is an invaluable and pioneering effort which should provoke far greater research in directions tragically ignored by Anglophone Indian radical thought, which has unfortunately drawn more from a borrowed imagination than is helpful or merited.

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NOTE

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