

NOTE FOR DISCUSSION

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Foucault in his famous essay on knowledge-power talks about insurrection of subjugated knowledges in the context of the West. Strangely or perhaps not so strangely, he does not talk about the knowledge systems of the colonised / indigenous people or their insurrection. Be that as it may.

We were quite excited at our own lokavidya standpoint, which we arrived at on the understanding that the ICT revolution marks a substantial break in capitalism. We rightly understood the coming of knowledge society and what it implied. The decline in the hegemony of science over all spheres of knowledge along with the challenge faced by the University as the sole producer of all valid knowledge, the clear decline and decimation of the proletariat and the dominance of global finance capital were easily identifiable consequences of the ICT revolution. We also argued that with the ICT revolution a new opportunity was available to the subjugated knowledges of the colonies as well as the subjugated knowledges of the West to gain respectability and legitimacy. This possibility was quite exciting.

But now, some two decades later, where do we stand? While the knowledge question still remains at the centre of any understanding of global capitalism, the respectability gained by subjugated knowledges has not made much difference to the actual bearers of these knowledges. We did not expect the global capital to be impacted in any manner by the legitimacy given to these lokavidyas. What has perhaps happened is that some smart startups have come up to creatively market the products of lokavidya samaj. We do occasionally hear about a rural craftsman or artisan making it big by the grace of dame luck.

We have claimed, rather naively, that the lokavidya samaj has no hierarchies, or at least it brooks no hierarchies. While we may detest hierarchies in general and hierarchies in knowledge in particular, the lokavidya samaj has always had hierarchies. Nyaya or justice in lokavidya samaj is to give what is due to a person or product. Since the lokavidya samaj is hierarchical (based on crafts and castes) it is hugely problematic to mobilise the samaj as a community. It might work when they are facing a common threat but soon after the threat disappears, they go back to the divisions of castes / sub castes. Unlike industrial workers who would at least be physically together in factory floors, lokavidyadhars are physically separated to feel a sense of camaraderie. Urban slums are perhaps the only equivalents of industrial shop floors where people physically get close to each other.

Community life in rural areas may not be a reality if one goes by the recent Pew research findings on religious affiliations and segregation in India. What has been preventing conflicts between groups and castes in India is that most of them are quite indifferent to what others are doing (eating, worshipping etc.). Traditional villages in India have always reflected their social segregation in their very physical structure. Only some rare events brought the whole village together, like some natural calamity or the annual festival.

The political subject in the Indian context can only be castes. The recent expansion of the Union ministry and the detailed press release on the sub castes of the incumbents only shows that caste may soon receive official and public recognition as political groups (which in my view is a belated but necessary recognition of the political nature of caste).