

IDEAS OF TODAY FOR THE POLITICS OF TOMORROW

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The problem of Philosophy

As an unnatural human activity, philosophy is disadvantaged in so many different ways. Unlike the study of society, it cannot describe the rituals of human life with a view to discovering their inner principles at work. Unlike the study of the mind, it cannot observe behavior with a view to finding the basic influences of Nature and Nurture on it. Unlike the study of exchange, it cannot look at markets in terms of value, impulse or negotiation as its fundamental dimensions.

Philosophy, in considering the human condition or its connection with all else in the world, locates itself as though it is an other-worldly basis (or a meta-construction) for understanding (or in the Indian sense, sublimating) the concerns of this world. Therein perhaps are the roots of its pre-occupation with the proposition, including in its self-description – either as seeking the love of wisdom or of the meaning of life – whose object seems determined to stay unproven. Moreover, to the extent that a reliance on belief (even if it is conditional on truth and justification) becomes unavoidable in determining the validity of propositions, the insertion of social mores, rituals, preferences and interests as marginal (and usually hidden) subjects of its kingdom constitutes an ignored self-contradiction of philosophy.

Is it possible that this is the reason why the realm of philosophy flounders at such times when social life is perceived to have become oppressive, to the point of desperation and hopelessness? When describing the world seems

pointless because it involves mere repetition, and visions of tomorrow appear fantastic or unjustifiable because they have no legs to connect them to the ground? In other words, is it likely that precisely when philosophy is most needed - at a time of great crisis for the human spirit - does it become incapable of offering solace to man because it is enveloped in its own existential angst?

A further question is, are we at such a juncture today?

Of course, there is a way to side-step the obvious dead end that the above line of reasoning leads us to. One way to do this is possibly by examining our perceptions of the world and inspecting whether they might have led us into the dark corner of hopelessness. And perhaps after due thought, it may so happen that we realize that our perceptions need fundamental changes, which in turn enable us to understand the world differently; and perhaps infuse the new understanding with hope.

It is in undertaking such an exercise that philosophizing possibly helps, when mere descriptions or recommendations for change – the usual components of social debate – have run their course and utter hopelessness reigns in public spaces.

In our midst, a deep reconsideration of Lokavidya may perhaps serve our purpose of furthering our ambition of identifying and encouraging streams of thought that have the potential to ultimately provide a release from bondage of a large section of society.

Lokavidya: Scope and Limits

As a defining attribute of a large section of society whose fortunes have been on the downswing for at least a couple of centuries, the idea of Lokavidya served several purposes: **identification**, in the sense that it provides a demarcation of society between the oppressors and the oppressed with knowledge as its prime component; **description**, to the extent that it provides a basis for understanding the fundamental contradiction of our times; **explanation**, in the sense that it provides insights into how the social, economic and ethical frameworks of the dehumanized sections of society not only help them cope with new waves of oppression but actually provide a model for a just and sustainable social order of the future.

As opposed to a consideration of indigenous knowledge either as a formal or practiced system when it was clearly different from that of the colonizer (e.g., healthcare, steel making, or education), the novelty of Lokavidya was that it enabled a transcendence of historical location by establishing continuity not with the content of indigenous knowledge, but primarily with the dimensions of justice, methodology and cooperation entailed by the former. This makes Lokavidya proximate with the human condition rather than (only) with epistemological concerns of historical interest. Especially in a context where information and knowledge have become instruments of new forms of oppression that have no parallel in human history, Lokavidya provides a source of inspiration for the rediscovery of possible pathways to construct and evaluate resistance against the dominant.

Having taken birth at a time when a new world order was being constructed, with knowledge as the prime mover of the new forms of ideology, organization and destitution of society, the notion of Lokavidya was indeed novel and

stimulating. Initial engagement with small groups facing the brunt of the new order being forcibly imposed was indeed encouraging and it did seem for a time that the idea of Lokavidya could perhaps gain traction and catch the imagination of a large number of people. However, this has not happened even as oppression continues to widen its spread in recent decades.

A small digression here: it appears to me that when a sweeping change affects society, language too adapts to it to help propagate its core ideas farther, to areas that are not affected yet by it. In that sense, the reification of labour or capital, even if viewed as a mere language construct, may have actually aided its spread and not merely been an inert reflection of a new reality taking shape in the 19th century. Similarly, without the ordinary human being seen as an instance of embodiment of Lokavidya, one may not be able to normalize the use of the term Lokavidyadhar except in smaller confines. Perhaps this is what underlies the relative comfort that some of us recently experience with the term "ordinary life" in contrast to Lokavidya.

It does appear that there has been some acknowledgement of this in recent times. It has led to a new attempt to identify within popular movements those elements of Lokavidya that might, with the right amplification, provide a new core of strength to the people of India.

I do believe that this may be a worthwhile project that may be further assisted by the following steps:

1. A recognition that we as a group have none of the skills for rallying people, or even coordinating other groups as some did during the farmers' agitations of the 1980's; however, we do have abilities that are not ordinarily possessed by many others, viz., to read, reflect and write with reasonable clarity.

2. Perhaps it is time for us to commit ourselves to spend a few weeks or months every year to bring out a state-of-the-society collection of articles on India that is sufficiently well argued out and somewhat representative of the essential strands of thought seen in various people's struggles in the country. In light of the international scenario, where possible.
3. If it is likely that our fervor lasts for another ten years, I should think that these collections may one day possibly aid someone's thinking, somewhere. Even if it doesn't, I suppose it may be considered that it is time well spent by this group.

I am sure that this note is likely to raise no questions or answer any. This note was written more to articulate a set of thoughts on Lokavidya that have affected me for long. I do believe that this ought not to be the subject of our discussion tomorrow and perhaps we should continue last week's discussion of Krishnan's note.

PS:

It may be useful to emphasize that this note deliberately avoids the materialism-idealism, consciousness-reality, idea-action types of dualities. Centuries after Renaissance and Machiavelli, we are perhaps in need of a meta-narrative that considers (for example) Hegel, Marx and Gandhi as actors, and not supra-historical prophets, in the project of discovering or acting upon "universal" truths. And even if we reflect such dualities in our own arguments, it might as well (appear to) be our own, and not that of times past. Indeed, the shadows of the past cannot but be present in our ideas of tomorrow, and yet perhaps it is time that we let them be there, in the shadows.