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The Knowledge Debate Reopened

Ananya Vajpeyi



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The Knowledge Debate Reopened

Gandhi's Challenge to Modern Science

by Sunil Sahasrabudhey;
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pp 90, Rs 90.

ANANYA VAJPEYI

I

The larger project of which this review is a part seeks to develop a fresh theory of knowledge in contemporary Indian society. A full or even partial theoretical articulation of such a theory will not be attempted here. My point of entry into the discourse on knowledge, to the extent that it has been articulated at all in India today, is Sunil Sahasrabudhey's small but important recent volume, *Gandhi's Challenge to Modern Science*. The author positions his work as perhaps the first significant commentary on, as well as further development of, Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* (1909), in the 21st century.¹ *Hind Swaraj* is itself a highly compressed book; Sahasrabudhey retains this 'sutra'-like quality in his commentarial text. It's clear that an elaborate exposition of Gandhi's politics before and after *Hind Swaraj* must be read back into it in order to unpack its terse formulations. In a similar fashion, an understanding of the People's Science, the Alternative Science, the Appropriate Technology, the Green and the Peace movements in India and elsewhere in the world from the late-1970s to the mid-1990s is necessary for a proper reading of *Gandhi's Challenge*....² Unfortunately it is not possible to undertake such exercises in the limited scope of this article.

I

From the rich array of materials compacted within *Hind Swaraj*, Sahasrabudhey is most concerned with Gandhi's critiques of "civilisation" and of the "machine". Sahasrabudhey calls Gandhi "a philosopher of the future", and the Mahatma's vision about the way science and technology

would impact our lives in a capitalist world is indeed astounding (*GCMS*, p 12). Not only his prescience, but the power of his metaphors is also striking:

A man, whilst he is dreaming, believes in his dream; he is undecieved only when he is awakened from his sleep. A man labouring under the bane of civilisation is like a dreaming man. (...). But there is no end to the victims destroyed in the fire of civilisation. Its deadly effect is that people come under its scorching flames believing it to be all good (*Hind Swaraj*, pp 35, 43).

Gandhi's critique of "civilisation" has everything to do with the role of science – what Sahasrabudhey insists we call "modern science" – in the present time. That so much tragedy underlies scientific advances in modernity is a surprise only to those who, like Gandhi's sleeping man, dream the dream of civilisation. In Sahasrabudhey's redaction of Gandhi, modern science is not a moral science. This is because rationality, in the west, is falsely construed as being value-free.

Science is the victor. Its drawing room is full of shields, medals and cups. And while it reigns, who can ask how they were won? (...). Science – and often even technology – stands exonerated of all disasters and antihuman consequences. These are clubbed under the label of "misuse" of science and technology and the entire blame is shifted over to users, planners and politicians. Is it not paradoxical that one side in the balance sheet of science is entirely vacant? (...). If science is credited with good consequences, it ought to be blamed for its bad consequences. It is here precisely that the question of the relation of science with morality arises. (...). [Values] according to Gandhi must be internal to science. It is not enough that it is done by moral men and women, which itself is a tall order, but science itself should be moral.

For moral science, pure reason must give way to a concept of human reason. (...). [And] if pure reason is to be replaced by human reason then scientific temper has to be replaced by humanist temper (*GCMS*, pp 1, 27, 33).

In a series of arguments about the ontology, the epistemology, the logic, and the

ethics of dominant knowledge systems originating in the west – arguments I will not reproduce here – Sahasrabudhey establishes that modern science rests on four fallacies. First (as already mentioned) is the position that reason is amoral. Second is the idea that the scientific society promotes the freedom of the individual. Third is the notion that the social life of human beings carries on in some plane that is not the plane of their natural life, or that society and nature can continue to function indefinitely at odds with one another. And fourth (following from two and three) is the most fallacious of all statements, that the enterprise of modern science is divorced from the project of social control. The power that these four propositions have exercised in the last two centuries is at least in part responsible for the world we inhabit today: a world of nuclear accidents and indestructible industrial waste, of starving workers and suicidal peasants, of innumerable camps and millions of refugees, of western prosperity and misery for the rest of the planet. According to Sahasrabudhey, it was Gandhi alone who, among the great thinkers in the 20th

century, foresaw such ghastly end-results from the big and small experiments of modern science in its vast laboratory, i.e., humanity itself.

III

“What comes to pass resists debate”, writes Sahasrabudhey, in his characteristically aphoristic way, “So with the machine” (*GCMS*, p 41). He substitutes the machine with technology and vice versa throughout his book, evidently to invoke Marx at some points and Gandhi at others. The paired and interchangeable terms, “machine” and “technology”, allow Sahasrabudhey to bring into his analysis several key Marxian categories without wandering too far from the Gandhian core of his argument: capital, state, alienation, useful work, human activity, labour, man-as-maker, and even art. Power, especially, is treated in its scientific and its social meanings, since it relates to technology in both of its senses. In one direction it extends to the problem of energy; in the other, it encompasses the state and its apparatuses, including, eventually, weaponry and war.³

“Power”, says Sahasrabudhey in another phrase at once memorable and true “is the blood of the modern machine” (*GCMS*, p 52). Hobbes, Heidegger and Foucault, all hover above his reading of *Hind Swaraj*. But they flutter about the text without bearing away the reader on their wings into the skies of European political philosophy, in a way that might have made it difficult for her to then engage with the down-to-earth concepts invented by Gandhi for India. The purpose of Sahasrabudhey’s brief but dense work is precisely to challenge that which pervades our post-industrial – and now even post-globalisation – world, and therefore is resistant to debate, i.e., technology. “The machine organises men, materials, energy and information on a scale unknown before and at an ever-increasing speed. So does it disorganise societies and destroy their knowledge bases elsewhere on a colossal scale with equal speed” (*GCMS*, pp 45-46). We may construe this as Sahasrabudhey’s gloss on Gandhi’s polemic against the railways, summed up in his objection to speed as the most desirable end for modern societies obsessed

with technology: “But evil has wings” (*Hind Swaraj*, p 48). Sahasrabudhey, too, objects:

Technology ought to be the technique of doing things, not undoing them. Only in this way can it be part of the extension of truth, an instrument of man’s labour for emancipation. (...). [Instead, it] has produced wealth and glitter for a few, and poverty, darkness, and “noise” for the rest. Underlying both creation and destruction, organisation and disorganisation, lies a common characteristic of modern technology: violence. Modern technology is violent for all (*GCMS*, pp 17, 46).

Gandhi’s principle of non-violence (ahimsa) is central to the construction of his challenge to modern science. “Non-violence” is a flat translation of ahimsa, a word more or less available in all the modern Indian languages, not just, Gandhi’s Gujarati. In the Sanskrit, two roots ‘han-’ and ‘hims-’ yield two different nouns, ‘hatya’ and ‘himsa’. Hatya, straightforwardly, is “murder”, killing without legal sanction. Himsa, on the other hand, has a more general sense of “violence”, including an entire range of meanings from “injury” to “killing”, and connoting verbal, bodily as well as psychological harm. If we go into its etymological antecedents, it also has a residual desiderative, preserved fleetingly in the form, but mostly lost in the usage, as “desire to harm”. We may carry this subtler sense of himsa into its opposite, ahimsa, to translate it as “absence of the desire to harm”. Such a nuanced meaning, perhaps first occurring in premodern Jaina and Buddhist thought, brings us closer to what Gandhi intended by ahimsa than the more opaque “non-violence”⁴. It is on the back of ahimsa that Sahasrabudhey is able to put on the table a constellation of related Gandhian ideas: ‘satyagraha’, ‘svadeshi’ and ‘swaraj’. Unfortunately, this is not the place to go into each one of these categories in detail, and because they will be left unanalysed, no ready – and potentially inadequate or even misleading – translations for them are provided. Suffice it to say that violence is to technology what Gandhi’s ahimsa is to a new category that Sahasrabudhey introduces in his book, and that is ‘lokavidya’.⁵

What is lokavidya? It is more than likely that many readers would jump to making literal translations, and come up with something like “knowledge (‘vidya’) of

the people (‘loka’)” or “arts (in the sense of “skills”) of the people”. But Sahasrabudhey is intent on keeping that which is moral inseparably tied to his notion of vidya, morality for him, as an avowed Gandhian, being as firmly wedded to vidya as it is divorced from modern science. Knowledge as vidya is by definition humane whereas modern science is rational. Lokavidya, then, cannot be taken away from a people. It is lost forever if a people is eliminated from the face of the earth. It is never derivative; it is always already owned by a people, in the sense of being made its own by that people. Lokavidya is not only what a people knows, not only a people’s “fund of knowledge” (Sanskrit ‘jnana-bhandara’/ Hindi ‘gyan-bhandar’). It is related somehow to a people’s experience, to their perception of that which is. I am conscious that none of the foregoing statements constitutes an exhaustive definition of lokavidya. But together these statements characterise lokavidya in a manner that begins to make the concept emerge from the obscurity of its mere translation into cognitive relief for the reader.

IV

In parts I to III of this essay, I have, no doubt very quickly and inadequately, tried to present everything in the root-text *Hind Swaraj* and in its commentary *GCMS*, that would allow us to use, in howsoever make-shift a way, the term lokavidya. The questions to be raised now are as follows: Can we posit lokavidya to be the same as “indigenous knowledge”? If so, then what is indigenous knowledge? If not, then how are the two different? What are the political entailments of trying to equate the two, regardless of whether or not they are in fact the same? Moreover, what is the future of lokavidya and of indigenous knowledge, either as identical or as distinct categories, in the new knowledge society – a society that is genealogically related to industrial society via the persistent and ever-more powerful machine?

“Indigenous knowledge” is what increasingly appears in activist as well as academic talk in contemporary India under the name of “non-modern”/“traditional”/“folk” knowledge. Under the sway of rightwing ideologies that we witness in our public sphere and in our intellectual life nowadays, “indigenous knowledge” enjoys a certain degree of attention from

all kinds of quarters and gets many more champions than might be good for it. It would be interesting, in a different context, to flesh out the relationship of this “indigenous knowledge” to other categories that have been available in anthropological discourse for a while now, most notably “practice” and “craft”. But the far more pressing, indeed, non-deferable task, is to understand both lokavidya and indigenous knowledge with respect to (i) ownership and (ii) economic activity.

First of all, who owns lokavidya? Who owns indigenous knowledge? Whose property is lokavidya? Whose property is indigenous knowledge? Does it even make sense to speak of ownership when discussing one or both of these categories? If we do not want to cast the debate in terms of ownership, then how are we to engage with the whole discourse on intellectual property and the patent régime that currently preoccupies those who are concerned with scientific knowledge proper? Without clarity on ownership and proprietary claims, how do we position either indigenous knowledge or lokavidya vis-à-vis individuals, communities, corporations and states (in which we can count both nation states and the global state)? Second, does either indigenous knowledge or lokavidya generate wealth? Does it result in a surplus? Does either one provide employment? Is either one really a form of life rather than a source of livelihood? In Marxist terminology, what is the relationship of each of these terms to means of production and to relations of production? These questions beg answers, which can only come from a systematic theory of knowledge in society that works for more than just modern science, i e, a theory that works for indigenous knowledge and for lokavidya, whatever the particularities of these entities turn out to be in a full-fledged descriptive account.

There is much in Gandhi’s thought that is provocative for a social theorist like Sahasrabudhey. He toys with Gandhi’s spinning wheel (‘charkha’). He flirts with social groups that the late D R Nagaraj (1944-1998) used to call the “technological communities” of south Asia, like the ‘agariya’-s, who traditionally manufactured high-quality iron and steel using non-industrial processes that remain poorly understood and, curiously, difficult if not impossible to replicate under laboratory conditions. But ultimately Sahasrabudhey’s

intellectual effort is to transcend the fetish object, whether it be the machine or its product. He seeks to get beyond a definition of knowledge that rests purely on the content of knowledge. He attempts, albeit with only partial success, to characterise lokavidya such that its meaning encompasses a phenomenology, an epistemology, an ontology, a logic, a morality, an ethics, a politics, a history, a value-system and a method. He seeks to define a way of knowing that is necessarily associated with a way of being. Whatever its other features turn out to be, the most important thing to note about lokavidya is that it is grounded in the principle of ahimsa. It is one weapon with which to challenge – and who knows, maybe even ultimately defeat – what Gandhi called the “monster” of civilisation (*Hind Swaraj*, p 42).

V

The trouble with all indigenist theories, whether they be theories in linguistics, in literary criticism, in historiography, in the study of religions, in epistemology, or in any other discipline, is that they tend to valorise whatever is indigenous to a given non-western culture because it is indigenous.⁶ So-called “civilisational” critiques of western knowledge also have the same tendency, to accord greater legitimacy to the knowledges that have their genealogy in the knowledge systems of non-western civilisations simply because of the accident of their birth, as it were.⁷ The nature of the truth claims made on behalf of indigenous knowledge and civilisational

knowledge can vary from: (i) “It’s better because it’s ours”, to (ii) “It’s better because it works better for us”, to (iii) “It’s better because it has been dominated, marginalised, and almost rendered extinct, first by western imperialism and colonialism, and currently the neo-colonial enterprise, and now it’s time to set the record straight”, to (iv) “Let all knowledges coexist in peace, there’s no such thing as truth anyway, or at any rate, our way of reaching for – and eventually falling short of – the truth is no better or worse than anyone else’s way”.

Through these statements I am trying to trace a cline, in a rough-and-ready fashion, from: (i) crude nativism, to (ii) cultural relativism, to (iii) a position whose name I do not know, but which is premised on some notion of the need for a historical balancing-out of large-scale cultural and civilisational inequalities. This position makes a call for what might be described as social justice for hitherto-oppressed knowledges. The last statement, (iv) is simply the bottomline of postmodernism, albeit presented as a caricature of itself.

The test that must determine the strength of lokavidya as a robust – that is to say, as a defensible – category, a category we can work with, without simplistically valorising that which is supposedly ours over that which is allegedly not ours, is perhaps its relationship to violence.⁸ Gandhi does not become germane to the discussion on lokavidya because he experimented with various concepts that incorporate, through the prefix “sva-” (literally: “own” or “of the self”) the sense

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of a knowledge or a practice being owned by, and proper to, Indic peoples – svadeshi and svaraj, for example. Gandhi is relevant here because of his humane and ultimately universalist insistence on ahimsa (non-violence). If modern science and technology produce and sustain violence (himsa: harm, as well the desire to harm) in communities and their natural habitats, is lokavidya any less harmful? We could be revivalists, glorifying the past. We could be utopians, imagining a glorious hereafter. Both revivalists and utopians have a dangerous inclination to recruit an as-yet fuzzy and ill-defined entity like lokavidya to their respective constructivist agendas. But we have to actually assess lokavidya's once and future record in history, in terms of its relationship to violence, its proven failures already and its potential for doing harm in times to come. Only then can we decide if this is to be our chosen weapon with which to wage war on inequality and oppression in human societies. **PNW**

Email: anya@bgl.vsnl.net.in

Notes

[A longer version of this paper was first prepared for the World Social Forum, Mumbai, January 17-19, 2004, as part of a workshop titled 'Dialogues on Knowledge in Society', organised by the Indigen Foundation, Pune and Lokavidya Samvad, Varanasi. The knowledge dialogue continued this year at the Karachi WSF (March 24-29, 2006), under the auspices of Vidya Ashram, Varanasi.]

- 1 M K Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*, edited by Anthony J Parel, Cambridge University Press (1997). Henceforth this text will be referred to as *Hind Swaraj*. Originally published in 1909.
- 2 Sunil Sahasrabudhey, *Gandhi's Challenge to Modern Science*, The Other India Press, Goa 2002. Henceforth this text will be referred to as *GCMS*.
- 3 The author does not make a note of this, but power is inscribed at the dead centre of our national flag, in the Asokan motif of the 'dhamma-cakra', the wheel of dharma that turns and turns incessantly in the firmament of the political life of human beings.
- 4 I am grateful to George Cardona and Madhav Deshpande for permitting me these semantic manoeuvres within the strict limits set by Sanskrit grammar, of which they are both masters.
- 5 The history of the word/concept of lokavidya is a complicated one, and by his own admission

it is not quite accurate to name Sahasrabudhey as its single author. Since the early 1970s, a mutating group of activists and intellectuals, originating from IIT-Kanpur, and operating in Kanpur, Jhansi, Varanasi and Nagpur, first produced a journal called *Mazdoor Kisan Niti*, then another journal called *Autonomy*, and finally a journal that still continues to be published, called *Lokavidya Samvad*. The size and nature of the collective, and its relationship with the alternative science and technology movements on the one hand, and the farmer and trade union movements on the other, have varied greatly over the last three decades and across different parts of India. It is probably fair to characterise Sahasrabudhey as a key actor in this discourse and its associated political activity, but to credit him with the invention of the very idea of lokavidya would be, by his own lights, excessive.

- 6 I thank Sudhir Chella Rajan for alerting me to the discomfort that many in the left feel with indigenism, even when it purports to be critical.
- 7 See Meera Nanda, 'Postmodernism, Hindu Nationalism and "Vedic Science"', *Frontline* (January 2, 2004), pp 78-82.
- 8 I am indebted to Dilip Simeon for this very simple, but, it seems to me, key, insight into the centrality of violence as a criterion by which to predict the politics that, even if it is not dictated by, might eventually become entailed by, a given theoretical position on what constitutes valid knowledge.