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Preservation and Provision of Access to Indigenous Knowledge in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Gives a brief overview of indigenous knowledge in Sri Lanka and examines the level of preservation and the provision of access to it through the libraries in Sri Lanka. Although the country inherits a vast amount of indigenous knowledge, the library system or any other institute in the country has not yet taken concerted effort to preserve and provide access to this knowledge.

Indigenous Knowledge (IK)

The adjectival word “indigenous” means “belonging to a place, native”(OED). Thus IK can be defined as a corpus of knowledge belonging to a particular geographical area. Native knowledge, traditional knowledge, cultural knowledge and civilization knowledge are synonymous terms. It is unique to a given culture or a society or a country. “It is seen to contrast with knowledge generated within the international system of universities, research institutions and private firms” (IK papers, 2005). According to Grenier (1998) IK is “unique, traditional and local knowledge existing within and developed around specific conditions of women and men indigenous to particular geographic area”. It is stated that “indigenous knowledge system is a cumulative body of knowledge and belief, handed down through generation by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (including humans) with one another and with their environment” (Kumaran, Dissanayake and Norbert, 2007, p.2).

One of the salient features of IK is that it is a knowledge developed by tribal or rural communities living in a particular geographic location. These early tribal groups are generally called as aboriginal people. However, the term IK does not refer only to the

knowledge of aboriginal people. Nakata (2002) states the notion that IK refers to indigenous people's knowledge does not reflect the current usage of the term. According to him "indigenous people's knowledge could be considered a subset of what is more broadly referred to as "indigenous knowledge"

As any other knowledge system, IK is also not static and limited only to that particular area where it is originated. It can be observed that IK produced in one particular area or country has transmitted to other areas or countries through travelers and traders. The other important characteristic is that IK is passed down from generation to generation mostly by the words of mouth and to a lesser extent through writing. It is basically an oral tradition.

Location specificity

One must understand that all sorts of knowledge systems are "indigenous" or location specific at the beginning. Strictly speaking, inhabitants of all geographic locations (except migrants or colonists) are "indigenous" or "native" to those locations or countries. Knowledge they produced at the earlier stages of civilization can be termed as IK. This crude mass of knowledge that was put into use through trial and error experiences, contributed to the development of ancient civilizations. Elites or educated people of these societies refined this inherited indigenous knowledge and made portions of it validated or legitimized knowledge. In addition to the legitimization of IK by elites, knowledge brought by colonists and invaders to other geographical areas got mixed with local knowledge systems and put forth new sprouts.

Then the question arises whether there is a body of knowledge that can be termed as pure IK. Simply the answer is "no". If so what do we really mean by "IK"? After all sorts of transformations there remains unchanged body of local knowledge. This can be termed as pure IK. Again, this knowledge is not static. Men and women in rural areas who do not have easy access to legitimized knowledge constantly produce new knowledge through their experience to be used in their daily life.

IK in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka possesses a large body on IK that has its roots into pre historical times. Archaeological evidences as well as certain records in early historical records of the country show that Sri Lanka had been inhabited long before the arrival Aryans from India who colonized the country. Recent archaeological excavations and surveys confirm that people who lived 10,000 years ago used natural wind furnaces to produce quality steel. Thus it is apparent that these early inhabitants or tribal groups had their own systems of knowledge.

It can be assumed that the Aryans brought here the legitimized knowledge practices prevailed in India at that time. When Aryans became the dominant political power of the island the tribal groups retreated to remote areas of the country. At subsequent periods

the Aryans imported more knowledge from India ranging from religions to arts and crafts. (This does not mean that early inhabitants in the country did not have religions or arts and crafts. Indeed, they practiced their own systems of beliefs, arts and crafts. What Aryans have brought were only more organized and refined.) This body of imported knowledge, under the royal patronage, gradually became the legitimized knowledge of the country. It also got mixed up with certain elements of local knowledge system of early inhabitants. Irrigation technology of ancient Sri Lanka is an example. There are evidences to prove that native irrigation system was in practice in the country before the arrival of Aryans. The legitimized knowledge in ancient Sri Lanka consisted of knowledge brought from India, portions of local knowledge systems and a mixture of imported knowledge and local knowledge.

Establishment of a legitimized knowledge system does not completely destroy or stop the growth the IK system. Even today the tribal group Vedda (the aboriginal people of Sri Lanka) practices their own local knowledge in their day- to -day activities (Serasinghe, 1996) Apart from the tribal groups, as mentioned earlier, the rural communities through their experience and experiments gave birth to another subset of indigenous knowledge. Thus IK in Sri Lanka can be defined as a mixture of the knowledge produced by the tribal groups and the knowledge created by rural communities. Unlike legitimized knowledge this knowledge was not recorded. It has always been a verbal tradition. The production of knowledge by informal sectors of the society has been a constant process.

Content of IK in Sri Lanka

IK in Sri Lanka covers almost all aspects of biological, ecological systems as well as socio-economic and cultural patterns in the country. Of course, its main concern is human well - being. However, it does not take human being as a separate entity. IK has always placed human being within the context of total environment. As such it pays attention to all living things including plants, animals, water, soil and other natural resources. It tries to achieve human well- being without jeopardizing the environmental totality. For example, people are not permitted to destroy woods haphazardly, although clearing jungles is needed for cultivation. There is a jungle lore to which people should obey. Similarly, cleared forests cannot be burned without following certain rituals. The farmer has to walk three times around the cleared forest shouting aloud, informing living beings who might be dwelling among fallen trees, that he is going to burn the forest. He sets fire to the forest against the wind. This gives an escaping time for hidden animals and creatures. Pollution of water is also prohibited. Taking lives of other animals is also discouraged. In brief the IK in Sri Lanka is a humane system of knowledge.

Disciplines and subjects within the IK in Sri Lanka

In general IK is shaped according to the needs of inhabitants living in a particular country or region. The disciplines within the different IK systems, therefore, may vary to one another, depending on the socio-cultural context of the geographical location. However, disciplines such as food, medicine, certain arts and crafts and folklore including folk beliefs seem to common to all IK systems.

In Sri Lanka IK system, one can observe the following basic disciplines: Agriculture, Arts and crafts, Food and nutrition, Housing, Irrigation, Medicine, Folk beliefs, Forest lore. Under each of these broader disciplines a number of subject categories exists.

1. Agriculture
Paddy cultivation, rain water and irrigated agriculture, Chena cultivation (Shift cultivation), Home gardening, Animal husbandry, fishing and hunting, harvesting
2. Arts and crafts
Metal work including the production of iron and steel, agricultural and household equipments, weapons, pottery, weaving, carpentry and woodwork, painting, sculpture
3. Food and nutrition
Post harvesting methods, food preservation, food habits, food taboos, food etiquettes, cooking,
4. Housing
Residential houses, religious structures
5. Irrigation
Rainwater collection methods, tank building, canals and water ways, management of water resources, water for drinking and other household activities
6. Medicine
Human medicine, veterinary science, material medica, pharmacy, toxicology, diagnosis, astrology
7. Folklore
Folk songs, folk stories, historical events, rituals, super natural beings
8. Forest lore
Forest protection, forest management, use of forest and other natural resources

Present status of IK in Sri Lanka

The advent of Western powers to Sri Lanka in the year 1505 tolled the death knell of both legitimized and indigenous knowledge systems of the country. Although certain ad hoc steps had been taken by the British rulers in 19th century to preserve the legitimized knowledge in the country (for details see Piyadasa, 1985) no efforts were taken to safeguard the indigenous knowledge. Even during the post- colonial period this situation did not change. As Nakata (2002) aptly states that “in colonial times, residually in so-called post colonial times, the knowledge of indigenous people occupied in the realm of ‘primitive’, an obstacle to progress along the path to modern civilization and was largely ignored or suppressed; and in many places, because of dislocation from our own land and way of life, much of it was lost.” This is true with regard to Sri Lanka too. Growth and

use of indigenous knowledge in Sri Lanka has been seriously hampered by certain false notions spread during the colonial times as well as post-colonial period. These are:

1. Indigenous knowledge is not scientific
2. It is mysterious, dubious
3. It is old and has no value today
4. It belongs to the rural poor and illiterates
5. Elites do not practice it
6. It is weak and powerless
7. It does not fit into modern society
8. It is of inferior quality
9. It is not growing, but dying

One cannot reject all practices of indigenous knowledge on the ground that they are not laboratory tested. By experience rural communities know indigenous knowledge practices relating to various aspects of their lives are very effective. For example, herbal medicine and agricultural practices are still being used successfully by the rural communities. Perhaps the testing methods of modern science may not sufficient to understand the principles behind IK practices.

Mysterious nature of certain indigenous knowledge practices plays a vital role in the preservation and the prevention of misuses of such practices. Rituals associated with such practices shade the reality of the system. In primitive societies where no system of patents existed, the owners of certain IK practices kept them as sacred secrets. Such practices were hand over only to selected family members or reliable persons. Thus the mysterious nature served the purpose of present day patent system.

The IK is powerless as it is in the hands of the rural poor. This powerless, rural nature of IK has made it invisible to the elites and science. It has been dismissed in many occasions as unscientific, unsystematic, useless and baseless. This attitude has prevented the systematic recording and preservation of IK in many countries. However, the situation is gradually changing. "Since the last decade of 20th century one may witness an explosive growth in the number of publications on the relevance of indigenous knowledge in a variety of policy sectors and academic disciplines" (Indigenous knowledge pages, 2005)

Features of IK

One can observe the following basic features in the IK when compared it with the legitimized knowledge.

1. IK loses its power and validity when the particular socio-cultural context where it produced is changed
2. Its is not destructive
3. It is mostly practical
4. It is environmental friendly
5. It is more humane
6. It is not based on consumerism and not profit driven

7. It is time tested
8. It is not fully explored and more research needs to be done

Access to indigenous knowledge

Access to any kind of information depends upon a number of pre requisites. They are: Collection, Preservation, Organization and Delivery.

Present Survey

The present survey on the preservation and provision of access to IK in Sri Lanka was done in the year of 2007. Data was collected from five major university libraries (established between 1924-1979), three major public libraries (established between 1840-1963), Colombo National Museum Library (1877) and the Sri Lanka National Library (1990). Personal visits, interviews with librarians of these institutes as well as examination of collections have been done in order to collect data.

University Libraries

Curricula in the universities in Sri Lanka do not have IK components except certain introductory sections in the subject fields such as sociology and anthropology. As such university libraries, although rich in their collections on other subject areas, virtually do not have separate collections on IK. However, under the subject such as medicine, folklore, agriculture, sociology, anthropology, technology, astrology they all have a considerable number of printed books that record IK. In other words, books and pamphlets that record IK can be found scattered in the general collection of books. In addition some of the university libraries have few palm leaf books in their collections. It was observed that in all university libraries examined there were separate Sri Lankan Collections or Rare Collections where a good number of printed books on IK stored. No university library did have oral indigenous knowledge collections either in audio or video form. However, it should be noted here that one university library, being a recipient of the legal deposit, has a large number of publications that record IK. Thus it has more documents on IK than others. However, these publications are kept in a locked room and the users have not free access to them. Also, this university has a collection about 600 palm leaf manuscripts.

Public Libraries

Public libraries under the review did have separate local history collections but not IK collections. They did not have palm leaf collections either. However, printed books that record IK were found scattered through out their collections. In these libraries too no collections of oral indigenous knowledge were available.

Colombo National Museum Library

Colombo National Museum Library possesses the country's largest amount of printed IK books, but unfortunately not as a separate collection. The National Museums Library has acquired these publications not as a result of any particular collection development policy, but as a legal deposit under the provisions of the Printers and Publishers Ordinance, no.1 of 1885. Country's largest collection of palm leaf manuscripts is also exist in the Colombo Museum Library (it is to be mentioned that the majority of palm leaf manuscripts record the legitimized knowledge of the country). Paper manuscripts, historical records, diaries, paintings etc., are also found in this library .As in all other libraries mentioned above this library too does not have an oral IK collection either in audio or video form.

Sri Lanka National Library

Sri Lanka National Library is also a recipient of legal deposit copies of the national imprint. As such it has a considerable number of printed books that record IK. It is the only library in the country that possesses a separate collection on IK. The collection is named as "Folklore Collection". This particular collection consists of hand written records of folklore (about 7000 handwritten pages) donated by late Mr. Peter Wijesinghe, a personal collector of folklore in Sri Lanka. Also, the collection has a dozen of audio recordings of folk songs recorded at various places in the country. In addition, the National Library has a small collection of palm leaf manuscripts also.

Preservation of IK

Except the usual preservation of printed books and manuscripts, no library under review pays any particular attention to the preservation of IK. As mentioned earlier, the IK is mostly in verbal form. Hence, it is to be recorded first, to be preserved for future generations. Only the Sri Lanka National Library has taken an effort to do so. However, the process has long been abandoned due to various reasons. Among the reasons the absence of a clear vision on the importance of recording national IK seems to be paramount.

In the context of IK, storage of materials in air-condition rooms alone does not mean preservation. The libraries should have specific ongoing programmes to collect IK before preservation. In general the situation with regard to the preservation of IK in Sri Lanka is not satisfactory.

Access to IK

The access to the available documents on IK in the libraries under review is extremely limited. Apart from normal cataloguing no other system of access is provided in none of these libraries. The legal deposit collections are not catalogued even. The content of the legal deposit is to be searched under the Registration numbers given to them by the

National Archives Department. Unless you know the year of publication of a particular publication, it is not easy to find it out from the legal deposit collections.

Palm leaf manuscripts collections in all libraries under review are catalogued or at least listed. However, these listings or catalogues do not provide sufficient access to the contents of the manuscripts other than showing their locations. This situation can be observed with regard to paper manuscripts collections too. There is no way of knowing the contents of the audio- cassettes at the National Library, except their titles given by the library.

Observations

In Sri Lanka, so far no concerted efforts have been taken to preserve its IK. On the other hand legitimized knowledge system of the country is also on the verge of extinction. Within the next few decades most of the records of this knowledge (palm leaf manuscripts), heaped in Buddhist temples here and there will be destroyed due to neglect. Preparation of bibliographies alone does not preserve these manuscripts. They are immediately to be copied, classified, indexed and preserved.

Vast amount of true IK of the country, the oral knowledge has already vanished since the word by mouth tradition does not exist in modern society. The verbal tradition is on the wane. Young generation of the country is not interested in the practicing of verbal traditional knowledge. Therefore, if no immediate actions are taken, it is inevitable that the verbal indigenous knowledge in Sri Lanka will be lost by the end of the present generation of elders. Hence, it is to be immediately collected, recorded, preserved and make available to the future generations.

Preservation and development of IK depend upon the commitment of the society for the purpose. Sri Lankan society has still not fully recognized the importance of such a project. Perhaps, authorities might have considered it is an unnecessary luxury to spend national income on such programmes as there are enough bread and butter problems to be addressed immediately.

Suggestions

In deed it is a difficult task for a country like Sri Lanka to spend a lot of money on the collection and preservation of IK in the entire country. Launching massive projects of this nature would involve not only economic resources but trained human resources also. Therefore, instead of initiating massive projects to collect and preserve IK, minute projects that demand less money and energy would be more appropriate to Sri Lanka. In this regard the main role has to be played by libraries in the country. Especially public libraries, irrespective of their size, can commence small projects with the help of the communities they serve to collect and preserve IK in the respective areas they are located. National Museum Library, National Library and university libraries in the country can provide leadership and guidance to public libraries in achieving this goal.

The technical know how needed for such projects is not expensive and major libraries already have resources for the purpose.

Through an effective library cooperation programme, it is not difficult to establish a National Centre for IK into which member libraries could send the copies of their IK records.

Using modern technology the IK in the country is to be digitized. This will provide better access to the content.

The present Sri Lankan library policies modeled on Western prototypes do not support the preservation or provision of access to indigenous knowledge. Hence, a redesigning of policies that take into consideration the necessity of preservation and the provision of access to indigenous knowledge is mandatory.

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