Indigenous Knowledge: Delineating the Systemic Notions and Interfaces

Rohan Pillay A. *
Research Scholar, Department of Communication and Journalism, University of Kerala, India

Lalmohan P.
**Research Supervisor & Assistant Professor, Department of Communication and Journalism,
University of Kerala, India**

Abstract

Although there has been an increased interest in indigenous knowledge systems, there still does not exist a consensus on what they mean and how they can be sustained. There is a need to see if such a consensus can be achieved or not and the reasons behind the same. Without undertaking such an endeavour, ensuring proper sustenance of indigenous knowledge systems would be a hefty task. In this light, the researcher undertakes an inquiry to determine whether such a consensus can be reached or not while also trying to understand the problems and challenges faced in understanding indigenous knowledge systems. Furthermore, the researcher also looks at opportunities that can be leveraged to ensure the proper sustenance of these systems.

Keywords

Indigenous Knowledge, Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Indigenous Peoples, Folk Knowledge, Traditional Knowledge.

Introduction

Although it had originally been denied a legitimate position as a knowledge system, indigenous knowledge (IK) has attracted a lot of attention in academia for various reasons (Simpson, 1999). However, most of these interests, especially from academia, have brought in Eurocentric frameworks. Would this juxtaposition of two knowledge systems be a fruitful endeavour? Can new avenues for understanding IK be developed and leveraged to better understand these knowledge systems?

Before we find answers to these questions, we need to understand how academia has tried to understand IK and the point it has reached. In this light, the researcher aims to investigate the indigenous knowledge systems, what they are, the problems present in the present-day understanding of them, the opportunities that can be leveraged to ensure their sustenance, and the challenges faced in understanding them.

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* Correspondence: Email: rohan.pillay21@gmail.com

Demystifying the Concept of Indigenous Knowledge

One of the greatest challenges in answering the abovementioned question is the varying characteristics that underlie Eurocentric notions of knowledge and IK. It has been argued by many indigenous scholars that there is no short answer that can define what IK stands for. Furthermore, three key indicators that cause hindrances to the conventional constructs of IK have been identified (McGregor, 2004). The first and foremost issue in this regard lies in the imposition of a definition. This leads to the second issue: these imposed definitions present the idea as something universal across the different Indigenous peoples. Finally, IK and people are not separate and cannot be codified without the people coming up with a definition (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). Therefore, it can be argued that the effort to try and define IK is a counter-productive endeavour that would lead to more misunderstandings than giving a sense of meaning.

When trying to understand IK, Battiste (2005) offers some indicators that help gain a better understanding. One of the key characteristics of IK is that it is systemic and covers both what can be observed and what can also be thought of while comprising "the rural and the urban, the settled and the nomadic, original inhabitants and migrants." This knowledge embraces the context of about 20% of the world's population. Additionally, they are also referred to as "folk knowledge," "indigenous technical knowledge," "traditional ecological knowledge," "local knowledge," "traditional knowledge," and "non-formal knowledge." (2005)

IK cannot be considered to be merely a commodity. However, it is a process (McGregor, 2004). This process shares extremely close links with the people and the place in which it is rooted (Cajete, 1994) (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). Trying to sever these ties does not simplify IK, on the other hand, it gets obscured. In this light, it can be considered the integration of person, place, product, and process (McGregor, 2004). It has also been established that IK encompasses the entire knowledge of a particular group of people and the land they reside in, including the different elements passed on among them through the different generations. This also comprises the respective peoples' knowledge capital, including their agricultural, ecological, scientific, and technical knowledge (Daes, 1993).

The Conundrum of Sharing and Prevention of Exploitation

The inherent structural differences in IK and euro centric notions of knowledge have led to many issues in the preservation of IK. It is imperative to look at and understand these issues so they can be tackled, which would

help remove misunderstandings. This would, in turn, ensure that IK is preserved and understood in the right sense.

One of the first friction points in this respect is the outlook of indigenous peoples and eurocentric thinkers on the concept of IK. On the one hand, while the peoples see it as "a way of life" and consider it a relationship, others see it as a source of knowledge regarding the environment. They believe that this knowledge can be used for the benefit of the larger society as a whole. This lack of consensus in having a shared meaning between indigenous peoples and eurocentric thinkers creates a gap that is too wide to bridge (McGregor, 2004).

This large gap in understanding what IK means has also caused a sense of fear within the indigenous peoples. They are reluctant to share their knowledge as they fear that it will be used by others against them and exploit them (McGregor, 2004). Therefore, indigenous people realise the need to protect their intellectual property and ensure that the ownership of their knowledge rests within themselves (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). This mistrust has created various other issues regarding the protection of IK. However, it should not be understood that indigenous peoples are unwilling to share their knowledge. On the contrary, they wish to share their knowledge, but they realise that the context has changed and their knowledge should be protected to prevent exploitation (McGregor, 2004). Their concern is that IK is being labelled and sold by others (Roberts, 1996).

Another point of mistrust by the indigenous peoples is the treatment of IK compared to Western science and knowledge. Scholars and peoples opine that IK is not valued as highly as western methods. Moreover, IK is even judged on the standards of the western scientific methods, thereby creating a hierarchy that would sustain. IK is yet to receive the same footing as Western science (Roberts, 1996). Additionally, the spiritual foundations of IK and the different values that support it are sidelined since they oppose the worldviews and values of the hegemonic societies (Simpson, 2004).

Threat of Extinction

One of the common attributions given to the reason behind the threat to the survival of IK is that they are predominantly oral. However, this should be seen as an ignorance of the real reasons for the threat, and it arises due to the eurocentric models of analyses leveraged in this endeavour. It is imperative to note that indigenous knowledge systems have been able to thrive and continue and propagate for millennia from one generation to another. These primarily oral cultures have sustained complex cultural, political, social, and spiritual systems (Simpson, 2004).

The answers to the threat to the survival of IK lie embedded in the crux of colonial infrastructure (Simpson, 2004). Cultural genocide, colonisation, and colonial policies that have been perpetuated in different ways and continue even today are some of the important driving factors that have been sidelining IK. This needs to be understood and negotiated, failing which, the infrastructure would continue to undermine the steps taken to strengthen IK systems and prevent decolonisation and self-determination of indigenous peoples (Simpson, 2004).

IK and the territory of the indigenous peoples share a very close relationship that cannot be separated. This relationship lies beyond the comprehension of eurocentric notions of knowledge. IK is part of the land that is formed through the relationships that the peoples develop and foster with the forces of nature (Battiste, 2000). These relationships are reflected in their political and spiritual systems and are practiced in the traditional forms of governance. However, in the absence of the ecological systems that they have been fostered in, IK ceases to exist (Simpson, 2004). The lands these communities reside in have been threatened by different vectors due to the actions of the hegemonic systems present globally. The destruction of the lands plays a significant role in pushing IK to the threat of extinction.

Issues of Dynamism and Fluidity

One of the most popular methods that have been undertaken for including IK in different areas, such as academic research, environmental policy, assisting in the recovery and protection of IK, and so on, is the documentation of IK (Simpson, 2001). However, what may look like a helping hand on the surface led to more problems than it may seem to solve. Documentation and digitisation have, for instance, increased access to IK, thereby increasing the possibilities for exploitation (Simpson, 2004).

When IK gets documented into written scripture, they are usually translated into languages other than what they are present in. This is because indigenous languages are oral and lack written text. This translation results in IK losing its dynamism and fluidity, thereby getting locked into a singular context devoid of its spatial relationships. It also gets generalised and depersonalised while being removed and separated "from the land, from the world of the spirits, from its source, and the methodologies for transmission"—all necessary factors that offer the rigor that facilitates proper communication (Simpson, 2004).

Modes of Engagement

One of the first and foremost steps to ensure that IK does not get threatened by extinction any further is to help facilitate indigenous self-determination and the recovery of indigenous national territories. The importance of self-determination of indigenous peoples has been acknowledged even by the hegemonic structures, as is evident from its presence in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 13, 2007. Indigenous peoples have also been vocal about this demand (Simpson, 2004).

The recovery of the different aspects required to ensure the protection and conservation of IK must be a strategic endeavor. Care should be taken to ensure that this recovery does not merely mean the recovery of only those aspects that seem palatable to the hegemonic forces in play. Still, it encompasses the different elements of indigenous culture as a whole. It means that the foundations of the system and the inherently indigenous processes that facilitate the propagation and preservation of IK are also maintained (Simpson, 2004).

It has already been established that documentation of IK does more harm than good; therefore, the worldview regarding preserving culture through documentation needs to change. What needs to be done is the preservation of indigenous lands and the processes in place to transmit IK to the younger generations. One of the steps that can be leveraged to achieve this is by strengthening the oral tradition. Moreover, for indigenous communities, the learning method is as important, if not more important, than the content being learned. This learning should also be based on the lands they have lived in for centuries (Simpson, 2002). By removing IK from its land and peoples, it only gets destroyed.

Engaging with anticolonial strategies to recover traditional IK is quintessential to ensure that IK systems can resist the threat of extinction. It would require deconstructing the colonial thinking engrained in the settler governments in different countries and the relationship it shares with IK. This means that there need to be inquiries done that would critically analyse the role that colonialism has played in the current state of IK. Some of the steps in ensuring corrective action in this regard would involve recovering the various indigenous intellectual traditions, establishing indigenous control over indigenous national territories, protecting indigenous lands from ecological and environmental destruction, and realising educational opportunities that are anticolonial and align with their indigenous values and traditions (Simpson, 2004).

Leveraging these methods would ensure that instead of merely having a misunderstood replica of the IK system for the future, the peoples' knowledge is preserved and continue to thrive and resist extinction. It would also ensure that future generations have access to and proper understanding of IK and IK systems.

Conclusion

The need to understand IK has always been undertaken in a manner that tries to define what it is. This question has been generated because of the overlaying of eurocentric frameworks on an inherently anticolonial system in its political stance. The underlying structural differences that are present between the two prevent any fruitful action from taking place. This is why the definition of IK has been an unsuccessful endeavor and more and more indigenous scholars have raised their voices against such a notion. Therefore, it must be understood that such an endeavor would not bring forth any helpful results for indigenous knowledge systems.

The problems that exist in the methods utilised to understand and preserve IK have not been fruitful due to the reasons mentioned above. Therefore, care needs to be undertaken to ensure that indigenous peoples, their land, and their knowledge do not become extinct due to the failings of the hegemonic forces at play. Protection of IK does not merely mean the recording or documentation of a few parts of indigenous communities. It requires the preservation and recovery of indigenous peoples, their land, and their ways of life, to mention a few steps. Only such proper correction can ensure the sustenance of indigenous knowledge systems.

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