Theoretical streams in Marginalized Peoples’ Knowledge(s): Systems, asystems, and Subaltern Knowledge(s)

Brij Kothari
Ravi J. Matthai Center for Educational Innovation, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, India

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Abstract. Two distinct theoretical streams flowing in the investigation, documentation, and dissemination of Marginalized Peoples’ Knowledge(s) (MPK) are identified and a third suggested. Systems thinking, which originally coined the term Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), continues to predominate the growing interdisciplinary interest in MPK. This approach has tended to view knowledge or its production based on systemic principles. The asystems approach challenges the usefulness of MPK as a systems construct. Its central proposition is that MPK does not always represent a coherent system of knowledge with underlying principles. Asystemists tend to prefer the term Local Knowledge (LK) and approach the subject from very different, even opposing, epistemological assumptions. Although both the systems and asystems research streams are often concerned with power, an in-depth exploration of power-issues is not inevitably integral to either approach. A third Subaltern Knowledge(s) (SK) perspective is suggested. The SK term embodies a central condition of many LKs vis-à-vis the scientific/Western knowledge establishment – that of being marginalized but resisting or with the potential to resist this process. More benign terms in literature (IK, LK, Rural Peoples’ Knowledge (RPK), etc.) fail to make this condition explicit. Such a conceptual recasting overtly invites a consideration of the intertwined nature of power and knowledge in the exploration of MPK.

Keywords: Indigenous, Knowledge, Local, Power, Subaltern

Brij Kothari is an Associate Professor at the Ravi J. Matthai Center for Educational Innovation, Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, India. This article is based on his doctoral dissertation at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, which focused on the conservation of indigenous peoples’ knowledge in six Quichua communities of Andean Ecuador with a knowledge-power perspective.

Introduction

Cultural anthropologists were some of the earliest 20th century scholars to value and explore local people’s knowledge in-depth (e.g., de Schlippe, 1956; Conklin, 1954). For the development community, literature and general interest in Marginalized Peoples’ Knowledge (MPK) has grown exponentially since the publication of the first book-length collection of essays that examined the relationship between Indigenous Knowledge (IK) and development (Brokensha et al., 1980). “Marginalized” is used in the Gramscian sense to qualify peoples who never quite fully accept their condition. Thus, a resistance or a potential for resistance is implied. Several interrelated factors are responsible for the surge in research on MPK. In part, it is the result of a welcome shift in the attitudes of many social and natural scientists towards indigenous/rural peoples and their knowledge (Slikkerveer, 1989; Warren, 1989). Another factor in the changing academic climate is the relative humbling of the Western scientific enterprise as a whole, including many scientists trained in Western traditions, caused by half a century of failed development programs. A growing number of scientists today acknowledge the validity (even if primarily from the Western scientific perspective) of many indigenous practices, practices that were earlier dismissed as regressive, ignorant, or non-scientific.

An attitudinal shift about indigenous/rural peoples and their knowledge has brought about an institutionalization of IK research. The establishment of a Center for Indigenous Knowledge for Agriculture and Rural Development (CIKARD) at Iowa State University contributed to the institutional interest in IK research worldwide. It was followed by the emergence of a journal (Indigenous Knowledge and Development Monitor (IKDM)), an internet list (INDKNOWN), a bibliographic database (Indigenous Agricultural Knowledge Systems (INDAKS); see
Slikkerveer, 1995), and numerous national, regional, international, and non-governmental (e.g., Honey Bee Network, Gupta et al., 1996) centers of IK research (see the numerous contributors to Warren et al., 1995: 426–479). Thus, in the two decades following Brokensha et al.’s (1980) seminal work, the IK buzz can be heard ubiquitously in international development circles.

Despite the systematic institutionalization, the conceptual boundaries of MPK are still very much evolving. If there is some intuitive consensus on the varieties of knowledge(s) that the term connotes, there is much less agreement on the term itself, its definitions, underlying assumptions, and theoretical underpinnings. Undeniably, the literature on the concept of MPK is best harvested with the keyword(s) “Indigenous Knowledge.” But that is more a reflection of the institutionalization of IK rather than a universally unproblematic acceptance of the term among theorists. Hence, for many who use the term IK, it is either due to the lack of a better alternative or perhaps due to a resignation in the face of widespread usage.

There is no dearth of competing labels for MPK. So “what’s in a name?,” one might ask. Whether MPK is called: IK, Indigenous Technical Knowledge (ITK), Rural People’s Knowledge (RPK), Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), Local Knowledge (LK), Traditional Knowledge (TK), or by any other name, does it make a difference? It does (Cashman, 1991). As will be argued in this article, the term not only reflects, but also enables, expands, or limits the domain of theoretical possibilities that one can impute to the concept. It implies certain assumptions and suggests specific research approaches. It emphasizes or de-emphasizes the peculiar conditions under which these knowledge “s” are generated. Above all, it has implications for research and action.

Of the many terms suggested in the literature for the concept of MPK, two – indigenous and local – have gained relatively more currency. McCorkle (1989) documents that a “consensus” had emerged from two conferences on MPK to use LK as the “best term to capture all such phenomena and to avoid the confusions and pejorative connotations.” It is asserted here that these and other terms that regularly surface in literature do not capture what is often (but not always) a fundamentally marginalized condition of LKs, but not without the possibility of resistance. This understanding of the tension between marginalization and resistance is informed by Gramsci’s notion of a perpetual struggle between hegemony and counter-hegemony and his call for greater focus on this aspect of the conditions of “subaltern classes.” Marginalization, tension, and resistance manifest both within and across the local epistemic domain. Thus, it is suggested that a characterization of MPK as “subaltern” would help us better understand the condition that seems most in common about these knowledges vis-à-vis the hegemonic character of Western scientific knowledge(s). By renaming MPK as Subaltern Knowledge(s) (SK), their marginalized condition is not only situated at the center of the theoretical debate, it also calls for research in this area as a praxis of resistance and empowerment (Lather, 1986). The study of SK is overtly and necessarily political in exactly the opposite way in which science, when it invalidates LK, is political.

The twin objective of this article is

a) to identify and examine the epistemological underpinnings of theoretical currents in research on MPK; and

b) to suggest a reconceptualization of MPK as SK.

Due to the fact that the terms traditional, indigenous, local, and so on are frequently used interchangeably (Heyd, 1995), it is confusing to associate them exclusively with any particular theoretical current. However, specific terms do predominate in certain currents. For analytical purposes, two theoretical currents can be identified in MPK research: i) the IK Systems approach (IKS) and ii) what will be called here as, the Asystems Local Knowledge(s) approach (ALK).4

With this semantic distinction, I do not wish to suggest the existence of two mutually exclusive strands that do not share overlapping conceptual boundaries. Rather, each by its unique emphasis prioritizes a range of approaches towards research, documentation, and dissemination of MPK. The principal motivation to recast the knowledge(s) that concerns us here as “subaltern,” is to steer MPK research more towards an empowering praxis and away from, what Thrupp (1989) has aptly called, “scientized packaging.”

Indigenous Knowledge Systems approach

Overwhelmingly, most literature on MPK has been generated in a systems framework. IK is the preferred term used in this body of literature and this land of knowledge is conceptualized as a system. Many of the foremost exponents of the systems framework are represented in the works edited by Brokensha et al. (1980), Warren et al. (1989), Warren (1991b), Warren et al. (1995). Together, they have contributed enormously to establishing the legitimacy of IK. They have changed the negative biases of researchers trained in Euro-American traditions toward IK, promoted and institutionalized IKS research, and forged the links between IK and international development.