

Indigenous knowledge in Sri Lanka: its Nature, Preservation and Development: Scenario 500 years after the Western Occupation

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Knowledge as an entity is indivisible. Strictly speaking, it cannot be categorized as indigenous, legitimized or scientific. However, for the sake of learning it is divided into two main categories. (1) Indigenous knowledge, is also known as local knowledge, traditional knowledge or civilization knowledge (2) Legitimized or scientific knowledge. These categories are artificial. Indigenous or traditional knowledge is the knowledge that is unique to a given geographical location, society or a culture. It is unique, traditional and local knowledge existing within and developed around specific conditions of women and men indigenous to a particular geographic area. It is passed down from generation to generation mostly through the word of mouth and to a lesser extent through writing.

Knowledge is a dynamic entity. It transmits across geographic locations other than where it was born and bred. Also it gets mixed with other systems of knowledge developed elsewhere and put forth new sprouts. These features are unique to indigenous knowledge, too. Similarities of indigenous knowledge practices among South and South Asian countries show the cross cultural transmission of traditional knowledge. There are enough evidences to show the mix up of indigenous medical knowledge of Sri Lanka with the Ayurvedic medical system of India.

Inhabitants in Sri Lanka throughout its long history have produced a wealth of local knowledge and used it effectively for the human and socio-economic development of the country. However, the Western occupation in Sri Lanka, from 1505 AD to 1948 AD has seriously hampered the growth and the use of indigenous knowledge in the country and has given birth to the following false notions. Nonetheless, one can observe the following salient features in the indigenous knowledge when it compares with the so called legitimized knowledge.

In Sri Lanka no concerted efforts have been taken yet to preserve the wealth of its traditional knowledge. Within next few decades most of the ola leaf manuscripts heaped in temples will get destroyed due to neglect. Most of the oral knowledge has already vanished since the word by mouth tradition does not exist in present society. Hence it is an urgent necessity to collect and preserve these valuable sources of knowledge for the benefit of coming generations. Indigenous knowledge should be developed and put to use.

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