

Traditional Wisdom and Alternative Models of Development

Sri Lanka's rich heritage of creative traditional knowledge and practices, have been the force behind the most complex and indigenous irrigation system the world has seen.

Technologically Sri Lanka had developed a unique wind driven iron smelting furnace, pioneering the production of the highest quality high-carbon steel the world had known commencing from the 3rd Century BC and reaching a peak during 7th to 11th Century AD. On the other hand, the small scale models of homestead farming described as Forest Gardens, are known to demonstrate the highest levels of biodiversity conservation known anywhere. It is this kind of indigenous knowledge that our ancestors used in all spheres of human activity throughout the recorded history of our civilization.

Traditions contain beliefs, customs and knowledge handed down through generations. It has specific features in a given culture, but it is also a partner with other neighbouring cultures.

Traditional Knowledge (TK) is sometimes referred to as 'Indigenous Knowledge', 'Local Knowledge', 'Folk Knowledge', and even 'Past Knowledge'. This knowledge is indigenous and local when it relates to a particular locality. It is also folk knowledge in character when it reflects the features and practices of a particular community. It is also past knowledge because it flows from generation to generation. Despite the diversity of characteristics of TK, there is a recognition that traditional wisdom in its dynamism and adoptive features, could not have survived the test of time, had it not served the basic needs for a

holistic livelihood for the people, which included economic prosperity, biophysical and spiritual advancement, and contentment to live in harmony with the natural environment.

It is clear that general policies on liberalization and globalization tend to create extreme forms of inequality and deprivation in social organizations, while the consequent extravagant consumption of natural resources leads to deforestation and loss of biodiversity, creating problems of waste disposal, as well as air and water pollution. On the contrary, these very specific concerns in environment management have been eloquently addressed through foresight, understanding and knowledge by our forefathers in a past era of contended living. It is in this context that TK needs to be revived, revitalized and appropriately utilized in alternative pathways of development to rationalize the current pace of unstable and skewed development.

It is an unfortunate reality that despite the unique advances made by Sri Lanka in recent times, the rapidly increasing population pressure, and consequent environmental degradation, driven partly by global policies on liberalization and globalization, have tended to create inequality and deprivation in our own social order. In this context one sees the need for a new paradigm in national development for which the State itself may take on the onerous task of evolving alternative models of development to ensure societal equality, equity, magnanimity and harmony through the guidance of the country's traditional wisdom and knowledge.