Editorial

Expanding Contours of Knowledge: Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Self-Reliance and Sustainability

Rashi Bhargava*

Department of Sociology, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya, India
*Correspondence: *rbhargava@nehu.ac.in ; rbhargava168@gmail.com*

Received: *10th March, 2025;* ***Accepted:*** *16th March 2025;* ***Published:****30th April, 2025*

Vantage: Journal of Thematic Analysis

A Peer Reviewed Multidisciplinary Publication of Centre for Research, Maitreyi College, University of Delhi. Volume 6, Issue 1, April 2025. https://vantagejournal.com ISSN(E): 2582-7391

How to cite:

Bhargava, R. (2025). Expanding Contours of Knowledge: Indigenous Knowledge Systems, Self-Reliance and Sustainability. *Vantage: Journal of Thematic Analysis*, 6(1), 1-2. https://doi.org/10.52253/vjta.2025.v06i01.01

The editorial of the last volume of Vantage began thus: "There are many stories about India. But the key question is how to know and see India?" The editorial answered it by stating, "The contemporary use of the term 'our culture' invisibilises this (pluralistic literary traditions) dimension of India" (Tripathy, 2024). Through her engagement with both national and vernacular literary traditions, Tripathy very lucidly made us relook our understanding of India, Indians and Indianness. Having worked on issues in the context of North-east India for more than a decade and half and now being stationed in the region not only made me approach this question differently but pushed me to raise a few of my own. How do we define (our) world and the people in that world? How did the text ('word' as Tripathy puts it in her editorial and quite rightly so) come to be the most prominent way to understand the world in its myriad forms? In doing so, are we not failing to account for the societies that have oral and visual traditions (often referred to as unlettered) defying the mainstream understanding of history, historicity and dynamism? My answer to this question is very simple: owing to the dominant civilisational paradigm, the textual and the written word had been prioritised over the oral and the visual, pushing many intellectual traditions and systems of knowledge to the periphery thereby placing them in a hierarchical relationship. Prima facie this may not seem to be a big issue, however, such a relationship underneath its surface has a civilisational bias, a distorted understanding of historicity, intellect and knowledge and subsequently development, growth and progress. However, these oral narratives which include an array of folklore materials have been an invaluable source of knowledge about indigenous worldview and lifeways providing us an insight into sustainability, survival and self-reliance.

Having said that, my submission is this: any attempt to discuss the relationship between systems of knowledge in India and self-reliance will be incomplete if folk, tribal and indigenous intellectual traditions and the associated material and non-material culture are not acknowledged and engaged with. This is so because their inclusion expands our contours of knowledge by bringing the marginalised systems of thought within the ambit of the mainstream. North-east India is the case in point. In the case of the North-east, Guite (2019) notes, "*...the history of Northeast Indian tribes roughly begins with the colonial period as if no history of them prior to that was written. Thus, we have two sets of the tribal pasts - the written and the spoken/oral, the history and the myth, the state and the stateless*" (pg. xiii). He further adds that these societies had their histories in oral narratives which received little to no attention for the longest time. It is not a 'relic' of pre-historic times, but a dynamic region that has responded to the various macro and micro phenomenon, thereby, giving us the linkages between the local, regional and global. North-east India, which was posited as the frontier region, became a recipient of development programmes, both national and international (Sharma, 2021), that did not take

into account the social, cultural, historical and political realities of the region, is now being looked at and engaged with a new perspective. The counter-narratives from the region with its rich cultural traditions including oral narratives, folkways, myths, legends and belief systems provide us with a roadmap towards self-reliance and sustainability. In his study of commons and wildlife conservation, Willem van Schendel (2023) writes, "Historically the societies of Northeast India had developed sophisticated ideas about shared resources" (pg. 73) and "although these were not codified in written statement of rights, they were nevertheless very real" (pg. 74). These materials "embody the process, resource and responsibility of tradition. They are a testimony to thousands of years of accumulated knowledge..." (Kharmawphlang, 2023, pg. 364) about healing practices, farming techniques, sustainable products (like that of bamboo - the green gold from North-East India), handlooms, handicrafts and local cuisines. Many of these oral narratives are now a rich source of information and a recognition of this does not only have policy implications, as can be seen in the current government's vision for *Viksit Bharat@*2047, which is said to begin with the North-eastern region, but also for the way we engage with indigenous knowledge systems in public, academic and scholarly discourse.

The discussion above though focuses primarily on North-east India, is only indicative of the rich canvas of systems of knowledge traditions that exist in India. It comprises the classical, vernacular, regional, folk, tribal and indigenous which not only provide us with the gamut of ways to think about self-reliance but also help us free our 'captive mind' (Alatas, 1972). That is to say, it makes us recognise the dangers of looking to the global north without recognising what we have. However, in our attempt to become self-reliant there is a danger of becoming parochial and misguided if not connected to the larger world that we are part of. It is up to us to look at this critically, reflexively and weigh its pros and cons and not fall into the trope of ending up with binaries.

REFERENCES

1. Alatas, S. H. (1972). The Captive Mind in Development Studies. *International Social Science Journal*, 24(1):9–25.
2. Guite, J. (2019). *Against state, against history: Freedom, resistance and statelessness in upland Northeast India*. Oxford.
3. Kharmawphlang, D.L. (2023). Oral narratives. In J.P. Wouters and T.B. Subba (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to Northeast India* (pp. 364-369). Routledge.
4. Sharma, G. A. (2021). The trajectory of 'development' in a resource frontier. In G.A. Sharma (Ed.) *State vs. society in Northeast India: History, politics and the everyday* (pp. 223-247). Sage.
5. Tripathy, G. D. (2024). Fullness of India: Word, World and People. *Vantage: Journal of Thematic Analysis*, 5(2):1-3.
6. Van Schendel, W. (2023). Commons and wildlife conservation. In J.P. Wouters and T.B. Subba (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to Northeast India* (pp. 73-80). Routledge.