



ISSUES AND CHALLENGES ON INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The significance of Indigenous knowledge and its role are being recognized worldwide today. However, there is the grave danger of its extinction due to internal and external factors. That the preservation of indigenous knowledge is a pertinent and urgent matter is being acknowledged by the stakeholders – indigenous communities, governmental and non-governmental bodies and researchers alike. One of the most important approaches to this preservation is the research being carried out by academics and non-academics. Researching on indigenous knowledge, while it faces the same issues as researching on other subject areas, is also saddled with additional issues in connection with key contacts, authenticity, copyright and so on. This paper describes the common and uncommon issues associated with researching on indigenous knowledge based mainly on personal experiences of the researcher.

KEYWORDS : *Indigenous Knowledge, Research on Indigenous knowledge, Problems in Research, Issues and Challenges.*

INTRODUCTION

The cultural practices and way of life of indigenous communities worldwide are also known as indigenous knowledge. This knowledge has been transmitted for generations amongst the indigenous communities, mostly orally, and is a reflection of their history and identity. Over the years however, indigenous knowledge has been gravely threatened by factors like dilution and even extinction (due to misinterpretation by existing practitioners and death of the original practitioners) and replacement by modern practices, especially with the proliferation of computer technologies. Preservation of indigenous knowledge has thus become a war cry among stakeholders like the indigenous communities, governmental and non-governmental bodies as well as researchers.

Indigenous Knowledge (IK) is defined as a systematic body of knowledge acquired by local people through the accumulation of experiences, informal experiments and intimate understanding of the environment in a given culture (Rajasakeran, 1992). Indigenous knowledge can be seen as local or traditional knowledge that is unique to every culture or society. The knowledge influences planning as well as decision-making in local areas. It is the unique knowledge confined to a particular culture or society. It is also known as local knowledge, folk knowledge, people's knowledge, traditional wisdom or traditional science. This knowledge is generated and transmitted by communities, over time, in an effort to cope with their own agro-

ecological and socio-economic environments (Fernandez, 1994). It is generated through a systematic process of observing local conditions, experimenting with solutions and readapting previously identified solutions to modified environmental, socio-economic and technological situations (Brouwers, 1993).

IMPORTANCE OF RESEARCH ON INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

Indigenous knowledge is crucial to development, hence it is frequently recommended that it be acquired and recorded in a systematic and cohesive manner (Brokensha et al. 1980; Warren et al. 1993). The importance of indigenous knowledge to development will become clear as more studies on it become available. According to the reasoning, these studies should be stored in databases at national and international centres so that the data in them may be carefully categorised. With the use of newsletters, journals, and other media, proper distribution and interchange among interested parties should be added to the gathering and storage of indigenous knowledge (Warren et al. 1993). The survival of the economies of emerging nations may be ensured by using local knowledge. Therefore, indigenous knowledge is crucial for fostering local community development. Even the wealthiest and most successful governments cannot meet all of the needs of the people, so it is important to consider indigenous knowledge as well in order to improve development (Atte, 1992). Indigenous information must be acquired, arranged,



and transmitted in the same organised manner as contemporary knowledge since it is crucial to progress (Agrawal, 1995).

Research on various aspects of indigenous knowledge is being carried out by scholars and non-scholars from various disciplines. While some report the existing status of such knowledge, others go farther and attempt to extend suggestions and solutions to issues facing indigenous knowledge. Researching on indigenous knowledge, while it faces the same issues as research on other subject areas, is also saddled with additional issues in connection with key contacts, authenticity, copyright and so on. Such knowledge being mostly rural centric also presents another set of issues for researchers. One of the means for preservation of indigenous knowledge is its documentation; collection, processing, preservation and dissemination. Documented knowledge is made accessible by governmental and non-governmental bodies. Following are the issues and challenges encountered while researching on indigenous knowledge.

ISSUES ON INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE RESEARCH

It takes careful consideration of ethical, cultural, and practical considerations to do research on indigenous knowledge, which is a complicated and sensitive task. Indigenous knowledge includes the customs, beliefs, and worldviews of indigenous peoples and frequently relates to topics like ecology, medicine, agriculture, spirituality, and more. When conducting study on indigenous knowledge, it's important to be mindful of the following issues:

- **Respect for diversity and cultural sensitivity:** Indigenous knowledge is closely entwined with indigenous peoples' traditions and identities. Respect for these cultures and traditions must be shown in how researchers do their research. Before starting their investigation, they should interact with local residents, authorities, and elders to get their approval.
- **Informed consent** is essential for indigenous research. Before beginning any study operations, researchers must get explicit, informed permission from community people. This includes describing the study's objectives, the manner in which data will be utilised, and any possible advantages or dangers.
- **Intellectual Property Rights:** Indigenous knowledge is frequently considered to be community or common property. Indigenous communities' intellectual property rights must be respected by researchers, who must also make sure that information is used for the community's advantage rather than being exploited for their own or other peoples' financial gain.
- **Involvement of the Community:** Indigenous communities should be actively included in all stages of the research process, from developing the research questions to gathering and analysing the data. As opposed to conventional, top-down techniques, collaborative and participatory research procedures are frequently more suitable.
- **Data Ownership and Control:** The information and data gathered throughout the research should be within the ownership and control of the indigenous populations. The

sharing and release of data should be decided upon in accordance with the community's rights to ownership and control.

- **Preventing Harm:** Researchers need to be conscious of the possible harm that might result from their work, such as cultural appropriation, misrepresentation, or adverse effects on the community. There should be precautions made to lessen these dangers.
- **Language and Translation:** Native knowledge is frequently passed down through the use of native tongues. To guarantee correct comprehension and portrayal, researchers may need to collaborate with interpreters or translators who are attentive to the intricacies of indigenous languages and cultures.
- **Benefit Sharing:** Researchers should think about how the included indigenous people could profit from their research's findings. This might involve disclosing study findings, offering chances for training and capacity-building, or assisting neighborhood-based projects.
- **Long-Term Relationships:** It's critical to forge enduring bonds of trust with indigenous populations. Researchers should be devoted to continual cooperation and assistance rather than doing "hit-and-run" studies.
- **Ethical Review:** Research utilising indigenous knowledge should go through ethical review procedures that are culturally sensitive and take into account the particular ethical issues of the community being investigated.
- **Compliance with Local and National rules:** Researchers should be aware of and adhere to local and national rules and regulations that apply to indigenous research, particularly those relating to cultural heritage, intellectual property, and human subjects.

CHALLENGES OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE RESEARCH

- **Lack of clarity:** The nature of indigenous knowledge is vast and complex in nature. The practices and knowledge of indigenous people differs with difference in climatic condition and the regions they live in. Topography and geographical conditions of the regions offer different cultures with different lifestyles. This results in developing different survival skills and involvement of different knowledge to bolster the origin of locally developed instruments. This indigenous knowledge is varied in nature and sometimes researchers make the mistake of confusing between a broad area and a specific topic or sub-topic leading to generalizations and vague results. It requires the study to focus on one nature of indigenous knowledge for it is difficult to cover the vast complex knowledge in a given limited time.
- **Inaccessibility:** Studies conducted on indigenous knowledge require participation and involvement of the stakeholders and practitioner in collecting the local knowledge. This often requires the researchers to live among the people under study, to observe their daily activities. Practitioners of indigenous



knowledge often live in most remote and inaccessible corners of the regions. This leads to difficulty in identifying and locating them. Moreover, in most cases, it is found that the topography of the areas are challenging, the places are often out of network coverage areas and there is sudden change in the climatic conditions. The researchers on the other hand are mostly urban citizens, unused to such conditions. It takes time for them to adjust to such new conditions. Some are unable to adjust. This sometimes affects the research process to the extent that some researchers may resort to vague and even manipulated data. One of the most challenging issues in the study of local indigenous knowledge lies in the language. Lack of knowledge of the local language is an issue, for language is the only effective communication medium that will lead to accomplishment of the objective of the study. Researchers have to take help from interpreters, a practice which is sometimes fraught with problems in terms of finance, equation with interpreter, accommodation of interpreter etc.

- **Lack of relevant information sources:** It is universally accepted that indigenous knowledge is orally passed down from generation to generation. Therefore, written records of this knowledge are not maintained unless studies are being conducted specifically. It also appears that most of the local people are not in a position to maintain records of the knowledge, one of the main reasons being illiteracy and ignorance of its necessity for the future. This lack of literature on indigenous knowledge tends to limit the research design which presents problems for the researchers. This in turn limits the number of research projects being carried out and hence lack of research articles on a specific topic. However, this can also be a blessing in disguise in that it makes pioneers of those who venture into these unknown areas.
- **Financial constraints:** Studies conducted on indigenous knowledge require the researchers to move from their comfort zone and equip themselves with all the tools and materials vital for collection and preservation of data collected from the field. The field for indigenous study as mentioned before tends to be a remote area, far from urban comforts. This requires travelling long distance and finding the right people to extract the valid knowledge. All of this incurs financial costs. It is thus important for the researchers to have a proper financial funding to support themselves for executing the perfect study.
- **Time constraints:** Academic study or research is often constrained by time obligations set up by the funding body. It thus requires the researchers to wind up in the allotted time period. However, the indigenous knowledge of a specific community is often vast and complex in nature. Moreover it requires participation of the locals to extract the minute details of the original knowledge embedded in their environment. Indigenous knowledge covers all the basic knowledge of a particular community which they had been practicing since time immemorial to sustain their livelihood. A thorough and

precise study of any indigenous knowledge becomes quite impossible, given such time constraints.

- **Lack of key people:** One of the most common reasons for the extinction of indigenous knowledge is lack of key people who can share (describe) such knowledge accurately. These are the original practitioners who have a hold over authentic information. As mentioned earlier, the oral nature of transmission of knowledge poses problems like dilution and even extinction (due to misinterpretation by existing practitioners and death of the original practitioners) of vital indigenous knowledge.
- **Wariness:** One of the common issues in indigenous knowledge research is the wariness of the stakeholders or practitioners towards any 'outsiders' and their activities. Of course, such suspicion on their part can be justified in their past negative experiences - such as of being cheated of their knowledge. Copyright issues continue to plague indigenous knowledge. Local knowledge of many communities has been reported to be misused without the consent of the stakeholders which led to wariness on the part of the locals. Such wariness can sometimes become so extreme as to pose a danger to the very lives of the researchers. It is advisable for researchers to tread carefully when researching on indigenous knowledge. Background knowledge as well as sensitivity towards the local conditions and practices can go a long way in facilitating the research work. Taking help from native guides can be very helpful. Being a native of the research site can help even farther.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, researching indigenous knowledge involves a strong commitment to moral ideals, cultural sensitivity, and involvement in the community. Throughout the study process, researchers should put the rights, welfare, and self-determination of indigenous populations first. To do competent and ethical research in this area, collaboration, transparency, and respect are essential. The world is waking up to the urgency of identifying, locating and preserving indigenous knowledge. This is mostly done through research. Such research however is not without issues, as mentioned above. Nevertheless, such issues should not hinder the flow of research on such a vital area as indigenous knowledge. Proper background check along with the necessary precautions and care need to be taken to ensure continuous research on this area.

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