



Understanding Tradition and Rethinking the Indian Knowledge System: A Contemporary Perspective

Radha J. Gohel

Assistant Professor of English

School of Arts and Humanities

Dr. Subhash University, Junagadh

Abstract

The newly implemented course Indian Knowledge System (IKS) signifies a vast and historically layered tradition of intellectual inquiry encompassing philosophy, science, medicine, linguistics, ecology, aesthetics, and social organization. In the current years, Indian Knowledge Systems have gained renewed academic and institutional attention. While this new birth seeks to correct the historical relegation of native knowledge under colonial epistemologies, it has also generated conceptual, methodological, and ethical challenges. This paper claims that Indian Knowledge Systems should neither be treated as static repositories of ancient wisdom nor positioned as ideological alternatives to modern knowledge. This, they must be understood as dynamic, plural, and evolving traditions capable of engaging critically with contemporary intellectual frameworks. Using this qualitative, humanities-based approach, this study scrutinizes the meaning of tradition in the Indian context, the epistemological foundations of IKS, and the challenges involved in the contemporary implementation of this course by the government of India. The research paper contributes the need for methodological rigor, interdisciplinarity, and ethical responsibility to ensure that Indian Knowledge Systems contribute meaningfully to global knowledge while retaining academic integrity and cultural specificity.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge System, tradition, epistemology, contemporary thought, humanities, NEP 2020

1. Introduction

India's heritage establishes one of the longest continuous traditions of knowledge production in the world. Over several decades, diverse systems of thought evolved in response to philosophical, ethical, scientific, and social questions. These systems were transmitted through oral traditions, textual scholarship, and teacher-disciple lineages. Cooperatively, these diverse intellectual traditions are now referred to as the Indian Knowledge System (IKS).

Indian knowledge traditions were systematically demoted during the colonial period. During the colonial period, Western science and philosophy were considered universal, supreme, and objective and progressive, while marginalized systems were dismissed as pre-modern, speculative, or religious. Colonial education policies were established by excluding Indian epistemologies from formal curricula, creating a lasting rupture between indigenous intellectual traditions and modern education.

Independent India has been discovering native knowledge, which often takes symbolic or nationalist forms based on cultural pride rather than critical engagement. The renewed interest in Indian Knowledge Systems in the twenty-first century, especially after the National Education Policy 2020, marks a significant shift.

Universities have established IKS centres, and the new curricula have been proposed; also, policy discourse increasingly emphasizes the relevance of indigenous knowledge.

This renaissance creates several critical questions: What does it mean to understand “tradition” in a contemporary academic context? And how can Indian knowledge systems be integrated into modern education without romanticization or ideological appropriation? Can IKS be engaged effectively with global knowledge frameworks? This paper talks about these questions by rethinking Indian knowledge systems from a contemporary humanities perspective.

2. Understanding Tradition in the Indian Intellectual Context

People are often misunderstanding tradition because it consists of uncritical and unresolved beliefs and practices that are frequently inherited. In this research paper, the researcher discusses the importance of tradition in relation to continuity, authority, and resistance to change. The meaning of the word "tradition" is to understand the standing inheritance, and this reinforces the assumption that modernity and tradition are fundamentally opposed.

In the Indian context, tradition has been historically dynamic, peculiar, dialogic, and self-reflexive. Classical philosophical schools such as Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, Vedānta, Buddhism, and Jainism grew through continued debate, difference, and reinterpretation. Knowledge was not accepted due to the basis of antiquity but was subjected to rigorous reasoning, commentary, and critique.

Texts functioned not as final authorities but as starting points for further inquiry. The functions of commentarial societies allowed for the refinement and challenge of ideas. This dialogic character represents that Indian tradition was not opposed to reason or critical inquiry but understood tradition as a living process rather than a fixed product; therefore, it is essential for meaningful engagement with Indian Knowledge Systems.

3. Colonial Epistemology and the Marginalization of Native Knowledge

To understand the Indian knowledge system thoroughly, we must look at the impact of colonial thinking. During British suppression, a strict hierarchy of knowledge was created. Western science and knowledge were superior compared to Indian knowledge, and Indian knowledge was treated as inferior. Many Indian knowledge traditions were labelled as delusions or were limited only to religion and spirituality, not thinking beyond thoughts and thinking.

Colonial education policies played a main role in India because schools and universities mainly taught English-language based on Western ideas. The traditional Indian languages like Sanskrit, Pali, and Persian were removed from regular education. The important Indian texts on philosophy, medicine, mathematics, and astronomy were excluded from the curriculum. As a result, Indian students were far away from their knowledge traditions.

This major change not just affected education, but it also exaggerated how Indians began to see themselves. Over many years, people in India adopted British culture and education. Indian people believed that Western knowledge was more modern and useful, while Indian knowledge was old-fashioned and less useful. These developments created a mental dependence on Western ideas and weakened confidence in indigenous knowledge systems.

We can still observe that the impact of this colonial mindset was deeply rooted in Indian knowledge systems, which were treated as less important and extra subjects rather than as an important part of world knowledge.

People are doubting and usually consider that this system is inferior to Western theories in academic discussions. To see this inequity, it is not enough to change institutions or policies alone. However, we must define knowledge and respect tradition as a serious and valuable source of learning.

4. Scope and Diversity of Indian Knowledge Systems

The Indian Knowledge System includes deeply epistemological subjects including philosophy, logic, linguistics, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, architecture, ecology, aesthetics, and social thought. Unlike modern disciplinary divisions, Indian knowledge traditions were full, mixing ethical, spiritual, and practical concerns.

Medical knowledge, is more emphasized precautionary care, lifestyle regulation, and ethical conduct. Linguistics was deeply connected to philosophy and procedural practice. Ecological knowledge arisen from sustained interaction with the natural environment rather than abstract theorization.

Indian Knowledge Systems are not massive. It includes diverse regional, linguistic, and community-based traditions. Identifying this internal diversity, it is essential to avoid essentialist representations that portray Indian knowledge as uniform or timeless.

5. Epistemological Foundations of Indian Knowledge Systems

The various elements of this for understanding the Indian knowledge system are perception, inference, testimony, comparison, and intuition. This plural epistemology contrasts with modern positivistic frameworks that prioritize empirical observation as the sole criterion of knowledge.

Indian philosophical traditions established stringent criteria for assessing knowledge claims, encompassing logical coherence, experiential validity, and ethical ramifications. Knowledge was understood not merely as information but as a means of reducing suffering and cultivating wisdom.

In contemporary academics, recognizing this epistemic plurality allows for more inclusive knowledge frameworks without abandoning rigor. It mostly encourages dialogue between different ways of knowing and challenges the dominance of a single epistemological model.

6. Methodology

The researcher has studied this research paper on the basis of qualitative, interpretative methodology grounded in humanities research. The study includes critical analysis of secondary scholarly sources and policy documents related to Indian Knowledge Systems. It studies the conceptual analyses of the tradition and modernity. The research does not attempt empirical validation of traditional knowledge claims. But it focuses on understanding intellectual structures, historical evolution, and contemporary relevance. This type of methodology is ill-suited to the study of Indian knowledge systems, which quantitative or technical approaches alone cannot adequately explain.

7. Contemporary Revival of Indian Knowledge Systems

The contemporary revival of Indian Knowledge Systems, particularly following NEP 2020, represents a significant shift in educational policy. Universities have introduced IKS courses, in colleges, universities and research centres, and funding initiatives. This institutional recognition has increased visibility and legitimacy for indigenous knowledge traditions.

However, the revival also reveals limitations. Many initiatives lack methodological clarity and rely on symbolic representation rather than critical engagement. In some cases, tradition is presented as inherently superior or unfailing, undermining academic inquiry. Without rigorous frameworks, IKS risks becoming a cultural token rather than a transformative intellectual resource.

8. Interdisciplinarity and Pedagogical Challenges

Meaningful integration of Indian Knowledge Systems requires interdisciplinarity. Traditional Indian knowledge production did not operate within rigid disciplinary boundaries. Philosophy intersected with linguistics, ethics with medicine, and cosmology with mathematics.

Modern academia, by contrast, is highly specialized. Integrating IKS therefore demands pedagogical innovation, interdisciplinary curricula, and faculty training. A major challenge is the shortage of educators trained in both classical Indian traditions and modern academic methodologies.

Accessibility is another concern. Indian Knowledge Systems should not be presented as elite or exclusionary. Community based knowledge, oral traditions, and marginalized voices must be included to reflect the diversity of Indian intellectual heritage.

9. Ethics, Intellectual Property, and Community Knowledge

Ethical considerations are central to the contemporary reinterpretation of Indian Knowledge Systems. Much traditional knowledge is collectively owned by communities rather than individuals. Commercialization and academic extraction raise serious questions of consent, ownership, and benefit-sharing.

Modern intellectual property regimes often fail to recognize collective knowledge systems, leading to exploitation and misappropriation. Ethical engagement requires transparency, acknowledgment, and respect for community rights. Knowledge must be studied within its cultural context rather than extracted as decontextualized data.

10. Politicization and the Risk of Essentialism

One of the most serious challenges facing the revival of Indian Knowledge Systems is politicization. When IKS is mobilized to support ideological agendas, it undermines scholarly credibility and discourages critical inquiry. Essentialist narratives portray Indian knowledge as homogeneous, timeless, and superior, ignoring internal diversity and historical change.

A humanities-based approach counters these tendencies by emphasizing debate, plurality, and historical context. Critical scholarship resists both colonial dismissal and nationalist glorification, ensuring academic integrity.

11. Indian Knowledge Systems in Global Intellectual Discourse

Repositioning Indian Knowledge Systems within global intellectual discourse requires moving beyond binaries of East and West. Knowledge production has always involved cross-cultural exchange. Indian intellectual traditions have historically interacted with Greek, Persian, Arab, and European thought.

Recognizing these interactions challenges civilizational isolationism and highlights shared intellectual histories. Indian Knowledge Systems should be engaged as contributors to global knowledge rather than alternatives to it.

12. Conclusion

Understanding tradition and rethinking the Indian Knowledge System from a contemporary perspective is both an intellectual necessity and an ethical responsibility. Indian Knowledge Systems are not static relics of the past but dynamic, plural, and evolving traditions shaped by debate, adaptation, and lived experience.

The contemporary revival of IKS offers an opportunity to correct historical marginalization and enrich global knowledge. However, this opportunity must be approached with methodological rigor, interdisciplinarity, and ethical sensitivity. Without critical engagement, IKS risks becoming symbolic or ideological.

A humanities-based framework enables reflective engagement with tradition, balancing respect for historical depth with critical inquiry. When approached thoughtfully, Indian Knowledge Systems can contribute meaningfully to contemporary thought while preserving academic integrity and cultural specificity

Works Cited

- Ganeri, Jonardon. *The Lost Age of Reason: Philosophy in Early Modern India 1450–1700*. Oxford UP, 2011.
- Mukherjee, Sujit. *Translation as Discovery and Other Essays*. Orient Longman, 1994.
- National Education Policy 2020. Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020.
- Pollock, Sheldon. “Is There an Indian Intellectual History?” *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 36, no. 5–6, 2008, pp. 533–542.
- Sen, Amartya. *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*. Penguin Books, 2005.
- Sharma, Arvind. *Classical Hindu Thought: An Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2000.
- Thapar, Romila. *The Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities through History*. Aleph Book Company, 2014.
- Alvares, Claude. *A Critique of Modern Science and Its Claims*. Other India Press, 2001.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton UP, 2000.
- Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*. 1859. Oxford UP, 2008.
- Dirks, Nicholas B. *The Scandal of Empire: India and the Creation of Imperial Britain*. Harvard UP, 2006.
- Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. Edited by Colin Gordon, Pantheon Books, 1980.
- Gandhi, M. K. *Hind Swaraj and Other Writings*. Edited by Anthony J. Parel, Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Kaviraj, Sudipta. “The Imaginary Institution of India.” *Subaltern Studies VII*, edited by Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey, Oxford UP, 1992, pp. 1–39.
- Mignolo, Walter D. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Duke UP, 2011.
- Ministry of Education, Government of India. *Indian Knowledge Systems: Position Paper*. Govt. of India, 2022.
- Mukherjee, Meenakshi. *The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English*. Oxford UP, 2000.
- Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*. Oxford UP, 1983.
- Pollock, Sheldon. “Is There an Indian Intellectual History? Introduction to ‘Theory and Method in Indian Intellectual History.’” *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, vol. 36, no. 5–6, 2008, pp. 533–542.
- Radhakrishnan, S. *Indian Philosophy*. Vol. 1, 2nd ed., George Allen & Unwin, 1951.
- Sen, Amartya. *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005.
- Sharma, Arvind. *Classical Hindu Thought: An Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2000.
- Thapar, Romila. *Cultural Pasts: Essays in Early Indian History*. Oxford UP, 2000.
- UNESCO. *Local and Indigenous Knowledge Systems*. UNESCO, 2017, www.unesco.org.
- Vivekananda, Swami. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*. Vol. 1, Advaita Ashrama, 1989.