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Indian Knowledge System in Contemporary Society : Relevance, Challenges and Sociological Perspectives

Abstract : Indian Knowledge System (IKS) refers to the wide range of intellectual, cultural and practical knowledge traditions that have developed and been transmitted across generations in India. These traditions include philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, agriculture, architecture, linguistics, literature, arts, ethics, education, yoga and community-based practices. In contemporary India, interest in IKS has increased significantly, particularly after the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasized the importance of Indian languages, culture, arts and indigenous knowledge in education. From a sociological perspective, IKS should not be viewed simply as a collection of ancient texts or practices. It is also a social process through which knowledge is created, transmitted, preserved, accepted and modified. Traditional knowledge has influenced family life, community relationships, agriculture, health practices, environmental management and educational traditions. At the same time, its historical development must be examined critically because access to knowledge was sometimes shaped by caste, gender, occupation and social status. The contemporary significance of IKS lies in creating a meaningful linkage between traditional and modern knowledge. Traditional practices may provide valuable insights into sustainability, community life, ethical development and local problem-solving, but their claims should be examined through historical, empirical and scientific methods. This paper discusses the meaning, historical foundations, sociological significance, educational relevance, environmental dimensions and contemporary challenges associated with IKS.

Keywords : Indian Knowledge System, Tradition, Education, Sustainability, Social Change

1. Introduction : Knowledge is fundamental to the functioning and development of every society. Human beings acquire knowledge through observation, experience, experimentation, reflection and interaction with their social

and natural surroundings. Families, communities, educational institutions, occupational groups and cultural organizations play important roles in preserving and transmitting knowledge from one generation to another.

India has a long and diverse intellectual history. Its knowledge traditions have developed through philosophical schools, scientific and mathematical contributions, medical systems, linguistic studies, literature, arts, crafts and community practices. Therefore, Indian Knowledge System (IKS) represents a broad heritage rather than a single discipline or historical tradition.

The contemporary revival of interest in IKS is closely associated with changes in Indian educational policy. NEP 2020 emphasizes Indian languages, culture, arts and knowledge traditions, while higher education guidelines have encouraged their integration into academic curricula. The IKS Division of the Ministry of Education has also promoted research, documentation, dissemination and contemporary applications of Indian knowledge traditions. However, the study of IKS requires a balanced approach. Traditional knowledge should not be rejected simply because it is old, but neither should every traditional claim be considered correct merely because of its historical origin. Its contemporary usefulness needs to be assessed through evidence, historical context, critical reasoning and appropriate scientific evaluation.

2. Meaning and Dimensions of Indian Knowledge System : IKS can broadly be understood as the accumulated knowledge developed, preserved and transmitted through different Indian communities and intellectual traditions over long periods. It includes written as well as oral knowledge. Its major areas include philosophy and epistemology, mathematics and astronomy, Ayurveda and health traditions, agriculture, ecological knowledge, architecture, linguistics, literature, music, dance, yoga, ethics, crafts and community practices. It is important to recognize that Indian knowledge is plural. The Indian subcontinent has historically included diverse philosophical, religious, linguistic, regional and cultural traditions. Consequently, IKS should not be reduced to one religious tradition, one language or one period of history.

A broad understanding of IKS should therefore recognize both its unity and diversity. At the same time, careful conceptualization is necessary because an excessively broad definition may combine historically established knowledge with later interpretations or unsupported contemporary claims.

3. Historical Foundations : The historical development of Indian knowledge is extensive and multidimensional. Vedic and Upanishadic traditions contributed important reflections on the self, reality, knowledge and ethics. Buddhist and Jain traditions developed distinctive approaches to philosophy, logic, morality and social thought. The Nyaya tradition made significant contributions to reasoning and theories of knowledge. Indian mathematical traditions developed important ideas in arithmetic, algebra and astronomy. The works associated with scholars such as Aryabhata and Brahmagupta constitute important parts of the history of Indian mathematics and astronomy.

Ayurveda represents another major area of historical knowledge concerning health, diet and treatment. Similarly, agricultural communities developed practical knowledge relating to soil, seeds, water, weather, livestock and biodiversity. Panini's grammatical tradition demonstrates the systematic nature of Indian linguistic scholarship. These examples indicate that Indian knowledge developed across numerous fields and cannot be understood exclusively in religious or philosophical terms.

4. IKS and the Sociology of Knowledge : Sociology of knowledge examines the relationship between knowledge and society. It asks how knowledge is produced, who has access to it, how it is transmitted and which social institutions give it legitimacy. From this perspective, IKS can be studied through several questions: Who produced particular forms of knowledge? Who could access them? Through which institutions were they transmitted? Who was excluded? How did social status affect access to education? How did knowledge change over time?

Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge highlights the relationship between social location and knowledge. His perspective is useful for examining IKS because knowledge is never completely separate from the social environment in which it develops. Traditional knowledge was transmitted through families, occupational communities, local institutions and oral traditions. Other forms were preserved through manuscripts and formal educational systems. Thus, the transmission of knowledge itself was a social process.

A sociological examination also requires attention to power and inequality. Historical access to education and specialized knowledge was not always equally distributed. Caste, gender, occupation and social position could influence educational opportunities. These dimensions should therefore be included in any serious academic study of IKS.

5. IKS and Contemporary Education : Education is one of the most important areas in which IKS has contemporary relevance. The integration of Indian knowledge traditions can help students understand India's intellectual history and appreciate its cultural diversity. IKS can also connect academic learning with local experience. Students may examine local agricultural practices, traditional crafts, ecological knowledge, languages and community institutions as subjects of systematic study. Such an approach can strengthen interdisciplinary learning.

However, incorporating IKS into education should not mean replacing modern scientific education. A more productive approach is comparative and dialogic. Traditional agricultural knowledge can be studied together with modern agricultural science; historical health traditions can be examined alongside contemporary medical research; and classical Indian approaches to logic can be compared with modern theories of reasoning. Such an approach allows students to recognize both the contributions and limitations of different knowledge traditions.

6. IKS and Sustainable Development : Traditional knowledge has particular relevance to contemporary discussions of environmental sustainability. Many communities developed practices suited to their local ecological conditions. Knowledge concerning water management, crop selection, seed preservation, biodiversity and community management of natural resources can provide useful areas for research.

These traditions are particularly significant in the context of climate change, water scarcity, environmental degradation and biodiversity loss. Nevertheless, traditional practices should not automatically be regarded as environmentally sustainable. Their effectiveness depends on specific ecological and social circumstances and should be assessed through empirical research. A constructive framework may therefore combine traditional knowledge, scientific evaluation, participation of local communities and contemporary innovation. Such collaboration can help develop solutions appropriate to particular local environments.

7. IKS and Rural Society : Rural communities are important sites for studying Indian knowledge traditions. Agricultural communities have accumulated knowledge about local crops, seasonal cycles, soil, livestock, water resources, medicinal plants, food preservation, architecture and cooperation. Much of this knowledge exists within everyday practices rather than formal textbooks. It is often communicated through observation, participation and experience. Modernization, migration, commercialization and technological change can weaken some traditional practices. At the same time, digital technologies can help record and preserve useful local knowledge.

This process demonstrates the relationship between tradition and social change. Traditional knowledge is not necessarily static; it can change as communities respond to new economic, technological and social conditions.

8. IKS, Values and Community Life : Indian philosophical and cultural traditions contain discussions of values such as compassion, truth, self-discipline, non-violence, duty, responsibility and concern for collective welfare. These ideas may contribute to contemporary discussions concerning social fragmentation, excessive consumerism and environmental

concerns. Ethical traditions emphasizing responsibility and collective well-being can provide useful material for value-based education.

However, values from the past cannot simply be transferred unchanged into contemporary society. They need to be interpreted in accordance with present-day principles such as equality, dignity, democracy, gender justice and human rights. Thus, IKS can contribute to ethical education when it is approached critically and inclusively.

9. IKS and Holistic Development : Several Indian philosophical traditions have presented human development in an interconnected manner. Physical, mental, intellectual, ethical and spiritual dimensions have often been considered together. Modern education frequently gives considerable attention to academic achievement and measurable outcomes. A broader conception of education can also include emotional development, ethical reasoning, creativity, physical well-being and social responsibility. This does not require replacing contemporary educational psychology or scientific methods with traditional approaches. Instead, selected traditional ideas can be examined comparatively and critically. The contemporary value of IKS therefore includes the possibility of encouraging a broader understanding of human development.

10. IKS, Health and Well-being : Ayurveda, yoga and other traditional health practices have attracted substantial contemporary interest. Yoga, in particular, has received international recognition as a practice involving physical postures, breathing and mental discipline. Ayurveda represents a historical system of health-related knowledge. At the same time, cultural importance and medical effectiveness are not necessarily the same. Claims concerning treatment and health outcomes should be evaluated using appropriate scientific evidence.

Sociology can contribute to the study of traditional health practices by examining how different communities understand illness, healing, food, the body and well-being. Such research can connect sociology with anthropology, medicine, psychology and public health.

11. IKS and Indian Languages : Language is an important means of preserving and transmitting knowledge. India's linguistic diversity has enabled knowledge to survive through Sanskrit and numerous regional and classical languages. Traditional knowledge is also embedded in folk songs, stories, oral traditions, local terminology and community practices.

Consequently, preserving Indian languages is closely related to preserving cultural knowledge. Translation and digital documentation can make traditional knowledge accessible to younger generations. However, translation should preserve cultural context and meaning rather than merely replacing words from one language with words from another.

12. IKS and Technology : Technology creates new possibilities for documenting and studying Indian knowledge traditions. Digital archives can preserve manuscripts, oral histories, traditional designs, historical documents and community knowledge. Artificial intelligence and computational technologies may assist with manuscript digitization, language analysis, cataloguing, knowledge mapping and development of educational resources. However, technological documentation raises important ethical questions concerning intellectual property, community ownership, consent and commercialization. Knowledge belonging to communities should not be extracted or commercially exploited without appropriate recognition and ethical safeguards.

13. Critical Sociological Perspective : A critical approach is essential for understanding IKS in contemporary society. First, the concept of IKS can become excessively broad. Different traditions should not be combined without considering their historical and cultural differences. Second, historical access to knowledge was not always equal. Caste, gender, occupation and social status influenced educational opportunities in different contexts. Third, some modern claims about ancient achievements may not have adequate historical or scientific evidence. Such claims require careful verification. Fourth, there is a risk of romanticizing the past. Every society contains both achievements and limitations. Historical knowledge should therefore be studied

without either idealizing or dismissing it.

Finally, Indian knowledge should not be represented as a single homogeneous system. Its history includes multiple intellectual, linguistic, philosophical, religious and regional traditions.

14. Tradition and Modernity : Tradition and modernity should not necessarily be understood as opposing forces. Traditions can adapt to changing social conditions, while modern societies continue to reinterpret and use elements of their cultural heritage. The contemporary study of IKS can therefore be understood as a process of critical examination, evidence-based evaluation, adaptation and contemporary application. This approach avoids two extremes. One extreme assumes that everything inherited from the past is correct. The other assumes that traditional knowledge is necessarily outdated. A sociological approach examines both its contributions and its limitations.

15. IKS and Social Change : Knowledge systems change along with society. Industrialization, urbanization, globalization, migration, mass education and digital technologies have transformed the production and transmission of knowledge. Knowledge that was previously restricted to a village or occupational community can now be documented and shared globally. However, globalization may also result in commercialization, simplification or decontextualization of traditional practices. Therefore, the sociological study of IKS should examine cultural change, globalization, identity, social mobility, commercialization, institutionalization, ownership and technological transformation. These dimensions demonstrate that IKS is not merely a historical subject but an important field for understanding contemporary social change.

16. Major Challenges : Several challenges need to be addressed for meaningful integration of IKS.

Conceptual clarity: The scope, historical boundaries and disciplinary dimensions of IKS require careful definition.

Evidence and validation: Historical and technical claims should be supported by credible textual, archaeological, scientific or ethnographic evidence.

Inclusiveness: Educational curricula should represent India's diverse regional, linguistic, cultural and intellectual traditions.

Teacher preparation: Teachers require suitable training and reliable academic materials to present IKS critically and effectively.

Avoiding politicization: IKS should be studied through academic inquiry, evidence and critical reasoning rather than political assertions.

Documentation: Many community-based traditions remain inadequately documented. Documentation should involve communities and respect their rights and interests.

17. Contemporary Relevance : IKS has potential contemporary relevance in several fields. In education, it can encourage culturally contextualized and interdisciplinary learning. In environmental studies, traditional ecological practices can provide subjects for research. In agriculture, indigenous knowledge can be investigated for locally appropriate practices. In health studies, traditional approaches can be examined alongside modern scientific research. IKS can also contribute to discussions of ethics, cultural preservation, language, arts, heritage and interdisciplinary research.

Its value therefore lies not simply in preserving the past but in creating opportunities to critically investigate historical knowledge and explore its possible contribution to contemporary social problems.

18. Recommendations : The meaningful integration of IKS into contemporary society may be strengthened through the following measures:

- (i) Develop clear conceptual and historical frameworks for IKS.
- (ii) Encourage interdisciplinary research involving sociology, history, anthropology, science and other disciplines.

- (iii) Systematically document local and community-based knowledge.
- (iv) Apply empirical and scientific evaluation to factual and technical claims.
- (v) Represent India's diverse intellectual and cultural traditions in educational curricula.
- (vi) Provide appropriate training for teachers and researchers.
- (vii) Promote Indian languages and high-quality translations.
- (viii) Protect community intellectual property and knowledge rights.
- (ix) Encourage comparative studies between Indian and global knowledge traditions.
- (x) Avoid both uncritical glorification and complete rejection of traditional knowledge.

19. Conclusion : IKS represents an important part of India's intellectual, cultural and social heritage. Its contemporary importance should not be understood merely as an attempt to recover the past. Its greater significance lies in examining how historically developed knowledge can inform present discussions concerning education, sustainability, ethics, health, culture and social development.

From a sociological perspective, IKS is a dynamic knowledge tradition embedded in institutions, social relationships, cultural practices and historical structures. Its study provides an opportunity to understand the relationship between knowledge, power, identity, culture and social change. The inclusion of IKS in contemporary education can enrich learning when it promotes critical inquiry, interdisciplinary dialogue and contextual understanding. At the same time, academic standards, historical accuracy, empirical evaluation and inclusiveness must remain central. The most constructive approach is therefore neither unquestioning celebration of tradition nor its complete rejection. Indian knowledge traditions should be historically contextualized, critically examined, empirically evaluated and connected creatively with contemporary knowledge.

In this sense, IKS can serve as a bridge between tradition and modernity. Its most valuable contribution may not be the assumption that the past contains ready-made solutions to every present problem, but the possibility that historical knowledge can offer new perspectives, questions and approaches for understanding and responding to contemporary social challenges.

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