शोधभूमि

शिक्षा एवं शिक्षण शास्त्र विषय की पूर्व समीक्षित शोध पत्रिका

Evolution and Epistemology of Indian Knowledge Systems : A Critical Review

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Abstract

The Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) represent a civilizational continuum of intellectual, scientific, and spiritual inquiry that integrates empirical observation, ethical reflection, and experiential realization. Emerging from the Vedic and pre-Vedic oral traditions, IKS evolved through the philosophical schools of the Classical era, vernacular expansion in the Medieval period, and colonial disruptions that marginalized indigenous epistemologies. Central to IKS is its epistemological framework of pramāṇa (valid means of knowledge), a pluralistic model encompassing perception, inference, testimony, analogy, presumption, and non-perception. This review critically examines the historical evolution and epistemology of IKS, highlighting its pedagogical traditions such as the guru-śiṣya paramparā, dialogical learning, and oral-textual synthesis. It also analyses the epistemic ruptures of colonial modernity and the ongoing revival of IKS in the context of India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The paper argues that IKS offers an alternative to Western reductionist paradigms by emphasizing integrative, contextual, and transformative knowledge. Finally, it suggests pathways for interdisciplinary research, digital preservation, and decolonization to ensure the ethical and sustainable revitalization of IKS in contemporary education, science, and policy.

Keywords : Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), Epistemology, Pramāṇa, Guru-Śiṣya Paramparā, Colonialism, Indigenous Knowledge, Decolonization, National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, Interdisciplinary Research, Experiential Knowledge.

Introduction

The Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) encapsulate a profound intellectual tradition originating from the Indian subcontinent, integrating empirical observation, philosophical inquiry, and spiritual insight. Spanning disciplines such as philosophy, mathematics, medicine (Ayurveda), astronomy, linguistics, architecture (Vastu Shastra), and arts (Natya Shastra), IKS emphasizes holistic understanding, where knowledge serves not only practical purposes but also ethical and liberatory goals like mokṣa (spiritual liberation) and dharma (righteousness). This system evolved through oral traditions, textual codification, and experiential pedagogies, contrasting with Western epistemologies that prioritize objectivity and reductionism.

The epistemology of IKS, centred on pramāṇa valid means of knowledge offers alternative pathways to truth, including perception, inference, and scriptural testimony. However, colonial disruptions marginalized IKS, leading to a knowledge gap that persists today. In the 21st century, initiatives like India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 have spurred a revival, positioning IKS as a complement to modern science for sustainable development and cultural equity.

This critical review traces the evolution of IKS, delves into its epistemological underpinnings, evaluates challenges and critiques, and assesses contemporary relevance. By synthesizing historical and modern perspectives, it aims to advocate for an integrative approach that honours IKS's pluralism while addressing epistemic biases.

What are Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)?

Broadly, IKS refers to the body of traditions in India, philosophical, scientific, medical, linguistic, ethical/spiritual, arts, etc., which have developed over millennia. They include both the classical scholarly traditions (Vedic, Vedāṅga, Upaniṣadic, Buddhist, Jain, and later philosophical schools such as Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, and Vaiṛākta) and folk, tribal, and vernacular bodies of knowledge.

Why study their evolution and epistemology?

Understanding how knowledge is conceived, validated, and transmitted in IKS is crucial for appreciating its contributions, preserving/taxonomizing them, and integrating them (where appropriate) into contemporary educational, scientific, and policy frameworks, especially under policies like NEP 2020 in India, which explicitly calls for integrating IKS.

Objectives and scope

1. To trace historical stages in the evolution of IKS.
2. To examine the epistemological foundations (pramāṇas, validation of knowledge, the role of perception, inference, testimony, etc.).

3. To critically assess how IKS have been transformed by colonialism, modernization, globalization.
4. To analyze contemporary efforts for integrating IKS (in education, science, sustainability) and the challenges thereof.
5. To suggest future directions.

Background and Rationale

Knowledge systems represent the organized ways through which societies perceive, interpret, and validate reality. India's intellectual heritage, preserved through oral, textual, and practical traditions, constitutes a rich repository of human inquiry, philosophical, linguistic, scientific, medical, and artistic. The term Indian Knowledge System (IKS) encompasses this cumulative civilizational wisdom, including classical disciplines (śāstras), folk practices, and spiritual sciences such as Yoga and Ayurveda (Rao, 2020).

Recent academic and policy discourse, especially following India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, has renewed focus on integrating IKS within contemporary education and research. Yet, for this integration to be meaningful, one must understand both its evolutionary trajectory and epistemological foundations, how knowledge was produced, validated, and transmitted within these systems.

Historical Evolution of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)

The evolution of IKS can be viewed as a continuous yet dynamic process across five broad epochs: Vedic, Classical, Medieval, Colonial, and Modern. Each stage reveals distinct epistemic orientations, pedagogical methods, and institutional structures.

Vedic and Pre-Vedic Foundations (c. 1500–600 BCE)

The earliest form of organized knowledge in India emerged from **oral traditions** of the Vedas. The Vedic corpus Ṛg, Sāma, Yajur, and Atharva Veda encoded not only hymns and rituals but also cosmology, phonetics, prosody, and linguistics (Panini, c. 500 BCE). The Vedāṅgas (ancillary sciences) such as śikṣā (phonetics), vyākaraṇa (grammar), and jyotiṣa (astronomy) reflect an early scientific temper aimed at precision and preservation. Epistemologically, this era valued śruti (revelation) as the highest authority, positioning śabda pramāṇa (authoritative testimony) as central. Yet, even within the ritual framework, a proto-empirical tendency is evident observation, classification, and causation within nature (Radhakrishnan, 1998).

The Upaniṣadic and Śramaṇa Movements (700–300 BCE)

The Upaniṣads revolutionized Indian thought by shifting focus from ritual to inquiry into ātman (self) and Brahman (ultimate reality). Simultaneously, the non-Vedic Śramaṇa traditions Buddhism, Jainism, Ajivika challenged ritual orthodoxy and introduced rational, ethical, and experiential epistemologies. The Buddhist theory of

dependent origination (pratītya-samutpāda) and Jain doctrine of anekāntavāda (many-sided truth) represent sophisticated epistemic pluralism, asserting that truth is multifaceted and perspectival (Matilal, 1985).

Classical Systematization (c. 300 BCE–800 CE)

This period witnessed the **systematization of six orthodox (āstika) schools** and numerous heterodox ones. The Darśanas developed distinct ontologies and epistemologies, all unified by the quest for valid cognition (pramā).

Table 1: Six Orthodox (Āstika) Schools and their Acceptance

School	Accepted Pramāṇas	Epistemic Focus
Nyāya	Perception, inference, comparison, testimony	Logic, argumentation, fallacies
Vaiśeṣika	Perception, inference	Atomism, categories of reality
Sāṃkhya	Perception, inference, reliable testimony	Dualism of puruṣa–prakṛti
Yoga	As above + experiential realization	Integration of cognition and liberation
Mīmāṃsā	All six pramāṇas; emphasis on śabda	Hermeneutics, scriptural authority
Vedānta	Perception, inference, testimony	Non-dual consciousness (Advaita)

Epistemologically, the period produced treatises on reasoning (tarka), debate (vāda), and semantics (śabda-śāstra). Pāṇini's Aṣṭādhyāyī remains a model of linguistic formalism rivaling modern generative grammar (Chomsky, 1986).

Medieval Synthesis and Vernacularization (800–1700 CE)

The medieval period saw the **flourishing of commentarial traditions** and interaction between Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic scholars. Thinkers like Śaṅkarācārya (Advaita), Rāmānuja (Viśiṣṭādvaita), and Madhva (Dvaita) produced monumental syntheses of metaphysics and epistemology. Islamic scholasticism (ʿIlm al-Kalām) and Persian translations also influenced logical discourse. Regional languages became vehicles of knowledge Tamil, Kannada, Bengali, Persian, Sanskrit co-existed. Knowledge democratized beyond Brahmanical elites, integrating art, architecture, music, and literature as forms of epistemic expression (Pollock, 2006).

Colonial Encounter (1757–1947)

British colonialism disrupted traditional institutions such as tol and paṭhaśālā. The introduction of English education marginalized Sanskrit and Arabic-Persian learning. Orientalist and missionary scholars, while preserving many texts, often reinterpreted them through Eurocentric lenses (Inden, 1990). Simultaneously, Indian reformers Rammohan Roy, Dayananda Saraswati, Vivekananda sought to reinterpret IKS through modern rationalist and nationalist frameworks. Epistemologically, this created a hybrid tension: valorizing indigenous wisdom while validating it through Western science.

Post-Independence and Contemporary Revival (1947–Present)

The establishment of bodies such as the **Indian Council of Philosophical Research (ICPR)** and the **Indian Knowledge Systems Division (AICTE, 2020)** marks institutional recognition of IKS. NEP 2020 calls for "rootedness in Indian culture while being globally relevant."

Table 2: Indian Knowledge Evolved in Stages

Period	Key Features / Developments	Main Knowledge Domains Supported / Systematized
Pre-Vedic and Vedic (c. 1500–600 BCE)	Oral traditions; rituals and cosmic order; early speculation on cosmology, life, death; early linguistic and phonetic analysis (śikṣā, chandas); the development of Upaniṣads; early vision of self (ātman), reality (Brahman).	Vedic ritual, hymns, phonetics/phonology, early cosmology.
Upaniṣadic / Śramaṇa movements (circa 700–300 BCE)	Introspective, metaphysical inquiry; emergence of Buddhism, Jainism, non-Vedic philosophies; challenge to Vedic authority; emphasis on liberation (mokṣa), ethics.	Metaphysics, ethics, logic, philosophy of self, non-attachment, meditation.
Classical Philosophical Systems (c. 300 BCE – 800 CE)	Systematization of pramāṇas (means of valid knowledge), robust logic (Nyāya), metaphysics (Vaiśeṣika), epistemology, grammar (Pāṇini), linguistics, medicine (Ayurveda), mathematics, astronomy. Pluralism of schools, dialectical engagement.	Logic, grammar, mathematics and astronomy (Vedāṅga Jyotiṣa), Ayurveda, commentarial traditions.
Medieval Period (approx. 800–1700 CE)	Commentarial expansion; synthesis (ex: Advaita Vedānta, Śaṅkarācārya); cross-school debates; influence of Islamic scholarship; regional proliferation; vernacularization; development of arts, poetry, literature.	Theology, metaphysics, tantric systems, regional literatures, arts, architecture.
Colonial Encounter (c. 18th–20th century)	Disruption of traditional institutions (paths of transmission like gurukula); marginalization of vernacular/tribal knowledge; imposition of Western scientific paradigm; textual translations; early critiques by Indian scholars; revivalist movements.	Education reform, textual preservation, missionary writings, early indology, comparative philosophy.

| Post-Independence and Modern Period (20th–21st century) | Institutionalization of IKS (universities, policy), inclusion in curriculum; scholarship in IKS; NEP 2020 emphasizing fusion; digital preservation; global interest in Ayurveda, Yoga, sustainability. Also tension: what counts as valid, how to standardize, how to integrate with modern science. | Education policy, sustainability, traditional medicine in regulated forms, interdisciplinary research, indigenous pedagogies. |

Epistemology of Indian Knowledge Systems

Epistemology (pramāṇa-śāstra) in Indian philosophy seeks to determine what constitutes valid knowledge (pramā), its sources, and limits.

Core Concepts

- **Pramāṇa:** Means of valid knowledge (e.g., perception, inference, testimony).
- **Pramātṛ:** The knower or subject.
- **Prameya:** The object of knowledge.
- **Pramiti:** The cognition itself, or act of knowing.

The aim is yathārtha-jñāna knowledge corresponding to reality and leading to liberation (mokṣa).

Table 3: Major Pramāṇas

Pramāṇa	Translation	Description	Accepted by
Pratyakṣa	Perception	Direct sensory or mental perception; basis of empirical knowledge	All systems
Anumāna	Inference	Logical deduction from observed relations (smoke → fire)	All systems
Upamāna	Analogy	Knowledge through similarity or comparison	Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā
Śabda	Testimony	Reliable verbal authority (scripture, expert)	Nyāya, Mīmāṃsā, Vedānta
Arthāpatti	Presumption	Postulation to explain an observed fact	Mīmāṃsā
Anupalabdhi	Non-perception	Knowledge of absence (e.g., "no pot on floor")	Advaita Vedānta

These categories show remarkable philosophical sophistication recognizing inference, absence, and testimony as valid modes of cognition centuries before modern epistemology articulated similar concerns (Dasgupta, 1922).

Comparative Dimensions

Indian epistemology diverges from Western empiricism by recognizing **multiple, complementary sources** of knowledge. For example, while Western modernity prioritizes observation and experiment, IKS accords legitimacy to **experiential, moral, and spiritual cognition**. Moreover, truth in Indian philosophy is **teleological** its value lies in its transformative power (knowledge as mokṣa-sādhanam). The Nyāya and Buddhist traditions even anticipate modern cognitive theories through analyses of perception, error, and mental representation (Ganeri, 2011).

The Experiential Epistemology

The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali articulate **pratyakṣa-pramāṇa through samādhi** direct experiential knowledge beyond discursive reasoning. Similarly, Buddhist vipassanā (insight meditation) posits prajñā as intuitive cognition transcending conceptual thought. Thus, Indian epistemology integrates **empirical, rational, and contemplative** dimensions into a single continuum of knowing.

Pedagogical and Institutional Dimensions
Guru–Śiṣya Paramparā

The guru–śiṣya paramparā (teacher–disciple lineage) functioned as the foundational pedagogical model of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). It transcended formal instruction, emphasizing moral cultivation (śīla), devotion (śraddhā), and transformation of consciousness rather than rote learning. The guru was not merely an instructor but a spiritual guide, embodying the ideals of knowledge and conduct. Learning took place through dialogue (saṃvāda), introspection, and lived experience, following the Upaniṣadic model where inquiry led to realization rather than mere intellectual comprehension (Dasgupta, 1940). This dialogical pedagogy fostered anubhava-jñāna (experiential knowledge) as the highest form of knowing. Institutions such as gurukulas and mathas provided not only scholastic training but also a moral community grounded in discipline, service, and respect for the teacher–disciple relationship. The emphasis on holistic education integrated ethics, aesthetics, and metaphysics, thus ensuring the unity of knowledge and life.

Oral and Written Traditions

The Indian intellectual tradition evolved through a complex interplay of oral and written cultures. The oral mode was central to the preservation and transmission of the Vedas, where accuracy of sound and intonation ensured epistemic integrity. Mnemonic systems like ghanas, padapāṭha, and krama-pāṭha trained memory and discipline, preserving texts over millennia.Even with the rise of writing, oral pedagogy retained its primacy. The transition from oral to written form did not represent a rupture but a continuum.

The commentarial traditions bhāṣya (commentary), ṭīkā (sub-commentary), and ṭippanī (gloss) functioned as an indigenous peer-review mechanism, enabling reinterpretation, debate, and validation of ideas across centuries (Olivelle, 2006). This layered textual culture cultivated interpretive plurality and intellectual humility, ensuring that each generation re-engaged with inherited wisdom rather than passively accepting it.

Debate and Dialectics

Debate (vāda) and dialectical reasoning were institutionalized forms of intellectual inquiry in Indian philosophy. The Nyāya-śāstra codified methods of reasoning and modes of debatevāda (truth-oriented debate), jalpa (competitive debate), and vitaṇḍā (destructive criticism) each serving distinct epistemic purposes. This culture of structured argumentation emphasized not rhetorical victory but epistemic refinement and ethical conduct. Participants were expected to maintain humility, clarity, and respect for the opponent's position. Logic (nyāya), epistemology (pramāṇa-śāstra), and semantics (vyākaraṇa) formed the foundation of this intellectual tradition, constituting an indigenous scientific method of inquiry long before modern logic emerged. These debates were conducted in pariṣads (assemblies) and śāstra-sabhās, representing an organized academic culture of peer discourse and review. This methodological rigor produced enduring systems such as Vedānta, Sāṃkhya, Mīmāṃsā, and Buddhist epistemology.

Coloniality, Modernity, and Epistemic Disruptions

Epistemic Violence and Loss

The colonial encounter fundamentally disrupted Indian epistemological systems. British policies most notably Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education (1835) deemed traditional knowledge "worthless" and imposed English as the medium of education. This shift reoriented intellectual legitimacy from Sanskritic and vernacular traditions to Western paradigms, marginalizing indigenous sciences such as astronomy (jyotiṣa), metallurgy, mathematics, and Ayurveda (Visvanathan, 2009). Colonial education redefined knowledge as that which conformed to European scientific rationality, thereby creating epistemic hierarchies that delegitimized experiential and spiritual forms of knowing. This process of epistemic violence resulted in the institutional decay of indigenous schools, libraries, and guild-based learning systems (śrenīs). Knowledge became alienated from its ecological, ethical, and spiritual foundations.

Hybrid Modernities

Despite the disruptions of colonial modernity, Indian thinkers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries sought to reclaim and reinterpret IKS through synthesis and reform.

- **Swami Vivekananda** harmonized Advaita Vedānta with modern science and rational inquiry, asserting that spirituality and empiricism could coexist.

- **Mahatma Gandhi** re-envisioned education through Nai Talim and Swadeshi, emphasizing moral self-rule (swaraj) and indigenous ethics like ahimsa (non-violence) and aparigraha (non-possession).
- **Sri Aurobindo** developed a philosophy of evolution of consciousness, where ancient yogic insights informed modern psychology and human potential.

Contemporary Revival and Policy Context

In the postcolonial era, initiatives such as the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** and the **AICTE's IKS Initiative (2021)** have reintroduced Indian epistemologies into mainstream academia. IKS is now recognized as a framework for sustainability, ethics, and innovation.

- **Sustainability:** Traditional water systems like johads and stepwells, along with community-based resource management, inform modern environmental policy.
- **Medicine:** Integrative research between Ayurveda, Siddha, and allopathic sciences promotes evidence-based healthcare rooted in traditional principles.
- **Education:** Holistic and value-based pedagogy, inspired by ancient models, now complements STEM education.
- **Technology:** Indigenous algorithms, paninian linguistics, and logic have influenced developments in artificial intelligence and computational modeling.

Epistemological Tensions and Critical Reflections

Universalism vs. Contextualism

Western epistemology often pursues universal laws applicable across contexts, whereas IKS values contextual truth rooted in ecological, cultural, and ethical interrelations. Knowledge is situational and embodied, reflecting harmony (ṛta) and balance rather than abstraction. This difference underscores IKS's ecological wisdom and pluralistic understanding of reality.

Empirical vs. Experiential

While Western science privileges sensory observation (pratyakṣa) and experimentation, IKS extends empiricism to include introspective awareness (yogic pratyakṣa). Knowledge is validated not only through observation but also through disciplined inner experience. This epistemic inclusivity bridges external and internal modes of knowing, linking science with consciousness studies.

Objectivity vs. Intersubjectivity

Modern science emphasizes impersonal objectivity, often separating the knower from the known. In contrast, IKS conceives sādhu-samvāda dialogue among disciplined minds as the basis of verification. Knowledge emerges through intersubjective consensus rooted in ethical and spiritual discipline rather than mechanical measurement alone. Thus, truth in IKS is relational, not reductionist.

Secular vs. Sacred

In IKS, the pursuit of knowledge (vidyā) is inherently sacred, intertwined with moral and spiritual aims. Learning is viewed as a path to self-realization (mokṣa) and service (seva), not merely material advancement. The separation between the secular and sacred, central to Western epistemology, is absent here; inquiry itself is a sacred act aligned with dharma.
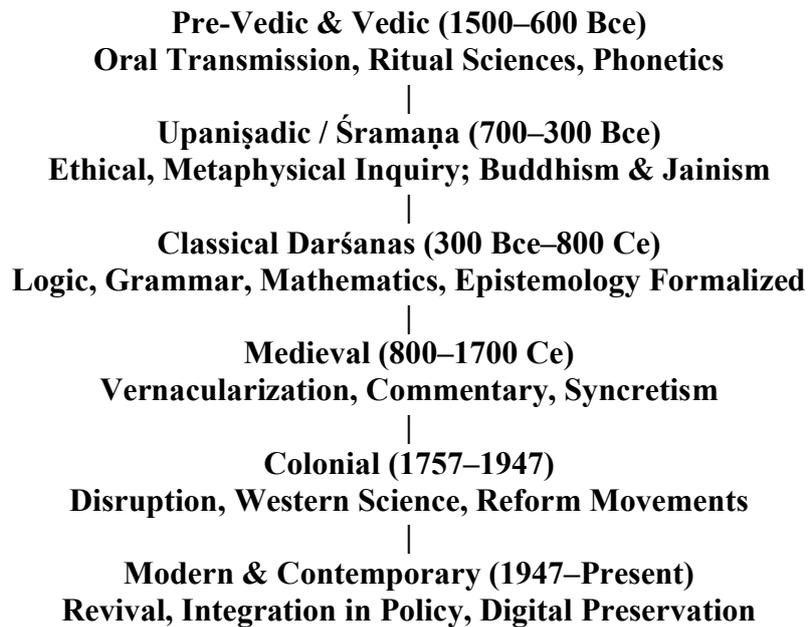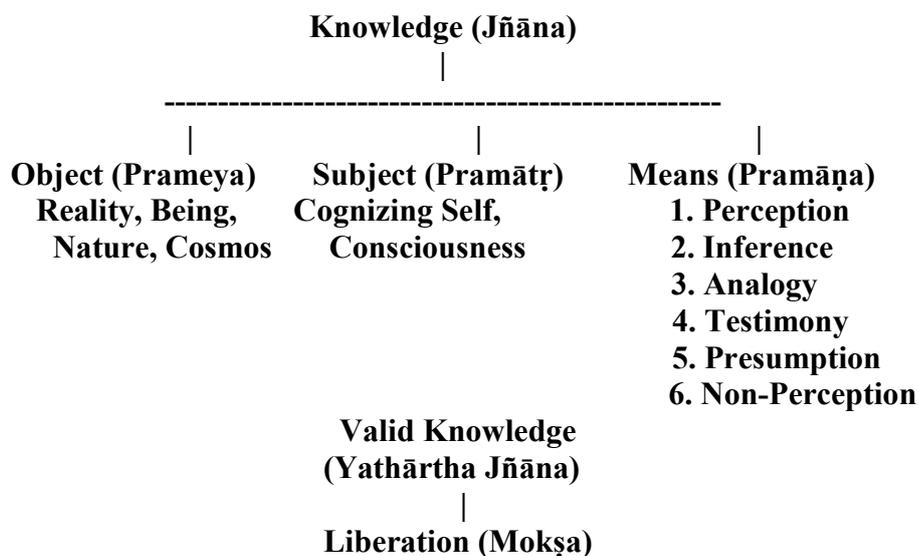
Diagram 1: Chronological Evolution of IKS

Pre-Vedic & Vedic (1500–600 Bce)
Oral Transmission, Ritual Sciences, Phonetics
|
Upaniṣadic / Śramaṇa (700–300 Bce)
Ethical, Metaphysical Inquiry; Buddhism & Jainism
|
Classical Darśanas (300 Bce–800 Ce)
Logic, Grammar, Mathematics, Epistemology Formalized
|
Medieval (800–1700 Ce)
Vernacularization, Commentary, Syncretism
|
Colonial (1757–1947)
Disruption, Western Science, Reform Movements
|
Modern & Contemporary (1947–Present)
Revival, Integration in Policy, Digital Preservation

Diagram 2: Epistemological Structure of IKS

Knowledge (Jñāna)
|

| | |
Object (Prameya)   **Subject (Pramātṛ)**   **Means (Pramāṇa)**
Reality, Being,   **Cognizing Self,**   1. Perception
  Nature, Cosmos   **Consciousness**   2. Inference
                                            3. Analogy
                                            4. Testimony
                                            5. Presumption
                                            6. Non-Perception

Valid Knowledge
(Yathārtha Jñāna)
|
Liberation (Mokṣa)

Future Directions and Recommendations

Interdisciplinary Methodology:

Future research on Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) should adopt an interdisciplinary approach that integrates philosophy, history, cognitive science, and anthropology. This would allow empirical exploration of concepts like consciousness and perception while preserving contextual and cultural meanings. Such integration bridges classical wisdom with contemporary scientific and humanistic inquiry.

Epistemic Pluralism in Education:

Educational reforms must promote epistemic pluralism by including multiple ways of knowing in curricula. Integrating indigenous case studies in science, environment, and ethics can foster holistic understanding. Teacher education should revive dialogical and value-based models inspired by the guru–śiṣya tradition to balance intellectual and moral growth.

Digital Humanities for IKS:

Systematic digitization of manuscripts, oral traditions, and regional knowledge archives can preserve and make IKS accessible globally. Digital tools AI-assisted translation, semantic mapping, and metadata tagging can enhance research and pedagogy. However, such initiatives must respect community consent, cultural sensitivity, and intellectual property norms.

Empirical Validation:

Traditional knowledge should be examined through empirical research without undermining its epistemic integrity. For example, Ayurvedic pharmacology, yoga, and ecological practices can be scientifically tested for efficacy while maintaining traditional parameters of validation like pramāṇa and anubhava. This dialogue can enrich both modern and indigenous science.

Decolonizing Research Paradigms:

To restore epistemic equity, IKS must be studied through frameworks that value its internal logic and categories rather than Eurocentric hierarchies. Encouraging bilingual scholarship, collaborative research between traditional scholars and modern academics, and recognition of Sanskrit and vernacular sources are essential for genuine decolonization.

Community Involvement:

Indigenous practitioners such as healers, artisans, farmers, and spiritual teachers should be recognized as co-creators of knowledge. Participatory documentation, training, and benefit-sharing ensure that IKS research remains democratic and socially accountable. Such collaboration strengthens both local livelihoods and cultural continuity.

Ethics and IPR Protection:

Robust ethical and legal mechanisms must safeguard traditional knowledge from misappropriation. Community-based intellectual property rights, equitable profit-sharing, and transparent data usage policies should be established. Respect for collective custodianship rather than individual ownership aligns with the moral foundations of IKS.

Conclusion

The evolution and epistemology of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) reflect one of humanity's most enduring intellectual traditions a tradition where knowledge was never divorced from ethics, ecology, or spirituality. From the oral recitations of the Vedas to the logical treatises of the Nyāya School, from the philosophical debates of the Upaniṣads to the pedagogical models of the guru-śiṣya paramparā, IKS demonstrates a dynamic interplay between empirical, rational, and experiential modes of knowing. The colonial encounter, however, fractured this epistemic ecosystem by imposing Western paradigms of objectivity and scientism, leading to a prolonged marginalization of indigenous epistemologies. In the postcolonial and globalized era, the challenge lies not merely in reviving IKS as cultural heritage but in re-engaging with its epistemological insights as living systems of thought. Integrating IKS within modern education, science, and policy guided by epistemic pluralism can create a more inclusive and sustainable framework for knowledge. Digital humanities, empirical validation, and community collaboration can further democratize access while maintaining authenticity.

Ultimately, the study of IKS invites a rethinking of what it means to "know" transcending the binary between the sacred and the secular, the rational and the intuitive. By embracing both critical inquiry and inner realization, IKS embodies a holistic vision of knowledge that remains profoundly relevant for addressing the intellectual, ethical, and ecological challenges of the 21st century.

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