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Review Article

The Role of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) in Education and the National Education Policy 2020

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Abstract

The National Education Policy 2020 represents a significant transformation in India's educational system by emphasising the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) as a key component of holistic, multidisciplinary, and culturally grounded education. Recognising the rich intellectual heritage of India, the policy seeks to incorporate traditional knowledge from diverse fields such as philosophy, science, arts, and ethics into contemporary educational practices. This study explores the historical importance of IKS and examines its explicit inclusion within the framework of NEP 2020. It also reviews the implementation strategies and guidelines introduced by the University Grants Commission to promote the integration of the Indian knowledge system in school and higher education curricula. The study highlights the potential of the Indian knowledge system to enhance critical thinking, ethical awareness, innovation, and cultural identity among learners. At the same time, it addresses key challenges associated with its implementation, including curriculum development, faculty preparedness, and the need to ensure authenticity and academic rigour in presenting traditional knowledge. The study concludes that the effective integration of Indian Knowledge Systems under NEP 2020 can strengthen India's education system by linking ancient wisdom with modern knowledge frameworks. Such an approach can contribute to fostering cultural confidence, promoting interdisciplinary learning, and positioning India as a global knowledge leader, often envisioned as Vishwaguru. The study of the Indian knowledge system integration under NEP 2020 can position India as a global knowledge leader (Vishwa guru) by bridging ancient wisdom with contemporary needs.

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INTRODUCTION

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) represent a vast, systematised body of knowledge developed over millennia, encompassing disciplines such as astronomy, mathematics, Ayurveda, yoga, linguistics, metallurgy, philosophy, governance, and indigenous practices (including tribal knowledge). Unlike compartmentalised Western models, the Indian knowledge system emphasises holistic inquiry, experiential learning, and the pursuit of Jnana (knowledge), Prajna (wisdom), and Satya (truth) for self-realisation and societal well-being.

For centuries, colonial education marginalised the Indian knowledge system in Favor of Western epistemologies, leading to a disconnect from India's cultural ethos. NEP 2020 addresses this by declaring the "rich heritage of ancient and eternal Indian knowledge and thought" as a guiding light for the policy. It seeks to revive ancient institutions like Takshashila, Nalanda, Vikram Shila, and Vallabhi, which exemplified multidisciplinary excellence, and scholars such as Aryabhata, Charaka, Sushruta, Panini, and Bhaskar Acharya, whose contributions influenced global knowledge in mathematics, medicine, grammar, and more.

This study analyses the role of the Indian Knowledge System in revitalising education, NEP 2020's mandates, operational guidelines, and pathways for effective implementation.

Historical Context and Significance of the Indian Knowledge System

The Indian Knowledge System evolved through Vedic literature, the 18 Vidyā Sthānas (knowledge domains) taught at ancient universities, and contributions from diverse communities. Key branches include:

Sciences and Technology: Astronomy (planetary models), mathematics (zero, decimal system, π approximations), metallurgy, and architecture. Health and Well-being: Ayurveda, Yoga, Siddha, and ethno-medicinal practices.

Humanities and Social Sciences: Linguistics (Panini's grammar), polity (Danda Nīti), ethics, and sustainable practices like natural farming.

Foundational Approaches: Emphasis on Anvīkṣikī (critical inquiry), experiential methods, and axioms such as Vasudha Iva Kodambakkam (the world is one family) and Sarve Bhavantu Sakinah (may all be happy).

According to Kautilya, education aims at Vidyā (new knowledge creation), Viveka (contextual wisdom), and Vicakṣaṇatā (practical skills) outcomes that modern systems often overlook by prioritising content over inquiry. IKS counters this by promoting interdisciplinary thinking, sustainability, and ethical leadership, making it highly relevant for 21st-century challenges like climate change, health crises, and digital disruption.

NEP 2020's Vision for the Indian Knowledge System

NEP 2020 explicitly roots education in the Indian Knowledge System to foster national pride, self-confidence, and holistic development. Key provisions include:

Curriculum Integration: "All curriculum and pedagogy will be redesigned to be strongly rooted in the Indian and local context… ancient and contemporary knowledge, indigenous and traditional ways of learning." Indian Knowledge Systems (including tribal knowledge) will be incorporated into subjects like mathematics, astronomy, philosophy, yoga, medicine, agriculture, engineering, and governance. An elective course on the Indian knowledge system is mandated for secondary school students.

Classical Languages and Literature: Sanskrit (as "Sanskrit Knowledge Systems"), Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Odia, Pali, Persian, and Prakrit are offered experientially. Students must study at least two years of a classical language in Grades 6–12. Stories from Panchatantra, Jataka, and Hitopadeśa enrich learning.

Multidisciplinary Approach: Revival of the ancient 64 Kalas (arts encompassing sciences, vocations, and soft skills) and the ancient universities' model. "Knowledge of India" (ancient contributions and values like seva, ahimsā, Satya) is infused across the curriculum.

Higher Education and Research: Multidisciplinary universities must promote the Indian knowledge system research. The National Research Foundation supports studies in Indology and IKS. Teacher education programmes ground educators in Indian ethos, values, and traditions.

The policy envisions education not merely for employment but for the complete realisation and liberation of the self, aligning with ancient goals while preparing global citizens.

Implementation Strategies: UGC Guidelines

To operationalise NEP 2020, the UGC issued detailed guidelines for incorporating the Indian knowledge system in higher education curricula (2021 onwards, with ongoing updates).

Key Mandates

Every UG/PG student must earn at least 5% of total credits in IKS courses (encouraged to take more). At least 50% of these credits must relate to the student's major discipline.

Foundational Course in the Indian knowledge system for all UG students (broad introduction covering Bharata Varsha, foundational texts, Indian astronomy, health sciences, etc.).

Elective courses, internships, apprenticeships, and projects in the Indian knowledge system.

For medicine students: Credit courses in Indian Systems of Medicine (Ayurveda, Yoga, etc.). Sanskrit/Indian Language Universities must evolve into broader Indian knowledge system universities and offer specific courses (e.g., Manuscriptology).

PG programmes in Indian knowledge system disciplines (e.g., Nyaya, Ganita, Indian Music) must be redesigned with an Indian knowledge system perspective and aligned for NET exams.

Implementation Principles: Courses must use authentic sources (texts, inscriptions, sociological records), emphasise continuity from ancient to the 18th–19th centuries, highlight unique methodologies, and indicate contemporary applications. The medium of instruction can include Indian languages. Faculty orientation, primary text access, and experiential sessions (Yoga, meditation, crafts) are recommended. A 10-year horizon with mid-term review ensures adaptability.

These guidelines ensure IKS is not an add-on but integral to multidisciplinary education, supporting NEP's 5% credit mandate and research focus.

Role in School and Higher Education

Schools: IKS fosters foundational literacy, cultural rootedness, and values through stories, games, and local examples. It supports multilingualism and reduces dropout by making learning relatable.

Higher Education: Enables interdisciplinary research (e.g., Indian knowledge system + AI for sustainable agriculture), vocational integration (Lok Vidyā), and global competitiveness while preserving heritage. Initiatives like IKS Division (AICTE/MoE), centres in universities, and faculty training programmes facilitate this.

Benefits include enhanced critical thinking, ethical consciousness, innovation (e.g., applying Ayurvedic principles to modern healthcare), and national self-reliance (Ātmanirbhar Bhārat).

Challenges and Prospects

Challenges

Integrating the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) into higher education under NEP 2020 presents several formidable challenges:

Authentic content development and faculty training gaps: Developing high-quality, evidence-based course materials rooted in primary sources (such as ancient texts, inscriptions, and living practices) remains difficult. Many faculty lack specialised training in Indian Knowledge System disciplines, leading to reliance on superficial or secondary interpretations. The UGC guidelines emphasise authentic sources and continuity from ancient to pre-modern periods, but large-scale teacher capacity-building is still evolving.

Risk of superficial integration or compartmentalisation: Indian Knowledge System risks being treated as an add-on elective rather than deeply interwoven with mainstream disciplines. This could result in tokenistic inclusion, where traditional knowledge is studied in isolation instead of fostering genuine interdisciplinary dialogue with modern STEM, social sciences, or professional fields.

Resource constraints in rural and under-resourced institutions: Many colleges, especially in rural and tribal areas, face shortages of infrastructure, digital tools, and funding. Balancing IKS integration with pressing demands for advanced STEM education and employability-focused skills exacerbates these inequities.

Documentation and validation of oral traditions and tribal knowledge: India's diverse oral traditions, folk practices, and indigenous/tribal knowledge systems (lokavidya) are often undocumented or undervalued in formal academia. Proving their scientific validity or contemporary relevance through rigorous methodologies poses epistemological and methodological challenges, compounded by language barriers and the need for community-sensitive approaches.

Prospects and Solutions

Despite these hurdles, NEP 2020 offers a robust framework for transformative integration, turning challenges into opportunities for a renaissance in Indian education.

Mission-mode integration: Link IKS with national missions in space (e.g., traditional astronomy and navigation), health (Ayurveda, Yoga, and holistic wellness), sustainability (indigenous agricultural and ecological practices), and technology. This "global" approach can generate indigenous solutions to global problems, such as climate-resilient farming or ethical AI informed by dharmic principles.

Teacher capacity-building: Leverage UGC-mandated faculty development programs, including induction and refresher courses under initiatives like the Malaviya Mission. The UGC guidelines recommend at least 5% of total credits in IKS courses (with ≥50% aligned to the major discipline), supported by MOOCs on SWAYAM and specialised training in pedagogy that bridges traditional and modern methods. Aim for large-scale orientation to equip 1.5 million+ teachers.

Digital repositories and authentic resources: Create centralised, open-access digital archives of primary texts, translations (with Devanagari and transliteration), multimedia content, and community-documented practices. Emphasise contemporary applications, e.g., Vedic mathematics in computing or Vastu Shastra in sustainable architecture, to make the Indian knowledge system relevant and engaging.

Community engagement and inclusive documentation: Strengthen partnerships through Unnat Bharat Abhiyan, connecting higher education institutions with rural and tribal communities for participatory knowledge mapping, validation, and co-creation of solutions. This fosters documentation of oral and indigenous traditions while promoting experiential learning and grassroots innovation.

NEP 2020 flexible credit system, multidisciplinary institutions, multiple entry/exit options, and emphasis on Indian languages as mediums of instruction provide the structural backbone.

Successful pilots such as IKS centres in universities, interdisciplinary research on sustainability, or corporate applications of yogic/wellness demonstrate potential for enhanced critical thinking, cultural pride, and innovation.

CONCLUSION

The National Education Policy 2020 elevates the Indian Knowledge System from a marginalised heritage to a foundational pillar of Indian education, paving the way for a balanced renaissance that harmonises ancient wisdom with modern aspirations. Through mandated Indian Knowledge System credits, foundational courses, authentic interdisciplinary integration, and a focus on utilisation over mere preservation, NEP 2020 promises holistic student development, cultural continuity, ethical grounding, and groundbreaking innovation. Sustained, collaborative efforts in curriculum design, faculty orientation, empirical research validating traditional knowledge, and resource allocation will be crucial. As Prof. Shrinivasa Varakhedi aptly notes, shifting from "preservation to utilisation" of the Indian Knowledge System will foster meaningful lives and establish Bharat as a global hub of emerging knowledge. Stakeholders' policymakers, educators, institutions, and communities must work in unison to translate this vision into reality, creating "global" graduates who are deeply rooted in Indian ethos yet equipped to excel on the world stage and contribute uniquely to humanity's progress.

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