

Philosophical, Historical, Sociological, and Psychological Perspectives of The Indian Knowledge System (IKS)

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Received 05 May 2026

Accepted 15 May 2026

Published 20 May 2026

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Doi: <https://doi.org/10.64880/ijeagr.v1i2.14>

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sector.

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Abstract

The Indian Knowledge System represents a diverse and continuously evolving body of knowledge developed through India's philosophical traditions, scientific inquiries, social institutions, artistic practices, ecological experiences, and spiritual disciplines. It cannot be understood merely as a collection of ancient texts or religious beliefs. It includes textual and oral traditions, community practices, systems of medicine, mathematics, logic, language, agriculture, architecture, environmental knowledge, yoga, meditation, governance, ethics, and artistic expression. This article examines the Indian Knowledge System through four interconnected perspectives: philosophical, historical, sociological, and psychological. The philosophical perspective highlights Indian theories of knowledge, reality, ethics, consciousness, and human purpose. The historical perspective traces the development and transmission of knowledge through educational institutions, monasteries, families, guilds, communities, and classical centres such as Nalanda. The sociological perspective examines the relationship between knowledge, culture, social identity, occupations, power, inclusion, and inequality. The psychological perspective considers Indian understandings of mind, behaviour, emotion, self-regulation, well-being, yoga, and meditation. The article argues that the contemporary study of IKS must be evidence-based, inclusive, critical, and interdisciplinary. Its educational integration should encourage intellectual inquiry rather than uncritical glorification, while recognizing both the achievements and limitations of historical traditions.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge System, Indian philosophy, traditional knowledge, sociology of knowledge, Indian psychology, yoga, historical education, NEP 2020

Introduction

The Indian Knowledge System, commonly abbreviated as IKS, refers to the broad intellectual, cultural, scientific, practical, and spiritual traditions that developed across the Indian subcontinent

over several centuries. These traditions emerged in different languages, regions, communities, schools of thought, and occupational settings. Therefore, IKS should not be treated as a single, uniform or unchanging system. It includes Vedic, Buddhist, Jain, materialist, tribal, folk, regional, Islamic, Sikh, and other intellectual and cultural contributions that interacted with one another throughout Indian history.

IKS includes knowledge preserved in the Vedas, Upanishads, Buddhist and Jain literature, philosophical commentaries, medical treatises, mathematical works, epics, poetry, inscriptions, oral traditions, artistic practices, agricultural methods, crafts, architecture, water-management systems, and community customs. It also includes practical knowledge developed by farmers, artisans, healers, metallurgists, performers, navigators, builders, and forest-dependent communities.

The National Education Policy 2020 encourages educational institutions to include India's knowledge traditions, languages, arts, ethical values, and local practices within contemporary curricula. The Indian Knowledge Systems Division of the Ministry of Education similarly promotes research, teaching materials, institutional centres, interdisciplinary study, and the examination of traditional claims through proof of concept and modern research methods.

A comprehensive understanding of IKS requires more than the description of ancient achievements. It requires philosophical analysis, historical investigation, sociological criticism, and psychological evaluation.

Philosophical Perspective of IKS

The philosophical foundation of IKS is characterized by sustained inquiry into knowledge, reality, consciousness, morality, suffering, freedom, and the purpose of human life. Indian philosophical traditions did not provide one universally accepted answer to these questions. Instead, schools such as Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, Vedānta, Buddhism, Jainism, and Cārvāka developed distinct and sometimes conflicting positions.

One of the most important contributions of classical Indian philosophy is the theory of *pramāṇa*, or valid means of knowledge. Different philosophical schools accepted different sources of knowledge, including perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), reliable testimony (*śabda*), comparison (*upamāna*), postulation (*arthāpatti*), and non-cognition (*anupalabdhi*). Classical Indian epistemology emphasized that knowledge must arise through an appropriate and reliable process rather than through accidental belief.

This tradition demonstrates that Indian philosophy was not based only on faith or revelation. Observation, logical inference, debate, linguistic analysis, doubt, comparison, and critical examination were important intellectual methods. Nyāya developed detailed theories of reasoning and argumentation. Buddhist philosophers examined perception, momentariness, causation, language, and consciousness. Jain philosophy developed *anekāntavāda*, which emphasizes the many-sided character of reality and the limitations of one-sided judgments. Cārvāka thinkers questioned religious authority, supernatural explanations, and inference that could not be supported by experience.

The philosophical perspective of IKS also emphasizes the relationship between knowledge and life. Knowledge was frequently understood as a means of transforming conduct, reducing suffering, developing wisdom, and attaining freedom. Concepts such as *dharma*, *karma*, *ahiṃsā*, compassion, self-discipline, truthfulness, and responsibility connected intellectual knowledge with ethical action. The four *puruṣārthas*—*dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, and *mokṣa*—presented human life as involving moral responsibility, material well-being, legitimate desire, and spiritual liberation. Although interpretations differed across texts and historical periods, the framework attempted to balance individual aspirations with social obligations.

A major philosophical strength of IKS is its holistic orientation. Human beings are understood through relationships among body, mind, society, nature, and consciousness. However, holistic thinking should not be confused with the acceptance of every traditional statement as scientifically established. Philosophical insight, historical belief, therapeutic practice, and experimentally verified knowledge must be distinguished carefully.

Historical Perspective of IKS

The historical development of IKS occurred through continuous interaction among communities, languages, institutions, and political systems. Knowledge was transmitted through oral recitation, memorization, dialogue, observation, apprenticeship, manuscripts, inscriptions, public debates, monasteries, temples, families, courts, guilds, and centres of learning.

In early traditions, oral transmission was especially important. Carefully organized methods of pronunciation, repetition, classification, and memorization helped preserve texts for generations. Over time, knowledge was recorded in Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, Tamil, Persian, Arabic, and numerous regional languages. This multilingual history demonstrates that Indian knowledge was never confined to one language.

Educational arrangements also took different forms. The *guru-śiṣya* tradition emphasized close interaction between teacher and learner. Buddhist and Jain monasteries developed organized systems of instruction, debate, commentary, and residential learning. Occupational knowledge was often transmitted through families, communities, and apprenticeships. Agricultural knowledge, craft techniques, healing practices, music, dance, and architecture were learned through observation and participation rather than through written examinations.

Nalanda represents an important example of organized higher learning. UNESCO describes Nalanda Mahavihara as one of the earliest major universities of early medieval India. Its educational practices included residential learning, debate, dialectical discussion, teacher-disciple relationships, and engagement with different contemporary systems of knowledge. Its institutional influence extended into South and Southeast Asia.

Indian scholars made significant contributions in fields such as grammar, logic, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, metallurgy, literature, political thought, and aesthetics. Pāṇini's grammatical system demonstrated highly organized linguistic analysis. Mathematical traditions associated with Āryabhaṭa, Brahmagupta, and Bhāskara examined numeration, algebra, geometry, astronomical calculation, and mathematical procedures. Medical traditions represented by the *Caraka Saṃhitā*

and *Suśruta Saṃhitā* discussed diagnosis, diet, pharmacology, surgery, professional conduct, and preventive health.

Historical analysis must nevertheless avoid presenting the past as an uninterrupted golden age. Knowledge institutions changed because of political conflict, economic transformation, religious movements, migration, patronage, regional interaction, and colonial rule. Colonial educational policies introduced new institutions and disciplines while also changing the status of indigenous languages, occupational knowledge, and local systems of learning. Some traditions declined, while others adapted, survived or were reorganized.

The historical approach therefore studies IKS as a dynamic process of creation, exchange, preservation, loss, reinterpretation, and revival.

Sociological Perspective of IKS

From a sociological perspective, knowledge is produced and transmitted within society. It is influenced by language, family, community, occupation, class, caste, gender, religion, region, political authority, and economic organization. IKS is consequently both an intellectual heritage and a social institution.

Traditional knowledge helped communities organize everyday life. Agricultural calendars, seed selection, food preservation, herbal practices, irrigation methods, handicrafts, songs, festivals, rituals, and local ecological observations supported social continuity. Shared narratives and cultural practices created collective memory and a sense of belonging. UNESCO similarly recognizes that living heritage consists of knowledge, skills, practices, expressions, and traditions maintained and transmitted by communities across generations.

IKS also has economic and occupational dimensions. Artisans, farmers, metalworkers, weavers, potters, forest communities, performers, and traditional healers created specialized bodies of knowledge. Such knowledge was frequently practical, empirical, and adapted to local environments. It was not always preserved in classical texts because much of it existed through embodied skill and oral teaching.

A responsible sociology of IKS must therefore look beyond elite written literature. Research has shown that discussions of Indian knowledge sometimes concentrate excessively on sacred and philosophical texts while overlooking the practical knowledge of occupational and marginalized communities. Madhav Govind argues that the techniques and skills of subaltern occupational groups have often been neglected in dominant accounts of Indian knowledge production.

The sociological perspective must also examine exclusion. Historical access to education and authoritative knowledge was not equal in every region or period. Caste hierarchy, patriarchy, economic inequality, and control over literacy affected who could study, teach, interpret texts or receive social recognition. Although Indian history contains examples of women philosophers, poets, teachers, saints, rulers, and scholars, such examples should not be used to deny wider structures of gender inequality.

Similarly, tribal, Dalit, pastoral, rural, and artisanal knowledge should not be treated merely as supplementary material to a dominant tradition. These communities are knowledge producers in

their own right. An inclusive IKS curriculum must represent their experiences, intellectual contributions, ecological practices, oral histories, and social struggles.

The sociological relevance of IKS lies in its ability to strengthen cultural continuity, local livelihoods, intergenerational learning, environmental responsibility, and social participation. However, its revival must not reproduce historical inequalities. Knowledge should be made accessible across caste, gender, language, disability, and economic background.

Psychological Perspective of IKS

The psychological perspective of IKS examines Indian ideas concerning mind, consciousness, personality, emotion, attention, memory, motivation, behaviour, suffering, and well-being. Indian traditions generally approached psychology in connection with ethics, philosophy, health, and spiritual development rather than as an isolated laboratory discipline.

Concepts such as *manas*, *buddhi*, *citta*, *ahaṃkāra*, *saṃskāra*, and *vṛtti* were used to explain different aspects of mental functioning. *Manas* was often associated with sensory coordination and ordinary mental activity, while *buddhi* referred to judgment or discrimination. *Saṃskāras* represented impressions or dispositions formed through previous experiences and actions. These ideas resemble contemporary concerns with habit formation, memory, conditioning, identity, and cognitive patterns, although they should not be regarded as exact equivalents of modern psychological terms.

The Yoga tradition provides a systematic account of attention, mental fluctuation, self-discipline, and emotional regulation. Practices such as ethical restraint, posture, regulated breathing, concentration, meditation, and reflective awareness aim to reduce mental disturbance and develop self-regulation. Buddhist traditions similarly analyse craving, attachment, aversion, attention, compassion, and the impermanent nature of mental experience.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* discusses emotional conflict, responsibility, action, self-control, motivation, and equanimity. Its account of Arjuna's distress may be studied as a philosophical dialogue about moral uncertainty and decision-making, although it should not be interpreted as a substitute for modern clinical diagnosis.

Contemporary research provides cautious support for some yoga and meditation practices. A review of yoga programmes in school settings found promising evidence concerning physical health, emotional functioning, resilience, attention, and stress management, while also emphasizing the need for stronger research designs.

A systematic review and meta-analysis of meditation programmes found moderate evidence for improvements in anxiety, depression, and pain, but weaker or insufficient evidence for several other outcomes. The findings caution against exaggerated therapeutic claims.

Therefore, psychological practices derived from IKS may contribute to education, preventive health, emotional regulation, and personal well-being when taught by qualified persons and evaluated scientifically. They should not replace professional medical or psychological treatment where such treatment is required.

Educational Relevance in the Contemporary Context

The contemporary value of IKS lies in connecting cultural knowledge with modern education, research, and social needs. NEP 2020 promotes multidisciplinary education, Indian languages, local knowledge, ethical learning, arts, culture, and holistic development. The UGC's 2023 guidelines emphasize faculty orientation so that teachers can understand IKS and apply suitable elements within their disciplines and classroom practices.

Effective integration may include:

1. Teaching Indian logic and epistemology alongside global philosophical traditions.
2. Examining historical mathematical procedures through modern mathematical analysis.
3. Documenting local ecological and agricultural knowledge with community participation.
4. Studying classical literature together with folk, tribal, Bhakti, Sufi, Dalit, and regional traditions.
5. Introducing yoga and meditation as voluntary, inclusive, age-appropriate well-being practices.
6. Translating manuscripts and oral traditions while preserving linguistic and cultural context.
7. Evaluating medical, agricultural, environmental, and technological claims through systematic research.
8. Protecting the intellectual and cultural rights of communities whose knowledge is documented or commercialized.

Teacher preparation is essential because superficial integration may produce memorization, unsupported claims or cultural stereotypes. Faculty members require linguistic resources, historical training, interdisciplinary collaboration, and access to reliable translations and research.

Challenges and Necessary Safeguards

The first challenge is romanticization. Pride in India's intellectual heritage should not lead to the assumption that every ancient claim is correct. Historical importance and scientific validity are separate questions.

The second challenge is homogenization. IKS should not be reduced to one religion, language, caste, geographical region or textual tradition. India's knowledge heritage is plural and includes disagreement, debate, materialism, heterodox thought, folk practices, and minority traditions.

The third challenge concerns evidence. Scientific claims must be tested through transparent methods, reproducible research, peer review, and appropriate comparison. The official mission of the IKS Division itself includes proof of concept, new knowledge generation, and interdisciplinary research directed towards contemporary social challenges.

The fourth challenge is social justice. Reviving knowledge without examining historical exclusion may reproduce unequal power relations. Curriculum development should include women, marginalized castes, tribal groups, artisans, regional communities, and practitioners of oral traditions.

Finally, traditional knowledge should not be removed from the communities that have preserved it. Documentation and commercialization must involve informed consent, acknowledgement, benefit-sharing, and protection against misappropriation.

Conclusion

The Indian Knowledge System is a complex and plural heritage containing philosophical inquiry, historical experience, social practice, psychological insight, scientific reasoning, artistic creativity, and ecological wisdom. Its philosophical traditions developed sophisticated discussions of valid knowledge, logic, consciousness, morality, and liberation. Its historical institutions preserved and transmitted knowledge through oral, textual, institutional, and practical methods. Its sociological dimensions reveal the role of communities, occupations, identities, inequalities, and cultural interaction in knowledge production. Its psychological traditions offer important ideas concerning attention, self-regulation, emotion, habit, well-being, and ethical conduct.

The contemporary relevance of IKS depends on how it is studied and taught. An academically responsible approach should combine cultural respect with critical examination, historical evidence, social inclusion, and scientific evaluation. IKS should neither be rejected merely because it is traditional nor accepted merely because it is ancient. Its strongest educational contribution lies in encouraging learners to examine knowledge through dialogue, evidence, experience, ethics, and interdisciplinary inquiry.

When approached in this manner, IKS can contribute to a more culturally grounded, inclusive, reflective, and intellectually independent education system.

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