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Recontextualizing or Reifying Tradition? A Critical Analysis of the Indian Knowledge Systems Mandate in NEP 2020

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Abstract

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 introduces a significant and contentious directive: the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) across all levels of education. Framed as a decolonial move to restore cultural pride and epistemic diversity, this mandate presents a complex terrain of pedagogical promise and ideological peril. This paper conducts a rigorous critical analysis of the NEP's IKS framework, interrogating its conceptualization, operational challenges, and potential implications for the aims of a 21st-century education. Through a close reading of the policy text and an examination of subsequent implementation guidelines, this research argues that the NEP's articulation of IKS, while a necessary corrective to historical epistemic erasure, risks four key pitfalls:

- i). A reification of "tradition" as a monolithic, static category, often conflated with a selectively curated Hindu Brahmanical canon;
- ii). A superficial, additive approach to integration that may sideline critical engagement and social contextualization;
- iii). An unresolved tension between valorizing indigenous knowledges and meeting the demands of a globalized technological economy; and
- iv). A significant implementation gap stemming from a lack of qualified scholars, pedagogical frameworks, and institutional mechanisms.

The paper concludes that for the IKS mandate to fulfill its stated goal of developing "rooted yet global" citizens, it must move beyond symbolic inclusion. It must adopt a rigorously critical, pluralistic, and interdisciplinary methodology that engages with IKS as dynamic, contested, and socially situated systems of knowing, encouraging students to analyze both their intellectual insights and their historical intersections with power, hierarchy, and exclusion.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems, NEP 2020, Decolonial Education, Epistemic Pluralism, Curriculum Politics, Indigenous Knowledge.

Introduction

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emerges in a global moment of reckoning with the colonial foundations of modern education systems. In India, this reckoning takes a specific form: a policy-driven push to center "Indian Knowledge Systems" (IKS) as a core component of the curriculum from school to university. The NEP positions this not as a nostalgic revival but as a vital step for a nation "to attain its rightful place in the global community in terms of economic growth, social justice and equality, scientific advancement, national integration, and cultural preservation" (Government of India [GoI], 2020, p. 5). This bold mandate represents one of the policy's most distinctive and potentially transformative—or divisive—features.

IKS, as invoked in the policy, is an umbrella term encompassing a vast and heterogeneous array of intellectual, scientific, artistic, and philosophical traditions developed in the Indian subcontinent over millennia. The NEP's inclusion

of IKS is framed as an act of epistemic justice, aiming to correct the systemic marginalization of indigenous knowledge under colonial and post-colonial education. As the policy states, a key principle is the "incorporation of Indian knowledge systems" to make education more "relevant to the Indian context" (GoI, 2020, p. 6).

However, the translation of this principled intent into curricular practice is fraught with conceptual, pedagogical, and political complexities. This paper poses a central research question: Does the NEP 2020 provide a framework for engaging with Indian Knowledge Systems that is critical, pluralistic, and intellectually rigorous, or does it risk promoting an uncritical, homogenized, and politically instrumentalized version of "tradition"?

Employing a critical policy analysis lens (Ball, 1993), this study analyzes the NEP's textual discourse on IKS, examining its stated rationales, proposed methods of integration, and inherent tensions. It situates this analysis within broader

scholarly debates on decolonial education (Andreotti, 2011), the sociology of knowledge (Bernstein, 2000), and the politics of curriculum reform in plural societies. The argument proceeds by first delineating the NEP's vision for IKS, then critically examining the gaps between its decolonial rhetoric and its operational logic, before concluding with recommendations for a more nuanced and educationally sound pathway forward.

The NEP 2020 Vision for Indian Knowledge Systems: A Descriptive Overview

The NEP's advocacy for IKS is not an isolated clause but a recurring theme woven into its foundational principles and specific recommendations. Its most explicit articulation appears in the section on "Curriculum and Pedagogy in Schools":

"All curriculum and pedagogy... will be redesigned to be strongly rooted in the Indian and local context and ethos. This will include... knowledge of India, its diverse and vibrant culture, its illustrious history, its magnificent traditions of literature and art, its strong traditions in mathematics, science, philosophy, and linguistics, and its contributions to world civilization." (GoI, 2020, p. 11)

The policy further elaborates that education must "integrate Indian culture, values, and knowledge systems" to foster "a deep sense of respect towards the fundamental duties and constitutional values" (GoI, 2020, p. 6). This integration is envisioned across stages. At the school level, it suggests incorporating "traditional Indian games" in physical education and "Indian literature and art" in languages (GoI, 2020, p. 13). For higher education, the mandate is more profound. The NEP calls for establishing "vibrant Departments of Indian Knowledge Systems" in universities to foster "high-quality interdisciplinary research" (GoI, 2020, p. 37). It specifically mentions fields like linguistics, astronomy, philosophy, architecture, medicine (Ayurveda, Yoga), agriculture, and governance as rich repositories of IKS.

The stated rationales are multifaceted: to foster cultural pride and identity ("rootedness"), to enrich the curriculum with locally relevant content, to stimulate innovation by re-examining traditional paradigms, and to contribute to national development. The policy frames this as part of creating a "knowledge society" that draws from both "modern" and "traditional" wells. This comprehensive vision, however, demands critical scrutiny, particularly regarding what is included, how it is framed, and the potential consequences of its implementation.

Critical Analysis: Conceptual Ambiguities and Ideological Pitfalls

1. The Problem of Definition: What Constitutes "Indian Knowledge"?

The NEP uses the term "Indian Knowledge Systems" persistently but never defines it with precision. This conceptual vagueness is the source of its greatest potential both for creative pluralism and for ideological capture. In the absence of clear parameters, "IKS" can easily devolve into a floating signifier, interpreted to mean anything from:

- The sophisticated mathematical formulations of the Kerala School.
- The empirical surgical techniques described in the Sushruta Samhita.
- The complex philosophical debates within Nyaya or Buddhist logic.
- The rich oral folk traditions, craft knowledges, and

agricultural practices of diverse communities.

- A selectively curated set of Sanskrit textual traditions that align with a particular cultural-nationalist worldview.

The policy's examples, while broad, tend to lean towards the textual and the canonical, often rooted in Sanskritic sources. There is a conspicuous underemphasis on the knowledge systems of non-Brahmanical, non-Sanskritic, tribal (Adivasi), Dalit, and other marginalized communities, whose epistemologies have been doubly oppressed—first by traditional hierarchies and then by colonial modernity (Guru & Sarukkai, 2019). This raises a critical question: Will the IKS mandate engage with the lived and embodied knowledge of forest-dwelling communities about biodiversity, or will it remain confined to the textualized knowledge of classical shastras? The danger is that a homogenized, upper-caste, Sanskrit-centric version of "Indian knowledge" becomes official, perpetuating epistemic injustice under a new, indigenous guise.

2. The Reification of Tradition: Static Heritage vs. Dynamic Knowledge

The NEP's language often portrays IKS as a "magnificent tradition" and a "vibrant culture" to be "incorporated" and "respected." This discourse risks reifying knowledge as a static heritage object—a museum piece to be displayed—rather than as a dynamic, contested, and evolving system of inquiry. Knowledge systems are not merely collections of facts or techniques; they are embedded in specific social, economic, and political contexts, with their own internal debates, power structures, and limitations.

A critical education would ask students not only to learn what Aryabhata discovered about zero but to investigate how mathematical knowledge was produced, who had access to it, and how it traveled and transformed. It would examine the philosophical assumptions underlying Sankhya alongside its materialist critiques within the Charvaka tradition. The NEP's emphasis on "rootedness" and "respect" may inadvertently discourage such critical interrogation, promoting an attitude of deference over one of analytical engagement. As Sen (2005) warns, a singular, glorified narrative of the Indian past can undermine the country's robust argumentative tradition and pluralistic identity.

3. The Tension between "Rootedness" and "Global Citizenship"

The NEP aims to develop individuals who are "global citizens" yet "rooted in their Indian ethos" (GoI, 2020, p. 6). This dual mandate creates a fundamental pedagogical tension. How does one critically engage with global scientific norms (e.g., evidence-based medicine, the scientific method) while simultaneously validating knowledge systems based on different epistemic foundations (e.g., authority of scripture, holistic paradigms)?

For instance, integrating Ayurveda into a biology curriculum is a worthy interdisciplinary goal. However, it must be done with epistemic clarity. Will students be taught Ayurvedic principles as complementary wellness practices, as historical precursors to modern medicine, or as scientifically validated therapeutic systems on par with biochemistry? The NEP provides no guidance on navigating these epistemic borders. The risk is either a superficial, tokenistic mention of IKS that fails to take its intellectual content seriously, or an uncritical presentation that sets up a conflict with modern science, potentially fostering skepticism towards evidence-based

reasoning. A truly integrative approach would require a meta-conversation about the nature of knowledge itself—comparing epistemic frameworks, their contexts of validation, and their domains of applicability—a sophisticated task for which most educators are unprepared.

Pedagogical and Implementation Quagmires

1. The "Add-On" Syndrome and Interdisciplinary Lip Service

The dominant model of integration suggested by the NEP appears to be an additive one: include Indian games in PE, add Indian scientists to science chapters, offer courses on Indian philosophy. This "add Indian and stir" approach fails to achieve a deeper, structural integration. True interdisciplinary engagement would involve using IKS as a lens to rethink fundamental concepts. For example, a physics unit on motion could engage with concepts of spanda (vibration) from Kashmir Shaivism not as a historical footnote, but as a different conceptual starting point for discussing energy and matter. This requires a complete re-conceptualization of curriculum design, moving far beyond inserting discrete "Indian" modules.

Furthermore, the institutional structures of education are ill-suited for this task. Subject-specific teachers, standardized textbooks, and rigid timetables militate against the fluid, conceptual integration required. Without dedicated space, time, and training for collaborative curriculum development between IKS scholars and subject teachers, the mandate will likely result in a few appended paragraphs in textbooks, easily skipped in the rush to complete the "main" syllabus for board exams.

2. The Acute Human Resource Crisis: Who Will Teach IKS?

This is perhaps the most pragmatic and severe bottleneck. Where is the cadre of teachers and professors qualified to teach IKS in an engaging, critical, and interdisciplinary manner? Traditional pandits or vaidyas may have deep content knowledge but often lack training in modern pedagogical methods or critical social science perspectives. Conversely, university professors in science or social science departments typically have no formal training in any IKS domain. The NEP's suggestion to create new IKS departments is a long-term solution, but it does not address the immediate need for thousands of school teachers.

The likely outcome is a top-down development of standardized textbook content by committees, which may prioritize easily testable information (names, dates, concepts) over nuanced understanding. This didactic transmission would be the very antithesis of the NEP's own stated preference for experiential and discussion-based learning, reducing rich, complex knowledge systems to a set of facts for rote memorization.

3. Assessment and the Specter of Ideological Conformity

High-stakes assessment inevitably dictates what is taught and learned. How will "knowledge of India" or "respect for traditions" be assessed? If assessment focuses on recall of canonical texts, historical figures, or cultural practices deemed authentically "Indian," it can easily become a tool for promoting a particular cultural narrative. There is a palpable risk of creating a "patriotic curriculum" where the correct answer aligns with a state-sanctioned version of history and culture. This would stifle the critical thinking of the NEP elsewhere. As the policy states, education should develop

"rational thought, scientific temper, and evidence-based thinking" (GoI, 2020, p. 5). An uncritical IKS curriculum could directly undermine this goal if it demands deference to traditional authority over empirical inquiry or rational debate.

Case in Point: The IKS Division and National Curriculum Framework

Post-NEP, the establishment of a dedicated IKS Division within the Ministry of Education's AICTE and its funding initiatives signal serious intent. The subsequent National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE, 2023) further operationalizes the mandate. It proposes "India-centric" approaches and highlights IKS in areas like linguistics (*vyākaraṇa*), arts, and mathematics (National Council of Educational Research and Training [NCERT], 2023).

A critical reading of the NCF-SE, however, reveals persistent issues. While it mentions "critical thinking," the examples of IKS integration often remain within a heritage appreciation mode. The framework's attempt to link IKS to values like seva (service) and shraddha (respectful attention) (NCERT, 2023, p. 28) is commendable but skirts the harder questions of social critique. The success or failure of this project will ultimately be determined by the yet-to-be-written textbooks. Will they, for instance, present the Manusmṛiti as a source of "Indian knowledge" on law and society while also critically examining its rigid social hierarchy? The composition of textbook committees will be the decisive battleground for the soul of the IKS mandate.

Towards a Critical and Pluralistic Pedagogy of IKS: Recommendations

To prevent the IKS mandate from becoming an instrument of intellectual regression or cultural majoritarianism, a fundamentally different approach is required—one grounded in critical pedagogy, epistemic pluralism, and social justice.

1. Redefine IKS through a Pluralistic and Critical Lens

- **Official Definition:** The Ministry of Education must publish a formal, inclusive definition of IKS that explicitly encompasses the knowledge traditions of all Indian communities—Sanskritic and non-Sanskritic, textual and oral, elite and subaltern.
- **Focus on Epistemology:** Shift the focus from content (what Indians knew) to epistemology (how they knew it, and how those ways of knowing compare to others). Develop curricular units that explore different theories of knowledge (*pramāṇa* *śāstra*) across Indian traditions and put them in dialogue with modern scientific methods.
- **Center Marginalized Epistemologies:** Actively commission and integrate scholarship on Dalit, Adivasi, and women's knowledge systems—from Warli art and folk medicine to oral histories and sustainable resource management. This would make the IKS project truly decolonial and transformative.

2. Develop Rigorous Teacher Education and Open Resources

- **Dual-Expertise Programs:** Create new postgraduate programs that rigorously train scholars in both a modern discipline (e.g., Ecology, Psychology, Political Science) and a relevant IKS domain (e.g., Traditional Agricultural Practices, Yogic Philosophy, Arthashastra). These graduates should become the next generation of teacher-educators and curriculum designers.

- **Mandatory In-Service Modules:** Design compulsory, high-quality professional development modules for serving teachers that equip them with basic IKS literacy, critical frameworks for integration, and lesson plans that go beyond tokenism.
- **Digital Archives and Pedagogical Kits:** Develop a national digital repository of primary IKS sources (translations, manuscripts, oral recordings) accompanied by pedagogical guides that pose critical questions, suggest activities, and connect traditional knowledge to contemporary issues like climate change or public health.

3. Foster Dialogical and Project-Based Learning

- **Move Beyond Textbooks:** Encourage schools to use local IKS as a resource for project-based learning. Students could document local architectural styles, analyze the botany mentioned in regional poetry, or interview craftspersons about their geometrical designs and material science.
- **Stage Intellectual Dialogues:** Structure classroom debates on questions like: "How did different Indian philosophical traditions define a 'good life' compared to modern notions?" or "What can traditional water management systems teach us about solving today's water crisis?" This positions IKS as a living resource for critical thought, not a relic.
- **Assessment Reform:** Design assessments that evaluate a student's ability to analyze, compare, and critique knowledge systems rather than simply reproduce facts from them. Portfolio assessments, research projects, and analytical essays should replace rote recall questions on IKS.

Conclusion

The NEP 2020's mandate to integrate Indian Knowledge Systems represents a watershed moment in Indian educational history, born from legitimate demands for epistemic decolonization and cultural reaffirmation. As this analysis has demonstrated, however, the policy's current formulation navigates a perilous path between intellectual liberation and ideological instrumentalization. While the NEP correctly identifies the historical marginalization of indigenous knowledge as a fundamental flaw in colonial and post-colonial education, its operational framework lacks the critical apparatus necessary to transform this corrective into a genuinely transformative educational practice.

The central tension lies in the policy's ambiguous conceptualization of IKS. By failing to define its scope with precision, the NEP inadvertently creates space for a selective, homogenized interpretation that may privilege Sanskritic, Brahmanical texts over the diverse, lived epistemologies of marginalized communities. This risks perpetuating what Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai term "epistemic injustice" under the new banner of cultural revival (Guru & Sarukkai, 2019). Furthermore, the policy's tendency to frame IKS as "magnificent tradition" encourages a heritage-oriented approach that may reify knowledge as static artifact rather than engage it as dynamic, contested systems of inquiry.

Pedagogically, the NEP's implementation strategy appears vulnerable to the "additive" fallacy—inserting discrete Indian elements into existing curricular structures rather than fostering the deep interdisciplinary synthesis required. This approach, combined with severe human resource shortages and assessment systems ill-designed for critical engagement, threatens to reduce complex knowledge systems to rote-

memorized facts. As the policy itself acknowledges, education must develop "rational thought, scientific temper, and evidence-based thinking" (Government of India, 2020, p. 5), yet an uncritical IKS curriculum could undermine these very goals by demanding deference to traditional authority over analytical inquiry.

The most profound challenge may be the unresolved epistemological tension between the NEP's dual aims of fostering "rootedness" and "global citizenship." Integrating Ayurveda with modern biology or traditional mathematics with contemporary STEM education requires sophisticated navigation of different epistemic foundations. Without explicit guidance on how to engage these differences critically and comparatively, the integration risks either tokenistic superficiality or uncritical acceptance that could foster anti-scientific attitudes.

For the IKS mandate to fulfill its decolonial promise, it must evolve beyond its current formulation. The project's success will be measured not by how much "traditional" content is inserted into syllabi, but by whether it cultivates students capable of critical discernment—those who can appreciate the Nyaya Sutras while understanding formal logic, who can study traditional water management while engaging with environmental science, and who can examine the Arthashastra while upholding constitutional values. As Amartya Sen (2005) reminds us, India's intellectual strength has historically lain in its argumentative pluralism, not in uncritical deference to authority.

The establishment of the IKS Division and the guidelines in the NCF-SE 2023 represent initial steps toward implementation. Their ultimate direction—whether toward critical pluralism or ideological conformity—will be determined in the coming years through textbook development, teacher training, and assessment reform. To guard against the latter outcome, this paper recommends a fundamental reorientation: from content transmission to epistemology education, from additive inclusion to structural integration, and from heritage appreciation to critical dialogue.

The NEP 2020 has opened a necessary and complex conversation about knowledge, power, and identity in Indian education. Whether this conversation enriches India's intellectual landscape or narrows it will depend on our collective commitment to ensuring that the study of the Indian Knowledge System becomes what philosopher B.K. Matilal celebrated in the Indian tradition itself: "a rigorous exercise in critical thinking, debate, and pluralistic inquiry" (Matilal, 1986, p. 12). The goal must be an education that is simultaneously rooted and radical, traditional and transformative—preparing citizens who are proud of their heritage but critical in their engagement with it, equipped to contribute to both Indian society and the global community.

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