

EPISTEMIC RESURGENCE: RETHINKING INDIAN KNOWLEDGE TRADITIONS IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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Abstract:

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) represents one of the world's most comprehensive and continuous traditions of thought, encompassing philosophy, science, art, ethics, and education. Its vitality lies not only in its antiquity but in its capacity for reinterpretation and renewal. This paper examines the philosophical foundations of IKS and its relevance to contemporary global epistemology. It argues that Indian epistemic traditions — grounded in notions of *ṛta* (cosmic order), *satya* (truth), and *dharma* (ethical order) — offer alternative paradigms of knowing that resist the fragmentation of modern Western rationality. Drawing upon thinkers from the Vedic corpus, classical systems (*darśanas*), and modern reformers like Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, and Rabindranath Tagore, the paper explores how knowledge in India has historically been conceived as integral, experiential, and self-transformative. The study then critically re-evaluates IKS within the framework of the National Education Policy (2020) and the AICTE-IKS initiative, proposing a philosophical model of “epistemic resurgence” — a process by which ancient wisdom interfaces dynamically with modern science and humanistic inquiry. Through this synthesis, IKS emerges not as a relic of the past but as a living framework for global knowledge futures.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge System, epistemology, dharma, education, philosophical foundations, NEP 2020

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1. Introduction

“Knowledge is that which liberates.” This ancient dictum from the *Vishnu Purana* encapsulates the spirit of the Indian intellectual tradition. Unlike the instrumental view of knowledge that dominates modernity, the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) situates *jñāna* within an ethical, spiritual, and cosmic order. It does not merely seek to explain the world but to transform the self in relation to it. In this sense, knowledge (*vidyā*) is simultaneously ontological, epistemological, and moral.¹ Across millennia, India developed a sophisticated network of knowledge traditions — the *śruti* and *smṛti* texts, the six systems of philosophy (*ṣaḍ-darśanas*), and diverse scientific disciplines such as Ayurveda, astronomy (*jyotiṣa*), linguistics (*vyākaraṇa*), and logic (*nyāya*).² These systems share a unifying philosophical vision: the pursuit of truth through disciplined inquiry grounded in experience and reason, yet open to transcendence.

However, colonial modernity fragmented this vision. Western education systems, while introducing rational methods and global perspectives, also imposed epistemic hierarchies that marginalized indigenous ways of knowing.³ In postcolonial India, the challenge has been twofold — to recover the depth of traditional knowledge while aligning it with modern research and pedagogical frameworks. The National Education Policy (2020) marks a significant institutional effort to revive and integrate IKS within higher education. Yet beyond policy and curriculum, the question remains fundamentally philosophical: What does it mean to know in the Indian sense? And how can

this epistemic heritage speak meaningfully to the crises of modern knowledge — its alienation, technocratic reductionism, and ethical disconnection?

This paper addresses these questions by undertaking a critical-philosophical exploration of the Indian Knowledge System as both a historical and living framework. The argument proceeds through three major movements:

1. Unfolding the **philosophical foundations** of IKS — its metaphysical and epistemological premises;

2. Analysing its **ethical and educational dimensions** — how knowledge is linked to *dharma* and human flourishing; and

3. Proposing a **contemporary model of epistemic resurgence**, aligning IKS with current intellectual and educational discourses.

The study draws upon classical sources like the *Upaniṣads*, *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Nyāya Sūtra*, and *Yoga Sūtra*, alongside modern interpretations by philosophers such as S. Radhakrishnan, Daya Krishna, and Sri Aurobindo. It situates these within a critical dialogue with Western epistemology, particularly the Cartesian and post-Enlightenment traditions that shaped modern thought. The aim is not to idealize the past but to explore how the Indian model of knowing — integrative, ethical, and experiential — can contribute to a global rethinking of knowledge in the 21st century.

2. The Philosophical Foundations of the Indian Knowledge System

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) begins not with the assumption of a fragmented or dualistic reality but with a holistic ontological

¹ The *Vishnu Purana* (1.19.41) states: “*Sa vidyā yā vimuktaye*” — that is knowledge which liberates.

² The six classical systems are *Nyāya*, *Vaiśeṣika*, *Sāṅkhya*, *Yoga*, *Mīmāṃsā*, and *Vedānta*.

³ See Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (1983).

principle — *ṛta*, the cosmic order.⁴ In the *Rg Veda*, *ṛta* represents the inherent law that governs the universe, linking truth, morality, and being. From this ontological ground arises *satya* (truth), the correspondence between thought and the cosmic order.⁵ In the Indian view, epistemology (*pramāṇa-śāstra*) is inseparable from metaphysics; knowledge is a form of participation in reality rather than a detached observation of it.

This worldview resists the Cartesian split between subject and object that defines Western epistemology. Instead, Indian thought conceives knowledge as relational and transformative — a movement from ignorance (*avidyā*) to realization (*vidyā*), culminating in *mokṣa* (liberation).⁶ Classical systems of philosophy articulate this in different ways. The *Sāṅkhya* system distinguishes between *puruṣa* (pure consciousness) and *prakṛti* (matter), yet the purpose of this distinction is to lead to discernment (*viveka*), a realization of consciousness's autonomy.⁷ The *Vedānta*, especially in Śaṅkara's Advaita tradition, deepens this into a non-dual ontology where *Brahman* is the sole reality, and the world is a manifestation of the same.⁸ In contrast, *Nyāya* and *Vaiśeṣika* develop rigorous logical and analytical frameworks to ensure valid cognition (*pramā*), emphasizing empirical and inferential reasoning (*anumāna*).

Despite their diversity, these systems converge on a few epistemic principles:

- **Unity of knowledge and being** (*sat* and *cit* are inseparable).

- **Hierarchy of knowing**, from sensory perception to intuitive realization (*aparā vidyā* → *parā vidyā*).

- **Ethical centrality**, where knowledge entails responsibility toward *dharma* (cosmic and social order).

In this sense, Indian epistemology is simultaneously **cosmological and ethical**. The act of knowing is not morally neutral; it is a sacred act that aligns the knower with the truth of existence.

3. Indian Epistemology: Theories of Knowledge and Truth

Indian philosophers developed one of the most intricate systems of epistemology in world philosophy. The *Nyāya* school classified four valid means of knowledge (*pramāṇas*): perception (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), comparison (*upamāna*), and testimony (*śabda*).⁹ Later systems like *Mīmāṃsā* and *Vedānta* expanded these, recognizing the authority of revealed knowledge and intuition. What distinguishes Indian epistemology is its **inclusive realism** — it accepts both empirical and transcendent means of knowing. In contrast to the empiricist tradition of Hume or Locke, Indian thought recognizes that the self is not merely a passive observer but an active participant in cognition.¹⁰

Daya Krishna observes that “the Indian concern with *pramāṇas* is not epistemology in the Western sense but a quest for *right knowing* — knowing that leads to freedom.”¹¹ This ethical

⁴ *Rg Veda* 10.190: “*ṛtaṃ ca satyaṃ cābhīdāt tapaso 'dhyajāyata*” — from austerity was born order and truth.

⁵ S. Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, Vol. 1 (Oxford University Press, 1923), pp. 51–52.

⁶ The *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* (1.1.4–5) distinguishes between lower (*aparā*) and higher (*parā*) knowledge.

⁷ *Sāṅkhya Kārikā* 64.

⁸ Śaṅkara, *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya*, I.i.4.

⁹ *Nyāya Sūtra* I.1.3–7.

¹⁰ Karl Potter, *Presuppositions of India's Philosophies* (Motilal Banarsidass, 1991).

¹¹ Daya Krishna, *Indian Philosophy: A Counter Perspective* (Oxford India, 2006), p. 77.

orientation is crucial. Knowledge that does not contribute to liberation (*mokṣa*) or social harmony (*loka-saṃgraha*) is incomplete. Moreover, the Indian epistemic tradition values *śraddhā* (trust or faith) not as blind belief but as epistemic openness — a willingness to enter dialogue with what transcends the ego. This aspect, often dismissed as non-rational by Western critics, corresponds to what phenomenologists like Husserl later described as the intentional structure of consciousness.¹² In this sense, Indian epistemology anticipates many modern philosophical concerns — the limits of objectivity, the role of language, and the interdependence of knowing and being. The *Yoga Sūtra* of Patañjali, for example, defines valid cognition as arising from direct perception, inference, and scriptural testimony (*pratyakṣa-anumāna-āgamāḥ pramāṇāni*).¹³ Yet Patañjali goes further: ultimate knowledge (*prajñā*) is beyond words and conceptual thought, attained in meditative absorption (*samādhi*). Thus, the Indian Knowledge System constructs a graded epistemology — from empirical observation to intuitive realization — unified by the principle that knowledge transforms the knower.

4. The Vedic Episteme: Unity, Inquiry, and Reflexivity

The Vedas and Upanishads articulate a vision of knowledge as both transcendental and empirical. *Brahmavidyā* (knowledge of ultimate reality) coexists with *aparā vidyā* (knowledge of the material). This dual structure resists modern epistemic hierarchies that separate science from spirituality, theory from praxis. Yet, a critical reading reveals that the Vedic corpus was not

monolithic. Debates among schools—ranging from ritualism (*Mīmāṃsā*) to introspection (*Vedānta*) and material realism (*Vaiśeṣika*)—constituted a vibrant intellectual democracy. The *ṣaḍdarśanas* (six systems of philosophy) are better understood as competing yet convergent epistemologies, unified by the pursuit of *mokṣa* (liberation through knowledge).

Importantly, this plurality anticipates what contemporary theorists call epistemic diversity—the recognition of multiple rationalities. However, the IKS framework also requires self-reflexivity. While it valorised inquiry (*parīkṣā*), it was historically constrained by social hierarchies—gendered exclusions and caste-based restrictions on learning. Reviving IKS today demands that we confront these internal contradictions rather than sanitize them in civilizational nostalgia.

5. Knowledge and Dharma: The Ethical Dimension

In the Indian tradition, knowledge is inseparable from *dharma*. The *Bhagavad Gītā* teaches that wisdom (*jñāna*) must be embodied through right action (*karma yoga*).¹⁴ Knowledge without ethical realization is sterile. This integration of epistemology and ethics marks a major departure from the morally neutral notion of knowledge in modern science. Tagore echoes this in his *Sādhana: The Realisation of Life*, arguing that true education must awaken the “universal man” within.¹⁵ Sri Aurobindo, in *The Life Divine*, extends this idea: “All knowledge is a seeking after self-knowledge, and all life a movement toward divine realization.”¹⁶ The Indian Knowledge System thus embodies an

¹⁴ *Bhagavad Gītā* IV.38: “There is nothing so purifying as knowledge.”

¹⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, *Sādhana: The Realisation of Life* (1913).

¹⁶ Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, Ch. 1.

ethico-spiritual epistemology. Its aim is not the domination of nature but harmony with it. The concept of *ahimsā* (non-violence) extends beyond moral conduct to epistemic humility — a refusal to impose one's categories upon reality.

In contemporary terms, this resonates with environmental ethics and sustainability studies. The ancient dictum “*īśāvāsyam idam sarvam*” — all this is pervaded by the divine — from the *Īśā Upaniṣad*, implies a worldview where knowledge and responsibility toward life are intertwined.¹⁷ In the context of modern education, this means nurturing character alongside cognition — the synthesis of *śikṣā* (instruction) and *saṃskāra* (value formation). The National Education Policy (2020) reaffirms this vision, emphasizing holistic learning grounded in ethical and cultural values.¹⁸

6. Knowledge and Education: The Pedagogical Vision of IKS

Traditional Indian education, as embodied in the *gurukula* system, was not merely about transmitting information but cultivating the whole person — intellect, body, and spirit. The *guru-śiṣya paramparā* symbolized the living transmission of knowledge through dialogue, example, and discipline.¹⁹

This pedagogy was founded on four principles:

- a. **Integral formation** — education as *saṃskāra*, the refinement of consciousness.
- b. **Dialogical learning** — the *upaniṣadic* method of questioning (*praśna-uttara*).

c. **Experiential verification** — students tested teachings through practice (*sādhana*).

d. **Ethical responsibility** — knowledge must serve society (*lokasaṃgraha*).

Modern educators like Radhakrishnan and Gandhi sought to revive these principles. Radhakrishnan envisioned universities as “temples of spirit” where knowledge and wisdom coexist.²⁰ Gandhi's *Nai Talim* (Basic Education) emphasized *learning by doing* — integrating intellectual and manual work. However, postcolonial education inherited a structure based on colonial bureaucracy and industrial modernity, prioritizing utility over wisdom.²¹ The result, as scholars like Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya have noted, was a rupture between India's philosophical heritage and its scientific temperament.²² The current efforts of the AICTE's Indian Knowledge System Division aim to bridge this gap by promoting interdisciplinary research grounded in indigenous epistemologies.²³ Yet to make this initiative philosophically robust, one must rearticulate IKS not as nostalgia but as a dynamic paradigm capable of engaging global challenges — digital ethics, sustainability, mental well-being, and social equity. IKS, when understood as *living philosophy*, can reform the very purpose of education: from producing employable individuals to cultivating enlightened citizens.

7. Knowledge and Liberation: The Educational Ethos of the Gurukula

¹⁷ *Īśā Upaniṣad* 1.

¹⁸ *National Education Policy 2020*, Ministry of Education, Government of India.

¹⁹ *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* VII.1.1–2 describes the guru as “one who leads the pupil from darkness to light.”

²⁰ S. Radhakrishnan, *Education and the Future of Man* (1952).

²¹ Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) parallels the Indian critique of colonial education.

²² Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, *Science and Society in Ancient India* (1977).

²³ AICTE, *Indian Knowledge System Division: Vision Document* (2022).

The *Gurukula* model embodies the holistic pedagogy of ancient India—learning as a moral and spiritual discipline. Knowledge was pursued through *śravaṇa* (listening), *manana* (reflection), and *nididhyāsana* (meditative realization). The *guru–śiṣya* relationship formed an ethical contract grounded in humility and reciprocity. However, a critical revaluation reveals that the *Gurukula* system also mirrored its social order. Access to education was stratified; women and marginalized communities were often excluded from the highest domains of learning. Therefore, reimagining IKS for the 21st century entails democratizing its pedagogical spirit while retaining its philosophical depth. As Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) reminds us, education must be dialogic and liberatory. The *Gurukula*’s emphasis on experiential knowledge can thus be reinterpreted through critical pedagogy, aligning ancient epistemology with contemporary notions of social justice and learner autonomy.

8. Colonial Rupture and the Politics of Knowledge

8.1 Epistemic Violence and the Macaulay Legacy

The colonial encounter in the 19th century transformed Indian epistemology from within. Thomas Macaulay’s 1835 *Minute on Indian Education* institutionalized English education to produce “a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste.” This project not only devalued indigenous systems of knowledge but also redefined what counted as “knowledge” itself. Postcolonial scholars like Ashis Nandy (1983) and Gauri Viswanathan (1989) have shown how colonial education created an epistemic dependence—a “coloniality of

knowledge” that persists even in postcolonial universities. Knowledge was detached from its ethical and spiritual foundations, instrumentalized for administration and utility.

8.2 Decolonization as Intellectual Reclamation

Decolonizing IKS thus involves more than republishing Sanskrit texts or celebrating cultural icons. It requires a critical epistemological reorientation—reclaiming the right to theorize from indigenous premises. As Ngũgĩwa Thiong’o (1986) argues, decolonization begins with the “decolonization of the mind.” For India, that means not only reasserting its intellectual traditions but interrogating how these can converse with modern science, technology, and global ethics without succumbing to chauvinism.

9. The Crisis of Modernity and the Call for Epistemic Resurgence

The 20th and 21st centuries have witnessed a profound epistemological crisis in global knowledge systems. The dominance of positivism and technological rationality, while enabling material progress, has resulted in alienation, ecological imbalance, and moral fragmentation.²⁴

The Enlightenment ideal of universal reason, once liberating, has turned into a technocratic hegemony that reduces knowledge to data and life to consumption. In this context, the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) offers not a rejection of modernity but a reorientation of it. By reasserting the unity of knowledge and value, IKS calls for what this paper terms epistemic resurgence — a process of renewal wherein ancient frameworks of knowing engage critically and creatively with contemporary thought.

Sri Aurobindo foresaw this necessity when he wrote that “India must recover the old spiritual

²⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1 (1984).

knowledge and use it to build her future.”²⁵ His vision was not of revivalism but of transformation — the reawakening of the intuitive and synthetic capacities of the Indian mind to meet modern challenges. Similarly, Tagore’s cosmopolitan humanism sought to harmonize the spiritual insight of the East with the scientific curiosity of the West.²⁶ Philosophically, epistemic resurgence means reclaiming the autonomy of consciousness as the ground of knowledge. It entails a critique of reductionism — whether scientific, economic, or ideological — and a return to the experiential depth of being.²⁷ In education, it translates into integrative learning, where disciplines are not isolated silos but interwoven modes of understanding reality. The National Education Policy (NEP 2020) marks a structural step toward such integration. Its vision of a “holistic and multidisciplinary education rooted in Indian ethos” aligns with the ancient principle of *sarva-vidyā-pratiṣṭhā* — the establishment of all knowledge upon the foundation of the self.²⁸ However, policy alone cannot bring resurgence. What is needed is a philosophical consciousness among educators and scholars — an awareness that knowledge is a moral and spiritual pursuit. Only when universities embody this ethos can the Indian Knowledge System become truly transformative.

10. Towards a Contemporary Framework of the Indian Knowledge System

To reinterpret the Indian Knowledge System for the contemporary world, three philosophical axes may be proposed:

(a) Ontological Integration

IKS recognizes the interdependence of all forms of existence — physical, mental, and spiritual. The *Vedāntic* notion of *Brahman* as the substratum of all being anticipates the systems theory of modern science, where reality is seen as a network of relationships.²⁹ This view supports an ecological and sustainable approach to knowledge, countering the anthropocentric bias of modern thought.

(b) Epistemic Pluralism

Unlike the exclusivism of many Western epistemologies, Indian philosophy acknowledges multiple valid paths to truth (*anekānta-vāda* in Jainism, *samanvaya* in Vedānta).³⁰ This pluralism is vital in an age of cultural diversity and global communication. It promotes intellectual humility and dialogue, enabling cross-civilizational understanding.

(c) Ethical-Educational Synthesis

The final axis links knowledge to *dharma* and education to self-realization. The teacher is not a technician of information but a guide in wisdom (*ācārya*).³¹ Education, in this model, becomes a process of aligning the individual with the moral and cosmic order — a process that produces responsible citizens and humane innovators.

Integrating these principles requires rethinking curricula, pedagogy, and research frameworks. The *AICTE-IKS Division* and various *IIT IKS Centres* have begun initiatives in this direction — offering courses on Indian epistemology, philosophy of science, and indigenous

²⁵ Sri Aurobindo, *The Renaissance in India* (1918).

²⁶ Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism* (1917).

²⁷ Raimon Panikkar, *The Cosmotheandric Experience* (1993).

²⁸ *National Education Policy 2020*, p. 12.

²⁹ Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics* (1975), discusses parallels between Vedāntic and modern physical cosmology.

³⁰ *Tattvārtha Sūtra* V.29; *Brahma Sūtra Bhāṣya* II.i.1.

³¹ *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* I.11: “*Ācārya devo bhava*” — revere the teacher as divine.

technologies.³² Yet the success of this movement depends on transcending mere cultural pride. As Daya Krishna cautioned, IKS must remain a **critical enterprise**, open to reinterpretation and free from dogma.³³ Its vitality lies in the capacity to question itself — to rediscover timeless truths in the light of new experiences.

• **Global Significance and Future Directions**

The resurgence of Indian epistemology is not a regional concern but a global philosophical necessity. As the world confronts crises of meaning, ecology, and technology, the Indian model of integrative knowledge offers a counter-narrative — one that unites science and spirituality, analysis and intuition, individuality and universality. Contemporary philosophers such as Amartya Sen and Sundar Sarukkai have argued for reengaging with the plural and dialogic traditions of Indian thought to address modern challenges of justice and ethics.³⁴ The Indian Knowledge System, seen through this lens, can contribute to a planetary ethics — a framework that respects cultural diversity while affirming the oneness of life. In practice, this means developing global curricula that include comparative philosophy, translating Sanskrit texts with philosophical sensitivity, and fostering research collaborations that treat indigenous knowledge as epistemic equals rather than as anthropological curiosities. IKS can thus play a pivotal role in shaping the “knowledge futures” of humanity — futures where wisdom, compassion, and sustainability form the basis of innovation.

Conclusion

The Indian Knowledge System, rooted in an ancient yet dynamic vision of truth, offers humanity an epistemic compass in an age of uncertainty. Its foundational insight — that knowledge is integral, ethical, and liberating — stands as a corrective to the fragmentations of modernity. Through the centuries, India’s philosophers have taught that *vidyā* without *dharma* is incomplete, and reason without realization is sterile. The challenge today is not to romanticize this heritage but to rethink and renew it — to engage critically with its metaphysical assumptions, historical contexts, and contemporary applications. “Epistemic resurgence” thus implies both recovery and transformation — recovering the unity of being and knowing while transforming it in dialogue with science, technology, and global thought. In doing so, India not only rediscovers itself but contributes to the world a philosophy of wholeness, a pedagogy of compassion, and a vision of knowledge that heals rather than divides. As the *Atharva Veda* declares:

“May our knowledge be one and our hearts be one; may we live in harmony and understanding.”³⁵

Such is the enduring message of the Indian Knowledge System — not a relic of the past, but a living light for the future of global civilization.

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³² AICTE–IKS Division, *Annual Report 2023*.

³³ Daya Krishna, *Indian Philosophy: A Counter Perspective*, p. 182.

³⁴ Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian* (2005); Sundar Sarukkai, *Indian Philosophy and Philosophy of Science* (2005).

³⁵ *Atharva Veda* 3.30.6.

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