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## Indian Knowledge System in History: An Indigenous Intellectual Tradition and Its Significance

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### **Abstract**

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) represents a long-standing indigenous intellectual tradition shaped through centuries of observation, experience, and reflective inquiry. Rooted in India's historical continuity, it integrates diverse domains such as philosophy, history, science, medicine, mathematics, governance, ecology, and education. Unlike modern compartmentalized disciplines, Indian knowledge traditions followed a holistic and value-oriented approach. This paper examines the historical evolution of Indian Knowledge Systems from ancient to colonial times, analyses their core methodologies and domains, and evaluates their relevance in contemporary academic and social contexts. The study argues that a historical understanding of IKS is essential for preserving cultural heritage and for integrating indigenous knowledge with modern education to promote sustainable and ethical development.

**Keywords:** Indian Knowledge System, Indigenous Knowledge, History, Heritage, Education

### **Introduction**

India is one of the world's oldest living civilizations with an uninterrupted tradition of knowledge transmission. Knowledge in the Indian context was not limited to material advancement but was aimed at achieving harmony between individual, society, and nature. The Indian Knowledge System evolved through continuous intellectual engagement, combining empirical observation with ethical and philosophical inquiry. From a historical perspective, IKS represents a comprehensive framework that shaped social institutions, educational practices, and governance systems. Studying IKS through history enables a deeper understanding of India's intellectual contributions and their relevance in the modern world.

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## **Concept and Scope of Indian Knowledge System**

The Indian Knowledge System refers to the body of knowledge that originated and evolved within the Indian civilizational context over several millennia. It includes both oral and written traditions, theoretical understanding as well as practical applications, and integrates material and spiritual dimensions of life. Knowledge in India was viewed as a means for self-realization and social responsibility rather than mere accumulation of information.

A distinctive feature of IKS is its holistic nature. Unlike modern disciplinary divisions, Indian knowledge traditions emphasized interconnectedness. Science, philosophy, ethics, and social values were interwoven. Learning was centred on inquiry, dialogue, reflection, and experiential understanding. The teacher–student relationship played a crucial role in transmitting not only knowledge but also values and discipline.

## **Historical Evolution of Indian Knowledge Systems**

### **Ancient Period**

In ancient India, knowledge was primarily transmitted through oral traditions before being codified in written form. Educational institutions such as Gurukuls functioned as centers of holistic learning, where students lived with teachers and engaged in disciplined study. Curriculum included philosophy, logic, grammar, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, political thought, and ethical training.

The ancient period witnessed remarkable achievements in scientific and philosophical inquiry. Indian scholars demonstrated a strong spirit of observation, rational analysis, and systematic reasoning. Knowledge production was not confined to elites alone but was deeply rooted in social and cultural practices. The historical evidence suggests that ancient Indian society valued learning as a sacred pursuit essential for both individual and societal well-being.

### **Medieval Period**

The medieval period marked a phase of continuity and transformation in Indian knowledge traditions. Despite political changes, indigenous knowledge systems continued to flourish through regional centres of learning and scholarly networks. Knowledge dissemination expanded through regional languages, making learning more accessible to wider sections of society.

This period also witnessed significant interaction with other intellectual traditions. Indian scholars contributed to developments in mathematics, medicine, architecture, literature, and astronomy. Translation activities facilitated cross-cultural exchange of ideas, leading to mutual enrichment. Rather than representing a decline, the medieval era reflects adaptability and resilience of Indian Knowledge Systems.

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## **Colonial Period**

The colonial era brought significant challenges to indigenous knowledge traditions. Western education systems marginalized traditional learning and institutions. Indian knowledge systems were often viewed as inferior or unscientific. Despite this, traditional practices survived through communities, manuscripts, and scholarly efforts. The period also marked the beginning of intellectual movements aimed at rediscovering and reforming indigenous knowledge.

## **Major Domains of Indian Knowledge System**

### **Medical and Health Knowledge**

Indian medical traditions emphasized preventive healthcare, balance between body and mind, and harmony with nature. Health was understood holistically, integrating physical, mental, emotional, and social well-being. Traditional practices focused on diet, lifestyle, discipline, and natural remedies. This approach contrasts with purely symptom-based treatment and remains relevant in contemporary healthcare discussions.

### **Scientific and Mathematical Knowledge**

Indian contributions to mathematics and science demonstrate advanced levels of abstract thinking and empirical reasoning. The development of numerical systems, algebraic concepts, geometry, and astronomical calculations reflects intellectual sophistication. These achievements were based on observation, experimentation, and logical deduction. Historical analysis shows that Indian scientific traditions significantly influenced global knowledge systems.

### **Environmental and Ecological Knowledge**

Environmental consciousness formed an integral part of Indian knowledge traditions. Indigenous practices related to agriculture, water management, forest conservation, and biodiversity preservation were guided by principles of sustainability. Nature was viewed as a living entity deserving respect and protection. These traditional ecological insights are particularly relevant in addressing present-day environmental challenges.

### **Governance, Ethics, and Social Thought**

Indian political thought emphasized ethical governance and social responsibility. Leadership was seen as a moral duty rather than a privilege. Concepts of justice, welfare, diplomacy, and administration were closely linked with ethical conduct. Governance was expected to ensure social harmony, economic stability, and moral order.

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## **Methodological Foundations of Indian Knowledge System**

The methodologies adopted within the Indian Knowledge System were comprehensive and distinctive. Learning was based on observation, experience, inference, and dialogue. Debate and discussion were encouraged as tools for intellectual refinement. Knowledge acquisition was inseparable from ethical discipline and self-control.

Experiential learning formed the core of education. Students were encouraged to question, reflect, and apply knowledge in real-life situations. This approach ensured the development of critical thinking along with moral character. The integration of values with knowledge remains a unique contribution of Indian intellectual traditions.

## **Contemporary Relevance of Indian Knowledge System**

In the contemporary world, Indian Knowledge Systems provide valuable insights into sustainable development, mental health, environmental conservation, and ethical leadership. Integrating IKS into modern education can promote interdisciplinary learning and cultural self-awareness.

## **Role of History in Reviving Indian Knowledge System**

History plays a critical role in documenting, analysing, and interpreting Indian Knowledge Systems. Historical research helps contextualize traditional knowledge within its social, cultural, and temporal framework. It also aids in distinguishing empirical practices from belief systems through critical analysis.

Historians act as bridges between past and present, enabling meaningful revival of indigenous knowledge. By studying historical sources, manuscripts, and practices, scholars can reinterpret Indian Knowledge Systems in ways relevant to contemporary academic and social needs.

## **Challenges in Integrating IKS with Modern Knowledge**

Despite growing interest, integrating Indian Knowledge Systems with modern disciplines presents challenges. These include lack of standardized documentation, limited interdisciplinary research, and misconceptions regarding traditional knowledge. There is also a need for critical evaluation to ensure scientific validity without undermining cultural integrity.

Addressing these challenges requires collaboration between historians, scientists, educators, and policymakers. A balanced approach that respects tradition while encouraging critical inquiry is essential for meaningful integration.

## **Conclusion**

The Indian Knowledge System represents a rich and dynamic intellectual heritage shaped by centuries of inquiry, experience, and reflection. A historical study of IKS reveals India's substantial contributions to global knowledge and highlights its

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relevance in addressing contemporary challenges. Rather than viewing traditional and modern knowledge as opposing systems, they should be seen as complementary. Reviving and integrating Indian Knowledge Systems within modern education and research frameworks can lead to more inclusive, ethical, and sustainable development. History, as a discipline, plays a vital role in this process by preserving, interpreting, and contextualizing indigenous knowledge for future generations.

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