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## Indian Knowledge Systems as Living Ethics: A Gandhian Interpretation

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### Abstract

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) represents a profound synthesis of philosophy, religion, ethics, and lived experience developed over millennia. Unlike modern epistemologies that compartmentalise knowledge into secular and sacred domains, Indian thought conceives knowledge as an integrated pursuit of truth, moral responsibility, and spiritual realisation. This article examines Indian Knowledge Systems through the lenses of philosophy and religion, with particular emphasis on Mahatma Gandhi's ethical reinterpretation of indigenous wisdom. Gandhi neither rejected religion nor confined it to ritualistic practice; rather, he transformed philosophical and religious traditions into moral forces guiding individual and social life. Drawing upon Vedantic philosophy, Jain ethics, Buddhist compassion, and Bhakti traditions, Gandhi articulated a universal moral vision grounded in Satya (truth) and Ahimsa (non-violence). The paper argues that Gandhian thought represents a modern articulation of Indian philosophical and religious knowledge systems capable of responding creatively to colonial modernity and contemporary global ethical crises. In an era marked by materialism, religious intolerance, and moral fragmentation, Gandhian philosophy offers a unifying framework harmonising reason and faith, spirituality and social action. The article concludes that revitalising Indian Knowledge Systems through a Gandhian philosophical-religious framework is essential for nurturing ethical citizenship and global humanism.

### Keywords

Indian Knowledge Systems; Philosophy; Religion; Gandhian Thought; Satya; Ahimsa; Spiritual Ethics; Interfaith Harmony; Moral Philosophy

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## 1. Indian Knowledge Systems: Philosophical and Religious Foundations

Indian Knowledge Systems are deeply rooted in philosophical inquiry and religious experience. From the earliest Vedic hymns to the Upanishadic quest for ultimate reality, Indian thought has consistently sought to understand existence, consciousness, and ethical living. Philosophy (*Darshana*) in the Indian tradition is not abstract speculation but a way of perceiving truth and transforming life. Religion, similarly, is understood as *Dharma*, a moral and cosmic order guiding human conduct (Radhakrishnan, 1951).

IKS represents one of the oldest and most comprehensive epistemological traditions, encompassing metaphysics, ethics, ecology, medicine, linguistics, governance, and education. Knowledge (*Vidya*) was never value-neutral; it was intrinsically linked to moral responsibility and social harmony. The emphasis on experiential wisdom (*Anubhava*) and dialogical inquiry (*Shastrartha*) fostered pluralism and intellectual tolerance. Gandhi recognised this civilisational depth of IKS and regarded it as a moral reservoir capable of correcting the excesses of modernity. He criticised Western civilisation for reducing knowledge to technical efficiency and economic utility, arguing that such reductionism alienates humanity from ethical responsibility (Gandhi, 1960). In the global era, IKS offers a balanced alternative integrating material progress with spiritual wisdom.

### Philosophical Foundations of IKS and Gandhian Moral Thought

At the philosophical core of the Indian Knowledge System lies a profound inquiry into the nature of reality, self, and moral duty. The six orthodox systems (*Shad Darshanas*), Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Samkhya, Yoga, Mimamsa, and Vedanta, along with heterodox traditions such as Buddhism and Jainism, collectively contribute to a pluralistic philosophical heritage. These systems converge on the idea that ignorance (*Avidya*) is the root cause of human suffering and that liberation (*Moksha*) is attainable through ethical living, disciplined action, and spiritual insight. Mahatma Gandhi's moral philosophy is deeply embedded in this tradition. Gandhi drew inspiration from **Vedanta's non-dualism, Jain ethics of Ahimsa, and the Bhagavad Gita's doctrine of selfless action (Nishkama Karma) (Bhagavad Gita, 2:47)**. Gandhi transformed these philosophical insights into practical ethics applicable to social and political life. For him, philosophy was not speculative abstraction but a lived experience guiding moral action. Gandhi believed that truth (*Satya*) and non-violence (*Ahimsa*) were universal principles rooted in the metaphysical unity of existence, a central tenet of Indian philosophy (Parekh, 1997). In contrast to utilitarian and instrumental rationality dominant in global modernity, Gandhian philosophy emphasized moral intentionality and self-discipline. This philosophical orientation aligns with IKS's insistence that means are as important as ends. In an era marked by ethical relativism and moral crises, the philosophical foundations of IKS, as articulated by Gandhi, provide a coherent ethical framework

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that integrates personal integrity with social responsibility. Thus, Gandhian moral thought serves as a modern expression of ancient Indian philosophical wisdom.

### **Gandhi as a Modern Interpreter of Indian Philosophical Traditions**

Mahatma Gandhi stands as one of the most significant modern interpreters of Indian philosophical and religious traditions. Deeply influenced by the Bhagavad Gita, the Upanishads, Jain ethics, and the teachings of Buddha, Gandhi translated ancient wisdom into practical ethics for modern society (Gandhi, 1927). He rejected abstract metaphysics disconnected from social life and emphasised applied philosophy rooted in moral action.

Gandhi viewed philosophy as a guide for life rather than an academic discipline. His concept of *Satya* was not merely factual truth but ultimate reality realised through moral living. Similarly, *Ahimsa* was elevated from a religious principle to a universal ethical law governing personal conduct, politics, and social relations (Parekh, 1997). In this sense, Gandhi revived the spirit of Indian philosophy as a transformative force.

By integrating spiritual insight with social activism, Gandhi re-established the relevance of Indian Knowledge Systems in the modern world. His philosophy represents continuity with tradition as well as creative reinterpretation.

### **Religion as Ethics: Gandhi's Spiritual Humanism**

Gandhi's conception of religion occupies a central position in understanding Indian Knowledge Systems in the philosophical sense. For Gandhi, religion was not confined to institutional belief systems, rituals, or theological dogmas; rather, it was the ethical foundation of human life. He repeatedly asserted that religion without morality was hollow, and morality without spiritual grounding was incomplete (Gandhi, 1931). This view aligns closely with the Indian philosophical understanding of *Dharma* as righteous conduct sustaining both individual and social order.

In Indian Knowledge Systems, religion functions as applied philosophy. Ethical living, self-discipline, compassion, and service are considered expressions of spiritual realisation. Gandhi revived this tradition by interpreting religious teachings as moral imperatives rather than metaphysical abstractions. His engagement with the Bhagavad Gita exemplifies this approach; he viewed the Gita not as a text advocating withdrawal but as a guide for detached action rooted in ethical responsibility.

Gandhi's spiritual humanism transcended sectarian boundaries. Influenced by Jain *Ahimsa*, Buddhist compassion, Christian love, and Islamic equality, Gandhi articulated a universal ethical religion. This inclusivity reflects the pluralistic spirit of Indian Knowledge Systems, where truth is approached through multiple paths. Religion, in Gandhi's view, was a means to cultivate inner purity and social harmony. Thus, Gandhian spiritual humanism represents a living synthesis of Indian philosophy and religion, oriented toward ethical transformation of society.

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## Religious Wisdom, Spiritual Ethics, and Gandhian Interpretation of IKS

Religion within the Indian Knowledge System functions as a transformative ethical force rather than a rigid institutional authority. Indian religious traditions emphasize inner purification, moral conduct, and social responsibility over ritualism. Concepts such as *Dharma*, *Karma*, *Ahimsa*, *Tapas*, and *Seva* form the ethical backbone of Indian spirituality. Mahatma Gandhi's religious worldview was profoundly influenced by this ethical-spiritual orientation of IKS. Gandhi viewed religion as a means to realize truth through service and self-sacrifice, asserting that "religion without morality is a dangerous thing" (Gandhi, 1958). His concept of *Sarva Dharma Sambhava* reflects the IKS principle of spiritual pluralism, recognizing the validity of multiple paths to truth. Gandhi's daily practices, prayer, fasting, spinning, and community living, were expressions of applied spirituality rooted in Indian religious wisdom. In the global era, where religion is often politicized and commercialized, Gandhian spirituality offers a corrective rooted in ethical universality. Gandhi rejected religious exclusivism and emphasized compassion, humility, and self-restraint as universal spiritual values. His religious philosophy resonates with the Upanishadic vision of unity and the Buddhist emphasis on compassion. By integrating religion with social action, Gandhi transformed IKS into a dynamic ethical force capable of addressing injustice, inequality, and violence. In contemporary global discourse on peace and interfaith harmony, the Gandhian interpretation of IKS offers a model where religion becomes a bridge rather than a barrier. Thus, religious wisdom within IKS, when interpreted through Gandhi's ethical lens, remains profoundly relevant for fostering global harmony and moral responsibility.

### Indian Philosophical Pluralism and Gandhian Synthesis

One of the most distinctive features of the Indian Knowledge System is its profound philosophical pluralism. Unlike monolithic traditions that insist on a single metaphysical truth, Indian philosophy accommodates multiple schools of thought, Advaita Vedanta, Dvaita, Vishishtadvaita, Buddhism, Jainism, Samkhya, Yoga, and Nyaya, each offering unique perspectives on reality, knowledge, and liberation. This plurality does not imply contradiction but reflects a civilisational commitment to dialogue, tolerance, and experiential truth (Radhakrishnan, 1951). Knowledge in the Indian tradition evolves through debate (*Shastrartha*), reflection, and lived practice rather than rigid dogma.

Mahatma Gandhi emerged as a modern synthesiser of this pluralistic philosophical heritage. He consciously avoided rigid alignment with any single philosophical school and instead drew ethical insights from diverse traditions. From Vedanta, he derived the idea of unity of existence; from Jainism, the rigorous ethic of *Ahimsa*; from Buddhism, compassion and mindfulness; and from the Bhakti tradition, devotion and humility. Gandhi's genius lay in translating metaphysical ideas into practical moral action (Parekh, 1997).

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Gandhi's synthesis was ethical rather than metaphysical. He believed that philosophical systems acquire meaning only when they guide conduct and social responsibility. In this sense, he revitalised Indian philosophy as a living knowledge system relevant to modern social and political life. His pluralism was deeply rooted in moral universality rather than relativism. By harmonising diverse philosophical traditions into a coherent ethical vision, Gandhi reaffirmed the adaptability and resilience of Indian Knowledge Systems in responding to modern challenges.

## **Interfaith Harmony and Religious Pluralism in Indian Knowledge Systems**

Religious pluralism forms the spiritual backbone of Indian civilisation and is a vital dimension of Indian Knowledge Systems. Historically, India has been a meeting ground of multiple religious traditions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, each contributing to the moral and spiritual landscape of society. Indian thought traditionally perceives religion as a path to ethical living rather than exclusive theological assertion. This inclusive understanding finds its strongest modern expression in Gandhian philosophy (**Sen, 2005**).

Gandhi approached religion through the lens of ethics and lived experience. He believed that all religions are different expressions of the same ultimate truth and that none can claim absolute superiority. His daily prayer meetings included readings from the Bhagavad Gita, the Quran, the Bible, and other sacred texts, symbolising his commitment to interfaith harmony. Gandhi firmly opposed religious fundamentalism, arguing that intolerance arises when religion is divorced from morality (**Gandhi, 1931**).

In the contemporary world, where religious conflicts often fuel violence and division, Gandhian pluralism offers a powerful alternative. Indian Knowledge Systems, by emphasising coexistence, dialogue, and ethical common ground, provide philosophical tools for peace-building. Gandhi's interfaith vision transforms religion from a source of division into an instrument of social harmony, reinforcing the universal relevance of Indian spiritual wisdom.

## **Karma, Dharma, and Social Responsibility in Gandhian Thought**

The concepts of *Karma* and *Dharma* occupy a central position in Indian philosophy and religious ethics. *Karma* emphasises moral causation, while *Dharma* represents duty, righteousness, and social responsibility. In Indian Knowledge Systems, these concepts underscore the idea that human actions have ethical consequences and that individual conduct sustains social order. Gandhi offered a radical reinterpretation of these ideas by integrating them with active social engagement (**Gandhi, 1927**).

Gandhi's understanding of *Karma Yoga*, inspired by the Bhagavad Gita, emphasised selfless action performed without attachment to outcomes. He rejected escapist

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spirituality and insisted that true religious life demands engagement with social realities. For Gandhi, serving society, especially the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalised, was the highest form of spiritual practice. Knowledge, therefore, was inseparable from responsibility and service.

This Gandhian interpretation transforms Indian philosophy into applied ethics. In an age marked by moral indifference and individualism, Gandhi's integration of knowledge, duty, and service offers a compelling framework for ethical citizenship. Indian Knowledge Systems, viewed through this lens, emphasise accountability, compassion, and moral courage as essential components of philosophical wisdom.

### **Knowledge, Self-Realisation, and Liberation**

Self-realisation and liberation (*Moksha*) constitute the ultimate goals of Indian philosophical inquiry. Unlike purely transcendental interpretations, Indian Knowledge Systems view liberation as freedom from ignorance (*Avidya*), ego, and unethical living. Knowledge (*Jnana*) is thus transformative rather than merely informational. Gandhi reinterpreted liberation in moral and social terms, emphasising inner freedom achieved through truthfulness, self-discipline, and non-violence (Parekh, 1997).

For Gandhi, self-realisation could not be separated from concern for others. He argued that individual liberation is incomplete without social harmony. This ethical understanding of liberation reflects the Indian philosophical insight that the self (*Atman*) is inseparable from the universal (*Brahman*). Knowledge of the self naturally leads to compassion and responsibility toward all beings.

In contrast to modern epistemologies that prioritise control over nature and external success, Gandhian knowledge emphasises inner transformation. Self-knowledge becomes the foundation for social ethics and spiritual growth. By linking knowledge, liberation, and service, Gandhi reaffirmed the Indian Knowledge System as a holistic framework capable of addressing both personal and societal challenges in the contemporary world.

### **Indian Knowledge System as a Philosophical Foundation of Holistic Living**

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) is deeply rooted in philosophical traditions that view life as an integrated whole, where material existence, ethical conduct, and spiritual realization are inseparable. Indian philosophy, as articulated in the **Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and Darshanas**, emphasizes the unity of knowledge (*jnana*), action (*karma*), and devotion (*bhakti*). Unlike Western epistemological frameworks that often fragment knowledge into isolated disciplines, IKS adopts a **holistic and integrative approach**, recognizing the interconnectedness of human beings, nature, and the cosmos (Radhakrishnan, 1951). Mahatma Gandhi drew extensively from this philosophical worldview, particularly from Vedantic principles

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such as *Advaita* (non-dualism), *Sarvodaya* (welfare of all), and *Aparigraha* (non-possession). Gandhi believed that true knowledge is not merely intellectual accumulation but moral and spiritual realization that transforms individual and social life (**Gandhi, 1960**). In the contemporary global era marked by ecological crises, ethical erosion, and cultural alienation, the philosophical foundations of IKS offer alternative pathways to sustainable living and ethical globalization. Gandhi critiqued modern civilization for its excessive materialism and argued that progress devoid of moral restraint leads to self-destruction. His idea of *simple living and high thinking* reflects the IKS principle that happiness arises from inner fulfillment rather than external accumulation. Philosophically, Gandhi positioned knowledge as a means to self-purification and social responsibility, echoing the Upanishadic dictum “*Tat Tvam Asi*”, the oneness of self and universe. In the global knowledge economy, where competitiveness often overrides compassion, the philosophical wisdom of IKS, as interpreted by Gandhi, emphasizes harmony, balance, and ethical restraint. Thus, IKS functions not merely as a cultural inheritance but as a living philosophical tradition capable of addressing modern global challenges.

## **Religious Pluralism and Ethical Universalism in IKS and Gandhian Thought**

Religion within the Indian Knowledge System is not confined to dogma or ritual but serves as a moral and spiritual guide for righteous living. Indian religious traditions, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, share core ethical values such as **non-violence (Ahimsa), truth (Satya), compassion (Karuna), and self-discipline**. Gandhi’s religious outlook was profoundly shaped by this pluralistic ethos of IKS. He regarded religion as a unifying moral force rather than a divisive institutional framework (**Parekh, 1997**). Gandhi famously asserted that “all religions are true,” emphasizing ethical universality over theological exclusivity. This perspective aligns with the IKS understanding that truth is multi-dimensional and cannot be monopolized by any single tradition. Gandhi’s practice of *Ahimsa* was not merely a political strategy but a deeply religious commitment rooted in Jain and Hindu philosophies. In a globalized world witnessing religious extremism and cultural conflicts, the Gandhian interpretation of IKS offers a model of **interfaith harmony and ethical coexistence**. Gandhi believed that religion must serve humanity and promote social justice rather than reinforce power hierarchies. His concept of *Sarva Dharma Sambhava* (equal respect for all religions) reflects the IKS vision of unity in diversity. This religious inclusivity is particularly relevant today, as globalization intensifies cross-cultural interactions while simultaneously fueling identity-based conflicts. Gandhi warned that religion divorced from morality becomes destructive, echoing the IKS principle that spirituality must guide ethical conduct. By integrating religious wisdom with social responsibility, Gandhi transformed religious values into instruments of peace, dialogue, and justice. Thus, the religious dimension of IKS,

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through a Gandhian lens, provides a moral compass for navigating global pluralism while preserving spiritual integrity.

## **Gandhian Ethics, IKS, and the Challenge of Modern Global Civilization**

Gandhi's critique of modern civilization is one of the most significant ethical contributions derived from the Indian Knowledge System. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi argued that modern industrial civilization prioritizes material comfort over moral development, leading to exploitation of both humans and nature (**Gandhi, 1938/2009**). This critique resonates strongly with IKS principles that emphasize moderation, self-restraint, and ecological balance. Gandhi believed that true civilization is measured not by technological advancement but by ethical refinement and social harmony. The global era, driven by consumerism and market fundamentalism, stands in sharp contrast to the Gandhian-IKS vision of sustainable and ethical living. Gandhi's advocacy of *Swadeshi* and village-centered economies reflects an IKS-based approach that values local knowledge, self-reliance, and community well-being. Philosophically, this approach challenges the dominant global narrative of endless growth and accumulation. Gandhi emphasized that economic systems must be guided by moral considerations, echoing the IKS belief that wealth (*Artha*) must be regulated by righteousness (*Dharma*). In the context of climate change, economic inequality, and cultural homogenization, Gandhian ethics rooted in IKS provide critical insights for rethinking development paradigms. Gandhi's emphasis on trusteeship, where wealth holders act as custodians for social good, reflects ancient Indian ethical teachings found in the *Smritis* and *Arthashastra*. By integrating ethics with economics, Gandhi demonstrated how IKS could address global challenges without rejecting modernity outright. Instead, he advocated a morally regulated modernity grounded in spiritual wisdom and social responsibility.

### **Conclusion:**

The revitalization of the Indian Knowledge System in the global era requires not mere preservation but creative reinterpretation, and Gandhian philosophy provides a powerful framework for this endeavor. Gandhi did not advocate a blind return to the past; rather, he emphasized the selective integration of tradition and modernity guided by ethical discernment (**Nanda, 2015**). This approach aligns with the dynamic nature of IKS, which has historically evolved through dialogue, debate, and adaptation. Gandhi's life exemplified how ancient philosophical and religious principles could be applied to contemporary socio-political realities. In today's globalized knowledge society, dominated by Western epistemologies, Gandhian IKS offers an alternative model that values wisdom over information and ethics over efficiency. Educational reforms inspired by Gandhi's *Nai Talim* emphasize experiential learning, moral education, and the integration of head, heart, and hand, core principles of IKS. Such an approach can counter the alienation produced by mechanistic education systems.

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Moreover, Gandhian non-violence and ethical leadership are increasingly relevant in global governance, conflict resolution, and sustainability discourses. By foregrounding compassion, responsibility, and self-restraint, Gandhian philosophy repositions IKS as a global ethical resource rather than a regional tradition. The global era demands knowledge systems that promote peace, justice, and ecological balance, values deeply embedded in IKS. Gandhi's enduring relevance lies in his ability to universalize Indian philosophical and religious wisdom without diluting its ethical core. Thus, the Gandhian reinterpretation of IKS not only safeguards India's intellectual heritage but also contributes meaningfully to shaping a humane and sustainable global future.

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