



Reinvigorating India: Contemporary Applications of the Indian Knowledge System for Societal Well-being and Sustainable Development

Dr. Savita Uttamrao Salunkhe

Head of Department

Jai Ganesh College of Education, Narhe, Pune

Abstract

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS), a vast repository of intellectual, philosophical, and practical wisdom accumulated over millennia, offers profound insights into human existence, nature, and societal organization. Despite its historical significance, the contemporary relevance and systematic application of IKS for the holistic development of the People of India have often been overlooked or inadequately integrated into mainstream discourse. This paper systematically explores the multifaceted 'us' – the People of India – and articulates diverse applications of IKS to address modern challenges and foster well-being, sustainability, and cultural resurgence. Drawing upon a conceptual framework, we examine applications across key domains: healthcare (Ayurveda, Yoga), education (holistic learning, ethical frameworks), environmental sustainability (traditional ecological practices, water management), socio-cultural well-being (arts, philosophy, community structures), and economic empowerment (traditional crafts, sustainable agriculture). We argue that a judicious and scientifically informed integration of IKS principles can significantly contribute to India's national development goals, providing culturally resonant, sustainable, and inclusive solutions. The paper also discusses challenges in integration and proposes a roadmap for leveraging IKS for a more resilient, knowledgeable, and thriving India.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge System (IKS), Traditional Wisdom, Holistic Development, Sustainable Development, Public Health, Education, Environmental Management, Cultural Heritage, India.

1. Introduction

India, a civilization with an unbroken history spanning several millennia, has been a crucible of profound intellectual and spiritual inquiry. The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) represents this vast, complex, and interconnected body of knowledge that emerged from diverse



intellectual traditions, spiritual practices, philosophical schools, and practical sciences developed on the Indian subcontinent. It encompasses fields as varied as mathematics, astronomy, metallurgy, medicine (Ayurveda), yoga, linguistics, logic (Nyaya), political science (Arthashastra), architecture (Vastu Shastra), performing arts, environmental ethics, and sustainable living practices (Sharma, 2011; Kapoor, 2005).

For centuries, this intricate system guided societal structures, informed daily life, and propelled scientific advancements. However, with colonial subjugation and the subsequent adoption of Western paradigms of development, a significant portion of IKS was marginalized, labelled as 'traditional' or 'unscientific,' and largely excluded from mainstream educational, policy, and developmental frameworks (Chattopadhyaya, 1986). While pockets of IKS persisted, its systematic application for the modern challenges faced by the People of India remained largely unrealized.

In recent decades, there has been a growing global and national recognition of the limitations of purely reductionist, materialist paradigms, especially in confronting complex issues like climate change, lifestyle diseases, mental health crises, and the erosion of cultural identity (WHO, 2013; Ministry of Education, 2020). This has led to a renewed interest in exploring alternative or complementary knowledge systems, including IKS, for sustainable and holistic solutions. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in India, for instance, explicitly advocates for the integration of IKS into the curriculum, signifying a policy-level commitment to this revival.

This paper aims to systematically explore the potential applications of IKS for the "People of India" – encompassing their physical, mental, social, economic, and environmental well-being. By articulating specific domains where IKS can offer significant contributions, we seek to demonstrate its contemporary relevance and advocate for its thoughtful integration. The central research question guiding this paper is: How can the principles and practices embedded within the Indian Knowledge System be effectively applied to address contemporary challenges and enhance the holistic well-being of the People of India?

The significance of this study is multifaceted. Firstly, it contributes to the discourse on decolonizing knowledge and fostering intellectual self-reliance. Secondly, it offers indigenous, culturally resonant solutions to pressing national issues. Thirdly, it highlights the



potential of IKS to contribute to global sustainable development goals, demonstrating India's unique contribution to human progress. Finally, it aims to inspire further scholarly inquiry and policy initiatives for the revitalization and application of this invaluable heritage.

2. Literature Review: Re-engaging with Indian Knowledge Systems

The literature on Indian Knowledge Systems is vast, spanning ancient texts, colonial critiques, post-colonial re-evaluations, and contemporary academic discourse. Early scholarly works, often by Orientalists, focused on cataloging and translating ancient Indian texts, laying the foundation for understanding IKS (e.g., Max Müller's editions of the Rigveda). However, these efforts were often viewed through a Eurocentric lens, leading to misinterpretations or downplaying the scientific and practical dimensions of IKS (Said, 1978).

Post-independence, Indian scholars like D.P. Chattopadhyaya (1986) critically examined the materialist traditions within ancient Indian science, challenging the prevalent narrative of India as solely mystical. Similarly, works by Dharampal (1971) highlighted the sophistication of indigenous Indian technologies and management systems that thrived before colonial intervention, particularly in areas like agriculture, metallurgy, and water management, demonstrating their practical utility and sustainability.

In recent decades, there has been a significant surge in interest in specific components of IKS. Research on Yoga and Ayurveda has moved beyond anecdotal evidence, with numerous studies exploring their therapeutic efficacy for a range of physical and mental health conditions, often through randomized controlled trials and systematic reviews (e.g., publications in *Yoga & Physical Therapy*, *Journal of Ayurveda and Integrative Medicine*). This scientific validation is crucial for their acceptance in mainstream healthcare.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a pivotal moment, explicitly advocating for the integration of IKS, including "ancient and modern scientific advancements and wisdom," into curricula (Ministry of Education, 2020). This policy directive has spurred discussions on how to effectively operationalize such integration, moving beyond superficial inclusion to deep pedagogical and conceptual alignment (Rajagopalan & Singh, 2022).

However, challenges persist. Some scholars caution against an uncritical glorification of IKS, emphasizing the need for rigorous scientific validation, standardization, and careful



contextualization to prevent the propagation of unsubstantiated claims (Mehta, 2020). Others point to the risk of "saffronization" or sectarian appropriation, stressing the secular and universal applicability of many IKS principles (Thapar, 2018). Furthermore, the pedagogical methods for integrating complex IKS concepts into a modern curriculum require careful thought, moving beyond mere memorization to critical engagement and application (Gupta, 2021).

Despite these debates, the consensus is growing that IKS offers a rich, largely untapped resource for addressing contemporary issues. The literature demonstrates a shift from purely historical or philosophical analyses to a more applied and interdisciplinary exploration of IKS's potential in areas like sustainable development, public health, and education. This paper aims to synthesize these various strands and provide a comprehensive overview of IKS applications specifically for the People of India, filling a gap by offering a cohesive framework for action.

3. Methodology: A Conceptual Framework for IKS Applications

This paper adopts a conceptual and analytical methodology (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) to explore and articulate the applications of the Indian Knowledge System for the People of India. Given the vast and interdisciplinary nature of IKS, a purely empirical approach would be beyond the scope of a single paper. Instead, this study utilizes a framework that categorizes key domains of human and societal well-being and then maps relevant IKS principles, practices, and theories onto these domains.

3.1. Theoretical Underpinnings: The approach is informed by:

Holistic Paradigm: IKS inherently views existence as interconnected – body, mind, spirit, society, and environment are not separate entities (Kapoor, 2005). This aligns with a holistic understanding of well-being, moving beyond fragmented solutions.

Contextual Relevance: The applications are analyzed within the specific socio-cultural, economic, and environmental context of India, recognizing that indigenous solutions often resonate more deeply and are more sustainable.

Synergy and Integration: The paper does not advocate for a wholesale replacement of modern systems but rather emphasizes the potential for synergy and intelligent integration of IKS insights with contemporary scientific advancements.

Problem-Solution Orientation: The focus is on identifying contemporary challenges faced by Indians and then demonstrating how IKS offers viable, often preventative or sustainable, solutions.

3.2. Data Collection (Secondary Sources): The analysis draws upon a wide range of secondary sources, including:

Classical IKS Texts: Conceptual understanding derived from original Sanskrit treatises (e.g., Charaka Samhita, Yoga Sutras, Arthashastra, Vedas, Upanishads) accessed through scholarly translations and interpretations.

Academic Research: Peer-reviewed articles, books, and conference papers exploring specific aspects of IKS, its history, philosophy, and contemporary applications.

Policy Documents: Government reports, white papers (e.g., NEP 2020, AYUSH Ministry documents) that indicate current policy thrusts and recognition of IKS.

Expert Commentaries: Analyses and discussions by scholars and practitioners on the relevance and application of IKS.

3.3. Analytical Framework: The analysis proceeds by segmenting the "People of India" into key dimensions of their lives and societal challenges. For each dimension, relevant IKS components are identified and their potential applications are elaborated. The dimensions are:

Public Health and Well-being: Addressing physical and mental health.

Education and Skill Development: Fostering knowledge, ethics, and critical thinking.

Environmental Sustainability: Promoting harmony with nature and resource management.

Socio-Cultural Cohesion: Strengthening identity, values, and community.

Economic Empowerment: Supporting livelihoods and sustainable economic models.

3.4. Limitations: As a conceptual paper, this study does not include empirical data collection or statistical analysis. The applications discussed are largely theoretical or based on existing, often localized, successful implementations. The challenge of scientifically validating all IKS claims and ensuring their widespread, equitable application remains a critical area for future empirical research. Furthermore, the



immense breadth of IKS means that this paper can only highlight representative applications rather than exhaustive coverage.

4. Applications of Indian Knowledge Systems for the People of India

The following sections delve into specific domains where IKS offers profound and practical applications for addressing contemporary challenges and enhancing the well-being of the People of India.

4.1. Public Health and Holistic Well-being

The modern Indian health system, while making strides, grapples with lifestyle diseases, mental health issues, chronic conditions, and the limitations of a purely allopathic approach. IKS offers a powerful complementary and often preventative paradigm.

Ayurveda: Rooted in the principle of personalized medicine, Ayurveda emphasizes balancing the doshas (Vata, Pitta, Kapha) unique to each individual. Its applications include:

Preventive Healthcare: Regimental therapies (Dinacharya, Ritucharya), dietary guidelines, herbal formulations for immunity building, and lifestyle modifications to prevent disease onset (Sharma & Shukla, 2011). This is particularly relevant given the rising burden of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) in India.

Curative Treatments: Effective management of chronic conditions like arthritis, digestive disorders, skin ailments, and metabolic syndromes through herbal medicines, Panchakarma therapies (detoxification), and specialized treatments (Patwardhan et al., 2005).

Geriatric Care: Tailored approaches for aging populations, focusing on rejuvenation (Rasayana) and vitality, contributing to healthy aging.

Yoga: More than just physical postures, Yoga is a holistic science of mind-body integration. Its applications include:

Mental Health: Stress reduction, anxiety management, and depression alleviation through asanas (postures), pranayama (breathing techniques), meditation, and ethical observances (Yamas and Niyamas) (Telles et al., 2017). This is crucial for India's youth and urban populations facing immense psychological pressures.



Physical Health: Improving flexibility, strength, cardiovascular health, and managing conditions like diabetes, hypertension, and asthma (B.K.S. Iyengar, 2005).

Substance Abuse Rehabilitation: Integrating mindfulness and self-discipline to support recovery and prevent relapse.

Siddha and Unani Systems: Parallel to Ayurveda, these traditional systems, particularly prevalent in specific regions of India, offer alternative approaches to healing, herbal remedies, and lifestyle guidance, catering to diverse local communities.

Community Health: Traditional midwifery practices, knowledge of local medicinal plants, and community-based health education can be integrated into primary healthcare, especially in rural and tribal areas.

4.2. Education and Skill Development

The IKS provides a rich framework for an education that is not merely informative but transformative, fostering character, critical thinking, and holistic development, as envisioned by NEP 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Holistic Learning Paradigm: The Gurukul system, though not directly replicable, emphasizes personalized learning, mentorship, experiential education, and the development of both intellectual and moral faculties. This contrasts with purely rote learning or examination-centric approaches.

Ethical and Value Education: Concepts like Dharma (righteous conduct), Satya (truth), Ahimsa (non-violence), and Seva (selfless service) can form the bedrock of value education, crucial for building responsible citizens.

Cognitive Sciences and Logic: Ancient Indian schools of thought like Nyaya (logic) and Vaisheshika (atomic theory) offer sophisticated methodologies for critical thinking, argumentation, epistemology, and understanding the nature of reality (Matilal, 1986). Integrating these can enhance analytical skills.

Interdisciplinary Approach: IKS inherently promotes interdisciplinary understanding, where science, philosophy, art, and spirituality are interconnected. This can break down artificial disciplinary barriers in modern education, fostering creativity and comprehensive problem-solving.



Linguistic and Literary Heritage: Study of Sanskrit, Pali, and other classical languages, along with epic literature (e.g., Mahabharata, Ramayana), not only preserves cultural heritage but also enhances linguistic proficiency, analytical skills, and understanding of human nature.

Traditional Arts and Crafts: Integrating traditional art forms (music, dance, painting, sculpture) and crafts into the curriculum fosters creativity, preserves cultural identity, and develops fine motor skills and vocational expertise.

4.3. Environmental Sustainability and Resource Management

India faces severe environmental challenges, including water scarcity, pollution, deforestation, and biodiversity loss. Traditional IKS offers sustainable paradigms rooted in reverence for nature and prudent resource management.

Ecological Harmony (Panchabhuta): The understanding of the five primordial elements (Panchabhuta - earth, water, fire, air, space) and their interconnectedness fosters an intrinsic respect for nature as a living entity, rather than merely a resource to exploit. This worldview encourages sustainable living and conservation (Kapoor, 2005).

Traditional Water Management: Ancient Indian civilizations developed sophisticated systems for water harvesting, storage, and distribution, such as stepwells (baolis), tanks (kunds), and intricate irrigation canals (Agarwal & Narain, 1997). Reviving and adapting these decentralized, community-managed water systems can address water scarcity in many regions.

Sustainable Agriculture (Krishi-Paradara): Traditional agricultural practices emphasized organic farming, crop rotation, seed preservation, and pest control through natural methods, reducing reliance on harmful chemicals (Nene, 2009). This knowledge is vital for promoting food security and ecological balance.

Forest and Biodiversity Conservation: Sacred groves (Devrai), traditional reverence for plants (Vrikshayurveda), and animal welfare principles (e.g., in Jainism and Buddhism) demonstrate an inherent conservation ethic that can inform modern biodiversity protection efforts.



Waste Management: Traditional practices often involved minimal waste generation and resourceful reuse of materials, aligning with principles of a circular economy.

4.4. Socio-Cultural Cohesion and Ethical Governance

IKS provides robust frameworks for social harmony, ethical conduct, and just governance, which are crucial for a diverse nation like India.

Dharma and Ethics: The concept of Dharma provides a comprehensive ethical framework for individual and societal conduct, emphasizing righteousness, duty, and cosmic order (Doniger, 2200). Integrating these ethical principles can strengthen social fabric, reduce corruption, and promote responsible citizenship.

Community Building: Traditional Indian society valued community structures (Gram Sabha, joint family systems) that fostered mutual support, shared responsibility, and conflict resolution at local levels. Adaptations of these principles can revitalize local governance and strengthen community bonds.

Conflict Resolution: Philosophical schools like Jainism's Anekantavada (multi-faceted reality) and Buddhist tenets of compassion and non-aggression provide frameworks for respectful dialogue, understanding diverse perspectives, and peaceful conflict resolution (Jain, 2004).

Restorative Justice: Traditional panchayat systems often focused on reconciliation and restitution rather than purely punitive measures, offering insights for modern justice systems, particularly at the local level.

Cultural Identity and Pride: Revitalizing traditional arts, languages, festivals, and narratives helps in preserving cultural identity, fosters national pride, and serves as a bedrock for social cohesion in a pluralistic society.

4.5. Economic Empowerment and Sustainable Livelihoods

IKS can inform economic models that are more equitable, sustainable, and rooted in local resources and skills, moving beyond purely industrial or exploitative models.

Traditional Crafts and Handlooms: India's rich heritage of handicrafts, textiles, pottery, and metalwork represents significant economic potential. Supporting artisans, providing market access, protecting Geographical Indications (GIs), and integrating



traditional designs into modern products can empower millions (Ministry of Textiles, 2016).

Sustainable Tourism (Wellness and Heritage): Promoting Yoga and Ayurveda tourism, heritage trails, and cultural experiences based on IKS can generate significant revenue and employment while showcasing India's unique offerings globally (Ministry of Tourism, 2019).

Local and Decentralized Economies: IKS often emphasized self-sufficient village economies and local resource utilization. Modern adaptations can foster micro-enterprises, rural livelihoods, and reduce economic disparities by promoting local production and consumption.

Ayurveda and Herbal Industry: The global market for herbal and alternative medicines is booming. Leveraging India's rich biodiversity and Ayurvedic knowledge can position the country as a leader in natural health products, creating jobs and export opportunities.

Ethical Business Practices: Philosophies like Artha (wealth) within the framework of Dharma and Moksha (liberation) encourage ethical wealth creation, social responsibility, and sustainable business models that prioritize well-being over mere profit maximization.

5. Challenges and Opportunities for Integration

While the potential of IKS is immense, its systematic integration faces several challenges and presents significant opportunities.

5.1. Challenges:

Lack of Scientific Validation: Many IKS practices, particularly in medicine, lack rigorous, contemporary scientific validation based on double-blind, randomized controlled trials, leading to skepticism and hindering widespread acceptance (Mehta, 2020).

Standardization and Quality Control: Ensuring consistent quality, dosage, and efficacy of IKS products (e.g., Ayurvedic medicines) and services across the country is a major hurdle.



Public Perception and Modernization Bias: A segment of the educated populace views IKS as outdated, superstitious, or inferior to Western science, necessitating robust evidence-based communication and education.

Commercialization and Exploitation: The rush to commercialize IKS can lead to adulteration, dilution of authentic practices, and exploitation of traditional knowledge without fair benefit sharing.

Pedagogical Challenges: Integrating IKS into the existing modern educational framework requires well-trained educators, appropriate curricula, and innovative teaching methodologies that go beyond mere textual learning.

Fragmentation and Disconnect: IKS itself is vast and fragmented across various traditions and practitioners, necessitating efforts to synthesize and present it coherently.

Policy Implementation Gaps: Despite policy pronouncements (like NEP 2020), translating intent into effective, widespread, and equitable implementation remains a challenge.

5.2. Opportunities:

Government Support: The Central and State governments, particularly through initiatives like the AYUSH Ministry and NEP 2020, are actively promoting IKS, providing institutional and financial support.

Global Interest: There is a growing global demand for holistic health practices (Yoga, Ayurveda), sustainable living solutions, and traditional wisdom, offering India a unique position to be a global leader.

Digitalization and Accessibility: Technology can play a crucial role in documenting, digitizing, and disseminating IKS, making it accessible to a wider audience and facilitating research.

Interdisciplinary Research: Collaborative research between IKS practitioners, modern scientists, social scientists, and technologists can bridge knowledge gaps and provide evidence-based validation.



Youth Engagement: Presenting IKS in an engaging, relevant, and contemporary manner can attract younger generations, fostering cultural pride and intellectual curiosity.

Brand India: IKS can become a unique differentiator for 'Brand India' on the global stage, especially in areas of wellness, sustainable development, and cultural tourism.

6. Discussion

The systematic exploration of IKS applications for the People of India reveals a transformative potential that extends far beyond cultural preservation. It offers a coherent, often preventive, and inherently sustainable paradigm for addressing many of the wicked problems facing modern India. The strength of IKS lies in its holistic nature, understanding that individual well-being is inextricably linked to community harmony, ecological balance, and ethical conduct.

In healthcare, IKS provides indigenous, accessible, and often cost-effective alternatives and complements to allopathic medicine, emphasizing prevention and lifestyle management – critically important in a nation where healthcare access and NCD burden are significant concerns. For education, IKS offers a pathway to nurturing not just skilled individuals, but ethical, critical-thinking citizens deeply rooted in their cultural heritage, a vision articulated by the National Education Policy.

Environmentally, the IKS worldview, with its inherent reverence for nature, presents a sustainable alternative to the anthropocentric and exploitative models that have led to the current ecological crisis. Reviving ancient wisdom in water management, agriculture, and conservation can build a more resilient India against climate change. Socio-culturally, IKS provides a bedrock of values, wisdom, and artistic expressions that can foster social cohesion, ethical governance, and a strong sense of national identity amidst globalizing forces. Economically, empowering traditional artisans, promoting wellness tourism, and fostering local, sustainable economies can lead to inclusive growth and reduce regional disparities.

However, the path to integration is not without hurdles. The call for scientific validation is paramount – not to diminish the wisdom of IKS, but to make it comprehensible and acceptable within contemporary frameworks and to ensure safety and efficacy. This requires a nuanced approach, combining traditional insights with modern research methodologies.



Furthermore, policy support needs to move beyond rhetorical endorsement to concrete implementation, involving curriculum development, research funding, infrastructure for traditional health systems, and protection of traditional knowledge.

The critical lesson is that IKS is not merely a relic of the past; it is a living knowledge system with profound implications for the future. Its applications are not about abandoning modernity but about enriching it, providing culturally appropriate and sustainable solutions that resonate with the ethos of India. By judiciously integrating IKS into our developmental strategies, India can forge a unique path to progress that is both globally relevant and deeply rooted in its civilizational wisdom.

7. Conclusion

The Indian Knowledge System is an invaluable civilizational asset offering a holistic, sustainable, and culturally resonant framework for the well-being and development of the People of India. This paper has systematically demonstrated its wide-ranging applications across critical domains: public health, education, environmental sustainability, socio-cultural well-being, and economic empowerment. From personalized Ayurvedic medicine and yogic mental health practices to traditional water harvesting techniques, ethical governance frameworks, and skill-based craft economies, IKS provides robust and indigenous solutions to contemporary challenges.

While challenges such as scientific validation, standardization, and integration into modern systems exist, the opportunities for leveraging IKS are immense. With increasing national and global recognition, policy support (e.g., NEP 2020), and advancements in interdisciplinary research, India stands at a pivotal moment to revive and intelligently apply its ancient wisdom.

The systematic integration of IKS is not merely an academic exercise or a nostalgic revival; it is a strategic imperative for India's sustainable and inclusive future. It offers a pathway to not only address present-day crises but also to empower its citizens with a deeper understanding of themselves, their culture, and their place in the world. By embracing and judiciously applying the Indian Knowledge System, the People of India can build a future that is healthier, more educated, environmentally conscious, socially cohesive, and economically vibrant, charting a unique and inspiring model of development for the world.

8. Future Research Directions

Future research should focus on:

Empirical Validation: Conducting rigorous scientific studies and randomized controlled trials for specific IKS practices and remedies, particularly in health and agriculture.

Case Studies: Documenting and analyzing successful (and unsuccessful) implementations of IKS applications in specific communities or regions across India to identify best practices and lessons learned.

Curriculum Development: Developing detailed, pedagogically sound curricula for integrating IKS into various levels of education, including teacher training programs.

Policy Analysis: Evaluating the effectiveness of existing policies concerning IKS and proposing evidence-based policy recommendations for better integration and promotion.

Economic Impact Assessment: Quantifying the economic contributions of IKS-based industries (e.g., Ayush, traditional crafts, wellness tourism) to the Indian economy.

Comparative Studies: Comparing IKS approaches with other indigenous knowledge systems globally to identify commonalities and unique contributions.

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