

Indian Knowledge System: Key Principles & Concepts

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) represents one of the world's most ancient and comprehensive traditions of intellectual inquiry deeply rooted in the cultural, spiritual, and philosophical heritage of India. This paper explores the key principles and concepts that form the foundation of Indian Knowledge System highlighting its relevance. Central to IKS is a holistic worldview that emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life forms, the harmony between humans and nature, and the integration of material and spiritual pursuits. Its core principles reflect a balanced and value-based approach to life. By revisiting and reinterpreting these traditional frameworks, the Indian Knowledge System offers valuable contributions to contemporary global challenges such as mental health, environmental crises, and ethical leadership. This paper aims to shed light on the concept and key principles of IKS and encourage its integration into modern academic and societal discourse.

Keywords: *Purushartha, Panch Mahakosh, Ashtangik Marg, Para Vidya and Aparā Vidya, Tri Ratna, Trigunas*

The Indian knowledge system refers to the collective body of knowledge, beliefs, practices, and traditions that have originated from and evolved within the Indian subcontinent. It is a rich and diverse repository of wisdom that has evolved over thousands of years, encompassing various fields such as philosophy, spirituality, science, mathematics, medicine, literature, arts, and social sciences. It includes ancient scriptures, philosophical treatises, scientific discoveries, literary works, artistic expressions, and social institutions that have shaped the intellectual and cultural landscape of India. The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) is the systematic transmission of knowledge from one generation to next generation. The Indian Knowledge Systems comprise of Jnan, Vignan, and Jeevan Darshan that have evolved out of experience, observation, experimentation, and rigorous analysis. IKS is based on the Vedic literature, the Upanishads, the Vedas, and the Upvedas. The Indian knowledge system holds significant relevance in contemporary times for a multitude of reasons. It serves as a vital source of cultural identity and pride, fostering a deep sense of continuity with India's rich and ancient heritage.

Its holistic and integrative approach offers valuable insights into addressing complex modern challenges such as healthcare, sustainable development, and social cohesion. Moreover, Indian philosophical, spiritual, and scientific concepts have long influenced global thought, continuing to inspire scholars, practitioners, and thinkers across cultures and disciplines.

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Practices rooted in this tradition such as yoga, meditation, and mindfulness have gained international recognition for their role in enhancing mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Furthermore, the interdisciplinary nature of the Indian knowledge system contributes meaningfully to diverse fields including psychology, neuroscience, environmental science, and economics, offering perspectives that are both timeless and profoundly relevant today.

Key Principles & Concepts of IKS

The Indian Knowledge System is founded on key principles that emphasize holistic understanding, interconnectedness, and the integration of knowledge with ethical and spiritual values. Central to IKS is the belief in the unity of all existence, the harmony between humans and nature, and the pursuit of knowledge for the well-being of both the individual and society. It values experiential learning, self-realization, and sustainable living. Following are the key principles of IKS.

1. Four Purushartha
2. Panch Mahakosh
3. Ashtangik Marg
4. Para Vidya and Apra Vidya
5. Tri Ratna in Jainism
6. Trigunas

1. Four Purushartha: The concept of Purushartha, a foundational principle of the Indian Knowledge System, refers to the four fundamental goals of human life. These four aims provide a comprehensive framework for leading a balanced, purposeful, and fulfilling life. Rooted in ancient Indian philosophy, the Purusharthas guide individuals in harmonizing material pursuits with ethical values and spiritual growth, reflecting the holistic worldview of IKS that integrates personal well-being with societal and cosmic order. The four Purushartha are as follows:

- i) **Dharma:** This means righteousness, morality, duty, and the cosmic order. It is the ethical and spiritual foundation of life.
- ii) **Artha:** This means wealth, prosperity, security, and material well-being. It is the pursuit of economic values and resources for oneself and society.
- iii) **Kama:** This means pleasure, desire, love, and enjoyment. It is the pursuit of psychological values and aesthetic experiences for oneself and others.
- iv) **Moksha:** This means liberation, freedom, and self-realization. It is the ultimate goal of human life and the transcendence of the cycle of birth and death.

The four Purushartha are considered to be interrelated and complementary, but also hierarchical. Dharma is the most important and should guide the other three. Artha and Kama are necessary and legitimate, but should be pursued in moderation and with respect to dharma. Moksha is the highest and most desirable, but requires the fulfilment and renunciation of the other three. The concept of Purushartha is a key aspect of Hindu philosophy and culture. It provides a framework for understanding the meaning and purpose of human life, and for making ethical and in spiritual decisions.

2. Panch Mahakosh: Panch Mahakosh refer to the five sheaths or layers of human existence, according to the Vedanta philosophy. These are:

- i) Annamaya Kosha, the physical body;
- ii) Pranamaya Kosha, the vital body;
- iii) Manomaya Kosha, the mental body;
- iv) Vijnanamaya Kosha, the intellectual body;

- v) **Anandamaya Kosha**, the blissful body
- i) **Annamaya Kosha**: This is the physical body that is made of food and sustained by food. It is the outermost and grossest layer of the human being. It is subject to birth, growth, decay, and death. It is also the instrument of action and perception for the other sheaths.
- ii) **Pranamaya Kosha**: This is the vital body that is composed of the five Pranas or vital airs i.e., Prana, Apana, Udana, Samana and Vyana and the five organs of action. The pranas are the life forces that regulate the physiological functions of the body, such as breathing, digestion, circulation, etc. The organs of action are the mouth, hands, feet, genitals, and anus. They are the means of expression and interaction with the external world.
- iii) **Manomaya Kosha**: This is the mental body that is composed of the mind, the five organs of knowledge, and the memory. The mind is the faculty of emotions, desires, doubts, and imagination. The organs of knowledge are the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin. They are the means of perception and cognition of the external world. The memory is the storehouse of impressions and experiences that shape the personality and character of the individual.
- iv) **Vijnanamaya Kosha**: This is the intellectual body. It is intellect/wisdom or knowledge sheath. The intellect is the faculty of reasoning, discrimination, and decision-making.
- v) **Anandamaya Kosha**: Ananda is the basic stuff of this universe from which everything has been created. It is called Anandamaya Kosha-the bliss layer of our existence. It is the most subtle aspect of our existence, devoid of any form of emotions; a state of total silence-a state of complete harmony and perfect health.

3. Ashtangik Marg: Ashtangik Marg is a concept from Hindu philosophy, particularly from the Bhagavad Gita and Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. The term "Ashtangik Marg" can be broken down into two parts: "Ashtangik," meaning "eightfold," and "Marg," meaning "path" or "way." Thus, it refers to the "eightfold path" or "eight limbs" of yoga. The Ashtangik Marg is a systematic approach to spiritual development and self-realization. Each limb represents a different aspect of practice that leads progressively toward the ultimate goal of yoga, which is union with the divine or self-realization.

These are:

- i) **Yama (Restraints)**: These are ethical principles that govern how one interacts with the external world. These are
- Ahimsa (Nonviolence): Practicing kindness, compassion, and non-harming towards all living beings.
 - Satya (Truthfulness): Speaking and living truthfully, both in words and actions.
 - Asteya (Non stealing): Respecting the property and belongings of others and refraining from stealing.
 - Brahmacharya (Celibacy or Moderation): Practicing self-control and moderation in all aspects of life, including sexual conduct.
 - Aparigraha (Non possessiveness): Letting go of greed, attachment, and possessiveness towards material possessions.
- ii) **Niyama (Observances)**: These are personal observances or practices for self-discipline and spiritual development. These are

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- Santosha (Contentment): Cultivating contentment and gratitude for what one has, rather than constantly seeking external validation or possessions.
 - Saucha (Cleanliness): Cultivating cleanliness and purity, both externally and internally.
 - Tapas (Austerity): Practicing self-discipline, determination, and perseverance in spiritual practices.
 - Svadhyaya (Self-study): Engaging in self-reflection, self-inquiry, and study of spiritual texts to deepen one's understanding of oneself and the divine.
 - Ishvara Pranidhana (Surrender to a Higher Power): Surrendering one's ego and individual will to the divine will or a higher power.
- iii) **Asana (Posture):** Asanas are physical postures practiced in yoga. They are designed to develop strength, flexibility, balance, and concentration, as well as promote physical health and well-being. The practice of asanas prepares the body for meditation and higher states of consciousness.
- iv) **Pranayama (Breath Control):** Pranayama involves techniques for controlling and regulating the breath to enhance vitality, mental clarity, and spiritual awareness. By controlling the breath, practitioners can influence the flow of prana (life force energy) in the body.
- v) **Pratyahara (Withdrawal of the Senses):** Pratyahara is the practice of withdrawing the senses from external stimuli and turning inward. It involves cultivating inner awareness and detachment from sensory distractions, allowing the mind to become more focused and concentrated.
- vi) **Dharana (Concentration):** Dharana is the practice of concentration, focusing the mind on a single point or object. By concentrating the mind, practitioners can cultivate mental stability, clarity, and inner strength.
- vii) **Dhyana (Meditation):** Dhyana is the practice of meditation, maintaining continuous and uninterrupted awareness of the object of meditation. In meditation, the practitioner transcends the ordinary fluctuations of the mind and experiences a state of inner peace, clarity, and unity.
- viii) **Samadhi (Union with the Divine):** Samadhi is the ultimate goal of yoga, where the practitioner experiences a state of oneness or union with the divine consciousness. In Samadhi, the individual ego dissolves, and there is a profound realization of the interconnectedness of all existence.

The Eightfold Path of Yoga provides a comprehensive framework for spiritual growth and self-realization, guiding practitioners on a journey of self-discovery, transformation, and union with the divine. Each limb of the path builds upon the others, leading the practitioner step by step towards the ultimate goal of yoga.

4. Para Vidya and Apra Vidya: Para Vidya and Apra Vidya are concepts deeply rooted in Hindu philosophy, particularly in the Vedanta tradition. These terms represent different levels or types of knowledge.

Para Vidya:

- Para Vidya, often translated as "higher knowledge" or "transcendental knowledge," refers to spiritual wisdom that transcends the material world. It is the knowledge of the ultimate reality, Brahman, which is beyond the realm of the senses and intellect.

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- Para Vidya is considered to be intuitive, experiential, and beyond the grasp of ordinary cognition. It deals with the understanding of the self as identical with the ultimate reality, Brahman, and the realization of the unity of all existence.
- Attaining Para Vidya requires intense spiritual practices such as meditation, self-inquiry (Atma Vichara), devotion (Bhakti), and the guidance of a realized teacher (Guru). It involves transcending the limitations of the mind and ego to directly experience the divine reality.
- The goal of Para Vidya is liberation (Moksha) from the cycle of birth and death (Samsara) and the realization of one's essential nature as Brahman. It leads to the state of enlightenment (Jnana) where the individual soul (Atman) recognizes its identity with the universal consciousness (Brahman).

Apara Vidya:

- Apara Vidya, often translated as "lower knowledge" or "mundane knowledge," refers to empirical knowledge concerning the material world. It includes various branches of knowledge such as science, arts, literature, philosophy, and worldly skills.
- Apara Vidya deals with the understanding of the phenomenal world and its functioning. It is acquired through sensory perception, reasoning, and intellectual inquiry. This knowledge is limited to the realm of duality and is subject to change and evolution.
- Apara Vidya finds its mention in various Hindu scriptures, including the Vedas, which contain knowledge about rituals, cosmology, ethics, and social order. It also encompasses the knowledge transmitted through worldly experiences and human endeavors.
- Apara Vidya is acquired through formal education, observation, experimentation, study of scriptures, and intellectual pursuits. It involves learning from teachers, scholars, and experts in different fields of knowledge.
- The goal of Apara Vidya is to facilitate worldly pursuits, fulfill material needs, and contribute to the welfare of society. While valuable for leading a fulfilling life, it is considered inferior to Para Vidya as it does not lead to spiritual liberation but only to temporary achievements and worldly success.

Thus, Para Vidya represents transcendental knowledge leading to spiritual liberation, while Apara Vidya encompasses empirical knowledge concerning the material world. Both are essential for leading a balanced and meaningful life, with Para Vidya guiding the ultimate quest for self-realization and Apara Vidya facilitating worldly pursuits and societal well-being.

5. Tri Ratna in Jainism

The Tri Ratna in Jainism are defined as right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct, which are the essential requirements for achieving liberation from the cycle of rebirth.

i) Samyak darshan (Right faith)

- It implies seeing (hearing, feeling, etc.) things clearly and rejecting prejudices and superstitions that obstruct your vision.
- Samyak darshan is translated as "correct perception"
- Right Perception is required to get to Right Knowledge.

ii) Samyak jnana (Right knowledge)

- Right knowledge, according to some authors, is possessing a clean spirit, one that is free of attachment and desire
- Sensory knowledge, or knowledge based on the senses, scriptural knowledge, clairvoyance, the study of telepathy, and omniscience are the five categories of knowledge recognised by Jainists.

iii) Samyak charitra (Right conduct/action)

- Following the realisation of Right Perception and Right Knowledge, the Jain might go on to Right Conduct.
- This is a set of precise vows, ethical rules, and discipline that one undertakes in order to achieve kevala.
- The Five Great Vows of nonviolence, honesty, non-stealing, celibacy, and non-possession or non-attachment are taken by yatis, Jaina monastic members

6. Trigunas

In Hindu philosophy, particularly in the context of Samkhya and Vedanta, the concept of "Trigunas" or the "Three Gunas" refers to the three fundamental qualities or attributes that are believed to pervade all aspects of creation, including the mind, body, and the material world. These gunas are understood to be the underlying principles that govern the qualities and characteristics of everything in existence. The three gunas are Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas.

- i) Sattva:** Sattva is the quality of purity, harmony, and balance. It represents light, clarity, and goodness. Sattva is associated with qualities such as knowledge, wisdom, compassion, and serenity. Sattva fosters qualities such as intelligence, clarity of perception, inner peace, contentment, and spiritual illumination. It promotes harmony and balance in the mind, leading to a sense of calmness and tranquillity. When Sattva predominates, individuals exhibit virtues such as truthfulness, compassion, patience, and selflessness. They are inclined towards spiritual pursuits, self-improvement, and the pursuit of higher knowledge and wisdom. The predominance of Sattva leads to mental clarity, spiritual growth, and the experience of inner joy and fulfillment. It facilitates the cultivation of virtues and the attainment of higher states of consciousness.
- ii) Rajas:** Rajas is the quality of activity, dynamism, and passion. It represents energy, motion, and the driving force behind action. Rajas is associated with desires, ambition, and the pursuit of worldly goals. Rajas fosters qualities such as ambition, desire, restlessness, and attachment. It fuels the pursuit of material success, achievement, and the fulfillment of desires. When Rajas predominates, individuals exhibit traits such as restlessness, agitation, competitiveness, and craving for sensory pleasures. They are driven by desires, ambitions, and the pursuit of worldly gains. The predominance of Rajas leads to a state of agitation, mental turmoil, and attachment to the fruits of actions. It creates a cycle of craving, striving, and dissatisfaction, perpetuating the cycle of birth and death (Samsara).
- iii) Tamas:** Tamas is the quality of inertia, darkness, and ignorance. It represents dullness, laziness, and the absence of light. Tamas is associated with qualities such as ignorance, delusion, and lethargy. Tamas fosters qualities such as ignorance, laziness, inertia, and delusion. It clouds the mind, obstructs clarity of perception, and leads to the neglect of one's duties and responsibilities. When Tamas predominates, individuals exhibit traits such as lethargy, ignorance, dullness, and procrastination.

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They are prone to ignorance, confusion, and resistance to change or spiritual growth. The predominance of Tamas leads to a state of darkness, confusion, and stagnation. It inhibits spiritual growth, fosters ignorance, and perpetuates the cycle of suffering and bondage.

According to Samkhya philosophy, the entire creation is believed to be composed of various combinations and permutations of the three gunas. While all three gunas are present in varying degrees in everything, one may predominate over the others, influencing one's temperament, behavior, and spiritual evolution. Through spiritual practices such as meditation, self-discipline, and self-inquiry, individuals aim to reduce the influence of Rajas and Tamas and cultivate the qualities of Sattva.

CONCLUSION

The Indian knowledge system represents a rich tradition of human wisdom that continues to inform and inspire individuals, communities, and societies, both within India and around the world. Its enduring relevance lies in its ability to offer profound insights into the human condition and pathways to personal, social, and spiritual fulfilment. The key principles and concepts of the Indian Knowledge System reflect a profound and holistic approach to understanding life, the universe, and the human role within it. Indian Knowledge System promotes harmony between the individual, society, and nature. Its emphasis on experiential knowledge, ethical living, and spiritual growth continues to offer timeless guidance in addressing modern challenges. By integrating traditional wisdom with contemporary thought, IKS not only preserves India's rich intellectual heritage but also contributes meaningfully to global discourses on sustainable living, well-being, and the pursuit of knowledge.

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Conflict of Interest

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