

Indian Knowledge Systems as Epistemic Pluralism: A Theoretical Reframing of Higher Education under NEP 2020

Dr. Sonal Mobar Roy ^{1*}

ABSTRACT

This paper examines Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) in the context of higher education reform under NEP 2020. While current debates often treat IKS as heritage or additional curriculum content, the paper approaches it as a deeper challenge to the dominant ways Knowledge has been organised in Indian universities. The core argument concerns not only inclusion but also how Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) might transform our understanding of Knowledge itself. The research employs an interpretive methodology, drawing on the Sociology of Knowledge, the philosophy of education, and postcolonial theory. The author analyses historical discussions on education, epistemic diversity, and the policy terminology of the NEP 2020 to construct the thesis. The research indicates that IKS embodies a unique epistemology characterized by holism, emphasis on lived experience, ethical foundations, and social significance. It should thus be regarded as an intellectual tradition in its own right, rather than as an ancillary cultural layer. NEP 2020 is read here as an epistemic intervention that opens institutional space for multiple traditions of learning and teaching. The paper proposes epistemic pluralism as a framework for this engagement, one that maintains academic rigour while recognising indigenous traditions as legitimate contributors to Knowledge. In doing so, it offers a conceptual guide for educators and policymakers seeking to implement NEP 2020 with both critical depth and social sensitivity.

Keywords: *Indian Knowledge Systems, Epistemic Pluralism, NEP 2020, Higher Education*

The renewed emphasis on Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reopens a longstanding question: *what counts as Knowledge in Indian higher education?* For more than a century, universities in India have operated within epistemological frameworks shaped by colonial modernity. Disciplines, methods, and academic standards have largely privileged Western notions of objectivity, specialisation, and methodological neutrality (Kumar, 2005). Indigenous traditions, by contrast, have often been treated as cultural memory rather than as intellectual resources. The contemporary turn toward IKS is therefore more than a curricular adjustment. It signals discomfort with the narrowness of existing knowledge structures. When IKS is framed merely as heritage preservation or cultural pride, it remains secondary to an already established academic order. This paper takes a point of departure, taking a different premise, arguing that integrating IKS raises foundational and critical questions about the epistemic architecture of the university itself.

¹ Assistant Professor, Centre for Wage Employment and Livelihoods, National Institute of Rural Development and PR, Hyderabad, Email: smobar2@gmail.com

*Corresponding Author

Received: March 01, 2026; Revision Received: March 20, 2026; Accepted: March 22, 2026

Indian Knowledge Systems as Epistemic Pluralism: A Theoretical Reframing of Higher Education under NEP 2020

Postcolonial scholarship reminds us that colonialism reshaped not only political institutions but intellectual hierarchies (Said, 1978; Nandy, 1983). Modern universities were institutionalised while indigenous traditions of thought, medicine, ecology, and philosophy were pushed to the margins. Over time, these traditions were labelled unscientific or irrational (Visvanathan, 2006), and legitimacy became tied to external frameworks. NEP 2020 now calls for the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems into higher education (Ministry of HRD, 2020). It is essential to realise that the policy intent alone cannot resolve the deeper theoretical issue. Without rethinking underlying academic assumptions, inclusion risks becoming symbolic rather than transformative.

This paper posits a fundamental assertion: the inquiry into Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) fundamentally pertains to the nature of Knowledge itself. Indian Knowledge Systems are not remnants of history but vibrant traditions possessing distinct intellectual legacies, methodologies, and perspectives (Dasgupta, 1995). They have consistently prioritized integration over fragmentation, experience alongside logic, and ethical responsibility in the learning process. These approaches do not consistently align with highly specialized and outcome-oriented academic frameworks. Acknowledging this distinction does not necessitate the dismissal of contemporary science. It merely requests that the constraints of any individual culture be admitted. Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge Systems into the university fosters a dialogic environment where diverse epistemologies can critically engage with one another. In an era characterized by environmental stress and ethical ambiguity, utilizing a wider array of intellectual resources is essential rather than merely nostalgic (Alvares, 1991).

NEP 2020 creates an opening to revisit the purposes of higher education in India. The challenge is to move beyond symbolic inclusion toward a more profound reconsideration of how Knowledge is defined, organised, and taught. This paper contributes to that effort by placing Indian Knowledge Systems at the centre of the epistemic debate rather than at its margins.

COLONIAL MODERNITY AND THE EPISTEMIC ARCHITECTURE OF INDIAN UNIVERSITIES

Indian higher education institutions did not develop spontaneously from indigenous intellectual traditions. They were formed during the colonial period under British dominion and were molded by Enlightenment principles of rationality, order, and administration. What is currently perceived as “standard” or “global” in academia is not universal but rather a product of historical development (Altbach, 2016). Colonial education was designed less to democratise Knowledge than to cultivate a small administrative elite aligned with Western frameworks. In the process, older systems of learning, such as the gurukuls, pathshalas, madrasas, and community-based traditions, were gradually marginalised (Kumar, 2005). What changed was not only institutional structure but the criteria by which Knowledge was recognised and legitimised.

Contemporary academic fields increasingly emphasize fragmentation, objectivity, and technical methodology, thereby distinguishing Knowledge from ethics, culture, and experiential reality. Nandy (1983) noted that colonialism operated through a “colonisation of the mind,” in which indigenous epistemologies were regarded as superstition, while Western science was exalted as universal rationality. Even after gaining political Independence, universities mostly retained these teaching and testing methods. Visvanathan (2006) describes this condition as “epistemic dependency,” in which academic legitimacy is still measured

Indian Knowledge Systems as Epistemic Pluralism: A Theoretical Reframing of Higher Education under NEP 2020

against external standards. Knowledge grounded in local languages or community practice seldom entered the educational mainstream.

The result has been a persistent gap between formal education and society's intellectual life. Farmers, artisans, healers, and local practitioners continue to sustain complex forms of Knowledge, yet universities rarely recognise them as intellectual partners (Alvares, 1991). Understanding this history is essential when discussing IKS in current scenarios. Without acknowledging the colonial genealogy of academic structures, calls for integration risk appearing symbolic. NEP 2020 gestures toward loosening these inherited hierarchies through its emphasis on Indian languages, multidisciplinary learning, and indigenous traditions (Ministry of HRD, 2020). Yet genuine transformation will require more than curricular inclusion. It demands questioning the epistemic assumptions that have long defined what counts as Knowledge in Indian higher education.

RE-THEORIZING INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

Public discussions of Indian Knowledge Systems often proceed through catalogues such as ancient sciences, philosophical schools, classical texts, or indigenous practices. While historically accurate, such a listing remains superficial. If IKS is to find meaningful space in higher education, it must be understood not as a collection of artefacts but as a distinct orientation toward Knowledge. Across traditions such as Vedanta, Nyaya, Buddhism, Jain philosophy, Ayurveda, and the classical arts, Knowledge was rarely treated as a set of isolated disciplines. It was conceived as interconnected and relational (Dasgupta, 1995). The guiding metaphor was less the laboratory and more the web of life. Understanding was contextual, embedded, and oriented toward human flourishing.

In these traditions, experience is not secondary to Knowledge; it is fundamental to it. Understanding develops through rigorous practice, contemplation, and continuous interaction with the world, rather than solely through measurable or verifiable means. This does not mean giving up on reason. Indian intellectual traditions, on the other hand, developed careful ways of arguing and debating. But they also knew that gaining insight takes a particular kind of work on yourself, such as being patient, disciplined, and mindful of your morals (Sharma, 2018).

Ethics was never an optional extra. Learning was closely linked to duty and the health of the community. People did not think of Knowledge as morally neutral. Individuals did not perceive truth as distinct from the context. Agricultural methods, medical practices, and ecological frameworks developed via intimate interaction with particular landscapes and social contexts (Alvares, 1991). Knowledge is invariably influenced by its context, application, and intended purpose. Truth was not perceived as abstract and disconnected from context. Agricultural methods, healing customs, and ecological frameworks developed in intimate interaction with particular landscapes and social contexts (Alvares, 1991). Knowledge is inherently contextual, influenced by its geographical location, application, and intended purpose. These were not casual beliefs but meticulously examined habits developed over time. Dialogue was equally crucial. The traditions of discussion, such as *shastrartha*, illustrate that inquiry and dissent were fundamental to intellectual discourse (Dasgupta, 1995). Collectively, these characteristics demonstrate that IKS signifies not only an alternative set of concepts but also a distinct epistemological approach. Recognising this epistemic distinctiveness does not mean placing IKS beyond critique. Like any tradition, it contains internal debates and historical limits. The task is not reverence but serious engagement. Only by approaching IKS as a living epistemology rather than as heritage can it be integrated meaningfully into Indian universities.

Indian Knowledge Systems as Epistemic Pluralism: A Theoretical Reframing of Higher Education under NEP 2020

EPISTEMIC PLURALISM AS THE INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORK

Modern universities in India were influenced by a paradigm of Knowledge rooted in Enlightenment rationality and empirical science (Altbach, 2016). This concept was progressively deemed universal; yet, other traditions, especially non-Western ones, were often analyzed as cultural artifacts rather than as active sources of Knowledge. Epistemic pluralism challenges this hierarchy. Knowledge is produced in conjunction with institutions, historical settings, and power relations (Visvanathan, 2006). From this perspective, Indian Knowledge Systems need not authenticate themselves by conforming to Western scientific criteria. They can be considered internally coherent traditions with certain norms and methodologies. Individuals did not perceive truth as distinct from the context. Agricultural methods, medical practices, and ecological frameworks developed via intimate interaction with particular landscapes and social contexts (Alvares, 1991). Knowledge is consistently influenced by its context, application, and intended purpose. Truth was not perceived as abstract and independent of context.

This does not require rejecting modern science. Instead, it creates space for dialogue. In fields such as ecology, traditional Knowledge and contemporary science can enrich one another (Alvares, 1991). Recognising plurality does not weaken rigour; it widens the university's intellectual horizon. At the same time, pluralism avoids two extremes: dismissing IKS as unscientific or embracing it uncritically. As Kumar (2005) reminds us, intellectual maturity lies between rejection and romanticism. Pluralism encourages careful evaluation, open exchange, and reasoned debate. It also resonates with postcolonial critiques that show how colonial power shaped definitions of legitimate Knowledge (Said, 1978; Chatterjee, 1993). In this sense, epistemic pluralism contributes to a broader project of epistemic decolonisation, restoring space to marginalised traditions without denying contemporary achievements.

Pluralism is not relativism. It does not claim that all knowledge claims are equal, but that different traditions may operate with distinct criteria. A university that brings laboratories, classical texts, field practices, and community knowledge into conversation treats IKS not as a supplement but as a partner. Such an approach aligns with the spirit of NEP 2020 and opens the possibility of a more confident and inclusive higher education system.

NEP 2020 AS AN EPISTEMIC INTERVENTION

When NEP 2020 is discussed, attention often settles on visible reforms: digital access, flexible credits, multidisciplinary degrees, and institutional restructuring. These changes are significant, but they do not fully capture what is at stake. The policy also invites a reconsideration of how Knowledge itself is organised in Indian higher education. Since Independence, policy understandably focused on expansion—widening access and preparing students for employment. In that process, questions of epistemic diversity and cultural rootedness remained secondary. Western academic frameworks continued to function as benchmarks (Altbach, 2016), and Indian intellectual traditions rarely occupied the centre of academic life.

The distinguishing feature of NEP 2020 is its language. Explicit acknowledgment of Indian Knowledge Systems indicates a readiness to reassess established hierarchies (Ministry of HRD, 2020). Its focus on transdisciplinary and holistic education reflects earlier traditions that perceived Knowledge as interrelated rather than strictly compartmentalized (Dasgupta, 1995). The development of Indian languages and the institutionalization of Indigenous Knowledge

Indian Knowledge Systems as Epistemic Pluralism: A Theoretical Reframing of Higher Education under NEP 2020

Systems studies further recognize that Knowledge is entrenched within cultural and linguistic contexts. These actions commence the resolution of what Visvanathan (2006) characterized as epistemic reliance. The policy prioritizes values, ethics, and well-being as fundamental objectives of education. Education is associated with social responsibility and character development rather than solely with employability (Ministry of HRD, 2020), consistent with traditions in which Knowledge is intertwined with obligation and collective welfare (Sharma, 2018). In this regard, NEP 2020 advances a more pluralistic conception of Knowledge, one that facilitates dialogue between contemporary research and India's intellectual traditions (Nandy, 1983).

Policy language by itself does not bring change. Without deeper reflection, the inclusion of IKS may remain largely symbolic. Fundamental transformation asks universities to look beyond adding new courses and to examine the assumptions that quietly shape what they recognise as Knowledge. Indian philosophical and scientific traditions cannot be treated as exhibits in museums; they must be recognized as living entities of thought. This also means creating space in classrooms and research cultures for dialogue, questioning, and genuine intellectual exchange. Whether NEP 2020 becomes transformative will depend less on official declarations and more on how seriously institutions are willing to rethink their own foundations.

PEDAGOGY AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF LEARNING

If epistemic pluralism provides the conceptual foundation for integrating Indian Knowledge Systems, pedagogy is where that foundation must take shape. The question of IKS is not only about curriculum content but about how learning is organised, experienced, and evaluated. Traditional Indian approaches to education understood learning as intellectual and moral formation rather than the transmission of information. The teacher–student relationship was dialogic and mentoring in character, grounded in reflection, discipline, and sustained practice (Dasgupta, 1995). Knowledge was cultivated through engagement, not treated as detached data.

Contemporary universities, by contrast, are often structured around standardised syllabi, measurable outcomes, and examination-driven performance, and have a start-to-finish structure of implementation with very little flexibility. Overemphasis on credits and rankings narrows the space for reflection and creativity (Altbach, 2016). Within such systems, education risks becoming credential-focused rather than transformative. This is where IKS comes in with a different pedagogical imagination. Dialogue, questioning, and interpretive engagement were central to classical traditions; practices such as shastrartha treated debate and disagreement as integral to learning (Sharma, 2018). These approaches encourage critical thinking rather than passive memorisation. NEP 2020's emphasis on experiential and multidisciplinary learning resonates with this orientation (Ministry of HRD, 2020). Projects, community engagement, fieldwork, and apprenticeship situate knowledge within lived contexts (Sen, 2005). Such a shift also requires rethinking assessment. There is now an emphasis on recognising the art of reflection, creativity, ethical reasoning, and social engagement, which goes beyond mere quantitative evaluation. This broadens, rather than weakens, academic rigour. Ultimately, the integration of IKS will depend on everyday teaching practices. Without pedagogical transformation, it will remain a policy aspiration. Pedagogy thus becomes the bridge between epistemic theory and institutional reality.

Indian Knowledge Systems as Epistemic Pluralism: A Theoretical Reframing of Higher Education under NEP 2020

ETHICS, KNOWLEDGE, AND THE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION

One of the quiet but powerful insights of Indian Knowledge Systems is that Knowledge and ethics were never meant to be pulled apart. In many classical traditions, learning was not morally neutral. To know something was also to ask what it meant for one's conduct—toward oneself, toward others, and toward the larger social world. Knowledge carried responsibility with it. Modern universities, however, have often moved in a different direction. Influenced by positivist ideas, they tend to treat Knowledge as something produced first and applied later. Gradually, this way of thinking has narrowed education to measurable outcomes, with employability and productivity standing in as markers of success (Altbach, 2016). Ethical concerns are not ignored altogether, but they are often treated as separate add-ons, confined to particular courses, rather than forming part of the everyday culture of teaching, inquiry, and academic life. In many Indian traditions, Knowledge was tied to dharma—to a sense of duty and moral balance. Education was not meant only to make someone intelligent; it was meant to shape how one lives. It asked learners to think about responsibility, about how their actions affect others, and about the wider social order (Sharma, 2018). Learning was not just the gathering of information. It was preparation for judgment and conduct.

This way of thinking feels difficult to ignore today. Science and technology have increased our power, but they have also brought new strains on the environment, on social relations, and on our sense of limits. As Kumar (2005) notes, education can become efficient and well-organised yet lose sight of why it exists in the first place. Bringing IKS into higher education reopens that older question of purpose. NEP 2020's language around values and well-being gestures in this direction (Ministry of HRD, 2020). In many traditional contexts, ethics was not abstract; it was part of daily life, visible in farming practices, systems of healing, and community decision-making shaped by ideas of balance and restraint (Alvares, 1991). Such perspectives do not reject modern progress, but they do ask us to think more carefully about its direction.

This ethical orientation does not reject critical inquiry. Indian philosophical traditions were marked by debate and contestation (Dasgupta, 1995). An IKS-informed framework, therefore, encourages reflection and moral reasoning rather than uncritical acceptance. By reconnecting Knowledge with responsibility, universities can move toward an education that is intellectually rigorous and ethically grounded, an orientation that is increasingly necessary in the contemporary world.

COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE AND SOCIAL EMBEDDEDNESS

Modern universities often assume that legitimate Knowledge is generated primarily in laboratories, libraries, and research centres. This assumption reflects a historical process through which academic Knowledge separated itself from practical and indigenous wisdom. In India, colonial education policies intensified this divide by privileging Western scientific paradigms and marginalising local practices (Kumar, 2005). As a result, ecological, agricultural, artisanal, and technological Knowledge developed within communities was rarely recognised as intellectually significant. Indian Knowledge Systems challenge this narrow view. They remind us that Knowledge also grows in fields, forests, workshops, and villages. Practices such as water management, traditional medicine, craft production, and architecture evolved through sustained engagement with local ecosystems (Alvares, 1991). These traditions may not always employ the language of modern science, yet they embody careful observation, experimentation, and practical reasoning.

Indian Knowledge Systems as Epistemic Pluralism: A Theoretical Reframing of Higher Education under NEP 2020

Integrating IKS into higher education, therefore, requires expanding our understanding of where Knowledge is produced and by whom. Postcolonial scholars have long questioned the hierarchy that places formal institutions above lived Knowledge (Said, 1978; Visvanathan, 2006). Recognising community knowledge promotes reciprocity: scholars become learners as well as teachers. This orientation reflects the relational ethos found in Indian intellectual traditions (Sharma, 2018). Valuing community knowledge does not imply uncritical acceptance. Dialogue and evaluation remain essential. Indigenous practices can be examined through scientific inquiry, just as scientific models can be enriched by local insight. The aim is mutual learning rather than romanticism. In a time of ecological stress and social fragmentation, such socially embedded forms of Knowledge are not optional. They reconnect universities with the communities they serve and restore higher education to a broader social purpose.

CONCLUSION

Integrating Indian Knowledge Systems is not a matter of curricular addition or cultural revival. It raises a deeper question about whether the university must continue to rest on a single understanding of Knowledge. Epistemic pluralism suggests that it need not. Different traditions can coexist within the same institution: questioning, refining, and learning from one another, without compromising scholarly rigour. Recognising that Knowledge is shaped by history, institutions, and ethical commitments (Visvanathan, 2006) does not weaken the university; it strengthens its self-awareness. Indian intellectual traditions offer resources that speak directly to contemporary educational concerns. In a period marked by ecological strain and moral uncertainty, their attention to relational thinking and ethical responsibility feels neither nostalgic nor merely necessary (Dasgupta, 1995; Sharma, 2018). NEP 2020 opens institutional space for this engagement by encouraging interdisciplinary learning and formally recognising IKS within universities (Ministry of HRD, 2020). Whether this opportunity leads to genuine transformation will depend on how seriously institutions rethink their epistemic assumptions. A plural university does not reject modern science or global scholarship. It situates them within a broader conversation. As Altbach (2016) notes, institutions thrive when they remain globally engaged while responsive to local contexts. Integrating IKS demands critical engagement, not romanticism; Indian traditions themselves evolved through debate and reinterpretation (Dasgupta, 1995). Ultimately, the task is not to choose between tradition and modernity but to create spaces where they can speak to one another. If taken seriously, the reopening of the knowledge question may allow Indian universities to become both rooted and forward-looking—confident in their intellectual inheritance and responsive to the challenges of the present.

REFERENCES

1. Alvares, C. (1991). *Decolonising history: Technology and culture in India*. Goa: Other India Press.
2. Altbach, P. G. (2016). *Global perspectives on higher education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
3. Chatterjee, P. (1993). *The nation and its fragments: Colonial and postcolonial histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
4. Dasgupta, S. N. (1995). *A history of Indian philosophy* (Vols. I–V). Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Indian Knowledge Systems as Epistemic Pluralism: A Theoretical Reframing of Higher Education under NEP 2020

5. Kumar, K. (2005). *Political agenda of education: A study of colonialist and nationalist ideas*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
6. Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. New Delhi: Government of India.
7. Nandy, A. (1983). *The intimate enemy: Loss and recovery of self under colonialism*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
8. Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.
9. Sharma, R. (2018). Indian knowledge systems and higher education: A conceptual review. *Journal of Indian Education*, 44(2), 15–29.
10. Visvanathan, S. (2006). Alternative sciences and the knowledge question. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41(35), 3785–3790.

Acknowledgments

The author(s) appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Roy, S.M. (2026) Indian Knowledge Systems as Epistemic Pluralism: A Theoretical Reframing of Higher Education under NEP 2020. *International Journal of Social Impact*, 11(1), 223-230. DIP: 18.02.1036/20261101, DOI: 10.25215/2455/11011036