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Indian Knowledge Systems in National Education Policies: A Comparative Analysis of 1968, 1986, and 2020 Frameworks

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a comparative study of India's National Education Policies of 1968, 1986, and 2020 to analyze how Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) have been framed, depicted, and implemented over different policy regimes. Grounded in qualitative document analysis, the research explores changes in epistemological orientations, curricular integration, and institutional frameworks relating to IKS. The 1968 policy, determined by post-independence developmental agendas, recognized India's cultural heritage but did not include IKS in systemic reform. The 1986 policy offered rhetorical acknowledgment without substantive curricular or pedagogical change. However, the National Education Policy 2020 represents a paradigmatic shift by locating IKS at the center of integral education and promoting its structural incorporation through curriculum planning, teacher training, and research. Based on traditional texts and modern research, the research delineates a path from epistemic marginalization to strategic inclusion. It does, however, delineate habitual obstacles such as implementation gaps, institutional inertia, and epistemic tokenism. The article advocates for persistent institutional commitment, interdisciplinary research, and culturally situated pedagogy to help the incorporation of IKS move beyond symbolic inclusion towards actual educational decolonisation and epistemic justice.

I. INTRODUCTION

Post-independence Indian education policies have developed through cross-cutting imperatives of national development, cultural revivalism, and international competitiveness. At its core is the issue of epistemological sovereignty—what forms of knowledge are legitimised, valued, and institutionalised. Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), including indigenous philosophical, scientific, linguistic, and pedagogical traditions, have traditionally provided an integrated and context-sensitive learning framework.¹ For this study, Indian Knowledge Systems are understood to be tried-and-tested, context-dependent traditions of

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knowledge based on Indian civilizational heritage across the disciplines of medicine, philosophy, linguistics, environmental science, and pedagogy. These systems are not just historical relics but dynamic and changing bodies of knowledge shared by oral traditions, texts, and communal practices.

However, these systems have largely been marginalised within formal schooling structures because of the long-lasting influence of colonial epistemologies.² The conflict between tradition and modernity has influenced policy frameworks since independence. While Western frameworks emerged with promises of progress, they also came with assumptions that tended to devalue local forms of knowing. The modern global situation—characterised by crises in sustainability, mental health, and ethical issues—has rekindled attention to the integrative, ethical, and dialogical aspects of IKS. This has also led to a rethink in policies regarding education, reminding policymakers to shift beyond utilitarian ends and instead foster learning based on culture and community.

In addition, discourses on epistemic justice and decolonisation have highlighted the institutional erasure of indigenous knowledge from the process of knowledge creation. In turn, the renewed policy focus on IKS responds not only to cultural pride but also to an attempt to develop a robust, inclusive education system. Such a paper therefore places itself within these broader conversations and aims to chart the way IKS has been handled in national education policy over time.

The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1968, shaped by the Kothari Commission (1964–66), was accentuated on modernization, national integration, and scientific temper. Although it recognized India's cultural heritage, it was not given any structural vision for incorporating IKS

into syllabi.³ The NPE 1986 and the Programme of Action (1992) brought in concepts of value-based education and cultural maintenance, but kept indigenous knowledge rhetorically oriented without syllabus depth or teacher training reform.⁴

The National Education Policy 2020 is a paradigm change. For the first time, IKS is officially recognized as an epistemic basis for educational change. The policy identifies measures to incorporate IKS into schooling and higher education across the nation, encourage multilingualism, evolve indigenous pedagogies, and facilitate associated research projects.⁵ Researchers note that NEP 2020 places IKS not merely as cultural heritage, but also as a dynamic and living approach to generating and sharing knowledge.⁶

The present paper attempts a comparative examination of the 1968, 1986, and 2020 education

policy documents to understand how IKS has been framed, represented, and enacted. Through close reading of these official policy documents and discussions of how their visions correspond or resist the notion of educational decolonisation, the research evaluates the changing policy discourse and its repercussions for epistemic justice in Indian education.

II. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Education has remained an important space for negotiating national identity and epistemic legitimacy in postcolonial India. While Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) possess a civilizational depth, their role in informing formal education policy has traditionally been uneven and sometimes symbolic. While National Education Policy 2020 marks a new emphasis on the integration of IKS, there is scarce academic thinking charting the course of this exchange through previous policies. A comparative study of the 1968, 1986, and 2020 policies provides valuable insights into India's shifting ideological allegiances and the cultural inclusion and exclusion mechanisms underpinning state-led educational transformation. Besides, the contemporary world shift towards epistemic pluralism compels reimagining education systems for non-Western societies. Access to IKS is not just an issue of cultural acknowledgement but also of cognitive justice, where various forms of knowledge are legitimized in schools. This question is not only of academic interest for comprehending history, but also for educational policymaking that would support culturally pertinent, decolonized, and inclusive education. Such a study can help teacher educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers to formulate epistemologically fuller educational strategies that go beyond tokenistic references to India's traditions of knowledge. It also invites a re-examination of how educational institutions conceptualize knowledge itself, and whose perspectives constitute that definition.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The debate about Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) and their incorporation into formal education systems in India has picked up strength in recent decades, notably in the wake of decolonization initiatives and policy changes. IKS comprises a wide and vibrant assembly of indigenous epistemologies, such as but not restricted to Ayurveda, yoga, logic (nyaya), linguistics (vyakarana), cosmology, ethics, and pedagogy. Bounded in the process of experiential learning and extended across millennia through tradition, scriptural transmission, and communally developed practices, IKS represents a civilizational strategy of holistic knowledge. Yet, their exclusion in colonial and postcolonial education systems has been well documented.⁷

Under British rule, Macaulay's 1835 Minute and later policies enshrined Western-dominated education systems that derided Indian epistemologies as being archaic and inferior.⁸ Following independence, India's post-independence education policies retained this colonial hangover. National Policy on Education (1968), which evolved out of the Kothari Commission Report (1964–66), focused on national development and scientific temper, but almost entirely ignored indigenous knowledge paradigms.⁹ According to scholars like Sharma and Verma¹⁰, the policy strengthened technocratic and positivist approaches while providing no structural support for traditional Indian pedagogies. Classical texts and epistemological systems—like the Vedas, Charaka Samhita, and Arthashastra—remained outside curricular and institutional schemes, indicative of an epistemic vacuum.

The 1986 policy was a discursive turn, recognizing the necessity for value-based education and cultural embeddedness. However, its interface with IKS was symbolic. The Programme of Action (1992) advised promoting the regional and traditional knowledge systems, but did not have the curricular and institutional tools in place to facilitate extensive integration.¹¹ Jana and Adhikary¹² also criticize the policy for homogenizing culture and not encouraging pluralistic, dialogical approaches to education. Chatterjee¹³ and Ghosh et al.¹⁴ also observe that there was no well-defined strategy in textbook creation, teacher education, and study that restricted the realization of its cultural objectives. The literature implies that Euro-American models of schooling continued unchecked.

By contrast, the National Education Policy (2020) provides a revolutionary approach. For the first time, IKS is defined not only as heritage but also as a knowledge paradigm at the core of all disciplines. The policy promotes the inauguration of IKS Centres, indigenous content integration in teacher training, multilingual education, and classical Indian language revival.¹⁵ Some scholars like Shirvalkar,¹⁶ Awasthi,¹⁷ and Bagchi¹⁸ have understood it as a deliberate shift towards epistemic decolonization. Goyal¹⁹ finds that NEP 2020 acknowledges the ability of IKS to tackle issues of climate change, mental health, and ethics issues in science and technology—areas generally seen as the exclusive prerogative of modernity.

However, the literature also points towards key gaps in implementation and critical engagement. Chatterjee²⁰ cautions against "epistemic tokenism," in which symbolic representation substitutes for transformative change. Jadhav²¹ describes how teacher education programs still depend almost exclusively on Western cognitive theories with little overlap from Indian philosophical psychology. As much as policy intention goes, there is little availability of IKS-based learning materials, trained teachers, and interdisciplinary research facilities. Kumar and Singh²² underscore the imperative for convergence between traditional

scholars and institutional academia for building strong pedagogical frameworks. Additionally, language is an obstacle to the democratization of access to IKS, particularly considering the dominance of English at the higher education level.

Recent work also asks for greater interaction with classical writings—not merely as scriptural quotations but as vibrant pedagogical documents. For example, Upanishads²³ and Charaka Samhita have rich observations on dialogical learning, ethics, ecological sustainability, and wellness, but remain underutilized in curriculum planning. The necessity for interconnected frameworks that span ancient wisdom and modern epistemologies is a common refrain.²⁴

Overall, although NEP 2020 unleashes transformational opportunities, the literature strongly underscores the importance of building institutional capacity, interdisciplinarity, and ongoing critical evaluation to transition from symbolic recognition to meaningful integration of IKS in Indian education.

Research gap

Despite the significant policy and academic interest generated by NEP 2020 concerning the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems, several crucial gaps persist within the existing literature. Primarily, much of the current research tends to either critique colonial legacies²⁵ or laud NEP 2020's vision in isolation, failing to situate it within the broader trajectory of educational policy evolution. Furthermore, there are very few studies that employ a diachronic analysis comparing the treatment of Indian Knowledge Systems across the 1968, 1986, and 2020 policies. This lack of comparative analysis obfuscates the extent to which the new trends represent a genuine paradigm shift or merely an extension of rhetorical trends.

Secondly, there is minimal interrogation of how the philosophical foundations of each policy are connected to larger issues of epistemic justice and educational decolonisation. The pedagogical implications and ideological assumptions of IKS incorporation—specifically around teacher preparation, curriculum planning, and research environments—are not explored adequately. These include, for instance, the lack of integration of classical Indian theories of mind, cognition, and ethics into B.Ed. and M.Ed. programs.²⁶

Third, policy documents tend to present IKS as a static corpus instead of a dynamic, developing knowledge tradition. This results in tokenistic mention in the curriculum without allied transformation in pedagogy, evaluation, or institutional culture. There is an apparent lack of research examining the operationalisation of IKS through textbooks, academic publishing, institutional incentives, and inter-disciplinary research frameworks.

Lastly, insufficient attention is paid to the environmental challenges of applying IKS in

multicultural socio-linguistic and regional settings. Issues of access, inclusion of castes, gender representation, and regional diversity within IKS are often overlooked. Absent from the answers to these structural questions, any move towards integration stands the chance of perpetuating new hierarchies in the name of cultural revival.

This research aims to fill these deficits by providing a critical, comparative policy analysis of the changing conceptualisation, representation, and operationalisation of IKS in three seminal policies. It also questions the implications of these changes for epistemic sovereignty, curriculum reform, and institutional change in Indian education.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How has the conceptual definition of IKS evolved over the 1968, 1986, and 2020 education policy reports?
2. What are the specific curriculum and pedagogy integration measures of IKS set out in the 1968, 1986, and 2020 policies?
3. How do the policies vary in their epistemological presumptions and institutional arrangements to support the integration of IKS?

V. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To critically analyse how Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) are defined and portrayed in the 1968, 1986, and 2020 National Policies on Education.
2. To examine the degree and type of curricular and pedagogical integration of IKS set out in each policy framework.
3. To determine the changes in epistemological direction and implementation mechanisms about IKS in the three policies.

VI. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative method through document analysis to contrast the manner Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) have been treated in three significant national education policies: the National Policy on Education 1968, the National Policy on Education 1986 (and the Programme of Action 1992), and the National Education Policy 2020. They were selected as they represent significant milestones in India's education journey and capture evolving national visions. The research emphasis lies on the fact that both policies mention knowledge, culture, values, and education, particularly regarding Indian traditions and philosophies. The issues of the place and significance of IKS, its integration into the curriculum, its adoption in teacher education, and the approach recommended to implement it were employed as a basis

to compare the policies. In support of this analysis, classical Indian texts and several research papers were also consulted to help make more understandable what IKS is and why it is important in education. The Kothari Commission Report (1964–66) was also read to be aware of the ideas that shaped the 1968 policy. This research does not look at classroom-level implementation but only the content of policy documents. The aim is to comprehend how the handling of Indian Knowledge Systems has evolved or remained the same in various policy structures over the years.

VII. ANALYSES AND DISCUSSIONS

The comparative examination of the National Policies on Education (NPE) 1968, 1986, and 2020 indicates a slow but deep shift in the identification and handling of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) across educational policy debates in India. The examination brings out the continuities as well as the discontinuities in epistemological direction, curricular articulation, as well as institutional resolve towards IKS in the three frameworks.²⁷ The NPE 1968, based on the Kothari Commission (1964–66), promoted a vision of national integration based on an integrated education system. Despite recognising India's cultural heritage, the focus remained predominantly on modernisation and the cultivation of a scientific temper.²⁸ The lack of a formalised framework for including IKS indicated a prioritisation of Western disciplinary paradigms and technocratic knowledge over local traditions.²⁹ According to researchers like Banerjee,³⁰ Bagchi,³¹ and Ghosh et al.³² the policy did not trouble colonial epistemic hierarchies, and hence continued to promote knowledge systems marginalising vernacular traditions and local epistemologies. In addition, the policy's failure to draw on classical Indian Educational Systems, such as those exemplified in works such as the Upanishads or conventional Gurukula models, mirrors its circumscribed recourse to indigenous pedagogy and philosophy.

The NPE 1986 and the Programme of Action (1992) constituted a discursive turn by officially acknowledging the necessity of value-based education and stressing cultural continuity.³³ While a turn indeed, this was more a turn of rhetoric than operation. Though it recognised the importance of India's rich philosophical and cultural heritage, the policy fell short of incorporating IKS into curriculum planning, pedagogy, or teacher education.³⁴ Research indicates that this policy positioned IKS as a symbolic heritage in place of a living, dynamic system of knowledge production.³⁵ Chatterjee³⁶ also points out that the absence of institutional mechanisms and accountability structures meant that incorporating IKS was superficial. The persistence of Western paradigms in textbooks, teacher training modules, and evaluation

practices indicates that IKS integration was declarative rather than transformative.

The NEP 2020 is a far-reaching epistemological and structural reorientation of the policy landscape. It explicitly refers to IKS as "foundational" to holistic and multidisciplinary learning and offers a blueprint to its curricular, pedagogical, and institutional implementation.³⁷ The policy recommends setting up IKS Centres, promoting the learning of Sanskrit and other classical Indian languages, integrating indigenous systems of medicine and ecology, and transforming teacher training through schemes such as the Integrated Teacher Education Programme (ITEP). Academics like Shirvalkar,³⁸ Awasthi,³⁹ and Goyal⁴⁰ highlight that this is a conscious move towards educational decolonization and reasserting epistemic agency on the part of India's traditional indigenous knowledge systems. The inclusion of yoga, Ayurveda, dharmashastra, vastuvidya, and ancient agricultural wisdom not only broadens the curriculum in academia but also enables new cross-disciplinary patterns of knowledge production. In addition, NEP 2020's priority of research and knowledge generation associated with IKS is historic. It promotes transdisciplinary academic inquiry based on literature like the Vedas, Upanishads, and Charaka Samhita, combined with contemporary scientific paradigms.⁴¹ The policy's orientation towards multilingual education also facilitates knowledge democratization by authenticating regional languages as bearers of epistemic traditions.⁴² This linguistic pluralism has strong implications for access, understanding, and diffusion of traditional knowledge systems in rural and marginalized areas. Yet the analysis also shows that the implementation problems are considerable. Although progressive in its rhetoric, NEP 2020 has not yet institutionalized a large number of its IKS objectives through more formal curriculum revision, textbook production, and capacity-building at teacher education institutions.⁴³ Bureaucratic inertia, faculty readiness issues, and the lack of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms continue to be concerns.⁴⁴ If not accompanied by sustained political and scholarly commitment, there is a risk that inclusion of IKS will be tokenistic, not transformative. Moreover, questions remain regarding how modern educational institutions can balance academic rigor with epistemological diversity while ensuring methodological coherence.

In short, the policy trajectory from 1968 to 2020 reflects a path from omission to awareness to operationalising of IKS. NEP 2020 establishes a clear vision for integration, but making this vision a reality includes overcoming structural inequalities, reconceptualising epistemic assumptions, and building institutional capacity for ensuring indigenous knowledge traditions continue in meaningful and suitable ways.

VIII. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

India's education policy has evolved from the sidelining of Indian Knowledge Systems in 1968, through rhetorical moves in 1986, to the significant epistemic inclusion as set out in NEP 2020. This mirrors a global trend of recovery of indigenous intellectual traditions and realignment of education with civilizational values. NEP 2020 offers an exceptional window of opportunity to relocate IKS to the heart of educational philosophy, curriculum, and research. Yet for such a potential to become a reality, policy needs to advance beyond symbolic allusions to an actual institutional response. This entails reworking teacher education curricula, normalizing IKS through curriculum reform, enhancing capacity for research, and developing partnerships with traditional knowledge keepers and local communities⁴⁵

Institutions need to adopt IKS as active systems pertinent to the problems of the day, including sustainability, mental health, and ethical thinking. The rollout of NEP 2020's IKS agenda must be supported with sufficient funding, institutional incentives, interdisciplinarity, and continuing faculty development. In addition, strong monitoring and evaluation systems need to be put in place to measure the quality and impact of IKS integration at varied levels of education.⁴⁶ National accrediting agencies need to formulate frameworks compatible with IKS ideals and support academic programs, facilitating links between ancient knowledge and new global demands.

Policymakers need to address context-based curricular models, pedagogies with multiple languages, and inclusive knowledge evaluation practices as a priority to ensure that IKS becomes an integral part of India's knowledge economy. Without a paradigm shift in educational thinking and policy action, Indian education systems will not be able to deliver on the promise of epistemic justice and build a knowledge society that is really inclusive, diverse, and culturally responsive.⁴⁷

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