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On the Topic
Indian Knowledge System (IKS): Challenges & its Application in Higher Education for Sustainable Development
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Challenges of Mainstreaming Indian Knowledge System in Academia

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Abstract

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) represents centuries of intellectual, cultural, and philosophical traditions encompassing diverse fields such as philosophy, sciences, medicine, mathematics, arts, and governance. Despite its depth and global contributions, mainstreaming IKS into modern academia faces significant challenges. These include structural barriers, colonial legacies in education, epistemological differences, lack of adequate research infrastructure, insufficient standardization, and questions of authenticity and validation. While the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 provides an important framework for integrating IKS into higher education, the process of making it a part of mainstream academia is still nascent and contested. This paper critically examines the challenges of mainstreaming Indian Knowledge System in academia, explores the tensions between traditional knowledge and contemporary scientific frameworks, and highlights pathways for bridging the gap through policy reforms, curriculum design, interdisciplinary research, and global collaborations.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge System (IKS), Academia, NEP 2020, Traditional Knowledge, Mainstreaming, Challenges, Epistemology, Higher Education

Introduction

India has been the cradle of a rich intellectual tradition that has shaped global thought for centuries. From Vedic texts, Upanishadic philosophies, Ayurveda, Yoga, and classical arts to breakthroughs in mathematics and astronomy, the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) offers holistic ways of understanding life and the universe. However, with the advent of colonial education and subsequent dominance of Western paradigms in academia, traditional knowledge systems were marginalized, often dismissed as unscientific or outdated.

The current educational discourse in India is witnessing a revivalist momentum, especially with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasizing the inclusion of IKS in school and higher education curricula. Yet, mainstreaming IKS into academia is not without hurdles.

Questions of credibility, methodology, compatibility with modern scientific frameworks, and political or ideological contestations continue to shape the debate.

This paper seeks to examine the challenges that hinder the systematic integration of Indian Knowledge System into mainstream academia. The discussion is structured across several thematic concerns: historical marginalization, epistemological conflicts, infrastructural limitations, standardization issues, global recognition, and socio-political contestations. By analyzing these challenges, the paper contributes to a balanced understanding of how IKS can be integrated without compromising academic rigor or cultural authenticity.

Historical Background: Marginalization of IKS

The decline of IKS in academia is deeply rooted in the

colonial restructuring of Indian education. Macaulay's Minute on Education (1835) explicitly prioritized English education, portraying Indian systems of knowledge as "deficient" compared to Western knowledge. Traditional gurukul and madarsa systems, which emphasized holistic and community-based learning, were systematically weakened.

This historical rupture created a long-lasting perception that Indian epistemologies were inferior, anecdotal, and unscientific. Post-independence, while there were attempts to revive Ayurveda, Yoga, and Sanskrit studies, mainstream higher education largely continued with Western frameworks. The colonial legacy continues to shape mindsets, creating resistance to integrating IKS in academia today.

Epistemological Challenges

One of the foremost challenges in mainstreaming IKS lies in the epistemological divergence between traditional knowledge and modern scientific paradigms.

Holism vs. Reductionism

- IKS emphasizes a holistic worldview, interconnectedness of life, and experiential wisdom.
- Modern science relies on reductionism, specialization, and empirical validation.
- Bridging these paradigms requires careful epistemological negotiation.

Orality vs. Textuality

- Much of IKS was transmitted orally, through teachers and practitioners.
- Academia depends on standardized written texts, peer-reviewed publications, and codified curricula.

Validation Mechanisms

- Traditional systems rely on experiential proof (pratyaksha), scriptural authority (shabda), and inference (anumana).
- Contemporary academia prioritizes randomized controlled trials, laboratory experiments, and reproducibility.
- Developing methodologies that respect both traditions is a complex challenge.

Structural and Institutional Challenges

Lack of Infrastructure

Few institutions are dedicated to systematic IKS research. While centers exist for Ayurveda, Yoga, or Sanskrit studies, multidisciplinary research hubs remain rare.

Fragmentation of Disciplines

Academia is highly compartmentalized, while IKS traditions are inherently interdisciplinary (e.g., Ayurveda integrates biology, chemistry, spirituality, and ethics).

Curricular Gaps

University curricula offer limited exposure to IKS, and when they do, they often present it in isolation rather than as part of integrated learning.

Faculty Preparedness

Lack of trained faculty with expertise in both traditional knowledge and modern academic requirements hampers quality teaching and research.

Standardization and Authenticity Issues

Diversity of Traditions

India's knowledge systems are regionally diverse: Ayurveda, Siddha, Unani, Yoga, folk medicine, classical arts, etc. Mainstreaming requires a careful balance between unity and diversity.

Textual Variations

Multiple versions of classical texts create challenges in deciding authoritative references for academic curricula.

Authenticity Concerns

Some modern reinterpretations of IKS risk diluting authenticity for commercial or political purposes. This creates mistrust among scholars.

Challenges of Global Recognition

While Yoga and Ayurveda have gained global recognition, much of IKS is still seen as "alternative" knowledge rather than mainstream science. This global perception affects local academic credibility. Moreover:

International journals often hesitate to publish research rooted in traditional epistemologies.

Patenting and intellectual property rights (IPR) issues arise when traditional knowledge is appropriated without acknowledgment (e.g., neem, turmeric, basmati cases).

Political and Ideological Contestations

The mainstreaming of IKS is often entangled with political ideologies. While revivalist efforts are important, they sometimes risk being perceived as politicization of knowledge. Concerns include:

Selective promotion of certain traditions over others.

- Use of IKS discourse to push ideological or religious agendas.
- Alienation of minority knowledge systems (e.g., Unani, folk practices)
- Such contestations undermine academic objectivity and create resistance within scholarly communities.

Research and Methodological Gap

Documentation: Large sections of IKS remain undocumented or scattered across manuscripts, folk traditions, and oral narratives.

Translation Barrier: Many texts remain untranslated, limiting accessibility for scholars across disciplines.

Research Funding: Funding for IKS research is limited compared to conventional sciences.

Interdisciplinary Methods: Lack of frameworks that integrate IKS with modern research methodologies creates credibility issues in academia.

Opportunities and Pathways Forward

Despite challenges, mainstreaming IKS into academia is both desirable and possible. Some potential pathways include:

Policy Support

NEP 2020 provides a framework for promoting IKS through curriculum reforms, research grants, and dedicated institutions.

Interdisciplinary Research

Collaborative projects between scientists, historians, philosophers, and practitioners can create bridges.

Digital Documentation

Digitization of manuscripts and oral traditions can preserve and disseminate knowledge widely.

Capacity Building

Training faculty and researchers in both IKS and modern research practices will ensure balanced scholarship.

International Collaborations

Partnerships with global universities can enhance recognition and credibility of IKS.

Ethical Integration

Ensuring authenticity, inclusivity, and non-politicization of IKS is essential for its academic acceptance.

Conclusion

The mainstreaming of Indian Knowledge System in academia represents both a challenge and an opportunity. While epistemological differences, infrastructural limitations, standardization issues, and political contestations hinder progress, policy initiatives and scholarly efforts can create a balanced integration. The task is not to replace modern science with IKS, but to enrich academia with diverse epistemologies that provide holistic and sustainable ways of understanding the world.

By embracing pluralism, fostering interdisciplinary research, and ensuring academic rigor, India can reclaim and globalize its intellectual heritage while also contributing meaningfully to the global pool of knowledge.

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