



International Journal of Recent Development in Engineering and Technology
Website: www.ijrdet.com (ISSN 2347-6435 (Online) Volume 15, Issue 04, April 2026)

Indian Knowledge System and Indian Polity: A Research Perspective

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Abstract-- The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) represents a vast intellectual heritage that evolved over millennia through philosophical inquiry, scientific exploration, ethical reasoning, and socio-political organization. In contemporary India, the relationship between IKS and Indian polity has gained scholarly attention, particularly after the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasized integrating traditional knowledge with modern governance and academic discourse (NEP-2020) by Pavan Mandavkar, n.d.). This paper analyses the historical foundations, philosophical underpinnings, and institutional legacies of the Indian Knowledge System and explores how these elements shaped India's political thought—from ancient institutions and governance to modern constitutional democracy. Furthermore, it examines the relevance of IKS in guiding public policy, conflict resolution, ethical leadership, environmental governance, and participatory democracy in 21st-century India (Tradition, Transition and Transformation: The Indian Experience -, n.d.). The paper argues that IKS offers not only cultural continuity but also a framework of ethical political conduct rooted in dharma, dialogue, and pluralism.

Keywords-- Indian Knowledge System, NEP 2020, Environmental Governance, Participatory Democracy, Etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

India's civilizational heritage is marked by an unparalleled continuity of knowledge traditions covering diverse fields: philosophy, polity, economics, health sciences, mathematics, linguistics, and environmental ethics. (India's Cultural Heritage, n.d.) These traditions, broadly understood as the Indian Knowledge System, evolved through scriptures, treatises, commentaries, and regional knowledge practices. The roots of Indian Knowledge Systems go back during the Vedic period, when people began observing nature, the stars, the human body, and daily life closely. They shared their ideas through spoken words, which later got written down in texts like the Vedas, Upanishads, and other ancient scriptures. Individuals like as Aryabhata (astronomy and mathematics), Charaka (medicine), Sushruta (surgery), and Panini (grammar), among others, contributed significantly to the development of this extensive knowledge system.

IKS continued to expand over various epochs, including the Mauryan and Gupta periods, as well as during the eras of Nalanda and Takshashila universities, which attracted students globally for education. Regrettably, throughout foreign invasions and colonial domination, a significant portion of this information was disregarded or lost. India is currently endeavoring to rejuvenate and promote its rich legacy through education and research (IKS), 2025).

The Indian polity, on the other hand, underwent a long historical transformation—from Vedic sabhas and samitis, to ancient republics like the Licchavis, to Mauryan and Gupta empires, to Mughal administrative sophistication, and eventually to the modern democratic state under the Constitution of 1950. (Tradition, Transition and Transformation: The Indian Experience, n.d.) Throughout these phases, political thought and institutional design were deeply shaped by the ethical and philosophical foundations provided by the Indian Knowledge System. (Vedas To Visionaries: Pathways of Indian Thought, n.d.)

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Secondary sources in the forms of books, Research journals, newspaper articles and internet etc. have been used.

Research methodology

It is a kind of desk research. The broad research design employed is exploratory where historical-analytical method has been used with an interdisciplinary approach.

Reference Style

American Psychological Association (APA-7th Edition) has been employed for citation and referencing.

Objectives of the Research

This research paper highlights the connections between Indian intellectual streams and evaluates how ancient knowledge continues to influence Indian polity and institutions in contemporary India.



III. HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) is one of the world's oldest and most comprehensive intellectual traditions, rooted in thousands of years of cultural evolution, philosophical inquiry, and scientific advancement. Its historical foundations lie in a deep interplay between spirituality, rationality, and an integrated understanding of life. From the Vedic age to the classical and medieval periods, the development of IKS reflects India's sustained quest for truth, harmony, and holistic knowledge (*Roots, Significance, and Contemporary Relevance | Bhartiya Knowledge Systems, n.d.*).

The earliest foundation of IKS can be traced to the **Vedas**, composed between 1500 and 500 BCE. These sacred texts contain hymns, rituals, philosophical reflections, and early scientific insights. The Vedas introduced fundamental concepts such as cosmic order (*ṛta*), interconnectedness of life, and the pursuit of knowledge (*vidyā*). The *Upanishads*, which followed, added profound metaphysical insights on the nature of the self (*ātman*), ultimate reality (*brahman*), and the unity of existence. Together, they laid the philosophical core of Indian thought (*The Upanishads: Foundations of Indian Thought and Their Global Philosophical Impact by Sanjay Koul :: SSRN, n.d.*).

Parallel to the Vedic tradition, the growth of the **Vedāṅgas**—grammar, phonetics, astronomy, ritual science, meter, and etymology—provided technical expertise essential for learning. Scholars like Pāṇini and Yāska contributed foundational theories in linguistics and semantics. These early disciplines shaped India's systematic approach to knowledge, emphasizing precision, logic, and analytical reasoning.

The **classical period** witnessed remarkable advances in diverse fields. In mathematics and astronomy, thinkers such as Aryabhata, Brahmagupta, and Bhaskara introduced concepts like zero, algebraic methods, and planetary models. In medicine, the *Ayurveda* tradition established principles of health, balance, and holistic healing through texts like the *Charaka Samhita* and *Sushruta Samhita*, the latter detailing surgical practices. Arthashastra by Kautilya laid the foundation for political science, economics, and governance. These contributions demonstrate that IKS was deeply empirical, interdisciplinary, and innovative.

Simultaneously, philosophical systems—including Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, and Vedānta—presented rigorous methods of reasoning, metaphysics, ethics, and spiritual discipline. Their debates enriched India's intellectual landscape and promoted a culture of inquiry and dialogue.

In essence, the historical foundations of the Indian Knowledge System lie in its continuity, adaptability, and holistic worldview (*An Exploration of the Indian Knowledge System: Roots, Significance, and Contemporary Relevance | Bhartiya Knowledge Systems, n.d.-b.*).

Indian Polity in Ancient Times

Indian polity in ancient and classical times represents one of the most sophisticated and well-organized political traditions of the ancient world. Its foundations were deeply rooted in ethical principles, social order, and a holistic understanding of governance. Rather than being narrowly political, the Indian conception of polity (*rājya, rājadharmā*) integrated moral responsibility, welfare of the people, and the pursuit of justice (Mishra, 2004). From the Vedic age to the Mauryan and Gupta eras, Indian political thought developed through both philosophical reflection and practical statecraft.

In the **Vedic period**, political organization was initially tribal, centered around units such as the *jana* and *viś*. Leadership was generally exercised by a *rajan*, whose authority was not absolute but dependent on the consent and respect of the people. Early texts like the *Rigveda* emphasize the king's duty to uphold *ṛta*, the cosmic order, and maintain harmony in society. Decision-making involved assemblies like the *sabha* and *samiti*, showing that collective deliberation was an important feature of early polity (*The Evolution of Tribal Polity in Early Vedic Society, n.d.*).

A major transformation occurred in the later Vedic and early classical periods with the rise of **mahājanapadas** and territorial kingdoms. Expansion of agriculture, trade, and urbanization led to more centralized forms of governance. The republican traditions (*gaṇa-sanghas*) of regions such as Vaishali, Kashi, and Kapilavastu are remarkable examples of early democratic institutions. These republics were governed by councils and assemblies, indicating that political plurality existed alongside monarchies.

The **Mauryan Empire** (4th century BCE) represents the zenith of classical Indian political organization. Under Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka, the empire developed a highly structured administrative system. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* provides a comprehensive account of governance, covering diplomacy, intelligence, fiscal management, law, and bureaucracy. It reflects a pragmatic understanding of statecraft while emphasizing the king's responsibility for public welfare. Ashoka's rule stands out for its ethical governance, where principles of *dhamma*, compassion, justice, and non-violence guided administration.



The **Gupta period** (4th to 6th century CE) continued the tradition of efficient governance, with advancements in law, administration, and local autonomy. Village and urban institutions played a key role in grassroots administration, showing the importance of decentralization. Political thought during this era was influenced by Dharmasāstra texts, which highlighted duties of rulers, social justice, and moral governance (*Gupta Administration - Ancient India History Notes*, n.d.).

IV. INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM AND THE MAKING OF MODERN INDIAN POLITY

a) *Influence on Nationalism*

As India faced colonial domination, thinkers, reformers, and national leaders turned to the intellectual wealth of IKS to rediscover a collective selfhood and inspire resistance. A key influence of IKS on nationalism came from its civilizational vision of *Bharat* as a cultural and moral community. Ancient texts projected ideals of unity, duty, and collective welfare. These ideas revived the sense that Indian society, though diverse, was historically bound by shared values such as *dharma*, *satya*, and *ahimsa*. Leaders like Swami Vivekananda emphasized Vedantic universalism and the spiritual strength of India, thereby instilling cultural pride among Indians. (*Pavan Mandavkar :: SSRN*, n.d.)

The concept of *swaraj*, central to the nationalist struggle, also drew inspiration from IKS. Gandhi's idea of *swaraj* was not merely political independence but self-discipline, moral autonomy, and community-based living rooted in classical Indian thought. Traditional knowledge systems such as Ayurveda, village self-governance, and craft-based economies inspired movements of self-reliance and constructive work.

b) *Impact on the Indian Constitution*

The Indian Constitution, though modern in form, is deeply rooted in the civilizational ethos and intellectual traditions of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS). The framers of the Constitution drew upon centuries-old concepts of governance, morality, and social order that had evolved through ancient texts.

The Constitution's commitment to secularism also resonates with India's long-standing tradition of pluralism. Ancient India was a land where diverse philosophies—Vedic, Buddhist, Jain, and later Bhakti and Sufi traditions—coexisted. This civilizational acceptance of multiplicity shaped the constitutional value of respecting all faiths. Fundamental Duties, added later, mirror traditional Indian teachings that rights and responsibilities must go together.

Texts like the *Bhagavad Gita* and *Manusmriti* stressed individual discipline, compassion, and duty toward society. Thus, the Indian Constitution stands not as a rupture from the past but as a modern expression of India's enduring knowledge traditions and civilizational wisdom (Journal, 2025).

c) *Role of IKS in Contemporary challenges*

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS), with its vast repository of philosophical, scientific, ecological, and socio-political wisdom, offers valuable insights for addressing the complex challenges of the contemporary world. Rooted in centuries of experience, IKS continues to remain relevant in areas such as environmental sustainability, mental well-being, social harmony, governance, and ethical living. One of the pressing global challenges today is environmental degradation. IKS promotes a holistic, nature-centric worldview as seen in concepts like *Prakriti-Purusha* harmony and the *Panchabhuta* (five-element) theory. Traditional practices such as sacred groves, sustainable agriculture, water-conservation systems, and Ayurveda's ecological ethics offer practical models for sustainable development. These indigenous methods emphasize balance, conservation, and respect for natural resources—principles essential for combating climate change (Sn et al., n.d.). In the field of health and wellness, modern societies face rising stress, lifestyle disorders, and mental health crises. The yogic tradition, Ayurveda, and mindfulness practices rooted in IKS provide integrated approaches to physical, mental, and emotional well-being. Yoga and meditation have gained global recognition for promoting resilience, reducing anxiety, and improving overall health (Sn et al., n.d.).

d) *Democratic Participation and Dialogue*

The ancient traditions of *shastrartha* (intellectual debate) and *samvad* (dialogue) offer models for contemporary political discourse—non-violent, reasoned, and inclusive. Reviving these traditions can strengthen India's democratic culture by promoting tolerance, critical thinking, and respect for diversity.

Challenges in Integrating IKS with Modern Polity

Despite its relevance, integrating IKS into modern governance faces several challenges:

- Fragmented Understanding
- Need for Critical Engagement
- Institutional Gaps
- Lack of Documentation



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Key Findings for Policy Innovation

IKS can contribute to policies on:

- Environmental sustainability,
- Holistic Development
- Ethical leadership training, and
- Conflict Resolution.
- Cultural Diplomacy
- Ascendance of soft power through knowledge traditions of Yoga, Ayurveda, etc.

V. CONCLUSION

The relationship between IKS and Indian polity is thus both historical and forward-looking. The modern Indian state, though founded on democratic and constitutional principles, reflects the continuity of civilizational values that emphasize justice, inclusiveness, and ethical conduct. As India navigates the challenges of the 21st century, integrating the wisdom of its indigenous knowledge systems with modern political institutions can foster a more humane, sustainable, and culturally rooted governance model.

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