



THE ROLE OF INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM (IKS) IN SHAPING LINGUISTIC AND LITERARY TRADITION: A CRITICAL STUDY

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Abstract: This paper critically examines the profound influence of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) on India's linguistic and literary traditions. Grounded in foundational philosophies such as Vedas, Vedanta, and classical Indian poetics (*Alamkāra-sāstra*), the study elucidates how IKS has not only preserved indigenous knowledge but also fostered a sophisticated literary and linguistic ethos across millennia. Central to this exploration is the symbiotic relationship between language, literature, and knowledge production in ancient India, and their enduring relevance in contemporary global academic discourse. IKS, encompassing a diverse array of indigenous epistemologies and cultural expressions, forms the foundational bedrock of India's intellectual heritage. It offers an integrative approach to knowledge that transcends disciplinary boundaries, connecting language, literature, science, art, and ethics into a cohesive worldview. Recent efforts towards decolonizing education have underscored the importance of IKS in promoting sustainable values and fostering global dialogue through indigenous knowledge systems. The study delves into the linguistic foundations of IKS, particularly through Sanskrit grammar, phonetics, and philosophy of language. Pāṇini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī*, composed circa 5th century BCE, remains seminal in linguistic theory, anticipating features of modern computational linguistics. Additionally, Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* and Bhartrihari's *Vākyapadīya* provide profound insights into semantic and philosophical dimensions of language, foregrounding a unity of cognition, language, and reality distinct from Western paradigms. Beyond theoretical rigor, IKS has cultivated an elaborate literary culture rooted in aesthetics and emotional resonance. The Vedas, *Upaniṣads*, *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Meghadūta*, and *Śākuntala* exemplify the fusion of philosophical inquiry with artistic expression. Bharata's *Rasa* theory in *Nāṭyaśāstra* identifies aesthetic emotion as central to literary experience, while Ānandavardhana's *Dhvani* theory and Abhinavagupta's synthesis of *rasa* and *dhvani* offer a unique Indian model of literary criticism emphasizing experience, connotation, and subtlety.

The paper also explores IKS's impact on regional languages and vernacular literatures during the Bhakti and Sufi movements, democratizing spiritual and literary expression. Figures like Kabir, Tulsidas, Meera Bai, and Tukaram exemplify an inclusive literary tradition grounded in devotion and ethical values, adapting philosophical tenets of IKS to vernacular contexts. This adaptability highlights IKS's enduring relevance and inclusiveness across diverse cultural landscapes. Central to India's literary culture are oral traditions, transmitting wisdom through recitations, epic narratives, folk songs, and storytelling. These traditions, rooted in community-based learning and memory, ensured knowledge continuity across generations, contrasting with Western print-centric systems. Such oral-aural pedagogies underscore IKS's participatory and embodied modes of knowing, enriching global humanities with non-Western perspectives.

Methodologically, this research employs a critical-interpretative framework integrating textual analysis with insights from comparative literature, postcolonial theory, and cognitive linguistics. It aligns with NEP 2020's emphasis on integrating IKS into education, bridging ancient paradigms with contemporary pedagogical reforms. The study underscores IKS's pluralism, interdisciplinarity, and ethical orientation, positioning it as a vital resource for reimagining global knowledge systems in the 21st century. While acknowledging challenges like Eurocentric dominance and institutional neglect, the paper advocates revitalizing regional languages and supporting intergenerational knowledge transfer through IKS. Ultimately, by reclaiming IKS in linguistic and literary studies, we decolonize knowledge paradigms and foster a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable intellectual landscape. In conclusion, IKS emerges not as a static repository but a dynamic, living tradition informing global discourse. Its holistic, humanistic approach to language and literature offers an alternative to fragmented academic paradigms, promoting a more integrated understanding of knowledge and culture.

Index Terms- Indian Knowledge System (IKS), Sanskrit Grammar, Bhartrihari, Pāṇini, Rasa Theory, Dhvani Theory, Śabda-Brahman, Classical Indian Poetics, Indigenous Literary Criticism, Bhakti Literature, Oral Traditions, Vernacular Languages, Language and Epistemology, Decolonizing Knowledge, Comparative Linguistics, Nāṭyaśāstra, Cognitive Linguistics, Literary Aesthetics, Cultural Hermeneutics, Epistemology of Language, *Alankara Shashtra*, Vedic Texts, *Śruti* and *Smṛti*, Indian Semiotics, Philosophical Linguistics, Indian Hermeneutics, *Pramāṇa* (means of knowledge), Language Philosophy in India, Postcolonial Philology.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) encompasses a vast, nuanced, and dynamic framework of intellectual, cultural, linguistic, scientific, and spiritual traditions that have evolved over thousands of years. More than a collection of disciplinary knowledge, IKS represents an indigenous epistemology—an integrative worldview that articulates unique ways of knowing, being, and doing. Rooted in the civilizational ethos of India, it transcends disciplinary boundaries, connecting language, philosophy, literature, science, art, medicine, ecology, and ethics into a coherent system. At its heart lies a deep reverence for language and literature—not merely as tools for communication or artistic expression but as profound instruments for knowledge creation, cultural preservation, spiritual elevation, and social cohesion (Kapoor, 2014; Ranganathan, 2022). From the earliest oral traditions of the Vedic age (circa 1500 BCE) to the intricate literary theories of classical Sanskrit poetics and the vernacular efflorescence of Bhakti and Sufi movements, IKS has continually shaped and sustained India's linguistic diversity and literary richness. This paper investigates how IKS has played a foundational role in shaping India's linguistic and literary traditions and how, in turn, these traditions have served as primary vehicles for the expression, evolution, and transmission of indigenous knowledge across time and space. IKS is deeply rooted in both oral and textual traditions. In the pre-literate Vedic period, knowledge was meticulously preserved through highly systematized oral methods involving recitation, memorization, and communal transmission. The *Vedas*, composed in Sanskrit and transmitted orally for centuries, epitomize a synthesis of linguistic precision and metaphysical depth. These texts were not merely religious scriptures but encyclopaedic repositories of cosmology, ethics, ritual, and epistemology (Falk, 1990; Witzel, 1997). Sanskrit, often termed the “language of the gods,” functioned as the primary medium through which IKS was codified, systematized, and philosophically articulated. Panini's *Aṣṭādhyāyī* (c. 4th century BCE) is a landmark in linguistic history, offering the world one of the earliest and most sophisticated systems of formal grammar (Cardona, 1997; Deshpande, 1993). Its rule-based generative structure anticipates developments in modern linguistic theory, computational linguistics, and structuralism.

The centrality of language in IKS is further institutionalized in the six *Vedāṅgas*, the auxiliary disciplines essential for Vedic study. These include *Śikṣā* (phonetics), *Vyākaraṇa* (grammar), *Nirukta* (etymology), *Chandas* (prosody), *Kalpa* (ritual), and *Jyotiṣa* (astronomy). Together, they reflect an integrated vision of linguistic practice, where phonetic precision, syntactic correctness, and ritual performance are interdependent. These disciplines reveal that, in IKS, language is not merely a neutral medium but a sacred, performative, and ontologically potent force (Bronkhorst, 2001). They emphasize a holistic paradigm in which language is imbued with metaphysical significance and epistemological authority. Beyond its grammatical sophistication, the Indian Knowledge System offers a deeply aesthetic and ethical approach to literary creation and reception. The epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, composed in poetic form but encompassing philosophy, ethics, statecraft, and metaphysics, serve as foundational texts that blend narrative artistry with civilizational values. The *Mahābhārata*, for instance, is not merely a story of dynastic conflict but an encyclopaedic reflection on *dharma* (duty), *artha* (material prosperity), *kāma* (desire), and *mokṣa* (liberation), illustrating the fourfold goals of life as conceptualized in IKS (Hiltebeitel, 2001). Such works illustrate how, within IKS, literature is not confined to artistic ornamentation; it is a moral, spiritual, and intellectual enterprise aimed at individual and collective transformation. One of the most distinctive contributions of IKS to linguistic philosophy is Bhartrihari's *śphoṭa* theory, which posits that meaning arises not from isolated phonemes or words but from the holistic realization of the sentence. This metaphysical conception of language challenges atomistic models of meaning and offers a unified framework where cognition, sound, and reality converge (Iyer, 1969). Bhartrihari's *Vākyapadīya* reflects a philosophical linguistics that aligns with modern inquiries in cognitive science, semiotics, and linguistic relativity (Matilal, 1990).

Importantly, IKS is not a monolithic or Sanskrit-centric tradition. Its pluralism is reflected in the rich tapestry of regional languages and literary cultures that developed across India. Tamil *Sangam* literature (300 BCE–300 CE), for instance, embodies ethical clarity, ecological awareness, and emotional refinement (Zvelebil, 1973). Similarly, the use of Pali in Buddhist texts like the *Tiṇṇakā* and Prakrit in Jain *Āgamas* democratized access to spiritual and philosophical knowledge. These languages allowed the tenets of IKS to permeate beyond elite Brahmanical circles and shaped the ethical imagination of diverse communities across South and Southeast Asia (Gombrich, 1988; Dundas, 2002). The Bhakti and Sufi movements represent another crucial dimension in the evolution of IKS-inflected literary traditions. These devotional movements emphasized love, surrender, and inner realization, articulated through the vernacular tongues of the masses. Poets such as Kabir, Meera Bai, Tulsidas, and Shah Abdul Latif created emotionally resonant and philosophically profound poetry that critiqued social orthodoxy and emphasized spiritual egalitarianism (Hawley & Juergensmeyer, 2004). Their works demonstrate the adaptability and inclusivity of IKS, which allowed profound metaphysical ideas to be expressed in accessible, emotionally charged forms. A unique characteristic of IKS is its seamless interdisciplinarity. Literature was never isolated from science, ritual, or philosophy. Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (circa 2nd century BCE) is a paradigmatic example—it is a treatise on dramaturgy that integrates insights from psychology, music, dance, ritual theory, and literary criticism. The *Rasa* theory developed in this text, further refined by Ānandavardhana and Abhinavagupta through *Dhvani* theory, establishes a literary aesthetics focused on emotional evocation and transcendental insight (Gnoli, 1968; Gerow, 1977). Despite centuries of colonial disruption, where European epistemologies relegated indigenous traditions to the margins, the resilience of IKS remains palpable. The colonial education system imposed a Eurocentric hierarchy that dismissed Sanskrit and other classical languages as “dead” and rendered IKS as mystical or anti-scientific (Pollock, 2006). However, the post-independence period and especially the 21st century have seen a resurgence of interest in IKS across academic, governmental, and cultural institutions. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a significant turning point by recognizing the need to reintegrate IKS into contemporary curricula and foster indigenous research paradigms (Ministry of Education, 2020).

This paper situates itself within this emergent discourse, critically examining how IKS has historically shaped linguistic and literary traditions in India and how these frameworks offer crucial insights for reimagining the humanities today. Through a qualitative and interpretative analysis of classical texts, vernacular literature, oral traditions, and theoretical treatises, the paper engages with three core questions: (1) How did IKS shape India's linguistic and literary consciousness? (2) What are the distinctive epistemological features of IKS compared to dominant Western models? and (3) In what ways can IKS contribute to decolonizing and revitalizing contemporary education, literary studies, and knowledge production? In sum, the Indian Knowledge System is not a relic of the past but a living, evolving, and relevant intellectual tradition. Its sophisticated treatment of language, its holistic

aesthetics, and its ethical orientation provide a much-needed corrective to fragmented, technocratic, and Eurocentric paradigms. Reclaiming and reinvigorating IKS is not just about heritage preservation—it is an act of epistemic justice and a transformative step toward a more plural, reflective, and humane scholarly future.

2. LINGUISTIC FOUNDATION OF INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS (IKS):

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) is deeply grounded in a linguistic philosophy that views language not merely as a communicative tool, but as an epistemic, metaphysical, and spiritual force. Within IKS, language is a vehicle of cognition (*jñāna*), a medium of cultural transmission, and a path to self-realization. This understanding is particularly exemplified in the development and deployment of Sanskrit, the cultivation of phonetics, grammar, etymology, and the philosophical contemplation of meaning, as well as in the multilingual landscape of India's intellectual traditions.

2.1 Sanskrit: The Cognitive and Epistemic Core:

Sanskrit occupies a central position in the architecture of IKS due to its etymological transparency, morphological regularity, and syntactic flexibility. Far from being a static or merely liturgical language, Sanskrit served as a pan-Indic scientific and philosophical lingua franca. The very term *saṃskṛta*—meaning “refined” or “systematically constructed”—underscores its deliberate cultivation for conveying complex ideas with precision. The most celebrated contribution to Indian linguistics is *Aṣṭādhyāyī* by Pāṇini (circa 4th–5th century BCE), a meta-linguistic treatise of nearly 4,000 concise grammatical rules. Pāṇini's system includes meta-rules, transformations, technical markers (*anubandhas*), and syntactic operations that anticipated principles of modern generative grammar and formal language theory (Staal, 1965; Cardona, 1997). The treatise encodes not only linguistic structure but also philosophical insights into how sound, form, and meaning relate. Complementing Pāṇini's grammar is Patañjali's *Mahābhāṣya* (2nd century BCE), a philosophical commentary that investigates pragmatics, context (*yogyatā*), expectancy (*kākaṅkṣā*), and proximity (*sannidhi*). These categories reveal the Indian emphasis on the performative and contextual dimensions of language—what today might be called a semiotic and pragmatic turn in linguistics (Staal, 1965).

2.2 The Vedangas and Linguistic Sciences:

Linguistic inquiry in IKS was not limited to grammar alone but was embedded within the *Vedangas*—six auxiliary disciplines required for the understanding of the Vedas. Among these, *śikṣā* (phonetics), *vyākaraṇa* (grammar), and *nirukta* (etymology) form the core of linguistic science. *Śikṣā* cultivated a meticulous science of sound, emphasizing correct pronunciation, intonation, and meter—essential for the oral transmission of the Vedas. According to Falk (1993), these traditions enabled the accurate preservation of Vedic texts for centuries without written scripts, showcasing an unparalleled oral culture centered on phonocentric precision. *Vyākaraṇa*, spearheaded by Pāṇini and furthered by Kātyāyana and Patañjali, codified both the prescriptive and descriptive dimensions of Sanskrit. Meanwhile, *nirukta*, attributed to Yāska (circa 5th century BCE), offered an early model of historical and philosophical linguistics by tracing word meanings to their *dhātus* (verbal roots). Yāska emphasized that semantic understanding is incomplete without etymological investigation (Deshpande, 1993).

2.3 Bhartrihari and the Philosophy of Language:

A landmark in the linguistic philosophy of IKS is Bhartrihari's *Vākyapadīya* (circa 5th century CE), which advances the *sphoṭa* theory—an understanding that linguistic meaning is grasped instantaneously as a cognitive whole. Bhartrihari proposes that language (*śabda*) is eternal, self-revealing, and ontologically fundamental. In his view, *sphoṭa* is the indivisible essence of meaning behind the temporal utterance (*dhvani*), resonating with modern semiotics and phenomenology (Iyer, 1969; Coward, 1990). Bhartrihari's concept of *śabda-brahman*—the unity of linguistic sound and universal consciousness—demonstrates the metaphysical integration of language and reality in IKS. His assertion that the sentence (*vākya*) is the primary unit of meaning contrasts with the atomistic syntactic analysis of Western models, underscoring a holistic linguistic epistemology.

2.4 Multilingualism and Vernacular Knowledge Systems:

While Sanskrit formed the grammatical and philosophical foundation of IKS, vernacular languages such as Tamil, Pali, and Prakrit, and later regional languages like Kannada, Marathi, and Bengali, played crucial roles in democratizing knowledge. Tamil Sangam literature (300 BCE–300 CE), guided by the *Tolkāppiyam*, offers an independent and equally sophisticated grammatical tradition (Zvelebil, 1973). Pali and Prakrit served as mediums for Buddhist and Jain teachings, enabling philosophical dissemination beyond elite circles. The Tripiṭakas and Jain Āgamas exemplify how IKS thrived in multiple linguistic registers without displacing Sanskrit's authority (Gombrich, 1988). This multilingual co-existence reflects a pluralistic vision of knowledge where the sacred and the vernacular interacted harmoniously.

2.5 Sound, Language, and the Sacred:

IKS integrates linguistic science with cosmology and aesthetics. The concept of *nāda* (primordial sound) underscores the belief that the universe itself originates in vibration. In the *Nāṭyaśāstra* by Bharata (circa 2nd century BCE), *vācika abhinaya* (verbal expression) is recognized as an essential element of dramatic performance, linking aesthetics, ritual, and metaphysics (Gnoli, 1968). The ritual use of mantras, hymns, and recitations illustrates that in IKS, language is dynamic, performative, and spiritually transformative. The efficacy of speech lies not only in its meaning but in its sonic quality—*śabda* as both signifier and sacred energy.

Conclusion:

The linguistic foundation of Indian Knowledge Systems is marked by analytical rigor, semantic depth, and spiritual integration. From the structural sophistication of Pāṇini's grammar and the philosophical insights of Patañjali and Bhartrihari to the phonetic precision of *śikṣā* and the semantic investigation of *nirukta*, IKS offers a comprehensive framework that unites linguistic theory with epistemology, ontology, and aesthetics. Unlike Euro-American traditions that often isolate syntax, semantics, and pragmatics, IKS embraces an interconnected approach that sees language as a pathway to knowledge, liberation, and cosmic harmony. Its multilingual inclusivity and reverence for sound as sacred further demonstrate a holistic worldview where linguistic expression is

not just a cultural artifact but a living, ontological force. Re-examining the linguistic heritage of IKS is vital not only for cultural preservation but also for enriching contemporary linguistic, philosophical, and pedagogical paradigms. It provides a non-Western model of linguistic inquiry—deeply intellectual, spiritually resonant, and profoundly relevant in today's global discourse.

3. LITERARY TRADITIONS IN THE LIGHT OF IKS:

The literary tradition of India, deeply intertwined with its epistemological and philosophical roots, reflects the profound impact of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) on aesthetic production, narrative construction, and ethical discourse. In IKS, literature is not a domain separate from philosophy, science, or religion—it is an integrated expression of cosmic order (*ṛta*), moral duty (*dharma*), and experiential wisdom (*anubhava*). Through poetry, epic, drama, and didactic verse, Indian literature has long functioned as a medium of knowledge transmission, spiritual contemplation, and cultural continuity. This section explores how the literary traditions of India are shaped by IKS frameworks, particularly through classical Sanskrit poetics, epic narratives, and the interplay of aesthetics (*rasa*) and suggestion (*dhvani*).

3.1 Integration of Philosophy and Literature:

One of the most distinctive features of Indian literature, as shaped by IKS, is its seamless blending of philosophy and narrative. Foundational texts like the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* are not merely epics or stories; they are encyclopaedic in scope, incorporating dharma-śāstra (ethics), artha-śāstra (politics), vyākaraṇa (grammar), and mokṣa-śāstra (liberation philosophy). The *Mahābhārata*, often called the "fifth Veda," encompasses over 100,000 verses and serves as a repository of political thought, psychological insight, social customs, and metaphysical inquiry (Hiltebeitel, 2001). The *Bhagavad Gītā*, embedded within the *Mahābhārata*, exemplifies this literary-philosophical fusion. It unfolds as a dramatic dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna but also articulates core philosophical ideas from Sāṅkhya, Vedānta, and Bhakti traditions. As Radhakrishnan (1948) notes, the *Gītā* represents "a gospel of action and contemplation," blending literary form with doctrinal substance.

3.2 Classical Indian Poetics (Alaṅkāra, Rasa, and Dhvani):

IKS profoundly influenced the evolution of Indian literary theory through its system of classical poetics, or *Alaṅkāra-śāstra*. This body of work examines the principles of aesthetic ornamentation, emotional impact, and the philosophical purpose of literature. Key thinkers such as Bhāmaha, Daṇḍin, Ānandavardhana, and Abhinavagupta established a nuanced system that remains relevant even in comparative literary studies today.

The cornerstone of Indian literary theory is the *rasa* theory, first codified by Bharata in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and later elaborated by Abhinavagupta in his commentary *Abhinavabhāratī*. *Rasa*, meaning 'essence' or 'flavor', refers to the aesthetic experience evoked in the reader or viewer. The nine *rasas*—including *śṛṅgāra* (love), *karuṇa* (compassion), *vīra* (heroism), and *bhayānaka* (fear)—form the emotional palette of Indian drama and poetry. According to Abhinavagupta, the aesthetic experience is transformative, allowing the individual to transcend ego and access universal consciousness (Gnoli, 1968). In addition to *rasa*, Ānandavardhana's theory of *dhvani* (suggestion) revolutionized literary criticism by arguing that the power of poetry lies not in direct expression (*vācya*) but in the suggestive potential (*vyāṅgya*) of language. This idea aligns with the Vedantic notion that ultimate truth (*brahman*) is beyond verbal articulation and can only be evoked indirectly. Thus, literature in IKS becomes a meditative practice, a subtle unfolding of layered meanings rather than a didactic statement (Ingalls, 1990).

3.3 Epics as Encyclopaedias of Knowledge:

The Indian epics, particularly the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, serve as the literary embodiments of IKS in its most encyclopaedic form. The *Mahābhārata* encompasses everything from cosmology and ethics to medicine and martial science. According to Hiltebeitel (2001), the epic's structure mirrors the complexity of life itself, with nested narratives, moral ambiguities, and dialogic plurality. Each character represents a different ethical or philosophical standpoint, making the epic a living text of inquiry and debate. Similarly, the *Rāmāyaṇa* by Vālmīki integrates political theory, ecological consciousness, and spiritual devotion within its narrative arc. The character of Rāma is often interpreted through the lens of *maryādā puruṣottama*—the ideal man who upholds dharma even under duress—making the text not just a literary story but a moral compass for generations. The *Rāmāyaṇa* has inspired regional adaptations across South and Southeast Asia, including in Tamil (*Kamba Rāmāyaṇam*), Telugu, Thai, and Javanese versions, demonstrating the civilizational spread of IKS through literature (Richman, 1991).

3.4 Didactic Literature and Ethical Instruction:

IKS has also produced an extensive body of didactic literature aimed at moral education and social harmony. Texts like the *Pañcatantra*, *Hitopadeśa*, *Nītiśataka*, and *Subhāṣita* verses encapsulate ethical principles through allegory, metaphor, and concise maxims. The *Pañcatantra*, attributed to Viṣṇuśarma, employs animal fables to teach political wisdom, strategic thinking, and human psychology. It has been translated into over 50 languages and remains one of India's most globally disseminated literary works (Ryder, 1925). These texts demonstrate that literature in IKS is not confined to aesthetic pleasure but is deeply didactic and ethical. They align with the Purushartha framework—*dharma*, *artha*, *kāma*, and *mokṣa*—guiding individuals toward a balanced and purposeful life.

3.5 Literature as a Vehicle of Bhakti and Social Change:

In the medieval period, the Bhakti movement used vernacular poetry to democratize spiritual knowledge and challenge social hierarchies. Poets like Kabir, Tulsidas, Mirabai, Tukaram, and Andal composed works in Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, and Kannada that combined emotional devotion with philosophical depth. These compositions critiqued ritualism and caste-based exclusion while affirming the accessibility of the divine to all, irrespective of caste, gender, or literacy. Bhakti literature exemplifies the adaptability of IKS to shifting socio-political contexts while retaining its core commitment to ethical and spiritual evolution. It also contributed to the growth and refinement of regional languages and poetic forms, expanding the literary horizon beyond the Sanskrit elite (Ramanujan, 1973).

Conclusion

The literary traditions of India, profoundly shaped by the Indian Knowledge System, represent an integrated vision of aesthetics, ethics, and epistemology. From the philosophical depths of the *Bhagavad Gītā* to the aesthetic theories of *rasa* and *dhvani*, from didactic tales to devotional poetry, IKS provides the theoretical and cultural scaffolding for India's vast literary output. Literature is not a mere cultural artifact within IKS—it is a dynamic, living tradition that serves as a means of inquiry, transformation, and communion with the deeper truths of existence. Recognizing this legacy is essential not only for literary studies but for understanding India's civilizational identity in its full richness and complexity.

4. ORAL TRADITIONS AND PERFORMATIVE KNOWLEDGE IN IKS:

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) is unique in its foundational reliance on orality and performance as legitimate and potent modes of knowledge production and transmission. Long before the advent of print culture, Indian intellectual traditions flourished through memorization, chanting, storytelling, music, dance, and drama. These oral-performative traditions were not merely artistic expressions but were epistemologically integral—imbued with ritual, philosophical, and didactic significance. This section examines how oral traditions and performative knowledge form a core part of IKS, sustaining cultural memory and facilitating the dissemination of knowledge across generations and social strata.

4.1 Orality and Mnemonic Culture in Vedic Tradition:

At the heart of ancient Indian knowledge transmission lies the oral recitation of the Vedas. The Vedic corpus, composed between 1500 and 500 BCE, was preserved with remarkable precision through an elaborate oral system. The *Śrauta* and *Smārta* traditions maintained various modes of recitation—*prakṛti* (natural), *vikṛti* (altered), and *ghana-pāṭha* (complex interlaced patterns)—which functioned as both mnemonic devices and protective mechanisms against corruption of the sacred text (Falk, 1993). Vedic chanting was governed by the science of *Śikṣā*, one of the Vedāṅgas, which outlined the correct articulation of syllables, intonations, and accents. Scholars such as Staal (1986) have argued that the oral transmission of the Vedas constitutes a form of “pre-literate scientific culture,” where knowledge is encoded, preserved, and reproduced through rigorous acoustic discipline rather than written documentation. The fidelity of this oral tradition is evident in the fact that the phonetic structure of Vedic Sanskrit has remained consistent for over three millennia. According to Houben (2000), the Vedic oral system is possibly the most sophisticated mnemonic tradition in human history, demonstrating how performance—when systematized—can rival the permanence of written text.

4.2 Katha, Itihasa, and Puranic Storytelling:

Beyond Vedic ritualism, the oral narrative tradition of *katha* (storytelling) played a vital role in popularizing philosophical and moral ideas among the masses. Itinerant storytellers known as *kathakās*, *purohitas*, or *vyāsas* would travel from village to village, reciting tales from the epics (*Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*), Purāṇas, and other devotional texts. These performances were not only entertaining but also pedagogical, imparting lessons in dharma, ethics, and metaphysics. The *Itihasa* (epics) and *Purāṇas* were originally composed and transmitted orally before being codified in written form. They served as cultural encyclopaedias, weaving together myth, history, theology, astronomy, and genealogy. As Dhand (2002) observes, the narrative structure of these texts allows for multiple interpretations and adaptations, enabling them to serve as living documents of collective wisdom. Performance was intrinsic to the dissemination of these texts. For instance, *Rām-līlā* (dramatic enactment of the *Rāmāyaṇa*) and *Bhagavat-melā* (devotional theatre centered on Vishnu) continue to be performed annually in different parts of India, reinforcing community bonds and cultural identity through ritualized storytelling.

4.3 Nāṭyaśāstra and the Science of Performance:

The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, attributed to Bharata (circa 2nd century BCE), is the foundational treatise on drama, dance, and music in IKS. It codifies performance as a holistic medium combining verbal expression (*vācika abhinaya*), physical gestures (*āṅgika*), emotional display (*sāttvika*), and costume (*āhārya*). Bharata's theory of *rasa* (aesthetic flavor) and *bhāva* (emotion) positioned performance as a vehicle of both aesthetic pleasure and spiritual elevation (Gnoli, 1968). What makes the *Nāṭyaśāstra* unique is its epistemological claim: performance is not mere artifice, but a way of knowing the self and the cosmos. As per Bharata, the dramatic arts were created by Brahma to offer both education (*śikṣā*) and entertainment (*vinoda*), thereby validating the performative domain as an instrument of truth (Pollock, 2006). In this context, the actor is not just a performer but a *sādhaka* (spiritual practitioner), and the stage is a sacred space where metaphysical truths are enacted and experienced. Thus, in IKS, performance serves the dual role of epistemology and soteriology.

4.4 Folk Traditions and Vernacular Knowledge:

While Sanskrit drama and classical dance forms represent the high culture of IKS, vernacular and folk traditions have been equally important in preserving indigenous knowledge and social memory. Folk theatre forms like *Yakshagāna* (Karnataka), *Therukoothu* (Tamil Nadu), *Nautanki* (North India), and *Jatra* (Bengal) blend music, dance, and narration to convey religious stories, historical events, and local legends. These performances often incorporate regional dialects, proverbs, and idioms, making them highly accessible to local populations. More importantly, they serve as tools of social commentary, engaging with contemporary issues such as caste injustice, gender roles, and ecological concerns. According to Blackburn and Flueckiger (1989), folk traditions act as alternative archives, preserving forms of knowledge marginalized in elite Sanskrit discourses.

4.5 Oral Transmission and Gendered Knowledge:

Oral traditions have also been instrumental in preserving gendered forms of knowledge. Women, who were often excluded from formal Sanskrit education, cultivated rich oral repertoires through lullabies, devotional songs (*bhajans*), and ritual chants. These practices not only contributed to the cultural transmission of IKS but also offered women a form of intellectual and spiritual agency (Narayan, 1997). In regions like Tamil Nadu and Bengal, female mystic poets such as Andal and Chandrabati composed verses that continue to be sung in domestic and temple contexts. These compositions challenge the notion of a male-dominated literary tradition and underscore the performative dimension of feminine devotional expression.

Conclusion:

The oral and performative dimensions of the Indian Knowledge System are foundational, not peripheral. From the mnemonic sophistication of Vedic chanting to the philosophical depths of *Nāṭyaśāstra*, from the inclusive storytelling of *kathās* to the subaltern voices in folk and women's songs, orality and performance serve as vibrant channels of knowledge preservation and dissemination. Far from being static or archaic, these traditions are dynamic, adaptive, and deeply embedded in the everyday cultural life of the Indian people. As we reimagine curricula and pedagogies in the 21st century, the recognition of performative knowledge as legitimate and valuable offers pathways toward inclusive, embodied, and culturally rooted education.

5. REGIONAL LITERARY EXPRESSIONS AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE:

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS), while deeply rooted in pan-Indian Sanskritic traditions, has also thrived in the rich diversity of regional languages and literary forms. From the Bhakti and Sufi movements to medieval vernacular chronicles and modern indigenous poetries, regional literatures have served as repositories and vehicles for local wisdom, ecological sensibilities, ethical teachings, and spiritual knowledge. This section explores how regional literary expressions have preserved, localized, and enriched IKS, offering an inclusive, pluralistic vision of knowledge deeply embedded in community life.

5.1 Vernacularisation of Knowledge: The Rise of Bhakti and Sufi Literature:

One of the most profound developments in Indian literary history was the vernacularisation of sacred knowledge during the Bhakti (devotional) and Sufi (mystical Islamic) movements between the 8th and 17th centuries. Saints and mystics across regions composed lyrical poetry in regional languages—Tamil, Kannada, Marathi, Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi, Gujarati, and others—challenging the hegemony of Sanskrit and Persian as exclusive carriers of spiritual truth (Novetzke, 2008). Bhakti saints such as Kabir, Mirabai, Tukaram, Tulsidas, and Andal rendered complex metaphysical ideas into accessible, emotionally resonant vernacular poetry. Their compositions democratized IKS, enabling peasants, artisans, and women to participate in spiritual discourse outside Brahmanical orthodoxy (Ramanujan, 1999). The emphasis on *anubhava* (experience) over *śāstra* (scripture) marked a radical epistemological shift—placing lived experience at the heart of truth-seeking. Similarly, Sufi poets such as Bulleh Shah, Khwaja Ghulam Farid, and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai composed in Punjabi, Sindhi, and other regional tongues, blending Islamic mysticism with local metaphors, folklore, and symbols. Their verses spoke of love, surrender, and divine union—often using imagery rooted in indigenous cultural contexts. As Ernst (2005) notes, this fusion of spiritual insight and local idiom fostered a syncretic tradition of regional mysticism that remains central to the cultural identity of many Indian communities.

5.2 Indigenous Epistemologies in Tribal and Folk Literature:

India's adivasi (indigenous/tribal) communities possess robust oral literary traditions that encode ecological knowledge, social values, medicinal practices, and cosmologies distinct from Sanskritic or Western paradigms. These narratives—often transmitted through song, myth, and ritual—constitute what scholars term “indigenous epistemologies” (Agrawal, 1995). For instance, the Gond epic of Lingo, the Santhal song cycles (*Binti* and *Harom*), and the Bhil creation myths convey insights about environmental stewardship, interspecies relationships, and the sacredness of land. These stories challenge anthropocentric worldviews and advance a relational understanding of the human-nature connection (Deb, 2009). Adivasi poets writing in languages like Gondi, Santali, Kurukh, and Khasi are today reclaiming their cultural identity through literature. Mamang Dai (Arunachal Pradesh), Jacinta Kerketta (Jharkhand), and Narayan (Gondwana) have used poetry and prose to reassert indigenous philosophies and ways of life. Their works testify that regional literature is not only expressive but also epistemic—producing alternative knowledges that must be valued within IKS frameworks.

5.3 Local Cosmologies and Ecological Wisdom in Regional Texts:

Many regional literatures preserve ecological wisdom that is central to sustainable living and environmental ethics. Tamil Sangam literature (c. 300 BCE – 300 CE), for example, categorizes the land into five ecological zones (*tinai*)—mountain (*kurinji*), forest (*mullai*), agricultural plains (*marutam*), arid land (*palai*), and seashore (*neital*)—each associated with specific flora, fauna, human emotions, and deities (Zvelebil, 1973). This integration of ecology, geography, and aesthetics exemplifies an indigenous environmental sensibility that modern ecological discourse is only beginning to acknowledge. Similarly, the *Vaishnava* literature of Assam, the *Vachana* literature of Karnataka, and the *Baul* songs of Bengal embed environmental ethics, communal harmony, and spiritual ecology into poetic form. These texts present the Earth not as a resource to be exploited but as a living entity to be revered—resonating with the concept of *ṛta* (cosmic order) and *prakṛiti-dharma* (duty toward nature) in classical IKS.

5.4 Regional Histories and Subaltern Voices:

Regional literary traditions often provide counter-histories—subaltern perspectives that question or complicate dominant historical narratives. Texts like the *Chandimangal* of Bengal, *Pandavani* ballads of Chhattisgarh, or *Dalit Sahitya* in Marathi, Tamil, and Hindi give voice to historically marginalized communities. These literatures foreground lived realities—oppression, resistance, resilience—and reinterpret classical myths and epics from non-elite perspectives (Omvedt, 1994). For instance, Marathi Dalit poet Namdeo Dhasal reworks traditional Hindu symbols to articulate the pain of caste oppression. Tamil writers like Bama and Iyayam narrate local experiences that are both deeply rooted in regional culture and politically conscious. These voices enrich IKS by bringing to light experiential knowledge often left out of mainstream discourses.

5.5 Continuity and Innovation in Modern Regional Literatures:

Modern Indian literature in regional languages continues to engage with and reinterpret IKS. The writings of U.R. Ananthamurthy (Kannada), Mahasweta Devi (Bengali), Sitanshu Yashaschandra (Gujarati), and Ayyappa Paniker (Malayalam) reflect an ongoing dialogue between tradition and modernity, Sanskritic knowledge and folk wisdom, local identity and global consciousness. For example, Ananthamurthy's novel *Samskara* critiques Brahmanical rigidity while drawing deeply from Vedic ethics and Kannada oral culture. Mahasweta Devi's stories such as *Drapadi* and *Arjun* foreground tribal epistemologies and reimagine Mahabharata figures in a contemporary political frame. This interplay of continuity and innovation testifies to the resilience of regional literary traditions in articulating new modes of understanding rooted in IKS.

Conclusion:

Regional literary expressions are not peripheral to Indian Knowledge Systems—they are integral to them. They represent a pluralistic, embodied, and dynamic approach to knowledge that transcends textual elitism and embraces lived realities. From Bhakti poets and tribal storytellers to contemporary feminist and Dalit writers, regional literatures have localized IKS, enriched it with diverse perspectives, and made it accessible to millions. In recognizing and integrating these traditions into academic discourse, we move toward a more inclusive and representative understanding of knowledge—one that celebrates India's linguistic, cultural, and philosophical plurality.

6. MODERN EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS AND POLICY INTEGRATION OF IKS:

The integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into modern education marks a paradigmatic shift in the epistemological and pedagogical landscape of India. IKS, once marginalized by colonial education systems, is now being recognized by policy frameworks such as the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which calls for a holistic, multidisciplinary, and culturally grounded curriculum. This section examines the evolving role of IKS in contemporary educational discourse, curriculum design, teacher training, and knowledge production, while also addressing institutional, epistemic, and pedagogical challenges.

6.1 IKS and the National Education Policy 2020:

NEP 2020 explicitly advocates for the inclusion of IKS across all levels of education, recognizing it as a repository of “traditional knowledge, cultural heritage, sustainable practices, and holistic wisdom” (Ministry of Education, 2020). It proposes the revival and contextual integration of disciplines such as Ayurveda, Yoga, Mathematics (like Vedic Mathematics), Astronomy, Metallurgy, Linguistics, Logic (Nyaya), and Environmental Science rooted in traditional Indian frameworks. NEP underscores the importance of “Indian languages, arts, and culture” not merely as adjuncts to Western models but as central to cognitive development, ethical reasoning, and social transformation. The policy envisions a threefold strategy:

1. Embedding IKS principles into subject-specific curricula;
2. Promoting interdisciplinary studies inspired by IKS methodologies;
3. Encouraging research and innovation rooted in Indian philosophical traditions.

This signals a systemic effort to decolonize the Indian education system and move toward epistemic inclusivity.

6.2 Curricular Innovation and Interdisciplinarity:

The contemporary push for curriculum reform offers fertile ground for incorporating IKS into diverse subjects. In literature and language, this means including ancient and medieval Indian literary traditions, regional oral literatures, and linguistic philosophies like *Vyakarana* and *Dhvani Siddhanta*. In science education, concepts such as Ayurveda, Rasayana, and traditional metallurgy are being re-evaluated within modern biomedical and material science frameworks (Ravindra, 2022). Furthermore, pedagogies are evolving to reflect the IKS emphasis on experiential learning (*anubhava*), holistic thinking (*samyak darsana*), and ethical knowledge (*vidya* as a transformative force). Schools and universities are designing integrated modules where, for example, Sanskrit grammar is taught alongside formal logic and computational thinking, or classical Indian ecology is integrated with modern environmental science. The establishment of interdisciplinary IKS centers—such as the Indian Knowledge Systems Division under AICTE and institutions like the Centre for Indian Knowledge Systems (CIKS)—provides structured academic platforms for this integration.

6.3 Language Pedagogy and Linguistic Pluralism:

A key educational implication of IKS is the renewed emphasis on linguistic plurality. Traditional India was home to a multilingual ethos where Sanskrit, Prakrit, Pali, and a wide range of regional languages coexisted symbiotically. NEP 2020's emphasis on the mother tongue and regional languages in the foundational years draws directly from this indigenous linguistic philosophy. Moreover, IKS approaches language not merely as a tool of communication but as a *carrier of culture and conduit of knowledge*. Teaching Indian languages with their literary and philosophical richness allows learners to engage with their epistemic heritage. Programs encouraging translation of ancient and regional texts are crucial to reviving these traditions in contemporary settings (Niranjana, 2006).

6.4 Teacher Training and Epistemic Capacity Building:

For meaningful integration of IKS, teacher preparation programs must undergo transformation. As most teacher education curricula are modeled on Euro-American paradigms, they lack grounding in Indic pedagogies, texts, and philosophies. Training educators to understand IKS—from the *gurukula* model and the *upanishadic* method of inquiry, to Bhakti pedagogies and the Jaina-Buddhist dialogic traditions—is vital. Several universities have begun offering certificate and diploma programs in Indian Knowledge Systems. NCERT and NCTE are developing training modules on topics such as Panchakosha theory, Natyashastra in education, and Indian logic systems. Such initiatives can help educators move beyond superficial incorporation toward transformative pedagogy.

6.5 Research, Innovation, and Decolonization of Knowledge:

One of the central goals of IKS integration is to dismantle the colonial hierarchy of knowledge that privileges Eurocentric science, literature, and philosophy. This requires creating epistemic spaces where Indian intellectual traditions are not merely studied but used as theoretical frameworks and methodologies. For instance, scholars are using *Nyaya* and *Mimamsa* logic systems in legal and ethical debates, *Charaka Samhita* principles in integrative medicine, and *Aesthetic theories from Natyashastra* in performance studies. The emergence of research journals, university departments, and Ph.D. programs dedicated to IKS is a step toward epistemic sovereignty (Patwardhan, 2023). Moreover, digital platforms like the “Bharatiya Gyan Parampara” portal and AICTE's IKS initiatives are making ancient manuscripts, commentaries, and classical texts available for reinterpretation and interdisciplinary scholarship.

6.6 Challenges and Criticisms:

Despite progress, several challenges remain. One major concern is the risk of tokenism—where IKS is included as a symbolic gesture without serious epistemological engagement. There is also the danger of politicization, where particular narratives or interpretations dominate at the cost of pluralism. Another barrier is the lack of access to primary sources in classical languages such as Sanskrit, Pali, Tamil, and Persian. Many students and teachers lack the linguistic training necessary for direct engagement with IKS texts. Furthermore, integrating IKS into a globalized knowledge economy requires balancing tradition with innovation, and faith with reason.

Critics also argue that without proper contextualization, some IKS elements could contradict scientific rationalism or human rights frameworks. Hence, scholarly rigor, interdisciplinary dialogue, and ethical reflexivity are crucial for sustainable IKS integration.

Conclusion:

The integration of Indian Knowledge Systems into modern education is both a corrective and a creative process. It challenges historical marginalization, reclaims intellectual heritage, and offers new paradigms of knowing, teaching, and learning. As India aspires toward a more inclusive and holistic educational framework, the thoughtful incorporation of IKS—rooted in regional diversity, ethical inquiry, and interdisciplinary rigor—can enrich not only national identity but global knowledge ecosystems.

7. CONCLUSION (RECLAIMING THE ROOTS, RETHINKING THE FUTURE):

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS), with its immense depth, diversity, and continuity, has been foundational in shaping the linguistic and literary traditions of the Indian subcontinent. Over millennia, it has fostered a unique civilizational ethos that integrated language, literature, philosophy, science, and ethics into a cohesive and dynamic knowledge culture. As India navigates its postcolonial educational and cultural landscape, the critical study and integration of IKS offers not only a reclamation of intellectual heritage but also a reimagining of the future—one grounded in plurality, sustainability, and epistemic sovereignty.

7.1 Revisiting Linguistic Legacy through IKS:

The linguistic philosophy embedded within IKS, particularly in texts such as Panini's *Ashtadhyayi*, Bhartrihari's *Vakyapadiya*, and the Buddhist and Jain traditions of semiotics, illustrates the sophistication of ancient Indian thought regarding language. These works, far from being archaic, offer profound insights into grammar, cognition, communication, and cultural identity. IKS thus provides not merely historical knowledge of Indian languages but also frameworks that remain relevant for modern linguistics, translation studies, and computational language modelling. Moreover, IKS celebrates multilingualism and oral traditions, foregrounding the role of language as both a cognitive and social instrument. Unlike Western linguistic models that often privilege written forms, IKS recognizes the legitimacy and richness of oral texts, chants, *kathas*, and *bhajans* as vehicles of cultural transmission. This pluralism offers a corrective to monolingual and text-centric approaches in language education today.

7.2 Literary Tradition as a Continuum of Wisdom:

Indian literary traditions, shaped by IKS, defy the binary between the sacred and the secular, the philosophical and the poetic. From the *Mahakavya* and *Khandakavya* genres of Sanskrit literature to the vernacular *Bhakti* and *Sufi* poetry, Indian literature has served as a dynamic repository of metaphysical inquiry, moral imagination, and social critique. Embedded within these traditions are the values of harmony, non-violence, truth, and self-realization, which form the ethical substrate of Indian civilization. By reintegrating these texts into modern literary curricula—not merely as cultural artifacts but as living discourses—educators and scholars can create a dialogic pedagogy where literature becomes a medium of transformative learning. Furthermore, IKS encourages a performative and embodied engagement with texts, through music, dance, and storytelling traditions, enriching literary appreciation beyond the confines of written word analysis.

7.3 Decolonizing Knowledge, Democratizing Access:

The postcolonial imperative to decolonize knowledge systems must begin with recognizing the intellectual violence of colonial education policies, which dismissed indigenous literatures and linguistic frameworks as unscientific or inferior. Reclaiming IKS is not a nostalgic act but a necessary intellectual decolonization, enabling India to construct a knowledge system that reflects its civilizational continuity and epistemological diversity. This reclamation, however, must be inclusive and democratic. Access to classical languages like Sanskrit, Pali, Tamil, and Persian, and their corresponding literary canons, must be widened through translations, open educational resources, and digital archiving. Projects like the *Bharatiya Gyan Parampara* portal, *Muktabodha Digital Library*, and AICTE's IKS Division are important steps in this direction, but broader public participation, especially from marginalized communities, must be ensured. Moreover, scholarly engagement with IKS must avoid the pitfalls of essentialism and exclusivity. The aim is not to replace one orthodoxy with another, but to foster a polycentric and dialogical knowledge culture that respects plural traditions and encourages critical inquiry.

7.4 Global Relevance of IKS:

IKS is not limited to India's historical or cultural contexts. Its systems of knowledge—whether Ayurveda's emphasis on balance and prevention, Yoga's insights into consciousness, or linguistic philosophies that predate modern semiotics—have global relevance. In a world grappling with ecological crises, mental health epidemics, and the alienation of hypermodernity, IKS offers alternatives rooted in holistic well-being, sustainability, and interconnectedness. Indian literary and linguistic frameworks, if recontextualized effectively, can contribute to global discourses on decolonial theory, eco-criticism, and comparative philosophy. For instance, concepts like *Rasa*, *Dhvani*, *Shruti*, *Shraddha*, and *Samskara* offer nuanced understandings of emotion, interpretation, sound, faith, and cultural conditioning that can enrich global literary theory and humanistic inquiry.

7.5 The Road Ahead: Challenges and Commitments:

While the revival of IKS offers immense possibilities, its integration into modern education and scholarship must be pursued with care, scholarship, and ethical sensitivity. Key challenges include:

- Pedagogical Preparedness: Teachers and researchers require training in classical texts, philosophical schools, and interpretive frameworks to engage deeply with IKS.
- Epistemic Bridging: A critical methodology is needed to bridge ancient wisdom with modern disciplines without reducing either to the other.
- Pluralistic Ethos: IKS must be taught and practiced as a diverse and dialogic tradition, inclusive of various sects, languages, and regional schools of thought.
- Critical Reflexivity: Any engagement with IKS must include self-critique and openness to reinterpretation, acknowledging that no tradition is immune to historical bias or ideological misuse.

Government bodies, universities, publishers, and civil society organizations must collaborate to create inclusive platforms for IKS dissemination—through research grants, open access publications, multilingual translations, and community-based educational initiatives.

7.6 Final Reflections:

The study of IKS in shaping linguistic and literary traditions is not merely an academic exercise but a cultural, intellectual, and civilizational imperative. It reclaims suppressed narratives, revitalizes plural voices, and renews the ethical foundations of education and knowledge production. As India and the world move toward a more interconnected and ecologically aware future, the values and insights of IKS—rooted in integrative thinking, spiritual inquiry, and linguistic richness—can offer sustainable and inclusive frameworks for human flourishing.

Let this reclamation be not about nostalgia, but about *nava srijana*—creative renewal. Let it inspire a generation of scholars, educators, and learners to think not only from the head but also from the heart and spirit, embodying the highest ideals of Indian knowledge: *satyam* (truth), *shivam* (benevolence), and *sundaram* (beauty).

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