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The Journey of IKS: A History of a New Interdisciplinary Field in NEP-Era India

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ABSTRACT

Since 2020, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) have moved from being a rhetorical flourish in a policy document to a funded, regulated and credit-bearing component of Indian higher education. This essay traces that journey in four movements: the colonial and nationalist debates that gave 'indigenous knowledge' its modern meaning; the post-independence settlement in which science was national and tradition was cultural; the drafting of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the creation of the IKS Division in October 2020; and the institutional, curricular and scholarly consequences of the six years that followed. It argues that IKS is best understood not as a revival of a single, continuous tradition but as an assembly project: a way of bringing together dispersed Sanskritic, vernacular, artisanal, medical and tribal knowledges into one governable category. The essay explores the promise of this category: epistemic plurality and a renewed focus on texts and practices ignored by the modern university, and its risks: selectivity, thin faculty capacity, blurred boundaries between history and science, and political instrumentalization.

1. Introduction: The Union Cabinet's approval of the National Education Policy on 29 July 2020 drew public attention mainly to its structural changes: the 5 + 3 + 3 + 4 school design, the four-year undergraduate programme, the Academic Bank of Credits, the promise of multidisciplinary universities. Less noted at the time was a quieter promise threaded through the text. The policy set the heritage of ancient

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and enduring Indian knowledge and thought as a guiding principle for the whole exercise. Within three months this sentiment had an address. An Indian Knowledge Systems Division, known as the *Bharatiya Jnana Parampara Vibhaga* in Hindi, was established in October 2020 at the headquarters of the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) in New Delhi. Six years on, IKS is now a feature of ordinary academic life. The University Grants Commission (UGC) has instructed that nearly five per cent of the total credits in a syllabus should be related to IKS courses. AICTE has introduced an IKS course for first-year engineering students. Colleges have established IKS cells, provided two-credit foundation courses, and conducted faculty development programs. It is a remarkable episode to a historian. This was not an administrative category in 2019; now there is a division, a credit requirement, research centres, a syllabus tradition and a growing literature of advocacy and critique. The essay asks how this came to be, and what it means. It does not adjudicate the truth claims of particular texts or traditions, nor does it declare IKS a triumph or failure. Its aim is more modest and, I hope, more useful: to situate IKS within a longer tradition of Indian debates about knowledge, to trace the trajectory from those debates to administrative practice in the NEP era, and to articulate the questions that scholars, especially historians of science, education and language, ought to be asking now.

The argument comes in three parts. First, IKS is a contemporary category, which has a genealogy; its elements are old, but their collocation under a single rubric is not. Second, its institutional trajectory since 2020 has been rapid and top-down, operating via regulators rather than disciplinary communities, shaping both its strengths and weaknesses. Third, IKS's future as a truly multidisciplinary field depends less on how many courses it offers and more on whether it can create its own standards for evidence, such as proofreading, translation, fieldwork, replication when claims are based on facts, and peer review by experts in the field.

2. What is IKS? A Conceptual Problem: The phrase Indian Knowledge Systems is capacious and slippery at the same time. In policy usage it covers, at minimum, the Vedic and post-Vedic textual corpus; the six *darsanas* and the Buddhist and Jain philosophical traditions; mathematics and astronomy, from the *Siddhantic* tradition to the Kerala school; Ayurveda and other medical systems; linguistics and grammar, from the famous ancient Indian Sanskrit grammarian Panini onwards; arts, architecture and performance; agriculture, metallurgy, water management and craft technologies; and what the NEP calls tribal and other local knowledge. How this breadth is packaged for undergraduates is clear from a course outline from Fergusson College, Pune: units on foundational concepts, on knowledge schools, on contributions to the natural and social sciences, performing arts and architecture, with later units on Mahatmya texts, Ayurveda and sustainability. This definition contains within it three tensions.

The first is system versus knowledge. System implies coherence and continuity, but South Asian historians tend to find plurality, regional variation, argument and rupture. The *Nyaya* logician and the village bonesetter, the court astronomer and the Kerala mathematician, the Buddhist monastic scholar and the oral healer did not belong to a single system in any sense that they would have recognised. IKS thus denotes a gathering rather than a given.

The second is between Indian as a geographical and as a civilisational concept. Geographically, it means knowledge produced by anyone on the subcontinent. Read civilisational it can be narrowed down to a Hindu and Sanskritic dominated heritage. The NEP's reference to tribal and other local knowledge suggests the former; the usual syllabus leans toward the latter. Islamic, Persianate and Christian contributions, and Dalit, Adivasi and subaltern knowledge-making, are present only variably.

The third is between heritage and research. Research is challenged and re-thought; heritage is inherited and honoured. The language of the IKS Division's mandate straddles preservation and inquiry: promoting, documenting and integrating traditional knowledge. The early IKS centres handled topics as varied as mathematics and the nature of the wandering mind, which itself points to the diversity of the enterprise. Recognising IKS is not discredited by these tensions. This means that the field has to be seen as a work in progress and that its history is part of its content.

3. A Genealogy: Colonial Encounter and Nationalist Recovery (c. 1780 - 1947):

3.1 Orientalists, Anglicists and the question of native education: The modern idea that Indian knowledge is a separate body of knowledge which can be recovered, classified and taught, originated in the colonial encounter. European scholars were brought into collaboration with pandits and munshis in the Asiatic Society of Bengal, founded in 1784, and Fort William College, founded in 1800, to translate, catalogue and study Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic texts. This Orientalism produced editions and grammars that remain foundational but also fixed an image of Indian knowledge as essentially textual, classical, and past. The backlash to it was just as formative. In 1823 Rammohan Roy wrote a letter against the establishment of a Sanskrit college at Calcutta, arguing that Indians needed the sciences of Europe rather than commentary on grammar and metaphysics. The most notorious statement of the Anglicist position was Macaulay's Minute of 1835, and Wood's Dispatch of 1854 provided for a framework of universities and vernacular schools. Indigenous institutions like *pathshalas*, *tols* and *madrasas* were marginalised. From the early-nineteenth-century surveys, Dharampal (1983) later argued, they had been far more widespread than colonial narratives allowed. The details of that argument are contested, but its outline matters here: from the

nineteenth century, the question of what to do with indigenous knowledge was tied to the question of who would control the curriculum.

3.2 Making Hindu science: The Bengal moment and its aftermath: Bengal is the obvious place for a regional crucible of what was to become IKS. Prafulla Chandra Ray's 'History of Hindu Chemistry' (1902–1909) and Brajendranath Seal's 'The Positive Sciences of the Ancient Hindus' (1915) sought to demonstrate that ancient India had made advanced contributions to chemistry, mathematics, physics and the life sciences. These books were as much products of nationalism as scholarship, responding to colonial claims about Indian backwardness by writing a prehistory of modern science in India's own past. Their way of reading ancient texts for anticipations of modern ideas has been criticised ever since, but it set the template for the contributions of ancient India to science lecture that continues to be seen in many IKS syllabi today.

Accompanying this scientific retrieval there was an educational one. Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan (1901) and Visva-Bharati (1921) were attempts to create a university that would put Indian traditions, arts, languages and rural reconstruction at the centre rather than the periphery, and that would look at the world rather than away from the world. Gandhi's Hind Swaraj (1909) questioned modern civilisation itself, and his *Nai Talim* (New Education) of the 1930s proposed an education built around productive work and the mother tongue. The strands of a vision of national education came from the National Council of Education in Bengal (1906), Swami Vivekananda's educational thought and the Theosophists. What these precedents reveal is that the impulse to educate Indians in and through their own heritage is over a century old and that it has always been suffused with very different visions, from Tagore's cosmopolitan universalism to more exclusivist ones.

3.3 The rival tradition of nationalism: modern science: The nationalist era also engendered a contrary conviction that India's future was in modern science and industry. The Indian Association for the Cultivation of Science (1876), the work of J. C. Bose and C. V. Raman, and the National Planning Committee of the late 1930s under the chairmanship of Jawaharlal Nehru all assumed that tradition would have to be selectively reconstructed in the light of modern knowledge. The tension between these two nationalist positions, retrieval and modernisation, runs through the whole later story, and the NEP era revives it in a new key.

4. The Post-Independence Settlement (c. 1947 - 2014): After independence the Indian state followed what can be called division of labour. Modern science and technology as embodied in the IITs, the CSIR laboratories, atomic energy and space programs were the engine of development. Tradition was the domain of culture: of the national academies for letters, music and dance, of the Archaeological Survey, of the study

of Sanskrit and the classical languages and, in medicine, of a parallel track of Indian Systems of Medicine, which became the Ministry of AYUSH in 2014.

Tension was recorded by education commissions but not solved. The University Education Commission of 1948–49, headed by S. Radhakrishnan, saw India's philosophical and spiritual heritage as a resource for the modern university. Sanskrit Commission (1956-57) Subject: Classical learning. The vision of the Kothari Commission (1964-66) was based on science, national development and common school system. All the National Policies on Education of 1968 and 1986 (revised in 1992) and the National Curriculum Framework of 2005 spoke of cultural heritage and values, but none created a structured, credit-bearing field in which indigenous knowledge was taught alongside the modern disciplines.

Scholarship, meanwhile, went in a number of directions. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, using a Marxist vocabulary, aimed at a materialist history of Indian thought and science. Joseph Needham's monumental study of China raised comparative questions about the emergence of modern science in the places where it did. Dharampal's work from the 1970s argued that working indigenous technologies and educational institutions had been disrupted by colonial rule. In the 1980s Ashis Nandy, Shiv Visvanathan and others asked questions about alternative sciences and cognitive justice, in a critical register quite different from state nationalism. Later historians, such as Gyan Prakash (1999) and, in the Indian context, Dhruv Raina and S. Irfan Habib (2004), have explored how colonial science and indigenous practitioners influenced each other, rather than viewing tradition and modernity as opposing.

Three developments prior to 2014 are of particular relevance. The first was the controversy of 2001 over the introduction of courses in Vedic astrology in universities, which showed how quickly the boundary between heritage and science could become a public quarrel. The second was the biopiracy episodes of the 1990s, particularly the contested patents on turmeric and neem, which led India to build the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL) from 2001, and brought traditional knowledge into the domain of intellectual-property policy. Third, the Ministry of AYUSH was created in 2014 to provide a dedicated ministry for traditional medicine. By then, most of the ingredients of IKS were in separate places: medicine in AYUSH, documentation in TKDL, Sanskrit in its academies, craft in cultural bodies, and a contentious scholarly debate in the universities. What was lacking was a single academic discipline that brought them together, and a state that was willing to make it compulsory.

5. IKS Enters Policy: Drafting the NEP 2020: The immediate background was the Committee for the Draft National Education Policy, chaired by K Kasturirangan, former chairman of ISRO, whose draft came out in 2019 and was put out for public consultation before the final policy was approved in July 2020. Its

central structural ideas were multidisciplinary, flexibility, a reduced hard separation between arts and sciences and the use of Indian languages. IKS was not an add-on to this scheme but was part of its justification. The NEP recognises the heritage of ancient and long-standing Indian knowledge and thought as a guiding principle.

The operative language is indicative. The policy aims to eliminate the discontinuity in Indian Knowledge Systems by integrating them at every level of the curriculum and recommends the accurate inclusion of traditional Indian knowledge, including tribal and other local knowledge, across humanities, sciences, arts, crafts and sports, wherever relevant. Three things are worth attention. First, the verb of discontinuity presupposes a break, presumably during the colonial period, and that policy can heal it. Second, accurate signals a consciousness, at least in the text, that quality control is a matter of concern; it is a word to which later critics and defenders can both appeal. Third, the phrase wherever relevant leaves the extent of integration open-ended and so implementation has been heavily dependent on later regulatory interpretation.

The policy also associated IKS with promotion of Indian languages, arts and culture, and research. This link is relevant to what follows. IKS has not only been conceived as a subject to be studied, but as a means of reorienting the language of instruction, the content of curricula and the aims of research toward indigenous sources. So, it is at the intersection of three NEP priorities: multidisciplinary education, mother-tongue learning and a national research ecosystem.

6. IKS Institutionalisation: The Division, the Regulators, and the Credits (c. 2020–2026):

6.1 The IKS Division: The division was created following a one-day workshop on research on traditional Indian knowledge held in March 2020. Launched in October 2020, about three months after the NEP was released, it was designed to foster interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research rooted in indigenous knowledge, and was located within AICTE, a regulator of technical education, instead of a university or a humanities council. That place is a historical fact in itself worthy of mention. This means IKS came through engineering and management education, where it had to fight for space in a crowded curriculum, and not through the humanities, where Sanskrit, philosophy and history already had institutional homes. The ministry panels on the promotion of Indian languages and IKS included a coordinator of IKS next to the chair of the high-powered committee for Indian languages, indicating how closely the two agendas were coupled.

6.2 Regulators and credits: Regulatory steps can be summarised as follows:

a. October 2020: IKS Division established in AICTE.

b. 2021 onwards: AICTE has introduced an IKS course for first year students in engineering colleges.
c. December 2022: UGC stated that there is a shortage of trained faculty in the higher education institutions and proper training in IKS is needed for teachers.
d. 2022-2023: UGC issues guidelines on IKS and encourages universities to adopt them.
e. Ongoing: UGC makes it mandatory that about five per cent of total credits should be related to IKS courses and works out modalities for inclusion of IKS as a subject in the UGC NET.

The most important of these are the five per cent rule, and the first year engineering course. They turned an aspiration into a calendar item. At the institutional level, they have led to a recognisable pattern: a two-credit foundation course of about thirty hours, taught in the first year, often by generalist faculty, sometimes through the SWAYAM platform. The course and revised syllabus of 2025-26 of Fergusson College under NEP 2.0 for the academic year 2023-24 and the report of International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai to run the course for its first NEP batch in 2025-26 are typical.

6.3 Scale. Warning about numbers: One non-official study-notes site reports that more than 8,000 higher education institutions have already started incorporating IKS by 2024-25 with 32 centres and more than 700 projects. I have not been able to check these figures against an official source and they should be considered provisional. They are widely mentioned in exam-preparation material. What is more certain is that the movement is geographically and institutionally broad. In its 2026 report, The Print describes how IKS is being practiced in institutions like Delhi's Aryabhatta College, connecting everything from astronomy to Ayurveda to the NEP's emphasis on an education based on Indian ethos.

6.4 Three characteristics of the institutional design: Three features of this design are worth comment because they will shape the development of the field. But, first, it is not disciplinary, it is regulatory. IKS grew through directives and guidelines rather than the slow accretion of journals, societies and doctoral programs that normally create a field. It gives it speed and reach, but it also means that content is often determined by what a regulator can mandate and an institution can timetable. Second, it's thin by design. Two credits is a small footprint in a degree of well over a hundred credits. A survey course can familiarise students with a number of traditions, but it cannot teach Sanskrit or deal with manuscripts or train students in the methods of the history of science. The result is a risk of what could be termed syllabus-driven IKS: lists of achievements learnt by heart rather than sources read. Thirdly, it relies on a faculty not educated for it. The Ministry itself admits that, in terms of capacity, most faculty members in UGC recognised institutions are not very familiar with IKS. IKS Training of teachers in 2022 was an acknowledgement of this. It is still the central bottleneck of the field.

7. Interdisciplinarity in Practice: The language of multi and inter-disciplinary education in the NEP provides IKS with its academic rationale. In principle the field shows several promising meeting points. The history of Indian mathematics, including the contribution of the Kerala school on infinite series, requires collaboration between historians and mathematicians. Computational linguists have long been fascinated by Panini's rule-based grammar. Historians of medicine, pharmacologists, clinicians could study together Ayurvedic and other medical texts, each testing different kinds of claims. Traditional practices of water management, agriculture, building and craft are linked to sustainability science, engineering and anthropology. The performing arts and ritual traditions link up with cognitive science and performance studies. When done well, these are the sorts of conversations a modern university should want.

In practice, however, interdisciplinarity has assumed a specific shape. Most IKS teaching is survey: one course that introduces a series of traditions in a few weeks each. It is multidisciplinary in the sense that it juxtaposes many subjects, but seldom interdisciplinary in the sense that it integrates methods to answer a common question. These are structural reasons. IKS has not yet got its own departments in most universities; it exists in cells, committees and a regulator's division. It has few specialist journals, few dedicated doctoral programs and no generally recognised standard for what constitutes good work. If a student wants to study Ayurveda historically, he has to choose between a medical college, a Sanskrit department and a history department, none of which is likely to treat the subject as central.

A further question is about method. Interdisciplinary fields succeed when each participating discipline accepts the standards of evidence of the others. The meeting is uneven here. Historians require provenance, dating, and context; scientists require testable claims; Sanskrit scholars require philological care; and practitioners of living traditions may rely on lineage and experience. It is only by making them explicit that IKS can become a meeting ground for these standards. Where they are blurred, there is a danger of reading every ancient text as a modern handbook and of describing every achievement as evidence of a complete previous science.

There are, too, concrete gains to be noted. The new interest has led colleges to dig out manuscripts, giving students access to Sanskrit and regional language texts that they would never have seen, documenting local craft and traditional agricultural methods, and opening up a dialogue between science and arts faculties. Students discover, often for the first time, that premodern India did serious work in astronomy, logic, grammar, medicine and metallurgy. These are real gains and a critical account on IKS should not ignore them.

8. Debates and Critiques:

8.1 The argument presented by supporters: Supporters give four main arguments. The first is epistemic and decolonial: a curriculum based almost entirely on European categories misrepresents the world and indigenous knowledge deserves a seat at the table. This argument resonates with scholarship outside India, for instance, the idea of cognitive justice and of epistemologies of the South (Santos, 2014), and with Indian critics of the monoculture of modern science (Nandy, 1988). The second is pedagogical: students learn better when the curricula are relevant to their own languages, environments and histories. Third, it is pragmatic: traditional knowledge in medicine, agriculture, water and building can offer low-cost, sustainable solutions that modern systems have overlooked. Fourth, continuity. The NEP's own phrase about ending discontinuity conveys the idea that a break caused by colonial rule can be repaired.

8.2 The argument presented by critics: There are five main criticisms. The first one is selectivity. If IKS is defined primarily in terms of Sanskritic and Vedic sources, there is a risk of marginalising Buddhist, Jain, Islamic, Dravidian, Dalit, Adivasi and other traditions, and of constructing a single civilisation out of a plural one. The second is the border between heritage and science. Critics cite instances such as the 2015 presentation at the Science Congress on ancient aviation, which was roundly criticised by scientists, and the 2022 calendar of a premier technical institute with its contested claims on early Indian history as examples of what happens when authority runs ahead of evidence. The third, capacity: without trained teachers and critical editions courses may repeat slogans. The fourth is political. Since IKS was introduced by a government with a very clear cultural-nationalist agenda, many scholars have read it in relation to the larger contest over history textbooks and institutions. Meera Nanda and others have argued that the invocation of ancient science has often served political projects (Nanda, 2003). The fifth is opportunity cost: time and money spent on IKS in a crowded engineering curriculum might have been better spent on core subjects or on better funded humanities, on this view.

8.3 Reading the debate as an academic: There are points on both sides and neither is put into a pro-and-anti box altogether. The genealogy outlined above hints at why. The nineteenth-century Bengali debates already contained a vigorous defence of indigenous learning, and an equally vigorous demand for modern science, many holding both at once. Rabindranath Tagore, for instance, wanted Santiniketan to respect Indian traditions but not to be isolated from the world. To treat IKS as merely an ideological device is to ignore the real continuity of the concern; to treat it as merely a recovery of authentic tradition is to ignore how recently and how selectively the category has been assembled.

The more fruitful question is, then, one of standards. A serious IKS would apply the same critical methods to its own materials that it expects others to honour: textual criticism, dating, comparison across traditions, and, where claims are empirical, testing. Supporters can make a reasonable case that the NEP's own demand for correct addition sets that bar; critics can make a reasonable case for asking who will police it. The answer will decide whether IKS becomes a scholarly field or remains an administrative designation.

9. Regional and linguistic perspective: Bengal and beyond: Bengal is a good test case, for it was important to the genealogy of IKS and many of its knowledge traditions are not based on Sanskrit. Navadwip was an important centre of *Navya-Nyaya* logic from the sixteenth century onwards. The scholars who combined classical study and modern reform were from Nadia, and the Sanskrit College of Calcutta, reformed by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in the 1850s. In addition to the Sanskrit traditions, there existed a rich vernacular and popular world, comprising Bengali medical traditions, astronomical and agricultural lore, craft knowledge of terracotta temples and textiles like the *kantha* and *patuas*, and oral knowledge of the Adivasi communities.

IKS needs to be inclusive and should be built on local and tribal knowledge and delivered in original languages as recommended by NEP. Here the NEP's attention to Indian languages is relevant. Translations from Sanskrit, Persian, Bengali and other languages into instruction languages and critical editions of vernacular writings are not secondary. They are the foundation of a credible field. There is an opportunity for Bengali scholars. A well-resourced IKS could fund cataloguing and studying much of the knowledge heritage of the region. It's about finance, not slogans.

10. Conclusion: The story of IKS can be divided into four stages. During the colonial period Indian knowledge was first catalogued by the Orientalists, then marginalised by the Anglicist education policy, and then retrieved by the nationalists like Prafulla Chandra Ray, Brajendranath Seal and Rabindranath Tagore. After independence it was divided between modern science for national development and a tradition for culture. In 2020, the National Education Policy had as a guiding principle the heritage of Indian knowledge, the Ministry of Education created the IKS Division and regulators turned that principle into credits, courses and teacher training. Since then, IKS has spread widely but thinly across Indian higher education.

The history leads to three conclusions. First, IKS is best understood as a constructed category Its elements are old, but the bringing of them together under one head is recent, and the very process of grouping is a subject of historical inquiry. Second, the institutional path has been fast and regulator-led in the past six years. It has given IKS reach but not depth. Its next phase depends on capacity: trained teachers, translators, editors and researchers. Third, interdisciplinarity cannot be policy-mandated. It has to be built through

shared problems, explicit standards of evidence and openness to criticism, including criticism from outside the field.

None of this detracts from what IKS has done. It has revived manuscripts, Sanskrit and regional language texts, local crafts and traditional agricultural methods into the classroom. It has also opened conversations between science and arts faculties that the modern university had neglected. Its strength will lie in applying the same critical methods it demands of others to its own materials, namely textual criticism, careful dating, cross-tradition comparison, and, for empirical claims, testing.

The NEP's own insistence on correct integration of traditional knowledge points in this direction. Read this way, IKS is not a celebration of the past, but a dedication to know it well. Whether that commitment is taken seriously and if it becomes an academic field or an administrative label will be up to the community.

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