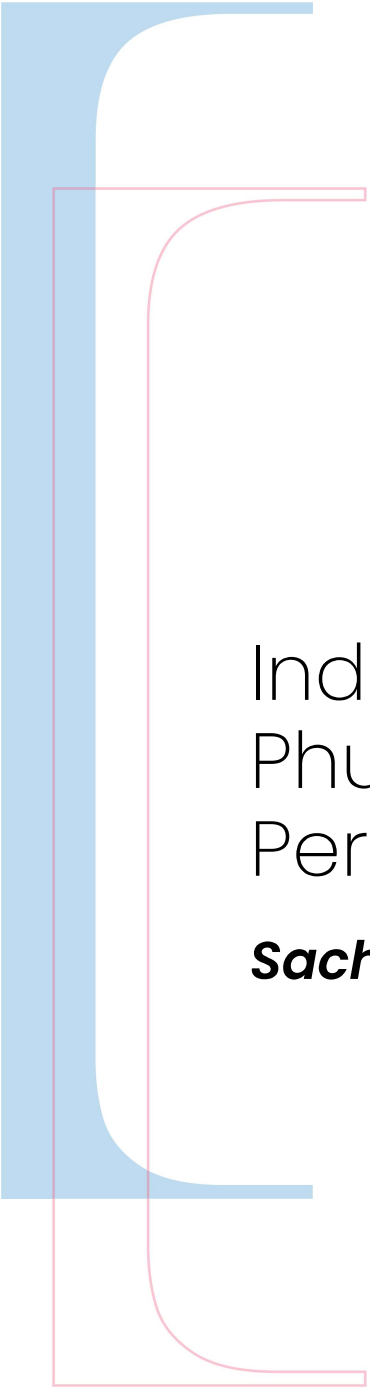




Indian Knowledge Systems: Phule-Ambedkarian Perspective

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Introduction:

While implementing the action plan of the National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) mandates a theoretical component called the Indian Knowledge System (IKS). This policy decision to create new subjects titled “Indian knowledge system” and establish them as mandatory courses in our curriculum will have essential implications in shaping higher education in the coming years. Prima facie, it appears that the policy of IKS is being decided by a specific type of ideology influenced by the religious majoritarianism of our country. Questions regarding the nature of what can be considered as “Indian knowledge” are at the forefront. Knowledge systems in India are diverse, each with peculiar histories and contexts, hence the complication of homogenising this diversity as an ‘Indian Knowledge System.’

The positions of diverse traditions are sometimes mutually contradictory and disagreeing with one another, for example, the diversity in positions of the Vedic and non-Vedic traditions. It raises concerns whether one can be unbiased in defining something as ‘Indian’ knowledge. The fact that this has generated much debate in the Indian intelligentsia is a positive sign. This review discusses some of these precise theoretical issues that follow from the Phule–Ambedkarian perspective of caste-based exclusions.

‘Indian Knowledge’: Systematic framework of Vedic Hegemonic Knowledge–Tradition or Multicultural Debate and Dialogue?

The first theoretical issue regards terminology. The NEP 2020 draft, paragraph 4.23, page 14¹, uses the term Indian Knowledge ‘System’ (IKS). The English draft uses the word ‘system’ while the Government of India’s Ministry of Education has translated its section into Hindi as The *Bhāratīya Jñyāna Paramparā*.² ‘Tradition’ is the English translation or alternative word for the Sanskrit-Hindi word “Parampara.”(परंपरा) The word ‘system’ is translated as ‘Pranali’(प्रणाली) in Hindi. The Ministry of Education’s website defines tradition: ‘Embracing the rich heritage and lineage of Indian knowledge systems, the IKS Division aims to uphold and carry forward the wisdom passed down through generations. The goal is to highlight the continuous unbroken knowledge traditions of Bhārata since time immemorial.’(p.3)³ The word ‘system’ means structured methodology and classification scheme to access the available corpus of knowledge. (Mahajan and other: 2023, 9) Thus, the currently scattered Indigenous and local knowledge must be collected, grouped and arranged systematically to become a ‘system’, a distinct and organised discipline. The attempt is to establish it as a scientific discipline in the modern education system, creating new disciplines and subjects and establishing them in the curriculum. IKS has a vision of combining traditional wisdom with modern knowledge.⁴ ‘Bharatiya’ Knowledge Systems and Traditions, also known as Indian Knowledge Systems and Traditions, refer to the vast and diverse body of knowledge, philosophy, sciences, arts, and spiritual traditions developed and evolved in the Indian subcontinent over several millennia. These systems and traditions have been integral to the cultural fabric of India and continue to play a significant role in shaping its society, thought processes, and way of life. Propagation of IKS rests because the “Western criteria” are not the only benchmark by which another cultural knowledge should be evaluated. Although the word ‘traditional’ sometimes conveys ‘primitive’ or ‘outdated’ in the sense

1 https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf accessed on 20th September 2024 at 9.10am.

2 <https://iksindia.org/about.php>

3 https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/nep_update/NEP_final_HI_0.pdf accessed on 20th September 2024 at 9.10am. /<https://iksindia.org/about.php>

4 <https://iksindia.org/about.php> accessed on 23th September 2024

of 'pre-modern', many traditional sciences and technologies were considered "advanced" even by standards set by Western scientific practitioners. Yet, they are guilty of homogenising diverse ancient traditions, folk culture, and classics as a unified heritage. Yet, the question is whether the current IKS approach considers the contradiction and diversity of the indigenous system or whether they are also guilty of reconciling them with mainstream education practices. Hence, the concerns of understanding IKS. While reviving the ancient tradition of knowledge and organising it into a system, the two words 'Tradition'-'Parampara.' (परंपरा) and 'System' are confused. Understanding traditional and modern knowledge systems requires their identification with different epistemologies. The word system (as explained earlier) signifies an enclosure of knowledge and thought. At the same time, tradition signifies the continuity of a particular ideology and practice. It is a symbol of the past in changing times for future generations. Hence, there is confusion in implementation; is it to be treated as a 'system of knowledge' or a 'tradition' that demands continuity (and revival) of the past?

One of the dangers with the acceptance of IKS as 'tradition' would be the continuity of the caste system that is widely recognised today as an unfair practice as opposed to the constitutional morality of the country. Not all traditions in India have been equally beneficial to all. By considering different caste groups' dominance, subordination, and exploitation, the Indian value system of equality adopted in the Indian Constitution promotes traditions applicable to human values in the field of knowledge. Hence, a practice such as Sati or Caste-based hierarchy cannot be considered a tradition; its criticism of violating fundamental rights and constitutional values of freedom, equality, and justice is well accepted. The challenge is if, in the name of IKS, such practices are being sublimated/ rerouted. The danger of them re-appearing as 'traditional knowledge systems cannot be ruled out; hence, discussing what constitutes IKS and implementing the same in curriculums must be protected from such dangers. According to the guidelines of NEP, while determining the core of Indian knowledge, Vedas, six darshans, and other Vedic literature have been considered major streams (the table of contents makes this sufficiently clear)⁵. The ancient Vedic culture also sanctioned practices based on gender and caste exclusions. Hence, there

⁵ https://www.ugc.gov.in/pdfnews/6436045_Guidelines-IKS-in-HE-Curricula.pdf accessed on 30th September 2024, 11.28am.

have been objections to Vedic traditions (Dr Ambedkar and Phule's philosophy appear as pioneering critiques of the same). Since an explicit rejection of the discriminatory practices inherent to Vedic traditions is not mentioned in the description nor guidelines of the implementation of the IKS, there is always the danger that caste-based discriminatory practices may find a way into curriculums and pedagogies as Indian 'traditions'.

While there is acknowledgement of other knowledge systems, such as Charvakas, Jains and Buddhists, it is seldom studied as protest ideologies (against the Vedic systems). Instead, they are spiritualised and studied as religions independent of the social and political context, making little room for explicit rejection of caste-based discriminatory knowledge and opening the possibility of caste-based exploitative systems to creep into the knowledge systems as Indian knowledge.

Yet, there is potential and value in studying diverse Indian traditions with their fluidity (rather than a homogenous whole); if NEP-2020 emphasises this nature of Indian knowledge, many possibilities for progress and development can be opened. Knowledge creation and development do not occur in a vacuum; studying it through the dialectical process of social and political development over centuries will always be helpful. In the Indian context, while constructing a 'system' such as the Indian Knowledge System, it would be most important to consider the multiple layers of ideologies that have shaped knowledge, both ancient and modern, caste being one of the central components. By centralising the study of Vedic and post-Vedic literature and institutions within the framework of IKS, not only are the foundations of pre-Vedic and Vedic conflicting streams conveniently ignored, but the glorifying roles of Vedic and post-Vedic literature and institutions made obsolete and regressive in contemporary changing society. For example, claiming an advanced form of scientific knowledge in Vedic times (based on deductions from religious beliefs and mythologies) without discussing the inequality-ridden exploitative society of the glorious Vedic age as discussed by Ambedkar in his work *Who Were the Shudras?*)

At this point, Mahatma Phule and Dr Ambedkar's critique on eradicating caste inequality during the colonial period becomes essential. It is not merely a mindless imitation of knowledge from Western traditions that criticised modern

capitalist development. They adopted those ideas to develop constructive frameworks against oppressive colonial ideology and internal discriminatory cultural practices and towards social emancipation. There is desired room for similar liberal, critical engagement with Indian traditions rather than a nostalgic return to tradition resulting in a regressive, non-democratic educational system.

A multilingual and multicultural country like India has a tradition of many streams of knowledge that cannot be confined to assimilated knowledge in forms of homogenised 'systems' or 'traditions'. It is not immediately clear whether policymakers want to revive the knowledge of ancient India, introduce new practices, and build it into an organisational system. If so, which of the various streams/ traditions of ancient expertise should be given centrality to construct that 'system'? The traditions of many streams of knowledge are not closed systems but are constantly in flux. Although many traditions are to be studied with equal justice, it is necessary to highlight their similarities while clarifying their differences and conflicts. How does one resist the hegemonic tendencies that become systemic and embrace the dialectic nature of systems that make more room for the fluidity and flux that characterise Indian knowledge systems? This remains a challenge. The policymakers must consider how the historical study of multiple religions, philosophies, sects, and folk traditions can be done from the perspective of Indian nationality without assimilating into one another. The need to emphasise 'unity in diversity' presents the challenge of making the value of equality (not a particular religious, social or cultural tradition) the foundation of all diversity. The danger of making the Vedic tradition the basis of unity in diversity is to continue the knowledge about India during the British colonial period, which had three points in common; firstly, The Vedic tradition of the Aryas is considered the mainstream of Indian history and culture. Secondly, they constructed a Hindu image of ancient India and defined it as non-contradictory and culturally unified. Thirdly, they ignored the struggle of Jains, Buddhists and other rebel sects with Brahmanical religion and the Varna-Jati (caste) system. (Bagade: 2006, 80-84). The idea of Hindu society as a national society arose from these three principles. It created an image of Hindu Rashtra, i.e., an Indian nation made up of Brahmin-centric Hindu history and culture. The English-educated middle-class intellectuals born out of the caste system came from the upper caste. Thus, they applied that knowledge through the dual struggle of their desire to preserve and

reform the Brahminical tradition and instil a sense of 'Indianness' against the British rule in India.

Unless the concerns mentioned in this section are considered, the values of IKS will likely be shaped by the above-mentioned historical caste-power relations. This requires an inquiry and questioning of the idea of 'Indianness'. To answer the same, we must engage with what is the theoretical understanding of the Indian nation-state framework. How exactly have policymakers seen this concept of 'Indianness'? These points are subject to scrutiny. It is true that 'Indianness' is derived from a multi-linear ancient history and culture, but it was shaped more and more during the British colonial period. The idea of 'Indianness' has evolved through socio-religious reform movements, anti-colonial political freedom movements, and later in the constitutional welfare state system (post-independence India). It advocates social and religious harmony, respect for diversity, and scientific vision. (Khilnani, 2012)

After liberally embracing diversity, the modern Indian elite Enlightenment tradition advocated the polycentricity of art, literature, culture, historical, scientific thought and practice in the Indian milieu. However, regarding the idea of India, it seems that it has absorbed the vision of Western modern values of liberty, equality, and fraternity and balanced it with the timeless human values and ideas of Indian culture and tradition. The same is reflected in our constitutional values and Preamble. Adopting socialist liberalism involved integrating diverse traditions; for example, in Nehru's socialist vision, the idea of 'Ganga-Jamuni Tehjeeb' continued to be constructed in a conceptual structure. (Garud and Desai: 2022,118-19). At the other extreme is the cultural nationalist model, which rejects the model of secular democratic socialism as a Western or colonial project and glorifies the caste-based hegemonic structure in the native model. It also directly leads to the exaltation of the upper caste and class authority. The aspirations and life experiences of the exploited-oppressed marginalised classes are most often excluded or find minimal representation. Oppressed classes, castes, races, and women are subsumed under the control of dominant groups and explained as '*Samarasatā*.' (Harmony). Though it has spiritual implications, materially, its expression is observed as unequal power relations of exploitation and oppression. Indian politics has rapidly changed over the past few decades

as it grows more inclined towards the ideology of independent monocultural nationalism. It proposes the idea of 'Bharat', 'Akaṇḁ Bharat', inspired by the idea of a religious majoritarianism.

The narrative of religious and cultural nationalism rejects the idea of India in its polycentric nature and aims towards constructing a culturally centralised dominant system. Is the project of the Indian knowledge system that strives towards a new India a step in the same direction? In the guidelines for incorporating Indian Knowledge in Higher Education Curricula issued by the University Grants Commission (UGC) in March 2023, the idea of 'Bharatvarsha' was highlighted. However, in the context of ancient Indian geography, there is always a danger of understanding it in a religious majoritarian sense, hence the urgent need to examine and seek clarification regarding the meaning, context and practice of 'Indianness'.⁶

Unless the idea of Indianness is located in constitutional values of liberalism separated from cultural nationalism, there will always be a danger of a new discourse reinforcing the traditional dominance of the upper caste and related principles and practices of inequality. The idea of 'Indianness' in its secular and democratic sense may be threatened as it may spell the revival of the theological hierarchical foundation of society. (Patil: 1993, 297–98) Here, a discussion of Phule–Ambedkar's ideology becomes pertinent.

According to Phule–Ambedkar's ideology, the philosophical basis of Indianness is to destroy the systems of inequalities, pertinent being caste discrimination, towards building an equal structure. It aims to reframe knowledge systems as emancipatory and egalitarian, which would count as Indian wisdom (Omvedt: 2003, 19–20). Most of the colonial oriental literature emphasised the Hindu–Brahminical literature as 'Indian' and brought forth a communal reading of Indian history by dividing it into Hindu and Muslim periods. While the Indian nationalist movement countered the unfavourable 'Indian backwardness' narrative, it seldom found powerful resistance in its lopsided version of the idea of 'Indian' as that which was hierarchical and unequal in nature. Unfortunately, this approach

⁶ https://www.ugc.gov.in/pdfnews/6436045_Guidelines-IKS-in-HE-Curricula.pdf accessed on 25th September 2024 PP-10

continues in the post-colonial literature, too. The Phule–Ambedkar–Periyar tradition and philosophy deconstructed this knowledge and brought forth the contradictions and conflicts of the various traditions. (Chentharassery: 2000, 90–104)

Yet, the idea of IKS in NEP 2020 seems to be more inclined towards an orientalist’s glorified version of ancient Indian history and culture, which may be more suited to be termed as Hinduism rather than ‘Indian’. The Orientalist presentation of knowledge and culture of ancient India was based on Sanskrit texts. Max Muller, W. J. Wilkinson, Colebrooke, William Jones, and Muir, to name a few, established the knowledge of Vedic literature, the Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata, *Manusmṛiti* as central to Indian Hindu knowledge. As the colonial rule rested on the secondary power of the upper castes, the British contributed more to the learning and teaching languages like Sanskrit and gave a central place to Sanskrit-based knowledge. The NEP and UGC drafts have also prioritised the study of the Sanskrit language and seem to reflect this Oriental ideology. Ancient studies of other Prakrit languages– Pali, Ardhamagadhi, and Paisachi have not been equally important⁷. Let’s consider the contents of what is accounted as “Foundational Literature of Indian Civilisation”. Under this main heading, there is more focus on Vedic literature and Sanskrit language. The drafts claim that the Sanskrit language has knowledge-based concepts and branches of knowledge such as science, philosophy, art, and literature. This rules out the argument that Sanskrit was the language of the Brahmin priestly class; women and persons from lower castes were denied access to the language. Thus, it may not be counted as “Indian” in an inclusionary sense; instead, it was a reinforcement of the Brahminical system that separates labour and knowledge, a means of exploitation (Ambedkar: 1987, 67). The sanctity of Sanskrit only reinforces the religious sanctity that insists on social inequality. Undoubtedly, it has value as a language, yet can it be the focus of constructing it as an Indian Knowledge System is an important question to consider.

Early Indologists organised their knowledge of Indian culture from Vedic literature in Sanskrit. They did not consider the anti-Brahmanical stance behind Sanskrit, which was developed by the Mahayana movement during the Buddhist period.

⁷ https://www.ugc.gov.in/pdfnews/6436045_Guidelines-IKS-in-HE-Curricula.pdf accessed on 25th September 2024 pp.10–12

Incorporating the Buddhist stream into the Hindu structure, the Buddha's varna caste opposition was treated as an internal subordinate line of opposition. (Mookerji: 1947, 336–37) Indologists refer to ancient India as Hindu India, with the Varna system as an ideal society. The ancient Aryan culture was considered the central Indian culture. (Bagade: 2006, 46–52) (Pennington:2005,111&117). Despite the archaeological discoveries of the Indus Civilization, most later Indologists still needed to change that view. What remains to be seen is whether the introduction of IKS will spell a repetition of some of the same exclusions.

While the issue of decolonisation of Indian knowledge remains one of the primary commitments for the NEP through the introduction of IKS, what seems to be exhibited is a complex dilemma of countering what is believed as 'Western' on the one hand and dealing with problems of inequality and injustice within what is considered 'Indian' primary challenge being caste (though Indian patriarchal value of gender, class, language, region and religion are also related and important difficulties). It may only translate into a battle of power between the and interest between upper castes and lower castes in India; its pace and nature of interest may depend on the direction given to the project of Indian knowledge. Such polarization is not healthy for the democratic future of the country.

This discussion takes us to another critical aspect- understanding the lens to view India's diversity. The widespread conflicts on citizenship and rights based on diversity caste, gender, region, language and religion do not present an encouraging picture. There is a need for a healthy understanding of society. While NEP aims to build an educated understanding of diversity, it remains trapped in a monolithic cultural knowledge of the country. (Chatterjee: 1992, 10) There is a selective understanding of what constitutes ancient, medieval and modern, with emphasis throughout all fields of sciences, ethics, languages and fine arts on preserving Vedic studies and their legacies. Even where traditions such as Bhakti and Sufi traditions are acknowledged, it is discussed as an independent universal knowledge rather than as an ideological awakening of the oppressed against the caste system and other exploitative practices based on caste hierarchy. There is little justification as to why there must be a preference for the Vedic systems and practices (such as the Gurukul system) over more egalitarian traditions, such as

the Buddhist traditions. While there is a reference to such traditions, they remain at the periphery of what constitutes IKS.

Lastly, this review makes a case that if one genuinely aspires to uplift the marginalised through education, then the Phule-Ambedkar philosophy of knowledge would provide valuable frameworks for building a more democratic system of knowledge. In *Buddha and his Dhamma*, Ambedkar argues for equality (Samanta), compassion (karuna), joy (mudita), Maitri (love) and rationality as the basis of a just society; these values can prove helpful to constructing what can be termed as an Indian Knowledge system.

It can form the basis of emancipation and empowerment of the oppressed victims and marginalised groups as knowledge systems will no longer be confined to Vedic traditions that the historically oppressed communities had to submit to. In the field of Indian knowledge, this offers the crucial dimension of critical reasoning and calls for a careful examination of tradition, literature and culture in a way that can lead to emancipation. The term Phule-Ambedkarite movement is not merely a historical period but a social movement. It does not simply point towards a social conflict; it was also a process of development of knowledge systems, where there is a review of old traditional knowledge and the creation of new knowledge. The Phule-Ambedkarite movement has struggled to emancipate the *Shudra* and *Ati-shudra* castes from the caste system. It has also been a battle for women's liberation against caste-related patriarchy. At the same time, it developed into a field of epistemological inquiry concerned with dismantling the caste and patriarchal historical sociological realities. (Rege: 2010, 92-94)

The Phule-Ambedkarite movement picked up inspirations and ideas from modern Western thinkers who supported rationalism, scientific vision and egalitarianism. The same was read in the context of dismantling the caste system in India. Phule brought forth an ideal critique of anti-Brahmin traditions and values. (O'Hanlon:1985,135-36,140-156) and Dr. Ambedkar continued the legacy of Phule and innovated the Buddhist movement. (Anand: 2003,62). This role of carefully selecting which parts of the Indian tradition to reject and which to accept to build a just society is noteworthy and much needed today in the

true spirit of critical thinking. This can become the unique quality of what can be characterised as the Indian knowledge system. Further, by embracing all systems, including the *Sramanic* traditions (that is, Jain, Buddhist and Lokayata, to name the primary ones), thinkers of syncretic traditions will lead to constructing an Indian knowledge based on rationalism and modern scientific vision, democratic socialist values and justice. Following the Phule–Ambedkar tradition, all systems that leave room for caste-based hierarchical power relations should be rejected, and the knowledge of ancient texts must be revisited with the contemporary contexts of building meaningful knowledge systems relevant to human rights and social justice. NEP 2020 and the policy guidelines of IKS will have to coordinate all Indian religions and traditions and have one critically engage with each other without assimilating one into the other or privileging one over the other. The Phule–Ambedkarian perspectives, methodology and practices can be useful in advancing this balanced approach to Indian knowledge and culture.

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