



On the Indianness of Being: Lessons from Language and Linguistics

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Abstract

India has a long and rich tradition of knowledge production in various domains. In the light of a new upsurge of academic interest in the field of Indian Knowledge Systems, it is imperative to critically understand what constitutes its Indianness. Through the insights from Linguistics and the multilingual fabric of India, we demonstrate that any knowledge tradition is at a confluence of several knowledge traditions and the Indian Knowledge Systems are no exception. What makes a knowledge tradition unique is the context of the processes of knowledge production, not the product. Therefore, one must steer clear of binaries such as tradition vs modern, and Western vs Indian in understanding the Indian Knowledge Systems. Instead, we claim, that the Indianness of the Indian knowledge systems is in its multiplicities of ideas, theories, perspectives, and experiences and the atmosphere of openness which encouraged reasoning, argumentation, challenges to the existing power structures and negotiations through the internal conflicts. In mainstreaming the Indian Knowledge Systems, it is this atmosphere of openness, the centrality of debates, and scientific temper that must be encouraged to maintain the characteristic multiplicities.

Keywords:

Indian Knowledge Systems, Indianness, Languages, Linguistics, Multiplicities, Scientific Temper, Decolonization

Introduction

Indians have inherited a long textual tradition (oral and written) with a vast and copious amount of literature in the various domains of science, mathematics, philosophy, language study and literature. While the majority of Indians may not be able to spell out the actual contents of most of these texts or even the titles beyond a handful of well-known examples, they are quite aware of the existence

of the tradition and often take pride in it. It is with this common awareness, that we generally use the term ‘Indian Knowledge Systems,’ ‘Indian Knowledge Traditions’ etc. The NEP 2020 looks to alter this scenario. The NEP 2020 brings the term ‘Indian Knowledge Systems’ (IKS hereon) and what it entails into the focus of all levels of education and academic activity in India. The Government of India has established a cell under the Ministry of Education for the promotion of IKS, which initiates and oversees the establishment of IKS centres in parts of India, research projects, training programmes & workshops, internship programmes etc. for the promotion of IKS¹. As a result of these efforts, we observe an upsurge in the implementation of research and teaching-learning activities in the field of IKS. Given this upsurge, it has become imperative to undertake a conceptual inquiry into the semantics of the terms involved in the expression “Indian Knowledge Systems”. The primary aim of the paper is to undertake such an inquiry, drawing upon matters related to languages and the discipline of Linguistics.

Ancient Indian philosophical discourse often uses a four-cornered frame called *anubandha-catuṣṭaya* to contextualize textual discourses. We borrow this frame to contextualize the current article. The *viśaya* (theme) of this article is a close reading of the term ‘Indian’ in the expression “Indian Knowledge Systems”, especially in the domain of languages and linguistics. In particular, we would like to address whether the attribution of a knowledge system as ‘Indian’ is spatial, temporal, cultural in nature or all of it at once. The primary endeavour of the article is to examine and make explicit the basis of the qualification “Indian”. Such an examination would help us infer what knowledge systems operative in India can be considered as not being Indian (despite being practised in the land) and what knowledge systems at work outside of India can be dubbed as Indian (despite being practised outside the country). The purpose of the *viśaya* – the *prayojana* – is the newly highlighted central focus on the IKS in the field of education and research. While this focus has created an impetus towards an engagement with IKS, an explicit statement specifying the scope of the term “Indian” is hard to come by and yet, the semantic domain of the term is being circumscribed, rather surreptitiously, through ongoing discourses on IKS and the academic activities in this field. We find such a strategy to be against the norms

¹ See <https://iksindia.org> for details of the vision, mission, objectives and initiatives of the Ministry of Education, Government of India.

of democratic discourse. Hence the endeavour. Given its special context of use, a critical conceptual engagement with the ideas involved is essential as we can no longer proceed with a common-sensical notion of what constitutes IKS. Our understanding and assumptions about what constitutes IKS have far-reaching consequences as they would (re)define the idea of India for the present and future generations, who are now being educated under curricula circumscribed by the NEP 2020. We, the authors- *adhikārī*- are researchers in the field of Linguistics, with a special focus on Indian languages. We have also been deeply interested in the role of language in education, particularly, in the multilingual setting of India. With these interests in mind, we bring our own perspectives to the discourse on IKS. We also bring linguistic methodology to this discourse in order to uncover the lexical semantics of the term “Indian”. Therefore, the overall context of this article- *sambandha*- is that given the theme, our interest in the Indian languages and the current topicality of the theme, we address the following questions:

(1) What is the semantic content of the word ‘Indian’ in the expression “Indian Knowledge System”? An explicit description of the semantic content of the word “Indian” would involve an engagement with the following questions:

- a. How does the term “Indian” relate to the oft-quoted binaries of “Indian vs Western”, and “traditional vs modern”?
- b. The vision of the IKS cell looks to combine ‘traditional wisdom with modern knowledge’. What does this entail? Why not combine “traditional knowledge with modern wisdom”?
- c. What does ‘continuous and unbroken knowledge traditions of India’ mean? If a tradition is continuous and unbroken, what does the binary of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ mean?

(2) The languages are the vehicles of knowledge and are a form of knowledge themselves. Given the rich multilingual fabric of India, which the NEP 2020 also brings into the limelight, how do we answer (1)?

(3) An aim of the IKS Division is ‘to solve the current and emerging problems of India and the world’ through mainstreaming the IKS. What are the current and emerging problems of Indian languages? What demands and constraints do these problems place on our attempts to conceptualize and operationalize the term “IKS”?

We approach the subject matter of the article from a vantage point which we wish to make explicit at the very outset. We believe that the *raison d'être* for any knowledge creation is to ameliorate the lives of the people in the society. This implies challenging and reducing the existing asymmetries of power relations in the societies, aiming to attain a more peaceful, harmonious, just and egalitarian social structure. Such an endeavour is a constant, never-ending process. It necessarily involves never-ending knowledge production activities that include meta-theoretic exercises of ceaseless evaluation that challenge and modify the existing systems of knowledge, giving rise to several knowledge systems that are engaged in constant debates and discussions. As a result, at any point in time, there exist multiple analyses, and interpretations of a given situation. In other words, there are multiplicities of knowledge systems in any knowledge tradition at any given time. *Indian knowledge tradition is not an exception to this*. As we will see further in this article, the best of the scientific and artistic developments in India have taken place when the debates and argumentation were at the centre of knowledge production and they challenged the existing power structures within the society in general and the concerned discipline in particular.

Another aspect of our vantage point is to draw upon the insights offered by the knowledge creation in the discipline of Linguistics and the setting of the Indian languages. Apart from the fact that our primary domain of studies is Linguistics and languages, there are three reasons for us to do so: one, we believe that languages are one of the best ways to understand humans and human societies. The cognitive capacity of language is a property that distinguishes the human species from other living beings. Another reason is that the language itself is a form of knowledge- it is both a storehouse and a medium of creation of knowledge. The third reason is that investigations into the nature of language and specific languages have been a major part of Indian knowledge systems. Thus, the insights from Linguistics and languages offer important inputs into our understanding of IKS.

The article is organized in the following manner. We begin in the section one by considering Modern Linguistics as an illustrative example to demonstrate that a knowledge tradition is in fact a confluence of several knowledge traditions. In section two, we discuss how the multilingual fabric of India illuminates the continuity in time and space. The implications of these illustrations, particularly

in understanding the complex and heterogeneous nature of processes of knowledge production, are discussed in the next section. Section four offers the concluding remarks highlighting the nature of Indianness.

1. Insights from Linguistics: knowledge tradition as a confluence

While the roots of Modern Linguistics lie in 19th century Europe, it is well-documented that several central methodological aspects of Modern Linguistics are inspired by the 4th century BC Indian grammarian Panini and several other Indian grammarians/philosophers. The idea of the internal structure of words (morphology), taxonomy and description of speech sounds (phonetics), and more importantly, the idea of neutralizing the difference between the written and spoken texts owe their origin to the linguistic thought of ancient and medieval Indian grammarians. It is often claimed that the Western i.e. European grammarians/linguists knew how to study written texts (and hence they studied only the literary languages with a long-written tradition), and the Indian scholarship, especially the Paninian tradition, showed the world how to study spoken languages. Thus the introduction of the Paninian tradition to Europe and America (the 'West') played a role in bringing a vast diversity of spoken languages into the purview of scientific linguistic investigations. However, the picture is more nuanced: It was not simply the primacy of spoken language but the orality of knowledge tradition in India that transformed Modern Linguistic methods.

1.1. Text-production- oral and written: lessons for Modern Linguistics

The Indian knowledge traditions are characterized by orality. It means that their primary ways of recording, transferring and maintaining knowledge were oral in nature and differed from the primarily "written" cultures of the West. Divakaran (2016) observes that in India whenever one wished to study a particular discipline, the student had to start by learning the old proponent's texts, however far back in time that text was composed. It was also done by memorizing the text first. We now understand why: the text must be known, and maintained as it was, in order to further its study. It is like making a copy of the text, quite like the students today make a photocopy or take a print-out of a library book. The analysis, interpretation and criticism would come later, before that the text must

first be known and made accessible to the learner. The textual thoroughness of the learners was appreciated in the way the learners would cite on demand, a verse or a *sūtra* from the text. Even if the texts were scribed, the Indians of the time had more faith in their own memory than in the perishable written material. Therefore, the texts were recited and memorized through various techniques to ensure faithful memorization. It was like carrying the whole library in one's brain that can be accessed whenever one wants.

What needs to be appreciated is that the Indian scholars, just like the Europeans, were creating stable and autonomous texts, and that only the medium of articulation of the texts differed. While the Europeans maintained the texts in written forms, the Indians did so orally. The medium of the text determined the nature of their representation: since the medium of representation for Indian texts was the memory, the precise, concise, formulaic (*sūtra*-s) or versified forms (*śloka*-s) were preferred instead of elaborate prose. However, the structural characteristics of these oral, memorized texts therefore quite were similar to those of written texts. They were precise, terse, relatively autonomous, and decontextualized just as any written/ printed text is. Interestingly, the later commentaries, especially since the medieval period, for instance, *bhaṣya*-s or in the grammatical tradition the *prakriyā* texts, were composed in prose, the practice of maintaining these prosaic texts through oral tradition continued. It is even more evident in these prose compositions that the written and oral texts do not differ in their structural properties. In that sense, Indian knowledge production was as much a text-production endeavour as European/Western textual knowledge production was, despite the difference in the medium of representation of the texts.

In other words, both the Indian scholars and the non-Indian ones were engaged in accessing, interpreting and analysing the texts, recontextualizing them in the situation at hand. The introduction of the Indian oral textual tradition enabled European scholars to treat any text in the same manner, irrespective of its medium of representation, that is, whether it was written or spoken. This insight allowed Modern Linguistics to employ the same methods of documenting and analyzing language in both written and spoken linguistic varieties. It can be argued that the idea of treating any language the same, irrespective of its medium of articulation is an insight from the Indian grammatical tradition that Modern Linguistics inherits.

Moreover, the methods of Paninian tradition may be Indian in origin, but they have been recontextualized in Modern Linguistics. Those methods are being used not only to analyse a wide variety of languages in the world but they are used to address different questions than Panini himself asked. One of the goals of Modern Linguistics is to explain the similarities and differences in the languages of the world, thereby discovering the nature of human language per se. The question of what is (human) language or the capacity of language that humans inherently have, and the question of understanding the potential of language are not new (Divakaran, 2016; Chomsky, 2000). But the subsequent developments in Modern Linguistics paved new ways to answer those questions and raise further new questions (Chomsky, 2000), and in order to engage with these questions the methods inherited from Paninian traditions are repurposed and, in the process, thoroughly transformed. Today, these modern linguistic methods are widely used in India to study Indian languages, thereby, in a way, drawing a full circle of the travel of ideas. These mutual influences of Indian and Western grammatical thought on Linguistics demonstrate that it is not meaningful to dub Modern Linguistics as belonging to either Western or Indian tradition. Of course, Paninian tradition is not the sole source of ideas in modern linguistic methodology. It draws from Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Humboldt, and many more. It also keeps transforming itself, as new structures from a variety of different languages come to light, right from the marginalized, endangered languages to the ong-written and well documented classical languages of the world. There are several perspectives from which human languages are studied- some focusing on the language and society interaction, others considering a language as an autonomous object, yet others studying the cognitive capacity of language and so on. What we wish to underscore through the above discussion is that any knowledge tradition draws critically, from a variety of sources, incorporating them, recontextualizing and transforming the ideas from those sources in the process.

Examples may be drawn from other disciplines in support. We know how several mathematical concepts and theorems originated in India and spread outside of India through the Greeks, Arabs, and the later European colonial rulers. We also know how they often returned to India in a transformed manner. For example, the way Āryabhaṭṭa (5th century AD) synthesized Greek mathematics and Indian mathematics, transformed the Indian mathematical tradition, especially Astronomy and Geometry (Divakaran, 2016).

The confluences of this type are not confined to academic or scientific knowledge production alone, but to art, religion, politics and every other aspect of the socio-cultural life of a society, more so Indian societies. The Ganga-Jamuni tehzib which was once glorified and now often denigrated typifies the Indian ways. There have been Hellenic influences on Indian sculptures long before the Mughals exerted their influence on the music and architecture of the land ("Hellenic influence on Indian art", n.d.). The Scythians, Huns, Greeks etc. came to India, ruled parts of it, and became Indian, often accepting the Indian names. The Mughals left their homeland, came to India, made India their new home and ruled parts of it for years. Similarly, Indians went eastwards and ruled new lands, left their influence on the local cultures and imbibed aspects of local cultures themselves.

In other words, any knowledge tradition is a confluence of several knowledge traditions and cultures. It implies that qualifying any knowledge systems or tradition as 'Indian', 'Western', 'European' etc. is not a given, settled and trivial matter but requires a critical understanding of these attributes.

2. Insights from linguistic diversity: Multiplicities

Linguistics has shown us that language is a form of knowledge. Humans are born with the capacity to acquire any language they are exposed to in their early life. Using this cognitive capacity, every human child learns the languages used in her environment and constructs the full-fledged, complex, but implicit knowledge of those languages in her mind. It is this implicit knowledge that enables her to use language creatively in any novel situation she finds herself in. It is also thanks to the linguistic capacity that we humans can access our own thoughts, and communicate them to others. We also use this knowledge of language to construct knowledge about the language (metalinguistic capacity). We cognize, organize and model the reality around us through the language(s) we know. It is through language that we establish social relations- friendly, intimate, adversarial, hostile etc. In turn, our experiences, relationships, and lives also shape the languages we use. Thus, the existence of linguistic diversity implies a diversity of world-views and knowledge of reality. It is therefore important to understand the nature of linguistic diversity that we inhabit and India, with its rich multilingual fabric offers crucial insights in this matter.

2.1. Continuum of variation

Diversity is a result of variation at various levels. If there is variation within a system, there is necessarily variation between the systems too. This is easily observed in any sort of diversity, say biodiversity, linguistic diversity etc. In India, there are several 'languages'— both written and spoken. Each of them shares certain features but they also exhibit differences, showcasing linguistic variation prevalent in Indian society. For instance, if we take a simple feature of the unmarked word-order of a language, we know that almost all languages in India have the word-order of Subject-Object-Verb, as against English having Subject-Verb-Object. However, Khasi, an Austro-Asiatic language spoken in Meghalaya, is arguably a Subject-Verb-Object type language (Subbarao, 2012), while Kashmiri is a Verb-second language² (Koul and Wali, 2006). There are languages with three grammatical genders (eg. Marathi, Konkani, Kannada) or with just two (eg. Hindi, Punjabi) or with no grammatical gender at all (eg. Malayalam, Bangla). The variation is quite vast. The Indian languages belong to at least four different language families, namely, Indic (or Indo-European as a superset), Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic and Tibeto-Burmese. There are also a few speakers of Arabic, which is a language from the Semitic family and Greater Andamanese is arguably another language family. This linguistic diversity is a result of linguistic variation *between* the languages. But *within* each language, there is also enormous variation. Marathi spoken in Kolhapur region shares features with Nagpuri Marathi, but they also differ from each other along several properties. Moreover, even if one considers Kolhapuri Marathi or standard Marathi as a single linguistic system, there is further variation *within* it, based on their domains of use. The standard Marathi of newspapers is quite different from the standard Marathi used during public speeches. This variation can be observed all the way to the level of an individual speaker. Each user has her own style of language—something that enables us to talk about P. L. Deshpande's Marathi vs Vijay Tendulkar's Marathi vs Laxmibai Tilak's Marathi etc. But even the same individual does not use her language in a homogenous way; she exhibits variation based on the setting of language use— her topic, her addressees, the purpose of using the language etc. (Pandey & Ozarkar, 2024)³.

² A verb-second language is that in which the only constraint on the word-order of a sentence is to have a finite verb as the second constituent of the clause. Another major Verb-second language is German.

³ Pandey & Ozarkar (2024) discuss four levels of diversity, especially linguistic diversity. These levels include species, genetic, functional and ecological diversity.

Given that languages are a form of knowledge, linguistic diversity entails diversity of knowledge. The nature of linguistic diversity also demonstrates that there is no abrupt break in the variation. Therefore, even if one speaks of ‘Marathi’, at any level of differentiation, one always incorporates the multiplicities within the entity. *Multiplicity within unity is the norm rather than an exception.*

The linguistic diversity in India is underscored in the Indian Constitution, in the form of the Eighth Schedule titled ‘Languages’. In 1950, when the Constitution of India came into force, there were 15 languages listed in the Eighth Schedule. With subsequent amendments, today this figure is augmented to 22. Of course, these languages are but a small subset of the enormous linguistic diversity in India⁴, but it counts as an important step in highlighting the multiplicity in the Indian linguistic scenario. The Indian Constitution also does not recognize any one language as a ‘national language’. Article 343 of the Indian Constitution attributes Official Language status to Hindi written in Devnagari script and recognizes English to continue performing associate official functions. The language of the Union Government, to communicate with its citizens, will be Hindi or English, but the citizens themselves can be speakers of any language(s). A person whose mother-tongue is Bhili, Marathi, Khasi, or Telugu, is as much an Indian irrespective of her knowledge of Hindi or English. In other words, the identity or citizenship of any Indian is not determined by her knowledge of any specific language. It is a remarkable move by the Constitution-makers to give recognition to such a large number of languages and not attribute a national language status to any. It shows the inclusive vision of the Constitution-makers and their accurate understanding of the Indian culture in refusing to reduce the Indian identity to any singularity.

Such diversity is not just observed in the languages of India, but in every aspect of the Indian culture and knowledge tradition. There is mind-boggling diversity in paintings, sculptures, architecture, religions, sports, food cultures, attires, dance forms, and music in India. The same is true of the Indian Knowledge Systems.

⁴ The Census of India (2011) lists 2843 rationalised mother-tongues reported by the speakers which are classified into 121 languages. Out of these, only 22 languages are scheduled and others are non-scheduled languages. Several other mother-tongues are listed as varieties of one or the other of these 121 languages. As such, the Census reflects 121 languages as variation without, and each of those 121 languages is marked with variation within.

Within the Indian knowledge system pertaining to any specific discipline, there are multiple schools of thought, multiple perspectives to observe and analyse the same objects, and multiple interpretations of the same text. It is, therefore, not possible to reduce the Indian Knowledge Systems to any singular idea or set of ideas. Indians abhor singularity.

2.2. Unity and diversity

The question is – is there a unity underlying the enormous diversity? We have argued that variation entails a continuum and, therefore a continuity of the entity without sharp boundaries. If so, one cannot identify an isolated object in this continuity, but can only talk in terms of moments in the continuum. Those moments are defined contextually, with reference to contrasts and associations with some other entities. Let us relook at languages. Despite the internal variation at the level of speakers, regions, as well as domains of use, one can still speak of ‘Marathi’ language which encompasses all such internal multiplicities highlighting their shared features as well as their social history. This ‘Marathi’ also contrasts with other languages such as Gujarati, Bhili, Hindi, Bangla, Kannada, Tamil etc. However, in another context, one can highlight the similarities between Marathi, Gujarati, Hindi, Bhili, Bangla etc., but not with Kannada, Telugu, Gondi, Santhali, Kokborok etc. In this context, the unity of Marathi with others is explained by their shared linguistic genealogical stock. However, Marathi, Kannada, and Telugu, also show similarities contrasting them with Hindi, Punjabi, Maithili etc. In this context, the unity of these languages lies in the shared history of coexistence in the same region and mutual convergence (language contact). Similarly, there is a context in which the unity of Marathi with all languages of the world can be observed. Here, Marathi exhibits similarities with all human languages. Modern Linguistics shows us that one can study languages as a cognitive capacity of an individual, as a social institute or as a shared genetic endowment of all humans (language as a property of the human species). What this implies is that both diversity and unity can be observed at different points in the continuum of variation, and that all such points are contextual. A careful reader would notice the implication of this: all such identities– Marathi being a language of a community, or of a region in India, or of a particular language family, or an Indian language, a human language etc.– reside in the entity ‘Marathi’ simultaneously. The same is true of an individual– one person can be a female, a Marathi speaker, a teacher, a mother,

a daughter, a South-Asian, a human etc. Which identity surfaces at what time is a matter of context. There need not be a conflict of identities. This is also true of a knowledge tradition or a cultural tradition. Therefore, unity underlying diversity is never given, fixed or singular. It is dynamic and contextual. Any attempt to locate the unity or *mūla-preraṇā* (the original impulse) or the original core character of any tradition is to reduce its multiplicity into a false singularity, imposing arbitrary breaks in the flow of variation.

In what sense can we then speak of 'Indian Knowledge Systems'? What contexts permit us to speak of it? Is it at all possible to carve out any entity as an 'Indian' Knowledge System?

3. The product vs. the process of knowledge creation

The implications of what we discussed so far lead us to conclude that the substance, ideas or product of a knowledge system cannot be uniquely qualified as Indian, Western, Chinese, European etc. We have seen how ideas flow across the boundaries of space and time and are also transformed and recontextualized. We also know how the same idea can originate independently at multiple places at different times (see Divakaran, 2016 for an example of Pythagoras Theorem in mathematics). Certain principles of sciences are also universal- the reasoning, laws of physics, universal properties of languages etc. Therefore, irrespective of who discovered them first, they properly belong to the universal knowledge. It is, therefore, not the product of knowledge, but the processes of knowledge production and the cultural contexts in which they are produced that make any knowledge tradition a unique one. These processes and contexts include the background of the emergence of a particular scientific development, what use are those developments put to, the influences and transformations, the internal conflicts, and the debates and discussions that led to those developments. This cultural context is also not homogeneous, but dynamic, diverse and complex. If a knowledge system is a confluence of several systems, there is necessarily diversity- multiplicities of ideas and perspectives within the system. These multiplicities would be characterized by conflicts as well as collaborations, involving constant debates, discussions, arguments, negotiations and constant transformations of ideas. It would not be a far-fetched statement if one says that

the history of Indian Knowledge Systems (or any knowledge system) is a history of collaborations, conflicts, and negotiations.

The Indian social structure, its religions, multilingual linguistic order of ancient and medieval India are all characterized by constant navigations between exclusions and accommodations, conflicts and negotiations. Ollett (2017) demonstrates how languages such as *Paiśācī* once deemed unrelated to and unintelligible to *Sanskrit speakers were accommodated into the discourse of literary languages centred around Sanskrit*. The tribal heroes and gods gradually were appropriated into mainstream religions. Folk music and dance forms were accommodated into the classical discourse and became inaccessible to the folk, creating new zones of conflict. The multiplicities at any given time transformed into a different configuration of multiplicities, but the Indian society, culture, and knowledge tradition remained heterogeneous. Every turn of history transformed Indian society, culture, languages and scholarship. This includes the colonial history of India. In other words, a particular configuration of contextual factors i.e. the historical processes of knowledge production makes the knowledge systems uniquely qualified by cultural attributes.

3.1. Complexities of the colonial experience

One of the objectives of the IKS Division of the Indian Government is to ‘completely decolonize the Indian mind’ (Indian Knowledge Systems Division, 2021). In light of the discussion so far, it needs to be discerned what one means by decolonizing. Does the term “Indian” in the expression “Indian knowledge system” entail traditions of pre-colonial India? If it does, does it involve a selective erasure of the colonial history? Any attempt to erase the colonial history would be tantamount to imposing a break in the continuity of the knowledge systems and cultural traditions. Although it is not explicitly stated in the vision-mission of the IKS Division, it appears that the colonial history of India is deemed to introduce a break in the Indian knowledge tradition, creating a gap between the traditional and contemporary knowledge systems which is in need of bridging. Such a view suggests that colonial history has had no other role to play in India’s knowledge production processes. But even the colonial experience was not a uniform, homogeneous experience. To understand the essence of decolonization, we need to critically evaluate the role of the colonial chapter of India’s history in the

processes of knowledge production in India. Cultural context is always complex and heterogeneous. At no juncture of history, no experience is fully righteous or fully unfair to the entire society, as the society itself is heterogeneous and constitutes multiplicities. Therefore, it would be a fallacy to assume that the colonial experience has been uniform for all the inhabitants of the land. While there is no doubt that colonialism in every form must be countered, the colonial history of India cannot be painted monochrome. Recall how Paninian methodology transformed Modern Linguistics and how it was also recontextualized and transformed by Modern Linguistics. If so, it is not easy to dub Modern Linguistics as 'modern' as against Paninian tradition being called 'traditional'. The old and the new have mutually transformed each other. The colonial experience of India has been instrumental in bringing about these mutual influences and so, the colonial history is very much a part of the historical-cultural contexts of the knowledge production processes in India.

The colonial rule in India brought with them print technology, which altered the record-keeping practices (see Raman, 2012) and changed the value of writing in the cultural space of the Indians. With the advent of print technology, the relevance of memorizing texts has reduced, just as maintaining a personalized telephone diary or memorizing the kin's telephone numbers became obsolete with the spread of mobile phones with built-in memory storage. Memorizing the texts even today may still be a useful and impressive skill, but it is now not a necessary one. The original context of memorizing and citing the texts is lost as there is now no need to carry the texts in the brain when you can carry them in your bag and flip through them at any time. One can delve into the interpretation and critical analysis of the texts without memorizing them. The print culture has changed the ways in which the texts are learned. Failing to recontextualize and recalibrate the methodology of learning the texts in the print world often reduces text-memorizing to a form of ritual. Few experts of Indian textual scholarship manage to not fall into the trap of such reduction. Surely, the loss of oral methods of text preservation was not a break in the tradition. It did not lead to a radical transformation in the textual traditions of India, except that the texts were now more accessible to the masses through the quick printing of multiple copies. It was possible to write and print (even now digitize) the previously orally maintained Indian texts, without the slightest alteration to the structure and nature of the texts. This shows that the text production was the same in the oral and written/

print cultures, as discussed earlier. Moreover, the print culture made the written texts central to the textual discourse, but the orality in India has not vanished. The hallmark of the heterogeneity of Indian society is that both literacy and orality coexist in it, each one in its own specialized context(s).

The colonial experience also introduced the art of newspaper publishing which played a crucial role in social reforms as well as forging pan-Indian alliances among the educated classes in the anti-colonial struggle. The colonial experience also transformed the Indian languages- for better or for worse- through the new educational practices, print culture, practices of grammar-writing, teaching of local languages to the colonial ruling classes and promotion of different forms of literature in the local languages (e.g. the Dakshina prize). These activities led to certain processes of standardization of modern Indian languages. These linguistic transformations, in the context of the anti-colonial freedom struggle of India, allowed several Indian languages to serve as instruments of mass mobilisation in the various regions of India. Regional linguistic identities took shape in the process, making way for the linguistic reorganization of states in independent India.

Introduction to the new education practices, scholarship and knowledge traditions in the world outside of India also gave a push to critical challenges to the existing social structures and exclusion of several social sections. Such challenges were not new to Indian traditions, but in the context of the freedom struggle which grew into a massive mass movement in the 20th century, new alliances were forged between the various sections of the society from different regions. These alliances paved the way for social reforms and revolutions by many such as Phule, Ambedkar, Shahu Maharaj, Maharshi Shinde and the like. These social churnings brought previously relatively muted voices such as those of the tribals, Dalits, and women into the literature and the public sphere. In other words, these transformations are now an integral part of the being of several Indian languages and literatures. Attempts to define IKS in terms of pre-colonial India would be to deny a major part of the being of modern Indian languages and literature any place in the knowledge tradition of India.

In other words, the history of the colonial experience is not only the history of foreigners plundering India, breaking her spirit, reducing the Indians to slaves, and subjecting them to exploitation. It is all this and more. It is also the history of mass resistance. It is also a history of the freedom struggle in which masses from different sections of society forged alliances against the exploitation by the feudal landlords and the European colonizers. Diverse interests came together in the freedom struggle and negotiated through their internal conflicts. The foundation of the Indian Constitutional values lies in this experience of the freedom struggle. India as an independent, democratic, republic nation-state rose out of the experience of the freedom struggle. She is very much a product of the confluence of multiple, conflicting interests in the freedom struggle. Failing to understand these conflicting complexities of the colonial experience and treating it as a homogeneously dark period of our history would be quite opposite to the spirit of India and would deny the very aspects that have come to define India.

It must also be noted that if the colonial past is complex and heterogeneous, so is the pre-colonial past. That is, neither is the colonial era entirely dark nor is the pre-colonial era completely golden. So, what should decolonization entail?

3.2. The essence of decolonization

There is no doubt that the colonial experience was nothing like what India had experienced before. No foreign rulers, including the Mughals, before the European colonizers, came to India to simply rule it. They all came to India in search of a new home and found one in India. The European colonizer, on the other hand, did not settle in India and made her their home. Their purpose was to exploit the resources of the land to boost the economy of their homeland and earn huge profits for themselves. Moreover, until the European colonial rulers, the local lives of the people of the land were relatively much more autonomous and self-sufficient. It did not matter greatly who the king of the land was as each village took care of its own local economic and social practices. The European rulers, for their economic benefits, penetrated deep into the local economies, as never before. They even wielded the power to decide what crop should be cultivated by the farmers, and not based on the local needs, but on the needs of the industry in their far-away homelands. It is in this sense that the colonial rule constitutes

a break in the Indian traditions– they destroyed the traditional, highly local, self-sufficient economic practices in India. And it is these aspects of colonialism that need to be countered.

The Britishers often constructed narratives to justify their rule in India. They wrote the history of India through their perspectives which often served to justify their superiority and their right to rule India. Their division of Indian history into the Hindu era, the Muslim (Mughal) era and the British (Christian) era is almost uncritically accepted by us even today, while there is no evident basis for such religious categorization of historical junctures in India. The British history of India has also been largely a history of the foreign conquests of India. It barely gives insights into the history of art, culture, economy, educational practices, scientific developments and the lives of the common people. For that, our better sources are the travelogues of earlier foreign travellers such as Al Biruni and Xuanzang.

Moreover, to establish the superiority of the colonial rulers, the Britishers resorted to the creation of false, reductionist binaries. They hailed India for its long, rich, glorious past, contrasting it with the technocratic, glorious present of Europe, thus creating the binary of ancient/traditional vs modern. They attributed India as having spirituality while Europe had scientificity and reasoning. Countering the colonization necessarily involves a critique of these binaries. Therefore, the IKS, with the aim of decolonizing the minds of Indians, must not fall into the trap of defining IKS in terms of traditional and modern. An implication of our discussion in this article is that traditions do not exist in the past unless they are dead. Traditions are always lived traditions and, hence are constitutive of the present. Traditional is not the opposite of modern. Traditions can be pre-modern, medieval, and modern too, since these attributes define a set of values. It also implies that the IKS cannot involve the erasure of the colonial experience in the entirety, defining 'Indian' knowledge system to be by-passing the colonial era. What is needed is an acute awareness of the multiplicities in all traditions and experiences and a critical acceptance of the choices offered by the multiplicities.

The centrality of writing/ print culture induced a new linguistic order in India, in which the spoken linguistic varieties are now seen in the shadow of the closely related written languages, reducing them to be considered as deviations of the written forms. This aspect of the colonial experience needs to be critiqued and

challenged. Interestingly such critiques and challenges are currently lacking. Part of the process of decolonization should involve a serious rethinking of the relationship between the written standard languages and spoken dialects.

4. Concluding Remarks: Multiplicities, Scientific Temper and Openness of Communicative Practices

Multiplicities of the knowledge systems necessarily entail a central role for reasoning, scientific temper and openness in the activities of knowledge production which in turn thrives on elaborate interactions and open channels of communication. Scientific temper involves an attitude which encourages a critical assessment and reassessment of one's position as well as others. It also entails being open to being challenged and for critical acceptance of other positions. We observe a clear link between providing a suitable environment for the vigours of knowledge production, reduction and removal of power asymmetries and adoption of a scientific temper. All of these activities are constituted by multiplicities which exist in society in general and the processes of knowledge production in particular. Once we understand the link between these activities, we are in a better position to understand why these values are enshrined in the Indian Constitution. India has always been a land of multiplicities and it is to the credit of the law-givers that they recognized that these multiplicities cannot be preserved and developed without developing a scientific temper in the citizens of the country. As a result, the 42nd Amendment of the Constitution spells out that one of the fundamental duties of a citizen of India is to develop a scientific temper, humanism, spirit of inquiry and reform. This duty not only underlines the importance of reasoned debates and critical acceptance of new ideas in the lives of the citizens but also recognizes every citizen's role in the knowledge creation for the healthy progress of the country.

We have seen in this article that the IKS are always constitutive of multiplicities. Sen (2006) demonstrates how the Indian scholarly discourse was characterized by constant debates, reasoning and argumentation. We would also like to bring to the notice of the reader that the most seminal of the developments in IKS took place when knowledge creation challenged the existing asymmetries. The Buddhists, the Jains and the Lokāyata-s posed the challenge to the asymmetric authority of Vedic texts. The Sanskrit-centric linguistic order was challenged,

leading to the accommodation of the other literary languages, including Pali, and several other Prakrits. In the 2nd millennium, from the 11th century AD onwards, we see another such challenge to the Sanskrit-centric linguistic order, from the regional vernacular languages. In the Bhakti movement in Maharashtra, the control of Brahmins on the domain of religion through Sanskrit was challenged from below, by the people from middle and lower castes and women. This challenge not only brought poetry, religious and spiritual discourse into the vernacular languages such as Marathi but also paved the way for the rise of the vernaculars (Novetzke 2017, Pandey & Ozarkar 2023). In more recent times, starting with the colonial period, the Dalits, women and tribals challenged their marginalization and exclusion, bringing their world-views and experiences in the literature and their linguistic varieties into the public and literary domain. The best of the music, dance, and paintings are also the ones that shook the existing rigidity of the norms. Such challenges force debates, argumentation, and negotiations to resolve the emergent and existing conflicts. Even during the colonial era, the leaders and social reformers of the anti-colonial freedom struggle exhibited critical acceptance of the colonial experience. Such critical acceptance reproduces the hybridity and confluences of multiple traditions and experiences. The Indian ways involved critical acceptance of the old and new, organically blending them together, functionally differentiating them whenever needed. This is captured by Ramanujan (1989) when he constructs the image of an Indian scholar (his father) wearing an outfit which was a blend of Western/modern and traditional/Indian. Ramanujan argues that the Indian way of thinking is a contextualized way of thinking as they are aware of the multiplicities (hence the need for the *anubandha-catustaya* for every discourse). It means that Indian ways cannot be reduced to any singularity. Any attempt to do so, by defining the content of Indian knowledge systems or any tradition of art, even linguistic resources in terms of a homogenous, singular, fixed system, exhibits a grave lack of understanding of the Indian ways of thinking.

For example, the idea of language families was introduced by the Britishers as they were struck by the remarkable, systematic similarities between Sanskrit and several classical languages of Europe. The observation of those similarities led to the development of Historical-Comparative Linguistics, which later paved the way for Synchronic Linguistics of the 20th century. The British colonial rulers may have hijacked the idea of an Indo-European family, highlighting the past unity of

Indian subjects and their European rulers, to justify the British rule on India. While this hijacking may be unacceptable, the idea of language families, historical shared past and divergent paths of development in time are not fragments of colonial fiction. The idea of language families of Indian languages therefore cannot be denied. Neither can the fact of language contact and convergence in a region be denied. But to reduce the unity of Indian languages– the similarities and differences in them– to only one of the two explanations (unity in time or unity in space) is unscientific and wrong. Thus, to say that all Indian languages belong to a single family or to say that they all have undergone convergence and so the idea of language families is irrelevant and not applicable to Indian languages is equally reductionist and unacceptable. Within India, the way the languages have come in contact, the way they influenced each other, the way the languages transformed to local regional standards, the processes of the linguistic reorganization of states in different parts of India—each one is a unique case, an outcome of a unique set of historical processes. Also, recall that the similarities and differences in languages can be explored and explained along several dimensions.

The unity and the uniqueness of the knowledge tradition are not located in the products of history but in the historical process. What is ‘Indian’ in the “Indian Knowledge System” is not a given, singular, eternal concept. ‘Indianness’ lies in the historical processes that have shaped and are shaping it. These processes make ‘Indian’ uniquely differentiated from say, ‘American’, ‘European’, ‘Western’ etc. The processes are continuously taking place in the present times and will continue in the future. Even in the past, these processes were characterized by heterogeneity and complexity. *What makes it Indian is the entire accumulated historical experience.* So, the Indian KS is inclusive of the past and present activities of knowledge creation. These activities are not isolated, not ‘pure’, devoid of influences. The cultural, and historical coordinates and the responses to those contexts constitute Indianness.

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