

CMDR Journal of Social Research

(A Biannual Journal of Centre for Multi-disciplinary Development Research, Dharwad)

ISSN: 3049-1797 (Vol.1, No.1, 2024, pp 63-73)

Anthropology and Indian Knowledge Systems: A Look at Collinear and Collaborative Future

Dattaniranjan* Jai Prabhakar S. C.** M. R. Gangadhar***

ABSTRACT

The growing prominence of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), especially post-National Education Policy 2020, has opened avenues for interdisciplinary contributions from various academic fields. This paper explores the role of anthropology in engaging with IKS, particularly given its evolved scope within the Indian context beyond its colonial origins. Anthropology's methodological focus on participant observation, ethnography, and immersive fieldwork positions it as a critical discipline for documenting and preserving IKS, especially marginalized and oral traditions. The paper highlights IKS's challenges while emphasizing anthropology's potential to bridge these gaps. It argues for leveraging anthropological methods to document traditional knowledge, promoting collaborative research, integrating IKS into modern education, and using technology to enhance IKS's reach and relevance. Ultimately, the paper envisions a collaborative framework where anthropology aids in the sustainable preservation, dissemination, and development of IKS.

Keywords: Anthropology; Indian Knowledge Systems; National Education Policy 2020; Traditional Knowledge

*Ph.D Research Scholar, Department of Anthropology, Karnatak University, Dharwad, **Assistant Professor, Centre for Multi-disciplinary Development Research (CMDR), Dharwad and ***Vice-Chancellor, ChamaraJanagara University, ChamaraJanagara, Karnataka

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the growing recognition of the relevance of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) has been amplified by the National Education Policy 2020 in India (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020). Indian Knowledge Systems or Bhāratīya Jñāna Paramparā refer to the rich and diverse body of knowledge, practices, and traditions that have originated and evolved within the Indian subcontinent over centuries. IKS encompasses a wide range of domains, including the natural sciences, social sciences, humanities, and traditional medicinal practices. This focus on IKS has prompted many disciplines like education (Lal et al., 2024; Nayak & Padhi, 2024), tribal studies (Nandikolmath & Hallikeri, 2023), Sanskrit literature (Majhi, 2024; Yadav, 2023), Philosophy (Jana & Adhikary, 2024), Art and Photography (Chaudhary, 2024), to take a look at how they can contribute to the preservation, dissemination, and creation of these valuable knowledge systems.

In this context, the discipline of Anthropology holds immense potential to collaborate with IKS in a meaningful and impactful manner. Anthropology, though exposed to the subcontinent during colonial times, has, over time, evolved and localized its nature and scope within the Indian context. Anthropology's core focus on understanding human cultures, societies, and their intricate knowledge systems aligns well with the objectives of preserving, disseminating, and further developing IKS. This review paper explores the possibilities and considerations for Anthropology's engagement with IKS in the present and future.

INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS AND ITS MAJOR CHALLENGES

According to Rahman (2024) etymologically breaks the IKS, noting that "*Indian*" refers to the undivided Indian subcontinent or Akhanda Bharat, including historical regions like Takshashila and Nalanda, where profound contributions in philosophy, science, and art originated. Further, "*knowledge*" signifies tacit insights gained through experience and observation, transferred into explicit frameworks or literary works. Finally, a "*system*" denotes a structured methodology that organizes and codifies knowledge tailored to the seeker's needs. Thus, IKS represents the organized transmission of ancient and modern knowledge—both literary and oral—through generations to address present and future challenges. Hence, Indian Knowledge Systems refers to the vast repository of knowledge, practices, and traditions that have originated and evolved within the Indian subcontinent over centuries. These knowledge systems include, but are not limited to, areas such as agriculture, medicine, mathematics, architecture, ecology, and the humanities (Khan & Sharma, 2024).

Meanwhile, IKS faces several challenges in its future integration. These include fragmentation and inaccessibility, lack of integration with modern curricula, language and translation barriers, perceived obsolescence and lack of recognition, insufficient research funding and policy support, and rapid cultural erosion and epistemological differences (Rahman, 2024; Singh and Ahmad, 2024). IKS is often seen as separate from mainstream

academic curricula, limiting the interdisciplinary approach needed to contextualize it within modern science and humanities. The lack of translation and standardization also poses a barrier to its incorporation. Furthermore, IKS research receives limited funding and governmental policy support, leading to fewer initiatives aimed at preserving or modernizing traditional knowledge systems.

Nevertheless, the National Education Policy 2020 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India, 2020) has recognized some of these challenges and revolutionizing and emphasized the need to integrate IKS into the mainstream education system. However, as disciplines are delving into the depth of the challenges (Nair, 2024; Singh & Ahmad, 2024; Nayak & Padhi, 2024), a subtle need for an academic framework that has experience in studying such microsystems has theoretical chassis to support holistic approach and has evolved a methodology to describe and integrate such diverse knowledge systems for the scientific community. The authors have an unbending and logical credence that Anthropology can fill this gap and play a vital role in the infusion of IKS into future ecosystems.

INDIAN ANTHROPOLOGY: MOTHERED FROM COLONIZERS BUT MATURED IN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT

Anthropology has an interesting history, especially in the Indian context. As a discipline, it was born out of the colonial interests of the European nations and their endeavour to understand and control the colonized societies and their sociocultural hemispheres (Sahay, 2008; Lewis, 1973). It was fostered by many British administrators like Francis Buchanan, E.T. Dalton, Edgar Thurston, Denzil Ibbetson, Herbert Risley, John Nesfield, C. L. Tupper, and others. They shaped the colonial state's approach to managing India's diverse social groups, especially focusing on caste as a major organizing principle. They aimed to categorize Indian society to facilitate governance, relying on official documents like censuses, which standardized categories of caste, tribe, religion, and race. These studies often objectified social practices, framing caste as an immutable characteristic of Indian society. They drew from European models of hierarchy, which reinforced British perceptions of Indian society as fundamentally different and justified the colonial state's role as a stabilizing authority (Fuller, 2015). Some of the positive and negative impacts of colonial anthropologists in India are:

Positive Impacts:

- 1) **Documenting Cultural Practices:** This work provided extensive ethnographic data, capturing the diverse cultural practices of various communities. The reports, though colonial in perspective, became invaluable resources for understanding India's social dynamics at that time.
- 2) **Codification of Customary Laws:** In regions like Punjab, officials like Ibbetson used anthropological data to influence land policies aimed at preserving traditional agrarian structures, which supported the social stability colonial authorities believed necessary.

Negative Impacts:

- 1) **Racial and Caste-Based Hierarchies:** The focus on caste and racial categorization reinforced stereotypes and social hierarchies, contributing to the solidification of caste boundaries. Risley's anthropometric studies, which correlated caste with physical characteristics, encouraged a rigid, racialized view of caste, which was scientifically discredited yet influential at the time.
- 2) **Division of Communities:** Policies like the partition of Bengal, partly influenced by these anthropologists, divided populations by ethnicity and religion, fueling communal tensions and contributing to socio-political fragmentation, which later influenced nationalist sentiments against British rule.
- 3) **Misinterpretation of Cultural Complexes:** Culture complexes, such as kinship, religion, belief systems, and material practices, were often misunderstood or distorted by colonial anthropologists due to their Eurocentric biases and limited engagement with the local context. It led to inaccurate and reductive representations of Indian societies. For example, the *Daiva* worship in South India is regarded as *demon worship* in colonial ethnographic accounts. This misinterpretation occurred due to a lack of cultural experience with these beliefs in European cultures.

Despite these colonial origins, anthropology in India has evolved with a unique trajectory, adapting to the local context and addressing the nuances of Indian societies. Post-independence, Indian anthropology has undergone significant transformations, with a shift towards more inclusive, egalitarian, and socially engaged approaches.

MATURATION OF INDIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

Prior to Indian independence, the academic infrastructure for anthropology had already been set up. Department of Anthropology started at Calcutta University in 1920 (Fuller, 2015). Gradually, more departments were established in other parts of the country.

Many Indian Anthropologists, like G.S.Ghurye, K P Chattopadhyay, M.N.Srinivas, D.N.Majumdar, and R.P.Chadda, were trained by or under European scholars. However, they brought insights that were nuanced to Indian conditions. For example, T.C. Das's insight on deaths in the Bengal Famine of the 1940s is that it was due to the denial policy of the British administration. One of the greatest external influences that matured Indian anthropology and its practitioners was the impact of **American Anthropologists** during the 1950s through the US-led Community Development Program (Mahapatra, 2006). American Anthropologists, who had experienced the concepts of Franz Boas, L H Morgan, and Robert Redfield, were much more humanistic and broader. They had the experience of engaging with all sorts of societies - from American Indians to urban societies. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who was inspired by the socio-economic and political emancipation aspects of American anthropology at Columbia University, played a significant role in policy shaped in India's constitution and freedom movement.

Indian Village Studies, ignited by American Anthropologists, produced a robust body of ethnographies documenting the intricate social, economic, and cultural systems of Indian villages. S.C. Dube's study on Shamirpet village (Dube, 1955/2017), M.N. Srinivas' edited book 'Indian Villages' (Srinivas, 1955/1963), and Oscar Lewis' study of Rani Khera (Lewis, 1958) are some of the seminal works.

The greatest concepts that matured the Indian Anthropologists were the concept of **Great and Little Traditions**, as understood by Robert Redfield, and **Universalisation and Parochialisation** by McKim Marriott (Marriott, 1955). Various seminal works such as Sacred Complex of Gaya by L P Vidyarthi (Vidyarthi, 1961) and Sanskritization and Dominant Caste by M N Srinivas (Madan, 2001) brought out the nuanced understanding of social dynamics in India. Another important aspect of anthropology was that it introduced the world to the interrelationship of simpler cultures of tribes with nature. **Nature-Man-Spirit Complex** by L.P. Vidyarthi (Vidyarthi, 1963) is one such study that highlighted the intricate relationship between tribal communities and their natural environment, furthering the understanding of India's diverse cultural landscape.

Thus, Indian Anthropology has evolved beyond the colonial legacy to become a discipline that is attuned to the unique social, cultural, and political realities of the Indian context (Guha, 2019; Wall, 2000).

ANTHROPOLOGY AND INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

Indian Knowledge Systems has attracted many shortcomings. Some of them have already been mentioned in the previous sections of this paper. Along with this, the whole revival of IKS is seen as a revival of cultural systems of great traditions, which will focus on written traditions of the Indian subcontinent, such as Vedas, Upanishads, and Puranas. There are several simpler cultures of tribes and many communities holding the knowledge systems in their traditional practices, belief systems, oral traditions, material cultures and worldviews. IKS cannot be complete without understanding these marginal and subaltern knowledge systems as well (Rahman, 2024).

Anthropology has the tools and methods to document, preserve, and disseminate these diverse knowledge systems. Anthropological fieldwork, with its emphasis on participant observation and immersive engagement with communities, can uncover the nuances and complexities of local knowledge systems, allowing for a more holistic understanding of IKS, including deciphering traditional and historical texts.

The ultimate motto of IKS is making use of *Drsti* (The unique perspectives that make this knowledge system 'Indian' and valuable to the world) and *Paramapara* (continuous knowledge traditions of Bharata since time immemorial) for **Laukika prayojana** (*The practical utility to solve current and emerging problems of India and the world*). (IKS Division, 2021). When the world, including India, is rapidly moving towards a technology-driven society with global challenges of ecological sustainability, public health, social inequities,

etc., the output of Indian Knowledge Systems need of the hour. However, simple historical and archaeological knowledge without a holistic understanding of these knowledge systems is biased and will be rejected in the outgrowth of the modern scientific world.

Anthropological methods such as ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, and oral history can document the living traditions, rituals, and belief systems that are apart from what is currently the constitution of IKS today. Of course, there is immense knowledge in our holy scriptures, but there is also equally important knowledge, practices, and worldviews embedded in the lived and vivid experiences of current people, which can guide people on how to live sustainably with nature and diversity.

The integration of Anthropology and Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) holds immense potential for enriching our understanding of traditional knowledge and its application in contemporary contexts. Futuristically, it is essential to leverage anthropology's methodologies to enhance the preservation, dissemination, and adaptation of IKS.

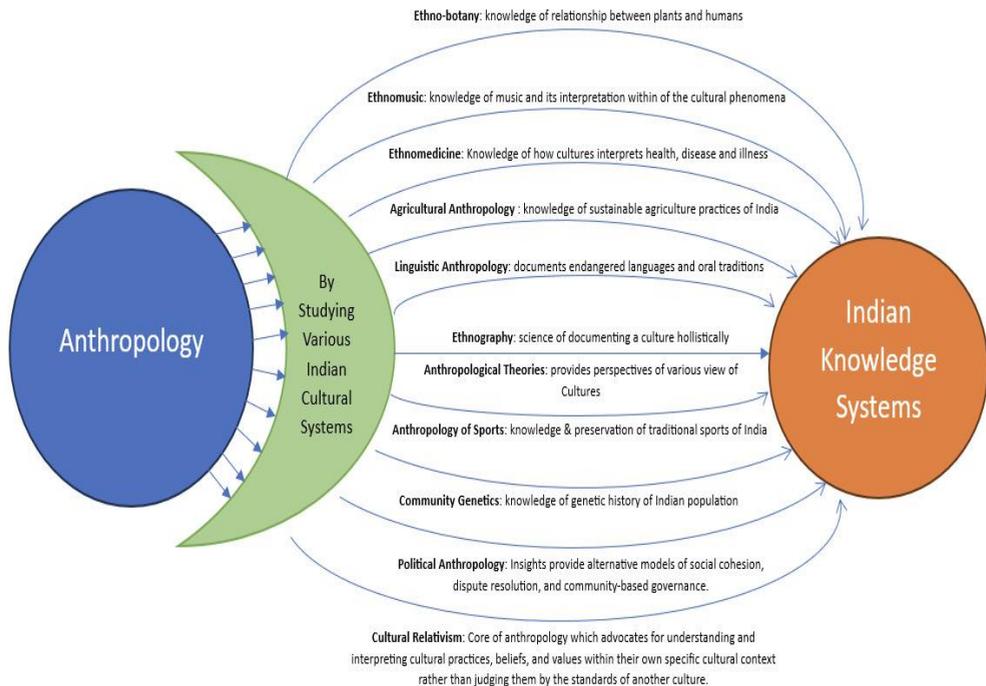
- 1) **Leveraging Anthropological Methods:** Anthropology offers unique methodologies such as ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation, oral history, and visual anthropology. These methods can be instrumental in documenting the living traditions, rituals, and belief systems that form the underpinnings of IKS but are often overlooked in mainstream education and research. For example, using digital ethnography, researchers can create digital archives of oral traditions and folk practices, thus preserving them for future generations while making them accessible to a global audience (Hunter, 2005).
- 2) **Building Collaborative Research Initiatives:** Collaborative research projects between anthropology departments and IKS research centres can help bridge the gap between traditional knowledge bearers and academic scholars. Initiatives like community-based participatory research (CBPR) can empower local communities to actively contribute to the documentation and dissemination of their knowledge systems (Sillitoe, 2006). This effort not only validates indigenous practices but also ensures their relevance in addressing contemporary challenges such as ecological sustainability, healthcare, and social equity.
- 3) **Incorporating IKS in Modern Education:** Educational institutions must prioritize the integration of IKS into their curricula through an anthropological perspective. It could involve introducing case studies of local communities, ethnographic fieldwork modules, and interdisciplinary courses that emphasize the practical applications of traditional knowledge. By doing so, students can develop a deeper appreciation for the richness of IKS and its relevance in solving modern-day issues. Additionally, establishing 'IKS and Anthropology research fellowships and field schools could provide platforms for young scholars to engage with these knowledge systems firsthand.
- 4) **Policy Recommendations for Sustainable Integration:** Policymakers must recognize the value of anthropological insights in revitalizing IKS. By creating

supportive policies that fund interdisciplinary research and promote the inclusion of IKS in national education frameworks, we can ensure the long-term sustainability of these knowledge traditions. Furthermore, anthropologists should be encouraged to collaborate with government bodies in crafting policies that respect and protect the intellectual property rights of indigenous communities, ensuring that the benefits of IKS are shared equitably.

- 5) **Harnessing Technology for Wider Reach:** The use of technology, such as AI-driven data analysis and digital platforms, can amplify the reach of IKS. Anthropologists, in collaboration with technologists, can develop digital repositories that archive traditional knowledge in multimedia formats, thus making it more engaging and accessible to younger generations (Rao, 2006). These platforms can serve as dynamic resources for both academic research and public education.

Blending the anthropological understanding of the 'lived' IKS with rigorous study of textual traditions can lead to a more inclusive, nuanced, and applied understanding of IKS, thereby enhancing its relevance and impact.

The following flowchart depicts the key areas where anthropology and IKS can collaborate:



WAY FORWARD: EMPOWERING IKS SCHOLARS WITH AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL LENS

Anthropology today stands as a vast and multifaceted science, with several sub-branches that focus on addressing critical issues facing humanity through a holistic and nuanced understanding of cultures, societies, and their environments. Its growth has been collinear, evolving alongside emerging fields that aim to solve complex global challenges. Similarly, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) represent a burgeoning multi-disciplinary field, drawing contributions from scholars in diverse areas such as mathematics (Kumar & Joshith, 2024), physics (Dongre & Nene, 2016), and agriculture (Brodt, 2001). This convergence of disciplines highlights the transformative potential of integrating anthropology with IKS to bridge ancient wisdom with modern scientific inquiry.

Anthropology, with its holistic and inclusive approach, is uniquely positioned to explore, document, and preserve the diverse facets of IKS, ranging from the sacred to the practical. This collaboration can unlock innovative solutions to pressing global issues like climate change, public health, and social inequities by leveraging indigenous knowledge systems that have been time-tested for sustainability and resilience. Anthropology's strength lies in its ability to offer both emic (insider) and etic (outsider) perspectives, thereby providing a more nuanced understanding of IKS. By combining anthropological fieldwork and the study of 'lived' experiences with rigorous textual analysis, we can achieve a more inclusive, interdisciplinary approach that enriches both academic scholarship and practical applications (Barnard & Spencer, 2009).

As India progresses towards implementing the National Education Policy 2020, which emphasizes the inclusion of IKS into the mainstream educational framework, anthropology can play a crucial role in shaping curricula that celebrate India's intellectual heritage. It involves equipping students with critical thinking skills while promoting cultural awareness. The anthropological approach can also contribute to decolonizing the curriculum by integrating marginalized voices and regional knowledge systems, thereby fostering a more inclusive and equitable education landscape.

In the future, it will be essential for scholars, educators, and policymakers to recognise the potential of a synergistic collaboration between Anthropology and IKS. Anthropologists can offer valuable methodologies and perspectives to IKS scholars, facilitating a deeper understanding of traditional knowledge systems. By adopting both emic and etic viewpoints, anthropologists can articulate the value of IKS for the scientific community, thus bridging the gap between ancient traditions and contemporary science.

In conclusion, Anthropology and Indian Knowledge Systems are not merely complementary but are indeed collinear in their shared mission to understand human societies and their interactions with the environment. By embracing this synergy, we can harness the strengths of both fields to promote cultural continuity, social innovation, and holistic development. This integration ensures that the wisdom of the past is not only preserved but also leveraged to inform sustainable solutions for the future, addressing the multifaceted challenges of the 21st century.

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