

Indian knowledge systems need to be inclusive to live up to Constitution's spirit

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The tableau of Ministry of Tribal Affairs on the theme 'Tribal Art' passes through the Rajpath during the full dress rehearsal for the Republic Day Parade-2013 in New DelhiPhoto | Wikimedia Commons

Discussions about Indian knowledge systems (IKS) resurfaced after the University Grants Commission released its draft Learning Outcome-based Curriculum Framework, which aims to embed 'ancient Indian wisdom' across subjects. While the UGC has invited feedback on the framework, the draft is attracting scholarly criticism. Beyond its content, critics note that the framework abandons the multidisciplinary and holistic course model envisioned by the National Education Policy (2020), instead prioritising single-major pathways. With most credits allocated to discipline-specific courses, the framework leaves little room for multidisciplinary exploration.

While the goal of multidisciplinary education appears increasingly elusive, the LOCF continues to support the NEP's flagship programme, IKS, through the inclusion of 'Bharatiya philosophy' across modules. To 'decolonise' and 'indigenise' education in India, the curriculum proposes, among other things, the study of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* in commerce education, as well as the integration of

ancient Indian conceptions of *paramanu* (atom) into chemistry. While the UGC's endeavour to reclaim India's ancient heritage may seem commendable, it raises deeper concerns about the erosion of scientific temper, risking an epistemic crisis.

The foundational principle underpinning IKS—Hindu exceptionalism—is not a recent development. Meera Nanda notes that the idea of Hinduism as a 'religion of science' has nearly a two-century-long history, one that exalted the Vedic tradition for its supposed "non-dogmatic rationalism" and "supersensory empiricism". Swami Vivekananda most famously articulated this vision of modern science as a handmaiden of Hindu tradition in his 1893 address in Chicago. The confluence between Hinduism and modern science gained momentum during British colonial rule—caught in the tussle between rationalism and nationalism, self-critique and self-assertion, and reform and revival.

In independent India, the constitutional commitment to scientific enquiry is not enshrined in any grand clause, but rather embedded in the language of the Directive Principles. While Nehru's solemn invocation of 'scientific temper' imagined science as a vehicle for national development, this vision soon gave way to inertia. Beyond a brief period of reform and self-critique, the Indian State lacked the political will to cultivate the social conditions necessary for fostering a new way of thinking among the masses. Nor did it succeed in realising the constitutional vision of science as a normative enterprise—one that should be practised, safeguarded, and subjected to critique within democratic institutions through active civic participation.

However, for a nation emerging from the shadow of colonial rule, independent India struggled with questions of authority, legitimacy, and the preservation of its ancient traditions and knowledge systems. In the effort to decolonise the 'Indian mind' from the lingering effects of colonialism—particularly in the epistemic realms of law, scholarship, and culture—the Sanskritisation of modern science took centre-stage. This process aimed to validate, but rarely challenge, the epistemic claims of Hindu exceptionalism. Such a decolonisation project risks ignoring the Constitution's vision of a citizen-centric science that thrives on dialogue and dissent.

At its core, this decolonising project commits an ontological fallacy: it seeks to universalise a single, privileged mode of knowing, one that is predominantly aligned with upper-caste Vedic and Sanskritic traditions. This endeavour constructs a static and selective portrait of ancient India, which systematically marginalises the subcontinent's rich heterodoxy—including the materialist and agnostic schools of Charvaka, Buddhism, and Jainism. The IKS also erases the profound contributions of Muslim scholars that were integral to the development of India's cultural syncretism.

Contemporary anxieties regarding the preferred version of 'ancient Indian wisdom' stem directly from this drive for conformity and the assertion of a singular, infallible knowledge system. This attitude is fundamentally antithetical to the critical pluralism and intellectual contestation that are the very bedrock of scientific enquiry.

The decolonial preoccupation within IKS scholarship often overlooks the rich reservoir of living indigenous pedagogies. IKS must engage directly with the practices and cultures of early, often understudied, tribal communities. While aiming to decolonise education by engaging with long-

marginalised epistemic traditions, UGC's proposed curriculum risks replacing one form of intellectual hegemony with another. Instead of liberating thought and nurturing critical enquiry, it may mould young minds to adhere to a nation defined by a monolithic history.

This approach creates a tension with the constitutional duty of the citizen, as outlined in Article 51A(h), to "develop the scientific temper, humanism, and the spirit of enquiry and reform". The imperative to include indigenous knowledge is vital; however, the uncritical prioritisation of a particular framework can veer into ideological indoctrination. Upholding the constitutional mandate demands a commitment to democratic engagement. Science and philosophy must remain in the crucible of open debate, dissent, scrutiny, and reform, ensuring they serve as tools for enquiry rather than instruments of dogma.

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(Views are personal)