



Whose Knowledge Matters? Caste, Gender, Power, and the Politics of Indian Knowledge Systems in Contemporary Discourse

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Abstract

Contemporary debates on Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) have gained renewed prominence in academic and policy circles, particularly through claims of epistemic decolonisation and cultural reclamation. While IKS is widely projected as an initiative to counter Western epistemic dominance, this paper critically examines whether its current articulation advances epistemic plurality or reproduces internal hierarchies rooted in caste and gender. Framed within the sociology of knowledge and critical social theory, the study interrogates the central question: whose knowledge matters in contemporary IKS discourse?

Employing a qualitative secondary research methodology, the paper undertakes a critical review of scholarly literature, policy documents such as the National Education Policy (2020), University Grants Commission guidelines, and institutional IKS curricula. Using a conceptual framework informed by power-knowledge relations, epistemic asymmetry, and Dalit feminist standpoint perspectives, the analysis examines patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and authority within dominant representations of Indian knowledge.

The findings reveal that while IKS discourse explicitly critiques colonial epistemologies, it often remains selective by privileging Sanskritic and Vedic textual traditions as the epistemic core of "Indian" knowledge. This selective decolonisation risks facilitating a process of re-Brahmanization, wherein Vedic culture is transformed into Vedic authority, marginalizing Dalit-Bahujan, Adivasi, women's, and oral knowledge systems. The paper further demonstrates how caste and gender shape epistemic legitimacy, relegating marginalized communities to experiential roles while denying them theoretical agency.

The study argues that IKS holds emancipatory potential only if it is redefined as a plural, inclusive, and socially just epistemic framework. Without a critical engagement with internal hierarchies of caste and gender, decolonisation risks reproducing epistemic domination rather than dismantling it.

Keywords

Indian Knowledge Systems, Knowledge and Power, Caste and Gender, Epistemic Asymmetry, Decolonial Discourse, Sanskritic Authority, Inclusive Knowledge Frameworks

Introduction

In a dusty archive room of a prominent Indian university, two researchers sit across a mahogany table examining historical documents. Professor Sharma, a renowned historian from a dominant caste background, carefully handles a Sanskrit manuscript detailing ancient philosophical debates. Across from him, Dr. Kamble, a Dalit woman scholar, holds a faded collection of folk songs, oral testimonies passed down through generations of her community, documenting resistance, suffering, and survival. When they present their findings to the departmental committee, Professor Sharma's work is immediately recognized as "authentic historical scholarship," while Dr. Kamble is advised that her sources are "too subjective" and "lack academic rigor." Her oral histories, despite being meticulously documented and contextualized, are deemed supplementary material at best, footnotes to the "real" history that only written Sanskrit texts can apparently provide.

This scene, replicated in countless variations across Indian academic institutions, reveals a fundamental crisis in Indian knowledge production: the systematic privileging of certain epistemic traditions while delegitimizing others. It raises a deceptively simple yet profoundly complex question: whose knowledge matters? More importantly, who decides what constitutes legitimate knowledge, authentic history, and valid theoretical frameworks?

The politics of knowledge production in India operates at the intersection of multiple hierarchies - caste, gender, class, religion, and region, creating what Gopal Guru (2002) termed an "epistemic asymmetry" where certain communities are relegated to providing raw empirical data while others maintain exclusive rights to theorization and interpretation. This division between "theoretical Brahmins" and "empirical Shudras" is not merely an academic concern but reflects deep-seated power



structures that determine whose experiences are validated, whose histories are preserved, and whose voices shape collective understanding of society, culture, and identity.

- The Palimpsest of Indian History: Layers of Ideological Inscription

Indian history resembles a palimpsest, a manuscript on which successive generations have written and rewritten narratives, each layer obscuring what came before while claiming to reveal the "truth." From Vedic period glorifications to colonial constructions, from socialist-Marxist reinterpretations to contemporary rightist revisions, each ideological force has shaped historical narratives to serve particular political agendas and power structures. Yet beneath these layers lies what might be called the "real" history, the lived experiences, resistance struggles, cultural productions, and knowledge systems of Dalits, Adivasis, Bahujan communities, and marginalized women whose stories have been systematically erased, distorted, or appropriated.

The Vedic period narratives, as transmitted through Brahmanical texts, established a cosmological and social order that naturalized hierarchy and justified exclusion. Colonial historiography, while critiquing certain aspects of Indian society, often reinforced caste hierarchies and created new epistemological frameworks that privileged textual over oral traditions, written over embodied knowledge. Post-independence, socialist and Marxist historians offered important critiques of feudalism and capitalism but frequently subsumed caste within class analysis, rendering specific caste-based oppressions invisible. Currently, rightist historical revisionism claims to "decolonize" Indian knowledge systems while often re-centering Brahmanical epistemologies as the sole authentic "Indian" tradition, thereby erasing Dalit-Bahujan philosophical contributions and indigenous knowledge systems.

- The Missing Narratives: Dalit and Marginalized Histories

What remains conspicuously absent across these ideological rewritings are the histories, knowledges, and theoretical frameworks developed by Dalits and other marginalized communities. As Sharmila Rege (2006) powerfully argued, when Dalit women began writing their own narratives, they revealed not just "different" stories but entirely different epistemological frameworks, ways of knowing grounded in intersectional experiences of caste and gender oppression that challenged both mainstream historiography and dominant feminist scholarship. These narratives contest what Rege called the "official forgetting" of histories of caste oppression, struggles, and resistance.

The erasure operates at multiple levels. First, dominant historiography has systematically devalued non-textual knowledge traditions, oral histories, folk songs, ritual practices, craft knowledge, that have been primary carriers of subaltern memory and resistance. Second, when marginalized voices do enter historical or academic discourse, they are often confined to testimonial roles, providing "raw experience" that upper-caste scholars then theorize and interpret. Third, the intellectual and philosophical contributions of anti-caste thinkers like Jotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar are either marginalized as "political" rather than "theoretical" or, paradoxically, appropriated by the very epistemic communities against whose hegemony they wrote.

- The Contemporary Crisis: Decolonization or Re-Brahminization?

Contemporary debates around "decolonizing" Indian knowledge systems have brought these tensions into sharp relief. While the call to critique colonial epistemological violence is crucial, critical scholars have raised concerns that current institutional efforts toward "indigenization" often represent re-Brahminization, the reassertion of upper-caste knowledge systems as the only authentic "Indian" tradition (Deshpande, 2020). Position papers advocating for "Indian Knowledge Systems" in universities frequently privilege Sanskrit texts and Brahmanical philosophical traditions while ignoring or dismissing Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Islamic, and Dalit-Bahujan intellectual traditions that are equally "Indian."

This appropriation of decolonial language by dominant groups exemplifies what Rajeev Bhargava described as cultural injustice, the replacement or adverse affecting of concepts and categories through which people understand themselves and their world. Ironically, the discourse of reclaiming "indigenous" knowledge often erases the experiences and epistemologies of India's Adivasi communities who face ongoing dispossession and epistemic violence. As several scholars have noted, Hindu supremacist claims to "indigenous" identity erase the actual indigenous peoples who resist both colonial and Brahmanical forms of domination.



The significance of this research extends beyond academic debates. In a period marked by intensifying caste violence, resurgent Brahmanical nationalism, and attempts to rewrite history textbooks and curricula, understanding the politics of knowledge production becomes crucial for democratic struggle. As Ambedkar recognized, political democracy cannot survive without social democracy, and social democracy requires epistemic democracy, the recognition that all communities possess valid ways of knowing, theorizing, and narrating their histories. The question "whose knowledge matters?" is ultimately a question about whose humanity matters, whose suffering is recognized, and whose futures are valued in the imagination of the nation

Methodology and Conceptual Framework

This study employs a qualitative, secondary research methodology grounded in a critical–interpretive approach to examine the politics of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) in contemporary academic and policy discourse. The research is premised on the understanding that IKS is a significant and timely initiative aimed at challenging colonial epistemic dominance; however, its contemporary institutional articulation requires critical examination to assess whether it promotes epistemic plurality or reproduces internal hierarchies based on caste and gender.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- (1) How is Indian Knowledge Systems conceptualized and represented in contemporary academic and policy discourse?
- (2) Whose knowledge traditions are privileged and whose are marginalized within dominant IKS narratives?
- (3) How do caste and gender shape epistemic authority and legitimacy in the construction of IKS?
- (4) To what extent can IKS be redefined as an inclusive and democratic knowledge framework?

Methodologically, the paper relies on a systematic critical review of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, edited volumes, and scholarly essays related to Indian knowledge traditions, caste, gender, education, and epistemology. In addition, policy documents and institutional texts such as the National Education Policy (2020), University Grants Commission guidelines, and university-level IKS curricula are analyzed to understand how IKS is officially framed and operationalized within higher education.

The analysis is informed by a conceptual framework that brings together multiple analytical lenses from the sociology of knowledge and critical social theory. These include the concept of power–knowledge to examine the relationship between epistemic authority and social power; epistemic asymmetry to understand caste-based divisions between theory and experience; and Dalit feminist standpoint perspectives to foreground how caste and gender intersect in knowledge production. Rather than applying these perspectives as rigid theories, they are used conceptually to interrogate patterns of inclusion, exclusion, and hierarchy within IKS discourse.

A comparative epistemic analysis is employed to examine the differential valuation of textual, Sanskritic knowledge vis-à-vis oral traditions, labor-based knowledge, community memory, and experiential narratives of Dalit, Adivasi, and marginalized women's communities. This approach does not reject classical or textual traditions but critically questions their elevation as the sole markers of authentic "Indian" knowledge.

By adopting a normative–critical orientation, the methodology seeks not merely to critique existing IKS frameworks but to contribute to their reimagining. The study thus positions itself as an intervention that argues for a plural, inclusive, and socially just conception of Indian Knowledge Systems, one that recognizes internal diversity and addresses historical and contemporary structures of epistemic exclusion

Findings and Discussion

1. IKS as a Selective Project of Decolonisation

The analysis of contemporary policy documents and academic literature indicates that Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) is predominantly framed as a project of epistemic decolonisation aimed at reducing the dominance of Western knowledge paradigms (Ministry of Education, 2020). However, a closer reading of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and University Grants Commission (UGC) position papers reveals that the conceptualization of decolonisation remains selective and

internally uneven. While colonial epistemologies are explicitly critiqued, internal hierarchies of knowledge rooted in caste and gender are rarely addressed.

Scholars have noted that colonial historiography privileged Sanskrit texts as the primary sources of “authentic” Indian knowledge, thereby reinforcing Brahmanical authority even while subordinating Indian traditions to Western frameworks (Dirks, 2001; Cohn, 1996). The contemporary IKS discourse, rather than rupturing this colonial–Brahmanical epistemic alliance, often reproduces it by continuing to prioritize classical textual traditions as the core of Indian knowledge (Deshpande, 2020). This suggests that the current decolonisation agenda targets Western dominance without adequately interrogating internal epistemic exclusions, thereby limiting its transformative potential.

2. Decolonisation or Re-Brahmanization? The Reassertion of Vedic Authority

A key finding of this study is the symbolic and institutional centrality of Vedic and Sanskritic traditions within IKS initiatives. Analysis of IKS syllabi, policy recommendations, and public academic discourse shows a disproportionate emphasis on the Vedas, Upanishads, classical Hindu philosophy, Yoga, and Ayurveda, while Buddhist, Jain, Islamic, Dalit-Bahujan, Adivasi, and folk knowledge systems remain marginal (UGC, 2022).

This pattern raises a critical question central to this paper: Does IKS represent decolonisation, or does it facilitate re-Brahmanization? Drawing on the work of Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd (2009), the study finds that the elevation of Vedic knowledge as the epistemic foundation of Indian civilization risks transforming cultural heritage into cultural authority. Ilaiah argues that Vedic traditions historically emerged from specific caste locations and systematically excluded Shudras, Ati-Shudras, and women from knowledge production. When such traditions are presented as universally inclusive or culturally neutral, their social origins and exclusionary functions are obscured.

Gopal Guru’s (2002) concept of epistemic asymmetry further illuminates this process, wherein dominant castes retain the authority to theorize, while marginalized communities are positioned as bearers of experience. The contemporary IKS framework, by privileging Sanskritic textuality, risks reproducing this asymmetry by converting Vedic culture into epistemic sovereignty, thereby recentralizing Brahmanical authority under the rhetoric of decolonisation.

3. Caste, Gender, and the Marginalization of Subaltern Knowledge Systems

The findings also demonstrate that Dalit, Adivasi, and women’s knowledge systems remain structurally marginalized within dominant IKS discourse. While these communities are occasionally acknowledged as contributors to India’s cultural diversity, their epistemic traditions, oral histories, folk songs, labor-based knowledge, ritual practices, and resistance narratives—are rarely accorded the status of theoretical knowledge.

This reflects what Sharmila Rege (2006) describes as the denial of epistemic agency to marginalized groups, where their knowledge is treated as “experience” rather than as a source of conceptual or theoretical insight. Dalit women’s narratives, for instance, challenge not only caste oppression but also dominant feminist epistemologies; yet these narratives remain peripheral in mainstream knowledge frameworks.

Similarly, Uma Chakravarti’s (2003) analysis of Brahmanical patriarchy highlights how gendered exclusions are deeply embedded within classical knowledge traditions. The absence of sustained engagement with anti-caste thinkers such as Jotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, and B.R. Ambedkar within IKS curricula further underscores the selective nature of inclusion. Ambedkar’s writings, which explicitly critique Vedic authority and caste-based epistemology, are often categorized as political or reformist rather than philosophical, reinforcing caste-based boundaries between “knowledge” and “critique” (Ambedkar, 1936).

4. Homogenizing “Indian” Knowledge and the Politics of Belonging

Another significant finding concerns the tendency of IKS discourse to promote a homogenized notion of Indian culture, often presented as ancient, unified, and harmonious. This narrative obscures historical conflicts, social struggles, and epistemic contestations that have shaped Indian society. Scholars such as Satish Deshpande (2013) argue that such homogenization serves contemporary political projects by erasing internal inequalities and presenting dominance as tradition.

Rajeev Bhargava’s (2010) concept of cultural injustice is particularly relevant here. He argues that when dominant cultural frameworks are imposed as universal, marginalized communities experience both symbolic exclusion and epistemic displacement. In the context of IKS, this manifests in the



implicit expectation that marginalized groups must align with Sanskritic and Vedic traditions to be recognized as legitimate contributors to “Indian” knowledge. For Adivasi communities, this homogenization is especially problematic, as their cosmologies and knowledge systems are often subsumed under Hindu civilizational narratives, erasing their distinct epistemic and political identities (Xaxa, 2008). Thus, the study finds that IKS discourse not only structures knowledge hierarchies but also regulates belonging and legitimacy within the national imagination.

5. From Vedic Authority to Epistemic Pluralism

Taken together, the findings suggest that IKS is neither inherently emancipatory nor inherently exclusionary. Its political and epistemic implications depend on how it is framed and institutionalized. While IKS has the potential to challenge Western epistemic dominance, its current articulation risks functioning as a project of re-Brahmanization if caste and gender hierarchies remain unaddressed. Building on Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ (2014) idea of epistemologies of the South, this study argues for reimagining IKS as a plural epistemic framework rather than a civilizational hierarchy. Such a framework would recognize anti-caste thought, indigenous cosmologies, feminist epistemologies, and oral traditions as constitutive of Indian knowledge, not supplementary to it. Without this redefinition, IKS risks reproducing the very exclusions it claims to overcome substituting colonial dominance with internal epistemic authoritarianism rather than advancing epistemic justice.

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