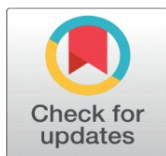
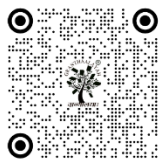


REIMAGINING INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS THROUGH SUBALTERN EPISTEMOLOGIES: TOWARDS A DEMOCRATIC, INCLUSIVE, AND CONTEXTUAL CURRICULUM IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary resurgence of interest in Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), particularly following the implementation of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, has generated extensive academic discourse concerning the role of indigenous epistemologies in curriculum transformation within India. Nevertheless, dominant institutional interpretations of IKS continue to privilege Sanskritic and elite-centered intellectual traditions while marginalizing the epistemic contributions of Dalit–Bahujan, Adivasi, nomadic, minority, laboring, and other subaltern communities. Such exclusions reproduce historical hierarchies of knowledge and reinforce structures of epistemic inequality embedded within Indian society (Guru, 2021; Rege, 2018).

This article critically interrogates the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems into contemporary educational frameworks through the analytical lenses of Dalit–Bahujan thought, subaltern historiography, constitutional morality, and critical pedagogy. Drawing upon the writings of B. R. Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, Paulo Freire, Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, Sharmila Rege, and Gail Omvedt, the paper argues that educational reform must transcend civilizational glorification and instead cultivate emancipatory, pluralistic, and socially accountable pedagogical frameworks. Contemporary curriculum discourse must therefore acknowledge indigenous ecological wisdom, labor-centered epistemologies, oral traditions, folk knowledge systems, multilingual pedagogies, and anti-caste intellectual traditions as foundational rather than supplementary domains of knowledge production (Omvedt, 2021; Ilaiah Shepherd, 2022).

The article further examines the tensions between cultural nationalism and epistemic democracy, emphasizing that meaningful integration of IKS requires critical engagement with caste, gender, labor, and power relations. It contends that democratizing curriculum through Dalit–Bahujan and subaltern perspectives can contribute toward cultivating critical consciousness, constitutional ethics, ecological sustainability, and social justice within contemporary Indian education (Freire, 2021; Kumaravadivelu, 2023).

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems, Dalit–Bahujan Epistemology, Subaltern Studies, Critical Pedagogy, Inclusive Curriculum, Constitutional Morality, NEP 2020, Indigenous Knowledge, Social Justice, Epistemic Democracy

1. INTRODUCTION

In the twenty-first century, educational discourse in India has increasingly shifted from narrowly instrumental and market-oriented paradigms toward frameworks emphasizing ethical citizenship, social justice, cultural plurality, ecological sustainability, and democratic participation. Within this intellectual context, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) have emerged as a significant area of scholarly engagement, particularly following the policy interventions introduced

through the Ministry of Education under the National Education Policy 2020. However, the growing institutionalization of IKS simultaneously raises critical questions concerning representation, epistemic legitimacy, and social inclusion within educational structures (Government of India, 2020; Nambissan & Rao, 2022).

Mainstream articulations of Indian Knowledge Systems have frequently privileged Sanskritic textual traditions, Vedic philosophy, and upper-caste intellectual histories while neglecting the lived experiences and knowledge traditions of Dalit–Bahujan, Adivasi, pastoral, artisanal, nomadic, minority, and laboring communities. Such selective representations risk reproducing Brahmanical epistemic hierarchies under the guise of cultural revivalism. Contemporary scholarship in subaltern studies and anti-caste thought therefore insists that Indian knowledge traditions cannot be conceptualized as homogeneous or singular; rather, they represent contested, plural, and historically layered formations shaped by resistance, labor, oral memory, and collective social experience (Guru, 2021; Ilaiah Shepherd, 2022).

Annihilation of Caste remains foundational in this regard because B. R. Ambedkar conceptualized education not merely as literacy acquisition but as a transformative instrument capable of dismantling caste oppression and democratizing access to knowledge. Similarly, Gulamgiri exposed the relationship between caste domination and educational exclusion, arguing that knowledge production within India had historically functioned to preserve social inequality. Savitribai Phule further expanded this emancipatory pedagogical vision by foregrounding women’s education, dignity, and social equality as indispensable components of democratic learning (Rege, 2018; Omvedt, 2021).

These concerns resonate strongly with Pedagogy of the Oppressed, wherein Paulo Freire critiques authoritarian educational structures and advocates dialogic pedagogy capable of fostering critical consciousness among oppressed communities. Likewise, contemporary decolonial theorists such as B. Kumaravadivelu emphasize context-sensitive pedagogies that resist Eurocentric and hegemonic forms of knowledge production (Kumaravadivelu, 2023).

Consequently, the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems into contemporary curriculum must move beyond romanticized narratives of civilizational glory and instead embrace epistemic plurality, constitutional morality, social justice, and critical inquiry. The inclusion of Dalit literature, oral traditions, tribal ecological knowledge, folk epistemologies, labor-centered practices, and anti-caste intellectual histories is therefore essential for constructing an inclusive and democratic educational framework suitable for contemporary India (Freire, 2021; Nambissan & Rao, 2022).

2. RETHINKING INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS BEYOND HEGEMONIC KNOWLEDGE TRADITIONS

Indian Knowledge Systems encompass an extraordinarily diverse range of philosophical, ecological, linguistic, medicinal, technological, artistic, and ethical traditions developed across centuries within the Indian subcontinent. Nevertheless, institutional discourse surrounding IKS has often reduced this complexity into a predominantly Sanskritic and upper-caste civilizational framework. Such reductionism obscures the epistemic contributions of productive castes, tribal communities, women, oral cultures, and labor-centered social formations that have historically sustained Indian society through embodied and community-based practices (Guru, 2021; Ilaiah Shepherd, 2022).

Why I Am Not a Hindu and Post-Hindu India challenge this exclusionary paradigm by arguing that productive labor constitutes a foundational mode of knowledge production. According to Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, agrarian communities, shepherds, potters, leather workers, fisherfolk, blacksmiths, and artisans possess sophisticated forms of technological, ecological, and scientific knowledge accumulated through generations of lived experience. Such knowledge systems disrupt caste-based binaries separating “manual labor” from “intellectual labor” and compel educators to rethink the social foundations of epistemology itself (Ilaiah Shepherd, 2022).

Similarly, Humiliation: Claims and Context demonstrates how caste operates not merely as a social hierarchy but also as a mechanism of epistemic humiliation that denies intellectual legitimacy to marginalized communities. The exclusion of Dalit–Bahujan experiences from mainstream curriculum reflects broader structures of knowledge inequality embedded within educational institutions (Guru, 2021).

Subaltern historiography further critiques elite-centered narratives by foregrounding people’s histories, oral archives, resistance movements, and community memory. Scholars associated with subaltern studies argue that history and knowledge production in India have frequently erased the agency of oppressed communities by privileging textual

and institutional sources controlled by dominant castes. Consequently, democratizing Indian Knowledge Systems requires recognizing oral traditions, folk performances, protest songs, labor practices, and indigenous ecological wisdom as legitimate epistemological domains rather than peripheral cultural artifacts (Chakrabarty, 2022; Rege, 2018).

3. SUBALTERN PERSPECTIVES AND THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF CURRICULUM

The intellectual contributions of Dalit–Bahujan thinkers remain indispensable for constructing socially inclusive curriculum frameworks within contemporary India. Among these thinkers, B. R. Ambedkar occupies a central position because his educational philosophy linked knowledge directly with dignity, equality, and democratic citizenship. Ambedkar consistently argued that education must cultivate rational inquiry, scientific temper, and constitutional morality rather than reinforce inherited social hierarchies (Ambedkar, 2023 edition).

Dalits and the Democratic Revolution emphasizes that anti-caste movements in India generated alternative democratic traditions rooted in social equality and resistance against Brahmanical domination. Gail Omvedt contends that Dalit–Bahujan movements should be understood not as marginal social protests but as foundational democratic interventions that redefined questions of citizenship, labor, and justice within modern India (Omvedt, 2021).

Likewise, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* foregrounds the intersectionality of caste, gender, and epistemic exclusion. Sharmila Rege critiques dominant academic discourse for universalizing upper-caste experiences while marginalizing Dalit women’s voices. She therefore advocates pedagogies rooted in lived experience, reflexivity, and social accountability, emphasizing that curriculum must engage with embodied histories of oppression and resistance (Rege, 2018).

The Dravidian intellectual movement led by Periyar E. V. Ramasamy similarly challenged religious orthodoxy, caste hierarchy, and linguistic domination. Periyar’s emphasis on rationalism, self-respect, and anti-caste consciousness expanded the scope of democratic education by insisting that pedagogy must interrogate structures of oppression rather than reproduce them. Integrating such intellectual traditions into curriculum can therefore foster critical citizenship, democratic participation, and socially engaged learning practices within contemporary educational institutions (Pandian, 2021).

4. CRITICAL PEDAGOGY, SUBALTERN AGENCY, AND KNOWLEDGE RESISTANCE

The integration of Indian Knowledge Systems acquires transformative significance when examined through the framework of critical pedagogy. Paulo Freire critiques the “banking model” of education because it reduces learners to passive recipients of officially sanctioned knowledge while discouraging critical reflection upon structures of domination. In contrast, Freire advocates dialogic pedagogy and conscientization, whereby learners actively interrogate social inequalities through collective reflection and praxis (Freire, 2021).

Dalit–Bahujan and subaltern pedagogical traditions closely resonate with Freirean educational philosophy because both foreground lived experience, dialogue, resistance, and social transformation. Educational institutions within India must therefore become democratic spaces where learners critically examine caste, gender, religion, labor, language, and power relations rather than merely internalize hegemonic narratives (Rege, 2018).

Contemporary decolonial scholarship similarly critiques Eurocentric frameworks that universalize Western epistemologies while marginalizing indigenous and local forms of knowledge. B. Kumaravadivelu argues that postmethod pedagogy must remain context-sensitive, culturally grounded, and resistant to epistemic domination. Such pedagogical approaches are particularly relevant in multilingual and socially stratified contexts like India, where knowledge production remains deeply intertwined with caste and linguistic privilege (Kumaravadivelu, 2023). Within this framework, Dalit autobiographies, protest literature, oral narratives, folk performances, and community histories emerge as powerful pedagogical resources capable of cultivating democratic consciousness and critical engagement. These forms of knowledge challenge canonical curricular structures by centering voices historically excluded from institutional education (Chakrabarty, 2022).

5. INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE, ECOLOGICAL WISDOM, AND LABOR-ORIENTED EPISTEMOLOGIES

One of the most significant yet neglected dimensions of Indian Knowledge Systems concerns indigenous scientific traditions embedded within labor practices, ecological relationships, and community survival strategies. Dominant representations of science within formal education frequently privilege textual and institutional forms of knowledge while disregarding embodied and experiential epistemologies cultivated by marginalized communities (Visvanathan, 2022).

Dalit-Bahujan epistemology conceptualizes labor itself as a mode of intellectual production. Agricultural communities possess sophisticated knowledge concerning biodiversity, irrigation systems, seed preservation, seasonal cycles, and sustainable cultivation methods developed through intergenerational practice. Similarly, Adivasi communities maintain advanced ecological knowledge relating to forest management, medicinal plants, water conservation, and biodiversity protection (Gadgil, 2021).

Traditional occupations historically associated with marginalized castes — including weaving, fishing, pottery, metallurgy, carpentry, and leatherwork — embody highly specialized technological knowledge accumulated through centuries of practice. Such labor-centered epistemologies destabilize caste-based distinctions between intellectual and manual work while simultaneously democratizing the concept of scientific knowledge itself (Ilaiah Shepherd, 2022).

Integrating these traditions into curriculum can contribute toward sustainability education, ecological ethics, dignity of labor, and experiential learning. Moreover, such inclusion challenges elitist educational structures by recognizing productive communities as legitimate knowledge producers rather than passive subjects of study (Visvanathan, 2022).

6. VERNACULAR CULTURES, FOLK KNOWLEDGE, AND EPISTEMIC DIVERSITY

Language constitutes a central medium through which cultural memory, collective identity, and community knowledge are preserved and transmitted. India's epistemic diversity is reflected not only in classical literary traditions but also in folk languages, oral storytelling practices, regional dialects, performative cultures, and tribal linguistic systems (Annamalai, 2021).

Scholars such as Sharmila Rege argue that dominant academic discourse frequently erases marginalized voices by privileging elite linguistic forms and institutionalized modes of expression. Dalit literature, protest poetry, oral testimonies, folk songs, and community narratives therefore function as counter-hegemonic archives that challenge structures of epistemic exclusion (Rege, 2018).

The emphasis on multilingual education within the Government of India's NEP 2020 provides opportunities for linguistic democratization. However, implementation must avoid reproducing hierarchies that privilege dominant regional or classical languages while marginalizing tribal dialects and subaltern linguistic traditions (Government of India, 2020).

Folk theatre, community storytelling, performative traditions, and oral archives can enrich pedagogical practice by encouraging participatory, experiential, and culturally responsive learning environments. Such approaches not only strengthen educational accessibility but also preserve endangered cultural knowledge systems threatened by homogenizing forces of globalization and linguistic standardization (Annamalai, 2021).

7. CONSTITUTIONAL ETHICS, EQUALITY, AND TRANSFORMATIVE EDUCATION

The integration of Indian Knowledge Systems into curriculum must remain firmly anchored in constitutional values including equality, liberty, fraternity, secularism, and human dignity. Without such grounding, educational discourse risks legitimizing exclusionary nationalism, caste hierarchy, and cultural majoritarianism under the rhetoric of civilizational revival (Ambedkar, 2023 edition).

B. R. Ambedkar consistently argued that democracy is not merely a political arrangement but a mode of associated living grounded in mutual respect and social equality. Consequently, curriculum must cultivate constitutional morality

alongside cultural awareness. Education should therefore encourage learners to critically interrogate oppressive social structures while simultaneously appreciating the plurality and diversity of Indian intellectual traditions (Guru, 2021).

The Doctor and the Saint revisits Ambedkar's critique of caste and interrogates the contradictions embedded within dominant nationalist discourse. Such interventions demonstrate that Indian traditions contain both emancipatory and oppressive dimensions that must be examined critically rather than celebrated unreflectively (Roy, 2022 edition).

Accordingly, integrating IKS into educational institutions requires balancing indigenous knowledge with scientific temper, democratic inquiry, human rights, and social justice. A genuinely inclusive curriculum cannot romanticize the past while remaining silent regarding histories of caste violence, gender exclusion, and social inequality (Nambissan & Rao, 2022).

8. DEBATES, LIMITATIONS, AND CRITICAL CONCERNS

Despite its transformative possibilities, the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems into curriculum remains fraught with conceptual, political, and pedagogical challenges. One major concern involves cultural essentialism, wherein India's vast diversity is reduced into a singular and homogenized civilizational narrative dominated by upper-caste perspectives.

Such homogenization erases the epistemic contributions of Dalit-Bahujan, tribal, minority, feminist, regional, and labor-centered traditions (Guru, 2021). Another critical issue concerns political appropriation. Contemporary discourse surrounding IKS occasionally romanticizes ancient traditions while simultaneously neglecting histories of caste oppression, patriarchy, social conflict, and anti-caste resistance movements. Under such circumstances, curriculum risks functioning as an ideological apparatus rather than a democratic educational framework (Omvedt, 2021).

The structural exclusion of marginalized communities from educational institutions further complicates the democratization of knowledge. Scholars such as Geetha B. Nambissan and Srinivasa Rao demonstrate that educational systems frequently reproduce social inequalities through unequal access to cultural capital, linguistic privilege, and institutional resources (Nambissan & Rao, 2022).

Therefore, there remains an urgent need for evidence-based, interdisciplinary, and critically informed engagement with Indian Knowledge Systems. Indigenous traditions should neither be dismissed through colonial prejudices nor romanticized as infallible repositories of wisdom. Instead, curriculum design must uphold scientific temper, democratic debate, constitutional ethics, and critical inquiry as foundational pedagogical principles (Kumaravadivelu, 2023).

9. CONCLUSION

The integration of Indian Knowledge Systems into contemporary curriculum possesses immense transformative potential when approached through Dalit-Bahujan, subaltern, democratic, and constitutional perspectives. Indian Knowledge Systems should not be understood merely as repositories of ancient textual wisdom; rather, they represent living and evolving traditions shaped by labor, ecological interaction, oral memory, resistance movements, and collective social experience.

A socially just educational framework must therefore move beyond elite-centered and exclusively Sanskritic formulations of Indian civilization and instead foreground the epistemic contributions of Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi, minority, feminist, tribal, and laboring communities. The intellectual interventions of B. R. Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, Sharmila Rege, and Gail Omvedt remain indispensable for constructing emancipatory pedagogies rooted in dignity, equality, and social transformation.

Holistic education within contemporary India must integrate indigenous wisdom with constitutional morality, scientific temper, ecological consciousness, multilingualism, democratic inquiry, and critical pedagogy. Curriculum should cultivate ethical reflection, experiential learning, social responsibility, and critical consciousness rather than reproduce inherited inequalities. Ultimately, meaningful incorporation of Indian Knowledge Systems requires epistemic democratization — a process through which historically marginalized communities reclaim visibility, dignity, and intellectual agency within educational institutions. Only under such conditions can IKS contribute toward building an inclusive, humane, socially transformative, and democratically grounded education system capable of responding to the complexities of contemporary Indian society.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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