

Integrating Indigenous Wisdom: Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) and the NEP 2020 Vision

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Abstract

This chapter explores the integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) within India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. It highlights the policy's recognition of indigenous wisdom as essential for culturally relevant, inclusive education. The discussion covers the nature of IKS, pathways for incorporating it into curricula and pedagogy, and the challenges involved. Emphasizing community participation and respect for diverse epistemologies, the chapter argues that embedding indigenous knowledge can enrich education, promote sustainability, and empower marginalized communities. The NEP 2020 offers a unique opportunity to bridge traditional wisdom and modern education for a more equitable future.

Keywords: *Indigenous Knowledge Systems, NEP 2020, Indian education, cultural inclusion, sustainable education and curriculum integration.*

Meaning of Indigenous Knowledge System

Indigenous Knowledge Systems refer to the body of knowledge, practices, and beliefs developed over centuries by indigenous communities through direct interaction with their environment. This knowledge is deeply tied to specific places, languages, and cultural identities, making it unique and context-dependent. Unlike scientific knowledge that is often universal and reductionist, IKS is holistic and relational—it sees humans as part of ecosystems, not separate from them.

IKS is dynamic, adapting to changing conditions while holding on to core values such as respect for nature, communal sharing, and intergenerational responsibility. Despite its richness, it has often been dismissed as folklore or superstition by dominant educational and scientific institutions. The NEP 2020's acknowledgment of IKS seeks to correct this imbalance by positioning indigenous wisdom as an equal contributor to knowledge.

Understanding Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS)

Indigenous Knowledge Systems refer to the complex set of understandings, skills, practices, and beliefs developed by indigenous communities through long-standing interactions with their environment. This knowledge is transmitted orally across generations and deeply rooted in local ecology, spirituality, and social structures. IKS encompasses areas such as agriculture, medicine, biodiversity conservation, natural resource management, and conflict resolution.

Unlike formal scientific knowledge, IKS is contextual, holistic, and community-centered. It offers insights into sustainable living, resilience, and adaptive strategies that have supported indigenous peoples for centuries. Recognizing the value of IKS challenges the dominance of Western epistemologies and calls for pluralistic approaches in education and policy.

For example, many indigenous agricultural communities practice forms of shifting cultivation or mixed cropping that maintain soil fertility and biodiversity. Traditional healers use plant-based remedies that have been refined through trial and error over generations. Storytelling, rituals, and songs carry not only cultural but ecological knowledge, preserving lessons on resource management and social harmony.

NEP 2020 and its Vision on IKS

The NEP 2020 explicitly endorses the integration of Indian knowledge traditions, including indigenous wisdom, in the curriculum at all levels. The policy states: “Educational institutions at all levels must ensure that Indian knowledge systems and traditional wisdom, including tribal and indigenous knowledge, are integrated into the curriculum.”

This endorsement is significant for several reasons. First, it acknowledges the historical marginalization of indigenous knowledge in mainstream education. Second, it aligns with global frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which advocates for the protection and promotion of indigenous cultures and knowledge.

The NEP 2020 explicitly incorporates indigenous knowledge into its framework, signalling a paradigm shift. The policy highlights the need to “inculcate values of respect and empathy towards other cultures and communities,” and to root education in India’s rich cultural

diversity. This includes integrating Indian knowledge traditions such as Ayurveda, yoga, classical arts, and tribal wisdom into the curriculum.

One of the policy's key ambitions is to make education more experiential and connected to learners' social contexts. For tribal and indigenous students, this means seeing their cultures reflected in textbooks, teaching methods, and school environments. This recognition is not only about validation but also about making education relevant and engaging.

For instance, the NEP encourages multilingual education, which respects mother tongues and local dialects—languages that carry indigenous knowledge. This can improve comprehension and participation, especially in early education, leading to better learning outcomes.

NEP 2020 encourages curriculum design that is multilingual, multidisciplinary, and rooted in local contexts, allowing indigenous communities to see their heritage reflected and respected in formal education. This can contribute to improved self-esteem among indigenous youth and greater community engagement.

Practical Pathways for Integrating Iks into Education

Integrating IKS in Education under NEP 2020 involves Multiple Dimensions:

Curriculum and Content Development

Curricula need to be redesigned to include indigenous histories, languages, arts, sciences, and philosophies. For instance, agricultural practices based on IKS can be taught alongside modern agronomy to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of sustainable farming. Similarly, indigenous medicinal knowledge can complement contemporary health education.

Integrating IKS requires rethinking curriculum content beyond tokenistic mentions. It means weaving indigenous perspectives throughout subjects—history, science, geography, health, and the arts. For example, history lessons could include indigenous narratives about land stewardship and resistance to colonialism, offering a fuller picture than standard textbooks.

Science education can embrace indigenous ecological knowledge, such as methods of water conservation or weather prediction that have been time-tested by communities. In health education, traditional medicinal knowledge could be introduced alongside modern medicine, encouraging respect for both.

Moreover, local arts and crafts can be incorporated as practical learning modules, preserving skills and providing livelihood opportunities. This approach not only enriches the content but also bridges formal education with community life.

Teacher Training and Capacity Building

Educators must be sensitized and trained to appreciate and deliver indigenous content respectfully and accurately. This includes recruiting teachers from indigenous communities and developing pedagogical methods that align with oral traditions and experiential learning.

Teachers are the linchpins of successful integration. Many educators currently lack training in indigenous cultures or may hold unconscious biases against them. The NEP 2020 emphasizes the need for specialized training programs that equip teachers with cultural sensitivity and knowledge of IKS.

Recruiting teachers from indigenous backgrounds themselves can be powerful, as they bring lived experience and community trust. Pedagogical approaches should also adapt to oral traditions and participatory learning styles common in indigenous contexts, moving away from rote memorization toward dialogue, storytelling, and hands-on activities.

Community Engagement and Participatory Approaches

True integration of IKS requires indigenous communities to be active partners, not just subjects of study. Participatory curriculum design involving elders, knowledge holders, and local organizations ensures authenticity and respect.

Community involvement can extend beyond curriculum to governance of schools and monitoring of educational outcomes, fostering accountability and relevance. This collaborative model empowers communities, supports cultural continuity, and counters the alienation many indigenous students feel in standardized education systems.

Meaningful integration of IKS requires active involvement of indigenous communities in curriculum design, teaching, and assessment. This participatory approach ensures that indigenous voices guide the representation of their knowledge and culture, preventing misappropriation or distortion.

Use of Technology and Documentation

Digital tools can aid in the documentation, preservation, and dissemination of indigenous knowledge, making it accessible to wider audiences while safeguarding sensitive information. NEP 2020's vision of leveraging technology in education offers opportunities to create repositories of indigenous wisdom that can serve both educational and research purposes.

NEP 2020's push for digital literacy and infrastructure in rural and tribal areas can support these efforts. However, caution is needed to ensure sensitive knowledge is not exploited or commodified without consent. Ethical protocols and community control over data are essential.

Challenges and Considerations

While the incorporation of IKS in education is promising, it faces challenges:

Epistemological Differences: Bridging indigenous and formal scientific epistemologies requires careful negotiation to avoid devaluing either system.

Standardization vs. Diversity: IKS is highly localized and diverse. Developing standardized curricula without eroding this diversity is complex.

Intellectual Property and Ethics: Protecting indigenous intellectual property rights and ensuring ethical use of knowledge is critical.

Resource and Capacity Constraints: Many educational institutions lack resources or expertise to implement IKS-based curricula effectively.

Risk of Appropriation: Without safeguards, indigenous knowledge can be misrepresented or exploited commercially, leading to cultural harm. Legal frameworks and community rights must be strengthened.

Addressing these challenges requires policy support, adequate funding, cross-sector collaboration, and continuous dialogue between government, academia, and indigenous communities.

The Broader Impact of IKS Integration

Incorporating Indigenous Knowledge Systems into education is not only about preserving traditions but also about enriching the educational experience and fostering sustainable futures. IKS offers holistic worldviews that emphasize harmony with nature, community

well-being, and resilience—principles increasingly relevant in the face of global challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss.

Moreover, integrating indigenous wisdom aligns with NEP 2020’s commitment to inclusive and equitable education. It empowers marginalized communities and promotes cultural diversity as a strength rather than a barrier.

For India, a country grappling with ecological crises and social inequalities, IKS provides valuable insights for resilience and harmony. Education that embraces indigenous wisdom can cultivate citizens who are not only knowledgeable but also empathetic and grounded in their cultural roots.

In global terms, India’s approach can serve as a model for other countries seeking to decolonize education and create pluralistic knowledge systems.

Conclusion

The NEP 2020’s recognition of Indigenous Knowledge Systems signals a progressive step toward an education that respects and reflects India’s rich cultural mosaic. Properly implemented, this integration can bridge the gap between traditional wisdom and modern knowledge, fostering learners who are not only academically competent but also culturally grounded and environmentally conscious.

To realize this vision, education must be reimagined as a dialogue between diverse knowledge traditions, grounded in respect and collaboration. This approach can nurture learners who are well-rounded, culturally aware, and equipped to face contemporary challenges with wisdom drawn from the past.

By weaving indigenous wisdom into the fabric of education, India can build a future that honors its heritage and embraces sustainable development, ensuring that the voices of its original custodians continue to guide and inspire generations to come

The future of education under NEP 2020 hinges on honouring indigenous voices, supporting community participation, and crafting curricula that celebrate knowledge in all its forms. In doing so, India can set an example of how education can be a tool for cultural preservation and sustainable development, rooted in the wisdom of its original custodians.

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