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Indian Knowledge System in Sanskrit Literature

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Abstract:

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) represents a profound confluence of philosophy, science, literature, ethics, and spirituality. Sanskrit literature, as the principal medium of ancient Indian expression, has served as the most authentic repository of this knowledge tradition. From the Vedic hymns to the Upaniṣads, from the epic wisdom of the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa to the systematic treatises on grammar, logic, astronomy, Ayurveda, polity, poetics, and architecture, Sanskrit has preserved and transmitted the intellectual heritage of India for millennia.

The Indian epistemological framework, rooted in the six darśanas—Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Mīmāṃsā, and Vedānta—demonstrates a rational yet spiritual approach to knowledge. Similarly, Sanskrit texts on śāstra (disciplines) such as Āyurveda (Caraka Saṃhitā, Suśruta Saṃhitā), Jyotiṣa (astronomy and astrology), Vāstuśāstra, Arthaśāstra of Kauṭilya, and Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharata, reveal how holistic, multidisciplinary, and interlinked the Indian knowledge system was.

The transmission of IKS through Sanskrit literature was not limited to intellectual theory but was deeply intertwined with practice, ethics (dharma), and aesthetics (rasa). The Indian approach to knowledge emphasized not only material prosperity but also spiritual liberation (mokṣa). Sanskrit authors saw knowledge as a means for the upliftment of both the individual and society.

This article critically analyzes the role of Sanskrit literature in preserving, systematizing, and transmitting the Indian knowledge system. It explores the epistemological, scientific, literary, and cultural dimensions embedded in texts, while also highlighting their contemporary relevance in modern discourse on sustainable living, health, governance, and ethics. The study further situates Sanskrit within global knowledge traditions and reflects on the importance of integrating IKS into modern education.

Keywords:

Indian Knowledge System, Sanskrit Literature, Vedas, Upaniṣads, Śāstras, Philosophy, Ayurveda, Arthaśāstra, Nāṭyaśāstra, Epistemology, Darśana, Knowledge Traditions.

Introduction:

India's knowledge traditions, collectively termed as the Bhāratiya Jñānaparamparā (भारतीयज्ञानपरम्परा), are among the most ancient and continuous intellectual heritages of the world. Sanskrit has been the language of this transmission, serving as a storehouse of philosophy, science, ethics, and aesthetics. The unique feature of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) lies in its integration of spirituality with rational inquiry, where knowledge (jñāna) was pursued not merely for material benefit but for the realization of truth (satya) and liberation (mokṣa). As the Ṛgveda declares:

“Ā no bhadrāḥ kratavo yantu viśvataḥ” (Ṛgveda 1.89.1)

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“Let noble thoughts come to us from every direction.”

This open-mindedness and inclusivity formed the foundation of the Indian epistemological system.

• Foundations of Indian Knowledge in Vedic and Upaniṣadic Literature

The Vedas are the earliest Sanskrit texts and constitute the bedrock of Indian knowledge. The Saṃhitās preserve hymns that blend philosophy, ritual, cosmology, and early scientific thought. The Brāhmaṇas explore ritual and symbolic interpretation, while the Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads delve into metaphysics and epistemology.

The Upaniṣads especially emphasize inquiry into the self (ātman) and ultimate reality (brahman):

“Tattvamasi” (Chāndogya Upaniṣad 6.8.7)

“Thou art that.”

This aphorism indicates the identity of the individual with the cosmic principle, reflecting the Indian pursuit of knowledge as self-realization.

• Epics as Knowledge Repositories

The Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa are not merely narratives but encyclopedic repositories of Indian wisdom. The Bhagavadgītā, embedded in the Mahābhārata, synthesizes philosophy, ethics, and practice:

“Karmanyeva adhikāraṣṭe mā phaleṣu kadācana”

(Bhagavadgītā 2.47)

“Your right is only to action, never to its fruits.”

This reflects the ethical foundation of knowledge. The epics also preserve political wisdom, military science, economics, and social norms, making them integral to the Indian knowledge system.

• Darśana (Philosophical Systems)

The six classical darśanas represent rigorous intellectual traditions:

1. Nyāya – logic and epistemology
2. Vaiśeṣika – atomistic and natural philosophy
3. Sāṅkhya – dualism of puruṣa and prakṛti
4. Yoga – discipline of mind and body
5. Pūrva Mīmāṃsā – ritual and dharma
6. Vedānta – metaphysics of brahman and ātman

Each system articulated methodologies of knowledge acquisition (pramāṇa). For example, Nyāya emphasizes perception (pratyakṣa), inference (anumāna), comparison (upamāna), and verbal testimony (śabda) as valid sources of knowledge.

• Scientific Knowledge in Sanskrit Literature

1. Ayurveda

Texts like Caraka Saṃhitā and Suśruta Saṃhitā codified medical science. Caraka stressed preventive healthcare and balance of doṣas, while Suśruta advanced surgical techniques.

“Dharmārthakāmamokṣāṇām ārogyaṃ mūlamuttamam”

(Caraka Saṃhitā)

“Health is the supreme foundation of dharma, wealth, desire, and liberation.”

2. Jyotiṣa (Astronomy and Astrology)

Sanskrit astronomers like Āryabhaṭa and Varāhamihira revolutionized mathematics and astronomy. Āryabhaṭa’s Āryabhaṭīya introduced place-value notation and the concept of zero.

3. Arthaśāstra

Kauṭilya’s Arthaśāstra integrates economics, statecraft, diplomacy, and administration. It represents the political science tradition of India.

4. Nāṭyaśāstra

Bharata’s Nāṭyaśāstra systematized performing arts, aesthetics (rasa), and dramaturgy. Its theory of rasa influenced not only literature but also Indian psychology and aesthetics.

5. Ethics, Dharma, and Society

Sanskrit literature closely links knowledge with ethics. Manusmṛti, Yājñavalkya Smṛti, and Dharmaśāstra texts codified social, legal, and moral frameworks. Knowledge was always situated within dharma, ensuring that intellectual pursuits benefitted society.

6. Transmission of Knowledge

The gurukula system, described in texts, emphasized oral transmission, memorization, debate, and experiential learning. Knowledge was transmitted holistically—integrating intellectual, ethical, and practical dimensions.

7. Contemporary Relevance of IKS

In today’s era of fragmented knowledge, the Indian holistic model offers valuable insights:

- Sustainable living through Ayurveda and Vedic ecology
- Ethical governance through Arthaśāstra
- Mindfulness and wellness through Yoga
- Interdisciplinary learning through śāstric traditions
- Sanskrit literature thus continues to inspire global knowledge systems.

• Literature Review

Scholars have long recognized the significance of Sanskrit literature in preserving India’s intellectual heritage. P.V. Kane’s History of Dharmaśāstra provides an exhaustive analysis of law, ethics, and society through Sanskrit texts. S. Radhakrishnan’s Indian Philosophy elucidates the systematic thought of the six darśanas. Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya’s Lokāyata traces materialistic traditions in Sanskrit philosophy.

In the domain of science, scholars like David Pingree have studied Sanskrit astronomical texts, while Dominik Wujastyk has highlighted Ayurveda’s contributions to medical history. Kapila Vatsyayan’s works on Nāṭyaśāstra explore Indian aesthetics as expressed in Sanskrit.

Recent research emphasizes the relevance of Indian Knowledge Systems in modern education. The Government of India's NEP 2020 stresses integrating IKS into curricula, with Sanskrit texts as primary sources. UNESCO has recognized Yoga and Ayurveda as global heritages, underscoring their Sanskrit roots.

Thus, literature reveals both historical continuity and contemporary applicability of IKS through Sanskrit.

Conclusion:

The Indian Knowledge System, as reflected in Sanskrit literature, represents one of the most holistic, enduring, and profound intellectual traditions in world history. Its uniqueness lies in the integration of material, ethical, and spiritual dimensions of knowledge. From Vedic hymns to scientific treatises, from epic narratives to aesthetic theories, Sanskrit served as the vehicle for recording, preserving, and transmitting this legacy.

Sanskrit literature emphasizes that true knowledge is not mere accumulation of facts but wisdom that uplifts individual and society. The Indian vision of jñāna harmonizes rational inquiry with ethical responsibility and spiritual realization. The multidisciplinary of IKS—spanning philosophy, science, arts, and governance—demonstrates how holistic learning was central to the Indian tradition.

In the contemporary era, where knowledge is increasingly specialized and fragmented, IKS offers a model for integrated and value-based education. The revival and incorporation of Sanskrit-based knowledge in curricula can enrich modern thought and promote sustainable, ethical, and human-centered progress.

Thus, Sanskrit literature remains not only a historical archive but also a living guide for humanity.

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