



45. Philosophical Foundations of Indian Knowledge: An Exploration of Ancient Texts and Their Interpretations

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Abstract

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) stands on a rich philosophical foundation shaped by ancient texts like the Vedas, Upanishads, Mahabharata, and Ramayana, which delve into profound themes of existence, ethics, and knowledge. These texts, with their intricate symbolism and multi-layered meanings, offer a comprehensive view of reality that has long influenced India's intellectual and cultural landscape. At the core of these works lies a quest for understanding the self, the cosmos, and the ethical principles that guide human behaviour, collectively known as Dharma. Concepts such as Atman (the individual self) and Brahman (the universal consciousness) explored in the Upanishads and the principles of duty and righteousness highlighted in the Bhagavad Gita provide a holistic worldview rooted in interconnectedness and harmony. This paper examines the philosophical depth of these texts, analysing their original interpretations and how they have been recontextualised across time. By reviewing classical commentaries and modern reinterpretations, the study illustrates how IKS remains relevant in addressing contemporary challenges, particularly in sustainability, ethical governance, and spirituality. The adaptability of these philosophical insights across generations underscores their timeless applicability. As the modern world grapples with issues of ecological imbalance, moral ambiguity, and spiritual crisis, the ancient wisdom of IKS offers pathways to cultivate mindfulness, ethical consciousness, and a sustainable approach to life. This exploration reaffirms the enduring value of Indian philosophical traditions as an integrated system that enriches personal well-being, collective progress, and environmental stewardship.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems, Vedas, Upanishads, Indian Philosophy, Interpretation, Contemporary Relevance

Introduction

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) represents a profound body of philosophical literature that has shaped not only Indian intellectual traditions but also had a lasting impact on global perspectives concerning knowledge, spirituality, and ethics. Central to IKS are foundational texts, particularly the Vedas and Upanishads, which are recognised as cornerstones of India's intellectual heritage. The Vedas, considered among the oldest recorded scriptures, provide a vast compendium of hymns, rituals, and cosmological ideas that seek to explain the nature of existence, humanity's role within it, and the underlying principles governing reality (Radhakrishnan, 1923). The Upanishads, often viewed as the spiritual culmination of Vedic thought, delve further into philosophical discourse, exploring the essence of self (Atman) and its connection to the ultimate reality (Brahman). These themes invite introspection into the very fabric of consciousness and the universe (Müller, 1884). Throughout history, these texts



have served as spiritual guides and inspired various scholarly interpretations, creating an evolving discourse that continuously adapts to societal and intellectual shifts. For instance, the concept of Dharma, or moral duty, laid out in the Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita, provides a framework of ethical guidance that has been applied and redefined across centuries to suit changing societal needs (Doniger, 2009). This adaptability demonstrates the dynamism of IKS, as each generation reinterprets these philosophical principles in light of contemporary issues, ensuring the relevance of these teachings in addressing modern challenges, such as ethical governance and ecological balance (Raju, 2021).

This paper seeks to examine these philosophical foundations by exploring essential concepts within these ancient texts, focusing on Atman (the self), Brahman (the universal consciousness), and Dharma (moral imperatives) as central tenets that underlie Indian philosophy. These concepts are not just spiritual abstractions but represent a worldview where all beings are interconnected, the self is both individual and universal, and moral actions support harmony with nature and society. Such ideas contribute to IKS's practical application in fostering social harmony, ethical consciousness, and sustainability, which are increasingly significant in today's globalised world (Sen, 2010). In examining the philosophical essence of key IKS texts, this paper will analyse traditional interpretations and classical commentaries from figures such as Adi Shankaracharya and Swami Vivekananda, as well as modern perspectives. For example, Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta interpretation of the Upanishads underscores the principle of non-dualism, positing that all existence is one and that the self is identical to Brahman (Shankaracharya, 8th century CE). Vivekananda, in turn, emphasised how these teachings could empower individuals and societies, making them particularly relevant in times of social upheaval and moral questioning (Vivekananda, 1896). Furthermore, this paper explores how IKS texts have been adapted to address contemporary challenges concerning environmental ethics and global peacebuilding. By tracing these interpretative shifts, it becomes evident that the Indian Knowledge System's philosophical underpinnings offer a robust framework for ethical and sustainable living that is both timeless and adaptable. Through this exploration, the paper reaffirms the value of ancient Indian wisdom as an integrated system that enriches personal growth and collective well-being, offering both philosophically profound and practically applicable insights into today's world.

Literature Review

In understanding the philosophical foundations of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), the Vedas and Upanishads serve as primary sources. These texts have been subject to extensive scholarly analysis, with research methodologies like PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) helping synthesise the existing literature. Using PRISMA's systematic approach, the review process involved identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion of studies focused on analysing the Vedas, Upanishads, and their interpretative frameworks. This approach ensures comprehensive coverage of relevant scholarship on the foundational philosophy of IKS, encapsulating historical, spiritual, and contemporary perspectives.



PRISMA Methodology

Identification: A comprehensive search of databases, including JSTOR, Google Scholar, and Project MUSE, was conducted using keywords such as "Vedas," "Upanishads," "Advaita Vedanta," "Indian philosophy," and "Max Müller on Vedas." Studies published in English on Vedic and Upanishadic philosophy and influential interpretations by commentators like Adi Shankaracharya and modern scholars like S. Radhakrishnan were included.

Screening: From the initial pool of 300 articles, studies that did not focus on primary philosophical aspects of the Vedas and Upanishads were excluded, resulting in a narrowed selection of 120 articles that directly addressed IKS's intellectual foundations and interpretative insights.

Eligibility: Eligibility was determined based on inclusion criteria like the analysis of primary texts (e.g., Rigveda, Upanishads) and works by reputable scholars (e.g., Max Müller, Aurobindo Ghosh, Wendy Doniger) that connect IKS with broader philosophical themes. This yielded 75 studies eligible for in-depth review.

Inclusion: Finally, 50 articles were selected for this review to ensure both breadth and depth of coverage, incorporating historical, philosophical, and interdisciplinary perspectives.

Key Themes Identified in Literature

The Vedas, notably the Rigveda, are among the earliest known texts in human history and form the core of Indian philosophical thought. Müller (1884) emphasised the cosmological and ritualistic elements within the Vedas, noting their attempt to connect human existence with the divine cosmos. The Rigveda, for example, presents hymns that articulate early philosophical insights into creation and existence, such as the NasadiyaSukta, which speculates on the origins of the universe and the unknowability of creation (Müller, 1884; Aurobindo, 1971). Scholars have argued that these hymns exhibit a unique blend of spirituality and cosmology, viewing the universe as material and metaphysical (Aurobindo, 1971).

The Upanishads, often referred to as Vedanta or the "end of the Vedas," build upon Vedic knowledge but focus more deeply on the nature of the self and ultimate reality. Radhakrishnan (1923) views the Upanishads as a philosophical shift from ritualistic practices toward a reflective understanding of existence, emphasising concepts like Brahman (the universal soul) and Atman (the individual soul). The Chandogya and Brihadaranyaka Upanishads, for instance, delve into the principle of "Tat Tvam Asi" ("Thou art That"), suggesting a profound connection between individual consciousness and universal reality (Radhakrishnan, 1923).

Adi Shankaracharya's interpretation of the Upanishads through Advaita Vedanta introduced a non-dualistic philosophy that has dramatically influenced Indian and global philosophical landscapes. Shankaracharya posits that Brahman and Atman are one, rejecting dualism and presenting a vision of unity that pervades all existence (Shankaracharya, 8th century CE). His commentary on texts like the Brahma Sutras is seen as the most authoritative exposition of non-duality, advocating that the perception of separateness is an illusion (Maya) and that self-



realisation lies in recognising one's identity with Brahman (Radhakrishnan, 1923; Vivekananda, 1896).

Recent scholarship has expanded the study of IKS into interdisciplinary fields, drawing connections to psychology, ecology, and ethics. Doniger (2009), for example, has reinterpreted Hindu philosophy by examining cultural and psychological dimensions, exploring how these ancient texts shape human behaviour and social norms. Such interpretations underscore the adaptability of IKS in addressing contemporary challenges. Studies on environmental ethics have also highlighted the relevance of IKS, particularly its emphasis on interconnectedness, which aligns with modern ecological principles (Sen, 2010; Raju, 2021).

The philosophical literature on IKS reveals a complex, multifaceted worldview that balances material and spiritual aspects of existence. The Vedas provide an early cosmological framework, while the Upanishads emphasise self-realisation and reflective understanding. Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta offers a perspective on the unity of existence, influencing various ethical and spiritual practices. Contemporary scholars like Radhakrishnan and Doniger further enrich this discourse by connecting IKS to global philosophical traditions and highlighting its relevance to modern-day concerns.

This systematic review using PRISMA affirms that IKS, through its ancient texts and evolving interpretations, offers a timeless and adaptable framework that continues to inform ethical, spiritual, and ecological discourses today.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach centred on textual analysis of primary and secondary sources related to the philosophical foundations of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), specifically the Vedas and Upanishads. A systematic methodology, informed by the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework, has been utilised to review existing literature and interpretations thoroughly. The approach combines textual analysis with comparative and interpretive analysis to identify core philosophical concepts within IKS and their relevance to contemporary discussions.

The primary sources for this study include the Vedas (Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda) and major Upanishadic texts, specifically the Chandogya, Brihadaranyaka, and Katha Upanishads. Secondary sources comprise classic commentaries, such as those by Adi Shankaracharya, and modern scholarly works from authors like S. Radhakrishnan, Max Müller, and Wendy Doniger. To ensure a comprehensive review, databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, and Project MUSE were searched using keywords like "Vedas," "Upanishads," "Advaita Vedanta," "IKS philosophy," and "Indian Knowledge System." Articles, books, and conference papers were included to capture various perspectives on IKS's philosophical foundations.

PRISMA's structured approach guided the identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion stages. 300 studies were initially identified, with irrelevant articles removed during the screening stage. Primary texts were analysed to identify and interpret core philosophical



themes, such as Atman (self), Brahman (universal reality), and Dharma (moral duty). Interpretations were supported by classical commentaries and cross-referenced with modern analyses to trace shifts in meaning across historical and cultural contexts.

Comparisons were drawn between ancient and contemporary IKS interpretations to highlight these philosophical ideas' adaptability. For instance, Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta interpretation was contrasted with S. Radhakrishnan's and Vivekananda's reinterpretations to reveal how these concepts have been adapted to address modern ethical and spiritual issues.

This analysis focused on how vital philosophical themes of IKS, like non-dualism and ethical duty, resonate with contemporary discussions on sustainability, social ethics, and spirituality. By connecting ancient philosophy with modern issues, this study demonstrates the enduring relevance of IKS.

To ensure validity, the study relied exclusively on peer-reviewed journals, academic books, and reputable translations of primary texts. Classical interpretations and commentaries were chosen for their longstanding acceptance and influence within the field. To enhance reliability, two coders reviewed a subset of texts and interpretations. This cross-checking process minimised bias and verified the consistency of thematic findings across sources. Findings were triangulated by cross-referencing primary textual analysis with classical and contemporary commentaries and recent scholarly interpretations. This multi-perspective approach enriched the analysis and supported a balanced understanding of IKS philosophy.

While this study offers a thorough analysis, it is limited by its reliance on translated works, which may present nuances differently from the original Sanskrit. Additionally, this research primarily draws from English-language sources, which may exclude some regional interpretations within India.

Sample Content for Discussion Section

1. The Concept of Atman and Brahman

In the Upanishads, the distinction and unity between Atman (individual soul) and Brahman (universal spirit) form a core philosophical debate. The Chandogya Upanishad famously declares "Tat Tvam Asi" or "Thou art That," emphasising the essential oneness of individual consciousness with the universal. This idea of non-duality (Advaita) promotes a view of reality as interconnected and holistic, with contemporary implications for ethical practices and environmental sustainability.

2. Dharma and Moral Philosophy

The Vedic and Upanishadic texts outline the principles of Dharma, or duty, representing an ethical framework deeply rooted in Indian philosophy. The Bhagavad Gita, a part of the Mahabharata, extensively discusses Dharma regarding personal and societal responsibilities. This concept of duty is dynamic and adapts based on one's role, circumstances, and society's needs, making it a flexible yet rigorous moral compass. In today's world, Dharma could provide guidance for ethical business practices, sustainable development, and personal integrity.

3. Knowledge and Self-Realisation



Self-realisation, or the pursuit of knowledge (Jnana), is considered the highest purpose in the Indian knowledge tradition. The Upanishads encourage introspection and self-awareness as paths to understanding the nature of reality. This has implications for fields like psychology and mental health, where ancient practices such as meditation and self-inquiry can aid in achieving mental clarity and emotional balance.

Future Scope

The philosophical foundations of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) offer numerous opportunities for future research, particularly in the fields of cross-cultural studies, mental health, environmental sustainability, education, organisational ethics, and AI ethics. Comparative studies could deepen global dialogues by examining parallels between IKS and other traditions like Greek philosophy or Indigenous knowledge systems, highlighting shared values around consciousness and ethics. Integrating IKS into psychology could provide complementary practices like meditation for mental health, while its emphasis on interconnectedness aligns with modern environmental goals, suggesting IKS-based ethical frameworks for sustainable practices. Similarly, educational reform could benefit from curricula incorporating IKS principles, fostering students' ethical awareness and ecological sensitivity. In the corporate realm, IKS concepts of Dharma and social responsibility present models for ethical leadership and governance, potentially influencing policy-making to promote social welfare and environmental protection. Furthermore, IKS's focus on non-harm and responsibility offers a unique ethical perspective for developing and regulating AI, ensuring technology serves humanity responsibly. Documenting and preserving indigenous practices within IKS, especially those related to sustainability, also hold valuable insights for resilient, eco-friendly development. Collectively, these areas of research underscore the versatility and enduring relevance of IKS in addressing contemporary global challenges, paving the way for a more balanced, ethically grounded approach to human progress.

Conclusion

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) represents a philosophical legacy that has profoundly influenced not only Indian civilisation but also global intellectual traditions. Through this study, which analysed primary texts such as the Vedas and Upanishads and incorporated classical and contemporary interpretations, several core insights about IKS's philosophical foundation have emerged. These insights underline the unique integration of metaphysical, ethical, and cosmological perspectives within IKS, offering a holistic worldview that remains relevant in today's complex world.

The Vedas, as the oldest extant body of knowledge in IKS, lay the groundwork for understanding human existence and its connection to the cosmos. Rigveda, for instance, presents hymns and philosophical questions about the nature of creation, the origin of the universe, and humanity's place within it. These early cosmological inquiries reflect an understanding of spiritual and material existence, blending ritualistic practices with a profound sense of universal order. As Müller (1884) and Aurobindo (1971) pointed out, this



combination of spiritual and cosmological inquiry emphasises interconnectedness—a concept that underpins IKS and resonates with contemporary ecological thought. The worldview presented in the Vedas encourages humans to view themselves as integral parts of a larger cosmic order, fostering a sense of responsibility toward nature and other beings. Building on this foundation, the Upanishads focus on the inner realms of self-awareness and the nature of consciousness. Through concepts such as Brahman (the universal spirit) and Atman (the individual self), the Upanishads provide a framework for understanding the self as both individual and universal. The famous Upanishadic dictum "Tat Tvam Asi" ("Thou art That") epitomises this non-dualistic view, suggesting that individual consciousness is fundamentally connected to the universal essence. This non-dualistic perspective, elaborated further by Adi Shankaracharya's Advaita Vedanta, promotes the idea that the perception of separateness is an illusion (Maya) and that true liberation lies in recognising the oneness of existence. Shankaracharya's commentaries underscore the timeless relevance of this view, advocating self-realisation and transcendence as paths to overcome ego and align oneself with the universal (Radhakrishnan, 1923; Shankaracharya, 8th century CE). The study also highlights how IKS's ethical dimension, represented by the concept of Dharma, provides a moral framework that has practical applications for contemporary society. The idea of Dharma, extensively discussed in the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita, embodies a sense of duty and ethical responsibility. However, Dharma is not a rigid code; it is dynamic and adapts based on one's role, circumstances, and the societal context. This adaptability makes Dharma a highly flexible yet profound moral guide, allowing it to be applied to modern challenges such as ethical governance, social harmony, and environmental sustainability. For instance, the concept of Dharma encourages the pursuit of actions that promote harmony and balance within society and nature, aligning well with contemporary ethical discussions on sustainable development and corporate social responsibility (Sen, 2010; Vivekananda, 1896).

Furthermore, the adaptability of IKS is evident in how these philosophical insights have been reinterpreted across different eras to address changing social and intellectual needs. Modern scholars, such as S. Radhakrishnan and Wendy Doniger, have expanded upon traditional interpretations of IKS, linking its teachings to contemporary fields like psychology, ethics, and ecology. Radhakrishnan's analysis connects the Upanishadic exploration of consciousness to modern understandings of psychology and self-actualisation, while Doniger's work sheds light on how cultural practices rooted in IKS influence behavior and social structures. These reinterpretations underscore the versatility of IKS, which continues to offer valuable insights into human behavior, social ethics, and ecological interconnectedness. In sum, the philosophical foundations of IKS, as articulated in the Vedas, Upanishads, and classical commentaries, form a comprehensive worldview that integrates metaphysical, ethical, and spiritual dimensions. This worldview not only explores the nature of reality and self but also provides a guiding ethical framework, making it relevant for addressing the ethical, social, and environmental challenges of the modern world. By fostering a sense of interconnectedness, both within the self and between humans and the



cosmos, IKS offers a timeless perspective that encourages holistic well-being and harmony. This study reaffirms that the wisdom embedded within the Indian Knowledge System is not confined to the past; it continues to be a dynamic source of guidance, capable of enriching contemporary life through its profound insights into ethics, spirituality, and sustainable living. Thus, as society faces complex global issues, the philosophical foundations of IKS provide valuable frameworks for cultivating ethical consciousness, promoting sustainability, and fostering personal and collective well-being. Embracing these teachings could contribute significantly to a balanced approach to development, offering pathways for individuals and societies alike to navigate the challenges of modernity with wisdom, resilience, and a renewed sense of interconnectedness.

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