



Harmonizing Heritage: The Integration of Tribal Knowledge Systems into the Revival of Indian Wisdom

Asst. Prof. Akash Dadasaheb Dhawad¹ & Asst. Prof. Shalini Yadav²

^{1,2}Asst. Prof. Department of Commerce Dr. D.Y. Patil Arts, Commerce and Science College,
Akurdi, Pune-44

Corresponding Author – Asst. Prof. Akash Dadasaheb Dhawad

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Abstract:

This paper examines the essential position occupied by tribal knowledge systems within the wider domain of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). It focuses on their valuable inputs in areas such as ecology, traditional medicine, cultural practices, and sustainable living. Long preserved through generations by indigenous communities, these knowledge traditions are currently undergoing a significant revival through contemporary initiatives in education and public policy. The discussion argues in favour of a thoughtful integration of ancient tribal insights with broader Indian intellectual traditions, as a means to effectively respond to pressing global issues including climate change, loss of biological diversity, and cultural decline. Drawing primarily from existing scholarly literature and policy analyses, the paper stresses the importance of systematic documentation, protection, and incorporation of tribal knowledge into mainstream frameworks to support inclusive and equitable development. The conclusions point to the considerable promise of such integration in developing truly sustainable approaches, accompanied by suggestions for strengthened policies and cooperative endeavours.

Keywords: Tribal Knowledge Systems, Indian Knowledge Systems, Indigenous Wisdom, Cultural Preservation, Revival, Ecological Balance

Introduction:

India possesses an extraordinarily rich intellectual legacy, formed by the confluence of ancient scriptural traditions, philosophical inquiries, and the dynamic, lived practices of its indigenous populations. Among these, the knowledge systems maintained by tribal communities stand out for their deep-rooted emphasis on living in harmony with the natural environment—a perspective developed over thousands of years.

These systems include sophisticated understanding of ecological processes, plant-based healing methods, farming techniques adapted to local conditions, artistic traditions, and spiritual worldviews. They continue to sustain diverse tribal groups across regions such as the

Northeast, central highlands, and arid zones of Rajasthan. The current revival—or renaissance—of Indian wisdom draws significant momentum from national initiatives, notably the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which calls for the meaningful inclusion of indigenous perspectives within formal education and administrative structures.

This study explores ways to bring tribal heritage into constructive dialogue with the larger stream of Indian knowledge traditions. It contends that such integration not only helps meet present-day challenges but also safeguards cultural distinctiveness. Through consideration of historical roles and ongoing revival measures, tribal knowledge emerges not as a historical

curiosity but as a living, adaptable resource capable of informing future-oriented solutions.

Significance of the Study:

- It draws attention to the serious threat of erosion facing tribal traditions amid rapid globalisation and urban expansion, thereby underlining the necessity of carefully recording oral narratives, languages, and customary practices that constitute vital elements of national diversity.
- Tribal approaches frequently provide environmentally sound alternatives in agriculture, forest stewardship, and natural resource use—models that stand in contrast to many resource-intensive modern methods contributing to ecological strain.
- Traditional healing knowledge, particularly in the realm of ethnobotany, holds potential to enrich both Ayurvedic practice and wider medical research.
- Inclusion of tribal perspectives in educational programmes advances equity and helps narrow the divide between dominant and peripheral knowledge traditions, in line with the vision of NEP 2020.
- Insights derived from tribal systems can guide more responsive governance, including effective implementation of legislation such as the Forest Rights Act, thereby enabling greater tribal participation in resource management and livelihood opportunities including nature-based tourism.
- Amid escalating environmental concerns worldwide, the integration of tribal insights with classical Indian thought offers valuable guidance on conserving biological diversity and achieving genuine balance between humanity and nature.

Objectives:

- To explore the diverse ways in which tribal knowledge enhances Indian Knowledge Systems in fields including ecology, health practices, and cultural expression.
- To analyse recent efforts at revival, encompassing policy measures and educational reforms that seek to harmonise tribal traditions with contemporary Indian intellectual frameworks.
- To assess the possibilities arising from the judicious combination of indigenous methods with scientific knowledge in tackling issues of sustainability.
- To identify effective strategies for documenting and safeguarding tribal knowledge against risks such as cultural dilution and misappropriation.
- To offer practical suggestions for incorporating tribal wisdom into education, healthcare delivery, and public policy in an inclusive manner.

Methodology:

The research adopts a qualitative orientation, relying chiefly on an extensive review of secondary sources. These include scholarly articles, monographs, official policy documents, and credible online materials related to tribal knowledge and the contemporary revival of Indian wisdom. Materials were sourced from academic repositories such as ResearchGate, Zenodo, and established publishers. Thematic content analysis was applied to discern recurring patterns concerning ecological integration, cultural continuity, and policy implications. The approach deliberately avoids primary fieldwork, instead synthesising a wide array of existing studies to achieve an interdisciplinary and balanced viewpoint.

Review of Literature:

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognised the centrality of tribal communities within Indian Knowledge Systems. For instance, Warvadkar (2024/2025) positions tribal groups as vital contributors across multiple domains—ecology, health, language, visual arts, and spiritual life—while calling for urgent documentation and educational integration to safeguard these traditions amid sustainability challenges.

The edited volume *Tribal Knowledge Systems: Tracing the Roots* (Nag & Kusum, Eds., 2026) adopts a multidisciplinary lens, examining aspects such as the scientific principles underlying tribal art forms and building techniques, traditional healing modalities, sustainable agriculture and nutrition, and philosophies of human-nature interdependence. It advocates translating inherited practices into applicable contemporary frameworks.

Works associated with Kapoor and related explorations of IKS emphasise the continuous transmission of experiential and place-specific knowledge from ancient times, with tribal contributions playing a prominent role in shaping empirical health traditions.

Contemporary studies further highlight the relevance of tribal conservation practices—such as protection of sacred landscapes and rotational farming systems—for modern biodiversity efforts, while stressing safeguards against misappropriation through instruments like the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library.

Building on this foundation, additional research underscores the policy-driven push for integration under NEP 2020. A 2023 paper on "The Essence of the Tribal Knowledge System in the Indian Knowledge System" provides insights into the significance of tribal knowledge, outlining persistent challenges like marginalization and proposing solutions for its

meaningful inclusion in broader IKS frameworks. This work echoes calls from higher authorities, including the President of India, for elevating tribal systems to support national knowledge goals.

In a similar vein, a 2025 study titled "IKS in Indian Education: A Transformative Framework for Cultural Continuity and Academic Innovation" explores how NEP 2020 facilitates the embedding of indigenous wisdom—including tribal elements—into modern curricula, drawing on philosophy, medicine, and environmental practices to foster holistic learning. It reviews government initiatives and highlights the role of educators in bridging traditional and contemporary pedagogies.

Another key contribution comes from "The Importance of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) for Undergraduate Students," which advocates for decolonizing education by incorporating IKS at the undergraduate level, with specific emphasis on NEP 2020's push for multidisciplinary approaches that include tribal and folk traditions.

Scholarly collections, such as the special issue on "Indian Knowledge Systems: Reclaiming Indigenous Epistemologies for a Global Context," critically reflect on integrating tribal knowledge with global discourses, covering topics like environmental studies, gender perspectives, and comparisons with other indigenous systems. This work stresses the need for rigorous, inclusive conversations to avoid subsuming diverse tribal epistemologies under dominant narratives.

Furthermore, "Indian Knowledge Systems And Nep 2020: Reviving Heritage Through Educational Policy" (2025) argues for greater inclusivity, warning against neglecting regional and tribal knowledge in favor of classical systems, and proposes ways to ensure diverse cultural representation in education.

A comprehensive literature review in "Integrating the Indian Knowledge System with Modern Pedagogy for a Holistic Educational Renaissance under NEP 2020" (2025) synthesizes historical IKS foundations with contemporary applications, including tribal mentorship models and ecological ethics, while addressing implementation challenges like teacher training and equity.

Digital innovation is addressed in "Adi Sanskriti: A NEP 2020–Aligned Digital Framework for the Preservation and Empowerment of India's Tribal Knowledge Systems" (2025), which proposes AI-enabled platforms for safeguarding tribal heritage, aligning with NEP's focus on technology and cultural preservation.

Finally, "Integrating Indian Knowledge Systems into Higher Education: Pathways for NEP 2020 Implementation in Rural and Tribal India" (2025) focuses on practical pathways for rural contexts, emphasizing how tribal ecological knowledge and oral traditions can infuse higher education with sustainability and cultural pride. These sources collectively reinforce the transformative potential of harmonizing tribal wisdom with IKS revival efforts.

Discussion:

Efforts to bring tribal heritage into alignment with the broader revival of Indian wisdom mark an important movement toward more inclusive knowledge frameworks. Tribal systems, deeply interwoven with the Indian cultural landscape, frequently embody principles of restraint and reciprocity in relation to the natural world—principles that stand in marked contrast to many prevailing industrial patterns.

A well-known illustration is provided by the Bishnoi community of Rajasthan, whose religious tenets, established in the 15th century, include strict prohibitions against harming trees

and animals. Community members have historically defended local flora and fauna, even at great personal cost, thereby maintaining pockets of biodiversity in an otherwise arid environment.

In the Northeast, Naga communities have long practised Jhum (shifting cultivation), a rotational system that, when fallow periods are adequately long, permits forest regeneration and soil recovery—offering insights relevant to sustainable land use in the face of contemporary deforestation pressures.

These localised practices complement and enrich classical Indian traditions such as Vedic environmental thought and Ayurvedic therapeutics. Tribal ethnobotanical knowledge has demonstrably influenced both traditional and modern medicine; the antimicrobial and healing properties of plants such as neem and turmeric, long recognised and utilised by various tribal groups, provide notable examples.

Nevertheless, serious challenges remain. Globalisation and urbanisation continue to endanger oral traditions that serve as vehicles for transmitting ecological and medicinal insights. Legal safeguards, including the Biological Diversity Act and TKDL, represent important steps toward preventing unauthorised commercial exploitation of traditional resources.

Successful harmonisation demands ethical, participatory approaches involving tribal communities as equal partners alongside researchers, educators, and policymakers. When undertaken sensitively, this process can yield hybrid models capable of addressing sustainability in a comprehensive manner—where spiritual reverence supports practical innovation and community resilience.

Findings:

- In ecology, customary practices such as the safeguarding of sacred groves and carefully

managed rotational farming help preserve biodiversity and support climate resilience, as evidenced by long-standing traditions among groups like the Bishnoi and Naga.

- In health, ethnobotanical expertise has supplied foundational resources for holistic healing systems, influencing both indigenous medicine and contemporary pharmacology.
- Culturally, oral literatures, songs, and distinctive art forms (such as Warli and Gond paintings) serve as repositories of intergenerational knowledge while reinforcing communal bonds and ecological awareness.
- Although supportive policies exist, gaps in implementation continue to limit full participation; educational reforms under NEP 2020, however, indicate promising directions for bridging these divides.
- Socially and economically, tribal governance models and community-led initiatives, such as those in eco-tourism and resource sharing, demonstrate potential for empowering marginalized groups and fostering inclusive development within broader IKS frameworks.

Recommendations:

- Prioritise ethical, community-guided documentation projects, including digital repositories of oral traditions, undertaken with full consent and equitable sharing of benefits.
- Accelerate curriculum reform to incorporate tribal knowledge in meaningful ways, supporting multilingual education and cross-disciplinary learning.
- Strengthen protective legislation and participatory governance structures to prevent misappropriation and ensure tribal voices shape decisions affecting their lands and resources.
- Encourage the selective adoption and scientific validation of tribal agricultural and healing practices within national development programmes.

- Develop sustained partnerships among tribal representatives, academic institutions, and government bodies, emphasising mutual respect and long-term capacity building.

Conclusion:

The thoughtful integration of tribal knowledge systems into the contemporary revival of Indian wisdom presents a compelling route toward cultural vitality and ecologically responsible progress. By recognising and valuing the distinctive contributions of indigenous communities in ecology, health, and cultural life, India stands to recover a fuller sense of its plural heritage while generating innovative responses to shared global concerns. Achieving this vision will require deliberate policy commitment, educational reform, and genuine collaborative effort. Only through such measures can this rich legacy be preserved and meaningfully extended into the future, offering lessons in balance and resilience for the world at large.

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