

From Colonial Epistemologies to Civilizational Consciousness: Reimagining Higher Education through the Indian Knowledge Traditions under NEP 2020

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Abstract

(This paper examines the conceptual architecture required to render Indian higher education curricula tenable (dhāraṇīya) within the implementation trajectory of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Drawing on institutional leadership discourse at a public university in Rajasthan and situating it within decolonial curriculum theory, teacher-development literature, and Indian Knowledge System (IKS) scholarship, the paper argues that Indian higher education has historically functioned as an imitative rather than transformative enterprise, sustained by a colonial pedagogical legacy of reproduction and reduction. It proposes a Man–Method–Material triad as an analytical lens for curricular reform, alongside two original heuristics: a Five-E framework (Ethics, Economy, Environment, Enlightenment, Entrepreneurship) describing the historical foundations of Bhāratīya Śikṣā, and a SMART sustainability framework (Systematic, Measurable, Achievable, Reliable, Time-tested) for operationalising curriculum reforms in contemporary institutions. The paper further engages the challenge posed by generative artificial intelligence to the three core functions of the university—knowledge generation, dissemination, and application—arguing that AI's acceleration of these functions necessitates a compensatory emphasis on creativity, critical thinking, and experiential (anubhava-based) pedagogy rooted in the Guru-Shishya tradition. The paper also engages critically with unresolved tensions in the IKS discourse, including the underrepresentation of tribal and North-Eastern indigenous knowledge systems and contested claims regarding caste-based stratification, arguing that these tensions must be Papered reflexively rather than elided if IKS integration is to achieve genuine epistemic pluralism. The paper

concludes with implications for teachers, universities, and policymakers engaged in NEP 2020 implementation.)

Keywords: Indian Knowledge System, NEP 2020, curriculum decolonization, teacher education, sustainable pedagogy, higher education leadership

1. Introduction

The implementation of India's National Education Policy 2020 has generated an expanding body of scholarship on structural reform—credit frameworks, multiple entry-exit systems, multidisciplinary curricula, and the institutional mechanics of academic restructuring (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 2020). Considerably less attention, however, has been paid to the epistemic question that NEP 2020 places at its normative core: the recovery of an indigenous philosophical orientation to education, described in the policy document as rootedness in "India's traditions and value systems" (MHRD, 2020, p. 4). This paper articulates a conceptual framework for curricular decolonization.

The central proposition advanced here is that Indian higher education, notwithstanding seventy-five years of political independence, has continued to operate on an imported epistemological chassis. Teaching has been reduced to syllabus "coverage," assessment has become the organising telos of classroom practice, and pedagogy has remained borrowed rather than indigenous. The Paper diagnoses this condition and proposes a corrective architecture organised around three components of educational practice: the teacher (man), pedagogy (method), and curriculum (material). This paper elevates that architecture into a generalisable scholarly framework, tests it against NEP 2020 provisions and University Grants Commission (UGC) guidance on IKS integration (UGC, 2022), and evaluates it using institutional case evidence from a public university engaged in faculty development.

Rather than treating the source material as a transcript of a lecture, this paper approaches it as a form of institutional discourse—a genre increasingly recognised in higher education leadership studies as a legitimate site for extracting implicit theories of educational change held by academic administrators (Bolden et al., 2012; Kezar & Eckel, 2004). Vice-

chancellors and senior academic leaders occupy a structurally significant position: they mediate between policy text and classroom practice, and their public articulations often function as informal curriculum-steering instruments even in the absence of formal policy authority. Analysing such discourse systematically therefore contributes to an underexamined stream of NEP 2020 implementation studies—one concerned not with policy architecture but with the leadership sense-making that determines how policy is locally interpreted and enacted (Spillane et al., 2002).

This paper's contribution is threefold. First, it formalises an institutional leader's implicit curricular theory into an explicit, citable analytical framework (the Man–Method–Material triad) that can be applied, tested, and critiqued across other institutional contexts engaged in NEP 2020 implementation. Second, it proposes two original heuristic instruments—the Five-E foundation and the SMART sustainability criteria—that translate an otherwise diffuse civilisational argument into criteria usable by curriculum committees, IKS centres, and faculty development programmes. Third, it models a methodological approach—the systematic scholarly analysis of institutional leadership discourse, inclusive of its unresolved internal tensions—that may be of use to other researchers working at the intersection of higher education leadership studies and NEP 2020 implementation research, a field in which primary institutional discourse remains comparatively underutilised as scholarly data relative to formal policy documents and survey-based studies.

2. Research Context and Background

The institutional setting for this paper is a public state university in Rajasthan actively engaged in NEP 2020 implementation, including curriculum redesign, faculty development, and the establishment of interdisciplinary consortia.

Two contextual features are significant. First, bilingual mode of communication alternating between English and Hindi casually in common Indian classrooms—itself a pedagogical choice consistent with the socio-cultural specificity of language and the limits of translation. Second, an open question-and-answer method wherein learners from diverse disciplinary and regional backgrounds (English studies, psychology, and representation from North-

Eastern India and Karnataka) raise substantive critiques, including the underrepresentation of tribal and North-Eastern indigenous knowledge systems within mainstream IKS discourse, and questions regarding the varna (social stratification) based on Karma framework historically embedded in some readings of Indian textual tradition becomes an effective teaching/learning device. This paper treats the Q&A exchange as integral data, since it reveals the framework's internal capacity for self-correction and contestation—an important marker of scholarly rather than merely rhetorical value.

The broader policy backdrop is NEP 2020's explicit call for curricula to be "rooted in the Indian ethos" while remaining globally connected (MHRD, 2020, p. 4), and the UGC's subsequent guidelines encouraging universities to establish IKS centres, integrate IKS content across disciplines, and develop appropriate documentation and translation infrastructure (UGC, 2022). The Paper can be read as a localised, leadership-level enactment of this policy mandate, rendering it a useful case for understanding how national policy language is translated into institutional practice.

3. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

3.1 Decolonial Curriculum Theory

The paper draws on the established tradition of decolonial curriculum critique, which holds that colonial education systems were designed not merely to transmit knowledge but to restructure the colonised subject's relationship to their own epistemic inheritance (Said, 1993; wa Thiong'o, 1986). This literature's central claim—that colonial curricula function through the systematic devaluation of indigenous knowledge systems rather than their outright suppression—resonates closely with the Paper's argument regarding Indian education's "admiration for the West" and the resultant "underestimation" of indigenous knowledge systems. The oft-cited nineteenth-century characterisation of Sanskrit and Arabic literature as inferior to a "single shelf of a good European library" (commonly attributed to Thomas Babington Macaulay's 1835 Minute on Indian Education) is a canonical reference point in this literature and is invoked in the Paper to illustrate the epistemic asymmetry embedded in colonial pedagogy.

3.2 Linguistic-Conceptual Untranslatability

A second theoretical resource is the literature on linguistic relativity and the socio-cultural embeddedness of conceptual vocabulary (Sapir, 1949; Asad, 1986). The Paper extends this literature into the specific domain of Indian civilisational vocabulary, arguing that terms such as *swarāj*, *paramparā*, *rāṣṭra*, and *dharma* carry conceptual density that is systematically flattened when rendered through their conventional English equivalents ("self-rule," "tradition," "nation," "religion"). This argument parallels Asad's (1986) contention that translation across unequal power relations is never a neutral technical exercise but a site of epistemic negotiation. The Paper's example of Gandhi's decision to retain "*swarāj*" untranslated in *Hind Swaraj* functions, within this framework, as a documented instance of resistance to conceptual assimilation—a strategy that can be deployed as a model for contemporary IKS documentation.

3.3 The Man–Method–Material Triad

The Paper organises its diagnosis and prescription around three components—Man (the teacher and the teacher-taught relationship), Method (pedagogy), and Material (curriculum/syllabus)—which this paper adopts as its primary analytical lens. This triadic framework is broadly compatible with established models of curriculum as a tripartite system of agents, processes, and content (Goodlad, 1979; Pinar et al., 1995), while giving the model a distinctively Indian inflection through its association with the Guru-Shishya (teacher-disciple) relational tradition and the concept of śāstrārtha (dialectical disputation) as a pedagogical method.

3.4 Two Original Heuristics Derived from the Paper

This paper formalises two heuristic frameworks for use in subsequent analysis and by practitioners:

The Five-E Foundation of Bhāratīya Śikṣā: Ethics (character-building, prefigured in the Kothari Commission's emphasis on character formation; Kothari, 1966), Economy (sustainable rather than extractive economic growth), Environment (custodianship rather than mastery over nature), Enlightenment (self-realisation and wisdom rather than information transfer), and Entrepreneurship (an ecosystem of innovation rather than merely institutional infrastructure).

The SMART Sustainability Framework: Systematic (organised), Measurable (outcomes-assessable), Achievable (feasible), Reliable/Realistic (dependable), and Time-tested (valid across time)—proposed as operational criteria against which curriculum reform initiatives, including IKS integration, can be evaluated for durability rather than symbolic compliance.

4. Major Themes Emerging from Institutional Discourse on Higher Education Reform

Six interlocking themes organised into a coherent argumentative sequence include: a diagnosis of colonial legacy and epistemic self-doubt; a conceptual distinction between imitative and transformative education; an account of the historical foundations of Indian

education organised around five domains; an analysis of artificial intelligence as a contemporary disruptor of the university's tripartite function; a discussion of the documentation and translation infrastructure required for IKS integration; and a set of concrete pedagogical and curricular prescriptions. Each is examined in turn below, with attention to how it extends, qualifies, or departs from existing scholarship.

4.1 The Colonial Legacy and Epistemic Self-Doubt

The Paper's foundational diagnostic claim is that post-independence Indian education continued, for approximately seven decades, to operate on "received knowledge and received experience" imported from colonial pedagogical structures, notwithstanding formal political independence. This argument is substantiated with reference to Gandhi's 1931 observation that literacy levels in India had, by his assessment, declined relative to pre-colonial conditions—a claim Gandhi attributed to the colonial administration's disruption of indigenous educational institutions rather than their reform. The Paper extends this into a horticultural metaphor attributed to Gandhi: colonial education did not merely fall the "tree" of Indian education but scraped away the surrounding soil, disabling regeneration.

The Paper further references H. H. Wilson's 1836 article in the *Asiatic Journal*, "Education for the Natives of India," as documentary evidence of an articulated colonial objective to "degrade [native] character, depress their energy, and...render them incapable of aspiring to any intellectual distinction." Whether this characterisation should be read as representative of official colonial education policy as a whole, or as one contemporary critique among several competing colonial perspectives (a debate colonial historiography continues to negotiate; see Viswanathan, 1989, for a more institutionally grounded account of English literary education's role in colonial governance), is a matter on which historians differ; the Paper's use of the material is best understood as illustrative rhetorical evidence within an argument about perceived intent, rather than as an uncontested historical settlement.

A related and illustrative sub-theme concerns the selective canon-formation practised by colonial educational administrators, exemplified in the Paper through the contrasting institutional fates of two literary texts: Kālidāsa's *Abhijñānaśākuntalam*, reportedly excluded

from prescribed reading on grounds of alleged "obscenity," and Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress," which continued to be prescribed despite containing comparably explicit content. The Paper frames this discrepancy not as an isolated curatorial inconsistency but as evidence of an underlying and largely "unstated aim" of colonial education policy—namely, to normalise European literary production as the unmarked standard of taste while marginalising indigenous literary achievement on shifting and inconsistently applied grounds. This form of argument is consistent with postcolonial literary criticism's broader claim that colonial curricula functioned as instruments of cultural hierarchy-formation rather than neutral literary selection (Viswanathan, 1989), though, as with the Macaulay reference, the specific canon-exclusion anecdote would benefit from independent archival corroboration before being treated as generalisable historical evidence rather than illustrative institutional memory.

4.2 From Imitative to Transformative Education

A central conceptual distinction advanced in the Paper is between *imitative* and *transformative* education. Imitative education, in this framing, is characterised by "reproduction" on the part of the teacher and "reduction" on the part of the learner—a formulation that maps onto Freire's (1970) "banking model" critique of transmission-oriented pedagogy, though arrived at through an independent, culturally specific route. Transformative education, by contrast, begins when a learner "ceases to imitate" and starts to understand their own culture. The Paper situates the post-2014/2015 period as the inflection point at which Indian higher education policy began a deliberate transition from the imitative to the transformative mode, culminating in NEP 2020.

This distinction has a further diagnostic dimension: the Paper argues that examination-and-degree-driven instruction has produced what it terms "robust specialists but fragile thinkers"—graduates possessing narrow disciplinary competence but limited capacity for synthesis, critical evaluation, or transfer of learning across domains. The metaphor invoked to characterise this fragility—adapted loosely from Percy Bysshe Shelley's poetic imagery of falling upon the "thorns of life" and bleeding—illustrates the Paper's broader claim that curricular over-specialisation, uncorrected by interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary exposure, leaves graduates poorly equipped for problems that do not respect disciplinary boundaries.

This concern anticipates, and is broadly consistent with, contemporary calls in higher-education literature for T-shaped or transdisciplinary graduate competencies (Uhlenbrook & de Jong, 2012), and directly informs NEP 2020's own emphasis on multidisciplinary and holistic education (MHRD, 2020).

4.3 The Five-E Foundations and Their Erosion

The Paper's account of pre-colonial Indian education emphasises its foundation in five domains—Ethics, Economy, Environment, Enlightenment, and Entrepreneurship—each illustrated with concrete pedagogical or civilisational examples: character-building as the primary object of ethical education (a claim consistent with the Kothari Commission's own emphasis; Kothari, 1966); sustainable economic thinking; an ecological ethic of custodianship illustrated through a personal childhood anecdote regarding prohibitions on disturbing standing crops or forest vegetation during pilgrimage; enlightenment as self-realisation rather than information acquisition; and entrepreneurship understood as ecosystem-building for innovation rather than the construction of institutional infrastructure alone. The Paper argues that contemporary higher education has substituted "building institutions" for "creating institutions"—a distinction that maps onto organisational theory's differentiation between structural and cultural dimensions of institutionalisation (Scott, 2001).

4.4 Artificial Intelligence as Disruptor of the Tripartite University Function

The Paper identifies three canonical functions of the university—knowledge generation (research), knowledge dissemination (teaching and learning), and knowledge application (extension and co-curricular activity)—and argues that generative AI has begun to "overpower" this ecosystem by making knowledge generation faster, dissemination wider, and application "smarter." Rather than treating this as cause for prohibition, the Paper advances a normative reframing: AI should function as "servant," not "master," of the educational process, and the appropriate institutional response is not to suppress AI adoption but to strengthen the curricular components—critical thinking, creativity, and knowledge application—that AI systems do not yet replicate. This position is consistent with emerging literature on generative AI in higher education that similarly argues for pedagogical adaptation over prohibition (Bearman et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2023), while

adding a distinctive emphasis on the Humanities and Social Sciences curriculum as the site of greatest vulnerability, given its comparatively slower pace of pedagogical innovation relative to the natural sciences.

Two supporting observations sharpen this argument. First, the Paper recounts an exchange with a research student who noted that AI-generated written output routinely exceeds what human effort alone can produce within comparable time constraints—an observation the Paper treats not as cause for resignation but as evidence that the "knowledge application" function, rather than knowledge generation or dissemination, remains the domain in which human pedagogical value is least substitutable, since AI systems draw upon existing knowledge rather than generating context-specific application pathways. This leads to a specific curricular recommendation: that curricula deliberately expand the proportion of content devoted to knowledge application—problem-based learning, extension activity, and field-based project work—since this is where the comparative advantage of human instruction over AI-mediated learning currently resides.

Second, the Paper explicitly refuses the proposition that disciplinary progress in the natural sciences can be treated as a proxy for national developmental progress in the absence of a corresponding curriculum in the humanities and social sciences capable of enabling learners to answer three foundational questions: who they are, where they come from, and what they are destined to contribute. This formulation positions civilisational self-knowledge not as an adjunct to STEM-oriented national development strategy but as a necessary precondition for it—a claim that merits further engagement in NEP 2020 implementation studies concerned with resource allocation between STEM and humanities disciplines.

4.5 Documentation, Translation, and the IKS-Integration Challenge

A recurring theme is the practical difficulty of integrating IKS into formal curricula in the absence of adequate documentation. The Paper distinguishes between *anuvāda* (translation understood etymologically as "following after" or discursive continuity) and technical/literal translation oriented toward lexical accuracy, arguing that the latter approach—inherited from Western translation theory's emphasis on equivalence—is structurally incapable of carrying forward concepts such as *swarāj*, *rāṣṭra*, *dharma*, *samatā*

(equity) and *samānatā* (equality), each of which the Paper treats as conceptually non-equivalent to its standard English gloss. The Paper cites the Chinese practice of retaining untranslated original-language terms in translated scholarly text as a model worth emulating, and situates ongoing national efforts such as the Bhartiya Bhasha Samiti's translation initiatives and the Government of India's Gyan Bharatam/manuscript-documentation mission as embryonic institutional responses to this documentation gap.

The Paper develops this argument through a series of paired terms intended to illustrate systematic conceptual flattening: *paramparā* (rendered as "tradition," but argued to denote "guiding continuity" transmitted through lived familial and communal practice, rather than inherited legacy in a static sense); *rīti* and *custom* (the former a "social practice," the latter a "prescribed method," terms frequently conflated in vernacular usage); and *rāṣṭra* and *nation* (the former, invoking Sri Aurobindo's 1947 Independence Day Paper, denoting spiritual and emotional interconnection rather than the geographically bounded political entity connoted by "nation"). The pedagogical implication drawn is that curriculum designers and researchers working with IKS material must resist reflexive lexical substitution and instead retain, gloss, and where necessary leave untranslated the original conceptual vocabulary—an approach with direct implications for how universities structure translation and terminology standards within IKS documentation projects.

4.6 Pedagogical and Curricular Prescriptions

At the level of curriculum design, the Paper recommends explicit disaggregation of syllabi into disciplinary, interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary components, cautioning against tokenistic IKS integration (e.g., a single isolated "IKS unit") in favour of embedding IKS perspectives across every unit of a course. At the level of pedagogy, the Paper recommends experiential learning modelled on the Guru-Shishya tradition, in which the teacher-disciple relationship precedes formal instruction ("they would practise, and then they would preach"), and recommends reviving śāstrārtha-style dialectical exchange as an alternative to unidirectional lecture delivery. At the level of the teacher (Man), the Paper calls for a fundamental role reorientation from "transmitter of knowledge" to "facilitator," arguing that sustained epistemic self-underestimation among Indian academics—rather

than any explicit governmental policy—has historically constrained the visibility of indigenous knowledge systems in higher education discourse.

5. Discussion and Analysis

Read together, the themes above constitute a coherent, if informally articulated, theory of curricular change that anticipates several strands of the international decolonising-curriculum literature while grounding its argument in specifically Indian civilisational vocabulary. Three points of critical analysis merit attention.

First, the Five-E and SMART frameworks, while heuristically valuable, function primarily as mnemonic devices rather than empirically validated instruments. Their scholarly value lies less in predictive power than in their capacity to operationalise an otherwise diffuse civilisational argument into criteria that curriculum committees can apply—for instance, using the SMART criteria as a checklist when evaluating whether a proposed IKS course unit is genuinely sustainable (time-tested, measurable) or merely symbolically compliant with NEP directives. Future empirical work could usefully test the discriminant validity of these criteria against actual curriculum outcomes.

Second, the Paper's treatment of the colonial-era Manusmriti controversy—raised directly by a faculty participant in the Q&A regarding caste-based educational disparity—illustrates both the framework's strength and its principal vulnerability. The Paper's response, which contends that the version of the Manusmriti in wide circulation was substantively altered during the colonial period relative to earlier manuscript traditions, and that the resulting stratified reading was strategically amplified to fracture Indian society, reflects a position found in some strands of contemporary IKS scholarship (e.g., critiques of colonial ethnographic codification of caste; Dirks, 2001, offers a related though not identical argument regarding the colonial "crystallisation" of caste categories through census and legal administration). However, this remains a contested historical claim rather than a scholarly consensus, and the manuscript-recension evidence required to substantiate the specific claim of textual alteration between an original version and an 1842 published edition would need independent codicological verification beyond the scope of this paper. For a policy-relevant conceptual paper of this kind, the more defensible scholarly move is to

register the claim as a live position within contemporary IKS discourse—one that merits further archival and historical research—rather than to adjudicate it. What is analytically significant, and not contested, is the pedagogical implication the Paper draws from it: that any IKS-based curriculum reform must engage seriously and transparently with caste-based inequities in Indian educational history rather than eliding them, since failure to do so would compromise the credibility of the entire reform project among faculty and students alike.

Third, the Q&A exchange regarding the underrepresentation of North-Eastern and tribal indigenous knowledge systems within mainstream IKS discourse surfaces an important internal tension. The Paper's response—citing Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR)-funded projects on tribal knowledge systems and a locally developed English-language pedagogy built around the Bhil community's Gavri performance tradition—demonstrates that the IKS framework as practised is not monolithically Sanskritic or textually confined, and can accommodate oral, performative, and regionally specific knowledge traditions. However, the Paper's own acknowledgment that such representation has been the product of individual faculty initiative rather than systemic policy design suggests that without deliberate institutional mechanisms (for example, mandated representation of North-Eastern and tribal knowledge systems in IKS centre charters), the framework risks reproducing exactly the kind of centre-periphery epistemic hierarchy it claims to dismantle. This is consistent with broader critiques in Indian sociolinguistics and anthropology regarding the historical marginalisation of North-Eastern epistemologies within mainstream national discourse (Baruah, 2020).

Fourth, the Paper's engagement with a faculty query regarding the compulsory introduction of IKS as a stand-alone college-level paper is analytically instructive for policy design. The Paper's response draws a sharp distinction between IKS and moral or "naitik" (ethical) education, cautioning against conflating the two, and instead insists that IKS content should be disaggregated across disciplines—invoking the historical contributions of figures such as Kanada (atomic theory) and Āryabhaṭa (astronomy/mathematics) as examples of discipline-specific indigenous knowledge that can be integrated into science curricula rather than confined to a single humanities elective. This position has a direct bearing on the SMART

framework proposed in this paper: a single compulsory IKS paper may satisfy a *measurable* compliance metric (a paper exists, a credit is assigned) while failing the *systematic* and *time-tested* criteria, since isolated, token curriculum units are more easily marginalised or discontinued than content embedded across a programme's disciplinary core. This reinforces the paper's broader argument that policy compliance metrics for NEP 2020 implementation should evaluate integration depth rather than the mere existence of IKS-labelled curriculum units.

6. Case Study Evidence: The MDSU Model of Bottom-Up IKS Integration

Two institutional initiatives illustrate the practical translation of the conceptual framework above into classroom practice. First, an English-language pedagogy unit was redesigned around the Bhil community's Gavri dance-drama tradition, retaining conventional disciplinary learning objectives (vocabulary acquisition, grammatical competence, conceptual comprehension) while substituting government-prescribed textual material with locally developed content drawn from Gavri performance narrative. Reported outcomes—described qualitatively rather than through formal assessment data—included markedly increased learner engagement, attributed to the pedagogical novelty of encountering a familiar cultural referent within a formal English-language classroom. This initiative, initiated independently by a faculty member roughly Fifteen years prior to the Paper, has subsequently become embedded within the regional curriculum, illustrating a diffusion pathway from individual pedagogical innovation to institutionalised practice—a trajectory consistent with bottom-up models of curriculum change documented in the international literature on teacher-led innovation (Fullan, 2007).

Evaluated against the SMART framework proposed in Section 3.4, this case performs strongly on several criteria: it is *time-tested* (having operated successfully across multiple cohorts over roughly eight years prior to the Paper), *achievable* (implemented by a single faculty member without requiring institution-wide restructuring), and arguably *reliable* (having survived the transition from individual practice to institutionalised regional curriculum). It performs less clearly on the *measurable* criterion, since the reported outcomes rely on qualitative faculty observation of engagement rather than a formal

comparative assessment of learning gains relative to the conventional syllabus it replaced. This case substantiates the paper's broader argument that durable IKS integration is more reliably achieved through incremental, teacher-initiated curricular innovation validated against the SMART criteria than through top-down mandated compliance—a finding with direct implications for how universities structure faculty development programmes such as MMTTC workshops going forward.

7. Implications for Teachers, Universities and Policy Makers

For teachers: The framework implies a redefinition of professional identity from knowledge-transmitter to facilitator, requiring faculty development programmes to build capacity not merely in disciplinary content but in dialogic (śāstrārtha-style) pedagogy and in the documentation of indigenous and regional knowledge traditions relevant to their disciplines.

For universities: Institutions should consider embedding IKS perspectives across disciplinary units rather than isolating them in single compulsory papers, while building the documentation and translation infrastructure (digital repositories, manuscript cataloguing) without which IKS content cannot be reliably scaled. Institutional IKS centres should be structurally required to represent regional and tribal traditions alongside classical Sanskritic sources, to avoid reproducing centre-periphery epistemic hierarchies.

For policymakers: NEP 2020 implementation guidance would benefit from operational criteria—such as the SMART framework proposed here—for evaluating whether IKS integration in institutional curricula is substantive or symbolic. Sustained funding for ICSSR- and UGC-supported tribal and regional knowledge-system documentation projects should be treated as integral to IKS policy rather than peripheral to it.

8. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the conceptual scaffolding required for Indian higher education to move from an imitative to a transformative epistemic posture can be usefully organised around a Man–Method–Material triad, informed by a Five-E account of historical foundations and evaluated against a SMART framework for sustainability. Institutional

leadership discourse of the kind examined here—generated at the intersection of policy mandate (NEP 2020), faculty development infrastructure (MMTTC), and lived institutional practice—constitutes an underutilised but valuable data source for higher education implementation studies. At the same time, the paper has argued that the credibility of IKS-based curriculum reform depends on its willingness to engage transparently with internal contestation—over caste-based historical inequity and over the representational completeness of "Indian" knowledge systems—rather than treating IKS as an uncontested, homogeneous inheritance.

This paper is not without limitations. Its primary source is illustrative rather than statistically representative of higher-education leadership discourse nationally; the two heuristic frameworks proposed (Five-E and SMART) have not yet been empirically validated against curriculum outcome data; and several of the historical claims engaged in Section 5—particularly those concerning the Manusmriti's colonial-era textual history—remain contested among historians and are presented here as positions within an active scholarly and public debate rather than as settled facts. These limitations should be read as an agenda for future research rather than as a deficiency specific to the case examined.

Future research should pursue systematic empirical evaluation of IKS curriculum interventions using the SMART criteria proposed here, alongside comparative studies of indigenous curriculum-integration models internationally, and longitudinal tracking of institutions that have moved IKS content from isolated compulsory papers toward disciplinarily embedded integration, in order to test the paper's central claim that the latter pathway produces more durable curricular change than the former.

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