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IKS and Social Work Education: Reimagining Higher Education for Inclusive Growth

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Abstract

The integrated indigenous intellectual traditions in philosophy, medicine, social organisation, ecology, and livelihood practices, described as Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), offer a rich basis for reorienting higher education towards social work that is inclusive, contextual, and values-based. A strategic window for the Indianization of social work education has been opened by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which specifically prioritises IKS and requires its integration across higher education curriculum. This study makes the case that introducing IKS into social work pedagogy can improve community engagement, ethical practice, culturally responsive interventions, and grassroots leadership—all of which promote inclusive growth. It is based on secondary sources, including policy documents, institutional guidelines, scholarly articles, and international literature on Indigenous education and practicum. In order to mainstream IKS into social work school, the study describes the curricular design principles, pedagogical tactics, fieldwork models, institutional capacities, and policy actions that are necessary. It also discusses implementation issues and offers a workable plan with tracking metrics. Important suggestions include district-level innovation hubs to convert indigenous knowledge into workable social welfare interventions, faculty orientation programs, university-community research partnerships, and required IKS-credit coursework.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems, Social Work Education, Indigenous pedagogy, Inclusive growth

Introduction

A vast collection of indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) covering philosophy, social ethics, communal life, medicine, education, spirituality, and sustainable practices has been fostered by India, one of the oldest civilisations in the world. These knowledge traditions, which are based on personal experiences and passed down through the generations, provide solutions to today's social issues in addition to insights into cultural legacy. Higher education in India has had to contend with the twin issues of local relevance and global competitiveness in recent decades. In order to provide comprehensive, inclusive, and future-ready education, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 acknowledges this requirement and places a strong emphasis on incorporating Indian Knowledge Systems into academic courses. At the same time, social work education in India has come under fire for failing to adequately address indigenous realities because it has been heavily influenced by Western theories and practices since its institutional inception in the early 20th century.

Although ideas of social justice, inclusiveness, and empowerment are popular in Indian society, teaching, practice, and intervention strategies frequently do not take into account local knowledge frameworks. A crucial question raised by this discrepancy is whether incorporating IKS into social work education may reframe higher education as a system that is both inclusive and culturally relevant. India's current socioeconomic situation emphasises how urgent such a reimagining is. Context-sensitive methods to social work are necessary in light of the following issues: ecological degradation, caste-based discrimination, gender inequity, rapid urbanisation, and rural underdevelopment. Although Western models offer useful resources, they fall short in capturing the intricacies of Indian society, where ancient customs, group decision-making, and community relationships are important factors. Here, Indian Knowledge Systems provide a useful basis for social work theory and practice through the philosophies of Sarvodaya (welfare of all), Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam

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(the world is one family), Gandhian ethics of service, and indigenous methods to welfare and healing. As a result, higher education is at a crossroads: on the one hand, there is pressure to meet international standards, and on the other, indigenous knowledge must be preserved and modified for inclusive national growth. There is a special chance to close this gap by incorporating IKS into social work education. Institutions can generate graduates who are not only academically proficient but also socially and culturally grounded, ethically orientated towards inclusive growth, and culturally sensitive by fusing traditional wisdom with contemporary pedagogies.

In order to rethink higher education in India, this research investigates the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems into social work education. It makes the case that this kind of integration will guarantee inclusivity, cultural rootedness, and innovation while enhancing higher education institutions' ability to address today's societal issues. Through the use of secondary data sources, such as academic literature, policy papers, and institutional case studies, the study investigates how IKS has influenced the development of a new paradigm for social work education.

By doing thus, the study places itself within larger discussions about the democratisation of higher education, the decolonisation of knowledge, and the indigenisation of social sciences. It claims that incorporating IKS is a strategic necessity to develop an educational framework that empowers communities, promotes equity, and significantly advances India's vision of inclusive and sustainable prosperity, rather than a question of cultural nostalgia.

Objectives of the paper

1. To examine the philosophical and ethical foundations of IKS and their relevance to social work education.
2. To analyze the role of IKS in addressing contemporary social challenges in India.
3. To propose curriculum and pedagogical reforms in social work education integrating IKS.
4. To identify challenges and barriers in integrating IKS into higher education and social work curricula.

Methodology

This conceptual and policy-analytic paper draws on **secondary data**: NEP 2020 materials and the Government of India's IKS webpages; UGC and HEI guidelines on incorporating IKS in higher education curricula; peer-reviewed articles and policy briefs on Indigenous field education and social work pedagogies; and institutional reports on pilot initiatives. Key sources informing the arguments include official NEP/Ministry of Education IKS documentation and UGC resources, academic analyses of IKS integration, and international literature on Indigenous practicum and culturally responsive social work education. The paper integrates these sources into a synthesis and proposes a pragmatic model for curriculum, pedagogy, fieldwork, and evaluation.

Discussion

It is both a pedagogical requirement and a sociocultural obligation to incorporate Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into social work education. Even though the field of social work places a strong emphasis on social justice, equality, and empowerment, classroom instruction and real-world situations frequently diverge due to the prevalence of Western theoretical frameworks. Using IKS to rethink higher education in India offers a chance to develop inclusive growth, indigenise curricula, and develop contextually appropriate methods. The potential connections, benefits, and difficulties of integrating IKS with social work education are examined in this conversation.

1. The Philosophical Foundations of IKS and Social Work

Human wellbeing, social justice, and the common good are philosophical concerns shared by IKS and social work. The ethical foundations of social work practice are strongly aligned with ideas such as Sarvodaya (welfare of all), Antyodaya (upliftment of the last person), Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world is one family), and Seva (selfless service). While these indigenous values are rooted in cultural traditions that the Indian community can readily relate to, they also correlate with the global social work ideals of dignity, social responsibility, and human rights.

Students can internalise ethical values as lived experiences anchored in Indian society rather than as abstract abstractions by incorporating these ideologies into higher education programs. Future social workers' cultural awareness, empathy, and community involvement are all improved by this change.

2. Relevance of IKS in Addressing Contemporary Social Issues

- Context-specific solutions are needed to address India's social issues, which include poverty, inequality, caste discrimination, gender-based violence, underdevelopment in rural areas, and ecological degradation. Although useful, Western models frequently overlook India's variety and subtle cultural differences. IKS provides pertinent tools:
- Health and Well-Being: In addition to social work interventions in community health, Ayurveda, Yoga, Siddha, and indigenous healing practices offer holistic approaches to mental and physical health.
- Conflict Resolution: Indigenous techniques for participatory decision-making and conflict resolution are highlighted by traditional panchayat systems and community councils.
- Sustainability: An issue that is becoming more and more significant in social work is environmental sustainability, which is addressed by indigenous agricultural expertise, water management systems, and environmentally friendly practices.
- Community Development: IKS may empower marginalised communities through participatory techniques, as demonstrated by Gandhian models of rural development, self-help organisations, and cooperative movements.

These illustrations show that IKS is more than just cultural heritage; it is a useful tool for inclusively tackling social issues of the twenty-first century.

3. Curriculum Reforms in Higher Education

Curriculum change is a significant step in rethinking social work education. Many Indian institutions currently base their social work curricula heavily on case studies and textbooks from the West. The following actions can be made to close this gap:

- **Integration of Indigenous Texts and Thinkers:** Including, in addition to Western social theorists, the writings of reformers like as Mahatma Gandhi, Jyotiba Phule, Savitribai Phule, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, and others.
- **Case Studies from Indian Contexts:** Using fieldwork on tribal welfare initiatives, women's collectives, Dalit movements, and rural development as instructional material.
- **Skill-based Training:** Combining contemporary research techniques with traditional participatory methods including folk pedagogy, storytelling, and community discussions.
- **Language and Accessibility:** To integrate theory with practical applications, educational materials in Indian languages are being promoted to a larger student body.

Graduates of such curricular modifications would be well-educated and socially conscious.

4. Experiential Learning and Community Engagement

Practice-based learning is essential to social work education, which cannot be contained in traditional classroom settings. In experiential pedagogy, IKS can be extremely important. For example, fieldwork might expose students to indigenous health practices, local governance structures, and traditional crafts.

Students can interact with communities as learners of traditional wisdom rather than as outside "experts." Collaborative projects utilising IKS methodologies with NGOs and grassroots organisations can improve community trust and problem-solving abilities. Under this model, knowledge is co-created by communities, faculty, and students rather than being transferred in a one-way fashion.

5. Inclusive Growth through IKS and Social Work Education

Development that helps everyone, particularly the underprivileged segments of society, is referred to as inclusive growth. Using IKS as a framework, social work can promote inclusion in a number of ways:

- **Caste and Gender Equity:** Using reformist traditions to instill activism and awareness in students, such as the Phule couple's support for women's education and Ambedkar's fight against caste prejudice.

Communities in rural and tribal areas: acknowledging indigenous tribal wisdom as authentic knowledge, guaranteeing their customs' observance and preservation, and facilitating socioeconomic advancement.

- **Digital Inclusion of IKS:** By recording and digitising traditional practices, we can close the gap between rural and urban areas and make them available to higher education.

Higher education becomes a forum for democratising knowledge and elevating under-represented voices when it values multiple epistemologies.

6. Challenges in Integrating IKS into Social Work Education

IKS integration has potential, however there are a number of obstacles to be aware of:

- **Epistemological Tensions:** IKS frequently favours subjectivity and experiential wisdom, while Western frameworks place a higher priority on objectivity and standardisation.
- **Absence of Documentation:** A large portion of IKS is still community-based or oral, which makes it challenging to incorporate into formal curriculum.
- **Academic Resistance:** The prevalence of Western conceptions in higher education may lead to opposition to the acceptance of indigenous knowledge as "scientific."
- **Global Recognition:** Indigenous knowledge systems may not necessarily be valued or validated by international academic norms. Research, cooperation, and lobbying are needed to address these issues and establish IKS as an adjunct to contemporary education rather than as a substitute.

7. Pathways for Reimagining Higher Education

The following avenues can be taken in order to get beyond these obstacles and fully utilise IKS in social work education:

1. **Policy Support:** NEP 2020's requirements for incorporating IKS into higher education are being strongly implemented.
2. **Institutional Innovation:** Setting up specialised IKS centres for curriculum creation, documentation, and research in academic institutions.
3. **Capacity Building:** Educating academics on how to interact critically and imaginatively with indigenous knowledge systems.
4. **Collaborative Research:** Promoting multidisciplinary studies that include indigenous sciences, humanities, and social sciences.
5. **Global Positioning:** To strengthen India's educational soft power, IKS-based social work models are being promoted at international fora.

These tactics will guarantee that higher education produces socially conscious leaders who can promote inclusive growth in addition to teaching academic knowledge.

8. Relevance to Viksit Bharat 2047

Lastly, IKS's incorporation into social work education is consistent with India's Viksit Bharat 2047 goal. Higher education may produce leaders who are creative, moral, and socially conscious by equipping young people with information derived from Indian traditions and modified for modern issues. By ensuring that no segment of society is left behind in India's development process, social workers with IKS can act as catalysts for inclusive progress.

Conclusion

One revolutionary move in rethinking higher education in India is the incorporation of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into social work courses. For many years, social work education has been mostly based on Western models, which provide insightful information but frequently ignore the sociocultural complexity of Indian society. IKS is a priceless resource for establishing social work education in local realities because of its rich history of holistic living, community solidarity, moral behaviour, and sustainable practices.

This conversation has shown how the ideals of social work—dignity, fairness, and inclusion—align perfectly with philosophical traditions like Sarvodaya, Antyodaya, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, and Gandhian ethics. Beyond theory, IKS is relevant because it provides useful frameworks for community empowerment, sustainable development, conflict resolution, and health and well-being. Higher education institutions can transition from an externally borrowed model of knowledge to one that is inclusive, contextually appropriate, and culturally resonant by integrating IKS into social work education.

There are still issues, nevertheless, such as academic hostility, a lack of systematic recording, and epistemological conflicts between modern and ancient knowledge. To overcome these, deliberate changes in research, pedagogy, and policy are needed. The ultimate objective is to reinterpret and incorporate old wisdom into contemporary higher education in ways that empower marginalised people and foster inclusive progress, rather than just preserving it.

In light of India's aim for Viksit Bharat 2047, the combination of IKS and social work education provides a potent means of producing socially conscious leaders who are grounded in cultural customs yet capable of handling modern issues. These leaders will exemplify the harmony between ethics and innovation, knowledge and values, and local concerns and global viewpoints—qualities crucial to creating a developed and inclusive India.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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