

Saffronization or Secularization? A Critical Discourse Analysis of Indian Knowledge System (IKS) in the NEP Framework

N RAMULU

Assistant Professor of Public Administration,

Government Arts & Science College (A), Kamareddy.

Abstract: The introduction of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) within the framework of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has generated intense academic, political, and ideological debates in India. Advocates view IKS as a decolonial project intended to restore indigenous epistemologies marginalized under colonial education, while critics interpret it as an instrument of “saffronization” associated with Hindu majoritarian nationalism. This article undertakes a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of IKS as articulated in NEP 2020 and related institutional documents. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, Edward Said, and Norman Fairclough, the paper investigates how discourse surrounding IKS constructs notions of national identity, culture, civilization, secularism, and epistemic legitimacy. The study argues that IKS in the NEP framework embodies a complex duality: it simultaneously functions as a project of epistemic decolonization and as a potential ideological apparatus aligned with cultural nationalism. While the policy rhetorically emphasizes inclusivity, plurality, multilingualism, and constitutional values, its selective privileging of Sanskrit and Hindu civilizational narratives risks marginalizing minority epistemologies, Dalit traditions, tribal knowledge systems, and secular scientific rationality. The article concludes that the future trajectory of IKS depends less on policy rhetoric and more on implementation practices, curricular design, institutional autonomy, and pedagogical interpretation. A genuinely pluralistic and secular IKS framework is possible only when indigenous knowledge traditions are engaged critically, comparatively, and democratically rather than as instruments of nationalist homogenization.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge System, NEP 2020, saffronization, secularization, critical discourse analysis, decolonization, Hindutva, education policy, epistemology, nationalism.

Introduction

Education has historically functioned as one of the principal sites for the construction of national identity, ideological reproduction, and social transformation. In postcolonial societies, educational reform often becomes intertwined with debates concerning cultural authenticity, civilizational memory, and political legitimacy. India’s National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents one of the most ambitious educational reforms since independence, proposing structural transformations across school and higher education. Among its most debated features is the emphasis on the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), envisioned as an effort to reconnect learners with indigenous intellectual traditions, languages, sciences, arts, and philosophies.

The insertion of IKS into the educational discourse has generated polarized reactions. Supporters argue that colonial education systematically marginalized Indian intellectual traditions and produced what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o termed the “colonization of the mind.” From this perspective, IKS is a corrective intervention intended to reclaim indigenous epistemologies and foster civilizational confidence. Critics, however, contend that the discourse of IKS often overlaps with the ideological project of Hindutva and risks transforming education into an instrument of cultural majoritarianism. The concern is not merely about the inclusion of indigenous knowledge but about which knowledge traditions are selected, institutionalized, and legitimized. The debate is therefore not reducible to a binary opposition between tradition and modernity. Rather, it concerns the politics of knowledge production itself. Which traditions are recognized as “Indian”? Who determines epistemic legitimacy? Can indigenous knowledge coexist with secular constitutionalism and scientific rationality? Or does the IKS discourse serve as a vehicle for “saffronization,” a term widely used to describe the ideological restructuring of educational and cultural institutions in accordance with Hindu nationalist narratives?

This article addresses these questions through a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of NEP 2020 and the broader IKS discourse. CDA is particularly suitable because it examines how language reproduces power, ideology, and social hierarchies. By analyzing policy texts, public discourse, and scholarly debates, the paper investigates whether the IKS framework represents an inclusive decolonial pedagogy or a culturally homogenizing nationalist project. The central argument advanced here is that the IKS discourse within NEP 2020 operates through an ambivalent and strategically flexible language. It invokes constitutional values, plurality, and interdisciplinarity while simultaneously privileging certain civilizational narratives associated predominantly with upper-caste Sanskritic traditions. Consequently, IKS can become either a democratic decolonial framework or an ideological instrument depending on how it is interpreted and implemented.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Discourse Analysis and Educational Ideology

Critical Discourse Analysis emerged as an interdisciplinary methodological framework concerned with the relationship between language, ideology, and power. Scholars such as Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk, and Ruth Wodak conceptualize discourse not merely as communication but as a social practice that constructs reality and reproduces hegemonic structures. Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice provides a useful framework for analysing NEP 2020. The policy text itself contains linguistic choices emphasizing "holistic," "multidisciplinary," "Indian ethos," "heritage," and "civilizational values." These terms are not ideologically neutral. They participate in broader struggles over identity, nationalism, and legitimacy.

Michel Foucault's notion of power/knowledge is equally relevant. Foucault argued that knowledge systems are inseparable from institutional power structures. Educational curricula therefore function not merely as repositories of information but as mechanisms for shaping subjectivity and governing populations. The inclusion or exclusion of particular epistemologies reflects broader relations of power.

Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony further illuminates the debate. Gramsci argued that dominant groups maintain authority not only

through coercion but through cultural institutions that normalize their worldview. Education plays a crucial role in manufacturing consent. From this perspective, critics interpret the IKS project as part of a broader hegemonic effort to institutionalize a Hindu civilizational narrative as the dominant national identity.

Postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak also provide analytical tools for understanding the decolonial aspirations of IKS. Colonial education often portrayed indigenous knowledge as irrational or inferior. Efforts to recover marginalized epistemologies can therefore function as acts of epistemic resistance. However, Spivak warns that elite representations of indigenous culture may silence subaltern voices rather than empower them. Thus, the theoretical framework adopted here recognizes the dual possibility embedded within IKS discourse: epistemic emancipation and ideological domination.

Historical Context of Educational Nationalism in India

The politics of education in India has always been deeply intertwined with nation-building. Colonial education policies, particularly after Thomas Macaulay's Minute on Education (1835), prioritized English-language education and Western epistemologies. Indigenous knowledge traditions were relegated to the margins, creating an intellectual hierarchy privileging European rationality.

Nationalist leaders responded differently to colonial education. Mahatma Gandhi advocated Nai Talim, emphasizing craft-based holistic education rooted in Indian realities. Rabindranath Tagore promoted cosmopolitan humanism and intercultural learning. B.R. Ambedkar viewed modern secular education as essential for social emancipation, particularly for oppressed castes. Jawaharlal Nehru emphasized scientific temper and secularism as foundational principles of postcolonial nationhood.

Post-independence educational policy largely reflected Nehruvian secularism. Institutions such as the NCERT attempted to develop curricula grounded in constitutional values, scientific rationality, and pluralistic nationalism. However, education also became a contested ideological terrain. Since the late twentieth century, Hindu nationalist organizations increasingly criticized secular historiography as "anti-national" or excessively influenced by Marxist historians.

The term “saffronization” emerged in this context, referring to attempts to reinterpret Indian history and culture through the ideological lens of Hindutva. Critics argue that such interventions selectively glorify ancient Hindu civilization while marginalizing Islamic, Christian, tribal, and Dalit contributions. NEP 2020 therefore emerged within an already polarized political environment where educational reform was inseparable from debates concerning nationalism and identity.

Indian Knowledge System (IKS): Conceptual Foundations

The concept of Indian Knowledge System refers broadly to indigenous traditions of knowledge developed in the Indian subcontinent across fields such as philosophy, mathematics, medicine, astronomy, linguistics, agriculture, governance, ecology, and aesthetics. The Ministry of Education has institutionalized IKS through dedicated divisions, research centres, and curricular initiatives.

Proponents of IKS argue that colonial education delegitimized Indian intellectual traditions. The recovery of Ayurveda, Yoga, Sanskrit literature, classical logic, and indigenous ecological practices is presented as necessary for decolonizing education and fostering self-reliance.

Recent scholarship portrays IKS as an epistemological alternative to Western disciplinary fragmentation. Advocates emphasize interdisciplinarity, experiential learning, ecological sustainability, and cultural rootedness.

However, the conceptual ambiguity of IKS remains a major issue. The category “Indian” encompasses multiple and often contradictory traditions: Vedic philosophy, Buddhist epistemology, Islamic scholarship, Sikh theology, tribal ecological knowledge, Dalit oral traditions, and regional linguistic cultures. Yet public discourse often narrows IKS to Sanskrit-Hindu frameworks. This selective representation raises critical questions. Is IKS genuinely pluralistic, or does it privilege upper-caste Brahmanical traditions as representative of “Indian civilization”? Can secular education incorporate religious-philosophical traditions without collapsing into ideological indoctrination?

NEP 2020 and the Language of Civilizational Recovery

NEP 2020 repeatedly invokes phrases such as “India-centered education,” “ancient and eternal knowledge,” and “pride in India.” These rhetorical formulations are significant because they frame education not only as skill development but as civilizational recovery.

The policy emphasizes:

- Integration of Indian arts, culture, and philosophy
- Promotion of Sanskrit and classical languages
- Inclusion of traditional knowledge systems
- Holistic and multidisciplinary learning
- Ethical and constitutional values

At the same time, the policy also explicitly supports scientific temper, critical thinking, constitutional morality, diversity, and global citizenship. This dual discourse produces ideological ambiguity. On one level, the policy appears inclusive and progressive. On another level, terms such as “Indian ethos” and “civilizational values” remain undefined, allowing multiple interpretations. A CDA approach reveals that ambiguity itself functions strategically. By avoiding explicit ideological declarations, the policy accommodates both liberal-secular and nationalist readings. Supporters interpret IKS as decolonial pluralism, while critics see it as a coded articulation of Hindu cultural nationalism.

Saffronization Thesis: Majoritarianism and Cultural Nationalism

Critics of IKS within NEP 2020 argue that the policy participates in the broader ideological project of saffronization. The term refers to the infusion of Hindu nationalist ideology into educational, cultural, and state institutions.

Several concerns dominate this critique.

Selective Civilizational Representation

The discourse surrounding IKS disproportionately emphasizes Vedic and Sanskrit traditions. While these are undeniably important components of Indian intellectual history, the overrepresentation of upper-caste Hindu traditions risks erasing the plurality of India’s epistemic landscape. Dalit intellectual traditions, Islamic scholarship, Christian

educational contributions, tribal ecological knowledge, and regional vernacular epistemologies receive comparatively limited institutional attention.

Historical Revisionism

Critics argue that the glorification of ancient India sometimes slides into mythologized nationalism. Claims regarding ancient aviation, genetic science, or technological supremacy often blur the distinction between mythology and empirical scholarship. This tendency threatens scientific rationality and academic rigor.

Institutional Centralization

The increasing role of centrally controlled educational bodies raises concerns regarding academic autonomy. Critics fear that curricular changes may prioritize ideological conformity over critical inquiry.

Marginalization of Minority Narratives

The discourse of cultural nationalism may implicitly define authentic Indian identity in Hindu civilizational terms. Such framing risks alienating religious minorities and undermining secular constitutionalism. Scholars discussing saffronization note that educational discourse increasingly frames India as a civilizational state rather than a secular republic.

Decolonization Thesis: Reclaiming Indigenous Epistemologies

Despite these criticisms, dismissing IKS entirely as saffronization would oversimplify the issue. There are legitimate epistemological grounds for critiquing colonial education and advocating indigenous knowledge recovery. Colonial epistemology often constructed Western modernity as universally superior while portraying indigenous traditions as backward or irrational. Decolonial scholars argue that this hierarchy continues to shape academic institutions globally. The inclusion of indigenous ecological practices, Ayurveda, classical philosophy, vernacular literature, and local pedagogical traditions can enrich contemporary education. Scholars argue that IKS may contribute to sustainability studies, mental health, ethics, linguistics, and interdisciplinary thinking. Furthermore, the dominance of English-language education has often alienated students from local cultures and languages. NEP's emphasis on multilingualism and mother-tongue

instruction may promote educational accessibility and cultural dignity.

The challenge therefore lies not in whether indigenous knowledge should be included, but how it should be included.

A democratic decolonial framework would:

- Subject all knowledge traditions to critical scrutiny
- Recognize epistemic plurality
- Avoid civilizational essentialism
- Integrate scientific methodology
- Include marginalized and subaltern traditions

Thus, IKS has emancipatory potential if implemented through critical pedagogy rather than nationalist romanticism.

Language, Symbolism, and Ideological Construction

Discourse analysis reveals that language plays a crucial role in shaping the ideological meanings of IKS.

“Ancient Wisdom”

The phrase “ancient wisdom” constructs tradition as inherently authoritative. While cultural continuity is valuable, the rhetorical sanctification of antiquity may discourage critical evaluation.

“Indian Ethos”

The term “Indian ethos” appears inclusive but remains undefined. In practice, dominant political narratives may interpret it primarily through Hindu cultural frameworks.

“Holistic Education”

Holistic education is framed as an alternative to colonial compartmentalization. Yet the term also carries civilizational connotations associated with spiritual-nationalist discourse.

“Pride in India”

The emphasis on cultural pride functions affectively. It seeks not only to educate but to emotionally align students with national identity narratives.

These linguistic strategies demonstrate how educational policy simultaneously shapes cognition and emotion.

Secularism and the Question of Educational Neutrality

Indian secularism differs from Western models because it does not require strict separation between religion and public life. Instead, it seeks principled equidistance among religions. The inclusion of cultural and philosophical traditions in education is therefore not inherently incompatible with secularism.

However, secular education requires:

- Equal representation
- Critical engagement
- Academic rigor
- Constitutional values
- Protection of minority rights

The problem arises when one tradition is normalized as synonymous with national identity. If IKS becomes equated primarily with Hindu civilization, secular pluralism weakens.

A secular approach to IKS would include:

- Buddhist epistemology
- Islamic scientific traditions
- Sikh ethics
- Christian educational contributions
- Dalit intellectual history
- Tribal ecological knowledge
- Regional linguistic traditions

Such pluralization would transform IKS from a majoritarian discourse into a genuinely inclusive epistemic framework.

Caste, Knowledge, and Epistemic Hierarchy

Any serious discussion of IKS must address caste. Historically, access to Sanskrit knowledge was restricted through caste hierarchies. Brahmanical dominance shaped the production and transmission of knowledge in precolonial India. Romanticizing ancient knowledge without interrogating caste exclusion risks reproducing historical inequalities. Dalit scholars argue that many celebrated traditions emerged within structures of social oppression.

A critical IKS framework must therefore include:

Anti-caste perspectives

Dalit literature and philosophy

Bahujan knowledge traditions

Oral histories

Labor-based epistemologies

Without such inclusion, the discourse of “Indian civilization” risks becoming synonymous with upper-caste heritage.

Scientific Temper and Knowledge Validation

One of the central tensions within the IKS debate concerns scientific temper. The Indian Constitution explicitly promotes scientific temper as a civic value. Traditional knowledge systems can contribute meaningfully to modern scholarship, particularly in medicine, ecology, ethics, and philosophy. However, knowledge claims require empirical scrutiny and methodological rigor. The uncritical glorification of ancient science risks undermining evidence-based reasoning. Scholars warn that nationalist pressures may encourage pseudo-scientific narratives.

A productive integration of IKS requires:

- Peer-reviewed research
- Interdisciplinary methodology
- Empirical testing
- Comparative analysis
- Historical contextualization
- The goal should not be civilizational competition but intellectual dialogue.

Media, Public Discourse, and Polarization

Public debate surrounding IKS and NEP 2020 reflects broader political polarization in India. Social media discourse often reduces complex educational questions into ideological binaries. Supporters portray critics as “anti-national” or “colonially conditioned,” while critics portray all IKS initiatives as fascistic. This polarization obscures nuanced analysis. Studies examining public reactions to NEP 2020 indicate diverse responses shaped by political identity, language politics, and regional concerns. Critical pedagogy requires

moving beyond ideological absolutism toward democratic debate.

Comparative Perspectives: Indigenous Knowledge in Global Context

The integration of indigenous knowledge into formal education is not unique to India. Countries such as New Zealand, South Africa, Bolivia, and Canada have attempted to incorporate indigenous epistemologies into curricula.

These efforts reveal important lessons:

- Indigenous knowledge inclusion can strengthen cultural dignity
- State appropriation can also instrumentalize culture
- Pluralistic frameworks are essential
- Academic rigor must be maintained
- Minority participation is crucial

India's challenge therefore lies not in whether to include indigenous knowledge but in how to institutionalize epistemic diversity democratically.

Pedagogical Implications

The future of IKS depends significantly on pedagogy.

Critical Pedagogy

Teachers should encourage questioning, debate, and comparative inquiry rather than rote reverence for tradition.

Interdisciplinary Learning

IKS should interact dynamically with modern sciences, social sciences, and global philosophies.

Democratic Curriculum Design

Curricula must include multiple traditions and marginalized voices.

Teacher Training

Educators require training to handle IKS critically rather than ideologically.

Research Orientation

Universities should promote rigorous research rather than symbolic cultural celebration.

Conclusion

The debate over Indian Knowledge System within the NEP framework reflects a larger struggle over the meaning of nationhood, modernity, secularism, and decolonization in contemporary India. IKS is neither inherently emancipatory nor inherently authoritarian. Its political and pedagogical significance depends on the structures through which it is interpreted, institutionalized, and taught. A Critical Discourse Analysis reveals that NEP 2020 employs a strategically ambivalent language that accommodates multiple ideological readings. On one hand, it promotes multilingualism, interdisciplinarity, indigenous knowledge recovery, and constitutional values. On the other hand, its civilizational rhetoric and selective representation risk reinforcing Hindu majoritarian narratives. The central challenge is therefore epistemic democracy. A genuinely secular and pluralistic IKS framework must move beyond Brahmanical and Sanskritic dominance to include Dalit, tribal, Islamic, Buddhist, Sikh, Christian, feminist, and regional knowledge traditions. It must encourage critical inquiry rather than civilizational glorification. Indigenous knowledge should enrich education through dialogue with scientific rationality, not through ideological insulation. The future of Indian education depends on whether IKS becomes:

A democratic project of epistemic pluralism and decolonization, or an ideological apparatus of cultural nationalism. The distinction between saffronization and secularization ultimately lies not in the existence of IKS itself, but in the politics of its implementation.

References

1. Govinda, R. "NEP 2020: A Critical Examination." *Social Change*, vol. 50, no. 4, 2020, pp. 603–607.
2. Swain, B.C., and Pranay Pandey. "Epistemological Shifts in Indian Higher Education: Implications of the National Education Policy 2020." *Archives of Educational Studies*, 2025.
3. Pandit, Santishree Dhulipudi. "Reviving Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS): Bridging Tradition with Modernity." *International Studies*, 2025.
4. Ara, Arzuman. "Incorporating IKS in English Language Education: Perspectives from Critical Pedagogy." *Journal of English Language Teaching*, 2024.

5. Biswas, Titas. *“Pedagogical Curricula and Educational Media: The Malignancy of Saffronised Otherisation in India.”* Zoon Politikon, vol. 11, 2020, pp. 146–199.
6. *“The ‘Saffronisation’ of India and Contemporary Political Ideology.”* World Englishes, 2020.
7. *“National Education Policy 2020 and the Revival of Indian Knowledge Systems: Prospects and Challenges.”* 2025.
8. Pandey, Avinash, and Renuka Ozarkar. *“Reworking the Aesthetics of Language Use: The Multilingual Challenge for NEP 2020.”* Contemporary Education Dialogue, 2024.
9. “Analysing the Tweets to Examine the Behavioural Response of Indian Citizens over the Approval of National Education Policy 2020.” International Journal of Educational Development, 2021.
10. Ahmed, Raja Qaiser et al. *“Chosen Trauma and Saffronization of India.”* International Area Studies Review, 2022.
11. Ambedkar, B.R. *Annihilation of Caste.* New Delhi: Navayana, 2014.
12. Fairclough, Norman. *Language and Power.* London: Routledge, 1989.
13. Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge.* New York: Pantheon, 1980.
14. Gandhi, M.K. *Basic Education (Nai Talim).* Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1951.
15. Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks.* New York: International Publishers, 1971.
16. Said, Edward. *Orientalism.* New York: Vintage, 1978.
17. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *“Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988.
18. Tagore, Rabindranath. *Towards Universal Man.* Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1961.
19. Thiong’o, Ngũgĩ wa. *Decolonising the Mind.* Nairobi: East African Publishers, 1986.
20. NEP 2020. Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020