

Sources of Indian Knowledge Systems: A Critical Study of the Vedas, Upanishads, Epics, Puranas, and Smritis

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Abstract: *Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) represent a comprehensive and integrated tradition of knowledge encompassing philosophy, science, ethics, social organization, and spirituality. Rooted in ancient textual sources, these systems evolved through a rich corpus of literature including the Vedas, Upanishads, Epics, Puranas, and Smritis. The present study critically examines these foundational sources to understand their role in shaping the epistemological, ethical, and cultural dimensions of Indian civilization. Using a qualitative and textual-analytical methodology, the paper explores the classification of knowledge into Śruti and Smṛti, the philosophical insights embedded in the Upanishads, the socio-ethical narratives of the Epics, the encyclopedic and cultural knowledge of the Puranas, and the normative frameworks of the Smritis. The study highlights the holistic and interdisciplinary nature of Indian Knowledge Systems and underscores their continued relevance in contemporary education, ethics, and sustainability discourse.*

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems, Vedas, Upanishads, Epics, Puranas, Smritis, Śruti, Smṛti

1. Introduction

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) constitute one of the world's oldest and most enduring intellectual traditions. Developed over millennia, these systems encompass diverse fields such as metaphysics, logic, medicine, mathematics, astronomy, linguistics, ethics, governance, and ecology. Unlike fragmented modern disciplinary approaches, Indian knowledge traditions emphasize holistic understanding, integrating material, moral, and spiritual dimensions of life.

The primary sources of Indian Knowledge Systems are traditionally classified into *Śruti* (that which is heard or revealed) and *Smṛti* (that which is remembered). The Vedas and Upanishads form the core of *Śruti* literature, while the Epics, Puranas, and Smritis belong to the *Smṛti* tradition. Together, these texts provide a comprehensive framework for understanding reality (*tattva*), duty (*dharma*), knowledge (*jñāna*), and liberation (*mokṣa*).

In recent years, there has been renewed academic and policy-oriented interest in Indian Knowledge Systems, particularly within the context of educational reforms and interdisciplinary research. However, a critical and systematic study of the classical textual sources remains essential to appreciate their epistemological depth and contemporary relevance. This paper seeks to examine the major sources of Indian Knowledge Systems, analyze their contributions, and highlight their enduring significance.

2. Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Indian Knowledge Systems has evolved from orientalist interpretations to indigenous and interdisciplinary frameworks. Early studies by Max Müller emphasized philological analysis of Vedic texts, while later Indian scholars such as Radhakrishnan (1951) and Dasgupta (1922) highlighted the philosophical depth and systematic nature of Indian thought. These works established the

intellectual legitimacy of Indian knowledge traditions within global philosophy.

Recent scholarship has expanded the scope of Indian Knowledge Systems beyond philosophy to include science, ecology, governance, and education. Chattopadhyaya (1986) demonstrated the scientific temper present in ancient Indian texts, particularly in astronomy, mathematics, and medicine. Mishra (2016) emphasized that IKS represents an integrated worldview where ethics, spirituality, and empirical observation coexist.

Studies on the Epics and Puranas have focused on their role as socio-cultural knowledge repositories. Scholars argue that these texts function as pedagogical tools, transmitting ethical and practical knowledge through narrative forms. Smṛti literature has been critically examined for its normative frameworks, with contemporary scholars advocating contextual and critical interpretations rather than literal applications.

Despite extensive scholarship, there remains a gap in holistic studies that critically examine all major sources—Vedas, Upanishads, Epics, Puranas, and Smritis—as interconnected components of Indian Knowledge Systems. This paper seeks to address this gap by presenting a comprehensive and integrative analysis.

3. Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research methodology based on textual analysis. Primary sources include translated versions of the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gītā, major Epics, selected Puranas, and Smṛiti texts. Secondary sources consist of scholarly books, journal articles, and contemporary research on Indian Knowledge Systems.

The study employs:

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Analytical method to examine key concepts and themes

Comparative approach to understand the distinction and interrelation between Śruti and Smṛti

Interpretative method to contextualize philosophical and ethical ideas

This methodological framework enables a critical understanding of Indian Knowledge Systems as dynamic, adaptive, and holistic knowledge traditions.

4. Sources of Indian Knowledge Systems**1) The Vedas as Foundational Knowledge Sources**

The Vedas- R̥gveda, Yajurveda, Sāmaveda, and Atharvaveda- constitute the earliest and most authoritative sources of Indian Knowledge Systems. Regarded as Śruti literature, the Vedas are considered revealed knowledge and form the epistemological foundation of Indian intellectual traditions. They are not merely religious texts but comprehensive repositories of philosophical, ethical, social, and scientific thought. According to Radhakrishnan (1951), “the Vedas represent the earliest record of the human mind in its quest for truth and order” (p. 72).

The R̥gveda, the oldest of the four Vedas, consists primarily of hymns (*sūktas*) addressed to natural forces such as Agni, Indra, Varuṇa, and Sūrya. These hymns reflect early cosmological speculation and a deep sense of reverence for nature. The Yajurveda focuses on ritual knowledge and sacrificial procedures, highlighting the importance of disciplined action (*karma*). The Sāmaveda emphasizes musical and aesthetic dimensions of knowledge, illustrating the role of sound and rhythm in spiritual practice. The Atharvaveda, distinct in character, addresses social life, health, psychology, and healing, revealing practical knowledge related to everyday human concerns.

Vedic literature demonstrates an integrated worldview where knowledge of the cosmos, society, and the self is interconnected. Keith (1925) observes that the Vedas present “a unity of religious intuition, ethical reflection, and primitive scientific observation” (p. 14). This holistic approach distinguishes Indian Knowledge Systems from later compartmentalized disciplines. The Vedas also contain early references to astronomy, mathematics, medicine, and ecology, indicating systematic observation of natural phenomena.

Ethical principles such as *rta* (cosmic order) and *dharma* emerge prominently in Vedic thought, emphasizing harmony between humans, nature, and the universe. According to Sharma (2013), “the Vedic vision is fundamentally ethical, grounded in the belief that human life must align with cosmic order” (p. 28). This ethical-cosmological framework later influenced Upanishadic philosophy, epic traditions, and Smṛiti literature.

Thus, the Vedas serve as foundational knowledge sources by establishing the metaphysical, ethical, and cosmological basis of Indian Knowledge Systems. Their influence extends across centuries, shaping philosophical inquiry, social organization, and spiritual practice, and continues to inform

contemporary discussions on holistic knowledge and sustainability.

2) Upanishads and the Philosophical Foundations of Knowledge

The Upanishads represent a decisive intellectual transition in Indian Knowledge Systems, moving from external ritualism to inward philosophical inquiry. While the earlier Vedic texts emphasize sacrificial practices (*karma-kāṇḍa*), the Upanishads focus on knowledge (*jñāna*) as the primary means of liberation. They seek to uncover the ultimate reality underlying the phenomenal world and the true nature of the self. Radhakrishnan (1951) describes the Upanishads as “records of the spiritual experiences of sages who sought to realize the ultimate truth by turning inward” (p. 137).

Central to Upanishadic philosophy is the concept of *Brahman*, the absolute, infinite, and unchanging reality that underlies the universe. Closely related is the notion of *Ātman*, the inner self or soul. The profound Upanishadic insight lies in the identification of *Ātman* with *Brahman*, famously expressed in the dictum *tat tvam asi* (That thou art). This non-dual vision forms the metaphysical foundation of Indian philosophy. According to Dasgupta (1922), “the Upanishads mark the first systematic attempt to unify cosmology, psychology, and metaphysics into a coherent philosophical vision” (p. 29).

The Upanishads also introduce key epistemological distinctions between *avidyā* (ignorance) and *vidyā* (true knowledge). *Avidyā* refers to knowledge confined to the empirical and material realm, while *vidyā* leads to the realization of ultimate truth and liberation (*mokṣa*). Knowledge, in the Upanishadic sense, is not merely intellectual but experiential and transformative. As Sharma (2013) observes, “Upanishadic knowledge is realization (*anubhava*), not conceptual speculation” (p. 47).

Methodologically, the Upanishads employ dialogue, questioning, and contemplation as tools of inquiry. Teacher–student conversations, metaphors, and paradoxes are used to guide seekers toward self-realization. This reflective and introspective method establishes a distinctive epistemology rooted in direct experience rather than external authority alone. Keith (1925) notes that the Upanishads “replace ritual exactitude with philosophical reflection and inward discipline” (p. 33).

In essence, the Upanishads provide the philosophical foundations of Indian Knowledge Systems by redefining the purpose of knowledge as self-realization and liberation. Their emphasis on unity, introspection, and experiential wisdom profoundly influenced later schools of Indian philosophy and continues to inspire contemporary philosophical and spiritual discourse.

3) Epics as Ethical and Socio-Cultural Knowledge Systems

The Indian Epics, the *Rāmāyaṇa* and the *Mahābhārata*, occupy a central place in Indian Knowledge Systems as comprehensive repositories of ethical, social, and political thought. Unlike abstract philosophical treatises, the Epics convey knowledge through narrative, symbolism, and

character-driven discourse, making complex moral and social ideas accessible to diverse sections of society. Radhakrishnan (1951) observes that the Epics are “not merely literary works but living documents of ethical reflection and social wisdom” (p. 312).

The *Rāmāyaṇa* presents an idealized vision of ethical life grounded in *dharma*. Characters such as Rāma, Sītā, and Hanumān exemplify values of duty, loyalty, sacrifice, and righteousness. The text addresses issues of kingship, family responsibilities, and social harmony, offering normative ideals for individual and collective conduct. According to Sharma (2013), “the *Rāmāyaṇa* serves as a moral compass, illustrating how ethical ideals can be embodied in everyday life” (p. 89).

The *Mahābhārata*, in contrast, presents a more complex and realistic portrayal of human life, where moral dilemmas often lack clear solutions. Through its vast narrative canvas, the epic examines conflicts related to justice, power, kinship, and governance. It recognizes the contextual and situational nature of *dharma*, emphasizing ethical reasoning rather than rigid moral codes. As Dasgupta (1922) notes, “the *Mahābhārata* reflects the moral struggle of humanity itself, revealing the tension between ideal values and practical realities” (p. 407).

Embedded within the *Mahābhārata*, the *Bhagavad Gītā* represents a philosophical synthesis of Indian thought. It integrates *karma* (selfless action), *bhakti* (devotion), and *jñāna* (knowledge) as complementary paths to liberation. The *Gītā* addresses the psychological and ethical crisis of Arjuna, offering a framework for action rooted in detachment and spiritual awareness. Radhakrishnan (1959) describes the *Bhagavad Gītā* as “a spiritual charter that reconciles action with contemplation” (p. 121).

Overall, the Indian Epics function as dynamic ethical and socio-cultural knowledge systems that shape values, social norms, and collective memory. Their narrative methodology, moral depth, and philosophical integration continue to influence Indian society and provide enduring insights into ethical leadership, social responsibility, and human relationships.

4) Puranas and Encyclopedic Knowledge Traditions

The Puranas constitute an important source of Indian Knowledge Systems by functioning as encyclopedic repositories of cultural, historical, cosmological, and religious knowledge. Traditionally classified under *Smṛti* literature, the Puranas were composed to communicate complex philosophical and cultural ideas in an accessible narrative form. They preserve a wide range of knowledge, including cosmology, genealogy, geography, mythology, ritual practices, and social values. According to Radhakrishnan (1951), the Puranas “translate the abstract truths of philosophy into concrete and imaginative forms suited to popular understanding” (p. 345).

A defining feature of the Puranic tradition is its narrative methodology. Philosophical concepts such as creation (*śṛṣṭi*), dissolution (*pralaya*), *dharma*, and devotion (*bhakti*) are presented through myths, legends, and symbolic stories. This

narrative mode allowed the transmission of knowledge beyond scholarly circles, making it accessible to the broader society. Wilson (1840) notes that the Puranas “served as the principal vehicles of religious and historical instruction for the masses” (p. xli).

The Puranas are traditionally characterized by five themes (*pañca-lakṣaṇa*): creation, secondary creation, genealogy of gods and sages, reigns of Manus, and dynastic histories. These elements reflect an early attempt at preserving historical memory and social continuity. Dasgupta (1922) observes that although mythological in form, the Puranas contain “valuable insights into the cultural and social evolution of ancient India” (p. 512).

Ecological consciousness is another significant aspect of Puranic knowledge. Rivers, mountains, forests, and animals are revered as sacred entities, reinforcing a worldview that emphasizes harmony between humans and nature. This ecological sensitivity aligns with the broader Indian ethical principle of *dharma*. According to Chattopadhyaya (1986), such texts reveal “an indigenous ecological awareness embedded in cultural and religious symbolism” (p. 219).

Devotion (*bhakti*) emerges as a central theme in many Puranas, particularly the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and *Viṣṇu Purāṇa*. These texts integrate metaphysical ideas with emotional and ethical dimensions of spirituality, promoting inclusive and personal forms of religious practice. Sharma (2013) states that “the Puranic tradition played a crucial role in shaping popular religion and moral consciousness in India” (p. 104).

In sum, the Puranas function as encyclopedic knowledge traditions that preserve India’s cultural memory and philosophical heritage. Their integrative approach to mythology, history, ecology, and devotion underscores their enduring role within Indian Knowledge Systems.

5) Smritis and Normative Knowledge Frameworks

The Smritis constitute a vital component of Indian Knowledge Systems by articulating normative frameworks governing ethical conduct, social organization, and legal principles. Unlike the Vedas, which are considered *Śruti* or revealed knowledge, Smritis belong to the *Smṛti* tradition—knowledge that is remembered, interpreted, and adapted according to social and historical contexts. Texts such as the *Manusmṛiti*, *Yājñavalkya Smṛiti*, and *Nārada Smṛiti* systematize the principles of *dharma* into practical guidelines for individual and collective life. According to Radhakrishnan (1951), the Smritis represent “the application of philosophical ideals to the regulation of social life” (p. 371).

The *Manusmṛiti* is one of the most influential Smṛiti texts and addresses a wide range of subjects, including moral duties, social roles, legal procedures, and governance. It seeks to maintain social harmony by prescribing duties (*svadharma*) appropriate to different stages of life (*āśramas*) and social categories. While often debated for its hierarchical prescriptions, the text provides valuable insights into the socio-legal structure of ancient Indian society. As Lingat (1973) observes, “the *Manusmṛiti* reflects an attempt

to codify social norms in accordance with the prevailing conditions of its time” (p. 68).

The *Yājñavalkya Smṛiti* represents a more refined and systematic legal framework, particularly in matters of civil law, inheritance, and judicial procedures. It reflects a rational and pragmatic approach to governance and justice. The *Nārada Smṛiti*, on the other hand, focuses primarily on legal procedures and jurisprudence, emphasizing fairness, evidence, and judicial responsibility. According to Derrett (1968), these Smritis demonstrate “a sophisticated legal consciousness rooted in ethical responsibility” (p. 112).

An important feature of Smṛiti literature is its contextual adaptability. Unlike the timeless truths of *Śruti*, Smritis acknowledge the variability of social conditions and allow for reinterpretation. This flexibility underscores the dynamic nature of Indian Knowledge Systems. Sharma (2013) notes that “Smritis were never intended as rigid laws but as guiding frameworks subject to interpretation and reform” (p. 118).

In conclusion, Smritis function as applied knowledge systems that translate philosophical and ethical principles into concrete social practices. Their study is essential for understanding ancient Indian legal thought, governance, and social ethics, as well as the adaptive and pragmatic dimensions of Indian Knowledge Systems.

6) Śruti and Smṛti: A Comparative Knowledge Framework

The distinction between *Śruti* and *Smṛti* represents a foundational epistemological framework within Indian Knowledge Systems. This classification reflects a layered understanding of knowledge, where eternal metaphysical truths coexist with contextual social applications. *Śruti*, literally meaning “that which is heard,” refers primarily to the Vedas and Upanishads and is regarded as revealed, timeless, and authoritative. *Smṛti*, meaning “that which is remembered,” includes texts such as the Epics, Puranas, and Smritis, which interpret and apply *Śruti* principles within historical and social contexts. According to Radhakrishnan (1951), “*Śruti* supplies the fundamental vision, while *Smṛti* translates that vision into practical life” (p. 54).

Śruti is considered the ultimate source of knowledge in Indian philosophical thought because it articulates universal truths concerning reality (*Brahman*), self (*Ātman*), and cosmic order (*ṛta*). Its authority lies in its transcendence of time and place. The philosophical insights of the Upanishads, which form the concluding part of the Vedas, emphasize self-realization and liberation as the highest goals of knowledge. As Dasgupta (1922) observes, “the authority of *Śruti* rests on its concern with the ultimate nature of reality rather than empirical or social conventions” (p. 21).

In contrast, *Smṛti* literature is inherently adaptive and pragmatic. It seeks to operationalize the principles of *Śruti* in relation to ethical conduct, social organization, and governance. Texts such as the *Manusmṛiti*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, and the Puranas demonstrate how universal ideals of *dharma* are interpreted according to societal needs and historical circumstances. Lingat (1973) notes that *Smṛti*

“does not claim timeless authority but derives its validity from social acceptance and practical relevance” (p. 7).

The interdependence of *Śruti* and *Smṛti* highlights the dynamic nature of Indian Knowledge Systems. While *Śruti* provides metaphysical and ethical foundations, *Smṛti* ensures their continuity through reinterpretation and application. This flexibility allows Indian intellectual traditions to remain resilient and responsive to changing conditions. Sharma (2013) emphasizes that “the genius of Indian thought lies in maintaining continuity without rigidity through the *Śruti–Smṛti* framework” (p. 131).

In essence, the *Śruti–Smṛti* distinction illustrates a holistic and adaptive epistemology where eternal truths inform contextual practices. Together, they form a comprehensive knowledge system that integrates philosophy, ethics, and social life, ensuring both continuity and change within Indian civilization.

5. Findings and Discussion

The analysis reveals that Indian Knowledge Systems are rooted in a holistic epistemology, where knowledge is not merely informational but transformational. The Vedas provide foundational cosmological and ethical insights, while the Upanishads deepen these insights through metaphysical inquiry and self-realization.

The Epics function as applied knowledge systems, translating abstract principles into lived human experiences. The Puranas democratize knowledge by making complex philosophical and cultural ideas accessible to society at large. Smṛiti texts reflect applied and normative knowledge, addressing social order, governance, and ethical conduct.

A significant finding is the interdisciplinary nature of Indian Knowledge Systems, where philosophy, science, ethics, and ecology are interwoven. The *Śruti–Smṛti* framework illustrates an adaptive knowledge model that balances eternal principles with contextual application. This adaptability contributes to the enduring relevance of Indian Knowledge Systems in contemporary discourse on education, sustainability, and ethics.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Indian Knowledge Systems, as derived from the Vedas, Upanishads, Epics, Puranas, and Smritis, represent a comprehensive and integrated intellectual tradition. These sources collectively offer insights into metaphysics, ethics, social organization, and ecological balance, reflecting a holistic worldview.

The critical examination of these texts reveals that Indian Knowledge Systems are not static or archaic but dynamic and context-sensitive. Their emphasis on harmony, duty, self-knowledge, and sustainable living offers valuable perspectives for addressing modern global challenges. Integrating Indian Knowledge Systems into contemporary academic and educational frameworks can foster interdisciplinary learning and ethical consciousness.

Future research may focus on comparative studies with other knowledge traditions, empirical applications of IKS principles, and curriculum development aligned with Indian Knowledge Systems.

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