NEP's Key Initiative: Bridging Past and Present through Indian Knowledge Systems—A Study of Bastar's Tribal Heritage and Chhattisgarh's Cultural Legacy

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 places unprecedented emphasis on reconnecting contemporary education with India's civilizational knowledge traditions through the framework of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). This paper examines NEP's key initiative of "bridging past and present" by exploring the convergence of modern progress and traditional wisdom in the context of Chhattisgarh, with particular reference to the tribal Ayurveda of the Bastar region, the ancient temples of the state, and the living traditions of tribal art and folk dance. The study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing upon historical sources, ethnographic studies, policy documents, and secondary data to analyse how indigenous healing practices, architectural knowledge, and performative arts embody sustainable, community-oriented epistemologies. The paper argues that integrating such knowledge systems into higher education not only enriches academic curricula but also fosters cultural literacy, ethical awareness, and national consciousness among students. Furthermore, it demonstrates how modern scientific tools, digital documentation, and academic research methodologies can complement traditional practices without diluting their essence. By situating Bastar's tribal knowledge and Chhattisgarh's cultural heritage within the broader objectives of NEP 2020, the paper highlights the transformative potential of IKS in creating a holistic, inclusive, and culturally grounded higher education system.

Keywords: NEP 2020, Indian Knowledge Systems, Bastar tribes, tribal Ayurveda, cultural heritage

1. Introduction

India's educational trajectory has long been shaped by colonial epistemologies that privileged Western knowledge systems over indigenous intellectual traditions. While this approach facilitated access to global scientific and technological developments, it also created a rupture between education and the lived cultural realities of Indian society. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 seeks to address this historical discontinuity by emphasizing the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into formal education, thereby creating a meaningful bridge between past wisdom and present progress.

Chhattisgarh, particularly the Bastar region, offers a compelling context for examining this vision. The state is home to ancient temples reflecting sophisticated architectural and cosmological understanding, as well as tribal communities whose knowledge of Ayurveda, ecology, art, and performance has been transmitted orally across generations. This paper explores how NEP 2020's emphasis on IKS enables higher education to connect modern scientific inquiry and technological advancement with these traditional knowledge systems, ensuring continuity, relevance, and cultural sustainability.

2. National Education Policy 2020 and Indian Knowledge Systems

2.1 Conceptual Foundation of IKS under NEP 2020

NEP 2020 defines Indian Knowledge Systems as encompassing "ancient and modern Indian contributions in mathematics, medicine, architecture, metallurgy, philosophy, arts, and ecology." The policy recognizes that these systems are not relics of the past but dynamic frameworks capable of engaging with contemporary challenges. It advocates their inclusion across disciplines, particularly in higher education, through curriculum design, research, and interdisciplinary studies.

2.2 Bridging Past and Present

The idea of "bridging past and present" does not imply a nostalgic return to tradition, but rather a dialogic relationship between indigenous wisdom and modern knowledge. NEP 2020 envisions higher education institutions as spaces where traditional practices can be critically examined, scientifically validated where appropriate, and innovatively applied using modern tools and technologies.

3. Bastar and the Living Tradition of Tribal Ayurveda

3.1 Overview of Tribal Ayurveda in Bastar

The Bastar region is inhabited by tribal communities such as the Gond, Muria, Maria, and Halba, whose healthcare practices are deeply rooted in nature. Tribal Ayurveda in Bastar relies on locally available medicinal plants, minerals, and holistic diagnostic methods that consider physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Knowledge is preserved through oral transmission by traditional healers, known locally as *vaidya* or *gunia*.

3.2 Data on Medicinal Plant Use

Ethnobotanical studies conducted in Bastar indicate the use of over 300 plant species for medicinal purposes, particularly in treating fever, gastrointestinal disorders, skin diseases, and bone injuries (Jain & DeFilipps, 2018). This data underscores the empirical richness of tribal knowledge systems.

3.3 Integration with Modern Science and Technology

Modern scientific methods such as phytochemical analysis, digital herbariums, and GIS-based mapping of medicinal plants offer opportunities to document and preserve tribal Ayurveda. Under NEP 2020, higher education institutions can facilitate interdisciplinary research where biotechnology, pharmacology, and anthropology intersect with traditional healing practices.

4. Ancient Temples of Chhattisgarh: Architectural Knowledge and Cultural Memory

4.1 Historical Overview

Chhattisgarh is often referred to as the "land of temples," with architectural marvels such as the Maa Danteshwari temple of Dantewada district in bastar region one of the main shaktipith of the Chhattisgarh state. From Warangal of Telangana state to bastar Maa Danteshawari represent and worshiped as the Goddess of the tribes so temples unexplored secrets and mystery are still a topics for the curiosity. In same way other temples of state like Bhoramdeo Temple the Khajuraho of the Chhattisgarh state, Rajiv Lochan Temple, and Sirpur temple complex. These structures demonstrate advanced knowledge of Moden arts, geometry, material science, iconography, and environmental adaptation.

4.2 Temple Architecture as Knowledge Systems

Ancient temples were not merely places of worship but canters of learning, art, and community life. The orientation of temples, use of locally sourced materials, and symbolic representations reflect a sophisticated understanding of cosmology and ecology.

4.3 Modern Documentation and Conservation

Technologies such as 3D laser scanning, digital archiving, and structural analysis are increasingly used by archaeologists and conservationists. Integrating such practices into higher education aligns with NEP's emphasis on combining heritage studies with modern technological skills.

5. Tribal Arts and Folk Dances of Bastar

5.1 Cultural Significance

Bastar's tribal art forms, including Dhokra metal casting, wood carving, and mural painting, are expressions of collective memory and social values. Folk dances such as *Gaur*, *Karma*, and *Panthi* are performed during agricultural cycles and festivals, reinforcing communal bonds.

5.2 Knowledge Embedded in Performance

These art forms encode ecological awareness, ethical norms, and historical narratives. They function as informal educational systems through which knowledge is transmitted across generations.

5.3 Digital Platforms and Contemporary Outreach

In recent years, digital media, virtual exhibitions, and online cultural repositories have enabled wider dissemination of tribal arts. NEP 2020 encourages such initiatives, enabling students to study, document, and promote traditional arts using contemporary tools.

6. Role of Higher Education in Integrating IKS

6.1 Curriculum Innovation

Higher education institutions can introduce credit-based courses on tribal knowledge, temple architecture, and folk traditions within humanities, social sciences, and even science programs.

6.2 Research and Field-Based Learning

Fieldwork in regions like Bastar allows students to engage directly with knowledge holders, fostering experiential learning and ethical research practices.

6.3 Cultural Literacy and National Integration

Exposure to Indian Knowledge Systems enhances students' understanding of India's pluralistic heritage, strengthening national identity grounded in cultural respect rather than uniformity.

7. Challenges and Ethical Considerations

Despite its promise, integrating IKS into higher education presents challenges:

- Risk of commercialization or misappropriation of tribal knowledge
- Lack of formal documentation
- Need for ethical frameworks protecting community intellectual rights

NEP 2020 emphasizes community participation and informed consent, which must guide all academic engagements.

8. Discussion: NEP as a Bridge between Tradition and Modernity

The case of Bastar and Chhattisgarh demonstrates that NEP 2020's vision is both culturally meaningful and academically viable. Traditional Ayurveda, temple architecture, and folk arts gain renewed relevance when studied through modern academic lenses, while higher education becomes more rooted, inclusive, and socially responsive.

Conclusion

NEP 2020's initiative to bridge past and present through Indian Knowledge Systems represents a transformative moment for Indian higher education. By integrating tribal Ayurveda, ancient

architectural wisdom, and living cultural traditions into academic discourse, institutions can cultivate holistic learning that balances innovation with heritage. In regions like Bastar, this approach not only preserves invaluable knowledge but also empowers communities and enriches students' cultural, ethical, and national consciousness. The future of Indian education lies in this meaningful synthesis of tradition and modernity.

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