BRIDGING THE GAP: LIBRARIES AS LIVING HUBS FOR INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

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Abstract :

This paper proposes a theoretical framework for transforming libraries into dynamic hubs for disseminating Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). In response to the historical marginalization of IKS, the study synthesizes library science principles with postcolonial theory to propose a tripartite model involving Curatorial Reorientation, Multimodal Access, and Participatory Knowledge Creation. The paper argues this transformation is vital for cognitive justice, knowledge preservation, and addressing modern challenges, while also addressing key implementation challenges like librarian training and decolonizing knowledge organization.

Keywords : Indian Knowledge Systems, library science, knowledge dissemination, epistemic justice, Ranganathan, digital libraries, cognitive justice.

Introduction :

1. Background and Significance :

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) are a rich and ancient collection of knowledge that developed in India over thousands of years. This includes advanced learning in fields like:

- Philosophy (different schools of thought)
- Medicine (such as Ayurveda)
- Mathematics (including the invention of zero)
- Astronomy, Metallurgy, Political Science, and Architecture

This knowledge is not just old history; it is practical, well-structured, and offers a holistic view of the world, connecting physical and spiritual well-being.

However, during the colonial period, Western knowledge was treated as the only valid form of learning. Indian knowledge was pushed aside and excluded from schools, universities, and public discussion. This created a huge gap between India's great intellectual heritage and what people know today.

Therefore, reviving IKS is not just for scholars—it is an important step toward reclaiming cultural identity, achieving knowledge equality, and finding solutions to modern problems like sustainable living and holistic health.

2. The Problem of Dissemination and the Institutional Gap :

While the 21st century has witnessed a renewed scholarly and governmental interest in IKS, evidenced by initiatives like the IKS Division under the Ministry of Education in India, a critical challenge remains: the lack of a robust, accessible, and widespread dissemination infrastructure. The primary channels for knowledge dissemination—formal education and academic publishing—are often inaccessible to the general public, gatekept by specialized language, and slow to adapt. This creates a paradox where valuable knowledge is "rediscovered" academically but remains confined to scholarly circles, failing to percolate into the broader societal consciousness.

This gap highlights the need for a community-centric institution that can bridge the divide between the esoteric realms of specialized knowledge and the everyday lives of citizens. Museums archive artifacts, universities create new knowledge, but there exists a pressing need for an institution dedicated to the democratization and active dissemination of existing knowledge in an engaging, accessible manner. It is within this institutional vacuum that the potential of the modern library must be reconsidered.

3. The Library as a Potential Epistemic Hub :

This paper posits that the contemporary library, particularly public and academic libraries, are uniquely and theoretically positioned to serve as the central nervous system for the dissemination of IKS. Historically, libraries have been perceived as passive repositories of books—silent warehouses of knowledge. However, a modern understanding, influenced by the foundational work of library pioneers like S.R. Ranganathan, redefines the library as a dynamic, community-oriented organism designed for active knowledge engagement (Ranganathan, 1931). Their core functions of curation, organization, access provision, and community programming align perfectly with the requirements of effective IKS dissemination.

Libraries are inherently democratic spaces, open to all regardless of academic or social background. They are trusted institutions within communities, making them ideal platforms for fostering a cultural re-engagement with IKS. By reimagining their role, libraries can transform from passive containers of information into active "epistemic hubs"—vibrant centers where knowledge is not only stored but also discussed, interpreted, practiced, and revitalized.

4. Thesis Statement and Research Objective :

The central thesis of this paper is that by synthesizing the principles of library science

with the imperatives of epistemic justice and sociocultural learning theory, a robust theoretical framework can be constructed to reposition libraries as essential agents in the dissemination and preservation of Indian Knowledge Systems. This transformation is not about adding a few books on IKS to a shelf; it is about a fundamental reorientation of the library's mission to actively foster cognitive justice and pluralistic knowledge ecology.

The primary objective of this theoretical research is to construct this framework. This paper will:

Analyze the theoretical foundations for this role, drawing upon Ranganathan's Five Laws of Library Science, postcolonial theories of epistemic justice, and sociocultural learning models.

Propose a detailed tripartite model comprising Curatorial Reorientation, Multimodal Access, and Participatory Knowledge Creation as the pillars for library-led IKS dissemination.

5. Scope, Methodology, and Paper Structure :

This study is conceptual and theoretical in nature. It employs a methodology of theoretical synthesis, drawing upon and integrating existing theories from library science, postcolonial studies, the sociology of knowledge, and educational theory to build a novel conceptual framework. It does not present empirical data but aims to establish a strong theoretical foundation for future empirical research and practical implementation.

Review of Literature :

This review synthesizes the key contributions of Indian scholars to the discourse on libraries and Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). The chronology reveals a clear evolution from foundational philosophical arguments to critical postcolonial analyses and, finally, to contemporary proposals for practical implementation.

1. The Foundational Vision: S.R. Ranganathan (1930s-1960s) :

The conceptual link between libraries and the dissemination of Indian knowledge finds its earliest and most implicit advocate in the work of S.R. Ranganathan, the father of library science in India. While not explicitly writing about IKS as a separate category, his seminal work, The Five Laws of Library Science (1931), provides an indispensable philosophical foundation.

Key Argument : Ranganathan's laws, particularly "Books are for use" and "Every reader his/her book," establish the library's fundamental purpose as a dynamic social institution for democratizing knowledge. Scholars like Kumar (2005) argue that by logical extension, these principles mandate the inclusion and active promotion of indigenous knowledge. If libraries

are to serve every Indian reader, they must contain books reflecting Indian intellectual heritage. Ranganathan's vision of the library as a "growing organism" inherently supports the integration of IKS as a natural part of its evolution.

2. The Postcolonial Critique and Call for Intellectual Decolonization (1980s-1990s) :

A significant shift occurred with scholars who began explicitly analyzing the colonial legacy on Indian knowledge. Authors like Ashis Nandy and Claude Alvares provided the critical "why" behind the marginalization of IKS.

Ashis Nandy (1988) : In The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism, Nandy explores the psychological impact of colonialism, arguing that it led to the internalization of Western intellectual superiority. This work is crucial for understanding why IKS were systematically excluded from "serious" institutions like libraries and universities, which were modeled on Western paradigms.

Claude Alvares (1991) : In Decolonizing History: Technology and Culture in India, China and the West, Alvares directly challenges the narrative of Western scientific superiority. He provides concrete examples of Indian scientific and technological achievements, making a powerful case for the need to "decolonize" knowledge systems. This scholarship created the intellectual imperative for institutions like libraries to actively counter epistemic injustice.

3. Bridging Theory and Practice: Library Science Scholars Engage with IKS (2000s-2010s) :

Building on the postcolonial critique, a new wave of Indian library and information science scholars began translating these ideas into their specific field.

G.P.S. Kumar (2005) : In his paper, "Library and Information Science in India: A Postcolonial Perspective," Kumar directly applies postcolonial theory to library practices. He critiques standard classification systems like Dewey Decimal for marginalizing IKS and calls for the development of indigenous classification schemes that respectfully categorize Indian knowledge within its own context.

P. B. Mangla (2010) : In works like "Knowledge Traditions of India and the Role of Libraries," Mangla moves beyond critique to propose practical steps. He emphasizes the need for specialized collection development policies focused on IKS, the importance of acquiring materials in Indian languages, and the role of librarians as active mediators of this knowledge.

4. The Contemporary Synthesis: Towards a Holistic Framework (2010s-Present) :

Recent scholarship reflects a more integrated and technologically-aware approach, synthesizing earlier ideas with modern possibilities.

P. K. Bhattacharya & S. Joshi (2019) : In their article "Digital Libraries as Repositories of Indian Knowledge Heritage," the authors focus on the transformative potential of digital technology. They argue that digital libraries can overcome the physical limitations of traditional libraries, providing global access to digitized manuscripts, oral history recordings, and multimedia resources related to IKS.

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and Scholarly Response: The Government of India's NEP 2020, with its strong emphasis on integrating IKS into all levels of education, has spurred a new wave of scholarly discussion. Researchers like Mehta and Sharma (2022), in their paper "Operationalizing NEP 2020: Academic Libraries as Hubs for Indian Knowledge Systems," explicitly connect national policy to library practice. They propose concrete models for library programming, community engagement, and curriculum support aligned with the goals of the NEP.

A Tripartite Theoretical Model for IKS Dissemination :

Building upon the theoretical foundations of library science, epistemic justice, and sociocultural learning, this paper proposes a tripartite model to guide the transformation of libraries into dynamic epistemic hubs for IKS. This model is not a sequential checklist but an interconnected framework where each dimension reinforces the others. It comprises: (1) Curatorial Reorientation, (2) Multimodal Access and Mediation, and (3) Participatory Knowledge Creation.

1. Dimension One : Curatorial Reorientation – From Western Canon to Pluralistic Constellation. The first and most fundamental dimension involves a paradigm shift in the library's core activity: collection development. This moves beyond merely adding a few books on IKS to fundamentally rethinking what constitutes a valuable collection.

1.1. Critical Collection Development :

Libraries must move from a passive acquisition model to a proactive, critical curatorial practice. This involves:

Beyond the Mainstream Publishers : Actively seeking materials from non-traditional sources such as university presses of Indian languages, research outputs from institutions like the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, IKS Division, and publications from ashrams and gurukuls that preserve living traditions.

Inclusive Scopes : Deliberately collecting works that represent the diversity of IKS, including often-marginalized traditions from various regions (e.g., Tamil Siddha medicine, Kerala's architectural treatises). This ensures the library does not perpetuate a monolithic, Sanskrit-centric view of Indian knowledge.

Critical Pluralism : The collection must include not just celebratory texts but also critical

scholarship that engages with IKS. This includes works that discuss historical limitations, internal debates, and contemporary reinterpretations. This approach fosters a scholarly environment of inquiry rather than dogmatic acceptance, aligning with the library's role as a space for critical thinking.

1.2. Decolonizing Knowledge Organization :

The way knowledge is organized shapes how it is perceived. Forcing IKS into Western classification systems like the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) or Library of Congress Classification (LCC) is a form of epistemic violence.

The Problem with DDC/LCC : In these systems, topics like "Ayurveda" are often subsumed under "Medicine," and "Vedanta" under "Philosophy, Indian," isolating them from their broader cosmological and cultural contexts. This reinforces their status as "alternative" or "ethnic" knowledge rather than equal, stand-alone systems.

Pathways to Solution : Libraries can explore several solutions:Development of IKS-Friendly Classifications: This could involve creating an alternative classification scheme based on Indian epistemological categories (e.g., organizing by the four Puruṣārthas - Dharma, Artha, Kama, Moksha, or by the various Śāstras).

Hybrid Mapping : A more immediately feasible approach is to adapt existing systems by adding local classifiers or creating rich cross-references that connect topics. For example, a book on ancient Indian metallurgy should be accessible under both "Technology (Dewey 600)" and "Indian Knowledge Systems," with a note explaining its significance.

Collaborative Tagging : Implementing community-based tagging systems in digital catalogs allows users—including scholars and practitioners—to add their own descriptive keywords (e.g., "Sushruta," "Dhanurveda"), creating an organic, folksonomy that reflects indigenous categories.

2. Dimension Two: Multimodal Access and Mediation – Bridging the Oral-Written Divide :

IKS are not solely text-based; they encompass oral, performative, and experiential dimensions. The library must, therefore, transcend its traditional print-centric model to provide multimodal access and skilled mediation.

2.1. Creating Dynamic Digital Repositories :

Digital technology offers unprecedented opportunities to preserve and share IKS in diverse formats.

Content Diversity : Digital repositories should host:

Digitized Manuscripts : High-quality scans of palm-leaf manuscripts and ancient texts, accompanied by transliterations and translations.

Oral Histories : Audio and video recordings of elders, traditional healers (vaidyas), artisans, and folk artists, preserving knowledge that is transmitted orally.

Multimedia Resources : Documentaries on traditional practices, video tutorials for crafts, and 3D models of archaeological sites and artifacts.

Metadata Sovereignty : The descriptive information (metadata) for these resources must be culturally sensitive. Instead of just standard fields like "author" and "title," fields for "Guru-Shishya Parampara," "Region of Origin," and "Materials Used" should be included, respecting the knowledge's context.

2.2. The Librarian as Knowledge Mediator :

This dimension requires a new role for the librarian: from a neutral custodian to an active mediator or "knowledge facilitator."

IKS Literacy : Librarians must undergo training to develop basic "IKS literacy"—a familiarity with key concepts, traditions, and resources. This enables them to guide patrons effectively, from a school student working on a project to a researcher looking for specific primary sources.

Curated Pathways : Librarians can create physical and digital "pathfinders" or resource guides on specific IKS topics (e.g., "Introduction to Indian Astronomy," "Resources on Sustainable Agriculture from Ancient Texts"). This proactive mediation saves the time of the reader (echoing Ranganathan's Fourth Law) and lowers the barrier to entry for curious patrons.

3.3. Participatory Knowledge Creation – The Library as a Living Space

The most transformative dimension conceptualizes the library from a space of knowledge consumption to a platform for knowledge creation and community dialogue, embodying the "community of practice" model.

3.1. Programming as Embodied Pedagogy :

Library programming should move beyond book launches to include events that embody IKS as living practices.

Workshop Series : Hosting regular workshops on Yoga, meditation, Ayurvedic cooking, traditional kalaripayattu, or handicrafts like pottery and weaving. These sessions translate theoretical knowledge into embodied experience.

Lecture-Demonstrations and Dialogues : Organizing talks by scholars alongside demonstrations by practitioners (e.g., a lecture on the science of metallurgy followed by a demonstration by a traditional metal artisan). Facilitating dialogues between traditional knowledge holders and modern scientists can spark innovative interdisciplinary research.

Storytelling Sessions : Reviving the oral tradition by hosting sessions where elders or storytellers narrate epics, Puranic tales, and local folklore, making this knowledge accessible to children and adults alike.

3.2. Fostering Intergenerational and Community Dialogue :

The library can become a neutral, respectful space for bridging the gap between generations and communities.

Community Archives : Initiating projects where community members contribute to building a "local knowledge archive." This could involve digitizing old family photographs, recording oral histories related to the locality, or documenting local ecological knowledge about plants and water bodies.

4. Theoretical Challenges and Considerations :

Turning libraries into centers for Indian knowledge is a great idea, but we need to be aware of some big challenges first. These aren't just small problems—they go to the heart of how knowledge is shared and who gets to share it.

1. The Librarian Training Problem :

Right now, librarians are trained to manage information using systems based on Western knowledge. To handle Indian knowledge properly, they need "IKS literacy." This means they must understand Indian philosophy, healing systems, and scientific traditions well enough to guide people. Without this special training, they might misrepresent the knowledge or fail to help people find what they need.

2. The Bookshelf Problem :

Libraries use standard systems like the Dewey Decimal System to organize books. These systems work well for Western knowledge but often misplace Indian knowledge. For example, Ayurveda might be filed only under "medicine," ignoring its connections to philosophy, diet, and lifestyle. We need to find a way to organize Indian knowledge that respects its unique structure and connections.

3. The "Museum" Problem :

There's a risk of treating Indian knowledge as a museum exhibit—something ancient

and decorative rather than useful. We might focus only on dance, festivals, and crafts while ignoring the deep science, mathematics, and philosophy. We must present this knowledge as a living system that can help solve modern problems, not just as a cultural souvenir.

4. The Digital Divide :

If we focus only on putting knowledge online, we might leave behind people with little or no internet access. Libraries must continue offering physical books and in-person activities to ensure everyone can benefit, not just those with good internet.

5. The "Who Decides?" Problem :

Who gets to decide what counts as "real" Indian knowledge? If librarians or government officials make these choices alone, they might pick the wrong versions or ignore important perspectives. We must involve traditional teachers, healers, and community elders in these decisions to ensure the knowledge is accurate and respectful.

In short, making this vision work requires more than just adding Indian books to library shelves. It requires retraining librarians, rethinking how we organize knowledge, and making sure we present Indian knowledge as a living, useful system that is accessible to everyone.

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