4. Reclaiming the Future: Indian Knowledge Systems and the Decolonization of Policy and Capacity Building

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Abstract

For over two centuries, India's governance and public policy have been shaped by colonial paradigms that prioritized control, abstraction, and hierarchy. Despite political independence, administrative frameworks have largely remained tethered to Western rationalist models. This article argues for a shift toward a decolonial and dharmic governance model grounded in Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)—a diverse, dynamic body of indigenous wisdom spanning disciplines from statecraft and ethics to ecology and psychology. By integrating principles such as Svadharma (contextual responsibility), Sahakaryata (collaborative action), and Yogakshema (collective welfare), IKS can reshape policy design, leadership, and capacity building in India. This essay proposes embedding IKS across public administration curricula, institutional research, and community engagement, thereby enabling governance that is context-sensitive, inclusive, and future-ready. Through experiential learning and a revalorization of India's civilizational heritage, this model aspires to reclaim cognitive sovereignty and foster Swaraj in thinking-laying the foundation for a regenerative and ethically anchored approach to national development.

Keywords

Capacity Building, Civil Servants, Decolonization, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), Mission Karmayogi, Policy Design, Policy Innovation, Sahakaryata, Svadharma, Swaraj, Traditional Knowledge, Training, Governance, Viksit Bharat.

Introduction

For over two centuries, the foundations of public policy and governance in India have been shaped by colonial knowledge systems and approaches that privileged abstraction over context, control over care, and hierarchy over harmony. In the aftermath of independence, although the political apparatus shifted, the paradigms that informed planning, administration, and leadership remained tethered to a Western rationalist worldview. Today, as India confronts complex

challenges of climate change, institutional legitimacy, cultural erosion, and socio-economic growth demands, it is imperative to revisit the development and public administration paradigms of the land. In this context, one should look at how indigenous and civilizational knowledge can help frame sustainable approaches to problem-solving.

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), encompassing a wide array of scientific, philosophical, artistic, and traditional knowledge, have evolved in the Indian subcontinent over several millennia. Rooted in the indigenous civilizational wisdom, IKS offers a framework that is not merely historical or symbolic but deeply pragmatic, contextually relevant, culturally appropriate, and future-ready. When consciously embedded into the policy design and capacity-building initiatives, IKS can catalyze a decolonial and dharmic governance model that is inclusive, sustainable, and authentically Indian.

This essay seeks to promote a transformative and future-oriented approach to public policy, governance, and capacity building in India by integrating the principles and values of Indian Knowledge Systems. By drawing upon the dynamic and holistic nature of IKS, the essay aims to inform policy design that is inclusive, sustainable, and responsive to contemporary challenges.

IKS as a Shift in How We Learn and Understand

Indian Knowledge Systems are not monolithic or frozen in time; they are dynamic, diverse, and dialogic. Encompassing disciplines ranging from agriculture, astronomy, mathematics, linguistics, and architecture to psychology, ethics, ecology, and statecraft, IKS emerges from a holistic understanding of life (jīvana darśana[1]) and relationality. It sees knowledge not as the conquest of nature but as a co-evolution with it; not as commodified information but as wisdom in action (vidya[2] leading to karma[3]).

A decolonial turn, therefore, requires more than inserting Sanskrit terms into curricula or showcasing temples as heritage. It involves recovering India's cognitive sovereignty and reclaiming how we define truth, reason, value, and progress. IKS invites us to shift from a paradigm that takes from people and nature

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[1]Jīvana Darśana (Sanskrit:जीवन दर्शन) means "philosophy of life" or "vision of life." It refers to the underlying worldview, values, and principles that guide how one understands and lives life. In the Indian tradition, jīvana darśana is not just abstract philosophy—it is deeply lived, experiential, and holistic

[2]Knowledge

[3]Action

for gain to one guided by inner responsibility, ethics, and harmony with society and the environment. In other words, one that is rooted in *Svadharma* (contextual responsibility), *Sahakaryata* (collaborative action), and *Yogakshema* (welfare and security of all beings).

Policy Design Through a Dharmic Lens

Contemporary policy frameworks are predominantly shaped by Western traditions, liberal-democratic ideals, utilitarian logic, and technocratic models. These tend to universalize solutions and abstract problems from their cultural and ecological contexts. A policy approach informed by IKS would be grounded in:

1. **Contextual Ethics:** Policies would arise from *desha-kala-paristhithi*[4], the awareness of time, place, and social fabric. For example, environmental laws prioritize sacred ecology and intergenerational custodianship over extractive developmentalism.

2. **Duty-centric Governance:** Inspired by *kartavya* (duty) rather than *adhikara* (rights) alone, policies would emphasize responsibilities of all stakeholders, not just entitlements, thus fostering civic co-responsibility

3. **Plural Epistemologies:** Indigenous and community knowledge about architecture, agriculture, water systems, dispute resolution, and medicinal practices would be legitimized and integrated into mainstream governance rather than seen as "informal" or "traditional."

4. **Integral Human Development:** Drawing from the *Panchakosha*[5] model and Indic psychology, human well-being would be seen as multi-dimensional, combining physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual development.

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[4]Desh-Kala-Paristhiti (देश–काल– परिस्थति) is a Sanskrit phrase commonly used in Indian thought to refer to contextual wisdom. It emphasizes that any action, decision, or understanding must be situated within the realities of:

Desh (देश) – Place or space: the geographic, cultural, and social setting

Kala (काल) – Time: the historical moment, temporal conditions, or timing of an event

Paristhiti (परिस्थति) – Situation or circumstance: the specific conditions, challenges, or environment in which something occurs

[5]The Pañcakosha (Sanskrit: पञ्चकोश) is a profound concept from Indian philosophy—especially the Taittiriya Upanishad— that describes the five layers or sheaths of human existence, moving from the outermost physical layer to the innermost essence (Ātman or Self). It offers a holistic model of the human being, emphasizing that we are not just body or mind, but composed of multiple, interconnected dimensions.

Capacity Building as Inner Re-orientation

Training institutions for civil servants, teachers, and grassroots workers must go beyond skill transfer and technocratic efficiency. Capacity building in a decolonial mode entails a deep inner re-orientation, from information to introspection, **from performance to purpose.**

A few key principles to guide such transformation:

- *Swadhyay* **(Self-knowledge) as Foundation:** Programs must begin with the process of building inner capacity through self-driven learning, reflection, and self-awareness, and their evolving *Svadharma*–one's own duty, responsibility, or path, aligned with their nature, role, and context in life.

- **Revalorization of *Bharatiya Niti* (Statecraft):** Study of texts like the Mahabharata, *Arthashastra*[6], and *Thirukkural*[7] should not be museumized but translated into living templates for learning, leadership, ethics, and collective decision making.

- **Experimental and Reflective Pedagogy:** Even in digital environments, learning should be grounded in lived experiences, virtual community engagements, and interactive case studies, e.g., IKS-based courses provided on iGOT[8].

- **Indic Diagnostics and Tools:** Tools and assessments rooted in IKS that shed light on one's *Svabhava*[9] i.e., helping individuals understand their inner dispositions, temperaments, e.g., *guna* and *panchamahabhuta*-based models, can personalize learning and deepen internalization.

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[6]Arthashastra (Sanskrit: अर्थ शास्त्र) is an ancient Indian treatise on statecraft, economics, military strategy, and governance, traditionally attributed to Kautilya (also known as Chanakya or Vishnugupta), the advisor to Chandragupta Maurya, the founder of the Mauryan Empire (~4th century BCE). The name "Arthashastra" translates to "the science of artha," where artha means material well-being, prosperity, or purpose—including wealth, power, and state interests.

[7]The Thirukkural (also spelled Tirukkural) is one of the most revered and ancient works of Tamil literature. It is a classic t ext composed by the Tamil poet-philosopher Thiruvalluvar, believed to have lived sometime between the 3rd century BCE and 5th century CE. It is considered a universal ethical guide, comparable to works like the Bible, Quran, or Confucius's Analects.Remarkably secular and inclusive, it avoids direct references to specific religions, making its wisdom accessible to people of all faiths.

[8]https://igotkarmayogi.gov.in/

[9]Svabhāva (Sanskrit:स्वभाव) means one's intrinsic nature or essential character—the inborn tendencies, dispositions, and qualities that shape who a person (or thing) is.

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Pathways for Institutional Integration

To enable this systemic transformation, a multi-pronged strategy is needed:

1. **Policy Alignment:** IKS values must be embedded across flagship national frameworks as demonstrated by the National Education Policy (NEP), the Karmayogi Competency Model, courses on Karmayogi Bharat[10], and Amrit Kaal Viksit Bharat. These platforms offer not just symbolic recognition but also serve as foundational paradigms to mainstream Bharatiya perspectives in governance and development.

2. **Curriculum Redesign:** Public administration curricula should integrate IKS-based frameworks for ethics, leadership, governance, and well-being. The Capacity Building Commission (CBC), along with the Central Training Academies (CTA's), plays a vital role by reimagining civil service training through Mission Karmayogi, ensuring that civil servants are equipped with contextually rooted, values-based approaches drawn from India's own intellectual traditions.

3. **Research and Knowledge Production:** Establish IKS Chairs, fellowships, and Centres of Excellence across academic institutions to critically engage, translate, and apply Indic wisdom to contemporary governance challenges. The IKS Cell at the CBC exemplifies this approach. It actively works to integrate India's civilizational knowledge into public administration through policy research, learning modules, and strategic collaborations.

4. **Community Co-Creation:** Indigenous communities, grassroots movements, and field practitioners must be treated not just as informants but as co-owners of knowledge, ensuring that lived realities and traditional ecologies of wisdom enrich institutional frameworks.

5. **Long-Term Immersions:** Promote **"*yatras*[11]" and immersive field experiences** where civil servants, educators, and students engage with communities practicing Indic models of sustainability, equity, and self-governance. These experiences foster embodied learning and cultivate empathy, humility, and deeper insight into alternative development paradigms.

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[10]https://igotkarmayogi.gov.in/

[11]Sanskrit *yātrā* meaning 'journey'

Conclusion: Toward Swaraj in Thinking

The decolonial project in India must move beyond critique to reconstruction. IKS offers not a romantic past but a regenerative future; an opportunity to reimagine policy and leadership as moral, contextual, and rooted in the well-being of all beings. When civil servants and policy designers begin with self- awareness and act with *dharmic* clarity, governance transforms from a mechanistic system to a living ethic.

When we reconnect with our own ways of knowing through Indian Knowledge Systems, we are not turning our backs on modern ideas; we reframe them through an Indic lens of wisdom, integration, and responsibility. This is the swaraj of the 21ˢᵗ century, not just political autonomy, but cognitive and civilizational self-rule. The time has come not merely to teach IKS but to live it. Through policies that care, leaders who reflect, and systems that embody the soul of India.

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Author's Profile

Dr. R. Balasubramaniam (Balu) is a widely respected development activist, leadership trainer, thinker and writer. After his MBBS, he earned his MPhil in Hospital Administration & Health Systems Management from BITS, Pilani. He has a Master's in Public Administration from the Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard University. He has spent more than three decades of his life in the service of the rural and tribal poor in the forests of India. He is also the Founder and Chairman of Grassroots Research and Advocacy Movement, a public policy thinktank in India. He is a Tata Scholar, a Mason Fellow of the Harvard Kennedy School and a Fellow at the Hauser Center for Civil Society, Harvard University. He was the Head and Visiting Professor of the Vivekananda Chair, University of Mysore twice.

He is a former professor at Cornell University, USA and at IIT-Delhi, India where he taught courses on Leadership and Human Development. He coaches and mentors senior leaders in the non-profit, corporate, government and educational sectors globally, apart from running leadership workshops for people from these sectors. He is the Chairman of the Social Stock Exchange Advisory Committee set up by SEBI. He is currently the Member-HR in the Capacity Building Commission of the Government of India.

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He has authored nine books, both in Kannada and English. More about him, his work and books are at www.drrbalu.com

Ms. Tanushree Bhat is a design-thinking professional who now leads the Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) mandate at India's Capacity Building Commission. Armed with a master's in Design Planning from the Institute of Design at Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, she blends rigorous systems thinking with a deep empathy for end-users. Before returning to India in 2021, Tanushree spent more than a decade in the United States as a senior consultant with WorkSpace Futures at Steelcase Inc.'s global headquarters in Michigan. Her portfolio spans education, healthcare, banking, HR, manufacturing, and product development, consistently uncovering human-centred insights that unlock growth and social impact. Through her leadership of the IKS Cell, she works to ensure that indigenous wisdom is not just acknowledged but meaningfully integrated into capacity-building initiatives, making them more contextually grounded, inclusive, and responsive to the lived experiences of both citizens and civil servants

Dr. Sakshi Pandey serves as the Research Lead at the Capacity Building Commission of India. With a Ph.D. in Food and Nutrition Policy from the University of Tokyo, Dr. Pandey is a MEXT Scholar with a technical background in Civil Engineering (B.Tech.) and Rural Development (M.Tech. from IIT Bombay). Her career spans work with UNICEF India, and later, academic and policy roles as a postdoctoral fellow and capacity-building associate at the Asian Development Bank Institute in Japan. Her research portfolio includes peer-reviewed articles, policy briefs, and edited volumes on topics ranging from malnutrition and sanitation to climate change and women's livelihoods. At the Commission, she contributes to evidence-based research that informs national capacity-building strategies, with a strong emphasis on sustainability, public health, and inclusive policy frameworks.