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What and Whose Traditions? Indigenous Epistemologies, Decolonial Critique, and the National Education Policy 2020

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 foregrounds "Indian Knowledge Systems" (IKS) as a corrective to colonial epistemic domination and as a foundation for curricular reform. While this move is framed as decolonial, this paper argues that the policy's invocation of indigeneity remains conceptually under-theorized and politically selective. Drawing on Indian decolonial and critical theorists and comparative postcolonial debates on language and knowledge, the paper interrogates the categories of "indigenous," "Indian," and "traditional" as deployed in NEP 2020. It demonstrates that without sustained engagement with caste, religion, migration, language, and historical syncretism, the policy risks reproducing epistemic hierarchies under a nationalist–civilizational framework. Rather than constituting a genuine epistemic rupture, NEP 2020 may represent a reorientation of dominance, from colonial–Eurocentric to upper-caste–majoritarian, raising the question of whether the policy produces decolonial disruption or epistemic disorientation. **Keywords:** Indigenous Knowledge; IKS; NEP 2020; Decolonial Theory; Epistemological systems; Indigeneity

Introduction: Indigeneity as an Epistemological Claim.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a significant reorientation of India's educational framework through its explicit endorsement of "Indian Knowledge Systems" (IKS) as a core component of curricular reform (Government of India 2020). This emphasis is articulated as a corrective to colonial epistemic dominance and as an attempt to re-anchor education in civilizationally rooted modes of knowing. While such claims are presented in the language of epistemic decolonization, the conceptual foundations of "indigeneity" mobilized by the policy remain insufficiently theorized. Indigeneity, in this context, functions not merely as a descriptive category but as an epistemological claim that asserts authority, authenticity, and legitimacy in the production, validation, and transmission of knowledge. To designate certain intellectual traditions as indigenous is simultaneously to establish hierarchical distinctions within the epistemic field, elevating some forms of knowledge while relegating others to the status of derivative, foreign, or epistemically marginal. Such classificatory practices are inherently political, as they shape curricular inclusion and exclusion while naturalizing particular historical narratives as civilizationally continuous and culturally authentic.As Partha Chatterjee (1993) has argued, postcolonial nationalist projects frequently draw upon selectively constructed premodern cultural repertoires to consolidate modern political authority. NEP 2020 risks reproducing this dynamic by presuming a coherent, internally unified, and socially consensual conception of indigeneity. This may elide the deeply contested histories of caste, religion, language, migration, and power that have shaped intellectual life in the subcontinent. In doing so, the policy foregrounds civilizational continuity while obscuring the social relations through which knowledge has historically been produced, regulated, and transmitted. This paper contends that the central analytical question is not whether indigenous knowledge warrants recognition—an issue that commands broad scholarly agreement—but rather whose traditions are institutionalized as epistemically authoritative under the rubric of indigeneity, and at what social, ethical, and political cost. By interrogating the epistemological

assumptions embedded in NEP 2020's discourse on Indian Knowledge Systems, the paper seeks to foreground the exclusions and hierarchies that accompany ostensibly decolonial educational reforms.

Indigenous Traditions as Epistemological Systems

Indigenous traditions are frequently represented in policy discourse as repositories of cultural wisdom, ecological harmony, and moral balance. While such representations are not inaccurate, they are incomplete. Indigenous traditions are not merely cultural artefacts; they are epistemological systems—ways of knowing, validating truth, and organizing social life.

These systems are typically characterized by holistic ontologies that resist rigid separations between nature and society, sacred and secular, past and present; by a strong emphasis on orality and embodied knowledge; and by relational conceptions of selfhood grounded in collectivity and interdependence. Such features challenge modern disciplinary epistemologies rooted in abstraction, textuality, and methodological individualism.

However, as Gopal Guru (2002) cautions, epistemologies cannot be detached from the social conditions of their production. Knowledge systems are embedded in relations of power, hierarchy, and exclusion. To valorise indigenous epistemologies without interrogating their internal social structures risks romanticization. Indigenous traditions, like all traditions, are sites of contestation rather than harmonious inheritances.

The Indigenous/Foreign Binary and the Illusion of Epistemic Purity

NEP 2020 implicitly relies on a binary opposition between indigenous and foreign knowledge systems. This distinction suggests that knowledge traditions can be neatly classified according to civilizational origin. Historically and epistemologically, this assumption is untenable.

Indian mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and political thought evolved through sustained interaction with Persian, Arabic, Greek, Central Asian, and later European traditions. Figures such as Aryabhata, Al-Khwarizmi, and Al-Kindi cannot be meaningfully located within isolated civilizational silos. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) argues, modern knowledge formations emerge from *entangled histories* rather than discrete traditions.

The attempt to purify knowledge systems retroactively into indigenous and foreign categories is therefore a political project rather than a scholarly one. It risks replacing colonial Eurocentrism with civilizational essentialism, thereby substituting one universal for another (Pollock 2006).

Indigeneity also raises unresolved temporal questions: *indigenous since when?* Is a tradition indigenous because it is ancient, precolonial, or continuous? If antiquity alone defines indigeneity, then longevity becomes a substitute for ethical legitimacy.

B.R. Ambedkar's critique of Hindu civilization directly challenges this logic. For Ambedkar (1936/2014), civilization cannot be evaluated by age alone but must be judged by its commitment to liberty, equality, and fraternity. A knowledge system that reproduces graded inequality cannot claim epistemic authority merely by virtue of antiquity.

Conversely, if all communities that have lived in the subcontinent for centuries are considered indigenous, then Muslims, Sikhs, and other historically rooted groups cannot be excluded without arbitrariness. Liberal scholars often argue that if everyone is indigenous, the concept loses analytical value. Yet restricting indigeneity through selective historical periodization turns it into a gatekeeping device rather than an analytical category.[1]

Spatiality, Civilization, and the Nationalization of Knowledge

If indigeneity is understood as spatially or territorially bounded, its conceptual coherence becomes deeply problematic in the South Asian context. Pre-modern centers of learning such as Takshashila and Somapura Mahavihara were not embedded within fixed national territories but functioned as nodal points in expansive transregional intellectual networks that connected scholars, texts, and pedagogical traditions across what are now India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and beyond. These institutions drew students and teachers across linguistic, religious, and political boundaries, sustained by itinerant scholastic communities rather than sovereign territorial authority. Knowledge production in these settings was therefore fundamentally circulatory, relational, and non-exclusive, resisting any straightforward mapping onto contemporary national borders.

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[1] The classification of early Central Asian migrations as constitutive of "Indian civilization," alongside the treatment of later Persianate and Mughal influences as "foreign," reflects nationalist periodization rather than historical method. Such distinctions retroactively privilege antiquity as indigenous while displacing medieval pluralism as external, despite extensive evidence of long-term cultural synthesis across Sanskritic, Persianate, and vernacular intellectual traditions (Thapar 2000; Pollock 2006). This selective framing obscures the central role of Persianate and Islamic knowledge systems in shaping South Asian political thought, aesthetics, administration, and educational institutions (Alam 2004; Subrahmanyam 2012), and functions primarily as an ideological boundary-making exercise rather than a historically grounded account.

Nationalist appropriations of such sites exemplify what Chatterjee (1993) identifies as the retroactive nationalization of premodern pasts, wherein civilizational histories are selectively territorialized to legitimize modern state projects. By presenting these institutions as unambiguously "Indian," contemporary policy discourse risks collapsing fluid civilizational geographies into the rigid spatial logic of the nation-state. NEP 2020's invocation of ancient centers of learning as repositories of Indian Knowledge Systems thus risks anachronistically projecting present-day territorial sovereignty onto historically plural and transregional epistemic worlds. This compression not only distorts intellectual history but also undermines the fundamentally shared, mobile, and dialogic nature of premodern knowledge traditions, replacing epistemic circulation with civilizational enclosure.

Caste, Religion, and Epistemic Injustice

Perhaps the most consequential silence in NEP 2020 concerns caste, a foundational axis of epistemic power in South Asian history that remains largely unaddressed in the policy's framing of indigenous knowledge. Knowledge production in the subcontinent was historically monopolized by upper-caste elites, constituting a small minority of the population, while Dalits, Adivasis, Shudras, and other subordinated groups were systematically excluded from institutions of formal learning, textual production, and epistemic authority. This exclusion was not incidental but constitutive of what came to be recognized as legitimate knowledge, with access to literacy, scholastic institutions, and sacred languages tightly regulated through caste-based norms.

Kancha Ilaiah (1996) demonstrates that Brahmanical epistemologies not only marginalized subordinated communities but actively devalued the productive, artisanal, ecological, and experiential knowledge systems practiced by them, casting such knowledge as inferior to scriptural and metaphysical traditions. These epistemologies privileged abstraction over practice and ritual over labour, thereby reinforcing caste hierarchies within the domain of knowledge itself. Gopal Guru conceptualizes this historical exclusion as a form of epistemic injustice, wherein marginalized groups are denied not merely material resources or institutional access but the very capacity to be recognized as credible knowers (Guru 2002; Guru and Sarukkai 2012). Epistemic injustice, in this sense, is inseparable from social domination, as it structures who can speak, whose knowledge counts, and which experiences are rendered intelligible within academic and curricular spaces.A curriculum that celebrates Indian Knowledge Systems without confronting this history risks reproducing caste hierarchies under the normative banner of decolonization. By valorising selectively sanitized traditions while neglecting the structural conditions of their production, such curricular reform risks transforming indigeneity into a legitimizing idiom for inherited privilege. The marginalization of Muslim intellectual traditions within dominant civilizational narratives further compounds this exclusion, rendering indigeneity a majoritarian rather than plural category. Without a sustained engagement with caste, religion, and power, the invocation of indigenous epistemologies risks entrenching epistemic exclusion even as it claims to dismantle colonial dominance.

Indigeneity as an Epistemic Process

Indigeneity need not, and indeed cannot, be understood solely in terms of origin, temporal priority, or civilizational purity. In the South Asian context, indigeneity is more coherently conceptualized as a historical and epistemic process shaped by acculturation, translation, and syncretic interaction. Across centuries, knowledge systems in the subcontinent have evolved through sustained engagement among Sanskritic, Persianate, Arabic, and vernacular traditions, producing composite intellectual cultures rather than bounded civilizational forms. The Indianization of Mughal governance, law, and aesthetics exemplifies this process, wherein political and epistemic practices were indigenized not through abandonment of foreign elements but through their creative adaptation within local cultural matrices.

The institutional parallel between Vikramaditya's Navaratnas and Akbar's Navaratnas is instructive in this regard. Rather than representing civilizational rupture, the latter reflects continuity in plural and court-centered knowledge cultures that valued intellectual diversity, interdisciplinarity, and cross-cultural translation. Both courts assembled scholars, poets, scientists, administrators, and artists drawn from varied linguistic, religious, and regional backgrounds, underscoring a shared epistemic ethos that privileged knowledge over origin. Such continuities complicate nationalist narratives that posit a sharp rupture between "ancient Indian" and "medieval foreign" traditions, revealing instead a longue durée of epistemic accommodation and hybridity.

Ashis Nandy (1983) has argued that Indian intellectual traditions historically thrived not through cultural purity but through porousness and dialogic openness. Attempts to purify indigeneity by excising Islamic, Persianate, or vernacular influences are therefore not only historically untenable but normatively dangerous. They erase the dialogic foundations of South Asian intellectual life and replace a tradition of negotiated plurality with exclusionary epistemic boundaries. Indigeneity, when reframed as process rather than possession, foregrounds historical entanglement over civilizational enclosure and challenges the essentialist impulses embedded in contemporary curricular reform.

Language, Knowledge, and Epistemic Decolonization

Language occupies a central place in indigenous epistemologies because it structures cognition, expression, and cultural memory. The Sapir–Whorf hypothesis, or linguistic relativity, suggests that linguistic forms shape epistemic possibilities by influencing how speakers perceive, categorize, and narrate reality (Sapir 1929; Whorf 1956). While contemporary scholarship rightly rejects strong linguistic determinism, the insight that language conditions genre, metaphor, and modes of reasoning remains analytically productive. Different linguistic traditions privilege distinct epistemic forms—poetic, narrative, aphoristic, or analytical—thereby shaping the kinds of knowledge that are produced and valued.

The Achebe–Ngũgĩ debate in African postcolonial thought crystallizes two divergent strategies of epistemic decolonization. Chinua Achebe (1975) advocates the pragmatic appropriation of colonial languages, arguing that they can be bent, indigenized, and repurposed to narrate subaltern histories and resist imperial epistemologies. For Achebe, linguistic hybridity is not a betrayal of indigeneity but a strategic resource in a linguistically plural postcolonial society. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), by contrast, insists that language is inseparable from culture and that continued reliance on colonial languages reproduces mental colonization by alienating writers from their communities. For Ngũgĩ, writing in African languages is a foundational act of epistemic and cultural sovereignty.

In India, this debate is rendered even more complex by the layered history of linguistic hierarchy that predates colonialism. Precolonial distinctions between Sanskrit, Persian, and vernaculars—each associated with different regimes of power, access, and authority—intersected with the colonial elevation of English as the dominant language of higher knowledge. As Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai (2012) have argued, language in India has long functioned as a gatekeeping mechanism that structures epistemic privilege and exclusion. NEP 2020's relative ambiguity on language policy thus raises a critical concern: without explicit attention to social hierarchies, linguistic revival may inadvertently reinforce elite dominance rather than democratize knowledge. Epistemic decolonization, in this sense, cannot be achieved through linguistic substitution alone; it requires a sustained interrogation of how language, power, and access intersect within the production of knowledge.[2]

Conclusion: Toward a Conflict-Aware Decolonial Curriculum

The central question animating this paper—whether NEP 2020 constitutes an epistemic rupture or merely a reconfiguration of dominance—cannot be resolved through policy intent alone. While the policy's explicit critique of colonial epistemic hierarchies marks an important symbolic departure from post-independence educational orthodoxy, its conceptualization of indigeneity remains undertheorized and politically underexamined. As Chakrabarty's (2000) call to "provincialize Europe" cautions, decolonization does not involve replacing one universal with another; rather, it requires sustained attention to the power relations through which universals are produced, institutionalized, and naturalized. In the Indian context, this necessarily entails confronting internal hierarchies—most notably caste, religious majoritarianism, linguistic privilege, and gendered exclusion—rather than merely displacing external colonial referents.

Without such confrontation, indigenous epistemologies risk being mobilized as instruments of ideological consolidation rather than as tools of epistemic justice. The selective elevation of certain traditions as authentically "Indian," while marginalizing others as derivative or foreign, reproduces precisely the forms of epistemic exclusion that decolonial projects seek to dismantle. As Ambedkar repeatedly warned, cultural revival divorced from social equality ultimately serves dominant interests rather than emancipatory ones. Decolonization, therefore, cannot be reduced to a civilizational recovery project; it is an ethical and political intervention into the conditions under which knowledge is authorized, transmitted, and contested.

The question of "what and whose traditions" thus reveals indigeneity not as a site of consensus but as a terrain of struggle over history, authority, and belonging. Indigenous knowledge systems are internally plural, historically contingent, and socially stratified; to present them as homogeneous or timeless is to erase the conflicts that shaped their production. NEP 2020 undoubtedly opens an important space for rethinking epistemic priorities and challenging the colonial residues embedded in Indian higher education. Yet its conceptual ambiguity and political silences, particularly with respect to caste, religion, language, and power, threaten to undermine its emancipatory promise.

A genuinely decolonial curriculum must therefore move beyond symbolic inclusion toward structural transformation. It must recognize indigenous knowledge not as a unified or consensual body of wisdom but as internally contested and historically heterogeneous, shaped by relations of power and exclusion. Such a curriculum would place caste, religion, gender, and social hierarchy at the centre of epistemological inquiry rather than treating them as external social variables. It would embrace syncretism, acculturation, and historical plurality as defining features of South Asian intellectual traditions, resisting attempts to purify indigeneity through exclusionary narratives. Finally, it must reject both colonial universalism and nationalist

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[2] Unlike many African contexts, India's linguistic hierarchies predate colonialism and were already structured around Sanskrit, Persian, and vernacular distinctions that regulated access to knowledge and authority along caste, class, and religious lines. Colonial English did not replace these hierarchies but layered itself onto them, often intensifying existing exclusions. Consequently, linguistic decolonization in India must address both colonial legacies and precolonial structures of epistemic inequality.

essentialism by foregrounding dialogic, conflict-aware, and reflexive modes of knowledge production that remain open to critique and transformation.

Only under these conditions can indigenous epistemologies function as instruments of epistemic justice rather than vehicles of exclusion. Decolonization, in this sense, is not about reclaiming a purified past but about creating a more equitable epistemic future that acknowledges historical entanglement, confronts social domination, and expands the conditions under which knowledge can be produced, transmitted, and debated.

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