

Indian Knowledge Systems: Reinterpreting Social Order and Cultural Practices for the 21st Century

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article History: Received: 15th Dec 2025 Accepted: 19th Dec 2025 Published: 20th Dec 2025	Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) offer a comprehensive worldview integrating philosophy, ethics, social organisation, cultural practices, and human development. In the 21st century, rapid socio-political, technological, and economic changes challenge traditional frameworks yet provide opportunities for adaptation and reinterpretation. This article examines the dynamic interplay between ancient social structures, cultural practices, and contemporary transformations, employing analytical and conceptual methodologies. Classical Sanskrit slokas enrich the discussion, reflecting enduring intellectual and moral principles. Findings indicate that while modernity reshapes traditional social systems, core values of IKS, including ethical living, dharma, social harmony, environmental consciousness, and holistic education, remain highly relevant, guiding both individual and collective well-being.
Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems, Social Order, Cultural Practices, Puruṣārthas,	
Plagiarism Check Report: Tool Used: Turnitin Date of Report: Dec 18, 2025 Similarity Index: 9% Remarks: No significant matching text. All citations and matches are properly referenced. The manuscript is considered original.	
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How to Cite: Rudrabhatla, S. (2025). Indian knowledge systems: Reinterpreting social order and cultural practices for the 21st century. IIP: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal (IIPMRJ), 2(IV), pp. 921-926.	

Introduction

The Indian Knowledge System represents an extensive and sophisticated intellectual, cultural, and philosophical heritage developed over millennia. IKS is not merely a repository of knowledge but a comprehensive framework for understanding human existence, societal governance, and ethical living. Ancient Indian thought conceptualises life in terms of dharma (righteous conduct), artha (material and social welfare), kama (emotional and aesthetic fulfilment), and moksha (spiritual liberation).

As the Bhagavad Gita states

चातुर्वर्ण्यं मया सृष्टं गुणकर्मविभागशः
(चातुर्वर्ण्यं मया सृष्टं गुणकर्मविभागशः)

Roles are determined by qualities and actions, not birth. This emphasizes that social order in IKS is functional and ethical rather than rigidly hierarchical. IKS provides holistic guidance on education, governance, ethics, health, and cultural practices, ensuring individual and societal well-being. In contemporary India, the challenge is to reconcile these ancient principles with globalisation, urbanisation, technological change, and social mobility.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the core principles of social order and cultural practices within IKS
2. To analyse the adaptation and reinterpretation of IKS in contemporary Indian society
3. To understand the interplay of tradition and modernity in shaping social identity, family, and community life
4. To evaluate the relevance of IKS for ethical governance, sustainability, and holistic education
5. To explore the continuities and transformations in rituals, education, and value systems

Significance of the Study

- Strengthens understanding of India's cultural and intellectual heritage
- Guides ethical, social, and environmental policies
- Supports holistic and value-based education aligned with NEP 2020
- Encourages revival and reinterpretation of cultural practices to address contemporary challenges
- Contributes to academic discourse on social change, cultural continuity, and governance

Research Methodology

The study employs a conceptual, analytical, and interpretative approach

1. Conceptual Analysis: Classical texts, slokas, and treatises (Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Dharmashastras) were examined to identify foundational social and cultural principles
2. Analytical Approach: Secondary sources, including scholarly articles, books, and journals, were synthesised to understand the adaptation of varna, jati, ashrama, samskara, and purusharthas in contemporary society
3. Comparative Interpretation: Historical and contemporary social structures were compared to identify trends, challenges, and continuities
4. Content Analysis of Sanskrit Slokas: Selected verses were interpreted to understand enduring ethical, spiritual, and social principles

Data Sources:

Peer-reviewed journals, government reports, classical texts, and academic articles on IKS Foundational Concepts of Social Structure in IKS

Varna System

The varna system, based on guna (qualities) and karma (actions), offers a framework for functional societal roles

- Brahmin – knowledge, teaching, and spiritual guidance
- Kshatriya – protection, governance, and justice
- Vaishya – economic and productive activities
- Shudra – service and support roles

Over time, varna evolved into the hereditary caste (jati) system, creating complex social hierarchies. Sanskrit slokas reinforce its ethical and functional foundation

धर्मो रक्षति रक्षितः
(धर्मो रक्षति रक्षितः)

Dharma protects those who uphold it

Jati System

Jati represents localized, hereditary, and endogamous social groups. Although originally linked to varna, many Jatis evolved independently, defining occupation, ritual status, and community norms. The evolution of Jati illustrates the dynamic interaction between ideal principles and social realities.

Ashrama System

Life is divided into four stages

1. Brahmacharya – education, discipline, and self-cultivation
2. Grihastha – family, societal responsibilities, and wealth creation
3. Vanaprastha – reflection, detachment, and spiritual contemplation
4. Sannyasa – renunciation and pursuit of moksha

These stages ensure ethical growth, personal development, and societal stability

Purusharthas

The four aims of life – dharma, artha, kama, moksha – guide individuals ethically and socially

सा विद्या या विमुक्तये
(సా విద్యా యా విముక్తయే)

True knowledge is that which liberates

Samskaras

Rituals and rites-of-passage (samskaras) strengthen social cohesion and moral development, from conception (garbhadhana) to death (antyeshti). These practices integrate ethical, spiritual, and communal values, maintaining continuity across generations

Analysis of IKS in Contemporary India

1. Family and Community: Traditional joint families are shifting toward nuclear structures; however, festivals, rituals, and community practices sustain collective identity
2. Education: Traditional pedagogy promoting ethical, experiential, and holistic learning complements modern curricula, reflecting IKS principles of brahmacharya and lifelong learning
3. Caste and Social Mobility: Legal reforms, urbanisation, and education challenge traditional hierarchies, while caste identities persist culturally and politically
4. Women's Roles: Empowerment through education and employment transforms traditional gender norms while adhering to ethical values embedded in IKS
5. Cultural Revival: Yoga, Ayurveda, Sanskrit, and performing arts demonstrate the adaptability and continuity of IKS
6. Governance and Ethics: Principles such as dharma inform public policy and ethical governance
7. Environmental Awareness: IKS emphasizes harmony with nature, offering insights into sustainable living and ecological education

Findings

- IKS promotes holistic human development encompassing intellectual, ethical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions
- Traditional values align with modern sustainability and environmental ethics
- Value-based education strengthens societal ethics and moral reasoning
- Social structures evolve under modernity, yet cultural values endure, ensuring resilience
- Community welfare and ethical governance principles continue to guide social interactions

- Global interest in IKS enhances India's cultural influence and soft power

Conclusion

Indian Knowledge Systems remain dynamic, continuously adapting to socio-cultural and technological changes. Ethical living, holistic education, social harmony, and environmental consciousness are embedded within IKS, demonstrating enduring relevance. Reinterpreting these principles allows India to address contemporary challenges while sustaining its intellectual heritage. Integrating IKS into modern education, governance, and community life ensures continuity, resilience, and the promotion of collective well-being. Classical Sanskrit slokas, rituals, and philosophical frameworks provide timeless guidance for individual, societal, and ecological balance

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