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IKS, Decolonisation, and the demands of the Global Market: A Critical Study

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Abstract: *This article presents a critique of the way in which Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) are being institutionalised and commodified by the modern state in the interests of the global market. Drawing on Mm Haraprasad Shastri and his son Dr Benoytosh Bhattacharyya's (20th Century) anti-colonial notices and Kapil Kapoor's (21st Century) outline of intellectual recovery vis-à-vis UGC IKS Guidelines, this study shows how traditional wisdom has been transformed from a holistic philosophy of life into a standardised commercial asset. Whereas early scholars sought to rescue manuscripts and intellectual traditions from colonial destruction and achieve a combination of material enrichment and spiritual regeneration, the present state apparatus has reversed those objectives. It appears that through the formal curriculum, the state acts as a neoliberal broker, converting these traditions into intellectual property for international consumption today. This transformation replaces the spiritual depth of ancestral traditions with an outward focus on profit and national branding. By examining the journey from the traditional tole-chatushpathi proscription to the current attempts at marketisation, this article tries to expose the epistemological betrayal perpetrated by state-controlled machinery.*

Key Words: *Indian Knowledge Systems, Decolonisation, Epistemological Reclamation, Cultural Capital, Neoliberalism, Commodification.*

1. INTRODUCTION

A peculiar resurgence is happening in the contemporary global context, where the olden intellectual traditions of the Global South are brought under the dazzling light of the bazaar. In the Indian scenario, this resurgence has manifested itself through the institutionalisation and promotion of Indian Knowledge System (IKS). It is a framework designed to encompass the vast traditions of indigenous science, philosophy, art, literature, and environmental practices, more or less. Yet, it seems that this approach is overshadowed by the modern nation-state's mandates of post-capitalism. It has transformed a holistic vision of human existence into a standardised product, which is being packaged and sold to bidders in the global marketplace.

This state-led initiative in the garbs of civilizational glory, national pride and epistemological decolonisation is a departure from the fundamental vision of the early Indian scholars interested in preserving the intellectual heritage of this country. It appears that the cultural legacies that were supposed to serve as a profound critique of Western materialism and as a remedy for a fragmented humanity have now become part of the machinery, they were qualified to contest. To understand the depth of this betrayal, one must look to the lineage of resistance in the works of early twentieth-century scholars of this country, who were often called the Indologists. We select from the galaxy of such luminaries, Mm Haraprasad Shastri and his son Dr Benoytosh Bhattacharyya, whose contributions to Indian knowledge systems have been indisputable. We also place in this group the name of Kapil Kapoor, whose brain-child was IKS in the twenty-first century India, as a structured framework, much before its appropriation by the nation-state.

These thinkers did not conceive of India's ancient intellectual tradition as merely a commercial asset to be exchanged for geopolitical advantage. For them, its survival was a vital resistance to the colonial empire's attempts to subjugate the native mind. When Haraprasad Shastri was invited to the Fifth Indian Oriental Conference in Lahore in 1928, despite his old age and a fatal accident, he presented his long scholarly intervention not as a commercial prospectus but as an assertion of historical consciousness. He said in his address, "you called me and I considered it a call of duty" (Shastri 673). Shastri witnessed the twilight of an intense tradition of learning and was deeply saddened by the rapid erosion of a civilizational memory. He aimed to document the destruction of indigenous structures of knowledge under

colonial rule and to find a way in which the ancient classical learning of the land could be properly preserved. In the mid-twentieth century, as India just received independence, Benoytosh Bhattacharyya expanded the vision of his illustrious father into a comprehensive philosophy of cultural survival. Writing in the 1950s, amidst the rise of a new state, he realised that the true genius of this civilisational legacy lay in its potential to balance the material demands of the outside world with the decrees of the inner soul. Reflecting the philosophical depth of this tradition, he often recalled the widespread sentiment that, if one were to identify the ultimate wealth of this land, the answer would be its ancient classical languages and literature, a glorious legacy that must "influence the basic genius of the people"(Bhattacharyya 24). He cautioned that if the newly independent nation lost its deep-rooted faith in this integrated worldview, it would certainly fall into the same existential darkness that plagued the industrialised societies of the West.

It is noticeable that in recent times, Kapil Kapoor's work has provided the structural outlines needed to shape these historical concerns into an academic critique. Kapoor argued that Indian knowledge systems were not primitive superstitions or relics of a bygone era. These are rather highly sophisticated, dynamic, and evolving "autonomous structures of thought" with their own methods, criteria of truth, and pedagogical paradigms (Kapoor 89). He aimed to break the Eurocentric monopoly on knowledge production by restoring the structural legitimacy of various indigenous disciplines. He sought to re-establish these systems as living traditions capable of producing contemporary meaning and to make the Indian academy free from "cognitive enslavement" (Kapoor 104).

It seems that the contemporary state apparatus has appropriated the arguments of Shastri, Bhattacharyya and Kapoor through bureaucratic mandates such as the University Grants Commission's Guidelines for incorporating IKS in higher education curricula.

2.The Colonial Rupture

To understand how the commodification of indigenous knowledge in modern state enterprise works, one must first delve into the deep historical wounds inflicted by colonial conflict. Mm Haraprasad Shastri analysed it with precision and irony long before the emergence of postcolonial theory. The colonial state did not merely conquer territory. It also perpetrated an epistemological violence that systematically demolished the foundations of indigenous learning. Shastri, in the acute language of a witness to this tragedy, observed how the introduction of Western educational systems, inspired by Thomas Babington Macaulay's infamous minutes, was built on arrogance and ignorance. This policy was designed to create the impression that the classical intellectual tradition of this country "could afford no genuine culture, possessing no literature, science, or art worth knowing" (Shastri 680).

The result of this policy was the proscription and decline of the traditional institutional structures—*tole and pathshala*—that had for centuries sustained the transmission of knowledge. Shastri records this decline through the poignant accounts of personal memory. He recalls how in 1861, as a young man assigned to the social duty of distributing farewell *dakshina* to traditional scholars, he came upon a gathering of a hundred lively pandits teaching in their homes on the banks of the Ganges near Naihati in Bengal (685). Yet, just two decades later, when asked to conduct a similar survey, he discovered that the number had fallen to just twenty-six. It was a staggering decline of nearly seventy-four per cent in less than a generation. The age-old academies emptied almost overnight. And young men were lured by the prospect of comfortable livings as clerks and lower-level officers within the administrative and commercial networks of the British Raj.

This structural displacement brought about a drastic psychological change in the native consciousness, which Benoytosh Bhattacharyya has pointed out as the tragic disappearance of "inward eye" (45). In the traditional sense, education was understood as a sacred vow to achieve a fine balance between material sustenance and spiritual liberation. However, the introduction of the all-consuming logic of colonial capitalism transformed it into a cold, business-driven system motivated by financial reward. Bhattacharyya observed with deep concern how the collective consciousness of the nation had become intensely extroverted and overwhelmed by the gross material prosperity and technological ascendancy of the West.

This change marked the birth of a "body-conscious society," in which individuals ceased to see themselves as spiritual beings placed within a larger cosmic and moral order and instead chose to act as isolated economic actors driven by competing interests (Bhattacharyya 42). Ancient systems of knowledge, which had traditionally provided moral guidance for a cooperative way of life, were systematically marginalised. Modern educational institutions created a strong alienation through an educated class that Bhattacharyya described as suffering from "parasitism and structural unemployment," cut off from their roots but unable to find true fulfilment within the confines of the colonial economy (48).

Shastri and Bhattacharyya's arguments clearly demonstrate that the primary crisis of the modern era was not the lack of scientific validity of indigenous knowledge, but rather the destruction of the moral and spiritual framework that gave that knowledge its true meaning. When the modern state entered this historical vacuum with its contemporary initiatives, it did not seek to restore the introverted, self-conscious paradigm that Bhattacharyya advocated. Rather, it

accepted the colonial idea that the value of knowledge was determined solely by its economic utility. The radical deviation of the state is that it has decided to use the same structures of global capitalism that initially destroyed traditional academies to revive those ancient practices as highly profitable market resources. The colonial state sought to eradicate indigenous knowledge; the modern neoliberal state seeks to exploit it as commercial capital.

3.From Epistemic Resistance to Market Asset

The historical preservation of India's vast textual heritage is a story of epic resistance. It is full of the silent heroism of the traditional scholars who guarded their sacred scrolls against the two-pronged onslaught of physical destruction and colonial appropriation. Mm Haraprasad Shastri's 1928 speech at the Oriental Conference in Lahore provides a vivid account of the immense dangers that have befallen the written word over the centuries. In the turbulent waves of colonial conquest and military campaign, ancient manuscripts were often treated as mere spoils of war, subject to systematic looting and casual destruction. Shastri recalled the horrific scene in Upper Burma in 1886, where ordinary soldiers were using the priceless palm-leaf pages of the Burmese royal library as mere cigarette papers (Shastri 692). He documents how the great intellectual treasures of this land—from the personal and sacred texts of the Peshwas to the glorious Arabic collection of Tipu Sultan—were aggressively carried off to distant libraries in Europe as the exotic remnants of a conquered civilisation.

Yet, at home, this destruction was often driven by another deadly force. It was the profound alienation of native minds under the colonial economic system. Shastri describes the tragic consequences of the manuscript collections preserved in the homes of scholars after their deaths. The sons, who had received an early Western education and secured minor administrative positions in the local bureaucracy, saw no practical utility or financial value in their fathers' treasures. The sacred texts were removed from the best rooms of the house and thrown first into the sooty kitchen and finally into the garden to rot and perish.

In many cases, the elder scholars, deeply concerned about the fate of their ancestral legacy in the hands of a generation that did not care about classical wisdom, chose to immerse their manuscripts in the sacred waters of the Ganges. They considered it better to dedicate the manuscripts they had cherished all their lives to the river goddess than to allow them to be defiled by neglect. This act of dynamic despair reflects the traditional view that "the paper or palm leaf on which any writing is the very self of Sarasvati and should never be consigned to fire or treated with disrespect" (Shastri 697). A far-sighted intervention of traditional intellectuals like the Lahore based scholar Radhakrishna was remembered by him. In 1868, Radhakrishna issued a powerful appeal to the colonial government to allocate permanent state resources for the systematic search, collection and preservation of Sanskrit manuscripts, which were otherwise destined to vanish in a short time. This initiative gave rise to the famous cataloguing expeditions undertaken by both European and Indian scholars. It was a massive effort that brought to light a hidden universe of literature, far exceeding the combined volume of the classical European traditions of Latin and Greek. However, as Shastri astutely observed, this early period of collection was marked by a complex politics of publication. Traditional scholars were highly professional men who made their living from the in-depth study of these texts, and they were naturally reluctant to reveal their manuscripts to strangers. Every traditional family had some hidden source of intellectual influence, a unique text that they guarded with great care. Only when the traditional economic structure had completely collapsed, and the ancestral inheritance was no longer an effective means of subsistence, did these scholars begin to share their treasures for historical and archaeological purposes. This transformation was utilised and accelerated by several native states, such as Mysore, Travancore, Baroda and Kashmir. They sponsored the publication of some book series and brought hidden masterpieces of statecraft, aesthetics and philosophy to the public. In this way, those princely states of India and traditional scholars sought to rescue the manuscripts from destruction so that their living wisdom could nourish the human spirit and protect the fundamental genius of the nation. But as the complete opposite of this grand initiative, the modern state sees this vast textual archive as a huge storehouse of unmonetized commercial data. Ancient manuscripts are being digitised, catalogued, and systematically mined under various projects, not for their moral or emancipatory potential.

4.When Heritage Becomes National Capital

The recent institutionalisation of Indian knowledge systems within the National Education Policy and marketing campaigns presents a wonderful but terrifying master class in the art of capitalist co-optation. The modern state has created a powerful narrative of cultural reclamation, and epistemological de-colonisation which uses the arguments of early scholars to legitimize its initiatives. Probably this points to Shastri's documentation of ancient texts such as Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, which demonstrated a sophisticated sense of national governance and statecraft long before the birth of modern European political economy (Shastri 705). It echoes Benoytosh Bhattacharyya's insistence that secular sciences of India such as traditional engineering, medicine, and architecture, are highly developed intellectual systems that have profound relevance for the contemporary era.

The state seeks to use these legitimate claims to create an image of a nation reclaiming its long-lost sovereign heritage from the shadow of the colonial empire. Yet, beneath this grand façade of cultural glory lurks a systematic betrayal of the fundamental objectives championed by the thinkers whom the state pretends to revere. Early scholars envisioned the recovery of indigenous knowledge as an essential tool for resisting the all-consuming and dehumanising effects of colonialism and capitalism. Benoytosh Bhattacharyya argued that the ultimate value of this heritage lay in its ability to provide a harmonious balance against the aggressive materialism of the West, ensuring that the pursuit of worldly enrichment (*artha*) would always be subordinate to the higher moral demands of spiritual rebirth (*paramartha*) (58). His intellectual aim was to build a society that was deeply introspective, self-aware, and firmly rooted in a non-exploitative and cooperative relationship with the natural world.

The modern state, however, has completely turned this civilizational philosophy on its head. Instead of using profound wisdom to challenge the destructive logic of global capitalism, the state is using ancient methods as highly effective tools to deepen its integration into the global capitalist economy. In this sense, the contemporary state functions not as the sacred guardian of a spiritual tradition, but as a highly skilled neoliberal broker. It takes the deeply holistic traditions of the past and transforms them into standardised goods, making them uniquely suited to the global consumer market.

The sacred knowledge yoga, originally a discipline aimed at breaking the bonds of worldly illusion, is transformed into a wellness industry, replete with branded merchandise and trendy consumer experiences. The ecological wisdom of Ayurveda has been stripped of its ethical context and repackaged as mass-produced pharmaceutical products to meet the demands of global market consumers. It will not be unfair to say, perhaps, that the UGC's intervention enforces this, mandating curricula to be directly aligned with institutional metrics and transforming it to discrete "learning outcomes" designed for vocational convenience (UGC 8).

Haraprasad Shastri, in the 1928 speech, warned against the rise of a shallow class of scholars seeking to exploit the deep, silent labours of traditional experts. He was critical of the tendency of these individuals to "tax the brains of poor traditional masters to make a name as an Oriental scholar" and warned that any intellectual project that relied on such exploitation should be strongly discouraged (702). He emphasised that true scholarship requires a deep, authentic engagement with traditional methods of interpretation and a profound respect for the living bearers of the tradition. Contemporary state-sponsored structures use the historical image of the traditional scholar as a powerful symbol of cultural authenticity to generate nationalist pride, while it actually marginalises the traditional academies. The structural management, financing, and institutional control of the newly formed indigenous knowledge sector are almost exclusively vested in a new class of technocrats and corporate consultants. These individuals often have no real empathy for traditional ways of life and interpretation, but instead subjugate vast traditions to market metrics.

5.Credits vs. Consciousness

To fully understand the gap between contemporary bureaucratic policy and the historical decolonisation perspective, the structural architecture of the University Grants Commission's mandate must be analysed. The UGC guidelines state that "every student enrolled in a UG or PG programme should be encouraged to take credit courses in IKS amounting in all to not-less than 5% of the total mandated credits" (UGC 4). The transformation of this mathematical abstraction of civilizational heritage as a small fraction within the Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) is in direct contradiction to the fundamental philosophy articulated by Mm Haraprasad Shastri and Benoytosh Bhattacharyya. In the traditional vein, knowledge was never an optional "bucket" designed to fill bureaucratic quotas. It was an all-encompassing, life-changing matrix of experience. Shastri's historical reflections reveal that the pursuit of education was driven by a deep sense of cosmic debt and social duty, not by the accumulation of institutional credits to earn a corporate degree. By reducing this legacy to a five percent credit requirement, the UGC framework essentially treats the Indian knowledge system as a foreign ornament. It is like a decorative fringe sewn onto the edge of a fundamentally Western-style, neoliberal educational machine. Bhattacharyya's critique of modern educational initiatives exposes the nature of this quantitative reduction. He observed that the primary danger facing post-independence India was the institutional production of a shallow, "bread-earning education" that deprived the native mind of its moral anchor and produced a generation focused entirely on individual economic competition (Bhattacharyya 36). The UGC's modern credit framework does not challenge this transactional model. It reinforces it. By framing the IKS as a standardised set of credit hours, the state tells students that the value of ancient philosophy, traditional medicine, or indigenous ecology is only as good as its transactional value on an academic transcript. The student does not study the texts of the indigenous knowledge traditions for the "inward eye", but to fulfil a mandatory requirement on the way to a corporate degree.

6.The Fragmentation of Content

The second point of radical deviation lies in the structural fragmentation of knowledge enforced by contemporary policy. The UGC guidelines divide the seamless web of Indian thought into discrete, highly specialised core and elective courses, compartmentalising them into small boxes such as "Indian Astronomy," "Indian Textiles," "Indian Metallurgy," and "Indian Polity and Economy" (UGC 6). This reductionist categorisation is opposed to the structural and hermeneutic principles championed by Kapil Kapoor. In fact, Kapoor argued that the true genius of the Indian intellectual tradition lies in its deep, organic unity. It is a holistic network in which various branches are deeply intertwined, anchored on common fundamental concepts regarding the nature of reality, language, and the human soul (Kapoor 92). To isolate Indian metallurgy or textiles from their larger philosophical, religious, and environmental matrix to create a single-semester elective module is to deprive these practices of their true epistemological framework, reducing them to mere technical curiosities. This modular fragmentation directly meets the operational needs of the contemporary global marketplace, which values specialised and extractable information over systematic wisdom. It directly contradicts Kapoor's insistence that Indian knowledge systems constitute entirely "autonomous structures of thought" that must be understood through their own internal mechanisms, criteria of truth, and interpretive traditions (Kapoor 112). By diluting living traditions into bite-sized, market-friendly curriculum packages, the state commits an act of epistemological violence. It replaces a deep, highly unified civilizational worldview with a scattered collection of historical trivialities and technical expertise crafted for contemporary vocational convenience.

7.The Pedagogy of Extraction

The divergence of perspectives is clearly evident when comparing the practices of traditional scholars with the educational approaches proposed by contemporary policymakers. The UGC guidelines enthusiastically recommend that "students may be allowed to opt for the internship/apprenticeship in any disciplines/topics that are part of the IKS" (UGC 5). On the surface, this policy mimics the traditional, immersive mode of experiential learning. However, within the larger context of the Curriculum and Credit Framework for Undergraduate Programmes (CCFUP), these internships are clearly designed to align with modern corporate and industrial parameters, transforming traditional arts, crafts and medicine into commercial skills leading to self-employment and immediate market utility (UGC 12). The student enters the traditional ecosystem not as a humble seeker of a sacred lineage, but rather as a modern consumer seeking to acquire a vocational asset that will provide an advantage in the neoliberal gig economy.

This transactional pedagogy represents a complete unfaithfulness to the *guru-shishya parampara* that Shastri and Bhattacharyy are cognised as the essential heart of the entire tradition. In his 1928 address, Shastri spoke with great reverence of the deep, silent labour of traditional scholars who taught in their homes, describing their educational work as an act of pure spiritual devotion that could never be compensated with mere money (Shastri 685). The transmission of knowledge was a slow, deliberate cultivation of the student's character, intelligence, and soul, requiring years of intense discipline and mutual trust. By translating this sacred relationship into the language of modern corporate "internships" and "apprenticeships," the state completely erases the moral and spiritual obligations historically bound up between teacher and learner. Living bearers of tradition are no longer respected as masters of an autonomous intellectual tradition. Instead, they are transformed into external service providers or cultural informants whose primary function is to help modern university students acquire corporate skills and vocational credits.

8.The Sovereign Subject vs. The Neoliberal Worker

Ultimately, the deep structural gap that separates Shastri, Bhattacharyya and Kapoor's perspectives from UGC guidelines lies in the ultimate human purpose that each seeks to create. The UGC framework, clearly anchored in the economic rhetoric of the National Education Policy 2020, claims that the primary purpose of including IKS is to nurture "creativity and innovation" to prepare students for the "21st-century requirements," thereby ensuring "global competitiveness" and national economic dominance (UGC 1, 12).The state makes no secret of its ultimate purpose. It sees ancient wisdom as a strategic asset to be used to produce highly skilled, flexible, and market-ready neoliberal workers who can present Indian heritage as a valuable national brand on the world stage. The spiritual capital of the ancestors is systematically redeployed to keep the wheels of global consumer capitalism turning.

In stark contrast, these three scholar-thinkers envisioned the recovery of indigenous knowledge as an existential act of civilisational liberation. Benoytosh Bhattacharyya repeatedly warned that a nation that surrendered completely to the external, materialistic logic of the West would inevitably lose its moral character and warned that the unrestrained pursuit of material wealth without *paramartha* would lead directly to social decay and profound existential alienation (54). For Kapoor, the recovery of indigenous intellectual traditions was an essential means of healing the fragmented consciousness, restoring an internal epistemic sovereignty that could boldly reject Eurocentric definitions of progress, development, and human value (120). Perhaps, turning this glorious, self-conscious civilisational alternative into a mere tool for economic advancement and nationalist branding, the modern state does not achieve decolonisation at all.

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