IKS and Democratic Pedagogy: Beyond Heritage to Public Reasoning

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Abstract

This paper reinterprets Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) not as static cultural heritage but as a living tradition of dialogic and public reasoning with direct relevance for democratic pedagogy. Moving beyond content-centric approaches that reduce IKS to historical contributions, the study argues that its core value lies in practices such as sastrartha, Nyaya logic, and Buddhist deliberation, which cultivate structured debate, collective inquiry, and ethical reflection. Grounded in an interpretivist and critical framework, the paper brings IKS into dialogue with democratic and critical pedagogies to conceptualize classrooms as laboratories of democracy. Through philosophical analysis and illustrative lesson designs, it demonstrates how IKS-inspired methods can foster critical thinking, inclusivity, and shared reasoning in plural educational contexts. The paper also addresses ethical concerns regarding essentialism and politicization, emphasizing the need for adaptive, pluralist, and non-dogmatic integration of IKS. It concludes that approaching IKS as a method of public reasoning strengthens democratic education by training learners not merely to acquire knowledge, but to deliberate, listen across difference, and participate responsibly in collective truth-seeking.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), Democratic Pedagogy, Public Reasoning, Sastrartha, Dialogic Learning, Pluralism in Education, Critical Thinking, Ethical and Civic Education

Introduction

Every society carries within itself the seeds of wisdom. These seeds are not only found in books or archives, but also in the ways people have reasoned, debated, and taught across centuries. Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) are one such reservoir of living wisdom. Too often, IKS is treated as heritage content- a static set of facts about Ayurveda, astronomy, or philosophy to be memorized and displayed as cultural pride. But to stop there would be to miss the real vitality of IKS. At its heart, IKS is not a museum piece but a method of reasoning, a practice of dialogue, and a habit of asking questions in community.

This paper asks: what happens if we bring IKS into the classroom not as frozen heritage but as a living practice of public reasoning? The proposal is simple yet radical. If democratic pedagogy is about building classrooms where students learn to deliberate, reason together, and listen to diverse voices, then IKS offers tools ready for this task. The dialogic method of *sastrartha* (structured debate), for example, is not merely historical but a model for democratic conversation. To see IKS in this light is to rediscover education as a shared search for truth, where heritage is not a limit but a springboard.

The problem, therefore, is not whether IKS should be taught, but *how*. Do we reduce it to content, or can we recover it as a living method of plural reasoning? The significance of this question is profound because classrooms today are not just sites of knowledge transfer, they are laboratories of democracy. In times of

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social polarization, to learn how to reason together is as urgent as learning mathematics or science. This paper argues that IKS, if approached as dialogic practice, can nurture this democratic imagination.

Literature Review

Scholars have long noted that the democratic classroom must move beyond rote learning toward participatory reasoning. John Dewey described education as 'the fundamental method of social progress,' arguing that learning occurs best through active engagement rather than passive memorization (Dewey, 1916). Similarly, Paulo Freire emphasized that education is never neutral; it either reinforces systems of domination or becomes a practice of freedom that empowers learners to think critically about their social realities (Freire, 1970).

Within the Indian intellectual tradition, there is also a long legacy of dialogic reasoning. The Upanishads are structured as conversations between teacher and student, using questioning as a method for discovering philosophical truth (Radhakrishnan, 1953). Buddhist councils institutionalized deliberation as a collective method of preserving and interpreting teachings (Gombrich, 1988). The Nyāya school formalized logical debate through well-defined rules of inference, while *sastrartha* in medieval India became a public forum where scholars tested knowledge through structured argumentation (Ganeri, 2001).

Modern scholarship on Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) often emphasizes heritage value, highlighting historical contributions to mathematics, medicine, or linguistics (Rao, 2019). While valuable, this approach risks treating IKS as static or fossilized. Less attention has been given to how IKS methods such as debate, dialectics, and dialogic reasoning can inform contemporary pedagogy. Some educators have experimented with classroom practices inspired by these traditions, including philosophy courses structured around dialogue resembling *sastrartha*. However, systematic empirical studies remain limited, suggesting the need for deeper philosophical inquiry into IKS as pedagogy rather than merely content.

This debate is not without critics. Some scholars caution that incorporating IKS into modern classrooms may risk cultural essentialism or exclusion of non-Indian perspectives (Nussbaum, 2010). Others express concern about ideological misuse. These critiques highlight the importance of integrating IKS with humility, inclusivity, and openness to plural viewpoints. At the same time, the dialogic core of IKS aligns strongly with democratic pedagogy, which values discussion, participation, and critical reasoning (Biesta, 2006).

Research Foundation (Research Questions, Objectives & Guiding Propositions)

The central research question is: *How can IKS be employed as a living method for plural reasoning, scaffolding democratic pedagogy and public reasoning in contemporary classrooms?*

This question unfolds into three inquiries. First, what can we learn from *sastrartha* about structuring classroom deliberation? Second, how do IKS-infused lesson plans foster critical thinking, inclusivity, and shared reasoning? Third, what ethical implications arise when we bring IKS into public education, where plurality of faiths and worldviews must coexist?

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The guiding proposition is that IKS is not merely cultural content but a living method of democratic inquiry. To treat IKS this way is to recognize its dialogic and deliberative modes as resources for building inclusive, participatory classrooms.

Research Framework

This study is grounded in an interpretivist paradigm. It seeks not universal laws but meaning- how IKS practices can be interpreted for modern pedagogy. It is also critical, questioning the dominance of Western pedagogical models and arguing for epistemic plurality. Finally, it is constructivist, seeing learners not as empty vessels but as active co-creators of knowledge.

The ontological assumption here is that knowledge is relational and dialogic. Epistemologically, learning is engagement, not absorption. Methodologically, this paper combines philosophical text analysis, design critique of lesson plans, and conceptual mapping of IKS practices.

The theoretical framework blends Dewey's democratic pedagogy, Freire's critical pedagogy, and Indian dialogic traditions. The conceptual framework is simple: IKS methods feed into lesson plans, which scaffold classroom deliberation, which in turn fosters democratic engagement and ethical reasoning.

Research Methodology

This study is qualitative, philosophical, and interpretive. It does not seek large-scale data but focuses on depth of meaning. The research design has three strands. First, philosophical analysis of classical texts and IKS methods like *sastrartha*. Second, critique of 2–3 lesson plans that consciously integrate IKS. Third, comparative analysis with Western pedagogies of dialogue and democracy.

The methods include textual analysis of classical debates, thematic analysis of pedagogical practices, and critical reflection. Ethical considerations are vital. Any invocation of IKS must avoid misrepresentation or appropriation. It must respect plurality and ensure inclusivity in classrooms.

Exposition (Analysis and Discussion)

The heart of this inquiry lies in understanding Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) not merely as preserved traditions but as living methods of reasoning and inquiry (Rao, 2018). A classroom infused with IKS can be imagined as a dialogical space where knowledge is constructed collaboratively rather than transmitted hierarchically (Freire, 1970). In such a setting, a teacher may initiate learning through *sastrartha* , a classical Indian method of structured debate characterized by open-ended questioning and critical deliberation (Matilal, 1998). Students actively participate by presenting claims, citing textual and experiential evidence, and responding to counter-arguments, while the teacher facilitates rather than dictates conclusions (Dewey, 1916). The outcome is not consensus imposed by authority but a collective journey of reasoning where the process itself becomes the site of learning.

This pedagogical approach resonates strongly with democratic education. Democracy extends beyond electoral practices to include habits of public reasoning, respectful disagreement, and listening across differences (Gutmann, 1999). Through dialogical practices such as *sastrartha*, IKS provides a framework

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for cultivating these democratic dispositions within classrooms (Sen, 2005). When students engage in structured debates, they are not only acquiring subject knowledge but also developing the skills necessary for participatory citizenship.

For example, in a lesson on environmental ethics, instead of presenting climate change as a fact to be memorized, a teacher might introduce hymns from the *Atharva Veda* that describe Earth as a nurturing mother deserving reverence and care (Bloomfield, 1897). Students can then deliberate on the ethical implications of this worldview, debating whether humans are stewards of nature or exploiters of its resources. When these discussions are enriched with contemporary scientific evidence and moral reasoning, students learn not only about environmental issues but also how to engage ethically and collectively with global challenges (UNESCO, 2017).

Consider a second lesson where the teacher introduces the Nyaya categories of knowledge-perception(*pratyakṣa*), inference(*anumana*), comparison (*upamana*), and testimony(*sabda*) as tools for structured reasoning rather than relics of ancient philosophy (Ganeri, 2001; Matilal, 1998). Students may be asked to analyze a contemporary media claim such as a viral news story, advertisement, or political speech. By examining how knowledge claims are justified and identifying logical fallacies, students apply Nyaya logic to distinguish valid reasoning from manipulation (Chakrabarti, 2010). In an age marked by widespread misinformation, such critical training supports democratic citizenship by enabling individuals to reason independently and resist deceptive narratives (Sen, 2005).

A third example can be drawn from Buddhist deliberative traditions. Historical Buddhist councils brought monks together to resolve doctrinal disputes through collective deliberation and consensus rather than coercion (Gombrich, 1988). When classrooms simulate such councils to deliberate on contemporary ethical dilemmas such as artificial intelligence governance or the expansion of animal rights- students learn patience, attentive listening, and shared decision-making (Keown, 2005). The emphasis shifts from winning an argument to achieving collective ethical clarity, reinforcing the idea that reasoning is both intellectual and moral.

Together, these examples illustrate the transformative potential of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)-infused pedagogy. Rather than reducing IKS to static heritage content names, dates, or doctrines this approach presents it as a living method of inquiry and engagement (Raina, 2016). Practices such as *sastrartha* , Nyāya inference, and Buddhist deliberation rehearse democratic habits by encouraging respectful disagreement, careful listening, and responsible argumentation.

Despite its promise, integrating IKS into contemporary education faces real challenges. Teachers may lack adequate training in these traditions, and institutions may fear that IKS integration risks cultural essentialism or political misuse (Nussbaum, 2010). The philosophical task, therefore, is to frame IKS inclusively as plural, dialogic, and critical rather than as dogmatic or nationalist. The goal is pedagogical renewal, not uncritical glorification of the past.

A comparison with dominant Western pedagogical models further clarifies this contribution. While many Western classrooms emphasize adversarial debate, where one side prevails over another, *sastrartha* is cooperative and truth-oriented (Matilal, 1998). The aim is illumination rather than persuasion. As *Amartya Sen* has argued, India's long argumentative tradition nurtures public reasoning and democratic dialogue (Sen, 2005). Far from being parochial, these traditions address universal educational and democratic needs.

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In fact, we may argue that the greatest gift of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) to pedagogy is not its content but its method. It teaches that truth is not given but sought through collective reasoning, emphasizing inquiry over memorization (Ganeri, 2011). It shows that dialogue is not a technique but a way of life, central to philosophical and educational practice (Radhakrishnan, 1951). It reminds us that knowledge is not only to be possessed but also to be shared, tested, and co-created through discussion and debate (Sen, 2005). In this sense, to integrate IKS into classrooms is to honor democracy itself, for democracy, too, is never finished it is always in dialogue (Dewey, 1916).

To strengthen the argument, it is important to place IKS not in isolation but in dialogue with other philosophical traditions of pedagogy. John Dewey, for instance, described education as a 'mode of associated living,' where learning emerges through social interaction and shared inquiry (Dewey, 1916). For Dewey, classrooms are miniature democracies where students learn to deliberate, cooperate, and reason together. Similarly, Paulo Freire, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, emphasized dialogue as the heart of education (Freire, 1970). He warned against the 'banking model' of teaching, in which students are treated as passive recipients of information, and instead proposed a dialogical model where teachers and students co-create knowledge.

If we compare these insights with *sastrartha* , we find striking resonances. Like Dewey, *sastrartha* treats reasoning as a communal act governed by shared norms (Matilal, 1998). Like Freire, it rejects passivity, insisting that learners actively question, argue, and respond. Yet IKS also offers something distinct. Dewey's pragmatism and Freire's liberation pedagogy were shaped by modern historical conditions such as industrial democracy and colonial oppression. *Sastrartha* , by contrast, evolved over centuries in monasteries, royal courts, and public assemblies, where the goal was not only social reform but the careful clarification of philosophical truth (Ganeri, 2011). Its rigor, codified through formal rules of debate, ensured disciplined reasoning rather than unstructured discussion.

This comparison reveals a powerful synthesis. From Dewey and Freire, we learn that pedagogy must be democratic, liberating, and socially engaged. From IKS, we inherit dialogic methods that emphasize logical discipline and ethical responsibility in argumentation. Together, these traditions offer a model of democratic pedagogy that balances freedom of thought with intellectual rigor an especially important goal for contemporary classrooms (Sen, 2005).

However, a potential critique remains. Is it realistic to transplant *sastrartha* a practice rooted in Sanskrit scholarship into modern, culturally diverse classrooms? This concern is valid. Yet the solution lies in adaptation rather than literal replication. The aim is not to reproduce ancient debates word for word, but to cultivate their underlying principles: structured dialogue, mutual respect, and reasoned disagreement. Just as Freire's ideas have been adapted globally beyond their Brazilian origins, IKS methods too can be reinterpreted for modern education without losing their philosophical core (Freire, 1970; Ganeri, 2011).

Another challenge lies in inclusivity. Can Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), often associated with Brahmanical traditions, truly serve plural classrooms that include Dalit, tribal, or minority perspectives? Scholars argue that this concern arises from a narrow reading of IKS rather than from its historical reality (Guha, 2007; Sen, 2005). Indian traditions of reasoning were never monolithic. The deliberative practices of Buddhist councils, the Jain principle of *anekantavada* (many-sidedness), and the dialogic traditions of the Bhakti movement all demonstrate plural reasoning within the Indian intellectual landscape (Bronkhorst, 2011; Cort, 2001). If IKS

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is to support democratic pedagogy, it must therefore be interpreted through a pluralist lens that emphasizes diversity rather than hierarchy (Nussbaum, 2010).

At stake is a broader philosophical claim: knowledge is not owned by a single culture. Traditions of reasoning can travel, interact, and enrich one another through dialogue (Sen, 2009). Bringing IKS into conversation with thinkers such as John Dewey, Paulo Freire, and Amartya Sen exemplifies democratic reasoning in practice, where learning emerges through interaction rather than authority (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970).

Consider an environmental ethics lesson. While the exclusive use of Vedic hymns may appear exclusionary, combining them with Buddhist compassion, Jain non-violence, and modern scientific perspectives on climate change transforms the lesson into a pluralist exercise (IPCC, 2023). Students learn that ethical reasoning develops through the interaction of multiple viewpoints, illustrating public reasoning in action (Sen, 2009).

However, the ethical risks of politicization remain real. When IKS is framed as cultural pride rather than a dialogic method, it risks becoming dogmatic (Kumar, 2005). Democratic pedagogy must therefore emphasize openness and inquiry. Teachers should use tradition as a scaffold for questioning, not as an unquestionable authority (Dewey, 1938). In doing so, IKS contributes to the universal human project of collective reasoning.

As Martha Nussbaum reminds us, 'education for democracy requires the cultivation of the narrative imagination' (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 95). Through practices such as *sastrartha* (structured debate), students learn to inhabit different perspectives, test arguments, and arrive at shared understanding. This dialogic practice reflects the very foundation of democratic life.

Conclusion

This study set out to challenge the prevailing tendency to frame Indian Knowledge Systems as static cultural inheritance and argued instead for their recovery as living practices of public reasoning. By foregrounding dialogic traditions such as *sastrartha*, Nyaya debate, and Buddhist deliberation, the paper has shown that IKS contains pedagogical resources that align deeply with the aims of democratic education. When approached as method rather than mere content, IKS enables classrooms to function as spaces of shared inquiry, where knowledge is tested through dialogue, disagreement is disciplined by reason, and plurality is treated as a strength rather than a threat.

The analysis demonstrates that IKS-infused pedagogy does more than diversify curricular references. It reshapes the very structure of learning. Students trained in structured debate, ethical deliberation, and multi-perspectival reasoning acquire not only intellectual skills but democratic dispositions: listening across difference, arguing without domination, and seeking understanding rather than victory. In this sense, IKS contributes directly to the cultivation of public reason, a foundational requirement for democratic life in plural societies.

At the same time, the paper has acknowledged the ethical risks involved cultural essentialism, exclusion, and politicization. These dangers underscore a crucial condition for integration: IKS must be interpreted expansively and critically, in dialogue with other traditions of thought, rather than elevated as unquestionable authority. The pedagogical value of IKS lies precisely in its openness to contestation and its historical commitment to disciplined disagreement.

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The broader implication is that democratic pedagogy need not be confined to a single intellectual lineage. By placing IKS in conversation with modern theories of democratic and critical education, this study affirms epistemic plurality as an educational virtue. Democracy, after all, is sustained not by uniformity of belief but by shared practices of reasoning.

Future work must therefore move beyond philosophical advocacy toward institutional practice: developing curricula that foreground dialogic methods, preparing teachers to facilitate structured deliberation, and conducting empirical studies on classroom outcomes. If education is understood as the ongoing formation of democratic habits, then reclaiming IKS as a living method of reasoning is not an act of nostalgia, but a forward-looking investment in democratic futures.

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