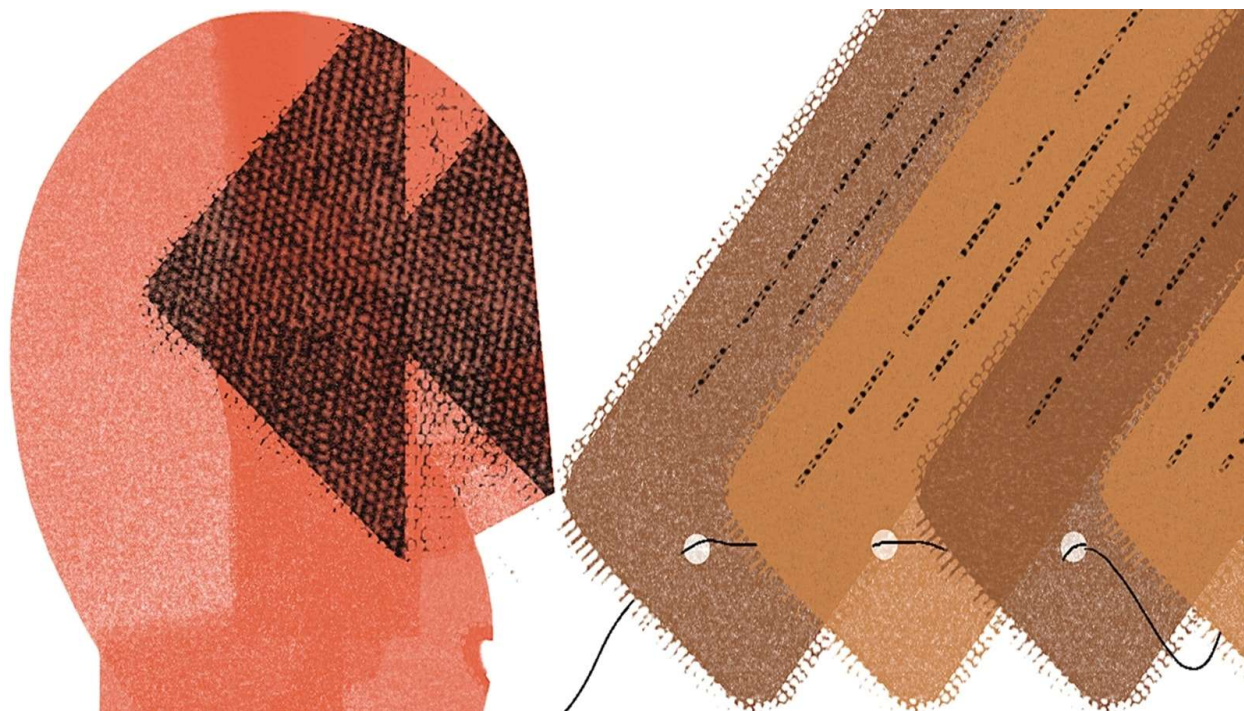


# State push for Indian knowledge systems is a farce. But dismissing them is a mistake

*It is a cultural disaster to raise generations of Indians who have no idea of the knowledge resources of the land where they were born. It is a political blunder to give up on the civilisational heritage of the country you seek to reclaim.*

**Yogendra Yadav**



This is the kind of engagement we need with Indian knowledge systems. (Illustration: C R Sasikumar)

---

Indian knowledge systems are either worshipped or dismissed. Two recent books suggest a way past these knee-jerk responses. They remind us why we must take Indian knowledge systems seriously. They also instruct us on how to — and how not to — do so.

Indian Knowledge Systems, or IKS, is the buzz word in Indian higher education these days. Every university is busy organising some IKS-related event and posting its photographs on the website. Academics are desperate to discover or invent a connection between their work and IKS. This newly discovered fondness is not organic but spawned by state patronage. The Ministry of Education has created an IKS Division to “rejuvenate and mainstream Indian Knowledge Systems for the contemporary world”. The government is pushing for it, pumping money and incentivising career mobility. Standing for IKS is also, for some academics, a not-so-subtle way of registering an ideological affinity with the present regime. The result is predictable. Thus, we have a flood of publications, mediocre if not worse, that do not serve either knowledge or India, let alone Indian knowledge systems.

This state-sponsored farce cannot but invite a reaction. Among advocates of “scientific temper”, it reinforces the notion that traditional knowledge is nothing but unscientific mumbo-jumbo. Critics of the caste order see this as an attempt to impose a Brahminic worldview. Critics of the government view this as an attempt to cloak an authoritarian regime with false national pride. The greater the advocacy of IKS, the greater the ridicule for the very idea of Indian knowledge in liberal and progressive circles. Such a rejection of IKS is a serious intellectual and political mistake.

It is historically absurd to believe in the self-serving autobiography of the modern West, to assume that it is the sole repository of human knowledge. It is a cultural disaster to raise generations of Indians who have no idea of the knowledge resources of the land where they were born. It is a political blunder to give up on the cultural and civilisational heritage of the country you seek to reclaim. Any serious engagement with IKS has to begin with a humble admission that India since Independence has been guilty of overlooking its intellectual traditions. Recovery and reconstruction of our knowledges must be an integral part of the future agenda of Swaraj in ideas.

The problem with IKS is not its basic idea but its skewed framing. The current focus on IKS involves multiple reductions. First, Indian knowledges are assumed to belong to the past, thus overlooking the living and vibrant knowledge systems. Second, the boundaries of India’s relevant past have been pushed to ancient times, bypassing the period of British and Muslim rule in India. Third, knowledge systems are reduced to those knowledges that are codified in texts, turning our back on the knowledges encoded in the practices of individuals and communities in agriculture, weaving, handicraft, medicine and so on. Fourth, the texts are limited to those of the high Brahminic traditions, to the neglect of a vast vernacular and desi textual tradition. And finally, the reference point for the validation of these knowledges continues to be the empire of knowledge created by the modern West. The push for IKS hinges on a pathetic political project of redeeming India’s honour in the eyes of the White man.

Bharat ki Saraswat Sadhna (Vani Prakashan, 2025) shows us a way to relate to India’s intellectual traditions without falling prey to the current IKS framing. The author is Acharya Radhavallabh Tripathi, a renowned Sanskrit scholar of our times, justly celebrated for his creative writing as well as more than 100 commentaries on literary and philosophical works in Sanskrit. This 556-page volume in Hindi is meant to be an introduction to 19 major literary and philosophical figures who wrote in Sanskrit from 1000 BCE to the 20th century. Given its scope and readership, the author does not get into scholarly and interpretative disputes. Yet, what stands out is his clear-eyed view of our intellectual legacy: Faithful to the texts, mindful of the context, but no attempt to brush inconvenient truths under the carpet. While respecting Western Sanskrit scholars, he quietly interrogates some of the dominant theories about Sanskrit in Western academia and brings the focus back on the tradition of Sanskrit and Oriental scholarship in India. While he does not hide his deep admiration for this tradition, he steadfastly refuses to participate in the supremacist political project.

Allama Prabhu and the Shaiva Imagination (Permanent Black, 2025) belongs to the other end of the spectrum of writings on Indian intellectual history that focuses on non-Brahminic and non-Sanskrit sources. Authored by D R Nagaraj, among the most profound cultural critics in post-Independence India, the Kannada book was originally published posthumously in 1999. Now we have its long awaited English rendering by N S Gundur, an act of linguistic hospitality that succeeds in bringing Nagaraj’s complex ideas to the English reader. The book focusses on Allama Prabhu, one of the great 12th century vachanakaras in the Virashaiva movement. In the course of establishing Allama Prabhu as a poet and philosopher, Nagaraj

questions the received ways of narrating the history of Indian philosophy and literature that have neglected the vernacular and desi imagination that expresses itself through images and metaphors.

Instead of using Western literary theory, Nagaraj interprets Allama's vachanas through the conceptual resources of the Shaiva Mimamsa tradition and sets up a conversation with Kashmiri philosopher Abhinavagupta. Above all, Nagaraj engages with Allama in a creative and critical manner, refusing to simply follow like a "flock of parrots". This book is shot through with a critical lens: Allama critiques the received Virashaiva tradition; Nagaraj critiques Allama and the translator offers a critique of Nagaraj.

This is the kind of engagement we need with Indian knowledge systems — a clear-eyed, future-oriented critical engagement with multiple systems from the past and present, not limited to any one phase of history, not restricted to textual forms of knowledge and not focused on high Brahminic texts. Once we adopt this vantage point, we may not search for Indian knowledge systems in some lost ancient text and struggle to connect it to modern science. We might begin to see and respect millions of Indians, from farming and artisanal communities that we call uneducated and backward, as carriers of Indian knowledge systems.

-----

19<sup>th</sup> May, 2026 @ <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/yogendra-yadav-writes-state-push-for-indian-knowledge-systems-is-a-farce-but-dismissing-them-is-a-mistake-10696544/>