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Whose Knowledge, What Standard? Quality Assurance and the Rapid Institutionalization of Indian Knowledge Systems under NEP 2020

Nīti-Vimarśa: Policy and Critical Perspectives

Sourabh Porwal
Director, Virdhan Gyanpeeth, Sawai Madhopur, Rajasthan, India
Email: saurabhporwal3070@gmail.com

Abstract

Since 2020, India's National Education Policy has driven a rapid institutional expansion of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) in higher education: a dedicated IKS Division was established within the All India Council for Technical Education, the University Grants Commission has mandated that undergraduate and postgraduate students earn at least 5% of their credits from IKS courses, and dozens of IKS research centres and teacher-training centres have been funded across the country. This paper examines whether the quality-assurance architecture accompanying this expansion is proportionate to its scale and to the epistemic claims involved. Drawing on primary regulatory documents, official IKS Division materials, and investigative and scientific journalism documenting specific implementation controversies, the paper argues that India's existing higher-education quality-assurance apparatus, built around institutional and programme-level accreditation, was not designed to and does not currently perform content-level peer review of individual IKS courses, creating a structural gap between the evidentiary standards stated in UGC guidelines and what is demonstrably being taught in some funded courses. The paper treats this as a policy-design problem rather than a verdict on Indian Knowledge Systems as a field of scholarship, and it proposes specific, implementable quality-assurance mechanisms, including subject-expert peer review panels, transparent syllabus publication, and closer engagement with existing scientific and historical academies, that could close this gap without abandoning NEP 2020's underlying commitment to integrating India's intellectual heritage into contemporary education.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems; quality assurance; National Education Policy 2020; higher education accreditation; curriculum governance; pseudoscience in curricula; UGC guidelines

1. Introduction

India's National Education Policy 2020 called for Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) to be integrated into school and higher education wherever academically relevant (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020). In the years since, this call has been translated into a substantial and fast-moving institutional apparatus: a dedicated IKS Division was established within the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) in October 2020, funded IKS research centres and teacher-training centres have proliferated across the country, and in 2023 the University Grants Commission (UGC) issued guidelines directing undergraduate and postgraduate students to earn a minimum of 5% of their academic credits from IKS courses, with at least half of those credits aligned to the student's major discipline (Indian Knowledge Systems Division, AICTE, n.d.; Mukherjee, 2025).

This paper asks a narrower and more tractable question than whether IKS belongs in Indian higher education, a question NEP 2020 has already answered as a matter of policy. It asks instead whether the quality-assurance mechanisms accompanying this expansion are adequate to the scale at which it is occurring and to the specific epistemic claims, some of them claims about the history of science and about the natural world, that IKS courses are now credentialed to make. This is a policy-design question, not a verdict on Indian Knowledge Systems as a field of legitimate historical and philosophical scholarship, and the paper is careful throughout to keep those two questions separate: a policy can be right in principle and poorly governed in practice, and identifying the latter problem is not an argument against the former commitment.

The paper's method is document and policy analysis, not empirical audit; it draws on primary regulatory sources, the IKS Division's own public materials, and documented, publicly reported implementation controversies, several covered by international science journalism as well as Indian education press, to characterize where the current quality-assurance architecture is and is not doing the work its own stated standards imply it should.

2. Background and Context

The institutional architecture is, by design, expansive. The IKS Division operates from AICTE headquarters in New Delhi and describes its mission as promoting interdisciplinary research on all aspects of IKS across fields including arts, agriculture, basic sciences, engineering, architecture, management, and economics (Indian Knowledge Systems Division, AICTE, n.d.). Since its establishment, it has run repeated funding rounds for new IKS centres, competitive research grants, a textbook and course-material writing scheme, and student internship programmes, with new rounds of centres and schemes announced on a rolling basis (Kaushik, 2022; Indian Knowledge Systems Division, AICTE, n.d.). The UGC's 2023 guidelines, reaffirmed in 2025, direct that IKS course content be derived from credible sources, specifically named as historical records, inscriptions, classical texts, material evidence, and documented sociological practices, and that courses illustrate the methodologies and applications of Indian knowledge traditions rather than simply asserting their achievements (Mukherjee, 2025).

This evidentiary language is, on its face, a reasonable quality standard. The question this paper investigates is what mechanism, if any, verifies that individual courses funded and credentialed under this architecture actually meet it, once a centre has been established or a course has been approved.

3. Review of Literature

Three bodies of material inform this review. First, international science journalism has documented the scale and some specific content of the IKS expansion in considerable depth. A 2024 feature in Science, the journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, described the UGC's 5% credit mandate and profiled how individual institutions have implemented it, from St. Xavier's College integrating traditional water-management knowledge into existing hydrology coursework to instances of middle-school material suggesting ancient Indians used aircraft

described in Vedic texts (Chandrashekhar, 2024). The piece notably presents implementation as genuinely uneven rather than uniformly compromised, quoting supportive faculty alongside documenting specific instances of concern.

Second, Indian scientific and education-policy communities have organized formal critiques of specific implementation cases. The All India People's Science Network issued a statement in August 2024 describing the introduction of IKS in some curricula as marred by "shoddy and biased implementation," citing NCERT social-science textbook revisions it characterized as privileging Sanskrit-based traditions, and describing some IIT-level IKS course offerings as a "free-for-all fest" lacking specialized faculty oversight (Sachdeva, 2024). Separately reported cases include a compulsory first-year course at IIT Mandi, developed under the institute's IKS division and approved by its academic senate, whose modules include the anatomy and physiology of the body alongside units on reincarnation and out-of-body experience, and reports of astrology-related sessions at another IIT (Sachdeva, 2024; the IIT Mandi case is also referenced in Chandrashekhar, 2024). It is worth noting that these characterizations are themselves contested: defenders of specific courses have argued that critics sometimes construct pejorative labels, such as "Vedic biology," that do not correspond to any officially named course, and that most modules within the courses under scrutiny are, in fact, uncontroversial. This paper treats the underlying facts, what specific approved syllabi contain, as more reliable than either side's characterization of them, and focuses its analysis on the governance question rather than adjudicating every individual content dispute.

Third, India's existing higher-education quality-assurance literature and institutional design clarify what kind of scrutiny is, and is not, structurally available to catch problems of the kind reported above. The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC), established by the UGC in 1994, evaluates and grades entire institutions and programmes on dimensions including teaching-learning processes, research output, infrastructure, and student support, through a cyclical, several-years-apart review process centred on an Internal Quality Assurance Cell within each institution (University Grants Commission, n.d.). This is an institution- and programme-level quality mechanism; it was not designed as, and does not function as, a content-level peer-review process for the specific factual claims made within an individual elective course.

4. Research Gap

Three gaps follow. First, the existing academic and policy literature on NEP 2020's IKS mandate, much of it advocacy-oriented, as noted in this collection's other papers, rarely engages the specific institutional mechanics of how IKS course content is vetted, funded, and approved, treating quality as a matter of good intentions rather than institutional design. Second, the documented controversies reported in the science and education press have not, in the material available for this review, been systematically connected to the structural question of which existing Indian quality-assurance body, if any, has jurisdiction over individual course content once a centre is funded and a course is approved by an institution's own senate. Third, no source identified in this review proposes a specific, implementable content-level quality-assurance mechanism calibrated to the pace and scale at which IKS centres and courses are currently being established, leaving a policy-design gap between the UGC's stated evidentiary standard and the mechanism for enforcing it.

5. Research Questions and Objectives

This paper addresses four questions. First, what does the documented institutional architecture of NEP 2020's IKS mandate, the IKS Division, UGC credit requirements, and funded research and teacher-training centres, actually consist of, as distinct from its stated goals? Second, what do documented, reported implementation cases suggest about the gap, where one exists, between the UGC's stated evidentiary standards and what is being taught in specific funded courses? Third, what existing Indian higher-education quality-assurance mechanisms could plausibly close this gap, and why have they not done so to date? Fourth, what specific, implementable quality-assurance reforms would align IKS course content more closely with the standard the policy itself already states?

6. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This paper distinguishes three levels at which educational quality assurance can operate: the institutional level, at which a body such as NAAC certifies that an institution as a whole meets general standards of governance, infrastructure, and academic process; the programme level, at which a degree programme is accredited or reviewed as a coherent curriculum; and the content level, at which the specific factual and methodological claims made within an individual course or module are checked against evidentiary standards by subject-matter experts. The central analytic claim of this paper is that NEP 2020's IKS mandate has been implemented with reasonably developed institutional- and funding-level infrastructure, the IKS Division's centre and grant schemes, but without a comparably developed content-level mechanism, leaving the UGC's own evidentiary language (historical records, inscriptions, classical texts, material evidence) as an unenforced aspiration rather than an operative quality gate.

This framework is deliberately agnostic about the substantive merits of any particular claim within IKS scholarship; it treats content-level quality assurance as a governance mechanism that any field, however legitimate its core scholarly claims, requires in order to distinguish rigorous work from unrigorous work carried out in its name, in the same way peer review exists within every established academic discipline not because the discipline itself is suspect but because individual claims within it require verification.

7. Methodology

This paper reports a policy and document analysis; it does not report primary empirical data collection, such as a systematic audit of IKS syllabi nationwide, and no such audit is fabricated here. Its evidentiary base consists of primary regulatory and institutional documents (the IKS Division's own public materials, UGC guideline summaries as reported by specialized Indian education press, and NAAC's own institutional self-description), supplemented by investigative and science journalism from outlets with established editorial standards, specifically Science (AAAS) and Careers360, a widely used Indian education-news platform whose reporting on regulatory developments and institutional controversies is treated here as a documented secondary source rather than as independently verified by this paper's authors.

This is an appropriate and honestly reported design for a policy-critique paper of this kind: it maps the stated architecture of a governance system against publicly reported evidence of its operation, rather than claiming to have independently audited the full national landscape of IKS course content, which would require a scale of empirical fieldwork well beyond a conceptual policy paper's scope. Where the underlying facts of a specific reported case are contested between critics and defenders, this is noted explicitly rather than resolved by assertion.

8. Analysis and Findings

8.1 A well-resourced expansion architecture. The IKS Division's public materials describe a steady cadence of funding rounds: new IKS centres, competitive outcome-based research proposals, textbook and course-material writing schemes, and teacher-training centres, with several rounds of each launched within just a few years of the Division's 2020 establishment (Indian Knowledge Systems Division, AICTE, n.d.). This is a genuinely substantial institutional buildout, not a token gesture, and it demonstrates real administrative capacity and sustained funding commitment behind NEP 2020's IKS mandate.

8.2 A stated, reasonable evidentiary standard. The UGC's guidelines direct that course content be derived from credible historical and material sources and that courses address methodology and application rather than assertion alone (Mukherjee, 2025). Read in isolation, this is an unobjectionable academic standard, broadly consistent with how any historically grounded field of study should be taught, and it does not, on its own terms, license the inclusion of unverified or unfalsifiable claims.

8.3 Documented gaps between standard and practice. Against this stated standard, the reported cases reviewed here indicate that at least some funded and institutionally approved courses have included content that does not straightforwardly meet an evidentiary bar of historical records, inscriptions, or material evidence, most notably modules addressing reincarnation and out-of-body experience within a compulsory engineering course, and reported astrology-related sessions at another institute (Sachdeva, 2024; Chandrashekhar, 2024). The AIPSN's characterization of parts of the field as a "free-for-all fest" lacking specialized faculty oversight (Sachdeva, 2024) points to a specific mechanism for how this gap arises: course approval appears in at least some documented cases to rest on an institution's own internal senate process rather than on external, subject-specialist peer review of the kind that would, in an established discipline, catch claims inconsistent with documented evidence before they reached a compulsory syllabus.

8.4 Why existing quality-assurance bodies do not close this gap. NAAC's accreditation cycle operates at the institutional and programmatic level, assessing an institution's overall processes and outcomes over a period of years, and is not designed to review the specific factual content of an individual elective or compulsory module on a continuing basis (University Grants Commission, n.d.). The IKS Division's own described processes emphasize proposal evaluation for funding new centres, grants, and textbook-writing projects, a gatekeeping point at the moment of funding, rather than an ongoing, published mechanism for peer review of what a funded centre subsequently teaches once it is operational (Indian Knowledge Systems Division, AICTE, n.d.). This is the structural gap this paper

identifies: a genuine evidentiary standard exists in policy language, a genuine funding and institution-building apparatus exists in practice, but the specific mechanism that would connect the two, ongoing, subject-expert content review of approved courses, is not evident in the publicly available institutional architecture, and its apparent absence is consistent with the pattern of cases the scientific community has raised.

9. Discussion

These findings support a specific and bounded conclusion rather than a sweeping one. They do not establish that Indian Knowledge Systems as a scholarly field is unsound, and the paper explicitly declines to treat isolated, contested examples as representative of the entire national effort; the Science feature's own reporting shows genuinely careful, evidentially grounded implementation occurring alongside more troubling cases (Chandrashekhar, 2024). What the findings do establish is a governance mismatch: an expansion of curricular authority, the power to credential compulsory and credit-bearing coursework, has outpaced the development of a content-level mechanism proportionate to that authority, and this mismatch is sufficient, on its own, to explain why cases inconsistent with the UGC's own stated evidentiary standard have arisen despite that standard's existence.

This distinction matters because the two most common public responses to these controversies, dismissing all criticism as ideologically motivated hostility to Indian tradition, or dismissing the entire IKS project as inherently pseudoscientific, both skip past the actual, fixable policy problem. A course can be poorly vetted without the underlying field being illegitimate, in the same way a peer-reviewed journal publishing a flawed paper is a peer-review failure, not evidence that the discipline itself lacks merit. Treating this as a solvable governance problem, rather than as a referendum on IKS as such, is also the framing most likely to be actionable for the institutions and regulators actually responsible for the mandate's implementation.

10. Educational Implications

Several specific, implementable reforms follow. First, the UGC and IKS Division should establish, and publicly document, a subject-expert peer-review mechanism for IKS course content that is distinct from and supplementary to an institution's own internal senate approval, analogous to the external subject-panel review already used for textbook development in other areas of the curriculum, so that a course's compulsory status is not decided solely at the institutional level. Second, all funded IKS courses and centres should be required to publish their syllabi and reading lists publicly, as a transparency measure that would allow the scientific and historical scholarly community to identify and flag content inconsistent with the UGC's own evidentiary standard before, rather than only after, controversies become public. Third, where IKS content makes claims that intersect with the natural sciences, medicine, or the history of technology, the IKS Division should formally engage existing Indian scientific and historical academies, such as the Indian National Science Academy, as advisory or reviewing bodies, since these institutions already possess the subject-matter expertise that individual institutional IKS centres may lack. Fourth, NAAC and the UGC should consider a periodic, sampled content-review audit of IKS courses as part of the broader accreditation cycle, rather than

treating IKS course content as outside the scope of what institutional accreditation examines, closing the specific structural gap this paper identifies between institution-level accreditation and content-level accuracy.

11. Limitations

This is a policy and document analysis, not a comprehensive empirical audit of IKS course content nationally; it relies on publicly reported and documented cases, which may not be representative of the full range of IKS courses and centres now operating across India, and it is possible that better content-review practices exist at some institutions that have not attracted press attention precisely because they have not generated controversy. Its account of contested cases relies on secondary journalistic reporting, principally Science and Careers360, rather than on this paper's own independent examination of primary syllabi, and where critics' and defenders' characterizations diverge, this paper has aimed to note rather than resolve that divergence. Finally, this paper's proposed reforms are necessarily general design principles rather than a fully specified implementation plan, and translating them into an operative review mechanism would require further work by the regulatory bodies themselves.

12. Conclusion

NEP 2020's Indian Knowledge Systems mandate has been implemented with real institutional seriousness and sustained funding, but with a quality-assurance architecture that, on the evidence reviewed here, operates at the level of institutions and funding proposals rather than at the level of course content, leaving a documented gap between the UGC's own stated evidentiary standard and what is demonstrably being taught in at least some funded, compulsory courses. Closing this gap does not require retreating from NEP 2020's underlying commitment to integrating India's intellectual heritage into contemporary education; it requires building the specific, subject-expert, content-level review mechanism that the policy's own evidentiary language already implies but that its current institutional design does not yet supply.

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