

# The Dharma of Knowledge: Bridging Ancient Indian Practices and Contemporary Thought

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**Abstract:** The present study aims to explore the foundations of knowledge management and sharing as seen in Ancient Indian culture. In a world that is making significant strides towards digitisation, knowledge management serves as an essential tool for efficiency, innovation and cultural continuity. Contemporary systems rely on technological infrastructure, but ancient civilisations developed sophisticated practices to ensure knowledge sharing and management. The study will delve into classical texts such as the Vedas and Brahmanas – which provide spiritual wisdom; Arthashastra – which offers administrative and economic knowledge; Manusmriti – which served as a benchmark for legal codifications, and other related texts. These works, while mainly religious and political, provide profound insights into the generation, transmission, and regulation of knowledge in Ancient Indian society. The study will involve thematic and textual analysis to understand the pedagogical frameworks, oral teachings, institutions such as Gurukulas, and the duties and information mentioned in the relevant texts; the research will uncover practices and principles of knowledge management and sharing. Drawing from these historical insights, the end goal of the study is to create and propose a model that can be incorporated into contemporary education systems to bridge ancient epistemological paradigms with contemporary organisational needs. This model can serve as a foundation for an enhanced knowledge management system, inspire the younger generations to understand the value of ancient wisdom and lead to further innovation in interdisciplinary studies by offering a culturally grounded yet universally relevant framework for knowledge management in the 21st century. Ultimately, this study aims to deepen our understanding of how oral traditions in ancient India successfully preserved and transmitted knowledge across generations long before the widespread use of script and writing.

**Keywords:** Knowledge management, Ancient Indian texts, Oral traditions, Gurukula system, Epistemology

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## 1. Research Methodology

The study has adopted a qualitative and interpretive analysis of primary sources from ancient Indian literature, namely the Rigveda, Arthashastra, and Manusmriti. The textual and thematic analysis of these texts focuses on identifying implicit and explicit references to the creation, preservation, transmission and application of knowledge in ancient India. The method used is textual discourse, where ancient verses and principles were interpreted through a modern light that incorporates contemporary knowledge management frameworks. These texts were chosen because they lay the foundations of knowledge in terms of cultural significance, temporal breadth, and thematic richness in matters of education, governance and epistemology for matters such as education, epistemology and governance. Attention was paid specifically to how oral traditions, social structures, and ethical frameworks functioned as early knowledge systems when compared to modern frameworks. Each text was studied contextually, with insights that were brought through secondary literature to enable further understanding and establish a solid context.

## 2. Introduction

Knowledge as a concept is a very broad and complex notion. The Cambridge English Dictionary defines knowledge as the understanding of or information about a subject you get through experience or study, either known by one person or people (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019). Knowledge has existed ever since our ancestors gained consciousness and the ability to process thought. One can relate it with innovation; for instance, the Homo Habilis developed the thought process to develop the hand-axe using stone, eventually building upon it to arrive at spears, arrows, swords and other weapons along with farming tools by the time the species evolved into Homo Sapien Sapiens. When one talks about knowledge in an epistemic and intellectual way, some might argue that it started in ancient Greece with the advent of Socrates in the 5th century BCE.

Modern knowledge frameworks are built on this, although in academia, it emerged as a discipline in the 1990s, with foundational contributions from scholars such as Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi. They presented the SECI model – Socialisation, Externalisation, Combination, and Internalisation. The model described how tacit and explicit knowledge was created and maintained whilst enabling sharing within organisations. These frameworks focused heavily on the role of individuals, institutions, and structures in shaping the flow of knowledge. While most of the research in this domain is rooted in the corporate or business world, this paper seeks to bring light to how knowledge management systems, especially one from Ancient India, can improve modern education systems.

Ancient India is often considered to be a hub of knowledge and wisdom. Even if the colonial notion had been that India was never rich in history and knowledge, ancient texts challenged this notion. The presence of texts such as the Vedas, Brahmanas, Upanishads, Arthashastra, Manusmriti, and the Samhitas proves the fact that knowledge as an intellectual notion and knowledge management systems (KMS) existed way before the era of kings and polity.

In the contemporary world, knowledge management is usually related to business, wherein various management systems are used to find sustainable ways to help promote a firm's progress. It is defined as identifying, organising, storing and disseminating information within an organisation (IBM, 2021). Based on this, Alavi and Leidner point out that the objective of KMS is to support the creation, transfer, and application of knowledge in organisations (Alavi and Leidner, 2001). However, this study aims to shift the orientation of this notion towards education, especially in India. By learning from age-old texts, the hope is to understand the current scenario of the education system in contemporary India.

According to a press release by the Ministry of Finance, posted on the 22nd of July 2024, about 4.33 crore students were enrolled in higher education in the Financial Year of 2022 (Government of India, 2017). The Ministry noted an increase of 26.5% since the Financial Year 2015. Similarly, a report published on the UNIFIED DISTRICT INFORMATION SYSTEM FOR EDUCATION PLUS (UDISE+) 2023-2024 by the Ministry of Education declared in its findings that within the Indian school Education system, there are nearly 14.72 lakh schools, more than 98 lakh teachers and almost 24.8 Crore students from pre-primary to higher secondary level from varied socio-economic backgrounds (GOVERNMENT OF INDIA, MINISTRY OF EDUCATION and DEPARTMENT OF SCHOOL EDUCATION & LITERACY, 2024). The report also highlighted the dropout rates of 1.9%, 5.2%, and 14.1%, respectively, at primary, upper, and secondary levels. The Ministry claimed that increasing the cost-effectiveness of public spending on education requires spending on pedagogy and governance. Officials suggested introducing supervisory positions to monitor teaching quality, scrutinising teacher performance, and hiring local volunteers to ensure 'teaching at the right level.' The argument was based on the fact that textbook knowledge would not be enough since children would still lack curricular standards. However, as of now, the claim remains a claim and nothing else. The New Education Policy of 2020 has helped improve the educational sector by a large margin, but inefficiencies remain. Although solving all of the problems within the system may take time, which the Government also agrees with by setting up a deadline of solving the issues by 2030, significant strides can be made by incorporating the knowledge management systems of ancient India into the contemporary education system.

### **3. Analysis of Literary Texts**

#### **3.1 Vedic Literature**

India has always been a hub of insightful texts that have provided information that transcends time to this day. The Vedas are a perfect example of this statement. The term *Veda* itself means wisdom. The texts have laid the foundations for religious, spiritual and philosophical insights, comprising four: Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda. However, the main text is always considered the Rigveda since all the other texts are built upon its hymns. These hymns not only include practices that promote religion, but they also include guidance towards environmental preservation and maintenance, education and knowledge management. It can be understood that Ancient Indian society focused on education to build a person's character whilst providing them with holistic knowledge of the world. Knowledge in India is termed as *vidya*, and the Vedic society believed that if education did not raise the spirituality and humanity within a person, it could not be considered as *vidya*, even if the person gained intelligence (Banerjee and Mahato, 2022).

“Vedic system of education in ancient India, more than three thousand years ago, designed the educational curriculum of the then Indian society in such a way where learning and application of the 'Apara Vidya' (worldly knowledge) was firmly based upon the philosophy of 'Para Vidya' (knowledge of self), or for the sake of our simple understanding, which we may call Dharma 'or spirituality (Banerjee and Mahato, 2022).” The Rigveda provides us with knowledge that spreads over every field, but if one were to focus on its educational aspects, the text would be one of the most important in Ancient India. The educators were well-versed in the knowledge of the Vedas, and they understood the importance of external factors affecting a student's education. “The ultimate aim of the ancient Hindu education system was to produce a person morally correct, spiritually inclined, socially responsible, respectful to tradition and holy spirits or gods, environmentally conscious, and a family person (Nath Ganguly, 2020).” The most interesting fact is that all the knowledge that was transmitted was done orally; the system of oral education in India was called *Gurupāramparya*, which means the uninterrupted ideal succession of pupils and teachers, by which knowledge is conserved and transmitted (Kokić and Tonći Kokić,

2024). This method showcases a knowledge transfer mechanism that is fundamental in creating an effective knowledge management system, ensuring continuity and integrity. In his paper, Ganguly (Nath Ganguly, 2020) quotes Max Muller, "How then were these ancient hymns and the Brahmanas, and it may be, the Sutras too, preserved? Entirely by memory, but by memory kept under the strictest discipline." This disciplined memorisation of knowledge can be interpreted as an early form of knowledge validation and quality control, which are key in maintaining accurate knowledge banks. This gives us insight into how knowledge management systems work, not by constantly bombarding with facts, but by maintaining discipline through a teacher's conduct and how he would treat his students. This gives us an insight into how the knowledge management systems worked in Vedic society. Here, ethical considerations regulated the spread of knowledge while preserving its value and, most importantly, its relevance. In contemporary India, it is often seen that teachers see themselves as superior to students and usually resort to belittling them and, in some cases, resorting to physical violence. Within the Vedic literature, this was not the case; teachers were supposed to instruct the students in a way that would benefit them. Punishment will be vocal and mild to start with. Only when the conduct was severely wrong to them will the student be punished with a split bamboo for the sound effect or a rope to hit the student on the fleshy parts. Never be the child hit on the face, stomach, and perineum with such contraptions (Nath Ganguly, 2020).

Analysing particular verses of the Rigveda, "Allied by worship, let him give man knowledge: by an extended cord they lead him onward (Griffith, 1896)." The verse provokes collecting reverence, enabling the transmission of wisdom through a structured and continuous lineage, which can be interpreted as a metaphor for oral systems that sustained Vedic rituals. Furthermore, the text also states, "Bring forth your gifts to his refulgent splendour, your hymn as purest offering to Agni, to him who goes as messenger with knowledge between all songs of men and Gods in heaven (Griffith, 1896)." The verse symbolises the role of intermediaries in conveying knowledge and safeguarding it. This transmission of knowledge, however, does not come without ethical conditions and warns us about hollow participation in spreading knowledge. It states, "Worship, thyself, O God, the Gods in heaven: what, void of knowledge, shall the fool avail thee (Griffith, 1896)?" The Rigveda also provides insight into how concealment of knowledge and dishonesty are enemies of learning and spreading knowledge; it states, "Guile follows close the untruthful men: no secrets may be hidden from your knowledge. (Griffith, 1896)" Conclusively, the Rigveda talks about knowledge as a divine gift and not only says that one who has an understanding of the origin of knowledge will be free of ignorance and will distribute this divine gift with purpose; the verses state, "She who hath knowledge Of the first day's nature is born refulgent white from out the darkness; As she who in her parents' house is growing old, I pray to thee as Bhaga from the seat of all. Grant knowledge, mete it out and bring it here: give us the share wherewith thou makest people glad (Griffith, 1896)." The symbolic language in these hymns highlights the role of knowledge intermediaries who act as keepers of sacred knowledge, safeguarding its transmission and ensuring its spread while maintaining its ethical boundaries, an essential feature of knowledge management frameworks. Overall, the Rigveda presents knowledge as a divine gift, underscoring the necessity of purposeful, ethical, and sustainable knowledge management practices to support societal evolution and prevent stagnation.

### **3.2 Arthashastra**

The Arthashastra is regarded as one of the most influential books on polity and statecraft in Ancient India. Authored by Kautilya, the book covers all aspects of statecraft, from a king's duties to how a state should function. Kautilya emphasises the education a king should receive and how to implement it. Within Book 1 of the Arthashastra, Chapter 2, titled "*Determination of the place of Anvikshiki*", talks about the sciences a king should be versed in and the place of *Anvikshiki* (the science of inquiry). Kautilya states that *Anvikshiki* comprises the Philosophy of *Sankhya* (interpreted as Practical Knowledge), *Yoga* (interpreted as activity without attachment), and *Lokayata* (interpreted as direct perception). In light of all the other sciences that are present, Kautilya argues that *Anvishaki* is the most important since it keeps the mind steady and firm in all situations and bestows excellence of foresight, speech and action (Kautilya, 2010). Ami Ganatra points out that Chanakya's emphasis on philosophy is based on the fact that the Sanskrit word for philosophy is *Darshan*, which translates to 'seeing' or 'perceiving', therefore asking for a king to have the correct perception (Ganatra, 2016). Having the proper perception and not being biased leads to better decision-making. This is an essential skill to learn, not just for a king but also for an ordinary man. In the contemporary world, textbooks are no longer thought-provoking and just contain information without building a student's thinking ability. By incorporating the principles of *Anvikshiki* into modern education, students will develop a new way of understanding things that will promote innovation and critical thinking, leading to faster and more accurate decision-making, which they can apply in the academic world and the professional world, especially in business organisations.

Similarly, in Chapter 8, titled "*Creation of Ministers*" of Book 1, Kautilya talks about appointing the king's ministers. He agrees with *Báhudant's* son that a man with only theoretical knowledge and no practical political experience will commit blunders; he adds that a man's ability is inferred from his capacity shown in work and by differences in the working capacity (Kaṭalya, 2010). Although Kautilya here highlights the importance of the practical knowledge of a king in terms of choosing his ministers, this perspective highlights a crucial tenet of knowledge management, i.e., practical knowledge is of utmost importance since a student who has learned through experience will be much more valuable than a student who has learned theoretically. This distinction aligns with the basic principle of modern knowledge management: the difference between explicit knowledge (theoretical) and tacit knowledge (experiential). Kautilya's emphasis on evaluating a minister based on his performance reflects that tacit knowledge was recognised systematically before the fundamentals of modern knowledge management were written down. By prioritising practical competence, he advocated for a holistic approach to knowledge management beyond formal learning, which modern education systems should implement.

The most crucial knowledge management system in the Arthashastra is the management of spies and the espionage system that the king oversees. The Arthashastra requires the king to set up various departments of spies to keep a check on the activities happening inside his kingdom and to ensure that there is no misinformation being spread by cross-checking the information he receives. In Chapter 13, Kautilya highlights that to protect the state from internal and external factors, a wise king would guard factions among his people, friendly or hostile, powerful or powerless, against the intrigue of foreign kings (Kaṭalya, 2010). Kautilya highlights that all the information a king receives should be written down, which we can see Ashoka of the Mauryan Dynasty built upon by inscribing his edicts and ordering his ministers and officials to write down every order issued by the king. This reflects an early recognition and institutionalisation of the central concepts of modern knowledge management systems, i.e., the need for systematic information verification and internal knowledge audits.

By analysing the aspects of the Arthashastra highlighted above, it can be inferred that Kautilya never limited the learning of a king only to the theoretical aspects. He emphasised understanding every aspect of life, including philosophy, sciences, history and polity. Leaving out any information on the concerned disciplines will only spread chaos since the king would be misinformed and not knowledgeable enough to tackle any situation that arises. Historians date the book to c.3rd century BCE; it is one of the most relevant and essential texts on statecraft and polity, which can help modern-day knowledge management systems in the education sector and inspire innovation.

### **3.3 Manusmriti**

The Manusmriti, often referred to as the Laws of Manu, is one of the most essential and ancient texts in Hindu jurisprudence, believed to have been composed around 200 BCE to 200 CE. Attributed to the sage Manu, the text provides a comprehensive code of ethics, duties, and societal laws that govern human behaviour, social order, and governance. It covers various topics, from personal conduct and family life to legal matters and the administration of justice. While its core focus is on dharma (righteousness) and the social roles of individuals within the varna (caste) system, the Manusmriti also offers insights into ancient Indian views on nature, sustainability, and social responsibility. Though revered and criticised over the centuries, the Manusmriti remains foundational in studying ancient Indian law, culture, and ethics.

While the Manusmriti does not exactly refer to knowledge management systems, it provides insight into the dissemination of knowledge; the text supports several Knowledge Management principles. One such principle is hierarchical transmission: knowledge, especially sacred knowledge like the Veda, is meant to be transmitted through specific social channels, typically from teacher to worthy disciple. The text talks about hierarchical transmission of knowledge and textual adaptation, aligning with the concept of tacit knowledge transfer. The Manusmriti also reflects textual adaptation and epistemic flexibility since the society went from orally transmitting knowledge to textual dissemination. As Lariviere notes, "Not only was the adaptation of textual tradition to the changing needs of society implicit in the development of the *dharmashastra*, but it was also explicitly recognised within the tradition (Lariviere, 2009)" This can also be interpreted as - the *dharmashastra* tradition of disseminating knowledge was not rigid or fixed but instead it evolved with society. The same should be applied to contemporary education systems, but we see cases where schools and universities use outdated curricula to educate and provide knowledge. The text explicitly mentions the need for scrutiny and promotes critical engagement with knowledge. It states, "A learned man, after fully scrutinising all this with the eye of knowledge, should, by the authority of the revealed texts, be intent on (the performance of) his duties (Bühler,

2024)." Not only did the text provide insight into how a knowledgeable man behaves, but it clearly stated that the knowledge one spreads should not be spread to a person who does not pay heed to its importance. It states, "Even in times of dire distress, a teacher of the Veda should rather die with his knowledge than sow it in barren soil (Bühler, 2024)." The Manusmriti may not have been designed as a text discussing knowledge management systems. Still, it talked about knowledge as one of the most sacred parts of human existence. It highlighted the importance of societal evolution and the need for a dynamic system to ensure that society would continue to spread knowledge systematically and truthfully. When a society refuses to focus on innovations, systems are bound to suffer, leading to inconsistencies.

#### **4. Systems of Gurukulas**

The ancient Indian education system was built on offering knowledge through Gurukulas and universities like Nalanda University for higher education. "These systems focused on a person's overall development, including their spiritual, moral, and intellectual growth. Today, the education system is more structured, focusing on academic achievements, skills, and standardised exams (Kumar, 2024)." Within the gurukula system, a student was placed under the direct supervision of his Guru and resided under the Guru's roof; this was known as the *antevasin* (Nath, 2023). This means that the student would spend his time at the Guru's house, and under this system, serving the teacher and his family was a priority for the pupil. Over time, this system evolved, and more buildings were added to the Gurukula. For a student, a guru was a spiritual father (Nath, 2023). The system fostered a personal relationship that was built on compassion but, at the same time, discipline. A Guru would guide his student on a better path academically and help him grow mentally, physically and spiritually. This holistic approach towards a student's overall development helped him maintain the knowledge he received. It also helped transmit it through harmonious channels where personal bias did not come into play, and knowledge management systems worked smoothly. Based on a case study by Edwina Pio (2005), one finds that the Guruguru–shishya process was instrumental in knowledge sharing and production and was a crucial move in the overall organisational viability. This can be looked at wherein an organisation (here the education system) which sees itself as a flexible network of independent, adaptive relationships between a teacher and student, rather than a rigid one where superiority plays a role, is more likely to adapt and innovate a student to reach his full potential (Brown and Duguid, 2000). Overall, considering a student's spirituality and value systems growth can significantly enhance knowledge management and educational outcomes. By blending in traditional wisdom through ancient techniques, one can ensure that knowledge is acquired, internalised, preserved, and passed on through meaningful and relevant channels.

#### **5. Discussion**

Ancient Indian literature is found to have a multi-dimensional approach to knowledge management that spans ethics, pedagogy, ritual, and governance. The Rigveda indicates ordered oral transmission and ethical sharing, resonating with present knowledge, integrity and stewardship issues. The Arthashastra illustrates the value of both tacit and explicit knowledge—performance-based assessment and practical prudence in leadership, pre-empting the tacit/explicit dichotomy in contemporary KM theory. The Manusmriti illustrates hierarchical yet adaptive knowledge structures, where knowledge must be transmitted purposively and ethically, in harmony with present-day controversies regarding access, legitimacy, and development of knowledge systems. These revelations collectively suggest that knowledge in ancient India was not just divine but purposefully managed intergenerationally through socially embedded routines. In contemporary parlance, they present a template of decentralised, morally rooted, and person-centred knowledge management suited for educational reform and intercultural KM theory.

#### **6. Conclusion**

Taking into account the nature and structure of texts like the Rigveda, Arthashastra and Manusmriti and pairing them with the pedagogical framework of the Gurukula system, it is viable to conclude that contemporary education systems need to focus on not only academic growth but the growth of a student as a human being. A future-oriented education system should be implemented where a student will learn how to regulate their values, spirituality and mental health. This holistic framework will lead to a knowledge transfer network where both tacit knowledge and practical knowledge are in play.

Including the study of ancient Indian texts such as the Vedas in the educational system will promote this holistic framework since the texts are well-versed in environmental jurisprudence and governance to ethics, value systems, and knowledge stewardship. Although very complicated, the authority in charge can use simplified translations of these texts while teaching the students in Sanskrit for a better understanding. The best example

is the state of Uttarakhand, where the state government mandated that Sanskrit be a mandatory subject from the 3rd to the 8th grade. This decision not only lives up to the potential of the New Education Policy of 2020 but also ensures that students can understand texts such as the Vedas.

Ultimately, reintegrating the knowledge and wisdom found in ancient Indian texts into the contemporary education system will not only help us preserve the rich cultural and epistemic heritage that our ancestors left us with but also build a resilient and adaptable society that leans towards knowledge. To end and quote the Upanishads, "Those who follow the path of *avidya* (ignorance) fall into darkness, those who follow the path of *vidya* (knowledge) fall into greater darkness (Radhakrishnan, 2018)." A simple reminder of the fact that knowledge should not be isolated from values. It is the mixture of *vidya* and values that should guide the future of education and knowledge management.

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