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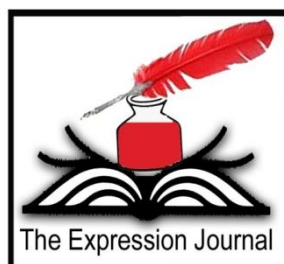
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DHARMA AND GLOBAL JUSTICE: THE ROLE OF THE INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM IN CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL LAW

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Abstract

The Indian knowledge system, rooted in ancient texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, and other classical works, offers a unique perspective on law and governance. This system, encompassing principles of dharma, justice, and ethical conduct, has influenced various aspects of Indian society, including its legal traditions. In contemporary legal education, there is a growing recognition of the value of integrating elements of the Indian knowledge system into the curriculum to provide a more holistic understanding of law and justice. This paper explores the relevance of the Indian knowledge system in the context of international law and its potential implementation in contemporary legal education. It examines how the principles of the Indian knowledge system align with key concepts of international law, such as sovereignty, human rights, and environmental protection. It elucidates how concepts such as dharma (duty/righteousness), ahimsa (non-violence), and sarvodaya (universal welfare) shape India's approach to international relations and law. Furthermore, it discusses the challenges and opportunities associated with incorporating the Indian knowledge system into legal education, including curriculum design, pedagogy, and institutional frameworks. Through a comprehensive analysis, this paper argues that integrating the Indian knowledge system into legal education can enrich students' understanding of law, foster a deeper appreciation of cultural diversity, and contribute to the development of a more inclusive and sustainable legal framework.

Keywords

Indian Knowledge System, International Law, Contemporary Legal Education, Ancient Principles, Modern Practice.

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Introduction

The study of international law has long been shaped by Western legal traditions, predominantly influenced by European Enlightenment values, colonial histories, and positivist jurisprudence. These paradigms, while foundational to modern legal systems, often overlook the philosophical and ethical frameworks that have guided non-Western societies for millennia. In this context, the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), deeply rooted in ancient texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Manusmriti, and epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, offers a rich, alternative lens through which to understand law, governance, and justice [1].

The IKS is not merely a historical or cultural artifact—it is a living body of knowledge encompassing a holistic worldview where legal and moral orders are inextricably linked. Central to this tradition are the concepts of dharma (righteous duty and moral order), ahimsa (non-violence), and sarvodaya (universal welfare). These principles extend beyond individual conduct to inform social harmony, ethical governance, and the responsibilities of rulers and citizens alike. Their relevance becomes particularly striking when viewed in relation to global legal concerns such as sovereignty, human rights, and environmental protection [2].

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of the need to diversify and decolonize legal education. Integrating elements of the Indian Knowledge System into contemporary legal curricula not only enriches the understanding of justice and law but also fosters a more inclusive and culturally sensitive global legal discourse. This paper explores the philosophical resonance between IKS and key principles of international law, highlighting how dharma, ahimsa, and sarvodaya can inform contemporary global governance. It further examines the practical implications and challenges of incorporating IKS into modern legal education, advocating for a balanced approach that bridges ancient wisdom with contemporary legal practice.

Historical and Philosophical Foundations

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) has evolved over thousands of years through a rich tapestry of oral traditions, philosophical treatises, and classical texts. Its foundational values dharma, ahimsa, and sarvodaya are deeply embedded in the cultural and intellectual heritage

of India. Far from being static, IKS is a dynamic and adaptable framework that has historically influenced not only religious and social norms but also legal and political thought. In recent times, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has emphasized the revitalization of India's indigenous intellectual traditions, calling for the integration of IKS into the mainstream academic and legal curriculum to cultivate a more holistic understanding of knowledge, ethics, and justice.

The concept of dharma lies at the heart of Indian philosophy and jurisprudence. As outlined in the Dharmasūtras, Smritis, and epic texts like the Mahabharata and Ramayana, dharma represents the moral and ethical duties of individuals within society. Unlike rigid legal codes, dharma is contextual and dynamic, promoting social harmony, justice, and righteous governance. It served as the guiding principle for kings and citizens alike, functioning as both a moral compass and a framework for legal conduct [3]. Its influence extended to areas of family law, statecraft, and dispute resolution, where ethical judgment often took precedence over punitive measures [4].

The value of ahimsa, or non-violence, has its roots in the Vedic, Jain, and Buddhist traditions. In Jainism, it became the supreme virtue; in Buddhism, a foundation of the Eightfold Path; and in Hinduism, a reflection of the principle of universal compassion. In the modern era, Mahatma Gandhi revived ahimsa as a powerful tool of political and social transformation. His philosophy of non-violent resistance (Satyagraha) not only shaped India's freedom struggle but also inspired global movements for civil rights and peace.

Sarvodaya, meaning "universal uplift" or "welfare of all," was another Gandhian ideal that emphasized collective well-being over individual gain. Drawing upon ancient values of compassion and community, Gandhi envisioned sarvodaya as the cornerstone of a just society. This vision was later institutionalized through movements like A.T. Ariyaratne's Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka, which applied these principles to grassroots development and peacebuilding. Together, dharma, ahimsa, and sarvodaya form the philosophical backbone of the Indian Knowledge System, offering a deeply ethical, inclusive, and sustainable approach to governance and law qualities that resonate strongly with the principles of international law today [5].

Alignment with International Law

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) offers a unique philosophical foundation that aligns closely with the values and principles of modern international law. Far from being outdated or insular, the ethical precepts embedded in IKS such as dharma, ahimsa, and sarvodaya resonate powerfully with contemporary global legal norms, particularly in the areas of sovereignty, human rights, and environmental protection.

3.1 Sovereignty and State Responsibility

In international law, the principle of sovereignty emphasizes the autonomy of states while simultaneously holding them accountable for upholding legal obligations, both within their borders and in the global arena. The concept of **dharma** in IKS similarly advocates for **responsible governance**. Ancient Indian texts such as the *Mahabharata* and *Arthashastra* urge rulers to exercise their power ethically, prioritizing justice, the well-being of citizens, and social harmony. Dharma not only ensures that power is not misused but also that rulers are bound by moral duties that mirror the idea of state responsibility found in modern international treaties and conventions.

3.2 Human Rights and Individual Dignity

The ideals of **ahimsa** (non-violence) and **sarvodaya** (universal upliftment) form the moral bedrock for respecting human dignity and rights in the Indian tradition. Ahimsa promotes a non-violent way of life that upholds the sanctity of all living beings, while sarvodaya stresses the need for inclusive development and social justice. These values align closely with the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)** and the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)**, both of which affirm the inherent dignity of every individual and the obligation of states to protect their civil liberties. Gandhi's philosophy of ahimsa has even influenced global human rights movements, illustrating the universal appeal of these ancient Indian principles [6].

3.3 Environmental Protection and Sustainability

Environmental concerns are central to both IKS and contemporary international law. IKS emphasizes the interconnectedness of life and the sanctity of nature. In texts like the *Atharvaveda*, the Earth is revered as a living entity deserving of respect and protection. This worldview anticipates modern legal frameworks such as the **Paris Agreement** and the **United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, which advocate for environmental justice and sustainability. The ethical imperative to live in harmony with nature deeply rooted in IKS complements the growing recognition of **environmental human rights** in international legal discourse [7].

Pedagogical Integration in Legal Curriculum

The integration of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) into legal education is not merely a cultural imperative it is a necessary step toward building a more ethical, inclusive, and globally relevant legal framework. The **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020** emphasizes the importance of incorporating India's rich intellectual traditions into higher education, recognizing that students benefit from exposure to indigenous knowledge systems alongside Western legal principles.

Curriculum Modules and Subject Integration

A practical approach to integrating IKS into legal education involves developing **curriculum modules** that blend traditional concepts with contemporary international law topics. For instance, while teaching courses on **public international law**, modules on **dharma-based state responsibility**, **ahimsa in conflict resolution**, and **sarvodaya as a framework for humanitarian aid** can be introduced. This integrated curriculum allows students to examine legal concepts through a dual lens drawing from both global norms and indigenous ethical traditions [8].

Case Studies and Applications

- **Gandhian non-violence** in political diplomacy and dispute resolution can be analyzed in contrast to coercive enforcement mechanisms in international law.
- **Sarvodaya-inspired development models**, like the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement in Sri Lanka, offer real-world parallels to **UN humanitarian frameworks**.
- Historical examples of **dharma-driven governance** can help students understand how rulers balanced state interests with ethical responsibility, much like the **international law principle of proportionality** in use-of-force situations.

Teaching Methods and Faculty Training

Innovative **teaching methods** can greatly enhance the impact of IKS in legal education. **Dialogic learning** inspired by the oral traditions of Indian philosophy can be employed through classroom debates and discussions rooted in ethical dilemmas. **Storytelling**

techniques, derived from the *Puranas* and epics, can be used to communicate complex legal principles. Additionally, **faculty training programs** must be introduced to equip legal educators with the tools to teach IKS effectively. Institutions like **Delhi University's Faculty of Law**, **University of Mumbai**, and interdisciplinary bodies such as the **Indian Council of Philosophical Research** have already begun engaging in this space [9].

Institutional Approaches and Structural Support

To institutionalize these efforts, **research centers** dedicated to the intersection of IKS and law should be established. Law schools can introduce **credit-based elective courses** focusing on topics like "**IKS and Global Governance**", "**Philosophy of Law in Ancient India**", or "**Gandhian Legal Thought**". Collaborations with organizations such as **Swadeshi Shodh Sansthan**, **Rashtram School of Public Leadership**, and **Indian Knowledge Systems Division of the Ministry of Education** can provide academic and logistical support for such initiatives.

Overall, embedding the Indian Knowledge System into legal education is not a replacement of global legal frameworks, but a **supplement and enrichment**. It allows for a deeper, values-based understanding of law that transcends cultural boundaries and contributes meaningfully to the global quest for justice and peace [10].

5. Challenges and Counterarguments

While the integration of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) into legal education offers transformative potential, it is not without challenges. One of the most significant obstacles is the colonial legacy that has long shaped the Indian education system. British colonial administrators deliberately sidelined indigenous legal and educational traditions, replacing them with Eurocentric models [11]. As a result, postcolonial India inherited a legal education system heavily influenced by Anglo-American jurisprudence, which continues to dominate academic and professional spheres.

This legacy has fostered resistance among academics, particularly those trained in Western legal paradigms who may view IKS as unscientific or irrelevant to modern legal practice. Skepticism also arises from concerns that introducing IKS could dilute academic rigor or compromise the universalism of international law. Moreover, there is a lack of comprehensive documentation and trained faculty capable of effectively teaching IKS within legal frameworks. Many ancient texts remain untranslated or inaccessible, and the oral nature of traditional knowledge poses additional challenges for standardization.

Another concern is the risk of essentialism and decontextualization the oversimplification or romanticization of ancient concepts without considering their historical context. If not approached carefully, efforts to revive IKS may lead to a rigid or ideological imposition rather than a nuanced integration [12].

However, solutions are within reach. First, there is a pressing need to develop digital archives, annotated translations, and scholarly commentaries on foundational texts, making them accessible to legal educators and students. Second, interdisciplinary faculty development programs can be introduced to train professors in interpreting IKS through legal and ethical frameworks. Third, pilot courses that blend international law with IKS perspectives can be launched and evaluated to fine-tune curriculum design. Importantly, the integration should be flexible, inclusive, and dialogic, allowing space for comparative analysis rather than dogmatic instruction.

Case Studies & Institutional Models

Several Indian institutions have taken pioneering steps in incorporating the Indian Knowledge System into legal education. The University Grants Commission (UGC), under the directives of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, has encouraged universities to include at least 5% IKS content in their academic curricula. This policy shift has opened the door for law schools to explore Indian philosophies of justice, ethics, and governance in their syllabi.

Prominent legal institutions like the Indian Law Institute (ILI), National Law School of India University (NLSIU), and National Law University, Delhi (NLU-D) have begun to offer courses and research programs that bridge classical Indian legal thought with modern jurisprudence. These programs facilitate comparative legal frameworks where concepts like dharma, nyaya, and rajdharma are analyzed alongside constitutional and international legal doctrines [13].

Civil society initiatives also play a crucial role. The Akhil Bharatiya Adhivakta Parishad, a pan-India network of legal professionals, has actively promoted the "Indianization" of legal values by conducting seminars, publishing research, and lobbying for curriculum reforms. Moreover, platforms like Swadeshi Shodh Sansthan and the Indian Knowledge Systems Division (IKS Division) have supported legal research aligned with indigenous values and traditions. These institutional efforts represent promising models for mainstreaming IKS in legal education and demonstrate the feasibility of scaling such initiatives nationwide.

Benefits of Integration

Integrating the Indian Knowledge System into legal education offers a range of academic, ethical, and cultural benefits. One of the most significant advantages is the promotion of a holistic worldview. Unlike Western legal systems that often emphasize procedural rationality, IKS integrates moral, spiritual, and socio-legal dimensions into its understanding of justice. This multidimensionality fosters deeper engagement with ethical dilemmas and enhances critical thinking [14].

Another key benefit is the cultivation of cultural competence. Exposure to IKS helps students appreciate the diversity of legal traditions and philosophies, which is crucial in an increasingly interconnected and multicultural world. It challenges students to view legal problems through multiple lenses, enriching their capacity for empathy and pluralistic reasoning.

Ethically, IKS encourages values such as non-violence, compassion, public welfare, and environmental stewardship. These values can significantly influence legal practice, inspiring future lawyers, judges, and policymakers to act with integrity and social responsibility. In a time of global crises whether ecological, humanitarian, or geopolitical the need for a more ethically grounded legal education cannot be overstated [15].

Importantly, IKS also contributes to the decolonization of education. By recognizing and reclaiming indigenous systems of knowledge, legal education in India can move beyond Eurocentric biases and develop a more balanced, self-confident intellectual identity. This is in line with global trends advocating for decolonized curricula that respect the contributions of non-Western civilizations to law and governance [16].

Policy Recommendation

To realize the full potential of integrating IKS into international legal education, a series of practical and policy-level steps are essential.

1. **Curriculum Reform:** Legal education bodies like the Bar Council of India (BCI) and UGC should mandate the inclusion of IKS modules within international law, jurisprudence, and legal philosophy courses.

2. **Faculty Development:** Universities must organize interdisciplinary training workshops to equip faculty with the skills to teach IKS-informed legal content. Collaboration with scholars from philosophy, history, and Sanskrit can enrich this process [17].
3. **Pilot Programs:** Launching pilot courses in selected law schools will allow institutions to test, refine, and expand successful models. These programs can feature cross-listed electives co-taught by humanities and law faculty.
4. **Research and Resources:** Government and private institutions should fund research projects, text translations, and open-access repositories to expand the reach and academic rigor of IKS materials.
5. **Stakeholder Engagement:** Involve legal practitioners, NGOs, think tanks, and IKS scholars in curriculum development to ensure practical relevance and scholarly depth [18].

Through these steps, India can pioneer a legal education system that honors its civilizational legacy while contributing meaningfully to global legal innovation.

Conclusion

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS), grounded in timeless concepts such as **dharma** (righteous duty), **ahimsa** (non-violence), and **Sarvodaya** (universal welfare), offers profound normative foundations for reimagining international law and justice. These principles resonate deeply with core values of sovereignty, human rights, and environmental protection, aligning traditional wisdom with contemporary global legal standards. In an age marked by ethical dilemmas, rising conflicts, and ecological crises, IKS provides a holistic and morally rooted framework that can guide the evolution of international legal thought and practice.

To harness this potential, **reforming legal education** is essential. By integrating IKS into mainstream legal curricula, we can cultivate professionals who are not only technically proficient but also ethically grounded and culturally sensitive. Such a shift would prepare legal minds to navigate complex international issues with empathy, wisdom, and a global perspective anchored in local traditions.

Ultimately, blending ancient Indian philosophical insights with modern legal systems is not a step backward, but a leap toward a more **inclusive, sustainable, and just global legal order**. As India emerges as a key voice in international affairs, embracing its indigenous legal heritage can enrich both national identity and global jurisprudence offering the world a model of ethical and culturally conscious legal practice.

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