
INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS (IKS) AND COMMUNITY-BASED LIVING: A SUSTAINABLE MODEL FOR CONTEMPORARY URBAN SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) represent a holistic, integrated, and value-oriented framework of knowledge that harmonizes ethical conduct, social responsibility, and environmental sustainability. Unlike reductionist modern paradigms that prioritize economic growth and material advancement, IKS emphasizes balance between human beings, society, and nature. Rooted in civilizational wisdom and community-based practices, IKS provides profound insights into participatory governance, ecological stewardship, shared resource management, and moral responsibility.

This conceptual and analytical study explores the relevance of Indian Knowledge Systems in addressing pressing challenges faced by contemporary urban societies, including social alienation, environmental degradation, consumerism, mental stress, and resource depletion. It examines how foundational principles such as Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (the world as one family), Dharma (ethical duty and balance), and Aparigraha (non-possessiveness) can be reinterpreted and integrated into modern institutional frameworks and technological systems.

The paper proposes an IKS-based urban community living model that promotes participatory governance, collective ownership of resources, ecological responsibility, and value-based education. It argues that IKS-based community living is not merely a revivalist cultural project but a pragmatic, future-oriented model for sustainable urban development in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems, Sustainability, Community Living, Urban Society, Traditional Wisdom, Ethical Governance

1. INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century has witnessed unprecedented technological advancement, rapid urbanization, and economic expansion. While these developments have enhanced material standards of living, they have simultaneously intensified environmental crises, social fragmentation, and psychological stress. Modern development models, largely influenced by industrial capitalism and linear economic systems, have prioritized production, consumption, and profit maximization. As a result, ecological degradation, climate change, resource depletion, and widening social inequalities have emerged as critical global concerns.

Urbanization, though a driver of economic opportunity, has weakened traditional community bonds. Nuclear families, high mobility, competitive lifestyles, and digital isolation have reduced meaningful social interaction. The decline of shared spaces and collective responsibility has led to loneliness, insecurity, and diminishing social capital.

In contrast, Indian civilization has historically emphasized holistic development. Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), deeply rooted in philosophical and ethical traditions, present an alternative worldview centered on harmony rather than domination, duty rather than rights alone, and sustainability rather than exploitation. The foundational philosophical insights of thinkers like [Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan](#) highlight that Indian thought views life as an interconnected whole where spiritual, social, and ecological dimensions are inseparable.

This paper seeks to explore how Indian Knowledge Systems can provide a sustainable framework for contemporary urban society by reviving and adapting community-based living models aligned with ethical and ecological values.

2. INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS: CONCEPTUAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS

Indian Knowledge Systems encompass diverse domains such as philosophy, governance, economics, medicine, architecture, agriculture, and environmental ethics. Unlike compartmentalized modern disciplines, IKS adopts an integrative approach where knowledge is oriented toward societal well-being.

2.1 Holistic Worldview

The Indian worldview is based on interconnectedness. The concept of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam—found in ancient texts—declares that the entire world is one family. This idea transcends narrow identities and promotes

universal welfare (Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah). It implies ethical responsibility toward all living beings and nature.

2.2 Dharma as Ethical Foundation

Dharma is not merely religion but a principle of cosmic order, moral duty, and balance. It regulates individual behavior in relation to society and environment. Dharma-based ethics emphasize moderation, accountability, and sustainability.

2.3 Aparigraha and Restraint

The principle of Aparigraha (non-possessiveness), central to Indian philosophical traditions, discourages excessive accumulation and consumption. It promotes sufficiency over excess, thereby aligning closely with modern sustainability discourse.

2.4 Knowledge for Social Good

Knowledge in IKS is not purely instrumental or profit-driven; it is normative and welfare-oriented. It aims at Lokasangraha—the welfare and stability of society. Thus, IKS provides a moral-intellectual foundation for sustainable community life.

3. Community-Based Living in Traditional Indian Society

Traditional Indian society was organized around self-regulating and self-sufficient community units. The village was not merely a geographical entity but a socio-economic and cultural ecosystem.

3.1 Village Republics and Participatory Governance

The Gram Sabha functioned as a participatory governance institution where collective decision-making was practiced. Resource distribution, dispute resolution, and welfare activities were managed locally, ensuring accountability and social cohesion.

3.2 Joint Family System

The joint family structure ensured social security, shared responsibilities, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and emotional support. It minimized isolation and strengthened community bonds.

3.3 Shramdaan and Collective Labor

The practice of Shramdaan (voluntary community service) encouraged citizens to contribute labor for public welfare activities such as irrigation, temple construction, and infrastructure maintenance. This fostered ownership and responsibility.

3.4 Ecological Harmony

Traditional communities respected nature as sacred. Sacred groves, water tanks, stepwells, and seasonal agricultural cycles reflected deep ecological sensitivity and local knowledge. These systems demonstrate that community living in India was inherently sustainable, participatory, and ethically grounded.

4. SUSTAINABILITY EMBEDDED IN INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

Sustainability in IKS is not a recent concept but a civilizational ethos.

4.1 Ecological Ethics

Nature was revered as divine. Rivers like the Ganga, forests, mountains, and animals were integrated into spiritual life, promoting conservation through cultural values.

4.2 Cyclical Economic Thinking

Traditional Indian agriculture followed seasonal cycles and biodiversity practices, avoiding monoculture and excessive extraction.

4.3 Moderation in Consumption

Aparigraha and simplicity reduced waste and ecological strain. Economic activity was embedded in moral limits.

4.4 Intergenerational Responsibility

IKS emphasizes duties toward future generations, ensuring that resources are preserved rather than depleted. Thus, sustainability in Indian thought is value-driven rather than regulation-driven.

5. CHALLENGES OF CONTEMPORARY URBAN SOCIETY

Modern urban environments face multiple interlinked challenges:

1. **Social Isolation:** Nuclear families and individualistic lifestyles reduce social interaction.

2. **Environmental Degradation:** Pollution, waste accumulation, and shrinking green spaces threaten urban health.

3. **Resource Depletion:** Water scarcity and energy overconsumption strain ecosystems.

4. **Mental Health Concerns:** Competitive work culture and loneliness increase stress.

5. **Consumerism:** Market-driven identities encourage material accumulation over meaningful living.

6. The prevailing linear economic model—produce, consume, discard—contradicts sustainability principles.

6. RELEVANCE OF IKS IN THE MODERN URBAN CONTEXT

Indian Knowledge Systems offer a corrective framework to address urban crises.

6.1 Rebuilding Community Bonds

The principle of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam encourages inclusive urban communities that transcend caste, class, and religious divisions.

6.2 Ethical Urban Governance

Dharma-based governance promotes transparency, duty-conscious leadership, and accountability.

6.3 Sustainable Consumption Patterns

Aparigraha aligns with minimalism and circular economy principles.

6.4 Integration with Modern Innovation

IKS is dynamic and adaptable. It does not reject modernity but reorients it ethically.

Thus, IKS can inform value-based urban planning and governance.

7. AN IKS-BASED COMMUNITY LIVING MODEL FOR URBAN AREAS

This paper proposes an integrated IKS-based urban community model consisting of the following components:

7.1 Participatory Governance Structures

Urban residential communities can institutionalize participatory forums inspired by Gram Sabha principles, ensuring collective decision-making.

7.2 Shared Resource Systems

Community kitchens, co-working spaces, shared transport, rainwater harvesting systems, and renewable energy cooperatives reduce resource duplication.

7.3 Community-Managed Green Spaces

Urban gardens and sacred green zones foster ecological awareness and biodiversity.

7.4 Cultural and Educational Centers

Centers promoting yoga, meditation, Indian philosophy, and value-based education strengthen social cohesion.

7.5 Circular Economy Practices

Waste segregation, composting, recycling, and responsible consumption can be institutionalized. This model combines ethical philosophy with practical urban planning.

8. ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY AS AN ENABLER

Technology should function as a facilitator rather than a dominating force.

8.1 Digital Governance Platforms

Mobile applications can enable community voting, grievance redressal, and transparent budgeting.

8.2 Renewable Energy Systems

Solar panels and microgrids reduce fossil fuel dependency.

8.3 Smart Water Management

IoT-enabled systems can optimize water usage and detect leakages.

8.4 Waste Management Technologies

Recycling plants and composting units support circular systems. Technology aligned with Dharma ensures sustainable innovation.

9. POLICY IMPLICATIONS**To integrate IKS into urban development:**

1. Urban planning curricula should include Indian Knowledge Systems.
2. Municipal governance should adopt participatory frameworks.
3. Policies must promote cooperative housing and shared infrastructure.
4. Environmental regulations should integrate cultural-ethical dimensions.
5. Educational institutions should encourage value-based community engagement.

Policy must move beyond infrastructure-centric approaches to value-centric development.

10. CONCLUSION

Indian Knowledge Systems offer a timeless yet dynamic framework for sustainable urban living. Their emphasis on interconnectedness, ethical responsibility, moderation, and community participation provides a powerful alternative to fragmented modern urban life.

Community-based living rooted in IKS is not a nostalgic return to the past but a forward-looking synthesis of tradition and innovation. By integrating participatory governance, shared resources, ecological responsibility, and ethical education with modern technologies, urban societies can achieve balanced and sustainable development.

In an era marked by environmental crisis and social fragmentation, Indian Knowledge Systems illuminate a pathway toward collective well-being and planetary harmony. The future of sustainable urban society may well depend on rediscovering and reinterpreting this profound civilizational wisdom.

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Ms. Laxmi Yadav is an Assistant Teacher and Research Scholar in the Department of Commerce at Chandrabhan Sharma College, Powai Vihar, Mumbai. She is actively engaged in interdisciplinary research focusing on Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), sustainable development, ethical governance, and community-based economic models. Her academic interests include value-based education, sustainable urban frameworks, participatory governance, and the integration of traditional wisdom with contemporary policy systems. She has participated in national and international academic forums and is committed to promoting research that bridges classical Indian thought with modern socio-economic challenges.

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