

Beyond Textual Traditions: Reframing the Knowledge of Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Communities within the Indian Knowledge System

Ankur Siyote¹, Mohan A K²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Social Work, Central University of Kerala

²Professor, Department of Social Work, Central University of Kerala

Abstract

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) encompass diverse forms of knowledge produced, preserved, and transmitted through textual traditions, lived practices, oral histories, and community-based learning. However, dominant discussions of IKS have often privileged classical textual and institutional forms, leaving the intellectual contributions of historically marginalised and mobile communities comparatively under recognised. This paper examines the living knowledge traditions of Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic (DNT/NT/SNT) communities and argues for their greater recognition within IKS. Drawing on secondary sources, including government commission reports, historical records, ethnographic studies, and scholarly literature, the paper adopts a qualitative conceptual approach to examine knowledge domains including livelihood and craft practices, healing traditions, ecological adaptation, mobility, and oral and performative traditions. The analysis highlights how such knowledge is produced through lived experience and sustained through oral transmission, apprenticeship, collective memory, and intergenerational participation. Historical marginalisation, particularly colonial criminalisation and subsequent institutional neglect, has contributed not only to social and economic exclusion but also to limited recognition and documentation of these knowledge traditions. The paper argues that DNT/NT/SNT knowledge should be understood as dynamic, adaptive living knowledge systems, thereby expanding IKS beyond predominantly textual and institutional forms.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems, Denotified Communities, Indigenous Knowledge, Oral Traditions, India

1. Introduction

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) represent a diverse and plural intellectual tradition that has evolved through the lived experiences, practices, and cultural expressions of communities across the Indian subcontinent. Unlike knowledge systems that rely primarily on written texts and formal institutions, IKS often emerges from everyday practices, collective memory, and intergenerational transmission within communities. These knowledge traditions encompass a wide range of domains, including ecological knowledge, healing practices, craftsmanship,

Published: 23 September 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/SPIJSH.2026.v3.i9.45930>

Copyright © 2026 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0).

social organisation, and cultural expressions. In recent years, there has been a renewed academic and policy interest in recognising Indian Knowledge Systems as an important component of India's intellectual heritage and civilisational continuity (Ministry of Education, 2021; National Education Policy, 2020).

However, much of the scholarly discourse on Indian Knowledge Systems has historically focused on classical textual traditions, philosophical schools, and codified bodies of knowledge preserved in scriptures and institutional learning systems (Raina & Habib, 2004). While these traditions form an important part of India's intellectual heritage, such a focus often overlooks the knowledge practices embedded within historically marginalised and mobile communities. Among these are the Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Communities, whose cultural and occupational practices have long served as repositories of lived knowledge traditions. Despite their contributions to local economies, craft traditions, performance arts, and ecological knowledge, the intellectual value of their knowledge systems has rarely been systematically recognised within mainstream academic discussions of Indian Knowledge Systems (Idate Commission, 2018).

The marginalisation of these communities can be traced in part to colonial administrative policies, particularly the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which classified several nomadic groups as "criminal tribes." This classification not only stigmatised these communities but also disrupted their traditional livelihoods and mobility patterns (Radhakrishna, 2001). Although the Act was repealed after India's independence and communities were formally "denotified," the legacy of stigma and institutional neglect continued to influence their social and economic conditions. As a result, the knowledge traditions embedded in their everyday practices such as craft production, animal husbandry, performance traditions, herbal healing, and ecological adaptation remained largely undocumented and underrepresented in academic literature (Renke Commission, 2008).

Understanding the intellectual significance of these practices requires a broader conception of knowledge itself. Many of the skills and practices sustained by Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Communities are transmitted orally through apprenticeship, community participation, and collective memory. Such modes of transmission reflect dynamic processes of learning and adaptation rather than rigidly codified systems. Viewed through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems, these living traditions represent valuable epistemic resources that contribute to the diversity and resilience of India's knowledge heritage.

Against this background, the present paper examines the living knowledge traditions of Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Communities and situates them within the broader framework of Indian Knowledge Systems. Drawing primarily on secondary sources, including historical records, ethnographic studies, government reports, and scholarly literature, the paper explores how everyday practices related to livelihood, healing, mobility, and oral traditions function as structured knowledge systems. By foregrounding these traditions within the discourse on Indian Knowledge Systems, the study seeks to expand the conceptual scope of IKS and highlight the role of historically mobile communities as important contributors to India's plural knowledge traditions.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the living knowledge traditions of Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Communities in India
2. To explore how practices related to livelihood, healing, mobility, and oral traditions function as structured knowledge systems within these communities.
3. To situate these community-based knowledge traditions within the broader framework of Indian Knowledge Systems, thereby expanding its conceptual scope beyond text-centric approaches.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative conceptual research design based on secondary sources. The study seeks to examine the knowledge traditions of Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic (DNT/NT/SNT) communities and situate them within a broader understanding of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS). A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study focuses on the nature, transmission, application and continuity of knowledge rather than on measuring its prevalence or frequency. The study is interpretive rather than empirical. It does not involve primary interviews, surveys or field observations. Instead, it critically examines existing documentary and scholarly evidence to identify recurring characteristics of community-based knowledge and to interpret their significance within the IKS framework.

2.2 Sources of Evidence

The study draws on multiple categories of secondary sources to develop a broader and more balanced understanding of the subject. These include government and commission reports, historical scholarship, ethnographic studies, academic books, peer-reviewed research and policy documents related to DNT/NT/SNT communities, IKS and community-based knowledge. Government and commission reports are used primarily to understand the historical, social and policy context of DNT/NT/SNT communities. Historical literature provides evidence on colonial criminalisation, mobility restrictions and subsequent marginalisation. Ethnographic and scholarly literature provides insights into community practices, livelihood traditions, healing knowledge, ecological adaptation, mobility and oral transmission. Literature on IKS and indigenous or community-based knowledge provides the conceptual basis for interpreting these practices as forms of knowledge. The use of different source categories also enables the study to consider the subject from historical, social, cultural and epistemological perspectives rather than relying on a single type of evidence.

2.3 Source Selection Criteria

Sources were selected purposively based on their relevance to the objectives of the study. The selection focused on literature and documents addressing DNT/NT/SNT communities and their historical or contemporary experiences, community-based, indigenous and traditional knowledge, knowledge production and intergenerational transmission, livelihood and craft-based knowledge, healing and ethnomedical practices, mobility and ecological knowledge, oral, performative and cultural traditions, colonial and postcolonial processes of

marginalisation, and conceptual discussions of the Indian Knowledge System and epistemic diversity. Priority was given to authoritative government documents, commission reports, established scholarly works, ethnographic studies and peer-reviewed academic literature. Sources lacking clear scholarly or documentary relevance to the objectives of the study were excluded from the analysis.

2.4 Analytical Framework

The study employs an analytical framework consisting of six interconnected dimensions: production, transmission, validation, application, adaptation and continuity. These dimensions provide a basis for examining whether the practices discussed in the literature can be understood not merely as cultural activities or traditions, but as forms of living and community-based knowledge.

Production refers to how knowledge develops through observation, experience, experimentation and interaction with social and ecological environments. Transmission concerns the ways in which knowledge is communicated and learned, including oral instruction, apprenticeship, participation and intergenerational learning. Validation refers to the recognition and reinforcement of knowledge through repeated practice, community experience and practical effectiveness. Application considers how knowledge is used to address livelihood, health, ecological, mobility and cultural needs. Adaptation examines how knowledge changes in response to environmental, social, economic and technological conditions. Continuity refers to the processes through which knowledge is maintained, reproduced and transmitted across generations.

These dimensions are treated as interconnected rather than as separate stages. Knowledge may be produced through practice, transmitted through participation, validated through repeated use, applied to everyday needs and continuously adapted while remaining embedded in intergenerational community life. This framework therefore provides an analytical basis for understanding DNT/NT/SNT knowledge as dynamic rather than static or merely historical.

2.5 Scope and Limitations

The study is limited to secondary documentary and scholarly evidence and therefore does not claim to provide an exhaustive account of DNT/NT/SNT knowledge traditions. The availability and quality of existing documentation also vary considerably across communities and regions. Some knowledge traditions may remain undocumented or may be inadequately represented in academic and institutional literature.

Furthermore, a conceptual analysis based on secondary sources cannot fully capture the lived meanings, community-specific contexts and contemporary transformations of knowledge. The study therefore does not substitute for community-based empirical research. Future research can extend this work through ethnographic, participatory and community-led approaches that examine specific knowledge traditions in their local contexts.

Despite these limitations, the methodological approach provides a systematic conceptual basis for examining documented DNT/NT/SNT knowledge traditions and their place within a broader and more inclusive understanding of the Indian Knowledge System.

3. Indian Knowledge Systems: Conceptual Framework

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) refer to the diverse intellectual traditions that have evolved in the Indian subcontinent through centuries of interaction between communities, environments, and cultural practices. These systems encompass both textual and non-textual forms of knowledge, including philosophy, science, medicine, agriculture, craft traditions, and cultural expressions. Unlike many modern disciplinary frameworks that emphasise written documentation and institutional learning, Indian Knowledge Systems recognise knowledge as something that is produced, preserved, and transmitted through lived experiences, social practices, and community-based learning processes (Ministry of Education, 2021).

Scholars have increasingly emphasised that knowledge in the Indian context has historically existed in multiple forms and locations. While classical traditions such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Ayurveda, and other philosophical texts represent codified bodies of knowledge, a large proportion of India's intellectual heritage has been preserved through oral traditions and community practices (Raina & Habib, 2004). These forms of knowledge are often transmitted through apprenticeship, storytelling, ritual practices, and everyday participation in occupational and cultural activities. As a result, Indian Knowledge Systems cannot be understood solely through textual traditions; they must also include the knowledge embedded in the everyday practices of communities.

One of the defining features of Indian Knowledge Systems is their close relationship with local ecological contexts and social environments. Knowledge related to agriculture, animal husbandry, forest resources, craft production, and healing practices has historically developed through continuous interaction between communities and their surroundings. Such knowledge systems are often adaptive and dynamic, evolving over time in response to environmental and social changes (Agarwal, 1992). This adaptability distinguishes community-based knowledge traditions from rigid, codified systems of knowledge and highlights the importance of experiential learning and collective memory in sustaining knowledge across generations.

Within this broader framework, indigenous and community-based knowledge traditions occupy an important position in the understanding of Indian Knowledge Systems. Indigenous knowledge is typically characterised by its localised nature, its transmission through oral traditions, and its integration with cultural beliefs and social institutions (Berkes, 2012). These characteristics are particularly evident among communities whose livelihoods and cultural identities are closely tied to mobility, craft production, performance traditions, and ecological adaptation. Such communities often develop specialised knowledge related to natural resources, medicinal plants, animal behaviour, and environmental patterns, which are passed on through practical engagement rather than formal education.

However, the recognition of these knowledge traditions within mainstream academic discourse has often been limited. Historically, knowledge produced by marginalised communities has been viewed as informal or traditional rather than as systematic and intellectual. This perception has contributed to the exclusion of many community-based practices from formal discussions of knowledge systems (Agrawal, 1995). In recent years, scholars and policymakers have begun to challenge this hierarchical understanding of knowledge by emphasising the

importance of plural epistemologies and the need to recognise diverse forms of knowledge production.

In this context, Indian Knowledge Systems can be understood as a broad and inclusive framework that accommodates both classical textual traditions and community-based knowledge practices. Recognising this plurality is essential for understanding the full scope of India's intellectual heritage. Knowledge traditions maintained by Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Communities, for instance, often involve sophisticated skills related to craftsmanship, performance, ecological adaptation, and healing practices. Although these traditions are rarely codified in written form, they represent structured systems of knowledge developed through generations of practical engagement and social learning.

Therefore, expanding the conceptual scope of Indian Knowledge Systems requires acknowledging the epistemic value of living knowledge traditions maintained by historically mobile and marginalised communities. By situating these practices within the broader discourse on Indian Knowledge Systems, scholars can contribute to a more inclusive understanding of knowledge that recognises the intellectual contributions of diverse social groups and the multiple ways in which knowledge is produced, preserved, and transmitted across generations.

4. Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Communities in India: Historical Context

Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Communities (DNTs) represent a diverse group of historically mobile populations whose livelihoods and cultural identities have long been associated with mobility, specialised occupations, and community-based knowledge traditions. Prior to colonial rule, many of these communities performed important economic and social functions within regional economies. Their occupations included pastoralism, craft production, entertainment and performance traditions, itinerant trade, animal training, and various service-based activities that supported rural and urban societies. These occupational roles required specialised knowledge related to ecology, animal behaviour, craft skills, and seasonal mobility, which were transmitted across generations through oral traditions and apprenticeship within the community (Radhakrishna, 2001).

The social and economic position of these communities underwent a significant transformation during the colonial period. The British colonial administration sought to regulate populations that did not conform to sedentary patterns of settlement, particularly those engaged in itinerant occupations. This effort culminated in the enactment of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, a law that categorised several nomadic groups as "criminal tribes" on the assumption that criminality was hereditary within certain communities. The Act allowed colonial authorities to monitor, restrict, and control the movement of these communities, often forcing them into settlement camps under strict surveillance (Radhakrishna, 2001). Such policies not only disrupted traditional livelihoods but also produced a lasting stigma that affected the social status of these communities.

Although the Criminal Tribes Act was repealed after India's independence in 1952 and the communities were officially "denotified," the legacy of colonial categorisation continued to shape their socio-economic conditions. Many communities previously labelled under the Act

continued to face discrimination, surveillance, and limited access to education, employment, and social welfare schemes. In several cases, colonial classifications were replaced by new administrative categories under the Habitual Offenders Acts introduced by different states, which maintained forms of institutional monitoring over certain communities (Renke Commission, 2008).

Recognising the continued marginalisation of these groups, the Government of India established various commissions to examine the socio-economic conditions of Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Communities. Among the most significant was the National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes, commonly known as the Idate Commission, which documented the historical injustices faced by these communities and highlighted their continued exclusion from mainstream development processes (Idate Commission, 2018). The Commission noted that the lack of reliable data, policy attention, and academic engagement has contributed to the continued invisibility of these communities in national development discourse.

Beyond socio-economic marginalisation, the historical experiences of Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Communities have also influenced how their knowledge traditions are perceived and documented. Because many of these communities relied on oral transmission and mobility-based livelihoods, their knowledge systems were rarely codified in written form. As a result, academic and institutional frameworks that prioritised textual knowledge often overlooked the intellectual value embedded in their practices. Knowledge related to craft production, performance traditions, healing practices, and ecological adaptation remained largely undocumented despite its importance for community survival and cultural continuity.

Understanding this historical context is therefore essential for situating the knowledge traditions of Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Communities within the broader framework of Indian Knowledge Systems. The marginalisation of these communities was not only social and economic but also epistemic, as their knowledge practices were excluded from mainstream narratives of knowledge production. Recognising the historical processes that contributed to this exclusion allows for a more inclusive understanding of Indian Knowledge Systems that acknowledges the intellectual contributions of historically mobile communities.

5. Living Knowledge Traditions of Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Communities

The knowledge traditions of Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Communities (DNTs) represent an important yet often overlooked dimension of India's intellectual heritage. Historically, these communities have developed diverse forms of knowledge closely linked to mobility, livelihood practices, ecological adaptation, and cultural expression. Unlike formal knowledge systems that are codified in written texts and institutional frameworks, the knowledge traditions of DNT communities are largely embedded in everyday practices and transmitted through oral traditions, apprenticeship, and community participation. When examined within the broader framework of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), these practices can be understood as living knowledge traditions shaped through continuous interaction between communities and their environments.

One of the major domains of knowledge among Denotified and Nomadic communities relates to livelihood practices and occupational skills. Many of these communities have historically specialised in crafts, artisanal production, animal training, itinerant trade, and performance-based occupations. Such activities require specialised technical knowledge transmitted through informal apprenticeship within families and community networks. For instance, communities engaged in bamboo work, metalwork, or tool-making possess intricate knowledge of materials, design, and production techniques refined across generations. These skills represent complex systems of learning based on observation, practice, and gradual mastery rather than formal instruction (Berkes, 2012). Within the framework of Indian Knowledge Systems, such craft traditions illustrate how knowledge is embedded in practice rather than codified in textual form.

Another important dimension of DNT knowledge traditions is ethnomedical knowledge. Many nomadic and semi-nomadic communities possess knowledge of medicinal plants, herbal remedies, and healing practices developed through long-term interaction with local ecological environments. This knowledge is typically preserved by community elders or traditional healers and transmitted orally through experiential learning. In many cases, healing practices are closely associated with cultural beliefs and ritual practices. Although such traditions are rarely documented in formal medical literature, they reflect detailed understanding of plant properties, environmental conditions, and community health practices (Agarwal, 1992).

Mobility itself also constitutes a significant form of knowledge among these communities. Seasonal movement, migration routes, and patterns of settlement are often guided by knowledge of ecological conditions, climate variations, and the availability of natural resources. Communities engaged in pastoralism or itinerant trade have historically developed strategies for navigating landscapes, locating water sources, and adapting to environmental changes. Such mobility-based knowledge demonstrates how learning can occur through continuous interaction with the natural environment.

Oral traditions play a crucial role in preserving and transmitting knowledge within Denotified and Nomadic communities. Songs, narratives, myths, and performance traditions function as important mediums through which cultural values, historical experiences, and practical knowledge are communicated across generations. Storytelling and performance not only strengthen community identity but also serve as mechanisms for knowledge transmission and cultural continuity.

Despite the richness of these traditions, the knowledge systems of Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Communities have rarely been recognised within mainstream academic or policy frameworks. When viewed through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems, however, these practices reveal sophisticated and adaptive forms of knowledge. Recognising these living traditions is therefore essential for expanding the conceptual scope of Indian Knowledge Systems and acknowledging the intellectual contributions of historically mobile communities to India's diverse knowledge heritage.

6. Discussion: Expanding the Scope of Indian Knowledge Systems

The knowledge traditions of Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Communities highlight the need to broaden the conceptual boundaries of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS).

Historically, discussions of IKS have largely focused on classical textual traditions, philosophical literature, and codified knowledge preserved in scriptures and scholarly texts. While these traditions form an important part of India's intellectual heritage, such a focus often overlooks the knowledge embedded in the everyday practices of diverse communities. Recognising the living knowledge traditions of historically mobile communities therefore expands the understanding of Indian Knowledge Systems beyond written and institutional forms of knowledge.

The practices maintained by Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Communities demonstrate how knowledge can emerge from lived experiences, ecological interaction, and community-based learning processes. Skills related to crafts, animal training, itinerant trade, performance traditions, and healing practices represent forms of practical knowledge developed through generations of observation and adaptation. These traditions are sustained through oral transmission and apprenticeship, allowing communities to preserve and refine their knowledge across generations (Berkes, 2012).

Expanding the scope of Indian Knowledge Systems thus requires moving beyond a narrow emphasis on textual knowledge toward recognising community-based epistemologies. Scholars have argued that knowledge systems are plural and context-specific rather than hierarchical or universal (Agrawal, 1995). In this perspective, indigenous and community-based knowledge traditions are dynamic systems that evolve with changing environmental and social contexts.

Recognising these living knowledge traditions contributes to a more inclusive understanding of Indian Knowledge Systems. It acknowledges the intellectual contributions of historically marginalised communities and highlights the multiple ways in which knowledge is created, preserved, and transmitted within society.

7. Conclusion

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) represent a vast and plural intellectual tradition shaped by the experiences, practices, and cultural expressions of diverse communities across India. While much of the scholarly and policy attention on IKS has historically focused on classical textual traditions, this paper has highlighted the importance of recognising knowledge systems embedded in the everyday practices of Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Communities. Through an analysis based on secondary sources, the study has demonstrated that the livelihoods, healing practices, mobility patterns, and oral traditions of these communities constitute significant forms of living knowledge traditions.

The historical marginalisation of Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Communities has contributed not only to their socio-economic exclusion but also to the limited recognition of their intellectual contributions. Colonial policies such as the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 disrupted traditional livelihoods and imposed lasting social stigma, while post-independence policy frameworks often failed to adequately address the structural challenges faced by these communities. As a result, the knowledge traditions sustained by these communities have remained largely invisible within mainstream academic discourse and formal knowledge systems.

However, when examined within the broader framework of Indian Knowledge Systems, the practices of these communities reveal complex and adaptive forms of knowledge developed through generations of lived experience. Skills related to craftsmanship, ecological adaptation, ethnomedical practices, and cultural performance illustrate how knowledge can be preserved and transmitted through oral traditions, apprenticeship, and community participation. These practices demonstrate that knowledge systems are not limited to written texts or institutional settings but can also exist in dynamic and practice-based forms.

Recognising the living knowledge traditions of Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Communities therefore contributes to expanding the conceptual scope of Indian Knowledge Systems. Such recognition encourages a more inclusive understanding of knowledge that acknowledges the contributions of historically mobile and marginalised communities. Future research and academic engagement should prioritise systematic documentation and interdisciplinary study of these knowledge traditions in order to preserve their intellectual and cultural significance. By incorporating the knowledge systems of diverse communities into broader scholarly discussions, Indian Knowledge Systems can be understood as a truly plural and dynamic intellectual heritage that reflects the diversity of experiences and practices within Indian society.

References

- Agarwal, A. (1992). *The wisdom of the villages: Ecological knowledge in India*. Centre for Science and Environment.
- Agrawal, A. (1995). Dismantling the divide between indigenous and scientific knowledge. *Development and Change*, 26 (3), 413–439.
- Berkes, F. (2012). *Sacred ecology* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Idate Commission. (2018). *Report of the National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes*. Government of India.
- Ministry of Education. (2021). *Indian Knowledge Systems: Integrating India's Knowledge Traditions into Education*. Government of India.
- National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (Renke Commission). (2008). *Report of the National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes*. Government of India.
- National Education Policy. (2020). *National Education Policy 2020*. Government of India.
- Radhakrishna, M. (2001). *Dishonoured by history: "Criminal tribes" and British colonial policy*. Orient Longman.
- Raina, D., & Habib, S. I. (2004). *Domesticating modern science: A social history of science and culture in colonial India*. Tulika Books.