

From the Vedas to Modern Global Narratives

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS), rooted in the Vedas and extended through classical philosophical, literary, and scientific traditions, has profoundly influenced world literature across centuries. From metaphysical speculation in the Upanishads to ethical frameworks in the Bhagavad Gita and aesthetic theories in the Natyashastra, Indian thought has shaped intellectual discourses beyond geographical boundaries. This paper explores the reflection and transformation of Indian Knowledge Systems in global literary narratives—from ancient cross-cultural exchanges to modern and postmodern reinterpretations. It examines how concepts such as dharma, karma, moksha, non-dualism, cosmic order, and ecological harmony permeated Western transcendentalism, Romanticism, modernist poetry, postcolonial literature, and contemporary global fiction. The study further analyses descriptive theoretical frameworks including comparative literature, postcolonial theory, intertextuality, and cultural transmission models to trace these intellectual journeys. By mapping the trajectory from the Vedas to modern global narratives, this paper demonstrates that Indian Knowledge Systems are not static relics of antiquity but dynamic intellectual traditions that continue to shape global storytelling, ethics, philosophy, and identity discourse.

KEYWORDS

Indian Knowledge System (IKS), Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, Comparative Literature, Transcendentalism, Postcolonial Theory, Intertextuality, Global Narratives, Dharma, Karma, Non-dualism

INTRODUCTION

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) represents one of the world's oldest continuous intellectual traditions. Emerging from the sacred corpus of the **Rigveda**, and extending through the **Upanishads**, the **Mahabharata**, and the **Ramayana**, Indian thought evolved into a vast repository of metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics, ethics, linguistics, mathematics, medicine, and environmental philosophy. Unlike many knowledge systems that evolved in isolation, Indian traditions travelled through trade routes, philosophical exchanges, colonial encounters, translations, and diaspora movements, influencing literary traditions across continents.

The concept of “world literature,” as proposed by Goethe and later expanded by scholars of comparative literature, emphasizes cross-cultural literary circulation. Indian knowledge traditions have been central to this circulation. Philosophical insights from the Upanishads influenced German Idealists and American Transcendentalists; ethical dilemmas from the Bhagavad Gita shaped existential and modernist reflections; and narrative structures from Sanskrit epics resonated in global storytelling traditions.

This paper seeks to trace the intellectual continuum from Vedic cosmology to modern global narratives, demonstrating how Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) have informed and transformed world literature.

1. INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM: FOUNDATIONS IN THE VEDAS

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) finds its earliest and most authoritative articulation in the Vedas, the foundational corpus of Indian civilization. Composed in archaic Sanskrit and transmitted orally for centuries before being codified, the Vedas are not merely religious scriptures but encyclopedic repositories of philosophy, cosmology, ritual science, ethics, poetics, linguistics, and social thought. They constitute the epistemological bedrock upon which later Indian philosophical systems—Vedanta, Samkhya, Yoga, Nyaya, and Mimamsa—were constructed.

The four Vedas—Rigveda, Samaveda, Yajurveda, and Atharvaveda—each serve distinct yet interconnected purposes. The Rigveda contains philosophical hymns and cosmological reflections; the Samaveda emphasizes musical chanting and aesthetic dimensions of sacred sound; the Yajurveda systematizes ritual procedures; and the Atharvaveda addresses everyday concerns such as healing, governance, and social harmony. Together, they reflect a holistic worldview in which spiritual, material, intellectual, and ecological dimensions are inseparable.

1.1 The Vedas: Cosmology and Poetic Consciousness

The Vedas, particularly the Rigveda, represent not only ritualistic hymns but profound poetic explorations of existence. Among its most celebrated hymns is the Nasadiya Sukta (Hymn of Creation), which speculates on the origins of the universe with striking philosophical humility. It questions whether creation emerged from being or non-being and even wonders whether the ultimate creator knows the truth of creation. This openness to doubt and inquiry anticipates philosophical skepticism and existential inquiry found later in Western literature.

• Cosmological Vision

Vedic cosmology does not describe creation as a singular, linear event but as cyclical and dynamic. Time is conceived as recurring (kalachakra), and the universe is sustained through an ongoing process of balance and renewal. This cyclical understanding of existence differs from linear historical models and resonates with later ecological and process-oriented philosophies.

The cosmos in the Vedas is not inert matter but a living, pulsating reality imbued with consciousness. Natural forces—Agni (fire), Vayu (wind), Surya (sun), and Indra (storm)—are personified not merely as deities but as symbolic representations of universal energies. This symbolic-poetic mode fosters a vision of unity between humanity and nature.

• Core Concepts of Vedic Thought

• Rta (Cosmic Order)

Rta represents the fundamental principle of cosmic harmony and moral order. It governs the movements of celestial bodies, seasonal cycles, and ethical conduct. Rta later evolves into the concept of Dharma, forming the ethical foundation of Indian civilization. The idea that the universe operates according to a moral-cosmic law parallels later global notions of natural law and universal justice.

• Brahman (Universal Reality)

Although systematically elaborated in the Upanishads, the seeds of Brahman appear in the Vedas as the underlying, infinite principle from which all existence emerges. Brahman signifies unity underlying multiplicity—a metaphysical insight that dissolves fragmentation and affirms interconnectedness.

- Atman (Self)

The Vedic hymns hint at a deeper interiority of the human being. The quest to understand the Self (Atman) becomes central to later philosophical traditions. This inward turn marks one of the earliest explorations of consciousness in world thought.

- Yajña (Sacrificial Reciprocity)

Yajña is not merely ritual sacrifice but a metaphysical principle of exchange and reciprocity. The universe is sustained through mutual giving—between humans and nature, gods and mortals, individual and cosmos. This idea anticipates ecological ethics emphasizing balance and sustainability.

- Epistemology and Knowledge Traditions:

The Vedas embody multiple modes of knowledge:

1. Shruti (Revealed Knowledge) – Knowledge heard and transmitted orally.
2. Smriti (Remembered Knowledge) – Interpretative tradition evolving over time.
3. Mantra and Sound Theory – Recognition of vibration (śabda) as foundational reality.

The emphasis on sound (vac) reflects a sophisticated linguistic awareness that later influenced grammar and semiotics, particularly through Paninian linguistics.

- Ethical and Social Dimensions

Vedic society emphasized harmony between individual duty and collective welfare. The notion of yajña extended into social responsibility. Hospitality, respect for nature, and communal rituals reinforced social cohesion.

The famous Vedic prayer “Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah” (“May all be happy”) reflects an early articulation of universal humanism. This inclusive ethos laid foundations for later philosophical pluralism and tolerance.

- Poetic Structure and Literary Influence

The Rigveda is composed in intricate meters (chandas), demonstrating advanced poetic sophistication. Imagery, metaphor, symbolism, and paradox enrich the hymns. Dawn (Ushas) is described with lyrical beauty; fire (Agni) becomes both material flame and divine messenger. Such layered symbolism established a literary template where metaphysical truths are conveyed through aesthetic expression.

This fusion of poetry and philosophy influenced not only later Sanskrit literature but also global Romantic traditions, where nature becomes a site of spiritual revelation.

- Environmental and Ecological Consciousness

Vedic hymns express reverence for rivers, mountains, forests, and the earth (Prithvi). The Earth is addressed as a nurturing mother, emphasizing gratitude and responsibility. This worldview fosters ecological sensitivity rather than exploitation.

Modern ecological literature and environmental ethics echo this ancient perspective, especially in movements advocating harmony with nature rather than domination over it.

2. THE UPANISHADIC VISION AND GLOBAL PHILOSOPHICAL LITERATURE

The Upanishads introduce non-dualistic (Advaita) thought, asserting the unity of Atman and Brahman. This metaphysical monism resonated deeply with Western thinkers such as **Arthur Schopenhauer**, who considered the Upanishads the “solace of his life.” American Transcendentalists like **Ralph Waldo Emerson** and **Henry David Thoreau** drew heavily upon these texts in developing their philosophies of self-reliance and nature mysticism.

In Emerson's essays and Thoreau's *Walden*, the Upanishadic emphasis on inner divinity and unity with nature reappears in a distinctly American context. Thus, Indian metaphysics entered global literature not as imitation but as philosophical dialogue.

3. THE BHAGAVAD GITA AND ETHICAL UNIVERSALISM

Embedded within the Mahabharata, the **Bhagavad Gita** articulates a dynamic synthesis of action (karma), devotion (bhakti), and knowledge (jnana). Its discourse on duty (dharma) amid moral crisis has influenced global ethical thought.

Mahatma Gandhi interpreted the Gita as a manual of non-violent resistance, influencing civil rights leaders worldwide. The Gita also shaped literary works concerned with moral dilemmas, including existential and modernist narratives exploring duty versus desire.

The Gita's dialogue structure—between Arjuna and Krishna—has parallels in philosophical dialogues worldwide, reinforcing its universal narrative power.

4. AESTHETICS AND DRAMATURGY: THE NATYASHASTRA AND GLOBAL THEATRE

The **Natyashastra**, attributed to Bharata Muni, systematized aesthetics through the theory of *Rasa* (aesthetic emotion). The concept that art evokes universalized emotions anticipated modern aesthetic theories.

Rasa theory influenced comparative aesthetics and performance studies globally. The idea that art produces a transformative emotional experience parallels Aristotelian catharsis and modern psychological interpretations of theatre.

5. INDIAN EPICS AND NARRATIVE ARCHETYPES

The Ramayana and Mahabharata established archetypal characters—hero, exile, trickster, divine guide—that recur in world literature. Themes of exile, righteousness, fraternal conflict, and cosmic justice resonate in global epics and novels.

Modern retellings and reinterpretations demonstrate the epics' adaptability. Diasporic writers reinterpret these myths within contemporary political and cultural frameworks, illustrating the dynamic evolution of Indian narratives in global contexts.

6. TRANSMISSION THROUGH COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL ENCOUNTERS

During the colonial period, translations of Sanskrit texts by Orientalists introduced Indian philosophy to Europe. While colonial scholarship often exoticized Indian knowledge, it also enabled intellectual exchange.

Postcolonial writers reclaimed Indian epistemologies. Authors such as **Salman Rushdie**, **Amitav Ghosh**, and **Arundhati Roy** integrate mythic structures, cyclical time, and ecological consciousness derived from IKS into global English narratives.

7. DESCRIPTIVE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

7.1 Comparative Literature

Comparative literature examines cross-cultural influences, identifying thematic and philosophical correspondences between Indian texts and global works.

7.2 Intertextuality

Intertextual analysis reveals how modern writers embed Upanishadic motifs, epic structures, and karmic philosophy within contemporary texts.

7.3 Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial frameworks analyze how Indian Knowledge Systems resist epistemic colonization and reassert indigenous worldviews within global discourse.

7.4 Cultural Transmission Theory

This theory explains how ideas migrate across time and space through translation, adaptation, diaspora, and globalization.

8. INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS IN MODERN GLOBAL NARRATIVES

8.1 Ecological Consciousness

The Vedic principle of harmony between humans and nature anticipates ecological literature and environmental ethics. Modern global climate fiction echoes ancient Indian environmental reverence.

8.2 Non-duality in Postmodern Thought

Postmodern dismantling of binary oppositions parallels Advaita philosophy's non-dualism. Writers exploring fragmented identity unknowingly echo Upanishadic insights.

8.3 Global Spiritual Literature

Contemporary global spiritual narratives integrate yoga, meditation, and Vedantic thought into self-help and philosophical fiction traditions.

9. CONTINUITY AND RELEVANCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Indian Knowledge Systems continue influencing global academia, philosophy, literary studies, and ecological thought. Universities worldwide teach the Bhagavad Gita, Upanishads, and epics as world classics.

Digital globalization further accelerates the circulation of Indian narratives, ensuring their relevance in contemporary storytelling.

CONCLUSION

From the metaphysical hymns of the Rigveda to postmodern global novels, the Indian Knowledge System demonstrates remarkable continuity and adaptability. It offers a worldview grounded in interconnectedness, ethical responsibility, spiritual inquiry, and aesthetic richness. Through comparative, postcolonial, and intertextual lenses, it becomes evident that Indian thought is not peripheral but central to world literary development.

The journey "From the Vedas to Modern Global Narratives" is not merely historical; it is ongoing. Indian Knowledge Systems continue to shape global imagination, ethics, and literary expression. In recognizing this influence, world literature expands beyond Eurocentric paradigms to embrace a truly pluralistic intellectual heritage.

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