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Indian Knowledge Systems and Ethical Pedagogy in Contemporary Indian Writing in English

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Abstract

This paper examines the pedagogical potential of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) as they intersect with ethical pedagogy in selected contemporary Indian writing in English. I argue that IKS — understood as an umbrella for indigenous epistemologies, oral traditions, ritual practices, and locally-grounded ecological knowledges — offers resources for an ethics-oriented pedagogy that resists colonial epistemic hierarchies and cultivates relational modes of learning (care, reciprocity, responsibility). Contemporary Indian English fiction and non-fiction frequently stages tensions between modern/scientific epistemologies and vernacular/indigenous knowledge, and these literary representations can be read as pedagogical interventions: they model modes of listening, restorative memory-work, and pluriversal epistemic humility that are useful for classroom practice. The study brings together three bodies of literature—policy debates on IKS, particularly NEP 2020 and institutional responses; pedagogical theories of Freire, Noddings, critical pedagogy, and the ethics of care; and literary studies of Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, and other writers—to develop a theoretical and practical framework for IKS-informed ethical pedagogy in English and literature classrooms in India. The paper includes five summary tables: (1) IKS elements and pedagogical affordances; (2) Selected contemporary Indian English texts that engage IKS (3) Comparative Framework: Western Pedagogical Ethics vs Indian Knowledge Systems (4) Ethical Values Embedded in IKS and Their Literary Representation (5) Pedagogical Translation of Literary Ethics into Classroom Practice.

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Key Words: Indian Knowledge Systems, Ethical Pedagogy, Epistemic Decolonisation, Indigenous Knowledge, Ethics of Care.

INTRODUCTION

The last decade in Indian educational policy has seen renewed official attention to what is termed the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) — a broad, contested category that refers to precolonial and vernacular epistemologies spanning Ayurveda, classical languages, oral traditions, architectural treatises, local ecological practices, and ritual knowledge. Prior to NEP 2020, there was no specific mention of IKS in the national education policy, but once it was incorporated into the teaching curriculum it triggered a number of institutional initiatives as well as high-level academic debates on methodology, politicization and academic rigour. At the same time, modern-day writing in English in India has been coming to terms with the vernal, oral and ecological knowledge as physical sources of meaning and resistance. When examined through the lens of theories of ethical pedagogy (critical pedagogy, ethics of care) these literary portrayals suggest three possibilities: literature can (a) record the epistemic erasures of colonial modernity, (b) provide models of dialogic, listening pedagogy, and (c) offer concrete narrative resources for the teacher to construct ethically-situated syllabi. This paper explores those possibilities and proposes practical classroom moves for integrating IKS-informed ethical pedagogy into English and literature teaching.

BACKGROUND

IKS is not a single canonical system but a category used by policymakers and scholars to name India's multiplicity of knowledge formations — grammar (Vyākaraṇa), medicine (Ayurveda), mathematics, architectural treatises (Vāstu), folk ecologies, and oral epistemes (smṛti, loka-kathā). Since NEP-2020, institutional efforts (including an IKS cell under the Ministry of Education/AICTE) and university-level course proposals have promoted curricular inclusion of IKS, while critics have worried about ideological instrumentalization and the methodological challenges of legitimately integrating traditional knowledge into modern disciplinary frames. The policy moment makes pedagogical questions urgent: how to teach with IKS without essentializing or dehistoricizing it; how to place IKS in conversation with critical theory and contemporary science; and how to design ethical classroom practices that respect plural epistemologies.

THEORETICAL FRAMINGS

1. *Critical Pedagogy* (Paulo Freire)- Freire's critique of the "banking model" of education- where students are passive depositories of knowledge- champions dialogic, problem-posing education that connects learning to the struggles and lived experience of learners. Freire insists that "education is never neutral"; it is either a practice of domination or liberation. Reading literary texts that stage struggles over knowledge can open space for problem-posing classrooms that deconstruct epistemic authority and cultivate student agency.

2. *Ethics of Care* (Nel Noddings): Noddings's work on caring ethics reframes moral education around relational responsiveness rather than abstract rule-following. Caring pedagogy prioritizes attention, receptivity, and concrete responsiveness to learners' contexts. When combined with IKS, care-based pedagogy suggests classroom moves that privilege listening to vernacular voices, honouring local knowledges, and situating textual study within communities' ethical worlds.

Together, critical pedagogy and ethics-of-care provide a normative framework for an IKS-informed pedagogy: one that resists epistemic domination while making relationships,

reciprocity, and local responsibilities central to learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars of education and cultural studies have rapidly produced critiques and proposals about IKS since NEP-2020: some see IKS inclusion as a chance for interdisciplinarity and cultural repair; others fear historicism, pseudo-science, or political instrumentalization. Empirical and conceptual articles recommend disciplined, evidence-based incorporation of IKS with safeguards against ideological misuse and with cross-referencing to contemporary scholarship and scientific method. In literary studies, writers such as Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy have been read as dramatizing tensions between colonial/modern epistemologies and vernacular knowledges. Ghosh's fiction (notably *The Hungry Tide* and his ongoing engagement with climate and local ecologies) often centres oral traditions and local ecological practices (e.g., the Bon Bibi legend in *The Hungry Tide*), presenting indigenous knowledge as practical, adaptive, and ethically attuned to multispecies cohabitation. Critics have argued that Ghosh stages a "politics of knowledge" that foregrounds local epistemes against technocratic state knowledge.

Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* recuperates local practice, casted memory, and small-scale economies as sites of ethical knowledge and counter-archives to official histories. Literary critics reading Roy emphasize the role of local ritual, oral stories, and embodied memory as pedagogical repositories: they are pedagogues who teach characters (and readers) other ways of valuing relationships and resisting systems of marginalization.

Other contemporary writers, such as the translations of works by Mahasweta Devi, some pieces by Kiran Desai, and a selection of short-story writers, also contain forms of indigenous knowledge, sometimes unconsciously. This conjunction of the scholarly and the literary is a fertile one for pedagogues who teach literature: Novels can be read not just for theme and form, but as locations of epistemic practice and ethical orientation.

METHODOLOGY

This paper presents a diachronic, interdisciplinary close-reading approach: (1) texts of policy and theory about IKS and education are cross-collated to (re)imagine pedagogical possibilities; (2) selected contemporary literary texts are read with attention to the depiction and questioning of vernacular knowledge, as well as the scene and narrative strategies employed; (3) theoretical concepts (Freire's dialogic pedagogy, Noddings' ethics of care, postcolonial ecocriticism, and others) are used to render the insights of literature into classroom strategies. The purpose is not a comprehensive coverage of literature, but rather an argument for effective pedagogical design that is supported, drawn from, and grounded in textual evidence and scholarship. Key sources include policy documents, peer-reviewed articles on IKS in education, and literary criticism on the selected novels.

ANALYSIS

Case study 1 — Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (2004)

The Hungry Tide takes place in the Sundarbans, and centres on local fishers, their oral ecology, and the scientific outsider, Piya, who is unable to bridge the gap between laboratory science and local practice. The novel foregrounds the legend of Bon Bibi — a variant of a protective deity whose tales carry safety warnings, river direction, and the intergenerational messages about tides and wildlife. Ghosh's narrative contrasts the scientific discourse of the West with the relational indigenous knowledge which is ecological, performative, and ethically coded. he novel plays out the 'politics of knowledge': local knowledge (e.g. Fokir's navigation) proves to be essential to survival in the tide country, yet is routinely demeaned or disparaged by outsiders.

The novel models listening: Piya learns from Fokir's practices when she enters the world of pedagogy. The movement from epistemic arrogance to epistemic humility is pedagogically helpful, in that it is a movement that students can perform in a classroom activity in which they map competing forms of knowledge, practice ethnographic listening, and reflect on how power affects the process of knowledge validation.

Pedagogical move from the text: Assign paired readings, one which is a scientific article about mangroves' ecology and the episodes of Bon Bibi from *The Hungry Tide*. Encourage students to create "situated knowledge reports" that identify what counts as evidence for each of the sources, how each source holds responsibility for nonhumans, and what policies in the classroom would favour one over the other. This fosters enquiry that at the same time is critical and caring.

Case study 2- Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (1997)

Roy's novel is aware of local rituals, caste-based embodied knowledge and the ethics of kinship-based economy. The vernacular memory is seen as the site of counter-knowledge against colonial modernity and post-colonial technocracy. Literary critics observe that Roy's narrative approach is digressive, embedded and dialogic, resembling the way people tell stories orally. For pedagogues, Roy's novel can be used to teach the ethics of attending to subaltern knowledge: how do we read the testimony of marginalized characters without co-optation? How can syllabi incorporate local testimony as authentic knowledge rather than exoticized data?

Pedagogical move from the text: Build an assignment called "Recovering Counter-Archives": students collect (or analyse published) short oral histories about local craft, ritual, or land-practices; they then write reflective essays that compare those oral histories with Roy's narrative strategies — focusing on questions of voice, authority, and ethical representation.

Practical Framework: Elements of IKS-informed ethical pedagogy

Table 1: IKS Elements and Pedagogical Affordances

IKS Element	Pedagogical Affordance	Classroom Activity Example
Oral narratives/folktales (e.g. Bon Bibi)	Promote situational learning, memory-based ecology, narrative evidence	Paired reading of folktale + scientific article; ethnographic listening exercise
Craft/ skill knowledge (agriculture, navigation)	Embodied knowing; multisensory pedagogy	Skill description projects; invite local practitioners for demonstration
Ayurvedic/medical traditions	Systems thinking; holistic health perspectives	Comparative analysis: biomedical vs. Ayurvedic case study discussions
Ritual and moral practice	Ethics as practice (not only principle); communal responsibility	Ethics labs: students map ritual norms to communal obligations
Vernacular languages and terms	Linguistic pluralism; conceptual resources unavailable in English	Translation projects; terminology glossaries co-created by students

Curriculum Design

Course Title: *"Literature, Local Knowledge, and Ethical Learning"*: 4 weeks

Week 1: Introduction to IKS- short policy reading (NEP excerpts) + theoretical primer on Freire and Noddings.

Seminar: What counts as knowledge? (Assessment: reflective post).

Week 2: Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (selected chapters) + Bon Bibi folktale.

Workshop: field-note writing; guest session with a local ecologist/fisher (if possible).

Assessment: "situated knowledge" short paper.

Week 3: Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (selected excerpts) + oral histories of caste and memory.

Seminar: representation and ethical testimony.

Assessment: ethics reflection and micro-ethnography.

Week 4: Synthesis: students design a mini-syllabus for a high-school literature class that incorporates IKS material ethically (peer review).

Final assessment: annotated syllabus (group project).

Table 2- Selected Contemporary Indian English Texts that Engage IKS

Text	IKS Elements Present	Pedagogical Potential
Amitav Ghosh, *The Hungry Tide* (2004)	Bon Bibi legend; fisher knowledge; local ecology	Ethno-ecological listening, science-literature pairing.
Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (1997)	Local ritual memory; caste-based knowledge	Testimony ethics; narrative as counter-archive.
Amitav Ghosh, *Gun Island* (2019) / other works	Myth and migration; localized cosmologies	Climate justice & indigenous narratives pairing.
Selected essays/translations of Mahasweta Devi	Oral testimony; craft knowledge	Courtroom/activist pedagogy; voice ethics.
Short fiction anthologies (various editors)	Folk tales; regional knowledge	Translation projects; comparative syllabi.

Ethical Challenges and Caveats

Integrating IKS into classrooms raises several ethical and practical concerns:

1. Commodification and tokenism: There is a risk of teaching the IKS superficially (as exotic content), and not as situated epistemes. Fighting tokenization requires curriculum designers to create longer-term modules and to incorporate community voices.
2. Politicization and academic rigor: There has been a tendency for the zeal of the NEP to sometimes merge with political agendas aimed at utilizing IKS for ideology purposes. Scientific integrity ought to be preserved from methodological sloppiness: corroboration, historicization and avoiding uncritical revivalism. Interdisciplinary collaboration (historians, scientists, local practitioners) and peer review are necessary.
3. Epistemic translation: Translating concepts which have developed in a different vernacular context into English may risk losing or distorting the meaning. In part, ethical pedagogy involves teaching students to live with untranslatability—to not flatten complex terms into English glosses, or at least to allow the learning of nuance by having students complete multilingual glossaries and do collaborative translation work.

Toward Assessment and Outcomes

A pedagogy based on an IKS emphasizes formative assessment, which is more process oriented than standardized tests.

1. Bilingual community glossaries (students create annotated bilingual community glossaries in collaboration with community partners).
2. Ethical reflection essays (students reflect on representational responsibilities).
3. Micro-syllabi and lesson plans that demonstrate ethical approach to teaching an IKS at the school level.

The measurement of these assessments is not only the content that is learned, but also relational competencies: listening, reflexivity, collaborative responsibility and holding epistemic pluralism.

Discussion

The modelling of ethics-of-practice is characteristic of fiction and literary forms. They both enact the conflicts between knowledge modalities, between dilemmas of representation on stage, and bring readers into experiences of imaginative listening. Carefully used texts from literature offer opportunities for ethical listening, negotiating the translation of meaning, and visualizing classrooms that focus on relational responsibilities. Rather than being anachronistic, or the exclusive preserve of the metropolitan, there is a wealth of contemporary Indian English literature that can be pedagogically mobilized as the means of teaching IKS as practices that are not for the past, but instead for living through ecological crisis, social injustice, and epistemic erasure.

Recommendations for Teachers and Curriculum Designers

1. Co-creation with communities - wherever possible, involve local knowledge holders; credit and remuneration. Extractive dynamics are lowered with co-created syllabus.

2. Dialogic pairings- Always use literary/verbal text with critical/empirical sources (e.g., folklore + ecological study) to show students how to shift between modes of evidence.

3. Ethics Training – Give explicit instruction on representation, consent and translation ethics prior to any fieldwork or oral-history assignments.

4. Assessment reform- change traditional single high-stakes assessment to portfolio and reflective essay, and project-based assessment; more reflective of relational skills.

5. Maintain scholarly rigor- Avoid essentializing and use historical and textual scholarship when reconstructing IKS traditions. Secondary literature that has been peer reviewed should support the claims in the classroom.

Table 3: Comparative Framework: Western Pedagogical Ethics vs Indian Knowledge Systems

Aspects of Western Ethical Pedagogy	Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)	Pedagogical Implication
Knowledge orientation	Abstract, universalist Contextual, experiential, situated	Encourages localized curriculum design
Teacher–student relation	Instructor-centered or dialogic Guru–śiṣya paramparā (ethical mentorship)	Emphasizes moral responsibility of teachers
Ethics framework	Rule-based / rights-based Dharma-based (duty, balance, responsibility)	Ethics taught as lived practice

Nature–human relation	Anthropocentric Ecocentric / cosmological	Promotes environmental ethics
Assessment	Cognitive achievement Holistic growth (knowledge- work-religion)	Portfolio-based evaluation

Table 4: Ethical Values Embedded in IKS and Their Literary Representation

Ethical Value (IKS)	Philosophical Source Literary Text	Textual Illustration
Dharma (duty)	Bhagavad Gītā *The God of Small Things*	Moral conflict between love and social duty
Ahimsa (non-violence)	Jain–Buddhist ethics *The Hungry Tide*	Ethical human–animal coexistence
Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam	Upaniṣhadic thought *Gun Island*	Global ecological interconnectedness
Karma & accountability	Indic metaphysics Roy's narrative cycles	Consequences of ethical transgression
Care for the marginal	Bhakti traditions Mahasweta Devi (tr.)	Ethics of witnessing suffering

Table 5: Pedagogical Translation of Literary Ethics into Classroom Practice

Literary Strategy	Ethical Learning Outcome	Classroom Method
Non-linear narration	Ethical ambiguity & reflection	Reflective journaling
Oral storytelling	Respect for indigenous epistemes	Story-circle pedagogy
Multivocal narration	Plural ethical perspectives	Group discussion & debate
Ecological metaphors	Environmental responsibility	Eco-critical assignments
Silence & absence	Ethics of listening	Testimony-based pedagogy

IKS, Ethics, and Narrative Pedagogy in Amitav Ghosh

Amitav Ghosh's fiction is of special importance in the field of ethical pedagogy in that it does not accept epistemic hierarchy. *The Hungry Tide* is not about the replacement of indigenous knowledge with scientific rationality, but rather an examination of the lack of ethics in knowledge systems that are out of context of place and community. This novel can be used in classrooms to ask the questions of who has the right to speak, who has institutionalized knowledge, and what are the ethical responsibilities of education.

"The river was their classroom, the tide their teacher" (Ghosh 232).

These passages provide a model for a pedagogy of humility that is congruent with IKS epistemology and care ethics.

Arundhati Roy and Ethical Pedagogy of Memory

As an ethical text, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* is based on local knowledge, memory and embodied ethics. The novel's focus on "small things" resonates with the IKS priorities on "micro ethics" – as opposed to abstract ethics – those small everyday acts of moral behaviour. The novel is taught from an

IKS perspective, enabling students to view ethics structurally, relationally and contextually, which aligns with NEP 2020 which gives emphasis on value-based education.

> "It's easy to judge, but hard to understand" (Roy 54).

This is consistent with moral pedagogy which emphasizes empathy over moral absolutes.

Mahasweta Devi: Indigenous Ethics and Pedagogy of Resistance

Mahasweta Devi's (in translation) texts address tribal epistemologies and ethics of survival, land and resistance. Ethics in stories like "Draupadi" do not stem from the law but from justice based on experience of suffering. Devi's teaching emphasizes the ethical imperative to hear the voices of the marginalised, and the pedagogic practices that include testimony-based learning and restorative classroom dialogue.

IKS and Ethical Pedagogy in the English Classroom

Based on these literary texts, the operationalization of the concept of ethical pedagogy with IKS is as follows:

1. Dialogic classrooms (Freire + Guru–śiṣya model)
2. Care centred assessment (reflection, portfolios, narrative responses)
3. Community knowledge integration
4. Ethical multilingualism (respect for vernacular terms)
5. Environmental humanities pedagogy

Such classrooms go beyond content mastery to ethical formation, addressing both literary and educational goals.

Alignment with NEP 2020 and Higher Education Outcomes

NEP 2020 emphasizes:

1. Value-based education
2. Incorporation of Indian Knowledge Traditions
3. Ethical citizenship

Literature classrooms that use contemporary Indian English literature texts directly are responsive to these goals in writing the curriculum of IKS. In this place ethical pedagogy is not ideology indoctrination but critical engagement with plural moral traditions, so that students can be reflective learners and socially responsible.

Conclusion

Indian Knowledge Systems, read carefully and taught ethically are a rich source for reorienting pedagogy from abstraction to the relational, the situated, and the caring. The contemporary Indian writing in English narrates plenty of labs for IKS as a moral practice, in the oral story, in the ritual knowledge and in the embodied ecologies. Ethical pedagogy can be established as a foundation of the classroom with the help of an IKS philosophy, a dialogism based on Freire's philosophy and a pedagogy of care based on Noddings' philosophy. The challenge is to bring these resources together without tokenizing or politicizing them: by co-creating them, by engaging with them in a rigorously cross-disciplinary way, and by paying attention to the ethics of representation. Literature, in this design, is not merely a text to be analyzed; it becomes a pedagogical partner that teaches us how to listen, translate, and respond. Indian Knowledge Systems mediated by contemporary Indian Writing in English, allow for an ethical pedagogy that is dialogic, inclusive, and socially responsive. Literature is not just a subject to be studied but a place of moral judgement, responsibility and care for students to rehearse.

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Priyanka Singla, MPhil, PhD, UGC-NET, is presently working as Associate Professor and Chairperson, Depatment of English and Foreign Languages at Guru Jambheshwar University of Science and Technology, Hisar, Haryana. She has teaching experience of more than twenty years. She has completed her doctoral degree on the topic "Postcolonial Concerns in Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man* and *An American Brat* and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* and *Family Matters*". Apart from postcolonialism, her areas of research interest include Gender, Sexuality, Cultural Studies, Masculinity Studies, IKS, Feminism, and Queer Theory. She has published several articles on these research areas in both national and international journals—peer-reviewed as well as UGC-CARE listed, Scopus-indexed, and WoS-indexed journals. She also has eight book chapter publications to her credit. She has presented several research papers in various national and international conferences and seminars. Additionally, she has acted as the Chairperson of technical sessions in a few international conferences. She also has two patents for English listening and learning devices to her name.