



FROM POSTCOLONIAL REALISM TO DHARMIC PHENOMENOLOGY:RE-READING THE GUIDE THROUGH IKS

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Abstract

R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958) integrates Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into its narrative fabric, detailing various indigenous epistemologies, including sthalapurana (sacred geography), nishkama karma (selfless action), lila (cosmic play), and jati shraddha (communal faith), which serve as foundational elements and philosophical tenets. The Guide is not merely a work of postcolonial realism, but a profound manifestation of IKS. By shifting the focus away from Western-centric Enlightenment rationalism, the study explores how the narrative is deeply rooted in a lived dharmic phenomenology. The analysis illustrates protagonist Raju's transformation from an opportunistic "Railway Raju" to a reluctant ascetic through a drought-ending fast, exemplifying the shift from selfish karma to nishkama karma, culminating in a state of jivanmukti. This paper also establishes that Narayan's nuanced reclamation of tradition functions as a decolonial praxis. Therefore, it places the novel in alignment with the objectives of NEP 2020. The interpretation of the monsoon finale as a restoration of rita (cosmic order) validates Narayan's predominance as a phenomenologist of lived tradition, providing a resilient cultural paradigm for modern educational and ethical reforms.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), sthalapurana, nishkama karma, lila, jati shraddha, dharmic ecology, Malgudi

Introduction

R.K. Narayan's literary canon exemplifies the inclusion of higher-order concepts from Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), such as karma, dharma, samsara, moksha, bhakti, and the guru-shishya parampara, into modern Indian English fiction, thereby transforming his fictional town of Malgudi into a microcosm of dharmic life cycles and ethical dilemmas. His works subtly blend postcolonial realities with Vedic and Upanishadic philosophies. Without overt didacticism, they depict common people navigating life's fleeting paths. Nowhere is this more evident than in *The Guide*, where Raju, the protagonist, embodies the ironic journey from materialistic philosophy to accidental spiritual redemption, reflecting the Bhagavad Gita's nishkama karma (selfless action). 3.19. Velan's steadfast shraddha: "We have faith in you, Swami" (Narayan 162), elevates panchayati jnana (local, collective and traditional knowledge) over Brahmanical monopoly of his times. Thematically, the fruition of monsoon represents the renewal of nature's varsha-dharma; structurally, dual narratives of confession and flashback reflect the non-linearity of lila.

Literature Review

While critics such as Dennis Walder have confined Narayan to realist traditions, M.K. Naik has concentrated on his ironic humanism. Graham Greene endorses R.K. Narayan's inclusion of IKS, which is found in his works, centred in Malgudi, as "Without his Malgudi, India would be incomprehensible." *The Guide* film (1965)



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popularised dharma globally. According to Chandra Shekhar Sharma and S.P. Saraswat, “Those who try to find existentialism, nihilism, magic realism, and all other kinds of ‘ism’ in Narayan's works will be disappointed, since western concepts have little to do with his vision of life.” (IJELH)

The Guide: IKS as Narrative Core

R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*, winner of the Sahitya Akademi Award (1960), stands as a seminal text in Indian English literature. It is not only because of its deceptively simple story of transformation, but also because of its complex use of IKS that challenge postcolonial literary norms. The incorporation of layered depictions of sthalapurana, nishkama karma, lila, and jati-based collective shraddha (faith) transformed the fictional Malgudi into a living repository of dharmic wisdom that subtly critiques postcolonial modernity. Narayan skillfully integrates these elements through irony, local rituals, and character transformations, as every individual navigates through the inexorable wheel of karma, and Raju is like everyone else who has to deal with karma. Village rituals and collective beliefs from local communities emphasise that faith is more than just an abstract idea, but a shared and lived experience.

Malgudi emerges as a dynamic karma-kshetra where the Mempi Hills temple, Sarayu rituals, and the potter community's epistemology restore rita (cosmic order) amid the disruptions of Kali Yuga's chaos. The story of *The Guide* unfolds in dual narratives—Raju's prison confession to Velan and a flashback to fame with dancer Rosie. Narayan prefaces: “This is the story of a man who became a legend in his own lifetime.” This is similar to the Puranic itihasa, where ordinary people become sages through tapas (austerity).

Narayan's IKS is more subtle than Raja Rao's Vedanta in *Kanthapura* but akin to Tagore's humanism. Raju's karma cycle is similar to the *Mahabharata's* Yudhishtira dice-game karma, but it makes moksha more secular. According to Feminist readings, Rosie's portrayal challenges devadasi stereotypes and aligns with Durga-shakti. NEP 2020 supports these kinds of texts for IKS curricula, which helps ethical pluralism.

Sthalapurana: Sacred Geography as Living Wisdom

The Mempi Hills temple is an example of sthalapurana (local sacred lore), an embodiment of divinity. The *Skanda Purana* asserts that certain places, like rivers, hills, and temples, exemplify divine cosmic order. Raju finds out the forgotten sanctity of the Mempi Hills temple during a drought: “This temple was built centuries ago by some king... now a neglected spot.” Villagers pray there as per Agama temple shastra rituals such as arati, vibhuti, and kumkum tilaks. This brings back sthala-mahatya (place-glory) mentioned in the *Skanda Purana*, which helps keep desi wisdom alive in the face of urban erosion.

Sthalapurana also extends to the ecology of Malgudi with the railway station as karma-kshetra (field of action) of Raju and the dance peak as sadhana space for Rosie's Bharatanatyam revival. Raju's foundational dharma, “I was born at this railway station... it was my kingdom,” changes to temple custodianship, demonstrating varsha-dharma or fluidity. During drought, rituals become more intense: “Women brought coconuts and fruit, circled the sanctum” (Narayan 210).

Malgudi geography also facilitates dharma. The Sarayu River facilitates ritual baths for punya, “Raju went down to the river for his morning dip... the water was cool and invigorating” (Narayan 140). Village life combines



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topography with jnana, different from Marco's archaeological detachment, which was “He was after inscriptions on stone slabs” (Narayan 85). Velan states that “This hill has always protected us... even in times of famine” (Narayan 132), an example of prithvi-dharma (earth duty). Narayan ironically explains Raju's exploitation as “The temple suited me fine... free board from the villagers” (Narayan 135), yet the sthala-mahatya elevates his inner consciousness, echoing Vedic bhumi-sukta hymns where land yields tapas power. Critics affirm that this represents Narayan's strategy of decolonisation, reclaiming sacred cartography in opposition to British cartographic violence.

Nishkama Karma: From Exploitation to Selfless Tapas

Raju's evolution can be assessed through the lens of the *Bhagavad Gita's* nishkama karma, which says, "Karmanye vadhikaraste ma phaleshu kadachana" (You have a right to do your duty, but you don't have a right to the results of your actions). The first half of Raju's life is a perfect example of selfish karma (doing things for selfish reasons). His identity is tied to the “fruits” of his work: money, fame, and, later on, his relationship with Rosie. Then his forgery of the signature is the worst thing he could do to break satya-dharma, which puts him in prison both literally and figuratively, just like the *Chandogya Upanishad* says: “as is one's deeds, so is one's destiny.”

The transformation from convict to “Swami,” on the other hand, enables the process of chitta-shuddhi (purification of the mind). Raju wears the ochre robes at first to get “free board from the villagers” (Narayan 135), but the external performance eventually requires internal authenticity. The drought is the karma-kshetra where Raju has to choose between his own survival instinct and the communal need.

When Raju finally decides to fast for twelve days, he experiences a conscious change that the *Katha Upanishad* mentions as “the extinguishing of the ego.” Narayan says that by the eleventh day, “his mind was blank, he felt serene confidence” (Narayan 242). This “blankness” is not a void; it is the attainment of sthitaprajna (equanimity of mind). He doesn't fast anymore to keep up his reputation as a Mahatma; he fasts because the role of “Guide” has finally become necessary for the village. His final collapse into the river Sarayu represents the ultimate nishkama karma, giving up the atman(self) to the universal flow, where the “reward” (the rain) is no longer a personal gain, but a return of rita (cosmic order).

Dharma-an Invisible Thread

Dharma is the invisible thread throughout the narrative, not as a strict set of rules, but as a duty (swadharma) with changes of life. At first, Raju misunderstands his dharma and thinks that being a railway man is just a way for him to “receive passengers [and] transact their business” for his own gain (Narayan 22). On the other hand, Marco embodies a “sterile” dharma; his fascination for archaeological artefacts constitutes a form of jnana (knowledge) devoid of human empathy, resulting in spiritual stagnation.

According to the novel, genuine dharma can be found where personal responsibility and group faith converge. Based on shraddha (faith), the pottery community embody a grihastha dharma. The strong belief of the potter community that Raju is divine finally pushes him to a higher dharmic consciousness. The *Gita* (18:66) says that the detachment from one's own ego makes it possible to fulfil a higher order of purpose. Rosie's transformation into Nalini further illustrates this; her dance is not merely a career but also a *sadhana*, a restoration of *kala*-



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*dharm*a that reclaims the old temple tradition of the devadasi via the prism of Shakti-agency and links the modern woman to it.

Bhakti, Maya, and Spiritual Irony

In the Malgudi microcosm, Rosie represents bhakti-marga. Rosie envisions dance as a “composite” spiritual practice, but at first, for Raju, she is like the intoxicating power of maya (illusion). His infatuation, “She was a vision of perfect grace”, is like the soul’s entanglement in the material world. Rosie can only become a classical exponent after Raju is arrested and forced to leave her.

Through Velan's unwavering bhakti, Narayan portrays that most people don't have viveka (spiritual discernment). When Velan says, “Swami, you must be a god,” he endorses a divine status for a common man who is still an opportunist who avoided his hometown after being released from prison to escape embarrassing situations. Narayan's irony subtly undermines the “guru-myth,” implying that Raju's saintliness is an inadvertent outcome of communal faith rather than deliberate sadhana. This is in line with what the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad preaches: “the self is indeed dearer than a son, greater than the world” (1.4.8). Raju's journey is a slow process of shedding the ego, until only the “dear” self remains.

Reincarnation Echoes: Samsara to Moksha

The switching identities of Raju, such as a shopkeeper, a guide, a lover, a convict, and an ascetic, are like the cycle of birth and death- the wheel of samsara. His persona represents a metaphorical rebirth, culminating in a final “saintly” punarjanma. The climax of the novel at the Sarayu River resembles the state of mrityu-samadhi. Raju's twelve-day fast blurs the line between life and death, as the Bhagavad Gita says, “For one who has been born, death is certain” (2:27). His ultimate detachment, “My mind at this moment was blank,” marks the shift from jivanmukta (liberation while living) to a state close to videhamukta (freedom beyond the body). The arrival of the monsoon rains as he falls into the water represents the ripening of karma-phala (the fruits of action) and suggests that his sacrifice will restore rita.

Lila: Cosmic Play and Maya

The narrative of *The Guide* manifests lila, a concept from the Bhagavata Purana that means the universe is a purposeful but playful manifestation of the divine. The protagonist's “name and form” (nama-rupa) change constantly, but the atman remains the silent spectator. This is an example of maya (illusion). The dual narrative reflects the non-linearity of lila. Rosie's transformation into Nalini fits into this framework as well. Her revival of Bharatanatyam is a marga of sadhana (spiritual practice) that connects her to the cosmic dance of Lord Shiva. Narayan's irony reaches its zenith when the “imposture” of Raju's guruhood yields genuine spiritual outcomes. According to critics, the villagers’ collective shraddha (faith) converts a fake identity into a real one, showing that in the world of lila, the mask eventually becomes the enlightened soul.

Jati Collectivism and Panchayati Jnana

Velan and the potter community do not approach Raju with the analytical scepticism of the “Enlightenment” gaze; rather, they engage through Panchayati Jnana a communal, experiential knowledge. This communal belief system



bypasses Brahmanical monopolies on scriptures and gives marginalised people the power to validate their own spirituality. Raju is not a lone martyr but a “vessel” for the community's survival. The reclamation of indigenous epistemology functions as a “decolonial praxis,” by establishing local traditions as robust and legitimate responses to environmental crises, as exemplified by the Malgudi drought. The potter community varna-dharma cohesion, with their shraddha, facilitating the democratisation of IKS beyond Brahmanical hegemony. “We potters have always lived here, the hill protects us” (Narayan 131) refers to kulachara, or family tradition.

Conclusion

The Guide is a work of postcolonial realism with a profound fusion of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), where sthalapurana, nishkama karma, lila, and jati shraddha come together to constitute Malgudi's dharmic ontology. Narayan decolonises the English language by weaving these indigenous threads into the novel. Theoretically, Narayan foreshadows contemporary subaltern studies by exemplifying Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) praxis. Ultimately, this reading transforms Narayan from a “quaint regionalist” into a decolonial phenomenologist. This makes The Guide one of the primary texts for the NEP 2020's goal of restoring knowledge.

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