

Transcending Boundaries: Exploring Panchkosha and Spiritual Evolution in Indian English Literature through the Works of Raja Rao, Sri Aurobindo, and R. K. Narayan

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ABSTRACT

The research article explores the extreme confluence of the Indian philosophical notion of Panchkosh and in Indian English literature its representation, focusing on the works of Raja Rao, Sri Aurobindo, and R. K. Narayan. With the help of the framework of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), the article explores how spiritual evolution is artistically and thematically depicted through narratives, characters and philosophical underpinnings in the selected authors' writings. The discovery expedites how these literary figures surpass Western narrative structures to integrate Vedantic and Yogic insights, tributing a decolonized literary consciousness entrenched in Indic metaphysics.

KEYWORDS: Indian Knowledge Systems, Raja Rao, Sri Aurobindo, R. K. Narayan, Vedanta, Yogic Psychology, Decolonization, Panchkosha, Indian English Literature, Spiritual Evolution

INTRODUCTION

Over Since its inception, Indian English literature has undergone significant transformation, shifting from colonial mimicry to a more rooted and indigenous literary ethos. This article explores the convergence of Indian metaphysical thought and English literary expression through the lens of Panchkosha (five sheaths), an originated from the Taittiriya Upanishad that maps the human journey from gross to subtle consciousness: Annamaya (physical), Pranamaya (vital), Manomaya (mental), Vijnanamaya (intellectual), and Anandamaya (bliss). This article examines how this schema underlies the literary and philosophical structures in the works of Raja Rao, Sri Aurobindo, and R. K. Narayan. It also explores how these authors use character arcs, narrative and thematic construction to depict a deeper metaphysical journey lined up with Indian spiritual evolution.

PANCHKOSHA: AN OVERVIEW IN INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

The conception of Panchkosha, as explained in Vedantic texts such as the Taittiriya Upanishad, forms a heart of India's spiritual anthropology. These five sheaths - Annamaya (physical), Pranamaya (vital), Manomaya (mental), Vijnanamaya (intellectual), and Anandamaya (bliss) -represent progressively subtler layers of human existence. The supreme goal of human life, according to Vedanta, is to entrench these layers and perceive the Self (Atman) that lies beyond them.

In Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), this concept serves as a foundational model for understanding the human condition and the path to liberation. Each sheath correlates to specific levels of experience and engagement:

Annamaya Kosha: Sustained by food, the physical body; concerned with survival and sensory pleasure.

Pranamaya Kosha: The vital energy that leads physiological functions like breathing and digestion.

Manomaya Kosha: The mind accountable for emotions, desires, and sensory perception.

Vijnanamaya Kosha: The intellect or discriminative knowledge that leads rationality and ethical judgment.

Anandamaya Kosha: The sheath of bliss experienced in deep meditation or spiritual realization.

Panchkosha is not just a metaphysical model but a practical psychology, influencing the seeker in self-inquiry and transformation. Its relevance in literature lies in the way authors, consciously or subconsciously, represent these sheaths through character development, plot progression, and thematic depth.

RAJA RAO: SPIRITUAL ALLEGORY AND THE TRANSCENDENCE OF SELF

Usually, the writings of Raja Rao regarded as one of the earliest and most extreme attempts to embed Indian metaphysics into English prose. His seminal work, *The Serpent and the Rope* (1960) can be read as a spiritual allegory mirroring the Panchkosha model. The novel's protagonist, Ramaswamy, is a seeker engrossed in the pursuit of truth beyond conventional reality.

At the start immersed in the Annamaya kosha through his personal and academic life in France, Ramaswamy gradually becomes disenchanted with material and emotional entanglements. His journey to India indicates a movement into the Pranamaya and Manomaya koshas as he manoeuvres through emotional turbulence and cultural dissension.

In the end, Ramaswamy meets with spiritual teachers who inflame his intellectual and intuitive faculties (Vijnanamaya). The novel crescendos in a moment of existential surrender - indicative of entry into the Anandamaya kosha. Rao's fusion of autobiography, philosophy, and myth transforms the novel a multilayered narrative of spiritual ascent.

The method of Rao's communication is wilfully metaphysical. His exercise of philosophical digressions, ellipsis, and Indian idioms subverts the linearity of Western narrative and aligns with the cyclical and holistic worldview of Vedanta. Sometimes he challenges the reader to participate not just cognitively but instinctively.

He contests that the human being cannot see the truth with the eye of the flesh. The eye must be burnt away by the sun of knowledge, means that our physical eyes can only see so much and can't help us to think deeper truths. To understand genuinely, we need to go beyond just looking at things with our eyes. We need to use our intellectual and emotions to gain wisdom and insight. This does not mean really burning anything but rather transforming our way of perceiving. It is like using a powerful light to see things more clearly, not merely what is visible, but what is truly meaningful. By acting this, we can start to realize the world in a new way and perceive things that are not merely visible but also true and significant.

SRI AUROBINDO: INTEGRAL YOGA AND COSMIC CONSCIOUSNESS

Sri Aurobindo stands only among Indian English writers because of his dual personality as both a visionary and a literary craftsman. In his great work *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*, the Panchkosha model is not only present but deeply intertwined into the fabric of the narrative. *Savitri* is a symbolic epic where each stage of Savitri's journey aligns with a greatness of one of the sheaths.

As Savitri encounters the Lord of Death to rescue her husband Satyavan, she entrusts the soul discovery through layers of ignorance and limitation. The poem's verses evoke the experiential progression from her material trials (Annamaya kosha) to her divine union (Anandamaya).

Sri Aurobindo's philosophy of Integral Yoga - which emphasizes the transformation of all levels of human existence rather than renunciation - furnishes a unique alignment with the Panchkosha theory. Integral Yoga affirms that spiritual apprehension should not repeal the physical or mental realms but incorporate and enrich them.

He writes: Spiritual evolution, in *The Life Divine* is not the invalidation of life but its transmogrification. The notion of spiritual evolution as a transformative process that uplifts human existence rather than rejecting it. The idea underscores the incorporation of spiritual consciousness into daily life, boosting one's experience of living. In-depth analysis into various spiritual traditions, including Buddhism, Christianity, and Hinduism, this study emphasizes how transmogrification symbolizes an extreme shift from materiality to spirituality. It

highlights that spiritual growth involves engaging fully with life's challenges while transcending their limitations.

The process of transfiguration is examined through practices such as mindfulness, meditation, and self-reflection, which accelerate higher states of awareness and foster a sense of connection with the divine. This transformation not only enriches the individual's life but also contributes positively to society by embodying virtues like compassion and wisdom. By investigating the practical implications of spiritual evolution, this study provides insights into how individuals can integrate spiritual principles into their daily lives, leading to a more fulfilling and meaningful existence. Ultimately, it demonstrates that spiritual evolution is a journey of refinement and growth, rather than

This notion of transfiguration across all koshas is central to Aurobindo's vision. Moreover, Aurobindo's distinction between surface and subliminal consciousness lines up with the koshas as veils obscuring the inner Divine.

Apart from this, in his other works, such as *The Human Cycle* and *The Synthesis of Yoga*, Aurobindo highlights a yogic psychology that parallels modern integrative frameworks in depth psychology. The Panchkosha thus serves not just as a spiritual ladder but as a map for individual and collective transformation.

R. K. NARAYAN: EVERYDAY VEDANTA AND SUBTLE TRANSFORMATION

In contrast to Rao and Aurobindo, R. K. Narayan engages irony, humour, and a deceptively simple narrative style to convey extreme spiritual insights. His novel *The Guide* (1958) is possibly the clearest example of Panchkosha evolution in a realist setting. Raju, the protagonist, starts as a railway guide steeped in Annamaya (materialism), indulging in sensual pleasures and manipulation.

A change happens when he is imprisoned, prompting Manomaya (introspection) and a gradual recognition of Vijnanamaya (deeper ethical values). His later acknowledgement of the role of a spiritual guide, despite initial imposture, culminates in an act of self-sacrifice that takes him to the threshold of Anandamaya kosha.

Narayan's genius lies in making spiritual evolution attainable. His qualities are deeply flawed yet capable of transformation. The metaphysical becomes entrenched in the mundane. This makes his work vibrate with a wider audience and aligns with the IKS principle that dharma and spiritual truth penetrate all aspects of life. He realized free-the first time in his life from R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* apprehends a crucial moment in the protagonist Raju's journey. This moment represents Raju's transformation from a self-centred individual to someone who finds true freedom and peace. In the beginning, Raju's life is driven by materialistic desires and a need for external validation. He takes advantage of people for personal gain, which leads to his downfall. However, after facing imprisonment and later being wrong for a holy man, Raju undergoes an extreme change. He starts to see the emptiness of his past pursuits and begins embracing a more authentic and meaningful life.

As Raju steers his new role as a spiritual guide, he begins to confront his past mistakes and discovers a sense of liberation from his previous life. This sovereignty is not about escaping responsibilities or societal expectations but about finding inner peace and self-actualization. Raju's journey represents the significance of personal transformation and redemption. It indicates how one can change and grow, moving from a life of selfishness to one of selflessness and genuine or real connection with others. Through Raju's story, Narayan discovers themes of spiritual awakening, identity, and the true meaning of freedom. Finally, the novel invites readers to reflect on their own ways to freedom and happiness, accelerating them to look inward for fulfilment rather than outward for acceptance.

This states, seemingly simple, captures the moment of transcendence - the crossing into bliss that lies beyond ego and desire.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: INTERSECTIONS AND DIVERGENCES

It shows an extreme intersection between modern literary expressions and ancient Indian philosophical frameworks.

In Raja Rao's writings, particularly *The Serpent and the Rope*, embody spiritual evolution by discovering the metaphysical dimensions of human existence. His writings often traverse the layers of Panchkosha, delving into Vijñanamaya Kosha (intellectual inquiry) and Anandamaya Kosha (blissful realization). Rao's characters grapple with self-awareness and transcendence, mirroring Vedantic ideals that line up with the Panchkosha framework. Similarly, Sri Aurobindo's works, such as *Savitri*, incorporate spiritual transformation with cosmic consciousness. His philosophy connects Manomaya and Vijñanamaya Koshas (the mental and intellectual sheaths) while aspiring toward Anandamaya Kosha, emphasizing divine bliss as the supreme goal of human being.

On the other hand, R. K. Narayan's works often focus on the tangible aspects of life, resounding with Annamaya and Pranamaya Koshas. Through his portrayal of ordinary lives in Malgudi, Narayan represents the interplay between subtle energies and physical existence, offering a grounded perspective on spiritual transformation. His thoughts reflect how spiritual insights can proceed from daily experiences without overt metaphysical discovery.

Among these authors, the disparity lies in their approach to spiritual transformation. While Rao and Aurobindo highlight transcendental dimensions, In practical spirituality, Narayan roots his exploration. Yet, their writings intersect in depicting human struggles to manage the koshas for holistic well-being, a theme central to Panchkosha philosophy. This integration underscores how Indian English literature transforms cultural boundaries by integrating ancient wisdom with modern storytelling.

However, the three authors differ in scope, style, and spiritual orientation, they all engage the Panchkosha framework, either implicitly or explicitly, to depict the evolution of consciousness.

Author	Primary Koshas Emphasized	Methodology	Spiritual Aim
Raja Rao	Manomaya to Anandmaya	Autobiographical, Philosophical narrative	Advaita Self-realization
Sri Aurobindo	All Five Koshas	Epic poetry, Yogic, psychology	Integral Transformation
R. K. Narayan	Annamaya to Anandmaya	Realistic fiction with subtle allegory	Ethical and Spiritual Awakening

These authors express an Indian spiritual sensibility that disparities with the predominantly rationalist and materialist orientation of Western literature. They highlight a literary decolonization where English becomes a vehicle for spiritual knowledge (adhyatmika jnana) rather than cultural integration.

INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS AND LITERARY DECOLONIZATION

Indian Knowledge System provides a powerful structure for reassessing literary criticism. By assimilation Panchkosha into literary hermeneutics, we shift beyond postcolonial binaries into a truly indigenous epistemology. This allows for:

- Reviving the divine in literary discourse
- Reasserting the unity of aesthetics and ethics
- Recognizing literature as sadhana or spiritual experience

The Panchkosha Framework shows how Indian authors use character arcs and narrative structure not just for plot but as symbolic representations of spiritual truths. Literature thus becomes a mirror for the inner journey, lining up with the Vedic dictum: as is the microcosm, so is the macrocosm (Yatha pinde tatha brahmande).

It represents the intersection between reviving indigenous knowledge traditions and challenging colonial influences in literature and education. Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) represent a vast repository of traditional wisdom encompassing fields like science, medicine, arts, philosophy, and literature, rooted in ancient texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, and Puranas. These systems highlight holistic understanding, interconnectedness, and cultural identity.

Literary decolonization, in contrast, refers to efforts to dismantle colonial messages and restore indigenous voices in literature. In the course of colonial rule, Western education systems marginalized Indian languages and knowledge traditions, creating a dichotomy between "modern" Western knowledge and "traditional" Indian wisdom. This led to a loss of confidence in native systems and a disruption of cultural recognition.

In post-colonial India, literary decolonization involves re-assessing these colonial structures by incorporating IKS into education and literature. To demonstrate, the National Education Policy (2020) highlights incorporating IKS into curricula at all levels to reclaim indigenous knowledge traditions. This includes promoting traditional Indian literary forms, philosophies, and languages alongside universal perspectives. Such incorporation fosters a balanced approach that respects cultural heritage while adapting to modern requirements.

IKS also contests dominant Western epistemologies by contributing alternative structures for understanding reality. For instance, the idea of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* ("the world is one family") demonstrates an inclusive worldview often absent in colonial narratives. Similarly, traditional Indian literary forms like epics and oral traditions are being revived to counteract the erasure caused by colonialism.

Hence, the cooperation between Indian Knowledge Systems and literary decolonization aims to restore India's cultural pride while fostering intercultural dialogue in a globalized world.

CONCLUSION

Raja Rao, Sri Aurobindo, and R. K. Narayan, by way of their remarkable literary styles, collectively weave a rich tapestry that incorporates the Indian spiritual ethos into the English literary canon. Their narratives, investigated through the Panchkosha framework, reveal an extreme engagement with Indian Knowledge Systems, offering readers a pathway to self-realization that elevates mere narrative.

Raja Rao's philosophical depth in *The Serpent and the Rope* attracts readers into an introspective journey, mirroring the protagonist's quest for ultimate truth. Sri Aurobindo's epic *Savitri* uses symbolic poetry to show the soul's ascent through the layers of ignorance, advocating for a holistic transformation through Integral Yoga. On the other hand, R. K. Narayan's *The Guide*, with its attainable narrative, subtly embeds spiritual insights into the mundane, demonstrating how daily life can be a vehicle for extreme ethical and spiritual awakening.

While differing in their approaches, these authors, converge in their depiction of human consciousness evolving through the Panchkoshas. Rao highlights the intellectual and blissful sheaths, Aurobindo incorporates all five in his vision of integral transformation, and Narayan grounds his narrative in the physical and vital aspects of existence, ultimately guiding his characters toward transcendence. This convergence emphasizes the universality of the Panchkosha model as a tool for understanding human experience, irrespective of cultural or linguistic boundaries.

By incorporating Indian Knowledge Systems into their works, these literary giants revive the sacred within literary discourse, reassert the unity of aesthetics and ethics, and recognize literature as a form of spiritual

practice. Their contributions show a significant step towards literary decolonization, where English becomes a medium for conveying spiritual knowledge rooted in Indian philosophical traditions. The Panchkosha framework, therefore, suggests a new paradigm for literary criticism, one that honours India's spiritual and philosophical legacy and provides a richer, more nuanced understanding of the human condition as depicted in literature. In contrast, the works of Raja Rao, Sri Aurobindo, and R. K. Narayan not only enrich Indian English literature but also serve as a beacon for universal literature, enlightening the way towards spiritual and philosophical authenticity.

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