



From Annamaya to Anandamaya: A Panchakosha Reading of Selfhood and Transcendence in R. K. Narayan's *The Guide*

Ayushi Parashar

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Central University of Jharkhand, Ranchi

*Corresponding Author: Ayushi Parashar & Email: ayushi.singh7.1998@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958) has long divided its readers over a single question: is Raju's terminal fast a genuine transformation, an accident, or a fraud that a credulous village mistakes for sainthood? The dominant critical answers; ironic, existentialist, psychoanalytic, and postcolonial read an Indian novel with tools shaped for other traditions. This paper reverses that procedure, reading *The Guide* from inside the intellectual world that gave the novel its meaning. It argues that Raju's life is not a random slide into fraud but a structured movement inward that the *Panchakosha* of the *Taittiriya Upaniṣad*—the five sheaths through which the self passes from the body of food (*annamaya*) to the ground of bliss (*anandamaya*) maps with striking precision. Read alongside the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s teaching of *Nishkama Karma*, action performed without attachment to its fruit, this framework dissolves the saint-or-fraud impasse: the authenticity of Raju's final act lies not in its outcome but in the emptying of self behind it. Situating the reading within current debates on indigenous critical methods, the paper argues that Indian Knowledge Systems can function not as a decorative source of themes but as a rigorous, working method for reading Indian English fiction.

Keywords: Panchakosha; Nishkama Karma; Indian Knowledge Systems; Vedanta; indigenous literary criticism

1. Introduction: Can Our Traditions Read Our Literature?

"The Self is not to be sought through the body, nor grasped through the senses, but known through the stilling of desire."

— Katha Upaniṣad

When scholars gather under the banner of Indian Knowledge Systems, one question sits quietly beneath the discussion: can the wisdom traditions of India actually *read* our literature, or are they only decorative background to it? The distinction is not trivial. It is one thing to observe that a novel alludes to the *Upaniṣads* or borrows a motif from the *Gītā*; it is quite another to claim that a Vedantic framework



can perform the analytical labour of criticism—that it can account for how a narrative is built, how a character is transformed, and how a reader is to weigh the moral shape of an ending. This paper takes up that larger question through a single, familiar novel.

R. K. Narayan's *The Guide* (1958), which won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1960, is taught in nearly every Indian classroom and argued over in nearly every seminar room. And the argument almost always comes down to its ending. Raju, a small-time tourist guide and confident man, is mistaken by a drought-stricken village for a holy man, is manoeuvred into undertaking a fast to bring rain, and dies or seems to die before the rain arrives. What are we to make of that ending? Generations of critics have called it many things (see Prasad): a bitter irony, the accidental manufacture of a saint out of a fraud, an absurdist joke in which a gullible crowd forces meaning onto a man who never sought it. Each of these readings is intelligent, and each borrows its lens from elsewhere from existentialism, from psychoanalysis, from the postcolonial critique of the colonial encounter. Useful as they are, they read an Indian novel with tools shaped for other soil.

In the spirit of a criticism grown from Indian roots, this paper attempts the opposite experiment: to read *The Guide* from inside the tradition that gave its world meaning. The claim is a simple one. Raju's life is not a random slide into fraud that luck redeems at the last moment. It is a structured movement inward, and the structure it follows is one Indian text described with great precision the *Panchakosha* of the *Taittiriya Upaniṣad*, read together with the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s teaching of *Nishkama Karma*. This is not an attempt to canonise Raju or to sentimentalise the novel. It is an attempt to demonstrate that Indian Knowledge Systems can do the hard analytical work of criticizing the very ambition that the *National Education Policy 2020* has placed before the

discipline and are not merely a storehouse of themes to be pointed at.

The argument proceeds in five movements. It first situates the reading within the existing critical conversation on *The Guide*, showing where the saint-or-fraud impasse comes from and why it persists. It then sets out the *Panchakosha* model and the ethic of *Nishkama Karma* as a critical method rather than a thematic ornament. The central section reads Raju's life as an ascent through the five sheaths, scene by scene. A fourth section returns to the disputed ending and shows how *Nishkama Karma* dissolves the either/or the novel's critics have felt bound to answer. A final section steps back from Raju to the larger methodological stake: what it would mean to build a criticism of Indian English fiction from indigenous ground.

2. The Critical Impasse: A Review of the Debate

The reception history of *The Guide* is, to a remarkable degree, a history of arguments about its final pages. The most influential early frame is the ironic one. M. K. Naik's study of Narayan reads the whole body of the fiction under the sign of an ironic vision (Naik), in which Malgudi's ordinary men are gently exposed by a gap between what they intend and what they become. On this account Raju's sainthood is the supreme Narayanian irony: a swindler is remade into a *mahatma* by the very gullibility he once exploited, and the novel's comedy lies in the distance between the shabby cause and the sacred effect. The reading is powerful and has proved durable, but it purchases its coherence at a price. It must treat Raju's transformation as something that happens *to* him rather than *in* him an accident of circumstance and crowd psychology because irony, as a structural principle, needs the transformation to be hollow. If Raju genuinely changes, the irony collapses.



A second family of readings turns to the existentialist and absurdist vocabulary that dominated mid-century literary study. Here Raju becomes a man thrown into a situation not of his choosing, condemned to enact a role until the role consumes him; the fast is an absurd gesture in an indifferent universe, and the ambiguous rain is the novel's refusal to grant consolation. This lens captures something real about Raju's passivity and about Narayan's famous reticence. But it imports a metaphysics of meaninglessness that the novel does not obviously share, and it cannot easily explain why Raju's final state reads, to so many readers, as peace rather than despair.

A third approach, broadly psychoanalytic, locates the drama inside Raju's psyche: his need for approval, his theatrical self-fashioning, the collapse of the performing ego under the weight of the part it has taken on. And a fourth, postcolonial in temper, reads the novel's spiritual apparatus with suspicion, asking whether the village's manufacture of a saint reproduces, in miniature, the colonial habit of projecting authenticity onto the exotic. Critics working in the mythic vein, such as Chitra Sankaran, have done valuable work recovering the Hindu substructure of Narayan's plots (Sankaran), showing how deeply his narratives are patterned by traditional story-shapes; this scholarship establishes that the tradition is *present* in the fiction. What it has been less concerned to argue is that the tradition can serve as the *analytic* itself.

Running alongside these text-centred debates is a broader methodological conversation that has gathered force in recent years: the call to develop indigenous frameworks for reading Indian literature rather than importing critical vocabularies wholesale. This impulse is not new; it reaches back to early attempts to recover *rasa* theory and *dhvani* as living critical instruments but it has acquired fresh institutional urgency. The concern animating it is that

a discipline which reads its own literature exclusively through borrowed lenses risks a subtle self-estrangement, seeing its texts always as instances of something theorised elsewhere. The present reading enters this conversation not by argument alone but by demonstration: the surest way to show that an indigenous framework can do critical work is to put it to work on a hard case and let the results speak.

What unites the text-centred criticism surveyed above is a shared demand for a verdict. Each framework, in its own idiom, asks the reader to decide whether Raju is finally a saint or a fraud, whether the ending is transcendence or joke, whether the rain redeems or mocks. The persistence of the debate suggests that the question, as posed, may be the wrong one that the either/or is an artefact of the tools, not of the text. This paper proposes that a framework drawn from the novel's own cultural world does not merely offer a fifth reading to set beside the others. It reframes the question so that the impasse dissolves.

3. The Panchakosha and Nishkama Karma as Critical Method

3.1 The Five Sheaths

The *Taittiriya Upaniṣad*, in its *Brahmānanda Vallī*, pictures the human person as five sheaths (*koshas*), one within the other, arranged from the coarsest to the most subtle. The *annamaya kosha* is the body made of food—the physical organism sustained by what it eats. Within it breathes the *pranamaya kosha*, the vital sheath of energy, breath, and appetite. Subtler still is the *manomaya kosha*, the sheath of the restless mind: desire, memory, emotion, and the ego's ceaseless self-assertion. Deeper lies the *vijñanamaya kosha*, the sheath of discernment, where judgement, conscience, and reflective intelligence live. And at the centre is the *anandamaya kosha*, the sheath of bliss, which opens onto the unconditioned Self, the *Atman* (see Sarma).



The decisive point for criticism is that these sheaths are not a static diagram to be memorised. They describe a *journey*. To grow inwardly, in the *Upaniṣadic* account, is to loosen one's identification with the outer sheaths and to settle nearer the centre. A person is not a fixed thing but a movement now dispersed outward into body and appetite, now gathered inward toward discernment and stillness. It is this dynamic quality that turns the *Panchakosha* from a chart of anatomy into a genuine psychology, and it is precisely as a psychology of inward change that it becomes usable for reading a novel about a man who changes. A *bildung*, an arc of transformation, is exactly what the model is built to measure.

3.2 The Ethic of Non-Attachment

If the *Panchakosha* supplies a psychology, the *Bhagavad Gītā* supplies the ethic that governs movement through it. The *Gītā*'s central counsel of *Nishkama Karma*—action performed without attachment to its fruit (*phala*) answers a question the sheath-model raises but does not resolve: how does one move inward? The tempting inference is that inwardness requires withdrawal, a fleeing of action into contemplation. The *Gītā* rejects precisely this. One reaches the innermost sheath not by abandoning action but by acting with the ego let go, so that the deed is performed for its own sake and offered up rather than clutched for its reward. Detachment, in this teaching, is not indifference; it is a mode of full engagement stripped of self-interest.

Taken together, the two frameworks furnish three distinct critical instruments. The *Panchakosha* offers a *structural* instrument a way of seeing how a narrative of inward change is built. It offers a *characterological* instrument and psychology for how a protagonist grows. And *Nishkama Karma* adds an *ethical* instrument, a criterion for weighing the moral value of an act that depends neither on the actor's past

nor on the act's outcome, but on the disposition behind it. This is a great deal more than a thematic reading can supply, and it is the burden of the sections that follow to show these instruments at work.

3.3 A Note on Method and Its Limits

Two cautions are in order. First, to read Raju through the sheaths is not to claim that Narayan consciously encoded the *Taittiriya Upaniṣad* into his plot, nor that the correspondence is exact at every point; the argument is that the tradition supplies a description of inward change under which the novel's shape becomes newly legible, not that the novelist worked from a blueprint. Second, an indigenous method must earn its keep by the same standards as any other by fit, economy, and explanatory reach and not by cultural entitlement alone. The test throughout is whether the framework accounts for more of the text, and accounts for it more economically, than the reigning alternatives. Where a Vedantic reading merely relabels what irony already explains, it adds nothing. The claim here is stronger: that it explains what irony cannot, namely the felt authenticity of an ending that irony must treat as hollow.

4. Raju's Ascent Through the Five Sheaths

4.1 The Outer Sheaths: Annamaya and Pranamaya

Consider where Raju begins. The Railway Raju the reader first meets in Malgudi lives almost entirely in the two outer sheaths. His world is food, comfort, money, and the small satisfactions of a well-managed appetite. Even his vocation as a guide is a performance calibrated to gratify the senses of his tourists' and his own art of pleasing, flattering, and supplying. He is a creature of the surface in the most literal sense: he lives by what he can sell to the eye and the palate. When Rosie enters his life, the *pranamaya* sheath takes command. His wanting of her is bodily and instinctive long before it becomes anything he reflects upon; it is appetite before it is



love. At this stage Raju simply *has his* desires. There is as yet no self in him that stands apart from them and looks back at them no distance between the man and his craving. The *Panchakosha* names this condition exactly: a self identified with its outer sheaths, dispersed into sensation, with the inner sheaths dormant.

It is worth noticing how well this beginning fits the novel's peculiar architecture. *The Guide* is famously told in two interleaved strands: a present-tense narrative of the temple swami and a retrospective, first-person confession of the old Railway Raju and critics have long debated the effect of this doubling. Reading through the sheaths, the structure is not merely a technical flourish but a formal image of the argument itself: the outer, past self and the inner, present self are laid side by side so that the reader can watch the distance between them open. The confession that Raju pours out to Velan is the *vijnanamaya* sheath performing its proper work of discernment upon the *annamaya* and *manomaya* life it is narrating. The novel's form, in other words, already enacts the movement inward that its plot describes.

4.2 The Reign of the Mind: Manomaya

Once Raju becomes Rosie's manager and remakes her into the celebrated dancer Nalini, a different sheath takes charge. This is the reign of the *manomaya kosha*—the phase of ego, possessiveness, and a mind that will not be still. Raju's world enlarges, but it enlarges under the sign of the grasping self. His jealousy of Rosie's independence, his hunger to control her career and her earnings, his growing appetite for status and for the theatrical role of the impresario, all belong to a mind captive to its own image. The crisis of this sheath is his forgery of Rosie's signature, the crime that sends him to prison an act that is the *manomaya* self in its purest form: a lie told to secure possession, ego defending its constructed world. Narayan lets the reader hear the

complacency that precedes the crime in Raju's own retrospective voice: "*There was no limit to my self-congratulation*" (149), he confesses, and it is this same unchecked self-satisfaction, not calculation, that carries him to the forged signature.

Here Narayan does something quietly. Prison is not merely Raju's punishment; it is his first discipline. He emerges from it having learned, almost despite himself, a first small taste of detachment, the forced loosening of a grip on a life he can no longer manage. The forward rush of the *manomaya* self has been interrupted from outside. It is a crucial narrative hinge: the ego cannot free itself by its own effort, and so the novel supplies an external constraint that begins the loosening the self could not begin on its own. Detachment enters Raju's life first as deprivation and only later as freedom.

4.3 The Awakening of Discernment: Vijnanamaya

The real turn comes after his release, when Raju takes shelter in an abandoned temple by the river and the villager Velan mistakes him for a holy man. At first he plays along for the oldest and lowest of reasons, the *annamaya* instinct to keep himself fed and sheltered. But something begins to change beneath the performance. Made to speak wisely, he starts to listen to his own words; made to act holy, he slowly grows into the part he is only pretending to play. This is the *vijnanamaya kosha* stirring into life, the sheath of discernment and conscience. The restless self-questioning that fills these chapters, Raju's discomfort at the widening gap between what he is pretending to be and what he is, marks the moment the reflective intellect at last pulls away from mere appetite. For the first time in the novel, Raju judges himself. The performance becomes a mirror, and the man begins to be ashamed of what it shows. Narayan marks the mechanism itself with wry aside on the shape sainthood takes in the villagers' eyes, one that Raju



comes almost to believe : that its essence lay in “one’s ability to utter mystifying statements” (38).

It is worth dwelling on the mechanism, because it is the subtlest thing in the novel. Raju does not decide to become good. Rather, the role imposed on him by others’ faith creates a discipline that his own will never could, a daily obligation to speak and act as a better man would, until the acting begins, imperceptibly, to reshape the actor. The *viññanamaya* sheath awakens not through introspection alone but through action rightly performed, which is already the Gītā’s insight anticipated: the discernment that transforms comes not from withdrawal but from doing the thing set before one.

4.4 The Threshold of Bliss: Anandamaya

Then comes the famine, and with it the villagers’ unshakeable certainty that their swami will fast to bring the rain. Raju could run; he could confess. He does neither. He accepts the fast, and the quiet turning point of the whole novel arrives when he realises that, for once in his life, he is doing something that is not for himself. Raju’s own summary of his situation, offered to Velan earlier and now bearing its full weight, is the plainest statement in the novel of a self no longer choosing for itself: “It is written on the brow of some that they shall not be left alone” (47). That recognition is the threshold of the *anandamaya kosha* not bliss as any species of pleasure, but the strange peace that arrives when the grasping, wanting self is finally set down. As Raju’s *annamaya* body grows weaker with hunger, he seems to grow clearer within, as though the fading of the outermost sheath allowed the innermost to show through. The novel stages, in the literal wasting of the body, the *Upaniṣadic* movement from the sheath of food toward the ground of bliss.

The famous ambiguity of the closing image the rain Raju feels rising up his legs as he sinks need not be

resolved for the reading to hold. The novel’s last words belong to Raju himself, sensation rather than assertion : “ *Velan, it’s raining in the hills, I can feel it coming under my feet*” (221). Whether it is a real miracle or the last sensation of a dying man is, on this account, beside the point. Read through the *Panchakosha*, that final image is simply the outer sheaths loosening their hold and dissolving back into the ground of being. The novel does not tell us whether the drought breaks because it is not, finally, a novel about weather. It is a novel about a man arriving, sheath by sheath, at the centre he could not have named when he began.

5. Nishkama Karma and the Resolution of the Ending

*“To action alone hast thou a right, and
never at all to its fruits;
let not the fruits of action be thy motive.”*

— Bhagavad Gītā, II.47

Why has the ending of *The Guide* divided readers for so long? The argument of this paper is that the frameworks usually brought to it *force* a verdict. Irony requires the reader to decide that Raju is a fraud whom circumstance ennoble; a sentimental reading requires the reverse; the existentialist reading requires that the whole gesture be absurd. Each demands an either/or. But the *Bhagavad Gītā*’s teaching of *Nishkama Karma* refuses that either/or at its root. For the Gītā, what makes an action pure is neither how it turns out nor what the doer once was, but whether it is performed without clinging to its fruit.

Apply this criterion to Raju’s fast and the disputed question reorganises itself. Raju does not fast in order to become holy, sainthood is not a *phala* he is pursuing. And by the end he is no longer even fasting in order to deceive; the swindle that began the episode has fallen away. He fasts because the act is simply there before him and he has stopped acting for



himself. That emptying of self-interest the very movement the *Panchakosha* traces inward is where the authenticity lies. Whether the rain comes is, in this light, almost immaterial: the rain is a *phala*, a fruit that the purified actor has already released. This is precisely what ironic reading can never accommodate. Raju's transcendence is not cancelled by his shabby past, because *Nishkama Karma* does not weigh the past; nor does it depend on the downpour, because it does not weigh the outcome. It rests entirely in the manner in which he performs his last act.

This is also why the novel's much-noted ambiguity is not evasion but precision. Narayan withholds the miracle because the framework within which the act becomes meaningful has no need of it. To supply a definite miracle would be to make the act's worth depend on its fruit the very attachment the ethic renounces. To supply a definite failure would be to reduce the act to folly. By leaving the rain suspended between arriving and not arriving, Narayan keeps the reader's attention where the *Gītā* keeps it: on the disposition of the actor, not the yield of the act. The ambiguity, so often read as the mark of the novel's irony, turns out on this account to be the mark of its fidelity to *Nishkama Karma*.

6. Toward an Indigenous Critical Method

It remains to step back from Raju to the larger point, because the reading offered here is finally a point about method. To read *The Guide* through the *Panchakosha* is to show that an Indian knowledge system can serve as more than a bag of themes to be spotted in a text. The five sheaths gave this reading three things at once: a way of seeing how the story is built, a psychology for how its central character grows, and an ethic for how to weigh his final act, all of it drawn from the same intellectual world the novel itself inhabits. That triple yield is the difference between using a tradition as an ornament and using it

as a method. An ornamental reading notes that Narayan alludes to Hindu ideas; a methodological reading uses those ideas to explain the novel's form, its psychology, and its ethics, and finds that they explain more than the imported alternatives do.

This is precisely the ambition the *National Education Policy 2020* has set before Indian scholarship: to grow criticism from Indian roots rather than forever borrowing it from elsewhere. The point is not a nativist rejection of Western theory, which would be both impoverishing and, in a discipline built on comparison, incoherent. Existentialist, psychoanalytic, and postcolonial readings of *The Guide* have taught genuine lessons, and an indigenous method that could not converse with them would be the poorer for it. The claim is narrower and more constructive: that for a literature written in an inherited language, as much Indian English fiction is, having a critical vocabulary drawn from one's own intellectual traditions is not a small matter. It lets us see the familiar afresh. Narayan's celebrated plainness and restraint, so often mistaken for something almost English (Walsh), turn out to rest on a quietly Vedantic frame, a temper of non-attachment that shapes not only what he narrates but how.

There is a wider lesson here for the reading of Indian English fiction generally. If a Vedantic psychology can measure the arc of a Narayan protagonist, comparable indigenous frameworks may illuminate other bodies of work whose spiritual architecture current criticism tends to translate immediately into Western terms. The *Panchakosha* is one model among many that the tradition offers; the *puruṣārthas*, the theory of *rasa*, the ethics of *dharma* in its situational complexity each is a candidate method awaiting the kind of patient application that comparative theory has long enjoyed. The task this paper illustrates in miniature is the recovery of these



frameworks not as heritage to be admired but as instruments to be used.

7. Conclusion

Read through the *Panchakosha* of the *Taittiriya Upaniṣad* and the *Nishkama Karma* of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *The Guide* stops being a novel about an accidental saint and becomes a novel about a man climbing, sheath by sheath, toward something he cannot name. Raju's road from the body of appetite to the peace of a self set down is neither a lucky accident nor a pious fable. It is a shape the tradition has always known, and the novel's disputed ending so long the occasion for a verdict the text refuses to underwrite turns out to be not an evasion but an exact rendering of an act performed without attachment to its fruit.

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If we want to read Indian literature as it once understood itself, we will have to keep recovering the frameworks its world was built from. This reading of one novel offers in that spirit a single illustration that the *Panchakosha* can do real critical work, and a modest vote of confidence in the larger task before the discipline: to let our own texts speak, at last, in their own voice.

*"From the unreal lead me to the real,
from darkness lead me to light,
from death leads me to immortality."*
— Brhadaranyaka Upaniṣad, I.3.28