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The Everyday Life of Culture: Knowledge Transmission and Continuity in Indigenous and Adivasi Communities of South India

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the transmission of traditional, ecological, cosmological, and social knowledge between the Kāṭṭu Nāyakar, Yerukala, and Irula communities of southern India. It argues that day-to-day activities such as domestic work, subsistence agriculture, divination, ritual, games and seasonal mobility constitute a structured learning ecology in which knowledge is learned through embodied participation rather than formal education. This article presents the Ethnocentric Collaborative Decolonisation Project (ECDP), an innovative methodological framework based on the doctoral research of the author, which places indigenous communities as co-investigators and epistemic agents. It does so by drawing on the theoretical frameworks of socio-cultural learning, culture, learning and practice, symbolic interactionism, practice theory and habitus, social learning theory, cultural reproduction and the tacit knowledge of Polanyi. Using primary ethnographic data and comparative analyses of Adivasi communities such as the Gond, Santal, Warli, Toda, Khasi and Chenchu, the study shows how intergenerational learning works through material mediation, narrative, gesture, rhythm and mutual responsibility. Language use, kinship practices, community exchanges, work, play, and ritual serve as important means of cultural continuity in everyday activities. Intergenerational learning systems that transmit cultural memory, moral reasoning, and environmental awareness include divination, ritual performance, oral storytelling, and apprenticeship. These findings undermine deficit-based educational models, support decolonial reform, and validate Indigenous pedagogical ecologies as epistemologically coherent, adaptive, and politically important knowledge systems in the context of India's National Education Policy 2020 and other global discussions of epistemic justice.

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1. Introduction

In modern South Asia, as formal education systems spread to more rural and underserved areas and digital infrastructures reach more rural and semi-nomadic populations, dominant development paradigms that privilege institutionalised, standardised forms of knowledge over ecological, cosmological, and social epistemologies of Indigenous and *Adivasi* peoples persist (Wadhwa, 2024, Sinha, 2020). The national curriculum in India, informed by post-colonial and now neoliberal educational logics, functions within a universalistic framework that does not always consider the particular socio-cultural realities of Adivasi life and thus systematically marginalises younger generations from their knowledge systems (Sucharita, 2023). However, as the doctoral research informing this article shows, structural exclusion does not render Indigenous Knowledge extinct, rather, it moves the transmission of knowledge to the organised informality of everyday social life (Kanyadari, 2025, p. 10).

Building on that doctoral research, which included a two-year ethnographic study of the *Yerukala, Irular,* and *Kāṭṭu Nāyakar* communities, this article considers how traditional knowledge is produced, maintained, and renewed through the regular rhythms of everyday life and introduces an original framework, the Ethno-Collaborative Decolonising Praxis (ECDP), as a methodological contribution to decolonial ethnographic research. The main argument is that the rhythms of daily life make up a pedagogical ecology, which is an organised, morally sound, and ecologically based curriculum that transmits knowledge about plants, cosmology, exploration, social governance, and livelihood through material engagement, oral narrative, ritual performance, and embodied participation rather than abstract instruction. The doctoral thesis is expanded upon in this paper, which offers a more comprehensive framework for comparing Adivasi and Indigenous pedagogies around the world.

Everyday practices such as domestic work, divinatory apprenticeship, oral storytelling, and seasonal mobility are the sites of intergenerational knowledge transmission in the Yerukala, Irular, and Kāṭṭu Nāyakar communities. What are the principal modalities through which ecological, cosmological, and social knowledge is acquired and validated in these communities, and how do the everyday pedagogical ecologies of these communities represent a cohesive, epistemically autonomous alternative to formal schooling, and what are the implications for educational policy and decolonial practice.

2. Literature Review: Indigenous Knowledge Transmission and Everyday Life as a Site of Learning

Over the past 20 years, conservationist paradigms that view cultural knowledge as a static legacy have given way to practice-oriented accounts that emphasise learning as an ongoing, relational, and socially embedded process (Reyes-García and Fernández-Llamazares, 2019). This has resulted in a theoretical reframing of the transmission of Indigenous knowledge. Naveh (2016) and Kanyadari (2025) state that the relational turn recognises that everyday tasks such as household chores, subsistence activities, participation in rituals, play, and seasonal mobility are not secondary contexts but rather the primary sites of learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) provide a conceptual link between Indigenous pedagogies and mainstream educational research by contending that communities of practice and situated learning develop competence through acceptable peripheral involvement in actual community practices rather than through discrete instruction. This pattern is seen in Adivasi communities in South India, where children gradually participate in ritualistic and productive activities and learn technical, ethical, and cosmological concepts by observing, imitating, and receiving guidance from more seasoned members (Naveh, 2016, Pukkalla and Sharma, 2021). This pattern is confirmed empirically in

Hewlett et al. (2011), who discovered that routine participation, imitation, and observation are the main mechanisms of cultural learning, which is ingrained in daily social interaction.

Another theoretical framework that is relevant to Adivasi contexts is the Sociocultural Learning Theory of Vygotsky (1978), which states that cognitive development is a social process that takes place within culturally structured activity systems. His Zone of Proximal Development, the zone between what a learner can do without support and what can be achieved with guidance, aligns perfectly with the apprenticeship-based learning in Adivasi contexts where young people are progressively supported by elders in divinatory, foraging, and ritual activities to become full participants in the community. This social constructivist perspective is augmented by Bandura (1977) and his Social Learning Theory, which underscores observational learning, modelling, and imitation as the main modes of cultural transmission. Instead of receiving didactic instruction, children learn competence by watching skilled practitioners and are progressively introduced to increasingly more complex roles by repeatedly performing them.

Relevant here is the concept of enculturation, that is, the process by which individuals acquire the values, customs, and behaviours of their cultural group through participation rather than formal instruction, which is consistent with Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969, Mead, 1934). The meanings of these symbols (cowrie shells, the *Sodhi Burra*, and the *Gadhe* basket) are negotiated, reinforced, and transmitted through use, interaction, and shared interpretation during divination sessions, storytelling circles, and craft apprenticeships.

This analysis is further informed by Bourdieu's (1977) theory of cultural reproduction, which he developed with Passeron (1977), which shows how dominant cultural forms are reproduced across generations through educational institutions, while also showing how marginalised communities reproduce their own cultural forms through everyday practice. For Adivasi communities, cultural reproduction takes place not through schooling but through the embodied repetition of divinatory, ecological, and narrative practices that instil habitus — the durable, transposable dispositions that produce culturally appropriate perceptions, judgements, and actions without explicit rules or instructions. This is not a passive process of cultural transmission but an active process of practice-based learning in which Adivasi learners are active participants in a curriculum that reproduces social identity, ecological knowledge, and moral orientation across generations.

In India, the different Adivasi communities offer an intriguing comparative landscape: for example, the *Gond* of central India orally transmit ecological, cosmological, and moral knowledge through oral traditions in which forests, rivers, and animals are seen as incarnations of ancestral spirits and divine forces (Elwin, 1964, Singh, 1985), the *Santal* of Jharkhand and West Bengal pass on knowledge through the *'baha'* seasonal festivals, song cycles, and communal agricultural practice, embedding ecological and spiritual knowledge in performative and participatory learning (Troisi, 1979, Dube, 1955), the *Warli* of Maharashtra embed cosmological and ecological knowledge in their unique pictorial art, which serves as a pedagogical system conveying relationships between humans, nature, and the divine (Dalmia, 1988), and the *Toda* of the Nilgiris pass on ecological knowledge, kinship obligations, and cosmological frameworks primarily through oral poetry and dairy ritual (Walker, 1986, Rivers, 1906). The *Khasi* of Meghalaya preserve knowledge through matrilineal oral transmission and communal *'nongkrem'* ceremonies, while the *Chenchu* of Andhra Pradesh pass on survival, medicinal, and spiritual knowledge only through embodied practice and intergenerational co-presence (Christoph von, 1943, 1982).

Oral traditions (Dube, 1955, p. 44) among Indian communities are not written down but rather reflect the ecological and social knowledge accumulated over generations. Taken together,

these examples illustrate that the patterns described in Kanyadari's (2025) fieldwork are not unique but rather part of a tradition of Adivasi pedagogy that privileges embodied, relational, and ecologically situated modes of knowing over didactic instruction.

Scholarship on Aboriginal Australian pedagogies further illustrates how learning is structured around listening, observation, narrative, and place-based participation rather than didactic instruction (Frazer and Yunkaporta, 2019). Auger (2016) identifies cultural continuity in Indigenous contexts as both a pedagogical and a public health determinant, closely linked to intergenerational knowledge transmission, collective memory, and cultural connectedness. Indigenous land-based learning theorists—most notably Simpson (2014, 2022)—extend this framework to argue that learning in Nishnaabeg and comparable Indigenous contexts is inseparable from relationships with land, ceremony, ancestors, and non-human beings, it constitutes a moral and ecological practice rather than an abstract transfer of information. As Simpson (2014, p. 9) argues, Indigenous education is not meaningful unless it "comes through the land"—a formulation that resonates directly with the cosmologically grounded everyday pedagogy documented in the South Indian communities studied here.

Mullon and Lehmann (2017) demonstrate, through formal modelling of gene-culture co-evolution, that knowledge transmitted within family-structured populations is sufficient to maintain cumulative cultural systems over time even under conditions of mobility and demographic change — directly challenging deficit models that characterise Indigenous learning as informal or incomplete. Naveh (2016) presents ethnographic evidence from *Nayaka* hunter-gatherers in South India showing how ecological understanding, social norms, and cosmological orientations are passed down through participation in mundane subsistence activities, guided engagement with elders, and contextual interpretation. The current article directly addresses this gap in the systematic underestimation of the pedagogical dimensions of everyday life (Naveh, 2016) and the tendency to treat everyday practice as a passive backdrop to learning rather than as its active site.

However, this body of scholarship also documents persistent structural threats. Heid et al. (2022) and Thomas et al. (2015) warn that Indigenous Knowledge Systems, despite their resilience, remain vulnerable to structural violence, epistemic appropriation, and misrepresentation within dominant development and governance frameworks. In the South Indian context, Sucharita (2023) documents how formal schooling has disrupted Adivasi intergenerational transmission by removing children from the everyday pedagogical contexts through which ecological, ritual, and linguistic knowledge is acquired. The spread of Hindi-medium and English-medium schooling further erodes the linguistic vitality of minority languages such as Yerukala Basha—an oral language with no written script (Kondamma, 2022, as cited in Kanyadari, 2025, p. 339) that depends entirely on intergenerational transmission for its survival.

3. Research Design and Methodology

3.1 Research Questions, Field Sites, and Participants

This article draws on doctoral ethnographic research conducted across three Indian states between 2022 and 2025 (Kanyadari, 2025). The fieldwork comprised six months of intensive ethnographic engagement at community sites in Andhra Pradesh (Duttalur, Dattaluru, and Pamuru), Telangana (Anajipuram), and Tamil Nadu (Thirukalukundram–Thandarai and Vakkampatti), followed by eighteen months of sustained consultation and collaborative analysis with a community-led Epistemic Justice Board (EJB). The three primary communities studied—the *Yerukala* (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana), the *Irular* (Tamil Nadu), and the

Kāṭṭu Nāyakar (Tamil Nadu)—were selected through purposive sampling on the basis of four criteria: (i) the continued practice of oral divinatory traditions, (ii) documented experience of colonial stigmatisation under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, (iii) distinct but historically connected patterns of marginalisation and cultural resilience, and (iv) the researcher's pre-established community relationships, which enabled ethically grounded access.

Data were generated through four integrated methods: (i) systematic participant observation during divinatory sessions, ritual preparations, domestic labour, subsistence foraging, and storytelling circles, (ii) semi-structured interviews with ten key knowledge-holders, conducted in participants' native languages (Telugu, Tamil, and Yerukala Basha where applicable), with community-led interpretation and translation, (iii) storytelling circles and divinatory performance documentation, and (iv) collaborative archival sessions focused on language documentation and material culture.

The ten primary knowledge-holders were Dāsari Rāmulamma (Yerukala fortune-teller, Anajipuram, Telangana), Āvula Kondamma and Dāsari Anjamma (Yerukala sānis, Duttalur, Andhra Pradesh), Lachamma/Lachuvamma (Pāmula community Yerukala sāni, Dattaluru, Andhra Pradesh), Pāpamma (Yerukala practitioner, Duttalur), Kāliamma (Kāṭṭu Nāyakar soothsayer, Vakkampatti, Tamil Nadu), and Venkateshwarlu/Venkatesan and Nāgappan/Karuppan (Irular fortune-tellers, Thirukalukundram–Thandarai, Tamil Nadu). Fieldwork was supported by two partner NGOs: LORD (Pamuru, Andhra Pradesh) and ITWWS (Thirukalukundram, Tamil Nadu). The research received institutional ethical approval from Loughborough University, with community-level consent negotiated through the EJB using protocols designed to respect sacred, gendered, and restricted knowledge.

Note on analytic procedure: Following fieldwork, thematic analysis was conducted collaboratively with EJB members across six dedicated workshops. Coding categories — including embodied apprenticeship, material mediation, oral pedagogy, cosmological practice, and gendered knowledge — were co-developed with community analysts. Preliminary interpretations were returned to community assemblies for validation and correction before incorporation into the final analysis.

Table 1. Summary of Research Design and Fieldwork Parameters

Parameter	Details
Field sites	Duttalur, Dattaluru & Pamuru (Andhra Pradesh), Anajipuram (Telangana), Thirukalukundram–Thandarai & Vakkampatti (Tamil Nadu)
Duration	6 months of intensive fieldwork (2022–2023), 18 months of EJB consultation (2023–2025)
Communities	*Yerukala* (AP/Telangana), *Irular* (Tamil Nadu), *Kāṭṭu Nāyakar* (Tamil Nadu)
Key interlocutors	10 knowledge-holders: Dāsari Rāmulamma, Āvula Kondamma, Dāsari Anjamma, Lachamma/Lachuvamma, Pāpamma, Kāliamma, Venkateshwarlu/ Venkatesan, Nāgappan/Karuppan
Methods	Participant observation, semi-structured interviews (native languages), storytelling circles, material culture documentation, collaborative archiving
NGO partners	LORD (Pamuru, AP), ITWWS (Thirukalukundram, TN)
Analytic procedure	Collaborative thematic coding with EJB, community validation assemblies, co-authored interpretations
Ethics	Loughborough University ethics approval, EJB consent protocols, community data sovereignty agreements, gender-specific consent

3.2 The Ethno-Collaborative Decolonising Praxis (ECDP): An Original Methodological Framework

The Ethno-Collaborative Decolonising Praxis (ECDP) was developed in response to a specific methodological necessity encountered during the doctoral fieldwork: existing participatory and decolonial research frameworks did not provide adequate mechanisms for redistributing interpretive authority, ensuring knowledge sovereignty, and operationalising the principles of epistemic justice within the particular constraints of South Indian Adivasi research (Kanyadari, 2025, pp. 40–51). The ECDP constitutes what Kanyadari (2025, p. 42) describes as ″a methodological restructuring based on tribal ontology and field-generated practice.″

The ECDP is grounded in three intellectual traditions: the cyclical inquiry and collective reflection of Participatory Action Research (Freire, 2019, Kindon et al., 2007), Indigenous Data Sovereignty frameworks that emphasise collective benefit, authority, responsibility, and ethics in knowledge governance (Carroll et al., 2020, Kukutai, 2023), and relational accountability (Chilisa, 2019, Wilson, 2008) that requires scholarly activity to be accountable to institutional protocols but also to the moral, spiritual, and cultural logics of the communities engaged. 'Research' is one of the most problematic words in the Indigenous lexicon, as research has historically been tied to extraction, classification, and colonial control (Smith, 2012, p. 1), and the ECDP directly confronts this legacy.

The ECDP has three phases: Phase 1 (Sovereign Initiation) starts with community-defined research priorities, not institutional agendas (in this study, those priorities — documenting storytelling traditions, preserving *Yerukala Basha (language),* and building community-controlled digital archives — were determined by consensus within the EJB before formal data collection began), Phase 2 (The Collaborative Loop) spans the six months of fieldwork and additional community engagement, which involved recursive, dialogic co-design, collaborative interpretation, and collective validation, and all data collection activities were co-led by community participants who made all decisions about participation, scheduling, and cultural boundaries, and Phase 3 (Restitution and Systemic Integration), which involves co-authorship and data governance agreements to ensure ongoing community ownership of the creation of community-managed digital archives, audiovisual repositories, and locally appropriate educational materials.

All three phases were governed by the Epistemic Justice Board (EJB), which comprised lineage elders, women knowledge-holders, storytellers and diviners, youth representatives, and NGO partners (LORD and ITWWS). The researcher was explicitly positioned as a local research facilitator and co-learner (Kanyadari, 2025, p. 48), and Loughborough University, as an international institution, places itself outside the fieldwork governance, directly addressing what Fricker (2007, p. 1) describes as a uniquely epistemic type of injustice, that is, one where someone is harmed in a way that wrongs them precisely in their role as a knower.

3.3 Limitations

There are a number of limitations that are worth noting: The purposive sample of ten primary knowledge-holders was appropriate for the depth-orientated aims of ethnographic research but limits the generalisability of findings, the insider position of the researcher as a person with intimate knowledge of South Indian Adivasi communities provided access and relational trust but came with risks of interpretive partiality that were managed, but not eliminated, via the EJB validation process, knowledge loss is not quantified, nor are pedagogical outcomes measured, claims are interpretive and relational rather than predictive, and the long-term sustainability of community-managed digital archives is outside the scope of this study.

4. Conceptual Framework: Everyday Life as Indigenous and Adivasi Pedagogy

The conceptual framework is informed by five complementary theoretical traditions that align with the empirical realities that have been documented in the field and, more importantly, with the full spectrum of theoretical contributions in the original conference paper and the revised manuscript: the first is de Certeau's (1984) account of everyday life as a domain of tactical intelligence (ordinary practices in which people navigate, resist, and appropriate dominant structures constitute a form of practical knowledge that is situated, improvisational, and epistemologically grounded), applied to Adivasi contexts to demonstrate how storytelling apprenticeship, forest foraging, domestic labour, and seasonal nomadic lifestyle are not merely functional activities but deliberate, morally structured practices through which cultural meanings are produced, transmitted, and renegotiated (Mitchell, 2007), tactics of everyday life (de Certeau, 1984), particularly applicable to communities that have been subjected to state surveillance and mobility control under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871.

The second tradition is Bourdieu's (1977) practice theory, and in particular, the concept of habitus: the system of lasting, transferable dispositions (e.g., bodily hexis, moral orientations, and aesthetic sensibilities) formed early and durably in socially structured practices (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) further extended this insight to demonstrate how social classes are reproduced not only via formal education systems but also via the everyday tastes, practices, and dispositions that convey cultural capital across generations. In the communities that this paper examined, habitus is cultivated through lifelong practices of cowrie-shell divination, forest plant gathering, and ritual storytelling, these practices, which are not formally taught, embody the classificatory logics, ethical constraints, and relational responsibilities that characterise membership and competence within a community.

The third tradition brings together Vygotsky (1978), who demonstrated that cognitive development is social, culturally organised, and mediated by more knowledgeable others, and Lave and Wenger (1991), who show that communities of practice scaffold learners into full community participation through a process of legitimate peripheral participation, whereby learners start on the periphery and move toward greater participation as experience and social recognition allow. The Adivasi apprenticeship structure of increasing scaffolding by elders into full community participation, and the notion of legitimate peripheral participation as learners gradually move toward fuller participation as they gain competence through experience and social recognition, are precisely mirrored in the Yerukala sāni apprentice.

The fourth tradition is Symbolic Interactionism, as formulated by Mead (1934) and developed by Blumer (1969), which asserts that meaning is not inherent in objects or practices but is created and interpreted within the context of ongoing social interaction and shared symbol use. Divinatory objects (cowrie shells, the *Sodhi Burra*, the *Gadhe* basket), narrative forms, and performative gestures comprise a symbolic vocabulary that Adivasi community members use to construct shared meanings, negotiate social roles, and transmit cultural identity across generations, and the learning that takes place in these contexts is not a passive acquisition of pre-existing meanings but an active, socially mediated process of interpreting symbols and constructing identities.

The fifth tradition draws on Polanyi's (2015) distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge and on Indigenous relational epistemologies articulated by Simpson (2014, 2022), decolonial scholarship by Santos (2018), and epistemic justice theory by Fricker (2007). Polanyi's insight that *"we can know more than we can tell"* is directly applicable to Adivasi knowledge systems, in which competence is substantially embodied, gestural, and relational — acquired through doing rather than through propositional instruction. Simpson's concept of land as pedagogy establishes that Indigenous learning systems are distinct ontological orientations in which

learning is inseparable from relationships with land, ancestors, and non-human beings. Santos (2018, p. 8) identifies the systematic destruction of non-Western knowledge systems—what he terms *'epistemicide'—as* a constitutive feature of colonial modernity and argues for an ecology of knowledges that recognises epistemological diversity as a prerequisite for cognitive justice. Fricker (2007, p. 1) supplies the philosophical vocabulary of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, enabling identification of the specific mechanisms by which Indigenous knowledge-holders are wronged in their capacity as knowers. The ECDP operationalises all of these intellectual commitments in concrete research practice.

5. Findings: Everyday Pedagogical Ecologies in the Yerukala, Irular, and Kāṭṭu Nāyakar Communities

The following five subsections present the principal ethnographic findings. Each subsection grounds theoretical claims in specific field observations and participant accounts, distinguishing empirical data from interpretive analysis throughout. A summary table is provided at the end of this section.

5.1 Embodied Apprenticeship and Situated Learning: The Pedagogical Structure of Everyday Practice

All three communities incorporate children as legitimate peripheral participants who initially imitate gestures, rhythms, and interpretive sequences before being given increasingly defined roles in the productive and ritual life of the community (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29). This trajectory was most thoroughly described in the case of the Yerukala. During fieldwork observations over multiple sessions in Duttalur, young girls (some as young as seven years old) first started to participate in divination by imitating the posture, breath, and vocalisations of their grandmothers during Gadde divination. Āvula Kondamma confirmed this trajectory directly:

> *"Traditionally, we begin learning the art of Gadde from a very young age — usually around eight or nine, sometimes even as early as seven. The learning process is primarily hands-on and experiential. As children, we accompany our elders, observing closely as they perform their readings. We watch how they analyse palm lines, handle the cowry shells, interact with customers, and interpret the various signs and symbols. Gradually, we begin practising ourselves, initially with family members before extending our skills to others within the community." (Āvula Kondamma, 2022, as cited in Kanyadari, 2025, p. 339)*

This developmental trajectory exemplifies what Kanyadari (2025, p. 230) describes as a 'non-formal apprenticeship'—a process that accords with both Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development and Rogoff's (1990) concept of apprenticeship in thinking as a socially mediated and culturally embedded activity, and with Lave and Wenger's (1991) account of legitimate peripheral participation. By adolescence, girls transition from role-play to recognised professional performance as Sānis or soothsayers (Kondamma, 2022, Anjamma, 2022, Pāpamma, 2022, as cited in Kanyadari, 2025, p. 230). This trajectory also illustrates Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory: competence is acquired primarily through observational learning and modelling, with the skilled elder functioning as a 'cultural attractor' whose behaviours offer reliable demonstrations of community-valued expertise.

Among the *Kāṭṭu Nāyakar*, the divinatory recital form known as Manapaaddam exemplifies the cumulative and embodied character of this learning. Kāliamma, interviewed in Vakkampatti, described her training as ″a difficult process of memorising rhythmic soothsayer

lyrics and ancestral tales″ (Kāliamma, 2022, as cited in Kanyadari, 2025, p. 108), emphasising the centrality of oral transmission in preserving Indigenous knowledge. This account aligns with Polanyi's (2015) notion of tacit knowledge and Goody's (1993) and Ong's (2002) analyses of oral cultures as epistemological systems organised through situational reasoning and performative verification rather than abstract representation.

Similar observations were made in Irular communities in Thirukalukundram–Thandarai, where young children accompany older adults on foraging trips to the forest from a young age (Venkateswarlu, 2022, as cited in Kanyadari, 2025, p. 169). Importantly, ecological knowledge, including the identification, preparation, and responsible use of medicinal plants, is transmitted by shared experience, observation, and guided practice, and in doing so, the knowledge is simultaneously ecological and moral: to know when to harvest a plant, or to bring something back to the forest after taking from it, is to acquire an ethical position as well as a technical ability. Ethnobotanical work among the Irular corroborates these findings (Venkatachalapathi et al., 2018), describing how knowledge about medicinal plants, and more generally subsistence knowledge, is maintained by ongoing interactions with specific landscapes that reinforce the practice of stewardship by use rather than exploitation.

5.2 Material Mediation and Tacit Knowledge: Objects as Pedagogical Agents

In all three communities, material objects are pedagogical mediators, not neutral instruments but agents of learning that organise bodily attention, temporal rhythm, and ethical orientation. One of the most frequently cited examples is that of the cowrie shell (*Gavvalu/Muthu/Muvvalu*) in *Yerukala* and *Kāṭṭu Nāyakar* divination practices, where fieldwork observations at Duttalur showed that the spatial distribution of cowrie shells in a divination session constitutes a visual grammar that produces cosmological meaning: the shells govern the practitioner's gesture, the order of her vocalisations, and the timing of her interpretive assessments in practical and cosmological ways (Kanyadari, 2025, p. 139).

Children learned cosmology from the rhythmic vibration and physical presence, and the *Sodhi Burra*, a single stretched-string instrument played by hand, was an ancient connection in fieldwork observations (Anjamma, 2022, as cited in Kanyadari, 2025). As Anjamma (2022, as cited in Kanyadari, 2025) states, "The *Sodhi Burra* is about its authenticity as a sign of Yerukala identity, not form or the music it makes" (Kanyadari, 2025, p. 139). Playing the *Sodhi Burra* requires coordination and dexterity, and it represents the power of the *Sāni* (Yerukala fortune teller) and the strength of her words, as symbolic interactionism would suggest (Blumer, 1969). The *Sodhi Burra* is an object that represents community identity, cosmological belief, and pedagogical authority, which are collapsed into a tangible material object that is shared and communicated through its use and performance.

Cultural practices, at the same time practical, aesthetic, and pedagogical, are "determined by the cultural resilience, ingenuity, and the interplay of tradition, economic opportunity, and community exchange that shapes them" (Kanyadari, 2025, p. 138). For example, Pāmula Lachamma made a *Sodhi Burra* out of recycled materials found in the village (Kanyadari, 2025). The physical actions of making and using provide cosmological orientation and ethical discipline without direct verbal instruction, and the *Gadhe* (ritual basket/sacred mobile shrine) does the same, transforming everyday life into a holy space. This is in line with evidence that tacit knowledge is inherently embodied and tool-mediated, and that repeated, rhythmic activity (e.g., material engagement) reconfigures perception and competence in ways that are beyond the scope of verbal instruction (Boris and Odgaard, 2014, Polanyi, 2015).

5.3 Oral Pedagogy and Dialogic Knowledge: Storytelling, Narrative, and Cosmological Transmission

Oral narrative in all three communities simultaneously fulfils epistemic functions. These include the storage of ecological and cosmological knowledge, the foundation for moral reasoning, social norms and relational responsibilities, and the conditions of intergenerational learning. For instance, Dsari Rmulamma's narrative, which was recorded at a storytelling circle in Anajipuram, Telangana, involves interweaves accounts of her ancestors relocating to specific forest locations, ethical guidelines for relationships with other-than-human beings, genetic details that influence community obligations, and empirical knowledge regarding the availability of plants (Kanyadari, 2025, p. 13). Younger listeners are active co-constructors of meaning, not passive receivers, thanks to her narrative form, which includes call-and-response patterns, rhythmic repetition, and audience participation. It is "a matrilineal inheritance that defines the identity and the sacred vocation of her family" and "a sacred practice rooted in myth and intergenerational story," according to Dsari Anjamma (2022), as cited by Kanyadari (2025, p. 122).

Such a dialogic approach to oral pedagogy fits with Vygotsky (1978) who described language as the medium of social thought, Freire (2019) who described learning as a social process of meaning-making, Goody (1993) who stated that oral cultures structure knowledge around situational reasoning rather than abstraction, and Cruikshank (1998) who ethnographically studied Indigenous oral traditions in the Yukon whose analysis of folktale transmission in the Arctic (Ross and Atkinson, 2015) empirically suggests that oral traditions are high-fidelity mechanisms for transferring culturally significant information across generations in mobile populations.

Venkatesan's reflection on the pedagogical imperative of oral tradition is instructive:

> *"We need to create a space where people, especially the younger generation, can appreciate the depth and significance of our traditions. This begins with education—teaching the historical, cultural, and spiritual significance of our practices. By delving into the philosophy and wisdom behind each ritual, we can help people understand that these traditions are not merely procedural but are rooted in timeless values and holistic development." (Venkatesan, 2022, as cited in Kanyadari, 2025, p. 365)*

5.4 Gender, Generation, and the Social Architecture of Knowledge

Gendered and generational organisation does not constitute a barrier to knowledge access in the communities studied but rather a structured distribution of epistemic authority that ensures comprehensive community coverage and adaptive flexibility. Among the Yerukala, divinatory authority (the role of *sāni*) is matrilineally transmitted, with women serving as primary public practitioners of cowrie-shell reading and Sodhi Burra performance. Girls as young as nine begin the learning process from their mothers and grandmothers (Thurston, 1912, Kanyadari, 2025, p. 125). As Kondamma (2022, as cited in Kanyadari, 2025, p. 125) explains, her stories are her community's "history, wisdom, and teachings″, used in readings to assist seekers in connecting with their own life journeys.

This gendered knowledge structure illustrates Pfeiffer and Butz's (2005) comparative finding that women's roles as carers, subsistence gatherers, and ritual preparers position them as primary transmitters of ecological, medicinal, and moral knowledge during early childhood socialisation. It also accords with Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) account of how cultural reproduction operates through gendered social roles, in which the distribution of cultural capital along gender lines ensures both the continuity and the adaptive flexibility of community

knowledge systems. Fieldwork documented how younger women in particular are playing pivotal roles in hybrid pedagogical practices that integrate oral tradition with digital tools — recording and sharing ritual songs via mobile phones and participating in language documentation projects (Ajani et al., 2024). This is not assimilation but resurgence: a strategic engagement with new media that extends the reach of oral traditions while preserving their relational and cosmological integrity.

5.5 Mobility, Cosmology, and Adaptive Learning

For the Yerukala and Kāṭṭu Nāyakar, who have historically been semi-nomadic and were under extreme mobility restrictions under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 (Radhakrishna, 2001, Nigam, 1990, Kamble et al., 2023), movement is not a logistical challenge to learning but a constitutive pedagogical requirement. Fieldwork observations revealed that the travel through forest ecologies, market circuits, ritual sites, and multilingual social worlds results in a certain kind of adaptive competence, that is, the ability to read new environments, to negotiate with multiple audiences, to adapt ritual practices to different material conditions, and to maintain cultural continuity through spatial discontinuity (Kanyadari, 2025, p. 9).

Dāsari Rāmulamma, from Anajipuram, Telangana, exemplifies this mobile pedagogy, having developed her divinatory and ecological skills, such as reading environmental signs, interpreting animal behaviour, and using practical ecological reasoning to address community issues, over decades of traveling and living within communities across Telangana (Kanyadari, 2025, p. 13). All three communities have similar adaptive capacity: cosmological knowledge is maintained through disruption of land use patterns by ecological change, displacement, or state regulation, as fieldwork shows that stories, chants, and ritual gestures reanimate ancestral spatial relations and maintain cosmological orientation even when physical access to ancestral territories is restricted (Simpson, 2014). This supports the notion that Indigenous cosmologies are based on lived culture and relationships and not on specific territories and thus can serve as a significant adaptive response for forced displacement and reduced mobility (Simpson, 2014).

This pattern is consistent with Ravna's (2021) findings from Nenets nomadic communities in Northern Russia, demonstrating that skills and knowledge emerge through division of labour, environmental monitoring, and rhythmic entrainment with travel rather than explicit instruction. Reyes-García and Fernández-Llamazares (2019) document analogous patterns among Tsimane' communities in Bolivian Amazonia, where mobile learning integrates spatial and bodily motion into mnemonic activity. Among the Santal, displacement and ecological change have not eroded oral tradition's capacity to transmit cosmological and ecological knowledge (Troisi, 1979). These patterns are consistent with the global Indigenous education scholarship that identifies institutional schooling as a primary vector of epistemic marginalisation (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008, Battiste, 2002).

Table 2. Summary of Ethnographic Findings: Pedagogical Dimensions of Everyday Life

Dimension	Community / Practice / Fieldwork Evidence
Embodied apprenticeship	Yerukala cowrie-shell/Gadde reading (Duttalur/Dattaluru), Kāṭṭu Nāyakar Manapaaddam recital (Vakkampatti), Irular plant foraging (Thirukalukundram)
Material mediation	Cowrie shells (Gavvalu/Muthu) — visual grammar, Sodhi Burra — ancestral connection/identity, Gadhe basket — sacred shrine/craft knowledge, medicinal plants — relational ethics

Dimension	Community / Practice / Fieldwork Evidence
Oral/dialogic pedagogy	Rāmulamma storytelling circles (Anajipuram), Kāliamma seasonal songs (Vakkampatti), Venkateshwarlu/Nāgappan ecological narratives (Thirukalukundram)
Gender & generation	Matrilineal sāni transmission (Anjamma, Kondamma, Lachamma), elder relational authority, hybrid digital/oral practice among younger women
Mobility & cosmology	Rāmulamma's ecological expertise through travel (Telangana), Anjamma/Pāpamma's mobile livelihoods, narrative reanimation of ancestral territories under displacement

6. The Epistemic Arena: Advocating for Indigenous Pedagogies

The data presented in Section 5 provide evidence for a substantive epistemological argument: the Indigenous pedagogies of the *Yerukala*, *Irular*, and *Kāṭṭu Nāyakar* represent unique, and within their contexts, epistemically sound modalities for transmitting ecological, cosmological, and social knowledge. The current formal education system in India, as well as the reforms articulated in the National Education Policy 2020 (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020), follows standardised curricula, textbook-mediated literacy, and assessments designed around decontextualised knowledge that creates systemic cultural mismatch for Adivasi students, who are faced with what Castagno and Brayboy (2008, p. 941) have identified as a "hidden curriculum" that reifies existing cultural norms and perpetuates structural marginalisation. This problem is recognised in the NEP 2020 under the formal designation of 'Indian Knowledge Systems', but the practical realisation of this principle often privileges dominant, text-based, Sanskritic traditions over the oral, embodied, and ecologically embedded epistemologies of the marginalised (Mahesh Kumar & Soundarapandian, 2023).

The colonial genealogy of this disruption deserves explicit acknowledgement. The Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 declared approximately 150–200 communities—including the Yerukala—to be 'hereditarily criminal', subjecting them to registration, surveillance, forced settlement, and the pathologisation of their nomadic practices and divinatory customs (Radhakrishna, 2001, Nigam, 1990, Kamble et al., 2023, Bokil & Raghavan, 2016). Although communities were officially 'denotified' in 1952, habitual offender legislation carried the stigmatising logic of the Act into the post-colonial period. The criminalisation of nomadism constituted a direct attack on the mobility-based pedagogical ecology through which Yerukala knowledge is transmitted.

The human cost of this disruption is documented in Kanyadari's (2025, p. 33) fieldwork: the majority of fortune-tellers interviewed noted that the Yerukala community no longer widely uses Yerukala Basha because ″customers now come from many other linguistic backgrounds″ (Anjamma, 2022, as cited in Kanyadari, 2025, p. 33). Kondamma (2022, as cited in Kanyadari, 2025, p. 339) confirmed that Yerukala Basha has no written script and remains an exclusive tradition, understood only by community members — a language and the knowledge system it encodes that faces irreversible attrition with each generation that enters monolingual formal schooling.

Towards epistemic justice, this article presents the ECDP not only as a methodological contribution but as a model for how research can be structured to redress testimonial injustice (Fricker, 2007) and epistemicide (Santos, 2018) in practice. Santos (2018, p. 8) argues that the suppression of non-Western knowledge through epistemicide—"the destruction of an immense variety of ways of knowing"—is a constitutive feature of colonial modernity. By positioning Indigenous participants as co-investigators, cultural guardians, and epistemic agents—rather than as informants—and by incorporating Chilisa's (2019) principle of 'relational

responsibility' into every stage of the research process, the ECDP demonstrates that epistemically just research is not merely aspirational but practicable.

7. Towards a Living Curriculum of Continuity and Change: Policy Implications and Conclusions

7.1 Global Perspectives on Indigenous Pedagogy

The study's documented pedagogical patterns are not exclusive to South India or the Adivasi communities it focuses on. The everyday-life-as-curriculum model, which transmits knowledge through embodied participation, oral narrative, material mediation, and relational accountability rather than formal instruction, is a common, structurally consistent, and culturally adaptive aspect of Indigenous pedagogical systems worldwide, according to a systematic comparison with Indigenous communities across several continents.

In North America, Aboriginal Australian, and Pacific Indigenous communities, the structural parallels with the South Indian communities studied here are striking. Aboriginal Australian communities organise learning around listening, observation, narrative, and place-based participation in ways that foreground intergenerational co-presence over didactic instruction (Frazer and Yunkaporta, 2019). Nishnaabeg communities in Canada, as Simpson (2014) demonstrates, conceptualise learning as quotidian interaction with land, ceremony, and collective responsibility — a formulation that maps directly onto the cosmological grounding of everyday knowledge in the Yerukala and Kāṭṭu Nāyakar communities. Māori communities in Aotearoa New Zealand transmit ecological and cultural knowledge through whānau (extended family) networks, oral tradition, and participation in marae-based ceremonial life, with formal schooling consistently identified as a disruptive rather than complementary force relative to Indigenous knowledge transmission (Bishop and Glynn, 1999).

In Hawaiian contexts, the revitalisation of Indigenous pedagogy through *'aha puna* (language nest) immersion programmes demonstrate how deliberate community-led re-embedding of knowledge in everyday linguistic and cultural practice can counter decades of epistemic displacement—a model increasingly studied as a precedent for Adivasi language revitalisation initiatives (Oliveira, 2014). Inuit communities in Nunavik, Canada, illustrate how Indigenous dietary, ecological, and spiritual knowledge is transmitted through intergenerational co-presence in seasonal subsistence activities, with research documenting the measurable erosion of such knowledge systems when formal schooling separates younger generations from the everyday contexts of knowledge practice (Aker et al., 2022).

In the circumpolar North, Nenets nomadic communities transmit ecological, navigational, and social knowledge through movement itself—through rhythmic entrainment with seasonal travel, environmental monitoring, and distributed labour—in patterns that resonate precisely with the mobility-as-pedagogy documented among the Yerukala (Ravna, 2021). First Nations communities in Canada have further demonstrated, through digital media revitalisation projects, that Indigenous communities can selectively appropriate new technologies to extend oral and performative knowledge systems without surrendering community control over their epistemic sovereignty (Akoh, 2017, Ajani et al., 2024). Tsimane’ communities in Bolivian Amazonia transmit ecological knowledge through songs, seasonal activities, and intergenerational co-presence (Reyes-García and Fernández-Llamazares, 2019), and Vhavenda communities in South Africa transmit Indigenous knowledge through oral narrative, ritual, and intergenerational engagement with changing landscapes (Malapane et al., 2024).

In each of these contexts, a family resemblance between different Indigenous pedagogies emerges, but the common structural logic is that cultural knowledge is most effectively transmitted through intentional, community-organised daily life, that formal schooling, when it supersedes rather than supplements this life, is consistently seen as a conduit of epistemic rupture, and that communities are able to experience cultural revitalisation when they retain control over the conditions and carriers of knowledge. The Adivasi communities documented in this study are therefore not exceptional cases but exemplary instances of a global pedagogical principle that mainstream educational research has systematically undertheorised. Positioning them—the Yerukala, Irular, and Kāṭṭu Nāyakar—within this comparative global frame does not dilute their particularity, it affirms the universal significance of the pedagogical principles their everyday lives embody.

This article makes three theoretical contributions to comparative Indigenous pedagogy scholarship. First, it recasts cultural reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) from a site of social inequality towards a generative, practice-orientated account: cultural continuity is constituted through the repeated performance of significant acts, each negotiated anew in relation to changing material, social, and ecological conditions. Second, it grounds abstract theoretical frameworks — Bourdieu's habitus, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, Lave and Wenger's situated learning, Bandura's observational learning, Mead's symbolic interactionism, and Polanyi's tacit knowledge — in close ethnographic attention to under-represented South Indian communities, adding empirical density to comparative Indigenous pedagogy scholarship. Third, it documents how communities selectively engage with digital technologies, market integration, and formal institutions as tools for cultural resurgence rather than as vectors of cultural erosion, demonstrating that tradition and modernity are not opposing forces but resources that communities negotiate on their own terms.

7.2 Implications for Policy and Decolonial Education

The findings also carry implications for educational policy in India and elsewhere: Most fundamentally, the results support a transition away from standardised educational models towards frameworks that acknowledge the epistemic validity of Indigenous learning systems as complementary systems of expertise grounded in relationality, observation, and community participation (da Silva et al., 2023). This requires concrete, institutionalised measures: bilingual education programmes that treat languages such as *Yerukala Basha* as fully formed epistemological systems rather than dialects to be overcome, community-based apprenticeship structures that allow schoolchildren to continue to learn divination, gathering, and craft work, and participatory documentation programmes, underpinned by principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty, that develop community-owned archives of oral traditions, ritual practices, and ecological knowledge.

The appeal of Venkatesan and many others—"teaching the historical, cultural, and spiritual significance of our practices" (Venkatesan, 2022, as cited in Kanyadari, 2025, p. 365)—must be seen not as a request for symbolic inclusion in a curriculum created elsewhere but as a demand for epistemic recognition: the right to define, govern, and transmit knowledge on their own terms. This demand for epistemic recognition is in line with decolonial educational scholarship that emphasises the need to disrupt Western-centric epistemological dominance by restoring epistemic justice through acknowledging the validity of diverse knowledge systems and creating spaces where Indigenous epistemologies are co-produced alongside dominant curricula rather than simply as supplemental (Visvanathan, 1997, Jacob et al., 2025).

7.3 Conclusion: The Living Curriculum

We have maintained that culture in these communities is not merely passed on from one generation to the next but is reproduced, renegotiated, and renewed within the rhythms of daily life: the tension of a loom, the placement of cowrie shells, the pause in a storytelling performance, the path of a foraging route, and the movement of a Sodhi Burra. In the ecology of pedagogy practised by the *Yerukala*, *Irular*, and *Kāṭṭu Nāyakar*, work, play, ritual, language, and ecological participation come together in a holistic, responsive, and ethically grounded system of learning that has parallels with, and much to offer to, dominant educational systems around the world. As Auger (2016) shows, cultural continuity is not an educational ideal but a measure of the health and well-being of a community, and its disruption has repercussions that reach beyond the classroom into ecological stewardship, social governance, and identity.

The communities documented here are not the passive victims of cultural decay but intentional cultural actors who adapt to external pressures through strategic hybridity: selectively engaging with digital technologies, formal education, and market opportunities while maintaining the relational, embodied, and cosmological core of their pedagogical systems. This is not assimilation but resurgence — a living epistemology that converts perseverance into innovation and continuity into renewal. To affirm these principles in educational policy and decolonial scholarship is not merely to advocate for Indigenous communities, it is to insist on the epistemological pluralism without which no genuinely just education is possible.

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