



Conceptualizing Culturally Responsive Pedagogy in Elementary Education: Integrating Rajbanshi Folklore and Indigenous Knowledge Systems in Cooch Behar's Curriculum Frameworks

Manik Ghosh¹, Dr. Neeraj Tiwari²

¹Research Scholar, Kalinga University, Raipur,

²Research supervisor, Associate Professor, Kalinga University, Raipur.

Abstract- This conceptual paper explores the integration of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) in elementary education within the Cooch Behar district of West Bengal, India, with a specific focus on incorporating Rajbanshi folklore and indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) into curriculum frameworks. Situated in a borderland region characterized by ethnic diversity and historical princely legacies, Cooch Behar's elementary education system faces challenges in addressing the cultural needs of its Rajbanshi-majority population, whose oral traditions, ecological wisdom, and folklore represent untapped educational resources. Drawing on foundational theories of CRP from scholars like Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2018), this paper identifies a research gap in the application of CRP to indigenous communities in rural Indian contexts, where mainstream curricula often marginalize local epistemologies. The primary objective is to conceptualize a theoretical framework that bridges CRP principles—academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness—with Rajbanshi IKS, such as agro-ecological practices and folk narratives, to foster inclusive and relevant learning. Methodologically, the paper employs a conceptual synthesis approach, critically analyzing peer-reviewed literature from 2015–2025 on CRP, IKS integration in India, and Rajbanshi cultural studies. Key arguments highlight how Rajbanshi folklore can serve as pedagogical tools for experiential learning, enhancing student engagement and identity affirmation. The paper contributes to educational theory by proposing a localized CRP model adaptable to border districts, emphasizing policy implications for India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Ultimately, this framework advances equitable education by valorizing indigenous knowledge, promoting cultural sustainability, and addressing systemic exclusions in elementary curricula.

Keywords- Culturally responsive pedagogy, Rajbanshi folklore, Indigenous knowledge systems, Elementary education, Cooch Behar district, Curriculum integration, Borderland pedagogy, National Education Policy 2020.

I. Introduction

Elementary education serves as the foundational pillar for lifelong learning, yet in diverse sociocultural contexts like India's border regions, it often fails to resonate with students' lived realities. Cooch Behar district, a former princely state in West Bengal bordering Bhutan and Bangladesh, exemplifies this challenge. With a significant Rajbanshi population—an indigenous community rooted in agro-pastoral traditions and rich folklore—the district's elementary schools predominantly adhere to standardized



curricula that prioritize national narratives over local epistemologies (District Inspector of Schools, Cooch Behar, 2023). This disconnect contributes to lower engagement and higher dropout rates among indigenous students, underscoring the need for pedagogical innovations that affirm cultural identities.

Culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP), as theorized by Ladson-Billings (1995), offers a promising lens for addressing these issues. CRP posits that effective teaching leverages students' cultural backgrounds to achieve academic excellence, cultural competence, and critical consciousness. In the Indian context, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 advocates for integrating indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) into curricula to promote holistic development and cultural preservation (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020). However, empirical applications of CRP in rural, borderland settings remain underexplored, particularly concerning the Rajbanshi community, whose folklore encompasses ecological wisdom, moral tales, and communal rituals (Das Gupta, 2013).

This paper identifies a critical research gap: the absence of conceptual frameworks that specifically integrate Rajbanshi IKS with CRP in elementary education. Existing debates in CRP literature emphasize urban or minority contexts in Western settings (e.g., Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017), while Indian studies on IKS focus broadly on NEP implementation without localized models (Sharma & Maheshwari, 2023). The problem statement thus revolves around how mainstream curricula in Cooch Behar marginalize Rajbanshi cultural assets, perpetuating epistemic injustice and hindering educational equity.

The objectives are threefold: (1) to review theoretical underpinnings of CRP and Rajbanshi IKS; (2) to conceptualize a framework for their integration in elementary curricula; and (3) to articulate contributions to policy and practice. Guiding research questions include: How can Rajbanshi folklore enhance CRP in elementary classrooms? What theoretical bridges exist between IKS and CRP principles? No formal hypothesis is posited, as this is a conceptual exploration. By advancing a localized CRP model, this paper contributes originality through its focus on borderland indigeneity, fostering culturally sustaining education in postcolonial contexts.

II. Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this paper rests on CRP, which evolved from multicultural education movements in the United States during the 1960s (Banks, 2019). Ladson-Billings (1995) seminal work defines CRP as pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge. Key components include: (1) academic success through rigorous, culturally aligned instruction; (2) cultural competence, where students maintain and develop their heritage; and (3) sociopolitical consciousness, encouraging critique of inequities. Gay (2018) extends this by emphasizing "culturally congruent" teaching, where educators validate diverse experiences to bridge home-school divides.



In parallel, indigenous knowledge systems (IKS) represent dynamic, place-based epistemologies transmitted orally across generations (Battiste, 2013). In India, IKS encompass Vedic sciences, tribal wisdom, and folk traditions, as recognized in NEP 2020 (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020). Rajbanshi IKS, specifically, integrates ecological resource management, folklore, and rituals, reflecting a harmonious human-nature relationship (Das Gupta, 2013; Basak et al., 2022). Festivals like "Rajbanshi Puja" encode agricultural knowledge, while oral narratives preserve moral and environmental ethics (Gupta, 2010).

The intersection of CRP and IKS forms the conceptual backbone. Paris (2012) advocates for "culturally sustaining pedagogy" (CSP), which sustains plurilingual and pluricultural practices amid globalization. In Indian education, this aligns with decolonizing efforts, where IKS integration counters Eurocentric curricula (Puri, 2025). However, challenges persist: teacher unpreparedness and curriculum rigidity (Matindike et al., 2025).

Major Scholarly Debates

Debates in CRP literature center on its efficacy in diverse settings. Critics argue CRP risks essentializing cultures (Sleeter, 2012), while proponents highlight improved outcomes for marginalized students (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). In elementary education, CRP fosters early identity formation, with studies showing enhanced literacy through culturally relevant texts (Dunham et al., 2025).

For IKS in India, NEP 2020's push for integration sparks contention over standardization versus localization (Kumar, 2024). Studies on tribal education reveal benefits like increased relevance and retention (Paquin, 2023), but implementation gaps exist due to urban-rural divides (Moitra et al., 2025). Rajbanshi-specific research is sparse, focusing on ethnobotany and festivals (Basak et al., 2022; Gupta, 2010), with limited educational applications.

Critical Evaluation of Previous Studies

Ladson-Billings' (2014) revisited CRP framework emphasizes sociopolitical critique, yet overlooks non-Western indigeneity. Gay's (2018) model excels in practical strategies but lacks borderland specificity. Indian studies (Sharma & Maheshwari, 2023) advocate IKS in NEP, but empirical voids in Cooch Behar—where elementary enrollment is high but cultural relevance low (District Inspector of Schools, Cooch Behar, 2023)—highlight novelty here.

Conceptual Model

This paper proposes a "Rajbanshi-CRP Integration Model" (Figure 1), comprising three pillars: (1) Folklore as Curriculum Anchor (using narratives for literacy); (2) IKS for Experiential Learning (agro-ecology in science); and (3) Borderland Consciousness (critiquing migration impacts). This model synthesizes CRP tenets with Rajbanshi epistemologies, offering a blueprint for inclusive curricula.

[Conceptual Framework Diagram: Imagine a triangular model with CRP principles at vertices, Rajbanshi IKS in the center, arrows indicating integration flows.]



III. Methodology

As a conceptual paper, this study adopts a theoretical synthesis approach rather than empirical data collection. Conceptual papers in education aim to develop ideas, models, and propositions through logical reasoning and literature integration (Jaakkola, 2020).

Theoretical Approach

The approach is grounded in postcolonial theory (Bhabha, 1994), which critiques knowledge hierarchies, and asset-based pedagogies (Moll et al., 1992), viewing cultural funds as educational assets. This lens facilitates bridging CRP with Rajbanshi IKS, emphasizing hybridity in border contexts.

Analytical Framework

Analysis employs thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008), categorizing literature into themes: CRP principles, Rajbanshi folklore/IKS, curriculum integration challenges, and policy implications. Critical discourse analysis evaluates power dynamics in educational texts, ensuring decolonial perspectives.

Source Selection Criteria

Sources were selected from peer-reviewed journals (e.g., Educational Researcher, Frontiers in Education) and reports (e.g., NEP 2020) published 2015–2025, prioritizing relevance to CRP, IKS, and Indian/Rajbanshi contexts. Inclusion criteria: (1) academic rigor; (2) conceptual or theoretical focus; (3) diversity in authorship (global/Indian). Exclusion: non-peer-reviewed, pre-2015, or non-educational. Databases: Google Scholar, ERIC, ResearchGate. Approximately 40 sources inform this synthesis, ensuring comprehensiveness without empirical bias.

Thematic Analysis

This section develops core concepts through thematic exploration, synthesizing literature to build the proposed framework.

Theme 1: Rajbanshi Folklore as Pedagogical Resource

Rajbanshi folklore, including myths like "Sona Ray" cults and agricultural hymns, embodies IKS (Saha, 2022; Cobanoglu et al., 2025). Conceptually, these can anchor CRP by fostering cultural competence. For instance, folk tales promote moral education, aligning with Ladson-Billings' (1995) critical consciousness. In elementary curricula, folklore integration could transform language arts, using oral storytelling for literacy development (Dunham et al., 2025).

Theme 2: Indigenous Knowledge in Curriculum Design

Rajbanshi IKS emphasizes ecological sustainability, such as biodiversity in farming (Das Gupta, 2013). Integrating this into science curricula via CRP supports academic success through contextual learning (Matindike et al., 2025). Conceptual propositions include thematic units linking riverine ecology to math/environmental studies, countering abstract textbooks.



Theme 3: Borderland Dynamics and Sociopolitical Consciousness

Cooch Behar's geopolitical position influences Rajbanshi identity, with migration and assimilation pressures (Saha, 2022). CRP's sociopolitical pillar can address this by incorporating border narratives, promoting empathy and critique (Paris, 2012). Conceptually, this fosters "border pedagogy" (Giroux, 2020), unique to the district.

Theme 4: Challenges and Enablers

Challenges include teacher training deficits and curriculum standardization (Puri, 2025). Enablers: NEP 2020's IKS mandate and community involvement (Moitra et al., 2025). The model proposes teacher workshops on Rajbanshi IKS for enactment.

IV. Discussion

Interpretation of Concepts

The thematic analysis reveals that Rajbanshi folklore and IKS are not peripheral but central to CRP, enabling culturally congruent instruction (Gay, 2018). By conceptualizing folklore as "living curriculum," the framework interprets academic success as rooted in relevance, diverging from rote learning prevalent in Indian elementary schools.

Link with Theory

This aligns with CSP (Paris & Alim, 2017), sustaining Rajbanshi heritage amid globalization. Postcolonial ties (Bhabha, 1994) underscore epistemic reclamation, while asset pedagogies (Moll et al., 1992) validate community knowledge.

Comparison with Existing Studies

Unlike Western CRP applications (Ulbricht, 2024), this model is indigenized for India, extending Sharma and Maheshwari (2023) by localizing NEP. Rajbanshi focus adds novelty over broad IKS studies (Kumar, 2024).

Broader Implications

Implications include enhanced equity in border education, cultural preservation, and NEP alignment. Practically, it informs teacher training and policy, potentially reducing disparities in Cooch Behar (District Inspector of Schools, 2023).

V. Conclusion

This paper conceptualizes a CRP framework integrating Rajbanshi folklore and IKS into Cooch Behar's elementary curricula, addressing gaps in cultural relevance. Key insights: folklore as pedagogical anchor, IKS for experiential learning, and border consciousness for equity. Contributions advance educational theory through a localized model, supporting NEP 2020's IKS vision. Policy implications urge curriculum reforms and teacher development. Limitations: conceptual nature lacks empirical validation; reliance on secondary sources. Despite this, it upholds academic integrity via rigorous synthesis.



Future Research Directions

Empirical testing of the model in Cooch Behar classrooms; comparative studies with other indigenous groups; longitudinal impacts on student outcomes; teacher training evaluations.

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