Pajjoya: Journal of Indian Knowledge Systems in Education, Vol. 1, No. 1, September 2026, pp. 4–13

Anekāntavāda in the Classroom: Jain Non-Absolutism, Epistemic Humility, and the Pedagogy of Multi-Perspectival Thinking

Śikṣā-Darśana: Educational Thought in Indian Philosophical Traditions

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Abstract

This paper examines whether the Jain doctrine of anekāntavāda — the principle that reality is multifaceted and that no single standpoint exhausts the complete truth of any object — can meaningfully inform contemporary pedagogies of critical thinking and perspective-taking. Rather than treating the doctrine as a ready-made educational technology, the paper undertakes a comparative conceptual analysis, situating anekāntavāda and its associated logical apparatus (syādvāda and nayavāda) alongside empirically grounded constructs in educational psychology, including epistemic cognition, intellectual humility, and dialogic inquiry pedagogies such as Philosophy for Children. It argues that anekāntavāda offers a structurally disciplined, non-relativist model of standpoint articulation that differs in important respects from the loosely defined "multiple perspectives" rhetoric common in classroom pluralism, while also inheriting long-standing philosophical objections concerning self-reference and the risk of collapsing into relativism. The paper further cautions against a naive translation of anekāntavāda into "teaching the controversy," which recent scholarship on false balance identifies as pedagogically and epistemically hazardous. It concludes with implications for curriculum design under India's National Education Policy 2020, emphasizing structured standpoint pedagogy over slogan-level inclusion of Indian Knowledge Systems.

Keywords: Anekāntavāda; Jain epistemology; epistemic cognition; intellectual humility; critical thinking pedagogy; Indian Knowledge Systems; perspective-taking

1. Introduction

India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 directs that Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) be woven into school and higher-education curricula wherever academically relevant, and identifies critical thinking, experiential learning, and holistic inquiry as pedagogical goals that IKS is presumed to serve (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020). This mandate has produced a rapidly expanding body of policy-adjacent literature asserting that Indian philosophical traditions can enrich, or even substitute for, contemporary pedagogical theory. Much of this literature, however, treats ancient concepts as self-evidently beneficial without submitting them to the same scrutiny applied to any other candidate pedagogy — a pattern that a number of scholars working within the IKS field itself have begun to flag as a romanticization risk (Science Publishing Group, 2025).

This paper takes a narrower and more disciplined approach to one specific case: the Jain doctrine of anekāntavāda, often rendered as "non-absolutism" or "the doctrine of manifold aspects." Anekāntavāda holds that reality is multi-

aspectual and that no single proposition, taken without qualification, can capture the complete truth of any object (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.). Because this claim resembles — at least on the surface — contemporary educational goals around perspective-taking, tolerance of ambiguity, and epistemic humility, it is tempting to present anekāntavāda as a ready-made pedagogy for the twenty-first-century classroom. This paper resists that temptation. Instead, it asks a more precise question: which structural features of anekāntavāda, as distinct from its popular slogan-level gloss, actually correspond to constructs that educational psychology has shown to be teachable and consequential, and where does the analogy break down or become pedagogically dangerous?

The paper proceeds through comparative conceptual analysis rather than empirical classroom research. It draws on Jain philosophical scholarship, including contested modern interpretations of anekāntavāda, and places this material in dialogue with the educational-psychology literature on epistemic cognition, intellectual humility, and dialogic inquiry pedagogy. The objective is not to certify anekāntavāda as pedagogically superior, but to identify, with appropriate caution, what a rigorous translation of the doctrine into classroom practice would and would not license.

2. Background and Context

Anekāntavāda is traditionally traced to the teachings attributed to Mahāvīra, the twenty-fourth Tīrthaṅkara of Jainism, and was subsequently developed into a systematic logical apparatus by later Jain logicians such as Samantabhadra, Siddhasena Divākara, Akalaṅka, Haribhadra, Hemacandra, and Yaśovijaya (Matilal, 1981). The doctrine is illustrated by the well-known parable of blind men each describing an elephant differently according to the part they touch — an image used to argue that every partial cognitive access to reality is genuine but incomplete (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.).

Anekāntavāda does not stand alone; it is embedded within two further doctrines. Syādvāda, the doctrine of conditioned predication, requires that any assertion about reality be qualified by the term syāt ("in some respect"), producing a sevenfold scheme of predication (saptabhaṅgī) that specifies the standpoint under which a claim is true, false, or indeterminate (Koller, 2000). Nayavāda, the doctrine of standpoints, classifies the partial vantage points (naya) from which such qualified assertions are made — a taxonomy of legitimate but incomplete angles of analysis, each valid within its own scope and invalid if treated as exhaustive (Matilal, 1981). Together, these three doctrines form an integrated system: a metaphysical claim (anekānta), a linguistic discipline for expressing it (syādvāda), and a method for classifying the standpoints involved (nayavāda).

It is this three-part structure, rather than the loose popular gloss of "many truths," that this paper treats as the relevant unit of comparison with contemporary pedagogy. The distinction matters because NEP 2020's invocation of IKS as a route to critical thinking (Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2020) is frequently cited in the applied literature without specifying which structural features of a given tradition are doing the pedagogical work — a gap this paper attempts to narrow for the single case of anekāntavāda.

3. Review of Literature

The literature relevant to this inquiry falls into four bodies of scholarship that have rarely been read against one another.

First, within Jain studies, the interpretation of anekāntavāda is itself unsettled. Matilal (1981, 1991) offered an influential reading of the doctrine as a form of "non-radicalism" and, following earlier commentators, as "intellectual ahiṃsā" — non-violence extended to the cognitive domain. Later scholars have contested this reading rather than simply extending it: interpreters have glossed the doctrine variously as relativity, as synthesis, and as syncretism (Global Critical Philosophy of Religion, n.d.), and Cort (2000) directly challenges the ahiṃsā-centred gloss as importing an ethical framing not clearly warranted by the earliest logical texts. This disagreement among specialists is itself an important finding for the present paper: there is no single, settled scholarly meaning of anekāntavāda available for direct pedagogical transplantation.

Second, the educational-psychology literature on epistemic cognition examines how learners and teachers understand the nature of knowledge and knowing. Lunn Brownlee, Ferguson, and Ryan (2017) synthesize this field and propose a framework of Reflection, Reflexivity, and Resolved Action, in which reflexivity is specifically defined as critical thinking that evaluates multiple perspectives in context and translates that evaluation into classroom action. This literature treats perspective-taking not as a disposition to be praised in the abstract but as a skill embedded in specific epistemic aims and values that teachers must learn to distinguish and apply.

Third, a parallel literature on intellectual humility treats the willingness to acknowledge the limits of one's own knowledge as a trainable, practice-based habit rather than a fixed trait. Baehr (2021) argues for teaching intellectual virtues, including humility, through modelled practice and structured reflection; Baehr (2022) further specifies that humility is meaningfully expressed through the interpersonal, practiced act of owning one's limitations rather than through private disposition alone. Zmigrod, Zmigrod, Rentfrow, and Robbins (2019) provide psychometric evidence that intellectual humility correlates with cognitive flexibility, and Dwyer (2023) reviews persistent barriers to critical thinking in educational settings, underscoring that the skill does not develop automatically from exposure to diverse content.

Fourth, the dialogic-pedagogy literature offers the closest existing analogue to a classroom operationalization of standpoint-based reasoning. Lipman's (2003) Philosophy for Children (P4C) programme structures classroom dialogue around a community of inquiry in which students articulate, test, and revise positions collaboratively. A large cluster-randomised evaluation by Gorard, Siddiqui, and See (2017) found that a year of P4C produced modest but real gains in reading attainment, with the strongest effects for disadvantaged pupils, while showing no evidence of harm to standard curriculum outcomes — a measured result rather than the transformative claims sometimes made for dialogic pedagogy in advocacy literature. Bleazby, Thornton, Burgh, and colleagues (2023), however, sound an important caution: they argue that when P4C-style "teach the controversy" approaches are applied to topics on which there is a

genuine scientific consensus, such as anthropogenic climate change, the approach risks manufacturing a false impression of unresolved debate, and they call instead for pedagogies that distinguish value-laden controversy from settled empirical fact.

These four bodies of literature have developed largely in isolation from one another. Jain philosophical scholarship rarely engages educational-psychology evidence; the IKS-in-education literature that invokes concepts like anekāntavāda typically does so at the level of slogan rather than structural analysis; and the dialogic-pedagogy literature, while methodologically rigorous, draws on a Deweyan and Lipmanian lineage without reference to comparable non-Western frameworks.

4. Research Gap

Three gaps follow from this review. First, the substantial IKS-in-NEP literature that cites concepts such as anekāntavāda as contributing to "critical thinking" does so almost entirely at the level of assertion, without specifying which structural component of the doctrine — its metaphysics, its logic, or its standpoint taxonomy — would do the pedagogical work, and without engaging the educational-psychology evidence on what actually builds perspective-taking skill. Second, the specialist literature on anekāntavāda's contested interpretation has not been brought into contact with the pedagogical literature at all, leaving practitioners unaware that the doctrine they may wish to teach is itself a site of ongoing scholarly disagreement. Third, and most consequentially, no literature identified in this review examines the specific risk that a popularized, under-specified version of anekāntavāda could licence false-balance pedagogy — treating empirically settled questions as though they were genuinely multi-standpoint in the way that ethical or interpretive questions are.

5. Research Questions and Objectives

The paper addresses four questions. First, what structural features of anekāntavāda, as distinct from its popular "many truths" gloss, are candidates for classroom translation? Second, how does this structure compare with, and diverge from, established educational-psychology constructs of epistemic cognition and intellectual humility? Third, what risks attend an uncritical pedagogical application of anekāntavāda, particularly regarding the distinction between genuinely contested and empirically settled content? Fourth, what design principles for curriculum and teacher preparation follow from this analysis for institutions implementing NEP 2020's IKS mandate?

6. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The framework developed here distinguishes three analytically separable layers within anekāntavāda. The first is the ontological layer: the claim that reality itself is multi-aspectual, a metaphysical thesis about the nature of objects that is tied, in its classical Jain setting, to a broader cosmology of jīva and ajīva and to the soteriological goal of liberation

(Matilal, 1981). The second is the linguistic-logical layer: syādvāda's requirement that assertions be qualified by respect and context, formalized in the sevenfold predication scheme (Koller, 2000). The third is the standpoint-taxonomic layer: nayavāda's classification of partial vantage points, each legitimate within a defined scope and illegitimate if absolutized.

This paper's central theoretical move is to argue that the second and third layers — the linguistic discipline of qualified assertion and the taxonomy of standpoints — are the layers most amenable to secular pedagogical translation, because they function as method rather than as metaphysical commitment. A student can be taught to preface a claim with an explicit statement of the respect under which it holds, and to name the standpoint from which an interpretation proceeds, without being asked to accept Jain cosmology. The first, ontological layer is harder to secularize without altering what is actually being taught, a tension explored further in the analysis below.

This three-layer framework is read against two established constructs from educational psychology. Lunn Brownlee et al.'s (2017) reflexivity construct — critical thinking that evaluates multiple perspectives in context and resolves into classroom action — offers a functional description of what a well-taught nayavāda exercise would need to achieve pedagogically. Baehr's (2021, 2022) practice-based account of intellectual humility, in which humility is expressed through the interpersonal act of owning the limits of one's claims, offers a functional description of what a well-taught syādvāda exercise would need to achieve. The framework thus treats anekāntavāda's linguistic and taxonomic layers as candidate methods for realizing constructs that educational psychology has already validated as valuable, rather than as an independent justification in their own right.

7. Methodology

This is a conceptual and interpretive paper; it does not report primary empirical data. Its method is comparative hermeneutic and conceptual analysis: classical and contemporary scholarly interpretations of anekāntavāda, syādvāda, and nayavāda are read alongside peer-reviewed literature in educational psychology and philosophy of education, identified through targeted searches of scholarly and policy sources. Sources were prioritized where they offered named authorship, identifiable publication venues, and, where available, empirical grounding (such as the randomised evaluation reported by Gorard et al., 2017). Where popular or advocacy-oriented sources were consulted for context on the contemporary IKS-in-education discourse, they are identified as such and are not treated as equivalent in evidentiary weight to peer-reviewed scholarship.

This design was selected deliberately over an empirical classroom study for two reasons. First, no primary data on anekāntavāda-based classroom interventions currently exist in the literature reviewed, so any claim of measured effect would have had to be fabricated; this paper instead maps a conceptual terrain that could inform a future empirical trial. Second, the prior question of what, precisely, an anekāntavāda-based pedagogy would consist of has not itself been

settled, making conceptual clarification a necessary first step before an empirical design could be specified with any rigor.

Limits of this method are acknowledged at the outset: it is interpretive rather than systematic, it relies substantially on English-language and secondary scholarly treatments of Sanskrit and Prākrit source material, and its conclusions are proposals for practice rather than demonstrated outcomes.

8. Analysis and Findings

8.1 Convergence with epistemic cognition research. Nayavāda's requirement that a standpoint be explicitly named before a claim is advanced maps closely onto what the epistemic-cognition literature describes as sourcing and standpoint-integration skill — the ability to attribute a claim to its vantage point and to integrate claims from divergent vantage points into a coherent, context-sensitive judgment (Lunn Brownlee et al., 2017). Where much classroom "perspective-taking" instruction asks students simply to list different opinions, a properly taught nayavāda exercise would require students to specify the scope within which each opinion is valid and the scope within which it is not — a more demanding and, on the evidence reviewed, a more pedagogically defensible task.

8.2 Convergence with intellectual humility research. Syādvāda's syāt qualifier operationalizes epistemic humility as a linguistic habit — a sentence-level discipline of stating the respect under which a claim holds — rather than as a vague disposition to be encouraged in the abstract. This is consistent with Baehr's (2022) argument that intellectual humility is best understood as an interpersonal, practiced act of owning one's limitations rather than a purely internal trait, and it offers a more teachable, assessable classroom technique than exhortations to "be open-minded." Zmigrod et al.'s (2019) finding that intellectual humility correlates with cognitive flexibility lends independent support to the plausibility of this mechanism, although that study did not test anekāntavāda-based instruction specifically and its correlational design does not establish that training in qualified predication would itself produce the trait.

8.3 Divergence and tension. The ontological layer of anekāntavāda is not metaphysically neutral. Its classical formulation is tied to a specific Jain cosmology and to the soteriological aim of liberation (Matilal, 1981), in a way that Lipman's (2003) P4C, designed from the outset as a secular civic pedagogy, is not. Transplanting anekāntavāda into a pluralistic public classroom therefore requires a degree of selective secularization — teaching the linguistic and taxonomic method while bracketing the metaphysical claim — that changes what is actually being transmitted. This is not necessarily illegitimate, but it should be named rather than obscured: what would be taught under the label "anekāntavāda" in a contemporary classroom is a pedagogical technique inspired by, rather than identical to, the classical doctrine. The point is reinforced by the finding, noted above, that even specialists dispute whether Matilal's own influential "intellectual ahiṃsā" reading over-ethicizes the doctrine (Cort, 2000); a curriculum that presents one contested reading as the settled meaning of the tradition would itself violate the spirit of intellectual humility it seeks to teach.

8.4 The false-balance risk. The most serious risk identified in this analysis concerns the boundary between genuinely multi-standpoint questions and empirically settled ones. If nayavāda is popularized as the general slogan that "every viewpoint contains some truth," without the discipline of specifying scope, it risks providing an intellectual permission structure for treating empirically resolved questions as though they remained live controversies. The broader controversial-issues literature identifies this exact failure mode: Bleazby et al. (2023) argue that a "teach the controversy" stance, in which teachers present opposing positions as equally weighted regardless of the underlying evidentiary balance, is pedagogically inappropriate and potentially harmful when applied to matters of scientific consensus such as climate change, and they call instead for structured inquiry pedagogies that distinguish value pluralism from settled fact. It is worth noting, in fairness to the classical doctrine, that Jain logicians themselves built in a comparable distinction: valid non-absolutism (samyak anekānta), correctly and precisely qualified, was traditionally distinguished from invalid non-absolutism (mithyā anekānta), an unqualified or careless multiplication of standpoints without logical discipline. A rigorous classroom application of anekāntavāda would therefore need to preserve, not discard, this internal distinction between disciplined and undisciplined pluralism — precisely the distinction that a slogan-level popularization tends to erase.

9. Discussion

Taken together, the findings support a qualified rather than sweeping conclusion. Anekāntavāda's linguistic and taxonomic layers — the syāt qualifier and the naya classification — correspond to constructs, epistemic cognition and intellectual humility, that the educational-psychology literature has independently validated as valuable and trainable (Lunn Brownlee et al., 2017; Baehr, 2021, 2022; Zmigrod et al., 2019). In this respect, the doctrine offers a culturally specific, India-rooted vocabulary and set of practices for goals that contemporary pedagogy already pursues through other means, and its introduction under NEP 2020 could plausibly strengthen the coherence and cultural resonance of existing critical-thinking instruction rather than merely decorating it.

At the same time, this contribution depends entirely on careful curricular design. Where the wider IKS-in-education literature has been criticized for romanticizing ancient systems and presenting them as inherently superior to contemporary alternatives without comparable evidentiary scrutiny (Science Publishing Group, 2025), the analysis here suggests that anekāntavāda is vulnerable to the same failure mode in a specific way: its popular gloss as tolerant pluralism can be detached from its internal logical discipline, producing a version of the doctrine that would license precisely the false-balance pedagogy that the controversial-issues literature warns against (Bleazby et al., 2023). The historical Jain distinction between valid and invalid non-absolutism is, in this sense, not a peripheral technicality but the feature that makes the doctrine pedagogically safe to teach at all.

A further tension concerns fidelity to the tradition versus secular applicability. Teaching the method while bracketing the metaphysics is a defensible pedagogical choice, common to the way many contemplative and philosophical traditions are adapted for public education, but it should be presented to students and teachers as an adaptation rather

than as the tradition itself, particularly given that specialists disagree about which reading of the tradition is even authoritative (Global Critical Philosophy of Religion, n.d.).

10. Educational Implications

Several design principles follow. First, nayavāda can be operationalized as a structured standpoint-naming protocol, functionally similar to structured academic controversy techniques already used in dialogic pedagogy, in which students must identify the standpoint from which a claim is advanced and the scope within which it holds before advancing it. Second, syādvāda's syāt qualifier can be taught as a concrete sentence-frame scaffold for classroom argumentation — for example, requiring students to complete constructions such as "from the standpoint of X, this claim holds because...; from the standpoint of Y, it does not hold because..." — offering a more teachable and assessable technique than abstract appeals to "open-mindedness," consistent with the practiced, ownership-based model of humility described by Baehr (2022).

Third, teacher preparation must explicitly train educators to distinguish pedagogically appropriate applications of standpoint pluralism, such as ethical dilemmas, historical interpretation, and literary analysis, from inappropriate applications involving matters of empirical or scientific consensus. This directly addresses the documented tendency of teachers to default to an undifferentiated "teach the controversy" stance out of caution or discomfort (Bleazby et al., 2023). Fourth, assessment design should reward justified, scope-qualified standpoint articulation rather than the mere production of multiple opinions, so that the classical distinction between valid and invalid non-absolutism is preserved in practice rather than lost in translation. Fifth, and more broadly, anekāntavāda-informed instruction should be positioned as one strand within, rather than a replacement for, existing evidence-based critical-thinking pedagogies such as Philosophy for Children, whose measured but real effects on attainment (Gorard et al., 2017) provide a more secure evidentiary foundation than any claim currently available for anekāntavāda-specific interventions.

11. Limitations

This paper is conceptual and interpretive rather than empirical; no primary classroom data were collected, and its proposals for pedagogical translation are hypotheses for future trial rather than demonstrated outcomes. Its treatment of Jain source material relies substantially on English-language secondary scholarship rather than direct engagement with Sanskrit and Prākrit primary texts, a limitation shared with much of the comparative literature it cites. Because the scholarly interpretation of anekāntavāda is itself contested, the specific reading operationalized here — emphasizing the linguistic and taxonomic layers over the ontological layer — is one defensible construction among several rather than a neutral summary of the tradition. Finally, the paper's comparative claims about educational-psychology constructs draw on a necessarily selective slice of that literature; a fuller systematic review of epistemic-cognition and intellectual-humility research might qualify or extend the specific correspondences proposed here.

12. Conclusion

Anekāntavāda is a structurally rich epistemological resource with genuine, if bounded, relevance to contemporary pedagogies of critical thinking and perspective-taking. Its contribution is most defensible when it is taught as a disciplined method — the linguistic habit of qualified assertion and the taxonomic habit of scope-limited standpoint articulation — rather than as a general warrant for relativism or as evidence of ancient Indian superiority over contemporary educational theory. Realizing this potential under NEP 2020's mandate to integrate Indian Knowledge Systems requires exactly the kind of critical, non-romanticized curricular design that recent IKS scholarship itself increasingly calls for: careful enough to preserve the tradition's own internal distinction between valid and invalid non-absolutism, and cautious enough not to let a slogan of tolerance quietly license false balance on questions that are not, in fact, open.

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