Broadening Cultural Perspectives of LLMs–Insights from Sanskrit Literature Pedagogy

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Abstract

This position paper outlines insights from pedagogy towards enhancing cultural values in LLMs. Specifically, we explore three prominent characteristics of Sanskrit literature pedagogy, namely, the practice of storytelling, the call to gather wider perspectives through commentaries, and the emphasis on reflexive and reflective thinking. We describe through illustrations how these can aid in enhancing cultural values, and thereby also address associated issues such as misinformation and stereotypes. We then map these characteristics into concrete steps in broadening the cultural perspectives of LLMs. Insights from our study outline the need a) to use process tracing methods in understanding cultural attribution, b) to leverage collective intelligence methods in incorporating diverse cultural perspectives, and c) to assess the validity and reliability of cultural constructs through contestable AI frameworks.

1 Introduction

With the rapid growth and adoption of Large Language Models (LLMs) across different sectors of the society, the need for developing models that are culturally inclusive and representative of the diverse world that we live in has become imperative. Research has shown that models that are oblivious of non-Western cultures can have far-reaching adverse impacts—perpetuating societal biases and propagating misinformation (Wu, Wang, and Mihalcea 2023; Mukherjee et al. 2023; Davani et al. 2024b; Hofmann et al. 2024; Bauer, Tischer, and Bansal 2023; Rettberg 2024; Davani et al. 2024a; Wang, Zhang, and Rajtmajer 2024).

Due to the nuanced and multi-faceted nature of culture, developing culturally inclusive LLMs comes with many challenges (Saha, Pandey, and Choudhury 2025; Saha et al. 2025). Some such challenges include variations in linguistic forms and styles across cultures, differences in the way people conceptualize based on their cultures (Adilazuarda1 et al. 2024; Thompson, Roberts, and Lupyan 2020), and deviation in human norms across cultures (Hershcovich et al. 2022). In recent years, there has been an increased interest towards addressing these challenges. For example, new datasets and benchmarks that are representative of non-Western cultures have been proposed (Jha et al. 2023; Wang et al. 2024; Myung et al. 2024; Seth et al. 2024; Nayak et al. 2024; Singhal, Shah, and Kumaraguru 2022).

Novel algorithms and metrics that are culturally aware have been developed for various NLP tasks, including those customized towards combating misinformation and mitigating biases (Huang and Yang 2023; Wang et al. 2020; Li et al. 2024a; Fan, Hu, and Zhao 2025; Borah, Garimella, and Mihalcea 2025). Works have also investigated the perception of LLMs towards global cultures (Li et al. 2024b; Wu, Wang, and Mihalcea 2023; Holt, Held, and Yang 2024; AlKhamissi et al. 2024).

This position paper complements the aforementioned works, taking stance from a pedagogy perspective. The benefit of a holistic, ethical, and collaborative pedagogy has been well established in traditional forms of learning such as in classrooms, and even for AI ethics education (Arteaga and Herschensohn 1995; Raji, Scheuerman, and Amironesei 2021). Studies have also shown how historical documents such as archives can shed light on strategies for sociocultural data collection in machine learning pipelines (Jo and Gebru 2020). Motivated by these past studies, in this opinion piece, we present insights from Sanskrit literature pedagogy towards broadening the cultural perspectives of LLMs.

Sanskrit is an ancient Indic language and is widely regarded as a repository of various Indic knowledge systems spanning science, religion, culture, philosophy, and more (Raghavan 2011; Bhattacharyya 1987). Sanskrit has also been regarded as a link language in ancient and medieval South Asia, facilitating communication between different cultural groups who do not necessarily share a common language or dialect (Truschke 2012; Kumar 2007; Wikipedia Retrieved September 2024). We thus consider delving into Sanskrit pedagogy in order to uncover potential lessons that it might offer in enhancing cultural perspectives of LLMs.

While there are many noteworthy characteristics in Sanskrit literature pedagogy, we consider three key ones: namely, a) the Practice of Story Telling, b) Consulting Commentaries, and c) the Emphasis on reflexive and reflective thinking, and describe through illustrations how these characteristics can aid in enhancing cultural inclusiveness in general. We then discuss their specific implications in the context of design and development of culturally inclusive LLMs. In the rest of the paper, each section describes a particular characteristic of Sanskrit literature pedagogy, followed by an illustration to exemplify its relevance to cultural

inclusiveness, and a discussion of its implication in the form of concrete lessons for the development of LLMs.

2 The Practice of Storytelling

Across geographies, stories are seen as a powerful means to convey ideas and influence people. As stated in (Konnor 2012), stories are centered around people, working *with* people, *for* people, and *on* people, affecting their perception and cognition. Being largely an oral tradition, story telling comprises an integral aspect in Sanskrit pedagogy. Each literary work in Sanskrit is not viewed as a siloed entity, instead it is studied in relation to other works along with its broader socio-cultural contexts —the purpose behind the work, the composer and their perspectives, the practical lessons and benefits the work offers to its readers, and so on.

2.1 Illustration

Sanskrit scholar and king Bhartrihari's *'Neethishatakam'* serves as an illustration to the aforementioned points. Bhartrihari composed *Neethishatakam* outlining the codes of morality and polity that have since then served as a basis for policy makers. Narration in *Neethishatakam* is structured around a) theme b) incidents c) plots d) setting, and e) moral values (Putra and Perni 2024). Theme can be construed to be the main idea or the subject matter of the story. Incidents are some of the events contained in a story, and that which occur because of the cause and effect of a movement, or an action on a particular side accompanied by the actor who acts (Putra and Perni 2024). Plot constitutes a series of events that show sequential logic. Setting is any form of information about a place, time, or period in history as the plot relates to. Finally, moral values are the core ethical concepts, interleaved within the theme, incidents, plots, and settings of the story (Putra and Perni 2024).

In the specific portion called *'Artha Paddhati'* of *Neethishatakam*, matters concerning wealth and justice are described through several illustrations (Putra and Perni 2024). As noted in (Krishnan 2018), there are differences in the way justice is conceptualized across cultures. Through illustrative stories, Bhartrihari argues that culturally universal dimensions of justice alone may not suffice, and that cultural individualism should also be considered (Krishnan 2018). For example, *Neethishatakam* states that in matters of distributive justice (Gaertner 1994), one has to look beyond equality and equity, to incorporate other dimensions such as reciprocity (i.e., prior agreement, promise) and individual merit (i.e., in the form of ability, contribution). *Neethishatakam* utilizes the lever of storytelling to articulate cause-effect or action-outcome relationships and aids in understanding resource allocation, reward assignment, and in determining individual responsibility, thereby enhancing inclusiveness across a variety of policy matters (Krishnan 2018). Recent studies further corroborate the effectiveness of such notions in formulating algorithmic fairness (Hertweck, Heitz, and Loi 2024).

2.2 Insight–Process and Knowledge Tracing

In the practice of storytelling, there is a lot of 'thinking aloud' with inferences being drawn after much deliberation and discussion between the teacher and the taught (Fernquest 2020). One may be able to draw analogies of this practice with 'process tracing' methodology in the social sciences (Beach and Rasmus 2019; Bennett and Checkel 2015). Process tracing (PT) involves understanding causal mechanisms linking causes and outcomes, analyzing the observable empirical evidence of such mechanisms through case studies, and then generalizing (Beach 2017). A key aspect that distinguishes PT from other methods of causal inference is its emphasis on 'careful and detailed' descriptions understanding the evolution of events over time. As culture is highly dynamic, learning cultural evolution becomes vital in LLM development. Recent research has leveraged pedagogical theories to understand student learning with graph-based knowledge tracing (Cui et al. 2024). We posit such knowledge tracing and PT methods can potentially aid in designing LLMs that can be better informed of cultural dynamics and provenance.

3 Consulting Commentaries

Sanskrit scholars routinely consult commentaries and other authentic texts to derive meaning. This is particularly evident in discourses where the speaker describes the meaning of a verse or text based on multiple viewpoints suggested across various commentaries, which themselves could reflect different philosophical principles, literary interpretations, or contextual connections.

3.1 Illustration

To illustrate the need and benefit of consulting commentaries, let us consider a verse from *Srimad Bhagavatham*, a very important historical and religious Sanskrit text. *Srimad Bhagavatham* is divided into twelve cantos, each having many chapters. Specifically, let us consider the 36th verse from chapter six of the tenth canto of the work. This chapter describes the past times of Krishna, a highly revered personality in Indic culture, with a demon called Putana. The transliterated verse being:

kim punaḥ śraddhayā bhaktyā
kṛṣṇāya paramātmane
yacchan priyatamam kim nu
raktās tan-mātaro yathā

The purport of the verse is that if Putana, a demon who had evil intentions was liberated by Krishna, then what to speak of those who have faith, what to speak of those who have devotion, and more so, what to speak of the mothers who were immensely immersed in Krishna, the Supreme Lord!

Let us see what commentators have to say with respect to just the word *'mataro'* (meaning– mothers) that appears in the fourth line of the verse. In this context, one commentator says the plural usage of the word *mataro* in the verse is indicative of respect to Yashoda, the mother of Krishna. Another commentator says that the plural form of mother here is referring not just to Yashoda, but to also all those women in the neighborhood (*'Gopis'* as they are commonly referred) who loved Krishna as their own child. Yet another commentator says that the word *mataro* refers to not only

Yashoda and the Gopis, but also to the cows in the town which loved Krishna dearly. To justify, the commentator alludes to a past time when all the cowherd boys and calves of the town were hidden (in order to test Krishna's power), and yet Krishna did not let this affect the mothers of the cowherd boys or the cows in any way as they felt the presence of their offsprings through Krishna. So, the commentator says the word *mataro* in the verse refers to all the cows, the Gopis, and Yashoda who had motherly love towards Krishna (Dasa 2022; Vyasadeva 2016).

For comparison, we asked ChatGPT-4o (OpenAI accessed September 2024) to provide the meaning of the same verse. And the response was— *The verse you've quoted is from the Bhagavata Purana (7.7.22) and can be translated as follows: "What then to speak of offering with devotion and faith to Krishna, who is the Supreme Soul? What is the use of loving Him more than our own selves, just as the mothers do with their children?"* Then after providing a breakdown of the meaning of individual words, ChatGPT-4o summarized as follows —*So, the verse is expressing the idea that the devotion and love one offers to Krishna, the Supreme Soul, are inherently more significant than the love a mother gives to her child, who is cherished above all else. It highlights the supreme nature of devotion to Krishna and how it transcends even the most profound forms of personal affection.*

From this example, it can be understood that the latent meaning of the verse is misunderstood. Further, the reference of the verse is quoted as 7.7.22 while it is actually 10.6.36. The illustration also highlights how consulting commentaries can augment cultural values in LLMs by means of expert and evidence based cultural knowledge, and enhance inclusiveness by incorporating the perspectives of diverse communities (in the example considered, consulting commentaries helped in uncovering that the word mothers in the verse reflects not just the affection of Krishna's mother, but also that of the neighborhood women and cows).

3.2 Insight–Collective Intelligence

As culture is shaped by collective and shared values of individuals and communities, it becomes necessary to incorporate these diverse and shared perspectives in training LLMs. This means, training databases have to be expanded to include commentaries and other authentic sources of auxiliary information necessary in understanding main texts. Towards learning collective and shared values, ideas from the field of collective intelligence in conjunction with KRR methods could serve as a starting point (Suran, Pattnaik, and Draheim 2020). In a very generic sense, collective intelligence refers to collaborative problem solving and decision making. As stated in (Nguyen and Nguyen 2018), for collective intelligence, there are four main criteria– these being, diversity, independence, decentralization and aggregation. These criteria ensure that cultural perspectives of diverse communities (diversity, aggregation) are upheld while protecting individual values (independence, decentralization). In enabling the emergence of collective intelligence, understanding individual cultural notions and interactive cultural notions between individuals becomes necessary. Furthermore, LLMs need to

be able to adapt themselves according to the dynamic nature of the environment they are exposed to. To facilitate such local and global knowledge understanding in dynamic environments, knowledge graphs and neuro-symbolic methods can be very useful. Ideas from collective intelligence such as self-organization, emergent behavior, swarm optimization, and cellular automata can aid in modeling the emergent behavior of LLMs in such contexts (Ha and Tang 2022).

4 Reflexive and Reflective thinking

In ancient Sanskrit education system called *Gurukulas*, the emphasis was on the all-round—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual— development of its pupils (Venkatesha 2020). The word *Guru* refers to a preceptor and Kula means a family or a clan. Typically, pupil used to reside with their preceptors/teachers for extended periods of time, usually lasting a few years and hence the name Gurukula to connote the close and intricate relationship between the teacher and the taught.

4.1 Illustration

Learning in Gurukula involved three cycles (Venkatesha 2020)

- *'Sravana'* - this meant listening to the words taught by the teacher. Primarily, the mode of teaching was through oral transmission.

- *'Manana'* - this meant contemplating on the significance of the lessons taught by the teacher. This was through debates, discussions, and deliberations between the teacher and the students.

- *'Nidhidyasanam'* - this involved total understanding of the understudy in order to facilitate the acknowledgement of reality by self-introspection and real-world application

The aforementioned cycles were in place to ensure that students do not just learn about people and objects in a given situation, or investigate their causal connection, but they are urged to critically think and infer the real nature of things and their relation with the environment (Srinivas 2024). Thus, the Gurukula system emphasized on critical thinking that was both reflective and reflexive (Srinivas 2024). 'Reflective' because it cultivated a sense of deep thought about something, and 'reflexive' because it placed the student at the center of learning urging them to apply the lessons to their own life.

4.2 Insight–Contestable AI

Researchers have emphasized on the role of reflexive thinking for enhancing fairness and other human values in AI systems (Fish and Stark 2021). The authors in (Fish and Stark 2021) state that value fidelity, value legibility, and value contestation are vital for incorporating human values adequately into formal models. In realizing these, methods from Measurement theory can be useful in verifying the reliability and validity of cultural constructs embedded in LLMs (Jacobs and Wallach 2021). Recently, researchers have advocated for 'contestable AI' frameworks as a means of counteracting harmful AI decisions (Alfrink et al. 2022). Towards this

Pedagogical Practice	Insight
Storytelling	'Process tracing' and graph-based knowledge tracing to infer cultural attribution
Consulting Commentaries	'Collective intelligence' methods such as self-organization, swarm optimization, and emergent behavior analysis with neuro-symbolic logic for incorporating diverse and collective views of different cultures
Reflexive and Reflective thinking	'Measurement theory' methods to verify reliability and validity of cultural constructs; 'Contestable AI' frameworks to assess value fidelity

Table 1: Summary of lessons offered by Sanskrit pedagogy towards enhancing cultural perspectives of LLMs

end, argumentation methods that can elicit grounds for contestation and facilitate explanations can be handy (Leofante et al. 2024). For example, argumentation based methods can be used for identifying the causes biases and thereby aid in transparent decision making (Waller, Rodrigues, and Cocarascu 2024).

A summary of all the pedagogical characteristics and insights discussed is provided in Table 1.

5 Conclusions

This perspective paper discussed the relevance and utility of Sanskrit literature pedagogy in enhancing the cultural perspectives of LLMs. Through illustrations, the paper analyzed certain noteworthy characteristics of Sanskrit pedagogy and described how they could benefit LLM design and development by suggesting potential pathways through which these characteristics could be realized.

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