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## VISUAL NARRATIVES AS EPISTEMIC PRACTICES IN INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

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### ABSTRACT

Education has long privileged written texts as the primary source of knowledge, often treating images as supplementary aids rather than as ways of knowing. This paper challenges that view by examining visual narratives in Indian Knowledge Systems as important epistemic tools in education and pedagogy. It shows how temple imagery, illustrated manuscripts, performance traditions, and contemporary digital visuals convey ideas, values, and modes of thinking by encouraging observation, reflection, and interpretation rather than rote memorisation. Using a conceptual approach with illustrative examples, the study focuses on how these visual narratives shape understanding and ethical meaning-making, and connects them to present-day classrooms shaped by image-based and digital learning, offering a broader and more meaningful perspective on visual learning in contemporary education.

**KEYWORDS:** Indian Knowledge Systems, Visual Narratives, Visual Learning, Education, Pedagogy, Indigenous Knowledge, Meaningful Learning, Ethical Learning.

Education across the world has largely depended on written texts. Reading, writing, and verbal explanation have been treated as the main ways of knowing. Images have usually played a supporting role. They are added to textbooks or presentations to explain ideas already expressed in words. Rarely are they treated as sources of knowledge in themselves. At the same time, learning environments today are becoming more visual. Digital platforms, online classrooms, and social media rely heavily on images, videos, and visual stories. Students engage with content through screens on a daily basis. Visual communication now shapes how learners receive, process, and remember information. Yet educational theory has not fully adapted to this change. Visual forms are still seen mainly as teaching aids rather than

as systems of learning. This gap points to a deeper issue. Many dominant models of education are rooted in traditions that value written language over other ways of knowing. Within such models, knowledge is expected to be clear, linear, and easy to express in words. What cannot be stated directly is often viewed as unclear or informal. As a result, visual and symbolic forms of learning are often undervalued.

Indian Knowledge Systems offer a different understanding of education. For centuries, learning in India has taken place through a combination of text, speech, image, and performance. Knowledge has been communicated through temple art, illustrated manuscripts, storytelling, ritual practices, and classical arts. These forms were not created only for aesthetic pleasure. They were designed to teach ideas about life, ethics, society, and the relationship between humans and the world. In these traditions, learning involved careful observation and reflection. Meaning was not always stated directly. Learners were expected to interpret symbols, follow visual sequences, and engage in dialogue. Understanding developed slowly through repeated exposure and contemplation. In this way, visual narratives functioned as structured tools for learning.

Modern education has often separated these visual traditions from their educational purpose. Temple images are studied as heritage objects. Manuscripts are treated as historical records. Performance traditions are discussed as cultural practices. Their role as methods of teaching and learning is rarely explored within education research. This has limited how Indian Knowledge Systems are understood in pedagogical terms. This paper argues that visual narratives in Indian Knowledge Systems should be seen as epistemic tools. They do not simply illustrate knowledge. They shape how knowledge is formed, understood, and internalised. They bring together thinking, emotion, and ethical reflection. Learning happens through engagement rather than memorisation.

The focus of this paper is education and pedagogy. The aim is not to document visual traditions in detail, but to understand how they work as modes of learning. The paper asks how visual narratives support meaning-making and ethical understanding. It also explores how these traditions can inform present-day education, especially in visually rich and digital learning environments. The study follows a conceptual approach supported by illustrative case examples. These include temple iconography, illustrated manuscripts, performance traditions, and digital visual narratives used in contemporary classrooms. These examples are used to explain pedagogical processes rather than to provide empirical data. By placing

Indian visual traditions within discussions of visual learning, this paper makes three contributions. First, it challenges the idea that knowledge must be mainly textual. Second, it presents Indian Knowledge Systems as valuable resources for rethinking visual pedagogy. Third, it offers a way to understand visual narratives as meaningful and ethically grounded forms of learning.

Educational research has traditionally prioritised written and verbal forms of learning. Visual elements are usually treated as supporting tools that help explain ideas already expressed through text. They are rarely recognised as independent ways of knowing. Studies in cognitive psychology show that visuals can support learning. Paivio's theory of dual coding explains that combining visual and verbal information can improve memory and understanding (Paivio). Research on multimedia learning also shows that well-designed visuals can enhance comprehension (Mayer *Multimedia Learning*). However, in these approaches, images mainly assist verbal knowledge rather than produce meaning on their own.

Scholars in visual culture argue that images actively shape how people understand the world. Berger explains that seeing is not passive and that images influence perception and meaning (*Ways of Seeing*). Mitchell further argues that images function as cultural texts that require interpretation (*Picture Theory*). Despite this, such perspectives are rarely integrated into educational pedagogy, which remains largely text-centred.

The growth of digital education has increased interest in visual and multimodal learning. Kress notes that meaning in contemporary education is made through multiple modes, including images, layout, and gesture, alongside language (*Multimodality*). While this work broadens ideas of learning, it often focuses on modern media and overlooks older visual traditions.

Indigenous knowledge systems remain marginal in discussions of visual pedagogy. Smith points out that dominant research frameworks frequently overlook indigenous ways of knowing (*Decolonizing Methodologies*). In the Indian context, visual traditions such as temple art, manuscripts, and performance are usually studied within art history. Coomaraswamy and Dehejia show that these traditions carry philosophical and ethical meaning, yet their role as methods of teaching and learning is rarely examined in education research.

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This gap highlights the need to study visual narratives in Indian Knowledge Systems as epistemic tools. Doing so can expand current understandings of learning and contribute to more inclusive approaches to visual pedagogy.

Indian Knowledge Systems present a view of learning that differs from dominant text-based models. Knowledge is not limited to written explanation or verbal instruction. It is understood as something that develops through experience, observation, and reflection. Seeing plays a central role in this process. In many Indian traditions, knowledge is shaped through symbols and narratives. Visual forms are designed to communicate ideas that cannot always be expressed directly in words. Meaning unfolds gradually. Learners are expected to observe carefully, notice patterns, and reflect on what they see. Understanding is not immediate. It deepens over time.

This approach treats vision as an active process. Seeing is not passive reception. It involves attention, interpretation, and judgment. Coomaraswamy explains that traditional Indian art was never meant to be realistic in a modern sense. Instead, it was symbolic and purposeful. Forms were created to guide thought and contemplation, not to imitate the visible world (*Transformation of Nature in Art*). Visual narratives in Indian Knowledge Systems often combine multiple layers of meaning. A single image can communicate philosophical ideas, ethical values, and social norms at the same time. These layers are not explained directly. They are discovered through engagement. This method encourages learners to think deeply rather than memorise information.

Dialogue is another important aspect of visual learning in these traditions. Images are often discussed within communities. Meaning emerges through conversation between teachers and learners, elders and students, or performers and audiences. Learning becomes a shared process. Knowledge is shaped through interaction rather than one see transmission. Ethics is closely tied to visual epistemology in Indian Knowledge Systems. Visual narratives often present moral situations rather than rules. Learners are invited to reflect on action, consequence, and responsibility. Dehejia notes that early Buddhist visual narratives were designed to guide ethical reflection rather than provide fixed interpretations (*Discourse in Early Buddhist Art*). Such narratives encourage judgment and self-awareness.

Embodiment also plays a role in visual knowing. In performance traditions, knowledge is expressed through movement, gesture, and space. Learning happens through doing and seeing

together. The body becomes part of the learning process. This challenges the idea that knowledge is purely mental or abstract. Unlike modern educational models that separate cognition from emotion, Indian visual traditions bring them together. Images often evoke feeling alongside thought. Emotional engagement is not seen as a distraction. It is part of understanding. This integration supports deeper learning and ethical awareness.

Indian philosophies such as Vedanta, Jainism, and the teachings of Buddha promote values like compassion, self-awareness, non-violence (Ahimsa), and a sense of duty toward society (Dharma). These concepts can be integrated into modern educational curricula to promote character-building alongside intellectual development. The research found that educational institutions globally are beginning to incorporate aspects of IKS, such as mindfulness and meditation practices, which enhance students' emotional and psychological well-being. (Khare 235)

From an educational perspective, this approach offers an important insight. Knowledge does not always need to be simplified into definitions or outcomes. It can be cultivated through exposure, reflection, and dialogue. Visual narratives create space for multiple interpretations while still guiding learning. This visual epistemology challenges narrow definitions of knowledge in contemporary education. It suggests that learning can be slow, reflective, and interpretive. Such an approach is especially relevant in today's visual and digital learning environments, where students constantly engage with images but are rarely taught how to interpret them critically. By recognising visual narratives as epistemic tools, Indian Knowledge Systems expand what counts as learning. They offer a model where seeing, thinking, feeling, and valuing are interconnected. This model provides a strong foundation for rethinking visual pedagogy in modern education.

This section presents concrete examples of visual narratives from Indian Knowledge Systems. Each example shows how images and visual forms were used to support learning. These cases help explain how seeing, reflection, and interpretation worked together in traditional educational settings.

## Temple Iconography as a Visual Curriculum



Many Indian temples functioned as spaces of learning. Visual narratives were carved or painted on temple walls in a planned sequence. These images guided visitors through stories, values, and philosophical ideas. A clear example is the Brihadeeswara Temple. The temple walls display scenes related to Shaiva philosophy, royal duty, and cosmic order. Devotees and learners encountered these ideas visually while moving through the space. Teachers and elders explained the symbols, helping learners connect the images to ethical conduct and social responsibility.

Another example is the Hoysaleswara Temple. The outer walls present continuous narrative panels from the epics. Learners followed the stories visually, often without written guidance. Meaning developed through observation and discussion. Temple spaces thus acted as visual textbooks. Learning happened through repeated viewing and shared interpretation rather than formal instruction alone.



## Illustrated Manuscripts and Visual Storytelling

Illustrated manuscripts combined text and image to support learning. Images did not merely repeat the written word. They highlighted key moments and guided reflection. A well-known example is the Kalpasutra manuscripts. These Jain texts include detailed illustrations of the lives of Tirthankaras. The images focus on moral choices, restraint, and spiritual discipline. Learners engaged with the ethical meaning of the stories by observing visual details alongside reading.

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Another example is the Bhagavata Purana illustrated manuscripts. Visual depictions of Krishna's life were used to teach devotion, duty, and compassion. Learners reflected on values through story and image together. These manuscripts supported slow reading and careful viewing. Learning emerged through attention and contemplation.



### Performance Traditions as Embodied Visual Knowledge

Performance traditions also function as visual narratives. Knowledge was communicated through movement, gesture, facial expression, and costume. Learning happened through watching and doing. A strong example is **Kathakali**. Stories from the epics are communicated through highly coded gestures and expressions. Students learn meaning by observing the teacher and practising repeatedly. Ethical themes such as duty, pride, and humility are conveyed visually. Another example is **Yakshagana**. Performances combine dialogue, costume, and music. Community members learn stories and values through collective viewing. Interpretation often continues through discussion after the performance. In these traditions, the body itself becomes a medium of knowledge.



### Digital Visual Narratives in Contemporary Education

Visual storytelling continues in modern classrooms through digital media. While the tools have changed, the learning process shows continuity with traditional visual pedagogy. One example is **Amar Chitra Katha**, which uses illustrated stories to introduce epics and historical figures to young learners. Images support understanding and encourage discussion

rather than rote learning. Another example is **Google Arts & Culture**, which provides virtual access to Indian temples, manuscripts, and artworks. Students explore visual material independently and reflect on meaning through guided activities. When used thoughtfully, digital visuals support interpretation and ethical reflection, not just information delivery.

Across temples, manuscripts, performances, and digital platforms, a shared pedagogical pattern appears. Visual narratives encourage learners to observe closely, reflect deeply, and interpret meaning. Knowledge is not handed down directly. It develops through engagement. These examples show that visual learning has long been central to Indian Knowledge Systems. Recognising this continuity helps educators understand visuals as meaningful tools for learning rather than decoration.

The examples discussed in the previous section show that visual narratives in Indian Knowledge Systems function as more than cultural expression. They operate as structured ways of learning. Seeing, reflecting, and interpreting are central to how knowledge is formed. This has important implications for contemporary education. First, these traditions challenge narrow ideas of what counts as knowledge. Modern education often treats knowledge as information that can be stated clearly and assessed quickly. Visual narratives suggest a different approach. Knowledge can also be symbolic, layered, and open to interpretation. Learning does not always need to lead to one fixed answer. It can involve reflection and ethical judgment. Indian visual traditions highlight the importance of slow learning. Meaning develops over time through repeated exposure and discussion. In contrast, many modern classrooms focus on speed and coverage. Visual narratives remind educators that learning can be gradual. Understanding deepens when students are given time to observe, question, and reflect.

These traditions integrate thinking, emotion, and values. Visual narratives do not separate intellectual understanding from ethical awareness. Stories shown through images or performance invite learners to consider action, consequence, and responsibility. This integration is especially relevant today, when education is expected to address not only skills but also values and social awareness. Visual epistemology offers guidance for digital and multimodal learning. Students today are surrounded by images, videos, and visual media. However, they are rarely taught how to interpret visuals critically. Indian Knowledge Systems show that visual literacy involves learning how to see carefully, question meaning, and engage in dialogue. These skills are essential in digital learning environments.

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Visual narratives support inclusive education. They allow learners with different language abilities and backgrounds to participate in learning. In traditional settings, visual stories reached audiences who could not read formal texts. In modern classrooms, visual pedagogy can similarly support diverse learners and reduce dependence on language alone. Recognising visual narratives as epistemic tools contributes to decolonial education. It challenges the dominance of text-based Western models of knowledge. It does not reject modern education but expands it. Indian Knowledge Systems offer resources that can enrich global discussions on pedagogy, especially in visually rich learning contexts. Overall, these implications suggest that visual narratives should not be treated as optional additions to teaching. They can be integrated as meaningful ways of learning that support understanding, reflection, and ethical growth.

The tensions between Western scientific paradigms and Indian epistemological traditions pose a serious challenge in science education threatening epistemological hegemony by prioritizing western knowledge over Indigenous ways of knowing which can distant students and perpetuate colonial hierarchies (Kriti 697)

The ideas discussed in this paper point toward clear directions for educational practice and research. Visual materials in classrooms need to be treated with greater seriousness. Images should not be added only to make lessons attractive or easier. They should be approached as learning material that requires attention, interpretation, and discussion. When students are guided to look closely at visuals and reflect on their meaning, learning becomes deeper and more thoughtful. There is also a need to strengthen visual literacy among teachers. Many educators use images, videos, and digital media regularly, yet few are trained to help students read visuals critically. Drawing from Indian Knowledge Systems, teachers can learn to encourage slow looking, questioning, and dialogue. Such practices help students move beyond surface understanding and develop interpretive and ethical awareness.

Curriculum design can benefit from the use of visual narratives rather than isolated images. Stories told through images allow learners to connect ideas over time. They support reflection and help link knowledge with values and lived experience. This approach is especially useful in subjects that deal with culture, history, environment, and ethics. Digital learning environments make these insights even more important. Students encounter visuals constantly in online spaces, but rarely pause to think about what they see. Educational practices informed by Indian visual traditions can help slow down visual engagement. They

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encourage students to reflect, question, and form their own understanding instead of consuming images passively.

For researchers, this paper suggests the need to rethink how knowledge is defined in education. Visual narratives deserve attention as systems of knowledge, not merely as teaching aids. Future studies can explore how students respond to visual pedagogy in classrooms and how such approaches influence understanding and values over time. In conclusion, visual learning is no longer optional in education. It is already a central part of how students engage with knowledge. Indian Knowledge Systems offer a rich and thoughtful model of visual pedagogy that integrates understanding, reflection, and ethics. Engaging with these traditions allows education to use visuals in more meaningful ways and helps bridge the gap between cultural heritage and contemporary learning needs.

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