

THE COMMUNICATIVE NATURE OF ART IN ANCIENT AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS

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Abstract

This paper explores the historical role of education in India, highlighting its focus on character formation and social values, rather than just technical skills. Rooted in the philosophy of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (the world is one family), education aimed to uplift the community. Art and literature were central to this vision, serving as powerful mediums for transmitting cultural values across generations through oral traditions, performances, and visual and written expressions.

In ancient India, art education was practice-based, with students learning technical skills and symbolic meanings in "Chitrashalas." This rigorous training fostered discipline and precision, essential for artistic and personal development. Art was understood as a universal mode of communication, encompassing all forms of knowledge, as articulated in Bharata's Natyashastra.

Art also played a crucial role in structuring society, with artistic professions often linked to hereditary roles, though individual creativity was also valued. Thinkers like Chanakya integrated art and vocation into governance, promoting social cohesion. Furthermore, art education was vital for cultural preservation, acting as a record of mythological narratives and historical events, as seen in the Ajanta murals. Oral traditions, combined with visual and performative art, created a layered system for transmitting India's cultural heritage.

Education, religion, and art were intertwined, with art serving as an effective medium for religious and moral teachings in temples and other institutions. Knowledge centers like Takshashila and Nalanda were interdisciplinary hubs that fostered cultural exchange and spread Indian artistic traditions globally.

However, the integration of art and crafts declined by the 8th and 9th centuries CE, leading to a marginalization of art. In the contemporary period, education's narrow focus on employability has further sidelined art. The paper argues for revisiting the ancient model of art as communication to restore its role in fostering empathy, dialogue, and social responsibility, addressing modern challenges, and preserving cultural continuity. Reclaiming art's communicative function can help realize the spirit of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam," uniting the world through shared values and culture.

Keywords: Education, Social Values, Art, Culture, Communication, Cultural Preservation, Social Transformation, Knowledge Centres, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam

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Introduction: Education as the Foundation of Social Values

The history of Indian education demonstrates that its primary aim was never limited to technical instruction or livelihood training but was deeply concerned with the formation of character and the nurturing of social values. The philosophical foundation of this approach lies in the concept of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam", or "the world is one family," which emphasizes that knowledge should not serve the individual alone but should be used to uplift and sustain the wider community. In this sense, education was regarded as a moral and social responsibility, and not merely a private pursuit.

Art and literature played a central role in this vision because of their communicative nature. Through oral traditions, performance, visual expression, and written texts, they acted as powerful mediums of transmitting cultural values across generations. Unlike purely textual learning, art engaged the emotions, imagination, and senses, making abstract concepts tangible to society at large. Thus, Art in India was not an isolated discipline but an essential part of social formation, cultural preservation, and communication between individuals and communities.

The Ancient Form of Art Education: Practice as Communication

In ancient India, the teaching of Art was rooted in practice and experience. Students often lived in the homes of teachers or in specialized studios known as “Chitrashalas”. There they learned not only technical skills but also the cultural and symbolic meanings behind their practice. Training included preparing brushes from natural materials such as tree roots, fibers, and animal hair, and producing pigments from minerals and plants. Students also practiced drawing geometric patterns, curves, ornaments, jewelry, and imaginative figures. This intensive training process cultivated patience, discipline, and precision, qualities regarded as essential for both artistic and personal refinement.

Importantly, Art was understood as a communicative discipline. The practice of creating images, ornaments, and sculptures was not confined to aesthetic pleasure but functioned to express cultural ideals, spiritual beliefs, and social codes. Bharata’s *Natyashastra* articulated this clearly: “न तज्ज्ञानं न तच्छिल्पं न सविद्या न सा कला। (Na taddnyānam na tacchilpam na sāvidyā na sā kalā)” – meaning that there is no knowledge or wisdom that does not fall within the realm of Art. This statement situates Art as a universal mode of communication that encompasses all forms of knowledge. Thus, Art education in ancient India functioned both as a technical discipline and as a communicative bridge between knowledge and society.

Art as a Social Construct: Structuring Society through Expression

Art in India was also a means of structuring society. Within the framework of varna-ashrama tradition, artistic professions were linked to hereditary roles, but they were also shaped by local resources and individual inclinations. Communities passed down skills across generations, ensuring the survival of traditions and the preservation of cultural identity. While caste-based systems determined much of vocational training, extraordinary individuals often transcended these boundaries, following personal interest and innovation. This dynamic created a balance between collective continuity and individual creativity.

The work of thinkers such as Chanakya (Kautilya) in the Mauryan period shows how Art and vocation were tied to governance and social organization. By aligning professional roles with artistic practices, society achieved a measure of cohesion and efficiency. Art thus functioned not only as expression but also as a social contract, shaping collective identity and integrating communities within a larger cultural framework. In this way, art became a tool of social construction, reflecting the roles, values, and aspirations of society while also guiding them toward cohesion and refinement.

Art Education as Custodian of Culture: Communication Across Generations

Another vital dimension of Art education was its role in preserving and transmitting culture. Before the widespread use of writing, cultural memory was embedded in art. Murals, sculptures, carvings, and ornaments acted as records of mythological narratives, historical events, and collective rituals. The Ajanta murals, for instance, not only represent a high point in artistic achievement but also serve as visual scriptures that communicated Buddhist teachings, ethical values, and stories of compassion.

The oral tradition further reinforced this function. Sages and seers composed religious, philosophical, and scientific texts, which were memorized and recited across generations. Combined with visual and performative art, these oral practices

created a layered system of communication that preserved India's cultural heritage. Art was, therefore, not merely decorative but a custodian of civilization. It transmitted values, preserved traditions, and ensured that each generation remained connected to its cultural roots while simultaneously developing new forms of expression.

Art, Religion, and Social Transformation

In ancient India, education, religion, and Art were inseparable domains. Education was seen as a spiritual pursuit, a means to attain moksha or liberation. Because Art engaged both the sensory and spiritual faculties, it was regarded as the most effective medium for transmitting religious and moral teachings. Sculptures and paintings in temples, for example, were not only devotional icons but also communicative tools that embodied scriptural ideas and guided the moral imagination of society.

Religious institutions such as gurukuls, ashramas, and temples functioned simultaneously as educational and cultural centres. The atmosphere of these institutions was imbued with ritual, devotion, and knowledge, reflecting the fusion of art, spirituality, and education. By shaping ritual practices, guiding moral codes, and reinforcing community identity, Art played a transformative role in society. It did not merely reflect social realities but actively participated in shaping them, making it an agent of both cultural preservation and social change.

Knowledge Centres as Communicative Hubs

The flourishing of centres like Takshashila, Nalanda, Vikramshila, and Kashi demonstrates how Art education was embedded within a larger network of knowledge. These universities attracted students from across the world, serving as global hubs for cultural and intellectual exchange. Instruction was interdisciplinary, integrating philosophy, language, science, and art. This ensured that artistic training was not confined to technical skill but extended to intellectual and cultural depth.

These centres also reveal the communicative role of art at an international level. By transmitting Indian artistic traditions to foreign students, they became conduits for the spread of Indian culture beyond its borders. The Buddhist monasteries, Hindu temples, and gurukuls were therefore not only institutions of learning but also agents of cultural diplomacy. They transformed art into a language of exchange, reinforcing its role as a medium of communication between civilizations.

From Ancient Traditions to Contemporary Relevance: Bridging the Gap

Despite the richness of these traditions, by the 8th and 9th centuries CE, the integration of Art, literature, and practical crafts began to decline. The applied and industrial arts came to be regarded as inferior, leading to stagnation in these fields. This shift marks a departure from the earlier vision, where art was central to both education and society.

In the contemporary period, the situation is reversed: education has become primarily livelihood-driven, focusing narrowly on employability while neglecting cultural and spiritual dimensions. As a result, Art is often marginalized as secondary or non-essential. This has created both unemployment and a disconnection from cultural roots. To address this crisis, it is necessary to revisit the ancient model of Art education, not by replicating it mechanically but by reclaiming its core insight: art as communication.

Reintegrating Art into education today can restore its function as a vehicle of empathy, dialogue, and social responsibility. Art can once again communicate values, address contemporary issues such as inequality, environmental degradation, and gender justice, and preserve cultural continuity in a rapidly changing world. By bridging ancient traditions with modern needs, art education can cultivate a society that is both rooted in its heritage and open to innovation.

Conclusion: Reclaiming the Communicative Role of Art

The evidence from ancient India shows that Art was never an isolated pursuit. It was a communicative force that shaped society, preserved culture, and transmitted values across generations. Through rigorous practice and holistic training, artists not only achieved technical mastery but also contributed to the moral and cultural life of their communities.

In today's context, where education is increasingly utilitarian, revisiting this vision is crucial. Recognizing Art and literature as vehicles of social change can restore depth and purpose to education. Art can once again function as a medium of communication that bridges the individual with the collective, the past with the present, and the local with the global. Only by re-establishing this communicative role of Art can we realize the true spirit of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam—a world united by shared values, culture, and compassion.

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