



Revisiting *Paurāṇika* Literature as a Repository of Indian Knowledge Systems: Preserving and Transmitting the Theory of the Six Fine Arts

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Abstract

The Purāṇas have a special place in the intellectual traditions of India. Hitherto treated as storehouses of myth, cosmology, genealogy, pilgrimage, ritual and religious narratives, their contents are much wider and extend to domains of systematic and applied knowledge. Among them, the Mahāpurāṇas and Upapurāṇas preserve an important body of knowledge concerning the fine arts. The paper reexamines Paurāṇika literature from the Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) perspective to understand its role in preserving and transmitting the conceptual foundations of six major fine arts namely music (saṅgīta), dance (nr̥tya/nr̥tta), architecture (vāstu), sculpture and iconography (pratimā/śilpa), painting (citra) and literature including poetics and dramaturgy (sāhitya/nāṭya). The study, based especially on the Viṣṇudharmottara, Agni, Matsya, Vāyu, Mārkaṇḍeya, Liṅga, Viṣṇu, Bhāgavata and other Paurāṇika traditions, argues that the Purāṇas did not only preserve isolated technical prescriptions, but placed artistic knowledge within an interconnected epistemological framework. The Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa is particularly important in explaining the interrelation of artistic disciplines, where knowledge progresses thru music, dance, painting and image-making. The paper reads this structure as typical of the integrative nature of Indian Knowledge Systems, where technical skill, aesthetic experience, embodied knowledge, material practice, ritual meaning and philosophical understanding all work in concert. It claims too that the contribution of the Purāṇas is not necessarily to originate every artistic theory but to collect, re-organise, contextualize and transmit inherited knowledge over generations. When the Puranas are viewed in this light, they become dynamic storehouses of knowledge and a model for contemporary research on Indian art, architectural education, continuity of culture and transmission of knowledge.

Keywords: Purāṇa; Indian Knowledge Systems; fine arts; Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa; Citrasūtra; Vāstu; Saṅgīta; Nr̥tya; Śilpa; Sāhitya

1. Introduction: Beyond the Narrative Reading of the Purāṇas

The Purāṇas are one of the largest repositories of knowledge in the Sanskrit intellectual tradition. They are popularly identified with mythology, religious stories, genealogies of gods and kings, cosmology, sacred geography, pilgrimage and ritual practice (Kumar, 2025). This is true, but it is only one dimension of their intellectual character. Their narrative and dialogical structures contain rich discussions of astronomy, medicine, polity, geography, architecture, iconography, music, dance, painting, poetics and dramaturgy (Thapar, 2002). Such a diversity necessitates a rethinking of the



Purāṇas as not merely religious texts but as repositories that were used to collect, organize, contextualize and transmit different forms of knowledge.

This is especially relevant in the current debate on Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). A knowledge system is not only composed of original theoretical propositions, it also depends on the mechanisms of knowledge-memory, knowledge-classification, knowledge-transmission, knowledge-interpretation and knowledge-social accessibility (Sehgal, 2023). From this point of view the encyclopedic character of the Paurāṇika literature becomes all the more important. The Purāṇas seem to be intellectual interfaces between specialized śāstric knowledge and wider cultural memory.

This proposition can be studied in an important field, the theory and practice of fine arts. Information on six broad domains of art is found in Paurāṇika literature, viz. Music, Dance, Architecture, Sculpture/Iconography, Painting and Literature, the latter being bifurcated into poetics and dramaturgy. But these categories should not be understood as being strictly separated according to modern disciplinary classifications. Indian artistic thought repeatedly creates relationships between sound, rhythm, movement, bodily proportion, visual form, spatial order, representation, emotion and aesthetic experience.

The argument of this paper is thus twofold: The first is that the Purāṇas are important repositories of theoretical and technical knowledge relating to the fine arts. Second, their greater epistemological significance is the preservation of these arts as inter-related forms of knowledge, rather than as isolated specializations. This is most clearly stated in the Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa, where the discussion of artistic knowledge sets up a progressive relationship between the various arts.

2. The Purāṇas as Repositories and Transmitters of Knowledge

Part of the intellectual importance of the Purāṇas is their synthesizing power (Kumar, 2025). The Paurāṇika corpus contains knowledge also found in specialized traditions such as the Nāṭyaśāstra, Śilpaśāstra, Vāstuśāstra, Saṅgītaśāstra and Kāvyaśāstra, but in a re-organized and often interrelated form. This characteristic makes an important distinction between invention and delivery. It would be hard to say that the Purāṇas invented all the principles of music, dance, architecture, sculpture, painting or literary theory that they contain. Indeed, certain concepts are strongly tied to specialized śāstric traditions (Wilson, 1864). Instead, their intellectual contribution can be seen as the operation of four interrelated functions: preservation, synthesis, contextualization and transmission. *Preservation* ensured that the body of established artistic knowledge was embedded in a durable textual tradition. *Synthesis* fused disparate fields of knowledge into common textual frameworks. *Contextualization* embedded technical knowledge in religious, social, cosmological and ethical narratives. *Transmission* made this knowledge available outside narrowly specialized treatises (Rocher, 1986). Very often in the Purāṇas, which is very important, the dialogical form is adopted. Knowledge is usually given in the form of a conversation between sages, kings, gods and interlocutors. Knowledge, therefore, is not merely information but upadeśa—instruction in an authoritative pedagogical relationship.

The Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa is perhaps the most explicit example of this encyclopedic pedagogical approach to artistic knowledge (Kramrisch, 1928). It shows, in its treatment of painting, sculpture, dance and music, that to master one discipline you must be familiar with another. The model does not anticipate the autonomous artist or the sharply divided disciplines common in modern institutional structures. Instead, it conceives artistic knowledge as a network of inter-dependent competencies.

2.1. Saṅgīta: Sound, Rhythm and the Foundation of Artistic Order



Music figures importantly in Paurāṇika discussions of the arts. *Gāndharva-vidyā*, the science of music, is acknowledged by the Vāyu Purāṇa as one of the branches of knowledge (Dimmitt, 1978). Music is understood, at once, as an aesthetic practice and as a means capable of spiritual significance. The traditional concept of *saṅgīta* itself shows the integrative character of Indian art. It is not confined to vocal music, but includes *gīta* (song), *vādyā* (instrumental music) and *nṛtya/nṛtta* (dance). Rhythm (*tāla*) is the principle by which these domains are coordinated. Discussions on the theoretical structure of classical music are preserved in Purāṇas like Mārkaṇḍeya, Vāyu, Viṣṇudharmottara, Nārada and Liṅga (Coomaraswamy, 1918).

The existence of concepts like *svara*, *śruti*, *grāma*, *mūrccchanā*, *jāti* and *tāna* shows that music was seen thru a well-developed technical vocabulary, not just described in terms of musical performance. In the Viṣṇudharmottara the treatment of the Paurāṇika is of particular importance (Dave Mukherji, 2001). The dialog between Mārkaṇḍeya and King Vajra in the acquisition of artistic knowledge is interrelated in the sequence. The understanding of rhythm is prior to the mastery of music; music becomes necessary for understanding dance; dance, in turn, provides knowledge required for visual representation. The sequence suggests that rhythm is not just a technical part of performance but an ordering principle linking temporal, corporeal and visual arts. So, the *saṅgīta* creates a conceptual base, where ordered sound becomes rhythm, rhythm becomes embodied movement, and embodied movement yields knowledge of form.

2.2. *Nṛtya* and *Nṛtta*: Embodied Knowledge and the Grammar of Expression

Perhaps dance provides the clearest transition between the temporal and the visual arts. In Indian traditions, *nṛtta* is distinguished from *nṛtya* (Coomaraswamy, 1918). *Nṛtta* is the general, pure rhythmic movement, whereas *nṛtya* is movement that expresses *bhāva* and *rasa*. This embodied language is developed into dramatic representation by Nāṭya.

The Paurāṇika material, particularly the Viṣṇudharmottara and Agni Purāṇa, has a complicated vocabulary of bodily representation (Kramrisch, 1928). The Viṣṇudharmottara treats dance in a systematic way in its Nṛttasūtra which includes *sthāna* (standing positions), *āsana* (seated postures), *śayana* (reclining positions), gaits, movements of *aṅgas* and *pratyāṅgas*, *dr̥ṣṭis* and *mudrās*. The Agni Purāṇa also discusses the gestures and movements of the body.

Dance thus represents a form of embodied knowledge. The body itself becomes an instrument on which codified knowledge is performed, remembered and transmitted. Gesture is not random, for limb, eye and hand movements have a representational and emotional significance.

The fourfold notion of abhinaya also shows the multidimensionality of performance: bodily expression (*āṅgika*), speech (*vācika*), costume and material presentation (*āhārya*), and internal or affective expression (*sāttvika*) (Hapayasirsa Pancaratnam, 1952). Their synthesis produces artistic meaning. This information is critical not only for performance. The formalized vocabulary of *aṅga*, *upāṅga*, *hasta*, *dr̥ṣṭi*, *sthāna* and *āsana* is also relevant to painting and sculpture. In representing a figure, the sculptor or painter has to know the body not as an object but as the vehicle of movement, gesture and emotion. So dance becomes a bridge between sound and visual form.

2.3. *Vāstu*: Architecture as Ordered Habitation

The Paurāṇika treatment of architecture is surprisingly comprehensive. The idea of *vāstu* is much bigger than what we understand as architecture today in terms of buildings. It includes habitation, sites,



settlements, temples, civic structures, gardens, water structures and associated spatial systems (Kumar, 2025).

Some Puranas systematically preserve architectural knowledge. They deal with topics such as site selection, soil examination, building materials, town planning, residential architecture, temple architecture, proportions and construction conventions. Some of the contributions in this architectural discourse are by the Agni, Matsya, Vāyu, Brahmāṇḍa and Viṣṇudharmottara (Acharya, 1934). An interesting facet of Paurāṇika architectural that is the narration of origin of habitation. The origin of dwellings and settlements is related to the changes in the environmental conditions and the requirements of the man in the Vāyu, Brahmāṇḍa and Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇas. Habitation arises from the need to combat heat, cold, insecurity and the need for collective settlement (Thapar, 2002). They are not architectural histories in the modern archeological sense, their importance is rather in the conceptual relationship they establish between environment, human necessity and built form. Architecture is a product of adaptation.

2.4. Śilpa, Pratimā and the Knowledge of Sacred Form

The fourth art area is sculpture and the highly developed science of iconography and image-making. The Paurāṇika literature is replete with descriptions of divine images and their attributes, postures, proportions, emblems and related iconographic identities (Banerjea, 1956). The Agni Purāṇa, Matsya Purāṇa and Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa are particularly relevant here. Their descriptions are a textual apparatus that translates abstract theological ideas into perceivable form. This translation is exactly the significance of *pratimā-lakṣaṇa* (Vatsyayan, 1968; Rao, 1916). An image of God is not merely an aesthetic reproduction of a human body. Its theological identity is communicated by its attributes, gestures, number of arms, posture, ornaments and associated symbols. Therefore, iconography is a system of knowledge that makes metaphysical and narrative concepts material. Measurement (*pramāṇa*) is central to this process. The proportions of the body and the relationships between its parts are codified so as to produce recognizable and proper forms. But measuring alone is not enough. Posture and gesture give the image its expressive force, and thus show why the knowledge of dancing is relevant to the sculptor.

This relation is perhaps the most convincing example of the interdisciplinary character of Paurāṇika art theory (G., 2023). Movement informs form; form becomes image; image becomes a vehicle of meaning and worship.

2.5. Citra: Painting as a Synthesis of the Arts

The *Citrasūtra* of the Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa occupies a peculiar place among the Paurāṇika texts on visual art (Dave Mukherji, 2001; Kramrisch, 1928). It includes one of the most extensive remaining discussions in Sanskrit of the principles, techniques, and ideals of painting.

The larger Indian theory of painting is often summarized in the well-known *Ṣaḍaṅga*, the six limbs of painting:

rūpabhedāḥ pramāṇāni bhāva-lāvaṇya-yojanam |
sādṛśyaṃ varṇikā-bhaṅga iti citraṃ ṣaḍaṅgakam |

These denote differentiation of forms (*rūpabhedā*), proportion (*pramāṇa*), emotion (*bhāva*), arrangement of grace (*lāvaṇya-yojana*), resemblance (*sādṛśya*) and treatment of color (*varṇikā-bhaṅga*) (Vatsyayan, 1968). The well-known formulation is not to be simply ascribed to the Viṣṇudharmottara,



but its ideas are very much at home in the conceptual world of the Citrasūtra. And so, painting becomes a site of meeting. It demands knowledge of bodily proportion as in sculpture, of movement as in dance, of rhythm and compositional order, of emotional expression, of material knowledge, of narrative knowledge.

2.6. *Sāhitya* and *Nāṭya*: Rasa as Aesthetic Knowledge

The sixth domain is literature, which deals with poetics and dramaturgy. The Agni Purāṇa and Viṣṇudharmottara within the Paurāṇika corpus contain important discussions of *sāhitya* (Hapysirsa Pancaratram, 1952). Subjects covered are *rasa*, *rīti*, *guṇa*, *doṣa*, *alaṅkāra* and *dhvani* and the principles of dramaturgy.

Fundamentally is *rasa*, the aesthetic experience. The technical apparatus of performance – gesture, movement, music, costume, language and dramatic construction – ultimately works toward the evocation of an aesthetic state in the *Sahṛdaya*, the receptive spectator (Vatsyayan, 1968). This points to an essential dimension of Indian art theory: the completion of artistic creation is not in the object or performance alone but in experience. Art passes from the maker to the form, from the form to representation and from representation to aesthetic consciousness.

3. From *Ṣaḍ-Kalā* to an Integrated Paurāṇika Epistemology

The six fine arts should not be viewed as independent disciplines but as an interconnected system within the Paurāṇika knowledge tradition (table 1). *Saṅgīta* establishes rhythm and auditory order; *Nṛtya* embodies rhythm through movement; *Śilpa* transforms movement into meaningful form; *Citra* articulates form through line, proportion and colour; *Vāstu* extends these principles into spatial order; and *Sāhitya/Nāṭya* integrates narrative, emotion and aesthetic experience (Dimmitt, 1978; G., 2023). This sequence is not a rigid hierarchy but reflects the interdisciplinary approach of the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*, where artistic knowledge is relational. King Vajra's instruction that mastery of painting requires knowledge of dance, and dance depends upon music and rhythm, exemplifies this integrated epistemology. Common principles such as *rūpa*, *pramāṇa*, *tāla*, *bhāva*, *rasa*, *sādṛśya* and *śilpa* transcend disciplinary boundaries and form a shared framework of artistic knowledge.

Table 1. Paurāṇika Contribution to Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS)

Paurāṇika Function	Contribution to IKS
Preservation	Conserved traditional artistic knowledge across generations.
Synthesis	Integrated music, dance, architecture, sculpture, painting and literature within a common epistemological framework.
Contextualisation	Embedded technical knowledge within religious, philosophical, cultural and social traditions.
Transmission	Disseminated knowledge through textual traditions, <i>guru-śiṣya paramparā</i> , ritual practices, artistic guilds and embodied performance.
Knowledge Character	Presented knowledge as relational, interdisciplinary, experiential and practice-oriented rather than merely textual or archival.

4. Preservation and Transmission: The Paurāṇika Contribution to IKS

From the perspective of Indian Knowledge Systems, the principal contribution of the Purāṇas lies in their role as repositories and transmitters of knowledge. Rather than originating every artistic theory,



they preserved, synthesised, contextualised and transmitted established traditions within broader cultural, religious and philosophical frameworks (Sehgal, 2023). Their dialogical structure embedded specialised knowledge in civilisational memory, facilitating its transmission through textual traditions, *guru-śiṣya paramparā*, ritual practice, artistic guilds and embodied performance. Consequently, the Purāṇas present knowledge as relational, interdisciplinary and experiential, rather than merely textual or archival.

5. Conclusion

The Puranas are worth rethinking as important repositories in the history of Indian Knowledge Systems. Their accounts of music, dance, architecture, sculpture, painting and literature demonstrate that Paurāṇika knowledge extends far beyond mythology and ritual (Kumar, 2025). The corpus includes technical vocabularies, principles of measurement, theories of expression, systems of representation, material practices, and aesthetic concepts inherited from the larger Indian intellectual traditions.

However, their unique contribution is in the way this knowledge was preserved, synthesized and transmitted. The Purāṇas do not always regard the arts as separate disciplines. In contrast, in the Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa in particular, artistic knowledge is presented as a connected system in which sound generates rhythm, rhythm generates movement, movement generates visual form, form generates representation and representation generates aesthetic and spiritual experience (Thapar, 2002). In this way the six fine arts demonstrate a more general epistemological principle: Indian artistic knowledge was mediated thru relations between *sabda*, *tala*, *deha*, *rupa*, *pramāṇa*, *bhāva*, *rasa* and *anubhava*—sound, rhythm, body, form, measure, expression, aesthetic essence and experience.

Thus, to re-enter this Paurāṇika framework in contemporary IKS discourse demands more than recovering ancient prescriptions of art. It involves the understanding of the Purāṇas as living repositories of civilizational memory: texts that brought together scattered traditions, contextualized specialized knowledge within larger cultural matrices, and transmitted them thru the ages. They are not important just because they record, but because they preserve epistemological relations. The Paurāṇika corpus, by way of the theory of the fine arts, presents a notion of knowledge in which artistic creation, technical skill, aesthetic experience, cultural memory and philosophical understanding are intrinsically linked.

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