

Article

Visualising Indigenous Wisdom: Ecological Consciousness and Pedagogy in Indian Mythological Cartoons

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Abstract: Several recent studies have highlighted the significance of indigenous knowledge systems in addressing contemporary societal issues. The interrelationship between the environment and the Indian knowledge system, as expressed through spiritual texts such as the Vedas and the Upanishads, plays a crucial role in fostering environmental awareness among today's children. In traditional Indian joint family structures, these mythological narratives were passed down through oral storytelling practices. However, with the disintegration of these family structures, digital media has assumed this role. Currently, animated cartoons have emerged as a powerful medium for conveying indigenous narratives and instilling moral values in children. These mythological cartoons represent traditional narratives that incorporate ecological lessons from the Indian knowledge system, while also adapting to the demands of modern media and preserving traditional wisdom. The paper explores the pedagogical potential of Indian mythological cartoon narratives as dynamic tools for conveying the values of the Indian indigenous knowledge system, with a particular emphasis on ecological consciousness. It highlights how these cartoons adapt ancient Indian ecological philosophies—where environmental elements are revered as sacred—and translate them into modern visual narratives that are accessible to intercultural and intergenerational audiences. By incorporating theoretical concepts such as ‘companionship’ and ‘parasocial relationships’ from media studies, along with concepts of children’s ‘social learning behaviour’, this paper examines how cartoons can serve as influential conveyors of indigenous values and principles. The study considers several prominent Indian mythological cartoons, including *Little Krishna* (2009), *Hanuman* (2005), and *The Legend of Buddha* (2017).

Keywords: Indigenous Mythological Cartoons; Eco-Spirituality; Indigenous Environmental Philosophy

Introduction

In Indian indigenous communities, cultural narratives and belief systems form a vital part of cultural heritage, sustained across generations through the oral traditions of elder community members. These narratives—encompassing myths, folktales, legends, and spiritual teachings—serve as carriers of moral, spiritual, and social wisdom, ensuring that such values are embedded within the collective identity of the people. Functioning as decolonial tools, they integrate ethical principles into everyday life and social structures.

In India, the practice of elders narrating these stories to younger generations has been central to preserving indigenous values, offering children cultural knowledge that extends far beyond the formal, often globalised, content of school curricula. These narratives frequently follow recurring patterns—what Carl Jung identified as archetypes and what Northrop Frye analysed through recurring imagery, motifs, and symbolic language—thereby shaping a shared cultural memory, or “collective unconscious,” within the community. For instance, in Hindu traditions, saffron is emblematic of religious devotion, while the sound of the flute evokes associations with the deity Krishna. Such symbolic consistencies are not confined to Hinduism; they are prevalent across the diverse indigenous cultures of India.

Through these symbolic and narrative frameworks, mythological storytelling plays an active role in transmitting the ethical principles embedded in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), fostering a form of societal development rooted in decolonised cultural perspectives. Traditionally, grandparents have played a central role in this process, acting as custodians of oral tradition. However, as Gauravam notes in the thesis *Television Cartoons and their Influence on School-Going Children of Patna*, the decline of joint family systems in favour of nuclear households has reduced opportunities for children to engage in these traditional modes of learning. (Gauravam 1-5)

Media theory concepts, such as the ‘media priming effect’, say that the fictional stories in media create emotional and mental connections that can affect how people feel in real life. This is evident in how mythological cartoons—such as Krishna caring for nature or Buddha showing kindness—evoke emotions and thoughts that shape children's real-life beliefs about nature and society. (Baker and Raney 69-70) This aligns with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which posits that children learn by observing and imitating what they see in the media. The outcomes shown for characters on-screen guide children's behaviour. (Oliver et al. 32-33) When mythological characters are praised for doing good things, such as being brave or kind, children are encouraged to emulate them. On the other hand, if bad actions are punished in the storyline, children are less likely to copy them. In this way, mythological cartoons become fun and educational tools that convey useful social and moral lessons while helping to keep IKS alive in today's world.

A closer look at select mythological cartoons, such as Little Krishna, Bal Ganesh, Hanuman, The Legend of Buddha, and Luv Kush, reveals that they are integral parts of

India's decolonised cultural world. Using Stephen Greenblatt's idea of the 'poetics of culture', which views art as a product of culture, we can say that these cartoons reflect a blend of contemporary media needs and traditional knowledge systems. (Greenblatt 10-11) As forms of art, they are shaped by their social and historical background. By examining select mythological cartoons, such as Little Krishna, Bal Ganesh, Hanuman, The Legend of Buddha, and Luv Kush, in this way, we can see them not just as entertaining stories but as a pedagogical tool to incorporate decolonised lessons on human-environmental relationships for children. They help build today's children's values while dealing with the challenges of modern life, such as an unsustainable lifestyle.

Indigenous Environmental conception and contemporary Cartoon Narratives:

In *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Peter Barry explains ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment." (Barry 248) Klaus Eder, a German sociologist, writes in *The Social Construction of Nature* that nature is not merely a physical entity, but is also shaped by cultural, social, and historical ideas. Barry also points out that "attitudes to nature vary, and some of the variations are culturally determined." (Barry 254) This means how nature is shown in texts about nature—and also in visual forms like cartoons—reflects these cultural understandings. In *Ideas of Nature* (1980), Raymond Williams suggests that people's ideas about nature are shaped by their cultural teachings, making nature something we understand through our indigenous culture. Thoreau's *Walden* (1999) supports this idea by advocating a return to nature to rediscover the self, and also criticises how modern life has diminished nature's true worth. (Barry 255-256) One needs to gain firsthand experience of nature to develop an ethical attitude toward it. If an individual has that experience during their childhood, the possibility of preserving nature becomes more evident due to the subject's childhood nostalgia for nature. Select cartoons with characters' decolonised, harmonious relationships towards the environment inspire children to gain real-life experiences of the material environment, all because of the parasocial relationship and priming effect of media. Following this, select cartoons might have a strong social impact, incorporating decolonised environmental values.

Based on this, select Indian mythological cartoons, such as Little Krishna, Bal Ganesh, Hanuman, The Legend of Buddha, and Luv Kush, can be seen as texts about nature. These cartoons focus on nature and animals that have human feelings and moral roles. They are based on Indigenous myths and old stories, and they adapt Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) for today's audiences, especially children. Using Cheryll Glotfelty's ecocriticism lens, we can see how these films portray nature—such as land, plants, animals, and the bond between humans and animals—in ways that reflect traditional Indian views on nature while also addressing contemporary environmental issues. These stories bring together decolonised ecological ideas from IKS and today's ecological issues. As Bharadwaj explains, environmental education helps people understand how natural systems function and how humans can coexist responsibly within them. (Bharadwaj 42) This idea dates back to Rousseau's *Emile* (1762), in which

he advocated for learning through nature. IKS relies on this practice, where students are taught lessons through their first-hand experience with the environment. While the focus on the environment gained popularity in the 1960s–70s, nature learning has always been a part of ancient Indian thought. These cartoons help bring back those indigenous ecological ideas. In light of today's environmental problems, cartoons have become a helpful modern tool for teaching about the environment. As Das and Sharma suggest, the way we teach about ecology needs to change to remain effective. (Baruah and Borah 231-233) Cartoons, which combine fun and education, are now a strong way to teach children about ecology and bring back decolonised environmental lessons to life. Animation also allows creators to make imaginative worlds that live-action cannot always show. In ancient Indian texts, natural elements such as trees, rivers, and plants were regarded as possessing emotions or spirits. This helped people respect and care for them. Similarly, in these cartoons, non-human characters, such as animals, rivers, and trees, exhibit emotions and form close bonds with human characters, illustrating how all life forms are interconnected. Indian myth-based cartoons utilise this approach to construct stories that promote environmental awareness. Children often form emotional bonds with these cartoon characters, helping them care more about nature. This supports the decolonised approach to ecology. These emotional ties help foster an ecological way of thinking that aligns with Fromm's idea of the 'Rebirth of Humanism.' (Bharadwaj 23) In this view, caring for the environment comes from deep emotional and moral connections with nature.

Review of related literature:

The researcher's preliminary observation suggests that the narratives of the selected cartoon series rely on ancient Indian cultural traditions to cultivate ecological consciousness among children. The primary purpose of this study is to investigate and verify this observation. Before delving into the content analysis of these cartoon narratives, the researcher reviews relevant academic literature on the pedagogical potential of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) in shaping ecological awareness. This literature review establishes a theoretical foundation upon which the analysis of the selected narratives can proceed with confidence.

In the current scenario, educators have shifted their attention to the relevance of IKS in addressing contemporary societal issues related to the environment, health, medicine, agriculture, and various other sectors. Considering the importance of integrating IKS into the contemporary knowledge system, the Indian Ministry of Education (MoE) established the IKS cell at AICTE, New Delhi, to promote research and the incorporation of IKS into the contemporary educational system. According to Dr. Pavan Mandavkar, the primary objective of this IKS cell is to address contemporary social issues through the traditional knowledge system, which encompasses Vedic literature and Upanishads. In ancient India, most of the beliefs and practices supported by IKS had a scientific reason. Ancient Indian beliefs and practices aimed at the betterment of human society, as well as the well-being of all other living and non-living creatures on the Earth. This worldview of the traditional system is veiled under the modern society's striving for economic and political profits; the IKS cell aims to

revitalise that worldview by inculcating IKS into the contemporary knowledge system. (Mandavkar 1-4)

To discuss elaborately on Goswami's observations in 'Environmental consciousness as reflected in the Vedas', on the role of the Vedas in incorporating environmental consciousness. According to her, the concept of ecological consciousness within Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) finds one of its most ancient and profound expressions in the Vedic tradition of India. The Vedas, as foundational texts of early Indian civilisation, reflect an intricate understanding of the environment and articulate a worldview where nature is not merely a resource but a sacred presence integral to human existence. Various hymns within these texts emphasise the divinity of natural elements and advocate for their reverent preservation, offering significant insights for contemporary ecological thought. One of the most compelling symbols in this tradition is the personification of Earth as a mother figure. The famous expression 'mātā bhūmih putro'ham prithivyāḥ' portrays a deep, filial relationship between human beings and the Earth. Texts like the *Bhūmisūkta* of the Atharvaveda advocate for the careful treatment of the soil, discouraging unnecessary exploitation and urging the preservation of its resources.

Considering the influential role of cartoons in educating children, cartoons' trait of combining attractive narratives, visuals, dialogues, and music, which is lacking in traditional education. Cartoon narratives have become the conveyer of ancient Indian knowledge. The content of Indian cartoons primarily relies on indigenous mythological narratives and epics. Sometimes, cartoons like Little Krishna, Bal Ganesha, and Hanuman copy from the actual mythological narrative without making any changes to the characters. At other times, cartoons like Chhota Bheem, Luv Kush, and Roll No. 21 present mythological characters by modifying their physical appearance and attitudes. However, the only objective of both these types of cartoons is to educate their young audiences. *Chhota Bheem* is a non-mythological cartoon, but in some episodes and movies, the mythological characters appear to help Bheem. *Chhota Bheem* is a popular cartoon among Indian children, and as a result, several critical works have been written about it. Jaggi, in his study of Indian cartoon content, states that Indian cartoons mostly borrow their content from ancient Indian mythological narratives. Mythological characters are the hero figures of Indian cartoons. This repetitiveness restricts the growth of Indian cartoon content. (Jaggi 5-8) Saranya and Balasubramanian, in their study on the role of mythological characters in *Chhota Bheem* cartoon series and movies, find that it is an action-oriented cartoon where the main character Bheem solves problems with the help of his friends, and several mythological characters like Krishna, Ganesha, and Hanuman appear to help Bheem with their advice. According to them, although *Chhota Bheem* narratives promote bravery and companionship, a quality also evident in ancient Indian epics. "The mythological characters portrayed in these cartoon series are quite contrary to their actual nature in the original epics." (Saranya and Balasubramanian 8516) Furthermore, while teaching lessons on bravery, Chhota Bheem narratives led the characters to incorporate violence into their actions, according to the Gauravam. When children get exposed to this on-screen violence, they tend to adopt aggressive behaviour in their real life, which is evident in the attitudes of school children

in Patna. Children imitate the violent actions of cartoon characters on their school friends in the classroom. (Gauravam 5-10)

IKS is a source of environmental education in ancient India. Considering the cultural repository role of select cartoons, glimpses of decolonised environmental lessons are evident in the narratives of the select mythological cartoons, which the researchers have merely explored. Considering the global need for environmentally sustainable human actions, the indigenous environmental lessons in cartoon narratives must be underscored and promoted. Exploring these cartoons as an indigenous environmental cartoon narrative is the research gap in this field.

Research Objectives:

The primary objective of this research work is to underscore and explore the evidence of indigenous environmental lessons in select Indian mythological cartoon narratives. Secondly, to promote select Indian mythological cartoons as a pedagogical tool for indigenous environmental education, for intercultural and intergenerational audiences.

Research Methodology:

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, utilising content analysis to examine select Indian mythological cartoons from an ecocritical perspective. The analysis will be guided by a diverse body of scholarly literature on Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS), which will support the research arguments and contribute to a well-rounded academic framework for the study.

This study approaches select cartoons as narrative texts, prioritising their storytelling elements over their technical composition. Although media forms like cartoons, films, and video games can typically be explored through two principal lenses – one emphasising their technical attributes, such as frame rates, visual composition, lighting, and colour palettes, and the other centring on their narrative frameworks – this research deliberately chooses to concentrate on the latter. By setting aside an analysis of the visual and technical craftsmanship of these animations, the focus remains on examining the narrative structures, themes, and content they present.

Accordingly, the priority of this research is placed on the ‘what’ of the narrative—the thematic and representational content—rather than the ‘how’, or the specific medium and stylistic techniques employed in its delivery. This methodological orientation aligns with the principles of ecocriticism, a critical approach that explores how these cartoon narratives, regardless of their medium, transform the IKS’s lessons on ecological consciousness.

Indigenous Environmental Stewardship in Cartoon Narratives

‘Dharmic Ecology’ is Dwivedi and Tiwari’s concept derived from their observations of IKS lessons on human responsibilities towards the environment. In other words, ‘Dharma Ecology’ underscores the rightfulness of any human action towards the environment. ‘Dharma Ecology’ of the IKS confirms that human beings do no injustice to the environment, because according to the IKS text, the Upanishad

invokes life and senses to all the environmental elements, through the concept of 'atma'. (Sheikh 62-64) IKS texts further illustrate the concept of lifefulness and awareness traits of the environmental elements through the tool of personification.

Select Indian mythological cartoon narratives transfer the IKS lessons on environmental consciousness into the virtual world. The select narratives achieve this through the personification of animals and environmental elements, where these personified characters instruct the human characters of the narratives on their duty towards the environment, adhering to the principles of 'dharmic ecology'. The spiritual worldview of the environment, as presented in the IKS texts, is replicated and transferred interculturally and intergenerationally through the medium of cartoons. The setting and narratives of the selected cartoons become influential for the children because IKS ecological lessons are taught to them through the assigned human emotions in the selected cartoon narratives. The anthropomorphic characters in select cartoons become the 'parasocial friends' of the children, influencing children's behaviours. (Krish 12) As Baidya notes, cartoon narratives and cartoon characters are very influential in shaping children's behaviour, and this influence sustains into adulthood. (Baidya 5) For example, IKS articulates an intrinsic connection between humans, animals, and plants through the concept of atma. Within this framework, atma is perceived as a microcosm of the supreme creator, 'Brahman', suggesting that all forms of life – human, animal, and plant – are interconnected manifestations of the same cosmic essence. (Sheikh 62-64) This philosophy of species interconnectedness is vividly portrayed in the narrative of *Little Krishna*. The storyline illustrates that, like humans and animals, trees too possess senses and an atma. In one episode, after Krishna uproots two trees as his innocent art, the liberated atmas emerge and reveal that they once inhabited human bodies before being reborn as trees. (*Little Krishna* 00:34:22) This narrative moment establishes a symbolic interconnection between plants and human beings, reinforcing the IKS worldview that life exists within a continuous, interconnected cycle, where all living entities share a common spiritual essence.

The presence of 'mahabhutas' within IKS closely resonates with Aldo Leopold's concept of 'biocentric ethics', which envisions all significant elements of the environment – air, water, soil, mountains – as vital organs of a single living organism, Brahman. According to this perspective, the malfunction of any one part leads to the disruption of the Earth's entire ecological balance. (Rangarajan 53) Ramachandra Guha argues that IKS environmental philosophies need not conflict with contemporary scientific approaches to sustainable practices; instead, they can complement and enrich them. IKS connects people with the environment both physically and emotionally. He suggests that when people remain emotionally and physically connected to their environment, they are more likely to adopt and sustain environmentally responsible behaviours.

In this context, the integration of dharmic ecology into children's cartoons serves a significant pedagogical function, aligning with the objective of this chapter: to explore how these narratives can cultivate environmental consciousness and sustainable practices in young audiences by incorporating lessons from IKS. Dharmic

ecology emphasises the moral responsibility of human beings to preserve the balance, righteousness, and purity of the 'mahabhutas' (the five great elements of the environment essential for sustaining human life on Earth, namely air, water, land, and fire). This environmental ethic is visually and narratively represented in select mythological cartoon narratives.

For example, the *Rig Veda* and the *Vishnu Purana* metaphorically associate Earth with a nourishing cow. (Sheikh 10-12) Considering the significant role of animals in maintaining the ecological balance of the Earth. Replicating this, in the narrative of *Hanuman*, the Earth is personified as a suffering cow, lamenting the devastation caused by demons who destroy trees and harm people. In this depiction, both human beings and trees are portrayed as essential organs of the Earth's body, and their destruction leads to the planet's suffering. Similarly, in *Dashavatar*, the deity Vishnu warns the sage Satyavat about the impending end of the current world and entrusts him with preserving vital elements from the existing world to ensure the balanced functioning of the new one. (*Dashavatar* 00:17:57) The subsequent scenes, where Satyavat gathers plants, animals, and human beings, emphasise the interconnectedness of all life forms and reflect a biocentric ethic that values both human and non-human existence. For example, in the narrative of *LuvKush*, after saving some small, weak animals from the harassment of monkeys, Luv and Kush advise those monkeys to coexist in harmony with all the other creatures and assist the weaker ones. Fostering IKS's philosophy of species interconnectivity through 'atma'. Similarly, the *Bal Ganesh* narrative introduces a land where humans, animals, and trees coexist. However, despite this harmonious arrangement, the land appears barren and lifeless due to the absence of water, visually reinforcing the importance of maintaining the proper function of all elements – mahabhutas – within the Earth's ecological system. (*Bal Ganesh* 00:56:44) The environmental philosophy presented in the Vedas is predominantly rooted in nature worship, where elements such as earth, water, fire, air, and space are perceived as divine entities. This is evident in the narrative of *Hanuman*. (*Hanuman* 00:37:43) Moreover, *LavaKusa* (*Lava Kusa - The Warrior Twins* 00:13:21), where both the human and animal characters pay homage to the setting sun. According to IKS's environmental philosophy, nature in all its glory is considered 'prakrti', female power. All elements of nature are considered the divine mother in ancient Indian environmental philosophy. Eco-feminism is evident in the roots of IKS; it metaphorically represents the Earth as 'Mother Earth'. Through several mythological narratives, IKS connects the origin and growth of the female with nature, establishing an indigenous eco-feminist worldview. In other words, the ancient Indian environmental worldview is 'feminine ecology'. (Shukla and Meegama) IKS refers to the environment as prakrti, and according to IKS, the female embodies this concept of prakrti. In ancient Indian mythological narratives, female power was embodied with all the elements of the environment; in this sense, worshipping the 'mahabhutas' results in worshipping female power. This invokes equality and harmonious coexistence of all creatures on Earth. Because a female seer in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* suggests worshipping the environment, because worshipping the environment "demolishes the ego-centric individual identity and

transcends one's awareness from individual self to higher planes of consciousness and thus results in selflessness."(Manogna 3)

The embodiment of the female with 'prakriti' (nature) within the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) is prominently evident in the narrative of *Lava and Kusa*. In this tale, the female character Sita originates from the Earth, and following her banishment from the kingdom, it is *Prakriti* that offers her refuge, positioning her as the sovereign of the forest. As Brisson argues, the association between women and nature is a social construct perpetuated by patriarchal societies. (Brisson 16), thereby contributing to the enduring grand narrative of 'Mother Nature.' This narrative, rooted in ancient mythologies and the "mythlore of the sacred feminine earth goddess" (Brisson 16) It has historically shaped cultural perceptions of both gender and the environment. (Lyotard 15) It has also influenced the way environmental conservation roles have been divided along gender lines over time. The historical relationship between gender and ecological engagement has consequently led to differing valuations of the environment. Martin López observes that women typically value the environment more in terms of protection and sustenance. This observation aligns with Fortnam et al.'s study, which notes that, culturally, men have been designated as providers, extracting natural resources for economic gain. At the same time, women have traditionally gathered materials that directly benefit the household, such as firewood, medicinal plants, and utensils made from roots. (Fortnam et al. 318) These culturally ascribed roles have, over time, shaped distinct gendered attitudes toward nature. Sujinah further explains that this division is justified within patriarchal systems by conceptualising men as aligned with culture and women as intrinsically linked to the natural environment.

However, Indian cultural narratives occasionally subvert this grand narrative. Dattaray and Sharma, in their eco-theographic reading of Indian myths, observe how the figure of Annapurna mediates between nature and culture. As they note, "Annapurna mediates between nature and culture, between the natural order of food and the 'kitchen,' or, to borrow the expression of Claude Lévi-Strauss, between the 'raw' and the 'cooked'". (Dattaray and Sharma 35) In these narratives, Annapurna, traditionally associated with both the raw produce of nature and the cooked food of the kitchen, blurs the rigid binary of nature (female) and culture (male). The myth also subverts male authority figures, as Lord Shiva—usually depicted as the cosmic energy of the universe—is rendered powerless before Parvati's (as Annapurna) anger and must beg for food. Through this narrative, food serves as a foundational element for dismantling gender binaries, promoting a more gender-neutral ethos toward environmental stewardship. (Dattaray and Sharma 33-34, 38-39)

In the *LavaKusa* narrative, the embodiment of nature is not restricted to female characters. Sita's sons, Luv and Kush, assume the role of protectors of 'prakriti', as guardians of their mother's forest kingdom. Such portrayals have the potential to emotionally engage children, inspiring them to appreciate the IKS philosophy of mahabhutas (the five elements) and cultivate an ethical responsibility toward their environment. These narratives can reinforce the significance of preserving the purity

and balance of the mahabhutas, advocating for a harmonious and inclusive relationship between humanity and nature. Notably, IKS's emphasis on the mahabhutas and human roles in relation to the mahabhutas is reflected in this narrative.

Conclusion

While the digital representation of sacred landscapes, these cartoons may seem utopian, it is important to recognise that their primary aim is not to replicate physical environments, but to evoke indigenous environmental awareness and concern among young audiences. Similar to the IKS principles, the objective of these select mythological cartoon narratives is to transform human beings' conceptual understanding of the environment. As Bharadwaj notes, cartoon creators possess the creative freedom to construct hyperreal worlds to convey significant cultural and ethical ideas. In this context, select cartoons complement the decolonised environmental lessons. Selected cartoons are designed to convey the tropes of indigenous knowledge on the human-environment relationship to young audiences.

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