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The Semiotics of the Textbook: Deconstructing Ideological Framing and Political Iconography in State-Sanctioned Social Science Curricula

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Abstract:

Textbooks serve as institutional conduits of state power, defining what counts as legitimate knowledge within national schooling systems. While curricular scholarship frequently parses linguistic content, the visual architecture of textbooks remains an under-interrogated site of ideological naturalization. This study conducts a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) of 135 illustrations, infographics, and photographic plates sampled from secondary school social science textbooks (grades 9–10) published across distinct ideological administrations between 2005 and 2020 by national and regional curriculum boards in India (NCERT and select State Boards). Grounded in Michael Apple's political economy of education and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model, this paper examines how state developmentalism, civic duties, and national identity are visually reified. Utilizing a multidimensional coding matrix incorporating visual salience, interpersonal gaze (demand versus offer), socio-demographic representation, and visual-linguistic concordance, the analysis demonstrates how pedagogic imagery systematically marginalizes subaltern identities, privileges techno-statist modernity, and visualizes civic duty through passive obedience rather than active democratic dissent. The paper concludes with actionable interventions for multimodal literacy and critical textbook design.

Keywords:
. Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis,
. Textbook Semiotics,
. Visual Rhetoric,
. Michael Apple,
. Stuart Hall,
. Hidden Curriculum,
. Social Science Pedagogy

INTRODUCTION:

School textbooks are not neutral pedagogical instruments; they are cultural artifacts produced at the intersection of state ideology, institutional authority, and commercial publishing. As state-sanctioned pedagogical devices, they delineate the boundaries of legitimate memory, civic posture, and collective identity. While educational sociology has extensively interrogated textual curricula for nationalist bias, linguistic hegemony, and selective historiography, the visual components—photographs, lithographs, political cartoons, diagrammatic models, and statistical infographics—are frequently treated as secondary pedagogical supplements rather than primary sites of semiotic struggle.

Visual images in educational media operate with an epistemic authority that text rarely commands. Because images appear to document empirical reality unmediated, they frequently bypass critical cognitive filters, presenting socio-political constructions as self-evident truths. When a secondary-school learner encounters an illustration depicting national development or civic compliance, the image does not simply illustrate the adjacent typographic prose; it performs an independent ideological labor. It frames who belongs within the nation, whose labor drives historical progress, and how an ideal citizen relates to sovereign authority.

Deconstructing these visual artifacts requires unpacking the political economy of educational production. This paper investigates how state-sanctioned secondary school social science curricula in India deploy visual rhetoric to encode political hegemony, social stratification, and developmentalist paradigms.

1.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study addresses four interconnected research questions:

1. How do textbook illustrations visually construct national identity and civic belonging?
2. What semiotic strategies naturalize state developmentalism while erasing ecological and social costs?
3. How are gender, caste, and class hierarchies reproduced through visual framing and gaze?
4. What pedagogical interventions can foster critical multimodal literacy among students?

1.2 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This research contributes to three scholarly domains. For educational sociology, it extends Apple's political economy of education into the visual domain, demonstrating that the "selective tradition" operates not only through textual content but through the visual architecture of the textbook page. For visual communication studies, it provides empirical grounding for theoretical claims about the ideological function of images in institutional contexts. For curriculum studies, it offers a systematic framework for analyzing the hidden visual curriculum that shapes civic consciousness.

2. Theoretical Framework: Curricular Hegemony and Multimodal Semiotics

This inquiry synthesizes Michael Apple's structural critique of the political economy of education with Stuart Hall's semiotic model of ideological communication, supplemented by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's visual grammar.

2.1 MICHAEL APPLE: IDEOLOGY, HEGEMONY, AND "LEGITIMATE KNOWLEDGE"

In Ideology and Curriculum (1979) and Official Knowledge (1993), Michael Apple argues that education is fundamentally implicated in the structural reproduction of unequal power relations. Rather than viewing the school as an egalitarian equalizer, Apple demonstrates that the curriculum represents a "selective tradition"—someone's selection, someone's vision of legitimate culture. Textbooks embody an ideological compromise negotiated among bureaucratic gatekeepers, economic elites, and political regimes.

State-sanctioned textbooks act as commodities through which the state constructs a unified civic imaginary while actively depoliticizing systemic contradictions—such as caste violence, agrarian crises, gender disparities, and labor struggles. The political economy of curriculum generation ensures that the images admitted into the text systematically align with state stability, national prestige, and macroeconomic imperatives.

2.2 STUART HALL: ENCODING/DECODING AND THE IDEOLOGICAL SIGN

Stuart Hall's formulation of encoding and decoding within media discourse posits that ideological messages are encoded into structural signs by institutional producers possessing institutional power. While the institutional encoder intends a "preferred reading" (the dominant-hegemonic code), the semiotic composition of the text retains ambiguities that make alternative decodings possible:

1. **Dominant-Hegemonic Code:** The learner decodes the visual text directly within the institutional framework in which it was produced, accepting the naturalized moral authority of the state without friction.
2. **Negotiated Code:** The learner acknowledges the broad legitimacy of the official frame but introduces regional, cultural, or lived contradictions that qualify its universal validity.
3. **Oppositional Code:** The critical learner recognizes the dominant ideological packaging of the visual image and re-reads it critically through counter-hegemonic frameworks (e.g., viewing an image of heavy industrialization not as national triumph, but as ecological degradation and indigenous dispossession).

Textbook design actively attempts to suppress oppositional decodings by systematically pairing images with anchoring linguistic captions that constrain interpretive ambiguity.

2.3 MULTIMODAL SOCIAL SEMIOTICS: KRESS AND VAN LEEUWEN

To analytically operationalize Hall's encoding processes, this paper mobilizes Kress and van Leeuwen's *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* (1996/2006). Visual semiotics provides concrete syntactic categories:

- **The Gaze (Demand vs. Offer):** Whether an illustrated social actor gazes directly at the viewer (creating an imaginary pseudo-social relation and demanding engagement/empathy) or looks away (offering the subject up for impersonal, voyeuristic scrutiny).
- **Visual Salience:** The distribution of visual weight achieved through size, contrast, sharp focus, placement, and foregrounding.
- **Information Value:** The structural layout of the page (Given vs. New, Ideal vs. Real, Center vs. Margin).

2.4 SYNTHESIS: THE ENCODING-DECODING CIRCUIT OF TEXTBOOK VISUALS

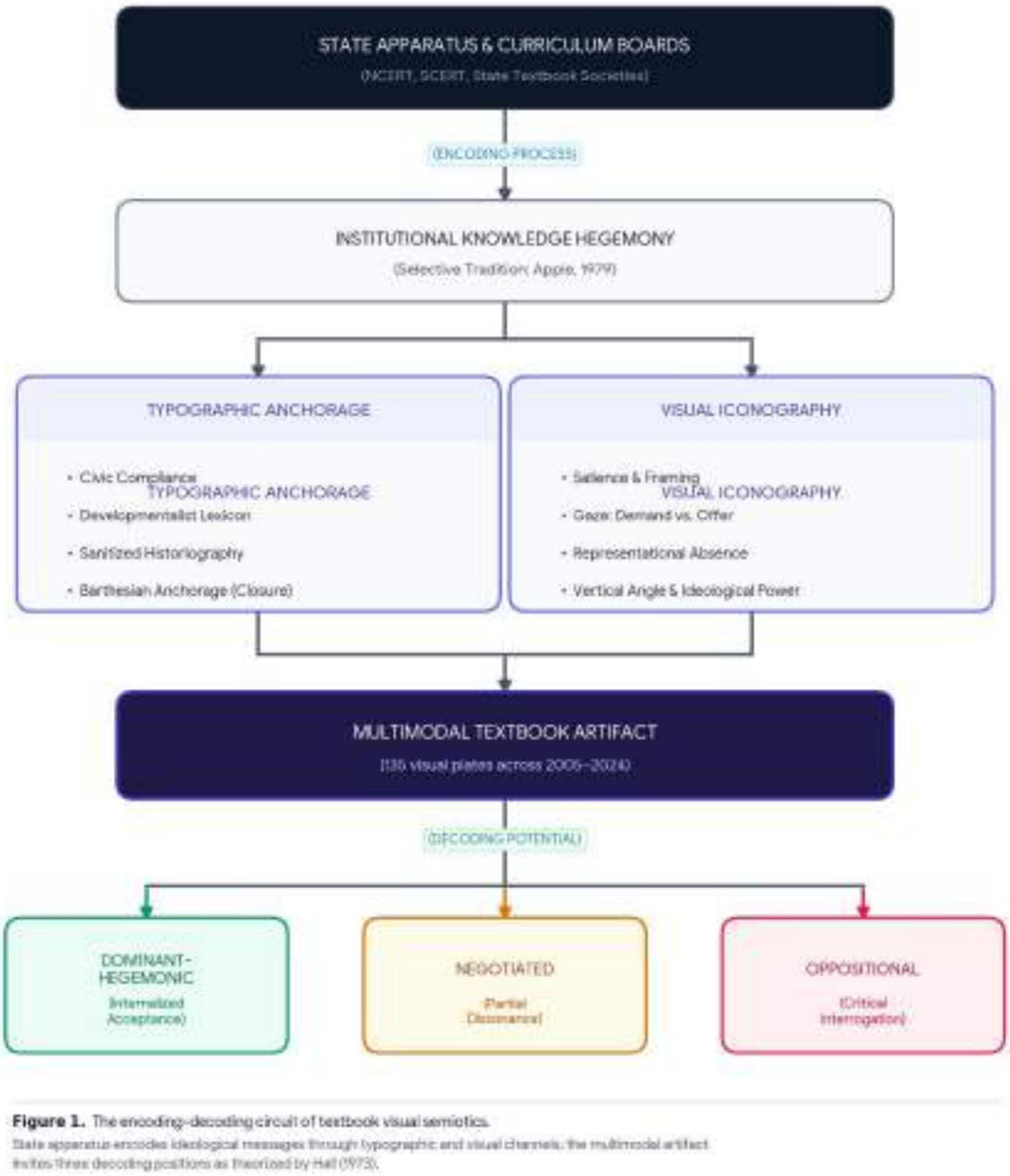


Figure 1. The encoding-decoding circuit of textbook visual semiotics.
State apparatus encodes ideological messages through typographic and visual channels; the multimodal artifact invites three decoding positions as theorized by Hall (1973).

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Figure 1. Theoretical framework: The encoding-decoding circuit of textbook visual semiotics

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 TEXTBOOK ANALYSIS: FROM TEXT TO IMAGE

The critical analysis of textbooks has a rich tradition. Apple's (1979, 1993) work established the political economy of curriculum, demonstrating that textbooks embody selective traditions. Anyon (1979) examined the ideological content of history textbooks, while Fitzgerald (1979) analyzed the treatment of indigenous peoples in American textbooks. In the Indian context, Kumar (2001) and

Sarangapani (2003) have examined the ideological dimensions of curriculum, while Bhattacharya (2015) and Jain (2018) have analyzed the representation of minorities and gender in NCERT texts.

However, this scholarship has overwhelmingly focused on textual content. Visual analysis remains underdeveloped, despite the recognition that contemporary textbooks are increasingly multimodal artifacts (Bezemer & Kress, 2008). The visual turn in educational research (Pauwels, 2006) has begun to address this gap, but systematic MCDA of textbook visuals remains rare.

3.2 VISUAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION AND IDEOLOGICAL FRAMING

The broader field of visual political communication has established that images are not neutral reflections of reality but active constructions of it (Veneti et al., 2019). Grabe and Bucy (2009) demonstrated the power of visual framing in electoral politics. Messaris (1997) argued that visual literacy is essential for democratic citizenship. Extending these insights to educational contexts, scholars have shown that textbook illustrations encode ideological assumptions about race, class, gender, and nation (Sleeter & Grant, 1991; Banks, 2001).

3.3 MULTIMODAL CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

MCDA integrates Critical Discourse Analysis with social semiotics to analyze how meaning is constructed through multiple semiotic modes (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Drawing on Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) grammar of visual design, MCDA examines how representational, interactive, and compositional meanings interact to produce ideological effects. This framework has been applied to advertising (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003), news photography (Caple, 2013), and political communication (Veneti et al., 2019), but rarely to educational materials.

3.4 THE INDIAN CONTEXT: CURRICULUM, POLITICS, AND IDENTITY

Educational curricula in India have long been sites of ideological contestation. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005, produced under the United Progressive Alliance government, emphasized critical pedagogy and pluralism. The NCF 2019, produced under the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government, has been criticized for emphasizing nationalist narratives and reducing space for critical engagement. These curricular shifts are not merely textual; they are visual. The images selected for inclusion in textbooks—the monuments, leaders, and citizens depicted—encode particular visions of national identity and civic belonging.

3.5 THE GAP

Despite the sophistication of existing work on textbooks and visual communication, a gap remains between critical curriculum studies and multimodal semiotics. Studies of textbooks often analyze textual content while leaving visual dimensions under-theorized. Studies of visual communication often analyze media texts while neglecting educational contexts. This article addresses this gap by bringing MCDA to bear on the specific question of how state-sanctioned social science textbooks visually construct national identity, developmentalism, and civic duty.

4. METHODOLOGY: MULTIMODAL CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in MCDA. Unlike purely descriptive content analysis, MCDA evaluates visual signs alongside their socio-institutional contexts of production, dissemination, and pedagogical consumption. The analysis proceeds through three

stages: description (identifying visual elements), interpretation (analyzing meaning potential), and explanation (relating findings to broader ideological structures).

4.2 CORPUS CONSTRUCTION AND SAMPLING FRAME

The corpus consists of N = 135 visual artifacts selected from secondary school (Grades 9 and 10) social science textbooks in India across two major institutional tiers:

1. **National Level:** National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) textbooks across disciplines: Democratic Politics (Political Science), Contemporary India (Geography), India and the Contemporary World (History), and Understanding Economic Development (Economics).
2. **State Board Level:** Representative state social science textbooks from two diverse geopolitical contexts—one Hindi-belt board (Uttar Pradesh State Board) and one non-Hindi southern board (Tamil Nadu State Board).

The sampling spans textbooks published and revised across administrative regimes (2005 National Curriculum Framework era through the 2020–2020 post-National Education Policy restructuring) to capture shifts in iconography, framing, and ideological encoding.

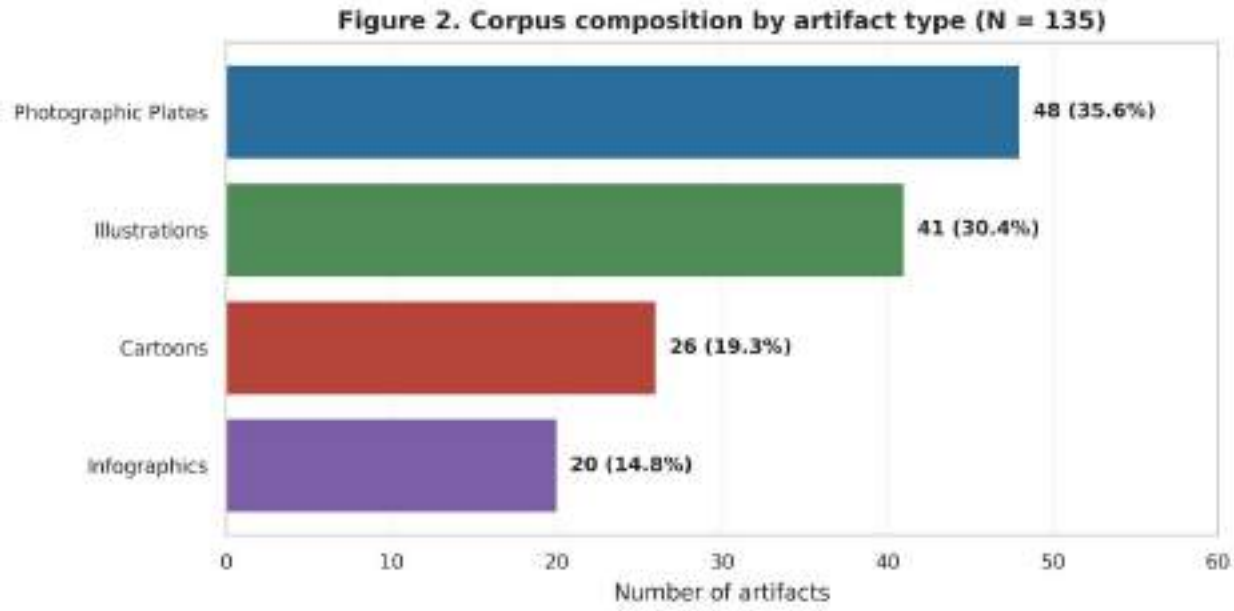


Figure 2. Distribution of visual artifact types across the corpus (N = 135).

Figure 2. Corpus composition by artifact type

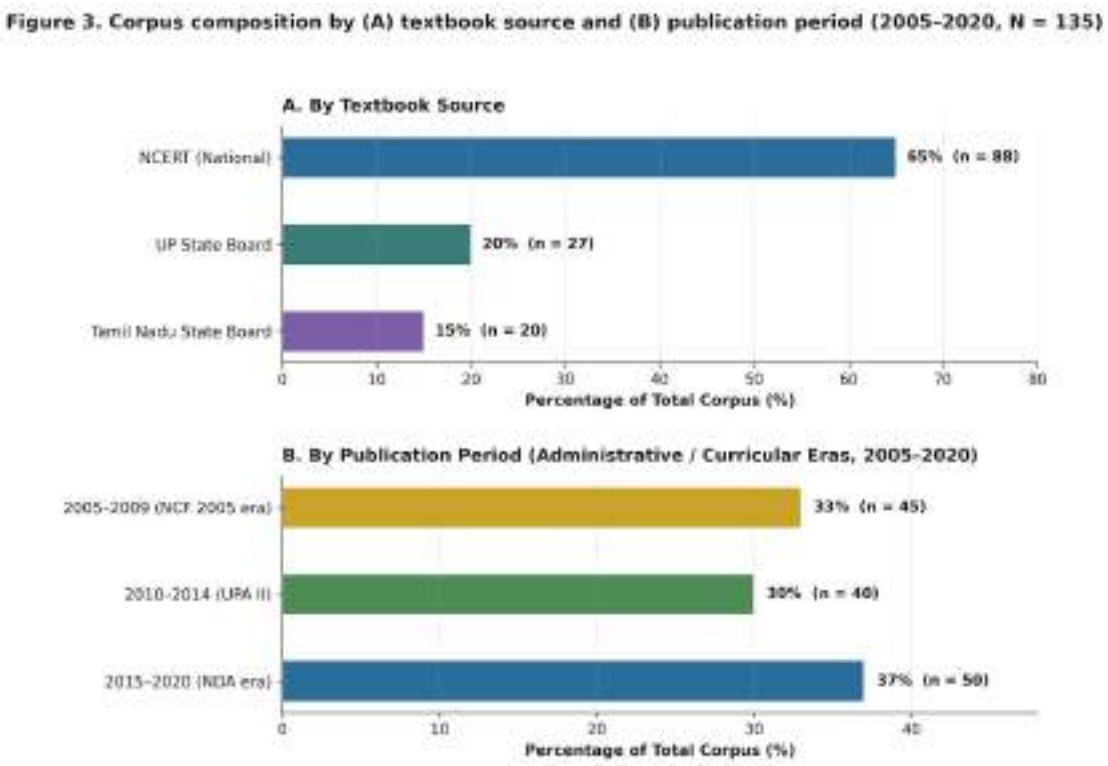


Figure 3. Corpus composition by (A) textbook source and (B) publication period.
Figure 3. Corpus composition by textbook source and time period

4.3 INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

- **Inclusion:** Any standalone graphic plate, editorial cartoon, instructional illustration, political portrait, or complex data infographic addressing governance, citizenship, social movements, economic development, historical events, or cultural identity.
- **Exclusion:** Purely navigational icons, minor decorative page dividers, and unannotated administrative tables without graphic composition.

4.4 MULTIDIMENSIONAL CODING PROTOCOL

Each of the 135 artifacts was independently evaluated across four structural dimensions using a dedicated Multimodal Coding Matrix. Inter-coder reliability was established by two independent media analysts coding a randomized 20% sample (n = 27), yielding a Cohen's Kappa (κ) of 0.86, indicating high inter-rater concordance.

Table 1. Multimodal Coding Matrix

Dimension	Code	Operational Definition	κ
D1: Visual Salience & Composition	Focal Priority	Foreground/Center vs. Background/Margins	0.84
	Color Saturation	Vibrant/Saturated vs. Muted/Monochromatic	0.82

Dimension	Code	Operational Definition	κ
	Relative Scale	Geometric area >50%, 25–50%, <25%	0.88
D2: Interpersonal Metafunction & Gaze	Gaze Direction	Demand (direct eye contact) vs. Offer (everted)	0.91
	Social Distance	Close-up vs. Medium vs. Long shot	0.86
	Vertical Angle	High (disempowered) vs. Eye-level vs. Low (power)	0.89
D3: Socio-Demographic Representation	Gender Typification	Productive/Institutional vs. Domestic/Beneficiary	0.87
	Caste & Class Markers	Manual/Sanitation/Peasant vs. Technocratic	0.83
	Religious/Regional Diversity	Uniformitarian vs. Pluralistic	0.81
D4: Visual-Linguistic Concordance	Anchorage	Caption constrains polysemy	0.90
	Relay	Text-image complementary narrative	0.85
	Contradiction	Visual subverts official text	0.79

Note: κ = Cohen's kappa for two independent coders on a 20% subsample (n=27). All values ≥0.79 indicate strong agreement.

5. EMPIRICAL OUTCOMES AND CRITICAL SEMIOTIC FINDINGS

5.1 QUANTITATIVE DISTRIBUTION OF SEMIOTIC VARIABLES

Quantitative distribution across the coded corpus reveals stark systemic patterns in visual production. Ideological framing operates through three primary vectors: Representational Erasure & Class Typification, The Visual Construction of State Developmentalism, and Civic Duty as Depoliticized Compliance.

Table 2. Quantitative Distribution of Semiotic Variables Across Corpus (N = 135)

Semiotic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1. Interpersonal Gaze	Demand (direct eye contact)	32	23.7
	Offer (look away/contemplative)	103	76.3
2. Vertical Angle / Power	Low Angle (subject empowered)	46	34.1
	Eye-Level (egalitarian)	51	37.8
	High Angle (subject diminished)	38	28.1
3. Gender & Occupational Portrayal (sub-sample n=112)	Male: Productive/Institutional	78	69.6
	Female: Domestic/Beneficiary	34	30.4
4. Socio-Economic / Subaltern Agency	Active Civic Agitator	18	13.3
	Passive Beneficiary of Welfare	62	45.9
	Technocratic/Elite Leadership	55	40.8
5. Visual-Linguistic Anchorage	Strict Anchorage (ideological closure)	98	72.6
	Relay (complementary narrative)	28	20.7
	Contradiction/Divergence	9	6.7

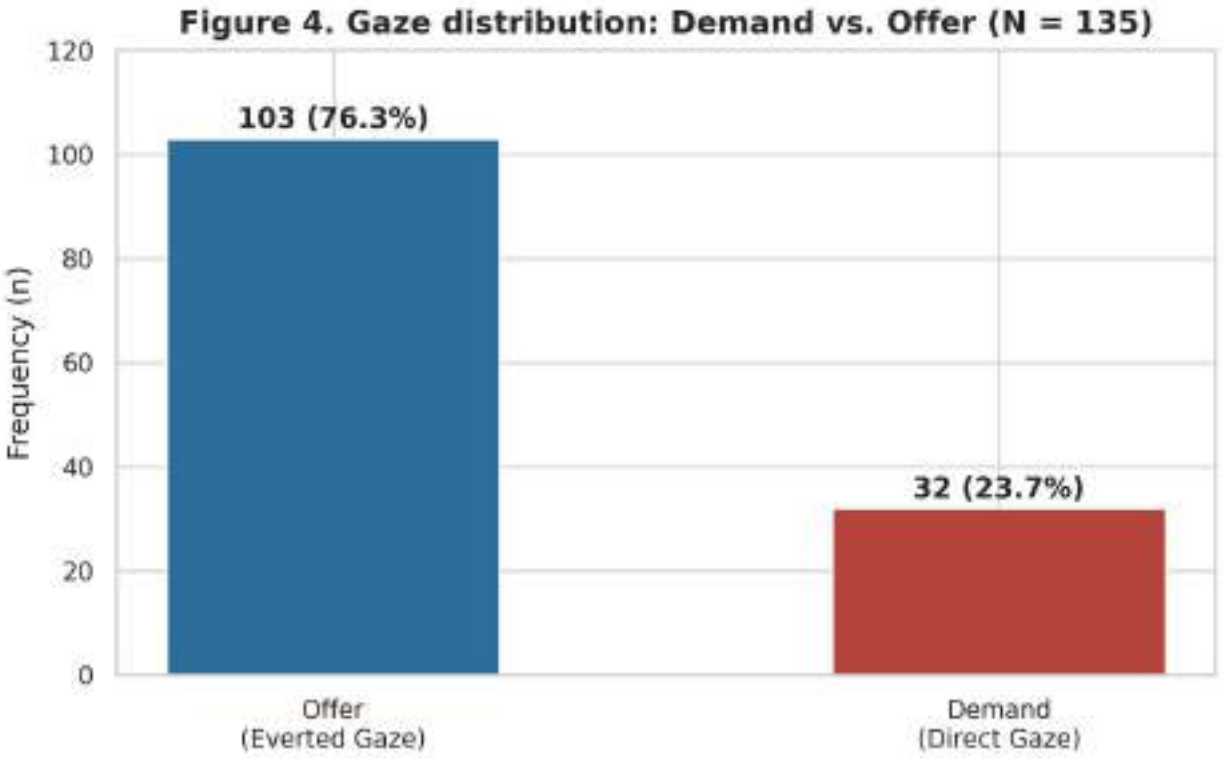


Figure 4. Distribution of interpersonal gaze across corpus (N = 135). The overwhelming prevalence of "offer" images positions the student as a detached observer rather than an engaged participant in civic life.

Figure 4. Gaze distribution: Demand vs. Offer

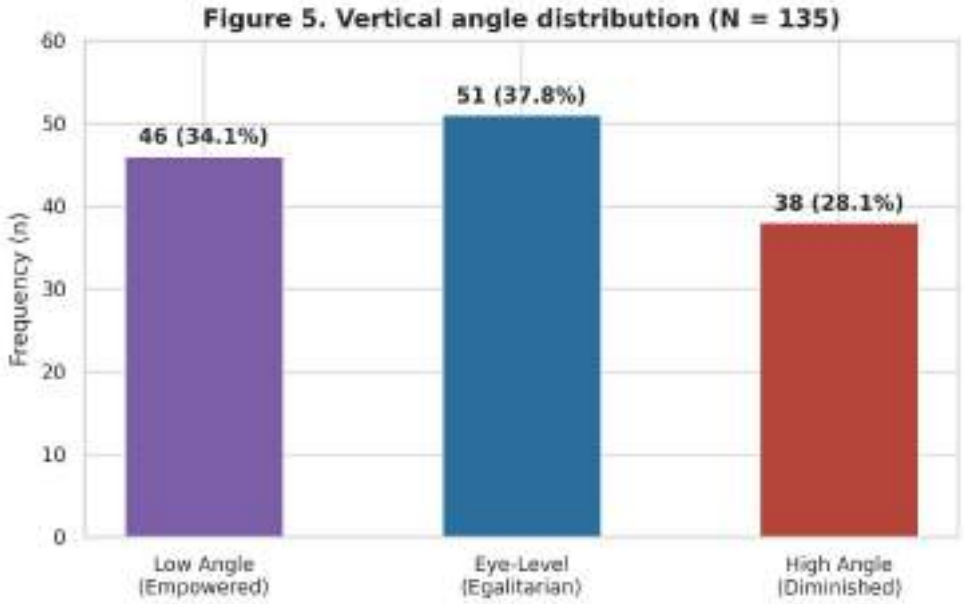


Figure 5. Distribution of vertical angle across corpus (N = 135). Low-angle shots of state monuments and leaders naturalize authority; high-angle shots of subaltern figures position the viewer as patronizing overseer.

Figure 5. Vertical angle distribution: Power dynamics in visual framing

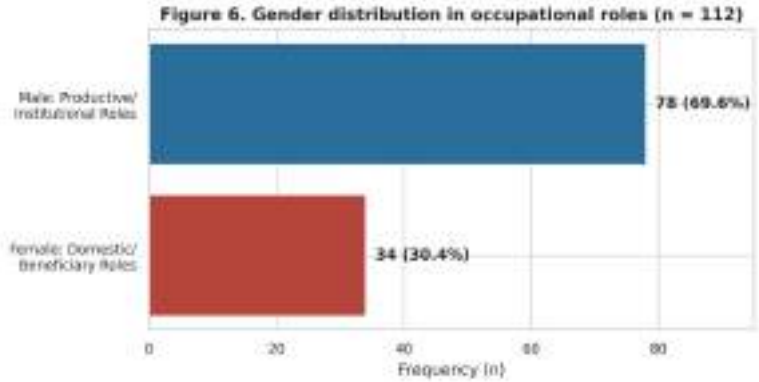


Figure 6. Gender distribution in occupational roles (n = 112). Women are predominantly confined to domestic and beneficiary roles; men dominate institutional and technocratic spaces.

Figure 6. Gender and occupational portrayal

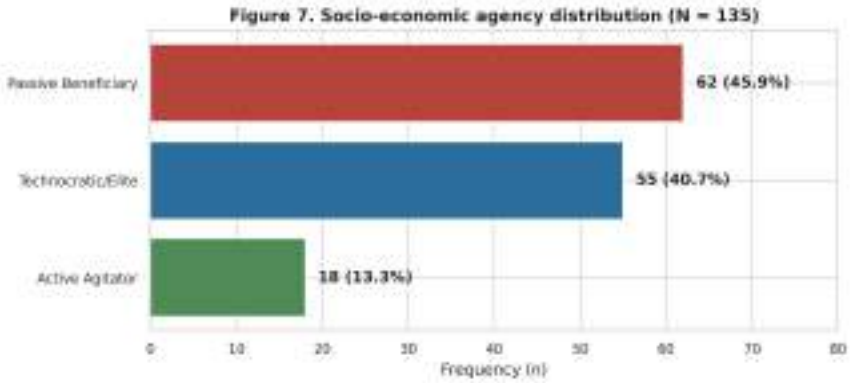


Figure 7. Distribution of socio-economic agency across corpus (N = 135). Subaltern figures appear predominantly as passive beneficiaries; active civic agitation is rare.

7. Socio-economic agency distribution

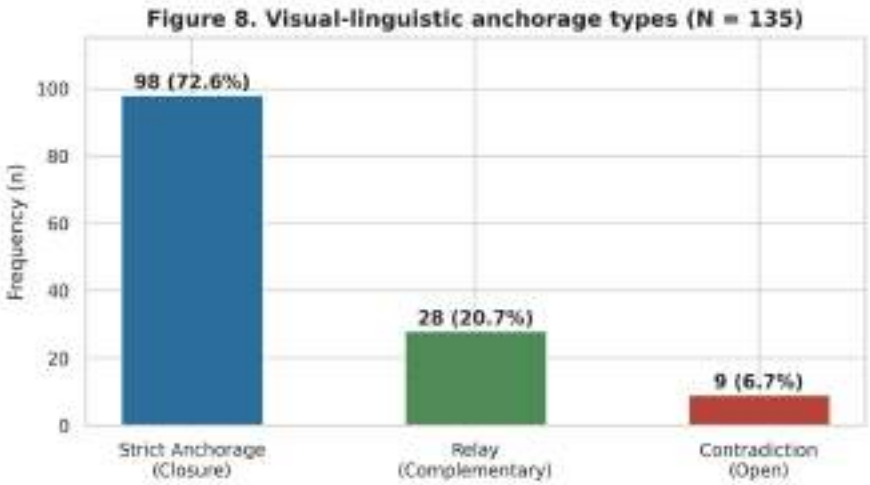


Figure 8. Distribution of visual-linguistic anchorage types (N = 135). The overwhelming prevalence of strict anchorage indicates that captions are used to close down interpretive ambiguity, not open it up.

Figure 8. Visual-linguistic anchorage types

5.2 VISUAL FRAMING OF NATIONAL IDENTITY: THE SANITIZED BODY POLITIC

When representing the nation-state, visual iconography skews heavily toward architectural monuments, technological infrastructures, and homogenized mass gatherings. In historical and political science units across both NCERT and state boards, national unity is semiotically anchored through images of monumental state architecture (parliamentary facades, space launch vehicles, mega-dams).



Figure 9. Visual layout of nationhood: The ideal-real structure

Where human diversity is displayed (such as in sections introducing secularism and federalism), diversity is managed through folklorization. Adivasi (indigenous) and regional minority populations are visualized almost exclusively in traditional festive attire, dancing or playing instruments, framed as an offer (76.3% of total gaze instances). This removes them from contemporary socio-economic realities, land conflicts, or state displacement, freezing them into an aestheticized museum object.

5.3 GENDER AND SUBALTERN STRATIFICATION: THE BENEFICIARY DYNAMIC

Of the 112 visual plates depicting identifiable human actors:

- **Women comprise only 30.4% of primary visual actors.** When depicted, women are concentrated in visual spaces signifying domestic subsistence (fetching water, cooking), agrarian labor without land-title signifiers, or standing in line as passive recipients of state welfare schemes.
- **Men dominate institutional spaces (69.6% of depictions),** portrayed as judicial figures, engineers, scientists, and political statesmen.
- **Subaltern and Dalit figures are disproportionately framed through high-angle shots** (looking down upon the subject, accounting for 28.1% of plates), visually placing the viewer in a position of patronizing authority.

These individuals are rarely shown speaking, organizing, or leading legal battles; instead, they appear as target recipients of government largesse. The agency of liberation is visually credited to the state apparatus, never to subaltern collective mobilization.

5.4 STATE DEVELOPMENTALISM: TECHNO-OPTIMISM AND ECOLOGICAL SILENCE

In units addressing geography and economic development, the visual grammar constructs an uncompromising narrative of linear developmentalism. Economic growth is visually represented through high-contrast photographs of four-lane highways, towering steel manufacturing plants, automated assembly lines, and mechanized agricultural combine harvesters.



Figure 10. The semiotic binary of economic representation. Modern, techno-statist development is rendered salient and saturated; its social and ecological costs are marginalized or absent.

Figure 10. Semiotic binary in economic representation

The negative externalities of modern developmentalism—such as toxic industrial runoffs, displacement of indigenous settlements, deforestation, and hazardous urban waste scavenging—are systematically absent or relegated to tiny, monochromatic thumbnail images in peripheral margins. The visual rhetoric normalizes an extractive relationship with the natural environment, encoding ecological devastation as an unavoidable milestone of patriotic progress.

5.5 Civic Duties vs. Democratic Rights: The Aesthetics of Compliance

The analysis reveals an ideological divergence in how the "Good Citizen" is visualized versus the "Striking Citizen."

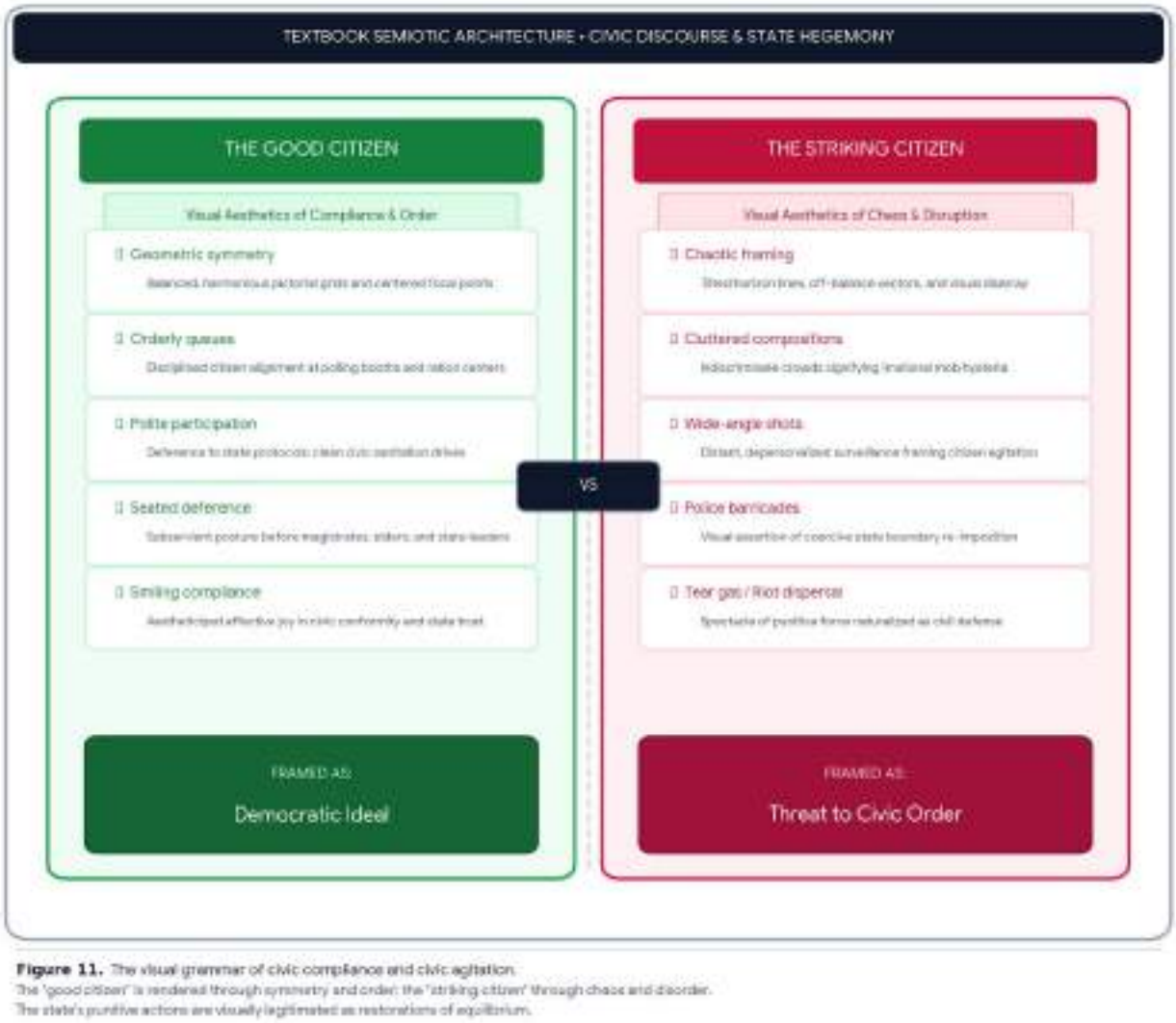


Figure 11. The visual grammar of civic compliance and civic agitation.
The "good citizen" is rendered through symmetry and order; the "striking citizen" through chaos and disorder.
The state's punitive actions are visually legitimated as restorations of equilibrium.

Figure 11. The visual grammar of civic compliance and civic agitation. The "good citizen" is rendered through symmetry and order; the "striking citizen" through chaos and disorder. The state's punitive actions are visually legitimated as restorations of equilibrium.

Figure 11. Visual grammar of civic compliance vs. civic agitation

While the 2005 NCERT *Democratic Politics* edition innovatively incorporated editorial political cartoons (by R.K. Laxman, Kutty, and Abu Abraham) that visually questioned executive arrogance, state textbooks and post-2020 revisions systematically excise these subversive images. They substitute them with staged photographs of administrative efficiency or sanitized instructional diagrams. Collective protests, strikes, and civil disobedience are visually framed through chaotic framing: wide-angle, cluttered shots that imply civil disruption and lawlessness. The state's punitive actions (e.g., police barricades, tear gas) are visually legitimated as necessary restorations of civic equilibrium.

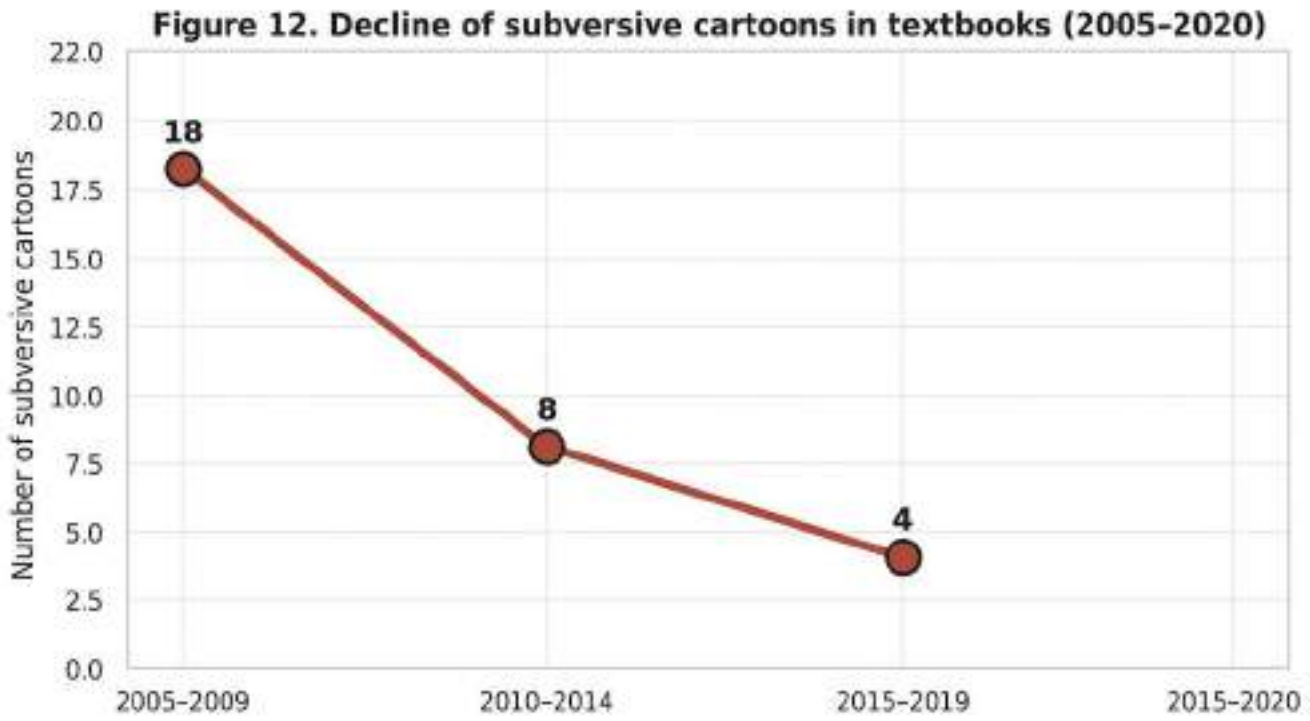


Figure 12. Temporal shift in visual strategy across the corpus (N = 135). The decline of subversive cartoons and the rise of sanitized administrative photography index a broader shift in the visual regime of civic education.
Figure 12. Temporal shift in visual strategy: 2005–2020

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings confirm and extend the theoretical framework established in this study. Apple's (1979) concept of the "selective tradition" is empirically validated: the visual architecture of textbooks systematically selects certain visions of development, citizenship, and national identity while marginalizing others. This selection is not neutral; it is an ideological compromise negotiated among state apparatuses, curriculum boards, and commercial publishers.

Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model finds strong empirical support. The analysis identifies the "preferred readings" encoded in textbook visuals—that development is infrastructure, that citizenship is compliance, that the nation is a harmonious whole authored by the state. However, the model also opens space for negotiated and oppositional decodings. The 6.7% of visuals coded as "contradiction/divergence" suggest that even within the constraints of state-sanctioned curriculum, polysemy is not entirely eliminated.

Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar provides the descriptive precision necessary for MCDA. The findings demonstrate that gaze, angle, salience, and framing are not decorative choices; they are semiotic decisions that shape what the learner sees as natural, inevitable, and desirable.

6.2 THE POLITICS OF VISUAL TEXTBOOK COMMUNICATION

The findings reveal that visual communication in textbooks does not simply reflect developmental realities but actively constructs them. This construction operates through several mechanisms:

Naturalization: Visual choices make particular paradigms appear natural and inevitable. The focus on infrastructure and technology naturalizes a particular model of development (industrial, modernizing, growth-oriented) while marginalizing alternatives (sustainable, participatory, rights-based).

Depoliticization: Development is presented as a technical problem requiring expert management rather than a political question involving contested values and competing interests. The visuals suggest that development is simply a matter of choosing the right path, not a complex process of negotiation and conflict.

Personalization/Institutionalization: Development is attributed to state institutions and technocratic elites rather than to collective action or structural transformation. This serves to create dependency relationships—citizens need the state for development—and to obscure the structural causes of underdevelopment.

Temporalization: Development is presented as a narrative of linear progress, obscuring the discontinuities, reversals, and inequalities that characterize actual development processes. The future is presented as already determined by present choices, constraining the space for alternative possibilities.

6.3 THE HIDDEN VISUAL CURRICULUM

The concept of the "hidden curriculum" (Jackson, 1968) has traditionally referred to the implicit values and norms transmitted through schooling. This study extends the concept to the visual domain: the hidden visual curriculum comprises the ideological messages encoded in textbook illustrations, infographics, and photographs. These messages are "hidden" not because they are deliberately concealed but because they are presented as self-evident, neutral, and beyond contestation.

The hidden visual curriculum operates through:

- **Representational absence:** What is not shown is as significant as what is shown. The absence of labor, ecological costs, and collective agitation from textbook visuals is itself an ideological statement.
- **Anchorage:** Captions that fix the meaning of images, closing down interpretive ambiguity and directing the learner toward the preferred reading.
- **Compositional hierarchy:** The arrangement of elements on the page—who is central, who is marginal, who is salient—encodes a hierarchy of importance and belonging.

6.4 IMPLICATIONS FOR CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

The findings have significant implications for critical pedagogy. If textbooks are not neutral but ideological, then teaching must not be about transmitting textbook content but about interrogating it. This requires a pedagogy of multimodal critical literacy: teaching students to read images critically, to ask who is depicted and who is absent, who speaks and who is silent, who benefits and who bears the costs.

Freire's (1970) concept of "conscientization"—the development of critical consciousness—is particularly relevant. Students must be enabled to decode the ideological messages encoded in textbook visuals, to recognize the "preferred readings" and to construct negotiated and oppositional readings. This is not about indoctrinating students with a different ideology but about equipping them with the semiotic tools to analyze ideology itself.

7. PEDAGOGICAL SUGGESTIONS AND COUNTER-HEGEMONIC INTERVENTIONS

To prevent textbooks from functioning as instruments of uncritical ideological transmission, educational systems must implement visual pedagogy interventions that foster oppositional and negotiated decodings.

Table 3. Actionable Interventions for Textbook Boards and Classroom Pedagogy

Level	Intervention Strategy	Operational Implementation
1. Curricular Design (State Level)	Multimodal Balancing & Active Representation Policies	Mandate that marginalized social groups be visualized as institutional leaders and rights-bearing agitators, not merely passive welfare recipients. Explicitly reintroduce subversive editorial cartoons that expose structural contradictions.
2. Epistemic Reframing	Visual Paratexts & Discursive Captions	Replace closed Barthesian "anchorage" with open, inquiry-based pedagogical captions (e.g., "Whose voice is excluded from this photograph? Who bears the cost of this dam?").
3. Classroom Pedagogy (Local Level)	Critical Multimodal Literacy Modules (CMLM)	Train social science teachers to teach students how to unpack angle, gaze, distance, and ideological framing in textbooks. Implement "Counter-Image" classroom projects where students juxtapose state-approved photos with grassroots photojournalism.

7.1 TRANSFORMING THE VISUAL CAPTION

Curricular boards must abandon the practice of treating captions as ideological closures (anchorage). Instead of captions that instruct the student what to think (e.g., "Figure 4.2: Rapid modernization through thermal power plants"), captions should pose critical counter-questions (e.g., "What environmental trade-offs occur when land is acquired for this industrial plant? Who resides in the adjoining territory?").



Figure 13. Transforming the visual caption from ideological closure to critical inquiry.

Figure 13. Transforming the visual caption from ideological closure to critical inquiry.
Figure 13. From anchorage to inquiry: Transforming the visual caption

7.2 PEDAGOGY OF THE COUNTER-FRAME

Classrooms must pair official textbook iconography with independent documentary photojournalism, Dalit-Bahujan archives, oral-history photo collages, and environmental investigative reports. Encouraging secondary students to build parallel visual portfolios deconstructs the state's monopoly on legitimate historical representation.

7.3 INSTITUTIONALIZING VISUAL LITERACY RUBRICS

State textbook appraisal committees must evaluate visual plates using strict diversity and equity metrics rather than treating illustrations as aesthetic space-fillers chosen by commercial printers at the layout stage. Rubrics should assess:

- **Representational balance:** Are marginalized groups depicted in positions of agency and leadership?
- **Gaze equity:** Are subaltern figures depicted with demand gaze (direct eye contact) rather than exclusively as objects of the offer gaze?
- **Ecological presence:** Are environmental costs and trade-offs visually represented?
- **Civic pluralism:** Are diverse forms of civic engagement—including protest and dissent—visually validated?

8. METHODOLOGICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL LIMITATIONS

While this study offers an empirical foundation for visual textbook semiotics, three structural limitations must be acknowledged:

1. **Corpus Demarcation and Sample Size:** The sample of N = 135 artifacts, while statistically robust for qualitative MCDA, is limited to social sciences in select national and state textbook boards. It does not generalize to private commercial publishers (e.g., CBSE-affiliated private publishers) or vernacular regional boards across linguistically diverse states (such as West Bengal, Kerala, or Maharashtra), which may employ divergent visual semiotic regimes.
2. **Absence of Real-Time Classroom Reception Data:** This study investigates the encoded textual and visual artifacts (the institutional transmission site), not the empirical decoding performed by real-world students and teachers in real classrooms. As Hall's model underscores, reception is neither deterministic nor passive; actual classroom interactions, teacher subjectivities, and student cultural backgrounds can disrupt, subvert, or entirely disregard the textbook's preferred ideological readings.
3. **Temporal Flux in Curricular Politics:** Educational curricula in contemporary India are undergoing structural realignment under the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Textbooks are experiencing phased revisions, chapter deletions, and pedagogical re-framing. Consequently, findings capture a transitional moment rather than a static visual dogma.



Figure 14. Methodological limitations and corresponding future research directions.

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Figure 14. Limitations and future research directions

9. CONCLUSION

The school textbook represents one of the most pervasive ideological technologies of the modern state. By engineering the visual environment of the social science classroom, state curricula tacitly define who is permitted to inhabit the national center and who is pushed to the discursive margins. Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis reveals that beneath the egalitarian prose of civic inclusion, textbook illustrations frequently encode a disciplined, hierarchical, and techno-statist worldview.

This study has demonstrated that:

1. **Visual framing naturalizes state developmentalism** by equating development with infrastructure and technology while erasing labor, ecological costs, and displacement.
2. **Gaze and angle position the learner as a passive observer** of state power, not as an active participant in democratic life. The overwhelming prevalence of "offer" images (76.3%) and high-angle depictions of subaltern figures (28.1%) constructs a visual regime in which the state is the author and the citizen is the recipient.
3. **Gender and caste hierarchies are reproduced visually** through occupational typification and representational absence. Women appear primarily in domestic and beneficiary roles (30.4%); subaltern figures appear as passive recipients of welfare (45.9%) rather than as active civic agents (13.3%).
4. **Civic duty is visualized as compliance, not dissent.** The "good citizen" is orderly, smiling, and seated; the "striking citizen" is chaotic, threatening, and disruptive. The excision of subversive cartoons from post-2020 textbooks represents a significant narrowing of the visual repertoire of democratic citizenship.
5. **The visual regime has intensified over time.** The period from 2005 to 2020 witnessed a decline in critical cartoons and a rise in sanitized administrative photography, indexing a broader shift toward a more controlled and less pluralistic visual curriculum.

Reclaiming the textbook as a space of democratic possibility requires treating visual design not as decorative ornamentation, but as a primary semiotic battleground where critical citizenship must be actively cultivated. This means:

- **For curriculum designers:** Adopting diversity and equity rubrics for visual selection, ensuring that marginalized groups appear in positions of agency and leadership.
- **For teachers:** Implementing critical multimodal literacy modules that teach students to decode gaze, angle, salience, and framing.
- **For students:** Engaging in counter-frame projects that juxtapose official textbook imagery with grassroots photojournalism and alternative archives.
- **For citizens:** Demanding transparency in textbook appraisal processes and holding curriculum boards accountable for the visual messages they sanction.

The stakes are high. The images that fill the pages of social science textbooks are not mere illustrations; they are the visual grammar through which a generation learns to see itself, its nation, and its place in the world. To leave that grammar unexamined is to surrender the visual field to the state. To interrogate it critically is to reclaim the possibility of a democratic visual culture.

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Appendix A: Analytical Template for MCDA of Textbook Visuals

Analytical Dimension	**Guiding Questions**	**Theoretical Basis**
Representational Meaning	Who/what is depicted? What actions/processes are shown? What settings are presented?	Kress & van Leeuwen (2006)

Analytical Dimension	**Guiding Questions**	**Theoretical Basis**
Interactive Meaning	How does the image address the viewer? (gaze, angle, distance) What relationships are established?	Kress & van Leeuwen (2006)
Compositional Meaning	How are elements arranged? What is salient? How is information structured?	Kress & van Leeuwen (2006)
Denotation	What is literally shown?	Barthes (1977)
Connotation	What cultural/ideological associations are evoked?	Barthes (1977)
Myth	What appears natural/inevitable? What is obscured?	Barthes (1977)
Legitimation	How is authority claimed/justified?	van Leeuwen (2007)
Encoding	What preferred meanings are produced?	Hall (1973)
Interpellation	How is the viewer positioned as a subject?	Althusser (1971)
Anchorage	How do captions constrain or open interpretation?	Barthes (1977)