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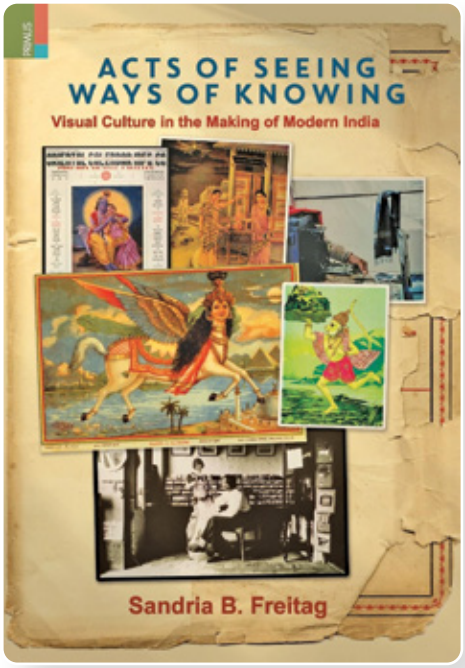
# VISUAL WORLDS, SOCIAL MEANINGS




**ACTS OF SEEING, WAYS OF KNOWING:** VISUAL CULTURE IN THE MAKING OF MODERN INDIA
AUTHOR | Sandria B. Freitag
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The book is a theoretically rich study that redefines South Asian visual culture as an active force shaping identity, politics, and civic life—moving beyond illustration to foreground "seeing" as a social practice central to modern India's knowledge systems.

In the last twenty years, work on South Asia's visual culture has increasingly stopped treating images as polite illustrations to history and started treating them as arguments—about power, identity, and modernity. A key trend is a reflexive, often decolonial, historiography that asks how the field itself was built through colonial institutions and categories. Scholars also increasingly treat terms like modern and contemporary not as tidy period labels but as contested concepts whose meanings shift across South Asian histories and debates. At the same time, the field has widened its objects and methods: photography studies have grown from relatively limited, archive-heavy documentation into more theoretically self-aware accounts of colonial and postcolonial camera cultures and genres, supported by expanding editorial and symposium infrastructures. Across these areas, attention to politics and violence has sharpened, including historically layered accounts of artistic activism and the lingering visual and affective residues of conflict, alongside arguments that postcolonial visual culture does not follow a single linear "modernization" narrative.Read in that context, Sandria Freitag's *Acts of Seeing, Ways of Knowing: Visual Culture in the Making of Modern India* is a statement of what the field has since learned: that seeing is a social practice that produces knowledge and agency. Freitag's own formulation—"everyday acts of seeing and knowing" through popular visual culture enabling identity-formation —squarely anticipates the emphasis on visual culture as a kind of civic technology, not merely an aesthetic domain.

Contents



The book has eight chapters portioned into three sections, titled "Framing the Questions,""Developing 'Tradition' and 'The New'", and "Picturing Larger Patterns and Processes." The first section contains, by the author's admission, an "extended Introduction" (p. 385), and two more chapters. The Introduction argues that there is no adequate theoretical or methodological approach to South Asian visual culture (p. 4), and that "historians have very little precedent for shaping a new narrative of the past through visual evidence." (p. 26). Freitag makes a case for using Alfred Gell's anthropological theory of visual art, as it offers possibilities of using models that are not Euro-centric or limited to high art, but yet do not universalize allowing for a South Asian identity. The emphasis on "art as doing" (p. 27) is combined with Daniel Miller's ideas of material culture that emphasise identity narratives through consumption, and value creation through visual interactions between the viewer and various objects. Physicist David Bohm who suggested that the universe possessed an inherent "implicate order" also provides a template to understand the "relationship among visual objects, their subject matter and the actions of the viewer interacting with these objects." (p. 25). Thus, an "array of approaches" (p. 45) is used to examine modern visual culture processes that emerged in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in South Asia.

The second chapter titled Narrativization and Consumption discusses the power of the gaze as explicated by Foucault and how individual acts, comprising interactions with images, built environments, and larger landscapes create new meanings. The participation of South Asia in a larger scientific discourse that privileged the "eye and observation" as reliable sources of information, also led to ocular forms of entertainments, from panoramas to museums and exhibitions (p. 60). In this chapter, three realms of the visual: courtly culture, religious observances and practices, and live performance traditions (particularly processions) are examined as the locus of visual culture. Freitag contends that the late nineteenth century saw the emergence of new forms of perception and communication, related to print production and visual vocabularies and spectator conventions (p. 83). The third chapter, Performative Meaning-Making, is about the creation of identities through the use of visuals performed in public arena activities (p. 124). Live performance is seen at the heart of narrativization of the past; South Asian storytelling, initially by itinerant "picture showmen" (p. 95) and later with the introduction of photography and print-making, provided a continuity in tradition. The juxtaposition of disparate and sometimes incongruous visuals also created narratives, and the consumption of images could be seen as an act of identity formation (p. 99). Brief histories of the Mahatta Studios and Brijbasi, of the Mehta and Garg families respectively, showcase "the agency of the entrepreneurs, as well as that of the viewers/consumers" (p. 112) in creating new visual cultures.

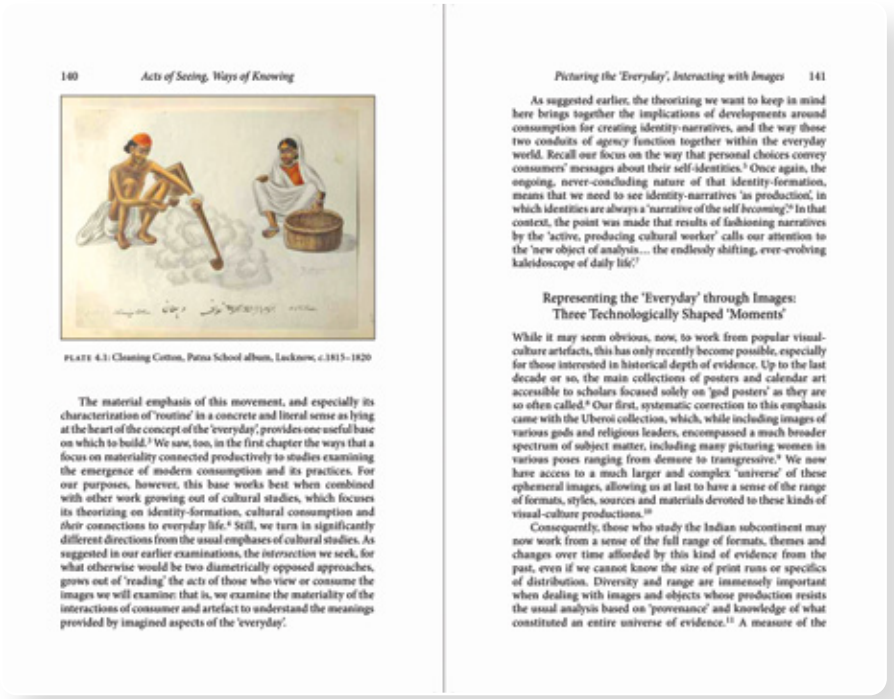

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PLATE 4.1: Cleaning Cotton, Patna School album, Lucknow, c.1815–1820

The material emphasis of this movement, and especially its characterization of 'routine' in a concrete and literal sense as lying at the heart of the concept of the 'everyday', provides one useful base on which to build.[5] We saw, too, in the first chapter the ways that a focus on materiality connected productively to studies examining the emergence of modern consumption and its practices. For our purposes, however, this base works best when combined with other work growing out of cultural studies, which focuses its theorizing on identity-formation, cultural consumption and *their* connections to everyday life.[6] Still, we turn in significantly different directions from the usual emphases of cultural studies. As suggested in our earlier examinations, the *intersection* we seek, for what otherwise would be two diametrically opposed approaches, grows out of 'reading' the *acts* of those who view or consume the images we will examine: that is, we examine the materiality of the interactions of consumer and artefact to understand the meanings provided by imagined aspects of the 'everyday'.

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As suggested earlier, the theorizing we want to keep in mind here brings together the implications of developments around consumption for creating identity-narratives, and the way those two conduits of *agency* function together within the everyday world. Recall our focus on the way that personal choices convey consumers' messages about their self-identities.[3] Once again, the ongoing, never-concluding nature of that identity-formation, means that we need to see identity-narratives 'as production', in which identities are always a 'narrative of the self *becoming*'.[4] In that context, the point was made that results of fashioning narratives by the 'active, producing cultural worker' calls our attention to the 'new object of analysis… the endlessly shifting, ever-evolving kaleidoscope of daily life'.[7]

## Representing the 'Everyday' through Images: Three Technologically Shaped 'Moments'

While it may seem obvious, now, to work from popular visual-culture artefacts, this has only recently become possible, especially for those interested in historical depth of evidence. Up to the last decade or so, the main collections of posters and calendar art accessible to scholars focused solely on 'god posters' as they are so often called.[8] Our first, systematic correction to this emphasis came with the Uberoi collection, which, while including images of various gods and religious leaders, encompassed a much broader spectrum of subject matter, including many picturing women in various poses ranging from demure to transgressive.[9] We now have access to a much larger and complex 'universe' of these ephemeral images, allowing us at last to have a sense of the range of formats, styles, sources and materials devoted to these kinds of visual-culture productions.[10]

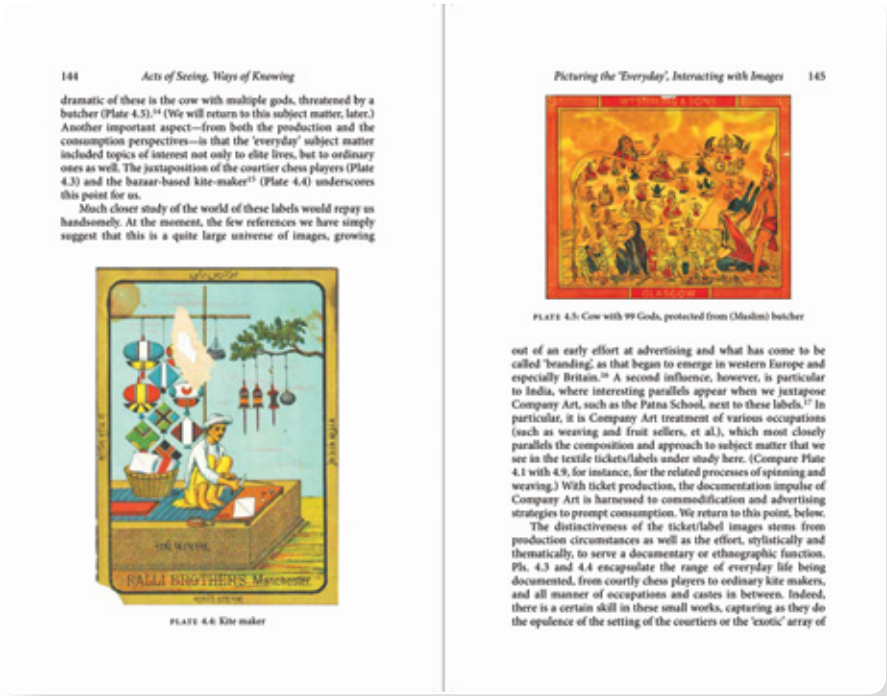
Consequently, those who study the Indian subcontinent may now work from a sense of the full range of formats, themes and changes over time afforded by this kind of evidence from the past, even if we cannot know the size of print runs or specifics of distribution. Diversity and range are immensely important when dealing with images and objects whose production resists the usual analysis based on 'provenance' and knowledge of what constituted an entire universe of evidence.[11] A measure of the

PLATE 4.2: ***A textile ticket/label picturing a middleman in the circulation process of textile manufacture and application, c.1870s(?)***

The next section has two chapters titled Picturing the Everyday, and From Place and Portraits, respectively. They engage the source material of printed labels, posters, photographs, and other artefacts of print production in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The two chapters deal with the printed ephemera and photographic images, but that division is arbitrary, and acknowledge as "artificial and misleading" (p. 196).In the first chapter, the visual material is broadly conceived as three technologically shaped 'Moments" that include early textile tickets, printed material from the 1930s and 1940s, and post-independence "Nehruvian Images" (p. 161). An important category that is expounded is that of the "everyday life" in which daily worship, work or labour, and family are three common themes depicted. Importantly, it is the nature of interactions between these objects and the consumers that creates meaning. The second chapter is on photography, which caused a new wave of image-making and consumption from the late nineteenth century onwards. They enabled the construction of collective identities and locations. The cities of Jaipur, Mysore, and Lucknow are given particular attention here as examples of the new spaces created by Indians, in which "alternative and autonomous avenues of power and patronage" interacted with former colonial institutions (p. 250). These three cities chosen were all capitals of former princely states, and therefore already had a cultural cache that could be adapted to a visual culture.

The last section opens with a chapter called Buildings and Bodies, which powerfully makes the case for deliberate acts of place-making, particularly as seen in Jaipur and Lucknow. Using photographs taken by Maharaja Sawai Jai Singh II, and later the photographers Gobindram and Oodeyram, an argument is made for identity creation in Jaipur. The reification of social hierarchy at the court, and through the genre of occupational types, the ordering of subjects is noted (p. 275). In the case of

PLATE 4.3: ***Chess players***



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dramatic of these is the cow with multiple gods, threatened by a butcher (Plate 4.5).[14] (We will return to this subject matter, later.) Another important aspect—from both the production and the consumption perspectives—is that the 'everyday' subject matter included topics of interest not only to elite lives, but to ordinary ones as well. The juxtaposition of the courtier chess players (Plate 4.3) and the bazaar-based kite-maker[15] (Plate 4.4) underscores this point for us.

Much closer study of the world of these labels would repay us handsomely. At the moment, the few references we have simply suggest that this is a quite large universe of images, growing

PLATE 4.4: Kite maker

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PLATE 4.5: Cow with 99 Gods, protected from (Muslim) butcher

out of an early effort at advertising and what has come to be called 'branding', as that began to emerge in western Europe and especially Britain.[16] A second influence, however, is particular to India, where interesting parallels appear when we juxtapose Company Art, such as the Patna School, next to these labels.[17] In particular, it is Company Art treatment of various occupations (such as weaving and fruit sellers, et al.), which most closely parallels the composition and approach to subject matter that we see in the textile tickets/labels under study here. (Compare Plate 4.1 with 4.9, for instance, for the related processes of spinning and weaving.) With ticket production, the documentation impulse of Company Art is harnessed to commodification and advertising strategies to prompt consumption. We return to this point, below.

The distinctiveness of the ticket/label images stems from production circumstances as well as the effort, stylistically and thematically, to serve a documentary or ethnographic function. Pls. 4.3 and 4.4 encapsulate the range of everyday life being documented, from courtly chess players to ordinary kite makers, and all manner of occupations and castes in between. Indeed, there is a certain skill in these small works, capturing as they do the opulence of the setting of the courtiers or the 'exotic' array of

Lucknow, Freitag posits that mechanically produced images used particular built environments—royal precincts, sites of civic engagement, educational institutions, and places of piety—as semiotic devices to project a sense of place. The next chapter, Using Images and Interactions to 'Talk about' Issues, deals with the production and consumption of Hindu and Muslim religious imagery, sometimes in conjunction with politics. Dalit visual representation, particularly images of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and the projection of political and religious values through mass media are themes addressed. The political mobilization of religion, and the creation of religious and caste identities through a visual culture is demonstrated. The concluding chapter, Modern India's 'Shape in Time', summarises the arguments, with a twist on George Kubler's influential Shape of Time, a work that has been invoked throughout.

*Acts of Seeing, Ways of Knowing* is rich in its selective visual material from South Asia,and the theoretical frameworks through which it is presented prevents it from being a mere catalogue. Though not a criticism, it is important to note that the book focuses largely on north India, with important urban centres of visual production in this period, such as Bombay, Calcutta, and Hyderabad, being conspicuously absent. Perhaps that is inevitable given the previous scholarship of the author on places in north India. The strongest promise of the book is methodological and theoretical: to connect popular visuality to identity, meaning, and civil society formation without reducing visual culture to ornament or as an illustration of textual politics.

Architectural historian and scholar, **Pushkar Sohoni** specialises in the architectural and urban history. His research examines the material cultures, questions of identity, empire, and heritage, and the diverse histories embedded within South Asian built environments.