

A Comparative Study of Concrete Visual Poetry: The Case of 'Chhabi te Kabita' by Karunakar Pradhan

Karunakar Pradhan

Independent Researcher, Kolkata, India

Abstract: *This paper presents a comparative analysis of concrete visual poetry as exemplified in Karunakar Pradhan's Bengali collection 'Chhabi te Kabita' (2026). Comprising over 130 shape poems, the collection arranges Bengali script into iconic visual forms to engage with contemporary social, ecological, and philosophical themes. The study situates this body of work within two lineages: the classical Sanskrit tradition of Chitrakavya and the international concrete poetry movement that emerged in the 1950s with groups such as Noigandres in Brazil and the European avant-garde. While classical Chitrakavya prioritized metrical virtuosity and devotional geometry, and Western concrete poetry emphasized minimalist reduction and verbivocovisual materiality, Pradhan's approach retains lyrical narrative depth while employing organic typographic freedom. Through close reading of selected pieces such as 'Dinosaur o Manush', 'Marubhumir Jahaj', and 'Bok Tapaswi', the paper argues that this corpus represents a sustained and culturally distinctive contribution to world visual literature, bridging traditional Bengali lyricism with spatial typography.*

Keywords: Concrete poetry, Visual poetry, Chhabi te Kabita, Bengali literature, Chitrakavya, Experimental poetry

1. Introduction

Visual poetry, or concrete poetry, treats typographic arrangement as an inseparable component of meaning. In Bengali literature, this impulse has found a renewed expression in 'Chhabi te Kabita' (Poetry in Pictures), a collection of more than 130 visual poems by Karunakar Pradhan. Published in July 2026 (ISBN: 979-8-90584-786-8), the book arranges Bengali words into shapes of birds, vessels, prehistoric forms, and symbolic structures, creating a dual reading experience: first as image, then as text.

This paper offers an authorial self-reflective study that adopts an analytical framework to compare this contemporary Bengali practice with both classical Indian and modern international traditions. The objective is not self-promotion but to document the compositional methodology and thematic expansion of shape poetry within a regional yet globally resonant context.

2. Literature Review

- 1) **Classical Precedent:** Chitrakavya. Sanskrit and Prakrit Chitrakavya established historical precedent for visual arrangements, including bandhas shaped as wheels (chakra), lotuses (padma), swords (khadga), and other symmetrical diagrams. These forms were largely constrained by rigid metrical puzzles and acrostics intended to showcase technical virtuosity and devotional praise.
- 2) **International Concrete Poetry Movement:** From the 1950s onward, concrete poetry emerged as an international movement. Foundational contributions include Eugen Gomringer's 'constellations' in Switzerland, the Brazilian Noigandres group (Augusto de Campos, Haroldo de Campos, Décio Pignatari) advocating 'verbivocovisual' poetry, and practitioners in Europe and North America. Recurring ambitions were: breaking free of linear syntax, treating whitespace as an

active structural element, and making typography itself carry primary meaning, often through radical minimalism and linguistic reduction.

3. Methodology and Corpus

The corpus comprises over 130 poems from 'Chhabi te Kabita', including 'Dinosaur o Manush' (Dinosaur and Human), 'Bok Tapaswi' (The Hypocritical Heron), and 'Marubhumir Jahaj' (Desert Ship). Analysis focuses on three dimensions: (a) thematic depth, (b) typographic freedom, and (c) scale and sustained vision. Each poem was analyzed for the relationship between visual form and semantic content, use of non-alphabetic characters (^, brackets, H-symbols), and spatial density.

4. Analysis and Findings

- 1) **Modern Thematic Depth:** Rather than using visual geometry merely for technical display, Pradhan's shape poetry engages with complex contemporary subjects. For example, 'Dinosaur o Manush' addresses historical extinction and human responsibility, while 'Bok Tapaswi' critiques social hypocrisy.
- 2) **Organic Typographic Freedom:** The layouts break away from rigid classical grids. They utilize fluid spacing, brackets, carets (^), and variable density to make typography dynamically enact the emotional and physical reality of the subject. The Bengali script, with its lyrical curves, is exploited to create structured silhouettes such as sun, violin, and bird.
- 3) **Scale and Sustained Vision:** Crafting a massive, interconnected collection of over 130 shape poems represents an unprecedented commitment to this specialized medium within modern Bengali and Indian literature. Many international practitioners approached concrete poetry as brief conceptual exercises, whereas this corpus sustains a cohesive aesthetic over a large body of work.

Volume 15 Issue 10, October 2026

Fully Refereed | Open Access | Double Blind Peer Reviewed Journal

www.ijsr.net

5. Comparative Discussion

- 1) **Minimalist Abstraction vs. Narrative Depth:** International practitioners often treated the poem as a sparse 'constellation' using few words to create a purely structural, self-contained visual object. In contrast, Pradhan retains a rich, expansive narrative heart. Even within strict geometric shapes, the poems tackle concrete social themes and human-earth relationships, using spatial design to amplify storytelling rather than strip it away.
- 2) **Typographical Experimentation vs. Lyrical Tradition:** While the Noigandres group championed words as physical material and phonetic blocks, often moving into radical abstraction, Pradhan's work remains anchored in lyrical cadence rooted in classical Bengali verse and folk sensibilities. Typography mimics musical phrasing or natural postures, such as the patient verticality of the heron in 'Bok Tapaswi'.
- 3) **Isolated Experiments vs. Sustained Corpus:** Western and Latin American practitioners produced concrete poetry as discrete avant-garde experiments. Developing a vast, cohesive corpus of over 130 interconnected shape poems represents an immense, sustained creative output rarely matched in scale.

6. Case Study: 'Bok Tapaswi' (The Hypocritical Person)

The poem employs the image of the heron (bok) as a metaphor for hypocrisy and hidden predation. Outwardly, the bird appears ascetic — standing motionless on one leg, seemingly absorbed in meditation, evoking a sage. Beneath this deceptive calm lies a calculated predator that waits patiently and strikes with its long beak to swallow unsuspecting fish.

Original excerpt (Bengali):

ঐ মাঠে দেখা যায় বকেরা সব ধ্যান করে, এক পায়ে দাঁড়িয়ে
চুপ রয়
মাছকে ঠকায়, অপেক্ষায় থাকে।
দেখায় তারা মহা তপস্বী, মনে নেই কোনো হিংসা ও পাপ।
মাছ মনে করে- এদের ভয় কিসের? কাছে এসে ঘুরে বেড়ায়।
সুযোগ বুঝে লম্বা ঠোঁটে একটি মাছ তুলে নেয়- অন্য মাছেরা
টের না পায়।

সমাজেও বক তপস্বী থাকে ছদ্মবেশে
মুখে সেবার ভণ্ড নামাবলী,
অন্তরে বিষের থাকে থলি।
অন্ধকারে নিরীহকে গিলে খায়,
কেউ তা দেখতে না পায়।

The poem extends this allegory to human society. Just as the heron cloaks violence in meditation, certain individuals conceal malice behind masks of service or piety. The 'bhondo namabali' (false titles of service) and 'bisher tholi' (bag of poison) symbolize duplicity. The visual arrangement of 'H' symbols and horizontal lines in the printed version reinforces imagery of barriers and hidden traps — a concrete representation of disguise and entrapment. For international

readers, it resonates as a universal allegory of deception, parallel to moral fables where outward sanctity masks inner corruption.

7. Conclusion

Viewed within Indian and world literature, 'Chhabi te Kabita' occupies a distinctive position. It honors the ancient spirit of Chitrakavya while anchoring it in modern, socially conscious expression. Simultaneously, it engages with the international avant-garde's quest to make language spatial and tactile, while infusing that impulse with a deeply grounded, visionary poetic heritage rooted in Bengali lyricism. The rare synthesis of avant-garde form and lyrical narrative, sustained over 130 poems, warrants serious critical attention as a landmark contribution to experimental Bengali literature.

Declaration

This is an authorial self-reflective study of the author's own creative corpus. The author declares no conflict of interest beyond authorship of the primary text analyzed.

References

- [1] Pradhan, K. (2026). Chhabi te Kabita. ISBN: 979-8-90584-786-8.
- [2] Campos, A. de, Pignatari, D., & Campos, H. de. (1958). Plano-piloto para poesia concreta. Noigandres.
- [3] Gomringer, E. (1954). Konstellationen.
- [4] Solt, M. E. (Ed.). (1968). Concrete Poetry: A World View. Indiana University Press.
- [5] Gerow, E. (1971). A Glossary of Indian Figures of Speech. Mouton.