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## Cinema, Digital Media, and Ecological Representation: An Indian Perspective

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### Abstract

*The new dimensions in recent decades have given the manifestation of the environmental consciousness in the Indian cinema, as well as in the digital media. This research paper focuses on ecocinema as it appeared and developed in the context of Indians. It focuses on regional films, independent documentaries and Adivasi media practices by going beyond mainstream Bollywood. It states that in an Indian environment, the concept of environmental representation is deeply connected with such questions as caste, class, colonialism heritage, and development politics. The research paper is split into four parts: the first examines historical changes of green themes in the Indian cinema, the second examines the new forms of storytelling in the digital era such as web series and community media projects, the third takes into account the methodological innovation used in the study of the Indian cinema, and lastly the fourth part challenges the material aspects of media infrastructure and the issue of environmental justice. All along, it has been argued that Indian approach provides new orientations to ecocinema research in the world, especially in the environment of postcolonial ecology and the voice of the marginalized.*

**Keywords:** Indian cinema, ecocinema, regional films, environmental justice, Adivasi media, digital storytelling.

### Introduction: The Lens and The Land

By shooting the Bengal country side in *Pather Panchali* (1955), Satyajit Ray did not make an environmental film as such. However, the careful attention paid by the camera to the rhythms of nature, the rain on dry dirt, the wind in the date palms, the pond in which the villagers used to gather was a crucial part of the human-land interrelation. Historically that relationship in India has been complicated; the agrarian growth of centuries, the bloodshed of colonialism, of the promises and betrayals of the modernization, and of the long struggle of communities to protect their forests and rivers and mountains against exploitation.

This research paper addresses the issue of how Indian film and digital media would reflect this complex ecological heritage, and states that an Indian take on ecocinema will have to be quite different than that of the western counterparts. Whereas Euro-American ecocriticism has often focused on the protection of the wild and anthropocentric criticism, Indian environmental representation cannot be considered outside the social justice issues. India does not have a wilderness oriented environmentalism as argued by environmental historian

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Ramachandra Guha; instead, it has a livelihood oriented environmentalism (Guha 112). The main environmental consciousness bearers in India will be the poor and marginalised, who directly depend on the natural resources to survive. Their plight, against dams that dislodge villages, against mining that ravages forests, against pollution that pollutes water, have influenced the ideas of nature in the movie industry.

The research paper is divided into four movement parts. It starts by following the development of the ecological themes in the Indian cinema during the 1970s-2015, including the production of both mainstream and parallel films. Second, it addresses the role of digital media in changing the way the environment is told through the introduction of new voices and new forms of engagement. Third, it addresses the methodological approaches to be applied to the Indian situation, especially those sensitive to the postcolonial situation and the subaltern attitudes. Lastly, it also tackles material realities of the Indian media production the ecological expense of the media industry itself and the unequal nature of ecological damage as well as media accessibility.

The research paper argues along the way that Indian ecocinema does not simply provide regional versions of globally popular themes but addresses problems at the very conceptualisation of ecocriticism relating to nature, culture, and justice. Environmental representation is not a matter of trifle in a country where the difference between the forest and a mine can be life-and-death to millions of people.

### **1. The Roots of Indian Ecocinema: From Parallel Cinema to Popular Appeal**

The rise of the ecological themes in the Indian cinema cannot be divorced of the social and political movements that have influenced the Indian nation today. In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a strong conflict between the environment and society. The Chipko, the movement of the villagers in the Himalayas that hugged the trees to stop the logging business, gained the attention of the whole world. The Narmada Bachao Andolan rallied thousands of people against a group of dams that would force thousands of people out of their home. These movements were not abstract activities of engagement with nature, it was about survival and asserting the right of peoples to inhabit the land which their forebears had occupied over ages.

These struggles were first screened in parallel cinema a film movement that thrived in India between 1950s and 1980s. Film directors that included Shyam Benegal, Mrinal Sen and Govind Nihalani created films that were both politically conscious and aesthetically ambitious. The films *Nishant* (1975) and *Manthan* (1976) by Benegal discussed the victimization of rural people by the hands of the influential forces. Even though it is not

directly eco-oriented, these texts set a pattern of thinking about the nexus between social justice and land.

The earliest film that can be rightly called ecological in its interests was *Esthappan* (1979) of Aravindan Govindan which was produced in Malayalam. The movie was shot in the backwaters of Kerala where water is the location and at the same time is figurative as the film explores close relationships between human life and the water body. More to the point, the film *Junoon* (1978) and the subsequent *The Making of the Mahatma* (1996) by Benegal showed how the colonial policies had reorganized the Indian scenery and livelihood, which would form the foundation of the ecological postcolonial criticism.

During the 90s and 2000s the ecological themes were more pronounced. The conflict between traditional fishing communities and development was brought up in *Jui* (1990) by Jabbar Patel and it was based in Maharashtra. Assamese films of Jahnu Barua, especially *Halodhia Choraye Baodhan Khai* (1987) and *Firingoti* (1992), explored the theme of modernization interfering with the fine balance between Assamese villagers and nature. These literature was not instructive; they depicted the phenomenon of environmental destruction as a component of more general processes of social change, which were experienced by communities differently.

Bollywood in general lagged behind in exploiting ecological subjects. When it did it was often commercially successful and culturally important. *Swades* (2004) by Ashutosh Gowariker is a story about a NRI scientist that comes back to India to face environmental and social issues in a village. The scarcity of water and management of community resources in the film found resonance with the Indians. The ecological activism of *Rang De Basanti* (2006) by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra was traced back to the resistance against colonialism in the past, and ecological resistance was viewed as an extension of the struggle against injustice.

The area of children films and animation has become, perhaps, the most important mainstream involvement with the environmental subject. The iconography of Ganesha, the elephant-headed god used in *Bal Ganesh* (2007) and its sequels, put into question the relations between humans and animals in a way that appeals to the traditional Indian ideas of nature. In a similar case, the animated movies focused on Hanuman use mythological motifs to extrapolate moral interrelationships between human beings and the more-than-human world.

The ecological issues of Bollywood have often been timidly explored by regional cinema. In the film *Court* (2014) directed by Chaitanya Tamhane, Marathi filmmakers have brought out the absurdity of the court of law cases that the folk singer is alleged to have incited a suicide

among sewage workers- a story that brings together the environmental degradation, caste oppression and court failures. *The Kaala* (2018) by Tamil director Pa. Ranjith is a drama about slum residents opposing land grabbers, and the access to urban land is presented as an environmental injustice concern. *Jallikattu* (2019) is an allegorical film, which explores the nature of human-animal relations and the frailty of civilisation, and was shot by Malayalam cinema under the direction of Lijo Jose Pellissery.

The feature of such films is the same, they do not want to distinguish between the environmental and social questions in a dichotomous way. Nature in the Indian context is closely connected with human history and social hierarchy. The forest is home to communities, which have lived there many thousands of years; rivers are the centre of Dalit traditional activity; mountains are crossed by pilgrims and grazed by transient shepherds. An Indian ecocinema should therefore take care of these peculiarities with the understanding that the representation of the environment is at the same time a representation of the social relations.

## **2. Digital Transformations: New Media, New Stories**

Indian environmental storytelling has been completely redefined by the digital revolution. Whereas in the past the filmmakers had to use the theatrical distribution to make their films available to the audience, nowadays creators are able to post their work to YouTube, share it through WhatsApp or stream it on OTT networks. This democratization of the media production has allowed the previously marginalized voices to get into the public discourse. This change has been dominated by independent documentaries. Anand Patwardhan is the king of documentary film makers in India and has spent the last 40 years capturing the environmental battles. His *Jai Bhim Comrade* ( 2011) connects the condition of the Dalit communities in Maharashtra to land, labour and dignity and even *Narmada Diary* (1995) created in partnership with Simantini Dhuru is a legendary account of displacement caused by the large reservoirs. The work of Patwardhan proves the strength of documentary film to witness the environmental injustice and raise the voices of protest.

The rise of the digital possibilities has driven a new generation of filmmakers in documentary works. The articles by Fathima Nizaruddin about the anti-CAA protests in Delhi used digital video to record the actions of targeting and displacing Muslim communities. This work is not specifically environmental, but overlaps with urban space and the right to the city, which are the main issues of environmental justice. The documentaries of Narmada valley by Shabani Hassanwalia and Samreen Farooqui are an extension of the efforts of earlier activists, showing

how even now the communities living in the Adivasi region are still affected by displacement a long time after the first protest.

The OTTs like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney Plus Hotstar have created additional avenues through which environmental stories can be told. Although the web series Panchayat (2020 -) is an alleged comedy of rural bureaucracy, it provides an insightful depiction of the life in one North Indian village, as well as its ecological aspects. *The Family Man* (2019- ) incorporates the genre of environmental terrorism into its thriller storyline, thus challenging the limits of justifiable environmentalist protest. These mainstream productions have large-scale viewer access that rivals the vast majority of documentaries with open opportunities and possible disadvantages to environmental representation.

One of the biggest consequences of digital innovation, perhaps, is the spread of community media. CGNet Swara is a mobile-based initiative that enables the Adivasi groups in central India to share the news and stories of their constituencies. Most of this material deals with forest rights, mining initiatives, and displacement, but is created by the communities and amongst the communities themselves, as opposed to outsiders filming. On the same note, Video Volunteers also trains community correspondents to create video content on the environment conflicts in their localities to be distributed on online platforms.

These efforts disrupt the belief that environmental representation should arise out of an educated and urban filmmaker. They demonstrate that the most vulnerable group when it comes to environmental degradation is also able to express themselves when it comes to presenting their plight. This replacement of representation by self-representation has serious implications to ecocriticism that requires much sensitivity to the person doing the representing and the intentions of the acting of representation.

The environment has also been revolutionized by social media. WhatsApp and Facebook played a key role in the protests that occurred against the Sterlite copper plant in Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu, in 2018. As police started shooting protestors and killed thirteen of them, photos, videos disseminated immediately among sites, creating a nationwide furor and some accountability. Similarly, anti-building protests in Gujarat against the construction of a bullet train have been maintained through social media, allowing the Adivasi communities to spread their plight to a larger audience. But there are dangers of digital media too. Environmental activism is also coupled with surveillance and repression by the same platforms being used. According to activists, their Facebook relations are investigated, and their WhatsApp messages are monitored. The social media algorithmic logic is prone to give voice to polarised voices and simplify complicated issues to solutions that are too simple. The

struggles between the environment, which often do not fit paradigms of good and evil, can therefore be distorted during this process.

Furthermore, the divide in digital is still vivid. Although India has the largest internet users of any country other than China, the distributed connectivity among the axes of caste, class, gender, and geography is unevenly spread. The bandwidth of adivasi people in remote areas can be low; women will not have as many smartphones as men. Because of this, voices boosted by digital media are more likely to be urban, upper-caste, and male. Ecocriticism should therefore be watchful of such omissions, asking not only who talks but who is listened to.

### **3. Methodological Approaches: Reading Indian Ecocinema**

What should ecocritics do with Indian cinema? The approaches worked out in Euro-American circumstances cannot be imported directly and altered to the Indian realities, they have assumptions about nature, culture, and representation which might not be applicable to the Indian realities. This part presents a rough outline of methodological principles of an Indian ecocriticism.

First, Indian ecocriticism needs to take care of the particularity of postcolonial circumstances. Like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has contended, environmentalism of the poor in the Global South is different from environmentalism of the wealthy in the North (Spivak 82). To people whose livelihood is directly linked with natural resources, environmental protection does not mean nature conservation but access to land, water, and forest products. An Indian ecocriticism should watch films attentive to these livelihood issues, in which it poses whether they manifest the connection between environmental degradation and social marginalization.

Second, Indian ecocriticism needs to deal with caste. The caste system has been influencing Indian environments over thousands of years, defining who can have access to resources, who does the polluting work, and who lives near toxic sites. The Dalit communities are not just overly impacted by the environmental degradation, but they are also overrepresented in environmental struggle films. Reading caste in Indian cinema involves attending to the ways that environmental discourses reproduce or challenge caste hierarchies, and poses the question, who has the right to speak on behalf of nature and whose knowledge is listened to.

Third, Indian ecocriticism should be concerned with regional specificity. India is not one environmental or a cultural entity. The forests of the centre of India are not like the coasts of Kerala; the mountains of the Himalayas are not like the deserts of Rajasthan. Every part possesses its own traditions of the cinema, its own language, and the methods of expression of the more-than-human world. An Assamese film on the Brahmaputra River does not talk

the same as a Tamil film on the Cauvery. To accommodate such regional particularities, ecocriticism has to devise approaches that will interpret films within their regional settings.

Fourth, ecocriticism in India should address the traditional ecological knowledge. Indian philosophy provides material to contemplate relations of human and nature that are not considered through the Western systems. Indians perceive nature informed by the Samkhya idea of prakriti, Jain and Buddhist ideas of ahimsa (non-violence), and even the Hindu love of rivers and mountains in popular Hinduism. The movies based on these traditions might reflect nature in such a way that does not fit Western classifications. Ecocriticism needs to create the conceptual words to interpret such representations themselves.

Fifth, Indian ecocriticism needs to be concerned with questions of language and translations. The majority of Indian movies are produced in local lingo, with national and international versions being subtitles. Translating always entails interpretation and meanings may be lost or distorted. Besides, most of the concepts in the environment such as biodiversity, sustainability, ecosystem are of translation etiology, and are replete with presumptions that are not necessarily applicable to the reality in India. Ecocriticism needs to be sensitive to these language aspects, reading translingually.

Lastly, Indian ecocriticism has to be addressed to popular culture. The Western film studies of high art and mass entertainment are not readily applicable to Indian contexts. The song-dance in a Bollywood movie can have as important environmental connotations as any documentary. The superstar image of an actor such as Rajinikanth or Amitabh Bachchan defines ways through which the environmental messages are received by the audience. Ecocriticism should find ways of reading popular forms in ways that are not condescending and the way environmental meanings are distributed within the whole media ecology.

These principles of methodology are not comprehensive, but they imply a direction. Indian ecocriticism has to be grounded in history, politically active, and concerned with the particularities of caste, region, language and popular culture. It should not read films in isolation but in a bigger social and environmental structures.

#### **4. Material Realities: Media Infrastructures and Environmental Justice in India**

We cannot have ecocritical description of Indian cinema, which would not address material facts of media production. Films never appear out of thin air; they are industrially manufactured, resources are depleted, waste generated and they require labor. Media production in India requires stringent environmental concerns.

The movie industry in itself is greatly affected on the environment. Large-budgeted films go out to exotic destinations abandoning garbage and interfering with the ecology in the area. Sets are made out of virgin materials and they are thrown away after shooting. Carbon emission is a result of the energy used in the production process and post-processes. Song sequences and special effects are done in a wasteful manner. The environmental impact of the industry is not insignificant.

In addition, there are also costs of infrastructure, which sustains the cinema and digital media, including environmental costs. Movies cinemas that run multiplex consume vast energy in air conditioning and projection. YouTube centres with streaming functionality to relay content to OTT platforms need cooling with ongoing power and water. The production of smartphones, televisions, and other products relies on mining that destroys sceneries and society. E-waste disposal- India is the major receiver of e-waste generated in developed nations, which pollute soil and water and impact the poorest population.

These material dimensions call in question environmental justice. Media consumption is unequally beneficial to the Indian society, as it brings with it entertainment, information, and connection. The media are consumed the most by urban, upper-caste and wealthy Indians. The environmental costs of media production and infrastructure, however, are accumulated mainly by marginalized communities - Adivasis who are displaced by mining, Dalits who are involved in recycling waste, rural communities where waste dumps are located. This is ecological injustice even in media itself.

These issues have been started to be dealt with by some filmmakers. The making of *Swades* has also been said to make attempts in reducing environmental impact, collaborating with the local communities and leaving the locations as they were discovered. Some documentary filmmakers tend to be lightweight and have a small amount of equipment with them and the local collaborators. The emergence of digital production has minimized the activities of resource-consuming film stock and chemicals. However these are minor steps in comparison to the magnitude of the problem.

Ecocriticism can have a role to play by making these material realities visible, by questioning the environmental price of the films under examination, and by observing the supply chains that make the media production possible. It can also work on representations of media infrastructure in the films per se, the cell tower in the village, the television in the slum, the smartphone in the hands of the activist, as well as can connect media analysis with environmental justice, showing how spectator pleasure depends on exploitation in other places.

## **5. Future Directions: What Indian Ecocinema Offers the World**

As it has been argued in this research paper, the Indian approaches to ecocinema are fundamentally different in comparison to Western approaches. These differences do not constitute shortcomings but assets that can be used to reconsider the future of ecocriticism. To start with, Indian ecocinema demands the inseparability of the environmental and social justice. In the Indian context, nature does not exist outside of human society; no environmental problem is not also a problem of caste, class and gender. This worldview takes issue with the inclination in some Western ecocritical traditions to posit nature as an independent space, kept out of human reach, and posits that environmentalism should be a livelihood environmentalism that is interested in the terms and conditions in which human beings live and work.

Second, Indian ecocinema provides the capability to think about more-than-human agency in non-Western contexts and resources. The Hindu, Buddhist and Jain traditions attribute consciousness and agency to animals, plants, rivers and mountains in a manner that can be aligned with the contemporary trends of decentring the human. These attributions are however not simply exotic adaptations of western animism, but are entrenched within sophisticated philosophical and practical traditions. These traditions can be read in Indian films to contribute to the world discourse of more-than-human representation.

Third, the Indian ecocinema proves the strength of local and vernacular media. In a globalized media of English-language content, Indian films made in Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Marathi and other languages provide their own visions. They circulate through linguistic communities across national borders forming publics that are neither local nor global but inhabited by an in-between space. Attentive ecocriticism that takes notice of such regional constructions is able to contest the fact that environmental consciousness has to be articulated using universal languages.

Fourth, the Indian ecocinema depicts the significance of popular forms. In India, environmental messages are delivered to the audience mostly by documentary or art cinema, and through commercial films, televised serials, music videos, and social media. The ecocriticism which rejects such forms as dimmed or false is blind to the point of action. The difficulty is to come up with the ways of interpreting the environmental implications of popular culture without foisting unwarranted criteria.

Lastly, Indian ecocinema provides the ways of resistance. Throughout the movies, there is a community struggling against displacement, pollution, and exploitation. These representations do not passively reflect the struggle; they are direct participants in it. They

offer materials of organization, witnessing and envisioning alternatives. Such an ecocriticism needed during the climate crisis should thus be not only analytical but also participatory, not only interpretive but also political. The Indian ecocinema is a good example of what this engagement can involve.

### **Conclusion: Seeing Through Indian Eyes**

The research paper has led to the argument that an Indian approach to cinema, digital media, and ecological representation cannot be and is different as compared to Western approaches. It has followed the development of the ecological theme in Indian cinema since the parallel cinema movement up to the present regional productions. It has discussed how digital media have revolutionized the storytelling process of the environment, allowing new voices and new ways of interacting. It has suggested methodological strategies that are appropriate to the Indian situations, sensitive to postcolonial situations, caste, region and popular culture. It has challenged the materialistic realities of media production and environmental injustices they have.

In the research paper, this has been reiterated to suggest that Indian ecocinema is not a local version of the world tendencies but a unique establishment with its histories, concerns and potential. In Indian films about the Adivasi fight against mining, of fishing villages against pollution, and of urban slums against displacement, the Indian issues subjects in which the contact with nature is direct and immediate, acute and irrevocably political.

India does not separate the pixel and the land. The images flickering on screens are the creations of landscapes carved by the thousand years of human life, forests which are also houses, rivers which are also goddesses. The ecocritical thinking of Indian cinema means keeping the following dimensions in mind: aesthetic and political, local and global, human and more-than-human. It is to look through Indian eyes but in a way where Indian eyes do not look the same to all and all times.

Indian ecocinema can provide resources of thought and action in the new millennium when the climate crisis is escalating, and environmental confrontations are on the rise. It helps us to remember that there is no way to discuss environmentalism out of the context of issues of justice, that nature is always also society, and that the most effective narration is the one that is told by the people who live it. This is not a break of ecocriticism with its concerns but a completeness of the same. It is now the time to hear, see, and learn.

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