

## Eco-Conscious Storytelling in Hindi Cinema as a Tool for Environmental Awareness

Vanshika Vardhan<sup>1</sup>, Prof. (Dr.) Sachin Bharti<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, University School of Mass Communication, Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Delhi

<sup>2</sup> Professor, University School of Mass Communication, Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Delhi

### Abstract

In the modern era, modes of social messaging and awareness have shifted toward advertising, short films, social media content, and regional and national cinema. The powerful narratives of cinema and visual representations can shape perception and reinforce awareness of the climate crisis. This paper critically examines embedded eco-conscious messages in select Hindi films and generates knowledge about cinema as a tool for environmental awareness. The study employs Narrative Analysis, a qualitative research method. The methodology is salient in its aim of establishing an understanding between Hindi Cinema and ecological awareness. This work is based on the principles of eco-critical film analysis. Purposive sampling has been chosen for the analysis. The researchers examine select Hindi films that focus on the environmental challenges and their repercussions. These films, when analysed together, depict a multitude of environmental degradation through visual representations and unique storytelling. In conclusion, this study suggests that cinema plays a vital role in fostering eco-consciousness among the audience by bringing diverse narratives.

**Keywords:** Hindi Cinema, Eco-conscious, Storytelling, Environment, Awareness

### Introduction

Eco-conscious films are not a new concept in India. *Neecha Nagar*, a 1946 film by Chetan Anand, showed the dispossession of villagers by real estate giants. The film weaves the story around how upper-class oppression and modern development lead to the dumping of toxins into a village, thereby causing multiple diseases, death, and uncertainty of livelihood. The rebellion depicted in this movie is iconic and remains relatable in many ways. The movie was inspired by a Russian play named 'The Lower Depths'. *Neecha Nagar* was the first film to acquire recognition at the Cannes Film Festival and became the only Indian film to be awarded a Palm d'Or. Western cinema has produced numerous eco-conscious blockbusters, including *Avatar* (2009), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *Beyond the Poles* (2009), *Interstellar* (2014), and many others across genres. Although eco-cinema is less frequent in India than in the West, there has been a noticeable increase in eco-conscious films in both Hindi cinema and other regional-language cinemas since 2000. Examples include *Paani* (2019) in Marathi, *Kadaisi Vivasayi* (2022) in Tamil, *Sontha Ooru* (2009) in Telugu, *Kalira Atita* (2020) in Odia, among others. While the interpretation of ecocriticism remains open to discussion, cinema today cannot be understood merely as a source of entertainment. In this digital era, when individuals continuously move from one screen to another, smartphones, laptops, televisions, and cinema halls, the visual medium has become an increasingly crucial site of learning, influencing, and socialising.

### Eco-Cinema

Since the concept of ecocriticism originated in literary studies and related fields, it has gradually emerged in cinema through various discourses, highlighting its potential to portray environmental injustice and its repercussions.

The term 'Eco-cinema' was first introduced by Roger C. Anderson in 'Eco-cinema: A Plan for Preserving Nature' (Anderson, 1975). 'Anderson's proposal was more of a sarcastic criticism towards modern people's growing detachment from the physical world, but it suggests the possibility of connecting the study of ecology or the environment with cinematic texts' (Chu, 2016, p. 11). Unlike textbooks and policy documents, films communicate through emotions, imagery, and narration. When audiences relate to characters and situations on screen, awareness

is not merely transmitted; it is experienced. The experiential dimension gives cinema a unique capacity to cultivate empathy and critical consciousness. This study aims to showcase cinema as an effective tool for educating the masses about environmental exploitation, inculcating eco-consciousness and human responsibility. To contribute to sustainable development goals adopted by the United Nations, the study aligns its analysis with SDG 13 (Climate Action) through the representation of ecological crises, SDG 16 (Strong Institutions) through the depiction of environmental governance failures, and SDG 4 (Quality Education) by showcasing cinema as a site of environmental discourse and education in select Hindi films.

### **Objectives**

- To systematically observe and document the eco-conscious narratives embedded in select Hindi films through the depiction of their ecological settings and environmental crises.
- To examine the character-nature relationship in select Hindi films with particular attention to exploitation, vulnerability, and environmental awareness.

### **Review of Literature**

Gregg Mitman's *Reel Nature* and Derek Bousé's *Wildlife Films* appeared to highlight wildlife and nature documentaries, thereby contributing to the visual expression of environmental themes (Ivakhiv A, 2008). Rust and Monani highlighted that eco-cinema studies are not simply limited to movies with explicit messages of environmental consciousness, but investigate the breadth of cinema from Hollywood corporate productions and independent avant-garde films to the expanding media sites in which producers, consumers, and texts interact (Rust & Monani, 2013). Scott Macdonald reserves the term for arthouse and avant-garde films that use slow pacing and long takes, in which environmental landscapes play an important role. He argues that eco-cinema does a 'fundamental job in a retraining of perception, as a way of offering an alternative to conventional media-spectatorship' (Macdonald, 2009).

Eco-cinema not only portrays natural disasters but also addresses the consequences of human interference with the natural environment. Eco-cinema conveys urbanisation, irresponsible development, environmental degradation, and inappropriate waste management as the primary causes of environmental imbalance leading to disasters. (Chu, 2016) The audience is not a passive participant in the cinema viewing process; in fact, they actively take part in multimedia content (Tong, C. 2013). As per Nixon, the contemporary age is one of a fast-paced capitalist era, where individuals are constantly occupied with temporal compression and a fleeting attention span. The challenge lies here is to divert their focus towards environmental injustice and erosion. (Nixon, R, 2011)

James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) portrays an imaginary ecological system, establishing a narrative of nature over everything, and depicting humans as exploiting natural resources. The film shows human greed causing harm to the natives of that ecological system and resulting in natural resource degradation. (Bergthaller, H. 2012) Karmakar and Sarkar, explaining about the potential of *Sherni* (2021) in conveying an ecocritical message, imply that by presenting environmental conflict authentically on screen, the film highlights environmental narratives that have long been overlooked by mainstream Bollywood. (Karmakar, G., & Sarkar, S., 2023)

Visual media have tremendous capability to sensitise audiences towards critical issues. Although Bollywood has produced numerous films on serious issues, including gender discrimination, corruption, terrorism, and others, the environmental crisis remains one of the least explored domains (Bhattacharya, P. 2020). This supports the argument that Kedarnath was one of the last mainstream Bollywood films to depict a disaster based on real events affecting the masses. Although few Hindi films inspired by real events were produced on diverse eco-crisis themes like *Sherni* (2021) and *Lakadbagha* (2023). *Kaantara* (2022), a Kannada-language action-thriller film, fiercely portrays the ecological issues in Karnataka's coastal region, India. The study mentions Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), underlining the tribal practices shown in the film to maintain ecological balance (Pradhan, S., & Kumar, N., 2025).

### **Conceptual Framework**

Cinema is not merely a 'text' in a literary sense but an amalgamation of various visual elements, narrative structures, sound design, and performances. This raises an important methodological question about which

dimensions of cinema fall within the scope of ecocriticism and which do not. Not every portrayal of nature or environmental setting qualifies as ecocritical. To answer such questions, Buell has outlined four criteria for determining if a work is suitably environmental for study (1995). These criteria are: (1) "the non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device" (p.7); (2) "the human interest is not [...] the only legitimate interest" (p. 7); (3) "human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation" (p. 7); (4) "there is some sense of the environment as a process"(Buell, 1995, pp. 7-8). This study incorporates Lawrence Buell's criteria as a conceptual framework. Ecocriticism becomes relevant when cinema treats the environment not as a passive space but as an active presence, while defining the human-nature interaction that reveals exploitation, displacement, or ecological destruction. The select films *Irada* (2017), *Kedarnath* (2018), and *Junglee* (2019) frame nature as a key element by exposing ecological interdependence, nature's wrath, and thereby fostering eco-consciousness to develop ethical responsibility.

### **Methodology**

This research incorporates qualitative narrative analysis to examine the representation of eco-critical messages in *Irada* (2017), *Kedarnath* (2018) and *Junglee* (2019). Narrative analysis focuses on how films construct meaning through story, characters, settings and visual symbolism. The study collects direct observable data, such as ecological landscapes and the nature of the environmental crisis. Indirect observable data include the interpretation of eco-conscious messages, the implied character-nature relationship and the representation of environmental negligence with particular attention to the narrative elements. Through systematic and repeated viewing of these films, key narrative elements were identified and then interpreted to understand how Hindi cinema frames ecological narratives.

### **Sampling of Films**

The films *Irada* (2017), *Kedarnath* (2018), and *Junglee* (2019) were selected using purposive sampling. The films were released in consecutive years. The key reasons for selecting these films are their portrayal of ecological crises and disasters. *Irada* and *Junglee* portray eco-crisis narratives, while *Kedarnath* is an eco-disaster film targeting a mass audience. These films are inspired by true events and convey environmental awareness messages. They represent different but complementary approaches to eco-conscious storytelling in Hindi cinema. *Kedarnath* dramatises a real climate disaster shaped by human actions; it was one of the last mainstream Bollywood films that depicted a disaster based on real events affecting the masses. In contrast, *Irada* and *Junglee* critique systemic ecological exploitation and highlight the dangerous impact of industrial pollution and human greed. Together, they enable an ecocritical analysis of how mainstream Hindi cinema addresses environmental themes through distinct visual lenses.

### **Eco-critical Analysis**

#### **Narrative Setting and Ecological Context**

*Irada* (2017) sets its narrative in an industrial town of Punjab where hazardous chemical factories operate near residential areas. There are repeated visual shots of industrial smoke emissions polluting the breathing air, foul water bodies that seem highly contaminated, barren land, and hospital interiors filled with cancer patients. The nature shown here is not lush and soothing, but rather damaged and chemically affected. The colours of the landscape appear dull, grey, and smoky, which indicates an uninhabitable setting. Another sequence of scenes shows *Myna*, an environmental investigator, collecting water samples from the affected area. The camera closely frames yellowish water buckets, a map of contaminated water zones, and containers labelled for lab testing.

In contrast to industrial degradation, the narrative of *Kedarnath* (2018) unfolds in the Himalayan region of Uttarakhand, centred around the famous pilgrimage town of Kedarnath, located in *Rudra Prayag* district in India. The visual landscape is constructed through snow-capped mountains, the fast-flowing *Mandakini* River, and a narrow, steep trekking route leading to the *Shiva* temple. The overcrowded temple surroundings have shown. The opening scene of the movie shows *Mansoor Khan*, the protagonist of the film, guiding and carrying pilgrims on the rocky paths, with the camera frequently framing human figures as small against massive mountains. Helicopters hover overhead, and hotels and shops appear squeezed into limited space near riverbanks. The

landscape is visually shown as massive but ecologically fragile. The human constructions at the riverbanks and the temple seem intrusive in the natural setting.

*Jungle* (2019) is set in the dense forests of Odisha, where *Dipankar Nair* operates an elephant sanctuary surrounded by lush greenery and a river. The initial frame captures elephants bathing and playing in the river. Multiple visuals of elephant herds, snakes, birds, and other animals portray a thriving ecosystem, with the elephants remaining as the central focus throughout the narrative. The villagers are shown living harmoniously alongside the animals.

### **Character-Nature Relationship**

*Irada* showed a deceitful relationship between humans and nature. The ecological degradation due to corrupt industrialisation and unethical dumping practices affects ordinary citizens. *ACP Arjun Mishra*, while investigating a bomb blast case, uncovers that farmers are unable to grow crops due to contaminated soil, communities are living in toxic landscapes, and are using adulterated water for survival. Thus, the film constructs the relationship between humans and nature, in which a handful of people with power and money exploit the environment, and ordinary citizens pay the price as a damaged entity.

In contrast, the tourists shown in *Kedarnath* are largely devotees of *Lord Shiva* (a Hindu god), visiting for temporary *pooja* (rituals). Their interactions with the ecological setting are temporary. On the other hand, the villagers are permanent residents who work as porters, shopkeepers, and small service providers. A series of scenes depicts their regular interactions with the Himalayan landscape. In particular, the character *Mansoor Khan*, a *pitthoo* (porter), is closely associated with the geological structure of *Kedarnath*. In many scenes, he warns pilgrims about unstable rocks and changing weather. Moreover, he even opposes the overdevelopment project, which could financially benefit many villagers, including him.

Similarly, in *Jungle*, *Raj*, a veterinarian and the son of *Dipankar Nair*, has been friends with *Bhola* and *Didi* (an elephant pair) since childhood. They have an amiable bond. After ten long years, when *Raj* arrives at the sanctuary, he finds *Bhola* is enormously beautiful and has long, beautiful tusks. He is now the leader of the elephants. *Didi* is pregnant, and *Shankara* (a female mahout) is caring for her. Other mahouts are also shown to be cordial with elephants. Additionally, *Gajja guru* is *Raj's Kalaripayattu* (a martial art form from Kerala) teacher, who nurses *Didi*. In contrast, *Keshav*, the film's antagonist, works with his team as poachers for various smugglers. His eye is on *Bhola's* tusks, so he bribes the police officers of the forest. Consequently, by brutally killing *Bhola* and *Dipankar*, he causes an ecological imbalance across the forest. *Didi* witnessed all these, and now she recognises *Keshav* as a murderer. In turn, *Didi's* resentments demonstrate her anger and heartbreak. Therefore, the film narrative constitutes elephants as extraordinary and intelligent creatures who never forget anything or anyone.

### **Articulation of eco-conscious awareness**

Eco-conscious messages in *Irada* are embedded through emotional appeal, showing illness and loss. A series of scenes shows *Parabjeet* interacting with families who have lost their family members due to cancer caused by pollution. Hospital corridors are filled with patients undergoing chemotherapy, which reminds him of his daughter's death. Thus, the film uses human suffering as an emotional bridge to communicate environmental injustice. *ACP Arjun Mishra* is shown confronting the injustice committed by corrupt officials and industrial representatives. Meanwhile, *Paddy*, an industrialist and *Ramandeep*, a powerful political figure, are shown as agents of environmental suppression. In this context, the awareness messages are reinforced through legal and political confrontation, emphasising moral responsibilities to take action against environmental injustice.

Similarly, through *Mansoor's* dialogues, the film *Kedarnath* communicates that nature has tremendous force and it deserves respect, not domination. The eco-conscious narrative emphasises humility towards nature and discourages its exploitation. Furthermore, the climax of the film visualised the massive 2013 Kedarnath flood as a consequence of human irresponsibility. The flood visuals are overwhelming. *Mansoor* and *Mukku* struggle to save as many lives as possible without fearing for their own. *Mansoor* loses his life while saving a man. *Mansoor's* death and *Mukku's* tragedy of losing her loved ones give a profound sense of loss to the viewers, conveying nature's wrath when it is intruded upon. Likewise, *Jungle* foregrounds human accountability through the dialogues of *Keshav*, where he challenges *Raj* that the world doesn't care whether elephants live or die, and he

supplies ivory because there is a higher demand among people across different countries. The awareness message in the film is reinforced in the last interview of Raj's father, which was conducted by a reporter, *Meera*, before his death. Through his interview, he reveals that an elephant is hunted every fifteen minutes for smuggling purposes. He urges people to stop these hunts by not buying any product that is produced from ivory. The visuals of jewellery and art pieces made from ivory were displayed to caution against purchasing them and thereby educating the audience to be cautious and not to participate in their exploitation.

### **Discussion**

The analysis signifies that the film collectively engages with multiple dimensions of Lawrence Buell's eco-critical framework. These films, when analysed together, showcase a range of ecological constructs from contamination (*Irada*) to fragility under anthropocentric activities (*Kedarnath*) and eventually human coexistence with animals, layered with underlying complexities (*Junglee*). The non-human interest is evident in a disaster beyond human control. This demonstrates that the environment is not a passive agent but the central force within the narrative. Furthermore, Buell's notion of showing the environment as a process is reflected across all three films. *Kedarnath* portrays change in weather and terrain; *Irada* amplifies gradual contamination. Meanwhile *Junglee* foregrounds ecological disruption through declining numbers of elephants; these narratives construct the environment as evolving and deeply interconnected with both human and non-human lives. Various Hindi films, such as *Haathi Mere Sathi* (1971), *Lagaan* (2001), *Swades* (2004), *Peepli Live* (2010), and *Kaun Kitne Paani Mein* (2015), are proof that Hindi Cinema has consistently delivered diverse eco-conscious narratives since its inception.

This study can be extended to web series, short films, or any other literary scholarship to study ecological narratives. Although there are certain limitations to this study. Since the analysis is restricted to a small sample of Hindi films, other regional-language cinema and diverse forms remain unexplored. Future research can expand this scope by including films from regional industries to understand the diverse ecological contexts within Indian cinema, rather than just limiting it to Hindi cinema.

### **Conclusion**

Indian Cinema has portrayed several themes of ecological degradation across genres and languages. The frequency of such themes remains low, as Bhattacharya notes in his study. Compared with social media videos, advertisements, and short films, movies are a form of long-form content. Thus, it tends to change the human perspective more prominently. The films discussed above attempt to convey the sensitivity that humans must develop to conserve natural resources. *Irada's* industrial corruption, *Kedarnath's* overdevelopment concerns and *Junglee's* moral failure highlight human accountability towards nature. They employ different cinematic and narrative approaches to convey their message and signify an effective awareness tool. Apart from mainstream cinema, over-the-top platforms are also contributing to conveying examples of the environmental crisis, such as *The Railway Men* (2023) about the 1984 Bhopal gas tragedy and *Bhoomika* (2021). Similarly, various documentaries such as *The Elephant Whisperers* (2022), *Vantara: Sanctuary Stories* (2025) and *All that Breathes* (2022) are contributing to raising ethical accountability. At present, eco-conscious messages are becoming increasingly critical in India, following numerous crises and disasters the country has faced. Every year, there are flood-related issues in Himachal Pradesh, Assam and other states of the north-eastern region. Delhi, the capital of India, has been consistently in the news due to hazardous air pollution and water contamination. Hindi cinema needs to address these underexplored narratives to raise awareness among society and encourage them to be mindful of the environment. This study urges the incorporation of more research on less explored crises and disasters.

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