



***“Children of the Soil” to “Dark Wind”*: Nature, Environment and Climate in Indian Films**

Pankaj Jain & Shikha Sharma

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FILM REVIEW ESSAY

“Children of the Soil” to “Dark Wind”: *Nature, Environment and Climate in Indian Films*

India is widely known as the biggest producer of films, now globally known with the portmanteau “Bollywood.” India also grabs the media attention for another reason—climate change. In 2015, *The New York Times* published an op-ed with a cartoon showing India as the proverbial “elephant” blocking the progress at the Paris Climate Change Conference. With the staggering number of films India produces and the steady increase in climate change-related disasters that India faces, the critics embraced the film *Kadvi Hawa* (literally, Dark Wind or Bitter Wind, 2017) as the “pioneering” film raising the critical issue of climate change. However, the issues raised in the movie were amply dealt with in several other Indian films in the last several decades. This article is a survey of Indian films that have shown or dealt with nature, environment, or climate starting from the 1940s till the present time.

FILMS OF THE ENVIRONMENT

At the end of 2021, as the whole world continued to reel under the two COVID-19 and climate change crises, Amitav Ghosh, an Indian anthropologist-turned-novelist, published his second nonfiction monograph, *Nutmeg’s Curse* (2021), which touched on both of the crises. He elaborated on the role of capitalism and colonialism that had led to climate change, leading to various zoonotic pandemics, including COVID-19. Intrigued by this strong criticism, I read his 2017 monograph *The Great Derangement* on the same subject. In it Ghosh began by recalling that his ancestors had been ecological refugees from Bangladesh. Recalling childhood memories of his encounters with natural phenomena in that region, Ghosh noted, “[T]he landscape of Bengal forces itself on the artists, writers, and filmmakers of the region” (2017, 11). Indeed, until recently Indian art, literature, and films could hardly be imagined without activity of the potent forces of environmental factors, including especially the two monsoons. However, Ghosh was quick to note, “[C]limate change casts a much smaller shadow within the landscape of literary fiction than it does even in the public arena” (*ibid.* 13). He noted: “[T]elevision, film, and the visual arts have found it much easier to address climate change than has literary fiction”

(*ibid.* 86). Intrigued by this observation, I started testing his thesis in the context of Indian films. This essay presents an analysis of films in several Indian languages that were based on imaginary or actual environmental or climatic issues or incidents.¹ These films touch on various environmental issues, including natural disasters, rural issues, urban issues, and nature preservation, as described below. These sections are only meant to categorize the films and are not watertight. Planetary ecological issues overlap and are interdigitated. Another essential feature of these Indian films, of course, is their poetic songs and ever-popular music amplifying the ecological message. These films have won numerous awards at home and abroad yet are rarely recognized for any environmental impact.

NATURAL DISASTERS

The two most common natural disasters appearing in Indian films are floods and earthquakes. Especially in the films made before the 1990s, human society was rarely shown as too far removed from natural forces. The film plots were suddenly turned upside down by abrupt floods or earthquakes. Such apocalyptic events might either break up a family or bring a community together. The latter was the case in the 1941 film directed by V. Shantaram, made in both Hindi and Marathi, with the titles *Padosi* and *Shejari* (literally, “the neighbor”) respectively. The plot was based on an industrialist trying to construct a dam around a village and in the process seed hatred between local Hindus and Muslims. In the climax, as the dam gets broken, both the protagonist groups sacrifice their lives to save their village, bringing the entire community together in the process: metaphorically all the sins having been washed away by the deluge. *Nastik* (“Atheist,” 1954) similarly depicts the heroine battling a monsoon flood as she tries to row her boat. The climactic scenes of *Baiju bawra* (“Crazy Baiju,” 1952) and *Milan* (“Confluence, or Meeting,” 1967) show the hero and heroine sinking in the stormy waters of their respective rivers. The ultimate non-dualistic experience founded on the Hindu and Buddhist philosophical traditions manifests in the protagonists merging with cosmic forces, as exemplified by water in such films.

Another globally celebrated black-and-white film is Satyajit Ray’s *Pather panchali* (“Song of the Little Road,” 1955). The fury of Bengal’s monsoon forces a starving family to move away from their dilapidated home and a village rich in flora and fauna. That village’s natural surrounding is shown in exquisite detail, but people are forced to migrate to the city as the weather turns furious. In *Mohenjo Daro* (2016), as the dam breaks after a massive flood, prehistoric people from the Indus Valley Civilization migrate eastwards across the Gangetic plain of northern India. These scenes in the film specifically highlighted the role of a climatic effect that some researchers have speculated was one of the reasons for the demise of this Copper Age civilization (Shendige 1990). Similarly, a flood destroys a dam in *Satyam Shivam Sundaram* (1978), uniting the estranged husband and wife as if some cosmic force is helping dualities merge into non-dualities yet again. The monsoon flash flood shown in *Kedarnath* (2018)

is based on the historic flood that occurred in Uttarakhand in 2013. Here, the Muslim male protagonist sacrifices his life to help rescue the family of the Hindu female protagonist. As in dozens of other Indian films, the message of Hindu-Muslim unity is driven home even in the face of climate disasters pounding everywhere. Harmony with nature must also result in harmony between the diverse communities.

Earthquakes also appear in some films; for instance, the plots of *Waqt* ("Time or Destiny," 1965) and *Kai po che* ("Cut the Kite," 2013) both begin with a backdrop of catastrophic destruction brought on by earthquakes. In the former film a family is broken apart, with each member estranged from the rest, while the latter film was based on the devastating earthquake in Gujarat in 2001. *Kalira atita* ("Yesterday's Past," 2021) seems to be the only Indian film that deals with the frequent cyclones in the eastern state of Odisha (formerly called Orissa). The film authentically and almost autobiographically shows the massive loss of land and lives with increasingly frequent cyclones on the east coast along the Bay of Bengal. Similarly, *Tum mile* ("You Met," 2009) alludes to the infamous 2005 Mumbai flood that reunites the estranged lovers; and *Dasavathaaram* ("Ten Incarnations," 2008) invokes the 2004 Indian ocean tsunami that killed thousands.

Another milestone movie based on a disastrous flood is *Mother India* (1957). According to Chatterjee (2020, 21) this pivotal scene was inspired by a real-life flood in 1955 in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, as is the case with many other films mentioned here. However, in this film the female protagonist stops the exodus of people abandoning the village as she reminds them of their eternal relationship with Mother Earth. As the villagers stay back and work hard, their farmlands start yielding fruitfully once more.

All the films mentioned above emphatically show that Mother Nature remains invincible, despite all scientific and technical progress in the form of massive dams, bridges and other industrial revolution benefits. The message from these films could not be more transparent: respect and revere the Mother and be grateful for her blessings. Moreover the various disasters serve as a decisive turning-point from where the plots emerge in the beginning. Alternatively the climatic catastrophes help the films achieve an intense climax that comes with ethical messages grounded in socioecological harmony.

FAMINE, FARMING, AND RURAL ISSUES

Over 80 percent of the Indian population still lived in villages at India's Independence in 1947, as was reflected in early Indian films featuring farming and a rural life in vivid detail. Many films from the 1950s and 1960s were about farmers living in villages. However, by 2020, the urban proportion of the Indian population had exceeded 40 percent (Keshav and Komaraiah 2015). That changing demographic is reflected in Indian cinema. After the 1990s rarely if ever was a film such as *Lagaan* (2001) made that highlighted famine, farming and other rural issues. This departure of Indians from villages into urban areas was explored by Tumble (2018) in particular. Ghosh also noted one

of the largest migrant groups of India came from his homeland of Bengal, including present-day Bangladesh and the Indian state of West Bengal; and he even referred to his ancestors as “ecological refugees” (2017, 9).

People from the arid region of Rajasthan, Marwar, can also be labeled ecological refugees. Owing to severe droughts and famines, coupled with their moneylending skills, the Marwaris have been on the move for centuries, and today are to be found in every part of India in their roles as traders or financiers. Gurcharan Das (2000) devoted an entire chapter in *Merchants of Marwar* to this, citing the noted British historian Col. James Tod (1832), “nine-tenths of India’s bankers and commercial men are natives of Maroo des and these chiefly of the Jain faith.” By *Maroo des*, he means Rajasthan.

Unlike Das, Timberg (2015, 40) refers to severe ecological challenges as being the prime reason for the Marwari diaspora to every corner of India. Although famines and droughts are most recurrent in Rajasthan, in Indian films Rajasthan is mainly presented as an exotic tourist place with magnificent castles and exotic palaces. *Genesis* (1986)² and *Trishagni* (“The Sandstorm,” 1988) seem to be two exceptional films where the desert is seen to be full of hardships, the end of human civilization and the beginning of the next cycle of the human eras. In *Trishagni* sandstorms appear both in the opening and the final scenes, marking the arrival of the young protagonists at a Buddhist monastery, their departure from that same monastery, and finally the burial of the monastery itself under mountains of sand. Once again, a natural disaster transforms the plot drastically (Sharma and Jain 2020).

Famines and droughts are also portrayed in other Indian regions such as Bengal, as shown in *Dharti ke lal* (“Children of the soil,” 1946) and *Ashani sanket* (“Distant Thunder,” 1973). Both films portray the horrors of the 1943 “man-made” Bengal famine which killed millions owing to massive mismanagement by the British administration. Drought also appears in Maharashtra in *Paani* (“Water,” 2019) and in Gujarat, as shown in *Jal* (“Water,” 2014) and *Lagaan* (“Land Tax,” 2001): characters in all three films mitigate water scarcity by finding new water sources and keeping the community united against hardships exacerbated by social mismanagement and injustice. A landmark film, *The Guide* (1965), also features a severe drought in its climax. The male protagonist fasts for several days, his self-sacrifice brings rain to their parched village, and the final scene celebrates his spiritual liberation in a glowing halo. In *Kaun kitney paani mein* (“How Deep in Water One is,” 2016), an upper-caste male is in love with a lower-caste female from a different village. When both villages suffer from drought, they mitigate water scarcity by dissolving social differences. *Peepli live* (2010) is another satirical commentary on irresponsible media that sensationalizes farmer-suicide in the face of harsh living conditions brought on by climate change. The plot of an incomplete film, *Paani*, was written around the future lack of water in 2040 CE.

Films such as *Godaan* (“Gift of a Cow,” 1963) and *Khandan* (“Family,” 1965) seem to have been inspired by *Mother India* (1957), mentioned above, these three films showing the plight and perseverance of farmers in the face of

socio-ecological hardships. Another landmark film is *A River called Titas* (1973) which showed the lives of fisherfolk who are entirely dependent on the rivers and the monsoon in Bengal. *Bhoomi geetha* ("Song of the Soil," 1997) shows how indigenous people deal with the pressures of modernity, similar to how Bhils of Rajasthan behave (Jain 2011). Recently *Kadvi hawa* (2017) has combined the issues of drought and famine with that of coastal villagers losing their livelihoods and lives. Thus *Kadvi hawa* carries forward a long film tradition of highlighting famine and farming issues in various ways.

FOSSIL FUELS, POLLUTION, AND URBAN ISSUES

The rampant burning of fossil fuels is now recognized globally as the most significant reason for climate change. Euro-American countries built their economies by burning these fuels and igniting the industrial revolution. China and India are both rapidly adopting the same models as they gallop forward to alleviate poverty from their societies. Amitav Ghosh suggests that India should instead adopt East Asian models of Japan and South Korea that are labor and education intensive, and not as resource-intensive as Western ones are.³ However, well before the rise of the "Asian tigers," *Naya daur* ("New Era" 1957) called for balancing fossil fuel-based industrial growth with labor-intensive growth, offering a call to find a way to balance carbon-dependent mechanical power with human resources. *Kaala patthar* ("Black Stone," 1979) was a film based on the 1975 mining disaster in the state of Jharkhand, in which 375 miners were killed by flooding and explosion in a coal mine. *Gangs of Wasseypur* (2012) showed the violent side of coal mining, one involving mafia and gang wars. Greenhouse gas emissions are widely understood to be the significant issue with fossil fuels. The three films just mentioned highlight other problems associated with the coal mining industry—their impact on labor, safety during mining, and criminality connected with the entire operation.

Similarly, *Yugant* ("The End of an Era," 1995) tried to weave its plot around the other fossil fuel, petroleum, and the Gulf War of 1991, both having lingering aftermaths on the environment, while the film's title was nostalgically referring to the good old days now gone forever. Two other milestone movies dealing with water pollution were *Neecha nagar* ("Lower Town," 1946) and *Ram teri Ganga maili* ("Rama, Your Polluted Ganges," 1985). In addition to highlighting the issue of water and river pollution, both also raise the pervasive issue of exploitation of lower classes by the wealthy and powerful. In *Ganashatru* ("An Enemy of the People," 1990), an honest doctor initially treated as an enemy eventually gets noticed, as he continues to spread awareness about the contaminated water spreading epidemics across a town. *Irada* ("Intention," 2017) is based on the public health crisis due to carcinogenic elements from a power plant mixing in groundwater. The other major urban pollution issue is air pollution caused by industry. This issue is sensitively dealt with in two films based on the notorious 1984 Bhopal poison-gas tragedy, *Bhopal Express* (1999) and *Bhopal: A Prayer for Rain* (2014). We can thus conclude

that pollution and other urban socio-ecological issues have a long history of portrayal in Indian films.

ANIMALS AND NATURE APPRECIATION AND PRESERVATION

In this section we explore how animals and other natural forces are portrayed in the cinema. Mountains have long fascinated Indian filmmakers and the audience, according to Lutgendorf (2005). A quick search showed how film titles routinely refer to mountains, especially the Himalayas; thus: *Himalay ki godmein* ("In the lap of the Himalayas," 1965), *Himalay putra* ("Son of the Himalayas," 1997), and *Prem parbat* ("Mountain of Love," 1973). A few other film titles refer to rivers, especially the Ganges, including *Gunga Jumna* ("Ganges and Yamuna," 1961), *Ganga ki lahren* ("Waves of the Ganges," 1964), *Ganga ki saugand* ("Oath of the Ganges," 1978), *Jis desh men Ganga behti hai* ("The country where the Ganges flows," 1960), and *Ganga sagar* ("The Ganges and the Sea," 1978). Other films to note include *Nadiya ke paar* ("Across the River," 1982), *Sangam* ("Confluence of the Rivers," 1964), *Jheel ke us paar* ("Across the Lake," 1973), *Saagar* ("Sea," 1985), *Samundar* ("Sea," 1986). A few film titles refer to the sky, including *Door gagan ki chhaon men* ("Far below the Sky," 1964), *Neela akash* ("Blue Sky," 1965), and *Pighalta aasman* ("Melting Sky," 1985). Many films of course had fire in their title, e.g., *Aag* ("Fire," 1948) and *Agni varsha* ("The Fire and the Rain," 2002). There are a few film titles referring to greenery or forest, e.g., *Vanaja* ("Daughter of the Forest," 2006), and *Hariyali aur rasta* ("The Greenery and the Way," 1962). Many other titles refer to the sun, e.g., *Suraj* (1966), moon, e.g., *Chaudvin ka chand* (1960), moonlight, e.g., *Chandni* (1989), cloud *Badal* (2000), flower and stone, e.g., *Phool aur patthar* (1966), lion, e.g., *Zakhmi sher* (1984), seasons or weather patterns, e.g., *Basant bahar* ("Spring," 1956), and *Barsaat* ("The rains," 1949).

However, none of the films cited here might be considered to be documentaries. and most films with words for natural elements in their titles may not actually deal with subjects of nature or the environment at all. There are nonetheless some films that *do* present characters exploring nature and exploring their own lives, including *Kanchenjunga* (1962), *Aranyer din ratri* ("Days and Nights in the Forest," 1970), and *Abara aranye* ("Again in the Forest," 2003). All three of these films have characters from urban areas taking a break for a few days in natural surroundings, leading to insightful self-exploration. In films such as *Bhalo theko* ("Take Care," 2003) and *Sati* (1989), trees and plants support the female protagonist even as her society abandons her. In *Aisa yeh jahaan* ("Such is this World," 2015), the main characters' visit to a village makes them realize the importance of nature. *Kartavya* ("Duty," 1979), *Devara kaadu* ("Sacred Grove," 1993), and *Urumatram* ("Transformation," 2003) are films that call for urgent action to conserve trees and nature in general. In *Ship of Theseus* (2012), a Jain monk's activism is portrayed as he raises his voice against animal testing for medicines, even as he falls ill and is left with no choice but to take such medicines.

Some of the films did not shy away from showing mankind–nature conflicts. In *Sherni* (2020), the female protagonist has to deal with a man-eating tiger. In *Jaanwar aur insaan* (“Animal and Human,” 1972) and *Mr. Natwarlal* (1979), the hero deals with a tiger in the respective village. Other films featuring similar conflicts include *Shikari* (“Huntsman,” 1963), *Kala parvat* (“Black Mountain,” 1970), and *Kaal* (“Time,” 2005). Tigers aside, *Wardat* (“Accident,” 1981) shows a locust attack that threatens farmers and their land, but the protagonist discovers evil human forces lying behind the attack and defeats them. Similarly, in *Krrish 3* (2013), a mysterious virus wreaks havoc across Africa and Asia, but the protagonist remains untouched by it and goes on to foil the malicious plan of the villain behind this attack.

In many other films, however, animals are shown as the protagonists’ loyal companions. A goat protects the female protagonist in *Mera Rakshak* (“My Defender,” 1978). In *Gaai aur Gori* (“Cow and Gauri,” 1973), a cow plays that role for the heroine. In *Haathi mere saathi* (“Elephants my Friends,” 1971), elephants are the closest companions for the protagonists. In *Teri meherbaniya* (“Your Favors,” 1985), a dog avenges the killing of the protagonists. In *Main aur mera haathi* (“My Elephant and I,” 1981), a pet elephant joins the male protagonist in punishing the villain. *Balak aur janwar* (“Child and Animal,” 1975) has a similar plot, in which elephants raise a child in the forest and then take revenge for the murder of his parents. In *Doodh ka karz* (“Debt of Milk,” 1990) a snake helps the protagonists avenge the injustice they had suffered years before. *Maa* (“Mother,” 1976) and *Safed haathi* (“White Elephant,” 1977) call for the co-existence of animals with humans instead of using animals for zoos, circuses, or other selfish motives.⁴ Finally, there are several films in which various animals assist the protagonists in carrying the narrative forward. For instance, a dog in *Chillar parti* (“Children’s Party,” 2011), a dog in *Entertainment* (2014), an eagle in *Coolie* (1983), a pigeon in *Maine pyar kiya* (“I loved,” 1989), a dog and a monkey in *Parivaar* (“Family,” 1987), a dog in *Dil dhadakne do* (“Let the Heart Beat,” 2015), a dog in *Hum aapke hain kaun* (“Who We are to You,” 1994), a horse in *Sholay* (“Ambers,” 1975), and another dog and a horse in *Khoon bhari maang* (“Blood-filled Forehead,” 1988),

There is yet another set of films in which a character magically turns from a non-human into a human being or *vice versa* for good or evil intentions. *Jaani dushman* (“Mortal Enemy,” 1979) has a man-wolf villain, and *Junoon* (“Obsession,” 1992) has a man-tiger villain. Several films in which serpents morph into human beings and *vice versa* have been popular over several decades. A few of the ones worth mentioning in this group are *Nagin* (“Female Snake,” 1954), *Nagin* (1976), *Nagina* (“Jewel,” 1986), and *Nigahen* (“Sights,” 1989).

In conclusion, natural elements such as forests, mountains, and wild or domesticated animals have a long tradition of featuring in film plots and titles (as is the case in Hollywood too). Most of these plots have a favorable portrayal of ecological surroundings, often inspiring appreciation among the audience.

CONCLUSION

Climate disasters are now a daily occurrence worldwide. In addition to scientific reports, print and visual media can emphatically spread awareness among both the public and policymakers. While literary novels and media have played their roles to some extent (as with the many stories of Kipling), this survey of Indian films suggests a close relationship of humans and nature in various dimensions, portraying natural disasters when the climate turns against humans, famine, and farming issues where humans try to mitigate nature's anger, pollution and urban issues where humans reap what they have sown in their groundwater and air, and finally preservation and conservation of all animals and natural surroundings. Films such as *Kadvi hawa* are stark reminders to all who see them to change our lifestyles to prevent further destruction of the world as we know it.

NOTES

1. Veteran film artists however would like to see more films dealing with environmental issues; <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/bollywood/bollywood-should-make-films-on-environmental-issues-amol-palekar/>. (accessed Dec. 25, 2021).
2. <http://mrinalsen.org/genesis.htm>. (accessed Dec. 25, 2021).
3. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/disasters-india-amitav-ghosh-climate-crisis-1872191-2021-11-01>. (accessed Dec. 28, 2021).
4. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-forests-idUSDEL25463820070102>. (accessed Dec. 26, 2021).

ORCID

Pankaj Jain  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3906-0855>
 Sharma Shikha  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2129-2108>

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Pankaj Jain
Philosophy & Religious Studies
FLAME University
Pune, India
✉ pankajaindia@gmail.com

Shikha Sharma
Mumbai University
Faculty of Philosophy
FLAME University
Pune, India