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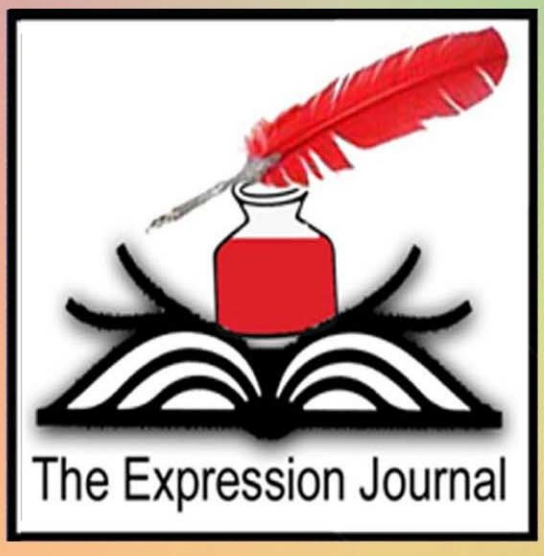

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Filmmaking and Ecological Concerns: A Comparative Textual Reading of Indian Popular Films *Bhediya* and *Kantara*

Ravi Kant
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Sri Aurobindo College (Evening), University of Delhi

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Abstract

Indian popular cinema extensively employs natural landscapes and non-human entities as integral elements of its mise en scène, reinforcing a realist aesthetic while advancing narrative progression. The growing preference for live locations over studio sets has not only enhanced cinematic realism but has also transformed these landscapes into consumable spectacles, promoting tourism and economic growth. However, this shift raises crucial ecological concerns. Large-scale film productions, as seen in global case studies, contribute significantly to carbon emissions, and in India, unregulated filmmaking exacerbates environmental degradation, particularly in eco-sensitive zones. Against this backdrop, this research examines *Bhediya* (2023) and *Kantara* (2022) as case studies of environmentally engaged cinema. Both films, rooted in indigenous narratives and filmed in live locations, explore the intersections of ecological concerns, mythology, and resistance to capitalist and state-led modernisation. While *Kantara* draws on regional folklore to critique developmental aggression, *Bhediya* foregrounds themes of conservation through its horror-comedy genre. By critically analyzing these films, this paper interrogates the role of Indian cinema in shaping environmental discourse, questioning whether it reinforces exploitative visual consumption or fosters ecological consciousness. It further examines the ethical responsibilities of filmmakers in addressing the unintended environmental consequences of their artistic endeavors.

Keywords

Indian Cinema, Environmental Ethics, Eco-Sensitive Filmmaking, Indigenous Narratives, Visual Consumption, Cinematic Tourism, Sustainability.

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In Indian popular cinema, natural landscapes and non-human entities play a crucial role in the mise en scène, enhancing the narrative's realist framework. The shift toward filming at live locations rather than artificial studio sets has become a key filmmaking trend. Breathtaking landscapes, including eco-sensitive zones, frequently serve as backdrops, particularly in romantic song and dance sequences, to reinforce narrative progression.

Beyond their aesthetic appeal, these landscapes offer audiences glimpses of places they might never visit while also promoting tourism. Though location-based shoots may benefit local economies through infrastructure development, they also carry ecological costs. A New York Times article cites a report estimating that a British studio production "generated 2,840 metric tons of carbon dioxide, or the equivalent of 11 one-way trips to the moon" (Nayeri).

Filmmaking in India often operates within unorganised sectors, and as a cultural product, cinema can significantly impact eco-sensitive regions—even in films addressing environmental issues. Outdoor shoots sometimes do more harm than good. Sreedeep Bhattacharya's study of Ladakh, an eco-sensitive region in Jammu and Kashmir (now a Union Territory), highlights how "visual interventions and photographic practices brand a tourist destination as a consumable idea" (2). This phenomenon was evident after the release of the films *3 Idiots* and *Jab Tak Hai Jaan*, which led to excessive tourism, affecting the lake's ecology (Quint). Further concerns arose when a Twitter account, Jigmat Ladakhi, accused the production team of Laal Singh Chaddha (2022) of dumping non-degradable waste in a Ladakh village. The claim, backed by video footage, was refuted by the production house, which argued the video was outdated (Indian Express). Regardless of the controversy, the incident underscores critical issues regarding filmmakers' ethical responsibilities, the environmental consequences of filmmaking, and the role of local communities in raising awareness.

This research paper critically examines the representation of natural landscapes and ecology in *Bhediya* (2023), directed by Amar Kaushik, and *Kantara* (2022), directed

by Rishabh Shetty. While Kantara was originally produced in Kannada, its pan-Indian appeal transcended regional boundaries. Both films, shot on live locations, foreground environmental concerns while engaging with indigenous myths, religious practices, and the communities' resistance to capitalist and state-led modernisation.

Beyond depicting landscape as a site of cultural and spiritual significance, these films also frame it as an exploitable resource, raising questions about human consumption and sustainability. Rather than delving into the technicalities of film production, this study adopts a comparative methodology to analyse the relationship between narrative structures, ideological forms, and visual content. By contextualising indigenous myths and religious practices, it explores how community-driven ethical interventions could reconfigure the filmmaking process and amplify the films' environmental message.

Hindi popular cinema, or Bollywood, is one of the world's largest and most prolific film industries. Like elsewhere, filmmaking in India is a multi-stage process, from pre-production—encompassing script development, casting, location scouting, and budgeting—to post-production and eventual distribution through theaters, streaming platforms, and other channels. Each stage presents ecological concerns, yet environmental considerations have largely remained absent from industry regulations.

Notably, Bombay Cinema was only granted "industry" status in 1998 by the Indian government. As Aswin Punathambekar observes in *From Bombay to Bollywood: The Making of a Global Media Industry*, this designation primarily sought to regulate film finance, curb unreported funds, and reduce underworld influence. The push for corporatisation aimed to reshape Bollywood's image from a disorganised national industry to a globally recognised media powerhouse. However, this transition did not include frameworks for sustainable resource use.

Environmental concerns in filmmaking have been largely overlooked, except in isolated cases—such as Maneka Gandhi's political intervention, which led to amendments in the Cinematograph (Certification) Rules, 1983, mandating a no-objection certificate (NOC) for the use of animals in foreign shoots. Over time, organisations like PETA India, backed by Bollywood actors, have amplified calls for stricter regulations on the treatment of non-human subjects in films (DNA India). However, broader environmental accountability in film production remains an unresolved issue.

Bozak characterises the cinema industry as resource-reliant and energy-driven, making it an ecological practice that functions as an ecosystem. Every film is created in relation to the material world, shaping a setting that audiences engage with, often unconsciously, while navigating its historical, political, social, and ideological dimensions. Given its resource-intensive nature, filmmaking involves high energy consumption—from large studio set constructions to outdoor shoots requiring transportation, accommodation, and extensive resource utilisation—contributing to a substantial carbon footprint (qtd. in Hayward, 23)[1]. The industry's activities generate

[1] Susan Hayward examines two economic frameworks addressing environmental degradation in the Anthropocene and their cinematic representations. She critiques how mainstream narrative cinema reinforces capitalist ideologies, often overlooking sustainable indigenous practices.

greenhouse gases, waste, and potentially hazardous chemicals through film equipment and prop manufacturing.

The neglect of ecological concerns in filmmaking stems largely from minimal state intervention and the absence of regulatory oversight. Tejaswini Ganti problematises the independent nature of Hindi film production, describing it as highly decentralised, flexible, and reliant on freelance labor—unlike the structured commercial cinema of the West. Ganti further observes that the lack of stringent regulations allows wealthy individuals to enter filmmaking purely for profit, with little ethical or professional accountability.

Siddharth Nakai, a sustainability consultant and founder of Greening Advertising Media and Entertainment (GAME), highlights that while the film and media industry is not classified as a carbon-intensive sector like manufacturing, its fluctuating energy and fuel consumption across production phases still exerts a considerable environmental impact. Unlike industrial sectors governed by explicit environmental regulations, both the filmmaking process and the films themselves remain largely unexamined through an ecological lens.

Most films are produced with profit as the primary motive, with little consideration for environmental impact. A common regulatory framework, informed by ecological concerns as ethical imperatives, could foster accountability among filmmakers. In *Screening Nature: Cinema Beyond the Human, Pack* Narraway advocate for a shift in film studies away from anthropocentric narratives, urging deeper engagement with the interdependence between humans and non-human entities. While both narrative films and documentaries can serve this purpose, the editors of Ecocinema Theory and Practice note that many Earth-focused documentaries, particularly those from Hollywood and television, remain anthropocentric. Similarly, most fictional films treat landscapes as passive backdrops rather than dynamic entities.

In Hindi cinema, films addressing ecological and planetary concerns are rare, especially within Bollywood's commercial framework, where nature is often reduced to a mise-en-scène element and animals serve as allies to the hero. Independent filmmakers, aware of limited theatrical appeal, have explored themes of environmental scarcity and survival. Their films depict working-class and tribal communities struggling for basic resources such as land and water, offering a stark reminder to privileged urban audiences that conservation is not an abstract issue but an imminent reality with dire consequences if ignored.

Nila Madhab Panda's *Kaun Kitne Pani Mein* (2015) and *Kadwi Hawa* (2017) exemplify this approach, addressing the immediate consequences of climate change on marginalised communities. Kadwi Hawa portrays the Mahua community's struggles with erratic rainfall, infertile soil, and agricultural decline, illustrating the devastating impact of environmental degradation. Another recurring theme in Hindi cinema is the depletion of forests, which are integral to tribal communities. For many Indigenous groups, forests are not just sources of sustenance but sacred entities, deeply intertwined with their cultural and spiritual existence. The dual themes of resource scarcity and the human-forest relationship thus serve as a key narrative framework in ecological storytelling.

Bhediya (2022) and *Kantara* (2022) similarly explore the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature, particularly through tribal communities' ties to the forest.

However, unlike typical narratives that center human concerns, these films privilege nature itself as an active force. While introduced through human perspectives, the narratives quickly shift focus to the forests—Ziro in Arunachal Pradesh (*Bhediya*) and the evergreen landscapes of Karnataka (*Kantara*). Both films dedicate significant screen time to the natural world, capturing its breathtaking beauty through cinematography that enhances visual aesthetics, underscoring the deep, intrinsic connection between communities and their environment.

In *Bhediya*, the narrative employs horror comedy, a genre rarely explored in Indian cinema but widely popular in Hollywood. Cynthia J. Miller and A. Bowdoin Van Riper argue that horror-comedy transforms traditional horror subjects—beasts, vampires, witches—through parody and satire, making them vehicles for cultural critique. While horror and comedy may seem paradoxical, they operate through similar mechanisms: both rely on surprise, destabilising normalcy, and disrupting everyday life. Well-constructed horror and comedy narratives strip characters of their "stable reality," forcing them into chaotic, unfamiliar situations until a resolution. The fusion of genres enables films to engage with pressing social issues, projecting nuances with subtlety.

Kaushik's Bhediya uses this interplay to destabilise the protagonist Bhaskar, played by Varun Dhawan. Bhaskar, a young contractor eager for financial success, secures a contract to construct a road through Arunachal Pradesh's Ziro forest—a project backed by a capitalist investor. The opening scene establishes power dynamics through humor: Bhaskar's boss's pet mastiff, ironically named Boss, intimidates him, foreshadowing his later transformation into a wolf. The trope of transmogrification, wherein a human transforms into a mythical beast, draws from Hollywood's werewolf films, which have gained traction in India, as well as indigenous folktales and literary representations of human-wolf relationships.

One major intertextual reference is Rudyard Kipling's The Jungle Book, particularly its depiction of Mowgli's bond with his wolf parents. The film playfully reinforces this connection by incorporating the nostalgic *Jungle Jungle Baat Chali Hai* theme song from the 1990s Jungle Book animated series, enhancing humor as Bhaskar helplessly undergoes his transformation. This layered intertextuality underscores the wolf's symbolic role as both a feared predator and a guardian figure.

However, the Indian wolf—an endangered species—is not native to Arunachal Pradesh, highlighting the film's mythological rather than ecological accuracy. The portrayal of the "mythical wolf" as a guardian protector blends folklore, legend, and contemporary storytelling, shaping the film's ecocritical perspective. The tribal community's belief in *Vishanu*, the wolf-deity responsible for ecological balance, aligns with India's broader cultural tradition of animal veneration.

This belief system is reinforced through another significant species in the film: the Mithun, a sacred ox-like animal and the state animal of Arunachal Pradesh, protected under the Wildlife Protection Act. When Bhaskar, a North Indian outsider, jocularly associates Mithun, the animal with Bollywood actor Mithun Chakraborty, his Arunachali friend Jomin and manager Panda sternly disapprove, signaling the cultural dissonance. This moment not only highlights regional differences in perceptions of nature but also critiques the urban gaze that often dismisses Indigenous ecological values as superstition.

Bhediya strategically employs familiar horror tropes to construct an eerie atmosphere—the surveilling eye of the camera hinting at an unknown presence, an upside-down bat hanging from the ceiling, the distant howl of a wolf on a full moon night, and Bhaskar's transformation into a wolf through computer graphics images (CGI) and VFX. These elements evoke conventional horror expectations, only to be punctuated by moments of comic relief, easing tension while reinforcing the film's underlying ecological message. The didactic theme is made explicit through Janardan's statement: "Jungle hai to jeevan hai" (If the forest exists, so does life). At its core, the film grapples with the politics of development and its environmental cost. Bhaskar, eager to push forward a road project through the *Ziro* forest, initially tries to win over the local tribal community by bribing officials and stakeholders. When the elders of the community reject the proposal outright, citing their deep-rooted ties to the land, Bhaskar shifts his strategy—he appeals to the younger generation, luring them with dreams of capitalist urbanisation: gleaming malls, multiplexes, and cafes. His complete disregard for the community's connection to the land sets the plot in motion.

The film employs a mythical framework to critique this exploitative development discourse. The figure of Vishanu, the mythical wolf, functions as a guardian spirit, punishing those complicit in the forest's destruction. One by one, those involved in the project—including Bhaskar himself—fall victim to Vishanu's wrath. After being bitten, Bhaskar and his friends gradually realise the severity of their predicament, forcing them to reconsider their stance on nature and the community's warnings.

Unlike traditional Hollywood werewolves, whose transformations often bestow supernatural powers, the wolves in Bhediya remain vulnerable. They feel pain, sustain injuries, and are ultimately perishable—rendering them fragile within the Anthropocene's destructive forces. By humanising the wolf's suffering, the film invites the audience's empathy, complicating the typical predator-prey dichotomy.

The climax reinforces this ecological perspective. As Bhaskar attempts to summon the wolf within, he initially fails. Panda's intervention makes him reconnect with the forest, finally embracing the tribal community's worldview. Panda's assertion that half of the community's mind resides in the forest encapsulates the deep, spiritual entanglement between land and people. The jungle is not merely a resource—it is embedded in the psyche, the body, and the very existence of those who inhabit it. The film thus underscores a key ideological shift: true power does not come from conquering nature but from aligning with it.

Kantara intricately explores the tension between the lived-experiences of indigenous communities and the modern secular practices of the nation-state in the context of forest conservation. At the heart of the film lies the ritualistic folk performance of *Bhoota Kola*, an indigenous spiritual practice primarily observed in the coastal regions of Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and northern Kerala, particularly by the Tulu-speaking community.

The film weaves *Bhoota Kola* into its narrative, positioning it as both a spiritual and performative tradition deeply intertwined with the community's ecological and social fabric. The ritual is centered around the veneration of bhutas—guardian spirits believed to protect the rural community and their livestock from malevolent forces. These spirits are considered divine attendants of Lord Shiva, reinforcing their

significance within the broader Hindu cosmology while retaining their regional specificity.

The Kola is more than just a religious practice; it is a complex blend of devotion, inspiration, and entertainment. The performers, known as Gurikaras or Bhootakola artists, undergo a transformative process, donning elaborate costumes, intricate jewelry, and striking face paint. Their metamorphosis is further emphasised by traditional music, including drums, percussion, and wind instruments like conch shells, which create an immersive auditory experience.

Central to the performance is the act of possession. The Gurikara invokes the deity, allowing the spirit to enter their body, at which point they embody the god's persona. This possession is the ritual's focal point, reinforcing the belief that the bhuta directly communicates with the community through the performer. The Bhoota Kola often includes retellings of historical events and local myths, conveyed through stylized movements and gestures, fostering an interactive experience between the performer and the audience.

In *Kantara*, this indigenous spiritual tradition is juxtaposed to the state's bureaucratic machinery for forest conservation. The clash between the forest department's legal framework and the community's belief system underscores a broader conflict—one that pits imposed environmental policies against an indigenous cosmology that sees nature not as a resource to be managed but as a sacred, living entity. By centering Bhoota Kola in its narrative, Kantara not only reaffirms the cultural vitality of these communities but also critiques the state's failure to recognise alternative ways of relating to the environment.

Kantara opens with a Bhoota Kola performance, immediately immersing the audience in a sacred indigenous tradition before transitioning into a folktale about a king who, in search of peace, abandons his opulent comforts and ventures into the forest. There, he encounters a local indigenous community worshipping the demigod Purulji and becomes enamored with its spiritual presence. Through a possessed tribesman, Purulji conveys that he will accompany the king only if the latter grants the forest to the people. The king consents, and a temple is erected in a ceremonial event, commemorated annually through the Kola performance.

The film then shifts to the 1970s, where a Bhoota Kola performer narrates this folktale to his son, Shiva. The contemporary Kola celebration unfolds, with Shiva's father preparing to perform. A wealthy landowner and his skeptical son attend, with the latter dismissing the performance as an archaic ritual. Rejecting his father's belief in the sacred, he forcibly reclaims the forest land that his ancestors had donated to the people. Confronting the performer, he accuses him of using theatrics to manipulate the villagers and warns of legal action. The performer responds with a cryptic declaration that justice will be served at the courthouse steps. Later, his body is found on those very steps, bloodied and lifeless. His mysterious disappearance into the forest leaves his wife and son behind, deeply impacting Siva, who distances himself from his ancestral duty.

Siva, embodying the spirit of Lord Shiva—reckless, indulgent, and immensely powerful—contrasts sharply with Subrat, a law enforcement officer committed to forest conservation. Subrat's rigid adherence to legal frameworks blinds him to the indigenous community's symbiotic relationship with the forest, resulting in escalating tensions. This conflict mirrors a broader struggle: the clash between modernity's legal-

bureaucratic order and indigenous knowledge systems that emphasise ecological balance.

Debjani Ganguly, drawing on *Ken Gelder and Jane Jacob's Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Post-Colonial Nation* explore how the sacred disrupts the modern, secular public sphere. They argue that the Aboriginal sacred—once dismissed as primitive—now permeates key political and cultural debates, unsettling capitalist enterprises such as the mining industry and pastoralism. While some view sacred sites as a hindrance to economic progress, environmentalists and New Age movements valorise them as antidotes to modern alienation. In the Indian context, Debjani contends that tribal sacredness within Indian modernity operates as an instance of Freud's unheimlich—the uncanny, where the unfamiliar intrudes upon the familiar. Unlike the colonial or postcolonial "othering" of the indigenous sacred, here it becomes an active, dialogic force within modernity itself. Rather than being an archaic remnant, the sacred remains integral to indigenous worldviews, deeply entangled with ecological consciousness and sustainable coexistence with non-human entities.

Siva's eventual transformation from a reckless wanderer to a responsible custodian of the land aligns with this discourse. His initial detachment reflects the alienation induced by modernity, while his gradual re-engagement with his ancestral traditions underscores the resilience of indigenous ecological wisdom. Debjani critiques the limitations of Western secular frameworks in fully capturing indigenous epistemologies. She does not argue for an essentialist view of tribal traditions but rather suggests an alternative reading of categories that foregrounds indigenous knowledge systems as legitimate modes of ecological stewardship. *Kantara* illustrates this by positioning Bhoota Kola as a site of resistance against ecological exploitation. The peace between the king and the tribal community, which originally secured prosperity, is disrupted by modern encroachments, necessitating a renewed understanding of balance between humans and nature.

This is particularly evident in a pivotal scene where Subrat attends the Kola festival, not out of respect for the tradition but to investigate alleged poaching. He violently reprimands villagers for bringing him a hunted wild boar, failing to recognise the cultural significance of controlled hunting in the ritual context. Similarly, when women collect leaves and wood for performance preparations, he objects, prompting Siva to assert that their community's existence predates legal restrictions. The tension encapsulates a fundamental dispute: whether conservation should be dictated by state-imposed frameworks or indigenous systems of ecological management. The concept of biophilia—humanity's innate affinity for nature—becomes particularly relevant. Kantara does not merely depict environmental concerns; it weaves them into an indigenous cosmology where the sacred and ecological are inseparable. The film, eventually, argues that true environmental justice cannot be achieved through external regulatory mechanisms alone but must emerge from a deeper, culturally embedded relationship with nature.

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