



Environmental Pedagogy: Teaching the Anthropocene through Texts and Selected South Indian Films.

Mr.B.Sudhakar

Ph.D. Research Scholar

Department of English

Sri Krishna Arts and Science College

Dr.I.J.Kavitha

Head & Associate Professor

Department of English

Sri Krishna Arts and Science College

Abstract:

This paper explores how literature and specific South Indian films serve as effective educational resources for instructing on the Anthropocene, an era marked by considerable human influence on Earth's ecosystems. It emphasizes the significance of environmental pedagogy and uses eco-critical theory to examine texts like "*Elephant Doctor*" and films such as "*Kantara*," "*Kaadan*," "*Kumki*," and "*Merku Thodarchi Malai*." These stories contest human-centered viewpoints by showcasing ecological links, the importance of non-human existence, traditional knowledge systems, and the socio-cultural aspects of environmental challenges. They illustrate nature—woods, waterways, wildlife, and terrains—as vital to human heritage and show how progress and government-driven conservation initiatives can lead to ecological unfairness and displacement. The article promotes the inclusion of regional literature and cinema in environmental pedagogy, arguing that this method enhances critical environmental literacy, compassion for nature, and a sense of moral responsibility. Additionally, it points out the ongoing marginalization of indigenous narratives in Indian cinema, showcasing "*Kantara*" as a significant exception for its genuine and impactful portrayal of these groups.

Keywords: Anthropocene, ecology, education, human influence, climate change, society, literature, and movies.

Introduction: Environmental Pedagogy & the Anthropocene

Environmental pedagogy encompasses educational practices that develop environmental awareness, and critical examination of environmental issues, and ethical actions aimed at achieving socio-ecological resilience. In the Anthropocene, characterized by the overwhelming dominance of human impact on Earth's climate eco system and geology, there is a need to transform traditional, anthropocentric educational models into holistic and ecological approaches that acknowledge the interconnectedness of non-human entities and the deep interdependence of environments, cultures, and economies. This pedagogical shift



emphasizes recognizing environmental crises as complex, systemic conditions influenced by historical and cultural factors rather than isolated problems. Eco criticism serves as an interdisciplinary framework that underpins these educational transformations by analyzing how various texts and media shape and challenge human–nature relationships. It promotes critical literacy, ethical awareness, and imaginative capacities by interrogating dominant narratives of exploitation and advancing alternative visions of coexistence, care, and sustainability, thereby enhancing the capacity for students to navigate the complexities of the Anthropocene.

Objectives:

The primary objective of this study is to examine how literature and South Indian cinema can be used as effective tools for environmental pedagogy in the anthropogenic era. The study focus to analyze selected literary texts, namely “*Elephant Doctor*”, along with south Indian films like *Kantara*, *Kaadan*, *Kumki*, and *Merku Thodarchi Malai*, to explore representations of human–nature relationships, environmental crises, and ethical responsibilities for the environment.

The study has the following specific objectives:

1. To enrich knowledge about the environment and understand how humans can live in harmony with nature.
2. To develop adaptability to natural systems and improve lifestyles in accordance with environmental rhythms.
3. To understand the principle of the nature’s “give-and-take” principle—acknowledging that what humans give to the environment affects what they get from it.
4. To foster environmental awareness, critical thinking, and socio-environmental responsibility among readers through narrative strategies, depictions of indigenous environmental knowledge, and culturally grounded perspectives on sustainability.
5. To demonstrate how literature and cinema can foster ethical and relevant approaches to environmental problems, illustrating interconnectedness between humans, non-human entities, and ecosystems.

The environment of Anthropocene era



Anthropogenic activities — the increases in pollution and climate change projected for 2025 illustrate that human impacts are dominating regional environmental quality. Human activities have significantly impacted the environment, resulting in profound changes in climate, land utilization, oceans, and biodiversity. This transformation is a direct consequence of increased human population density and the corresponding occupation of various geological orders, leading to alterations in natural systems and habitats. This is key characteristic of the Anthropocene epoch, where atmospheric chemistry. Extreme weather events and public health outcomes are shaped by human activities. From massive growth in vehicles, industries, and energy consumption to land use changes in rural and agricultural lands, human activities have intensified air pollution and disrupted climate systems in the regions surrounding Delhi. These trends underscore the need for robust environmental education, policy interventions, and systemic changes to reduce emissions, enhance resilience, and mitigate climate impacts.

The Narrative

Text: *Elephant Doctor* by Dr. Udhayakumar (translated from Jayamohan's Tamil *Yaanai Doctor*)

“*Elephant Doctor*” by Dr. Udhayakumar (translated from Jayamohan's Tamil *Yaanai Doctor*), is a compelling story that highlights the complex relationships between humans, animals, and forest ecosystems. The story begins with an Indian Forest Service (IFS) officer suddenly awakened from his sleep by the disturbing sound of a telephone. This moment sets the stage for the story, as the IFS officer act as the narrator and the events of the story unfold through his perspective. The call comes from Dr. Krishnamoorthy, a veterinary surgeon working in the Anamalai Tiger Reserve, who is popularly known as “Doctor K” or the “*Yaanai Doctor*” (Elephant Doctor) among the communities living in the forest region. As he recounts his life, work and moral struggles in the forest environment, His voice and experiences become central to the story.

Through Dr. K's narrative, this book offers an intimate portrayal of forest life and the day today realities of the people who living in close proximity to wildlife. He explains to the IFS officer how tribal communities and forest-dwelling people coexist with animals and how they possess a deep, experiential knowledge of the land, its cycle, and its dangers. At the same time, the narrative critically exposes how human societies operating from outside the forest,



who consider themselves “wealthy “modern,” and “civilized”, systematically destroy natural habitats.

Dr. Udhayakumar explains how human interventions driven power, technology, and development lead to the exploitation of forests and the suffering of non-human species , particularly elephants, how their lives are disrupted by encroachment, deforestation, and human greed.

Therefore this story functions as an ecological critique that challenges anthropocentric assumptions of progress and development. By juxtaposing the lived ecological ethics of forest communities with the destructive actions of dominant human forces, “*Elephant Doctor*” underscores the imbalance that arises when human power is wielded without environmental responsibility. Dr. K’s reflections reveal the moral and emotional impact witnessing animal suffering and environmental degradation, positioning the forest not merely as a setting but as a living, vulnerable ecosystem under threat. In this way, the text invites readers to reconsider prevailing ideas of human superiority and to acknowledge the urgent need for ecological sensitivity, coexistence, and ethical stewardship of the natural world.

Environmental Themes in South Indian Cinema

Broader industry analysts suggest that South Indian cinema frequently engages with themes of nature, tradition, and survival, often rooted in specific regional ecologies and cultural histories. Such films resonate strongly with local audiences by reflecting place-based ecological knowledge and day today ecological struggles. As a result, regional cinema possesses significant pedagogical potential, offering culturally relevant narratives that can foster environmental awareness, ethical reflection, and critical engagement with ecological challenges. By connecting global environmental crises with local experiences, South Indian cinema contributes meaningful contribution to environmental education and anthropocentric discourse within both educational and social contexts.

South Indian cinema offers a powerful and culturally embedded perspective that helps to articulate, negotiate, and critique environmental concerns. Films like *Kaadan*, *Kumki*, *Kantara*, and *Merku Thodarchi Malai* exemplify how regional filmmaking deeply engages with environmental issues within the context of local landscapes, cultural traditions, and socio-economic realities. Instead of treating nature as a passive backdrop, these films foreground environmental spaces as active, contested, and meaning-making forces that shape human lives, livelihoods, and identities. Collectively, they reflect the growing regional



anxieties surrounding deforestation, industrial expansion, wildlife displacement, and the erosion of traditional human–nature relationships.

Films

'Kumki' (2012), directed by Prabhu Solomon, explores the profound relationship between elephants and forest communities through the narrative of a mahout and his trained elephant who confront a wild tusker that threatens a village. The film depicts the emotional drama surrounding the conflict between humans-wildlife, portraying the struggles faced by both animals and humans in their coexistence. The cinematography presents breathtaking visuals of nature, which enhance the storytelling and underscoring the theme of dependency that local communities have on the forests. It poignantly addresses the tensions that arise when this delicate balance is disrupted, making '*Kumki*' as a significant tribute to nature within Tamil cinema. The film not only entertains but also raises awareness about wildlife preservation and the environmental challenges faced by rural communities. Through its rich narrative and visual splendour, '*Kumki*' becomes an evocative reflection on the need to protect both human and animal habitats.

'Kaadan' (2021), the Tamil film "*Kaadan*," featuring Rana Daggubati as the lead character, intertwines elements of drama and activism, centered on the theme of preserving elephants and their habitats. The narrative emphasizes the urgent need for harmony between humans and nature, drawing attention to pressing issues such as corporate greed, deforestation, and the mistreatment of wildlife by humans. Notably, the film's cinematography is remarkable, vividly capturing the beauty of verdant forests, which serves as a poignant reminder to audiences of the ecological threats posed by ongoing environmental degradation. Through its storytelling, "*Kaadan*" advocates for environmental awareness and the ethical treatment of animals, making a compelling case for sustainable coexistence.

'Bhoomi Geetha' (1997). The Kannada classic explores topics of relocation and tribal life. The film shows how modernization often threatens both the environment and cultural heritage by telling the heartbreakingly stories of villages forced to leave their land because of development activities. It illustrates the continuous fight to protect the environment and traditional ways of life through a delicate portrayal of these problems. The film's message is



still relevant today because it serves as a reminder that the survival of the communities that rely on nature is directly related to its preservation.

'Boomika' (2021) is a Tamil eco-horror film that effectively combines suspense with environmental awareness. The narrative centers around a group of individuals who find themselves trapped inside an abandoned school, where they encounter a series of strange and eerie events directly linked to the land itself. The film personifies the environment as a living entity, suggesting that it has the capacity to retaliate against human exploitation. This chilling depiction serves as a cautionary tale about the consequences of environmental abuse, emphasizing that the Earth can indeed "fight back." The film uniquely merges horror elements with a profound environmental message, distinguishing it as a significant contribution to Indian cinema. Its eerie tone reinforces the urgency of respecting nature, making *'Boomika'* not only a horror story but also a reflective commentary on ecological issues. This combination of horror and advocacy positions it as a standout work in the genre, engaging audiences both emotionally and intellectually.

'Merku Thodarchi Malai' (2018), Lenin Bharathi's film, elucidates the Western Ghats as a dynamic, historical presence marred by human exploitation, positioning it as a poignant commentary on the Anthropocene epoch. This work vividly illustrates how activities branded as developmental—such as mining, deforestation, the construction of dams, and agricultural plantations—brutally alter the mountain's natural landscape. In doing so, it highlights that human endeavours have evolved into a significant geological force. The film further underscores the injustices inherent in the Anthropocene, where indigenous and marginalized populations, who maintain a symbiotic relationship with the earth, face displacement and adverse effects, while corporate and state entities orchestrate environmental degradation for profit. By correlating the plight of these communities with the devastation of ecosystems—forests, rivers, and soil—the poem contests the prevailing notion that "humanity" is uniformly culpable for ecological harm, instead attributing the real responsibility to capitalism and the legacy of colonial development. Ultimately, *Merku Thodarchi Malai* advocates for a reimagined ecological ethic founded on principles of interdependence and resistance, envisioning a future free from the violence characteristic of the Anthropocene.

'Kantara' (2022) employs elements of folklore, ritual, and landscape to present an ecological perspective that critiques the prevailing Anthropocene narrative. The depiction of the forest as a sacred, life-filled realm inhabited by spirits, such as Panjurli and Guliga, indicates a cosmology wherein humans are seen as an integral part of a broader ecological community.



This portrayal directly challenges the Anthropocene view, which is characterized by human supremacy resulting in environmental degradation, land exploitation, and the erosion of ecologies. The film mirrors the tension between the forest's indigenous communities and state/corporate entities, illustrating how modern development undermines traditional ecological wisdom. Here, the forest emerges as a battleground shaped by human avarice rather than a space for harmonious coexistence.

'Kantara: Legend – Chapter 1' (2025). Enhancing the narrative, the text revisits mythological roots, emphasizing ancestral memory and cyclical time, contrasting sharply with the linear and exploitative aspects of modern historical narratives. It critiques the Anthropocene framework and suggests an alternative vision. From an environmental education perspective, the film "*Kantara*" acts as a cultural instructional medium, promoting emotional and ethical learning over mere factual transmission. It underscores the significance of rituals, myths, and collective memory in fostering ecological accountability across generations. The film argues that genuine environmental stewardship emerges from lived experiences, spiritual reverence, and community involvement, rather than from abstract regulations or policies. By highlighting indigenous belief systems, "*Kantara*" becomes a pedagogical tool, urging viewers to challenge and overturn the arrogance tied to Anthropocene thinking and advocating for a renewed ecological respect and understanding through cinematic engagement.

Real-life example: Delhi

Anthropogenic activities, including the surge in vehicle use, industrial growth, energy demands, and land use changes, have significantly heightened air pollution and disrupted the climate system in Delhi. This city is often noted as one of the most polluted globally, with air quality frequently reaching dangerous levels due to vehicular emissions, industrial operations, construction dust, crop burning in nearby areas, and energy production. Climate change exacerbates these conditions through increased heat waves, decreased rainfall, and more frequent dust storms, further impairing air quality. Additionally, rising temperatures enhance chemical reactions that generate ground-level ozone, adding to health hazards. Framed within the Anthropocene—the geological epoch defined by human impact on Earth—Delhi's pollution issue illustrates the extensive effects of human activity on the environment. It reveals that the ecological crisis is interconnected, reflecting the fallout of industrialization, urbanization, and unsustainable consumption, all of which modify atmospheric conditions and threaten both human and ecological health. Viewing Delhi's pollution through the lens of



the Anthropocene highlights the anthropogenic origins of these challenges, underscoring the need for responsible decisions, policy changes, and a collective ethical commitment to urban planning and sustainable energy practices. This perspective advocates for a shift towards holistic environmental awareness and systemic transformations to prioritize long-term ecological resilience and the intricate relationships between human and natural systems.

Between 2000 and 2025, Delhi experienced a significant intensification of environmental stress, particularly in air pollution and climate extremes. Around 2000, while Delhi's air was already polluted due to vehicles, industry, and rapid urbanization, systematic PM2.5 and AQI monitoring was limited, making the full scale less visible. By 2025, despite improved monitoring and mitigation efforts, air quality frequently reaches "very poor" to "severe" levels, especially in winter, with PM2.5 concentrations far exceeding national and WHO safety standards. Simultaneously, climate trends show a noticeable warming: India's average temperatures have risen over the past two decades, and Delhi now experiences more frequent and intense heat waves, higher extreme temperatures, and prolonged hot nights, amplified by urban heat island effects and climate change. Together, these trends mark a shift from chronic but less-documented environmental strain in 2000 to a more extreme, persistent, and health-threatening ecological crisis by 2025.

Eco Criticism as a Framework for Environmental Pedagogy

Eco criticism has developed as a significant theoretical lens through which literature, cinema, and cultural texts are interpreted in relation to environmental concerns. Originating with the environmental movements of the late 20th century, it critiques anthropocentric views by emphasizing interconnectedness, non-human agency, and ethical dimensions of environmental representation. Influenced by eco feminism and postcolonial critiques, eco criticism examines how narratives shape societal attitudes towards ecological crises and resource exploitation, using literature and visual media to contest harmful paradigms and envision sustainable coexistence. In Indian contexts, eco-critical scholarship focuses on literary works that articulate sustainable perspectives and cultural ecological ethics, addressing issues of environmental degradation linked to globalization while showcasing community relationships with nature. It highlights the socio-economic impacts of ecological changes on marginalized groups, promoting a localized understanding of environmental thought through a diverse range of texts.

Teaching the Anthropocene through Literature



Literary texts serve as significant vehicles for examining human–nature relationships, challenging anthropocentrism and fostering ecological empathy through narrative, characterization, and metaphor. They articulate environmental issues and critique the human-centered worldview that contributes to many environmental crises. Studies of Indian literature reveal that landscapes are not mere settings but integral to meaning, engaging with themes of environmental justice, colonialism, and displacement. For instance, Amitav Ghosh's novel *The Hungry Tide* illustrates the intertwining of fragile ecologies and human lives, prompting readers to reassess their ecological responsibilities. Furthermore, incorporating local and indigenous texts from South India enhances pedagogy by emphasizing cultural views that see humans as part of a broader web of life. This approach promotes relational ethics and challenges dominant Western narrative models, cultivating a more diverse and ethically informed understanding of environmental issues in the context of the Anthropocene.

Eco-Cinema and Environmental Awareness

Cinema serves as a significant medium for reflecting and disseminating environmental concerns across the globe, effectively visualizing ecological crises and engaging viewers emotionally. Film scholars highlight cinema's ability to present complex environmental issues—such as climate change, resource scarcity, and pollution—in intellectually compelling ways, challenging anthropocentric narratives and fostering discussions about sustainability and environmental justice. Research indicates that films addressing these themes not only cultivate ecological consciousness but also reach diverse audiences, extending beyond academic circles.

In India, a notable eco-cinema movement has emerged where filmmakers utilize various narrative forms to emphasize critical environmental issues, including water scarcity, deforestation, and human-animal conflict. Indian films often contextualize these crises within specific socio-cultural frameworks, revealing the intersection of environmental degradation with caste, class, and regional identities. Regional works contribute unique ecological perspectives, rooted in local cultures and landscapes, underscoring the importance of place-based environmental knowledge. This connection between localized struggles and global environmental challenges positions Indian eco-cinema as a vital educational tool, enhancing environmental awareness, empathy, and critical discourse surrounding the socio-ecological realities of the Anthropocene.

Pedagogical Implications

Integrating literature and cinema in environmental pedagogy serves multiple functions:



Cognitive learning: Texts and films provide contexts for understanding ecological concepts and Anthropocene realities.

Emotional engagement: Narrative and visual storytelling can motivate empathy and ethical reflection toward non-human life and environments.

Cultural relevance: Using South Indian texts and films allows pedagogy to be contextualized locally, making environmental learning relevant to students' lived experiences.

Critical thinking: Students learn to deconstruct anthropocentrism and explore alternative worldviews that present interdependence over dominance.

Conclusion

In the realm of Anthropocene education, the integration of eco-critical literary analysis and film studies has been identified as a significant enhancement to environmental pedagogy. The focus particularly on South Indian texts and films reveals their potential as invaluable resources for fostering ecological awareness. These cultural artifacts are grounded in specific cultural contexts, providing an emotionally engaging experience that is not only effective pedagogically but also enriches students' understanding of ecological crises in a nuanced manner. By embedding such resources into educational curricula, educators can broaden students' comprehension of global ecological challenges while simultaneously promoting a pluralistic, reflective, and ethical connection to the environment. This multifaceted educational strategy underscores the vital role of emotional resonance in the learning process, highlighting the intersection of culture, emotion, and ecological awareness.



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