

Delhi Safari: Reel turning into Reality

Dr. Ezra John

Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism, Kalindi College (University of Delhi)

Abstract:

Environmental safeguard has become a prerequisite for ensuring sustainable ecological development. A significant regulatory mechanism to reverse ecological degradation is only feasible with strong socio-political global relations and strengthened partnerships of all stakeholders. The drastically changing landscape has endangered the flora and fauna driving environmentalists to engage in a fierce criticism of global leaders and policy-makers. Stagnant and redundant long-term goals of the global leaders are no longer fruitful to appease the global activists and environmentalists due to the irreversibility of environmental losses. United Nations (UN) identifying environmental agendas since Millennium Summit (2000) and intensifying its efforts to achieve development goals has remained unsuccessful to evade climatic catastrophe. The development goals identified by UN delve into an unwavering commitment by all member nations to equally dedicate themselves for environmental cause as the only cynosure. Historically, development has always been multi-faceted and communication media's reflexivity has been its foundation. Today, the convergence of development and cinema holds key to global communication society. Cinema in India through its visual and sonic environment registers an impressionable experience on its mass audience. Understanding the potential of this popular form in India, the article explores the significance of revisiting ecological agendas through cinematic lens. The article unravels how an anthropomorphic Hindi film, *Delhi Safari* (2012), turned out to be a reality and the filmmaker proved himself as a soothsayer for what lies ahead. It, eventually, suggests how cinema can be the educator and motivator in promoting environmental awareness but, unfortunately, has not been used to its absolute potential.

Key words: Sustainable Development, Deforestation, Tiger Count, Ecosystem, Hindi Cinema, Delhi Safari

Introduction

Rachel Carson's unabated work, *Silent Spring* (1966), inspired an environmental movement. She unequivocally wrote on how the synthetic pesticides (especially DDT) are entering the food chain and infesting ecology. She believed that if humans continue polluting the nature, the nature, too, will avenge by poisoning their meals. As the world began to realise the importance of ecology, India's struggle to protect the 'mother' nature and its resources intensified due to political indifference. With the slogan, "*what do the forests*

bear? Soil, water and pure air”, the forest of Alaknanda valley echoed. This became the bugle for the social movement representing ecology against the state which came to be known as *Chipko Andolan* (Chipko Movement). It literally means ‘to cling on’ or ‘to hug’ the trees in order to save them from logging. The brave rural women of Uttar Pradesh (now Uttarakhand) along with prominent environmentalist like Sunderlal Bahuguna, Dhoom Singh Negi, Bachni Devi, Gaura Devi, Sudesha Devi and Chandi Prasad Bhatt non-violently resisted state’s move to logging of their ancestral forests. The uprising against deforestation began when the forest area was allotted to a sports manufacturing company instead to the locals who requested to use the forest wood for making agricultural tools. Understanding the severity of conserving nature and maintaining the ecological balance, what originated in Chamoli district swiftly spread to other northern states within no time. The resistance against irreversible damage to the vulnerable ecosystem, causing soil erosion and eventually floods, was stopped when Sunderlal Bahuguna appealed to then Prime Minister of India. Bahuguna later, aptly, called the ecology as a ‘permanent economy’ of the nation.

Chipko Movement became a collective social movement. This mass movement in a broader aspect defines public’s collective effort towards attainment of their rights. To initiate a new social order, masses join together for a collective movement after being disillusioned from the existent system. Sustainable development is, thus, a vision which does not jeopardise the pace of development but inculcate a way of thinking towards using the available resources in a manner that either they get replenished in due course or we use these resources efficiently by leaving adequate amount for the future generations. But during several global summits and debates, mostly blame games always ensue between the world leaders. The developed nations are blamed for their failed promises and disregarding environmental treaties whereas, the developing countries are held liable for their poverty and incompetency in controlling environmental hazards. As one pollutes the planet for supporting fast paced industrialization (industrial combustion), the other does it due to poverty and illiteracy. The latter clog the environment by burning waste, deforestation, mining, pollution caused by vehicles and factories, toxic and plastic waste, improper and unplanned sanitation etc.

Indian Cinema’s response

Unfortunately, Indian Cinema could not foresee the relevance of environmental sustainability and its related issues as a subject due to commercial aspects involved. Despite the unfavourable approach to environmental issues, few commercial attempts were successful at the box office whereas others were critically acclaimed. Based on environmental themes, approximately eight popular Hindi films [*Swades* (2004), *Kaal* (2005), *Delhi Safari* (Animated, 2012), *Jal* (2013), *Mohenjo Daro* (2016), *Kadvi Hawa* (2017), *2.0* (2018) and *Kedarnath* (2018)] have been produced by the commercial Bombay Hindi cinema industry from 2000 to 2018. Fortunately, regional cinema has been upfront in delivering messages based on environmental issues. In 1992, Sanjiv Shah introduced a Gujarati political satire titled as *Hun Hunshi Hunshilal*. The narrative encapsulates the socio-political stand of the nation in a single image. The plot finely takes a rhetorical recourse with an explication where mosquitoes have become a nuisance in the mythical kingdom of Khojपुरi. King Bhadrabhoop decides to tackle the mounting menace by eradicating them. The mosquitoes in the movie metaphorically represent the underprivileged and marginalised social groups which are presumably considered as a barrier on the path of development by authorities and the state. They prefer disposing them unceremoniously by pushing in an uncertain future. Amrit Gangar (2013) shares his interaction with Sanjiv Shah who revealed that the metaphor

of ‘mosquitoes’ clicked to him while visiting the Rihand Valley (Andhra Pradesh). Shah says that,

“This was once a very fertile valley with dense forests inhabited by tribals. The British could never penetrate this area. In post-independence India, the government set up many thermal power plants there, disturbing the natural ecology. Interestingly, the power generated by these plants is supplied to far-off factories belonging to big industrialists while a village nearby does not have any electricity!” (Gangar, 2013: 97)

Jahnu Barua (a renowned Assamese filmmaker) in his movie *Bonani* (1990, lang.: Assamese) addressed the issue of deforestation. The film narrates the story of a protagonist who is a forest officer in confrontation with the illegal timber mafia. The duty-bound ranger not only diligently fulfils his responsibility but also ethically stands for the rights of uneducated and impoverished tribal population living in the forests. It is certainly not surprising to see film auteurs addressing the issue of environment and climatic change through cinematic lens as the stalwart of Indian cinema, Satyajit Ray, too unhesitatingly spoke his mind aloud. Ray in his movie, *Pather Panchali*, evoked a similar resistance against the inaudible state authority. He single-handedly, as an artist, challenged the industrialisation policies of the state (Nehruvian development) by reflecting iconographies of socio-political affairs on his cinematic palette. He introduced symbolic references of ‘electricity pole’ and ‘train’ passing through rural India as agents of development for industrialists but categorically defined it as a mirage for those marginalised. “...The parallel between the mosquitoes and the people, both essentially weak against repressive measures yet able to fight them, gave birth to an idea that developed into *Hun Hunshi Hunshilal*.” (Gangar, 2013: 97)

In order to support and encourage filmmakers and producers to produce meaningful cinema on the subject of environmental issues, the state in 1989 constituted a new award category, *Rajat Kamal* for the best film on Environment Conservation/Preservation, at the National Film Awards. But due to the insensitivity of mainstream commercial filmmakers, *Rajat Kamal* in the category has been awarded for mere nineteen times (six times to Malayalam films, five times to Kannada films, two times to Assamese and Oriya respectively and one time each to films from Marathi, Tamil, Manipuri and Bodo languages) since its inception with not even once to any movie from the Bombay Hindi Cinema. The dismal state of affairs, despite central ministry’s encouragement, reflects upon the social responsibility which mainstream Hindi filmmakers owe. Their insensitive approach to overlook the endangering issues related to climatic change and need for environmental sustainability shows sheer indifference and irresponsibility. As United Nations prominently considers it a supreme agenda towards attaining sustainable development, it is time commercial filmmakers take cognizance and deliver content which enlighten and educate film audience with thought provoking subjects by addressing these grave issues.

At the outset, it needs to be pointed out that the ‘Reel Development’ can pave way for the ‘Real Development’. With a movie spectator caught in isolation within three walls and a screen, s/he can effectively be influenced by the captivating, life-like projection and inspirational power of cinema. The larger than life reel effect can motivate a spectator to be the change s/he wants within the real world. Films in the past have inspired the masses to unite for a common cause. Trotsky in 1924 proclaimed that “the cinema is the greatest means of mass agitation. The task is to take it into our own hands” (Taylor 1979:64). Thus, as a medium it has a potential to bring about a social change in the society.

But it also has a flip side to it. Karl Marx in German Ideology said that “The class that has the means of material production has control, at the same time, over the means of mental production (i.e. concept) ... regulates the production and distribution of ideas of that age.” A hegemony created by the capitalist bourgeoisie to manipulate the dominant view thereby, destabilising the public sphere is a deliberate attempt to gain monopoly and is, thus, capitalistic and exploitative in nature. They deny access of the alternative opinion to the proletariat (the urban and rural workers) and control the information as a gate-keeper. Thus, the reel development can certainly contribute to the real development but can only be effective when the development is for all stratum of the society.

Significance of the message in *Delhi Safari*: a narrative or prediction?

The social value of concealed messages in cinematic narratives has rarely been focused upon by film critics and academicians. 2012 anthropomorphic Hindi film, *Delhi Safari*, adopts a unique way to convey its message. Facing the grim reality of ecological destruction, Nikhil Advani focuses on how humans are drastically changing the ecological landscape in the name of development. Filmmaker’s artistic reproach is highlighted in *Delhi Safari* where the jungle, Sultan (a tiger) and his family’s abode, is uprooted by horrifying mammoth bulldozers. The conflict between humans and animals here, too, is akin to the struggle for existence. The metaphorical imageries (iconographies) are used by the filmmaker to reflect the ever-existent tussle. The film educates children and adults alike on how unconsciously humans are destroying jungles - a home to animals.

The movie ‘*Delhi Safari*’ portrays a billboard of a building project in a shot after the scene of unprovoked killing of Sultan who is the leader to all animals at the Sanjay Gandhi National Park. The billboard which reads, ‘Live with Nature and Harmony’ is ironic as just after the killing of a tiger, the building project pronounces the residency for the humans as close to nature and that too harmoniously. The Aarey Milk Colony (AMC) near the Film city in Mumbai was once an extension area of Sanjay Gandhi National Park (SGNP). SGNP has been shown in *Delhi Safari* (2012) as the cinematic space where the narrative begins. As the story unfolds, it introduces all wildlife characters who live there. Interestingly, the AMC has an idol of a tiger which is been worshiped for years by the tribal communities around the area. This forest area cover has marked a highest number of leopard counts in the world which is tracked through geo-tagging. This proves how the natives have been close to the nature and their association has been well received by the animals as well.



Image 1: Waghoba deity worshipped by the Adivasi communities in Aarey Milk Colony and Sanjay Gandhi National Park. (Source: Scroll.in)

As civilization grew, the developers encroached upon the forest land with their upcoming infrastructure projects in the area. It is believed that in SGNP and AMC, leopards do not feel threatened and are visibly comfortable living in coexistence with humans. But due to the absence of natural cover for feline residents of Aarey forest, they enter the ‘human-occupied’ spaces resulting in a conflict. According to a status report by Shinde Rajendra, the AMC and SGNP green belt forest cover prevents flooding by absorbing rainwater and adding the ground water reserve. Aarey Colony has been in news for the protests against the proposed plan for metro construction works by Mumbai Metro Rail Corporation (MMRC). A dense forest area covering over three thousand acres was reportedly damaged after deforestation in the name of mass rapid transport system for building “better infrastructure to suit city’s present and future needs” (Twitter post by Ashwini Bhide, M.D., Mumbai Metro Rail Corporation). The movie, *Delhi Safari* way back in 2012 could, thus, foresee this destruction coming in 2019. Nikhil Advani as a filmmaker was, in fact, aware of the rapid deforestation in and around Mumbai and his work can’t be just seen as a work of fiction but an insight of an artist. The iconographies used in the movie have been exactly the same in reality six years later when the trees were debarked in Aarey Milk Colony.



Image 2: Debarked of trees at Aarey Milk Colony near SGNP leading to protests in 2019 (Source: Indian Express & Outlook)

In 2019, forty hectares of forest land was cleared already to build a zoo and then MMRC attempted to take away another portion for constructing metro car shed. It was only after Supreme Court’s order that the Maharashtra State Government took cognizance of the appealing protestors by putting halt to the MMRC project. SC ordered an immediate ban on cutting of trees in the forest areas of Mumbai. But despite the move, as reported by the BBC, the protestors and environmentalists fear that the land, one day, would probably be encroached by the private builders in connivance with the politicians and corrupt government officials. The movie, *Delhi Safari* shares a similar concern towards the nature and draws extreme similarity from the looming threat over Aarey Forest cover and Sanjay Gandhi National Park. A punch-line by Bagga in the movie – *Kaal* (2005), has also been memorable for cinephiles which states, “*Jungle ka ek hi ussol hai sahib ji, jab tak zinda ho jungle ki shaan*”

ho, shikaar hue, shaksiyaat mit jaati hai” (Only one rule prevails in the jungle, you are King till you are alive but your identity is lost the day you are hunted). The saying evidently proves tiger’s destiny as it is used as an allegory by Bagga in the scene to threaten the unwelcomed visitors. *Kaal*, brilliantly, turns the table around by making the tiger as the hunters and humans as the one being hunted. It sends across a strong message through terror. Whereas, in *Delhi Safari*, the message is more succinct, inclusive and to a certain extent sermonically presented. A series of images portrayed in *Delhi Safari* (2012) are visually presented through ‘point-of-view’ shots. These visual perspectives place the audience in center of the action. Metaphorically, the attempt of the filmmaker to offer a POV shot of Sultan’s killing with a muzzle of the gun below throughout the shot is to make humans (viewers) feel guilty of the killing. A deliberate attempt to share the onus of crime has been the main agenda to place it as an effective reflexive form. The scene in its initial moments does induce a sense of guilt and evoke a sensitive approach towards conservation of the nature. The movie could also be seen as propaganda to garner support from all corners. As the movie, *Delhi Safari*, was released in 2012 and the protests gaining momentum in 2019, it is evident that cinema has been an influential and potent force to determine the future course of action. Thus, film’s visual intuitive impression predicts and warns the human race against irreparable damages as a soothsayer.

Analysing the human tendency, as one of greed, encroach and dominate, Kali (*Kaal*, 2005) calls ‘Humans as the most dangerous animals’. He conforms to this idea as he believes, whatever the humans say is only a façade and thus they cannot be trusted. Kali, time and again, asserts that he hates tourists who break rules. The nature draws and demands certain rules to be followed but ‘...man breaks it and never learns’ he says. The third and the final time he echoes it when his identity as a spirit is revealed in the movie and through a monologue, he addresses the audience by saying, ‘Kali hates those who break the rules of jungle. Every human being who crosses the limit will learn a lesson’. Kali, in *Kaal*, becomes a personified identity for the voiceless animals (tigers), inhabiting in the wilds of Orbit (alluding to Corbett National Park) and similarly, Yuvi (a cub) in *Delhi Safari* is a symbolic entity who seeks justice on behalf of animals and make humans listen to their concerns as a co-habitant on the planet. Unwilling to relocate due to human encroachment in forest land, Yuvi (the son of Sultan) along with his mother, Bajrangi (monkey), Bagga (bear) and Alex (parrot) undertake a journey to Delhi. Their journey unravels the signs of inhumanity committed for ages. It is visually and lyrically presented through the song ‘*Dhadak Dhadak Dhadak Dhadak*’ which is sung by Raghubir Yadav and Shankar Mahadevan. Apart from it, the journey introduces the audience to a tale of a tiger who calls itself a cat. As the frail looking tiger encounters the travelling group of animals going to the parliament, he submits that the humans make him feel scared. The tiger says ‘if the human will prevail then they would kill all the tigers one by one. I do not wish to be killed by them, so to escape I have started living like a cat. Calling myself a cat has made me forget how to live like a tiger. I know you all must be thinking that I am a coward but only because I remained so I could escape from being turned into a taxidermy mount.’ This hard-hitting message accounts for the unabated tiger poaching rampant in India. The identity crisis posed by the species in the movie also forces us to deliberate upon the illegal skin trade of tigers, leopards and other rare animals. This problem was so huge that once it was reported that all tigers in Sariska National Park were killed by the poachers. Thus, unless and until the policy makers and government officials take preemptive action, we all soon will be responsible for the irreversible damages caused to the nature. The

Red List Index (RLI) by International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) accounts for the same wipe-out of the endangered species like the Indian tigers. It is only after the constructive efforts of the Indian government in 2019, that the nation could again boast of its growing tiger reserve.

The movie, *Delhi Safari*, in its denouement gives a positive message on how the Prime Minister arrives to hear the plea of affected animals and passes a bill against deforestation and ensured an absolute ban on animal cruelty.



Image 3: India’s achievement towards Tiger Conservation on PMO & PIB Twitter handles

The movie again shares a stark similarity with the actual event as on 29 July 2019, the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, proudly declared that India has become “one of the biggest and most secure habitats of the tiger”. His statement comes in light of the nation now becoming home to almost seventy per cent of the total tiger population of the world. The result-oriented initiatives like the ‘Save Our Tigers’ proved to be vital for the increasing number of tigers in India. India’s ‘tiger count’ every four years is a laborious task involving scientists and forest officials. Through effective measures, the government and other stakeholders functioning for the conservation of tigers, gradually, improved the numbers of live tigers in India.

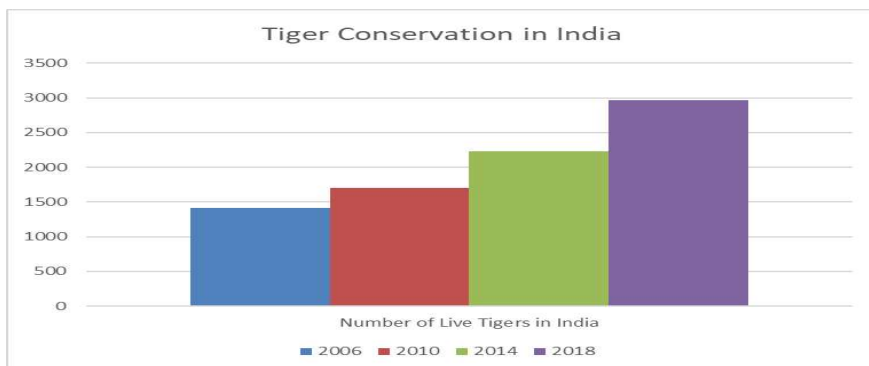


Figure 4: Data according to summary report titled ‘Status of tigers in India, 2018’ by National Tiger Conservation Authority. (Source: NTCA)

Thus, the effectiveness of media in addressing the desired fields of environment and wildlife protection can help the nation achieve its desired goals. The unanimous concerns on conserving the environment and protecting species should be centered towards securing the ecosystem which sustains all including humans. Well-being of the ecosystem will embrace all species, eco-system and wild nature alike, thus maintaining the integrity of all species by striking a balance in the biodiversity.

References:

- BBC (2019): “Aarey protests: Supreme Court steps in to save Mumbai trees after protests,” 7 October, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-49956957#:~:text=Watch%20the%20protests%20over%20tree%2Dcutting%20in%20Mumbai's%20Aarey%20Colony&text=India's%20top%20court%20has%20asked,with%20police%20over%20the%20weekend.&text=But%20a%20high%20court%20dismissed,officials%20began%20felling%20the%20trees.>
- BBC (2019): “India tiger census shows rapid population growth,” 29 July, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-49148174#:~:text=India%20is%20now%20home%20to,2014%20to%202%2C967%20in%202018.>
- Bhide, Ashwini (M.D., Mumbai Metro Rail Corporation) Twitter post, <https://twitter.com/AshwiniBhide/status/1175105751846510592>.
- Chandramouli, Kartik and Tandon, Aditi (2018): “Who will protect Waghoba? Mumbai metro project threatens to drive away leopards from Aarey,” Scroll, 19 November, <https://scroll.in/article/902390/who-will-protect-waghoba-mumbai-metro-project-threatens-to-drive-away-leopards-from-aarey>
- Deshpande, A. (2009), *Class, power and consciousness in Indian Cinema*, New Delhi: Primus Books.
- Deshpande, A. (2007), ‘Indian Cinema and the Bourgeois Nation State’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 42(50): 95-101, 103
- Gangar, Amrit (2013), ‘Gujarati cinema: Stories of sant, sati, shethani and sparks so few’, in Gokulsing, K. and W. Dissanayake (eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Indian Cinemas*, New York: Routledge Taylor Francis Group.
- Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1968): *The German Ideology*, Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- National Tiger Conservation Authority (2018): “Data Summary Report: Status of Tigers in India 2018”, <https://ntca.gov.in/assets/uploads/Reports/AITM/StatusTigersIndiasummary2018.pdf>
- PIB’s twitter on India’s achievement towards Tiger conservation https://twitter.com/PIB_India/status/1155694752135704576.
- PMO’s twitter on India’s achievement towards Tiger conservation <https://twitter.com/PMOIndia/status/1155694808519680000?s=20>.
- Sandøe, P. and S. B. Christiansen (2008), *Ethics of Animal Use*, Oxford UK: Blackwell.
- Shinde, Rajendra (2017): “Aarey Milk Colony, Mumbai as Forest Territory - A Status Report,” *Xplore - The Xavier’s Research Journal.*, Vol. 8, Issue 3, pp 80-95, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323394369_AareyMilkColonyMumbaiasForestTerritory-AStatusReport
- Taylor, Richard (1998), *Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany*, London: I. B. Tauris.

Image Sources

- Image 1: <https://scroll.in/article/902390/who-will-protect-waghoba-mumbai-metro-project-threatens-to-drive-away-leopards-from-aarey> (Photo credit: Kartik Chandramouli).
- Image 2: Indian Express <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/mumbai-online-battle-over-aarey-car-shed-gets-ugly-6004563/>
- Outlook India <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/bombay-hc-refuses-pleas-seeking-forest-tag-for-aarey-declines-bmc-authoritys-decision-to-allow-tree-felling/339964>.
- Image 3: <https://twitter.com/PMOIndia/status/1155694808519680000?s=20> & https://twitter.com/PIB_India/status/1155694752135704576.