

Art and Environmental Protection

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Abstract:

The article highlights the alarming and ongoing environmental crisis in India, particularly in the National Capital Region (NCR), where air pollution, toxic water bodies, and unmanageable waste are leading to severe health complications and, in extreme cases, even resulting in death of residents. Even though citizens and civil societies quickly critique the government, they fail to draw attention to public complacency, unawareness and lack of participatory action in combatting this crisis. Ironically, contemporary attitudes towards nature are contradictory to the cultural ethos of India. The ancient Indian tradition considered nature in its various forms as divine. The concept persists to this day, as is evident in many forms of nature worship. Unfortunately, the reverence for nature in the present day has become ritualistic, and the essence of nature worship, as understood by the ancients, has been lost due to heightened consumerism.

The present article argues that art and culture can play a vital role in safeguarding the environment and maintaining ecological balance. By creating awareness about the Indian knowledge and value system reflected in ancient Indian art, literature and political discourses, the community can be made aware of the deep-rooted reverence for nature in Indic philosophies, where forests, rivers, and wildlife were regarded as sacred and protected through governance and cultural practices. The paper also emphasises the significance of contemporary art, which could be a potent tool in sensitising common people about the grave environmental crisis and facilitating their participation in environmental protection.

The alarming state of environmental crisis

Three cases from our contemporary lives which are as shocking as they are illustrative:

During the recently concluded Chhath festival, thousands of devout ladies stood knee-deep in polluted waters of river Yamuna along the ghats of Delhi; unmindful of the toxic waters with waves of industrial foam bobbing along¹

Qutb Minar, a UNESCO world heritage site, is a unique minaret, 72.5 metres in height, the tallest minaret in the world built of bricks. It now has a rival: the Ghazipur landfill in east Delhi where the human and animal waste has been piling up to reach the unimaginable height of 72 metres²

In an open drain, filthy and overflowing, a 13-year-old boy recently slipped, fell into the drain and died. This tragic death occurred in the thickly populated Rajendra Nagar Extension area.³

¹ "Delhi Pollution: Devotees Stand Knee-Deep in Toxic Foam in Yamuna for Chhath Puja," *The Economic Times*, November 4, 2019, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/delhi-pollution-devotees-stand-knee-deep-in-toxic-foam-in-yamuna-for-chhath-puja/toxic-yamuna-water/slideshow/71888429.cms>.

² "Ghazipur Garbage Dump Almost as Tall as Qutub Minar: Story behind Delhi's Largest Landfill Site," *India Today*, September 3, 2018, <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/gk-current-affairs/story/ghazipur-garbage-dump-delhi-largest-landfill-site-1329240-2018-09-01>

³ "13-Year-Old Falls into Drain, Dies," *The Tribune*, November 9, 2024, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/delhi/13-year-old-falls-into-drain-dies/>

While the National Capital Region's air pollution has been making world news, for all the wrong reasons, the onset of 2024 winter is making residents shiver, cough and sneeze as the air is poisonous beyond belief. The NCR has earned the tagged of being the most polluted in the world. Moreover no one in authority has informed what this poisonous air is doing to our eyes, lungs and heart; how is it affecting the young especially those who are still learning to walk but now cannot breathe in peace?

Our faith in divinity is our strength. Our culture, marked by its spirit of tolerance and acceptance over the centuries, has become our identity. Today, as we look around us, it seems our spirit of tolerance and accommodation has made us develop an attitude of utter disregard and resignation towards this environmental crisis which is affecting the entire nation. Today NCR tops the most polluted list, while cities like Agra and Lucknow are not too far behind.⁴

If there is any hue and cry in the civil society and the media, it is against government and governmental agencies which have failed to address the environmental crisis. Public leaders, intellectuals and environmental activists have rightfully highlighted fault-lines in the governance of policies and programs of the government, often without underscoring the role that they themselves can play in addressing environmental issues at the level of their households, localities, communities, villages and cities.

Undoubtedly the government owes to its people the creation and maintenance of sound infrastructure and healthy environment. However, in today's time and age, a handful of political leaders and government authorities can hardly be held completely responsible for the state of the environment of the National Capital Region which has over 40 million residents and is spread across a staggering 14,000 sq miles. The need of the hour: collective, responsible and participative action by the people themselves.

Divinity and nature worship in Ancient Indian Tradition

The role of a good leadership in protecting of the environment has been integral to our ancient Indian traditions. The fifth pillar edict of Ashoka stresses upon the protection of wildlife and forest. The edict lists a wide range of animals that are to be protected and mentions, “forest must not be burnt either uselessly or in order to destroy (living beings)”⁵. Similarly, the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya gives a detailed account of significance and maintenance of the forest, forest produce and wildlife. Forest officials were to be appointed according to *Arthashastra* to look after the forest and forest produce. While emphasising on significance of forest as an important economic resource of State, its safeguarding is also ensured, “adequate fines and compensations to be levied from those who cause any damage to productive forests except in calamities”.⁶ Thus, ancient Indian administration affirmed a balanced approach towards nature to protect it from exploitation and human greed.

It is fascinating to delve into the heritage of our arts and literature to come face to face with the sacredness associated with the rivers and lakes, forests and trees, the mountains and fields depicted through innumerable paintings, sculptures, statues created over the centuries.

Even today when we think of river Yamuna, it is the eternal play of Lord Krishna, the Krishna Lila comes alive in our hearts filling us with love, joy, hope, excitement and happiness. The episodes of Krishna

⁴ “India Third Most Polluted Country, Delhi Tops List of Most Toxic Cities: AQI Report,” *The Times of India*, February 20, 2025, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-third-most-polluted-country-delhi-tops-list-of-most-toxic-cities-aqi-report/articleshow/118425564.cms#:~:text=Delhi%3A%20Delhi%20set%20a%20new,both%20India%20and%20the%20worlId>.

⁵ Romila Thapar, *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, Revised Edition (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 246.

⁶ R. Shamasastri, trans., “Book 2 Chapter 17 the Superintendent of Forest Produce,” in *Kautilya's Arthashastra* (Mysore: Sri Raghuvver Printing Press, 1951), 127.

swallowing the forest fire, battling Kaliya Mardan and lifting Mount Govardhan (fig. 1) celebrates Him as the supreme hero who not only protected and saved his people but He was preserving the forests, cleansing the Yamuna waters of their toxicity and maintaining the ecological balance by preserving the Mount Govardhan.

The beautiful verse from Bhagavad Gita sums it all in the chapter 3, verse 27:

*“prakṛiteḥ kriyamāṇāni guṇaiḥ karmāṇi sarvaśhaḥ
ahankāra-vimūḍhātmā kartāham iti manyate”*

“The spirit soul bewildered by the influence of false ego thinks himself the doer of activities that are in actuality carried out by the three modes of material nature”⁷.



Fig. 1 Krishna Lifting Mount Govardhan, Kusum Sarovar, Govardhan, 18th Century. Credit: Saanvi Sharma

Similarly, **King Dasharatha** in Ayodhya was duty-bound to send his beloved son Rama to protect the forest and forest dwellers on the call of Sage Vishvamitra. As we listen to Ramcharitramanas and hear the inspiring words and 'choupais' of Goswami Tulsidas, the message of 'respecting and saving the environment' overwhelms us. Lord Rama is the saviour of the entire world, for the eco-system that keeps forests alive, fields fertile, rivers clean and gives the people a mission in their lives. Despite being the supreme power, Lord Rama collaborated with and sought help from animals to defeat the mighty demon king Ravana. Jatayu, Sugriva, Jamvant and Hanuman were respected for their bravery and wisdom by the Supreme Lord. Thus, asserting the significance of each being and not just the humans.

⁷ A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada, *Bhagavad Gita as it is*, Revised Edition (Mumbai: The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1986), 171.

In our Indic religions and traditions, respect for nature and natural resources is central and finds tangible manifestation in the visual arts. Each Hindu deity is assigned an animal Vahana or vehicle. Their role is not merely of a subordinate but of a companion and bhakta. Indian astrology, also accords significance to the planting and preserving of the tree. Each individual's life journey has a constellation (nakshatra) attached to it. In order to receive the positive impact of the nakshatra and for overall well-being, it is suggested to plant trees associated with individual's birth nakshatra. The tradition of worshipping trees still continues. These stories of wisdom are recorded in *Panchatantra* and Buddhist *Jataka* tales where the protagonists are animals.

Similarly, most of the Jain Tirthankaras are provided with an animal emblem. There is no superiority accorded to the human race in Indic tradition. Human beings are only one of the components of nature and living in harmony with all constituents of nature is fundamental to Indian religion and philosophy, *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakama*. It is ironic and tragic that despite having such strong traditions of preserving ecology, we are today facing severe environmental crisis with few solutions in sight.

One of the important reasons of this crisis is our distancing from Indian cultural ethos. In this era of high-paced life and rampant consumerism, we may continue to worship the tree (or as during Chhath pooja, worshipping the Sun, the river Goddess and mother nature as goddess Shashthi) or embark on the Govardhan parikrama but, at heart, we have become disconnected with the value-systems, beliefs that kept our traditions alive.

Environmental Issues in Contemporary Art

Art has ability to operate both at cognitive and emotive levels and many contemporary artists are raising their concerns about environmental crisis. These provocative works can be used to sensitive people regarding the gravity of the situation and persuade to take measures and not just be a passive spectator.

In the present scenario many contemporary artists have explored the themes of environmental degradation, urban chaos, and consumerist excess to provoke reflection and action. Artists such as Sudipta Das, Vivan Sundaram, Hema Upadhyay, and K.P. Reji have critically engaged with the ecological crisis. The article argues that art—both ancient and contemporary—can serve as a powerful medium to rekindle environmental consciousness and inspire collective responsibility. By reconnecting with cultural ethos and utilising artistic expression as a tool for awareness, society can work towards reclaiming a sustainable and harmonious relationship with nature.

Sudipta Das's installation *Journey Uncontained* (2023) (fig. 2) is a critical comment on the present-day consumerism. The artist has created a small faded cupboard filled with toy figurines of objects used in the course of once life journey. Each object, which might have originally some story and memory associated with it, ultimately takes the shape of clutter which could not be contained. All of us can relate to this provocative work where the excessive desire for hoarding ultimately effects our physical and mental well-being. When this amassed, non-essential possessions spill over in the environment, the damage is uncontained and victims are often those not responsible for the disaster as evident for the tragic death of the 13-year old.



Fig. 2 Sudipta Das, Journey uncontained, 2023. Photo Courtesy: Deepak Kumar

A stimulating visual record of the garbage and trash accumulated in the city are a set of digital prints by the artist **Vivan Sundaram** titled *Barricade* (2008) (fig. 3). Through these works, Vivan brought attention to trash and urban waste which is responsible for severe damage to the public life. The artist took services of waste-pickers and created a city scape with waste and garbage in his studio. The installation was then carefully recorded through camera and displayed in the large exhibition spaces in India and abroad where only a tiny section of population would have the chance to come face to face with the damage done by the global consumerist culture.



Fig. 3 Vivan Sundaram, Barricade (with Two Drains), Digital Print, 2008. Credit: Chemould Prescott Road

<https://south-south.art/asia/vivan-sundaram-solo-exhibition-titled-trash/> (accessed 10 December, 2024)

The allure of a good life in city has blindfolded us from the stark reality. Hema Upadhyay in her sculpture and mix-media work *Dream a wish, Wish a Dream* (2006) (fig. 4) shakes the viewer from the imaginary idea of city and brings them face to face with the unorganized urban spaces with poor sanitation where the dream home is replaced by a cluttered slum dwelling. The work is a reflection on the impact of migration on the city infrastructure which the civic bodies failed to handle. It is sad to notice that a country which had produced some of the finest urban infrastructure some 5000 years ago in Sindu-Saraswati Civilization and envied its contemporaries is, now, struggling in the 21st century to provide a decent livable space.



Fig. 4 Hema Upadhyay, Dream a Wish, Wish a Dream, 2006

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hema_Upadhyaydream_a_wish_wish_a_dream_Ivam.jpg

(accessed 10 December, 2024)

The damage to the environment has been severe. Our efforts to address the environmental crisis is not at par with the severity of the situation as is expressed in works of the contemporary artist K P Reji, now housed in the National Gallery of Modern Art. In one of his work (fig. 5), the artist has shown, on a large canvas, a burning potted plant as a metaphor for the forest fire. Blazing branches of the tree represent the uncontrolled fire which a monk like figure is trying to contain by watering the plant from a traditional pot (*ghata*). There is a dichotomy. At physical level, the effort may seem miniscule compared to the intensity of fire. The gravity of the situation is captured by the intense expression, but there is also hope as indicated by the illuminated face of the monk. The message is clear. Every effort counts in this era of environmental crisis. In yet another stimulating work, Reji tries to make the viewer understand that the real wealth is our natural resources which is essential for sustenance. In the darkness of the night, a naked colossal man is shown carrying on his shoulder a fruit-laden banana tree when the house sets on fire and not any material possession.



Fig. 5 K P Reji, Untitled. Credit: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi



Fig. 6 K P Reji, When the house is burning, 2003. Credit: National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi

https://museumsfindia.gov.in/repository/record/ngma_del-ngma-16183-2832 (accessed December 10, 2024)

Conclusion

Through a select case study, the paper tried to demonstrate how artists across the country are working towards raising awareness about the present ecological crisis. Unfortunately, civil society and the public are unable to benefit from such works, which can create awareness for environmental protection. Regrettably, contemporary Art is not accessible to all. The spaces where these artworks are displayed intimidate ordinary people. With an aim at catering to the market and profit making, the central message of contemporary Art dealing with burning issues like environmental crisis remains in elitist purview. As a result, we are unable to use Art as a significant tool to address the crises confronting us. Public access to

Art that sheds light on the dire need to protect the environment can serve as a source of inspiration and ignite change. Similarly, many ancient practices about the reverence of nature continue to date, but the context is lost. It is of immense importance to reassert the core message of communion with nature and its protection as prescribed in ancient Art, literature and philosophy through formal and informal education. Unfortunately, in this era of globalization and consumerism, the human race has started considering itself as superior to nature rather than an integral part of it. The disastrous results of such attitude are evident in the natural calamities seen world over every year.

Both contemporary Art and ancient Indian Art and literature have tremendous potential to sensitize and create awareness about our collective responsibility to protect Mother Nature. Revisiting the streams of ancient Indian Art and literature can connect us to age-old traditions of gratitude and reverence for Mother Nature, providing the much-needed healing touch for the environment and showering us with blessings of Divinity.

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