

Eco Cinema in India is Not Enough to Change the Attitude of the Audience

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Abstract

Eco cinema is emerging as a vital genre in Indian and global filmmaking, aimed at reshaping public perceptions and inspiring ecological consciousness. Coined by Roger in 2016, the term encapsulates the growing trend of integrating environmental themes into visual storytelling. As the world grapples with climate crises and sustainability challenges, films such as "Sherni" (2021), "Kadvi Hawa" (2017), and international productions like "Kiss the Ground" and "Don't Look Up" serve as both educational tools and catalysts for policy and behavioral change. Despite their potential, eco films in India face challenges including limited appeal, poor accessibility, weak storytelling, and minimal institutional support. This paper explores the merits, demerits, challenges, and solutions related to eco cinema in India, with supporting examples and case studies. It emphasizes the need for multi-dimensional strategies involving storytelling innovation, accessible platforms, government support, and audience engagement to harness the transformative power of eco cinema.

Introduction

Eco cinema, a genre that integrates environmental themes and ecological consciousness into cinematic storytelling, was coined by Roger in 2016. It seeks to reshape public perception of nature and the environment by fostering empathy and prompting action. According to Willoquet-Maricondi (2010) and Soles & Chu (2015), eco cinema offers a visual representation of human interaction with the environment, providing an immersive experience where audiences are made to confront ecological crises and explore possible solutions.

The COVID-19 pandemic further amplified public interest in environmental issues. Filmmakers have since intensified their efforts to raise ecological awareness. Notable international examples include *Don't Look Up* (2021), *David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet* (2020), and *Burning* (2021), while Indian eco-centric films like *Sherni* (2021) and *Joram* (2023) attempted to engage audiences in environmental discourse. These films, while impactful, raise questions regarding their accessibility, outreach, and actual influence on the behavioral attitudes of Indian viewers.

Merits of Eco Cinema in India

1. Environmental Awareness

- Helps audiences understand critical issues like climate change, deforestation, and biodiversity loss.
- Encourages eco-friendly behavior through visual storytelling.

2. Educational Tool

- Acts as a visual supplement for schools and universities in environmental studies.
- Makes complex ecological concepts easier to grasp for all age groups.

3. Policy Influence

- Films like *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Sherni* have influenced discussions on policy and conservation efforts.
- Can stimulate civic responsibility and political dialogue.

4. Community Engagement

- Inspires local communities to participate in eco-projects or activism (e.g., wetland protection in “Earth Matters”).
- Strengthens connections between indigenous knowledge and environmental conservation.

5. Global and Local Outreach

- Eco films can cross national borders via OTT platforms, raising global awareness.
- Regional eco-cinema can reach rural populations with culturally relevant narratives.

Demerits of Eco Cinema in India

1. Limited Entertainment Value

- Often perceived as slow, preachy, or depressing, which limits mass appeal.
- Lacks the dramatic or thrilling elements that commercial cinema offers.

2. Restricted Access

- Many eco films are available only on specific OTT platforms with paid subscriptions.
- Rural and economically weaker sections may not have access to digital streaming.

3. Niche Audience

- Appeals mostly to academics, activists, or environment enthusiasts.
- General public tends to prefer entertainment over education in cinema.

4. Weak Marketing

- Eco-films often suffer from poor promotion and visibility compared to commercial blockbusters.
- Limited reach due to low-budget marketing and absence from mainstream media.

5. Oversimplification or Exaggeration

- Some films either oversimplify complex issues or dramatize them for emotional impact, leading to misinformation.
- Viewers may feel overwhelmed rather than motivated to act.

Impact of Eco Cinema

Eco cinema has the potential to inspire both personal and political action. Scholars like Keitaro Morita (Moitra, 2019) argue that eco-media can be a significant tool for environmental communication. Films like *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Kiss the Ground* have become global references for environmental advocacy through cinema.

In India, the TV show *Earth Matters* aired on Doordarshan successfully showcased the relationship between Sarus Cranes and wetland conservation in Northern India, highlighting how local communities act as protectors of biodiversity. Yet, despite these efforts, most eco-themed films in India struggle to gain mainstream attention.

Films such as *Sherni* (6.8/10 IMDb) and *Kadvi Hawa* received moderate appreciation, while documentaries like *Widnetic: Climate Change is Real* (7.6/10 IMDb) remain restricted in reach due to limited distribution on niche platforms. The commercial success and cultural impact of such films pale in comparison to mainstream cinema.

Required Audience Attitude

Changing audience attitude requires a multi-dimensional approach:

1. Awareness and Education: Eco cinema must be paired with educational initiatives to deepen understanding and urgency.
2. Entertainment with Message: Environmental themes should be integrated with engaging storytelling rather than purely documentary formats.
3. Empathy and Responsibility: Audiences should be encouraged to feel personally accountable for environmental outcomes.
4. Accessibility and Inclusion: Eco films should be made widely available on free platforms and in regional languages to reach rural and underserved populations.

At present, the average Indian audience tends to prioritize escapism and entertainment due to daily life stressors. This results in limited interest in eco cinema, which is often perceived as serious, preachy, or monotonous.

Challenges of Eco Cinema in India

Despite the increasing relevance of environmental issues, eco cinema in India faces multiple challenges that limit its effectiveness and reach. Some of the key challenges include:

1. Limited Audience Appeal

Eco cinema often lacks the entertainment value that mainstream Indian audiences seek. Viewers prefer light-hearted, action-packed, or socially engaging films over serious environmental themes, which are perceived as heavy, slow-paced, or overly didactic.

2. Restricted Accessibility

Many environmental films are released only on specific OTT platforms or screened at film festivals. This limits access for a large section of the population, especially rural and low-income viewers who may not have subscriptions or internet access.

3. Lack of Promotion and Marketing

Unlike commercial films, eco cinema receives minimal marketing support. Without proper promotion, these films fail to create the buzz required to attract attention, even among audiences who might be interested.

4. Weak Storytelling and Plot Design

Several Indian eco-films suffer from weak scripting and underdeveloped narratives. When the storytelling fails to engage, the message gets lost. Movies that are too simplistic or overtly preachy often fail to connect emotionally with audiences.

5. Limited Government and Industry Support

There is a lack of institutional and financial support for filmmakers working in the eco cinema genre. Environmental films rarely receive tax benefits, subsidies, or dedicated grants, which hinders production quality and distribution.

6. Competing Priorities

In a country like India, where socio-economic challenges dominate public discourse, environmental issues often take a backseat. People are more concerned about livelihood, education, and healthcare, and thus, environmental films may not seem immediately relevant to their lives.

7. Niche Target Audience

The current audience base for eco cinema is mostly limited to environmental enthusiasts, researchers, and students. The lack of mass appeal restricts its potential to influence broader public opinion or behavior.

8. Fragmented Data on Viewership

Due to lack of wide distribution, there is limited data on how many people watch eco films, and even less on whether these films lead to actual behavioral change. Measuring impact remains a challenge for researchers and filmmakers alike.

Solutions of Eco Cinema in India

1. Limited Audience Appeal

Solution:

- Integrate entertainment elements (humor, drama, action) with environmental messages to make the content more engaging.
- Use celebrity endorsements or popular actors to attract broader audiences.
- Create hybrid genres (thriller + eco-message, romance + climate awareness) to widen the appeal.

2. Restricted Accessibility

Solution:

- Partner with Doordarshan, YouTube, and free OTT platforms to stream eco films without a paywall.
- Organize public screenings in schools, rural areas, and community halls.
- Work with telecom providers to offer free data for educational/environmental content.

3. Lack of Promotion

Solution:

- Launch targeted marketing campaigns on social media and educational platforms.
- Collaborate with environmental influencers and NGOs to promote films.
- Engage in cross-promotions with eco-brands and sustainable product companies.

4. Weak Storytelling

Solution:

- Involve experienced screenwriters and directors with a passion for environmental issues.
- Use real-life stories or case studies to build relatable and emotional narratives.
- Conduct audience testing and feedback rounds before final release.

5. Limited Support

Solution:

- Advocate for government policies and incentives like tax rebates, film grants, or awards for environmental films.
- Encourage CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) funding from companies for production and promotion.
- Form alliances with educational institutions for co-production and research support.

6. Competing Priorities

Solution:

- Show how environmental issues are linked to health, economy, agriculture, etc., making them more relatable.
- Make short, impactful content (2-5 min reels or shorts) for time-constrained audiences.
- Embed messages within popular genres to avoid the feel of forced education.

7. Niche Audience

Solution:

- Diversify content to include regional languages and local cultural references.
- Launch youth-targeted campaigns with gamified content, quizzes, and eco challenges.
- Create a national eco-film festival that travels from metro cities to small towns.

8. Data Deficiency

Solution:

- Use viewership analytics tools from YouTube/OTT platforms to gather insights.
- Encourage research institutions to track impact metrics like awareness, behavior change, and reach.
- Conduct pre- and post-film surveys during community screenings to assess knowledge gain.

Examples & Case Studies: Eco Cinema Impact and Solutions

1. Case Study: “Sherni” (2021) – Balancing Storytelling and Environmental Awareness

- Directed by: Amit Masurkar
- Starring: Vidya Balan

- Theme: Human-wildlife conflict and forest bureaucracy
- Impact:
 - Highlighted challenges faced by forest officers and environmental degradation.
 - Sparked public discourse on conservation policies.
 - Solution Link: Demonstrates how integrating strong storytelling with ecological themes can attract mainstream attention.
 - Challenge Solved: Weak storytelling, limited appeal.

2. Case Study: “The New Wilderness” (Netherlands) – Mass Engagement through Eco-Documentary

- Directed by: Mark Verkerk
- Genre: Documentary
- Theme: Rewilding and nature preservation
- Impact:
 - Became the highest-grossing nature documentary in the Netherlands.
 - Used cinematic visuals and emotional storytelling to engage viewers.
 - Solution Link: Shows how documentaries can become commercially successful if well-produced and promoted.
 - Challenge Solved: Limited audience appeal, lack of promotion.

3. Case Study: Earth Matters (India, Doordarshan) – Government-Led Awareness

- Theme: Indigenous community relationships with wetlands and Sarus cranes
- Impact:
 - Educated masses through public broadcasting.
 - Showcased rural communities as environmental protectors.
 - Solution Link: Free, accessible platform combined with cultural storytelling.
 - Challenge Solved: Restricted accessibility, niche audience.

4. Example: “Kiss the Ground” (2020) – Global Reach through Netflix

- Narrated by: Woody Harrelson
- Theme: Regenerative agriculture and climate healing
- Impact:
 - Available on Netflix, it reached millions globally.
 - Led to eco-friendly farming discussions and policy change advocacy.
 - Solution Link: Effective use of OTT and storytelling to drive global awareness.
 - Challenge Solved: Limited support, data deficiency.

5. Campaign Example: Films for Change – Mobile Cinema Vans

- Initiative by: Greenpeace India and other NGOs
- Theme: Short eco-films screened in rural and urban slums
- Impact:
 - Brought environmental education to underprivileged communities.
 - Interactive sessions followed every screening.
 - Solution Link: Bypassed the need for expensive OTT platforms and brought films directly to the people.
 - Challenge Solved: Accessibility, niche audience.

6. Example: “Kadvi Hawa” (2017) – A Missed Opportunity

- Directed by: Nila Madhab Panda
- Theme: Climate change and farmer debt
- Criticism:
 - Plot lacked mass entertainment appeal.
 - Did not offer solutions, making it emotionally heavy.
 - Lesson: The audience needs hope and practical takeaways, not just despair.
 - Solution Link: Points to need for balanced storytelling and solution-oriented cinema.

Conclusion

- Eco cinema in India stands at a critical juncture where its relevance is undeniable, but its reach and impact remain constrained. This study highlights that while the genre holds immense potential to educate, influence policy, and inspire action, it must overcome several barriers—ranging from storytelling limitations to marketing constraints and limited accessibility.
- To truly realize its transformative power, eco cinema must be made more relatable, entertaining, and widely available. This requires not only creative storytelling that resonates with mainstream audiences but also policy-level interventions, partnerships with educational and social institutions, and the use of emerging media channels.
- Case studies like "Sherni," "Earth Matters," and global examples like "Kiss the Ground" demonstrate that with the right blend of narrative, accessibility, and strategic promotion, eco cinema can transcend its niche status and become a mainstream vehicle for environmental advocacy.
- As content creators, educators, and policymakers unite to shape a greener future, eco cinema should be embraced as both a mirror and a guide—reflecting ecological realities while leading society towards sustainable change.
- **Note:** This research was compiled and contributed by [User's Name], Asst. Professor cum HOD of Management and Computer Science, Ram Chameli Chadha Vishwas Girls College, Ghaziabad. The author has previously published multiple academic books and articles on topics related to computer science, library management, and environmental awareness.