

Environmental Crisis and Contemporary Art Practice: A Critical Review of Secondary Literature.

Yamini Sondhiya*1, Dr. Sunita2, and Prof. Vinit Kumar3

1 Institute of Fine Art, Bundelkhand University, Jhansi (U.P.), India

2 Institute of Fine Art, Bundelkhand University, Jhansi (U.P.) India

3 Institute of Environmental Science, Bundelkhand University, Jhansi (U.P.) India

Abstract

The intensification of environmental crises across the globe—manifested through climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and resource depletion—has profoundly reshaped the cultural imagination of the twenty-first century. Within this context, contemporary art has increasingly emerged not merely as a site of aesthetic production but as a critical platform for ecological reflection, public engagement, and environmental activism. This review paper examines the evolving relationship between environmental crisis and contemporary art practice, with particular emphasis on Indian contemporary art since 2000. Drawing upon secondary literature including scholarly articles, exhibition catalogues, curatorial essays, and critical art histories, the study synthesizes major theoretical frameworks such as ecocriticism, environmental aesthetics, postcolonial ecology, and art activism. The review identifies how Indian artists employ installation, site-specific practice, recycled materials, community participation, and indigenous knowledge systems to address urgent ecological concerns. At the same time, the literature reveals significant debates regarding the effectiveness, accessibility, and institutionalization of environmental art. While many practices successfully generate awareness and alternative ecological imaginaries, others risk remaining symbolic or confined to elite art spaces. By critically comparing existing scholarship, this paper highlights key contributions, conceptual tensions, and research gaps, particularly the need for more empirical studies and regionally diverse documentation. The review concludes that contemporary art in India functions as an important cultural mediator between environmental knowledge and public consciousness, yet its transformative potential depends on deeper interdisciplinary collaboration and socially embedded methodologies.

Keywords: environmental art, contemporary art, ecocriticism, sustainability, Indian art, art activism, environmental aesthetics

1. Introduction

The twenty-first century has been repeatedly described as an age of ecological emergency. Rising temperatures, extreme weather events, shrinking forests, polluted rivers, and disappearing species have become part of everyday experience rather than distant scientific projections. India, in particular, confronts acute environmental pressures: urban air pollution, groundwater depletion, deforestation, industrial waste, and climate-induced displacement affect millions of lives. These realities have not only influenced policy and science but have also begun to reshape cultural and artistic expression. Increasingly, artists are responding to environmental crises by rethinking both the subject matter and the methods of their practice.

Art has historically mediated human relationships with nature. From landscape painting to pastoral poetry, nature has often been depicted as sublime, beautiful, or spiritually restorative. However, contemporary ecological realities challenge such romantic representations. Scholars in ecocriticism argue that nature can no longer be imagined as an untouched realm separate from society; rather, it is deeply entangled with politics, economy, and technology (Morton, 2013). Consequently, contemporary art practices worldwide have shifted from passive depiction to active engagement, using creative strategies to question systems of extraction, consumption, and inequality.

Within this global turn toward ecological art, India presents a particularly compelling case. The country's environmental concerns are intertwined with rapid urbanization, postcolonial development, and indigenous ecological

knowledge systems. As Guha (2000) observes, environmental conflicts in India frequently involve questions of social justice, land rights, and community survival. Therefore, artistic responses to ecological issues often intersect with activism, local histories, and cultural memory rather than functioning purely as aesthetic commentary.

Since the early 2000s, a noticeable body of Indian contemporary art has emerged that directly addresses environmental degradation. Artists have experimented with recycled materials, site-specific installations, community collaborations, and participatory projects to foreground issues such as water scarcity, forest loss, waste accumulation, and climate vulnerability. Exhibitions, biennales, and independent art spaces have increasingly curated themes around ecology and sustainability. As Demos (2016) suggests in his broader study of contemporary eco-art, such practices reposition art as a form of “cultural agency” capable of shaping environmental awareness and collective imagination. Indian scholars and curators similarly argue that contemporary art can function as a bridge between scientific knowledge and public sensibility (Khan Bhai, 2023).

Despite this growing visibility, academic evaluation of these practices remains scattered. Much of the available writing consists of exhibition reviews, journalistic features, or isolated case studies. Systematic critical reviews that synthesize existing literature, compare perspectives, and identify research gaps are relatively rare. Without such synthesis, it becomes difficult to understand broader patterns: How has environmental art in India evolved conceptually? What theoretical frameworks guide these practices? Do they genuinely contribute to environmental activism, or do they remain symbolic gestures within institutional art spaces? Which regions and communities are represented, and which remain marginalized?

This paper addresses these questions through a critical review of secondary literature on environmental crisis and contemporary art practice, focusing specifically on Indian art after 2000. Rather than merely summarizing individual sources, the study adopts an analytical approach that compares arguments, highlights convergences and disagreements, and situates artistic practices within wider socio-cultural contexts. The review is guided by three key objectives:

First, to examine the theoretical foundations—ecocriticism, environmental aesthetics, postcolonial ecology, and art activism—that inform scholarly interpretations of environmental art. Second, to trace the historical and curatorial development of ecological concerns within Indian contemporary art since the turn of the millennium. Third, to synthesize debates, identify limitations, and suggest directions for future research.

By doing so, the paper seeks to contribute to art historical and interdisciplinary scholarship by offering a coherent overview of a rapidly expanding yet under-systematized field. More broadly, it argues that environmental art in India should be understood not simply as a stylistic trend but as a critical cultural response to ecological crisis—one that negotiates aesthetics, ethics, and activism simultaneously.

2. Methodology of Review:

This study employs a qualitative secondary literature review to interpret and synthesize existing research on environmental art and contemporary Indian artistic practices. Systematic searches in databases and art-specific repositories identified relevant literature, prioritizing works from 2000 to 2024. Selection criteria focused on peer-reviewed articles and critical essays. Thematic analysis grouped concepts into frameworks, historical development, artistic practices, material sustainability, and challenges, allowing for comparative discussion. Limitations include the emerging nature of the field and under-documented practices. Overall, the study aims to present a balanced overview of how environmental crises influence contemporary artistic discourse in India.

3. Theoretical Foundations of Environmental Art Discourse

Understanding the relationship between environmental crisis and contemporary art requires engagement with a set of theoretical frameworks that have shaped recent cultural and aesthetic debates. Rather than emerging in isolation, environmental art practices are deeply informed by interdisciplinary ideas drawn from literary theory, philosophy, political ecology, and activism. The secondary literature consistently identifies four interrelated frameworks—

ecocriticism, environmental aesthetics, postcolonial ecology, and art activism—as particularly influential in interpreting contemporary ecological art practices.

3.1 Ecocriticism and the Cultural Imagination of Nature

Ecocriticism, originally developed within literary studies, has gradually expanded into visual culture and art history. At its core, ecocriticism examines how cultural forms represent and construct relationships between humans and the natural world. Instead of treating nature as a neutral backdrop, it interrogates the ideological assumptions embedded in these representations (Buell, 2005).

Applied to contemporary art, ecocriticism encourages scholars to ask how artworks shape environmental consciousness. Do they reinforce romantic myths of untouched wilderness, or do they reveal the political and economic systems that produce ecological degradation? Morton (2013) argues that in the age of climate change, the idea of a separate “nature” is no longer tenable because humans and non-humans are entangled within complex ecological networks. Art, therefore, must grapple with this entanglement rather than simply depicting scenic landscapes.

Indian art historians have increasingly adopted this perspective. Rather than viewing environmental art as a genre of landscape painting, recent scholarship interprets it as a form of critical inquiry into development, industrialization, and environmental injustice (Khanbhai, 2023). From this standpoint, installations made from industrial waste or performances staged in threatened landscapes are not merely aesthetic choices; they function as cultural critiques of ecological exploitation.

Ecocriticism thus shifts attention from representation to responsibility. It frames art as a medium through which viewers confront their complicity in environmental damage, making ecological crisis a lived and ethical question rather than an abstract concept.

3.2 Environmental Aesthetics and Sensory Engagement

While ecocriticism emphasizes ideological critique, environmental aesthetics focuses on the experiential and sensory dimensions of environmental perception. Scholars in this field argue that aesthetic experience shapes how people value and care for environments (Carlson, 2010). Beauty, discomfort, immersion, and affect are not superficial responses; they influence ethical and political attitudes toward nature.

This framework is particularly useful in analyzing installation and site-specific art. Many contemporary environmental artworks do not simply present information about ecological problems; instead, they create immersive spaces that evoke bodily awareness. Viewers may walk through fields of recycled plastic, breathe air filtered through plants, or encounter sounds of endangered species. Such sensory experiences cultivate what Gablik (1991) calls “connective consciousness,” a feeling of relationality with the more-than-human world.

Indian contemporary artists frequently adopt these experiential strategies. Large-scale installations in public spaces or interactive exhibitions attempt to make environmental degradation tangible. Rather than presenting statistics about pollution, artists often employ material metaphors—dust, debris, water, or soil—to generate direct sensory encounters. The literature suggests that this embodied approach can be more emotionally persuasive than purely informational methods.

At the same time, environmental aesthetics raises questions about the balance between beauty and critique. If environmental art becomes too visually pleasing, it risks aestheticizing crisis. Conversely, overly didactic work may alienate audiences. Scholars emphasize the importance of negotiating this tension so that aesthetic experience supports critical awareness rather than distracting from it (Demos, 2016).

3.3 Postcolonial Ecology and the Indian Context

In the Indian context, environmental concerns cannot be separated from histories of colonialism, development, and resource extraction. Postcolonial ecological theory therefore plays a crucial role in interpreting contemporary art practices. This perspective highlights how environmental degradation is often linked to unequal power relations, displacement of indigenous communities, and exploitative economic policies (Guha & Martinez-Alier, 1997).

Environmental conflicts in India frequently involve struggles over land, forests, and water—resources that sustain local livelihoods. Movements such as Chipko, Narmada Bachao Andolan, and more recent forest rights campaigns demonstrate that ecology and social justice are inseparable. Consequently, artists responding to environmental issues often engage with questions of identity, heritage, and resistance.

Scholars note that many Indian artists draw upon indigenous knowledge systems and vernacular practices to challenge Western notions of nature as a separate wilderness. Instead, they foreground relational worldviews in which humans, animals, and landscapes are interconnected (Shiva, 2016). Folk traditions, craft practices, and local materials become both aesthetic strategies and political statements, asserting alternative ecological epistemologies.

This postcolonial lens also critiques global art institutions. Some writers caution that international exhibitions may appropriate environmental themes while overlooking local struggles. Thus, effective environmental art in India must remain attentive to specific regional contexts rather than reproducing universalized climate narratives. The literature repeatedly stresses that ecological art gains depth when grounded in lived experiences of place.

3.4 Art Activism and Social Practice

A final theoretical strand concerns the relationship between art and activism. Over the last two decades, contemporary art has increasingly intersected with social movements, giving rise to what is often termed socially engaged or participatory art (Bishop, 2012). Within environmental contexts, this approach views art not simply as representation but as intervention.

Art activism blurs boundaries between aesthetic production and political action. Artists collaborate with communities, organize workshops, create protest visuals, or participate directly in campaigns. The artwork becomes a process rather than a discrete object. Demos (2016) describes this tendency as the “politicization of aesthetics,” where creative practice seeks tangible ecological outcomes.

In India, this intersection is particularly pronounced. Curators and critics observe that many environmental artists work closely with grassroots organizations, using art to mobilize public attention or support legal struggles (Khanbhai, 2023). Such projects challenge conventional definitions of art by prioritizing collective participation over individual authorship.

However, the literature also identifies tensions. Participatory projects may risk tokenism if communities are not genuinely involved in decision-making. Additionally, when activist art enters galleries or biennales, its political force may be diluted. These debates underscore the need to critically assess not only what environmental art represents but also how it operates within social structures.

Together, these theoretical frameworks provide the conceptual foundation for analyzing contemporary environmental art in India. They reveal that ecological art is simultaneously aesthetic, ethical, and political—a form of cultural practice that negotiates multiple responsibilities.

4. Historical and Curatorial Development of Environmental Art in India

4.1 From Landscape Representation to Ecological Consciousness

Although environmental art appears as a recent phenomenon, Indian visual culture has long engaged with nature. Traditional painting schools such as Pahari miniatures or Mughal landscapes depicted forests, rivers, and seasons with symbolic and spiritual significance. Folk and tribal art forms similarly expressed intimate connections with land and

ecology. However, these traditions typically celebrated harmony with nature rather than confronting environmental degradation.

The transition toward explicitly ecological concerns emerged alongside rapid industrialization and urban growth in the late twentieth century. As cities expanded and environmental problems intensified, artists began to reflect on pollution, displacement, and loss of biodiversity. By the early 2000s, these concerns became increasingly visible within contemporary art discourse.

Scholars observe that this shift paralleled global developments. International movements such as land art, eco-art, and site-specific practice influenced Indian artists studying or exhibiting abroad. Yet these influences were adapted to local realities. Rather than monumental interventions in remote deserts, Indian environmental art often addressed densely populated urban spaces or fragile rural ecosystems.

4.2 The Role of Exhibitions and Independent Art Spaces

The literature consistently highlights the importance of curatorial initiatives in shaping environmental art in India. Independent art spaces and biennales provided platforms for experimentation beyond commercial gallery systems.

One frequently cited milestone is the public art festival 48°C Public.Art.Ecology held in New Delhi in 2008. Curated by Khoj International Artists' Association, the event placed installations and performances in everyday urban spaces, directly engaging residents with ecological themes. Scholar's regard this as a turning point because it moved environmental art out of elite galleries and into public life, foregrounding issues such as water scarcity, waste, and urban heat (Roy, 2024).

Subsequent biennales and festivals continued this trajectory. The Kochi-Muziris Biennale, for instance, regularly featured works addressing climate change, coastal erosion, and maritime histories. Such events normalized environmental themes within mainstream contemporary art discourse.

More recently, initiatives explicitly dedicated to sustainability—such as artist residencies, climate fellowships, and interdisciplinary collaborations—have expanded opportunities for ecological practice. These platforms encourage artists to work alongside scientists, activists, and local communities, reinforcing the idea that environmental art is inherently collaborative.

4.3 Institutionalization and Its Contradictions

While increased institutional support has enabled visibility, scholars also note contradictions. As environmental art becomes fashionable within global art markets, there is a risk that critical intentions may be neutralized. Exhibitions may frame ecological crisis as an aesthetic trend rather than an urgent social issue.

This institutionalization creates tension between radical activism and professional art practice. Some projects succeed in influencing public debate, while others remain symbolic gestures confined to cultural spaces. The literature therefore emphasizes the need to evaluate environmental art not only by its visual impact but also by its social consequences.

Despite these challenges, the historical trajectory since 2000 demonstrates a clear expansion of ecological consciousness within Indian contemporary art. What began as isolated experiments has gradually developed into a recognizable field supported by curators, scholars, and practitioners alike.

5. Key Contemporary Practices in Indian Environmental Art (Post-2000)

Since the early 2000s, Indian contemporary art has increasingly engaged with ecological precarity, climate vulnerability, and environmental justice. The secondary literature reveals that this engagement is not confined to a single style or medium; instead, it manifests across installation, sculpture, public art, participatory practice, photography, video, and craft-based interventions. What unites these diverse approaches is a shared concern with how artistic practice can make environmental crisis visible, sensible, and politically urgent.

Rather than producing distant representations of nature, many Indian artists situate their work within lived environments—urban streets, polluted rivers, industrial zones, or vulnerable rural landscapes. In doing so, they move beyond metaphor toward material and social entanglement. Scholars frequently characterize these practices as “embedded” or “situated,” emphasizing that the artwork emerges from specific ecological conditions rather than abstract themes (Demos, 2016; Khanbhai, 2023).

The following review synthesizes how researchers discuss key tendencies and influential practitioners in post-2000 Indian environmental art.

5.1 Public Ecology and Urban Interventions

One of the most visible strands of environmental art in India is public and site-specific intervention. Rapid urbanization has transformed cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, and Kolkata into zones of acute environmental stress—marked by air pollution, water scarcity, waste accumulation, and shrinking green spaces. Artists working in these contexts frequently treat the city itself as both medium and message.

The literature often cites the public art initiatives organized by Khoj International Artists’ Association as crucial catalysts. Projects such as 48°C Public Art Ecology encouraged artists to engage directly with urban ecological realities rather than exhibiting inside insulated galleries. Installations addressed heat stress, disappearing commons, and waste economies, prompting everyday passersby to encounter environmental issues within familiar spaces (Roy, 2024).

Scholars argue that such interventions alter the function of art. Instead of producing collectible objects, artists create temporary, process-based works that emphasize experience and dialogue. The public becomes an active participant rather than a passive viewer. This participatory orientation aligns with Bishop’s (2012) conception of socially engaged art, where meaning emerges through collective interaction.

Importantly, these projects also democratize environmental discourse. By situating art in markets, streets, or neighbourhoods, artists reach audiences beyond elite cultural institutions. Researchers suggest that this accessibility is particularly significant in India, where environmental crises disproportionately affect marginalized communities.

5.2 Materiality, Waste, and Ecological Ethics

A second major tendency identified in the literature concerns the use of reclaimed, recycled, and biodegradable materials. Material choice itself becomes a critical language. Instead of relying on pristine industrial supplies, artists increasingly incorporate discarded plastic, scrap metal, organic matter, or found debris.

This practice serves multiple functions. At a practical level, it reduces resource consumption and models sustainable production. At a symbolic level, waste materials carry the histories of consumption and disposal that define contemporary environmental crisis. They transform abstract concerns about pollution into tactile realities.

Art historians interpret such strategies through the lens of “material ecology,” arguing that materials are not neutral carriers of form but active participants in meaning-making (Gablik, 1991; Carlson, 2010). A sculpture constructed from e-waste or landfill debris does not merely depict environmental degradation; it physically embodies it.

In the Indian context, this material turn also resonates with long-standing traditions of repair, reuse, and craft. Scholars note that practices of recycling have historically been embedded in everyday life, particularly among informal economies. Contemporary artists often draw from these vernacular systems, thereby bridging sustainability with cultural continuity.

The literature further observes that this emphasis on material ethics challenges the carbon-intensive norms of the global art world—large shipments, temporary constructions, and energy-heavy exhibitions. By foregrounding modest, local materials, artists implicitly critique these unsustainable structures.

5.3 Community Collaboration and Social Practice

Another prominent theme in post-2000 scholarship is collaboration with communities affected by environmental change. Instead of working independently, many artists engage fishermen, farmers, waste pickers, or forest dwellers as co-creators.

Researchers interpret these practices as extensions of social practice art, where the process of collective work becomes more important than the finished artifact (Bishop, 2012). Environmental issues such as water scarcity or land displacement cannot be understood from a distance; they demand participation from those directly experiencing them.

Through workshops, storytelling sessions, and shared making, artists create platforms for dialogue. Such projects often produce outcomes that are educational or infrastructural rather than purely aesthetic—murals that spread awareness, community gardens, or temporary shelters. The boundaries between art, activism, and development blur.

Scholars emphasize that these collaborations humanize environmental discourse. Instead of presenting climate change as statistical abstraction, they foreground personal narratives of loss and resilience. This storytelling dimension deepens emotional engagement and strengthens what Morton (2013) calls ecological intimacy—the recognition that environmental crisis is intertwined with everyday life.

However, the literature also cautions against romanticizing participation. Meaningful collaboration requires long-term commitment and equitable decision-making. Otherwise, projects risk becoming symbolic gestures that exploit communities for artistic legitimacy. Thus, ethical practice remains a central concern within critical debates.

5.4 Case-Based Discussions in Secondary Literature

While this review does not attempt exhaustive artist biographies, secondary sources frequently reference practitioners whose work exemplifies ecological engagement. Scholars discuss artists who address land degradation, industrial pollution, disappearing crafts, or fragile ecosystems through diverse media.

These case studies reveal several recurring patterns:

Site-responsiveness – works created specifically for particular landscapes or communities.

Interdisciplinarity – collaborations with scientists, architects, or activists.

Ephemerality – temporary or biodegradable installations that avoid permanent ecological footprints.

Narrative strategies – storytelling that links local experiences with global climate concerns.

Rather than celebrating individual genius, recent scholarship emphasizes networks and collectives. This shift reflects a broader understanding that environmental crisis is systemic and therefore demands collective rather than solitary responses.

6. Critical Debates and Ongoing Challenges

The significance of environmental art is increasingly recognized, yet tensions and unresolved issues persist within the literature.

6.1 Aestheticization versus Activism

A primary debate is whether environmental art risks aestheticizing crisis. Visually striking works may evoke beauty instead of urgency, potentially diluting political critique, as warned by Demos (2016). Conversely, overly didactic art may come off as propaganda, sacrificing aesthetic depth. Effective environmental art, therefore, must achieve a balance between emotional resonance and critical clarity.

6.2 Institutional Co-option

As ecological themes gain traction, galleries market “green” exhibitions, raising concerns that institutions may dilute radical intent. When environmental art becomes trendy, it risks losing its oppositional power. This is especially evident in global contexts, where sustainability discourse may serve branding purposes instead of genuine commitment. Critics advocate for artists and curators to evaluate their ecological footprints.

6.3 Documentation and Ephemerality

Many environmentally conscious works are temporary, complicating documentation and scholarly analysis. Researchers often rely on fragments such as photographs or testimonies, which may not fully encapsulate the experiential aspects of these works.

6.4 Regional Imbalances

The literature shows uneven geographic coverage, favoring metropolitan areas while neglecting rural and indigenous practices. This highlights the necessity for localized research that acknowledges India's ecological diversity.

6.5 Comparative Synthesis of Findings

Common conclusions across studies reveal that environmental art in India has evolved from representational landscapes to socially engaged, process-oriented practices. Material choices emphasize ecological ethics, collaborating with communities and blurring boundaries between art and activism. Theoretical frameworks like ecocriticism and postcolonial ecology aid in understanding these shifts.

7. Conclusion:

Environmental Art as Critical and Cultural Practice

The review of contemporary Indian art practices post-2000 underscores significant evolutions in response to environmental crises. Insights point to a transformation where art engages directly with ecological realities rather than merely depicting nature. Theories emphasize that artistic expression now often involves social responsibility, challenging traditional notions of “nature” as separate from humanity.

8. Research Gaps in Existing Scholarship

Despite a burgeoning body of literature, gaps remain. Academic documentation of Indian environmental art is limited compared to Western narratives. Urban-centric approaches marginalize rural initiatives, while insufficient interdisciplinary dialogue restricts understanding. There is also a lack of empirical assessment of art's social impact, and underrepresentation of emerging digital practices.

9. Future Directions for Research and Practice

Future scholarship should focus on longitudinal studies, comparative research across Global South contexts, and deeper interdisciplinary collaborations. Incorporating indigenous ecological knowledge could broaden theoretical frameworks, and creating accessible platforms would democratize knowledge about environmental art.

10. Final Synthesis

Overall, contemporary Indian environmental art serves as a critical response to urgent ecological challenges through material experimentation and collaborative practices. It fosters emotional connections and empathy essential for confronting environmental crises, demonstrating art's role in society's understanding, resistance, and adaptation to ecological change.

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(Additional references for theoretical grounding and related contexts may include standard works on ecocriticism, environmental aesthetics, and Indian environmental thought, e.g. Morton 2013; Latour 2017; Guha 2006; Shiva 2016.)

Important Links

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