



Climate Change and Indian Literature: Ecology, Memory, and Environmental Consciousness

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Abstract

Climate change has become one of the most pressing concerns of the twenty-first century, shaping political debates, social realities, cultural practices, and literary expressions across the world. In India, literature offers a particularly rich space for thinking about these changes because ecological relationships have long been part of the country's cultural and literary traditions. This paper examines how Indian literature represents environmental degradation, climate anxiety, and displacement, and the ethical questions that arise from our changing relationship with the natural world. It brings together perspectives from ancient Indian traditions, postcolonial ecological writing, contemporary climate fiction, ecofeminism, and indigenous narratives. Particular attention is given to Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, and Vandana Shiva, whose writings highlight environmental exploitation and the close relationship between human well-being and ecological health. By reading literature as both a record of ecological memory and a space for reflection and action, this paper argues that Indian literary traditions can offer meaningful ethical perspectives on the climate crisis.

Keywords: Climate Change, Indian Literature, Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Climate Fiction, Environmental Humanities, Amitav Ghosh.

Methodology

This paper takes a qualitative, ecocritical approach to the study of climate change and ecological consciousness in Indian literature. It considers literary representations ranging from ancient Indian traditions to contemporary climate fiction and examines how writers respond to environmental change, ecological grief, displacement, and the need for sustainable living. Close reading and comparative analysis are used to juxtapose older ecological ideas with contemporary literary responses to the climate crisis.

Introduction

Climate change is no longer a distant scientific concern and is increasingly visible in everyday life. Rising temperatures, melting glaciers, floods, cyclones, droughts, and community displacement have made it a humanitarian and environmental crisis. Literature plays an important role in making these changes imaginable because it can give shape to experiences that statistics and scientific reports cannot always convey. The growing field of ecocriticism, which studies the relationship between literature and the physical environment, has become an important way of reading literary responses to ecological change.

Indian literature has a long and complex relationship with nature. In many ancient texts, forests, rivers, mountains, animals, and other elements of nature are not simply part of the background; they have spiritual, emotional, and cultural significance. Such traditions suggest a relationship based on respect and coexistence, rather than complete human control over nature. At the same time, this relationship has changed considerably through colonialism, industrialisation, and modern development. These processes have led to extensive resource extraction and contributed to environmental destruction and social inequality. Contemporary Indian literature reflects these tensions through engagement with floods, droughts, migration, extinction, displacement, and climate injustice.

This study uses a qualitative ecocritical methodology. It draws on ecocriticism, postcolonial ecocriticism, and ecofeminist theory to examine selected works by Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Indra Sinha, Vandana Shiva, and Mahasweta Devi. Close textual reading was used to explore recurring concerns such as ecological grief, climate anxiety, environmental justice, displacement, and sustainability. A comparative approach also helps to connect the ecological ideas found in older Indian literary traditions with the concerns expressed in contemporary climate fiction. Secondary scholarship in environmental humanities and literary studies provides theoretical and contextual support.

Ecocriticism and Climate Literature

Ecocriticism became an influential approach to literary studies in the late twentieth century. Cheryll Glotfelty defines it as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). At its core, ecocriticism asks us to look beyond purely human concerns in literature and consider how texts represent nature and environmental change and how human lives are shaped by ecological systems.

Climate literature, often called “cli-fi,” focuses directly on climate change and environmental catastrophe. It does not deal only with storms, droughts, or rising temperatures; it also explores the fear, uncertainty, loss, and ethical questions that accompany environmental changes. Indian

climate literature brings these wider concerns into conversation with specific local experiences, allowing global climate anxieties to be understood through particular landscapes and communities in India.

Lawrence Buell’s work similarly stresses the close relationship between human culture and the natural world. From this perspective, literature can help readers recognize ecological vulnerability in personal and emotionally engaging ways. Stories can make environmental questions more immediate, encouraging readers to think about how their lives are connected to larger ecological systems.

Ecological Consciousness in Ancient Indian Literature

Ancient Indian literary traditions reveal a sustained awareness of nature. Nature is rarely presented simply as scenery; it often carries spiritual, emotional, and philosophical meanings. For example, the Vedas celebrate rivers, fire, wind, rain, and the earth as forces that sustain life. The Rig Veda hymns reflect an understanding of nature as worthy of reverence and gratitude.

The Ramayana and Mahabharata also give forests a central place in their narratives. Forests are spaces of exile, learning, meditation, transformation, and spiritual experience. They are not merely empty wildernesses but living environments in which humans encounter themselves and others. These representations suggest that people exist within a larger order of life, rather than standing completely outside or above nature.

Classical Sanskrit literature continues to pay close attention to landscapes. For instance, Kalidasa’s Meghaduta and Abhijnanasakuntalam present rivers, mountains, forests, and seasons with remarkable sensitivity. In Meghaduta, the cloud that carries a message between separated lovers moves across a richly imagined landscape, linking places and people along its journey. Nature is therefore closely woven into human emotion rather than treated as something separate from it.

Tamil Sangam literature offers another striking example of ecological imagination. Its classification of landscapes into five categories *kurinji* (mountain), *mullai* (forest), *marutham* (farmland), *neithal*

(coastal region), and paalai (desert) connects particular environments with human emotions and social experiences. This relationship between the landscape and lived experience suggests a nuanced understanding of ecological diversity.

Taken together, these traditions show that the idea of living in relationship with nature is not new to Indian literary thought. They provide a useful cultural memory through which present-day discussions of climate change, sustainability, and ecological responsibility can be considered.

Colonialism, Industrialisation, and Environmental Transformation

The colonial period brought about major changes to India's ecological landscape. Deforestation, resource extraction, industrialization, and the commercialization of agriculture have increasingly placed economic interests above ecological balance. Colonial forest policies and other forms of resource control have disrupted the established relationships between local communities and their environments.

Postcolonial ecocriticism draws attention to the connection between environmental destruction and the histories of imperialism and capitalist development. When forests and other natural resources were brought under colonial control, Indigenous communities often lost access to landscapes that had supported their livelihoods and cultural practices for generations. Environmental damage is accompanied by social and cultural disruption.

Rabindranath Tagore was deeply critical of aggressive industrialization that separated people from the natural world. In his poems and essays, he repeatedly returns to the idea of harmony between humans and nature. For Tagore, excessive materialism could narrow human experience and weaken the sense of spiritual and emotional connection that people have with their environment.

This understanding also shaped Tagore's educational vision at Santiniketan, where learning occurred in close contact with the natural environment. Nature is not simply a setting for education but is part of the learning process itself. Tagore viewed the natural world as a catalyst for creativity, sensitivity, and ethical awareness. His

ideas remain relevant to contemporary discussions on environmental education and sustainable living.

The pressures of modern development have also produced new forms of inequality and environmental displacement. Literary representations have increasingly drawn attention to rural communities whose lives have been affected by land exploitation, drought, and ecological change. In these narratives, environmental damage cannot be separated from questions of livelihood, social power and survival.

Climate Change in Contemporary Indian Literature

Contemporary Indian literature engages directly with ecological disasters and the growing uncertainties associated with climate change. Floods, cyclones, rising sea levels, migration, and the loss of species appear not simply as environmental events but as experiences that reshape communities and individual life.

Amitav Ghosh and Climate Fiction

Amitav Ghosh has become one of the most prominent Indian writers to address the literary challenges posed by climate change. In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), he questions why modern literary fiction has found it difficult to represent climate events. Such events can be sudden, improbable, and on a scale that seems to resist the conventions of realist storytelling.

For Ghosh, climate change exposes the limits of familiar ideas about realism, probability, and human control. The problem is not simply that writers need to include more environmental events in their stories; literature may also need to find new ways of imagining uncertainty and ecological interconnectedness.

The Hungry Tide explores this vulnerability through the landscape of the Sundarbans, where rivers, tides, animals, and human settlements exist in a fragile relationship. The threat of cyclones and rising sea levels is closely tied to questions of livelihood, migration, memory, and survival. The novel makes difficult to separate environmental instability from the human stories unfolding within it.

Gun Island extends these concerns across different geographical locations. The novel brings together

climate migration, ecological disasters, folklore, and global connections, showing that environmental change does not respect national borders. Local ecological disruptions can have consequences that reach far beyond the place where they first occur.

Arundhati Roy and Environmental Justice

Arundhati Roy's writing frequently questions the human and environmental costs of development projects. In essays such as *The Greater Common Good*, she examines the consequences of large dam projects in India, drawing attention to the displacement of tribal and rural communities as well as the destruction of ecosystems. Her work asks readers to look more critically at who benefits from the idea of development and who is asked to bear its costs.

Roy links environmental damage with wider structures of political power and economic inequality. Her writings make visible the fact that communities with the least political and economic power often experience the harshest consequences of environmental disruption. Projects celebrated as signs of progress can therefore become sources of displacement and ecological loss for those living closest to the affected landscapes.

Indra Sinha and Environmental Disaster

Indra Sinha's *Animal's People* draws on the Bhopal gas tragedy to explore what happens when environmental disaster becomes part of everyday life. The novel focuses on the continuing effects of toxic pollution on a marginalised community. Rather than presenting the disaster as a single event that ends once the immediate crisis is over, Sinha shows how its consequences remain present in bodies, relationships, identities, and memory.

The novel also draws attention to corporate negligence and environmental injustice. Its central concern is the unequal distribution of risk: poorer communities are often left to live with the consequences of industrial practices over which they have little control.

Ecofeminism and Indian Environmental Writing

Ecofeminism brings together questions of gender, power, and the exploitation of the natural world.

Ecofeminist thinkers argue that systems that subordinate women can also encourage attitudes in which nature is treated as something to be controlled, used, and consumed. The approach therefore examines the connections between social inequality and environmental exploitation.

Vandana Shiva is an important Indian voice in ecofeminist environmental thought. In *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development*, she emphasises the ecological knowledge that women in local communities preserve and practise. For Shiva, this knowledge is not merely traditional or symbolic; it can play a practical role in sustaining biodiversity and supporting communities.

Shiva is critical of industrial agriculture, deforestation, and forms of globalisation that weaken local ecological practices and reduce biodiversity. In place of such models, she stresses community-based approaches that recognise ecological limits and the importance of local knowledge.

The Chipko Movement offers a powerful example of women's participation in environmental activism in India. Women in Uttarakhand embraced trees to resist commercial deforestation, turning a local struggle into a widely recognised symbol of ecological resistance. The movement has since influenced literary and cultural representations of women's relationships with forests and environmental protection.

Indian women writers have often placed women close to struggles over land, forests, and water. Their writing also draws attention to forms of ecological knowledge that are passed from one generation to another. Care, responsibility, sustainability, and coexistence consequently become important parts of these narratives.

Indigenous and Regional Ecological Narratives

Indigenous and regional literatures in India offer perspectives on the environment that often differ from dominant development models. In many tribal communities, forests and rivers are understood as living and culturally significant spaces rather than simply as sources of economic value. Oral traditions, stories, and everyday practices preserve ecological knowledge accumulated over generations.

Regional writing also records the displacement of indigenous communities caused by mining, dams, industrial expansion, and other development projects. The loss involved in such processes is not limited to land or livelihood; it can also mean the loss of cultural practices, memories, and connections to particular places.

Mahasweta Devi's writings bring these struggles into sharp focus. Her representations of tribal communities reveal how exploitation of people and exploitation of the environment frequently occur together. By foregrounding marginalised voices and local knowledge, such works question human-centred approaches to development and draw attention to the need for ecological justice.

Climate Anxiety and Ecological Grief

Contemporary climate literature is increasingly concerned with the emotional experience of environmental change. Anxiety, grief, fear, and uncertainty enter narratives alongside more familiar descriptions of floods, droughts, and ecological destruction. Climate change thus becomes not only a scientific problem but also something that affects how people imagine their futures and understand their present.

The disappearance of familiar landscapes, the decline of species, and the fragmentation of communities can all produce a sense of ecological loss. Climate anxiety grows from the recognition that environmental destruction can take away more than natural resources; it can also threaten memories, identities, cultural practices, and a sense of belonging.

Indian climate fiction often connects ecological instability with migration and displacement. When floods, droughts, or rising seas make familiar places difficult to inhabit, people are forced to leave or to adapt to uncertain conditions. The movement of people therefore becomes an important part of the climate story.

Amitav Ghosh's fiction is especially attentive to these emotional consequences. His narratives show how environmental change can interrupt personal histories, collective memories, and relationships between people and places.

Literature as Environmental Activism

Literature can become a form of environmental activism because it creates space for awareness,

empathy, and reflection. Scientific reports can tell us how temperatures are changing or how frequently disasters occur, but literary narratives can show what such changes mean in the lives of ordinary people.

Climate fiction invites readers to imagine possible ecological futures and to reconsider the ways in which human life depends on the natural world. Literature can also preserve memories of landscapes and ecosystems that are changing or disappearing, giving cultural meaning to forms of environmental loss that might otherwise remain abstract.

The inclusion of environmental literature in educational settings can help students approach climate change through both critical thought and human experience. Literary studies can consequently contribute to wider conversations about sustainability, ethics, environmental justice, and the responsibilities that accompany living in a shared world.

Indian literature makes clear that environmental crises are rarely experienced equally. Questions of class, caste, gender, and colonial history shape who is most exposed to environmental harm and who has the resources to respond. Ecological destruction is therefore also a question of social justice.

This study brings together ecological ideas from ancient Indian traditions with contemporary climate fiction and environmental humanities. It shows how literature can function as a cultural archive, preserving memories of landscapes and ecological relationships while also questioning exploitation, unequal development, and climate injustice. At the same time, literary narratives can encourage readers to imagine more responsible ways of living with the natural world.

Contribution of the Study

There is considerable scope for further research in this area. Comparative studies of Indian and global climate fiction could reveal different ways of imagining environmental change, while work on regional-language literature and tribal ecological narratives could bring less frequently discussed perspectives into climate studies. Digital storytelling, cinema, and other media also offer promising areas for examining how environmental concerns are communicated. Interdisciplinary research involving literature, environmental studies, anthropology, and media studies could further broaden the study of climate discourse in South Asia.

Conclusion

Indian literature offers a valuable way of thinking about climate change because it brings environmental questions into conversation with memory, culture, identity, and social justice issues. From ancient texts that imagine forests, rivers, and landscapes as meaningful parts of human life to contemporary fiction concerned with ecological disaster and displacement, literary works reveal how ideas about nature have evolved over time.

Writers such as Amitav Ghosh, Arundhati Roy, Vandana Shiva, and Mahasweta Devi draw attention to the political, emotional, and ethical dimensions of environmental crises. Their work questions development models that place economic growth above ecological and human well-being and instead calls attention to sustainability, coexistence, and responsibility.

Thus, climate change is not only a scientific or political problem. It is also a cultural and imaginative challenge for the society. The ways in which societies narrate stories about nature, disaster, loss, and survival influence how environmental change is understood. Literature can play an important role in developing environmental consciousness and encouraging a sense of shared responsibility.

At a time of growing ecological uncertainty, Indian literature continues to offer a voice of resistance, memory, and hope. By bringing older cultural understandings of nature into dialogue with contemporary environmental realities, these literary narratives help us think more carefully about what is at stake in the climate crisis and the kind of relationship with the natural world that might be possible in the future.

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