Picturing the Anthropocene Through Flood Narratives: The Environmental Disaster Discourse in Indian Cinema

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11. Picturing the Anthropocene through flood narratives: The environmental disaster discourse in Indian cinema

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Abstract

Narratives of disaster play a significant role in the construction of perspectives on the Anthropocene. In an age where human activity has crossed many boundaries to explicitly reveal the imminent threat of ecological degradation, environmental disasters need to be addressed with utmost seriousness. Cinema being the popular art of the technologically advanced and globalized world, it is possible to realistically visualize environmental disasters and their impact on the ecosystem. For instance, cinematic representation of geographies of the tropical regions affected by climate change and natural disasters helps one understand the complex sociocultural repercussions that restructure the very fabric of organic life. This chapter examines how narratives of flood in Indian cinema define the notion of ecological disaster in India. Floods are one of the most common natural disasters in India as their sudden and long-term impact on the natural environment puts the lives of millions of people and animals at risk. Films that show floods as a narrative tend to emphasize the cultural disorientation as a result of the monstrosity of water. This can be argued as an anti-romantic approach whereas such narratives essentially subvert the aesthetics of rain, a common theme in Indian cinema. When floods alter the geography of a region, it reflects the vulnerability of a given population and the consequences of human activity that force them to vacate the premises of their habitat. Using contemporary disaster discourses, this chapter deconstructs the spectacles of flood in Indian cinema to understand their overarching impact on the geography, culture, and life in India.

Keywords: Flood, Disaster, India, Anthropocene, Environment

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1. Introduction

The geological division that defines the contemporary global environment is the Anthropocene Epoch where human activity is observed to have overcome natural processes to reach a point of producing a maximum impact on the environment (Crutzen, 2006). The Anthropocene marks the "magnitude, variety and longevity of human-induced changes" that altered the relationship between humans and the Earth system (Lewis & Maslin, 2015). Human influence can be measured in terms of the changes happening in a range of areas including the atmosphere, Earth's surface, oceans, and biological life. Jedediah Purdy (2015) opines that the Anthropocene began as part of a threefold crisis—of ecology, economics and politics. After agricultural and industrial revolutions skyrocketed human activity to new possibilities for exploitation in a new globalized context, the Anthropocene has become a category of narratives that reflect the disastrous effect on life not only on the ecological and biological levels but on the social, cultural, and political levels as well. The natural resources that helped human beings in their evolution to new dimensions of progress have now become agents of climate change in modern civilization which is increasingly rendering geographical spaces uninhabitable for the human population and other species (Chakrabarty, 2016).

Narratives of disaster play a significant role in the construction of perspectives on the Anthropocene. In an age where human activity has crossed many boundaries to explicitly reveal the imminent threat of ecological degradation, environmental disasters need to be addressed with utmost seriousness. Cinema being the popular art of the technologically advanced and globalized world, it is possible to realistically visualize environmental disasters and their impact on the ecosystem. The ability to construct worlds in which disasters can be portrayed in their extremity makes cinema one of the useful mediums where one can make sense of the effects of the Anthropocene. In her book, *Inhospitable World: Cinema in the Time of the Anthropocene*, Jennifer Fay (2018) observes that: "filmmaking occasions the creation of artificial worlds, unnatural and inclement weather, and deadly environments produced as much for the sake of entertainment as for scientific study and military strategy. Cinema's dominant mode of aesthetic world-making is often at odds with the very real human world it is meant to simulate" (p. 4).

The real-life experiences of populations and communities in catastrophic events is something cinema often deals with when it produces disaster narratives. The cinematic representation of geographies of the tropical regions

affected by climate change and natural disasters helps one understand the complex sociocultural repercussions that restructure the very fabric of organic life. This chapter examines how narratives of flood in Indian cinema define the notion of ecological disaster in India. Floods are one of the most common natural disasters in India as their sudden and long-term impact on the natural environment puts the lives of millions of people and animals at risk. Films that show floods as a narrative tend to emphasize the cultural disorientation as a result of the monstrosity of water. This can be argued as an anti-romantic approach whereas such narratives essentially subvert the aesthetics of rain, a common theme in Indian cinema. When floods alter the geography of a region, it reflects the vulnerability of a given population and the consequences of human activity that force people to vacate the premises of their habitats. Using contemporary disaster discourses, this chapter deconstructs the spectacles of flood in Indian cinema to understand their overarching impact on the geography, culture, and life in India.

2. Disaster narratives in cinema

Discussions on environmental protection have changed from purely academic to more popular. Topics like climate change, environmental disasters, new diseases, urbanization, etc. are not problems of the future anymore, on the contrary, they are growing anxieties of today's generation as their effects are felt collectively. Since the current scenario demands more nuanced and collective action, more specific environmental narratives are required from mainstream media ecosystems. India, being one of the prominent environment-depending agricultural lands in the world, is facing threats of environmental degradation in the form of climate change, pollution, urban expansion, and population explosion, but the popular cinema of the land is reluctant to thematize the environment as a narrative or text unless the commercial value of "beauty" serves the purpose of visual aesthetics. In addition to this, environmental cinema gets submerged in the ideologies of capitalism which depend on the concept of "profitable" mainstream cinema, and the effects and challenges of such overlaps are reflected in the construction of ecological film narratives. Therefore, in order to unearth the complexities of the Anthropocene, one has to look beyond the scenic visual texts of Indian commercial cinema to understand the ecological importance of local spaces and their regional ecological politics. The critical representation of environmental tragedies in the visual format encourages the audience to have a closer look at how disaster strikes ecologically indigenous

spaces in the country. Investigations centralizing Indian cinema, one of the largest non-Western film industries in the world, reveal how disaster narratives reflect the complex sociocultural life in the Indian geographical space.

Disaster is often conceptualized as a materialist reality with immediate repercussions that might produce a long-lasting effect. The way it affects a range of parameters in a given population adds meaning to its representation through different means. According to Joanna Bator (2012), disaster "is always a cultural phenomenon because the moment it happens it becomes a part of the human world. All [disasters] have cultural, social, and political dimensions and the trauma of a disaster can shake the very foundations of the cultural, social and political structures" (p. 92). Disasters, whether they are man-made or natural, have a representational and interpretational aspect within the social, cultural, and environmental discourse. It encompasses elements and themes from a personal as well as regional point of view. In cinema, disasters are narrated as huge events that appear as spectacles of tragedy where the lives of people are threatened with imminent danger. These people, who would not get visibility in the enormity of a disaster in real-life are focused in the frames of cinema as they become subjects, victims, survivors, or even the cause of a catastrophic event. Kiu-wai Chu (2019), on the other hand, argues that disaster spectacles have the capacity to reduce the importance of climate change and environmental catastrophe into the mere repetition of images that do not often reflect real-life environmental contexts. However, the way cinema depicts the intensity of disasters varies from film to film, depending on other factors such as production cost, the use of technological effects, cultural and historical contexts in which the disaster is imagined or recreated, etc. Questions of realism are important whenever disaster events are pictured in cinema and the problem of authenticity is something filmmakers have to always consider when making disaster movies. Since cinema is an art form that reigns in the fictional world of imagination, transcribing visual images of disaster into the screen is of paramount significance. Glenn Kay and Michael Rose (2006) identify some key characteristics of a disaster movie, which include:

1. A cavalcade of recognizable faces and big stars playing characters of various social backgrounds.

2. A powerful force of nature beyond the control of humankind, and a protagonist who is constantly warning the community of the impending danger, to no avail.

3. Scenes of self-sacrifice, mass destruction, and citizens in peril.

3. Spectacular special effects and panicked crowds running toward the camera.

4. There's often a love theme in these films, […] horribly gruesome and elaborate death scenes. (Kay & Rose, 2006, pp. 10-11).

Jennifer Fay (2018) points out that cinema as a creative medium stimulates the imagination to produce an aesthetic imitation of the Anthropocene:

While no one film or set of films adds up to a totalizing explanation of climate change, cinema enables us to glimpse anthropogenic environments as both an accidental effect of human activity and a matter of design. Thus, not only is cinema like the Anthropocene in its uncanny aesthetic effects, but also, insofar as cinema has encouraged the production of artificial worlds and simulated, wholly anthropogenic weather, it is the aesthetic practice of the Anthropocene. Or, to put it more forcefully, cinema helps us to see and experience the Anthropocene as an aesthetic practice (p. 4).

Disasters in cinema are events that often refer to the adverse effects of human activity through which they become sites of historical knowledge about what went wrong in the past and how people can correct things in the present. However, more than considering them as physical threats, disasters are chosen in films as background to narrate stories of people, that eventually the disaster text becomes a metaphorical representation of the human condition itself. These narratives are sometimes about personal relationships, cultural fears, historical violence, regional myths, and religious superstitions acting as sources of information regarding the meaning of the disaster. The belief that natural disasters such as hurricanes, Tsunamis, earthquakes, and floods are caused by the evils of human activity is central to religious myths and cultural discourses. In India, such disasters are prophesized to be the result of ancient curses from angry gods as they are dissatisfied with how humans live in the natural world.

3. Floods in Indian cinema

Floods, one of the most devastating and common natural disasters, have recently become a recurring phenomenon in India. The peninsular geographical structure of India, surrounded by the Arabian sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Bay of Bengal, makes the land highly vulnerable to floods. Due to the effects of climate change in the twenty-first century, there was a significant rise in the number of large-scale flooding across central and North India. The Mumbai floods in 2006 and 2017 are examples of how floods are frequent catastrophic events that negatively affect everything from agriculture

to daily life and public administration. There has been a three-fold increase in heavy rainfall events between 1901-2015, causing frequent floods in West Bengal, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Telangana, Odisha, Jharkhand, Assam, and portions of the Western Ghats in Goa, north Karnataka, and South Kerala (Roxy *et al*., 2017). Indian states have floodplains associated with rivers like Brahmaputra, Ganges, Yamuna, Mahanadi, Damodar, and Kosi producing high discharges during the monsoon season (June- September). Villages and urban areas near the banks and deltas of these rivers and their tributaries are frequently affected by floods. For instance, the river Brahmaputra is called the "sorrow of Assam", the river Kosi "the sorrow of Bihar", and the river Damodar "the sorrow of Bengal" for their destructive power during the floods. All these Indian states have different socio-cultural characteristics but their immediate panic response to a disaster event appears to be somewhat similar and this allows us to deliberate upon the universality of disasters.

High population density, urbanization, and global warming are cited as reasons for flooding in India along with problems like the inadequate carrying capacity of rivers bringing heavy sediment load from catchments, drainage congestion and erosion of river-banks ("Floods", n.d.). Issues of urban flooding have intensified recently in city areas like Mumbai, Delhi, Hyderabad, Kolkata, and Chennai. Floods in urbanized areas have shown 8 times more flood peaks and 6 times more flood volumes than in rural areas and the former has shown the spontaneous eruption of floods within small time scales due to faster flow times ("Urban Floods", n.d.). The population's vulnerability to floods in urban regions has also been intensified by problems related to the inability of large populations to relocate within shorter time periods. The loss of vital infrastructure and public transportation in cities results in extreme survival conditions which are harder for governments to mitigate. Since the poorly maintained old drainage systems in metropolitan areas fail to contain the increased rainfall intensity, flood disaster management has not been very effective in finding solutions to these problems. The increased human settlements and encroachments on the floodplains with large-scale dumping of industrial and domestic waste in rivers also make the urban areas in India more vulnerable to floods than in other countries.

Flood narratives are used in religious texts to denote apocalyptic events that specifically refer to the end of humanity as a whole. For example, the Great Flood described in the Old Testament is one of the most popular and fundamental myths in the narrative tradition of flood narratives that pronounces the violent elimination of humankind (Bekkum, 2020). Different

versions of the flood myth are there in the "creation myths" of many cultures and civilizations. The concept of the Great Flood is often used as a result of divine retribution to cleanse humanity of its sins and serves as a precursor to a new civilization and world order. In these narratives, amidst the mass destruction and extinction of natural life, there usually exists a cultural hero who "represents the human need for life" (Leeming, 2004, p. 138). Similarly, in films, the hero is often the last man standing who survives the catastrophe to become the torch-bearer of hope and faith.

For example, the apocalyptic climax of *Dasavatharam,* the 2008 South Indian science fiction film, is set against the background of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and Tsunami where the sudden eruption of a Tsunami-led flood washes away a deadly virus capable of mass destruction. The film uses the flood myth as a narrative trope through which one disaster leads to the stopping of another. The flood destroys much of the coastline with instant deaths of thousands of people but at the same time becomes a "divine intervention" in preventing the active spreading of a catastrophic biological weapon. Susan Sontag (1964) observes that science fiction disaster films reflect "the deepest anxieties about contemporary existence" as they often visualize "new anxieties about physical disaster, the prospect of universal mutilation and even annihilation" (p. 220). Concerned with the aesthetics of destruction, such films extensively stage disaster events where not only the individual life is threatened with immense havoc but the "collective incineration and extinction which could come any time, virtually without warning" (Sontag, 1964, p. 224).

Since natural disasters in the Anthropocene are highly affected by repercussions of human intervention in the natural environment, they cannot be described as merely natural anymore (Holm, 2012). It is also evident that the origin and intensity of flood disasters are highly influenced by human activities and climate change (Brisset *et. al*., 2017; Yin & Li, 2001; Zhou *et. al*., 2021). The Anthropocene is strictly based on human activities and disasters are consequences of these actions, therefore, narratives about a disaster also bear "human characteristics". In a technologically advanced world with media ecosystems controlling the authenticity of reality, the fictional aspects of disaster narratives are considered significant as far as public perception is mediated by them. In this sense, Fay's opinion that the "Anthropocene can be understood as a matter of design, if not an accomplishment— a kind of aesthetic wish-fulfillment of human worlding, however perverse" becomes valid (Baer & Fay 2018, p. 83). The social construction of disasters in modern society is something that invites multiple perspectives on how a catastrophic event is reported, described, interpreted,

and visually broadcasted (Webb, 2007). It must account for the social, cultural, political, economic, and historical meanings surrounding a tragedy and its aftermath (Allen, 2006). A cinematic narrative framing a disaster is therefore a cultural text in which the "concerns" of humankind are highlighted over an authentic depiction of the actual event.

Natural disaster discourses emphasize the significance of acknowledging people's vulnerability to a disaster rather than approaching the disaster as a physical event (Cannon, 2000; Hewitt, 1997; Mitchell, 1999; Varley, 1994). Cinematic versions of disasters are not just narratives about the actual disaster as a physical event but they contain subtexts of human misery, survival, and emotional stories. In the 2018 Hindi film, *Kedarnath* (Kapoor, 2018), the flood narrative is used as a background to tell the inter-faith love story of the protagonists. The film is based on the Uttarakhand floods in 2013, the worst natural disaster in India since the 2004 tsunami. It uses Bollywood's archetypal emotional drama, the tragic Hindu-Muslim love story, to symbolically connect both disasters as human-made. Using computer-generated images and live-action shots, *Kedarnath* recreates the flood situation that engulfs the lives of thousands of people. The film is set in the geographical landscape of the Himalayas and the cultural life surrounding the Kedarnath temple in Uttarakhand. Questions concerning the anthropogenic effects of climate change, the unscientific construction of roads, buildings, and hydroelectric projects in the area are raised by researchers and environmental activists, claiming that the disaster was a "man-made" one (Cho *et al*., 2015; Shadbolt, 2013). Like *Kedarnath*, an earlier romantic disaster film called *Tum Mile* (Deshmukh, 2009) also discussed similar patterns of disaster. *Tum Mile* was based on the Maharashtra floods of 2005 against which it pictures the love story of the protagonists and their fate in the catastrophic events that destroyed the city of Mumbai.

4. Environmental cinema and eco-horror

The concept of environmental cinema in the anthropogenic era considers the situation where a technologically and scientifically advanced world creates isolated spaces, habitats, and people whenever they are not compatible with the pace of mainstream society. Since the Anthropocene offers an opportunity to reconceptualize cinema and media history in an age where human interventions accelerated ecological change (Peterson & Uhlin, 2019), film analysis can provide insights into the ever-changing historical aspects of ecological perspectives. For instance, the South Indian state of Kerala has the

Malayalam cinema industry producing many films that can be viewed as regional environmental texts. Often referred to as "God's Own Country", Kerala's topographical specificity is environment-centric and tourism-driven, in which modern negotiations concerning environmental degradation are relevant. The environmental film narrative is a modern discourse on the construction of mediating narrative spaces of the environment and nature. The "environment cinema" of Malayalam is a special narrative about an "ecological heterotopia" where local spaces merge with international environmental issues. Analyzing the existence of such a mediated environment of "third spaces" with poor visibility to larger contexts will reveal how localized narratives contribute to issues concerning the environment.

If we select a couple of Malayalam films such as *Churam* (Bharathan, 1997)*, Kaazhcha* (Blessy, 2004)*,* and *Naran* (Joshiy, 2005), flood is used as a spectacle through which cinema juxtaposes the ferocity of nature with the regional geographies where nature-friendly life is the norm. Here, disaster is not depicted as a harbinger of an ecological apocalypse, but as a cause of cultural disorientation in the Anthropocene. Depiction of heavy rains and floods directly presents the audience with a picture of an environmental situation where survival is extremely difficult. The cultural life in such contexts emphasizes the human misery, despair, and psychological conditions that essentially subvert the glorified notion of pro-nature life. In the portrayal of environmental disasters through visuals, the cinematographic capturing of the frames of emergency situations offers the audience a wider picture of the event in its maximized intensity, and thus they ultimately become spectacles in cinema (Murray & Heumann, 2006). The concept of "eco-disaster" transcribes the very impossibility of eco-friendly life in the Anthropocene, which affects differently for different people and communities. The regional disaster films invoke a nostalgic remembering of a lost ecological and environmental memory that is no longer the same in the changed circumstances of the Anthropocene (Murray & Heumann, 2005).

According to Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009), climate change in the Anthropocene is about "human collectivity" that points out a universality that emerges from a "shared sense of a catastrophe" (p. 16). Disaster narratives shape a collective sensibility through which the disaster is perceived in social discourses (Illner & Holm, 2016). These narratives in cinema, although colluded with extra layers of thematic paradigms that are submerged in the main plot, clearly situate the audience under the shadows of the catastrophe. In disaster films, the tragic nature of the catastrophe is described through visuals of disaster-affected landscapes, dilapidated houses, rescue operations,

mass migration of communities, and displacement of loved ones. The sudden transformation of geographical space with considerable changes in ecological balance intensifies the material loss and psychological trauma suffered by the common folk. Many of these disasters, such as flooding, are region-specific as they affect those communities vulnerable in a geographical context. People living on the banks of rivers, water reservoirs, and hilly areas are severely threatened by the fear of these disasters whenever a similar one happens anywhere in the world. The fear of disaster forces people to envision future disasters in the present time. Forming a collective sense about disasters ultimately interprets the fear in light of impending ecological horror. The narrative of disasters can be viewed as a form of "enlightened doomsaying", which according to Dupuy, is "a philosophical attitude, a reversal of the metaphysical order in our ways of thinking the world and the time based on the temporality of catastrophes" (Dupuy, 2002, p. 80, cited in Holm, 2016, p. 91).

Since fear, in its fundamental sense, is environmental in origin, the relationship between the inner and outer realms of the human subject defines the structural domain of fear. The notion of fear operates in a communicative way as it often performs like a language, a medium through which explicitly visible and mysteriously hidden aspects of social, cultural, and political elements are embedded in ecological discourses. Humanity's ancient struggle with nature is something that has persistently changed over time to new dimensions. The human-nature synchrony with the living world has been drastically affected by the economically globalized political scenario where climate change in the Anthropocene epoch is metastasized to regurgitate observable realities of eco-horror.

5. Conclusions

In addition to the creation of emotional spectacles, disaster narratives of floods when represented on a screen can reflect the significance of flood as a crisis that needs to be addressed collectively. Cinema can be used as a popular medium to ease disaster communication and crisis management through powerful images and narratives that can help propagate awareness. Even if those representations of disasters are highly exaggerated for cinematic effects, they can be viewed as sources of information about how people interact with disaster environments, find strategies for survival, and form community engagements. Cultural barriers like language often affect the way disaster warnings are disseminated and understood in specific social groups (Aguirre,

1988). Disaster films, therefore, promote the idea of creating a universal language for disaster communications.

Disaster narratives help construct the structure of eco-horror in its representational, performative, semiotic, and affective qualities in Indian cinema. India's culturally sensitive and diverse geography has been environment-dependent from time immemorial; this is reflected in the worship of nature and animals through collective narratives. As opposed to western conceptualizations of ecophobia, a religious, superstitious, and sentimental approach towards nature as protector and punisher is what defines "eco-fear" in India. In Indian cinema, the romanticization of natural landscapes and geographical features corroborates the idea that human existence is not possible without having a co-dependency with nature. However, after India opened itself to the economy of neoliberal values and globalization, the changes in the socio-political setting have subverted the ecological perspective in favor of new materialistic aspirations. The urbanization of cultural elements aided the reorientation of the eco-politics in the postmodern neoliberal era, and this evolution has led to the nourishment of eco-phobia as an anti-nature response. Disasters are environmental texts dealing with the anxieties, traumas, and cultural fears associated with ecophobia. The transformational aspects of "eco-fear" reveal how they challenge the essential quality of pro-nature life in India; making it a harsh reality with ingrained violence affecting marginalized communities, thus making views on environmental protection highly divisive in the context of their practicality.

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