



Ecofeminism and media: Visual narratives of women and environment in Indian documentary films

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Abstract

Environmental problems such as deforestation, biodiversity loss, and climate change affect women in India in particularly severe ways because their daily lives, labour, and resource dependence are closely linked with local ecosystems. Ecofeminism argues that the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature arise from the same structures of patriarchy and unequal development (Shiva, 1988; Agarwal, 1992) ^[1, 15]. Documentary films, as a visual medium, play a significant role in representing these gender–environment relationships. This study examines how selected Indian documentary films, Piplantri: A Tale of Ecofeminism (2025), wildlife films by Aishwarya Sridhar, works by Rita Banerji, Something Like a War (1991), The World Before Her (2012) ^[18], India: Nature’s Wonderland (2015), and recent short films by emerging women conservation filmmakers, portray women as ecological actors, knowledge, holders, and political subjects. Using ecofeminist theory (Shiva, 1988; Mies & Shiva, 1993; Agarwal, 1992) ^[1, 12, 15] and feminist film theory, the paper analyses how these films depict women’s environmental labour, their resistance to ecological injustices, and their participation in community, led conservation. The findings show three clear patterns: (1) community, based conservation efforts, such as those in Piplantri village, reflect ecofeminist values of care and collective responsibility; (2) women wildlife filmmakers introduce empathetic, non, exploitative ways of representing nature that challenge the traditional male gaze; and (3) documentaries on women’s bodily autonomy expose how state development policies often control both natural resources and women’s lives. The study concludes that Indian documentary cinema provides powerful visual narratives that support ecofeminist insights and highlight women’s central role in environmental protection, sustainability, and social change.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Indian documentary film, women and environment, visual culture, conservation media, feminist film theory, gender and ecology

Introduction

Environmental challenges such as climate change, deforestation, water scarcity, and biodiversity loss are increasingly recognised as social issues as much as ecological ones. These problems affect different groups in different ways, and studies consistently show that women, especially in rural and resource, dependent communities, face a heavier impact. Their daily responsibilities of collecting water, fuel, and food link their lives closely with local ecosystems, making them more vulnerable when environmental degradation occurs (Agarwal, 1992; Shiva, 1988) ^[1, 15]. Ecofeminism provides a useful framework to study these connections between women and the environment. Ecofeminist thinkers like Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, and Bina Agarwal argue that the exploitation of nature and the oppression of women arise from the same patriarchal and capitalist structures that prioritise profit, control, and extraction (Shiva & Mies, 1993) ^[12]. This perspective helps explain why women often carry the heaviest burden of ecological decline and why they frequently play central roles in conservation and sustainable practices. Media, especially documentary films, play a powerful role in shaping how the public understands environmental issues. In India, documentary filmmaking has long been associated with social activism, environmental movements, and community struggles. Documentaries present real, life visuals, testimonies, and experiences that written texts cannot always capture. They create emotional and ethical engagement, allowing viewers to see how environmental change affects people’s lives, labour, and identities.

This study focuses on how selected Indian documentaries portray women’s relationship with nature. Films such as Piplantri: A Tale of Ecofeminism, wildlife documentaries by Aishwarya Sridhar and Rita Banerji, Something Like a War, The World Before Her, India: Nature’s Wonderland, and other conservation films by women filmmakers provide rich material for ecofeminist analysis. These documentaries show women as caretakers, protectors, activists, farmers, and knowledge, holders, while also highlighting the pressures they face from state policies, development projects, and social norms. By analysing these visual narratives through ecofeminist theory and feminist film theory, this paper examines how gender and environment are represented on screen, how women filmmakers reshape the cinematic gaze, and how documentary films contribute to broader conversations on environmental justice and gender equality.

Ecofeminism: Concepts and Theoretical Framework

Ecofeminism is a philosophical and social movement that examines the connections between the oppression of women and the exploitation of nature. It emerged during the 1970s and 1980s alongside global feminist and environmental movements. The central idea of ecofeminism is that patriarchal systems, those that value domination, control, and hierarchy, shape how societies treat both women and the environment (Shiva, 1988; Mies & Shiva, 1993) ^[12, 15]. Ecofeminist scholars argue that women share a unique relationship with nature because of their roles in food production, water collection, seed preservation, household management, and community care. This relationship gives

women specialised ecological knowledge that contributes to sustainable living (Agarwal, 1992) ^[1]. At the same time, when forests are cut, rivers polluted, or natural resources privatized, women's daily lives are affected first and most severely. Thus, ecofeminism helps us understand why environmental problems are also problems of gender justice. There are different strands within ecofeminism. Cultural ecofeminism highlights women's closeness to nature through nurturing, care, and emotional bonds. Social or materialist ecofeminism, explained strongly by Bina Agarwal, focuses on social structures, access to resources, land rights, and power relations affecting women's environmental roles. Both perspectives, however, emphasize that women are not simply victims of environmental decline; they are active agents who conserve seeds, protect forests, organise community movements, and resist destructive development projects.

Ecofeminist theory is especially relevant for analysing media representations. By applying ecofeminism to documentary films, researchers can study:

- how women's environmental labour is shown on screen,
- how their knowledge and practices are valued or ignored,
- how filmmakers represent power, conflict, and inequality in ecological settings, and
- whether the film challenges or reinforces patriarchal ways of seeing nature.

This theoretical framework guides the analysis in the present study and helps connect women's lived experiences with broader questions of environmental justice, sustainability, and media representation.

Role of Media and Documentary Films in Environmental Communication

Media plays a crucial role in shaping how people understand environmental issues, especially in a country like India where ecological challenges such as deforestation, water pollution, climate, related disasters, and displacement from development projects affect millions of lives. Among different forms of media, documentary films have emerged as one of the most powerful tools for environmental communication because they combine visual evidence, real testimonies, and emotional narratives. Indian documentary filmmaking has a long history of engaging with social and environmental concerns. Since the 1970s, films have documented major grassroots movements such as the Chipko Movement, Silent Valley Movement, and the Narmada Bachao Andolan, helping both national and international audiences recognise how environmental degradation affects vulnerable communities. Documentaries make invisible aspects of environmental life visible, especially women's daily labour of collecting water, preserving seeds, gathering firewood, and maintaining household resources, which mainstream media often ignores. By showing real people and real landscapes, these films help viewers understand the complexities of ecological change and the unequal burdens faced by women, tribal communities, and small farmers.

Documentary films also encourage public debate and policy discussions. They challenge dominant narratives that portray environmental issues only in terms of development, tourism,

or economic growth. Instead, they highlight voices that question destructive mining projects, large dams, deforestation, and climate injustice. In recent years, Indian women filmmakers such as Aishwarya Sridhar, Rita Banerji, and Akanksha Sood Singh have created strong environmental documentaries that introduce a more sensitive and relational way of seeing nature. Their storytelling focuses on coexistence, care, and community knowledge, offering alternative perspectives that differ from traditional, male, dominated representations of the environment. These films not only inform audiences but also preserve ecological memory by documenting endangered species, dying rivers, disappearing forests, and traditional ecological practices. Because they educate, inspire, and mobilise, documentary films function as cultural documents, research material, and instruments of activism. This makes them particularly valuable for ecofeminist analysis, as they offer visual evidence of women's relationship with nature and the gendered dimensions of environmental change.

Ecofeminist Perspectives in Indian Environmental Movements and Media Representations

Ecofeminist ideas have deeply influenced the way environmental movements in India are understood and represented, both in academic studies and in documentary films. Scholars such as Vandana Shiva (1988) ^[15] argue that women's close relationship with natural resources, water, forests, seeds, and soil, comes from their everyday responsibilities and traditional knowledge systems. This makes them the first to experience the impacts of ecological destruction.

Similarly, Bina Agarwal (1992) ^[1] emphasises that environmental problems are shaped by social structures such as land ownership, labour divisions, and resource access, which often disadvantage women. These theoretical frameworks help explain why women have historically been at the forefront of several people's ecological movements in India.

Well-known movements like the Chipko Movement (1970s) and the Narmada Bachao Andolan (1980s–2000s) show how women played active roles in resisting deforestation, displacement, and unsustainable development. Chipko's women hugged trees to prevent commercial logging in the Himalayan region, linking their survival to the survival of forests (Guha, 1989). In the Narmada Bachao Andolan, activists such as Medha Patkar became central figures in questioning the ecological and social costs of large dams (Baviskar, 1995). These movements reveal that women are not merely affected by ecological harm, they are political agents who challenge state and corporate power.

Documentary films play an important role in shaping how these movements are remembered and understood. Films on Chipko, Narmada, seed protection, and forest rights often highlight women's voices, reflecting the ecofeminist idea that women's knowledge carries important insights for sustainability. Many documentaries, especially those made by women filmmakers, portray women not as passive victims but as leaders, organisers, and custodians of ecological traditions. This reflects what Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (1993) ^[12] describe as the "subsistence perspective," where women's practices, such as seed saving, organic farming, and collective decision-making, provide alternatives to exploitative development models.

Through these representations, media becomes a space where ecofeminist themes, care, resistance, ecological wisdom, and critique of patriarchal development, are visually communicated. Such portrayals help audiences understand the deeper connection between gender justice and environmental protection, supporting the central ecofeminist claim that sustainability cannot be achieved without addressing social inequality. Thus, Indian environmental movements and their media representations together demonstrate how women's struggles are inseparable from the struggle to protect the environment.

Overview of Selected Indian Documentary Films for Ecofeminist Analysis

Documentary films offer a unique space to explore how women interact with the environment, resist ecological injustices, and contribute to conservation practices. The selection of films for this study represents different regions, filmmakers, and ecological concerns, allowing a broad understanding of ecofeminist themes. Each film provides insight into the way's women shape and are shaped by environmental realities in India.

One of the most significant films in this category is *Piplantri: A Tale of Ecofeminism*, which documents the well-known Rajasthan village where trees are planted to celebrate the birth of every girl child. The film captures how local women have transformed ecological practices into a form of social empowerment by linking environmental restoration with gender equality. This real, life initiative is well documented in development literature and news reports highlighting how over 300,000 trees were planted as part of this community, led effort (Bhattacharya, 2016). The documentary visually presents women as ecological stewards who nurture both the environment and social change.

Wildlife documentaries created by Aishwarya Sridhar, such as *Panje-The Last Wetland* and other short films, represent another emerging ecofeminist visual tradition. As one of India's youngest female wildlife filmmakers, Sridhar brings a distinctive narrative that focuses on animal behaviour, habitat loss, and human-wildlife coexistence. Her work has received national and international recognition. Through her lens, the environment is portrayed not as a distant wilderness but as a shared space where humans, particularly women in forest, fringe communities, play crucial roles in protection.

Another important set of documentaries are those directed by Rita Banerji, whose works produced under *Dusty Foot Productions* address environmental conflict, river conservation, and community rights. Film such as *The Tiger Who Crossed the Line* highlights how ecological destruction often coincides with the marginalisation of women and tribal communities. Banerji's work aligns closely with ecofeminist concerns by showing how local women, especially in riverine and forest regions, hold deep ecological knowledge while navigating the pressures of industrial projects, mining, and deforestation.

The documentary *Something Like a War* (directed by Deepa Dhanraj, 1991) broadens the ecofeminist framework by examining how the state controls women's reproductive bodies in the name of "population management." Although the film does not focus on nature directly, ecofeminist scholars argue that such control over women's bodies parallels the control exerted over natural resources (Shiva,

1988; Mies & Shiva, 1993) [12, 15]. Thus, the film becomes relevant for understanding how patriarchal institutions regulate both ecological systems and women's autonomy. Likewise, *The World Before Her* (directed by Nisha Pahuja, 2012) is not a traditional environmental film but is valuable for ecofeminist analysis because it examines female identity, representation, and nationalism. Ecofeminist scholars, especially those studying media, acknowledge that representations of women's bodies, beauty norms, and cultural expectations are interconnected with broader narratives of development and modernity (Agarwal, 1992; Shiva, 1988) [1, 15]. The film visually contrasts two types of femininity, cosmetic national modernity versus grassroots activism, making it relevant for understanding how women are portrayed in relation to social and environmental structures.

Nature,

focused films like India: Nature's Wonderland (2015)

present India's landscapes, biodiversity, and ecological challenges, offering useful material for understanding how women conservationists are involved in field research, community protection, and wildlife monitoring. Though broader in scope, such films introduce visual narratives that can be interpreted through ecofeminist lenses, especially when highlighting women's contributions.

Short films created by emerging Indian women conservation filmmakers further enrich this corpus. Many of these works, profiled in media features such as *National Geographic* and *Mongabay India*, focus on local ecological challenges, including forest protection by women in Jharkhand, coastal conservation by fisherwomen in Tamil Nadu, and climate resilience practices in Himalayan villages. These short documentaries collectively demonstrate how environmental stewardship emerges from daily lived experiences.

Together, these selected films offer a strong foundation for ecofeminist analysis because they represent diverse themes, community forestry, wildlife conservation, environmental conflict, gendered labour, and identity politics. They help reveal how women are positioned not simply as victims of environmental change but as powerful agents of ecological knowledge, resistance, and sustainability.

Analytical Discussion of Each Film (Ecofeminist Interpretation)

Indian documentary films provide rich visual material to study the intersections of gender and ecology. Through real, life narratives, these films reveal how women's bodies, labour, and knowledge systems are deeply shaped by environmental change. Each film selected for this research brings forth different dimensions of ecofeminism, ranging from grassroots conservation to political control over women's reproductive rights. The following analysis interprets these films through ecofeminist, feminist film theory, and environmental justice frameworks.

Piplantri: A Tale of Ecofeminism (Directed by Suraj Kumar)

This documentary focuses on Piplantri village in Rajasthan, where villagers plant 111 trees every time a girl child is born. The film connects environmental regeneration with the celebration of girlhood, presenting a direct challenge to patriarchal norms that often devalue daughters. Through

slow panning shots of the orchards and close-ups of women performing conservation work, the film visually reinforces the ecofeminist idea that women's survival is linked to natural sustainability. Women are shown as the primary caretakers of the trees, demonstrating their ecological agency rather than victimhood. The director's camera avoids objectifying the women; instead, it highlights their labour, community leadership, and decision-making power.

Wild Karnataka and the Work of Aishwarya Sridhar (Indian Woman Wildlife Filmmaker)

Aishwarya Sridhar, known for films like *Panje – The Last Wetland* and *Queen of Taru*, represents the growing presence of women in wildlife filmmaking. Her documentaries emphasise empathy towards non-human beings, challenging the traditionally masculine style of wildlife films that prioritise danger, speed, and conquest. For instance, *Queen of Taru* focuses on the life of a tigress, highlighting maternal instincts, vulnerability, and ecological threats caused by human encroachment. Ecofeminist theory considers such storytelling important because it portrays nature not as a resource to be dominated, but as a being with agency and relational value. Sridhar's work also reflects the gender barriers women filmmakers face, such as restricted access to forests and equipment, indicating how patriarchy shapes environmental professions.

Something Like a War (1991, Deepa Dhanraj)

This documentary is not traditionally "environmental," but it is essential for ecofeminist analysis because it exposes how the Indian state controls women's bodies through sterilisation programmes. Ecofeminists argue that the domination of women and the domination of nature stem from the same patriarchal logic of control, regulation, and extraction. Dhanraj uses raw interviews, on-site footage of sterilisation camps, and testimonies of marginalised women to reveal how state policies treat women's bodies as sites of population management. The film powerfully shows that women's bodily autonomy is tied to environmental justice, because population policies have historically blamed poor women instead of addressing industrial pollution, deforestation, or resource mismanagement.

The World Before Her (2012, Nisha Pahuja)

Although this film primarily examines beauty pageants and conservative training camps, it is relevant for ecofeminist study because it shows how women's identities are shaped by cultural ideologies that also influence environmental attitudes. The film contrasts neoliberal consumerism (beauty industry) and patriarchal nationalism (*Durga Vahini* training), both of which position women's bodies as symbols of power or purity. Ecofeminists argue that such ideological control is parallel to the control of land, forests, and natural resources. By placing both worlds side by side through cross-cut editing, Pahuja demonstrates how modernity and tradition both discipline women, much like how development and conservation policies discipline nature.

India: Nature's Wonderland (BBC & Discovery India)

Though not exclusively about women, this documentary includes segments featuring women from forest-dependent communities in the Western Ghats and Northeast India. Their knowledge about medicinal plants, seasonal cycles,

and wildlife behaviour highlights the ecofeminist idea that women often hold intricate ecological knowledge derived from daily interaction with nature. The film's representation counters the stereotype of women as passive sufferers of environmental change; instead, they appear as custodians of biodiversity. The camera captures women's movements in forests and fields with a calm, observational style, emphasising their harmonious relationship with the environment.

Short Environmental Films by Emerging Women Filmmakers

Recent short documentaries, often produced for platforms like PSBT India, YouTube, Film Southasia, and independent festivals, cover topics such as mangrove restoration, tribal women's seed banks, climate, resilient farming, and anti-mining movements led by women. These films typically adopt a participatory visual style, allowing women narrators to speak directly to the camera. This aligns with feminist film theory, which advocates dismantling the "male gaze" by giving narrative authority to women themselves. Ecofeminist themes emerge clearly: women defend land against extraction, advocate seed sovereignty, and resist displacement, illustrating the idea that environmental destruction disproportionately harms those with the least political power.

Conclusion

This study shows that Indian documentary films provide powerful and meaningful pictures of how women and the environment are closely connected. The films analysed in this paper reveal that women are not only affected by environmental problems, but they also play leading roles in protecting nature, conserving resources, and fighting against ecological injustice. Ecofeminism helps us understand that the same systems that harm nature also harm women, and these documentaries make this connection visible through real stories, voices, and visuals. Films like *Piplantri: A Tale of Ecofeminism* show how environmental care can also support gender equality, while the works of women filmmakers such as Aishwarya Sridhar and Rita Banerji challenge traditional ways of looking at nature and offer more sensitive and inclusive perspectives. Documentaries dealing with issues like reproductive rights and identity further show how women's bodies and natural resources are controlled in similar ways under patriarchal and developmental systems. Overall, the study concludes that Indian documentary cinema does more than entertain, it educates, raises awareness, and inspires change. By presenting women as caretakers, community leaders, and environmental activists, these films strengthen ecofeminist arguments and highlight the essential role of women in building a sustainable and just future.

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