

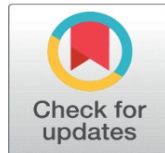
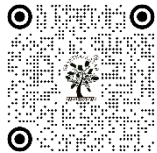
DOCUMENTING COEXISTENCE: A STUDY OF ENVIRONMENTAL NARRATIVES IN DOCUMENTARY FILMS THE ELEPHANT WHISPERERS AND ALL THAT BREATHES

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ABSTRACT

The Study explores the growing importance of environmental documentaries in fostering dialogue, influencing public consciousness, and documenting the fragile threads of coexistence in an age of ecological uncertainty. The research examines environmental narratives embedded in two critically acclaimed Indian documentary films, *The Elephant Whisperers* (2022) directed by Kartiki Gonsalves and *All That Breathes* (2022) directed by Shaunak Sen. Set against the backdrop of India's rapidly evolving ecological and socio-political landscape, the study investigates how these documentaries depict the complex relationship between humans and non-human life forms, and how they reflect broader environmental concerns such as climate change, species adaptation, coexistence, habitat loss, and human-wildlife conflict. Using a qualitative methodology that includes thematic film analysis, interviews with audiences, and an interview with director Shaunak Sen along with some other documentary filmmakers, the research examines the affective strategies used to portray environmental realities. Audience responses reinforce the impact of these films in raising awareness, evoking empathy, and challenging conventional perceptions of environmental crises. By situating these films within the larger discourse of environmental communication and media ecology, the study argues that through the portrayal of human-wildlife relationships, documentaries play a crucial role in showcasing various environmental issues.

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Keywords: Environmental Documentaries, Human–Wildlife Relationships, Ecological Narratives, Climate Change, Coexistence



1. INTRODUCTION

India is a country rich in biodiversity but currently dealing with severe environmental crises. Numerous challenges, such as urbanization, air and water pollution, climate change and habitat destruction, not only endanger natural ecosystems but also the livelihoods of countless individuals who rely on them. Development that comes at the expense of our environment has been a prevalent issue for a long time. Since ancient times, both the humans and wildlife coexisted together, though there were instances of conflict as well, but they had a strong connection with the natural world around them that has been portrayed in numerous places.

Even the depiction of human-wildlife relationships is an old theme woven into the fabric of many cultures. The Panchatantra, an ancient Indian fable tradition, offers an early cultural articulation of human-wildlife relationships by framing animals as moral agents within shared ecological and social systems. It has highlighted the human-wildlife connection, showcasing the balance between coexistence and conflict through various stories, such as 'The Lion and the Bull' illustrate how miscommunication disrupts harmony between species, while narratives like 'The Dove and the Hunter' advocate collective coexistence against human dominance, whereas 'The Brahmin and the Mongoose' underscores the tragic consequences of misinterpretation and broken trust between humans and animals [Rani and Stella \(2025\)](#).

The media has played an important role in bringing various environmental issues ahead by highlighting the seriousness of different environmental problems and also raising awareness among the people as to how these concerns are growing rapidly [Rajan \(1992\)](#). Documentary films are defined as nonfiction films in which factual information about real people, events, or subjects is presented creatively. Documentary films are defined as one of the "discourses of sobriety" that include nature, economics, politics, and history—discourses that claim to describe the "real" to tell the truth [Nichols \(1991\)](#). Documentary films have emerged as a powerful tool for spreading awareness about growing environmental concerns.

A number of environmental documentaries have been made globally; some prominent documentaries are 'An Inconvenient Truth' (2006) by Al Gore, which showcases the issue of global warming to a wide range of audiences. Another one is 'Before the Flood' (2016), which showcases the severe effect of climate change in the world and also provides some solutions to it. There are many such documentaries, like 'Chasing Ice', 'My Octopus Teacher', 'Our Planet', etc.

Now, in Indian films, nature, environment, and climate have been featured since the 1940s. Over time, there has been significant evolution from eco-cinema to eco-documentaries. In the contemporary landscape in India, the need for original narratives in this genre is greater now than ever before after the global recognition gained by "The Elephant Whisperers" and "All That Breathes," said the well-known wildlife filmmaker, Amoghavarsha J. S., who is known for his documentary 'Wild Karnataka' (2019) and the recent docudrama 'Gandhada Gudi' (2022). There is an emerging trend growing currently of the environmental films as they are playing an important role in fostering positive dialogues around various environmental issues.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. MEDIA AND ENVIRONMENT

India is renowned for its varied landscapes and rich cultural heritage but faces numerous environmental challenges. Due to the country's swift industrial growth and increasing urban development, significant difficulties arise in balancing economic advancement with environmental conservation. Presently, the majority of environmental issues in India focus on air pollution, water contamination, soil erosion, deforestation, desertification, and the decline of wildlife resulting from unregulated land and resource use by humans on a large scale [Dwivedi and Kishore \(1982\)](#). Some of the most common environmental issues in India today are air pollution, water pollution, waste management issues, biodiversity loss, and declining groundwater levels, primarily driven by rapid population growth, industrial activity, and unsustainable agricultural practices [Igini \(2024\)](#).

In India, different media platforms report on various environmental issues. The print media mainly discusses climate change, extreme weather, and pollution, often focusing on alarming conditions and concerns rather than educating the public or encouraging them to change their lifestyles. On the other hand, television covers natural disasters and international events but lacks in-depth discussion. Today, social media plays an important role in raising awareness about environmental issues like air pollution and climate change. Various other factors like culture, politics, and personal beliefs also shape how these issues are presented in the media. Overall, each media type has its own focus; there is a need for more consistent and solution-focused discussions across all platforms to better inform the public and support environmental protection [Mutyala \(2024\)](#).

2.2. ENVIRONMENT AND DOCUMENTARY

"In documentary we deal with the actual, and in one sense with the real. But the really real...is something deeper than that. The only reality which counts in the end is the interpretation which is profound." said by film scholar John Grierson. Documentaries about environmental issues may cover various subjects and ideas related to nature, science, protests,

demonstrations, culture, the humanities, etc., or be specifically connected to environmental conservation. The environmental issues can further have different subgenres that can be classified into preservation of species, demonstration and public hazards, anti-nuclear hazards, local features, recording of public hazards, and natural disasters Pérez (2019).

Documentary filmmaking in India has undergone significant transformation, especially when it comes to the portrayal of environmental issues, as it has undergone a significant shift from a primarily government-controlled narrative to a vibrant platform for independent voices and their growing environmental issues at large, which are often neglected by the government and mainstream media. During the 1970s and 1980s, filmmakers began to embrace activist techniques, using film as a tool for social change to highlight critical environmental concerns alongside social injustices. And the landscape of documentary filmmaking has been ever since changing and evolving Namitha (2023).

Hindi cinema is also increasingly embracing different environmental narratives by incorporating themes of wildlife, climate change, and water scarcity into its storylines. These films often receive critical acclaim, but they don't perform commercially at the box office. Despite challenges, environmental films and documentaries remain crucial for raising awareness and promoting understanding of critical environmental issues. Innovative storytelling, partnerships with OTT platforms, and engaging with a broader audience can help these films reach a wider impact Shankar (2024). Nila Madhab Panda, who has directed and produced over 70 films, documentaries, and short films focusing on environmental and social issues stated, "When climate change topics appear in the news, they are often not taken seriously by people. Many individuals believe it is a problem affecting others, not themselves. Thus, I thought creating climate fiction would create a more significant impact" Shankar (2024).

Environmental documentaries in India serve as powerful tools for raising awareness about various ecological issues and also promoting sustainable practices. Various films and series critically highlight topics such as solar energy, indigenous knowledge, and water conservation. For example, the Eco India Magazine's documentary series showcases successful solar energy initiatives, emphasizing its role in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and promoting clean energy solutions. Several other media platforms are also raising awareness about growing environmental concerns and promoting sustainable solutions to sensitize people at large Viswam (2024).

2.3. DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKERS AND FILM FESTIVALS

India confronts significant ecological challenges owing to its increasing population and rapid industrial development, making it crucial to address these environmental issues urgently. Documentaries have successfully engaged the public with emotional storytelling and impactful visuals. Numerous filmmakers have contributed significantly to this effort, including the Bedi Brothers, Ajay and Vijay Bedi, who are well-known Indian filmmakers making noteworthy contributions to this genre. Their film from 2006, "India's Best Environmental Documentaries – Part 1 Cherub of the Mist," won a Green Oscar and focuses on the endangered Red Panda, highlighting its behavior and habitat. This film dispelled the myth that Red Pandas are not found in India, revealing their scarcity, as there are fewer than 1,000 individuals left, unlike other species like snow leopards and tigers Ecoideaz (2023).

Filmmakers have significantly contributed to showcasing various environmental narratives through documentary filmmaking. One prominent Indian filmmaker in this field is Mike H. Pandey, who concentrates on themes related to wildlife and the environment. With more than thirty years in documentary filmmaking, Mike Pandey has created over 600 films and has garnered numerous accolades at both national and international levels. Some of his notable works include *The Last Migration* (1994), *Shores of Silence* (2000), *Vanishing Giants* (2004), *Broken Wings* (2006), and *The Timeless Traveler*. These films have not only educated viewers about various environmental issues but have also directly influenced legislative changes aimed at protecting species such as whale sharks, elephants, vultures, and horseshoe crabs. He remarked, "We humans have destroyed this planet, and we are the only species who can fix it" (Your Story, 2016).

Documentaries are no longer considered boring and non-glamorous in India, documentaries are gaining a lot of popularity, as they are focusing on authentic content, compelling issues and untold stories related to the environment. Also the digital platforms and independent filmmakers are growing and filming various environmental narratives. The *Elephant Whisperers*, in the year 2023 made history by becoming the first documentary to win an Oscar, also Shaunak Sen's *All That Breathes* was nominated but couldn't win. The documentary landscape in India has evolved in recent years,

with audiences inclination towards content that is a perfect blend of intellectual depth along with emotional appeal. [Mehrotra \(2025\)](#).

The film festivals in India are also playing a crucial role in promoting environmental documentary films and are emerging lately, as they are providing platforms where films about various issues are displayed and talked about. One such film festival is, CMS VATAVARAN. This groundbreaking international festival focused on environmental and wildlife films began in 2002. Another one rooted in India, ALT EFF is a destination for universal stories that transcend borders and focus on what unites humanity: our relationship with nature. (Film free Way)

Table 1

Table 1 List of Indian Environmental Documentary Film Festivals		
Serial No.	Environment Film Festival	Location
1	tiNai Ecofilm festival (TEFF)	Chennai, India
2	Tigerland India Film Festival (TIFF)	Bhopal, India
3	CMS VATAVARAN	New Delhi, India
4	All Living Things Environmental Film Festival (ALT EFF)	Launched in Panchgani, Maharashtra, India
5	Kolkata International Wildlife & Environment Film Festival	Kolkata, India

2.4. HUMAN-WILDLIFE COEXISTENCE

The definitions of coexistence vary according to different conservation researchers, the definition provided by [Carter and Linnell \(2016\)](#) who define coexistence as “a dynamic but sustainable state in which humans and wildlife co-adapt to living in shared landscapes, where human interactions with wildlife are governed by effective institutions that ensure long-term wildlife population persistence, social legitimacy, and tolerable levels of risk.”

Human-wildlife conflict occurs when interactions between humans and animals lead to negative outcomes, such as property damage, loss of livelihoods, and even deaths. These conflicts can play a role in the extinction of species. Not only is human-wildlife conflict a major threat to many of the world’s most recognizable species, but the report "A Future for All: The need for human-wildlife coexistence" also highlights it as a development and humanitarian issue, in addition to being one of conservation. The report underscores the importance of paying greater attention to this issue, explains the complexities of human-wildlife conflict and its underlying causes, illustrates the immediate effects of conflict on various scales, proposes strategies for resolution through encouraging solutions and fostering coexistence, and offers forecasts for the future of human-wildlife harmony. [World Wildlife Fund \(2021\)](#).

Human-centered activities have notably encroached on wildlife’s natural habitats, resulting in heightened conflicts between humans and animals, particularly elephants and tigers in India. Human-elephant conflicts are a complicated issue that arises when elephants enter human-dominated landscapes in search of food, and water leading to conflicts with humans. With roughly 30,000 wild Asian elephants, conflicts emerge as their foraging territories shrink, leading to more than 500 human deaths and over 100 elephant fatalities each year. [Das et al. \(2025\)](#). In response, different state governments are adopting measures like trenches, fences, community engagement, and advanced technologies such as drones and AI-based warning systems to alleviate these conflicts, although the challenge remains significant as human development continues to encroach on wildlife habitats [Team \(2024\)](#).

3. METHODOLOGY

For this research study a mixed-methods approach is utilized, incorporating both thematic analysis of the documentary films and also the structured/semi-structured interviews with filmmakers, other documentary makers and people who have watched it. Qualitative research is suitable as it provides in-depth exploration of different narratives portrayed in the documentary and also to understand the subjective experiences of various individuals shown in both the films.

Research Sampling: Purposive Sampling.

Table 2

Table 2 Sample Distribution				
Serial No.	Documentary	Year	Duration	Director
1	The Elephant Whisperers	2022	41 Minutes	Kartiki Gonsalves
2	All That Breathes	2022	1h 37 Minutes	Shaunak Sen

3.1. CRITERIA OF SELECTION

The selection of "Elephant Whisperers" and "All That Breathes" is based on a number of factors like- both the films have a similar theme of human-wildlife relationship and other common themes as well, it's because of the humans that animals face problems and it's them only who protect them in both these documentaries. Apart from the thematic relevance, both the documentary films are contemporary, they are critically acclaimed, globally recognized and they have thematic relevance in representation of environmental issues.

3.2. METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

The methods used for this study are Thematic analysis, and Interviews with filmmakers, other documentary makers, and audiences. The thematic analysis will be done through Six steps of Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#).

The interviews are conducted in 3 phases respectively;

Table 3

Table 3 Phases of Interview Distribution		
Phase I	Phase II	Phase III
Structured Interview	Semi-structured Interview	Semi-structured Interview
The Documentary Filmmakers	Audience Analysis	Other documentary filmmakers or scholars
Total Number: 01	Total Number: 10	Total Number: 05
Purposive Sampling	Snowball Sampling	Purposive Sampling

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the present scenario environmental issues are escalating and there is an increasing overlap between human settlements and wildlife habitats, leading to potential human-wildlife conflicts and disruptions. Environmental documentaries in India serve as powerful tools for raising awareness about various ecological issues and also promoting sustainable practices [Viswam \(2024\)](#).

Both the documentaries explore the intricate relationship between humans and wildlife while also highlighting the political dynamics that impact marginalized communities. The film showcases how these communities possess a profound understanding of environmental challenges, as they are often the first to experience their effects; they have a clearer grasp of the complexities surrounding wildlife conservation and their inherent rights, as demonstrated in "The Elephant Whisperers." Meanwhile, "All That Breathes" centers on two brothers in Delhi who nurture black kites against a backdrop of a shifting political climate; here, the focus on coexistence is expressed through personal experiences rather than direct political critique. Both films advocate for a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, encouraging a solution-based approach to ecological issues [Roy \(2023\)](#).

In the context of the documentary, the indigenous tribes and their relationship with nature plays an important role, as these communities help in environmental conservation. These narratives are very much evident in documentaries like "The Elephant Whisperers" where it serves as a powerful medium for showcasing this human-wildlife connection, highlighting the cultural significance that shows their conservation efforts and at the same time how beautifully they resonate emotions. Visual storytelling and narrative techniques can bridge gaps between indigenous perspectives and broader ecological discourses, raising awareness about the different challenges caused due industrialization and climate change. Furthermore, studies on the impact of eco-documentaries indicate their effectiveness in mobilising public

sentiment towards environmental issues. The Elephant Whisperers not only highlights the plight of Asian elephants but also champions the indigenous tribes as custodians of ecological wisdom and guardians of the planet Jain (2024).

Both contemporary documentaries, "The Elephant Whisperers" and "All That Breathes," deeply investigate human-animal connections within specific cultural frameworks while also addressing larger environmental issues.

5. THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE DOCUMENTARIES

5.1. THE ELEPHANT WHISPERERS (2022)

The Oscar-winning documentary "The Elephant Whisperers", directed by Kartiki Gonsalves, is a heart-touching story based in the Mudumalai National Park in Tamil Nadu, India, about a couple named Bomman and Bellie, who are caretakers of two orphaned elephants, Raghu and Ammu. Instead of showing factual information, real life stories are more impactful and engaging when it comes to highlighting important issues. In the same manner, this documentary through personal narratives and emotional storytelling beautifully portrays the human-wildlife relationship between the caretakers and the elephants and at the same time also talks about the increasing environmental challenges that are caused due to human activities. The documentary highlights how the marginalized communities have a deeper understanding of environmental issues, as they are the ones who suffer from it first, they have a better understanding of the complexities of wildlife protection and their rights, which is highlighted in "The Elephant Whisperers" Roy (2023) as it showcases the local cultural practices of the caretakers towards the animals as how their traditional knowledge is passed on generationally to take care of the elephants and contribute in conservation of wildlife.

Now, after watching this documentary the environmental narratives that were portrayed in it are;

Theme 1: Human-Wildlife Relationship

Human-wildlife relationship refers to the bond and emotional connection shared between humans and animals. This relationship can be defined in terms of their coexistence, human-wildlife conflicts, or how mutually they benefit each other in an ecosystem. The human-wildlife relationship is beautifully portrayed in the recent documentary film "The Elephant Whisperers", as the story explores the beautiful bond between two caretakers, Bomman and Bellie, and the two elephants they take care of, especially Raghu, who was rescued and given to them to look after him, and he overcomes his dreadful traumatic past with the love and guidance of the caretakers who consider him as his own child Das (2022).

There are a number of instances where the beautiful bond between the caretakers, and the orphaned elephants are portrayed. Bellie says, "We have become a family around Raghu, and that is the reason he survived. I feel like I am his mother, when I cried, Raghu wiped my tears with his trunk." Bomman says, "Elephants also require a lot of love and affection. It's just like raising human babies and I can't imagine a life without elephants".

Theme 2: Habitat Loss and Human Encroachment

Habitat loss refers to the situation where there is a decline in the availability of natural spaces for flora and fauna mostly because of various human activities and Human encroachment is the expansion of human settlements into the natural spaces of wildlife.

The documentary however slightly addresses this issue by highlighting the past experiences of the elephants. It portrays how because of human activities the elephants suffer in Tamil Nadu. For example- It is shown that "Wild Elephants roam in search of food and water and how their babies often get lost and left behind and are displaced in the jungles". These instances showcase the various challenges faced by these elephants and how they suffer because of human activities. However, this theme could have been expanded more by showcasing the scenes of human activities like- deforestation or land being cleared for farming, that actually impacts these elephants' here and how because of that they are displaced in the jungle. This theme could have highlighted how human activities hamper the survival of these wildlife animals.

Theme 3: Conservation and Coexistence

Conservation refers to the efforts made by individuals and communities to preserve the wildlife. And Coexistence defined by Carter and Linnell (2016) is "a dynamic but sustainable state in which humans and wildlife co-adapt to living in shared landscapes, where human interactions with wildlife are governed by effective institutions that ensure long-term wildlife population persistence, social legitimacy, and tolerable levels of risk."

The documentary, "The Elephant Whisperers" showcases the efforts made by the Forest Department of Tamil Nadu to rescue the orphaned elephants and also how the caretakers who make efforts to nurture the elephants and contribute in the conservation efforts. Bellie says,

"We live off the forest, but we also protect it. We don't take anything more than necessary".

The couple uses their indigenous knowledge to educate the people within their communities to spread the importance of conservation efforts. Also, despite the human-wildlife conflicts, the documentary portrays how a peaceful coexistence can exist between humans and animals. Also the couples are emotionally invested in taking care of the elephants and give an important lesson to the audience as to how collective actions of individuals or communities can help in conservation of wildlife and lead to a peaceful coexistence between humans and wildlife.

Theme 4: Climate Change

Climate change refers to the long-term shift in temperature and weather patterns changed over a long period of time. The documentary talks about the larger issue of how the Asian Elephants are losing their habitats because of climate change. It portrays different seasons throughout and how it affects the wildlife. Because of climate change, "The verdant greens are gone, replaced by the scorching heat of summer and the wild elephants roam in search of food and water". The forest fire scenes are shown to highlight the urgency of growing environmental concerns and how it is impacting the wild animals.

But these aspects are shown less in the documentary and could have been highlighted more to portray the urgency of the environmental crisis. The documentary urges the audiences through personal narratives of the caretakers as to how their efforts and commitment is crucial to protect these animals and tackle the growing environmental challenges.

Theme 5: Human-Wildlife Conflict

The term "human-wildlife conflict" describes the unfavorable interactions that occur between people and animals and how these encounters can result in detrimental outcomes like the loss of property, livelihoods, or even lives [World Wildlife Fund \(2021\)](#). The documentary explores the theme of conflict between humans and wildlife from both the human and animal perspectives, while also showcasing the lovely relationship between the elephants and their caretakers.

Bomman says, *"It is the actions of us humans that is causing elephants to enter villages these days. Our mistakes are very harmful both for us and for elephants"*. Also, a tiger killed Bellie's Ex-husband and despite that the love and affection she shows for the wildlife animals is very heart-touching and beautiful. It is because of the humans the animals are suffering but it is the human only who is rescuing and taking care of these animals. The couple's understanding of this issue and their efforts and empathy towards the elephants bridges the gap between humans and wildlife.

5.2. ALL THAT BREATHES

"All That Breathes" shows a more urban narrative towards the growing environmental concerns, and the story revolves around two brothers, Nadeem and Saud, who have dedicated their lives to rescue the injured kites in Delhi. The Oscars nominated documentary Directed by Shaunak Sen, explores the intersection between urban life and wildlife conservation. *"Conceptually, I was interested in thinking of human non-human entanglement or kinship or neighborliness. And therefore, the abstract triangulation of birds, humans and air was the broader kind of conceptual scaffolding that I was interested in. And I started looking for people who had a meaningful relationship with the air and non-human life. So that's how the brothers or my protagonists kind of initially came into my purview. And that's how the film began. You might call it ecology, but my entry point wasn't largely through the lens of the ecological as it was in terms of being about human non-human interfacing, especially in the urban"*. [S. Sen, Personal Communication \(April 1, 2025\)](#)

One of the brothers says, *"Delhi is a gaping wound. And we're a tiny band-aid on it"*. It begins with showing a number of species, and tackles the growing issue of black kites falling in Delhi because of the severe air pollution. It also captures the dedication and commitment of both the brothers in order to rescue the injured kites.

After watching this documentary a couple of times, some of the environmental narratives that were effectively portrayed in it are as follows.

Theme 1: Human-Wildlife Relationship

The documentary "All That Breathes" depicts the human-wildlife relationship through the personal stories of two brothers who devoted their lives to saving the injured birds. The term "human-wildlife relationship" refers to the bond and emotional connection shared between humans and animals, which can be defined in terms of their coexistence, human-wildlife conflicts, or how they mutually benefit each other in an ecosystem.

Throughout the documentary there are a number of scenes that depict their beautiful relationship with the black kites they have rescued, in one scene the brothers jump into the river Yamuna to rescue the kites, and it shows how much they are dedicated towards rescuing these black kites. It beautifully depicts the human-animal relationship, as how both the brothers have strong determination and commitment towards rescuing the birds. It also highlights the broader environmental and cultural crisis that we witness in urban India. The film is also appealing in terms of visual aesthetics, it has stunning cinematography that documents the coexistence of both the black kites and the humans within the same ecosystem, that evokes a sense of wonder but at the same time also highlighting the harsh realities. Khan (2023). Not only the brothers but their families are also empathetic towards the kites, the wife of one of the brothers helped him in dressing the injured kites.

Theme 2: Air Pollution and Climate Change

Air pollution refers to the harmful toxic substances that are present in the atmosphere and has an adverse effect on humans and the environment. Climate change refers to the long-term shift in temperature and weather patterns changed over a long period of time.

The documentary addresses the major concern of air pollution in Delhi, a city known for its poor air quality and how this impacts the overall ecosystem, particularly the black kites here. The two brothers rescue the black kites who fall down because of the polluted air in Delhi, one of the brothers says, *"The air is awful today. As Delhi's air changed, so did its metabolism". "In the winters in Delhi, when you know the whole city gets laminated by this thick, hazy, almost monochromatic air and the texture of grayness that kind of envelops all aspects of life. And every time you look up at the skies of Delhi or this dystopian picture postcard with these lazy dots that are the black kites gliding in the sky."* S. Sen, Personal Communication (April 1, 2025).

The documentary also tackles the broader theme of climate change apart from the air pollution issue in Delhi, suggesting that the growing environmental crisis is much more than just the issue of air pollution. It is because of human activities that the environment is degrading and these issues are caused and they are in a way affecting the wildlife around. And human activities contribute to the environmental degradation and deteriorating conditions for animals around.

Theme 3: Coexistence

Coexistence defined by Carter and Linnell (2016) is "a dynamic but sustainable state in which humans and wildlife co-adapt to living in shared landscapes, where human interactions with wildlife are governed by effective institutions that ensure long-term wildlife population persistence, social legitimacy, and tolerable levels of risk."

The documentary depicts coexistence through the everyday life interaction of the people and black kites in Delhi. Some people are peacefully coexisting with the kites as there are scenes that depict the admiration of local residents towards the kites, and others are getting to know about the ecological balance maintained due to kites through the brothers. In a particular scene, one of the brothers says, "Without the kites, the garbage mountains would be sky-high". Kites eat away all the filth generated by human beings, and without them the waste would increase. One of the dialogues highlights how important other species are for the coexistence, "You don't care for things because they share the same country, religion or politics. Life itself is kinship. We're all a community of air. That's why we can't abandon the birds". This fosters a sense of responsibility towards the birds and brothers and appeals to the mutual coexistence among humans and animals that is essential in urban landscape.

Theme 4: Species Adaptation

Species adaptation refers to the process by which different organisms adapt their surrounding environment to adjust and survive on it. One of the important themes highlighted in the documentary is how black kites struggle to survive and adapt in the polluted environment of Delhi. The Documentary portrays how different species are adapting here amidst the ongoing changing environment, "Every life form adjusts to the city now. Rats, pigs, frogs, mosquitoes, turtles, insects, cows and horses... All improvise and adapt to the city". There are scenes where the kites are feeding on the garbage in Delhi's landfills, and in a way contributing to keep the city clean. These scenes emphasise how important

the black kites are to keep the city's ecosystem clean. The black kites have also adapted to live in the urban spaces created by humans to provide them shelter. "This is also a form of natural selection. Humans are now their natural environment". The black kites struggle to adapt in the polluted environment but the efforts of both the brothers are visible throughout.

Theme 5: Human-Wildlife Conflict

Human-wildlife conflict refers to the negative interaction between humans and animals and how the encounter between them lead to negative results, such as loss of property, livelihoods, and even life (WWF, 2021). The documentary, through the story of two brothers who rescue black kites, addresses human-wildlife conflict subtly in the urban setting, by depicting how because of human actions there is an ecological imbalance, as the kites are struggling to live in the toxic environment. The severe issue of air pollution in Delhi not only impacts the kites but also the humans and other animals in Delhi. The grey hazy sky of Delhi is used as a visual metaphor to showcase the environmental as well as political conflicts going on in the city at that time. It is because of humans the environment is degrading and it is leading an impact on wildlife as well. There are some scenes in the documentary that depicts both the sides, a lot of people where had mixed attitude towards the kites, but the brothers with their compassion and efforts tried their best to resolve those conflicts and also urge the viewers to foster affection for the birds

6. INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

6.1. THEMES IN BOTH THE DOCUMENTARIES

1) The Elephant Whisperers

Table 4

Table 4 Themes from The Elephant Whisperers		
Human-wildlife Relationship	Bonding	Humans Relationship
Love	Economic Conditions	Affection
Nurturing	Parenthood	Human-Nature Relationship
Exploitation	Poaching	Endangerment
Climate Change	Separation	Cultural Significance

2) All That Breathes

Table 5

Table 5 Themes from All That Breathes		
Sympathy	Human-Wildlife Relationship	Climate Change
Brotherhood	Air Pollution	Political Struggles
Passion	Economic Conditions	Emotions
Socio-Political Conflict	Communal Riots	Coexistence
Religious Tension	Personal Stories	Dedication

Based on the audience analysis, Human-Wildlife Relationship emerged as a central theme in both the documentaries. Both the documentaries highlight this major theme by portraying several other themes as well, like in "The Elephant Whisperers" the human-wildlife relationship is showcased through the affection, love, care of the caretakers and also how they not just look after them but also nurture them like their own kids and when Raghu gets separated from them, that emotional bond is visible more. Additionally, "All That Breathes" explores themes of compassion, fervor, and the brothers' commitment to saving the injured black kites in Delhi. Apart from this, some environmental narratives like- Climate Change and air pollution were also a prominent theme recognized in both the documentaries as mentioned by the audiences. It was more talked about in the documentary "All That Breathes", as audiences found the ecological themes more dominant in this documentary as how air pollution causes harm to the black kites and other creatures. This was something missing in "The Elephant Whisperers" as there the main focus was more on the relationship of both the caretakers and the elephants as audiences connected more with themes of love, care, empathy and affection, sidelining the ecological concerns like- climate change or habitat loss by the audiences majorly.

"I don't enter a documentary with quote unquote issues. You know, documentary cinema is cinema. And it's as much a function of storytelling and character and emotions, etc. It's not a didactic pedantic thing that people sometimes make it out to be. It's just a big issue. The broader ideas that I was interested in were human and non-human entanglement, especially in the urban space, the Anthropocene. You might call it ecology, but my entry point wasn't largely through the lens of the ecological as it was in terms of being about human non-human interfacing, especially in the urban" S. Sen, [Personal Communication \(April 1, 2025\)](#). Also, one of the significant findings is how majority of the audiences identified the themes like- political tension and communal riots that were happening amidst all this in the documentary "All That Breathes" and it portrays how the environmental issues are very much part of these tensions going on and can't be separated from the social-political contexts of life.

Something that was common in the audience's responses were that themes showcasing personal narratives affects the viewers attention towards the larger ecological concerns as well, and both the documentaries to a larger extent did that. Another common theme audiences resonated with was the economical conditions of the protagonists in both the documentaries and despite that struggle, how they were constantly dedicated and passionate towards rescuing the animals and taking care of them. Both audience feedback and the filmmaker's takeaway suggests how complex environmental narratives can be showcased by simplifying them through personal narratives, but at the same time the stories can overshadow the environmental concerns that the filmmaker wants to address.

7. OTHER ASPECTS OF FILMMAKING IN BOTH THESE DOCUMENTARIES

The portrayal of environmental issues in documentaries has emerged as a powerful tool to raise awareness among the people and urge them to take collective actions in order to maintain an ecological balance. Apart from the storytelling technique, documentary films, or any audio-visual medium through other filmmaking techniques like- visual aesthetics, sound, editing structure etc. has the potential to enhance the overall viewing experience and it helps in bringing to the forefront the environmental crisis happening around in the world. It allows filmmakers to capture and present reality in a compelling and engaging way, ensuring the audience understands and connects with the story. As documentaries show the actuality, it not only educates viewers about the crisis going on but also tends to provoke thought and inspire change. One of the research participants said, *"Masses feel documentaries are boring, that's why technical aspects and visual aesthetics enhance the audience engagement and platforms like Netflix are producing such documentaries"*.

In the similar manner, the different filmmaking techniques played a crucial role in both the documentaries "Elephant Whisperers" and "All That Breathes" as well. To begin with, "The Elephant Whisperers", the documentary's cinematography was top notch. It emerged as the most talked-about aspect among viewers. The majority of participants found they were present in the jungle and were part of the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve and were living with the caretakers and the elephants. Because of the beautiful cinematography, the human-wildlife relationship between the couple and the elephants was portrayed in a more appealing way. The documentary used both contrast of natural light and visual aesthetics to make it more beautiful, the camera movements beautifully showcased the bond between the elephants and the caretakers, there were a lot of closeups to show the close proximity between them. Many respondents found the visuals in the documentary to be "raw and original," by the portrayal of natural landscapes and even the minute moments captured between the caretakers and the elephants throughout the documentary. But, a few participants expressed that at times, the cinematography "felt a bit staged or artificial," particularly in scenes where the human-wildlife interactions appeared a bit choreographed for the camera. This raises a question about how the documentaries can focus on balancing the representation of actuality along with making it visually aesthetic and appealing.

Now, the technical aspects of the documentary "All That Breathes", the structured editing style and sound design was the most liked aspect by the participants. One of the participants said, "The editing is very beautifully done and it has structured the whole story all together, also the sound design makes you immersed in that cinematic world as you can hear the sound of the kites, the other creatures very minutely and you are a part of the chaotic urban life". Moreover, sound design was widely praised like the smooth and detailed sound escape of the urban setting along with the different creatures that enhanced the viewing experience as well as the listening experience.

"Well, obviously, everything from cinematography to sound to editing, everything is a very specific choice. So I can give you an example of some of this, for instance, in the cinematography, because the film kind of keeps this idea of not firstly shooting it handheld, because whenever you're shooting something handheld, there's a sense of urgency and emergency, whereas my characters are very contemplative and meditative. And therefore, the form of the film had to intuitively, you

know, be in conversation with its content, and therefore had to take on a more still aestheticized cinematic and mostly a contemplative kind of style, which is why these long languorous pans and tilts and so on. And that's when we decided that we are going to use a fiction film toolkit to tell a nonfiction story. So the use of these long track shots, or at times, screens, etc., which are not usually used in documentaries, was largely to, you know, give it that kind of a cinematic tinge. And that's how the idea was to enhance the narrative. And because we kept cutting between a tight basement, which obviously looked very claustrophobic, and the open vistas of the city of Delhi. So it meant that that itself also gave a certain kind of a cadence and rhythm of extreme close up, followed by extreme long shots, like inhaling and exhaling, like breathing in a way" S. Sen, Personal Communication (April 1, 2025).

In "The Elephant Whisperers" the stunning cinematography played a crucial role to enhance the overall narrative and in "All That Breathes" the sound escape of urban setting and the smooth structured editing was on point. This analysis reflects that audiences are engaged not just with good content but other aspects play a crucial role in enhancing the overall experience as well, specially when it comes to environment documentaries, these techniques help in simplifying the complex issues in an engaging and interesting manner to connect it with the audiences at large as it adds multiple layers into the story and it develops connection with the audiences.

8. ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTARY GENRE

Documentaries are one of the "discourses of sobriety" that include nature, economics, politics, and history-discourses that claim to describe the "real" to tell the truth, said by one of the noted film scholar Bill Nichols. Documentary filmmaking in India has undergone significant transformation, especially when it comes to the portrayal of environmental issues, as it has undergone a significant shift from a primarily government-controlled narrative to a vibrant platform for independent voices and their growing environmental issues at large which are often neglected by the government and mainstream media [Namitha \(2023\)](#).

During the interview, one of the documentary filmmakers said, *"When we talk about the environment, it is not just something, you know, like something happening in a vacuum. It is very much happening there. There are still a lot of people who deny its impact, who think that, you know, climate change is a hope. It is real and people are actually being affected. So these documentaries as a genre kind of gives that, you know, lived experience inside to people who are being affected. So it is a very interesting and a very interactive way to kind of educate people about the implications of it and how it affects lives of people, especially the marginalised communities, the ones that we don't even think about".* While the other documentary filmmaker believes, *"Other documentary forms OK. Currently the market for environmental documentaries is there in the country, but the funding is not so much".* These films often receive critical acclaim, but they don't perform commercially at the box office.

Now when it comes to audiences, the environmental documentary has a very niche audience; the majority of audiences watched these documentaries because of the global recognition they got at the Oscars, specially "The Elephant Whisperers". People believe if such complex issues are shown through personal stories its audience would obviously increase and instead of broader issues people connect with small themes that impact their lives as well, like the issue of Air pollution in Delhi, portrayed in "All That Breathes". One of the participants said, "We are dealing with many environmental issues and any art form be it theatre, natak or documentary films is a mirror to the society". In contrast, one of the participants also said, "Audio-visual mediums have power to showcase such complex realities but fiction films have more potential to do so in comparison to the documentary films". Also, the audience believes that documentary films lack in marketing and if it's marketed well like these two documentaries definitely it's reach would increase, as people want fresh content and something new but documentaries despite having good content lack the mass appeal. And the environmental documentary genre will increase in India now but it needs to be marketed well and funding remains a major problem too.

9. ROLE OF DOCUMENTARY MAKERS AND ENVIRONMENTAL FILM FESTIVALS

When we talk about documentaries, the filmmaker's vision and approach definitely plays an important role to bring those issues to the forefront and how to simplify the complex environmental issues becomes very challenging, especially in the environmental genre. But at the same time, they play the role of changemakers as at least they are addressing these issues which are often neglected by the mainstream and even people don't pay much attention to it. Mike H.Pandey is one such well-known Indian filmmaker, his work has spread awareness about biodiversity and species conservation. His

powerful films are living proof of the difference a film can make in bringing about changes locally, nationally and globally, one such example is “Shores of Silence”, to the complete ban on the killing of whale sharks in the coastal area by the Government of India.

“Films have the power to enter the cultural bloodstream and, you know, kind of DNA of the zeitgeist in terms of what becomes the central idea. So they are quite forceful. And the main challenge of climate change is that it's difficult to represent because the transformations of the earth geologically or otherwise or in terms of global warming are so big and difficult to comprehend because they take place over long time spans that representing them is a real challenge and people keep thinking that it's not affecting them till there's a natural catastrophe or like a climate change related issue. So therefore representation is important and it is difficult. And the whole idea is to, you know, that it also has to be good cinema so that it also ropes people in emotionally and is able to move them. So it has to be good storytelling alongside” [S. Sen, Personal Communication \(April 1, 2025\)](#).

One of the documentary filmmakers said, “I think the film collectives can play a very, very important role because through those collectives you can get not only the platform, but at times you get an environment where through networking you can also generate funds. Because as I told you in the beginning, it is very difficult to get your documentaries commissioned, especially if you are focusing on the development issues. Because either the development agencies would want to fund you, but then they will have their own sort of agenda. Or if you are sort of a documentary filmmaker who wants to make a documentary without compromising with your voice. I think first we need to understand that not everybody is interested in watching documentaries. So we can sort of approach the entire sort of endeavour very strategically in which we can target first the audience which is aware of the subject and is interested in watching such content. And so we need to create content and we need to make content easily available to them. And as I told you that then through word of mouth, people would get to know about these documentaries and then they would be eager to watch these documentaries. One. So the other is that as documentary filmmakers, we should not shy away from sending our documentaries to various film festivals or what sort of functions”.

10. CONCLUSIONS

In the present times when environmental issues are escalating, documentaries are emerging as a powerful tool to spread awareness among the people at large. The research study explored the various environmental narratives portrayed in both the documentary films. One of the prominent themes in both the documentaries was the depiction of the “Human-Wildlife” relationship, and how human efforts can contribute to the peaceful existence between them. Also, the audiences were more inclined towards other themes instead of the environmental themes, but they did recognize the broader environmental issues as well.

Documentaries have the potential to address major ecological issues through personal stories but it should reach the ones who are most affected by climate change. Apart from the content, other filmmaking techniques make the documentaries more appealing and engaging. Audiences demand fresh content and the audience of documentaries is very niche, good content along with marketing strategies can only increase their reach, word of mouth also plays a crucial role in it. Documentaries like “The Elephant Whisperers” and “All That Breathes” has paved path for the environment documentary genre because of the global recognition at the Oscars, along with amazing content they have shown, as how personal stories engages with viewers and also sensitize them about the broader ecological concerns.

Documentaries actually have the potential to show the actuality of the growing environmental concerns but at the same time it faces a lot of challenges from funding to distribution issues. Also, it is very difficult to showcase environmental issues and make it engaging and appealing, the market is growing no doubt but it still has a long way to go. Environment documentaries should focus on issues that are relevant to people at large, stories like what an individual or community is doing to conserve wildlife and nature can foster positive examples to people at large. And the documentary filmmakers play that crucial role to tell different environmental stories through the medium of documentaries and the environmental documentary genre will evolve more in the future, but we need many more such stories to convey the growing environmental concerns and foster a sense of responsibility among people and find potential solutions to it as well.

The environmental documentary genre has a lot more potential and it is yet to address and explore many such issues in the future and the different approaches to showcase this will emerge as well, like the emergence of environmental film festivals to promote the documentaries and provide a platform to various films and filmmakers as well.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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