

Reading ‘Mother India’ Through an Eco-critical Lens: Environment, Rural Livelihoods, and Development

Sachin Kumar

PhD Scholar, Department of English, University of Delhi

Abstract

This paper offers an ecocritical reading of Mehboob Khan’s movie *Mother India* (1957) by examining how the film represents the relationship between the rural community and its environment. The existing scholarship has largely focused on the film’s nationalist, gendered, and developmental dimensions, and has comparatively paid little attention to the role of the natural environment in shaping the lives and livelihoods of its characters. The paper focuses on the flood sequence and the concluding irrigation canal scene and argues that *Mother India* portrays environmental events not simply as narrative backdrops. They become the driving forces that influence economic insecurity and social relations. The flood exposes the vulnerability of agrarian communities whose survival depends on ecological stability, while the irrigation canal reflects the post-Independence belief that technological development could address the uncertainties of rural life. Through the reading of these two sequences together, the paper explores how the film negotiates ideas of environmental vulnerability, agricultural development, and state intervention. It further suggests that these concerns continue to resonate in the context of contemporary debates on climate variability, water management, and agrarian distress in South Asia. The paper does not treat *Mother India* solely as a nationalist narrative but attempts to highlight its relevance for understanding the interconnected relationship between ecology, rural livelihoods, and development.

Introduction

In contemporary South Asian studies, the escalating environmental crisis has become inseparable from the region’s structural agrarian distress. The recurring flash floods, erratic monsoon patterns, and severe groundwater depletion are no longer isolated meteorological events (Dasvarma, 2003) [1]. They become the core economic drivers that shape rural livelihoods. For small and marginal farmers, ecological volatility acts as a destabilizing force that triggers crop failure and leads to forced migration. While the scientific data map the physical scale of this crisis, cultural texts, particularly cinema, provide critical insights into how postcolonial societies have historically internalized and cross-examined environmental vulnerability.

The recent scholarship in eco-cinema often focuses on contemporary narratives, such as the disaster-drama *Kedarnath* (2018) or the agrarian satire *Peepli Live* (2010). The anxiety surrounding landscape, resource management, and rural survival has been a central theme in Indian filmmaking since the mid-twentieth century. Early social-realist filmmakers like Bimal Roy, Satyajit Ray, and Goutam Ghose frequently positioned the natural environment not as a passive aesthetic backdrop, but as an active, structural force. In their works, the soil and the climate are directly tied to the mechanics of human labor, demonstrating

that rural communities were acutely vulnerable to ecological shifts long before modern climate discourse was established. Mehboob Khan's epic *Mother India* (1957) represents a foundational text within this eco-material tradition [2]. The film is set during the early years of Indian nation-building and portrays the agrarian struggles of Radha (Nargis) against both powerful moneylenders and natural disasters. Because of its canonical status, *Mother India* possesses an extensive body of secondary literature. Existing scholarship has thoroughly analyzed the film through the lenses of nationalist allegory (Schulze, 2002) [3], Nehruvian state development (Bhure, 2024) [4], and gender politics (Thomas, 1989) [5], particularly the ecofeminist conflation of the female body with the fertile but suffering nation-space (Singh, 2023) [6]. However, there remains a research gap within this literature. Traditional film analysis tends to treat the natural elements in the film, specifically the catastrophic monsoon and subsequent flood, purely as psychological or symbolic metaphors designed to highlight the protagonist's moral fortitude. The physical landscape is rarely analysed as a dynamic economic agent that actively dictates the material boundaries of rural survival. Furthermore, classical film history has generally accepted the film's climax, the inauguration of a state-sponsored irrigation canal, as an uncritical, triumphant resolution to the village's systemic struggles. The primary objective of this paper is to address this oversight by offering an ecocritical reading of *Mother India*, analyzing it as a text that anticipates the modern South Asian agrarian crisis. By shifting the critical focus from abstract allegory to material ecological vulnerability, this study examines how the narrative maps a transition from a volatile, unpredictable monsoon ecosystem to a highly managed, state-bureaucratized environment. This paper attempts to contribute to the existing literature through its establishment of a historical continuity between the 1957 text and contemporary agrarian distress. It argues that the structural intersection of climate shock and predatory debt depicted by Khan remains identical to the root causes of modern farmer vulnerability.

Context: Then and Now

To understand *Mother India* as an important historical film, it is essential to look at the historical moment it was made alongside what is happening in rural India today. The mid-1950s were a period of intense, almost aggressive optimism. India was fresh off independence, and Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was championing a secular, socialist blueprint for the country. The focus, especially under the First Five-Year Plan (1951–1956), was entirely on making the country food-secure after the trauma of wartime inflation, Partition, and colonial neglect (The Statesman, 2017) [7]. In this political climate, agriculture wasn't just a way to make a living; it was a national duty. Nehru famously called large dams "the temples of modern India," and cinema quickly fell in line with this ideology. Mehboob Khan's film didn't happen in a vacuum; it was a direct cultural mirror of this developmental drive. By tying the physical sweat of the peasant directly to the progress of the nation, the film argued that the chaotic, unpredictable wilderness of the Indian countryside could be engineered into submission by the modern state. Even in the present time, that 1950s optimism feels incredibly distant. The grand promise of a technologically managed countryside has largely stalled, replaced by a chronic cycle of agrarian and ecological exhaustion. Today, the rural economy is defined by severe farmer distress, driven not just by erratic market forces but by an increasingly volatile climate that the state's infrastructure can no longer contain.

The latest economic data makes this precarity clear. The Economic Survey (2026) continuously flags climate change as the single biggest threat to long-term food security and rural livelihoods [8]. Instead of the environmental stability promised at the end of Khan's epic, modern smallholders are caught in an annual gamble against nature. Recent studies show just how fragile this balance is. A mean temperature

increase of just 1°C now correlates to roughly an 8% drop in national crop yields (Agrijob, 2026) [9]. More critically, the very tools used to rescue the farmer from nature have turned into the source of the crisis: over 80% of India's current groundwater extraction is sucked up by intensive, unsustainable irrigation networks (Agrijob, 2026) [9]. The aquifers that fueled the post-independence agricultural boom are running dry. This is where the timeline connects. The structural traps that are visible today, where a single weather anomaly triggers crop failure, which immediately feeds into predatory debt loops, are structurally identical to the crisis Radha faced in 1957. The only difference is scale. What was once a localized, generational disaster in *Mother India* has become an annualized, systemic reality for millions of farmers across the subcontinent. The ecological crisis facing modern South Asia isn't a failure of the development model born in the 1950s; it is the logical, long-term consequence of it.

Climate Shock and the Debt-Ecology Trap

The flood sequence in *Mother India* is often interpreted as another trial that tests Radha's resilience and moral strength. While this reading is not inaccurate, it overlooks the material significance of the disaster within the narrative. The flood is not simply an emotional turning point; it fundamentally alters the economic conditions of the village. Through expansive shots of the overflowing river, collapsing houses, submerged fields, and villagers struggling against the current, Mehboob Khan presents the environment as an active force capable of reshaping everyday life. The destruction is immediate and indiscriminate. Crops disappear beneath the water, livestock are lost, and homes are reduced to ruins, leaving the villagers without the resources needed to rebuild their lives.

The significance of this sequence lies not in the flood itself but in what follows. Once the harvest is destroyed, Radha's family loses its only source of income and food security. The disaster exposes the fragile foundation of agrarian life, where survival depends almost entirely on a successful agricultural season. Without savings, institutional support, or access to affordable credit, the family is pushed towards the village moneylender, Sukhilala. Their dependence on him is therefore not a consequence of personal failure or financial ignorance. But it emerges from a situation in which environmental destruction leaves them with virtually no alternatives. The flood reveals how ecological vulnerability and exploitative economic structures reinforce one another, making debt a condition of survival rather than a matter of individual choice. Seen from this perspective, the flood does not create poverty; instead, it exposes the structural insecurity that already exists within the rural economy. The disaster becomes catastrophic because the community lacks mechanisms to absorb environmental loss. Nature itself is not portrayed as an enemy to be conquered, nor does the film romanticize rural life as harmonious and self-sufficient. Instead, *Mother India* presents the village as existing in a precarious balance with its environment, where a single ecological disruption can unravel years of labor. The film, therefore, shifts attention from the natural event to the social conditions that transform an environmental hazard into an enduring economic crisis.

This representation resonates strongly with contemporary debates on climate vulnerability in South Asia. Today, smallholder farmers continue to experience financial distress not only because of fluctuating markets but also because of increasingly frequent droughts, floods, heatwaves, and uneven rainfall. These environmental disruptions often compel farming households to borrow money for seeds, fertilizers, or household consumption, initiating cycles of indebtedness from which recovery becomes increasingly difficult. Although *Mother India* predates the discourse on anthropogenic climate change, it captures a structural reality that remains relevant: environmental shocks become socially devastating when they

occur within systems marked by unequal access to resources, insecure livelihoods, and exploitative credit relations. In this sense, the film anticipates an ecological understanding of rural poverty by demonstrating that environmental crises cannot be separated from the political and economic structures through which their consequences are experienced.

The Irrigation Canal and the Promise of Development

The final sequence of *Mother India* marks a striking shift in the film's relationship with nature. Earlier, the village is shown as living according to the uncertainties of the monsoon, where droughts and floods determine the success or failure of each agricultural season. Towards the end, however, this dependence appears to have been replaced by a new technological order. As Radha opens the irrigation canal, the camera lingers on water flowing steadily through carefully constructed channels before it reaches the fields. The contrast with the earlier flood is unmistakable. Whereas the flood is chaotic, destructive, and impossible to control, the canal presents water as disciplined, measured, and productive. Nature is no longer represented as an unpredictable force but as something that can be directed through human intervention. This transformation reflects the developmental optimism that shaped the early decades after Independence. The canal symbolizes more than an engineering project; it represents the belief that modern infrastructure could overcome the uncertainties of rural life and secure agricultural prosperity. Unlike the moneylender, whose power depends upon scarcity and crisis, the newly independent state appears as the provider of stability. Through irrigation, the film suggests that technological intervention can protect farmers from the environmental vulnerabilities that have defined Radha's life. Yet the ending is not entirely free from ambiguity. The visual transition from the devastating flood to the orderly canal encourages the audience to believe that environmental instability has finally been mastered. However, the film does not ask whether technology can completely replace the complex relationship between rural communities and their natural environment. Instead, it presents irrigation as a definitive solution, leaving little room to consider the ecological consequences of large-scale environmental transformation. The confidence of the ending therefore reflects a broader post-Independence faith in scientific planning and state-led development rather than an engagement with the environmental costs that such projects might eventually produce.

The image of water flowing through the canal gains additional significance when viewed from a contemporary ecocritical perspective. Later environmental history has demonstrated that large irrigation projects undoubtedly increased agricultural production in many regions, but they also generated new ecological challenges, including waterlogging, soil salinity, and the over-extraction of groundwater in several parts of South Asia. These consequences are absent from the film, yet they invite present-day viewers to reconsider the optimism with which the canal is portrayed. An ecocritical reading of the ending scene recognizes it as a product of its historical moment, a moment in which technological development was widely imagined as the pathway to national progress. Seen today, the ending reveals not the failure of *Mother India*, but the limitations of a developmental imagination that believed environmental uncertainty could be permanently resolved through engineering alone. The closing image therefore carries a productive tension. Within the narrative, the canal signifies hope, renewal, and collective progress after years of hardship. At the same time, when read alongside subsequent environmental history, it also reminds contemporary audiences that technological solutions rarely eliminate ecological problems altogether; they often transform them into new forms that become visible only over time. This tension between hope and hindsight makes the ending of *Mother India* particularly significant for ecocritical inter-

pretation.

Conclusion

An ecocritical reading of *Mother India* offers a fresh perspective on a film that has traditionally been examined through the frameworks of nationalism, gender, and post-Independence development. By focusing on the flood and the irrigation canal, this paper has shown that the natural environment is not merely a backdrop to the narrative but an important force that shapes the lives of the rural community. The flood exposes the fragility of agrarian livelihoods and demonstrates how environmental disruption can intensify economic insecurity and indebtedness. In contrast, the irrigation canal reflects the optimism of the newly independent nation, presenting technological intervention as a means of overcoming the uncertainties of nature. Reading these two sequences together reveals the film's engagement with the relationship between ecology, rural livelihoods, and development. While *Mother India* ultimately places its faith in modernization, an ecocritical perspective invites us to reconsider this optimism in light of contemporary concerns about environmental sustainability and agrarian vulnerability. It challenges the historical significance of the film, such a reading broadens our understanding of its environmental dimensions and the questions it raises about the relationship between human communities and the landscapes on which they depend. More than six decades after its release, *Mother India* continues to resonate because many of the issues it depicts, including environmental uncertainty, rural indebtedness, and the search for sustainable agricultural futures, remain relevant across South Asia. Revisiting the film through ecocriticism, therefore not only expands existing scholarship on *Mother India* but also demonstrates how classic cinematic texts can contribute to ongoing discussions about ecology, development, and rural life.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor for his valuable guidance and support. I am also thankful to the Department of English, University of English for its encouragement and assistance.

References

1. Agrijob. (2026). Climate Change & Indian Agriculture 2026 – World Bank & IPCC Guide. Retrieved from <https://www.agrijob.in/climate-change-impact-indian-agriculture-world-bank-ipcc-findings/>
2. Bhure, R. (2024). Tracing the Nehruvian Ideology through the Lens of Hindi Cinema. SIESJH: Journal of Humanities, 1(1), 92–102.
3. Dasvarma, G. (2003). Population and environmental issues in South Asia. South Asia, 35, 61-73.
4. Economic Survey. (2026). Ministry of Finance, Government of India. Parliament Tabled Report.
5. Khan, M. (Director). 1957. Mother Indi [Film]. Mehboob Productions.
6. Schulze, B. (2002). The Cinematic “Discovery of India”: Mehboob’s Re-Invention of the Nation in Mother India. Social Scientist, 30(9/10), 72-87.
7. Singh, K. (2023). Ecofeminism: From the Perspective of Indian Cinema and Performing Arts. International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research, 5(3), 1-7.
8. The Statesman. (2017). 60 years on, Mother India grapples with same woes. Retrieved from <https://www.thestatesman.com/opinion/60-years-mother-india-grapples-woes-1502526599.html>
9. Thomas, R. (1989). Sanctity and scandal: The mythologization of mother India. Quarterly Review of Film and Video, 11(3), 11-30.