In Shakespeare's King Lear, Lear asks one of his blinded companions, how he "sees" the world through his blindness. The amused companion responds saying that he sees the world not with his eyes, but with a fullness of his heart. What we learn from Shakespeare's most vital characters, is this deep sense of empathy for the world.

The scientist, James Lovelock, while simultaneously studying the planetary ecologies of Mars and the Earth, discovered that the earth was a 'single living self-regulating system' and his new insights revealed that the earth has the tenacious ability for homeostasis. According to Lovelock, this mutually symbiotic process between all life forms makes it impossible for human beings to claim pole position in the evolution of life. It is this deep connection, this empathy for the planet that Shakespeare's character refers to.

The emergence of the Environmental Humanities: Beyond Boundaries

The field of environmental humanities has emerged as a new 'interdisciplinary matrix' over the last decade. It seeks to study and understand the interrelationship between humans and nature. It is mindful of the organic web of mutuality that lays the foundation for all ecocritical thought, where the whole world is viewed as a continuum. In engaging with new archives, tools and communications venues, "environmental humanists seek to make the differences between their own home disciplines productive rather than divisive" (Bergaher et al). The discipline engages in a spectrum of conversations with ecocritics, humanists, scientists, engineers, activists, policy makers, social scientists, artists, writers, film makers and philosophers, drawing insights from a wide range of disciplines and partnering both within and outside academia.

A globally significant and emerging field, it seeks to harness the interpretative powers of the Humanities and Social Sciences and seeks to contextualise technologies and policies. It differs from nature writing in the sense it is grounded in the understanding of "ecological crises as a basic cultural process" (Heise 2018), and seeks to create a more sustainable world for humans, the biota and the abiotica – our co-inhabitants of the planet.

The Age of the Anthropocene - Difficult Dialogues

It was the atmospheric scientist Paul Crutzen who came up with the term Anthropocene to describe the present epoch that we live in. He went on to make a case for the Anthropocene in his article in Nature, in the year 2002, stating that it is increasingly accepted, that the planet has approached a new geological epoch – The Anthropocene. The etymology of the word Anthropocene is derived from the Greek word anthropo for “man” and cene for “new”, and roughly translated, means an epoch where human activities have altered ecosystems in ways unimaginable, and on unprecedented geological scales.
While the Anthropocene epoch still remains an unofficial unit of geologic time, and has not been formally adopted by the International Union of Geological Sciences, (IUGS) which names and defines epochs, there is no denying that our present societal changes have caused and continue to cause a tremendous dent on the blue planet. Taken in its entirety, the planetary ecological crisis has presently reached a magnitude perhaps even beyond human comprehension. Depletion of natural habitats, global warming, acidification of oceans, climate anomalies and systematic subversion of indigenous cultures are some of the issues that instil a sense of urgency and a desperate need to act to halt global ecological decimation.

In his seminal essay, ‘The Climate of History’ Dipesh Chakrabarty observes that historians will have to revisit many fundamental assumptions and procedures in this era of human-induced climate change where, “humans have become geological agents, changing the most basic physical processes of the earth”(197-198). In his work The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable (2016), Amitav Ghosh goes a step further and states “The Anthropocene presents a challenge not only to the arts and humanities, but also to our common-sense understandings” (12) and to contemporary culture in general. Climate crisis therefore is also viewed as a crisis of culture.

Reimagining Sociocultural Entanglements through Environmental Humanities

Scratch the surface of any culture and you will find a fascinating, disturbing and potentially beautiful story – that are both local particularities and simultaneously accessible universalities. It is believed that from every corner of the earth, wherever human beings reside or transit through, there are unique and significant exchanges between human culture and the natural world. Typically, these expressions may be a result of native, indigenous, colonial, post-colonial, neo colonial practices and expressions or beyond.

How does the knowledge of human entanglement with the environment affect cultural production? What do specific power structures mean to society at large? Are there literary texts/genres, creative nonfiction and fiction, art installations, aesthetic digitization, visual narratives, experiential data, all of that which offer alternative voices and insights that are inclusive, socially equitable and environmentally sustainable? Do these alternatives help us in reimagining our socio-cultural structures that complement mainstream scientific discourses on sustainable solutions and development? Environmental Humanities often poses these questions, simultaneously providing an equitable space for innovative cultural strategies and forms that are willing to go beyond the conventional academic engagement of teaching and research.

Environmental narratives around the world are often disparate and unequal, sometimes where voices are muted, for various reasons, and seek urgent international attention since we are all participants on this shared and troubled planet. Environmental Humanities as a discourse seeks to address these issues respectfully and sensitively.

Sustainable Narratives and Public Outreach through Environmental Humanities: A Film on self-reliance (Atmanirbhar Bharat) and Sustainability from IIT Jodhpur

A clarion call for sustainable societies and self-reliance or Atmanirbhar Bharat have been consistently reiterated by the Government of India. Self-Reliance is the need of the hour, with a focus on sustainable economies, infrastructure, systems, demography and demand as the five pillars of Atmanirbhar Bharat.

We, at IIT Jodhpur with an international public outreach grant from Germany and a seed grant funding from IIT Jodhpur decided to create a short documentary film to showcase a remote Indian village in the Rajsamand district of Rajasthan that has managed to be a model village for self-reliance or Atmanirbharata. The short film titled Under another sky is an uplifting story about a unique, remote village in India called Piplantri. The village is situated in the Rajsamand district of Rajasthan, India and celebrates the birth of every girl child by planting 111 trees. Situated at the confluence of environment, local ecologies, mining, gender, education, empowerment and self-reliance, the film documents this model village which is an exemplar of Atmanirbhart. Located in a state which produces 90 percent of mined marble in the country and 11 percent of the global market, the villagers decided to use the marble mined land as a palimpsest to rewrite their local histories. The village has planted a quarter million trees over the last six years. The collective initiatives, community building resilience and several government schemes have empowered the people – especially the women, both financially and emotionally. The film addresses issues of the environment, that are both local and global - sustainability, stewardship, a deep passion to preserve our planet through the lens of the environment and aesthetic entanglement.

Conclusion

Reflection, research and the praxis of environmental humanities has made one more mindful of one’s role – both as a witness and as a participant in this beautiful planetary narrative. The air hangs dense with peace and silence on a winter morning, on this 800 odd acre spectacular campus where I live. Lack of raucous humans has made the campus stark and naked. Birds of all kinds are my avian-circadian rhythm keepers.

This morning as I change the lens on my EOS 600 to focus on a peacock, lest I miss him in the wilderness, I see he is not afraid. He is patient. I see him through my viewfinder... his eyes are focussed on my lens. Suddenly, I am a little shaken by a flutter of wings... he does a dramatic and flirtatious display of his brilliant plumes and insists on doing the happy dance for me.

We both see each other – me through my lens and he through his eyes. The moment is visceral. Visceral, in other words simply means “the fullness of the heart”. This is all we’ve got!

References


---

**Image Copyrights – Vidya Sarveswaran.**

You tube link for the film - [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQZdDmC_W5w&t=4s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQZdDmC_W5w&t=4s)

---

**Dr. Vidya Sarveswaran**

Associate Professor, Department of Humanities & Social Sciences

Email: vs@iitj.ac.in