

FROM RIVERS TO CANVASES: THE INFLUENCE OF WATER ON CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the profound relationship between India's rivers and water bodies and their transformative impact on contemporary Indian Art. Water serves as a vital cultural and ecological symbol, shaping the identity, spirituality, and livelihoods of diverse communities across the nation. In the context of escalating environmental challenges, including water scarcity, pollution, and climate change, contemporary artists increasingly draw upon these essential elements, crafting evocative visual narratives that engage with pressing social issues. The research employs a multidisciplinary approach, investigating how artists utilize various mediums—painting, installation, sculpture, and performance—to explore the theme of water. Through a series of case studies, the paper highlights the work of notable artists who blend traditional and modern techniques to depict water's multifaceted role in society. Some artists celebrate the beauty and sanctity of rivers, while others confront the stark realities of water mismanagement and environmental degradation. By situating water as a central motif in modern artistic expression, this study underscores its significance not only as a physical resource but also as a catalyst for cultural critique and community activism. These artistic endeavors invite audiences to reflect on their relationship with water and deepen their understanding of the socio-political context surrounding this vital resource. Ultimately, this paper argues that the interplay between water and art serves as a compelling reminder of our collective responsibility toward environmental stewardship and social justice, celebrating resilience amid adversity in the contemporary landscape of Indian art.

Keywords: Visual Art, Water, Contemporary Art, Indian Art, Installation Art.

Introduction

The rivers and water bodies of India possess profound ecological and cultural importance. They are essential not only as sources of sustenance but also as deep-seated symbols of spirituality, identity, and community. In the realm of contemporary Indian art, water has emerged as a pivotal motif, encapsulating the complex interrelations among nature, culture, and society. As India confronts escalating environmental challenges—including water scarcity, pollution, and the ramifications of climate change—artists are increasingly engaging with these issues to craft compelling visual narratives.

This paper investigates the interplay between India's rivers and water bodies and contemporary Indian art. It seeks to elucidate how artists utilize these elements to reflect on and address significant social issues. Adopting a multidisciplinary approach, the research examines various artistic mediums—such as painting, installation, sculpture, and performance—through which artists interpret the theme of water. By showcasing the works of notable artists, this study aims to highlight the multifaceted significance of water not only as a vital resource but also as a powerful catalyst for cultural critique and community activism.

Literature Review

Water as Cultural and Ecological Symbol

The cultural significance of water in India is well-documented in historical and contemporary scholarship. Rivers such as the Ganges, Yamuna, and Brahmaputra are not just geographic entities; they are intertwined with the spiritual and cultural fabric of the nation. Scholar like Vinay Kumar (50) also highlight the significance of water in everyday life, agricultural practices, and religious rites to show how it shapes societies and identities. In addition to cultural implications, the ecological dimensions of water management have received considerable academic focus. Elinor Ostrom's (280) work on common pool resources highlights the importance of collective management of water resources, particularly in the face of challenges such as over-extraction and pollution. The intersection of cultural and ecological perspectives provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how water bodies influence social dynamics in India.

Environmental Challenges

India is facing significant environmental issues, particularly concerning water resources. According to a 2018 report by the World Bank, the quality and accessibility of water are in critical condition, highlighting the urgent need for sustainable management strategies. Water scarcity and contamination are pressing concerns that endanger the health and livelihoods of countless individuals. In response to these challenges, artists are utilizing their creativity to advocate for environmental awareness through their work.

Water as a Medium for Social Change

The role of art in addressing social issues is a well-explored domain. The intersection of art and activism has been examined by various scholars, including Susan Sontag (1977), who argued that art has the power to evoke empathy and inspire action. In India, artists such as Subodh Gupta, Atul Bhalla (Grewal 27) and Asim Waqif (Maddipati) have emerged as prominent figures, using their work to engage with pressing environmental and social issues. Their artistic practices highlight the potential of art to serve as a vehicle for cultural critique and community engagement.

Water in Contemporary Art

Contemporary Indian artists have increasingly turned to water as a theme in their work. Their approaches range from celebratory depictions of water's beauty to confrontational critiques of environmental degradation. For instance, the works of artists like Anish Kapoor often embody a philosophical exploration of water as a fluid symbol, representing the complexities of identity and culture. The versatility of water as a motif allows artists to address multifaceted issues, from spirituality to environmental justice.

Objectives

This study aims to investigate the intricate connection between India's rivers and water bodies and their influence on contemporary Indian art, emphasizing how artists incorporate water as a central theme to address urgent ecological and socio-political challenges. This study seeks to explore the significance of water as a cultural, spiritual, and ecological symbol in Indian society, examining how contemporary artists employ various artistic mediums—such as painting, sculpture, installation, and performance—to reflect on water's significance. This analysis of case studies featuring prominent Indian artists aims to illuminate the various representations of water, encompassing themes of beauty and sanctity as well as challenges posed by environmental degradation. This paper seeks to explore the ways in which these artistic expressions enhance awareness of water-related issues, such as scarcity, pollution, and climate change, while promoting discussions on environmental stewardship and social justice. This exploration aims to illustrate how art functions as a significant instrument for cultural critique and community activism, urging reflection on humanity's responsibility toward sustainable water management and the preservation of this vital resource.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, multidisciplinary approach to explore the relationship between water and contemporary Indian art. The study involves a combination of literature review, case studies, and analysis of art projects conducted by artists to gather a comprehensive understanding of how water is represented in their work.

Case Study Selection

The selection of case studies was based on the prominence of artists in the contemporary art scene and their engagement with water as a theme. The following artists were chosen for detailed analysis:

- **Subodh Gupta:** Renowned for his installations that incorporate elements of water and reflect on its sanctity and vulnerability.
- **Atul Bhalla:** His artwork explores the complexities of water as a vital resource, addressing its environmental and social implications through innovative installations and thought-provoking performances.
- **Anish Kapoor:** Known for his large-scale sculptures that explore the concept of water as both a physical entity and a metaphor for fluidity in culture.

Data Collection

Data was collected through a combination of literature reviews, gallery visits, and going through interviews with artists and curators available online. The literature review focused on existing scholarly articles related to water in Indian culture, environmental challenges, and contemporary art practices. The description about the artworks in various published articles provided insights into the concept of artworks and their contextual placements, while going through the interview articles allowed for indirect engagement with artists' motivations and interpretations.

Discussion

Historically, Indian painters have consistently derived inspiration from the aesthetic allure of rivers, lakes, and other water bodies, reflecting its profound cultural and spiritual importance in works that celebrate water as a symbol of life, purity, and continuity. Iconic rivers such as the Ganges and Yamuna have been pivotal subjects in Indian art, represented in mythological stories, traditional paintings, and sculptures (Rao). However, in recent decades, the emphasis of numerous Indian artists has undergone a significant transformation. Currently, they are more obligated to confront the significant ecological difficulties confronting these water bodies. Contemporary Indian artists are utilizing their work to highlight issues such as pollution, water scarcity, and the environmental deterioration of rivers and lakes, rather than only enjoying the beauty of water. Through installations, performances, and multimedia works, they seek to elevate consciousness and stimulate discourse around the imperative necessity to safeguard these vital resources. In doing so, they are not just preserving their artistic heritage, but actively working to safeguard the very water sources that continue to inspire their creative expressions.

The Socio-Political Context of Water in India:

The significance of water in contemporary Indian art cannot be fully appreciated without considering the socio-political context that shapes these artists' work. India is facing a multifaceted water crisis characterized by severe pollution, over-extraction, mismanagement, and the looming threats of climate change. The "Composite Water Management Index" report released by NITI Aayog in June 2018 indicates that India is undergoing its most acute water crisis in history, affecting about 600 million individuals who are experiencing different levels of water stress. The survey indicates that India is positioned 120th out of 122 countries regarding water quality, with almost 70% of its water supply being contaminated (NITI Aayog 2018).

Artists are increasingly compelled to address these challenges, not only as creators but also as cultural commentators. The historical and cultural significance of water in India adds layers to this discourse. Rivers such as the Ganges and Yamuna are imbued with religious significance, often perceived as sacred. This reverence contrasts sharply with the realities of pollution and degradation that these water bodies face today. Artists like Subodh Gupta reflect on this dichotomy, presenting works that evoke the spiritual while concurrently critiquing environmental neglect. Gupta's installations often integrate found objects—like discarded metal and mirrors—creating a dialogue about waste and its impact on sacred waters.



Image 1: Subodh Gupta, 'This is not a fountain', 2011-2013.

The duality of water as both a revered element and a subject of crisis is central to contemporary artistic expression in India. Many artists grapple with this tension, prompting audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about water mismanagement and pollution. As scholar Parveen Sultana mentions, 'The concept of eco-aesthetics has become increasingly important, especially in response to the widespread calls for "saving the environment" from governments, corporations, and economic elites. This area of study extends beyond art practice to encompass social and political theory, exploring the relationships between humans and non-human entities, political ecology, and the potential for alternatives to the current ecological trajectory. The rise of ecological concerns has highlighted the growing relevance of eco-aesthetics, which is being explored by artists, filmmakers, and social theorists in their work.' (Sultana 20)

Art as a Catalyst for Change

The potential of art as a catalyst for social change is especially significant in India, where water-related challenges are prevalent. When artists deal with environmental issues, they foster a dialogue that extends beyond the confines of traditional artistic expression. Art has the ability to elicit emotional responses, challenge perceptions, and motivate action—all of which are increasingly important in today's environmental crisis.

The artworks by contemporary Indian artists often serve as forums for activism, raising awareness about critical issues related to water. For instance, works that combine water elements or utilize reflective materials can create immersive experiences that attract spectators in. Gupta's reflecting surfaces, for example, not only stimulate contemplation but also signify the fragility of water resources. This immersive nature of art provides for a greater connection between the audience and the subject matter, generating empathy and comprehension. Moreover, the use of visual narratives enables artists to explain complicated themes in an accessible manner. For many audiences, environmental issues might feel abstract and intimidating. However, through the perspective of art, these topics become personal and relevant. The emotional resonance of artworks helps viewers to engage with the subject matter on a deeper level, generating a sense of duty towards environmental stewardship. In this context, art functions as a medium through which artists can challenge existing narratives about water and provoke critical discussions about sustainability. Atul Bhalla and Asim Waqif have utilized their work to emphasize the neglected state of the Yamuna River in Delhi, urging a more personal and communal understanding of the river's significance. Bhalla's *Chabeel* (2008) and Waqif's *Maintain–Scavenge* (2011) challenge the mainstream media narratives that emerged around the river during the 2010 Commonwealth Games, which focused on infrastructural development and the environmental consequences of such projects. In contrast to this mediatized discourse, Bhalla underlines the Yamuna's symbolic and physical separation from Delhi, while Waqif draws attention to the necessity for an awareness of the river's status that reaches beyond the urban, media-driven viewpoints of the metropolis (Maddipati). Both artists highlight the intimate, lived experiences of those who inhabit or visit the riverbanks, arguing that understanding the Yamuna requires a more embodied connection with the water rather than merely a distant, infrastructural vision. Their work questions the boundaries between the viewer and the viewed, urging a reconsideration of how the river is perceived and treated by society.



Image 2: Atul Bhalla, *Deliverance*, 2014. Archival Pigment Print.

The Role of Community in Artistic Expression

The connection between community engagement and artistic expression is another critical aspect of this discussion. Many contemporary artists find inspiration in local narratives, incorporating community experiences and opinions into their work. This collaborative approach promotes artistic expression by creating a stronger connection between the artwork and the audience. For example, artists often partner with local people to investigate traditional water management practices. By engaging with these stories, artists not only honour cultural heritage but also amplify the voices of those most affected by water emergencies. This grassroots approach can act as a sort of resistance to prevailing narratives that frequently ignore underprivileged populations.



Image 3: Rameshwar Broota, *What lies beneath* (Edition:A/P-1), 2010

Rameshwar Broota's work demonstrates the convergence of art and community. His compositions usually highlight the socio-cultural consequences of water, focusing on individual and community experiences. In the exhibition *What Lies Beneath*, the artist presents a close-up of a human hand, capturing its intricate creases and wrinkles, with a single drop of water resting on it. The artist suggests that this drop could symbolize not only water but also the Earth, animal skin, or even a rock, blurring the boundaries between nature and the human form (Kalra). By situating his work in local contexts, Broota urges audiences to contemplate the broader implications of water-related concerns, enabling them to engage with the stories of individuals who have been directly impacted.

Furthermore, community engagement promotes a sense of shared responsibility. When artists work with communities, they create a forum for discourse that extends beyond individual experiences. This shared engagement cultivates a deeper understanding of water's significance within cultural and ecological contexts. The resulting artworks serve as a reflection of communal values and concerns, enabling spectators to join the continuing discussion about water and its impact on society.

Water as a Metaphor for Change

Water also serves as a powerful metaphor for change, fluidity, and transformation—concepts that resonate deeply in the contemporary Indian context. Artists use water not only to depict physical realities but also to investigate abstract concepts surrounding identity, migration, and environmental degradation. The fluid nature of water allows for diverse interpretations, making it a versatile and compelling motif.



Image 4: Anish Kapoor, *'Descension'*, 2014.

Anish Kapoor's sculptures exhibit this allegorical usage of water. His works typically question rigid perceptions of form and identity, allowing viewers to reflect on the ephemeral nature of both water and human experience. Kapoor's approach underlines the connectivity of water with wider themes of change and transition, inviting viewers to rethink their own fluid identities in relation to environmental issues.

Moreover, the metaphor of water as a transformational force is particularly relevant in discussions about climate change and social justice. As communities cope with the implications of climate change on their water resources, artists play a critical role in communicating these challenges. Their art serves as a reminder of the importance to adapt and react to changing environmental circumstances.

The Global Context of Water in Art

Although this paper primarily examines contemporary Indian art, it is crucial to frame these discussions within a broader global context. The challenges related to water—whether in terms of scarcity, pollution, or climate change—are not confined to India alone; they are universal concerns that affect societies worldwide. In this global context, Indian artists contribute to a larger conversation about environmental stewardship and social justice. Their unique perspectives, rooted in cultural heritage and local narratives, enrich the discourse on water-related challenges. By engaging with global audiences, Indian artists can raise awareness about the specific water issues facing their communities while also drawing parallels to similar struggles elsewhere.

The interdependence of water-related challenges underscores the need for cross-border collaboration and solidarity. Art has the potential to act as a unifying force, facilitating dialogue between communities grappling with shared environmental concerns. Through exhibitions, collaborative projects, and cultural exchanges, artists can strengthen their voices and mobilize collective action on these pressing global issues.

Future Directions for Research and Art

As the environmental landscape continues to evolve, the role of water in contemporary art will undoubtedly remain a significant area of exploration. Future research can further investigate how emerging artists are responding to the challenges posed by climate change, pollution, and water scarcity. Additionally, examining the role of technology in artistic expression related to water can provide valuable insights into innovative practices that engage contemporary audiences.

Furthermore, exploring the impact of public art initiatives focused on water issues can shed light on the ways in which art can foster community engagement and activism. Initiatives that encourage participatory art practices can empower communities to express their experiences and advocate for sustainable water management.

Conclusion

The interplay between water and contemporary Indian art serves as a compelling commentary on the cultural, ecological, and socio-political milieu of the nation. As artists engage with water as a central motif, they focus not just on its beauty but also on the essential need for environmental stewardship. By employing diverse creative forms, these artists navigate the intricacies of identity, culture, and crisis.

Ultimately, the investigation of water in contemporary Indian art underlines the crucial role of artists as cultural commentators and advocates for social change. Their work urges audiences to focus on their connection with water and their social responsibility toward environmental justice. In an era marked by environmental crisis, the significance of water as a motif in art serves as a potent reminder of the interdependence of culture, nature, and society. Through their artistic expressions, contemporary Indian artists are not only changing the narrative surrounding water but also motivating a generation to engage with these critical issues.

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