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ECOSPIRITUAL CINEMA: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF KANTARA MOVIES THROUGH PRITHVI SUKTA AND INDIAN ECO-PHILOSOPHY

Dr. Noojilla Srinivas

Lecturer in English, Government College (Autonomous), Rajahmundry

Abstract

The two movies - *Kantara* (2022) and *Kantara: Chapter 1* (2025), written and directed by Rishab Shetty have become the talk of the town not only because of their commercial success but also for the way they projected the relationship between man and nature. We find a thoughtful merging of traditional Indian ecological wisdom and modern cinematic storytelling technique in these Pan-Indian movies. This article studies the films through ecocriticism with specific focus on ecospiritual frameworks developed in Indian tradition. Vedic hymns such as Prithvi Sukta and Bhumi Sukta, many other texts and Shanti Mantras conceptualize the Earth as mother and all creatures as her children. Ancient Indian texts sustain ecological awareness mainly through *ṛta* (cosmic order). These ancient ecological visions have been studied and analysed by many scholars. They even tried to demonstrate the alignment of these ancient Indian ecological insights with modern ethics of environment and sustainability. Through the ritual of Bhoota Kola, *Kantara* movies visualize this eco-philosophy. Bhoota Kola ritual expresses the holy relationship between humans and forest deities. The movies also show the never-ending conflict between native ecology and modern land politics. We can position the two *Kantara* movies within the global eco-film discourse. These films are distinctive as narratives rooted in living sacred traditions. These films can be said to have established a new genre - ecospiritual cinema. Environmental justice cannot be separated from cultural memory and divine responsibility. Such a perspective reaffirms the relevance of ancient Indian wisdom in addressing the current environmental problems.

Keywords: Ecocriticism; Ecospirituality; *Kantara*; Panjurli Daiva; Bhoota Kola; Indian Eco-Philosophy; Prithvi Sukta; Bhumi Sukta; Ritual Ecology; Deep Ecology; Ecospiritual Cinema; Indigenous Land Ethics; Sacred Ecology; Environmental Justice.

1. Introduction

Literatures across the globe have always been interested in portraying the relationship between humanity and nature. The relationship is sometimes harmonious and other times conflicted. The current environmental concerns such as global warming, climate change, deforestation, extinction of species, mindless exploitation of natural resources has ignited and increased ecocritical inquiry into cultures across the world to find how they represented ecology. Ecocriticism has emerged in the last century, as a field of study of the relationship between humanity and environment. It mainly seeks to understand how the literary and cultural texts reflect, shape, or challenge human attitudes toward the natural world (Glotfelty and Fromm; Buell). As a major cultural medium, Cinema plays a significant role in this discourse. Movies can visually represent ecological imaginations and anxieties.

While numerous global films have dealt with the themes rooted in environmental consciousness, Indian movies have begun exploring sacral ecological wisdom embedded in native Indian culture and rituals. The two Kannada films *Kantara* (2022) and its prequel *Kantara: Chapter 1* (2025), which were written and directed by Rishab Shetty, mark a new beginning in this direction. These films were set along the coastal and forested regions of Karnataka. They portray the intricate relationship between the spiritual identity and ecological survival of tribal communities with the sacred landscape. The narrative focuses the ritual of Bhoota Kola. It is a living tradition wherein the spirit deity Panjurli Daiva represents the forest's authority, justice, and protection.



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These films capture the conflicts between state-driven land policies and traditional ecological beliefs. While the tribals consider the land as sacred common, the authorities and rulers attempt to redefine the forest as property, reflecting their consumeristic mind. The resulting resistance is not just political or social. It is cosmological—defending a worldview in which land belongs to the god (deity), and humans are custodians rather than owners. The film visualizes the concept of ecospiritual ecology, where there is no separation between environmental harmony and spiritual responsibility.

Ancient Indian scriptures, the Vedas, Upanishads, epics, and other texts, place ecology within a larger moral and cosmic framework. The *Prithvi Sukta* of the Atharva Veda addresses Earth as *Mātā* (mother) and human beings as her children (Atharva Veda 12.1.12). Such a philosophy aligns with modern ecological theories such as Deep Ecology. It emphasizes biospheric equality and intrinsic value of all life (Naess). The revival of this fundamental thought through the form of a film places *Kantara* as the continuation of an enduring ecological ethos, and not simply as a film grounded in folklore.

Further, the film portrays environmental activism which is culturally embedded. Many recent researchers argue that *Kantara* challenges anthropocentric modernity and restores indigenous ecological knowledge to public discourse (Rupkatha Journal; Humanities and Social Sciences Communications; Religions MDPI). The sacred ecology represented in the film suggests that a holistic Indian ecocritical model can be a solution for the current environmental concerns. Such a model can complement and expand the theoretical frameworks of the Western world.

Kantara represents the intersection of ecocriticism, Indian eco-spiritual philosophy, and contemporary cinema. It reflects a new genre - ecospiritual cinema, presenting a narrative mode in which environmental justice is enacted through divine agency and ritual performance. Through an analytical engagement with Vedic hymns—especially *Prithvi Sukta*—and a close reading of cinematic symbolism, this study highlights how *Kantara* invigorates ancient Indian ecological ethics for a new generation audience, reiterating Earth as sacred and stewardship as dharma.

2. Ecocriticism: Concepts, Theoretical Trajectories & Global Cinema Context

Ecocriticism is a literary and cultural theory that mainly emerged in the twentieth century. It examines how nature and environment are represented in literary texts across the globe. Glotfelty defines it as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). Buell highlights the centrality of the “environmental imagination” in shaping ethical and political perceptions of nature. Over time, ecocriticism has evolved into a comprehensive analysis of environmental justice, climate narratives, indigenous knowledge systems, and multispecies relations.

2.1 Evolving Schools of Ecocriticism

Ecocritical scholarship developed multiple complementary strands. Some schools expand ecocriticism into a vibrant interdisciplinary inquiry across literature, anthropology, cinema, and indigenous studies.

- The central idea of Deep Ecology (Naess) is to show – the intrinsic worth of all beings and rejection of anthropocentrism
- Ecofeminism (Plumwood) draws parallel study between domination of nature & domination of women
- Postcolonial Ecocriticism (Huggan & Tiffin) talks about environment as a site of colonial or state violence.
- Ecospiritual Ecocriticism (Grim & Tucker) views religion as foundational for ecological ethics.

For an interesting researcher, all these theories can be applied to *Kanthara* films. Panjurli Daiva protecting ecological equilibrium reflects the spirit of Deep Ecology. Exploitation of land and women by patriarchal feudal hierarchy can be understood through ideas of Ecofeminism. Postcolonial Ecocriticism is useful to study the land dispossession under state “forest laws”. Bhoota Kola ritual as environmental justice mechanism can be studied as part of Ecospiritual Ecocriticism.



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2.2 Cinema as Ecological Discourse

Cinema can be a powerful medium to extend ecological consciousness by converting the storytelling into immersive experience. Visuals and sounds help in representing nature in an active and participatory mode than in passive setting. With powerful visual techniques and sounds, nature can be given a form than limiting it as a silent backdrop.

There are certain films in the world which stand as great examples in the genre of ecocritical films. Hayao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* (1997) depicts spirits of nature resisting industrial expansion. James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) visualizes indigenous planetary ecology under corporate invasion. Bong Joon-ho's *Okja* (2017) challenges corporate commodification of life. These films present ecological trauma on global platforms — but largely through invented mythologies.

2.3 Need for Indigenous Perspectives

Interest for indigenous knowledge systems for interpretation of any concept has been increasing. Similarly, Indian knowledge system is being used as an alternative non-Western framework across the fields. The indigenous ecological frameworks provide knowledge systems capable of re-imagining environmental discourse. Indigenous communities preserve:

- Land-based spiritual identity
- Rituals that maintain ecological balance
- Ancestral legal systems tied to landscapes

In such worldviews, environmental ethics is not optional — it is core and essential.

2.4 Toward an Indian Model of Ecocriticism

India's ecological consciousness — rooted in *ṛta* (cosmic order), *dharma* (duty), and the sacred personhood of Earth — precedes modern environmental movements across the globe. Vedic and tribal knowledge systems converge in practices that treat - Land as deity, forest as temple, and stewardship as worship.

Kantara movies become exemplary within this paradigm. Unlike Western environmental films or eco-films that invent imaginary fantastical mythologies to articulate ecological justice, *Kantara* draws from a living sacred tradition. The deity-forest-tribe relationship represented in Bhoota Kola ritual practices aligns directly with Indian scriptural eco-philosophy.

Thus, *Kantara* films allow ecocritical scholarship to:

- Expand beyond secular or purely materialist environmental frameworks
- Include ritual, faith, and divine agency as ecological determinants
- Restore indigenous ecological sovereignty in discourse

This positions the film not merely as ecological cinema, but as ecospiritual cinema, where cinematic narrative sustains a cultural bond with nature.

3. Ecospiritual Philosophy in Indian Tradition

While the Western ecological thoughts and movements arise from environmental anxiety, Indian ecological thought is rooted in a metaphysical understanding of the universe. It views the universe as a morally ordered and spiritually animated



whole. As per this view, Nature is not external to human existence but constitutive of it. The cosmos is sustained by *ṛta* (cosmic order), and human life is governed by *dharma*—the ethical responsibility to preserve that order. This ecospiritual framework provides the philosophical foundation for understanding *Kantara* as a cinematic articulation of India’s ancient ecological consciousness.

3.1 Prithvi Sukta: Earth as Mother and Moral Authority

The Prithvi Sukta of the Atharva Veda (Book 12, Hymn 1) is one of the earliest and most comprehensive ecological texts in world literature. It addresses Earth as *Mātā* (mother) and establishes humanity’s loving relationship with her through the oft-quoted declaration:

Mātā bhūmiḥ putro ’ham pṛthivyāḥ

(*Earth is my mother; I am her son*) (Atharva Veda 12.1.12)

This Vedic formulation rejects anthropocentric dominance propagated by Western theories and replaces it with ecological kinship. Prithvi Sutra considers Earth as a living moral presence whose “vitals” and “heart” must not be injured (Rig Veda 10.173). The Sukta repeatedly invokes Earth as the bearer of forests, rivers, mountains, animals, crops, and human settlements, presenting an integrated vision of ecosystems long before the emergence of ecological science.

Scholarly analysis by Srinivas interprets the *Prithvi Sukta* as a proto-ecocritical text that anticipates modern ecological principles. His study identifies four foundational dimensions:

- (1) Earth as sacred mother rather than exploitable matter;
- (2) the sustaining role of *ṛta* (cosmic order), *satya* (truth), and *yajna* (sacred performance) in ecological balance;
- (3) recognition of interdependence among all life forms; and
- (4) an ethic of sustainability expressed through prayers for replenishment rather than extraction (Srinivas).

These elements align closely with later ecocritical concepts such as Lawrence Buell’s “environmental imagination” and Arne Naess’s rejection of human exceptionalism. The Prithvi Sukta thus functions not merely as devotional poetry but as an ethical charter for ecological responsibility.

3.2 Bhumi Sukta: Sacred Diversity and Ecological Plurality

Bhumi Sukta (Atharva Veda 12.1) is another Vedic text that complements the *Prithvi Sukta*, further elaborating Earth’s sacred plurality. This text praises Earth as *Viśvambharā*—the all-bearing mother who sustains beings of “varied forms, colours, and habitats.” Rivers, herbs, seasons, animals, and minerals are not viewed as resources but are invoked as co-participants in cosmic life.

Earth’s descripton as *hiranya-vakṣā* (golden-breasted), symbolizes abundance that flows through care and balance. Mountains are imagined as her bones, rivers as her veins, and forests as her ornaments. Such imagery dissolves the binary between nature and culture, presenting Earth as a living body whose integrity ensures human survival. The hymn emphasizes fertility, nourishment, and continuity.

Bhumi Sukta sacralizes biodiversity and ecological plurality. Difference among life forms is not accidental but divinely ordained. This vision parallels contemporary ecological emphasis on biodiversity as essential to planetary resilience. Thus, *Bhumi*, reinforcing the Sukta’s relevance in modern environmental discourse.



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3.3 Shanti Mantras: Ecological Peace as Cosmic Harmony

The ecological vision of ancient India is further reinforced through the *Shanti Mantras* that appear across many Vedic texts. They articulate peace not merely as the absence of conflict but as harmony across cosmic, environmental, and spiritual dimensions. The mantra *Sarve Bhavantu Sukhinah* prays for universal well-being, freedom from disease, auspicious perception, and the absence of suffering. Its scope extends beyond humanity to encompass all living beings.

Similarly, *Bhadram Karṇebhiḥ Śṛṇuyāma* invokes sensory harmony, urging humans to hear and see what is auspicious, and to live their allotted lifespan in alignment with divine purpose. The mantra *Svasti Na Indro* calls upon cosmic forces to protect and nourish life.

Each of these mantras concludes with the invocation - *Om Śāntiḥ Śāntiḥ Śāntiḥ*. The triple *śānti* signifies peace at three levels - *Adhidaivika* (cosmic or divine), *Adhibhautika* (environmental or material), and *Adhyātmiika* (inner or spiritual).

This triadic peace underscores the core insight of Indian ecospirituality which says that environmental harmony cannot be achieved without cosmic and spiritual alignment. Ecological crises are therefore symptoms of deeper moral and spiritual disorder.

3.4 Dharma and Ṛta: Ethical Foundations of Ecology

At the heart of Indian ecological philosophy lie *ṛta* and *dharma*. *Ṛta* denotes the universal order governing seasons, elements, and life cycles. *Dharma* represents human responsibility to preserve that order through ethical conduct.

Environmental exploitation driven by greed is understood as *adharmā* — a violation of cosmic law. Preservation, restraint, and reverence, by contrast, uphold *ṛta*. This ethical ecology is reinforced throughout Indian literary tradition. In the *Ramayana*, Rama's forest exile is depicted not as punishment but as immersion into ecological harmony. Kālidāsa's poetry treats forests, rivers, and seasons as living agents shaping human destiny.

Such literary continuity demonstrates that Indian ecological consciousness has always been cultural, spiritual, and ethical rather than merely utilitarian.

3.5 Relevance for Ecocritical Discourse

When compared with Western ecocriticism, Indian eco-spiritual philosophy reveals striking convergence and critical expansion. Deep Ecology's biospheric equality echoes the Vedic assertion of Earth as mother. Buell's call for recognizing nature as an active presence parallels the hymnic personification of rivers, mountains, and forests. Grim and Tucker's ecospiritual framework finds its antecedent in the *Shanti Mantras*' integrated vision of peace.

Thus, Indian tradition provides not only a historical precedent but also a theoretical foundation for ecospiritual ecocriticism. This framework enables a deeper reading of *Kantara* movies as contemporary cultural texts that revive ancient ecological ethics through rituals, myths, and cinematic narratives.

Kantara and Kantara: Chapter 1 as Ecospiritual Cinematic Texts

Kantara and its prequel *Kantara: Chapter-1* constitute a rare cinematic articulation of Indian ecological ethics rooted in living ritual tradition. Rather than treating nature as scenic background or metaphor, the films construct ecology as an active moral force—one that governs justice, identity, and survival. The narrative conflict emerges from two irreconcilable worldviews: the indigenous belief that humans belong to nature, and the modern legal-administrative ideology that nature belongs to humans.



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4.1 Forest as Sacred Commons vs Forest as Property

The central ecological tension in *Kantara* arises from land ownership disputes. The forest land, traditionally protected under the guardianship of Panjurli Daiva, is reclassified by state authorities as reserve land subject to bureaucratic control. This transformation from sacred commons to legal property marks the onset of ecological violence.

From an ecocritical perspective, this conflict exemplifies what postcolonial ecocriticism identifies as environmental dispossession—where legal frameworks erase indigenous ecological knowledge (Huggan and Tiffin). The forest ceases to be a living entity and is reduced to a survey number, a resource, or an economic asset. In contrast, the indigenous community recognizes the forest as a sentient moral space, governed by divine law rather than human statute.

This ideological clash mirrors the Vedic ecological vision articulated in the *Prithvi Sukta*, where Earth is revered as mother and cannot be claimed as property. The king's oath in the film's prologue—pledging never to appropriate forest land—echoes the dharmic principle of custodianship rather than ownership. The eventual violation of this promise results in both ecological and moral collapse.

4.2 Panjurli Daiva: Embodiment of Ecological Justice

Panjurli Daiva, the boar spirit deity, functions as the film's ecological conscience. In indigenous cosmology, *Panjurli* is not a symbolic construct but a living presence that safeguards forest boundaries, resolves disputes, and restores balance. The deity's periodic manifestation through *Bhoota Kola* ritual affirms the continuity between the human and non-human realms.

Ecocritically, *Panjurli* represents non-anthropocentric justice. Unlike modern legal systems that privilege human authority, *Panjurli's* judgments prioritize ecological equilibrium. The deity's anger is provoked not by personal grievance but by violations against land, trees, water bodies, and ancestral trust.

The boar imagery is itself ecologically significant. In Vedic symbolism, the boar (*Varaha*) is associated with Earth's rescue and regeneration. By adopting a boar deity, the film draws upon deep mythic memory, positioning *Panjurli* as a protector of subterranean roots, forest soil, and ecological continuity.

4.3 *Bhoota Kola* as Ritual Ecology

The *Bhoota Kola* ritual occupies the narrative and symbolic heart of *Kantara*. Far from being a performative spectacle, the ritual functions as a community-based ecological institution. Through possession, the deity communicates ecological law, enforces ethical conduct, and restores disrupted harmony.

Ritual ecologists argue that such practices serve as environmental regulatory systems embedded in culture (Grim and Tucker). *Bhoota Kola* achieves this by reinforcing communal memory of ecological boundaries, sanctifying forests against exploitation, and ensuring accountability through divine surveillance.

The dancer-medium's transformation during possession signifies the dissolution of ego and the emergence of ecological consciousness. The body becomes a conduit through which forest justice speaks, collapsing the divide between human subject and natural object.

This ritual dimension aligns closely with the *Shanti Mantras*, which envision peace as harmony between cosmic, environmental, and spiritual realms. *Bhoota Kola* embodies this triadic peace by reconciling social conflict through ecological order.



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4.4 Shiva’s Arc: From Alienation to Ecological Dissolution

The protagonist Shiva’s journey reflects modern humanity’s fractured relationship with nature. Initially portrayed as rebellious, detached, and resistant to ritual responsibility, Shiva represents the alienated modern subject—one who inhabits the forest yet remains disconnected from its sacred meaning.

As the narrative progresses, Shiva’s resistance gives way to reluctant participation, culminating in possession by *Panjurli*. This moment is not a triumph of the individual but the erasure of individual ego. Shiva’s identity dissolves into the larger ecological consciousness embodied by the deity.

From an ecocritical standpoint, this arc symbolizes the transformation from anthropocentrism to ecological humility. The human body no longer dominates nature but becomes its vessel. This dissolution parallels the Vedic ethic of *yajña*, where the self is offered back to the cosmic order.

4.5 Violence, Law, and Ecological Retribution

The film’s climactic violence is often misunderstood as glorification of revenge. However, within an ecospiritual framework, this violence represents ecological retribution rather than personal vendetta. The deaths that occur are framed as consequences of covenantal betrayal—violations against land, deity, and ancestral trust.

Such narrative resolution aligns with the Indian ethical worldview wherein nature responds to injustice. Floods, droughts, and destruction are traditionally interpreted as signs of disrupted *ṛta*. *Kantara* translates this metaphysical belief into cinematic form, making ecological imbalance visible through narrative consequence.

4.6 Kantara as a New Ecocritical Genre

While global eco-films often rely on speculative worlds or futuristic allegories, *Kantara* derives its ecological power from lived tradition. Its originality lies in presenting environmental justice as inseparable from ritual, memory, and divine authority.

This synthesis warrants recognition of *Kantara* as beginning a genre that may be termed ecospiritual cinema—a form where ecological ethics are articulated through sacred performance rather than secular activism. The film thus expands ecocritical discourse by re-centering indigenous spirituality as a legitimate and urgent ecological epistemology.

5. *Kantara* in Global Eco-Cinema: Comparative Perspectives

The rise of ecological consciousness in global cinema has produced several influential films that interrogate environmental destruction, indigenous displacement, and anthropocentric modernity. However, *Kantara* occupies a distinctive position within this corpus by grounding its ecological vision not in speculative futurism or allegorical fantasy, but in living ritual ecology. A comparative analysis reveals both points of convergence and significant departures.

5.1 Global Eco-Cinema: Shared Concerns

Several internationally acclaimed films articulate ecological conflict through indigenous resistance. *Avatar* presents a planetary ecosystem where the Na’vi people defend sacred land against corporate extraction. The narrative emphasizes biocentric ethics, neural connectivity with nature, and spiritual ecology. *Princess Mononoke*, directed by Hayao Miyazaki, dramatizes the tension between industrial progress and forest spirits. Nature appears as sentient and retaliatory, and ecological destruction is portrayed as morally catastrophic. *Okja* critiques capitalist commodification of life through the lens of animal exploitation, foregrounding ethical consumption and corporate violence.



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These films share thematic concerns with *Kantara*: displacement of indigenous communities, desacralization of land, and the ethical consequences of human domination over nature. Ecocritical scholars frequently cite them as cinematic interventions against ecological injustice.

5.2 The Limits of Allegorical Ecology

Despite their ecological engagement, most global eco-films rely on constructed mythologies or speculative worlds. The *Na'vi* culture of *Avatar*, the animistic spirits of *Princess Mononoke*, and the corporate dystopia of *Okja* are imaginative constructs designed to universalize environmental concerns. While effective, such narratives often remain external to lived cultural practice.

Kantara, by contrast, does not invent an ecological mythos. Its spiritual ecology emerges from existing indigenous cosmology practiced by coastal and forest communities of Karnataka. *Bhoota Kola* is not a metaphor but a ritual continuum; *Panjurli Daiva* is not symbolic but sacred; forest boundaries are not imaginary but historically remembered. This ontological difference marks a decisive departure from allegorical eco-cinema.

5.3 Ritual vs Resistance: A Fundamental Distinction

Global eco-cinema often frames environmental struggle through resistance narratives—armed rebellion, legal confrontation, or moral protest. *Kantara* reframes ecological justice as ritual accountability. Conflict resolution does not occur through revolution or reform alone but through divine adjudication enacted in ritual performance.

This distinction aligns *Kantara* with what Grim and Tucker describe as “religious ecology,” where spiritual practices regulate human-nature relationships. The deity’s intervention replaces institutional law, suggesting that ecological governance predates and transcends the modern state.

5.4 Indigenous Temporality and Ecological Memory

Another critical distinction lies in temporality. Global eco-films often situate ecological catastrophe in the future or present it as imminent crisis. *Kantara* situates ecological conflict within ancestral time, invoking generational memory, inherited vows, and sacred promises. Environmental degradation is portrayed not as sudden disaster but as the cumulative effect of ethical erosion.

This temporal depth resonates with the Vedic worldview, where cosmic cycles (*rita*) govern continuity and disruption. The ecological present is inseparable from past transgressions and future consequences. *Kantara* thus embeds environmental ethics within historical accountability.

5.5 Re-centering Indian Ecocritical Contribution

By drawing upon indigenous ritual, Vedic cosmology, and local ecological knowledge, *Kantara* challenges the dominance of Western ecological frameworks in cinematic discourse. It asserts that ecological wisdom does not originate solely in modern environmentalism but has long existed within Indian spiritual traditions.

The film thereby re-centers Indian eco-philosophy within global ecocritical conversations, offering a model where environmental justice is inseparable from cultural memory, religious practice, and ethical obligation.

6. Discussion: *Kantara* and the Emergence of Ecospiritual Cinema

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that *Kantara* cannot be adequately interpreted within conventional frameworks of environmental cinema or secular ecocriticism alone. While the film undoubtedly participates in global ecological discourse, its narrative logic, ethical structure, and aesthetic grammar arise from a fundamentally different epistemological ground—



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one rooted in sacred ecology, ritual authority, and ancestral memory. This convergence necessitates a new conceptual category: ecospiritual cinema.

6.1 Defining Ecospiritual Cinema

Ecospiritual cinema may be defined as a narrative mode in which ecological justice is articulated through spiritual cosmology, ritual performance, and divine agency rather than through purely secular activism, technological critique, or policy-driven environmentalism. In such cinema:

- Nature is a moral and spiritual subject, not merely a threatened resource.
- Environmental transgression constitutes ethical and cosmic violation, not only legal or social injustice.
- Resolution emerges through ritual accountability rather than institutional reform alone.

Kantara exemplifies this mode by locating ecological authority in *Panjurli Daiva* and *Bhoota Kola*, where environmental order is restored through sacred adjudication rather than human arbitration.

6.2 Beyond Anthropocentrism: Reframing Environmental Ethics

Most modern environmental narratives remain entangled in anthropocentric assumptions, even when advocating sustainability. Humans often retain moral centrality as protectors, saviours, or reformers of nature. *Kantara* disrupts this hierarchy. The deity, forest, and land assume ethical primacy, while human characters—whether rulers, administrators, or villagers—are accountable to non-human authority.

This inversion aligns with Deep Ecology’s rejection of human exceptionalism (Naess) and resonates with the *Prithvi Sukta*’s insistence on filial humility toward Earth. However, *Kantara* advances beyond philosophical abstraction by embodying this ethic in lived ritual practice. The forest does not merely “deserve” protection; it demands obedience.

6.3 Ritual as Ecological Governance

A critical contribution of *Kantara* lies in its portrayal of ritual as a functional ecological institution. *Bhoota Kola* is not symbolic folklore but an active mechanism of environmental regulation. Through possession and proclamation, the deity enforces land boundaries, resolves disputes, and punishes transgression.

This challenges modern assumptions that ritual belongs to the realm of belief while governance belongs to law. In *Kantara*, governance precedes the modern state and operates through sacred continuity. Such representation invites ecocritical scholars to reconsider ritual not as cultural residue but as ecological jurisprudence.

6.4 Indian Eco-Philosophy as Cinematic Theory

Kantara also invites a re-evaluation of Indian eco-philosophy as a legitimate theoretical framework rather than a cultural supplement to Western theory. Concepts such as *ṛta*, *dharmā*, *yajña*, and *śānti* are not merely thematic motifs; they function as organizing principles of the film’s narrative logic.

The film thus performs what may be described as theorization through cinema, translating Vedic ecological ethics into visual and performative language. In doing so, it affirms the scholarly position advanced by Srinivas that Vedic hymns like the *Prithvi Sukta* anticipate and enrich contemporary ecocritical discourse.



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6.5 Genre Formation and Scholarly Significance

By integrating indigenous ritual, Vedic eco-philosophy, and cinematic storytelling, *Kantara* inaugurates a genre that transcends national cinema classifications. Ecospiritual cinema challenges the dominance of secular environmental narratives and reintroduces sacred responsibility into ecological ethics.

This genre is particularly significant in a global context marked by ecological crisis and cultural alienation. It suggests that environmental sustainability cannot be sustained through policy and technology alone but requires cultural memory, spiritual accountability, and ethical humility.

7. Conclusion: Reclaiming Sacred Ecology through Cinema

The ecological crisis confronting the contemporary world is not merely environmental but civilizational. It reflects a profound rupture in humanity's ethical, spiritual, and cultural relationship with the natural world. *Kantara* and *Kantara: Chapter 1* emerge within this context as cinematic interventions that challenge dominant anthropocentric paradigms and restore ecological consciousness through sacred memory and ritual practice. By foregrounding indigenous cosmology, divine agency, and ancestral responsibility, the films articulate an ecological ethic that transcends modern environmental discourse.

Kantara cannot be adequately interpreted through conventional frameworks of eco-cinema or secular ecocriticism alone. Its narrative logic derives from Indian eco-spiritual philosophy, particularly the Vedic vision articulated in the *Prithvi Sukta* and *Bhumi Sukta*, where Earth is revered as mother and moral authority. The *Bhoota Kola* ritual, central to the film's narrative, functions as an indigenous ecological institution that enforces environmental justice through divine adjudication. Such representation challenges modern legal and administrative systems that reduce land to property and nature to resource.

By situating ecological conflict within a cosmological and ethical framework, *Kantara* inaugurates what may be termed ecospiritual cinema—a genre in which environmental justice is inseparable from spiritual accountability, ritual continuity, and cultural memory. Unlike global eco-films that rely on speculative futures or allegorical mythologies, *Kantara* draws upon a living sacred tradition, thereby grounding ecological ethics in lived experience rather than abstraction.

The film's significance extends beyond Indian cinema. It contributes to global ecocritical discourse by re-centering indigenous knowledge systems and demonstrating that ecological sustainability cannot be achieved without ethical humility and spiritual reorientation. In reaffirming the relevance of ancient Indian ecological wisdom, *Kantara* offers a compelling alternative to purely technocratic or policy-driven approaches to environmental crisis.

Ultimately, *Kantara* invites scholars, filmmakers, and audiences alike to reconsider the foundational assumptions of human-nature relationships. It reminds contemporary society that environmental justice is not a modern invention but an ancient responsibility—one encoded in ritual, sustained by memory, and enforced by moral law. Through its synthesis of cinema, ecology, and spirituality, *Kantara* reclaims sacred ecology as a vital resource for imagining sustainable futures.

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Recent Critical and Scholarly Articles on Kantara

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