

Home-grown Environmental Aesthetics for North India

Environmental aesthetics is a relatively new field of study. It is concerned with how human beings experience their environment through the senses, mostly in a pleasing manner. Neha Khetrapal and Bhavya Chhabra show that moving beyond a Eurocentric focus and evoking culturally familiar aesthetics can be an effective way of getting people in the global South to absorb messages around climate change. Their discussion draws on their work carried out in Prayagraj, one of the holiest cities in India.

Environmental aesthetics plays an integral role in both how people ascribe value to their environment and in precipitating actions for conservation. While its importance continues to gain prominence in the West, countries like India lack dialogues around environmental aesthetics. Dialogues initiated in this regard show that environmental aesthetics may have a different flavour for people outside the Eurocentric boundary. In the anthropogenic world, it becomes imperative to address this aesthetic divide. A multi-cultural conception of environmental aesthetics could then be used to achieve valuable practical ends.

To illustrate this point with a concrete example, one may remember that [a polar bear holding onto a few blocks of ice](#) is one of the most popular icons of climate change. However, contrast this to a context in India where the picture does not carry the same emotional charge as it is not connected with the people's experience of the weather, climate or landscape. The polar bear is still physically and emotionally out of reach for thousands of people who come to have a holy dip in the river Ganges that flows through [Prayagraj](#), a holy city in North India. The river waters are considered holy by millions of Hindus (see, Figure 1). Yet, Hindu devotees remain oblivious of [global warming that is the cause of Himalayan glacial melts](#), landslides, and changes in water flow across the Indo-Gangetic plains.



Figure 1: River Ganges in Prayagraj (Source: First author's personal photo)

Climate change is hard to grasp for a lot of people around the world, as the consequences are uncertain and intangible. To overcome gaps in understanding, artists and concerned others in the West have been engaged with [ecological arts](#) with recurring themes of nature, as a means to precipitate conservationism in communities.

At the next level, there has been an intense discourse about environmental aesthetics where the focus is on aesthetic judgments that follow encounters with environments, landscapes, and species. The idea is that nature is appreciated for its intrinsic or aesthetic value in a non-instrumental manner. As an example, aesthetically appreciating trees along a river-bank rests on its aesthetic qualities, perhaps the green leaves, colourful flowers and graceful display of the tree within a breath-taking setting that includes glistening waters. The example signifies how aesthetic appreciation of trees in this case is not based on their potential value as an economic resource. Natural encounters and aesthetic judgements, in this manner, play an important role in encouraging actions for preservation and conservation of nature (see, Figure 2).



Figure 2: A little girl caresses flowers for their intrinsic aesthetic value in Jindal Global City, Haryana (India). She promises to protect them by not plucking them. (Source: First author's personal photo)

With a Eurocentric origin, [aesthetics](#) has coloured ecological arts and the development of environmental aesthetics in the West. Therefore, the rising popularity of environmental aesthetics further widens the aesthetic divide between countries. Nevertheless, the divide remains unacknowledged. But, it is important to emphasise that environmental aesthetics holds potential for the spread of climatic action and awareness, which makes it imperative to address the environmental aesthetic divide between countries.

A small experiment on the banks of the Ganges

The first author initiated this task by talking to pilgrims in the holy city of Prayagraj on the banks of the Ganges in January 2022. Although Hindu pilgrims worship river Ganges as a goddess, paradoxically, they wouldn't undertake efforts to unearth information about the links between global warming and changes in water flow across the Indo-Gangetic plains, or take steps to reduce [dumping of waste along the river banks](#). This is in contrast to other [Indian reports on forest conservation efforts that result from paying reverence to forest goddesses or gods](#). In contrast to those reports, the supposed divinity of the river Ganges fails to inspire utilisation of the environment and the waters in a manner conducive for conservation.

In other words, the initiated dialogue with the pilgrims shows that a reverence for the Ganges is at odds with the concepts of beauty and spirituality that might be more common in the West or in other less urbanised regions containing water bodies or forest areas. The dialogue, however, did confirm the possibility that domestic or home-grown aesthetics may serve as an inspiration or a viable solution for conservation and preservation in the absence of conducive forms of utilisation.

The untapped North Indian environmental aesthetics, which could possibly be tapped with domestic ecological arts, is intimately linked to people's capacity for environmental imagination. On being probed about appreciating nature for its intrinsic or aesthetic value, several vouched for imagining the Ganges in the future. A pilgrim, echoing the sentiments of others around her, mentioned that mentally picturing a drying river encourages her to empathise with the emptiness of the Ganges. An emptiness that could be compared to a divine void. The imagination is based on her own previous encounters with decreasing water levels, again echoing the observations of the others around her. The pilgrim and the others were not aware of the human-led activities that are an important reason for retreating glaciers in the Himalayan region. But, she along with the others were open to infusing their imagination with the available scientific data. The first author introduced the group to [warming stripes](#) (Figure 3) that helped the people connect the dots between human activities and the greenhouse effect.

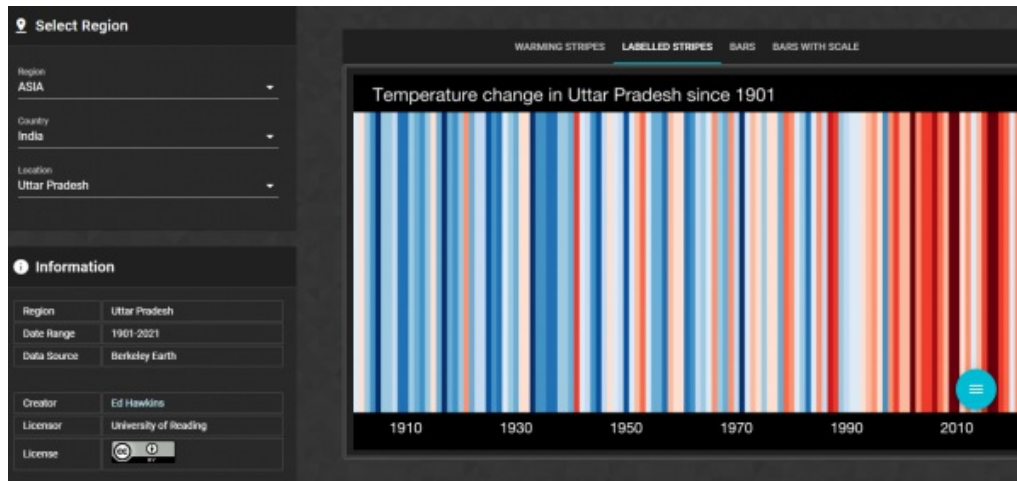


Figure 3: #Show Your Stripes is a simple web-based app that shows the temperature trend in a given region between 1910 and 2010 (Source: <https://www.reading.ac.uk/news/2021/university-news/pr857560>. Reproduced under [CC BY 4.0 Licence](#))

One of the pilgrims looked around and found a local version of the warming stripes (see, Figure 4).



Figure 4: Local merchandise for sale by a peddler in Prayagraj, India. (Source: First author's personal photo)

For her, the local stripes served as a domestic ecological art form that helps conceptualise the significance of a drying river. This newly-discovered aesthetic appreciation is grounded in tradition and familiarity. Inspired by the newly-discovered local ecological art coupled with a home-grown version of environmental aesthetics, she and the others are now eager to spread the message about preservation beyond Prayagraj.

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