

Advocating Deep Ecology in Masurkar's film *Sherni*

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Abstract:

This paper aims at examining how a Hindi film, *Sherni* discusses matters of environmental concern – particularly deep ecology. Arne Naess' eight postulates of deep ecology can be applied to this film to show how it advocates deep ecology as a solution to most ecological or environmental issues. While the urban population sees a clear divide between the natural world and the world of human beings, the rural folk, particularly those who live near forests see no divide between the two. This coexistence is the root to all environmental sustainability. But when this complementary relationship is threatened by external factors like politicians, corporates, hunters, and shady forest officials, then the natural world is at risk and environmental sustainability and ethics prevail merely in theory. The central character Vidya clearly illustrates the need to live and let live and to maintain the ecological balance for the betterment of posterity.

Keywords: environment, ecology, *Sherni*, tigress, villagers, forest officer, balance, sustainability, deep ecology, social ecology, anthropocentrism

Cinema and Ecocinema:

It is a widely accepted fact that the cinema is one of the most sought-after forms of entertainment. However, its significance in terms of value (extrinsic or intrinsic) or serious interpretation and analysis remained an unsolved enigma until the dawn of the early twentieth century with the emergence of film studies as a branch of critical inquiry in cinema. Elsaesser and Hagener (2010) affirm the same in their book titled, *Film Studies: An Introduction Through the Senses*:

From the very beginning, inventors, manufacturers, artists, intellectuals, educators and scientists asked themselves questions about the essence of cinema: was it movement or was it interval, was it image or was it writing, was it capturing place or was it storing time? Besides its relationship to other forms of visualization and representation, the question was: was it science or was it art? And, if the latter, did it elevate and educate, or distract and corrupt? Discussions centered not just on the specificity of cinema, but also on its ontological, epistemological and anthropological relevance, and here the answers ranged from derogatory ("the cinema - an invention without a future": Antoine Lumiere) to skeptical ("the kingdom of shadows": Maxim Gorki) or triumphal ("the Esperanto of the eye": D.W. Griffith). (p. 1)

Further, Elsaesser and Hagener state that it was during the 1970s that film studies actually reached its pinnacle. In short, the very idea that a genre to be treated as a subject of contemplation is definite proof of its impact and ubiquity in the fabric of human existence.

With the development of film studies, films, like literature, were classified according to their predominant themes – horror, thriller/ suspense/ detective, romance, history, family drama, ecocinema, etc.

From an ecocritical perspective, environment is not just the organic world... It is an ecology of connections that we negotiate to make our meanings and our livings. In this habitat, cinema is a form of negotiation, a mediation that is itself ecologically placed as it consumes the entangled world around it, and in turn, is itself consumed. While film and media scholars have always explored cinema's cultural negotiations, until recently ecocritical perspectives have been largely absent in the scholarship... It is only recently, most notably since the mid-1990s, that a growing number of scholars have begun to critically interrogate cinema's

ecological dimensions and their implications for us and the more than human world in which we live." (Rust and Monani, 2013, p. 1).

The earliest use of the term is in a one-page proposal-cum-article by Roger Anderson (1975) titled, "Ecocinema: A Plan for Preserving Nature." However, his idea of ecocinema was that of a motion picture that dealt with the flora and fauna of a particular natural environment. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that Anderson sank into oblivion. According to critics, Scott Macdonald (2004) is credited with the coining of the term ecocinema in his article "Toward an Eco-Cinema," in which he uses the term in its modern sense. The twenty-six-page article is undoubtedly a seminal work in one of the youngest and oft-neglected genres of film studies. "That it has found difficulty attracting substantial audiences is to be expected, given the distractions of contemporary life" (p. 108).

Further, Macdonald perceives "the fundamental job of an ecocinema as a retraining of perception, as a way of offering an alternative to conventional media spectatorship, or ... as a way of providing something like a garden—an "Edenic" respite from conventional consumerism—within the machine of modern life, as modern life is embodied by the apparatus of media" (p. 109). But not all ecocinema can afford to be Keatsian escapes into Edenic or enchanted worlds for that would mean turning a blind eye to the seemingly latent environmental apocalypse that threatens to destroy the very roots of our existence in the days to come.

Willoquet-Maricondi (2010) offers a more feasible explanation regarding the concept of ecocinema.

Ecocinema overtly strives to inspire personal and political action on the part of viewers, stimulating our thinking so as to bring about concrete changes in the choices we make, daily and in the long run, as individuals and as societies, locally and globally. The capacity to choose consciously, with an awareness of the planetary consequences of our choices, is uniquely human... Films falling within the genre of ecocinema can work on our perceptions of nature and of environmental issues through a variety of approaches.

A lyrical and contemplative style can foster an appreciation for ecosystems and all of nature's constituents—air, water, earth, and organisms. Alternatively, ecocinema can deploy an overt activist approach to inspire our care, inform, educate, and motivate us to act on the knowledge they provide. (p. 45)

In contrast, environmental films, according to Willoquet-Maricondi, affirm the idea of strong or weak anthropocentrism that culture has brought in its wake.

Since the key objective of this paper is to examine the features of deep ecology in the ecofilm *Sherini*, it is mandatory to understand what the nature and scope of ecocinema is all about. While the other genres grab more attention, ecocinema has been slow in gaining popularity. This is mainly due to a number of reasons, a few of which are the following:

Documentary-like: Most films that focus on the environment tend to be more serious in nature, thereby giving it a documentary-like garb and consequently making it appear less interesting. An example is *Devara Kadu*, a 1993 Kannada film on how the protagonist Deva manages to grow a forest on barren land and thereby fulfil the wishes of his mother. But throughout the film, it is the environment (initially barren, and later a luxuriant forest) that takes over as the central figure. Although the film is characterised by thematic richness in terms of environmental sustainability, it proceeds in a very slow manner with lesser dialogues and more shots of the changing environment.

A Mere Setting: As mentioned earlier, the environment can never shine as the protagonist because the film is demoted to the status of a documentary. Therefore, films that focus on the environment make use of frontline heroes and heroines to run the show. Although the theme concerns ecological balance or protection of the environment, the hero or the glamorous heroine emerges as the point of focus throughout, thereby relegating the environment to a mere background or setting.

Selective Audience: The above-mentioned factors are reason enough to persuade producers and directors from venturing into ecocinema as it is not as lucrative as the horror or the action or other 'promising' genres. Further, except for genuine environment lovers and those who love 'serious' films, ecocinema cannot boast much in terms of audience support and encouragement.

Nevertheless, despite these decelerating characteristics, the growing sense of environmental/ ecological awareness among viewers has largely contributed to the growing expansion and popularity of this genre.

Sherni: The Hunter Turns Prey

The film *Sherni* (2021) is an eco-thriller that combines characteristics of a documentary and a seemingly quiet thriller. Its consistent appeal to the public to maintain ecological equilibrium is noteworthy indeed. The film implicitly, and at certain places, explicitly advocates ecological egalitarianism that is synonymous with sustenance of life forms on earth. The obligatory intertextuality evident in the film takes us down memory lane to *Yavatmal*, 2018, when Avni or T1, an adult tigress was shot dead. K.M. Abharna, an honest and dynamic forest officer, whose role in the film is played by Vidya Balan, handled the Avni case.

The film is a no-nonsense type right from start to finish, with very little space for light humour. It is about the struggle that a forest officer Vidya Vincent undergoes in order to protect a tigress (that has turned man-eater) and her two cubs. While her efforts to save the T12 tigress fail eventually, the ray of hope dawns when T12's cubs are rescued by a few earnest villagers and the Forest Friends team.

In spite of being quite slow-paced, the film does smack of high emotional appeal and has managed to make an impact among the general audience. This is mainly due to the way in which the animal and the rescue attempts are depicted in the film. The explanation that Jonathan Burt (2002) is more concrete in this regard: "It appears that certain kinds of animal imagery, magnified and intensified precisely by the artifice of film, are responded to more emotionally and are therefore less mediated by the judgements that we might normally apply to other kinds of imagery" (p. 10).

The film depicts the tug-of-war between "biospherical egalitarianism" and anthropocentrism in a more realistic light. To use the term ecocentrism would mean pushing the human race to the margin although experts do argue that human beings are a part of nature. Egalitarianism is a better term to use as it presents a synergy between humans and the natural world of flora and fauna.

In his book *Life's Philosophy*, Arne Naess (2002) discusses the eight tenets of deep ecology that he had framed with George Sessions (pp. 108-109). In the film, it is obvious that Vidya and her team of forest service personnel, Hassan Noorani the local zoology professor and selfless environmentalist, a few villagers and the Forest Friends team who recognise the value of

biospherical egalitarianism, represent these tenets of deep ecology while the other characters, in sharp contrast to the aforementioned, display more anthropocentric and self-centred tendencies.

The aim of the paper is to examine each postulate in detail by relating it to *Sherni* so that readers may have a clear perspective on deep ecology and its application.

1. All living beings have intrinsic value.

This feature is upheld by Vidya, Hassan Noorani, the forest guards, Pyare Lal, and a few of the villagers. For instance, when Pyare Lal and Vidya question a villager on why he didn't inform the forest department about the tigress, the villager calmly responds by saying that tigers frequently visit those places during that particular season. They merely come, eye their cattle and go away quietly. This statement clearly reveals that villagers have never seen animals as a threat to their livelihood. Even during the department meeting, when one of the officers suggests that the place should be evacuated and converted into a national park, Vidya and Noorani express their dissent. They clearly state that the people living there at the outskirts depend on the forest as much as the forest depends on them. Therefore, this balance should not be compromised upon, at any point (*Sherni*: 34.16- 34.34). In fact, animals and human beings co-exist in villages that border the forest and animals face no major threat at the hands of humans. Even in the case of Vidya Vincent, at first, she is not willing to encourage a kitten at home. But, she is ready to tolerate its presence in her veranda and is ready to help in protecting it from the rowdy tom-cat that is ready to kill it. Gradually, the kitten Tuffy becomes an integral part of her life and Vidya personally begins to take care of it.

In contrast, Vidya's superior Bansal is not even concerned about the welfare of the villagers. When she accosts him on how Saiprasad's planting of teak saplings has endangered their regular source of daily sustenance, Bansal merely shrugs it off with a smug expression saying, "How do I care what they do for their daily existence?" (*Sherni*: 35:03-35:45) The film depicts Pintu as the very symbol of self-centredness and strong anthropocentrism along with the politician duo and a few of the forest officials. When he brags that he killed seven tigers and thirty-two leopards in six states, Vidya calmly questions him, "And how many did you capture alive?" This is clearly indicative of her empathy for fellow living creatures and her conviction that all creatures on earth have an equal right to live (*Sherni* 43:39-43:52).

When T12 is captured with her cubs on the camera traps set up by the forest department personnel, Bansal appears vexed and says that it is a headache that they will have to look for T12 along with two of the cubs. He is hand-in-glove with the politician GK, his superior officer Nangia and the notorious hunter Pintu Bhaiyya whose aim is to hunt down the tigress for lucrative purposes and to prove his manliness as a hunter. On the other hand, Vidya and her team merely shout and make noises to distract a bear and send it back into the forest without hurting it.

Robert Geal (2021) holds a different opinion regarding anthropocentrism. He affirms that it is deeply rooted in the very essence of our existence in spite of the fact that it is instigated from without (not within).

...contemporary human subjectivity is grounded in the illusory separation of humanity from the rest of the world. The alienation of humanity from ostensibly separate and external 'nature' underpins our disregard for that which is not 'us'... This subjectivity is exemplified in the dualistic philosophy of René Descartes. I claim that the Cartesian illusion that we are separate and hierarchically positioned over and above the ostensibly

passive environment is an 'epistemology we live by' – our damaging behaviour towards the natural world is an inevitable result of our ingrained alienation from the natural world. (p. 1)

However, Geal does not justify anthropocentrism and neither can any ecocritic do so, since as Glotfelty (1996) rightly says, "current environmental problems are largely of our own making, are, in other words, a by-product of culture" (p. xxi).

2. *The diversity and richness of life has intrinsic value.*

Vidya and her group of colleagues and well-wishers are aware of this fact. They recognise the need for animal existence in forests and also the need for varied plant life in the forest and in their surrounding areas. However, the corrupt and spineless officials of the forest department, as portrayed in the film, think otherwise. By planting teak saplings, Saiprasad proves a threat to the biomass and ecological diversity of the region. The hunter Pintu Bhaiyya is yet another threat to the diversity and richness of the forest region as he is hell bent on killing the tigress merely to boost his manliness and to make money out of the whole affair.

The tigress is seen as the threatening OTHER – the animal that is death in animal form. Therefore, the only easy way to escape from death is to put an end to the tigress. Val Plumwood (2003) rightly opines, "The construction of nonhumans as 'Others' involves both distorted ways of seeing sameness, continuity or commonality with the colonised 'Other', and distorted ways of seeing their difference or independence. . . The excluded group is conceived, instead, in the reductionist terms established by mind/body or reason/nature dualism: 'mere' bodies, which can thus be servants, slaves, tools or instruments for human needs and projects. (Plumwood, p. 53)

Noorani clearly emphasises this when a forest official suggests evacuating the villagers from the area. He affirms, "The people depend on the forest, and the forest too depends on people for sustainability. This balance should not be disturbed" (*Sherni* 34:21-34:28). This idea is reiterated throughout the film, where Vidya in contrast to the competing politicians GK and PK, makes sure that the women are provided other means of sustenance so that they can improve their standard of living and depend less on the forest, thereby attempting to maintain the ecological balance in the smoothest way possible. This is closely related to the moves of the real-life Sherni, K.M. Abharna. "It is said that just like Balan's character, she also handled the man-animal conflict in the region. She formed a team of female forest guards who were in touch with the villagers. She also laid out camera traps in order to tackle Avni and monitored it 24x7" (Satija, 2021).

3. *Except to satisfy vital needs, mankind does not have the right to reduce this diversity and this richness.*

As mentioned earlier, the villagers use the forest only for their basic needs unlike corporates who destroy it for mining purposes and for construction of factories. Although this is made aware to the audience in passing mention by Hassan Noorani and by a couple of incidents where the villagers are shown as using the forest only to gather firewood or to graze their cattle, this depiction clearly drives home the need for ecological or environmental co-existence.

When the tigress turns man-eater, most villagers see her as a threat that needs to be killed for the safety of the neighbouring villages. Vidya Vincent is a sincere forest officer who not only possesses in-depth knowledge of the forest and its ways but also adopts lateral thinking that enables her to think and perceive way ahead of the others including her superior officers in the forest department. For instance, she sees that one of the reasons why the tigress strays into villages is that the water holes in certain areas of the forest have dried up completely thanks to

the negligence of the MLA's brother-in-law Manish (who is supposed to make sure there is constant water supply in all water holes that have naturally dried up).

Vidyadoes not consider the tigress an isolated menace that scourges human-inhabited areas near the forest. Instead, she studies the situation closely in relation to various other factors that are responsible for the present state of affairs. For instance, her investigation leads her to a human-centric chain of events that have imperilled the lives of the villagers, and the life of the tigress as well. If one were to view the whole scenario in terms of a vicious sequence of events, then this is how it would appear:

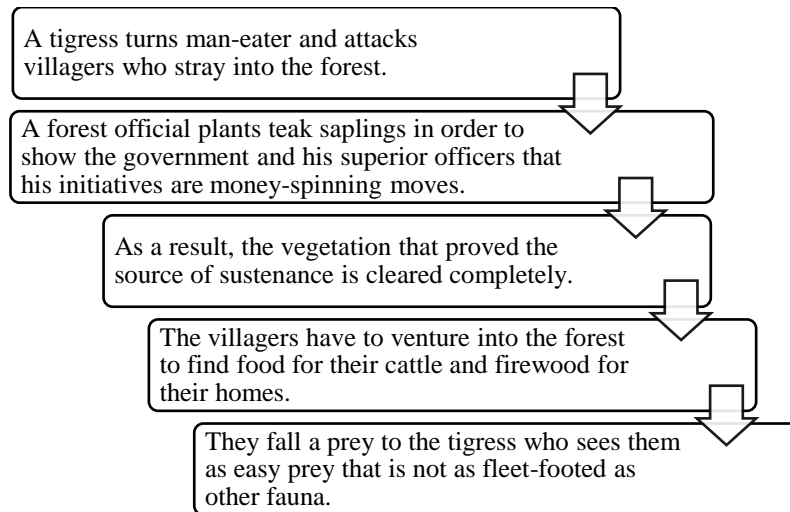
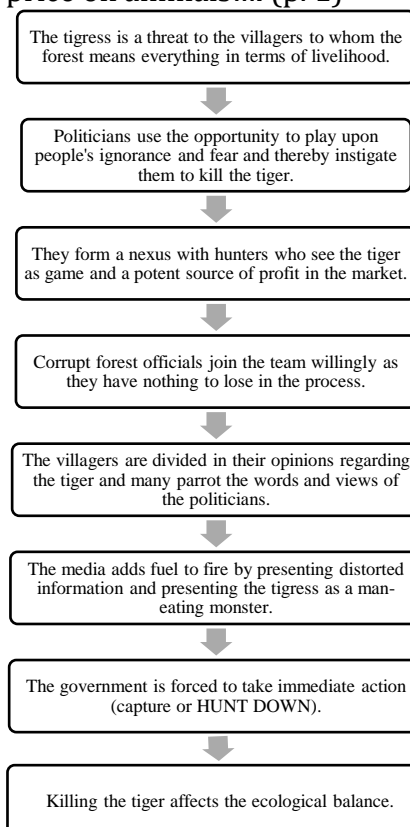


Fig. 1. The Primary Vicious Sequence

This sequence is only the tip of the iceberg as it gives rise to other factors that only aggravate the situation instead of assuaging it. As Pick rightly opines,

The human-animal distinction is a site of contestation, anxiety, and ritual (philosophical, scientific, religious, and artistic) and that the concrete relations between human and nonhuman animals have been—increasingly since the age we call modernity—an area of sharp separation, a zone in which the upkeep of human integrity, as it were, exacts a devastatingly violent price on animals.... (p. 1)

In this film, Masurkar tigress T12 who is towards the end when T12 is not projected on character in the film, but brings us to the second in the film.



presents events centred around the hardly depicted on screen except she is found dead. The reason why screen is that she is not merely a a symbol of forest ecology. This vicious sequence that is accentuated

Fig. 2. The Second Vicious Sequence

In fact, K.M. Abharna, the deputy forest officer, on whom Vidya Vincent's character is loosely based, clearly states:

"There is a lot of fictionalization. But it is also true that it may be perhaps the first film to highlight the ground problems of foresters and the landscape management issues. The director Amit Masurkar has filmed *Sherni* in Madhya Pradesh showing a different landscape. Had the filming been done in T1 habitat in Pandharkawada, it would have made a different impact as viewers would have come to know how tigers live with cubs in such a fragmented habitat." (Chatterjee, 2021)

4. It would be better for human beings if there were fewer of them, and much better for other living creatures.

This is clearly illustrated in the film where there are lesser people who live in the areas near the forest. The film doesn't focus more on numbers but their worldviews and ideologies that manipulate their thinking. T12's rare appearance on screen has another interpretation to it. The very fact that the audience only gets to catch fleeting glimpses of T12 when she is captured on camera traps, alone and once with cubs, when she scoots the fields on hearing humans making noise, and when she is found dead at the end, indicates the marginality of the carnivore that is further critically endangered by its newly acquired taste for human flesh.

5. Today the extent and nature of human interference in the various ecosystems are not sustainable, and the lack of sustainability is rising.

When Vidya and her forest team try to ascertain the possible ways by which T12 and her cubs can enter the National Reserve Park, Noorani takes her to the spot that T12 and her cubs need to cross. The environmental nightmare caused by commercialisation becomes clearer to Vidya when Noorani points out to a copper mine and says that this was part of a jungle once. He says that we have usurped the tiger's habitat and caused hurdles for it to even move from one place to another (*Sherni*: 1:28:02-1:28:55). The politicians GK and PK are merely interested in their vote banks and for them, the villagers are merely pawns in their game of power. They have no regard for nature or the environment except for a bottle of pure herbal oil to ease their joint pain. Further, they hardly understand the value of the forest. At one point, when the tigress mauls another person to death, PK says that the people will even burn the forest to protect themselves. Some of his supporters mindlessly repeat his words not realising that they are attempting to destroy the very source of their existence.

Bansal and Pintu Bhaiyya are caricatures who represent total ignorance of the forest and its ways. Bansal, in spite of being a forest official, doesn't know the difference between a butterfly and a moth. He is totally ignorant about the breeds of tiger that are present in the forest and diverts the topic by asking the other officials who T12's father is. Pintu Bhaiyya, in spite of being a hunter, is unable to distinguish between a male and a female tiger and even tries to shoot Pasha, a male tiger mistaking it for T12.

The forest department personnel, in contrast, are more knowledgeable than the bragging hunter and can easily find out whether a tiger is right-handed or left-handed and whether the excreta found on the ground belong to a leopard or a tiger. The top official Akhil Nangia is no exception in this regard. When T12 is killed and when the media starts questioning the department about rescuing the cubs, Nangia holds a private talk with Pintu where the latter says that the cubs will be killed without anyone knowing about it. This is proof of the fact that the environment is endangered mainly due to people who claim to be associated with it.

The audience once again delves into the intertextual realm where Avni's killing became a subject of controversy. Just as Pintu Bhaiyya shot T12 even before the tranquilizer was aimed, it was reported that Asghar Ali Khan, the civilian hunter in the Avni case lied about shooting the tigress in defence. "The claim was that Asghar shot at the tigress when she was charging at the people behind him," an official close to the operation said on condition of anonymity. It was a "clever theory" but it didn't hold up. Videos showed Avni was moving in a different direction from that of the vehicle Khan was in" (thewire.in).

6. Decisive improvement requires considerable changes: social, economic, technological, and ideological.

Poverty is one of the main issues that is subtly presented in the film. Even when the forest department instructs villagers to stay indoors since the tigress will be crossing their village to get to the national reserve park, wealthy landlords oppose the department stating that their farmhands must work in the fields or they will incur loss. The poverty-stricken villagers are left with no choice.

Politics is yet another factor that needs to be considered here. The film portrays two self-centred egoistic politicians to whom each villager is a potent vote. Their real issues are of no consequence to them. Both GK and PK seek the help of hunters in killing the tigress not because they care for them, but because they need votes in their favour.

Women like Jyoti represent the silver lining in the greying social and political situation. She respects her daughter's talent at athletics and encourages her to pursue her goal. Like Vidya, she thinks ahead and questions the injustice in her village. Throughout the film, women are shown as enterprising and clear-headed, but they are forced to be obsequious to men or are branded hags and shrews. The film does hint at gender equality as a requirement right from the beginning. In fact, the film *Sherni* makes us wonder whether it is a reference only to the T12 tigress or to all those iron-willed women who stand ground even in the most trying of circumstances. Although we manage to catch a fleeting glimpse of T12, it is an indication of the strong sense of marginalisation that T12 and women, in general, face in society.

The film appeals to the audience that there is the pressing need for change in the above-mentioned spheres so that we can eventually progress towards egalitarianism in the true sense of the word.

7. An ideological change would essentially entail seeking a better quality of life rather than a raised standard of living.

Vidya's husband and most of the city-bred characters in *Sher* hope for better life style whereas Vidya and some of her friends and well-wishers are more focused on commitment to one's goals. To them, everyone deserves to live a peaceful life and killing or destroying is not the only way to usher in a new order of existence.

8. Those who accept the aforementioned points are responsible for trying to contribute directly or indirectly to the realization of the necessary changes.

The crux of the entire film is environmental sustainability and justice. It emphasises the pressing need for deep ecology in the true sense since it fosters and encourages a virtual cycle that is illustrated below.

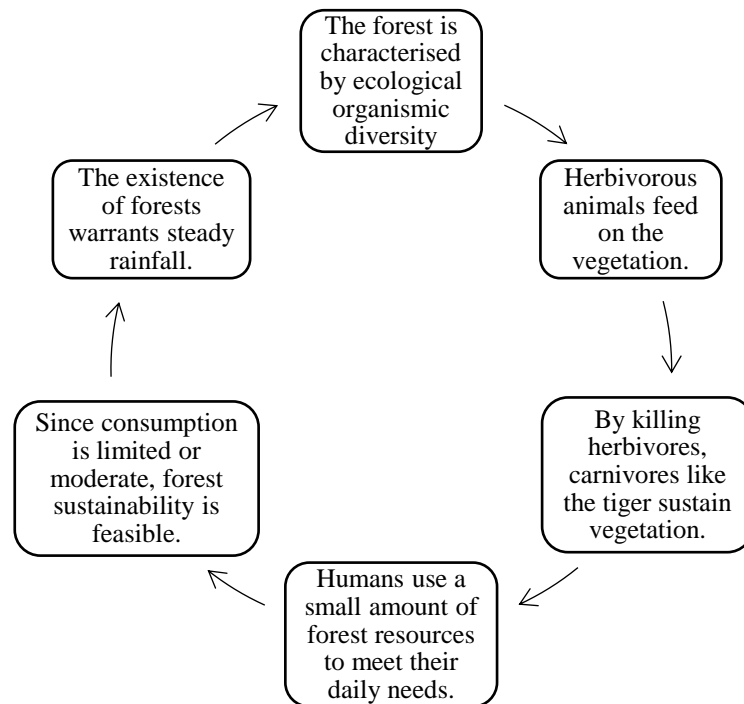


Fig. 3 The Virtual Cycle of Forest Sustainability

Being the protagonist, Vidya plays an active role in avoiding any environmental conflict between T12 and the villagers. Her first step in that direction is to advise them to start small scale businesses like tailoring, weaving colourful bamboo hats and baskets. To facilitate things further, she also gets permission from the top authorities in the forest department to allot land for the grazing of cattle and gathering of firewood. Hassan Noorani organises awareness programmes on how to deal with a tiger and how to escape without harming or being harmed. He inspires the Forest Friends group to maintain the ecological balance by not killing animals or destroying the forest. In fact, a young lad in the group surprises Noorani by discussing the significance of the virtual cycle.

The hope that such a virtual cycle might persist even in the face of such trying circumstances is evident when one young man from the Forest Friends group, who is also responsible for rescuing T12's cubs says, "How can we accept defeat so easily?" (*Sher*: 2:01:28-2:01:34) This is the ray of optimism that filters down to the hearts of the audience, establishing an emotional link, and thereby ushering the feeling of positivity as far as the environment is concerned.

In the film, at the end, Nangia and other officials of the forest department succeed in getting Vidya transferred to a museum where she is in-charge of preserving stuffed animals. Although it is a bathos in a sense, to someone as sincere as Vidya, sustenance is a persisting factor, be it for living beings or stuffed animals. The film doesn't hint at an apocalypse that is bound to occur in the long run due to vile anthropocentric actions. But a sharp ecocritic or an audience with an eco-conscious bent of mind is sure to envisage what might occur in future. As Lovelock (2006) in *The Revenge of Gaia* remarks, "Unfortunately, we are a species with schizoid tendencies, and like an old lady who has to share her house with a growing and destructive group of teenagers, Gaia grows angry, and if they do not mend their ways, she will evict them (60). Therefore, *Sherni* hints at an environmental/ ecological anagnorisis to prevent eco-disasters in the near future.

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