ISSN: 2582-5526 www.thevoiceofcreativeresearch.com

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 4 (October 2026)

Peer Reviewed Article

DOI: https://doi.org/10.53032/tvcr/2026.v8n4.01

Defending the Commons: Playground, Community, and Ecological Resistance in *Rakshadhikari Baiju Oppu*

Rejitha R.
Assistant Professor of English
Govt. Arts and Science College, Kulathoor
Trivandrum, India
Email: rejithar2@gmail.com

Abstract

This article examines the representation of ecological consciousness and community resistance in contemporary Malayalam cinema through Ranjan Pramod's 2017 film *Rakshadhikari Baiju Oppu*. Rather than treating nature as a passive backdrop or simply as a resource to be managed, the film presents the village playground as a living commons, a shared space that sustains social relationships, a sense of belonging and an intimate connection with the natural environment. The loss of the playground to development brings questions of community, ecological value and the meaning of progress to the foreground. Drawing on ecocriticism, commons theory and film analysis, the article considers how the film engages with the Anthropocene while negotiating the tension between nostalgia and ecological critique. It also examines the relationship between memory, place and resistance in the film's representation of ecological loss.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Malayalam cinema, Anthropocene, Commons, Playground, Ecological resistance

The concept of the Anthropocene, the proposed geological epoch in which human activity has become a dominant force shaping the Earth's systems, has generated considerable debate across the humanities and social sciences. Introduced by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer in 2000, the term draws attention to the scale of human influence on the planet, from climate change and biodiversity loss to the transformation of landscapes and the disruption of natural cycles. For scholars in the environmental humanities, the Anthropocene is more than a scientific concept. It is also a cultural and political framework that raises fundamental questions about the relationship between human beings and the natural world and about the possibility of imagining different ways of living.

In this context, cinema has become an important medium for exploring ecological questions. Films do more than reflect environmental realities; they also shape the ways in which audiences perceive and understand them. Cinema can make gradual and often unseen forms of environmental

change visible, create emotional connections with the non human world and imagine possible futures. The study of ecological cinema, or "ecocinema", has therefore become an important area of film studies, particularly in relation to the representation of nature, environmental politics and ecological consciousness.

Within Indian cinema, Malayalam cinema has shown a sustained interest in environmental concerns. Kerala's fields, mountains, streams and other landscapes have long appeared on screen, often as settings for romantic narratives or as images of an idealised rural past. As A. Chandrasekhar argues in *Haritha Cinema*, however, nature has gradually moved beyond the role of a visual backdrop and has become a central concern in a number of films. Contemporary Malayalam cinema increasingly addresses ecological loss, community resistance and the tension between development and conservation. Ranjan Pramod's *Rakshadhikari Baiju Oppu* (2017) occupies an important place within this evolving cinematic landscape. Starring Biju Menon as Baiju, the film is set in the village of Kumbalam and centres on a playground that functions as the social heart of the community. The villagers' relationship with the playground, and their eventual loss of it to a hospital construction project, brings questions of development, community and ecological value into focus. The playground becomes a representation of the commons, a shared resource that sustains social relationships and a sense of belonging, yet remains vulnerable to the pressures of development and enclosure.

This article examines how *Rakshadhikari Baiju Oppu* engages with the discourse of the Anthropocene through its treatment of community, memory and place. It argues that the film develops an ecological perspective rooted in shared spaces and collective experience, while also revealing the limits of such a perspective. Through an analysis of its characterisation, narrative structure and symbolic elements, the study considers both the possibilities and the limitations of the film's ecological critique.

The study of environmental themes in Indian cinema has become an important area of scholarly inquiry as filmmakers have increasingly addressed ecological loss, climate change and the relationship between human beings and nature. Much of this work is grounded in the environmental humanities, which question the separation between nature and culture that has shaped Western thought. From this perspective, nature is not simply a passive setting for human history but an active presence that both shapes and is shaped by human activity.

In the context of Indian cinema, scholars have traced the evolution of environmental representations from the early years of independence to the present. Early films often depicted nature as a benevolent force, a source of beauty and spiritual renewal that stood in contrast to the corruptions of urban life. This romanticised view of nature, as critics have noted, served to legitimise the modernising project of the post colonial state while obscuring the environmental costs of development. The emergence of environmental criticism in Indian cinema in the late twentieth century represented a significant departure from this tradition. Filmmakers began to address environmental issues more directly, exploring themes of pollution, deforestation, and displacement. In Malayalam cinema, this shift has been particularly notable, with films like *Adaminte Makan Abu* (2011) and *Ottal* (2015) exploring the relationship between humans and nature in increasingly complex ways.

However, the representation of ecological questions in mainstream cinema remains a contested and ambivalent project. As scholars of ecocriticism have argued, films often rely on visual tropes and narrative conventions that reinforce rather than challenge anthropocentric perspectives. The tendency to position nature as a resource for human use, the marginalisation of non human perspectives, and the resolution of environmental conflicts through individual acts of heroism all serve to contain the radical potential of ecological critique. The concept of the commons, which is central to an understanding of

Rakshadhikari Baiju Oppu, has also attracted extensive scholarly attention. The commons consists of resources shared by a community rather than controlled by a single individual and sustained through forms of collective governance. In Elinor Ostrom's work, the commons provides an alternative to both state control and market privatisation, demonstrating how shared resources can be managed collectively over time. For scholars concerned with the Anthropocene, the defence of the commons is closely connected with ecological politics because it challenges the processes of enclosure and accumulation associated with environmental destruction.

Scholars have also explored the specific challenges of representing ecological loss in cinema. As one analysis notes, films often struggle to make visible the slow violence of environmental degradation, which unfolds over decades and is difficult to capture in conventional narrative forms. The use of nostalgia, memory, and place based storytelling offers one way of addressing this challenge, connecting individual experiences to broader processes of ecological change. The film has been the subject of critical discussion since its release, with reviews noting its gentle humour, its vivid portrayal of village life, and its poignant meditation on community and loss. The film's engagement with environmental themes has been identified as a significant contribution to Malayalam cinema, offering a counterpoint to narratives of development and progress that dominate mainstream discourse. However, critics have also noted the film's limitations, including its tendency toward nostalgia, its occasional idealisation of village life, and its reluctance to fully confront the political and economic forces driving ecological destruction.

This article employs qualitative textual analysis to examine the move, applying frameworks from ecocriticism, commons theory, and film analysis to understand how the film represents ecological consciousness and community resistance. The primary text is Ranjan Pramod's *Rakshadhikari Baiju Oppu* (2017), supplemented by critical reviews, scholarly articles, and interviews with the film's cast and crew. The analysis focuses on three key areas: first, the representation of the playground as a commons and its role in sustaining community life; second, the film's portrayal of the relationship between humans and nature, including the ecological embeddedness of village life; and third, the film's engagement with the forces of development and modernisation that threaten the playground and the community it sustains.

The study interprets these elements through theoretical frameworks concerning the Anthropocene, the commons, and ecocriticism (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000; Ostrom 1990; Buell 2005). It also draws on scholarship specific to Malayalam cinema and its engagement with environmental themes, positioning the film within broader debates about ecological representation in contemporary Indian film. This multidisciplinary approach provides a nuanced understanding of how the film integrates entertainment with ecological critique, revealing the broader implications of changing representations of nature and community in contemporary Malayalam cinema.

The analysis identifies several ways in which the movie represents ecological consciousness and community resistance through its narrative structure, characterisation and symbolic elements.

At the centre of the film is the playground, which functions as a commons and sustains both community life and collective identity. It is not merely a place for games but a social institution that brings villagers together across differences of age, religion, caste and gender. The film presents it as the soul of the village, a space in which people gather by choice and develop the friendships and bonds of solidarity that hold the community together. The film's treatment of the playground reflects the central concerns of commons theory, particularly the importance of shared resources to community life. No single individual owns the playground. It belongs, in practice, to everyone and is maintained through

the informal practices of the community rather than through market mechanisms or direct state control. Baiju, the "Rakshadhikari", or protector, acts as a steward of the space and helps to keep it accessible to everyone. In this sense, the playground provides an example of the collective management of a shared resource. The importance of the playground to community life becomes clear through the film's various characters and subplots. Vineeth's recovery is connected with the playground and its club members, while the relationship between Manoj and Rosy develops and later fades within this shared space. A boy grieving his mother's death also finds comfort in its greenery. The playground therefore functions as more than a physical location. It becomes a social institution and a space of care, friendship and connection.

The village of Kumbalam is presented as a community closely connected with its natural surroundings. The film does not draw a sharp boundary between the built environment and the natural world. Houses are surrounded by plants and trees, while the playground is itself part of a richly vegetated landscape. Villagers gather around wells, trees and ponds rather than in enclosed commercial spaces. This closeness to nature is not simply a matter of physical proximity. It suggests a way of life in which human existence is understood as inseparable from the land. The villagers' relationship with nature is also presented through their familiarity with ecological processes. The elders discuss changes in the climate, and their observations are confirmed when the weather suddenly shifts from calm to strong winds. The scene suggests a form of ecological knowledge acquired through experience rather than formal education. Their understanding has developed through generations of observing the natural world, and this knowledge influences the way they live and respond to environmental change.

The film further stresses the importance of contact with nature in childhood. The children appear more relaxed and joyful when they spend time in the playground, which provides opportunities for social interaction, physical activity, patience and endurance. These experiences offer forms of learning that cannot be obtained from books alone. In one significant scene, Baiju asks a boy who is absorbed in his books to look up and observe the world around him. The film does not reject education, but suggests that children also need leisure, movement and contact with nature for their development.

The central conflict develops around the threat that development poses to the playground and the community it supports. The arrival of a black car in the playground signals the beginning of this change, while the altered mood of the natural surroundings anticipates the loss that follows. When the villagers learn that a hospital is to be built on the playground, they are deeply saddened, yet they also recognise the need for a hospital in the locality. They eventually leave the playground, allowing the construction to proceed. The film treats this loss with considerable ambivalence. It acknowledges that hospitals and other forms of infrastructure are necessary for the well being of the community, yet it also mourns the destruction of the playground and the trees that once defined the space. The replacement of green surroundings with concrete becomes a visible reminder of the ecological costs that can accompany development.

The film also questions the logic behind this form of development. The construction of a hospital on the playground places institutional healthcare in direct contrast with the everyday benefits of open space, physical activity and community life. Baiju's observation that children who grow up playing outdoors may be healthier gives the situation an additional irony. The film therefore asks whether development can be considered meaningful when it removes the spaces that contribute to people's everyday well being.

The film is suffused with nostalgia for a vanishing way of life, a mood that is both its strength and its limitation. The character George, who has made his fortune in America, returns to the village

and confesses that despite his wealth, he has never been truly happy. His poignant words, “I have three companies in America, to be frank, till this moment I thought I am content with my life, but after seeing you, I realized how wrong I was, you are lucky to have this life, to stay happy always”, articulate the film's central contrast between material wealth and genuine well being. George and Baiju spend the night under a tree, reminiscing about their childhood days, and Baiju sleeps peacefully without fear or anxiety. The scene is packed with wistful emotions, taking the audience on a nostalgic journey. This nostalgia serves an important ecological function. By evoking the memory of a more harmonious relationship with nature, the film creates an emotional connection to what has been lost, making the loss feel tangible and consequential. The grandmother's oral storytelling, the recollections of childhood games, the sense of place that anchors the characters' identities, all of these contribute to a form of ecological memory that resists the erasure of the past. The film suggests that memory is a resource for resistance, a way of keeping alive the possibility of alternative ways of living.

However, the film’s reliance on nostalgia also represents a limitation. By idealising village life and contrasting it with the corruptions of the city, the film risks obscuring the real problems that exist in rural communities and romanticising the past in ways that may not be historically accurate. The absence of conflict, the harmony that prevails, the lack of any serious disagreement, all of this suggests a community that exists more in memory than in reality. The film’s nostalgia, in other words, may be more of an obstacle than an aid to genuine ecological critique.

The movie’s resolution, Baiju’s letter to the minister, in which he pleads for a small plot of land for children to play, reflects the film’s reliance on individual agency rather than collective action. His letter is heartfelt and moving, and it brings the film’s message into focus: we should not forget to leave a small plot of land for children to stir their friendships, enjoy the breeze, and involve in games. But the letter is also a solitary act, a plea to those in power rather than a demand backed by collective resistance. This emphasis on individual agency is consistent with the film’s overall approach, which focuses on Baiju’s personal journey and his relationships with the other characters. But it also limits the film’s political potential. The forces that are destroying the playground are not merely individual decisions but structural forces, the logic of development, the power of capital, the priorities of a state that values economic growth over ecological well being. Addressing these forces requires collective action, organised resistance, and political mobilisation. The film gestures toward these possibilities but does not fully explore them, leaving the viewer with a sense of melancholy rather than a call to action.

The film engages with the theme of the Anthropocene in a manner that is at once poignant and limited. It diagnoses the ills of ecological loss and the enclosure of the commons with considerable insight, but its prescribed remedies, nostalgia, individual agency, appeals to authority, remain insufficient to the scale of the problem. This ambivalence makes the film a fascinating case study for understanding the possibilities and limitations of ecological cinema in contemporary India.

The film’s most significant contribution is its portrayal of the playground as a commons and its depiction of the enclosure of that commons by the forces of development. The playground functions as a space of social reproduction, a place where the community sustains itself not through economic transactions but through the gift of shared time and space. It is, in this sense, a form of wealth that is not measured in money but in the quality of relationships and the depth of connection to place. The enclosure of the commons, as scholars of political economy have argued, is one of the defining processes of capitalist modernity. From the enclosure of common lands in early modern England to the privatisation of public services in the contemporary era, the logic of enclosure transforms shared resources into private property, collective governance into individual ownership. The film's depiction

of the playground's loss to a hospital construction project is a local instance of this global process, a reminder that the Anthropocene is not merely a matter of climate change but of the systematic destruction of the commons and the forms of life that depend on it.

The film's critique of this process is powerful but incomplete. It laments the loss of the playground without fully articulating what might be done to prevent similar losses in the future. It relies on nostalgia for a vanishing past without imagining a different future. And it appeals to the conscience of those in power without challenging the structures that produce the power to enclose.

The film's portrayal of the villagers'ecological embeddedness offers a vision of human life as inseparable from the life of the land. This vision challenges the fundamental premise of the Anthropocene, that humans are separate from and superior to nature, by showing a community that lives in harmony with its environment, that understands and respects the natural world, and that finds meaning and joy in its connection to place. Yet the film also portrays this embeddedness as fragile and vulnerable, threatened by the forces of modernisation and development. The arrival of the black car, the transformation of the weather, the felling of the trees, these are the signs of an encroaching modernity that the villagers cannot resist. The film's melancholy arises from its recognition that the ecological embeddedness it celebrates is being lost, that the Anthropocene is not merely a threat but a reality that is already unfolding.

This recognition is important, but it also raises questions that the film does not fully address. If the Anthropocene is already here, what does it mean to resist it? If the commons are already enclosed, what does it mean to defend them? The film gestures toward these questions without answering them, leaving the viewer with a sense of loss that is powerful but ultimately unresolved.

The film's reliance on nostalgia is both its greatest strength and its most significant limitation. On the one hand, nostalgia serves an important ecological function by keeping alive the memory of alternative ways of living, by making the loss of the commons feel real and consequential, by creating emotional connections to nature that might motivate ecological action. On the other hand, nostalgia can be a form of evasion, a way of mourning the past without confronting the present, a substitute for political action rather than a stimulus to it. The film's nostalgia for village life is not without its problems. It idealises a community that is free from conflict, harmonious in its relations, and untouched by the corruptions of modernity. This idealisation obscures the real problems that exist in rural communities, caste discrimination, gender inequality, economic precarity, and romanticises a past that may not have been as idyllic as it appears. The film's nostalgia, in other words, may be more of a symptom of the Anthropocene condition than a response to it, a way of coping with loss that ultimately accepts the loss as inevitable.

The film's limitations also reflect the broader challenges of representing ecological loss in mainstream cinema. Commercial filmmaking operates within constraints, box office expectations, audience sensibilities, distribution networks, that limit the kinds of stories that can be told and the ways in which they can be told. The film's gentle humour, its episodic structure, its resolution through individual appeal all represent concessions to these commercial pressures, strategies for making an ecological critique palatable to a mass audience. Yet the film's willingness to address ecological themes at all represents progress. The film suggests that Malayalam cinema is willing to engage with environmental questions, even as it navigates the constraints of commercial filmmaking. This is not to excuse the film's limitations but to situate them within a broader context of cultural production and its possibilities.

Ultimately, *Rakshadhikari Baiju Oppu* is a film about loss, the loss of a playground, the loss of a way of life, the loss of a relationship with nature that once seemed secure. This loss is the defining experience of the Anthropocene, the condition in which human activity has become so pervasive that it threatens the very systems that sustain life. The film's elegiac tone, its nostalgia for a vanishing past, its sense of melancholy, all of these are appropriate responses to a situation that is genuinely tragic. But the film also offers moments of hope. The children who play in the playground, the elders who understand the weather, the community that gathers around the tree, these are reminders that another way of living is possible, that the values of the commons have not been entirely erased. The film's final message, that we should not forget to leave a small plot of land for children to play, is a modest but meaningful plea, a recognition that even in the age of the Anthropocene, there are small acts of resistance that can make a difference.

Ranjan Pramod's *Rakshadhikari Baiju Oppu* represents a significant intervention in the representation of ecological consciousness in contemporary Malayalam cinema. Through its portrayal of the playground as a commons and its depiction of a community that lives in harmony with nature, the film offers a powerful critique of the Anthropocene condition and the forces of development that drive ecological destruction. The playground functions as a symbol of shared resources and collective identity, a space of social reproduction and ecological embeddedness that stands in quiet opposition to the logic of enclosure and privatisation. The film's engagement with ecological themes is not without its limitations. Its reliance on nostalgia, its emphasis on individual agency, and its reluctance to fully confront the structural forces driving ecological loss all represent weaknesses in its critique. The idealisation of village life and the absence of conflict may obscure the real problems that exist in rural communities. The resolution through appeal to authority rather than collective resistance may leave the viewer with a sense of melancholy rather than a call to action.

Yet these limitations do not diminish the film's significance. Its willingness to address ecological questions directly, the vivid portrayal of the commons and its enclosure, and the poignant meditation on loss and memory represent important contributions to Malayalam cinema and to ecological thought more broadly. The film suggests that cinema has a role to play in making visible the often invisible processes of environmental change, in creating emotional connections to nature, and in imagining alternatives to the Anthropocene condition. The film's ambiguous conclusion, Baiju's letter, the loss of the playground, the uncertain future, reflects the uncertain status of ecological resistance in contemporary India. The film offers hope for the possibility of change while acknowledging that the forces arrayed against it are powerful and entrenched. This ambivalence may be the film's most honest response to a moment in which the Anthropocene is not merely a future threat but a present reality.

Works Cited

Buell, L. (2005). *The future of environmental criticism: Environmental crisis and literary imagination*. Blackwell Publishing.

Chandrasekhar, A. (2019). *Haritha Cinema: Green cinema in Malayalam*. Kerala State Film Development Corporation.

Crutzen, P. J., & Stoermer, E. F. (2000). The "Anthropocene". *Global Change Newsletter*, 41, 17 18.

Guha, R. (1999). *Environmentalism: A global history*. Longman.

Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.

Heise, U. K. (2008). *Sense of place and sense of planet: The environmental imagination of the global*. Oxford University Press.

Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow violence and the environmentalism of the poor*. Harvard University Press.

Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the commons: The evolution of institutions for collective action*. Cambridge University Press.

Pramod, R. (Director). (2017). *Rakshadhikari Baiju Oppu* [Film]. Malayalam.

Shiva, V. (2016). *Staying alive: Women, ecology, and development*. North Atlantic Books.

Williams, R. (1973). *The country and the city*. Oxford University Press.