

From Drought to Ecological Anxiety: An Ecocritical Study of Kedarnath Singh's Poetry

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Abstract- Kedarnath Singh occupies an important place in modern Hindi poetry for his ability to connect ordinary experiences with larger questions of human existence. His poetry is closely associated with villages, fields, rivers, water, birds, animals and the earth. These elements, however, are not merely picturesque details. They become ways of thinking about human dependence on nature and the changes taking place in the environment. This paper examines the ecological dimension of Singh's poetry through an ecocritical reading of selected poems, particularly Akaal Mein Saras, Akaal Mein Doob, Paani Ki Prarthana, Paani Tha Main, Nadi, O Meri Udaas Prithvi, Baagh and Prithvi Rahegi. The study focuses on drought, water scarcity, biodiversity, anthropocentrism, ecological displacement and the relationship between environmental and social crisis. It argues that Singh does not treat nature merely as an object of aesthetic appreciation. Instead, human beings, animals, birds, water, soil and the earth appear as parts of an interconnected world. Drought becomes a crisis that extends from the agricultural field to the wider community of life, while water becomes both a material necessity and a symbol of memory and responsibility. Although Singh cannot historically be described simply as a "climate-change poet," his poetry anticipates several concerns that have become central to contemporary environmental discourse. His poetry ultimately moves from an awareness of nature towards ecological anxiety, ethical responsibility and hope.

Keywords- Kedarnath Singh, Ecocriticism, Hindi poetry, ecological consciousness, drought, water, biodiversity, anthropocentrism, ecological anxiety.

I. Introduction

The environmental crisis has become one of the most pressing concerns of the contemporary world. Climate change, water scarcity, deforestation, pollution, loss of biodiversity and the excessive exploitation of natural resources have altered the relationship between human beings and their surroundings. What was once considered an issue concerning forests, rivers and wildlife has gradually become part of everyday human experience. Agriculture, food, livelihoods and communities are increasingly affected by changes in the natural environment.

Literature responds to such changes in ways that are different from scientific or political discourse. A scientific report can provide information about drought or declining water levels, but a poem can make the emotional reality of such experiences visible. A dry field, a thirsty bird or a disappearing river can communicate the human meaning of environmental loss in a particularly intimate manner.

Ecocriticism provides a useful framework for examining this relationship between literature and the physical environment. Cheryll Glotfelty describes ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment."¹ This approach encourages literary studies to move beyond an exclusively human-centred

reading and to examine the representation of animals, plants, rivers, landscapes and ecological systems.

Kedarnath Singh's poetry is particularly suitable for such an examination. His poems frequently return to ordinary elements of life—water, soil, crops, birds, animals, trees and villages. His interest in these elements is not simply descriptive. They are connected with memory, livelihood, hunger, social relations and human vulnerability.

The environmental dimension of Singh's poetry has received increasing attention. The publication of *Paani Ki Prarthana: Paryavaran Vishayak Kavitayen* in 2020 is especially significant. Published by Rajkamal Prakashan and edited by Sandhya Singh and Rachna Singh, the collection brings together poems in which nature and environmental concerns occupy a prominent place. The publishers describe nature and environment as deeply rooted in Singh's poetic work.

The present study therefore attempts to read Singh's poetry through an ecocritical framework, focusing particularly on the relationship between drought, water, non-human life and ecological anxiety.

II. From Nature to Ecological Consciousness

Nature has always been an important presence in Hindi literature. The classical and medieval traditions contain numerous representations of rivers, forests, seasons, flowers, mountains and agricultural landscapes. In much traditional poetry, however, nature frequently functions as a source of beauty, metaphor or emotional expression.

Singh's treatment of nature is somewhat different. He certainly uses natural images, but these images often carry a social and ecological significance. A field is connected with the farmer's livelihood. Water is connected with survival. A bird can indicate the condition of its habitat. An animal can make us question the limits of human control.

This is particularly visible in the poems collected under the environmental rubric of *Paani Ki Prarthana*. The collection itself acknowledges that environmental concerns in Singh's poetry cannot be restricted to a few explicitly "environmental" poems; nature and the environment often exist within the larger fabric of his poetic world.

Singh's ecological consciousness therefore develops organically from his engagement with everyday life. He does not need to turn his poems into environmental manifestos. Ecological concerns emerge through ordinary objects and situations. This quality makes his poetry particularly effective from an ecocritical perspective.

Drought as More Than a Natural Disaster

Drought occupies an important position in Singh's poetry, especially in *Akaal Mein Saras* and *Akaal Mein Doob*. Both poems are included in the collection *Akaal Mein Saras*, published in 1988. Available discussions of the collection identify these as two of Singh's major poems on drought.

What is significant about Singh's treatment of drought is that he does not present it only as the absence of rainfall. Drought affects an entire network of life.

The farmer suffers because the crop fails. The field suffers because the soil loses moisture. Animals suffer because water becomes scarce. Birds are forced to move in search of water. Human communities experience anxiety because their livelihoods depend upon the agricultural environment. The connection may be represented as:
Drought → Water scarcity → Agricultural distress → Disturbance of habitats → Suffering of non-human life → Human anxiety

This interconnectedness is central to Singh's ecological imagination.

“Akaal Mein Saras”: The Crane as Ecological Witness

Akaal Mein Saras offers one of the most striking examples of Singh's treatment of ecological crisis. The crane appears in a landscape affected by drought and searches for water. The bird's movement immediately raises questions about what has happened to its natural environment. The poem is especially powerful because Singh does not directly explain the entire ecological crisis. Instead, he allows the bird's behaviour to reveal it.

The crane has come in search of water, but the human world does not necessarily provide what it needs. The bird's presence in an unfamiliar environment suggests a disturbance in the relationship between species and habitat. The crane thus becomes an ecological witness.

One of the most moving moments in the poem is the response of an old woman who understands that the cranes are looking for water and places a water-filled bowl in the courtyard. This small act is significant because it introduces compassion into an otherwise disturbed environment. The poem consequently contains both ecological suffering and human sensitivity.

A discussion of the poem notes that the cranes come from distant places searching for water and that the old woman responds by placing a bowl of water for them.

The episode also complicates the relationship between human beings and nature. Humans have contributed to the disturbance of the natural environment, yet the poem also recognises the possibility of empathy and care. The crane therefore represents more than ecological displacement. It also becomes a test of human sensitivity.

“Akaal Mein Doob”: Survival and Hope

If Akaal Mein Saras emphasises ecological vulnerability, Akaal Mein Doob introduces the possibility of survival. Doob is an ordinary grass, easily overlooked in everyday life. Yet its survival during drought gives it symbolic importance. The grass becomes an image of persistence.

The significance of doob lies precisely in its ordinariness. Singh does not choose an impressive or spectacular form of nature to represent hope. He chooses something small and familiar. The survival of the grass suggests that life retains a capacity for renewal even under difficult conditions. Critical discussions of the poem similarly interpret doob as a sign of hope and the persistence of life during drought.

This makes Akaal Mein Saras and Akaal Mein Doob complementary poems. One foregrounds the vulnerability of life; the other foregrounds its resilience. Singh's

ecological imagination therefore does not end in despair. Even in a damaged environment, there remains the possibility of survival.

Water as Life in “Paani Ki Prarthana”

Among Singh's environmental poems, Paani Ki Prarthana is particularly important because it gives water a voice. The poem reverses the conventional relationship between human beings and nature. Usually, human beings speak about water. Here, water itself becomes the speaker. This shift is important from an ecocritical perspective. Water ceases to be merely a resource and becomes a presence with its own history and significance.

The poem draws attention to the contradiction between the increasing scarcity of water and its continued availability within the market. A critical discussion of the poem points to this tension between the disappearance of water in the natural environment and its continued presence as a commodity.

“Paani Tha Main”: Water and Memory

Water in Singh's poetry is connected not only with physical survival but also with memory. Human settlements have historically developed around rivers, ponds and other sources of water. Agriculture, festivals, occupations and local cultures have evolved in relation to water. Consequently, the loss of water can also become a loss of cultural memory.

In Paani Tha Main, water may therefore be read as a carrier of both ecological and cultural experience. Its presence connects human beings to their past, while its disappearance suggests a break in that continuity. This relationship between water and memory expands the meaning of environmental crisis. Ecological destruction does not merely damage physical surroundings; it can also transform the cultural relationship between people and place.

III. The River as Ecological and Cultural Space

The river occupies an equally important position in Singh's poetic imagination. A river is simultaneously a physical ecological system and a cultural presence. It provides water, supports agriculture and sustains biodiversity. At the same time, it becomes part of the memory of communities and places.

This dual significance is important because it prevents us from viewing rivers simply as “resources.” A river is also a living part of a cultural landscape. When a river becomes polluted, depleted or altered, therefore, the loss is not limited to water. The ecological and cultural relationships built around the river are also affected. Singh's river imagery can consequently be read as a reminder that environmental and cultural memory are closely connected.

“O Meri Udaas Prithvi”: The Earth as a Suffering Presence

The title O Meri Udaas Prithvi creates an immediate emotional relationship between the poet and the earth. The earth is described as “sad,” and this personification changes its status within the poem.

The earth is no longer an object.
It becomes a presence.

The sadness attributed to the earth can be read as a reflection of ecological damage and human indifference. The poem therefore encourages an emotional response to environmental crisis. This personification also challenges the idea that nature exists simply for human use. If the earth is capable of suffering, human beings are no longer merely users of nature; they become responsible for their relationship with it. The ecological concern here is therefore inseparable from ethics.

“Baagh”: Beyond Anthropocentrism

The tiger occupies a distinctive place in Singh's poetry. Baagh brings the question of non-human life directly into focus. The tiger does not exist merely as a symbol created for human purposes. It represents a form of life that has its own place in the world. This is significant because environmental destruction is often driven by an assumption that human development has priority over other forms of life. Forests become land for development; animals become obstacles; habitats become resources.

Singh's tiger challenges this hierarchy.

The question raised by the poem is ultimately one of coexistence: Can human beings imagine a world in which other species have a legitimate place?

This aspect of Baagh has continuing relevance. The poem is also taught in contemporary university curricula in the context of ecological consciousness; for example, the revised Hindi syllabus of Tamil Nadu Central University includes Singh's Baagh under modern poetry and ecological consciousness. The tiger thus becomes a powerful figure through which anthropocentrism can be questioned.

IV. Biodiversity and the Non-Human World

Singh's birds and animals should not be treated as decorative elements. They are part of the ecological world represented by his poetry. The crane in Akaal Mein Saras reveals the consequences of water scarcity. The tiger in Baagh raises questions about species coexistence. Birds associated with water and landscape suggest the condition of their habitats.

Their presence—and sometimes their absence—allows Singh to communicate ecological change without resorting to scientific terminology. This is one of the strengths of his poetic method. A small living creature can make a large environmental problem visible.

Rural Life and Environmental Crisis

Singh's ecological consciousness is also closely connected with his representation of rural life. Agriculture depends upon a delicate balance between rainfall, water, soil, crops, animals and human labour. When one element is disturbed, the others are affected. Drought therefore becomes much more than a meteorological event. It becomes a crisis of livelihood. The farmer, the field, the animal and the bird all become part of the same environmental story.

Singh's rural landscape consequently provides a useful alternative to the idea that environmental concerns belong only to forests and wildlife. For him, ecology is also present in the field, the village and the everyday struggle for water.

Market, Development and Nature

Environmental crisis in Singh's poetry cannot be separated entirely from economic and social structures. The concern with water and its commodification suggests a tension between nature and the market. A natural element that is essential to everyone becomes something that can be bought and sold. Similarly, development can create ecological displacement when human expansion alters habitats and landscapes.

Singh does not always express these concerns through direct political argument. Instead, they emerge through images and situations. This understated approach is one of the distinctive features of his poetry. The reader is encouraged to recognise the contradiction rather than being simply instructed to accept a particular argument.

V. Ecological Anxiety and Human Responsibility

The ecological anxiety present in Singh's poetry arises from an awareness that the natural world is changing.

Drought creates uncertainty.

Water scarcity produces fear.

The displacement of birds signals ecological disturbance.

The threatened existence of animals raises questions about biodiversity.

The sadness of the earth suggests a deeper crisis in the relationship between human beings and their environment. Yet Singh's poetry does not stop with anxiety. It repeatedly returns to the possibility of human sensitivity.

The old woman who places water for the cranes in Akaal Mein Saras is an important example. Her small action cannot solve the larger ecological crisis, but it demonstrates that environmental responsibility begins with sensitivity towards another form of life.

From Ecological Anxiety to Climate Discourse

Singh's poetry needs to be approached historically. It would be inaccurate to describe him simply as a "climate-change poet." His poems were written before contemporary climate-change discourse had acquired its present scientific, political and cultural prominence. Drought, water insecurity, habitat disturbance, biodiversity loss, commodification of natural resources and uncertainty about the future are all central to present ecological discussions.

Singh therefore may more appropriately be described as a poet who developed a strong ecological consciousness before climate anxiety became a dominant cultural discourse. His poetry does not scientifically predict climate change. Rather, it creates a sensibility through which present-day readers can understand environmental vulnerability. This distinction is important because it avoids imposing contemporary terminology on an earlier poet while still recognising the continuing relevance of his work.

“Prithvi Rahegi”: Hope Beyond Crisis

Singh's ecological imagination is not entirely pessimistic.

Prithvi Rahegi introduces the possibility of continuity. The earth will remain, but the poem also invites us to think about what kind of earth will remain and what kinds of life will be able to exist upon it.

This distinction is important.

The survival of the planet does not automatically guarantee the survival of existing ecosystems, species or human ways of life. The poem therefore offers a form of ecological hope that is more complex than simple optimism. Hope becomes meaningful only when accompanied by awareness and responsibility.

VI. Conclusion

Kedarnath Singh's poetry offers a significant contribution to the study of ecological consciousness in modern Hindi literature. His treatment of nature moves beyond conventional descriptions of beauty and creates a deeper relationship between human life and the natural environment.

Akaal Mein Saras transforms drought into an experience of ecological displacement. The crane becomes a witness to a damaged landscape, while the old woman's response introduces the possibility of human compassion. Akaal Mein Doob complements this sense of vulnerability with an image of resilience. Paani Ki Prarthana makes water a speaking presence and raises important questions about scarcity and commodification. Paani Tha Main connects water with memory and cultural continuity. O Meri Udaas Prithvi creates an emotional relationship between humanity and the earth, while Baagh challenges anthropocentric assumptions by foregrounding the independent significance of animal life.

The ecological significance of Singh's poetry lies ultimately in its understanding of relationship. Human beings do not exist outside nature. Their lives are connected with water, soil, crops, animals, birds and landscapes. Therefore, an environmental crisis cannot remain merely an “environmental” problem. It eventually becomes a crisis of livelihood, culture, memory and human existence. At the same time, Singh does not reduce ecological poetry to despair. The surviving doob, the compassionate gesture towards the cranes and the continuing presence of the earth suggest that hope remains possible.

His poetry may consequently be understood through the movement:

Nature → Awareness → Ecological Crisis → Anxiety → Responsibility → Hope
Singh should not be called a climate-change poet in the strict historical sense. Yet his poetry provides an important literary vocabulary for understanding many of the environmental anxieties of the present. By giving poetic significance to things as ordinary as water, grass, birds, animals and fields, he reminds us of something fundamental: human life is sustained by a world that human beings do not own.



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