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Documenting poaching and the vanguards of environment: A discursive study on Indian OTT docuseries, "Poacher"

Lekshmi Priya Sanal* and I. Arul Aram

Department of Media Sciences, Anna University, Chennai - 600025, India.

Ivory poaching was believed to be contained in India following stringent law and policy enforcement in the 1990s. This proved to be false when a poaching ring was uncovered in 2015, revealing an extensive, shadowy nexus of poachers, traders, high-end art dealers, and collectors spread across the country, making it the largest one in Indian history. A study by Poacher, a critically acclaimed docuseries, fictionalizes the two-year-long investigation that led to the crackdown on this ring. Environmental issues are rarely covered by news media, let alone on the big screen. However, the proliferation of OTT (over-the-top) platforms has changed the way media production and consumption functions, and previously overlooked or controversial scripts are now seeing the light of day. The recent push for environmental concerns worldwide may be a reason for the slow but gradual increase in such web series and feature films in India. This paper studies the eight-episode series through content analysis of its narrative, visual elements, and environmental philosophies, with Ecocriticism as the theoretical framework. Through triangulation, the researchers aim to understand the communicative effectiveness of bringing gruesome, real-life incidents to the wider-than-ever reach of the OTT screen and the impact it may have on the audience's understanding of the irreplaceable significance of non-human species and the inimitable role of forest rangers and grassroots environmentalists in conservation and environmental well-being.

Key words: Environmental communication, poaching, India, over-the-top, web series, ecocriticism, docuseries, environment.

INTRODUCTION

A pressing environmental concern with far-reaching global impact, wildlife and forest crime was designated as a "serious transnational organised crime" (Environmental Investigation Agency, 2013) during the London Conference on Illegal Wildlife Trade in 2014. Corroborated by a Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice (CCPCJ) report on wildlife crime, which exhibited several indicators associated with organised

crime (United Nations, 2003), a major outcome of the international conference was that wildlife crime must be treated and investigated as any other transnational organised crime (United Nations, 2014), as it was "destabilising, subverts the rule of law, and the proceeds may fuel other organised criminal activities and conflict" (Environmental Investigation Agency, 2015).

Wildlife crime encompasses any and all forms of illegal activities committed against wild animals, including trafficking, poaching, breeding, hunting, trading, and trapping (International Fund for Animal Welfare, 2024). Present-day wildlife crime has evolved into a lucrative, business-like operation "with an estimated value of $20 billion per year and is often orchestrated by highly organised, transnational criminal networks" (Environmental Investigation Agency, n.d). According to the World Wide Fund (WWF) (n.d), wildlife and poached animal parts exchange hands in ways similar to how illegal drugs and arms are smuggled. "By its very nature, it is almost impossible to obtain reliable figures for the value of the illegal wildlife trade. It is estimated to run into billions of dollars" (WWF, n.d). Wildlife crimes are not limited to just the poaching of animals or birds for their parts such as skin, hide, fur, scales, horns, teeth, and/or bones, or the illegal trade of exotic/threatened species, but also include unauthorised logging of timber and unregulated fishing. Additionally, acts such as manufacturing commodities from wild/endangered species, along with possession, sale, and import or export of these items, are considered wildlife crimes, as nipping the bud at demand may also help towards eradicating the supply chain (Rana and Kumar, 2023; Toland et al., 2020).

In India, the two high-value species that have been primarily associated with poaching post-independence are the Bengal Tiger (*Panthera tigris tigris*) and the Indian Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus indicus*). Both species have been part of India's natural and cultural heritage since time immemorial and are among the top priority species (World Wide Fund India, n.d) for conservation and rehabilitation efforts in the country.

Although the hunting of wild animals as a sport or recreation has existed in the Indian subcontinent for centuries, the tradition of 'shikar' during the colonial era, of which patrons also included the Indian royalty and nobility, caused an irrecoverable dent in the wildlife statistics, especially in tiger numbers. The sport may have, as such, involved the Englishmen and Indian royals committing the final act; however, the imperial government employed indigenous *shikaris* (hunters) for their local knowledge and endowed them with monetary rewards for killing man-eaters (Chatterjee, 2018). It is believed that between 1875 and 1925, close to 80,000 tigers were killed as a result of insatiable hunting, and from 40,000 individuals at the start of the 20th century, an independent India was staring at a ghastly figure of 4,000 tigers by 1964 (Gee, 1964; Rangarajan, 2001; Mitra, 2019). Besides the Big Cats, elephants were also hunted by the British as a sport across the present-day Mysore and Dhaka regions throughout the 19th century. But more than the ivory-prompted greed of the present day, ambitious big game hunters from the era considered capturing and shooting an elephant a challenge far superior and more difficult than hunting any of its wild counterparts, showcasing high-intensity sportsmanship and a display of great physical prowess and authority over not just the beast but also the natives (Nongbri, 2003).

Hunting of wild animals has been prohibited in India under the provisions of the Wild Life (Protection) Act (Government of India, 1972), especially those listed in Schedule I, II, III, and IV (section 9), except in rare cases of self-defense, danger to human life or property, diseased or beyond recovery, crop damage, etc. Also, the Act prohibits the trade of over 1,800 species of wild animals, plants, and derived products (Government of India, 1972).

However, poaching of wild animals has now emerged as a worrisome contender to hunting, a wildlife crime whose complex nexus is believed to be on par with transnational crime syndicates enabling drugs, terrorism, and human trafficking. An exponentially increasing demand in global markets for high-value wildlife products such as elephant ivory, rhino horns, tiger products, and pangolin scales through illegal routes, with covert buyers willing to pay any price, is further threatening the existence of these species in Asia and Africa (Rana and Kumar, 2023). At any rate, it has taken over as the third most illegal trade in the world following drugs and arms, a situation furthered by the idea of wildlife trafficking being considered a low-risk and high-profit activity for offenders (Interpol, 2022), while threatening the survival of already endangered/threatened species and undoing the efforts of conservationists (Carter et al., 2017).

A global ban on ivory trade was instated in 1989 when the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) placed the African elephant in Appendix I (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, n.d), following a sharp decline in the pachyderm numbers edging towards extinction across the continent. However, this did not deter the underground wildlife trade circuits in Asia, as poaching of elephants for their tusks and ivory smuggling was on the rise in India through the 1980s, with a burgeoning international demand for ivory artefacts and traditional Chinese medicine, a racket reported to have involvement from dangerous transnational organised crime syndicates like the Yakuza and Triads (Green, 2024). It is reported that ivory poaching has resulted in an estimated 8% annual decline in the world elephant population (Sosnowski et al.,

2019).

Following years of stringent law and policy enforcement, ivory poaching was believed to be contained in India by the late 1990s. However, this proved to be false when a poaching ring was uncovered in 2015, revealing an extensive shadowy nexus of poachers, carvers, traders, high-end art dealers, and art collectors spread across the country, making it the largest ivory poaching ring in Indian history (Wildlife Trust of India, 2015). *Poacher* (Bhatt et al., 2024), a critically acclaimed docuseries directed by Richie Mehta and hosted by Amazon Prime Video India, fictionalizes the two-year-long investigation codenamed *Operation Shikar*, involving forest department and wildlife crime control officials, rangers, informants, former poachers, and non-profit organizations like IFAW and WTI, which led to the crackdown on this ring.

Environmental issues are rarely covered by news media, let alone on the big screen. However, the proliferation of streaming platforms has changed the way media production and consumption functions, and previously overlooked or controversial scripts and productions are now seeing the light of day. The recent push for environmental concerns worldwide may be a reason for the slow but gradual increase in web series and feature films on streaming platforms in India that address environmental crimes and injustices.

This paper studies the eight-episode series through content analysis of its narrative, visual elements, and philosophies related to environmentalism and uses Ecocriticism as the theoretical framework. Through triangulation, the researchers aim to understand the communicative effectiveness of bringing gruesome, real-life incidents to the wider-than-ever reach of the over-the-top (OTT) screen and the impact it may have on the audience's understanding of the irreplaceable significance of non-human species and the inimitable role of forest rangers and grassroots environmentalists in conservation and environmental well-being. The study found that the production used many ecocritical narratives as well as visual tropes with the goal of not just tapping into the mega prospects of OTT reach, financial gains, or creative accolades. Moral conflicts in the backdrop of environmental justice are repeatedly contemplated and discussed among characters, and tropes such as motif placement, integration of non-human beings as part of the natural world within the narrative, and associated trivia aid in garnering audience attention towards the reality of environmental crimes in creative manners. The utilization of a celebrity and their social media capital for the promotion of a series blatantly advocating environmentalism is also fairly unusual but ensures a wider reach. In terms of audience perception and reception of such shows, more studies need to be undertaken.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Romanticism and ruminations over the natural world can be traced back to late 18th-century English literature. While these were mostly odes and prose musing over the beauty, vastness, or mystique of nature, it is worth noting that almost all of these works still arose from an anthropocentric premise, where 'humans' could seek and learn from nature for their betterment.

It wasn't until the latter half of the 21st century that an ecological presence emerged within the field of literary criticism, where scholars sought to explore the physical world and its complex relationship with humans, moulded by social, cultural, and historical factors. Perhaps having frequent environmental disasters in real time that were drastically affecting people and their living conditions may have been a significant trigger. One may also attribute *Silent Spring* (Carson, 1962), while not a literary work, as a watershed text that left a deep imprint on the public psyche about environmental degradation in the Western world.

Literary ecology had been one of the first terminologies in academic use to describe ecological associations and themes emergent in literary works. Coined by an ecologist, who believed that the extant environmental crises were the result of a moral predominance of culture over nature through self-serving justifications and earmarked the rampant consumerism fuelled by capitalism and industrialisation as the pinnacle of anthropocentrism in the Western world, which caused further disconnectedness between culture and nature among the masses (Meeker, 1972).

Ecocentric perspectives began prominently emerging within the dominant spheres of Anglo-American literature during the 1970s. The term *ecocriticism*, however, was coined by William Rueckert much later, who understood it as "the application of ecology and ecological concepts to the study of literature" (Rueckert, 1978). Many schools of thought emerged during this period, now considered the first wave of ecocriticism; though these were mainly contained within the Anglo-American peripheries (Buell, 2011). Concepts such as deep ecology (Næss, 1973) and ecofeminism (d'Eaubonne, 2023) also emerged during this period, but outside the American spheres, adding perspectives and dimensions to ecocriticism such as gender, colonialism, environmental justice and ethics, and laid the foundation for the second wave.

Næss's philosophy was heavily inspired by Carson's work, which was met with much contention and resistance at the time for being quite radical. Calling out the shallowness of the incumbent environmental movement for its anthropocentric nature, which fails to recognise the true inherent value of the environment and non-human beings, he asserted that humans were only a part of it, and that their superseding wants, which result in

environmental degradation, need to be radically kept in check to maintain ecological balance. On the other hand, ecofeminism ties together feminism and political ecology towards understanding environmental issues, where rampant environmental exploitation and wildlife crimes are viewed under the same purview of patriarchal oppression, injustices, and crimes against women—with 'man' being the common factor behind both. This branch also explores indigenous rights, their relationship with nature, primitive/uncultured representation in media, as well as LGBTQi+ perspectives.

By the late 1990s, more refined definitions of ecocriticism started surfacing, with the most widely cited one being "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xviii), which was inspired by Barry Commoner's laws of ecology, with particular focus on his first law, "Everything is connected to everything else" (Commoner, 1972). An operational definition was further developed by Gomides (2006, p. 16), defining it as "the field of enquiry that analyses and promotes works of art which raise moral questions about human interactions with nature, while also motivating audiences to live within a limit that will be binding over generations".

According to Gladwin (2017), the second wave saw scholars approaching literary analysis from different perspectives, including deconstruction of human-centric narratives, colonialism and environmental degradation, agency for non-human beings, foci on gender and race as ecological constructs, anthropocentric effects on the climate, etc. An eminent ecocritical academic is Lawrence Buell, whose works have been considered pioneering and shed light on waves of ecocritical movements, threats and concerns about environmental crises, concepts such as 'environmental thinking,' 'built and unbuilt nature,' urban landscapes, and 'nonspace,' and explore environmental writing beyond American peripheries (Johnson, 2009). In his groundbreaking work, *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), he outlines four criteria that determine if a text is environmental, which continue to be utilized by researchers worldwide as a blueprint for ecocritical analysis. Today, the field of ecocriticism has evolved much beyond the Anglo-American and Global North narratives and explores discourses such as postcolonial ecocriticism (Huggan and Tiffin, 2010), environmental justice and ethics, the climate crisis, eco-anxiety, veganism, the impact and aftereffects of Covid-19, among others.

In the Indian milieu, a concept akin to eco-consciousness as a way of life has existed much before the rise of environmentalism in the Global North. Rabindranath Tagore's renowned school, Shantiniketan, can single-handedly stand testimony to this, as the Nobel laureate had repeatedly advocated for an environmentally inclined way of not just living but also learning. Also, much of his writings and poetry continue to be studied by literary and cultural scholars under ecocritical and ecospiritual frameworks, as his belief system held nature as a living being (Kunwar and Khali, 2016) that must be preserved for the well-being of all beings. Going back even further, a crucial addition has been the ecocritical deconstruction of an ancient collection of Tamil texts on grammar titled *Tolkappiyam* (1000-600 BC) by Selvamony (1998). His study of the translated works found deep ecological appreciation in terms of natural and cultural features of landscapes inhabited by early Tamil natives, native flora and fauna, and the relationship between people and their land.

In terms of Western influence, notable ecocritic Ramchandra Guha had been fairly critical of deep ecology and its tenets of radical environmentalism and wilderness preservation for being an impractical model that could not be emulated in countries still developing from colonial exploitation, with "emphasis on equity and the integration of ecological concerns with livelihood and work" (Guha, 1989, p. 71). Another school of thought that has been rather prominent in India is postcolonial ecocriticism. The extent of environmental degradation in India during the British colonial period included indiscriminate felling of forests, land clearance, introduction of invasive ornamental flora, criminalization of indigenous communities, and excessive hunting of wild animals for recreation—impacts and aftereffects of which can be found in works of English-language writers like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh, and Arundhati Roy. Works of early 20th-century writers like Munshi Premchand, Mahadevi Varma, and Mahasweta Devi are also reflective of deep ecological connections, be it Premchand's capturing the plight of animals or allegiance to one's land, Varma's poetry reflecting love and respect for animals, and Devi's works highlighting tribal communities' connection with nature and land. Being a country with hundreds of languages and a rich literary heritage, the exploration of regional literature may yield even greater numbers of works with unassuming, ecologically driven narratives from socio-cultural, religious, spiritual, indigenous, and gender-based perspectives.

As more and more disciplines have been integrating environmental aspects within their scholarship, Commoner's discourse on ecological interconnectedness holds for ecocriticism as well. Buell further opines that the scope of ecocriticism has transcended beyond the initial literary precedence and can include "any and all expressive media, including not only visual, architectural, and other non-textual genres but also even more purely instrumental, functional discourses—of scholarly articles in the natural and social sciences, the texts of legislative documents and treaties, and so forth" (Buell, 2011, p. 89).

Ecocritical theories being used as frameworks to study media, including comics, photographs, films, and web series—i.e., texts beyond written works—can ascertain that the field has established itself as an integral part of environmental humanities. For instance, Gomides (2006) used ecocriticism to study the film adaptation of *The Burning Season* (Revkin, 1990), an environmental classic with Amazonian deforestation and mass extinction as the backdrop, while Alexander and Aram (2019) conducted an ecocritical analysis of climate change-themed comic strips for their impact on the audience.

In recent years, more Indian web series with premises incorporating genuine ecological considerations have emerged, with Amazon Prime Video's *Poacher* joining the litany. Khan et al. (2024) studied the effectiveness of Hindi language web series such as *The Jengaburu Curse* (Chakraborty, 2023), *The Railway Men* (Chopra et al., 2023), and *Teerandaz* (Athwal and Taneja, 2022), highlighting the importance of such eco-fictional narratives in promoting environmental stewardship and sustainable practices in contemporary Indian society. Basu and Tripathi (2023) examined the Netflix-based web series *Kaala Pani* (Saxena and Shah, 2023) to understand the show's treatment of philosophical and moral contexts surrounding humanity, set against the backdrop of a mysterious and contagious viral outbreak. More recently, Maity and Rai's (2024) commentary addresses the concept of eco-genocide as a theoretical construct, using film adaptations of the 1984 gas leakage tragedy in the Indian city of Bhopal as the backdrop, and identifies the varied range of the disaster's portrayal beyond anthropocentric impact in these films. While these studies do not explicitly include ecocritical theories, they certainly emphasize the emergence of ecological discourses beyond climate crisis or apocalyptic tropes, which are gaining more visibility through streaming platforms with massive reach, in terms of viewership and subscriptions. Addressing environmental concerns within fictional narratives can go a long way toward raising public awareness and instilling ecological consciousness, especially as the effects of climate change and global warming are increasingly witnessed in real-time around the world.

Discourse emerging from any text is crucial, as Foucault (1969) rightfully identified it as an entity beyond just language or practices, but intertwined with the knowledge and power influences that shape societies, create identities, and define the roles embodied by individuals. Yazdannik et al. (2017) broadly define discourses as "systems of meaning that are related to the interactional and wider sociocultural context and operate regardless of the speakers' intentions" (Yazdannik et al., 2017, pp. 1-2). Analyzing and critiquing discourses emerging from any form of media is particularly relevant, as these are reflective of extant power structures and social practices, assisting researchers in exploring these constructs and pertinent sociocultural influences in today's media-driven world.

Theoretical framework

Given that the web series 'Poacher' has an eco-fictional narrative; the researchers employed Lawrence Buell's four criteria for creating fiction (Buell, 1995) as the primary theoretical framework. These are summarised as:

1. The non-human environment is present not merely as a framing device;
2. The human interest is not the only legitimate interest;
3. Human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation; and
4. There is some sense of the environment as a process." (Johnson, 2009).

Through these parameters, Buell's framework allows researchers to assess whether a text is ecocritical or not, and helps in identifying latent anthropocentric advocacies, underdeveloped or poorly planned environmental narratives, or if the environmental perspective in the narrative is merely a prop. While Buell's criteria assist in the identification and analysis of the text, the broader scholarship of Ecocriticism was also considered for this study to uncover latent environmental philosophies in the narrative. Concepts such as deep ecology, ecofeminism, and environmental justice were applied to understand various character sketches. For instance, one can interpret repeated dialogues in coherence with some of the philosophies of deep ecology, which asserts that every non-human being has intrinsic value beyond anthropogenic purposes, that current human interference is excessive and causes irreversible damage, and that radical changes are urgently needed in ideological, political, and ethical spheres (Devall and Sessions, 1985). Similarly, ecofeminism connects patriarchal oppression and socio-economic barriers for women with environmental destruction fueled by capitalism (Ruether, 1975; Mellor, 1997). Furthermore, the visual tropes used in the narrative allow viewers to comprehend environmental injustice between social class groups in terms of environmental access, resource distribution, and health, in line with the philosophy of environmental justice (Bullard et al., 2008).

Objectives

The objectives of the study are:

1. To analyse the visual narratives and tropes related to environmentalism in the web series Poacher.

2. To identify various ecocritical philosophies used by the creators in the visual content of the web series and to analyse how relevantly these were framed to capture pertinent issues.

Research questions

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the ecocritical themes emerging in the web series Poacher?
2. What are the visual narratives, elements and tropes used in the show that aid towards effective communication of grave environmental issues?
3. Which ecocritical theories resonate from the series' narrative?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study employs a mixed-methods approach to analyze the data. First aired on the Prime Video platform on 23 February 2024, the data set includes all eight episodes of the series *Poacher*, along with the main poster (1), opening credit sequence (1), pre-credits sequences, trivia content embedded within the episodes (161), and corresponding promotional Instagram posts (6). The episodes were viewed multiple times to identify and analyze the emergent narrative, visual elements, and environmental philosophies presented in the series. The data from the trivia section were organized, coded, and quantified using Microsoft Excel. Key dialogues reflecting various ecocritical theories were also reviewed for the study. Given the variety of data formats analyzed—ranging from qualitative elements such as scenes, dialogues, and narrative structure, to quantitative parameters like promotional posts and trivia content—the researchers adopted triangulation of methods to provide a comprehensive and well-rounded analysis for the study.

FINDINGS

The findings derived from the analysis of the *Poacher* web series include the poster, opening credit sequence, meta-narrative in the pre-credits sequences, trivia, narrative structure, dialogues, and social media promotional posts.

Poster

The primary poster of the series, as displayed on the Prime Video platform, was scrutinized for this study (Figure 1). The central image of the poster features an Asian elephant, towering above the rest of the composition. The main protagonists, Mala Jogi, Neel Bhattacharya, and Alan Joseph, are positioned on either side of the elephant, with a densely forested background that occupies nearly three-fourths of the poster. Notably, the elephant does not appear to have tusks, leaving its gender ambiguous. This visual choice may be a deliberate symbolic decision, representing the larger ecological context in which the series operates.

The reflection at the bottom of the poster, presented as an upside-down image, shows a slain elephant, this time with tusks, alongside three men—Raaz, Poyya, and Aruku—depicted as poachers. The mirrored reflection emphasizes the contrast between the conservation efforts represented by the protagonists and the poaching activities depicted below. In essence, the poster is a visual representation of the dual struggle between wildlife conservation and wildlife crime.

The elephant, being a high-value species and the national animal of India, occupies the center of the poster. This placement underlines its symbolic role in wildlife conservation within the series. The mirrored, upside-down reflection suggests the darker, criminal side of the ecological narrative—poaching and its devastating consequences. The poachers, captured in an attacking pose, reinforce the violent nature of the illegal wildlife trade. The color palette used throughout the poster is relatively muted, with somber tones that mirror the serious subject matter and the personal sacrifices made by forest officials. The poster thus serves as a thought-provoking representation of the complexities of conservation, highlighting not only the ecological struggles but also the sociopolitical and economic factors—such as greed, poverty, superstition, politics, and, at times, sadism—that complicate the issue.

Opening credit

The one-minute opening credit sequence begins with a dark background, showcasing an uncarved ivory specimen, centrally lit. This shot transitions into a montage of intricately carved ivory pieces, featuring representations of Ganesha (the elephant-headed Hindu deity), Buddha, and elephants with tusks. The sequence closes with a final, focused shot on a carved Ganesha (Figure 2). This deliberate focus on ivory carvings serves to foreshadow the central narrative of the series, which revolves around the illegal ivory trade. The inclusion of these specific artefacts—particularly those depicting Ganesha and Buddha—carries significant symbolic weight. It suggests a stark hypocrisy among collectors who claim to follow religious or spiritual practices yet continue to support the ivory trade, contributing to the destruction of the very species that represent their deities. This framing also hints that the market for ivory may not be solely international but could very well be rooted in domestic demand for culturally significant items, such as Ganesha and Buddha carvings.

Figure 1. Poster of the series Poacher.
Source: IMDB.

Figure 2. Opening credit featuring a headshot of an ivory-carved Ganesha.
Source: Prime Video.

Narrative structure of episodes

The series consists of eight episodes, each with an average running time of 47 minutes. The primary language of the series is Malayalam, with English, Hindi, and Bengali incorporated intermittently. The inclusion of these languages serves to capture the regional authenticity of the narrative, as the original bust occurred in Kerala, and the multilingualism reflects the linguistic diversity present in government workplaces. The main protagonists—Mala Jogi (Forest Range Officer), Neel Bhattacharya (Field Director), and Alan Joseph (Intel Analyst)—are set against a backdrop of primary antagonists, such as Raaz (Poacher), Morris Finn (Smuggler), and Poonam Varma (Main Buyer).

The narrative follows a largely linear progression, with events unfolding in chronological order. However, episode 6 introduces a dual narrative structure, blending a flashback with a parallel present-day sequence. While elephants are at the core of the series, the creators purposefully incorporate other species into the storyline, often placing them within the same outdoor diegetic

space. These creatures, though not always directly referenced, are symbolically significant throughout the series.

Motifs related to elephants are prominently featured across episodes, such as figurines, hand-carved ivory artefacts, and statues. The creators also weave in turtle-related motifs—such as embroidered patches on Neel's shirt, stickers on his car, and figurines in his home space. These recurring turtle symbols might emphasize the conservation of other species beyond the iconic Big Cats, offering a broader ecological narrative. The inclusion of turtles could also be a subtle reference to Neel's Bengali heritage, with turtle nesting grounds along India's eastern coastline. This adds an additional layer of cultural specificity to the series and further deepens the environmental consciousness embedded in the narrative.

Meta-narrative in pre-credits

In the series *Poacher*, the pre-credits sequences, found at the beginning of each episode, build a meta-narrative that unfolds progressively throughout the series. The first episode begins with an extreme close-up shot of an elephant in transit, followed by the sound of a gunshot. The camera focuses on the side profile of the elephant, capturing its eye movements throughout the sequence, with the sound effects effectively heightening the tension. Importantly, this sequence avoids explicit depictions of violence, instead allowing the viewer's imagination to fill in the details. After this, the episode transitions into the title sequence, setting the stage for the unfolding drama. This meta-narrative technique is carried over into subsequent episodes, each portraying the elephant's death from the perspective of other beings in the forest. In Episode 2, a tiger is shown reacting to the elephant's brutally savaged body; in Episode 3, a troop of Bonnet macaques observes silently; in Episode 4, vultures scavenge the carcass; in Episode 5, maggots feed on the decaying body; and by Episode 8, a herd of elephants appears, visibly disturbed by the events.

While most of these sequences serve as pre-credits in the earlier episodes, in Episodes 4 and 5, they are placed after the opening credits, leading into the main narrative. Episode 6 offers a unique structure with a flashback sequence that aligns with the dual narrative format of the episode, connecting the events to the first episode's initial confession. Episode 7 omits the pre-credits sequence, while Episode 8 reintroduces a sequence similar to that in Episode 1. Here, however, the camera focuses on the ground, capturing only the movement and agitated trumpeting of the elephants' feet. This pre-credits scene transitions into a covert operation sequence involving the primary suspect in the case. The meta-narrative, focused on the cycle of life and death, could symbolize the natural

progression of death in the wild, were the elephant to die naturally. Instead, it underscores the tragedy of the animal's death at the hands of poachers.

Dialogues

The scriptwriting and dialogue in *Poacher* reflect the depth of research undertaken by the creators. Given that the series is based on a real-life poaching bust, the dialogues not only enhance character development but also convey critical eco-centric messages about environmental protection, species conservation, and the anthropogenic impact on wildlife. Several key dialogues throughout the series address issues such as the long-term consequences of poaching, the impact of urbanization on nature, and the interconnectedness of all living beings in maintaining ecological balance.

For example, one dialogue draws a comparison between Kerala, a biodiversity hotspot, and heavily polluted cities like Delhi. One of the protagonists explains how the loss of elephants—ecological engineers that shape and maintain landscapes—could turn pristine environments into heavily polluted urban spaces within a few years. These exchanges not only promote awareness of the far-reaching impacts of wildlife crime but also emphasize the fragility of the ecosystems we take for granted.

There are also moral and philosophical conflicts expressed through character dialogues. One protagonist, a forest enforcement officer, justifies her commitment to conservation as a way to atone for the sins of her family, whose members were poachers and hunters during the colonial era. In another instance, a poaching sympathizer argues that the survival of his family outweighs concerns about animal deaths, revealing the complex intersection of poverty, survival, and ecological responsibility.

One particularly striking dialogue is when a character reflects, "There's nothing more dangerous in the jungle than humans," a line inspired by a real-life forest officer. This statement highlights the reality that human actions, whether directly or indirectly, have devastating effects on the natural world and its delicate balance.

Series trivia

Poacher also includes a set of trivia, a feature unique to the Prime Video platform, which provides viewers with interesting insights about the production and its actors. The series features a substantial amount of environmental trivia, with 161 points spread across various episodes. These bits of information are synchronized with specific scenes, offering viewers facts about the species featured, the importance of conservation, and the ecological roles

Table 1. Episode-wise trivia breakup of information in Poacher.

Episodes	Total trivia	Species information	Environment related information
1. The Confessor	27	9	11
2. The Crusader	26	12	11
3. The Scapegoat	16	9	5
4. The Blind Eye	17	11	2
5. The Kidnapping	14	7	4
6. The Jungle	26	18	6
7. The Big Fish	13	5	4
8. The Graveyard	22	11	4

Figure 3. The QR code placed at the end of each episode.
Source: Prime Video.

played by lesser-known species. For example, in Episode 6, a scene detailing a mongoose poaching bust is accompanied by trivia about the poaching of mongooses for their hair, the tragic number of mongooses killed to produce a kilogram of hair, and the countermeasures employed by authorities to combat the illegal trade. While the poaching of iconic species like elephants is widely recognized, the poaching of lesser-known species such as mongooses, civets, and porcupines is less familiar to the public. This trivia helps bridge that knowledge gap and raise awareness about the often-overlooked aspects of wildlife crime. Table 1 features an episode-wise trivia breakup of information in Poacher.

Additionally, there are segments of trivia related to the series' production, such as behind-the-scenes challenges, research on environmental aspects, and the collaboration between the director, cinematographer, and music composer. One notable feature is the inclusion of a Quick Response (QR) code at the end of each episode's credits, linking to the Wildlife Trust of India's website, where viewers can make donations to support conservation efforts (Figure 3).

The trivia heavily emphasizes the Asian elephant, with 20 points dedicated to educating viewers about its critical role as an environmental engineer, its behavioral patterns, social structures, and the human-elephant conflicts that arise due to poaching and habitat loss. This focus reflects the series' central theme, underscoring the elephant's significance in maintaining ecological balance. The trivia also sheds light on the concerted efforts by wildlife enforcement agencies to dismantle poaching rings targeting elephants and other endangered species. The distribution of species-related trivia is shown in Table 2.

Social media-celebrity influence

Poacher benefited from the significant influence of its executive producer, Bollywood actress Alia Bhatt, who played a key role in the show's promotion through her massive social media presence. With 85 million followers on Instagram, Bhatt is the fifth most-followed personality in India (Forbes India, 2024) and was recently named one of the 100 most influential people of 2024 by *Time* magazine (Harper, 2024). Bhatt's popularity and social media prowess made her an ideal figure to help promote *Poacher*, particularly given her considerable reach across platforms such as Instagram and Facebook.

Bhatt's association with a show that addresses a serious environmental issue was a significant moment in Indian cinema, where Bollywood celebrities rarely

Table 2. Species included in Poacher Trivia content.

Number of trivia	20	4	3	2	1
Species	Asian Elephant	Indian leopard Rhesus macaque	Bonnet macaque, Sloth macaque/ Kalandar community, White rumpled vulture, Indian pariah dog/ street dog, Avian population/ influenza.	Spiders, Bengal Tiger, Black Kites, Golden jackal, Indian Peafowl, Mongoose/ Operation Clean Art (Mongoose hair) Lion-tailed macaque, Owls, Greater Indian Fruit Bat/ echolocation, Spotted Deer (Chital), Indian Rock Python/ Snakes.	Leafbird, Malabar pied hornbill, Common Krait, Kingfishers, Small Indian civet, Cockatiel, Flies, Amphibian crisis, Indian whistling duck, Tetrameles nudiflora, Frogs, Nilgiri Marten, Fireflies, Maggots, House sparrows, Indian Flapshell Turtle, Malabar Giant Squirrel, Leech therapy, Common Indian toad, Millipede, Grey Slender Loris, Goldfish, Ant, Turtle (motif), Beetles, Ducklings, Indian crested porcupine.

associate themselves with controversial social causes due to the potential for backlash. Bhatt's role as a producer, rather than just a collaborator, in promoting a show that openly addresses the grave issue of wildlife crime marked a watershed moment. Her vast social media following meant that even if a portion of her followers watched the series out of fan loyalty, the impact would be far greater than if the show were marketed to a smaller, more niche audience. This influence could snowball, with her followers spreading the word through word-of-mouth, further amplifying the show's reach.

Along with Bhatt, other key figures involved in the show, such as the director, producers, and actors, leveraged their social media followings, tagging their Instagram handles and using the hashtag #PoacherOnPrime to increase engagement. Bhatt shared six posts about *Poacher* on her feed, five of which were posted before the show's release on 23rd February 2024, and one was shared the day after the release. These posts were analyzed to understand the potential of Bhatt's social media reach. The dataset of her Instagram

activity was retrieved as of 15th July 2024.

The analysis of these posts (Figure 4 and Table 3) revealed a stark difference in social media engagement between posts shared by Bhatt and those shared by Prime Video. For example, the difference in likes between the first two posts was more than double, with Bhatt appearing in the series' teaser herself. This surge can be attributed to Bhatt's massive fan following and her influence on social media, which directly benefited Prime Video as well. After Bhatt's post, the engagement with Prime Video's subsequent post, the series trailer, also saw a significant increase in interaction, indicating how Bhatt's involvement helped generate initial interest in the show.

Out of the five posts shared by Bhatt, the engagement levels continued to grow. The fifth post, which had the highest engagement, received an astonishing 25,81,438 likes and 6,768 comments. This post featured Bhatt in a personal setting, showcasing her outfit for an event, a move that not only engaged her fans but also resonated with cinema, fashion, and makeup enthusiasts. By
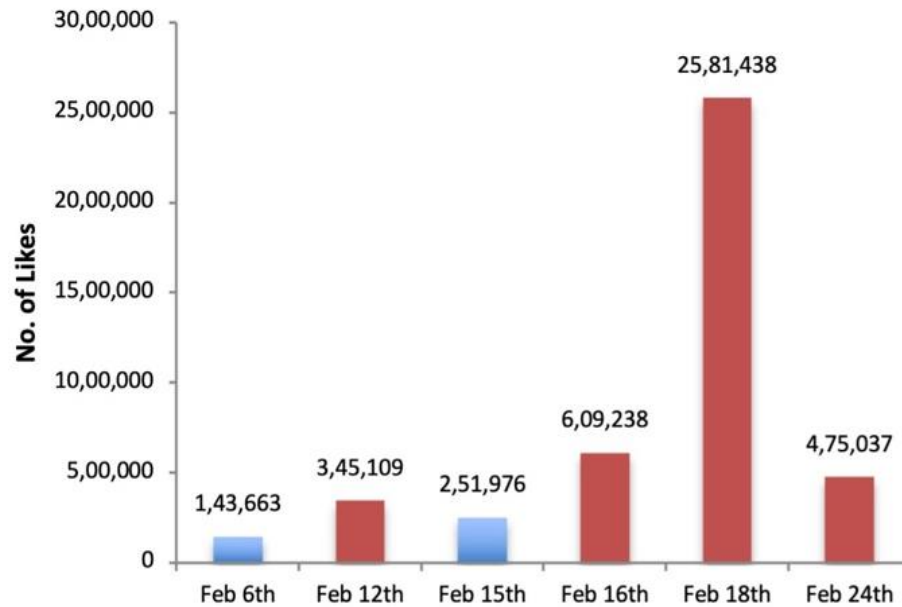
Figure 4. Species included in Poacher Trivia content.

Table 3. Likes and comments on Poacher posts (As of 15 July 2024).

Type of post	Date	Likes	Comments	Media handle
1. Series announcement	6 Feb 2024	1,43,663	898	Prime Video
2. Teaser release (featuring Bhatt)	12 Feb 2024	3,45,109	1,368	Alia Bhatt
3. Trailer release	15 Feb 2024	2,51,976	940	Prime Video
4. Trailer launch event	16 Feb 2024	6,09,238	1,309	Alia Bhatt
5. Series Press Conference (Personal post)	18 Feb 2024	25,81,438	6,768	Alia Bhatt
6. Series trending as #1	24 Feb 2024	4,75,037	1,528	Alia Bhatt

reaching out to these wider communities, Bhatt expanded the show's visibility beyond just the typical entertainment-focused audience.

The final post, which was made the day after the show's release, celebrated *Poacher*'s success in trending as the number one show in India according to Prime Video's viewership metrics (Chakraborty, 2024). While this post received 4,75,037 likes and 1,528 comments—lower than Bhatt's typical engagement levels—it was still higher than any post shared by Prime Video itself, further illustrating the power of Bhatt's influence. The success of this post, and the show's trend-setting performance, is notable because environmental-themed shows, particularly in India, rarely gain such widespread attention and recognition. This highlights how celebrity involvement can play a pivotal role in bringing global awareness to pressing environmental issues through popular media channels.

DISCUSSION

Keeping Buell's four criteria in hindsight, the Poacher series sets its premise entirely within the gritty and gruesome ecology of environmental crimes from the very beginning. While fictionalizing a real-life incident, the director has definitely taken many creative liberties, such as combining characteristics of many real-life individuals to create the character Mala or reversing the genders of the primary protagonist and ivory dealer. However, the events leading up to the final ivory bust remain true to its soul. As per Buell's first factor, the non-human environment in Poacher is not just a framing device but forms an essential part of the series' text. Mehta repeatedly brings in sequences where juxtaposed drone shots of wilderness and urban cities are featured, allowing the audience to process the perils of rapid and uncontrolled urbanization. Multiple conversations

regarding the capital city's extremely deteriorating air quality and the detrimental fate of densely forested regions and their inhabitants, if not protected, are addressed. Be it enforcement officials or NGO workers, the wildlife crime fighters' stance in the show aligns with Buell's second criterion. These are a group of individuals who truly believe in the interests of the environment and non-human beings, which have inherent value beyond anthropocentric utility, and whom they are willing to conserve at the cost of their own lives. The series also maintains the need for respect toward wildlife to the extent of absolute null human interference and the ideology that the world does not belong only to humans.

The entire plot of Poacher substantiates Buell's third criterion, as it sheds light on different layers of human accountability to the environment: the actions of the adversaries within the poaching nexus, the counter-measures by crime fighters for maintaining the ecological balance, and, most importantly, providing environmental justice. In Mala's case, this accountability takes a moral and philosophical tone over her general love and admiration for nature; she is constantly haunted by the guilt of her ancestors' wildlife crimes and the fixated need to atone for them. Multiple examples citing the valuable contributions of different species toward maintaining ecological balance are featured throughout the show, with further information supplemented in the series trivia. Some examples are: elephants as ecological engineers, hornbills as forest farmers, vultures as sanitary engineers of nature, flies as lesser-known pollinators, frogs as indicators of environmental health, etc. Beyond the anthropogenic view of assessing nature by its utilitarian prospects and vanity, understanding the contribution of each species toward environmental balance truly upholds their inherent value while aiding humans to perceive nature as an entity that is the sum of all these beings. As per Buell's final criterion, the show tries to make sense of the environment as a process by including such discourses in the screenplay. Further, an ecocritical reading of Mala as a character resonates with the values of deep ecology, ecofeminism, environmental justice, and ethics. Her dialogues are reflective of these discourses—when she regards humans as the most dangerous beings in the wild or holds her ex-poacher father and people like him accountable for the deplorable state of the environment and cruelty against non-human beings. While some of Mala's contemporaries are painted as having a softer approach toward the situation, her personal conflicts may be the trigger that keeps her radically committed to the cause, often wishing the same cruel end for poachers as for their victims. Despite the tragic narrative of poaching and its aftermath, the meta-narrative that the creators of Poacher included in the pre-credits may also be taken as adhering to Buell's criteria of observing the environment as a process. The life cycle

of the crime and the crumbling of the environmental balance must be observed as a process, affecting different species and life forms in that collective space—some natural, while others not. It is also interesting to note the level of subtlety with which Mehta intricately weaves the religious dimension into the poaching racket, which was the breakthrough in reality that established the existence and prevalence of the domestic ring—both in the opening credits and the plot.

In terms of visual literacy, the makers have made extra efforts to maintain a realistic spatial arrangement that thrives through its multimodality. Keeping the real-time nature of the event that the show fictionalizes, the makers used real audio footage from forests, encompassing bird calls, sounds of various species, animal movement, etc., as background score, especially while featuring outdoor shots. Much of the visual footage was shot in actual forest department office locations in Kerala, which aids in creating a realistic space of engagement between characters in their professional and social spheres. The makers have taken further care in portraying these characters in their private spaces as well, where the physical arrangement of these spaces with personalized tropes (pets, motifs, plants, etc.) makes these characters even more relatable. As much of the drama is shot in Kerala, where it is quite common to come across countless wildlife species even in urban setups due to the state's unique geographical setting, the placement of different non-human beings throughout the show adds the proximity element. However, it is the linguistic element that has been best utilized by the makers in developing the spatiality of sequences, where the show presents its characters speaking multiple languages, such as Malayalam, Hindi, Bengali, and English. This is common and reflective of the linguistic diversity across India and its government offices. Even the characters are distinctly sketched through their gestures, like Mala's passive and often active aggression for the cause, which is in frequent, diametric opposition with her colleagues, while Alan and Neel remain mostly pensive in their demeanor, but their actions exhibit equal commitment. On the other hand, the characters portraying the poachers were mostly developed as being engaged in violent, sadistic, and deeply terrifying acts. Their gesticulations may be intentionally reflective of the dark path they have chosen through their actions. One may also contemplate that these gestures may be indicative of the social class these poachers belong to and whether the makers intentionally (or accidentally) tried to unveil the common perception of savageness associated with such marginalized and poverty-stricken communities by the upper tiers of society. All these multimodal elements together enhance and add significant value to the general effects of the show.

Besides theoretical scrutiny, it is important to highlight

the association of a popular Bollywood actor as executive producer. Observations from Instagram posts (Figure 4 and Table 3) reveal the reach and extent of engagement that a celebrity's post has, and in this particular case, the cause they are associating themselves with. Even if it is a PR tactic employed by social media influencers, the choice to back a production featuring an environmental crime is a welcome move and sends a strong message. One may argue that the support may be purely superficial, like every other social media trend. However, awareness of the high-level poaching nexus in India and the extreme cruelty meted out to animals in obtaining their parts, along with an increased consciousness toward environmental justice, may be much more pronounced through the actor's support, given that the fan base would want to watch the series as a show of support for her first production venture.

The social media algorithm behind posts, especially of celebrities like Bhatt, is designed in a way to reach people much beyond her followers by appearing in random feeds. Even if ten individuals in a million are inspired by the show, the number of people influenced to adopt environmentally conscious lifestyles or actually consider environment-centric services shows greater promise than in a scenario where such shows did not have a popular OTT platform or star-studded backing. The takeaway from these observations is that people with significant influence on huge audiences, tapping into this connection to promote shows with environmental messages, do make a substantial difference, especially in a country like India, where superstars have God-like status and conversations on environmental issues are frequently subdued by corporate-fueled political interests. However, caution must be exercised when the social capital of a celebrity of such gargantuan scale is being tapped; blind faith may still lead these very same legions of fans to follow the celebrity and the cause they endorse—which may or may not be religiously, politically, or monetarily fueled. One may also morally contemplate the motivations behind a celebrity's association with a show, as well as the political economy of the returns they gain—indicating a grossly disproportionate monetary divide between the celebrities and their audiences in India. These areas open scope for more discussions and future research on audience perception.

Conclusion

There has been a rise in films and web series around the world that capture environmental issues, but most often, the plots rarely move beyond climate fiction, apocalyptic, or post-apocalyptic narratives. This makes a show like *Poacher* quite significant. Like an artist, it is the director who brings any production to life, and fictionalizing a gruesome real-life incident without losing its essence requires vision. Already renowned for his exceptional directorial prowess with his acclaimed series *Delhi Crime* (Kaplan et al., 2019), Richie Mehta's *Poacher* emerges as a truly eco-centric work of art. Based on the findings and analysis of the series, the creators intended to do much more than just document the domestic poaching racket busted by an undercover team in 2015. There is a moral discourse deep-seated throughout the narrative that makes one ponder over the extent of human greed and violence that fosters evils like poaching, illegal wildlife trade, and trophy hunting, while also leaving the viewer deeply unsettled. But the picture is not entirely black or white, and the creators have knowingly placed multiple and conflicting perspectives, as one would face in real life, including poverty and hunger driving communities to turn to poaching as a means of survival, moral detachment of art dealers, middlemen, and craftsmen while dealing with poached animal parts, and the majoritarian standpoint that everything on earth is made for man's consumption. The show features dimensions such as religion, corruption, and the political economy within the poaching nexus that extends deep within the government and non-government organizations in the environment and conservation sectors as well, often undoing the painstaking efforts and years of planning of officials fighting the crime, while allowing the brutality to persist in feeding vanity and vested interests. While educating and raising awareness of the poaching racket in India may have been the primary agenda, the creators have made earnest attempts to broaden the environmental discourse without being too preachy. This includes individual shots of many threatened and endangered species throughout the series to simply showcase the vibrant biodiversity of India, incidental placements of motifs from elephant statues and artworks to stitched turtle embellishments on apparel, and the presentation of over 100 interesting facts about the natural world in the trivia section of Prime Video, etc. Such innovative tropes reflect the creators' commitment toward crafting a show that ensures the environmental dialogue remains in the collective psyche, and not just for accolades or monetary pursuits.

Whether intentional or coincidental, *Poacher*'s sequences, dialogues, and underlying philosophies embody many ecocritical discourses as elaborated in the discussion section, making this study significant not just in visual media but also in pedagogies such as environmental communication, literature, and/or culture studies. Further, the real cost of poaching (and/or similar environmental crimes) is contemplated throughout the narrative—the cost of non-human lives, the cost of Anthropocene-driven ecological imbalance and mass extinction, the cost of associated environmental degradation, and the cost of human lives fighting these

crimes. In this aspect, the inherent value of all beings and respect for nature forms the fundamental premise of *Poacher*, countering the extant narratives of anthropocentric control or the taming of nature, and the abject disregard for non-human beings, and their connection and lived experiences with the natural world; though this is a tough ideology to break at the current juncture where India is, with the state sponsoring corporate interests, and a good percentage of the population remaining impoverished for whom survival takes priority over environmentalism.

Like any other commercial film or web series, the creators of *Poacher* have also successfully harnessed current technological advancements (social media reach and algorithms) and social capital (star power and influence) to the show's benefit. This may enable better awareness of environmental crimes such as poaching, illegal wildlife trade, the thankless profession of wildlife crime fighters, and most importantly, the possibility of an outlook shift from a man-centric to an environmentally conscious existence among the common people in India. The popularity and reach of *Poacher* may be an anomaly in India when it comes to shows on environmental issues; however, the series trended as the most-watched in India within a day of its release, which may indicate that people may actually be interested in serious environmental issues, paving the way for more such shows to enter the Indian mediascape.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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