

Podcast | Green Guide for India (Part 1)

Kerrine: Hello and welcome to another podcast hosted by culture360.ASEF.org, the arts and culture portal of the Asia-Europe Foundation, ASEF.

I am Kerrine, and I manage the activities of culture360 and I am also your host for today's episode.

In today's conversation asks, we ask what is happening at the intersection of the arts and environment today in India? Following the online launch of the Green Guide for India last year, commissioned by ASEF culture360 and researched by Contact Base, the guide emphasises how the arts play a crucial role in responding to the ecological and climate crisis.

From the guide, we know that India's cultural landscape is a vibrant tapestry of diverse traditions and evolving contemporary expressions across visual, digital and performance arts. Today, this nation of close to 1.5 billion people faces increasing environmental threats, from climate change to biodiversity loss, pollution and deforestation.

In this context, the conversation further probes in between fragility, adaptability and climate change, how are local arts and cultural organisations addressing environmental challenges through their practices? How do the arts then play a crucial role in shaping the public's understanding and their responses to the ongoing crisis?

Since 2015, ASEF culture360 has been publishing its *Creative Responses to Sustainability* series. This series of country-specific guides look at cultural initiatives that address issues of sustainability in their artistic practice in several countries across Asia and Europe.

If you are a practitioner, artist or policymaker seeking to highlight pathways for a more sustainable future, we invite you to explore these guides on our website.

For today's conversation, we have three speakers with us:

- Dr Madhura Dutta, a development sector professional working in the area of culture and development. She is also the main researcher from Contact Base, and the reason why we are able to gather for this conversation today
- Raki Nikahetiya, the director and co-founder of the sã Ladakh Biennale, the world's highest-altitude regenerative art biennale, focusing on site-specific installations and initiatives at the intersection of climate, culture, and community
- Manjiri Dube, the Associate Director at Khoj International Artists' Association, a not-for-profit contemporary arts organisation based in Delhi, whose work bridges emerging, experimental and transdisciplinary creative practices and pedagogies

Spotlighting a variety of approaches to the same urgent question: what role can the arts and culture play in driving environmental engagement?

So thank you everyone for joining us today. Madhura, thanks to you and the Contact Base team for bringing this research together and it highlights a very important conversation of what is happening at the intersection of culture and climate in India.

When you were putting the guide together, the whole process, how it came about was that Madhura and her team actually did some desktop research. They did interviews with the organisations and together we featured 19 organisations in the guide. So I'm sure there were some insights, there were some challenges, some moments of discovery that actually shaped how we presented the final guide.

Madhura: Thank you Kerrine. It was a pleasure to put together the Green Guide for India because it was so much of learning for us, to know such a wide landscape of art organisations with such interesting models, which are at the intersection of art and climate adaptation, climate resilience, climate change. We could map a very dynamic and deeply rooted landscape, where the overarching trend that we found is that art is moving away from being just a decorative medium, to becoming an active, strategic instrument for ecological action, community stewardship and policy change.

There are some major trends that came up throughout the guide. One was how organisations were translating science into storytelling – where art is being used to simplify abstract, technical, scientific concepts into emotionally resonant human stories.

So instead of just acting as a mirror reflecting ecological degradation, creative practices are being used as a hammer to actively shape public perception, change behaviour, and spark civic responsibility.

The other very interesting trend was about decolonising knowledge and upholding Indigenous knowledge systems. This came up as a very universal theme across all the organisations we interviewed. There is a powerful pushback against top-down Western frameworks of sustainability, which often feel contextually mismatched for India.

So the organisations we looked at emphasised that true sustainability is already embedded in India's diverse cultural fabric. For example, its food, traditional architecture, clothing, rituals, folklore and frugality, zero waste lifestyles, circular economy. These are age old generation spanning patterns and habits and traditions of India. These are not modern trends. So we find initiatives that seamlessly blend Indigenous technical knowledge with modern engineering.

The other trend is using participatory, site-specific art to reclaim either neglected urban spaces or vulnerable fragile biodiversities, and boost environmental literacy. There is this whole movement towards democratising conservation and turning an expert monologue into a shared community dialogue.

There is also a distinct trend of cultivating youth agency and empowering youth as eco conscious leaders. This is a very important foundation, I guess, for really taking all these initiatives forward.

We also saw organisations that work right at the intersection of gender marginalisation and ecological degradation, because concepts like feminist ecology came up. Then there are interventions, where women are being treated as primary agents of environmental stewardship and climate adaptation.

The report also highlighted creative heritage as vital for economic empowerment. The focus was on creating decentralised value chains, economic resilience, managing local resources by the community and upcycling waste.

And finally, there was also an aspect of where education was impacted by the way organisations are working with climate change and art, because there's an intersectoral push to fix formal scientific and design education, which often lacks local relevance. So this was a challenge that came up.

And there are organisations which are stepping into pedagogy, introducing creative innovations like interactive board games, graphic novels to address how sustainability is understood and practiced.

Ultimately the guide showed that artistic expression is a central catalyst for shifting public behaviour, driving policy, and building a sustainable future.

Kerrine: Thank you very much Madhura. So now I have to turn to Khoj and Manjiri. So Khoj has been working in the intersection of arts and ecology since 1997. They've unpacked ecological issues through site specific residencies, cross-disciplinary collaborations. So my question to you Manjiri is actually, how has Khoj's definition of arts and sustainability actually shifted over the years? Were there any say, specific projects or turning points that kind of reflects this shift, and how Khoj is tackling the local environmental and ecological crisis?

Manjiri: Thank you Madhura. Thank you Kerrine. So as you have mentioned, Khoj started in the year 1997. But when it started, it started more as an experimental workshop space. You know the idea at that time was that, India was just kind of opening up. Contemporary artists did not have much of a room outside galleries or museum spaces.

So what was this third space that could bring in a group of local people, people from across the region, but also internationally who could stay together and maybe learn through peer to peer sharing and learning. So that was the key reason why Khoj came about.

And I think at that time, ecology was seen as a thematic focus or a response to what was happening, where artists kind of use their art practice and their understanding of local ecological issues or other ecological issues to kind of make site specific installations.

I think as time passed for Khoj, and found a home in Khirkee, which is where Khoj is located right now. So Khirkee is a very dense neighborhood. It is also an urban village, which lies outside of municipal oversight. It comes under the larger area in Delhi and there are several such villages, over 300 such villages, which are not regularised. So they lack proper sanitation, and development here is very scattered. It's almost like growing by accident.

So I think the meaning of ecology kind of changed for Khoj around that time. And it kind of expanded from just a thematic focus to something of a lived experience, something that we were sharing with our neighborhood, in the sense that day to day issues around sanitation, issues around public health, day to day issues of how spaces are being used. How also looking at how these relationships are kind of unequal. You know where Khoj is and where this neighborhood is, and where what kind of amenities are available to more gentrified areas.

Also looking at issues where there is widespread conversation around air pollution and what it's doing to our country, what it's doing to the people. And a lot of technocratic solutions that are kind of floating around right now. Can we put air purifiers, can we put monitors, can we put AQI (Air Quality Index) systems?

But at the same time, where Khoj comes in in these kind of spaces is to bring about the nuance. You know the more embodied experience of what this ecological crisis is looking like, and how this is not separate from human beings. Everyone is bearing the burden of it differently. There is labour, there is class, there is caste, there is gender.

So I think those are the kind of spaces where Khoj felt that there was an intervention needed. We moved away from just treating it like a thematic focus in terms of site-specific installations or land art and actually inviting interdisciplinary actors, you know more civic intervention and more communities to respond to their local issues.

Kerrine: Thank you Manjiri, I think those were very great insights. And I particularly like the point about not thinking about sustainability in isolation. Because it's a collective responsibility right. That's why we're inviting organisations, civil society to join in on the conversation as well.

So now, I'll have to bring in Raki because but sa Biennale actually does a very good job engaging with the local communities and all of that.

With sa Biennale, they seem to bridge the immersive land art experiences and talking about the environmental crisis in a very creative way. So maybe you could share with us how you conceptualised this need to actually fill that space. Maybe also what is happening in India, regionally and globally? How has that actually helped you to shape the way that this Biennale was formed?

Yeah, so I'm looking forward to hearing from you.

Raki: Thank you so much. And it's really interesting to hear Madhura's inputs as well. And Manjiri's. And a lot of these things also really I think, resonated. I think when Manjiri said that Khoj started experimental. It's again very much also on how Sa started. There was not a long-term idea of like doing a biennial or long-term initiative.

Initially it was looking at land art in a space, Ladakh, which is of course very climate sensitive. It's one of the fastest changing environments on the planet, the high altitudes. So it's almost like a window into the future, to see how rapid and how drastic climate change can happen. The increase in heat is 1 to 2 degrees more than in the lower lands, where we are currently based.

When we started, we started very interdisciplinary. So the group around Sa, Sagardeep Singh, who was working in interior, design and architecture and Tenzin Jamyang, who was working in mountaineering and climbing, and myself, I'm a contemporary artist. The way we looked at the landscape was basically starting with a small project and a concept in Leh, which is sort of the capital of Ladakh, in collaboration slowly with Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation.

Where we first wanted to do an arts installation, where we found a space which was 20 acres of monastery land, which has been sort of cleared up by an institution called Discovery Bike Park,

into this sort of communal space for the youth. There we showcased artworks on 20 acres of land. And we thought 20 acres is just too much for a small group.

Thanks to the Ladakh Arts and Media Organisation, we could reach out and get together a lot of Ladakhi artists. We were working in the landscape, and we were working with our own curatorial skills. But the biggest curator for us per say was nature, because it was defining on how something could work in whatever space there was.

For us I think since the beginning, continuous learning and adapting to the given circumstances versus imposing certain ideas which we had into that space. And working in these high altitudes also is a question of like ego breakdown. Where you come in with an idea, but it changes and you have to adjust with the local needs.

With that, the idea for Sa came with, Sa meaning soil in the Ladakhi language. Again, as Manjiri says, none of these can happen in isolation. So we wanted to look at this holistically. And then the idea of an interdisciplinary approach was shaping up.

So out of these ideas, we had the first edition in 2023 and then the second edition in 2024, where we felt, actually, this is not a festival. We don't want to make it in a way that it's creating a splash or remark, which automatically happens. Of course, when the media reaches out and these sort of things naturally happen.

But this was all organic. There was no paid journalist trips and all these things were not happening, but they were happening as the dialogue happened.

So we felt we wanted to move away more and more in that direction from sensation and spectacle. And we felt, why are we actually doing this?

And so the engagement happened more and more naturally since the first edition, that we felt if climate change is happening here, there must be also other regions which are climate vulnerable with similar issues, for example the Alps.

So these like transboundary dialogues happened with institutions in other places, where this international exchange, which artists also happen to exchange on these shared experiences. From that on we felt that also, is it art for art's sake are we putting this up and it's a cool narrative of like, okay, this is like very sustainable and it's great, but what do we leave behind?

And out of that discussion and thinking and working with institutions like Local Futures in Ladakh, who looked at regenerative practices and climate change as well, we felt the engagement with the youth was very important.

So we engaged with schools since the early days, and that was sort of a very exciting part for us as well. Actually, not only the idea of like giving back and sharing, but also learning from them because they were very knowledgeable.

More and more naturally, we felt we needed more time to engage more closely with the community to figure out what it is.

And from the results of Leh, a lot of communities wanted to also show artworks in their villages. And out of this, this discussion happened that this edition will, for example, have engaged with

eight communities from the corridor from Leh to Kargil, but not as a spectacle again, but in a very slow way. It's almost like a slow art pilgrimage where you have time to, like, reflect on the arts works.

All the artworks we are aiming to do are regenerative. We are setting up now with the partner called Good Life X, who's looking at generation, regeneration, standard operating procedures for looking at holistically what, where, how do you start your artwork? How do you do it and what happens afterwards?

Concretely, one example was working with an artist called Skarma Sonam Tashi at the India Art Fair. Where we were invited kindly by the India Art Fair to do a site-specific installation, where we had limited resources. And we worked with waste materials which could be found in Delhi because that was not in the high altitudes. We looked at one of the main problems in Delhi, which is waste. They are- particularly packaged waste, cardboard waste which are biodegradable, but it ends up and creates more CO2 emissions.

That sort of waste product turned into an artwork, site specific installation at the India Art Fair, and then from there on, what would be next with it? Would it go back into the ecosystem or will it be a collector's piece?

But the community discussion was that it goes into an installation for a school of migrant family kids in Haryana. So then it changed the whole narrative of something being packaged waste art installation. So there we thought like, is there a way to refine that a bit more. So we are also constantly learning, to continue a dialogue which is not only in Ladakh, but take the experiences and actually the wisdoms also of the communities to deal for such a long time with the resources at hand and share that also with others and exchange it for the long run.

Kerrine: So now I'm going to open up the conversation to everyone. From your experience in working at intersections of arts and sustainability, how are public perceptions actually evolving to recognise that climate change is an important issue that we need to discuss now?

Manjiri: So I think public perception has changed over the years. Because I think earlier there was this detachment from the idea of anything to do with environmental crisis. It felt like, okay, you know, there is this beast which has to be addressed.

Either the government is addressing it or there is going to be a technocratic solution to it. And everything around ecology has also been so data driven, that one feels almost intimidated even thinking about it. There are so many of these scientific terminologies, and it's almost like we lost the human understanding. Even feeling that okay, we are also to be fully blamed and we are equal party to whatever that is happening around us.

So I think where art spaces really bridge that gap is, they normalise this interdisciplinarity and, public facing methodology into the entire contemporary art discourse. It's okay to think that, you know, there is a technocratic understanding of it and data driven understanding of it, but then there is also a human, embodied understanding of how you're feeling today. Maybe there is fatigue, maybe there is illness, you know. And why is that?

Because maybe the environment around you is not conducive to your health, to feeling good. And I think those are more personalised experiences. But I think our practice can bring that out.

Even through what Raki was talking about, thinking through biennales in very difficult terrains, which also carry a lot of social and political, but also geographical baggage of, you know, where they fall, how the politics around those areas is, what is happening to them with increasing tourism and all of those things.

So I think what is happening is that art has the ability maybe to reposition the artist as a mediator, as a collaborator with larger publics and also work alongside scientists, legal teams, larger communities.

So I think that sort of cross sharing of knowledge has also expanded the understanding of what these ecological issues really are. And that, you know, we've started feeling that we also have a role to play and we can do something about it.

Raki: I think that also got me thinking on how you said Manjiri, that we are living in a place where we have this like one column of like oxygen now, and that's our safe space and that's all what we need to care about. But I think it's changing as well. The idea of a community aspect is there's a sharing and understanding. That is, climate does not have borders, and the discussion does not have borders.

So I think that sort of collective working together is such a crucial thing in the outward thinking. Knowing that we are in a very complex situation and a difficult one, but there is potentially ways of acting and working together. And we need to, I think, get together a lot of different people, not only in the arts but other realms as well.

For example, from farming communities to communities who are differently abled, but also in the intersection of like age groups, that there's more dialogue between the elders and the youth.

Working sometimes in a non-safe space, weather can happen all the time, where certain other unrest and changes can happen. That's the nature of things. So how do you react and work in that sort of complexities? And that can only be in collaboration and through acts of like sometimes also, which we don't often talk about in arts. Kindness and reflection. So these aspects have to also be in a way intertwined in all these discussions.

I think there's lots art can actually do and there's maybe sort of, untapped potential in like bringing people together as well.

Madhura: So I think Manjiri and Rakhi just hit the nail by really mentioning the key points. But I'll just like to second them. On the issue of how arts especially visual, performative and sensory narratives are changing public perceptions and shifting them in a way that they are realising that climate change is a cross-cutting issue.

It is directly affecting their lives in every aspect and every possible way. Be their health, be it their own landscapes, be their socioeconomic survival. It is affecting where they live, how they live, what they eat, what they wear, everything. Because it has become as Manjari also mentioned, it is becoming so personal. People are realising that they need to be in charge as well. And so the community custodianship, the community leadership are coming in in a big wave.

When we are talking about the Indigenous knowledge systems or the generational knowledge, which is extremely strong in India, there we are finding extremely strong community movements where they are bringing in very strong community governance systems to govern their own landscapes, to govern their own resources in a way they are conserved for generations, and also that they are able to address climate adaptation.

Because in the guide, we also talked about traditional architecture or handmade crafts and grassroots economies. Based on that, I would also add that there is a huge change in consumer and producer mindsets. They realise that it is important to choose sustainable options. So there is a huge movement towards responsible consumption, upcycling, recycling, waste management, trying to get to zero waste production.

These are all coming in as day-to-day practices of people, and that is very very visible in this society.

Kerrine: Thank you to everyone for this essential conversation. As we wrap up the first part of today's podcast, three insights stand out:

- First that climate change is a cross-cutting issue. It has become something that's very personal. It directly affects our lives in every aspect and every possible way.
- There's also an understanding that climate does not have borders, and the discussion around climate change does not have borders as well.
- Last but not least, sustainability does not happen in isolation. We need to collaborate across generations, across different sectors, across different realms, and get more people to think together with us.

In part 2, we'll look forward. How can we enact transdisciplinary methods and sectors, through which diverse publics, artists, scientists and more, play a role in engaging with social and environmental issues?

If you want to explore the Green Guide for India or learn about the arts and environment in Asia and Europe, do remember to check out the guide, resources and opportunities on culture360.ASEF.org, the arts & culture portal of the Asia-Europe Foundation.

Thank you for listening and we look forward to bringing you more insights in the next podcast.

