When the Earth sings

Musicians across the world are increasingly using their platforms to raise awareness about environmental issues, blending artistry with activism to inspire change

SPANDANA BHURA

ADITI Veena, a singer-songwriter who goes by the stage name Ditty, 35, lost her father about 12 years ago to interstitial lung disease. At the time, she didn't fully understand it, but later, as she read more, she learned that environmental factors such as dust, chemicals, and air pollution can play a big role in causing it.

Music became a way for her to cope with the loss, to build meaning around it. "I made peace with his absence by believing that he had become one with the earth — that I could find him in everything, and within myself. That idea gave me a powerful beginning in songwriting," says the urban ecologist now based in Germany. Ditty has become known for her introspective, ecologically conscious music — a blend of poetry, acoustic textures, and ambient soundscapes which is reflected in her albums Poetry Ceylon and KÄLI.

Over time, that deeply personal beginning evolved into a more expansive vision that sought to address ecological decline, loss, and resilience through song. "I wanted to speak about topics that were becoming taboo. For instance, my song Eulogy for a Sparrow reflects on how sparrows disappeared from Delhi, which is where I grew up." Another song of hers, On an Island, talks about the pressures cities in the Global South face from corporations, governments, overpopulation, and environmental degradation.

These aren't abstract concerns. According to UN-Habitat, the world generates between 2.1 and 2.3 billion tonnes of municipal solid waste each year — from food to plastics to electronic waste. "It's a weight the planet can't carry alone," notes Ditty.

Since leaving his job, Elijah Emmanuel has sustained himself through his grassroots music school called Seeds of Banyan in the Aarey forest area, aimed at connecting young people with nature, in hopes that this bond fosters respect and care for the environment. PIC/SATEJ SHINDE

RADHA KAPURIA

PRIYANKA BASU

Musicians across the world are increasingly using their platforms to raise awareness about environmental issues, blending artistry with activism to inspire change. Renowned artistes like Billie Eilish and Coldplay have incorporated the ideas of eco-consciousness into their performances and actions.

When Coldplay announced their Music of the Spheres Tour in 2021, they had pledged to reduce their direct carbon emissions by at least 50 per cent. Earlier this year, they reported that their direct CO2 emissions from the first two years of this tour were 59 per cent less than their previous stadium tour in 2016-17.

Closer to home, Elijah Emmanuel — music artiste, educator, and active participant in the Save Aarey movement — embodies this fusion of music and environmental consciousness. "For me, music has always been healing. It soothes me, grounds me. And through my teaching, I share the philosophy that music is a healing force and a tool for unity," he says.

Emmanuel runs a music school for children in the Aarey forest area. Seeds of Banyan, where he uses nature itself as a classroom. "During the lockdown, I began teaching under a banyan tree when I realised many local children couldn't access online education. That space became a sanctuary." His work highlights the disconnect between children who are academically confident but distant from nature, and those who are rooted in the land but lack platforms for expression.

In India, environmental themes have long resonated through music, woven into the cultural fabric of various regions. "The power of music to express ecological concerns isn't new — it's deeply rooted in the country's history. Songs have long been tools of protest and consciousness-raising," says Radha Kapuria, Assistant Professor of South Asian History at Durham University, UK. Kapuria and Priyanka Basu, an Assistant Professor of Performing Arts at King's College London, are co-editors of a book, Performing Nature: Ecology and the Arts in South Asia, that explores how

Continued on page 15

Continued from page 14

performance practices intersect with environmental thought.

One chapter from the volume, authored by Ihsan Ul-Ihthisam and Rohini Menon, examines how song emerges in times of crisis, focusing on flood songs from the Malabar region — spiritual and ecological laments rooted in Arabic and Malayalam traditions. "In the world of Punjabi pop, songs like Sajjad Ali's Ravi, centred around the metaphor of the river, has poignant connections with movements to save the endangered Ravi floodplains; while the late Sidhu Moosewala's SYL on the contentious Punjab-Haryana water-sharing dispute, shows how even popular music can elevate environmental awareness," Kapuria notes.

Meanwhile, artistes like Rahul Ram of Indian Ocean — with his PhD in environmental toxicology influencing his folk-rock music — prove that activism and art are not only compatible but powerful together. "Music doesn't cause change by itself," Ram says. "It gives people a shared message. That's why we call it an anthem."

Basu adds, "From our vantage point as educators, we witness music as a unifying force in everyday activism and advocacy. Whether in picket lines outside universities during industrial action or in general protest rallies/sit-ins globally, music and instrument-playing bring people together. It creates shared space — between young and old protesters such as 18-year old students and senior academics — in solidarity."

Basu cites the example of filmmaker and tribal rights activist from Chhattisgarh, Biju Toppo, who echoes this connection between artistic expression and the earth. His Kurukh-language documentary Sona Gahi Pinjra captures the deep consciousness of tribal communities in Jharkhand. "For communities like the one depicted in the film — whose lives are so rooted in jal, jungle, jameen (the cornerstone of the Pathalgadi Movement in Jharkhand) — to talk is to sing, and to walk is to dance," Toppo said during a recent screening of the film in London, graphing it, and subsequently she met a man who had come for a holy dip. "I tried to stop him, telling him it was like a cesspool, but he went ahead," she says. This prompted her to use the muck from the riverbed on her canvases.

At Nature of Us, you see a host of expressions of the environment. Kolkata-based artist Jit Chowdhury's Urban Soul uses Bengal-rooted materials like shola (Indian cork or pith), natural indigo, and recycled paper to depict the concrete jungle overtaking our lives, where nature is a getaway, not a given. "I'm trying to show the city as soulless; and I tend to show less of nature, almost none, in my work — as a slap that we are losing it," he explains.

Baroda-based Keerti Pooja's watercolours explore human rituals with nature, while Delhi-based Prasoon Poddar's tea kettle series honours everyday conversations and urges us to pause, reflect, and reconnect with nature.

Explaining why it is crucial to depict environmental themes, Poddar says, "Earlier, elders had rituals and stories which didn't allow you to cut a banyan or a peepal tree. Either it was because of God or because a spirit was believed to reside in the tree. Whatever the reason, it made us leave trees as they are, and not chop them down. We don't have that any more."

"Art, after all, has a unique way of reaching us. While data and reports can inform, it is often a painting, a performance, or an installation that moves us to act," says Jindal.

It almost seems like an artist cannot simply be an artist any more, and environmental changes have pushed them to the edge. Many have turned activists, too. But Chowdhury says it's not new. "We are the voices. Every sector, every group plays different roles. We are the vocal cords."

For most, putting out such messages in their art is not about raising awareness. It's simply a way to question, reflect, and to push audiences to reflect as well. So, will art ever bring about behavioural change?

Chowdhury says that design and art always play with emotions. "It has happened with the national flag. No-where is it written that you have to get goosebumps looking at the flag, yet people do throughout the world. People are moving mountains looking at that design. If I take that as a piece of design, it's one of the loudest designs ever made."

Singh cites Picasso's Guernica as an example of art activism. This anti-war painting was a response to the bombing of Guernica in northern Spain during the Spanish Civil War, and reportedly caused world leaders to pause and reconsider.

However, Singh's work has helped prevent violence as well. During the farmers' protest, he staged a performance called Stone Pelting, where farmers threw stones — first rubbed on carbon paper — onto cloth to create impressions. "I then showed it to the farmers, explaining to them that if the protest turned violent, it would be of no use. If they resorted to pelting, they would have already lost," he says. Later, children at the Tikri border who had participated told him, "Hum stone pelter toh nahi banenge (we will not become stone pelters)."

Does this mean galleries can be a place of learning and conveying messages? Arora says they could, but adds, "I wouldn't say anything is a gallery's responsibility to address or not. Every gallery and curator creates exhibitions that speak to them. Besides, even if we see 100 shows addressing environmental issues are we going to make any tangible difference? Probably not. Does that also mean galleries should avoid environmental issues? Not at all."

smdmail@mid-day.com

Aditi Veena, a singer-songwriter who goes by the stage name Ditty has become known for her introspective, ecologically conscious music — a blend of poetry, acoustic textures, and ambient soundscapes

Rahul Ram of Indian Ocean — with his PhD in environmental toxicology influencing his folk-rock music — proves that activism and art are not only compatible but powerful together. FILE PIC/GETTY IMAGES

Assam based 5-member group Rain in Sahara is harnessing music's power to spotlight environmental and social concerns

Mumbai-based duo Maati Baani, made up of Hindustani classical vocalist Nirali Kartik and composer Kartik Shah, build their music around the ethos of earth connection.

And the impact is tangible. From Copenhagen to rural Majuli Island in Assam, audiences — some of whom are encountering rock music for the first time — have connected deeply with the group's sound and message. "When we performed in Arunachal Pradesh, a group of young people trekked for over an hour from their village to come see us. They said they were inspired by the messages in our music, and that's what counts the most for us," adds Heringman.

In Assam, a genre-bending, five-member band called Rain in Sahara is also harnessing music's power to spotlight environmental and social concerns. Founded in 2016 in Guwahati, the band combines hip-hop, rock, Latin, classical, and electronic influences to create music that speaks directly to issues like climate change, displacement, and injustice.

"The group started as a conscious music project," says Lain Heringman, the band's co-vocalist, keyboardist, flutist and producer. "Making music for change, for us, means using music to address real, pressing issues like climate change, which affect everyone universally. It's about sparking dialogue and helping people process these massive challenges." They are set to release their debut EP — You Think Our Future is a Joke — a five-track collection that gives a voice to interconnected themes centred on climate change, social justice, and digital-age disconnection — in conjunction with their Tatakai tour in June.

Their live shows become spaces of solidarity and hope. "Climate anxiety is real," says Heringman. Climate grief, according to the American Psychological Association, is the deep emotional response people experience when they witness or anticipate the loss of species, ecosystems, and meaningful landscapes due to climate change. It's a sense of loss, sadness, and despair related to the ongoing degradation of the natural world. "But we want people to leave our concerts feeling uplifted, knowing that there are solutions, and they can be part of the change."

"We experiment with different ways of presenting these themes. Sometimes it's through satire; other times, it's more direct," notes Rajat Bangia, the band's bassist.

Not all efforts to link music and the environment are immune from critique. Major concerts, even the ones surrounding the theme of climate change, can carry their own contradictions, from the carbon emissions of international travel to the plastic waste left behind. "My brother, Proshanto Mahato, who's both a Kolkata-based musician and a photographer, attended a big concert recently, and the only image he shared was of the trash left behind," Basu notes. "That's what we need to interrogate: what's the environmental cost of our cultural consumption?"

In academic circles, there is a growing attention to ideas like deep listening, a practice that encourages slowing down and tuning into the environment. But in today's fast-paced digital culture driven by social media trends, such attentiveness is increasingly rare. "Once contemplative sites like Santiniketan, envisioned by Tagore for nature-based learning, have now turned into over-commercialised event spaces. The space for genuine and introspective listening — ecological and otherwise — is shrinking," says Basu.

Ditty's method of music-making reflects this. "I've chosen to record my music in non-traditional spaces, especially outdoors. I want to break away from the sterile, plastic notion of music production. Music is transcendental and sacred, but in the studio, it's often treated clinically," she says. Instead, she chooses resonance over polish. "Many elements, including vocals and guitar for my song Azadi, were recorded outdoors. That natural resonance can continue."

Mumbai-based duo Maati Baani, made up of Hindustani classical vocalist Nirali Kartik and composer Kartik Shah, tells us: "The name Maati Baani reflects our love for Mother Earth. It represents the ethos of our band, the belief that everything is interconnected: nature, people, culture, and music."

Their music draws heavily from folk traditions, many of which organically centre nature. "Our ancestors and folk communities have deeply connected to nature. Their songs reflected that bond and often carried messages about caring for the environment," says Nirali.

Even when the lyrics aren't explicitly environmental, their music videos are staged in outdoor locations: a desert, a village, under a mango tree. "We hope to revive that lost connection through our songs," Nirali adds. "For example, our version of Heal the World, which we released around 2016, struck a chord globally. It wasn't our original composition, the original was by Michael Jackson, but the message behind it came from an honest place. People felt that."

A 2021 study titled Waking Up to No Sound: Music Psychology and Climate Action by Dr Francis Collins highlights how music, when used with intention, can promote climate engagement, reduce anxiety, and foster a sense of shared purpose.

"I haven't released any of my songs," says Emmanuel with a sigh. "The commercialisation of music has affected many artistes, and I'm one of them." Since leaving his job, he has sustained himself through his grassroots project aimed at connecting young people with nature, hoping that this bond fosters respect and care for the environment. "That's made it difficult to record my music," he admits.

"But through jam sessions, gigs, community gatherings, and word of mouth, my songs have still reached people and made an impact." One such song is Hawa, which conveys the idea that the air and the ocean exist without boundaries, just as we humans should ideally live.

smdmail@mid-day.com

Continued from page 15

growing attention to ideas like deep listening, a practice that encourages slowing down and tuning into the environment. But in today's fast-paced digital culture driven by social media trends, such attentiveness is increasingly rare. "Once contemplative sites like Santiniketan, envisioned by Tagore for nature-based learning, have now turned into over-commercialised event spaces. The space for genuine and introspective listening — ecological and otherwise — is shrinking," says Basu.

Ditty's method of music-making reflects this. "I've chosen to record my music in non-traditional spaces, especially outdoors. I want to break away from the sterile, plastic notion of music production. Music is transcendental and sacred, but in the studio, it's often treated clinically," she says. Instead, she chooses resonance over polish. "Many elements, including vocals and guitar for my song Azadi, were recorded outdoors. That natural resonance can continue."

Mumbai-based duo Maati Baani, made up of Hindustani classical vocalist Nirali Kartik and composer Kartik Shah, tells us: "The name Maati Baani reflects our love for Mother Earth. It represents the ethos of our band, the belief that everything is interconnected: nature, people, culture, and music."

Their music draws heavily from folk traditions, many of which organically centre nature. "Our ancestors and folk communities have deeply connected to nature. Their songs reflected that bond and often carried messages about caring for the environment," says Nirali.

Even when the lyrics aren't explicitly environmental, their music videos are staged in outdoor locations: a desert, a village, under a mango tree. "We hope to revive that lost connection through our songs," Nirali adds. "For example, our version of Heal the World, which we released around 2016, struck a chord globally. It wasn't our original composition, the original was by Michael Jackson, but the message behind it came from an honest place. People felt that."

A 2021 study titled Waking Up to No Sound: Music Psychology and Climate Action by Dr Francis Collins highlights how music, when used with intention, can promote climate engagement, reduce anxiety, and foster a sense of shared purpose.

"I haven't released any of my songs," says Emmanuel with a sigh. "The commercialisation of music has affected many artistes, and I'm one of them." Since leaving his job, he has sustained himself through his grassroots project aimed at connecting young people with nature, hoping that this bond fosters respect and care for the environment. "That's made it difficult to record my music," he admits.

"But through jam sessions, gigs, community gatherings, and word of mouth, my songs have still reached people and made an impact." One such song is Hawa, which conveys the idea that the air and the ocean exist without boundaries, just as we humans should ideally live.

smdmail@mid-day.com

Canvas of crisis

Art has always reflected society, and artists are getting louder about depleting nature and the increasing pollution around us

JUNISHA DAMA

AN ARTIST is a sensitive person... If a sensitive person doesn't feel, who will?" asks Kulpreet Singh, a Patiala-based visual artist, whose series, Indelible Black Marks, highlights the effects of the stubble burning practice in the farmlands of Punjab.

Singh's series conceptually reflects on the permanent black marks carved onto our ecosystem through practices farmers have been forced to take up. He dragged massive canvases through the burning fields in his homeland, allowing the stubble to leave impressions like scars on the earth. The series was also showcased at the JSW Earth Care Awards 2025 in Mumbai.

Speaking about his work, Sangita Jindal, chairperson of JSW Foundation says, "Recognising him through the Earth Care Awards is a reminder that addressing climate change is not just about science and technology; it is about empathy, creativity, and collaboration across all walks of life."

While artists have often used their canvases for activism, the environmental crisis and messages about climate change are increasing.

Kulpreet Singh working on his series Indelible Black Marks

Kulpreet Singh's Indelible Black Marks

At Nature Morte, the contemporary art gallery that sits inside the historic Dhanraj Mahal in Colaba, Vibha Galhotra's works are on show. A visual artist known for her environmental themes, Galhotra's solo exhibit titled Solastalgia: The Weight in the Air, focuses on the distress caused by environmental changes.

Some steps away in Kala Ghoda, Method, art gallery's Nature of Us, a group exhibition, explores the paradoxical relationship between humans and the environment.

Why are we seeing the art world speak of the environment crisis so much? Founder and curator of Method Sahil Arora says, "Growing up in a city like Mumbai, 'nature' is almost a foreign concept. We were and not quite removed from it; it's never been deeply integrated into my life. I think because of this distance, it felt like a theme worth exploring."

Galhotra began exploring ecological themes after she realised, around 2009, that the stinky drain she crossed daily was the heavily polluted Yamuna, once a cherished part of her childhood. She began photo-

Continued on page 15

Couture, crowns and chic: Royalty in 2025

Celebrity stylist Aastha Sharma takes us inside Netflix's swankiest palace, walks us through The Royals' style bible, and tells us why Zeenat Aman in a pair of sunglasses was her biggest triumph

MOHAR BASU

A SWEEPING palace bathed in golden-hour light sees a self-made startup queen storm into a room of chandeliers in a sharp pantsuit. At the other end, a prince in a royal bandhgala looks on. When we sat down with Aastha Sharma, that's the picture she painted for us of The Royals — Netflix India's newest offering. "Think what happens when royalty is reimagined with a distinctly modern swagger...," she says.

In the buzzy romantic dramedy created by Rangita and Ishita Pritish Nandy, Bhumi Pednekar plays Sophia, a fiery entrepreneur who falls for Ishaan Khatter's Prince Aviraj. And in the most inspired casting coup of recent times, Zeenat Aman graces the screen as the matriarch, while the ensemble is packed with names like Sakshi Tanwar, Nora Fatehi, and Lisa Misra, among others. Known for dressing red carpet queens like Aishwarya Rai Bachchan and Kiara Advani, Sharma's work here is character architecture.

"When people hear 'royals', they think of heavy silks and stiff embroidery. But I kept asking myself: what would a 2025 Maharani wear to brunch?" Sharma says.

That's where the mood board began, mixing heritage with haute couture, and old money with new mood. "The aim wasn't to cosplay the monarchy. It was to create aspirational, elevated looks that reflected privilege, power, and personality. I had met the Nandy sisters, Rangita and Ishita, in 2017. I got a call saying that they're making a show, Four More Shots. It was an instant connection. Rangita has a very strong sense of style, and we are constantly sending each other styles, trends, and how

ISHAAN KHATTER

Zeenat Aman (right) with Sharma (centre) and Kavya Trehan (left)

we can incorporate that in what we do next. And just like that, it's been eight years," she snaps her fingers.

Strapped for time with only a month to shoot, Sharma says that best creativity happens on a deadline. "I had just had my baby and I wasn't sure if I wanted to live in Rajasthan for a few months. But the only person who was locked for the show was Zeenat, and how does anyone pass up the opportunity to style the OG?"

When she read Zeenat Aman's character, she had goosebumps, Sharma says. "I thought that this is it, this is my dream project. I would get to dress the ultimate icon in a way she's never been styled before. The day she walked in for the presentation was the first time I met her. We showed her the look board, the mood board. She was all in instantly. She looked at me and said, 'You're going to style me?' I nodded. Then she said, 'You're going to make me look like this?' I said yes. And she just went, 'Bang on.' At our first fitting, she looked at herself and said, 'You know, no one has ever made me look this cool.' I nearly fainted. She does look incredibly cool and gorgeous. It was surreal. She's Zeenat Aman. I don't even need to say anything more. And these weren't easy clothes to carry off. They were layered, textured, opulent. But as Maajisa, she killed it."

Each principal character had a clear fashion persona. Bhumi's Sophia is an outsider. She is unapologetically a disruptor. "We leaned into structured cinched blazers, cigarette trousers, and a muted palette. She is today's girl and I dressed her in power suits."

Ishaan's Prince Aviraj, by contrast, is the reluctant royal. "We always do research, but all I got was images of men dressed in the traditional regalia — for the most part, the same stereotypical portrayal. I had to reimagine it. Here was a character who is a Maharaja by birth but he's never actually lived that life. He's grown up in New York, far from palaces and protocol. When he returns, he's not walking in with a crown on his head or wearing those expected brocades or silks. He'd look like someone you'd see in South Bombay today; stylish, effortless, and contemporary. Yet there's something about him... The royalty is in his bearing. It's inborn. We did multiple trials to arrive at that look. There's a transformation arc in the show, emotionally and aesthetically, and it reflects in his wardrobe too. It was a team effort. Rangita, Ishaan, the rest of us all shaped Aviraj together."

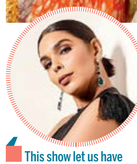
The show's creators allowed Sharma the room to design with depth. "When I found out the shoot was happening in Jaipur, I thought, 'Half my job is already done!' Jaipur has some of the finest jewellers, people with the craftsmanship we needed for this world. In a show like this, jewellery is everything. These characters are royalty. Even if they aren't in elaborate clothes all the time, their jewellery needs to speak for their lineage. It has to be exquisite. So I brought Amrapali, Gem Palace, and Rambhaja Jewellers on board. These three were absolute saviours. Because I've been in this industry for so many years, I simply picked up the phone and said, 'Guys, I really need your support on this one.' And everyone came through wholeheartedly. From Falguni and Shane Peacock to Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla, they all said yes instantly. I just had to call and remind them, 'We've worked together for so long now! I need your real backing.' And they showed up for me. The styling on this show is massive, but somehow, everything came together beautifully. This show let us have fun. We weren't restricted by realism. We were creating a fantasy with roots in India's royal past."

Of course, comparisons were inevitable. A commoner entering a palace as a misfit, and challenging legacy? Sonam Kapoor and Fawad Khan's Khoobsurat (2014) walked that line. But Sharma insists this series is painting a wholly different picture.

"Khoobsurat was a fairy tale. The Royals is a satire dressed as a romance. Moreover, that film is over 10 years old. Royalty, like everything else, has seen a sea of change ever since..."

For Sharma, The Royals is an experience of a lifetime. And who gets to be royal in 2025? "Anyone who walks into a room and owns it," she smiles.

Hope it's crown-worthy!



This show let us have fun. We weren't restricted by realism. We were creating a fantasy with roots in India's royal past

Aastha Sharma, celebrity stylist

DINO MOREA

mohar.basu@mid-day.com