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5. Movies, Mainstreaming and (Counter) Culture Narratives: A Study of Select Bolly Flicks set on NE India

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Abstract

Movies are great medium for spreading ideas and altering people's perceptions as they combine visuals with sound, movement, music, and other sensory elements. Also, they promote cultural interchange among citizens of the same country living in different geographical regions. India's North East area with indigenous cultural components, has been featured in some well-known Indian films, although infrequently and mostly at a surface level. To ascertain what these films convey about the lesser-known North East India region through the portrayal of individuals, scenery, and the culture, the study analyses four Bollywood films from three different decades. These movies include *Tango Charlie*, *Mary Kom*, *Anek*, and *Bhedia*, all of which are set and based in the North Eastern states. Textual analysis has been used to evaluate the narrative representation of the North East in the films. The study concludes that all four movies paddle stereotypes about the culture and people of Northeast in a uniform and clichéd way with *Mary Kom* being an exception that at some degree introduce the less well-known vital human elements of the seven sister region.

Keywords: North East and Bollywood, North East Portrayal, Mainstream Media, Cultural Narratives, Seven Sisters and Cinema

1. Introduction

It hits hard when actor Ayushman Khurana, in the opening scene of 2022 Bollywood movie '*Anek*' says- "*Northeast India mein hain. Northeast matlab West Bengal ke purbi side wala area* (Northeast is in India. The territory on the eastern edge of West Bengal is referred to as the North East)". How often do we hear such statements about any other region of India? How many of us are familiar with the people, history, and culture of India's North East? What 'keywords' spring to mind when we hear the phrase 'North East'? Do those words include usual stereotypes like Chinky, Nepalese, tribal, insurgency, or violence other than 'seven sisters,'? Ever wonder why? Although it is true since the cyber-media has brought geographically distant people in this country closer together and sports champions like Mary Kom, Lovlina Bogohain, and Mirabai Chanu have made their shining presence on the Olympic front, the stereotypes we established in



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our minds have slightly shifted. But, our understanding of the people and culture of this 262,179 square kilometer region of North East India, which includes Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim, is still largely restricted to what the mainstream media depicts. Why? Because the majority of us base our beliefs on the limited information we have learned from Bollywood's distorted and far-fetched portrayal of the seven sisters region (see Chongloi 2017, Chaudhuri 2022, Mukherjee, 2022).

Representation of people from these states has either been nonexistent or archetypal in the popular mainstream movies as per the studies of the previous scholars who conclude that films (or the characters) based on this region like *Dil se* (1998), *Dansh* (2005), *Tango Charlie* (2005), *Bumm Bumm Bole* (2010), *Mary Kom* (2014), *Pink* (2016), *Jagga Jasoos* (2017), *Badhai do* (2022), *Anek* (2022), *Bhediya* (2022) often perpetuate stereotypes about people, culture and socio-political situation of Northeast (Dowerah & Nath 2017). For example, the people are portrayed as exotic, backward, primitive and in some cases; they are even shown as barbaric (as in *Tango Charlie*), completely ignoring their distinct identities. Producing a North Eastern film without casting a main character hailing from any of the eight states is also a common practice. In the biopic of the boxing champion Mary Kom, Bollywood star Priyanka Chopra played the role of the female protagonist by using prosthetics to replicate the Mongloid facial features of the legendary athlete, a practice that is disapproved by many people (Dattaray 2016, Mukherjee 2022). The lack of representation of North East people in mainstream cinema is not just an issue of diversity and inclusion, but it also has serious implications for the way people from the region are perceived by the rest of India as movies play important role in cross cultural exchange of ideas and shaping attitudes, beliefs and values of society. The stereotypes promoted by Bollywood films might result in prejudice towards and marginalisation of persons from the North East. A few eminent academics have examined the issue of misrepresentation of Northeasterners in Bolly-flicks; more research has always been recommended to determine whether Bollywood has been changing patterns of its portrayal of seven sisters and its populace over time and where it needs to put its attention. The study, an important addition in the existing literature in the field, sets out to answer the following research questions with a specific goal of studying the development of northeast representation in mainstream Hindi films and to gauge the most commonly perpetuated stereotypes about the region:

- Which stereotypes most frequently depict the North Eastern region in Bollywood films?
- Has the pattern the North East is portrayed in movies changed over time?

2. Review of Literature

Chaudhury (2022) makes a note of how the stereotypes and exotic 'others' are frequently used to depict people from the Northeast in Indian cinema. The individuals are subjected to racial discrimination due to their distinct facial features such as fairer skin, epicanthic folds around the



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eyes, and smaller noses that Bollywood depicts as intrinsic to and biologically determinant of people from the region. They are commonly represented as crooks, drug dealers, or hyper-sexualized people. While discussing '*Anek*', Mukherjee (2022) makes the argument that Bollywood needs to do more to comprehend and represent the various cultures and people in the area which can only be done if filmmakers are prepared to interact with local communities and gain an understanding of their perspectives and experiences.

The divisions between organic and mechanical modes of living are noted by Dowerah & Nath (2019) in an interesting eco-critical examination of Bollywood films depicting the North East. They also describe how the less developed people's stories are primarily conveyed using existing preconceptions with very little effort made to challenge them. While in a different study a couple of years back, they examined how the region was portrayed in Hindi cinema and how it positioned the Northeast in the national audience's conception (Dowerah & Nath, 2017). Dattaray (2016) observes films like '*Mary Kom*', '*Rangoon*', and '*Rock On 2*' to conclude that in order to convey an air of exoticism about the locale, these films frequently use visual cues such as traditional attires, dancing, and music. He contends that this strategy ignores the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Northeast and turns it into a homogenous, monolithic entity. Thakur (2016), however, comes to the conclusion that Bollywood's depictions of the northeastern part of India are changing slowly but steadily. Hindi cinema is gradually adapting to changes, moving away from uninformed stereotype and towards a confident recognition of the region's tremendous diversity and cultural richness. According to Sarmmah (2015), teaching the public on the positive aspects of the Northeast can significantly alter the general public's perception of the area. Even if it starts off as a tiny gesture, this will eventually grow into a more significant accomplishment in terms of altering the inaccurate perception of the Northeast.

3. Research Methodology

To accomplish the study's goals, the researchers have chosen textual analysis of a movie sample as it entails comprehending the language, symbols, and images included in visual and linguistic texts to analyze how individuals communicate and make sense of their daily lives. Four popular Bollywood movies from three different decades (2000-2010, 2011-2020 and 2021 till date) have been taken as a sample to find the answers of research questions.

Following criteria have been used to analyse the film texts:

- 1- Portrayal of the region (visual geography)
- 2- Portrayal of its inhabitants and culture
- 3- Portrayal of Northeasterners' experience of discrimination
- 4- Casting of Northeast actors in the movies

The sample movies include:

- Tango Charlie (2005)



- Mary Com (2014)
- Anek (2022)
- Bhediya (2022)

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Tango Charlie (2005)

‘Tango Charlie’ is a 2005 Bollywood movie directed by Mani Shankar. The movie illustrates the journey of an Indian army soldier, Tarun Chauhan, played by Bollywood actor Bobby Deol, who goes to various regions of India like Manipur, Telengana, Gujarat and finally Kashmir to fight militancy, rebellion, terrorism and Pak forces respectively.

Representation of BODO Tribe:

The protagonist has been shown to go to Manipur to fight Bodo rebellions in his maiden military assignment. A spine chilling scene illustrating brutal attack on Indian army soldier by Bodo militant leader (played by actor Kelly Dorji) who ‘operates in Manipur’ and speaks in ‘Tibetan accent’ shows him slicing open a trapped soldier’s abdomen, firing bullets in both his knees and leaving him as bait to trap other soldiers.

The film clearly lacked adequate study on the Northeastern region. First of all, it portrays members of the Bodo tribe incorrectly as terrorists who take delight in slicing off a dead body’s ear and using it as bait to kill any Indian army rescuers. Second, the Bodo militants have been incorrectly portrayed as being from the state of Manipur; in fact, they are Assamese. Thirdly, the movie’s portrayal of the insurgents included their speaking with a Tibetan accent. The largest ethno-linguistic community in Assam is sketched as a monolithic, violent, aggressive, backward, and primitive entity that engages in terrorism and rebel operations. The Bodo people’s traditions, language, and culture were utterly disregarded. The movie sparked intense resentment in the Northeast, leading the state of Assam to outright ban it. The Assamese consider the harm created by Tango Charlie’s to be repairable even today.

In the words of Rajan Yumnam (2023) “It is a cold comfort that even as I write this, the Assam government has banned screening of the movie in theatres in the state. It is a cold comfort because the damage has already been done to the frayed image of the Northeast. Many in the mainland India who have already watched and are going to watch the movie might never know -- in their lifetime -- that Tango Charlie is a mockery of the Northeast frozen forever in celluloid. This assault on the prestige and culture of the Northeast will be hard to compensate for unless Mani Shankar or some other Bollywood filmmakers, by some miracle, decide to make a film that shows the truthful side of the Northeast: bright, sunny, picturesque and polite.”

4.2 Mary Com (2014)



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The 2014 Bollywood movie ‘Mary Kom,’ is a biopic of the Indian world champion boxer Mary Kom, who hails from Northeastern state of Manipur. The movie stars Priyanka Chopra in the lead role.

Representation of the Daily Lives & Problems of Northeasterners:

Director Omung Kumar’s ‘Mary Kom’ presents a development in the fair and favourable portrayal of the North East in Indian mainstream media. In the movie, the locals' daily lives and the region's cultural and traditional traits are depicted truthfully. The beautiful images of the region's verdant hills and valleys that showcase its natural beauty are also included in the movie. The portrayal goes beyond the stereotypes that are widely held about the North East as a centre of insurgency, drug trafficking, and other negative aspects. Instead, it concentrates on the locals, their struggles and successes. With mentions of the numerous tribes and communities, the diversity of the region was also illustrated.

One of the film's most significant accomplishments is the accurate portrayal of Mary Kom's struggles as a woman from the North East region. The movie shows how she faced discrimination because of her gender as her modest peasant father refused to let her participate in boxing. Additionally, she encounters the same issues throughout the film that any woman from a lowly background encounters in any part of the nation. Even if the director exercised his artistic freedom in depicting Mary Kom's life story, the North East's reputation was not damaged. The depictions that bring forth the human angle of the region and its people connecting them with the rest of India emotionally include a scene where a rebel leader lets go of the vehicle carrying pregnant Mary Kom from riot hit areas, another scene where Mary and her sister work to prevent their calf from being sold, and the scene where the entire village gathered in Mary's home to watch her match on TV with her father cheering her for the victory. Such a representation actually links the people and issues of the North East with those of the rest of India. Kom’s grit and determination to become the boxing champion despite all the odds was correctly portrayed in the film and put forth a positive image of the region. The film helped to dispel negative stereotypes about the seven sisters that commonly appear in Indian popular culture.

4.3 Anek (2022)

‘Anek’ is a 2021 political and action-thriller film directed by Anubhav Sinha. The movie stars Ayushmann Khurrana as an undercover cop who is on the mission of getting a peace accord signed between the Government and the head of the largest militant group in the insurgency hit North-Eastern region.

Representation of the North East as a Violence Hit Region on War against India:

The movie for the first time casts a number of North East actors in pivotal roles including female protagonist-Andrea Kevichüsa from Kohima, Nagaland as Aido and antagonist- Loitongbam Dorendra Singh from Imphal, Manipur as Tiger Sanga. Other Northeast performers like Deeplina



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Deka from Assam, Rajib Kro from Assam and Lanuakum Ao from Nagaland were among other important supporting cast members.

Despite including a number of local actors, *Anek* fails to accurately represent the Northeast and its inhabitants by merely depicting the region as being full of separatist groups that are waging war 'against' India and Indians. Due to the fact that the film is set in a fictional part of the North East region with no indication of the state's identity, it portrays the area as having a uniform terrain where violence and civil upheaval are common occurrences. The distinct identities of the numerous communities in the area, including the Nagas, Mizos, and Assamese, among others, are erased by the homogenization of the people and culture. Additionally, the film depicts the area as a hub for terrorism and insurgency. Political turmoil and insurrection have occurred in the North East region in the past, although this is not the sole aspect of the region's character. The movie's depiction of the area as a hotbed of terrorism not only feeds into negative perceptions but also keeps the locals in the background.

The film's female lead, Andrea Kevichüsa, a performer from the Northeast (Nagaland), was merely presented as a showpiece with a few lines to deliver in generic Hindi and some scenes to demonstrate how she trains assiduously to win a medal for India despite encountering racial discrimination in sports like any other North Eastern woman. The character's presentation lacked nuance. She was merely the movie's high point.

When discussing how the North-Eastern region of India is portrayed in the 2022 film 'Anek', Mukherjee (2022) contends that despite having a prominent North-Eastern character, the film falls short of doing the culture and people of the area justice. Other problematic representations include the use of derogatory language and the enduring myths about the region serving as a hotbed of insurrection and bloodshed (Dattaray, 2022). The North East region has a rich culture and history that should be celebrated and represented authentically in mainstream media. *Anek* missed an opportunity to do so.

4.4 Bhediya (2022)

The werewolf folklore is the central theme of *Bhediya* movie which is set in Arunachal Pradesh. Directed by Amar Kaushik, the movie tells the tale of Bhasker (played by Bollywood actor Varun Dhawan) who is an ambitious road construction contractor from Delhi with a job to build a highway across the forested region of Arunachal Pradesh that borders China. The movie gives a lesson on environment conservation through discreet amalgamation of local folklore in the story.

Portrayal of Arunachal Pradesh and its Locals:

The movie beautifully delineates never before seen dense green forests of Arunachal Pradesh. Lives of local villagers, their protecting nature towards their natural habitat and their bid to save their environment have been projected in an authentic manner. Local mythology and folktales



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have been also included in the film that further enhances its depiction of the area's indigenous culture. However, the film makes use of some cliches and prejudices that are frequently connected to the area. The inhabitants of the area are represented as superstitious, illiterate, and technologically behind the times. The characters' imperfect Hindi speech with generic accents furthers the sense that they are 'othered' and do not belong to the group. In one of the scenes, his local friend Jomin (played by Paalin Kabaak) reiterates how mainland Indians see him as Chinese and how it hurts him as he is a proud Indian.

In addition, there are issues with how women are portrayed in the film. Kriti Sanon, who plays the female protagonist, is portrayed as a fragile and weak figure despite being a werewolf. The film also includes a scene in which several males from the area are shown harassing a woman from outside the area, which supports the stereotype that women aren't safe in North East India. While the movie makes an effort to highlight the natural beauty and cultural diversity of the region, it also frequently uses tropes and stereotypes that contribute to a negative perception of the area.

As written by the film critic Naman Ramchandaran (November 2022)-

“In “Bhediya,” the primary message is to save the environment and the other Indian practice that is denounced, is the habit of describing people from the Northeast pejoratively as Chinese -a casual racism that is prevalent in the rest of the country. The messages are on the nose with no subtlety whatsoever, but that is the often the best way to get them across to a mass audience”.

Table1: Bollywood movies Stereotypes Depicting North East

Geographical Stereotype: The region is rich naturally but underdeveloped and devoid of basic infrastructure	The northeastern region is home to a primitive, backward, and monolithic community; this is demonstrated by the generic depiction of the geography of the region, which include rich landscapes and mountainous terrain (devoid of any development), rather than by emphasizing the distinctive identity of a single state and its culture.
Inhabitants and Culture Stereotypes: They are a primitive, barbarous, and uniform group, with majority of them detesting mainland Indians.	Despite each state having different tribal residents with their own unique cultures, the inhabitants and their way of life are also depicted in a uniform manner. <i>Tango Charlie</i> depicts the North Eastern tribal as barbarous with horrible personalities, which is highly uncomfortable, while <i>Mary Kom</i> and <i>Bhediya</i> represent the Northeasterners as underdeveloped, superstitious, primitive, and technology frightening people. By



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	portraying residents of this region as violent separatists opposing to the Indian government, the film <i>Anek</i> feeds preconceptions. The area has been depicted as one that frequently experiences civic strife.
Northeasterners' experience of discrimination: They have all experienced racial prejudice from Indians who mistake them for Nepalis or Chinese.	<i>Tango Charlie</i> movie portrays Bodo insurgents fighting the Indian army without providing a rationale for their animosity. On similar lines, <i>Anek</i> depicts North Eastern people waging war against Indians without explaining the historical justifications for doing so. Additionally, all films, aside from <i>Tango Charlie</i> , illustrate the ongoing discrimination that people in the north East Experience. While the Jomin's character in <i>Bhediya</i> asks viewers why they are treated differently just because they have different facial features, female protagonists in <i>Mary Kom</i> and <i>Bhediya</i> decide to fight with this prejudice through sports achievements.
They speak generic broken Hindi	Characters in all four movies speak in a generic broken Hindi with wrong gender usages.

Some of the most common stereotypes that the Bollywood movies use to describe North East include the landscapes, tribal communities and insurgent situation in the area (See Table#1). The films exhibit the area as a battle zone against 'India' which is plagued by violence and rebellion. *Tango Charlie* and *Anek*, depict this in brazen and unrealistic manner, while *Mary Kom* portrays it in a more subtle and realistic way. Without addressing the root causes of the conflict, 'Tango Charlie' paints the Bodo rebels as vicious militants, whilst 'Anek' depicts the entire Northeastern region at war with the Indian government. As also pointed by the scholars like Thakur (2016), Dowerah & Nath (2017) and Chakrabarti (2018), such portrayals have serious implications flaming the prejudice against North Easterners. As for the people from the Northeast experiencing racism and discrimination from mainland Indians is concerned, representation of those incidents is also becoming stereotypical in Bollywood movies. *Mary Kom*, *Anek*, and *Bhediya* portray this pattern succinctly. It, however, seems a necessary inclusion in the movies set in North East to make fellow Indians aware of their North Eastern brothers and sisters' agony.

The use of prosthetics by the Bollywood actors to mimic the flat nose and epicanthic folds of the eyes, which are the distinctive facial features of North Eastern people, in the roles of lead characters who are from the region is another significant problem with how North Eastern people are portrayed in Bollywood films. This oversight by the Mumbai directors is mentioned by



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Mukherjee (2022). Bollywood filmmakers must use more actors from the area in key roles to enhance authenticity and to promote talent and cultural interchange between the mainland and the Northeast. Additionally, it will increase inter-regional acceptance of people from both regions. Chongloi (2017) views it as a crucial step towards accurately representing the seven sister regions.

It's crucial to remember that Bollywood has made progress, albeit slowly, in the past few years in terms of the positive portrayal of the Northeast and the participation of its artists in mainstream media. While films like *Bhedia* and *Mary Kom* demonstrate some improvement, an accurate portrayal of the diversity and distinctiveness of the Northeast in Bollywood cinema still seems a long way off. The winds of change can be sparked by even modest actions. We may witness actors from the Northeast being cast in films like *Pink* (2016), *Badhai do* (2022), and web series like 'The Last Hour (2021, Amazon Prime),' where they were also given significant roles. A new Roof Afza 'drink of India' advertisement featuring a Northeastern girl onboard a train sipping Roof Afza served to her by fellow passengers can also be regarded as a significant advancement in the trend. It's crucial that she was shown in the advertisement as a genuine fellow Indian without making a big deal out of her unusual characteristics and Northeastern ancestry; a genuineness that Bollywood still lacks is such authentic portrayal.

5. Conclusion

Through the representation of various issues, society segments, and cultural diversity of the people that resonate with its audience, films significantly contribute to the shaping of society's values, beliefs, and attitudes. As numerous mass communication researchers have discovered and examined in the past, the Hindi cinema industry of India has been the precursor of a lot of socio-political transformations in India (Balabantaray, 2020, Ahemad 2021). The multimedia portrayal of the characters has such a strong mass appeal that there have been numerous instances where people have called for the banning of films because the 'so-called' fictional stories depicted in those mediums have the ability to create a narrative about a particular group of people, social class, cultural practice, or sociopolitical issue. The stereotypical representation of North East people in Bollywood movies is a serious issue that needs to be addressed. The continuous perpetuation of stereotypes about North East people in Bollywood movies as found in study will only do a little to erase discrimination and marginalisation against the seven sister region and its people. To address this issue, there is a need for more representation of North East people in Bollywood movies. The representation should be authentic and should reflect the diversity and unique identity of the region. Also, there is a need to cast more Northeastern actors in the movies to give authenticity to the characters.



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