



Navigating Unity in Diversity: Addressing Cultural Exclusion in the ‘Axone’ and the Discrimination Against North-East Indian Tribes

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the movie “Axone” (2019) to consider the concept of ‘unity in diversity’ in India and the problems of discrimination against the tribes of the North-East region. In this paper, sociological theories of cultural marginalization, multiculturalism, and food as a cultural metaphor are applied to analyze the film’s theme of national integration versus cultural prejudice. The aim of the research is to investigate the importance of food in processes of inclusion and exclusion by and within culture, especially regarding the media portrayal of culture and its effects on prejudices. The methodology employs a qualitative approach, combining film analysis, insights from Dolly Kikon’s ethnographic study, and media studies. Thus, the movie “Axone” is discussed to identify the issues of cultural othering, and Kikon offers background information on caste-based food discrimination. The representations of foods in media are also studied to analyze the impact on the culture of North-East India. The conflict that is depicted in the study focuses on the role of food in defining culture and social acceptance of tribal people; this exposes how tribal foods have been locked out of the mainstream Indian food identity due to the dominance of power structures. Thus, this paper provides a more complex perspective on cultural representation and marginalization in modern India and underlines the importance of questioning the caste-

Introduction

The Indian concept of ‘unity in diversity’ is a beautiful sentiment that is repeatedly stained by the cultural and social oppression many groups suffer, including the people from the North-East. This is enacted in the 2019 movie “Axone” by Nicholas Kharkongor, where North-East Indian immigrants in Delhi are made to face constant racism and social rejection. As such, this paper aims at analysing the sociological aspects of cultural exclusion as depicted in the movie “Axone,” with an emphasis on the prohibition of food and the cultural meaning of food taboos. The tribal people of the North-East region of India and their cultural practices and food habits receive negative social reactions and are shunned by the larger Indian population. Exclusion of this sort is not only related to the kind of food consumed but is also a product of caste and race discrimination. Dolly Kikon’s “Dirty Food: Racism and Casteism in India,” presents a detailed account of how racism and casteism play out in relation to food by ‘marking’ some foods and their consumers as ‘impure’ or ‘polluted’ (Kikon, 2019). Based on ethnographic study, Kikon’s research focuses on the systematic marginalisation of North-East Indians.

The main aim of this research is to explore the position of food in relation to cultural assimilation or rejection, with an emphasis on media portrayals of cultural representation and discrimination. The study aims to:

1. Learn about cultural prejudice and racism depicted in the movie “Axone.”
2. Examine how the restriction of certain foods affects the integration of the North-East Indian communities.
3. Examine the general social relations in connection with the caste-based food prejudices as discussed in Dolly Kikon’s work.
4. Evaluate the function of media in terms of cultural perceptions and prejudice.

Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative research approach in which film reviews, ethnographic insights, and media studies form part of the method of the study.

Film Analysis: Thus, this paper seeks to understand the sociological themes of cultural erasure, identity, and resistance present in “Axone.” This entails analyzing the events in the story as well as the relationships between the characters and food culture of North-East India.

Ethnographic Insights: Therefore, Dolly Kikon’s article “Dirty Food: Racism and Casteism in India” can be considered as a kind of background information that provides deeper context about the caste and race discrimination that is present in food-related practices. It is for this reason that Kikon’s ethnographic data gives us an insight into the discrimination and social exclusion that North-East Indian migrants suffer.

Media Studies: This paper assesses how the popular media portrays North-East Indian foods so as to enhance the knowledge of the effects on cultural prejudices. This involves the study of newspaper articles, social media posts, and other media sources that portray or refer to North-East Indian eating habits.

Thus, as the data from these multiple sources is integrated, the study will intend to provide an enriched understanding of the state of cultural inclusion and exclusion in modern India. Overall, the study points to the importance of questioning caste food practices as racism and social injustice, which enriches discourses about multiculturalism and cultural representation.

Role of Media in Cultural Representation

The influence of media in the shaping of popular perceptions, social values, and cultural identities in this contemporary society cannot be ignored. All media platforms, including films, serve as powerful agents of cultural production and reproduction (Hall, 1997). Within this context, the representation of culture in media plays a vital role in defining and constructing social realities, which further results in the creation of collective meanings. With the help of sociological perspectives, we can explain media representations as reflections of cultural norms, stereotypes, power dynamics, social attitudes, and behaviours.

Media representations are not mere reflections of reality but also the reflections of constructed interpretations influenced by various socio-cultural factors (Hall, 1997). As argued by Stuart Hall, cultural representations are discursive formations that reflect the interests, values, and ideologies of dominant social groups. In this sense, media function as agent of negotiation, where meanings are produced, contested, and negotiated. However, the production of cultural representations is not a neutral

process. It is influenced by power relations, economic interests, and institutional structures within the media industry.

The portrayal of cultural diversity and the continuation of stereotypes through media is one of the key points of interest in a sociological sense. As media has the potential to celebrate and amplify diverse voices and experiences, it often reproduces generalized and stereotypical images of marginalized groups (Entman, 1994). For example, racial and ethnic minorities are frequently depicted in very narrow ways that reinforce dominant stereotypes and prejudices in a larger society. Similarly, gender representations in media often reflect and perpetuate traditional notions of masculinity and femininity, supporting gender inequalities and limiting possibilities for substitute identities (Butler, 1990).

Cinema as a Device of Mass Communication

Cinema is one of the most recognized forms of mass media, with the vast potential to communicate with numerous and diverse people with its visual messages and appeals to emotions. From the late 19th century to the present, cinema has been a very important factor in the development of cultures in different societies since it has been a determinant of the discourses of the societies and the beliefs and values of the societies. Cinema can be regarded as a tool of mass communication with the help of a sociological approach. Thus, with this effort, it is justifiable to analyze its effects on social structures, identities, and cultural representations.

McQuail (2010) stated that cinema as a method of mass communication can impact people's cultural beliefs and standards by educating them 'en masse.' In addition, it has enough potential to create new stories in the minds of a larger population with reconstructed thoughts for the alteration of social perceptions. Thus, cinema can express ideas, feelings, and social messages in a straightforward manner. It is very significant in the formation of how audiences can perceive themselves as well as others. Movies, in one way or another, portray culture, customs, and ceremonies and remind people of the rules and ethical codes. Also, cinema is a means of passing or sharing culture by disseminating ideas, practices, and symbols from one culture to another.

Cinema is one of the significant phenomena that contribute to the formation and stabilization of collective identities in society (Hall, 1997). As a social art, cinema can create belongingness and solidarity through characters, settings, and narratives. Cultural or patriotic films can enhance the feeling

of patriotism or cultural identity due to their ability to invoke the audience's emotions. Likewise, cinema can become the voice of the oppressed to announce their weakness and claim acknowledgement from society by negating the existing hegemonic discourses and representations.

According to Giddens (1990), cinema has the potential to play a role in the change and transformation of society. In this respect, cinema as a tool for depicting social problems, conflicts, and challenges can be a powerful means of spreading awareness, initiating discussions, and encouraging people to come up with solutions collectively. For instance, films that are based on social justice, human rights, and environmental issues can make viewers reconsider their values and, therefore, motivate people's individual and collective actions for change, positive or negative. However, cinema can act as a call to action, help marginalized voices find an audience, and make people continue to discuss the relevant issues.

The Film “*Axone*”

This scholarly article discusses the sociological aspects portrayed in the film “*Axone*,” directed by Nicholas Kharkongor. “*Axone*” depicts the theme of identity crisis, discrimination, and belongingness for the North-East Indian community living in New Delhi. Using the method of sociological analysis based on theories and research findings, this article discusses and evaluates the cultural and power differences depicted in the film. Thus, by analyzing its characters and stories, this article reveals features of sociocultural processes taking place in cities.

Axone is a comedy-drama movie produced in India in 2019 that was directed by Nicholas Kharkongor. The plot is about a group of friends from North-East India residing in New Delhi who decide to cook the traditional dish *axone* (akhuni) for their friend's wedding. *Axone* is a stinking fermented soybean preparation with strong smell that forms a staple of North-East Indian cuisine but is not appreciated by the landlord of the protagonists.

Since *axone* is difficult to prepare, the film captures the plight of the friends in an attempt to cook it in the small apartment they were living in. They are threatened by their neighbours and owner of the residence, who stereotype that they have a bad odour because of the smell of *axone*, and by local shopkeepers, who don't sell them the ingredients required to cook the dish because of their colour. In

addition, they have to overcome obstacles in the big city, such as racism, cultural conflict, and interpersonal relationships.

This paper highlights that the themes of identity as well as acceptance and belonging are evident throughout the movie. They have to overcome stereotypes and prejudices on the one hand, internal and external. The friends eventually draw their strength from the unity and the bond that they have as the backdrop of the culture and traditions as they unite to celebrate their friend's wedding and partake in the axone that was prepared with lots of effort and perseverance.

By presenting the lives of North-East Indian immigrants in metropolitan cities, "Axone" brings to light the issues of the struggled integration process and the strength of the overlooked population. Laughing and crying, the film helps to draw attention to how vital food, camaraderie, and togetherness are in the face of hardship and how necessary it is to stand up for one's culture in a diverse world.

Against the background of New Delhi, "Axone" is a story that tells about the diaspora and the process of building a new identity. Analyzing the characters' experiences, the film discusses the problems of multiculturalism, prejudice, and unity among the North-East Indian population. Indeed, by analyzing the sociological aspects of 'Axone,' the audience can receive an explanation of the film's representation of social relations and their impact on the perception of modern urban existence.

The present in "Axone" is therefore the play between cultural difference and the construction of one's and our subjectivity. The people in the movie are from different states in North-East India, and all the characters are dealing with different issues arising from the conflict between the change of living in urban areas and maintaining their cultural heritage (Bhabha, 1994). In their relationships and conflict, "Axone" demonstrates the constructivist assertion of the complexity and dynamism of identity formations within diaspora. The cooking process of axone is a form of assertion of cultural self and a defiance of assimilation in culinary and foodways as a way of affirming a shared identity and memory.

It also shows how prejudice is a reality that North-East Indian migrants have to endure in cities such as New Delhi. The cases of racial discrimination, ethnic oppression, and racism are illustrated in the movie, and the audience becomes aware of the social injustice that lies at the core of society (Fanon, 1967). However, in the face of such difficulties, "Axone" also captures the themes of unity and strength in which characters unite and fight against oppression. Such examples of collective action show that the

key to managing discrimination consequences and empowering discriminated groups is community support.

The film “Axone” presents a realistic picture of the sociocultural processes within the diaspora and thus poses questions to the viewers: How do people manage to negotiate their cultural selves? What are the experiences of discrimination? What does it mean to be united? Thus, the film offers a perspective on the structural factors that underpin urban lives and relations in the process of delineating these themes. Thus, through a sociological analysis of “Axone,” one is able to understand the challenges that people face in today’s cities and the fight for identity and equality.

Cultural Significance of Axone (Fermented Soyabean)

Axone, called ‘akhuni’ in some parts of North-East India, forms a core part of the food and ethnicity in the region. This article aims at discussing the sociological characteristics of axone and the background of this product as a part of the culture, with an emphasis on the ways in which it helped to form collective tendencies and solidify the bonds between people. This article will therefore explore how the cultural history of Axone in relation to time and other cultures of North-East India can be used to enhance the understanding of the society-food culture relationship.

Axone has its origins in the ancient period, as fermented soybean products are documented in historical scripts and the history of archaeological records. Axone is reported to have been consumed by the different ethnic groups of people in the North-Eastern part of India, such as the Nagas, Manipuris, and Assamese, over centuries (Dutta, 2017). Apart from being a means of preserving the food, the process used in the preparation of axone has a positive impact on the nutritional value and taste of the end product, thus making it a favourite delicacy for consumption irrespective of the geographical location of the people.

Axone is not just a food for the people in North-East India; it has a lot of importance in their culture. It is also associated with cultural as well as religious connotations regarding family and ancestry. For instance, the preparation and consumption of axone are closely followed by rituals and ceremonies that emphasize social relationships and their origins with the ancestors (Gupta, 2015). Also, axone is used in contexts of home, memories, and identity, especially for those who move from rural areas to urban areas and want to cherish their roots (Chakravarty, 2019).

Thus, axone is related to the core of the social structure and culture of many North-East Indian societies. It plays the role of a bond that connects different ethnic groups in a given society and creates a feeling of oneness among them. Axone is a traditional dish that is consumed at social events and festivals, which makes consumption a way through which people can come together and engage in cultural narratives (Baruah, 2018). Furthermore, the local production and distribution of axone are carried out based on kinship and community structure, which exposes the system of social organization (Sharma, 2020).

Food as a Symbol of Culture

Food is not only a necessity that is needed to sustain life; food is a manifestation of cultural and social reality and people's identities within that reality. This paper aims to understand how food is a sociological entity in the present-day context by discussing how it acts as a cultural asset, how it defines and separates people, and how it is a tool for cultural imperialism. Based on the conceptual perspectives of sociology, we outline how food can be used to explain the nature of social reality and cultural processes.

Sociology, as a scientific discipline, does not deny food's multifunctional role and emphasizes that it becomes a cultural sign that signifies various meanings in a society (Douglas, 1972). In the preparation, consumption, and representation of food, it is seen to convey numerous cultures, beliefs, and practices. For instance, some foods may be considered sacred and used in religious or spiritual practices and ceremonies (Belasco, 2017). In the same way, food represents regions and histories, and particular foods and ingredients may come to stand for specific peoples (Mintz and Du Bois 2002).

Food is a vital element in influencing social relations and social contacts within society. Symbolic and social eating and drinking are the hallmarks of people's collective eating experience, which is necessary for the construction of social identity (Fischler, 1988). In addition, food habits and preferences are also indicators of social class, and certain foods are considered to have a higher status and are exclusive (Bourdieu, 1984). Bodily practices that regulate food are also involved in sociability and symbolize membership in specific social classes or communities (Simmons, 2007).

Food practices and food preferences are closely related to personal and group identities. Cultural and personal identities may be negotiated through food, which influences people's feelings of who they are and where they belong (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997). In addition, food can be a form of self-identification

or ‘other’ where struggles of identity are expressed, especially in societies that are multicultural (Kittler and Sucher, 2007). Food and diet are cultural resources, and through them, people perform their social identity and cultural membership (Long, 2018).

Unity in Diversity in Terms of Food

It is a known fact that India is a country of different cultures, and similarly, the food also varies from place to place (Khattar, 2018). Starting from the hot curries of South India to the flavourful biryanis of North India, Indian regional cuisines depict a wide variety of cooking techniques that are a result of history and the exchange of culture and food (Kapur, 2016). In addition, religious food practices include: Indians are predominantly vegetarians because of their religion, especially the Hindus, while Muslims and Sikhs have their own special dietary habits.

The role of food is pivotal in constructing identity among the people and in Indian society in particular. People’s consumption patterns are ways of signifying culture, religion, and region, thus serving to maintain social divisions (Appadurai, 1988). For example, people may refrain from eating beef or pork because it is prohibited by their religion, while other people may consider it a cultural delicacy (Chaudhuri, 2019). Thus, foodways and culinary culture as the means of identity construction and maintenance are being actively used by people in the context of globalization and modernization (Rath, 2014).

As for the social functions of food in Indian society, Gupta and Ferguson (1997) noted that it is a medium that facilitates social interaction in intergroup relations. Cohesion and communal eating practices give those of different generations, ethnicities, and races a chance to sit, listen, and learn about each other (Kumar, 2015). Furthermore, trade and migration histories have created a blending of cuisines, and hence, most of the cuisines in India can be classified as fusion cuisines due to the syncretic nature of the country (Tharoor, 2017). In India, aspects of food festivals, street food markets, and culinary tourism are in line with fostering multiculturalism and intercultural communication since the country’s diverse cuisine is promoted and shared throughout the world (Kumar, 2018).

Sociological View Point on Tribal Food Exclusion

Food exclusion on the basis of tribal status is a major example of how some groups of people experience other forms of exclusion and inequality in society. In this article, we discuss on the basis of tribal food

exclusion, social facts, and relations that are responsible for making tribes an excluded one in the food system. In this way, with the help of historical, cultural, and policy analysis, we expect to reveal the causes of tribal food exclusion and its consequences for identity, health, and justice.

The reasons for tribal food exclusion are historical, colonial, and post-colonial violence that led to dispossession, displacement, and marginalization (Guha, 1983). Land alienation policies as well as forest management policies distorted food regimes and modes of living, thus eradicating tribes' natural resources and traditional food security (Scott, 1998). Also, the post-independence development paradigms focused on industrialization and agricultural modernization, displacing tribal people from their ancestral lands and resources, and hence food insecurity and poverty among the tribal people persist (Das, 2011).

Tribal food exclusion is also sustained by cultural prejudice and stereotyping, labelling tribal diets and foods as 'barbarian' (Sundar, 2007). The social misconceptions of the tribal diet by the outside world as 'impure' or 'substandard' breed social prejudice and exclusion of tribal people from the normal market avenues for food and nutrition (Rao, 2016). Also, dietary norms and preferences that are forced on tribal people by the dominant cultural groups compromise the rights of the tribes to choose and control the food they eat and their cultural freedom (Satpathy, 2019).

Food exclusion in tribes is more so due to policy abandonment and institutional breakdown that sustain structural discrimination and prejudice (Padi, 2020). Despite the availability of government policies and programs for food aid, health, and social services, the official perception does not factor in the special requirements of tribal people and their diet (Gadgil, 1998). In addition, the development interferences that focus on the market economy and cash crops that replace the traditional food security system erode tribal food security and sustainability (Mishra, 2017). Lack of proper culturally sensitive and community-based treatment also increases rates of food insecurity and contributes to the perpetuation of poverty and hunger among the tribal people (Mahapatra, 2021).

Exclusion of tribal food has deep implications for the tribe's identity, health, and well-being. Tribal people suffer from low nutrition, inadequate food, and poor dietary habits due to restricted access to healthy foods and their original food habits (Ramdas, 2015). Besides, the decline of cultural food practices weakens the cultural coping capacity and cultural passing on of information (Mamgain, 2018).

There is a clear implication of food desecration that disorients the tribal communities further in terms of identity and indigenous control over their resources and overall existence (Baviskar, 2005).

Thus, the phenomenon of tribal food exclusion can be portrayed as a multifaceted social injustice that reflects the consequences of colonialism, racism, and discrimination in modern societies. Therefore, the study of sociological aspects of food exclusion in tribal communities helps to understand the roles of exclusion, identity, and power in the context of social structure. Realizing food exclusion for tribal populations entails gender-sensitive and culturally sensitive evidence-based approaches that respect tribal autonomy and tribal voice. It, therefore, requires that policy interventions and development initiatives that are being affected must consider the tribal communities as active players in decision-making and resource use. Through promoting the principles of food sovereignty, cultural preservation, and social justice, it is possible to establish a society that is fair for everyone.

Work of Dolly Kikon

In her article “Dirty Food: Racism and Casteism in India,” Dolly Kikon (2019) wrote on Racism and Casteism in India in relation to Food Cultures. In this regard, Kikon shows how diet is governed by upper-caste purity and is an extension of caste logic concerning cleanliness. In her ethnographic study, she explains that food discrimination against migrants from North-East India has its roots in Brahminical ideologies of purity and contamination when it comes to certain types of foods, which influence different spheres of the migrant’s life, including housing and employment. Thus, Kikon parallels the conditions of North-East Indian migrants and Dalits, who live through everyday racism and casteism that includes how one eats and where one lives. She states that caste impurity ideas about certain foods and bodies being polluting have a large part to play in creating and sustaining social justice discrimination. Similarly, Kikon’s analysis needs to address caste-based food hierarchy in order to promote social justice against caste discrimination, which requires questioning the practice of the way foods maintain caste superiority and racism in present-day India. This perspective is important in explaining the cultural exclusion portrayed in *Axone*, where food turns out to be a representation of culture, as well as the social rejection that people with such a culture face.

Conclusion

This paper focuses on the documentary of cultural exclusion and discrimination in North-East Indian communities illustrated in the movie “*Axone*” and Kikon’s work on caste food prejudices. Thus, the

research, along with focusing on the semiotic analysis of food in the portrayal of social hierarchies in both caste and race terms, emphasises the structural nature of prejudice in modern Indian society. The study shows that food is a site of war over culture and recognition and how tribal foods are pushed to the periphery in order to perpetuate colonialism. It is through the media that societal norms and prejudices are either deconstructed or reinforced. Therefore, this study urges the need to pay attention to the caste-based food hierarchies, bring more cultural and social justice into the community, and assert the need to understand and fight against the everyday racism and casteism that are experienced by minority groups.

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