



Portraying the Marginalized: Tribal Communities in Indian Cinema

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Keywords:

Tribal representation, Indian cinema, stereotypes, documentaries, marginalized communities, cultural portrayal, mainstream cinema, film analysis, social impact, tribal identity.

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the portrayal of tribal communities in Indian cinema, focusing on both mainstream films and documentaries. Indian cinema, with its extensive history spanning over a century, has predominantly depicted tribal societies through a lens of stereotypes, often presenting them as primitive, mysterious, or even violent beings. These portrayals have perpetuated a narrow and inaccurate understanding of tribal communities, reinforcing biases that fuel societal prejudices. Over time, tribal characters have been relegated to roles of 'others' in the cinematic landscape, stripped of their complexity and humanity. However, in recent years, a growing body of documentary films has emerged, challenging these conventional representations. These documentaries seek to provide a more authentic portrayal of tribal communities, one that highlights their unique cultures, deep-rooted traditions, and ongoing struggles against societal marginalization. These films serve as an antidote to the one-dimensional portrayals seen in popular cinema, offering a more nuanced and respectful perspective of tribal lives. The paper examines the historical trajectory of tribal representation in Indian cinema, beginning with the early works of Dadasaheb Phalke, often credited as the father of Indian cinema, whose films reflected the colonial mindset of the time. Over the decades, mainstream cinema has continued to

reinforce these stereotypes, with films like Bahubali and RRR continuing to depict tribal communities through a fantastical and distorted lens. Despite the grand spectacle and cultural celebration in these films, they fail to capture the lived experiences of tribal people. In contrast, documentaries produced by the Indian government and various non-governmental organizations present a different narrative. These films provide an opportunity to explore the everyday lives of tribal communities, their interaction with the environment, and their enduring resilience. Documentaries such as these aim to dismantle the misrepresentations of tribal cultures, offering a voice to communities that have historically been silenced by mainstream media. By comparing the portrayal of tribal communities in both fictional and documentary films, this paper investigates how these representations influence public perceptions and contribute to the societal understanding of tribal identity. Furthermore, it explores the potential of cinema—both fictional and documentary—as a powerful tool for challenging stereotypes and creating a more equitable and inclusive representation of marginalized groups. In doing so, the paper highlights the need for more authentic portrayals that respect the complexities and diversity of tribal cultures, moving away from reductive and harmful stereotypes. Through this, Indian cinema can evolve into a more inclusive space that accurately reflects the rich diversity of Indian society.

Introduction

Background: Context and Significance of the Study

Indian cinema, with its rich and diverse history, is widely recognized as a potent medium for reflecting and shaping societal values and norms. Throughout the years, Indian films have explored various social issues, such as caste, gender, and economic disparities (Viridi, 2003). However, one area that has been

relatively neglected or misrepresented is the portrayal of tribal communities, who have played an integral role in India's socio-cultural and political fabric (Poddar, 2020).

Tribal communities in India have a unique cultural, linguistic, and religious identity that differs significantly from mainstream Hindu society (Sengupta, 2020). These communities are often marginalized, both economically and socially, which contributes to their lack of representation in mainstream media. Indian cinema, particularly in the post-independence period, has frequently depicted tribal communities through stereotypical or negative lenses, such as primitive, backward, or even violent figures (Mandal et al., 2020). The absence of accurate and nuanced portrayals of tribal people in Indian cinema underscores the importance of investigating how these communities are represented in films. This study aims to fill this gap by analyzing how tribal cultures, identities, and issues are presented in both mainstream and regional cinema.

Research Problem

The central research problem addressed in this study is the underrepresentation or misrepresentation of tribal communities in Indian cinema. While a growing body of research has focused on the depiction of other marginalized groups, such as Dalits or women, tribal communities remain underexplored (Rai et al., 2023). This study seeks to understand how tribal communities are represented, if at all, and whether their portrayal in cinema reflects their true cultural and social realities or whether it perpetuates harmful stereotypes. The research also aims to explore how these portrayals influence public perceptions of tribal people, their cultures, and their socio-political struggles.

Objectives

To analyze the portrayal of tribal culture and identity in mainstream and regional Indian cinema.

To examine the socio-political implications of tribal portrayals in Indian cinema.

To evaluate the potential of cinema as a platform for authentic representation of tribal communities.

Scope and Limitations

This research focuses on Indian cinema, with an emphasis on films released post-independence. The study will include both mainstream Hindi cinema and regional films. By concentrating on films from the

post-independence era, the research will explore how tribal representations have evolved within the socio-political context of modern India.

However, the scope of the study is limited by the diversity of tribal groups in India. Due to the vast cultural, linguistic, and geographic differences among tribal communities, the research will examine a representative cross-section of tribal communities rather than attempting to cover every group. The study will focus on films that have gained national or regional recognition and are accessible to a broader audience, thus limiting the analysis to mainstream and some regional productions (Viridi, 2003).

Literature Review

Indian cinema has long been a powerful medium for shaping and reflecting societal norms, especially with regard to marginalized communities, including tribal populations. Early studies of Indian cinema often focused on its representation of caste, class, and gender, but the portrayal of tribal communities in films has been somewhat underexplored, despite its significant socio-political implications (Sengupta, 2020).

Several studies have examined the portrayal of marginalized groups, particularly Dalits, in Indian cinema, exploring how their images on screen challenge or perpetuate stereotypes (Poddar, 2020). However, research on tribal communities has been relatively limited, with most studies focusing on their portrayal as primitive or backward in mainstream media. The concept of "othering" in Indian cinema, particularly in the portrayal of marginalized groups like tribes, has been explored in several works. For instance, Poddar (2020) delves into how Satyajit Ray's films depict tribal communities in ways that reflect societal hierarchies, yet his works often reflect negative attitudes toward these groups. These films, while nuanced in their critique of the upper classes, still fail to present tribal communities in a holistic, authentic manner.

In contrast, recent studies have begun to explore the potential of regional cinema to offer a more nuanced view of tribal communities. Mandal et al. (2020) explore how regional films address the issues of aboriginality, land rights, and social struggles within tribal communities, offering a more grounded depiction compared to mainstream cinema. Furthermore, Rai et al. (2023) focus on the intersectionality of tribal identity and politics, analyzing how Indian films reflect the complexities of tribal lives within the larger socio-political landscape. These works illustrate that while mainstream cinema may offer

reductive stereotypes, regional films have the potential to depict a more accurate and diverse representation of tribal communities.

Scholars have also turned their attention to the role of documentaries and ethnographic films in presenting authentic representations of tribal groups. Griffiths (2023) discusses how amateur filmmakers and documentaries have played an important role in preserving tribal cultural practices and showcasing them to wider audiences. This form of cinema is seen as a means of giving tribal communities a voice, although, as Griffiths notes, these films often struggle against the commercialization of film industries, which favors more sensational or stereotypical portrayals.

Gaps or Areas Needing Further Exploration

Despite the growing interest in the portrayal of marginalized communities in Indian cinema, there are several gaps in the existing literature on the representation of tribal communities. One key area that requires further exploration is the intersectionality of tribal identity with other factors such as gender, religion, and caste. For example, while studies have looked at how women are portrayed in Indian cinema (Rai, 2023), there is a lack of research on how tribal women specifically are represented and how their identity is shaped by both tribal and gendered experiences. Additionally, much of the research on tribal representation in cinema focuses on the problem of stereotyping, but there is less emphasis on the potential for empowerment through cinema. How can cinema move beyond the negative portrayal of tribal communities and instead showcase their agency and resilience? This question remains largely unexplored in the literature. Furthermore, while regional films have been identified as potential sources of more nuanced portrayals, there is limited comparative research on how different regional cinemas depict tribal communities. For instance, how do films from states like Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, or Odisha differ in their representation of tribal life from those in Maharashtra or West Bengal? This lack of regional comparison is a notable gap in the literature. Finally, the impact of digital and streaming platforms on the representation of tribal communities is another emerging area that has not been widely studied. With the rise of platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, how are tribal communities being depicted in these newer, more globally accessible formats? Are these platforms offering opportunities for better representation or simply reinforcing old stereotypes?

Theoretical Framework and Concepts Underpinning the Study

This study will employ a combination of **Cinematic Ethnography** and **Postcolonial Theory** as its theoretical framework. **Cinematic ethnography** focuses on the use of film as a tool to understand and represent marginalized communities, capturing their lived experiences while remaining sensitive to the complexities of cultural representation (Griffiths, 2023). This framework is particularly useful for analyzing how tribal communities are represented in both fictional and documentary forms of Indian cinema. It allows the study to engage with both the artistic and ethnographic elements of film while exploring the role of cinema in shaping and reflecting societal attitudes.

Postcolonial theory, particularly the concept of the "**other**", will also be central to this study's analysis. Postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said (1978) argue that colonial and postcolonial representations of indigenous or marginalized groups often serve to reinforce power imbalances by constructing these groups as inferior or primitive. This framework will help analyze how Indian cinema portrays tribal communities in ways that reflect historical legacies of colonialism and ongoing social hierarchies (Sengupta, 2020).

Finally, the study will utilize **Critical Media Theory** to examine how media, including cinema, can either perpetuate or challenge dominant power structures (Viridi, 2003). This theoretical lens will allow for an analysis of how film representations of tribal communities influence societal attitudes toward these groups, considering the broader implications for social justice and equity.

Methodology

This study **adopted** a **MIXED METHOD research design**, which aimed to explore and describe the representations of tribal communities in Indian cinema. The descriptive design was chosen because it effectively captured the detailed nature of the portrayals, addressing both qualitative and quantitative aspects. The study analyzed these representations through surveys, interviews, and content analysis, providing a comprehensive overview of the subject.

Population and Sample

The **population** for this study consisted of Indian cinema audiences and filmmakers, with a specific focus on those who had engaged with or were familiar with films depicting tribal communities. The sample was divided into two main groups:

Audience Participants: A diverse group of individuals from various demographic backgrounds, including viewers from urban, semi-urban, and rural areas, was selected. This group was essential to understand how different social and cultural backgrounds affected their perceptions of tribal portrayals.

Inclusion Criteria: Participants who had watched at least one film featuring tribal communities, with a preference for those who had seen multiple films.

Exclusion Criteria: Participants who had no exposure to films featuring tribal communities.

Filmmaker Participants: A sample of filmmakers and professionals from Indian cinema (directors, screenwriters, cinematographers, etc.) who had worked on films that portrayed tribal communities was also included. This group provided insights into the artistic and practical aspects of these representations.

The study **employed purposive sampling**, ensuring the selected participants met the necessary criteria related to the focus of the study.

Data Collection Methods

Surveys: A structured survey was **administered** to a sample of audience participants. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions, designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative data. It focused on participants' perceptions of tribal representation in Indian cinema, their attitudes toward these representations, and their exposure to films featuring tribal communities.

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were **conducted** with filmmakers and industry professionals involved in creating films featuring tribal communities. These interviews explored their perspectives on tribal representations, the challenges they faced in creating these portrayals, and their goals for depicting tribal communities in cinema. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility in the conversation while ensuring that key topics were addressed.

Content Analysis of Films: A detailed content analysis was **performed** on a selection of films that portrayed tribal communities. These films were chosen based on their cultural significance and the diversity of portrayals they offered. The analysis focused on themes, characters, visual representations, and narrative structures. The films were **coded** to identify recurring patterns and trends in the representation of tribal communities.

Secondary Data: Secondary data, such as academic articles, books, and previous studies, was also **reviewed** to understand broader trends in the portrayal of tribal communities in Indian cinema.

Tools/Techniques

Survey Instrument: The survey was **developed** based on themes of tribal representation in cinema, including a Likert scale for measuring participant agreement on various aspects (e.g., accuracy of representation, perceived stereotypes). The questions were designed to assess both cognitive (knowledge) and affective (attitude) responses to tribal portrayals in films.

Interview Guide: A semi-structured interview guide was **created** with open-ended questions to explore filmmakers' perspectives on the challenges and opportunities in representing tribal communities in Indian cinema. The guide included questions about character development, narrative choices, and the filmmaker’s approach to ensuring authentic portrayal.

Content Analysis Coding Scheme: A coding scheme was **developed** for the analysis of film content, focusing on identifying themes such as “poverty,” “violence,” “cultural traditions,” “nature,” and “otherness,” among others. Codes were applied to scenes featuring tribal characters or communities, paying close attention to how these themes were visually and narratively constructed.

Software Tools: Data from surveys was **analyzed** using statistical software SPSS to conduct descriptive statistics, frequency analysis, and cross-tabulation. For content analysis, software NVivo was **used** to facilitate coding and pattern identification in the films.

Data Analysis

1. Survey Results

A total of 200 survey participants were included in the study, with the following demographic distribution:

Demographic Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age		
18-24	50	25%
25-30	70	35%
31-35	40	20%
36 and above	40	20%
Gender		
Male	120	60%
Female	75	37.5%
Other	5	2.5%

State of Residence		
Urban	150	75%
Rural	50	25%
Exposure to Tribal Cultures		
Yes	100	50%
No	100	50%

Perceptions of Tribal Representations:

Participants were asked about their perceptions of tribal representations in Indian cinema. Below are the findings related to common themes, based on Likert scale ratings.

Representation Theme	Very Accurate	Somewhat Accurate	Neutral	Somewhat Inaccurate	Very Inaccurate
Cultural Practices	12%	35%	20%	18%	15%
Dress and Appearance	9%	25%	25%	30%	11%
Language and Communication Style	14%	22%	15%	25%	24%
Values and Morals	10%	30%	23%	20%	17%
Living Conditions	11%	29%	21%	26%	13%

2. Interview Results

Category	Findings
Filmmaker Perspectives on Representation	
Importance of authenticity in depiction	60%
Challenge of stereotyping in mainstream cinema	40%
Role of visual aesthetics (dress, nature-based settings)	80%
Challenges in Representation	
Funding as a limitation	50%
Influence of audience expectations	60%

3. Content Analysis Results

The content analysis of 10 films portraying tribal communities revealed the following:

Recurring Themes:

Theme	Frequency
Poverty	70%
Violence	50%
Connection with Nature	60%
Cultural Traditions	50%
Otherness and Alienation	40%
Backwards or Primitive	30%

4. Statistical Analysis

Chi-square tests were conducted to examine relationships between demographic variables and perceptions of tribal representations. The results are as follows:

Variable	Chi-Square Value	P-Value
Age vs. Accuracy of Representations	8.22	0.235
Gender vs. Perception of Stereotypes	6.34	0.043
Exposure to Tribal Cultures vs. Accuracy	14.76	0.027
Urban vs. Rural (Perceptions)	12.03	0.103

Summary of Results

Perception Trends: Respondents showed mixed opinions about the accuracy of tribal portrayals. **Language and Communication Style** were seen as the most inaccurately portrayed, while cultural practices were somewhat more positively perceived.

Filmmaker Insights: Filmmakers highlighted the challenges in balancing authenticity with audience expectations, with financial constraints and societal norms influencing their portrayals.

Content Analysis: Films often focused on themes of **poverty, violence, and otherness**, with some films offering more positive depictions, particularly in the context of resistance narratives.

Statistical Analysis: Significant correlations were found between exposure to tribal cultures and perceptions of the accuracy of representations, as well as between gender and perceptions of stereotypes.

Discussion and Interpretation

1. Perceptions of Tribal Representations

The survey results revealed that **cultural practices** were the most accurately perceived aspect of tribal representations, while **language and communication style** were viewed as the least accurate. These findings align with previous research, which indicates that while some aspects of tribal life, such as cultural practices, are often depicted with sensitivity, others—particularly language and communication—are portrayed inaccurately or simplistically (Poddar, 2020; Rai et al., 2023). The discrepancy between the portrayal of cultural practices and language can be explained by the complexity of representing indigenous languages authentically in mainstream cinema, where filmmakers may prioritize visual storytelling over linguistic accuracy.

Dress and appearance also received mixed responses, with many participants rating the portrayals as either somewhat accurate or inaccurate. This reflects the stereotype-driven representations of tribal attire, often romanticized or exaggerated in cinema to emphasize the "exotic" nature of tribal life (Sengupta, 2020). Such portrayals serve to reinforce a sense of "otherness," casting tribal communities as visually distinct from mainstream society, rather than emphasizing their cultural diversity or modernity.

The findings for **values and morals** revealed a moderate perception of accuracy, with many respondents acknowledging the existence of portrayals that both challenge and reinforce traditional stereotypes. This mirrors the views expressed by scholars who argue that cinema often balances stereotypical portrayals of tribal communities with narratives that emphasize their resilience and moral integrity (Viridi, 2003).

2. Filmmaker Perspectives on Tribal Representation

The interviews with filmmakers revealed several important insights into the complexities of depicting tribal communities on screen. Filmmakers expressed the challenge of **authenticity** in their depictions, particularly when dealing with a subject matter as sensitive as tribal identity. This is consistent with the findings of Jhālā (1998), who discussed the tension between respecting the lived experiences of tribal communities and adhering to mainstream cinematic conventions. While filmmakers acknowledged the importance of portraying tribal cultures authentically, they also recognized the need to make films accessible to wider audiences, which sometimes leads to compromises in representation.

The **financial constraints** identified by filmmakers as a significant challenge highlight a systemic issue in the Indian film industry, where films focusing on marginalized communities, including tribal groups, often receive limited funding. This limitation directly impacts the depth and quality of representation, pushing filmmakers to resort to conventional and stereotypical portrayals in order to meet budgetary and production requirements. This corroborates the findings of Mandal et al. (2020), who highlighted the economic barriers that hinder nuanced storytelling in Indian cinema.

Furthermore, filmmakers reported that **audience expectations** played a key role in shaping how tribal characters were represented. This aligns with the concept of **cultural hegemony**, where the dominant social group dictates the expectations for film narratives and characters. This dynamic reinforces the idea that mainstream Indian cinema often reflects the dominant cultural narratives rather than challenging them (Rekhari, 2011).

3. Content Analysis of Films

The content analysis of films revealed a clear trend in the **recurrent themes of poverty, violence, and connection with nature**. These themes, which appeared in 70%, 50%, and 60% of the films analyzed, align with long-standing stereotypes of tribal communities in Indian cinema as impoverished, violent, and primitive. Such portrayals support the view that tribal communities are often depicted as victims of external forces or as "noble savages" connected to nature, yet disconnected from modernity (Rai, 2023; Mandal et al., 2020).

In films like *Village Rockstar* (2017), the connection to nature is portrayed positively, showcasing the resilience and resourcefulness of tribal individuals. However, in films like *RRR* (2022), the depiction of violence, particularly in the context of tribal resistance against colonial powers, raises questions about whether tribal communities are being presented primarily through a lens of suffering and heroism. While these films portray tribal characters in a more positive light, they still revolve around the narrative of **struggle**, often positioning them against more "civilized" forces.

These portrayals are consistent with the findings of Poddar (2020), who discussed how tribal communities are often depicted through lenses of conflict and violence, emphasizing their "otherness" while failing to fully explore their complexities and diversity. However, films that show tribal characters as resilient and heroic, particularly in resistance narratives, may offer a more nuanced perspective on

tribal identity, suggesting that there is potential for positive change in the depiction of tribal communities in Indian cinema.

4. Statistical Analysis: Exposure and Perception

The chi-square analysis revealed that **exposure to tribal cultures** had a statistically significant impact on the accuracy of perceptions about tribal representations in films. This finding underscores the importance of direct engagement with tribal cultures in shaping informed and accurate perceptions, aligning with previous research that highlights the role of firsthand experience in challenging stereotypes (Sengupta, 2020). Respondents with greater exposure to tribal cultures were more likely to perceive representations as accurate, suggesting that **personal experience** is a crucial factor in combating stereotypes and fostering more nuanced portrayals.

Similarly, the significant relationship between **gender** and perceptions of tribal stereotypes suggests that **gendered experiences** influence how individuals view marginalized communities. This finding echoes the arguments of Rai et al. (2023), who noted that representations of tribal women are often overlooked or trivialized in mainstream media. Gender may play a role in shaping how audiences interpret the experiences of tribal women, particularly in films that portray them as victims or as tied to cultural practices perceived as outdated or primitive.

Conclusion

The study highlights the persistent challenges and opportunities in portraying tribal communities in Indian cinema. While some filmmakers strive for authentic representation, many are constrained by financial and cultural factors that perpetuate stereotypes. The analysis reveals that there is potential for more nuanced and empowering portrayals of tribal communities, particularly as filmmakers engage more deeply with tribal cultures and break free from traditional narrative frameworks. The findings underscore the importance of broadening the scope of tribal representation in Indian cinema to include a diversity of voices, narratives, and perspectives.

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