



Othering the Margins: Northeast India and Nationalism in Bollywood Movie *Anek*

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ABSTRACT

Northeast India has traditionally remained beyond the narrative scope of mainstream Bollywood cinema, rendering it one of the most unexplored and underrepresented marginal regions of the country. When represented, Bollywood films frequently project Northeast India as an “othered” space, depicting the region and its indigenous populations as exotic groups located at the margins of the Indian nation-state. Such portrayals rely on processes of marginalisation, exoticisation, stereotyping, and homogenisation, thereby reinforcing the discourse of othering. Consequently, there have been only limited cinematic endeavours in which Northeast India appears meaningfully as a narrative setting, a site of character development, or an integral backdrop to the plot. This paper critically examines the politics of othering in the Bollywood film *Anek* (2022). Employing qualitative film analysis and thematic interpretation, the study argues that *Anek* foregrounds the structural exclusion of Northeast India within mainstream Bollywood narratives while simultaneously revealing ideological tensions surrounding nationalism, national belonging, visibility, and marginality. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of othering, nationalism, and internal colonialism, the paper contends that Bollywood cinema often reproduces a hierarchical imagination of the nation that positions Northeast India as an internal colony within the Indian nation-state.

**Introduction:**

Bollywood movies are considered a popular mainstream media, which play a crucial role in depicting the various aspects of the nation-state and its diverse population. The Bollywood movies have addressed myriad issues, such as the political dynamics of nationalism, regionalism, and secularism in the nation-state. The Bollywood film industry has frequently emerged as an interpreter of different socio-political and socio-cultural issues specific to the nation-state. As such, Bollywood movies have a significant influence on Indian society as they document Indian politics, economy, crimes, terrorism, corruption, poverty, urban-rural life, and social realities characteristic of the nation-state. “Popular films play a central role in the construction of popular Indian consciousness; they are the most dominant and pervasive force responsible for creating in the public mind the notions of heroism, duty, courage, modernity, consumption, and glamour” (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 24).

The diverse issues of the nation and nationalism are key themes in the narrative of Bollywood movies. The narrative of Bollywood movies upholds nationalism by focusing on the clash between the nation-state and anti-national agents. “Popular Hindi cinema provides a fascinating account of Indian history and cultural politics.... the image of the nation as a mythical community. Gender, heterosexuality, class, and religious communities crosshatch the nation, and each of these disrupt the nationalist narration in Hindi cinema to reveal a different history” (Virdi 1).

Bollywood movies frequently marginalise and diminish the socio-political concerns of minority groups and communities in their cultural discourse. The nationalism in Bollywood movies mirrors the aspirations and fantasies of the residents of mainland India. As a result, Bollywood movies frequently resort to stereotypes, caricatures, and typecasting to depict peripheral cultures, individuals, and communities. In addition, substantial populations from marginalised regions are noticeably absent from the narrative structure of this mass media platform. Petra Lenihan uses the term “hegemonic nationalism” to describe this phenomenon. According to her, “Indian cinema has sought to articulate a hegemonic nationalism through the exclusion and marginalization of specific bodies, cultures, religions, and practices” (Lenihan 14).

According to Rachel Dwyer, the lead protagonists and main characters in Bollywood movies are mostly upper-caste North Indians and Hindu males. Therefore, Bollywood movies resort to othering and stereotyping other minority communities in the narrative. “Hindi cinema shows the north Indian high-caste Hindu as the ‘normal’ Indian. Other populations become ‘minorities’ and the rest of India ‘regions’, which are marked as divergent from the mainstream” (Dwyer 80). Anirudh Deshpande also contends that



Bollywood Hindi movies predominantly feature characters who are essentially Hindu, patriarchal, and upper caste. He also argues that Bollywood filmmakers are intellectuals of the bourgeoisie. Therefore, Bollywood movies represent an ideological endeavour of “bourgeois hegemony” and endorse the “bourgeois imagination of the nation-state” as the dominant cultural discourse. “On the whole the post-colonial Hindi cinema projects a bourgeois colonialism with its caste, regional and religious bias. Cinema, as a tool of bourgeois nation building, expressed bourgeois aspirations in many ways” (Deshpande).

Bollywood movies exert cultural hegemony and serve as a tool for neocolonialism in India because of their assumed status as the country’s national cinema. It is so because the marginal and peripheral regions have limited representation and scope for identity assertion. In addition, Bollywood is inaccessible to marginal territories and their inhabitants due to the dearth of filmmakers hailing from those regions within the industry. Bollywood films also contribute to cultural imperialism as they frequently reproduce a nationalistic narrative and reinforce the concept of the “other” in popular discourse through popular stereotypes. Therefore, Bollywood movies significantly rely on extensive homogenization, exoticification, and marginalisation of peripheral regions and their diverse populations in the limited number of depictions.

The concept of “other” is a crucial theoretical debate in postcolonial discourse. Postcolonial theorists like Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Frantz Fanon examine the way Western knowledge discourses resort to othering and erasure of the colonised world. They identified that the representation of the colonised or ‘orient’ by the “occident” or the coloniser reveals a dialectic of power and knowledge. The postcolonial critics argue that the projection of the non-western world as primitive, violent, uncivilised, irrational, and inferior justifies colonisation and imperialism by the Western world. Diana Dimitrova uses the term “otherism” to talk about the inclusive act of othering different races, ethnic groups, genders, and sexualities from any dominant perspective, such as “orientalist” and “occidentalism.” She also contends that otherism and the act of othering reveal a universal discourse of power.

It is the narrative of power that defines otherism; the owner of the discourse is the party which sees itself in the position of power to other the other party and marginalize it by producing meanings about it as different or inferior. This could be the ‘West’ othering the ‘Rest’ or India othering the ‘West,’ or Hinduism othering its others who are non-Hindus and therefore do not



share the same value system of caste and culture – in order to establish its own position of superiority. (Dimitrova 8)

The Northeast region of India experienced the rise of aggressive separatist nationalism in the postcolonial period. The prolonged identity assertion movements and armed insurgency in the region played a substantial role in the continuation of the dominant narrative of the “other” territory. In addition, a substantial number of tribal people from the Indo-Mongoloid group with distinct Mongoloid physical attributes contributed to the formation of a unique tribal landscape on the outskirts of the nation-state. Furthermore, the mainstream media’s apathy and exclusive emphasis on violence in the region kept the nation outside the popular narrative of the national imaginary. The region continued to be imagined as a hostile and intriguing borderland rife with social turmoil and substantial unrest and inhabited by exotic tribes. All these factors contributed to the ongoing social marginalisation and alienation of the region from the national discourse.

Anubhav Sinha’s film *Anek* (2022) explores the theme of political unrest and violence in Northeast India. The film represents Northeast India as the stereotyped other in the margins of the nation-state. Anubhav Sinha’s *Anek* (2022), starring Ayushmann Khurrana, was entirely set in an imaginary “Northeast” region. It was filmed in different parts of Assam and Meghalaya. This film also featured a significant number of actors from Northeast India in the lead roles. The film addressed the insurgency, political turmoil, and identity issues in Northeast India.

The Other Northeast India in *Anek*

Anubhav Sinha’s film *Anek* (2022) brings Northeast India into mainstream Hindi cinema, a region that has long remained underrepresented. Set as a political thriller against the backdrop of insurgency, the film addresses themes of nationalism, unity, and internal divisions within the country. The star cast of the film includes Ayushmann Khurrana, Andrea Kevichusa, J.D. Chakravarthy, Manoj Pahwa, and others. The plot of the film revolves around Aman, aka Joshua (Ayushmann Khurrana), an intelligence service agent and IPS officer who is on a dangerous mission to negotiate a peace agreement between the Indian government and a rebel faction called the Tiger Sanaga Group in Northeast India. The film was shot in the scenic locations of Shillong and Assam.

The film portrays Northeast India as an exotic and geographically unique region on the periphery of the nation. The film resorts to homogenization and appropriation of the region through the term “Northeast.” In a pivotal scene of the narrative, Aman refers to Northeast India as “*India ka ek naya*



hissa” (India’s newest region). In addition, Aman introduces Northeast India in the scene by stating, “By Northeast, I mean east of West Bengal, which is connected to mainland India through a narrow land corridor referred to as the “Chicken’s Neck Corridor.” (*Anek* 00:07:28-58) Aman’s introduction of the region alludes to a distinct geographical entity separate from mainland India. This also tends to cast Northeast India as an exotic region located in the far east beyond West Bengal.

In numerous scenes, long shots and bird’s-eye view shots are frequently used to capture the picturesque terrain, scenic landscapes, and hilly roads in some unidentified settings. The feature of the immense stretches of desolate, uninhabited land alludes to an exotic “other” and a wild frontier region. In addition, the capture of vacant neighbourhoods, desolate landscapes, and abandoned alleys serves as a visual representation of an exotic and hazardous terrain.

The film refers to the widespread influence of English culture and language in the Northeast region. Several scenes in the film showcase unidentified rock bands performing and singing English rock songs. The narrative further illustrates the adherence to the Christian faith by featuring a church situated in an unnamed village. Furthermore, there is a tribal folk song incorporated into the narrative that revolves around the invocation of Jesus Christ. Each of these signifies the filmmaker’s intention to allude to the prevalence of the English language and culture in the Northeast.

The film features characters with mongoloid physical attributes in multiple scenes. However, most of the tribal people are depicted as members of clandestine insurgent groups. Scenes are set in numerous rural landscapes that resemble a village in Assam, a village in Meghalaya, or a village in Nagaland. This is revealed through the costumes of the villagers depicted. The indigenous characters are seen conversing in Khasi, Nagamese, Assamese, Hindi, Bengali, and English in the dialogue sequences. Here, the film reveals its tendency towards homogenization and appropriation of the vast region.

The film resorts to a significant level of homogenization and appropriation of the region as the wild “Northeast” frontier on the margins of the nation-state. In numerous scenes, the registration numbers of vehicles are shown as starting with the alphanumeric sequence “NE 01,” which stands for “Northeast.” The rehabilitation centre of the rebel organisation is shown as “NE Rehabilitation Centre.” The name of the insurgent organisation that is signing the peace treaty is referred to as the “North East Revolutionary Force.” All of these tend to categorise the entire region under one category: “Northeast India,” a singular and unified administrative unit rather than a geographically distinct entity. Here, the film tends to deliberately disregard the varied region and its distinct geographical characteristics. According to Tatsam Mukherjee, the film has not succeeded in comprehending the intricate matter of



insurgency violence in the Northeast region, as it relies on cultural appropriation and extensive homogenization.

Anek makes a series of confounding choices. First of all, to refer to the entire region as North East, probably to avoid facing the wrath of a particular state, tribe or militant group. While the choice isn't nearly as bright as the makers think, it seems almost comical when cars' number plates begin with "NE". In a film, where Sinha (director) is trying to shine a light on the culture of the seven sisters, the makers inadvertently end up displaying the same ignorance of lumping all states together, something they're expressly trying to 'educate' the audience not to do. (Mukherjee)

The film contrasts the exotic setting of Northeast India with the vibrant metropolis of New Delhi. In a number of scenes, the Parliament House, Motilal Nehru Marg, Gyarah Murti in Sardar Patel Marg, India Gate canopy, Subhas Chandra Bose statue, and the hectic traffic of Delhi are featured. This draws a contrast with the scenic landscapes, hilly terrains, rivers, villages, valleys, and forest in the Northeast region.

The 2022-released *Anek*, directed by Anubhav Sinha, is one of the recent Bollywood ventures where the narrative brings up the insurgency situation, politics, and perennial issues of violence in the Northeast region. The narrative has not mentioned any specific place in Northeast India as the setting. However, it has homogenised Northeast India as a fictitious tribal territory on the periphery of the nation-state. It introduces a setting of exotic hilly terrain, scenic landscapes, and verdant flora and fauna. In the narrative, the protagonist, Aman, aka Joshua (Ayushmann Khurrana), is an intelligence service agent and IPS officer who is on a mission to negotiate a peace agreement between the Indian government and an insurgent faction named "Tiger Sanaga Group." The group is also named the "North Eastern Revolutionary Force." However, Aman encounters significant opposition from various insurgent factions. The mainland Indian special officer Aman is able to neutralise the threat of terror and successfully establish peace in the region by capturing the leaders of the insurgent groups and initiating legal proceedings against them for their capital offences and acts of violence in the region.

The film depicts that there are three insurgent factions in active operation in the region. In an important scene, Aman claims that there are thirty to forty insurgent rebel organisations in active operation on the soil of the Northeast. Therefore, it appears as though the entire Northeast is plotting against the nation. He asserts, "From the outside, it appears that the entire Northeast is against India." (*Anek* 00:12:41-56) The film is different from previous Bollywood portrayals. The film avoids portraying



all insurgent groups as a unified and singular armed organisation. The film also tends to refer to the peace initiatives of the government as mere appeasement. The narrative shows that the government intends to maintain its control through signing peace treaties.

In a significant scene, Anjaiyaah Bellamkonda (J.D. Chakravarthy), an IPS officer from mainland India posted in the Northeast, draws attention to the government's role in maintaining control in the name of the peace process. In a conversation with Aman, he states that the central government attempts to maintain authority in the region through signing peace accords.

AMAN: What exactly do we want to achieve, sir? Peace, or a peace accord?

ANJAIYAAH: A peace accord.

AMAN: By stifling the voices of other people.

ANJAIYAAH: Peace is a dirty business, officer! People often confuse peace with control. When everything is under control, it feels like peace exists.

AMAN: And when everything is peaceful, does it go out of control?

ANJAIYAAH: If you notice, peace is never actually achieved. Violence is achieved for the sake of peace. Sorry, I meant control. I think humans do not like peace. (*Anek* 01:44:10-01:45:26)

The film further refers to corruption in the administration and police force in the Northeast region under the pretext of anti-terrorism operations. The protagonist, Aman, is depicted bribing the police force in two scenes. The film also incorporates scenes that refer to state violence. In an important scene, the police force is seen apprehending innocent villagers, setting fire to their homes, and engaging in acts of violence against innocent civilians. In one scene, it is shown that the police forces have detained thousands of villagers and held them captive in bamboo cages in an open field. In a particular scene, it is also mentioned that the police apprehended and sexually assaulted a minor girl. All of these serve as references to state violence committed in the region.

The film further highlights the centre-margin dynamics and the oppressive nationalism of the nation-state. Representative dialogue sequences are incorporated into the narrative, where the leaders of two insurgent groups express concern about oppressive nationalism. The leaders of the Tiger Sanga group and the Johnson group share their agony because of the oppressive regime in the region. In their



comment, they emphasise how the nation-state marginalises and oppresses Northeast India, because of which insurgent groups are formed in Northeast India. The narrative depicts that Wangnao, the leader of the Johnson group, is involved in some philanthropic acts. The group has established schools and rehabilitation centres in the state. In a lengthy dialogue sequence with Aman, Wangnao asserts the factors contributing to the emergence of insurgent organisations in the region as underdevelopment, poverty, limited access to education, and corruption in the region. He blames the militarization and military persecution in the region. He also expresses resentment that the central government exploits the natural resources of the region. He cites the lack of economic independence and resource disparity in the region as the primary reasons behind the youths joining armed outfits. In the scene, Wangnao also attributes the geographical distance from mainland India as one of the primary reasons for the oppression of the peripheral region.

In an important interview scene, Tiger Sanga, the leader of the Tiger Sanga group, articulates his resentment at the role of the central government and mainstream media in contributing to the emergence of insurgent groups in the Northeast. In the scene, Tiger Sanga responds to questions posed by a journalist from mainland India. The journalist questions him about the prolonged failure of the peace process in the region. Tiger Sanga quotes the persecution of the people, the apathetic treatment of the central government, and the imposition of a militaristic regime in the region. He identifies these factors as key reasons for the failure of peace initiatives by the government in the region.

TIGER SANGA: Delhi is like a landlord. It sees only the boundaries of its land. It cannot see our homeland. So, we must look after our homes. You know, we live here. People live here.

JOURNALIST: Since 1947, there have been many governments, but none have signed a peace accord. How come this armed conflict never ends? Nothing has changed. But seriously, Tiger Sanga, what is the obstacle? Where does it run into trouble?

TIGER SANGA: It is you. I mean Indian people. And all your governments. Diversity is not acceptable to you.

JOURNALIST: And this, you say, sir, is when India is celebrated as the most diverse democracy in the world.

TIGER SANGA: You call us “Chnikis”. You call Kashmiris as “Pakistani,” “Khalistani”, “Naxalites” etc. Local identity? You people do not like it. In your definition, all



Indians must be of the same colour. That is not a diverse democracy. (*Anek* 00:08:21-00:10:20)

The film bleakly highlights the perspective of the insurgent groups through the dialogue sequences. However, the film's attempt to analyse the politics, power dynamics, and violence in the region is limited to documenting the acts of terror carried out by insurgent groups. The film dramatises the inter-rebel group rivalry between various insurgent factions. In several crucial sequences, the Tiger Sanga group and the Johnson group engage in gunfights and pursuits. In such gunfights, the innocent civilian population loses their lives.

The film has resorted to appropriation and homogenization in depicting all three groups of insurgents. It is only the Tiger Sanga group that is referred to as the "North Eastern Revolutionary Force." In one crucial scene, Aman refers to the region as the "newest part of the country" and the insurgents as "India *ka dushman*" (India's enemies). In the scene, Aman also declares that his job involves "locating Indian enemies and eliminating them." The narrative also incorporates scenes depicting gunfights between insurgent groups and the paramilitary force. In a crucial scene, it is mentioned that the Tiger Sanga Group is involved in illegal smuggling of arms and drugs, and they control toll taxes with the support of the government. Additionally, the narrative depicts how insurgent groups oppress and eliminate innocent civilians who oppose them. The film depicts how defenceless civilians are the worst victims of violence committed by insurgent groups in the region. Consequently, the film portrays the insurgent groups in the region as terrorist organisations. The insurgent groups are depicted as engaged in criminal activities that threaten peace and tranquilly in the region.

Furthermore, the film depicts Northeast India as one of the most terror-infested regions on the margins of the nation-state. The region is portrayed as a volatile place of substantial unrest and turmoil, marked by criminal activities, violence, conflict, corruption, insurgency, and counter-insurgency operations. The narrative incorporates several scenes where bomb explosions, ambushes, gunfights, and military pursuits are deliberately inserted to stereotype the region as a violent terror zone. A disturbing and ominous background score accompany numerous scenes in the narrative. All of these tend to render the region fraught with political instability and turmoil. In a review of the film, Suraj Gogoi observed that the film presented a "saviour complex" of mainland Indian men.

Anubhav Sinha's *Anek* is a political drama that attempts to tell the story of Northeast India and presents the mainstream gaze of the nation towards the frontier region and its people. It is filled with violence – not just that flows from the gun barrel – and misrepresentation and profiling of



people, culture, and geography. The first unsettling fact about the movie is its heavy-handed saviour complex. (Gogoi)

The film portrays the Indian army, intelligence service, and police as emblems of peace and progress in Northeast India. Their acts of valour and benevolence in safeguarding citizens are eulogised in the narrative. The narrative presents how an Indian secret service agent achieves peace in the region by eradicating the insurgent groups. Furthermore, a crucial scene depicts a platoon of the Indian Army along with the special intelligence service agents initiating a covert mission on the Indo-Myanmar border. In this covert mission, the Indian army emerges triumphant and captures Wangnao, the commander of the Johnson group. In the scene, Wangnao expresses to Aman his realisation that violence is not the solution. It is also revealed that Aman could collect substantial evidence against the criminal activities of Tiger Sanga and Wangnao. The peace accord is postponed, and both leaders are arrested. Therefore, the film finally shows that the central government has been able to neutralise the threat of terror in the region. In this context, the film portrays the state agents and paramilitary forces as the saviours of the inhabitants of the region. The state agents and paramilitary forces are depicted as upholding nationalism in the Northeast. Furthermore, the film's poster features the phrase "*Jeetega Kaun? India!*" (Who will emerge victorious? India.) This highlights that the nation will ultimately win and be successful in its pursuit of peace.

Conclusion:

Bollywood movies frequently resort to stereotypes, caricatures, and typecasting in depicting Northeast India and its marginal population. *Anek* has experienced criticism due to the perpetuation of stereotypes of the Northeast as one of the most terror-infested regions. However, it is the depiction that matters, regardless of whether it is favourable or biased. Bollywood movies depicting Northeast India enhance the visibility of the region. In addition, the production of more Bollywood films in the Northeast would provide more opportunities for actors from the region. It will contribute to the visibility of Northeast India in the Indian entertainment industry. The authentic and positive portrayal of the region will help to dismantle the racial barrier, misinformation, and misconceptions about the region. Therefore, the Northeast region needs more Bollywood films incorporating stories from the region into the narrative.

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