

## Fractured Frames: Cinematic Marginalization of Northeast India in Indian National Cinema

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### Abstract

Despite India's status as one of the most prolific and globally visible film-producing nations, its cinematic imagination remains profoundly uneven. While dominant industries such as Bollywood and select regional cinemas enjoy widespread circulation and critical attention, entire regions remain marginalized within the national visual discourse. Among these, Northeast India occupies a uniquely peripheral position—simultaneously incorporated within the territorial nation-state and excluded from its representational frameworks. This paper examines how Indian cinema contributes to the marginalization of Northeast India through structured absence, stereotyping, and regimes of selective visibility. Drawing on postcolonial theory, particularly the works of Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha, alongside cultural studies and epistemic injustice frameworks, the paper argues that cinematic marginalization constitutes a form of representational and epistemic violence. Through close readings of selected films—including *Mary Kom* (2014), *Chak De! India* (2007), *Axone* (2019), and *Aamis* (2019)—the study highlights how Northeast identities are either erased, commodified, or mediated through an external gaze. The paper further situates these dynamics within contemporary algorithmic cultures, demonstrating how digital platforms reproduce older hierarchies of visibility. Ultimately, it calls for a decolonial reconfiguration of Indian cinema that centers indigenous epistemologies, strengthens regional film infrastructures, and redefines the contours of national cinematic imagination.

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### Introduction

Indian cinema is frequently celebrated as a site of cultural plurality, linguistic diversity, and narrative abundance. Producing thousands of films annually across multiple languages, it is often positioned as a reflection of India's complex and heterogeneous social fabric. This celebratory framing, however, obscures the deeply hierarchical and uneven structures that govern cinematic production, circulation, and recognition. The category of "Indian cinema" itself is far from neutral; it is discursively dominated by Bollywood and a select group of regional industries that enjoy institutional support, global visibility, and critical legitimacy (Willemsen, 1999). As a result, vast geographical and cultural regions remain underrepresented or misrepresented, revealing that cinematic plurality often operates within tightly controlled limits. Within this stratified representational order, Northeast India emerges as a particularly telling case of systemic marginalization. Comprising eight states—Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Sikkim—the region is characterized by extraordinary ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity. Yet, despite its geopolitical significance and rich cultural traditions, Northeast India occupies an ambiguous and often contradictory position within the Indian national imagination. It is territorially integral yet symbolically peripheral, included within the nation-state's borders while excluded from its dominant cultural narratives (Baruah, 2005). This paradox becomes especially visible in mainstream cinema, where the Northeast is either rendered invisible or reduced to a set of recurring tropes—insurgency, primitivism, hyper-exoticism, and racialized otherness (McDuie-Ra, 2012). Such patterns of absence and distortion are not merely accidental omissions but are indicative of deeper structural forces embedded within the political economy of Indian cinema. Film production and distribution in India are heavily concentrated in metropolitan centers such as Mumbai, Chennai, and Hyderabad, where market logics, audience assumptions, and industry gatekeeping shape what kinds of stories are told and whose voices are amplified. Within this framework, narratives from the Northeast are often deemed commercially nonviable or culturally "unrelatable," leading to their systematic exclusion. This dynamic resonates strongly with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) formulation of the subaltern wherein marginalized subjects are denied the capacity to "speak" within dominant epistemic systems. In cinematic terms, Northeast India is not simply unheard; it is spoken for—its identities mediated through an external, often homogenizing gaze that privileges spectacle, difference, and consumability over lived experience and

self-representation. Moreover, the representational logic governing the portrayal of Northeast India can be productively understood through Edward Said's (1978) concept of Orientalism. Although originally theorized in the context of Western representations of the East, Orientalism's underlying mechanism—the construction of cultural difference as exotic, inferior, and knowable only through dominant frameworks—finds a compelling parallel within intra-national contexts. In Indian cinema, the Northeast is frequently “othered” through visual and narrative codes that emphasize its deviation from a presumed cultural norm, often aligned with North Indian, upper-caste, and Hindi-speaking identities. This internal orientalism reinforces a hierarchy of belonging, where the Northeast is positioned as both part of and apart from the nation.

Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) notion of ambivalence and the “third space” further complicates this dynamic by highlighting how marginalized identities are never entirely excluded but are incorporated in ways that sustain their difference. The Northeast, in this sense, exists within Indian cinema as a site of partial visibility—appearing in fleeting roles, stereotypical characterizations, or tokenistic inclusions that do little to challenge dominant narratives. This ambivalent inclusion produces what Bhabha describes as a condition of “almost the same, but not quite,” where recognition is always accompanied by distortion. Importantly, these representational inequalities are not confined to traditional cinematic spaces but are increasingly reproduced and amplified within digital and algorithmic ecosystems. Streaming platforms, recommendation systems, and social media visibility metrics play a crucial role in determining which films gain traction and which remain obscure. Far from democratizing access, these technologies often reinforce existing hierarchies by privileging content that aligns with dominant consumption patterns and linguistic majorities (Noble, 2018). Consequently, films from or about Northeast India continue to struggle for visibility even within ostensibly open digital platforms, pointing to a new layer of algorithmic marginalization that intersects with older forms of cultural exclusion.

By bringing together postcolonial theory, cultural studies, and emerging scholarship on algorithmic bias, this paper argues that the marginalization of Northeast India in Indian cinema must be understood not simply as a representational gap but as a form of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). It reflects a broader system in which certain ways of knowing, seeing, and narrating are systematically devalued or erased. Addressing this imbalance, therefore, requires more than increased representation; it demands a fundamental rethinking of the structures, aesthetics, and epistemologies that underpin Indian cinematic production and circulation.

### **Internal Orientalism and Representation**

Edward Said's (1978) concept of *Orientalism* remains a foundational lens for understanding how cultural representations are implicated in the production and maintenance of power. Said demonstrated how the "Orient" was not merely a geographical entity but a discursive construct—produced through Western knowledge systems that framed it as exotic, irrational, backward, and fundamentally inferior. While Said's work focused on colonial relations between the West and the East, subsequent scholarship has extended this framework to examine similar dynamics within postcolonial nation-states, where internal hierarchies reproduce comparable modes of representation (Kumar, 2022).

In the Indian context, this extension is particularly useful for analyzing the position of Northeast India, which is frequently subjected to what may be termed *internal orientalism*. Here, the Northeast is constructed as culturally distant from the imagined national norm—often implicitly defined through North Indian, upper-caste, and Hindi-speaking identities. Cinematic representations play a crucial role in sustaining this discourse by portraying the region through reductive visual and narrative codes: lush landscapes devoid of socio-political context, insurgency-driven narratives, or hyper-exoticized cultural practices (McDuie-Ra, 2012). Such portrayals do not merely misrepresent; they actively produce the Northeast as an object of knowledge to be consumed, thereby reinforcing asymmetrical relations of power within the nation. This process also reflects what Stuart Hall (1997) describes as the constitutive role of representation—where meaning is not simply reflected but produced through discourse. In this sense, Indian cinema does not passively depict the Northeast; it actively constructs its marginality by repeatedly situating it outside the boundaries of normative "Indianness." The result is a cultural imaginary in which the Northeast appears simultaneously visible and alien, present yet fundamentally estranged.

## 2.2 Subalternity and Epistemic Violence

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) intervention—"Can the subaltern speak?"—remains central to understanding the structural exclusion of marginalized voices within dominant representational systems. Spivak argues that the subaltern is not merely unheard but is systematically prevented from speaking within hegemonic discourses that predefine the terms of intelligibility. This framework is particularly relevant to Indian cinema, where Northeast India functions as a subaltern space whose narratives are either absent or articulated through external, dominant perspectives. In cinematic practice, this manifests as a persistent denial of narrative agency. Stories about the Northeast are frequently told by filmmakers located outside the region, often relying on familiar tropes that render the subject legible to mainstream audiences. Even when Northeast characters are included, their roles tend to be peripheral,

stereotyped, or instrumental to the development of “mainstream” protagonists. This aligns with Spivak’s notion of *epistemic violence*—a form of discursive domination in which subaltern voices are appropriated, translated, or distorted in ways that erase their specificity (Spivak, 1988). Contemporary media scholarship further underscores how such exclusion is institutionally produced. Film industries operate through networks of financing, distribution, and audience targeting that privilege certain narratives over others, effectively silencing voices that fall outside dominant market logics (Chakravarty & Roy, 2023). In this sense, the marginalization of Northeast India is not simply a representational issue but a structural condition embedded within the political economy of media production. The subaltern, therefore, does not merely lack access to representation; it is actively positioned in a way that forecloses the possibility of self-representation.

### 2.3 Hybridity and Ambivalence

Homi K. Bhabha’s (1994) theorization of *hybridity* and *ambivalence* provides a critical framework for understanding the contradictory positioning of marginalized identities within national discourse. Bhabha challenges fixed notions of cultural identity by emphasizing the “third space”—a site of negotiation where meanings are neither entirely dominant nor entirely subordinate. However, this space is also marked by tension, as inclusion within the nation often occurs alongside processes of differentiation and exclusion. Northeast India exemplifies this ambivalent positioning. On one hand, it is incorporated into the symbolic framework of the Indian nation-state—appearing in national narratives, sporting representations, and occasional cinematic texts. On the other hand, it is persistently marked as culturally distinct, even foreign. This duality is particularly evident in cinema, where Northeast characters are often portrayed as “Indian, but not quite”—a formulation that echoes Bhabha’s notion of mimicry, wherein the colonized subject is rendered “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha, 1994). Such representations produce a form of conditional inclusion that sustains hierarchical distinctions. The Northeast becomes legible within the national imagination only through its difference, which is simultaneously emphasized and contained. Recent cultural analyses suggest that this ambivalence is especially pronounced in representations of border regions, where questions of belonging, identity, and sovereignty are inherently unstable (Baruah, 2023). Cinema, as a powerful cultural medium, not only reflects this instability but actively participates in its reproduction by framing the Northeast as a liminal space—caught between inclusion and exclusion, familiarity and foreignness.

### 2.4 Epistemic Injustice and Algorithmic Visibility

Miranda Fricker’s (2007) concept of *epistemic injustice* provides a crucial extension to postcolonial theory by foregrounding the ethical dimensions of

knowledge production. Fricker identifies two key forms: *testimonial injustice*, where certain speakers are not believed or taken seriously, and *hermeneutical injustice*, where marginalized groups lack the interpretive frameworks necessary to make sense of their experiences. In the context of cinema, both forms are evident in the marginalization of Northeast India, where voices from the region are either excluded or rendered unintelligible within dominant narrative structures. This epistemic marginalization is further intensified in the contemporary digital landscape, where visibility is increasingly governed by algorithmic systems. Streaming platforms, search engines, and social media networks rely on data-driven logics that prioritize content based on engagement metrics, linguistic dominance, and existing popularity. While often framed as neutral or democratizing, these systems tend to reproduce and amplify pre-existing cultural hierarchies (Noble, 2018; Gillespie, 2024). For Northeast Indian cinema, this creates a double bind: not only does it face structural barriers within traditional film industries, but it also struggles for visibility within digital ecosystems that favor mainstream, Hindi-language, or globally marketable content. Emerging research highlights how algorithmic curation can marginalize already underrepresented communities by limiting their discoverability and reinforcing patterns of cultural invisibility (Qadri et al., 2023). In this sense, algorithmic visibility becomes an extension of epistemic injustice—where the capacity to be seen, heard, and recognized is unevenly distributed. Taken together, these theoretical perspectives reveal that the marginalization of Northeast India in Indian cinema operates across multiple, interconnected levels: discursive, structural, and technological. It is not merely a question of who is represented, but how representation itself is organized, controlled, and circulated. Addressing this condition, therefore, requires a critical rethinking of both cinematic practices and the broader systems of knowledge and visibility that sustain them.

## 5. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in critical film analysis and informed by postcolonial and cultural theory. Rather than treating films as neutral cultural artifacts, the analysis approaches cinema as a site of ideological production where meanings are constructed, circulated, and contested (Hall, 1997). The objective is not only to identify patterns of representation but to interrogate the underlying structures that make such representations possible.

The methodological framework integrates three interrelated components: textual analysis of films, theoretical interpretation, and contextual engagement with contemporary media discourse. First, a close reading of selected films is undertaken with attention to four key dimensions: narrative structure, character representation, visual aesthetics, and discursive framing. Narrative analysis

focuses on whose stories are told, whose perspectives are centered, and how conflicts are structured and resolved. Character analysis examines the depth, agency, and positioning of Northeast identities within the cinematic text. Visual analysis considers how cinematography, mise-en-scène, and costume design contribute to the construction of difference or familiarity. Discursive framing explores how films situate Northeast India within broader national and cultural narratives. Second, these textual readings are situated within a broader theoretical framework drawing on postcolonial theory (Spivak, 1988), epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), and media studies scholarship. This enables a layered interpretation in which cinematic elements are understood not merely as aesthetic choices but as embedded within larger regimes of knowledge and power. Third, the study engages with contemporary digital and media scholarship to account for the changing conditions of visibility in the age of streaming platforms and algorithmic circulation (Gillespie, 2024). This is particularly important in understanding how older patterns of marginalization persist, even as new modes of distribution emerge. A key methodological emphasis is placed on the dynamics of repetition and omission. Repetition refers to the recurring use of specific tropes—such as exoticization, racial marking, or insurgency narratives—that normalize particular ways of seeing the Northeast. Omission, on the other hand, highlights the systematic absence of nuanced, self-represented, or everyday narratives from mainstream cinema. Together, these processes produce what can be understood as a structured regime of visibility, where certain identities are hyper-visible in distorted forms while others remain entirely unseen. The selected films function as case studies that exemplify broader representational tendencies across Indian cinema. They include both mainstream Bollywood productions and independent or regional films that attempt to disrupt dominant narratives. This comparative approach allows for an analysis not only of marginalization but also of emerging counter-representational practices.

## 6. Film Analysis

### 6.1 *Mary Kom* (2014): Representational Displacement and the Politics of Casting

*Mary Kom* (2014), a biographical sports film, ostensibly marks a moment of inclusion by foregrounding a celebrated athlete from Manipur. However, this inclusion is deeply complicated by the casting of a non-Northeast actor, Priyanka Chopra, in the titular role. This decision sparked widespread criticism and brings into focus what scholars describe as representational displacement—a process in which marginalized identities are made visible but are not allowed to represent themselves (Sen, 2022). From a postcolonial perspective, this can be read as a form of epistemic control, where authenticity is subordinated to market logic and star power. The Northeast body is effectively replaced by a

more “acceptable” and commercially viable figure, reinforcing the idea that Northeast identities require mediation to be legible within mainstream cinema. This aligns with Spivak’s (1988) notion of epistemic violence, as the subject is spoken for rather than allowed to speak. Narratively, the film adheres to a familiar biopic structure that emphasizes individual perseverance and national pride, thereby subsuming regional specificity into a broader nationalist framework. While Mary Kom’s identity as a Manipuri woman is acknowledged, it is often flattened into a generic story of success, limiting the exploration of the socio-political context from which she emerges. Visually, the film attempts to approximate Northeast features through makeup and styling, which further underscores the artificiality of representation and the distance between lived reality and cinematic portrayal. Thus, *Mary Kom* exemplifies a paradoxical form of visibility—where inclusion occurs, but on terms that reinforce existing hierarchies of representation.

### **6.2 *Chak De! India* (2007): Subtle Stereotyping and Racial Marking**

In *Chak De! India* (2007), the character of Molly Zimik, a hockey player from the Northeast, occupies a marginal yet symbolically significant position. Unlike overtly exoticized portrayals, the film employs more subtle forms of stereotyping that operate through humor, dialogue, and visual coding. Molly’s identity is frequently reduced to her physical appearance and accented speech, marking her as racially distinct from her teammates. This form of representation aligns with what Hall (1997) describes as the *racialization of difference*, where physical traits become shorthand for cultural identity. Molly’s characterization often serves as comic relief, reinforcing her status as an outsider within the team. While the film ultimately promotes national unity, this unity is achieved through the assimilation of difference rather than its genuine recognition. From a Bhabhaian perspective, Molly’s role exemplifies ambivalence: she is included within the national team yet remains marked as “other.” Her inclusion does not disrupt dominant norms but instead reinforces them by positioning her difference as something to be managed or overcome. This reflects a broader pattern in Indian cinema, where Northeast identities are incorporated in ways that sustain, rather than challenge, hierarchical distinctions.

### **6.3 *Axone* (2019): Counter-Representation and Everyday Racism**

*Axone* (2019) represents a significant departure from mainstream portrayals by centering the everyday experiences of Northeast migrants in Delhi. The film shifts the focus from spectacle to the mundane, foregrounding issues of housing discrimination, racial prejudice, and cultural misunderstanding. In doing so, it challenges dominant representational frameworks that either erase or exoticize the Northeast. The narrative structure is deliberately intimate and localized, revolving around the preparation of a traditional dish for a wedding. This seemingly simple premise becomes a powerful vehicle for exploring broader

questions of belonging and identity. By emphasizing everyday interactions, the film disrupts the tendency to frame Northeast India solely through crisis or difference. From the perspective of epistemic justice, *Axone* can be seen as an attempt to restore narrative agency to marginalized subjects. The characters are not merely objects of representation but active participants in their own storytelling. This aligns with recent calls for counter-representational cinema, which seeks to challenge dominant narratives by foregrounding marginalized voices and experiences (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2023). Moreover, the film's use of language, humor, and interpersonal dynamics reflects a nuanced understanding of hybridity and negotiation, resonating with Bhabha's (1994) concept of the "third space." Here, identity is not fixed but continuously shaped through interaction and contestation.

### ***Aamis* (2019): Regional Cinema and the Ethics of Representation**

*Aamis* (2019), an Assamese film, offers a radically different cinematic approach by resisting both exoticization and overt political framing. Instead, it presents a deeply intimate and psychologically complex narrative centered on human relationships, desire, and transgression. In doing so, it demonstrates the richness and diversity of regional storytelling that often remains inaccessible within mainstream circuits. Unlike Bollywood representations, *Aamis* does not position the Northeast as an object of curiosity or difference. The setting, culture, and characters are treated as integral and unremarkable, thereby normalizing what is often rendered "other" in mainstream cinema. This refusal to explain or justify cultural specificity can be understood as a form of epistemic resistance, where the film asserts its own terms of intelligibility.

From the perspective of Fricker (2007), *Aamis* challenges epistemic injustice by granting full narrative authority to its characters and their lived experiences. It does not seek validation from dominant frameworks but instead constructs its own aesthetic and ethical universe. This highlights the potential of regional cinema to offer alternative modes of representation that are grounded in local epistemologies and cultural practices. Furthermore, the film's critical reception underscores the role of digital platforms in expanding the reach of such narratives, even as questions of algorithmic visibility remain. While *Aamis* gained recognition beyond Assam, its circulation was still limited compared to mainstream productions, pointing to the persistent structural inequalities that shape cinematic visibility. These case studies illustrate the spectrum of representation in Indian cinema—from appropriation and stereotyping to resistance and self-representation. They reveal that marginalization operates not only through absence but also through the specific ways in which presence is constructed, mediated, and circulated.

### **Gender and Intersectionality**

An intersectional framework is crucial for understanding the layered and compounded marginalization experienced by women from Northeast India. Drawing on Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) foundational concept of intersectionality, identity must be understood as constituted through multiple, overlapping axes of power—including gender, race, ethnicity, and region—rather than as a singular category. In the context of Indian cinema, Northeast women occupy a particularly vulnerable position at the intersection of racialization, gendered stereotyping, and regional marginality. Mainstream cinematic representations frequently construct Northeast women through a limited set of visual and narrative tropes that simultaneously exoticize and sexualize their bodies. These portrayals are often shaped by what Deka (2022) identifies as the *racialized eroticization* of indigenous women, where phenotypical difference—especially facial features and body types—is framed as both desirable and deviant. This dual coding positions Northeast women as hyper-visible objects of desire while simultaneously excluding them from normative ideals of Indian femininity, which are typically aligned with upper-caste, North Indian aesthetics. Such representations can be productively analyzed through Laura Mulvey's (1975) concept of the *male gaze*, wherein women are objectified and rendered passive within visual culture. However, in the case of Northeast women, this gaze is further inflected by racial and colonial logics, producing what may be termed a *racialized male gaze*. Here, the cinematic framing does not merely sexualize but also “others,” reinforcing a sense of cultural distance and difference. This aligns with broader patterns of internal orientalism, where the Northeast is constructed as both exotic and inferior within the national imagination (Kumar, 2022). Moreover, the marginalization of Northeast women is not limited to representation alone but extends to their absence in positions of creative control within the film industry. The lack of Northeast women filmmakers, writers, and producers contributes to a cycle of misrepresentation, as narratives continue to be shaped by external perspectives. This reflects what Fricker (2007) terms *testimonial injustice*, where certain voices are systematically devalued or excluded from knowledge production. Importantly, independent, and regional cinemas have begun to challenge these dominant frameworks by offering more nuanced portrayals of women's experiences. Films such as *Axone* (2019) and *Aamis* (2019) foreground female subjectivity in ways that resist both sexualization and stereotyping, instead presenting women as complex agents navigating social, cultural, and emotional realities. These counter-representations demonstrate the potential of intersectional storytelling to disrupt hegemonic visual regimes and reclaim narrative agency.

## **8. Algorithmic Cultures and Digital Marginalization**

The rise of digital platforms and streaming services has often been celebrated as a democratizing force in media distribution, ostensibly enabling greater access

to diverse content. However, emerging scholarship suggests that these platforms do not simply level the playing field; rather, they reproduce and, in some cases, intensify existing hierarchies of visibility (Gillespie, 2024). Algorithmic systems that govern content recommendation, searchability, and visibility are driven by data-centric logics that prioritize engagement, popularity, and linguistic dominance. He further argues that these systems are not neutral but are embedded with cultural assumptions and economic imperatives that shape what is made visible and what remains obscure. In the Indian context, this often translates into the privileging of Hindi-language and metropolitan-centric content, marginalizing films from regions such as Northeast India. Athique (2023) demonstrates that streaming platforms in India tend to favor content that aligns with established audience bases and advertising markets, resulting in a disproportionate emphasis on mainstream industries like Bollywood. This creates a feedback loop in which already popular content gains further visibility, while regional cinemas struggle to reach wider audiences. For Northeast filmmakers, this means that even when films are produced and distributed digitally, their discoverability remains limited. This phenomenon can be understood as a form of *algorithmic marginalization*, where technological systems replicate older patterns of cultural exclusion under the guise of neutrality. From the perspective of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), this represents a new mode of silencing, where certain narratives are not explicitly censored but are effectively rendered invisible through lack of circulation.

Furthermore, algorithmic cultures shape not only what audiences watch but also what kinds of films are produced. Filmmakers increasingly tailor content to align with platform logics, potentially discouraging experimentation and reinforcing dominant narrative forms. In this way, digital infrastructures exert a subtle yet powerful influence on the aesthetics and politics of representation. Thus, while digital platforms offer new opportunities for Northeast cinema, they also introduce new challenges, requiring a critical engagement with the technological systems that mediate cultural visibility.

## **9. Toward a Decolonial Media Framework**

Addressing the systemic marginalization of Northeast India in cinema requires more than incremental reforms; it demands a fundamental rethinking of the epistemological and institutional foundations of media production. A decolonial media framework, informed by scholars such as Mignolo (2011) and Smith (2012), emphasizes the need to dismantle dominant knowledge systems and center indigenous ways of knowing, seeing, and storytelling. At the institutional level, this involves sustained support for regional film industries through funding, infrastructure development, and distribution networks. Government initiatives and policy interventions play a crucial role in this regard. Recent

discussions by the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, India (2024), have highlighted the importance of decentralizing media production to ensure more equitable representation across regions. However, such efforts must move beyond symbolic inclusion to address structural inequalities in resource allocation and access. Inclusive casting practices are another critical component of a decolonial approach. As illustrated by the controversy surrounding *Mary Kom* (2014), representation without authenticity can reinforce, rather than challenge, existing hierarchies. Ensuring that actors from Northeast communities are cast in roles that reflect their identities is essential for fostering both visibility and credibility. Equally important is the question of algorithmic accountability. Greater transparency in how digital platforms curate and recommend content is necessary to mitigate biases that disadvantage regional cinemas. This includes rethinking metrics of success that prioritize engagement over diversity and exploring alternative models that actively promote underrepresented voices (Gillespie, 2024). Finally, a decolonial framework must foreground the recognition of indigenous epistemologies—ways of understanding the world that are rooted in local histories, cultures, and experiences. This requires not only incorporating Northeast narratives into mainstream cinema but also valuing them on their own terms, without forcing them to conform to dominant aesthetic or narrative conventions. In this sense, decolonizing Indian cinema is not simply about adding more diverse content; it is about transforming the very structures through which cinematic knowledge is produced, circulated, and legitimized. It calls for a shift from representation to self-representation, from inclusion to agency, and from visibility to epistemic justice.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has argued that the marginalization of Northeast India in Indian cinema is neither incidental nor merely representational, but deeply structural—embedded within the cultural, economic, and epistemic frameworks that shape cinematic production and circulation. Through an interdisciplinary engagement with postcolonial theory, intersectionality, and media studies, the analysis demonstrates that the Northeast occupies a paradoxical position within the national imagination: territorially included yet culturally peripheral, visible yet misrepresented, present yet systematically silenced. Drawing on Said's (1978) concept of Orientalism, the paper has shown how cinematic representations construct the Northeast as an internal "other," marked by exoticism, difference, and inferiority. This internal orientalism is not simply a matter of misrepresentation but a mechanism of power that reinforces hierarchical distinctions within the nation. Spivak's (1988) notion of the subaltern further illuminates how Northeast voices are structurally excluded or mediated through dominant frameworks, resulting in what can be understood as epistemic violence. Even when visibility is granted, it often takes the form of

appropriation or distortion, as seen in films like *Mary Kom* (2014). Bhabha's (1994) framework of hybridity and ambivalence helps explain the contradictory positioning of the Northeast in cinema, where inclusion is always accompanied by differentiation. This ambivalence is evident in films such as *Chak De! India* (2007), where Northeast identities are incorporated but remain marked as culturally distinct. At the same time, counter-narratives like *Axone* (2019) and *Aamis* (2019) demonstrate the possibility of alternative cinematic practices that foreground lived experience, complexity, and self-representation. The paper has also extended these concerns into the contemporary digital landscape, arguing that algorithmic systems reproduce older hierarchies of visibility under new technological conditions. As Gillespie (2024) and Athique (2023) suggest, streaming platforms and recommendation systems often privilege dominant languages and industries, thereby limiting the reach of Northeast cinema. This points to the persistence of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) in new forms, where marginalization operates not only through absence but through constrained visibility. An intersectional lens further reveals how these dynamics are intensified for Northeast women, who face compounded forms of marginalization through racialization, gendered stereotyping, and exclusion from narrative authority (Deka, 2022). Their representation within cinema exemplifies the convergence of multiple axes of power, underscoring the need for more inclusive and self-reflexive storytelling practices.

In response to these layered exclusions, the paper calls for a decolonial reconfiguration of Indian cinema. Such a transformation requires structural interventions—ranging from institutional support for regional film industries and inclusive casting practices to greater algorithmic transparency and accountability. More fundamentally, it necessitates a shift in epistemological orientation: from representing the Northeast as an object of knowledge to recognizing it as a site of knowledge production. Ultimately, the question is not simply whether Northeast India is represented in Indian cinema, but how, by whom, and under what conditions. Addressing cinematic marginalization, therefore, demands more than visibility; it requires a redistribution of narrative power and a reimagining of the national cinematic imagination itself. Only through such a shift can Indian cinema move toward a genuinely plural and equitable cultural landscape.

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