The Cinematic Othering of Northeast India: Bridging the Gap Through Representation

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Abstract

The depiction of Northeast India in the mainstream Indian cinema has often oscillated between romanticized portrayals and marginalization. Despite its cultural richness, historical significance, and socio-political complexities, the region remains underrepresented and often misrepresented in conventional Indian films. While the Northeastern States of India has gained greater visibility in Indian cinema throughout the years, significant challenges such as stereotyping of characters and cultures, lack of the native voices and over simplification of region's diverse cultures and issues to clichés, perpetuating misconceptions still remain. This paper examines the duality of self and other in the cinematic depictions of the Northeast, exploring how these narratives shape and reflect perceptions of identity, culture, and belonging.

Keywords: Indian cinema, Northeast, Identity, Othering, Cultural diversity, Stereotypes.

Introduction:

Since its inception, cinema has emerged as one of the most powerful forms of artistic expression and communication, capable of shaping public consciousness, mediating cultural memory, and expanding our imaginative horizons. As the seventh art, with its dynamic combination of visual imagery, sound, and narrative, film operates simultaneously as a mirror reflecting collective existence and as a portal through which new possibilities of being are explored. In India, writings about cinema appeared relatively early, though systematic academic engagement with film as a critical and cultural discourse gained significant momentum only after independence. Despite its enormous linguistic diversity, wide-ranging social reach, and global influence, Indian cinema has often been treated as an underexplored field within academic studies. However, the current dominance of visual media and the growing interrelation between politics, culture, and entertainment make such an assumption increasingly untenable.

Bollywood, the commercial Hindi-language film industry centered in Mumbai and often seen as the public face of Indian cinema, has long been portrayed as a vibrant site of cultural plurality. As M. Deshpande argues, "Bollywood is a melting pot of cultures and an example of Indian secularism" (Deshpande 96). While this claim captures Bollywood's apparent inclusivity, it overlooks the subtle yet pervasive ideological mechanisms that sustain exclusion beneath its cosmopolitan facade. Although often conflated, Bollywood represents only the mainstream Hindi film industry, whereas Indian cinema encompasses a far wider spectrum of regional, linguistic, and aesthetic film traditions. Deshpande states that the industry's so-called "social films" are deeply rooted in the politics of inequality and escapism (96). Beneath its spectacle of unity and romance lies an intricate negotiation of class, gender, and regional hierarchies. A discernible binary emerges between perception and identity, and between history and its cinematic representation. Depending on where the emphasis falls, this binary may also extend to the way history itself is imagined and reconstructed through visual culture. The process of what critics' term "Bollywoodization" thus produces a cultural canon that shapes everyday understandings of the Self and the Other while presenting itself as apolitical entertainment. Consequently, a critical understanding of the sociopolitical and historical relationship between the Indian "mainland" and the Northeastern region becomes essential to interpreting films such as *Dil Se.*. (Mani Ratnam, 1998), *Chak De! India* (Shimit Amin, 2007), *Pink* (Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury, 2016), and

Axone (Nicholas Khcarkongor, 2019), all of which engage, in varying degrees, with questions of identity, marginality, and belonging.

Benedict Anderson's seminal work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* provides a valuable theoretical framework for understanding how cinema participates in the construction of national identity. Anderson defines the nation as an "imagined political community" in which "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). The nation, therefore, is less a material entity than a symbolic construct, an affective space where shared language, history, and culture create a sense of belonging that transcends physical borders. During the 20th Century, particularly in the context of anti-colonial struggles, the idea of the nation served as a unifying myth that fostered solidarity among the oppressed. Yet the very diversity that empowered nationalist movements also posed challenges to postcolonial nation-states, where competing ethnicities, languages, and religions complicated the notion of a unified national identity.

In India, a country marked by immense heterogeneity across caste, class, religion, and ethnicity, the idea of the nation is inseparable from questions of representation and difference. The popular slogan "Unity in Diversity" captures an aspirational ideal but often conceals persistent social hierarchies and racialized forms of exclusion. Within the national imagination, binaries such as center and margin, self and other, and we and they have been deeply entrenched. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin observe in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (2003), such binaries like center/margin, civilized/native, colonizer/colonized are the enduring legacies of colonial discourse that postcolonial theory seeks to expose and deconstruct. Indian cinema, as both an aesthetic practice and a cultural industry, frequently reproduces these binaries, shaping the way the nation and its Others are visualized.

The Northeastern region of India, comprising the eight states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura, embodies a rich mosaic of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural identities. Despite this diversity, the region remains marginal within the Indian national imagination. Mainstream cinema and media discourses have historically exoticized, stereotyped, or rendered invisible the Northeast, situating it at the

periphery of the nation-state's consciousness. Geographically linked to the rest of India by the narrow Siliguri Corridor, often referred to as the "Chicken's Neck", the region's strategic significance is frequently emphasized over its cultural and historical complexity. National media narratives tend to highlight insurgency, violence, and border conflicts, thereby obscuring the region's lived realities and everyday experiences. Such selective representation reinforces xenophobic and exclusionary attitudes within mainland discourse. Commercial Indian cinema, functioning as a cultural apparatus of the dominant elite, reflects a form of nationalism that privileges the interests of the center while marginalizing peripheral voices. Within this framework, the people of the Northeast continue to be positioned as outsiders in their own nation, excluded from the cinematic imagination that claims to speak for India as a whole.

The "Othering" of the Northeast

Violence is a pervasive element in postcolonial societies, though it does not always manifest through overt forms such as revolution or military intervention. As Frantz Fanon observes, colonialism leaves behind deep psychic and structural wounds that persist long after formal independence. This violence often takes latent and systemic forms such as structural, cultural, and ideological often operating through institutions, discourses, and representations rather than physical force (Galtung 171). It is reproduced through what Spivak terms "epistemic violence", that as "the silencing or misrepresentation of subaltern voices within dominant cultural narratives" (280). The intertwined politics of representation and mainstream commercial Indian Cinema exemplify such subtle operations of power. Joseph Nye defines *hard power* as "the ability to get others to act in ways contrary to their initial preferences and strategies," exercised through coercion, threats, or inducements, what he calls "sticks" and "carrots" (Nye 5). In contrast, *soft power* refers to the ability to shape desires and achieve goals through attraction rather than coercion, to get others to "want the outcomes that you want" (6). Mainstream Cinema in this sense functions as an instrument of postcolonial soft power, reflecting and reproducing political, social, and cultural hierarchies while also enacting symbolic and representational violence that naturalizes these structures.

Before colonialism, India existed within a complex network of ethnic, cultural, and religious boundaries. Following the partition of British India, various indigenous tribal groups such as the

Nagas and Assamese nationalist groups demanded self-sovereignty and autonomy (Srikanth 60). However, the newly established Indian state subsumed these regions into its national framework. Despite enduring centuries of British and European colonization, the postcolonial Indian state internalized colonial rhetoric rather than liberating itself from it (Chatterjee 21). Diverse Indigenous ethnic groups such as the Bodo, Angami, Zeme, and Chakma peoples were homogenized into a single, primitive, and objectified entity known as "the Northeast." This constructed identity casts the region in stark contrast to the modern, heterogeneous Indian "Self" (Hall 223). To define this "Self", an "Other" was fabricated through a pseudoscientific racial stratification, developed by European powers to justify imperial violence and colonization (Johnson 96). These racialized categories portray the ethnic groups of the Northeast as inherently tribal, anti-modern, and rebellious, positioning them in opposition to the modern, capitalist state and the supposedly civilized citizens of the Indian mainland.

This backdrop forms the narrative framework of *Dil Se...* (1998). The protagonist, Amarkant Varma, a program executive with All India Radio, is assigned to cover political and cultural developments in Assam during the celebrations of India's Fiftieth Independence Day. Within this politically charged milieu, he encounters Meghna, a member of an Assamese separatist movement, and becomes romantically drawn to her. Amarkant's profession anchored in the state's broadcasting apparatus symbolically represents the ideological reach of the Indian nation-state into its northeastern peripheries, an effort to disseminate a homogenized sense of national belonging. The film thus stages a dramatic encounter between the "center" and the "margin," between a figure of metropolitan authority and one of insurgent resistance, encapsulating the spatial and psychological fissures that continue to shape postcolonial India (Devadoss 380).

Amarkant's repeated comments on Meghna's "tiny eyes" and "flat nose," though seemingly benign or even affectionate, reveal a normalized discourse of racialized perception. These remarks expose how physical traits such as epicanthic folds, lighter skin, and smaller noses are mobilized as markers of ethnic otherness. In this context, *Dil Se...* transforms romantic attraction into a site of visual and ideological tension, where the North Indian gaze both exoticizes and marginalizes the Northeastern subject. The film's portrayal of bodily difference thus participates in a broader system of representational violence, where cultural and racial hierarchies are reproduced under the guise of admiration and desire.

Mani Shankar's *Tango Charlie* (2005), a war film set against the backdrop of insurgency and national defense, traces the experiences of soldiers from a Border Security Force regiment as they move through various conflict zones across India. The narrative opens in Manipur, where the soldiers confront a group of so-called "Bodo militants." The representation of these insurgents is deeply troubling: they are depicted as imitating the calls and movements of birds and animals to communicate among themselves. This characterization effectively animalizes them, collapsing the distinction between human and non-human forms of communication and symbolically stripping them of rationality, language, and culture. Such imagery reveals a deep-seated epistemic violence, wherein the subaltern is not merely silenced but rendered incomprehensible within dominant cultural narratives (Spivak 283).

The film's portrayal aligns with what Edward Said identifies as the logic of Orientalism, wherein the periphery is represented through the lens of exoticism, primitiveness, or threat, thereby reinforcing the moral and cultural superiority of the center (Said 3). In this context, the Indian Northeast becomes a cinematic "other space"; a frontier to be disciplined, domesticated, or romanticized by the national gaze. When the region does appear in popular Cinema, it is often confined to reductive binaries such as the idyllic and untouched landscape versus the site of perpetual insurgency. These limited portrayals erase the multiplicity of Northeastern identities and histories, reinscribing hierarchical distinctions between the "mainland self" and the "peripheral other." These portrayals, while partially reflective of reality, often reduce the region to a monolithic entity, ignoring its diversity and complexity.

These films reveal a deeper pattern in the way Northeast is imagined within the popular Indian cinema. Rather than isolated stereotypes they form part of a larger representational logic that keeps the region at a distance, often visible yet never fully understood. Films like *Dil Se…* and *Tango Charlie* rely on forms of looking that both acknowledge difference and contain it. The Northeast becomes a space that can be desired, feared, or romanticized, but rarely approached on its own terms. This tension echoes broader postcolonial dynamics where communities at the margins are spoken about far more often than they are allowed to speak for themselves. By framing Northeastern characters through tropes of exotic beauty or primitive menace, the films stabilize an unequal relationship between the national center and its imagined peripheries. These patterns of representation also point toward a larger crisis in the very distribution of belonging

within the Indian nation-state. When Northeastern characters appear only as insurgents and mysterious strangers, they are effectively denied the complexity and ordinariness that the mainland characters effortlessly receive. This mirrors real-world hierarchies, where certain regions are seen as central to the idea of India while others are treated as distant borderlands, important mainly in moments of conflict or spectacle. Such portrayals are often drawn from fragments of reality but they compress an entire set of diverse cultures and histories into narrow narrative roles, reinforcing the idea that the Northeast is somehow outside the shared cultural history of India.

Bridging the Gap: Towards Inclusive Representations

In the recent years growing visibility of Northeastern cinema in both national and international circuits marks an encouraging, albeit gradual, shift in Indian cinematic discourse. This emergence signifies a movement away from token peripheral representations towards more self-reflexive and authentic storytelling. Yet, bridging the chasm between self-representation and othering demands more than isolated recognition; it requires an ongoing dialogic process of inclusion. Mainstream Indian cinema must encourage collaboration between Northeastern filmmakers and mainstream industries to facilitate more authentic and inclusive storytelling. Collaboration between Northeastern artists and established film industries can foster nuanced representations that move beyond the reductive binaries of insurgency versus exoticism, thereby reframing the region not as a geographical periphery but as an integral site of Indian cultural production. A key step towards inclusivity lies in diversifying the narratives surrounding the Northeast. Historically, cinematic portrayals have oscillated between depictions of insurgency, political unrest, and picturesque landscapes, either dramatizing the region as a space of perpetual conflict or romanticizing it as a distant paradise. Both tendencies obscure the region's lived realities, complex histories, and cultural heterogeneity. Expanding cinematic storytelling to include narratives of aspiration, urban life, gendered experience, and inter-community relationships would not only challenge prevailing stereotypes but also celebrate the Northeast's multifaceted identity.

Shimit Amin's *Chak De! India* (2007) serves as a compelling example of how mainstream cinema attempts, albeit imperfectly, to negotiate diversity within the framework of national

identity. The film brings together women from various Indian states, ranging from Punjab and Haryana to Manipur and Mizoram on the Indian National Women's Hockey Team. Through this collective, *Chak De!* promotes a vision of national unity grounded in teamwork and shared purpose, suggesting that India's diversity can coexist within a singular national ethos. However, this celebration of unity is underpinned by a subtle assimilationist logic. The characters' regional, linguistic, and cultural particularities are gradually effaced as they learn to "play for India," symbolizing the subsumption of difference within a homogenizing national ideal. As Robert Young argues, such narratives often reaffirm the notion of a "default national identity against which otherness is defined and measured" (Young 173).

The inclusion of Northeastern actresses Masochon V. Zimik and Kimi Laldawla, representing Manipur and Mizoram respectively, lends authenticity to the film's depiction of alienation and belonging. A particularly striking scene captures the deep-seated marginalization faced by Northeastern individuals in mainland India: when the players from Manipur and Mizoram arrive at a government office, a clerk mockingly "welcomes" them to India. One of them retorts sharply, "Would you be happy being treated like a guest in your own country?" (*Chak De! India*). This seemingly incidental exchange reveals the persistent perception of Northeastern citizens as foreigners, a product of racialized and cultural othering that positions them as peripheral to the Indian nation. The irony of demanding loyalty to an imagined community that continues to exclude them underscores the asymmetrical power relations embedded in the national discourse of belonging.

Mainstream Indian Cinema's ongoing struggle to represent Northeastern identities with sensitivity is further exemplified in contrasting cases of casting. While *Chak De! India* takes a small but significant step towards authentic representation; the 2014 biopic *Mary Kom* exemplifies the industry's failure to move beyond surface-level inclusion. The casting of Priyanka Chopra Jonas, a North Indian actress as the Manipuri boxing champion Mary Kom, and the use of prosthetics to simulate Mongoloid features, exposes its discomfort with visibly distinct racial identities. Such practices not only perpetuate racial stereotypes but also reinscribe the Northeast as a site of difference that must be visually "translated" for mainstream consumption. The attempt to approximate Northeastern physiognomy through artificial modification

underscores a deeper cultural anxiety and the reluctance to acknowledge the Northeast as fully Indian unless its difference can be cosmetically neutralized.

In contrast, Nicholas Kharkongor's *Axone* (2019) offers a more grounded and self-representational narrative that resists the tropes of exoticism and victimhood. Centered on a group of Northeastern and Nepali friends living in Delhi, the film foregrounds the quotidian struggles of migrants negotiating prejudice, alienation, and belonging in the metropolitan center. Its inclusion of actors from Northeastern and Nepali communities, as well as the use of indigenous languages such as Khasi and Meitei, affirms the film's commitment to authenticity. Unlike mainstream Indian Cinema productions, *Axone* does not render difference as spectacle but as lived experience by depicting discrimination, resilience, and solidarity with quiet realism. The film's humor and intimacy humanize its characters, challenging the racial and cultural stereotypes that have long plagued cinematic portrayals of the region.

Similarly, Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury's *Pink* (2016) addresses the issue of cultural bias through the character of Andrea Tariang, whose origins in Shillong become a focal point of prejudice during the courtroom proceedings. Though *Pink* primarily engages with questions of gender and consent, the film subtly exposes the intersecting axes of discrimination faced by women from the Northeast. In a powerful courtroom scene, lawyer Deepak Sehgal refutes two dominant myths: first, that the Northeast is a culturally homogenous region, and second, that its women's relative social freedom equates to moral laxity. By confronting these assumptions, *Pink* extends the discourse of inclusion beyond gender to encompass cultural identity and belonging.

These films reveal both the steps forward and the enduring gaps in Indian cinema's engagement with Northeast India. The unevenness in representation is not accidental rather it mirrors the larger imbalance of cultural power that shapes the country's media landscape. The issue is not simply whether Northeastern characters appear on screen, but who has the authority to tell their stories and from what standpoint. Many postcolonial media scholars remind us that representation is never just about being visible; it is also about who controls the narrative and how experiences are interpreted. When mainstream film industries continue to filter Northeastern realities through nationalistic frameworks, they reproduce a cultural hierarchy in which the periphery must be made legible to the center in order to be recognized as part of the nation. In

this process, cinema becomes a tool for maintaining a stable idea of national identity by regulating which voices, and stories can enter the mainstream without unsettling its norms. Challenging this imbalance requires more than expanding the types of stories being told; it calls for shifting narrative power so that Northeastern filmmakers and communities can shape the cinematic imagination from within, rather than being spoken for from afar.

The "Self" in Regional Cinema

While mainstream Indian cinema has historically marginalized Northeast India through limited and stereotypical portrayals, regional filmmakers from the area have increasingly turned to cinema as a means of self-articulation and cultural reclamation. These filmmakers resist the reductive binaries of center and periphery by using the screen as a space to narrate their histories, articulate their identities, and contest the frameworks of representation. In doing so, they redefine the relationship between image and identity, positioning cinema as a mode of cultural resistance as well as a repository of lived experience. The regional film industries of Assam, Manipur, and Meghalaya have emerged as crucial sites of this cinematic self-expression. Rather than replicating the aesthetic and thematic patterns of mainstream Cinema, these regional cinemas cultivate their own visual languages that reflect local sensibilities, ecological relationships, and social structures. They not only preserve indigenous storytelling traditions but also engage with contemporary political realities such as militarization, ethnic conflict, displacement, and globalization. Through such engagements, these films challenge the homogenizing tendencies of national cinema and assert a pluralistic vision of Indian identity.

In Manipur, independent filmmakers like Haobam Paban Kumar and Aribam Syam Sharma have played a pivotal role in shaping a distinctly Manipuri cinematic voice. Kumar's *Lady of the Lake* (2016) is a meditative and visually arresting film that explores the fragile interdependence between humans and their environment. Set on Loktak Lake, the film uses the story of a displaced fisherman and his wife to illuminate broader issues of ecological degradation, state control, and existential uncertainty. Kumar's minimalist approach and use of non-professional actors root the narrative in realism, allowing the landscape itself to become a character that embodies both loss and resilience. His work moves beyond political reportage to evoke a poetic and humanistic understanding of Manipuri life under duress.

Similarly, Aribam Syam Sharma's *Ishanou* (1990), a landmark of Manipuri cinema, provides an intimate portrayal of the maibi (priestess) tradition, an essential part of the state's spiritual and cultural heritage. By centering the experiences of a woman chosen by the divine, Sharma captures the intersection of faith, gender, and social belonging in Manipuri culture. *Ishanou* resists exoticization by rendering the sacred within the context of everyday life, emphasizing continuity rather than spectacle. The film's global recognition (screened at the Cannes Film Festival and hailed as one of the greatest Indian films ever made) underscores how local narratives, when told authentically, can transcend geographic and cultural boundaries. Together, these Manipuri filmmakers offer counter-narratives to the dominant cinematic imagination of the Northeast as merely insurgent or peripheral, highlighting instead its spiritual, ecological, and human complexities.

In Meghalaya, Wanphrang Diengdoh has emerged as a significant voice articulating Khasi identity through a modern cinematic lens. His film *Lorni - The Flaneur* (2019) fuses noir aesthetics with social commentary to reflect on urban alienation and cultural loss in Shillong. Through the journey of a Khasi detective navigating the tensions between tradition and modernity, Diengdoh explores themes of identity, dislocation, and the commodification of indigenous culture. His work is deeply self-reflexive, confronting the viewer with the question of what it means to belong in a rapidly globalizing world. By situating Khasi identity within both local and global contexts, Diengdoh resists the narrative erasure of indigenous histories and challenges the homogenization that mainstream Indian cinema often perpetuates.

In Assam, Rima Das has become an emblem of contemporary regional cinema's global reach. Her film *Village Rockstars* (2017), an intimate coming-of-age story about a young girl's dream of owning a guitar, captures the beauty and hardship of rural life in Assam with remarkable authenticity. Shot with a handheld camera and non-professional actors, Das's filmmaking style embodies the ethos of independence and sincerity. The film's international acclaim including its selection as India's official entry for the Academy Awards demonstrates how deeply personal, locally grounded stories can achieve universal resonance. Das's subsequent works, such as *Bulbul Can Sing* (2018), continue this exploration of childhood, gender, and social conformity, presenting the Assamese village not as a site of backwardness but as a living, evolving cultural landscape.

Collectively, the works of these filmmakers express what can be understood as a form of cinematic selfhood, a way for marginalized communities to assert themselves both within and against dominant cultural narratives. By telling their own stories in their own languages, they reclaim the right to represent themselves in an industry that has too often spoken "about" them rather than "with" them. Their films center the politics of visibility and voice, reminding us that cinema is not just a passive reflection of society but an active force in shaping how people think and feel. In this way, regional cinemas serve a dual purpose: they challenge the hegemonic frameworks of mainstream cinema and simultaneously affirm cultural continuity, identity, and self-determination. They present the Northeast not as a scenic addition to the national imagination but as a vibrant space of creative ideas. By rooting their narratives in local realities while still speaking to universal emotions, these filmmakers have opened a new direction for Indian cinema that values plurality over stereotype. The expanding landscape of Northeastern cinema also pushes us to rethink the frameworks through which Indian film scholarship has traditionally approached questions of regionality and authorship. These films disrupt the usual center-periphery model by showing that the margins are not simply shaped by the nation but actively shape the nation in return. By asserting their own narrative authority, Northeastern filmmakers unsettle old hierarchies of representation and urge us to imagine national cinema as a dynamic, contested space enriched by multiple, equally important voices. Through their collective efforts, the filmmakers of Northeast India are not merely producing films but are crafting cultural interventions that demand recognition within the broader framework of national identity. In doing so, they remind us that the story of Indian cinema is incomplete without the voices from its margins, voices that continue to redefine what it means to belong, to represent, and to imagine through the lens of the cinematic self.

Conclusion

India is a socio-politically and discursively constructed nation, defined not by a singular homogeneous identity but by an extraordinary diversity of cultures, languages, and communities. This multiplicity, often celebrated under the national motto of "Unity in Diversity," also exposes a fundamental paradox: how can a nation built on heterogeneity sustain practices of marginalization, racial stratification, and cultural homogenization, particularly toward the Northeastern region and its people? The answer lies in recognizing how socio-political

hierarchies and ideological structures are reproduced within the cultural domain, especially through the representational practices of Indian cinema.

Mainstream Indian cinema has historically mirrored broader societal attitudes toward the Northeast, often positioning it as peripheral to the national narrative. The cinematic gaze has frequently contributed to the "othering" of the region, depicting its people through exoticized, infantilized, or racially marked lenses. Such portrayals reinforce stereotypes and sustain a cultural distance between the so-called mainland and the Northeastern frontier, perpetuating an imagination of the nation that privileges centrality and sameness over difference. Yet this narrative of exclusion is not monolithic. Over the past few decades, regional and independent filmmakers from the Northeast have begun reclaiming cinema as a space of resistance and self-articulation. Through their work, they challenge dominant representations, foreground local histories, and articulate identities that are self-defined rather than externally imposed.

The emergence of a vibrant regional cinematic tradition has thus become instrumental in countering the epistemic violence of mainstream depictions. Films such as *Ishanou* (Aribam Syam Sharma, 1990), *Village Rockstars* (Rima Das, 2017), *Axone* (Nicholas Kharkongor, 2019), and *Lorni- The Flaneur* (Wanphrang K. Diengdoh, 2019) offer nuanced portrayals of Northeastern life, addressing its cultural dynamism, social struggles, and political complexities. These films not only dismantle reductive stereotypes but also reveal the richness of lived experience that has long been excluded from dominant cinematic narratives. They affirm that the Northeast is not a monolithic entity but a constellation of distinct yet interconnected identities, each contributing to the plural fabric of the Indian nation.

Cinema, as a cultural medium, wields immense power as it can reinforce exclusionary ideologies or become an instrument of empathy and transformation. The visual representation of the Northeast carries the potential either to perpetuate alienation or to foster inclusion and mutual recognition. By embracing the multiplicity of Northeastern identities and amplifying indigenous voices, Indian cinema can move toward a more equitable and holistic representation of the nation. In doing so, it may bridge the enduring divide between the "self" and the "other", allowing cinema to function not merely as entertainment but as an ethical and political space of engagement. Through such a reimagining, film becomes a site of dialogue and reconciliation, an

art form capable of envisioning a more inclusive national consciousness that acknowledges and celebrates India's vast plurality.

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