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Reimagining Northeast Indian Identity In The Age Of Bollywood And Globalization

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Abstract: This essay investigates the evolving reimagination of Northeast Indian identity within the intersecting frameworks of Bollywood's cultural dominance and the far-reaching dynamics of globalization. It critically engages with the ongoing tension between visibility and marginalization, stereotype and self-representation, while tracing the efforts of filmmakers, actors, and cultural practitioners from the region to assert their narratives within India's cinematic mainstream. By analyzing both dominant portrayals and emerging counter-narratives, the study underscores the persistent struggle for cultural recognition, dignity, and meaningful inclusion—at a time when questions of representation are deeply political and profoundly influential.

Index Terms – Northeast, Identity, Globalization, Bollywood, Marginalization, Visibility

Introduction

The identity of Northeast India when viewed through the vast and cultural tapestry of India has long occupied a marginal position. The region is characterised by the existence of eight diverse states with hill terrains, distinct ethnicities, languages, and traditions reverberating both the geographical and cultural distance from mainland India. With the acceleration of globalization and the pervasive influence of popular culture, particularly Bollywood, the cultural identity of Northeast India is undergoing a complex reconfiguration. In this shifting landscape, the portrayal of the Northeast Indian identity as a peripheral frontier or a space of conflict in the Bollywood movies has been interrogated by the alternative narratives emerging through independent cinema, and digital platforms and revolving around more nuanced representations of the region.

Objectives and Methodology

This essay explores how Northeast Indian identity is being reimagined in the dual contexts of Bollywood's cultural hegemony and the expansive forces of globalization. It examines the tension between visibility and marginality, stereotype and self-representation, and the evolving efforts of filmmakers, actors, and cultural producers from the region to assert their voice within India's cinematic imagination. By interrogating both mainstream portrayals and emerging counter-narratives, the study aims to highlight the ongoing struggle for cultural recognition, dignity, and inclusion in an era where representation has never been more political—or more powerful. This article is grounded in qualitative research methodology and is based on an extensive review of academic journals, scholarly books, and official government websites. These sources were consulted to ensure a comprehensive and context-rich understanding of the subject matter.

Conceptualizing the Northeast Identity

Northeast India nestled along the northeastern borders of the country occupies only an area of over 255,088 km², which is about 7.7% of the total geographical area of India. The region encompasses the Indian states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. It shares international borders with China in the north, with Myanmar in the east, with Bangladesh in the south-west and with Bhutan in the north-west. The region is located at a strategic confluence between South, Southeast and East Asia. The proximity with the international borders, makes the region very sensitive and vulnerable both from the strategic and geo-political point of considerations. Despite having the enormous significance in shaping both the domestic and foreign policies of the country, geographically, the entire region is connected with the latter by just a narrow 22 km land corridor in Siliguri, North Bengal, referred to as the 'Chicken's Neck'ⁱ (also known as the 'Siliguri corridor'). The peripheral location of the Northeast in context of the mainland India and its proximity to the borderlands of East and Southeast Asia, leads to the creation of a perception that the region is a culturally homogeneous unit inhabited by the mongoloid races sharing ethno-cultural commonalities. However, contrary to this popular opinion, the region is diverse in almost every aspect; it is inhabited by an assortment of tribal societies differing from each other in terms of ethnicity, language, culture, religion, social organisation, economic pursuits, productive relations and participation in political processes. The region represents itself as a melting pot where different people from East and Southeast Asia have migrated into at various points of history. This confluence of varied cultures, customs, traditions, practises, language and above all social values is also responsible in creating conflicting interests between the different communities as manifested in severe intra-regional differences in social issues and ethno-political aspirations, ethnic unrests, insurgency, immigration, drug trafficking, communication gap, etc. In the book *History of the Government with the Hill Tribes of the North-East Frontier of Bengal* in 1884, Alexander Mackenzie for the first time used the term "Northeast Frontier" to identify Assam, including the adjoining hill areas and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura (Haokip 2011, 111). During the British Rule, the term initially denoted a geographical area but then gradually throughout the colonial period, the Britishers preferred to identify Assam as the as the "Northeastern Frontier of Bengal" (Haokip 2011, 112). The region had a great geopolitical significance because of the occupation of the plains of Assam from 1817 to 1826 and Manipur from 1819 to 1826 by the erstwhile Kingdom of Ahom (Burmese). The British rulers felt the immediate necessity of protecting and defending of the region militarily. Eventually the British defeated the Burmese rulers and the latter was forced to surrender their suzerainty over Assam and Manipur. The British annexation of these territories profoundly impacted both the political and economic trajectory of the region. What is referred today as the Northeast is the result of extreme political calculations caused by the Partition of India in 1947 and earlier separation of Burma from the Indian sub-continent in 1937. These course of events led to the geographical isolation of the region by severing its vital inland water, road, and railway links that once ran through the territory of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). The loss of access to the Chittagong port further compounded the region's disconnection. Journalist and policy analyst B.G. Verghese described this situation as highly detrimental to the region's economic and political well-being, resulting in a significant economic setback and long-term developmental challenges (Haokip 2011, 113).

At the time of India's Independence, the term "Northeast" primarily referred to Assam and the princely states of Manipur and Tripura. In response to the diverse ethnic, cultural, and political aspirations for self-governance among tribal communities, the Indian government initiated a process of reorganizing the region by carving out new states from Assam. The underlying rationale was that democratic representation within the framework of parliamentary democracy would help address these groups' grievances and integrate them into the national political system. The first major step in this direction was the creation of the state of Nagaland in 1963, through the amalgamation of the Naga Hills district of Assam and the Tuensang Frontier Division of the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA), now Arunachal Pradesh (Haokip 2011, 114). The Assam Reorganisation (Meghalaya) Act of 1969 granted Meghalaya the status of a semi-autonomous state, which came into effect on April 2, 1970 (Haokip 2011, 115). Meghalaya was subsequently granted full statehood on January 21, 1972, through the North Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act of 1971ⁱⁱ. In July 1971, the Government of India proposed converting the Mizo Hills into a Union Territory. The insurgent group Mizo National Front (MNF) agreed to this arrangement on the condition that it would later be granted statehood (Haokip 2011, 114). Consequently, Mizoram became a Union Territory on January 21, 1972, and later attained full statehood on February 20, 1987. Although the people of the NEFA (present-day Arunachal Pradesh) had not actively demanded statehood, but the Indian government renamed it as Arunachal Pradesh and conferred statehood in 1987 because of its strategic location and immense geo-political significance in context of Sino-India bilateral relations, which suffered severe shocks after the 1962 war. The political formalization of the concept of the 'Northeast' was marked by the establishment of the North Eastern Council (NEC) in 1971. Since its inception, the NEC has functioned as a regional planning body, serving as the nodal agency for the

socio-economic development of the northeastern states. Further institutional support was provided through the creation of the Department of Development of the North Eastern Region (DONER) in 2001, which was upgraded to a full-fledged Ministry (MDONER) in May 2004. The region also came under the administrative purview of the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. The diversity, obscurity and the varied problems associated with it makes the Northeast a heterogeneous complex region within the Indian Union. In an attempt to address the Northeast as a single entity, the scholars and policymakers tend to club together all the eight states of the Northeast into a single basket, ignoring the varied cultural mosaic and sub-national aspirations of the various ethnic groups. This clubbing together further leads to the stereotyping of the very concept of the Northeast identity. The question whether Northeast should be addressed as a single identity or a conglomeration of myriad identities have been best debated by the scholars belonging to four different contending paradigms- Sceptics, Apologists, Peripheralists and Irredentists (Ngaihte & Hanghal 2017, 39). The Sceptics refuse to accept the Northeast as a collective identity (Ngaihte & Hanghal 2017, 40). This denial is rooted in the fundamental argument that given the diverse culture along with the existence of myriads of ethnic tribal communities disqualify the region from being dubbed as a homogenous entity existing at the periphery of India. They argue that the generalized treatment of the social realities of the region by ignoring the diversity and differences existing in the Northeast has often resulted into gross injustice to the people staying there, who are far from being homogenous in terms of ethnic, cultural and political aspects. States like Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland are dominated by different tribal communities, whereas the non-tribals are the majority in Assam, Manipur and Tripura. The majority of the tribals are Christian, while the non-tribals are mostly Hindu or Muslim. The ethnic diversity of the Northeast, as posited by the Sceptics, is reflected in the assertions of identities by communities, fragile ethnic relations, violent ethnic clashes, interstate border disputes and above all in the perilous practise of ethnic/identity-based politics. In contrast, the Apologists advocate for the recognition of the Northeast as a singular, unified entity. Their argument rests on the growing acceptance of a collective Northeastern identity by both mainland India and mainstream political and media narratives (Ngaihte & Hanghal 2017, 41). The Apologists acknowledge that the sense of 'alienation' or being treated as the 'other', compounded by discriminatory attitudes and mistreatments in professional spaces as well as during times of interactions with the law-and-order enforcement institutions of the state is most acutely experienced by the people of the Northeast in Indian metropolitan areas (Ngaihte & Hanghal 2017, 42). The racism faced by people from the Northeast is often rooted in their distinct physical appearance—such as differences in skin tone, facial features, and language—which marks them as visibly different and fuels prejudice and exclusion. Nevertheless, the Apologists argue, that such perceptions have paradoxically fostered a sense of solidarity and have also served as a catalyst for collective mobilization among the people of the region.

The sceptics' stand on 'diversity' find its reverberation among the Peripheralists' voices within the Northeast (Ngaihte & Hanghal 2017, 44). The Peripheralists who represent the voices of the minority communities of the region, interpret the concept of a collective Northeast entity as a real threat to their myriad identities. The Peripheralists strongly condemn such approach as an agenda or a policy adopted and pursued by the locally dominant communities of the region, and also an attempt to ignore the importance of their existence in the socio-political milieu. The Irredentists and Ethno-nationalists of the region aspiring for their ethnic homeland have also presented their views in the similar line of arguments. Northeast India has been witnessing several ethno-nationalist movements (starting with the Naga armed struggle for independence from India in 1953, followed by the Mizo movement for self-determination in 1966 and the recent Kuki-Meitei clash in Manipur) since its inception in the post-independence India. Ethno-political aspirations are not confined to the larger communities or nationalities – many smaller communities of the region are also asserting and articulating their rights, interests and identities. In such a scenario, the debate on a collective North-East has been perceived by the Ethno-nationalists as an attempt to dilute their fundamental objective of 'autonomy or homeland' demand. While the debate over the identity of the Northeast is likely to continue, it is important to note that since the 1990s—marked by globalization, liberalization, and the adoption of the New Economic Policy—the Government of India has increasingly positioned Northeast India as both a development-oriented economic zone and a strategic identity corridor, central to the Look East and now Act East Policy, and envisioned as India's gateway to Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific region. While Northeast India was positioned at the core of the Look East Policy, the Bollywood—despite emerging as a dominant soft power force in the era of globalization—failed to move beyond its stereotypical portrayal of the region.

Bollywood as a Soft Powerⁱⁱⁱ Giant in the age of Globalization

According to Featherstone, the emergence of a third culture or a global culture that transcends national boundaries is one of the dominant trends of the contemporary globalization discourse (Mahapatra 2012). This concept of third or global culture is often associated with the phenomenon of Macdonaldization or Coco-Cola Culture marked by the global spread of consumer culture widely practised in the US and the West (Mahapatra 2012). Jan Nederveen Pieterse outlines three competing models of cultural change under globalization- first, the homogenization paradigm, which sees globalization as the leading force behind cultural standardization or creating a monolithic culture across the globe; the second view promotes the cultural clash paradigm, and reflects growing resistance among local cultures threatened by global market forces, resulting in assertive identity politics; the third view, advocates the hybridization or glocalization paradigm, focusing on cultural mixing, producing hybrid forms and heterogeneity rather than uniformity (Mahapatra 2012). Spurred by globalization, India's economic liberalization in the 1990s, resulted into significant transformations across its social and cultural landscapes. One of the major transformations witnessed has been the emergence of Bollywood as both a cultural touchstone and a soft power tool, connecting India with the rest of the world (Dua 2024). Bollywood is no longer a mere purveyor of entertainment rather it can be considered as key contributor to India's economy. It has been actively operating on the principle of cultural hybridization or glocalization. Over a century, the appeal of Bollywood has reflected, shaped, and redefined Indian society. While films like *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* and *Hum Saath Saath Hain* mirror the traditional values, familial bonds, and cultural milestones of India, movies such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Kal Ho Naa Ho*, and *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* seamlessly portrayed the flexibility and adaptability of the Indian cultural values in context of global sensibilities (Yennamanini 2023). Beyond entertainment, Bollywood films have addressed many diverse social realities, from mental health and family dysfunction to LGBTQ+ rights, urban alienation, brain drain and cultural reconciliation. Additionally, post 9/11 narratives like *My Name is Khan*, *New York*, presented a sensitive and nuanced understanding of much contested concepts like Islamophobia and minority experiences (Yennamanini 2023). Others like *Gadar* and *Bajrangi Bhaijaan* portrayed messages of Indo-Pak unity, using emotionally charged stories to challenge communal divisions. Bollywood films have extended its cultural footprints across South Asia in countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka not only by fostering regional solidarity, nostalgia, and a shared cultural experience but also by opening its doors to artists from neighbouring countries, promoting collaboration and mutual respect (Yennamanini 2023). Studies have revealed that even in conflict ridden areas like, in Afghanistan, Iraq, and parts of Africa, Bollywood films offer psychological refuge and emotional catharsis to the local residents (Yennamanini 2023). While contemporary Bollywood increasingly embraces inclusive, content-driven narratives that highlight India's vast linguistic and cultural diversity, a critical question arises: how effectively does it accommodate and represent Northeast India? Despite greater visibility for many regions, Northeast India continues to remain largely peripheral in mainstream cinematic narratives, raising concerns about cultural inclusivity and equitable representation within the Indian film industry.

“Otherization” of the Northeast in Bollywood Films

In the post-Independence era, the government of India policy towards the Northeast was primarily dominated by the perception of preserving the pristine purity and archaic indigenous cultures of the region. The inclusion of the tribal (hilly) areas in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India further asserted the tribal identity as a marker of difference contributing to the formation of a distinct political and cultural identity in the region. This policy orientation aligned with the mainstream narratives that often viewed these cultures as backward and incompatible with the dominant socio-cultural and economic rhetorics of mainland India. This denial was further compounded by a persistent portrayal of the region through reductive and stereotypical categories—“backward,” “violent,” “underdeveloped”—in national media and cinema, resulting in a profound sense of cultural distance and otherization between the Northeast and mainland India (Chaudhuri 2022). Mainstream Indian media and cinema, particularly Bollywood, have long practised this binary, by reducing the Northeast to merely a scenic backdrop or a symbol of otherness - an area which is remote and mysterious or donning aesthetic embellishments like a traditional mekhala-chador worn by the protagonist or may be a Bihu dance sequence—without meaningful engagement with the region or its people. Mani Ratnam's *Dil Se* (1998), marked departure from stereotype and portrayed the Northeast against the backdrop of growing insurgencies and violence in the region. Nevertheless, the film constructed a clear dichotomy between a volatile, shadowy Northeast and a vibrant, stable mainland, exemplified by the contrast between Meghna (the suicide bomber from the Northeast and the love interest of Amar, the honest journalist and an army officer's son from Delhi) and Preeti (Amar's cheerful fiancée from Delhi). This militarised and outsider view continues in *Tango Charlie* (2005) as well, which was allegedly banned in Assam for overlooking the historical struggle of the Bodo people for statehood—beginning as early as the 1930s and culminating in the creation of the Bodoland

Territorial Council in 2003 under the Sixth Schedule (Datta Ray 2016). The cinematic portrayal of the Northeast by Bollywood films reinforced a marginalised existence of the region manifested in the cultural, emotional and geographical gap with mainland India. Although, *Chak De! India* (2007) attempted to address the issue of racialism and portray diversity in women's hockey, yet fell into traps of tokenism and stereotyping by introducing two North-Eastern players with racist comments and leering gazes, in a way the players were projected as victims of objectification and otherization (Basu 2019). Similarly, in the case of *Mary Kom* (2014), Bollywood chose not to cast a Northeastern actor in the lead role, opting instead for Priyanka Chopra Jonas—believing her star power would attract a larger audience. This decision was widely perceived as a direct affront to actors from the region, reinforcing the industry's disregard for authentic representation. However, recent years have seen a subtle shift, as regional filmmakers like Rima Das and Bhaskar Hazarika have gained attention through global film festivals. During the pandemic, streaming platforms briefly turned to Northeast stories. Acclaimed films like *Village Rockstars* (2017), *Bulbul Can Sing* (2018), *Axone* (2019), and *Aamis* (2019) found audiences on platforms like Netflix and SonyLIV. Although this momentum soon lost its pace in the post-pandemic period, in the last five years films like *Anek* (2022), *Bhediya* (2023), and *Jawan* have made efforts toward inclusivity and sustained representation of the Northeast in Indian cinema.

Conclusion

The attempt to reimagine the Northeast Indian identity in the age of Bollywood and globalization is both a cultural conjecture and a political act. For decades, the region has been caught between invisibility and misrepresentation despite its vibrant cultural landscape. In the era of globalization and democratization, inclusivity and equity call for celebrating the marginalized and oppressed voices. The rise of independent regional cinema, digital platforms, and global film festivals has enabled filmmakers, actors, and storytellers from the Northeast to reclaim their narratives and challenge long-standing stereotypes. As we move further into an era of digital interconnectedness and cultural flux, the question is no longer just how the Northeast is represented in the broader spectrum of Indian cinema, rather it is necessary to introspect who gets the chance to represent it. The future of Northeast Indian identity in cinema lies in this shift: **from being a story to be narrated to being the creator of its own stories**. In that transition lies the promise of a more inclusive, pluralistic, and truly representative Indian cultural landscape.

NOTES

ⁱ **Chicken Neck**- Often referred to as the "Chicken's Neck", the Siliguri Corridor is a narrow tract of land, approximately 20–22 kilometers wide, situated in the state of West Bengal. This corridor serves as the only land link between mainland India and its eight northeastern states, rendering it one of the most strategically sensitive areas in South Asia. From a geopolitical and strategic standpoint, the corridor's vulnerability stems from its proximity to four countries—Nepal and Bhutan to the north, Bangladesh to the south, and China-occupied Tibet to the northeast. In the event of a conflict or military escalation, particularly with China, this thin strip could be severed, potentially isolating the Northeast and disrupting critical supply chains. In the context of India's Look East Policy (1991) and the more proactive Act East Policy (2014), the Siliguri Corridor functions as a gateway for economic integration with Southeast Asia. Furthermore, as part of India's evolving Indo-Pacific strategy, securing and developing the Siliguri Corridor is essential for maintaining territorial integrity, ensuring energy and trade security, and projecting influence in the Bay of Bengal and beyond.

ⁱⁱ **North Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act of 1971**- The North Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act of 1971 laid the foundation for the modern federal structure of Northeast India and was a crucial step in India's efforts to integrate the region more closely into the Union. It also acknowledged the **ethnic diversity and unique socio-political fabric** of the Northeast, setting the stage for further administrative reforms and autonomy movements in the decades to follow.

ⁱⁱⁱ **Soft Power**- It is the ability of a country to influence others through attraction rather than coercion or force. Coined by Joseph Nye, it draws on elements like culture, political values, and foreign policy to shape international preferences. Unlike hard power, which uses military or economic means, soft power relies on appeal, credibility, and shared values to build goodwill and strengthen diplomatic relationships.

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