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Exploring the Role of Tribal Belief Systems and Folklore stories in Indian Cinema

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Abstract:

Indian cinema: an age-old storytelling medium that usually reflects the excess of cultural, social, and spiritual diversities of the country. Among various inspirations for creativity, the bind of tribal belief systems and folklore holds a very special and neglected place. This study attempts to explore how Indian filmmakers shaped their films with indigenous myths, customs, and stories, and how such representations invest in larger cultural debates. The paper joins a series of picturing's of how the tribal worldviews, founded upon nature, spirit, ritual, and oral tradition, get change for the screen through a few films selected from mainstream and regional cinema sectors. It also looks into the ways folklore may be upheld or modified by film in association with those whose cultures are on the edge of extinction; additionally, film may corrupt or alternately commercialise such folklore through stereotyping. The research also entered into how folklore-attributed films help forge identities, question existing cultural hierarchies, and promote appreciation of the diverse heritage of India. Finally, the study stresses that besides being artistic resources, tribal stories are, for the Indian filmmakers and audiences, a sort of vital cultural archive that still exists and continues to survive in India itself.

Keywords: Tribal Community, Folklore stories, Environmental ethics, Cultural Sustainability, Sacred Groves

Introduction:

The folklore and traditions of India's indigenous peoples convey belief systems that conceptualize nature as a sacred, interconnected being rather than a resource meant for exploitation. These belief systems provide critical approaches to environmental ethics. India has various ecological issues such as deforestation, river pollution, and climate-change related disasters, and these indigenous worldviews contest the pragmatic, anthropocentric theories that often dominate environmental discussions. Mythology, religious and folkloric traditions have been woven into Indian cinema for generations, renowned for regional variety, richness, and diversity of narration. Tribal lore and folklore are just a few of the numerous cultural threads which shape storytelling in film; they have offered filmmakers both artistic vision and ethical issues.

Tribal communities possess special spirituality rituals, religions, and practices which are infused into everyday existence. These are typically encountered in remote forests, hills, and seashores. These traditions identify human life with forests, rivers, animals, and the earth itself, thus putting them far beyond religious rituals. This paper explores how Indian cinema has engaged with tribal belief systems and folklore through a case study approach. It discusses how certain films not only incorporate rituals like *Bhoota Kola*, *Yakshagana*, and *spirit worship*, but also how such practices are integral to community identity and survival.

The representation of tribal communities, their belief systems, and folklore in Indian cinema requires a study of the evolution of cinema as an art form alongside the socio-political context surrounding tribal cultures. Tribal communities, also known as Adivasis in India, are among the original inhabitants of the subcontinent. Their cultures, languages, rituals, mythologies, and spiritual practices have been influenced by centuries of engagement with forests, rivers, wildlife, and natural events. For generations, their way of life revolved around community living, oral traditions, and an intimate connection with nature, which is reflected in their folklore and religious activities.

Historical Context:

Before cinema, storytelling, songs, dances, rituals and spiritual ceremonies were some of the ways in which tribal communities could pass on their ways. Folklore served as a repository for cultural ideals, morals and practical knowledge from generation to the next generation. Not only their history, theory, in jargon familial, but also their creation myths, ancestral ghost stories and ritual practices connected with agriculture, the seasons and healing came to form part of the collective consciousness. These stories were not just tools for religion or entertainment, but also binding links among people, education systems and psychological stabilizers.

Indian cinema is the one most powerful medium to spread the information in the society. Taking the aid of cinema tribal community can easily share the condition about their communities. Folklore stories are also one of the vital components of tribal community.

From the late 20th century and onward there has been an increasing shift to region-based narratives in films. Filmmakers began to engage with indigenous and tribal cultures much more due to the rise in awareness about indigenous rights and the growth of regional cinema. Social injustices, land dispossession, environmental exploitation, and the sustaining of tribal culture became the center of attention in parallel cinema and indie films. An example of this is the films *Ankur* (1974) and *Mrigaya* (1976) which examine the socio-economic exploitation, discrimination based on caste, and tribal identities. Skipping the foreign representations, these films highlighted the socio-cultural issues of the under privileged.

In recent times, movies like *Kantara* and *Jai Bhim* have lifted up tribal belief systems not as marginal but as central to the story. Healing rites and rituals like the *Bhoota Kola* are treated with depth and understanding, and tribal characters are fully realized as sentient beings with emotions, agency, and conflict. The use of local languages, traditional attire, and authentic representations of religious practices is a significant development in acknowledging the realities of tribal life.

Related Bollywood movies:

Mrigayaa (1976): *Mrigayaa* (1976), directed by Mrinal Sen, is a powerful socio-political drama set in colonial India. It tells the story of Ghinua, a tribal hunter played by debutant Mithun Chakraborty. His simple life changes dramatically due to British

rule and feudal oppression. Though admired for his hunting skills, Ghinua is culturally misunderstood. After experiencing a personal tragedy, he takes justice into his own hands, only to face betrayal from the very system that once applauded him. Rich in symbolism, the film examines themes of exploitation, colonial hypocrisy, and tribal innocence. With impressive performances and captivating cinematography, Mrigayaa remains a key film in Indian parallel cinema. The story was written by Mohit Chattopadhyay and Arun Kaul.

Raavan (2010): Ravan movie was directed by Mani Ratnam in the year 2010. The story of the film “Raavan” revolves around a police officer named Dev Pratap Sharma, whose wife, Ragini, is kidnapped by a rebel named Bira Munda. Bira, considered a hero by the locals, abducted Ragini to avenge the death of his sister, Jamunia. Jamunia died after being beaten and tortured by the police while they were trying to locate Bira. Dev searches for Bira in the forest to rescue his wife. Meanwhile, Ragini learns about Bira’s life and struggles and develops sympathy for him. She discovers that Dev was the one who tortured Jamunia. The story takes a decisive turn when Dev kills his brother Hariya, making it clear that his primary goal is not to save Ragini but to eliminate Bira. The film ends with a final battle between Dev and Bira on an old bridge. In the ensuing fight, Beera is shot multiple times, and he smiles even as he dies, while Ragini is distraught. The film blurs the traditional lines between good and evil, depicting how power and vengeance can lead people astray.

Oonga (2013): “Onga” (2013), directed by Devashish Makhija, was highly praised by critics and film festivals for its sensitive storytelling. The film beautifully depicts the lives and struggles of tribal communities in India, particularly through the innocent eyes of a child. The film’s greatest strength is its cinematography, which realistically depicts the jungle and tribal life. Critics hailed it as a thought-provoking and important film, offering an unbiased perspective on serious issues like Naxalism and corporate land acquisition. The performance of Raju Singh, who played the lead child actor, was also highly praised. “Onga” is not just a film, but a powerful social commentary that confronts audiences with a stark reality.

Jal (2013): Jal movie was directed by Girish Malik in the year 2013. Finding water in the Rann of Kachchh is a struggle, and ‘Jal’ vividly portrays this struggle. Director Girish Malik’s film tells the story of a young man, Bakka (Purab Kohli), who, due to his water disability, searches the villages for water. But when a European ornithologist (Sarika Hedel) demands water for flamingo chicks, human greed and hostility emerge. Tannishtha Chatterjee and Kirti Kulhari’s performances are impressive, unravelling the complex layers of love, hatred, and betrayal. The cinematography (Sunita Radia) captures the golden, cracked land of the Rann so beautifully that it feels like we’re there ourselves. The music (Sonu Nigam and Bikram Ghosh) is a blend of Indian and international sounds, adding depth to the emotions. However, the narrative sometimes drifts like the desert wind, and the fantasy elements feel superfluous. Nevertheless, the film delivers a powerful message on the water crisis – water is not only life, but also a mirror of human selfishness. The film was acclaimed at festivals, won a National Award, but struggled in the mainstream. If you liked films like “Pyaasi” or “Parched,” then “Jal” is a must-see. It’s a dry, yet profound experience.

Joram (2013): Devashish Makhija’s “Joram” is a gritty thriller that portrays the lives of marginalized tribal people with brutal truth. Manoj Bajpayee plays Dasaru, who flees Mumbai’s slums with his newborn daughter, Joram, for the jungles. His wife’s murder, his Maoist past, and the politics of destruction in the name of development all combine to create a story that stings like a stomach ache. The film

sharply examines the socio-political imbalance where exploitation of nature and its native inhabitants fall prey to human greed. Bajpayee's performance is heartbreaking, bringing to life the despair and anger. Tannishtha Chatterjee and Smita Tambe are effective in supporting roles, while Mohammed Zeeshan Ayyub brilliantly portrays the conflicted nature of the policeman. The cinematography brings to life the mysterious beauty of the jungles and the filth of the city, but the slow pace sometimes drags on the narrative. Nevertheless, "Joram" is an experience that lingers. It forces one to reflect on the injustices perpetrated in the name of development. If you enjoyed films like "Bhonsle" or "Newton," this masterpiece is a must-see. With a 95% rating on Rotten Tomatoes, this film is a voice of the marginalized.

Sherni (2021): Amit Masurkar's provoking drama "Sherni" (2021) skillfully addresses the conflict between nature and humanity. Vidya Balan, who plays forest officer Vidya Vincent, has to deal with T-12, a lioness, and its attacks in Madhya Pradesh's forests. The narrative explores the complicated issues of the environment, bureaucracy, and social inequality in addition to being a story about prey and predator. A woman in a patriarchal society and corrupt system is given life by Vidya Balan's complex and impactful performance. Neeraj Kabi and Vijay Raaz give strong supporting performances that highlight the close ties in tribal life and local politics. The background music enhances the mood while the cinematography conveys the wonder and beauty of the jungle. But the movie drags a little because of its slow pacing and a few unresolved plot points.

Jai Bhim (2021): Jai Bhim was the movie which was directed by T.J Gnanavel in the year 2021. An engaging and impressive courtroom drama inspired by real events, Suriya plays a brave advocate who is seeking to get justice for a tribal family. The film was praised for a believable story, solid dramatic acting (particularly from Lizomol Jose and Manikandan), and presentation of social injustice, while some reviews characterized the violence as too real and potentially stomach turning.

'Dhabari Kuruvi' (2023): The untold suffering of the Irula tribal community is beautifully portrayed in "Dhabari Kuruvi," an outstanding piece of Malayalam cinema directed by Priyanandan. With an all-star cast of tribal actors, it is the first feature film in Indian cinema history. In the Attappadi forests of Kerala, the narrative centres on an innocent tribal girl who is burdened by cultural norms and an unintended pregnancy. The mythical bird "Dhabari Kuruvi," whose father is unknown, is used as a symbol to shed light on her struggle. In rebellion of tribal culture and traditions, this girl rises from the ashes to claim control over her body and choices. The authenticity of the movie is its strongest point. The performances by the tribal actors avoid artificiality and are genuine and natural. The mysterious is brought to life by the cinematography.

Critically Analysis:

The way that tribal (Adivasi) communities are portrayed in Indian cinema, as demonstrated by films such as Jai Bhim (2021), Mrigayaa (1976), Raavan (2010), Oonga (2013), Jal (2014), Joram (2023), Sherni (2021), and Dhabari Kuruvi (2022), indicates a growing dedication to elevating minority voices while challenging structural injustices. Through a variety of genres, including courtroom dramas, socio-political allegories, eco-thrillers, and coming-of-age stories, these films tackle intersecting oppressions, including casteism, environmental exploitation, corporate takeovers of land, patriarchal norms, and colonial legacies.

Many a times folklore and culture stories are true and many times they are based on the myth. Folklore is the traditional oral communication and the stories are passed from generation to generation. The above-mentioned movies have a common theme

related to the tribal community and their major problems. Due to the creativity in the film many times filmmaker enhance the story for engage the audience towards the film.

The *TWO-STEP FLOW THEORY* applies in the folklore and cultural studies. Many a times narrator enhanced the story for more engagement towards the culture and community. The two-step flow model becomes highly relevant when used in movies, especially those that deal with environmental issues, tribal communities, and folklore traditions. The first stage of communication is represented by films, which convey cultural messages, stories, and representations. Their effects are rarely consistent or immediate however. Rather, the second stage is when opinion leaders—such as journalists, critics, academics, filmmakers, activists, or community elders—interpret the story for a larger audience. For instance, a movie like *Newton* (2017) became well-known for showing democracy in tribal areas, but it also generated discussion among academics, critics, and political analysts who placed its message in the context of marginalization and governance discourses.

Similarly, films like *Dhabari Quruvi* (2023), which are based on tribal belief systems and folklore, gain cultural resonance through the influence of opinion leaders who present the story as either an artistic reinterpretation or an authentic representation. Opinion leadership for tribal audiences themselves frequently comes from within the community, such as activists or elders who reframe the movie in the context of their own beliefs and lived realities. Thus, the theory emphasizes how cinema serves as a mediated communication process where audiences, opinion leaders, and filmmakers co-create meaning rather than just providing mass entertainment.

This study highlights the intermediary role of cultural gatekeepers in influencing the reception of tribal and folklore narratives by applying the Two-Step Flow Theory to the film industry. This methodology facilitates a more profound comprehension of how the representation of tribal belief systems and folklore in films extends beyond the screen and enters scholarly discussions, policy debates, and community dialogues, eventually affecting cultural memory and public perception.

Conclusion:

Tribal belief systems and folklore stories in Indian cinema function as cultural bridges that preserve indigenous knowledge while negotiating with mainstream discourse, as this study shows. They are more than just narrative devices. It is clear from examining how they are portrayed in a few chosen movies that film has the power to elevate marginalized voices, eliminate myths, and demonstrate the applicability of conventional ecological knowledge in modern settings. However, depending on the intention of the filmmaker and the interpretive function of reviewers, viewers, and community leaders, the cinematic representation of tribal communities frequently fluctuates between authenticity and commodification.

Incorporating tribal belief systems and folklore into films enhances their narratives while also promoting more general discussions about identity, environmental ethics, and cultural durability. The Two-Step Flow Theory's application in this situation emphasizes how mediating agents, such as critics, activists, or elders, reinterpret films' meaning for a variety of audiences rather than directly influencing them. In the end, Indian cinema becomes a place of cultural contestation and preservation, where folklore is transformed from a static artifact into a dynamic, living thing. This study emphasizes the necessity of responsible and sensitive filmmaking techniques that honour tribal epistemologies and actively participate in the larger cultural environment.

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