

Research Vidyapith International Multidisciplinary Journal



(International Open Access, Peer-reviewed & Refereed Journal)

(Multidisciplinary, Monthly, Multilanguage)

* Vol-2* *Issue-10 (Special Issue)* *October 2025*

Cinematic Politics: Exploring Tribal Identity and Resistance in Indian Parallel Cinema– A Case Study

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Abstract:

This paper critically examines the representation of tribal communities in India's non-mainstream film movement, commonly known as Parallel Cinema. It highlights a gap in scholarship, which has often engaged with caste and class but neglected tribal identity. The study argues that tribal portrayals have shifted from an early "urban gaze," rooted in stereotypes, to more authentic and politically resistant narratives. Drawing on the concept of "othering," the paper analyzes Satyajit Ray's (Ray, 1970) *Aranyer Din Ratri*, where tribal figures appear as symbolic foils for urban protagonists, reflecting the limitations of early humanist cinema. It then explores a transformative phase in the works of Mrinal Sen and Goutam Ghose. Films like *Mrigayaa* and *Dakhal* frame tribal life as allegories of systemic exploitation and resistance to state and patriarchal oppression. The analysis concludes with contemporary films such as *Udalaazham* and *Jai Bhim*, which represent a new commitment to authenticity through indigenous casting and native languages. By restoring agency to tribal voices, these films mark cinema itself as an act of resistance. The paper contends that while Parallel Cinema laid the groundwork, the pursuit of truly equitable representation remains unfinished.

Keywords: Tribal Representation, Othering, Parallel Cinema, Indigenous Voices, Urban gaze

Introduction: The Cinematic Canvas of Parallel India

A. Defining Parallel Cinema: A Socio-Political Mandate

Indian Parallel Cinema, also known as the New Indian Cinema, emerged in the 1950s as a transformative film movement, largely centered in the state of West Bengal. This cinematic approach was a deliberate counterpoint to the dominant commercial Indian cinema, which was characterized by its formulaic narratives, melodramatic plots, and extensive use of song-and-dance routines. Parallel Cinema distinguished itself through a profound commitment to realism and incisive social commentary. It eschewed glamour and escapism in favor of a naturalistic style that drew heavily from contemporary Indian literature, serving as a vital study of a society in transition.

This movement's ideological and aesthetic foundations were significantly inspired

by global film movements, most notably Italian Neorealism, which sought to depict the hardships of everyday life with raw authenticity. Pioneers such as Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, and Mrinal Sen were instrumental in establishing a genre that aimed to use cinema for social critique rather than mere entertainment. The films of this era were often supported by state governments, reflecting a post-independence ideal of promoting an authentic art form that could engage with critical social issues, from structural inequalities like caste and class to the complexities of urbanization and religious discourse. This period is widely regarded as part of the “Golden Age” of Indian cinema, and its films, such as Chetan Anand’s *Neecha Nagar* (Anand, 1946) (1946) and Shyam Benegal’s garnered international acclaim for their efforts to highlight social issues consistent with the ideals of a new nation.

B. The Central Inquiry: Tribal Identity and Resistance

While Parallel Cinema is widely celebrated for its critiques of class, gender, and caste disparities, the scholarly discourse on its representation of tribal communities has been comparatively underexplored. The existing body of research has frequently focused on the portrayal of other marginalized groups, leaving a notable gap in the analysis of how tribal cultures, identities, and socio-political issues have been presented on screen. This paper seeks to address this lacuna by moving beyond a simple survey of films to offer a critical analysis of the ideological underpinnings and ethical challenges that have defined these cinematic portrayals.

The central argument is that the representation of tribal identity within this cinematic movement is a multifaceted and evolving narrative. It is posited that this journey began with a limited “urban gaze” that, despite its humanistic intentions, often inadvertently perpetuated stereotypes and “othered” tribal communities. The analysis suggests that over time, the movement became a crucial platform for powerful allegorical and, more recently, authentic narratives of resistance against systemic exploitation and cultural appropriation. The trajectory of this cinematic representation serves as a microcosm of the movement’s own ideological struggles and its enduring, though unfinished, work in social critique.

The Foundational Problem: “Othering” in Representation

A fundamental concept for understanding the portrayal of marginalized communities in Indian cinema is “othering,” a theoretical framework that explains how cinematic depictions can strip a group of its complexity and humanity. The process relegates the represented group to the role of a primitive, exotic, or even villainous “other”. This phenomenon in Indian cinema is deeply rooted in a history that reflects colonial mindsets, where postcolonial representations of indigenous groups often serve to reinforce historical power imbalances by portraying these communities as inferior or primitive.

Historically, this has led to tribal characters being reduced to roles that serve as a foil for the stories of non-tribal characters. These portrayals have ranged from primitive beings and “noble savages” connected to nature to violent figures, all of which reinforce societal biases. This analysis will use “othering” as a critical lens to examine how even the most acclaimed filmmakers, who were pioneers in social realism, may have inadvertently contributed to this problematic representational legacy in their earlier works. It is an academic perspective that acknowledges the complexity of a progressive intent being limited by the cultural and geographical lived experiences of its creators, leading to portrayals that, while not overtly hostile, can still lack true agency and voice for the represented community.

The Politics of Representation: A Historical and Ideological Trajectory

A. The Troubled Legacy of Mainstream Cinema

The depiction of tribal communities in Indian cinema has a long and often troubling history. Mainstream films, in particular, have persistently relied on pervasive stereotypes, portraying tribal societies through a lens that labels them as “primitive, mysterious, or even violent beings”. This approach has perpetuated a narrow and inaccurate understanding of these communities, reinforcing biases that contribute to societal prejudices. Tribal characters have often been relegated to the sidelines, serving as symbolic or fantastical figures rather than complex human beings.

This issue is not confined to the past; it continues in modern, commercially successful cinema. Recent “Pan-Indian” blockbusters such as *Bahubali* (Rajamouli, 2015) and *RRR* (Rajamouli., 2022) have faced criticism for their use of a “fantastical and distorted lens” to depict tribal communities. The film *RRR*, for instance, takes creative liberties with the lives of real-life tribal hero Komaram Bheem, using his story as a symbolic backdrop for a heroic narrative that has been criticized for historical distortion and for reinforcing a commercial rather than social agenda. This perpetuation of stereotypes provides a stark contrast to the stated mission of the Parallel Cinema movement, which was to engage with complex social issues. The commercial business model of mainstream cinema encourages the use of tribal identity as a simple plot device, a practice that reinforces, rather than challenges, existing prejudices.

B. Early Parallel Cinema and the “Urban Gaze”

Despite its stated mission of realism and social critique, the early Parallel Cinema movement was not immune to its own set of representational challenges. The most significant of these was the “urban gaze,” a perspective that, while empathetic, often viewed rural and tribal life through the lens of a city-dwelling intellectual. This dynamic is evident in Satyajit Ray’s celebrated 1970 film, *Aranyer Din Ratri (Days and Nights in the Forest)*.

While the film is widely recognized as a nuanced character study of four urban men, its portrayal of the Santhal tribal woman, Duli, reveals the limitations of this perspective. Duli is presented as a “sensual tribal girl” who becomes an object of desire for one of the protagonists, Hari, and is ultimately reduced to a symbolic foil for his emotional journey. The film’s gaze is explicitly described as “mostly urban,” a direct result of the filmmakers and actors not being from the communities they were depicting. This demonstrates a fundamental paradox: a movement that set out to depict reality truthfully inadvertently fell prey to a form of exoticism. The tribal characters were not the subjects of their own stories but rather plot devices or catalysts for the moral and psychological journeys of the urban protagonists. The a-political nature of this portrayal served the narrative’s central concern, highlighting how a movement’s progressive intent can be limited by the lived experiences of its creators.

A Study in Compassion and Critique: Key Filmmakers and Their Stances

A. The Humanist vs. The Marxist: Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen

The distinct ideological foundations of Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen (Sen, 1976) shaped their contrasting cinematic approaches and, in turn, their portrayal of marginalized communities. Satyajit Ray, a product of the Bengal Renaissance, espoused a liberal-humanist worldview that focused on individual human integrity and the complex psychological journeys of his characters. His films were often concerned with a “broader view of Indian history” and the “crisis of nationhood,” grappling with the “betrayal of the Nehruvian dream” and the decline of traditional values in a modernizing India.

In stark contrast, Mrinal Sen was a self-described “private Marxist” whose films were overtly political and stylistically disruptive. Influenced by the radical communist Naxalite movement, his work focused on “class hierarchies and socio-economic conditions” and the revolutionary spirit of the common person. Sen’s use of real-life footage and montages created a form of cinematic activism that was far more confrontational than Ray’s subtle, narrative approach. This ideological schism is central to understanding their respective contributions to the politics of representation. Ray’s portrayal of tribal communities, as seen in *Aranyer Din Ratri*, was filtered through a humanist lens that prioritized the urban narrative, whereas Sen’s approach, as demonstrated in *Mrigayaa*, used tribal life as a direct allegory for systemic exploitation and injustice.

B. Mrinal Sen’s *Mrigayaa* (1976): Resistance as Allegory

Mrinal Sen’s 1976 film *Mrigayaa* (*The Royal Hunt*) is a pivotal work in the history of tribal representation in Parallel Cinema. Set in the 1930s in Odisha, the film tells the tragic story of Ghinua, a tribal hunter who is hanged for “murder” after killing a local moneylender who abducted his wife. He performs this act believing he is following the British administrator’s “game hunting” philosophy. The film’s power lies in its allegorical nature, as the narrative, while based on a historical short story, is set against the backdrop of a rebellion similar to the Santhal revolt of the 1850s, making its message timeless.

By juxtaposing the tribal hunter’s understanding of justice with the colonial administrator’s arbitrary and self-serving legal system, the film masterfully exposes the inherent corruption and exploitation of the system itself. The act of “hunting” is celebrated when performed by a white man for sport, but the same act is condemned as “murder” when a tribal man seeks justice for his family. This juxtaposition serves as a potent critique of “administrative tyranny” and the racial and class-based hierarchies that defined colonial rule. The film’s production during the Emergency in India lends further weight to its veiled political commentary, demonstrating how allegory can be a powerful tool for resistance against contemporary political realities.

C. Goutam Ghose’s *Dakhal* (1981): The Empathetic Gaze

Goutam Ghose emerged as a key filmmaker with a style that was “deeply political in thought and poetically resonant in expression”. His 1981 film *Dakhal* (*The Occupation*) (Ghose, *Dakhal* (The Occupation) , 1981) exemplifies this approach by telling the story of a nomadic “crow hunter” woman named Andi who, after her husband’s death, fights a deceitful landlord for her land. The film portrays her struggle as a fight for “bare survival” against systemic exploitation and patriarchal manipulation.

Dakhal’s portrayal of resistance is unique. It is not a large-scale rebellion but a deeply personal and elemental battle for survival. The protagonist’s defiance, her refusal to rejoin her nomadic tribe, and her choice to fight for her own piece of land represents a fierce act of individual resistance. This personal struggle speaks to the broader issues of development-induced displacement and the erosion of traditional livelihoods, problems that disproportionately affect women. Ghose’s “empathetic gaze” on a single character’s struggle effectively makes the political personal, a narrative choice that creates social consciousness and proves that resistance can be as much about the endurance of a single individual as it is about a collective movement.

The New Wave of Authentic Narratives: Case Studies in Contemporary Resistance

A. The Apex of Evolution: A Shift in Creative Locus

The evolution of tribal representation in Indian Parallel Cinema culminates in a new wave of contemporary films that move beyond allegory and embrace a direct, authentic, and empowering narrative. These films, emerging primarily from regional cinema, are not only a continuation of the movement’s legacy but also a direct critique of its past limitations. This trend is marked by a crucial shift in authorship and casting. Films now actively involve indigenous actors and use authentic dialects to tell stories from within the community, rather than from an outsider’s perspective. This qualitative leap in representation demonstrates that genuine, truthful portrayals are more likely to emerge when creative control is decentralized and moves closer to the communities being represented. The transition from the urban center to the regional periphery and from non-tribal to indigenous creators signals that the locus of a “politics of representation” lies not just in a film’s theme but in its very production process.

This shift in approach is a direct response to the ethical failings of the past, signaling a more advanced form of political representation that gives a voice to a community that has long been silenced. The table below outlines the key cinematic case studies that exemplify this historical and ideological progression.

Table: Key Films in Tribal Representation

Film (Year)	Title	Director	Community Portrayed	Approach to Representation	Theme of Resistance
	<i>Aranyer Din Ratri</i> (1970)	Satyajit Ray	Santhal tribe	Critiqued for its 'urban gaze' and objectification of the tribal woman as an exotic 'other.' Focus is on urban protagonists.	No direct resistance. The tribal character serves as a symbolic catalyst for the urban characters' self-reflection.
	<i>Mrigayaa</i> (1976)	Mrinal Sen	Tribal hunter	Allegorical portrayal using a historical period to critique contemporary administrative tyranny.	Resistance is allegorical, a clash between two systems of justice (tribal vs. colonial/feudal). The protagonist's act is a defiant, personal rebellion.
	<i>Dakhal</i> (1981)	Goutam Ghose	Nomadic "crow hunter" tribe	Empathetic and poeticized. Focus is on the personal, physical battle for survival of a marginalized individual.	Resistance is personal and elemental, a single woman's fight for land and dignity against a deceitful landlord.
	<i>Udalaazham</i> (2018)	Unnikrishnan Avala	Paniya tribe	Authentic and insider's perspective. Uses indigenous actors and the community's own dialect.	Resistance is inherent in the act of self-representation. The film itself is a political statement of agency.
	<i>Jai Bhim</i> (2021)	T.J. Gnanavel	Irula tribe	Realistic and direct. Based on a true story, focusing on the legal and social fight against systemic injustice.	Resistance is a literal, collective, and legal struggle against police brutality and institutionalized discrimination.

B. Case Study: *Jai Bhim* (2021)

Jai Bhim (Gnanavel, 2021), directed by T.J. Gnanavel, is a landmark film that represents the apex of Parallel Cinema’s thematic evolution. Based on a real-life legal case, the film narrates the story of a lawyer who fights for justice for a man from the Irula tribe in Tamil Nadu who disappears in police custody. The film’s significance lies in its unflinching realism, meticulously portraying the daily lives of the Irula tribe and highlighting their struggles with untouchability, humiliation by the “upper caste” community, and the denial of basic rights, including education and community certification.

Unlike earlier films, *Jai Bhim*’s portrayal of resistance is not allegorical but literal. The narrative revolves around a direct legal and social fight against a corrupt and brutal system, represented by the police department and a prejudiced society. The film’s power is enhanced by its focus on the collective struggle, particularly the resilience of the pregnant wife of the disappeared man, who fights tirelessly against the system. The film is not a simple critique of injustice; it is a call for systemic change and a

representation of the agency of tribal communities in their fight for justice. The choice to tell a true story and center the legal and social struggle as the primary narrative device marks a powerful new form of cinematic activism.

C. Case Study: *Udalaazham* (2018)

The Malayalam film *Udalaazham*, (Avala., 2018) directed by Unnikrishnan Avala, stands as a crucial example of cinematic authenticity in its representation of tribal identity. The film's creators made a powerful political statement by casting an Adivasi actor, Mani P.R., as the protagonist and by incorporating dialogues in the Paniya dialect, the language of the tribal community. This choice is not merely stylistic; it is a direct act of resistance against the long history of "othering" and misrepresentation in Indian cinema.

By empowering a member of the community to tell their own story, the film dismantles the historical "urban gaze" and provides an insider's perspective on the struggles of the Paniya people, including language loss, identity struggles, and the clash between traditional practices and modern legal frameworks. These contemporary films demonstrate that for representation to be truly political, it must extend beyond plot and theme to encompass the very process of filmmaking. The use of indigenous actors and languages is a political statement about agency and self-representation, a direct response to historical ethical failures. It signals a new era where the creative voice is no longer an external observer but a participant, ensuring that the stories of tribal communities are told with the dignity and respect they deserve.

Enduring Ethical and Political Challenges

A. "The Othering Problem" Revisited

Despite the progress made by contemporary regional cinema, the problem of "othering" remains an enduring ethical challenge in Indian filmmaking. Mainstream cinema continues to reinforce harmful stereotypes, portraying tribal communities through a "fantastical and distorted lens" for commercial appeal. This lack of nuanced portrayal contributes to the persistence of societal biases and prejudices.

Even within the more enlightened spaces of Parallel Cinema, a subtle, but prevailing, "upper caste" gaze can be observed. This perspective often positions tribal characters as "voiceless," their struggles serving primarily to "enhance the persona" of the "upper caste" protagonists who come to their aid. This dynamic demonstrates that a filmmaker's progressive political intent does not automatically translate into an equitable or authentic representation of the subject. The power imbalance inherent in the creator-subject relationship can perpetuate the very hierarchical structures that the film purports to critique.

B. Gaps in Research and Practice

Scholarly research on the representation of tribal communities in Indian cinema has been notably limited, especially when compared to the extensive studies on the portrayal of other marginalized groups such as Dalits and women. This void leaves significant areas underexplored. A key area for future inquiry is the intersectionality of tribal identity with other factors like gender, religion, and caste. For example, there is a lack of research on how tribal women, in particular, are represented and how their identities are shaped by both their tribal and gendered experiences. This academic failure to match the cinematic progress is a direct result of the historical "othering" that reduced tribal identities to a single, monolithic category, making it difficult for researchers to see the complex, intersecting layers of identity.

Beyond the academic sphere, ethical challenges persist in the practice of filmmaking. These include issues of cultural appropriation, where mainstream creators may co-

opt tribal symbols or narratives without understanding their significance. There is also a persistent lack of indigenous voices in decision-making roles within the media and entertainment industries. This underscores the critical need for more films to be made by indigenous filmmakers themselves, as creative control by a community is the most effective way to combat stereotypes and achieve authentic, self-determined representation.

C. The Role of Documentaries

A comparative analysis of documentaries reveals a different approach to representation that often serves as an “antidote” to the one-dimensional portrayals of popular cinema. Research indicates that documentaries produced by the Indian government and various non-governmental organizations provide a “more authentic and nuanced” look at tribal communities, highlighting their unique cultures, traditions, and ongoing struggles. This form of cinema offers a respectful perspective by focusing on the everyday lives, enduring resilience, and genuine concerns of the people, rather than fitting them into a fictional narrative.

Documentaries can serve as a powerful tool for indigenous filmmakers to preserve oral histories, document contemporary issues, and engage in activism and advocacy. The most complete picture of tribal identity and resistance is therefore achieved through a dialogue between these two forms, where documentaries provide the foundational truth and fictional films use that truth to inspire broader social awareness and empathy. The existence of an emerging ecosystem of support for this work, including organizations that fund and promote indigenous cinema, indicates a structural change in the Indian film landscape.

Table: Organizations and Initiatives Supporting Indigenous Cinema

Organization/Festival	Mission/Focus	Key Activities
Baripada Indigenous Short Film Festival (BISFF)	To promote Santali cinema, nurture indigenous talent, and contribute to community development.	Showcases short films and music videos in Santali, Ho, or Mundari languages, open to all indigenous tribal filmmakers in India.
Indian Documentary Foundation	A not-for-profit organization committed to growing the documentary climate in India and using films as a tool for social and environmental change.	Organizes "Good Pitch" events to connect documentary filmmakers with social changemakers and activists, fostering new partnerships and solutions.
Bitchitra Collective	To enable authentic storytelling for women and non-binary filmmakers from India and the Indian diaspora.	Provides grants, mentorship, and a peer knowledge network to elevate the work and support marginalized artists, including those focused on social justice and indigenous wisdom.

Conclusion: Legacy and the Future of a Movement

A. Summary of Key Findings

Indian Parallel Cinema’s journey in representing tribal identity is a complex and evolving narrative that mirrors the movement’s own ideological struggles. The report has demonstrated that this cinematic trajectory moved from a problematic, though often well-intentioned, “urban gaze” in its early years to a powerful, direct, and increasingly authentic form of resistance in its contemporary phase. Early films, while socially conscious, often viewed tribal communities through a limited lens, using them as symbolic foils for the moral journeys of urban protagonists.

The movement’s maturation, however, saw a turn toward a more direct political engagement, pioneered by figures like Mrinal Sen and Goutam Ghose, whose films used allegory and empathy to critique systemic exploitation and oppression. The most significant leap occurred with a new wave of regional cinema, where the stories of communities like the Irula and Paniya tribes are being told with unprecedented authenticity. By featuring indigenous actors and their native dialects, films like *Jai*

Bhim and *Udalaazham* have shifted the creative locus from the external observer to the community itself, making the act of filmmaking a powerful political statement of agency and self-representation.

B. The Unfinished Work and Enduring Legacy

The legacy of Parallel Cinema is not one of a finished product but of an enduring and evolving process. The movement's contribution to the politics of representation is its demonstration that cinema can be a potent tool for social commentary and resistance. However, the analysis of the persistent problem of "othering" and the identified gaps in scholarly research and filmmaking practice underscore that the work is far from complete. The continued presence of an "upper caste" gaze in some narratives and the lack of research on intersecting identities highlight the deep-seated nature of these representational challenges.

To ensure that the rich and diverse cultures of India's tribal communities are represented with the dignity they deserve, future efforts must focus on empowering indigenous voices with creative control. The emerging ecosystem of support, including festivals and organizations that champion indigenous filmmakers and their work, is a crucial step in this direction. True, equitable, and respectful representation will only be achieved when the stories of these communities are told from within, by creators who share their lived experiences and perspectives. The journey of Indian Parallel Cinema has laid the foundation for this change, and its enduring legacy lies in the unfinished work it has left for a new generation of filmmakers and scholars to complete.

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Cite this Article

'Anshul Mehrotra; Dr. Mukul Srivastava', " Cinematic Politics: Exploring Tribal Identity and Resistance in Indian Parallel Cinema- A Case Study", Research Vidyapith International Multidisciplinary Journal (RVIMJ), ISSN: 3048-7331 (Online), Volume:2, Issue:10 (Special Issue), October 2025.

Journal URL- <https://www.researchvidyapith.com/>

Published Date- 31 October 2025