

Article

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North East India: As Depicted in Contemporary Indian Cinema

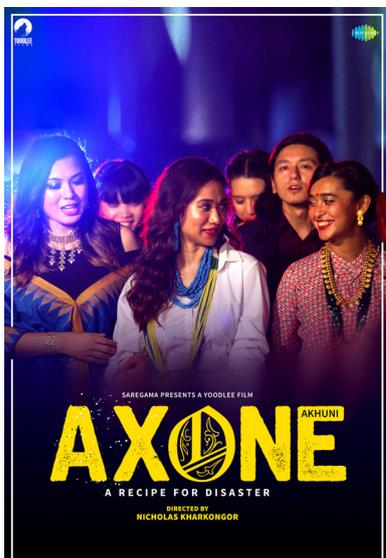


Probably the most beautiful yet neglected part of India as depicted in contemporary cinemas is North-East. The ‘Seven Sisters’ have already been deprived with even basic amenities and along with it all, they are being ignored in popular Indian culture also. The scenic beauty of this hilly part of our country was used as a backdrop of general commercial films. But the tendency of exploring the culture and people of this region is exceptionally low. There is some stereotypical depiction of North Eastern people in cinemas which is quite hilarious. Not only in film even day-to-day life they face severe discrimination all over the other region of this country. But recently the picture has changed, and they are coming into mainstream cinema.

The first ever attempt was made by none other than Satyajit Ray. The film was a documentary and may not be considered as a mainstream cinema but this ‘Chogyal’ produced documentary ‘Sikkim’ can be easily marked as a paving stone of exploring the beauty of North-East not as a backdrop but as a character. In 1970, Tapan Sinha directed a film named *Sagina*

Mahato which tells the real story of revolt by tea estate laborers of Kurseong against British Raj. But the main concern is though Sinha made a film on North Eastern people and their fights but he failed to cast the proper North Eastern actor actresses in his film instead he made the film twice (Bengali & Hindi) with same mainstream Bollywood casts. In past few years, the trend has changed but sadly casting the mainstream Bollywood actor actresses is still going on. Another film which dealt with the crisis of North Eastern people is Mani Ratnam’s *Dil Se*. The plot revolves around a journalist and a mysterious woman. In the progression of the plot the audience got to know about the woman who was a member of liberationist in Assam. The film also depicts the brutality of Army on the civilians of Assam which led them to join several terrorist liberationists groups. Mani Ratnam here made a little justice by casting Manisha Koirala as an Assamese girl. The 2005 war film *Tango Charlie* directed by Mani Sankar, also tried to show the political turmoil in North-Eastern India. Tale revolves around an Indian BSF Trooper in the 101st BSF Battalion arriving at

Manipur. The plot is mainly about the Bodo Insurgency in the North-East. Later in 2010 the authorized adaptation of 1997 Iranian film *Children of Heaven* directed by Priyadarshan, *Bumm Bumm Bole* was set up in the region of North-East. Here also the director depicted the poverty of Tea Estate workers. Apart from all these there are several films which was shot in the backdrop of North Eastern India like *Jewel Thief* (1967) in Sikkim. *Koyla* in 1997 in Arunachal Pradesh. *Main Hoo Na* (2004) in Darjeeling, *Rock On 2* (2016) in Shilong, *Rangoon* (2016) in Assam and so on. So to depict their own culture and to tell their stories in their own way The North-Eastern



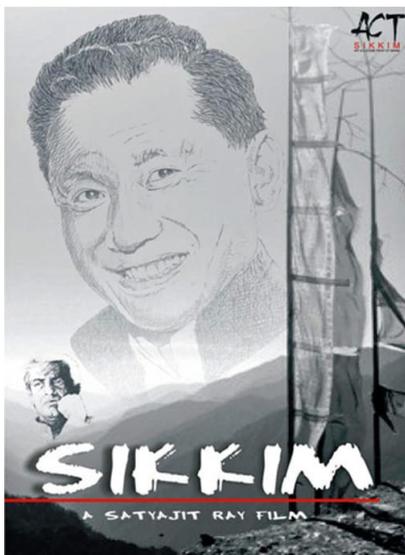
filmmakers started making cinemas which got acclamation from all over the world as well as from the other parts of India Rima Das's *Village Rockstar* (2017) won best Indian Film and two other prizes at the Mumbai Film Festival. It was also screened at many national and international film festivals. It won the coveted Golden Elephant for Best Director Competition Asian Panorama by Adult Jury at the 20th International Children's Film Festival. According to acclaimed Hong Kong based film critic Maggie Lee, "Writer-director Rima Das's second film is a tonic to third world poverty porn". Another such film is director Sanjib Dey's Debut film *Three Smoking Barrels*. It is an anthology of three stories from North-East Indian which reveals the socio-political situation of the region. The film got official selection in the International Competition section the 66th International Film Festival

Mannheim-Heidelberg, the second oldest film festival in Germany after Berlin. It also made its Indian premiere at the International Film Festival of Kerala. It was made over a period of two years set in various politically sensitive locations in North-East India. Another remarkable work is *Nana- a tale of us*. This church funded Nagamese language film was set at a backdrop of corruption-ridden society and the need for clean election in Nagaland. Not only these, there are many such indigenous North-Eastern film which was made to tell their stories to the rest of the country and world and been highly appreciated by audiences and critics all over the world.

Not only the films or plots but also the actors are being neglected from North Eastern region as mentioned before from Tapan Sinha to Priyadarshan everyone choose mainstream Indian actors to play North Eastern characters. The original actors who belong from that region are even been offered to work as the watchman of the producer's house. Apart from all these several talented North-Eastern actors made their mark in Bollywood. To name the first Danny Denzongpa. This Sikkimese actor, singer and director appeared in several Bollywood films. With a career spinning more than forty years he has starred in about 190 Hindi films since 1971 and was awarded the Padma Shree in 2003. Besides, he also acted in Tamil, Nepali, Bengali, and Telugu films and has also appeared in international films and played a significant role in the 1997 movie *Seven Years in Tibet*, alongside Brad Pitt. Not only in acting Denzongpa made his mark also in the field of singing. He sung with the heavyweights of Indian music like Lata Mangeshkar, Mohammad Rafi, Kishore Kumar, and Asha Bhosle. Another renowned name of North-Eastern acting talent is Adil Hussain. He starred in films such as *Life of Pie* (2012), and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012). Hussain has starred in English, Hindi, Assamese, Bengali, Tamil, Marathi, Malayalam, Norwegian and French films. He was also conferred with the 'Outstanding Achievement Award 2020' at the online Film Festival by BFI. To name a female acting talent from that region is Geetanjali Thapa. She was born & brought up in Sikkim.

She won the National Film Award for 'Best Actress' for her performance in 2013 Bollywood movie *Liar's Dice*. The film also served as India's official entry for 'Best Foreign language Film' at the 87th Academy Awards. Another name is Rima Debnath. She was born in Agartala, Tripura. She acted as 'Savitha' in 2011 Bollywood movie *Bodyguard*. She is a member of Cine & TV Artist Association (CINTAA), Mumbai and appeared in Rajkumar Hirani's 2014 film *PK*. Another notable name is Andrea Tariang, who got her fame from 2016 blockbuster *Pink*. The list is growing radically.

A popular trend in recent mainstream cinema has been observed that is to depict the North Eastern sports persons through movies. *Mary Kom* is one such instance. This 2014



Omung Kumar directed biopic was originally developed by writer Saiwyn Quadras. Who suggested the storyline to Kumar when Kom was not a familiar name in name even after her numerous achievements? But the film was made after her bronze medal victory at 2012 Summer Olympics. Here also the film faced a great controversy for casting Priyanka Chopra as Mary Kom. Though she depicted the character justly but the casting of a star instead of a true North Eastern actor made the film judged by critics. Another sport related North

eastern movie is *Penalty*. It shows the story of a young boy who comes from the state of Manipur to a Lucknow based college to follow his passion over football and to realize his dream of playing for India national Football Team. It is a true depiction of discrimination and hardships which are being faced by North Eastern people based on their 'Unusual Look'. Even this discrimination is being highlighted in the film *Pink*. Though all three girls equally suffered the trauma of the harassment. But Andrea told the court apart from being a girl, she must suffer a lot more discrimination for being a North Eastern. But apart from all these, there is a ray of hope. The 2019 film *Axone* directed by Nicholas Kharkongor weaved a beautiful comedy drama which shows the culture and other peoples' behavior towards North Eastern community. The plot revolves around a simple incident that is making a special delicacy for the marriage of a friend. The director ironically showed how North Indian people reacts to the food and culture of the North Easterns. Moving away from the known topics related to North East India such as political sensitivity and sports enthusiasm this film illuminated the food habit and cultural aspects like marriage rituals and communal harmony among the North Eastern people.

We in India believe equality in diversity but practice discrimination even among our own tribes in the name of caste, creed, political, religious, and even geographical standpoints. The scenario will not change overnight. Not only the North Easterns but also South Indians are being hilariously presented by Indian mainstream cinema. Thanks to new generation filmmakers who despite running behind stars and commercial success, take responsibility to tell an honest story about their own tribe and make the other part of the country aware about the actuality. The rest is upon us, the spectators to decide between mainstream vague depiction of reality and new creator's honesty.

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