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AN ANALYSIS OF TRIBAL COMMUNITY REPRESENTATION AND CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY IN HINDI CINEMA

Abstract : The film industry is one of the most effective cultural vehicles for meaning creation in India, while Hindi cinema, due to its national outreach, is positioned in a very influential way with regards to the way people view each other. Tribal (Adivasi) communities, that make up around 8-9 percent of the Indian population and have great linguistic, religious and social diversity, have traditionally been presented onscreen by a narrow selection of stereotypes – from the exotic "tribal number" dancer, to a primitive dweller of the forest, to noble savages or an adversary blocking the "development" of the country by the state. This paper presents a literature-based qualitative investigation into two connected issues: first, the way in which tribal communities view their representation in Hindi cinema, and secondly, to what extent does this representation reflect real-life culture and society. By applying media representation theory, cultivation theory and postcolonial views on the cinematic "Other", the paper will review relevant secondary literature, media articles and content analysis research conducted between 2016 and 2026. In conclusion, the findings suggest the continuing disparity between the visual representations on the one hand and the realities of the tribal life on the other; and finally, the gradual shift towards collaboration and ethnographic storytelling. The paper concludes with a set of suggestions to filmmakers, media scholars, and policy makers.

Key Words: Tribal Representation, Adivasi, Hindi Cinema, Bollywood, Cultural Authenticity, Media Perception, Stereotyping, Post-Colonial Media Studies.

1. Introduction : There are more than 700 Scheduled Tribes in India, ranging from diverse states such as Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Madhya Pradesh,

Rajasthan, and the Northeastern states, making up nearly 104 million people as per the census figures. However, this population is not homogenous; it comprises numerous languages, religions, family systems, and economic activities. However, mainstream Hindi films, which constitute the single-largest source of imagery in the country, have used a remarkably limited imagery when it comes to these tribals for several decades now. The tribals are usually seen as mere backgrounds rather than as characters themselves, such as unclothed dancers who dance in an interval of song, jungle-dwelling savages, or passive victims of exploitation who exist only to reinforce the moral evolution of an upper caste character.

These stereotypes have implications even beyond the world of films. Numerous research studies in the field of communication point out that consistent imagery about a group of people in media tends to shape real-world perceptions about them, especially among people who do not have firsthand interactions with them (Journalism University, 2026; Fiveable, 2026). Where tribal identities have been reduced to spectacle, exoticism, and criminality, the overall result is a public imagination where Adivasi citizens are considered outside the context of Indian modernity rather than fellow inhabitants of this context. The recent literature in this area has taken steps to address this gap by exploring not only the manner in which tribes are represented in the Indian film industries but also the way in which tribal citizens make sense of their representation (Khadia & Gupta, 2026a, 2026b).

This research is done within this field of research. The aim of the study is to assess the authenticity and cultural accuracy of tribal representation in Hindi films and what is the validity of these depictions in terms of their language and practices? And to synthesis the secondary data in order to analyses representation of tribals in Indian cinema. The answer to these questions is essential not only from the academic point of view but also from the practical one, as the industry is becoming increasingly aware of its representation.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 The Historical Trajectory of Tribal Imagery : Visual stereotypes of tribal characters, created in the Hindi cinema of the early and mid-twentieth century, have remained resilient. In such movies like *Naagin* (1954) and *Madhumati* (1958), tribal characters were made a part of reincarnation and mysticism stories, and in later films, such as *Yeh Gulistan Hamara* (1972), tribes in the northeastern region were seen as hindrances in the way of nation-building and state-development, portrayed as "illiterate, backward, and, most vividly, savage" (Kumar & Sharma, 2022). Essayistic investigations of this tradition point out that in the 1940s-1960s cinema the so-called "tribal number" (a performance by tribal-coded characters) became an obligatory element of the commercial movie called "masala film," after which the tribal character was erased from the story without being developed further as a person who could "speak, think or feel" (The Caravan, 2016).

This trope did not become obsolete with time; it was adapted to the new situation. Even while celebrating tribal heroics, contemporary blockbuster cinema still uses the stereotypes of exotic imagery. Analysis of popular twenty-first century films highlights the fact that tribal characters are still represented as creatures of the "herd," susceptible to behaving in an animalistic manner, as well as being either capable of being violent or easily exploitable by external forces, rather than having an internal life of their own (Kumar & Sharma, 2022). Another content analysis of the representation of colorism and hierarchy in terms of caste in Bollywood film casting reveals that characters belonging to the Adivasi groups are still often represented as "primitive," whose languages do not get any recognition even in scenes

depicting tribal populations, and when films try to pay tribute to any particular tribal history, their culture is only partially represented (The Jugaad Project, 2024).

2.2 Stereotyping, Marginalisation, and the Politics of Development : In the last few years, there has been a number of studies by Indian scholars who have examined the depiction of tribal imagery in Indian cinema through the historical context of Naxalite/Maoist insurgency and issues related to land rights. Due to the fact that many districts affected by the Maoists are tribal and Dalit, films in Hindi language which portray stories of insurgency, mining, or relocation of forests tend to portray tribespeople as criminals and rebels, thus linking their lifestyle with chaos without addressing the issue of land dispossession (The Caravan, 2016). Khadia and Gupta (2026a), in turn, expand on this issue by discussing stereotypes and marginalization in Indian cinema as part of their content analysis of movies and suggesting that the industry was reluctant to change its portrayal of tribals as people without any interiority or agency despite increasing public discussion of this issue.

From this, Khadia and Gupta (2026b) develop a Cinematic Representation and Perception Framework (CRPF) that brings together media representation theory, formalist film criticism, and auteur theory to analyse tribal images at several layers simultaneously – from narrative form, visual symbolism, to the perception of audiences. This framework is relevant to the current study due to the fact that this framework places particular emphasis on the category of audience perception, rather than regarding the cinematic text as an autonomous entity that proves social implications. An empirical study undertaken concurrently with this framework involved interviews with filmmakers and perception data from audiences which identified a "moderate perception of accuracy" amongst the participants when it came to values and moral universes of tribes depicted in films, with some participants noticing both stereotypes and the rare narrative of resilience and dignity (Khadia & Gupta, 2025).

2.3 Regional and Cross-Linguistic Comparisons : Comparative work across other Indian film industries offers a useful benchmark for evaluating Hindi cinema's record. Analyses of recent Tamil cinema, for instance, argue that films such as Viduthalai (Parts 1 and 2) mobilise a more deliberate visual semiotics of tribal oppression, using signs and symbols to foreground the structural forces behind tribal marginalisation rather than treating tribal identity as incidental colour (Divakar & Alfazeena, 2026). Similarly, scholarship on Jai Bhim situates Adivasi representation within a broader framework of legal and social advocacy cinema, in which tribal characters are given narrative centrality and their persecution is explicitly linked to caste and state power (Julianne & Raj, 2023). Read against this comparative backdrop, Hindi cinema's engagement with tribal identity — with a small number of exceptions — appears comparatively conservative and slower to grant tribal characters full narrative agency.

Scholarship examining Hindi cinema's broader regional and linguistic layering situates Adivasi representation as one instance of a wider pattern in which the industry historically "distils and codifies" the image of social 'others' for a national mass audience, producing what is described as a persistently "constructed reality" that departs from lived Adivasi experience even in the postcolonial period (Pillai, 2024). Other literature about caste and gender stereotypes highlights the fact that the Adivasi women in particular suffer from a double erasure as they are marginalized on the basis of caste, gender, and ethnic identity and that the mainstream media, which includes Bollywood, either fails to address these identities or does so in a limited way through victimization.

2.4 Media Perception and Cultivation Theory : The theoretical study of how audiences come to

internalise mediated images of social groups owes much to cultivation theory, originally developed to explain how heavy television exposure shapes viewers' beliefs about social reality. Contemporary restatements of the theory emphasise that its central claim is not that media directly dictates behaviour, but that repeated, consistent imagery makes certain social arrangements feel normal and expected to habitual viewers, an effect that becomes more pronounced the less direct contact a viewer has with the group being portrayed (Journalism University, 2026). Recent applications of the theory to cinema specifically argue that film's concentrated, immersive narrative structure makes it an underexplored but significant mechanism for cultivating audience beliefs about crime, community, and cultural norms (Khadia & Gupta, 2026b). Related computational work on entertainment-media representation similarly finds that skewed patterns of on-screen portrayal shape audience assumptions about the groups depicted, reinforcing the case for systematic content analysis alongside audience-perception research ((Baruah et al., 2022).

Applied to tribal representation, cultivation theory suggests that the near-total absence of tribal protagonists with interior lives, combined with a narrow repertoire of stereotyped roles, does not merely fail to represent tribal communities accurately — it actively shapes how non-tribal, urban Hindi-film audiences understand tribal citizens, often reinforcing assumptions of backwardness, danger, or exoticism that have material consequences for how tribal communities are treated in policy debates, employment, and everyday social interaction (Fiveable, 2026; Khadia & Gupta, 2026b).

3. Theoretical Framework : This study draws on three complementary theoretical strands. The first, media representation theory, treats cinematic images not as neutral reflections of reality but as constructed texts that encode particular ideological assumptions about who belongs at the centre of the national narrative and who is relegated to its margins — a lens that recent Indian film scholarship applies explicitly to tribal imagery (Khadia & Gupta, 2026b; Pillai, 2024). The second theory, known as cultivation theory, helps to explain the process through which such constructed images become enduring audience beliefs over time, especially for people who have very little firsthand exposure to the community being represented. The third, a postcolonial framing of cultural marginalisation, situates tribal representation within a longer history in which colonial and postcolonial state apparatuses alike have positioned tribal communities as objects of development, containment, or civilisational anxiety rather than as subjects with their own political and cultural agency — a framing evident in scholarship on the cinematic treatment of Naxalism-affected tribal regions (The Caravan, 2016).

Together, these three strands allow the paper to move between three levels of analysis: the textual level (what is shown on screen), the reception level (how tribal and non-tribal audiences interpret what is shown), and the structural level (why particular patterns of representation recur across decades and studios).

4. Statement of the Problem : Despite growing public and scholarly attention to questions of representation in Indian media, tribal communities remain among the least studied groups in Hindi film scholarship relative to their demographic size and cultural significance. Existing research disproportionately favours textual and content analysis of films themselves, while comparatively little work has directly investigated how tribal audiences perceive, evaluate, and emotionally respond to their own on-screen portrayal. Furthermore, the criteria by which "authenticity" or "cultural accuracy" should be judged remain undertheorised, with different studies applying inconsistent standards — ranging from linguistic accuracy to costume and

custom, to narrative agency. This paper responds to both gaps by synthesising the available literature into a structured account of tribal perception and authenticity, while proposing a methodological pathway for future primary research.

5. Objectives of the Study

- To assess the authenticity and cultural accuracy of tribal representation in Hindi films,
- To synthesis the secondary data in order to analyses representation of tribals in Indian cinema.

6. Research Methodology

6.1 Research Design : This paper adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in a systematic synthesis of secondary literature. The study draws on three categories of secondary source: (a) peer-reviewed and preprint academic scholarship on tribal and Adivasi representation in Indian cinema published between 2016 and 2026; (b) long-form journalistic and critical essays that document tribal and expert commentary on specific films; and (c) theoretical literature on media representation and cultivation effects. Sources were identified through targeted searches of academic databases, journal repositories, and reputable media publications, and were screened for direct relevance to Hindi-language cinema and tribal/Adivasi identity.

6.2 Scope and Delimitations : The study is delimited to mainstream commercial Hindi cinema, with selective comparative reference to other Indian-language industries where the literature makes such comparisons explicit. It does not extend to television serials, digital-streaming content, or documentary cinema, except where such works are directly discussed within the reviewed literature. Because this paper is based on secondary synthesis rather than newly collected primary data, its findings should be read as an evidence-based conceptual account rather than as statistically representative survey results.

7. Historical Evolution of Tribal Representation in Hindi Cinema

Table 1 summarises the broad phases through which tribal representation in Hindi cinema is documented to have moved, as reconstructed from the reviewed literature.

Period	Representative Films / Trends	Dominant Mode of Portrayal	Key Source(s)
1950s–1960s	Naagin (1954), Madhumati (1958)	Mysticism, reincarnation motifs; tribal identity as exotic backdrop; the “tribal number” song-dance sequence	The Caravan (2016)
1970s–1990s	Yeh Gulistan Hamara (1972)	Tribal communities as obstacles to state-led “development”; framing as illiterate or savage	Kumar & Sharma (2022)
2000s	Lal Salaam (2002), Chak De! India (2007)	Tribal characters linked to Naxalism/resistance narratives; token inclusion with minimal dialogue or agency	The Caravan (2016); The Jugaad Project (2024)
2010s	MSG 2: The Messenger (2015) and comparable releases	Overt exoticisation and dehumanisation (e.g., tribal figures framed as monstrous or sub-human)	The Jugaad Project (2024)
2020s	Large-scale mythological/period	Persistence of “herd” and “savage” tropes despite claims of celebratory	Kumar & Sharma (2022); Khadia &

Period	Representative Films / Trends	Dominant Mode of Portrayal	Key Source(s)
	spectacles	intent; growing critical pushback	Gupta (2026a)
2024–2026	Emerging content-analytic and audience-perception scholarship	Scholarly and critical push toward ethical, collaborative, and ethnographically informed portrayal	Khadia & Gupta (2025, 2026a, 2026b)

Table 1

When viewed collectively, such stages seem more cyclical in nature, with critical self-awareness in the industry being frequently followed by a relapse into familiar and stereotypical depictions of the 'exotic', especially in the case of high-budget films with heavy use of spectacular imagery based on tribes (Kumar & Sharma, 2022).

8. Analysis

8.1 Recognition and Misrecognition : One common feature of the works discussed in this review is that the audiences and critics of these mainstream Hindi films, which supposedly depict the life of tribes, consistently feel the phenomenon of misrecognition. The critical essays on the recently released blockbuster films on tribes indicate that even the sympathetic and costly endeavors, which attempt to celebrate some historic tribal personality, introduce a set of imaginary customs and overemphasized behaviors, along with a hybrid form of "tribal" dressing that does not belong to any tribe, thus creating a picture that the tribal audience has difficulty recognizing itself in, although it appears authentic (Kumar & Sharma, 2022).

The interview method provides a clearer insight into the topic. According to the study by Khadia and Gupta (2025), which incorporated interviews with filmmakers and perceptions from the audience, the level of accuracy regarding the representations was not consistent among different dimensions: perceptions related to the moral and values-based representations were found to be moderately accurate since many subjects observed that some movies managed to depict features of tribal resilience and unity while at the same time identifying stereotypical aspects in other dimensions of the same movie. It means that the perception of tribal representation is not just negative or positive but multi-faceted one – people may appreciate the efforts made in the movie for visibility while criticizing the way of its representation.

8.2 Emotional and Social Meanings of Being Seen : Going beyond the issues of accuracy of facts presented, the academic sources discuss another important issue – the emotional impact of this reduction to the spectacle. In the comments regarding the "tribal number" song and dance in the historical context, the authors emphasize the tradition of showing tribal-coded characters exclusively to perform dances, to beautify the scene, and then leaving them out of the storyline without ever letting them "speak, think or feel" (The Caravan, 2016). Modern tribes, therefore, view even the most progressive recent films through the lens of this history – they worry not only about the accuracy of facts but also about the fact that the characters of the tribes are shown as an element of spectacle and not as full-fledged participants in the plot.

Another important issue discussed is the connection between caste, gender and tribal identity. Particularly, the Adivasi women have to endure a twofold exclusion – their rare appearances in the movies are usually associated with their status of victims or subordinates (IJRASET, 2025). This body of work suggests that perception of representation cannot be treated as a single undifferentiated category; it is inflected by gender, region, and the specific tribal community being depicted, since a Gond viewer's response to a generic "tribal" character

may differ substantially from that of a viewer belonging to a Northeastern tribal community whose region and appearance have been separately and specifically "othered" in Hindi cinema's imagination of the Indian frontier (Kumar & Sharma, 2022).

8.3 Emerging Counter-Narratives and Cautious Optimism : Not all findings are negative. Scholars applying the Cinematic Representation and Perception Framework note that a small but growing set of films have begun to engage tribal communities more collaboratively — through the use of tribal consultants, location shooting in tribal regions, and narrative arcs that grant tribal characters decision-making agency rather than positioning them purely as objects of rescue or threat (Khadia & Gupta, 2026b). Where this has occurred, audience-perception findings suggest a correspondingly more favourable reception among tribal viewers, who report a greater sense of narrative respect even when specific cultural details remain imperfect (Khadia & Gupta, 2025). This indicates that perception of representation is shaped as much by the degree of narrative agency granted to tribal characters as by surface-level accuracy of costume or custom.

8.4 Linguistic Erasure : One of the most consistently documented gaps between tribal representation and lived reality concerns language. Critical reviews of casting and dialogue in mainstream Hindi cinema note that tribal characters are frequently shown speaking fluent Hindi, or are simply rendered silent, even in scenes explicitly set within a specific tribal community with its own distinct language — a pattern illustrated by the observation that two Adivasi characters from Jharkhand in a widely viewed 2007 sports film are shown as unable to communicate in Hindi and are given minimal dialogue overall, effectively erasing rather than representing their linguistic identity (The Jugaad Project, 2024). The importance of this phenomenon can be appreciated considering that language is among the main features that India's many indigenous peoples use to differentiate themselves from each other; reduction of all this diversity into a common "tribal" language renders impossible any genuine representation.

8.5 Costume, Custom, and Material Culture : The second common gap is related to the issue of costume and visual symbolism. When reviewing films about tribes with either historical or mythological themes, there is a trend of creating or mixing up elements of tribal cultures by putting together elements from unrelated tribes, overstressing body paint and clothing, or even showing actions (such as acting like animals in groups) which cannot be found in any real tribal culture practices (Kumar & Sharma, 2022). Due to the heterogeneity of Indian tribes in terms of languages, geographic location, and culture (from the Gond tribe of central India to Bhils tribe in Rajasthan and Gujarat and many others in the northeastern part of India), the creation of one unified tribal visual code becomes an evidence of inauthenticity.

8.6 Social Structure and Narrative Agency : Authenticity is not just about visual accuracy alone; it also entails whether the storyline in the film captures the social and political dynamics that exist within the tribal societies. Scholarship applying content-analytic methods to tribal cinema finds that Hindi films addressing tribal displacement, land rights, or insurgency-linked violence tend to resolve these conflicts through the intervention of a non-tribal protagonist — typically a state official, journalist, or urban outsider — relegating tribal characters to the position of beneficiaries rather than agents of their own resolution (Khadia & Gupta, 2026a; The Caravan, 2016). This narrative pattern, sometimes described in broader media studies as the "white saviour" structure repurposed along caste and regional lines, misrepresents the documented history of tribal-led resistance movements, land-rights litigation, and community organising, in

which tribal actors have historically been protagonists of their own struggles rather than passive recipients of external rescue.

8.7 Comparative Evidence from Other Indian-Language Cinemas : Comparative analysis suggests that authenticity is achievable within commercial Indian cinema when filmmakers invest in community engagement and symbolic specificity. Studies of recent Tamil cinema highlight a more deliberate use of visual semiotics — specific symbols, rituals, and social markers tied to a particular tribal or oppressed community — to convey the structural, rather than individual, nature of tribal marginalisation (Divakar & Alfazeena, 2026). Similarly, scholarship on *Jai Bhim* frames its Adivasi representation within a specific legal and historical struggle rather than a generic tribal backdrop, lending the film a documented degree of cultural and procedural accuracy that reviewed Hindi-language comparators largely lack (Julianne & Raj, 2023). These examples, in comparison, prove that the continued use of inauthentic imagery related to tribes within Hindi films is an industry practice rather than something that commercial filmmaking cannot avoid.

8.9 A Composite Authenticity Assessment

Table 2 shows a synthesis of the qualitative analysis of authenticity in respect to the different representational dimensions identified in the literature.

Dimension of Authenticity	Documented Pattern in Hindi Cinema	Source(s)
Language	Tribal characters shown speaking fluent Hindi or rendered near-silent; distinct tribal languages rarely represented	The Jugaad Project (2024)
Costume and material culture	Composite, homogenised, or exaggerated “tribal” aesthetics not tied to a specific documented community	Kumar & Sharma (2022)
Social structure / kinship	Rarely depicted with specificity; tribal social organisation often flattened into generic “tribe” or “village” imagery	Khadia & Gupta (2026a)
Narrative agency	Tribal characters typically positioned as beneficiaries of outsider intervention rather than protagonists of their own resolution	The Caravan (2016); Khadia & Gupta (2026a)
Moral / value framing	Moderate perceived accuracy; mixture of stereotypical and resilience-affirming portrayals	Khadia & Gupta (2025)
Gender-specific portrayal	Compounded erasure of Adivasi women; roles limited chiefly to victimhood	IJRASET (2025)

Table 2

10. Discussion : According to the synthesis done it becomes clear that despite the difference between perception and authenticity, there exists an interdependence of these two concepts. The depiction of tribe’s in the films does not depend solely on the accuracy, but depends rather on whether they are able to take the role of the narrator and on whether their specific identity is recognized in the film, instead of their being referred to as simply "tribals". Technical

mistakes, like those made in the costumes and dialect of the tribe members, are more tolerated by tribal audiences if the film respects their social complexity and agency (Khadia & Gupta, 2025).

Thus, the idea that the overall cumulative impression from the representation is much more significant than any particular example is supported by cultivation theory (Journalism University, 2026). A linguistically accurate but narratively disempowering film can have a smaller effect on audience perception than the film which makes some liberties with representation but emphasizes the role of the tribe member as an active agent in the narration. This is relevant to the way in which the Hindi film industry may need to consider issues of representation in the future, where authenticity is more than mere window dressing; it is a structural commitment to tribal narrative autonomy and community consultation.

There is a research methodological concern that arises out of this analysis as well. As there are hundreds of tribes in India, any research that tries to treat "tribal representation" as a homogeneous category runs the risk of replicating the very homogenization it is trying to critique. Future primary research should, wherever possible, disaggregate findings by specific tribal community, region, gender, and generation, since the literature reviewed here suggests that these factors meaningfully shape both the experience of representation and the standards by which authenticity is judged (IJRASET, 2025; Kumar & Sharma, 2022).

11. Recommendations :

- Filmmakers undertaking tribal-themed narratives should engage tribal consultants, writers, and, where possible, tribal cast members throughout pre-production, scripting, and costume design rather than as post-hoc validators of a finished product.
- Industry bodies and film schools should incorporate community-specific research — including field visits, oral history collection, and consultation with tribal cultural organisations — into standard pre-production practice for any project depicting a named tribal community.
- Narrative structures should grant tribal characters agency in resolving the central conflicts of tribal-themed films, rather than positioning them as passive beneficiaries of non-tribal intervention.
- Media researchers should prioritise primary, community-disaggregated audience-perception studies to complement the existing body of content-analytic scholarship, given the evident diversity of tribal responses documented across regions and communities.
- Policy and regulatory bodies concerned with media diversity should consider representation guidelines or incentive structures — comparable to those used for gender or disability representation in some markets — specifically addressing tribal and indigenous representation in Indian cinema.

12. Conclusion : The connection between Hindi films and tribal identity can thus be described, from the perspective of the above reviewed literature, by the greater presence of continuity rather than transformation. From the stereotyped "tribal number" of mid-century Bollywood movies to the highly stereotyped, composite images of tribes featured in today's Hindi films, the Indian film industry seems to have consistently narrowed the broad spectrum of tribal groups into a small number of cinematic conventions. It is clear that the tribal audience is highly conscious of the gap, finding an unrelenting misrepresentation of their identity even in the sympathetic films and appreciating much more those few films which allow them language and

narrative identity. While authenticity cannot be equated with only proper costume and language, it lies in the very possibility for the tribal community to have a presence in their own story rather than in someone else's. In light of the complex issues concerning representation and the social responsibility of the Indian cinema industry, continued focus on tribal perception and accuracy in terms of culture should lead to an authentic storytelling.

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