

Frames of Misrepresentation: Indigenous Insights into Cultural Depictions in the Mainstream Cinema

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Abstract

The research article discusses the portrayal of Tamil culture through the Bollywood movie "Chennai Express" in Indian cinema. The paper aims to discuss how mainstream Indian Hindi film depicts Tamil culture and portrays cultural misinterpretation. Through the close examination of the film's narrative, characters, wardrobe choices, cultural elements and reaction from pertinent critical comments, the research article reveals that "Chennai Express" often falls back into simplistic stereotypes of Tamil culture, traditional dress, customs and manners. The article explores the cultural hegemony of Bollywood and how Bollywood misinterprets other regional cultures. It also discusses the broader consequences of cross-cultural understanding and cultural identity misinterpretations. The article concludes by highlighting the effectiveness of cinema in presenting Indian culture and emphasising the need for more genuine portrayals of regional cultures to defend against stereotypes and misconceptions.

Keywords: *Ambivalence, Bollywood, Cultural Hegemony, Indian Cinema, Tamil Culture.*

INTRODUCTION

Cultural Misinterpretations in Cinema

Cinema is a medium that represents and reflects society and its culture. In the Indian context, cinema has become an important element in regular life. In India, cinema moved from the level of entertainment to the expression of reality. The Indian cinema holds a firm grip on business and cultural value worldwide.

Foreign countries understand Indian culture mainly through cinema because Indian cinemas are accepted worldwide mainly for their theme and plot. In this scenario, which cinema is usually branded as Indian cinema? India has a variety of languages and cultures, so do the Indian brand cinemas accurately represent everyone? Representing all the aspects and nuances is not possible, but how does it represent a culture that is not close to mainstream? This research article deals with how the branded Indian cinemas and representatives depict the Tamil culture to others. Tamil cinema gains greater reach and triggers discussions at the global level, but still, the Indian cinema shows partiality and misrepresentations while representing the culture and lifestyle of Tamil Nadu.

Stereotypes Perpetuated:

Stereotypes were built and projected through cinema regularly. The person who has never stepped out of his hometown has a notion and understanding of the entire country because of cinema. People gain experience of other cultures and lifestyles through movies. All the heroines are fair and have wheatish complex skin, which was the most significant myth created by the cinema industry. Apart from the appearance, it started to project cultural elements like food, economic conditions, language and dress. Almost everyone understands other cultures in India, but most are misunderstandings. Even in the same state and culture, the movies come out with many misrepresentations and create the worst stereotypes. For example, people from the western region of Tamil Nadu have different understandings of people who belong to the southern and northern regions of Tamil Nadu. It is the condition of the same state itself; what will be the condition in the whole nation?

In earlier days, misrepresentations took place in most movies when it came to representing or portraying a person from another part of the country. Rather than misrepresentation, the Tamil movies have shown Punjab Sikhs as representatives of North India. Still, most of the age-old people in Tamil Nadu believe that all North Indians wear the turban and have an identical beard and moustache. Those people were unaware of the other languages in North India; they considered Hindi the common language for all others. These were the conditions of previous days; the people might not have been aware of or unexposed to other cultures. The modern world cuts down many barriers among borders, languages, religions, cultures, and beliefs, but these are turned into more sensitive identities.

The people who lived in European countries for their jobs might have pride in their Asian roots and the Dravidian language. The Tamil people celebrate the victory of Mrs. Kamala Harris, elected Vice President of the USA, the achievements of Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google, and many other personalities who have their roots in Tamil land. It is widely happening among people who hail from Indian backgrounds. These acceptances and celebrations show that the people are still united and bound by their culture and traditional ideologies. The people consider these icons ambassadors for their identity and land, but what happens in cinema?

Culture Misrepresented:

This paper analysed how the culture of Tamil land is portrayed in the Bollywood movie, *The Chennai Express*. The movies prefer using characters from other cultures for comical elements or minor characters. Even the language, intonation or pronunciation turned into fun elements and were used in the movies. In this movie, the central role (heroine) belongs to Tamil Nadu, and they brought a few elements to the limelight. The Bollywood movie industry is considered the face of Indian cinema. Though great legends like Satyajit Ray, Adoor Gopalakrishnan, and K. Balachander shape the cinema uniquely, the Bollywood cinema enjoys more pride and benefits than the other regional language movies. Bollywood actors gain more attention in the global market and are widely popular.

The most popular icons of Bollywood cinema, Shahrukh Khan and Deepika Padukone, joined hands for this movie project. Unanimously, this project creates high expectations in Bollywood when it deals with two different cultures of India. The protagonist grew up in Mumbai, but he belongs to a Punjabi family; the heroine belongs to Tamil Nadu. When approached from the cultural perspective, it never represents the culture of Tamil or Punjab, but there are many stereotypes and misrepresentations throughout the movie.

When it comes to the story, the director just mixed up the commercial elements, the hero's stardom and his previous success formulas. The storyline never meets the demands of the present, and it enjoyed the 90s structure. Many critics criticised this movie, mentioning it as the recreation of Sharuk Khan's blockbuster, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenga* (DDLJ), released in 1995. The popular website for Bollywood cinema commented that "this one is SRK doing his DDLJ work with a twist of Tamil tadka in it as the romance initiates travels through the road of trouble! This is not the 90s anymore, and falling in love needs much toiling now" (Bollypedia, n.d). One more reviewer, Chopra, stated, "And after a while, the innumerable references to DDLJ seemed like a lazy shot of siphoning some of the enduring affection we have for that film." (Hindustan Times)

The reviews and critics have mixed opinions about its story, concept, and plot, but this movie catches the big fish in its collection. When the movie reaches a worldwide audience and is branded as Indian cinema globally, it should have a minimum standard in expressing the culture. Though it is a commercial film, it is focused on and taken only for entertainment. A movie must maintain dignity when it comes to expressing culture. Why are commercial movies from Bollywood never ready to make fun of their surroundings and culture related to the Northern States? The Bollywood movies misrepresent important factors and issues like religion, female roles, LGBT issues, and patriotism.

Cultural Hegemony and Representation:

Most of the time, Bollywood failed to project the culture of others; it even misrepresented Western culture and promoted some cultural jingoism. Regarding this note, the article "How Bollywood Stereotypes the West" listed the misrepresentations and stereotypes in Bollywood cinema. It stated that Hollywood often stereotypes India, but films made in India paint the clichéd portrait not only about the Western culture but also about the Indian emigrants. The author highlighted movies like *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jaayenge* (1994), *Pardes* (1997), *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001), *Kal Ho Naa Ho* (2003) and *Befirke* (2017) to explain how Western culture and the NRI (non-resident Indians) mindset were explained and expressed in Bollywood cinema. She mentioned that the approach towards Western culture remains the same regarding representation: "Apart from swapping the Statue of Liberty for the Eiffel Tower in the backdrop of a musical number, the approach taken to France is the same taken towards the US in films". The author appreciates the films *The Big Sick* (2017), *The Namesake* (2006), and *Meet the Patels* (2014) for expressing the minds of Indian-Americans or British Indians who were born and brought up in foreign lands (Laya).

The representation of Tamil Nadu and the culture of Tamils were misrepresented not only in the story part of the movie *Chennai Express*. The stereotype starts from the movie posters. The girl wearing bridal makeup and a saree is not enough to depict the attire of most people in Tamil Nadu. The style of draping the saree differs based on the culture and states in India. The costume designer of this movie connects the concept of the saree with Tamil Nadu, but it never relates to the attire worn in the villages of Tamil Nadu. They might go with the craze of jasmine flowers to avoid confusion about culture or wrong identification. The girl in a saree wearing stylish sunglasses is a rare combo, which is hard to see in any village in Tamil Nadu. Antonio Gramsci's (1971) notion of cultural hegemony offers a lens to examine Bollywood's commanding role in Indian cinema and its impact on regional cultural portrayals (Lears, 1985). The film "*Chennai Express*" exemplifies how dominant cultural forces can shape perceptions of local traditions, often leading to oversimplified or inaccurate depictions. The movie's representation of Tamil Nadu is seen as a confluence of broad South Indian stereotypes

rather than authentic Tamil cultural elements. The costume choices, for instance, rely on generalised ideas of Indian fashion instead of accurately reflecting the diverse sartorial customs of Tamil Nadu's various regions. The film reinforces a homogenised view of Tamil identity by employing symbols like jasmine flowers. The juxtaposition of traditional sarees with modern sunglasses in village settings reveals a disconnect between urban Bollywood aesthetics and rural Tamil realities. This mishmash of cultural signifiers demonstrates how Bollywood's hegemonic influence can blur regional distinctions, potentially marginalising genuine local expressions in favour of a more marketable, pan-Indian image. Such portrayals contribute to Bollywood's continued dominance in crafting narratives about Indian cultural identity, echoing Gramsci's insights on how cultural hegemony operates through the production and dissemination of mainstream cultural norms.

Stereotypes in Visual and Narrative Elements:

The story of this movie revolves around unexpected situations which ultimately lead to love. As already discussed, the story has nothing new to inspire or enjoyable things, which makes the audience sit and enjoy. Every love story in movies has some challenges, and the vital role of the antagonist is to disagree with love. Sometimes, problems arise among family members because of differences in religion, caste, and status. In this movie, the heroine is forced to marry someone with her father's approval. Her father is known as the influential person in that village; somewhere, he is portrayed as Don, but there is no appropriate scene or background story to prove his power. It projects only through the crowd of people with weapons and always stands behind him. This plot is usual in commercial cinema, but what made them use billhook (Aruval) as the symbol or representation of violence in the promotion posters? The article does not argue that there is no connection between violence and Aruval (billhook). However, it is not ready to accept that it represents an ethnic group. From the early 90s, Tamil cinema glorifies non-violence and wants to bring reformation to society. Most village-based iconic movies like *Devar Magan* (1992) and *Kizhakku Cheemayile* (1993) educate the people to come out from the pride and violence related to their identity. In this condition, this movie once again misrepresents the ideology of the particular state and strengthens the stereotype about culture.

The group of men standing without shirts—all of them are fatty and wear a dhoti (Lungi) differently. Their colour complexity is also considered in this part; the dark complexion related to Tamils might not be the misrepresentation, but why do they still follow the stereotype of a heroine who always has a wheatish complexion and is fair, even if she belongs to the root of Tamil? Suppose the movie team prefers Aruval as a representation of violence/don from Tamil Nadu. What will they prefer to represent the other states, which are struggling with brutal rapes, cold-blood murders, religious riots and communal clashes? The name Chennai is enough for any audience to link or associate this movie with Tamil Nadu, but the posters are filled with stereotypes and misrepresentations.

Critical Reception and Public Response:

The reviewer Shubhra Gupta (2013) shared her experience of getting frustrated with stereotypes while watching this movie; she stated, "Wannakum, Wannango? I went into Chennai Express dreading I would be doused, doused, I tell you, with a staggering number of stereotypes, and that I would spend the film flinching, grimacing, and counting the minutes. Mercifully, the director does not have his dark "southly" fellows licking rasam off their elbows. Yes, the stereotypes are there". (The Indian Express)

The movie wants to reach the Tamil audience and gain attention as a blockbuster hit in the Tamil cinema market. The movie had no popular Tamil actors except Sathyaraj, but they wanted to project it as related to Tamil Nadu. For that purpose, they came up with a tribute to Rajni Kanth, the superstar of Tamil Cinema. Based on this idea, they released a song as a tribute to him under the label "Lungi Dance". The song went viral and was celebrated as a sensational hit. The song had no connection with Tamil Nadu except for the name Rajni Kanth, and there is no logic behind the term "Lungi Dance" when they mentioned it as a tribute to Rajni.

The song is filled with stereotypes and misrepresents the state with things that hardly connect with Tamil Nadu. In *The Economic Times*, there is an article on this song that mentions that it has put the spotlight on Lungi. The author explained the history of Lungi, how it travelled from Myanmar, how the people modified it based on their convenience, and how Lungi is famous among India in many states. He quoted the tweets of famous personalities about this lungi dance and how that song made it popular and cool.

The article highlighted the scene from the *Nayakan* movie and how Kamal Hassan sported a half-white lungi in that memorable scene. This article claimed the fact that Lungi is popular among Bengalis, Malayalis, and Assamese cultures; it recollects the incident of arresting Mr Karunandhi, former Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, in the year 2001 because he was wearing the 'Madras check' lungi at the time of midnight arrest. The article criticises the opposite reaction from the Tamils to this song; he mentioned that "Now, the unassuming garment is top of the mind for people across the country, thanks to Shahrukh Khan's latest release, *Chennai Express*, whose song 'Lungi Dance' is as gratingly stereotypical as the movie. Many who have seen the film or the song will likely hold on to their erroneous notion that Lungi is worn only by South Indian men. On the contrary, it is as common in the eastern states as in the southern ones (Seetharaman). It is understood that nobody from Tamil Nadu ever had any erroneous notion towards that movie or crew; nobody claimed Lagi as an identity of only Tamils or Tamil Nadu.

The people and critics from Tamil Nadu condemned this idea because they mentioned it as a tribute to Rajni Kanth, the icon of Tamil cinema. Most rational thinkers in Tamil Nadu criticise the song not for using the word "lungi," which has a connection with Tamil Nadu. However, they are not ready to tolerate more misrepresentations and stereotypes about Tamil Nadu in Bollywood cinema. Examining "*Chennai Express*" through Bhabha's concept of ambivalence unveils a nuanced interplay between cultural portrayal and stereotyping in Indian film. The movie's depiction of Tamil culture, especially "Lungi", reflects Bhabha's ideas on mimicry (Bhabha, 1984). It aims to embrace Tamil culture but creates a distorted reflection that verges on caricature.

The mixed responses to the film highlight the duality Bhabha describes in colonial discourse - simultaneously exploitative and supportive (Ashcroft et al., 1998). The clichéd portrayal of Tamil men aligns with Bhabha's concept of rigid, often unflattering images in colonial representation (Bhabha, 1984). However, the pushback from Tamil critics and viewers against these stereotypes echoes Bhabha's notion of how the represented can challenge such portrayals. The dialogue about the Lungi's widespread use across India also points to the cultural blending Bhabha often discusses, challenging overly simplistic cultural associations (Bhabha, 2013). This examination underscores the tension between authentic representation and misrepresentation in cross-cultural depictions within Indian cinema, revealing the complex dynamics at play when one region's film industry attempts to portray another's culture.

The tribute is something like an acknowledgement or praise for someone's achievement; it is an act of gratitude and respect, but in which aspect does the lungi dance come under the category of 'tribute' to Rajni? Mentioning the word "THALAIVA" in between that song or just having famous stills from his movie in the backdrop alone makes it a tribute? Do the lyrics do any justice to his achievement, or do they praise or celebrate his success? Everyone knows the answer, and it is straightforward for discussion. Why do the heroes or people who wish to pay tribute to Rajini not dance with a Lungi in that song? Why do they use it as a property for their dance? These questions are not odd things to find out the fault from a pointless perspective or argument, but they reject that song in the list of tributes. It might help to understand how that song is an example of misrepresentation and stereotype.

Bollywood's Approach to Sensitive Issues:

What could not be tolerated in this movie was how they described one of the problems between the India and Sri Lanka border in international waters. On what basis was the scene of diesel smuggling shown in the movie? It is the most sensitive thing between the two nations; still, the Tamil Nadu fishermen face sea problems because of border issues and security threats. When the police enquired in the harbour, Sharuk Khan used the statement, 'I am not a terrorist.' While watching that whole scene or segment, the audience may conclude that the group of men who were in the boat are terrorists. This is how the misrepresentations happened throughout the movie. The Sri Lankan government openly accused and banned the Tamil revolutionist groups as terrorists in their region; that problem was discussed with various international organisations to bring peace between them. At that time, if the popular cinema projected smuggling, which has connections to the Tamils and Sri Lanka, what kind of impact would that movie create? According to the data submitted by the Government of Tamil Nadu in the Madurai High Court, 85 fishermen were killed by Sri Lanka in the last ten years. The Sri Lankan navy had 167 incidents of shooting on Indian fishermen in the year between 1991 and 2011 (TOI). This data shows the pathetic condition of safety and the relationship between Sri Lankans and Indian Tamils.

Apart from language, a country like India connects the people through art and cinema and celebrates the movies and their favourite heroes. Still, we could find stickers and photographs of Bollywood heroes in the villages of Tamil Nadu; it applies to South Indian celebrities. The people encourage and prefer the multi-hero subjects and want to see many celebrities in a movie. There are no politics, language, or border barriers for the celebrities; the audience accepts them as role models and inspirations. In the last few years, there have been many politicians who request heroes to avoid smoking and drinking scenes in their movies because it misleads the young audience.

In 2005, the Union Health Minister, Mr. Anbumani, wanted to ban tobacco in media and cinema. In another incident in 2015, he referred to the verdict of the Kerala High Court, which mentioned that using tobacco in the film could be similar to advertising that particular product (The Economic Times). It shows the power of cinema and the role of celebrities in cultural representation. In this situation, the cinema industry is responsible for avoiding misrepresentation and stereotypes.

The misrepresentation and stereotypes will not only spread the wrong information or misunderstanding towards that particular group, but they will also affect the identity of that group. The culture of the Tamil people is rich and has a long history and tradition. The culture is not stagnant; it keeps changing based on the needs and demands of that particular group.

Food, lifestyle, and dress change depending on the demand of external factors like climate. At the same time, the culture, values, ethics, or some identities were closely associated with personal beliefs, policies, and practices. There are small groups of people in tribal communities that were not explored much in movies, but we can trace a lot of misrepresentation and stereotypical references in movies. It is also applicable to ethnic groups, which have great traditions and literature.

The movies in earlier days built many stereotypical references, but this is the age of educating the audience with proper information. In this era, the regional cinemas flourished with their own identity and raised their voice for rights; at this time, if movies built the same stereotype references, it entirely collapsed the structure of society.

Cinema as Cultural Educator:

Cinema and art are not merely entertainment in nations like India; people learn things and educate themselves from cinema. The nation could always witness defamation cases, lodging complaints on movie directors for the problems of misrepresentation of women, LGBT, religions, rituals, and political ideologies. These things show a need for refinement in the thought process when projecting the people for a particular group. It is not an act of cutting the throat of freedom to express, but a guideline to avoid misunderstandings. Most movie directors misrepresent a particular group without intention; in many cases, they do it unintentionally and because of a lack of knowledge or groundwork study about that group. In North India, a few people still use the term "Madrasi" to address people from the southern states of India. In Tamil Nadu, one term has become popular when addressing people from the northern part of India. The movies played a vital role in defining these terms and identifying them.

CONCLUSION

This article concentrates only on the surface level and highlights the misrepresentation, which looks odd and unacceptable. The movie can be approached from the perspectives of linguistic representations and cultural studies for further exploration. The idea of this article is not to bring any disgrace to the particular movie, director, or actors. However, it tries to bring a basic understanding of modern Tamil Nadu, which has been significantly refined in the last 60 years.

Every culture is beautiful and has values to learn and respect; still, literature encourages the art of translation for broader acceptance and enhancing knowledge relating to other cultures. It helps to enrich the art of interpersonal skills and relationships. The movie industry has a great business in doing movie remakes, dubbed, and copyrights. If the movie has misrepresentation or stereotypes in any aspect related to the other culture, it will not reach a wider audience.

The Oscar-winning movie 'Slum Dog Millionaire' received many accolades for screenplay, magical music, direction, and sound engineering, but the critics questioned how it represented India to the world. Why does the representation of India's dark side gain more attention from world cinema? The people who celebrated the success of 'Slumdog Millionaire' should think about these questions; likewise, the people who considered Chennai Express as an entertaining movie also have to think about the earlier questions on stereotypes and misrepresentation.

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