

Ethnic Identity and Marginalized Communities in Northeast India: An Analysis of Axone (2019)

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of ethnic identity and marginalization in the film Axone (2019), focusing on the lived experiences of Northeastern migrants in urban India. While mainstream Indian cinema has historically portrayed the Northeast through stereotypes or invisibility, Axone presents everyday life as a site where discrimination, negotiation, and cultural assertion coexist. Using qualitative content analysis supported by semiotic interpretation, the paper analyzes dialogues, characters, spatial interactions, and food practices depicted in the film.

The analysis identifies three interconnected dimensions of representation: racialization in everyday interactions, food as a marker of cultural identity and resistance, and the intersection of gender and ethnicity in shaping experiences of exclusion. The preparation of the traditional fermented dish "axone" functions not merely as a cultural practice but as a symbolic challenge to dominant norms of purity, belonging, and national identity. The film transforms ordinary domestic spaces into arenas of negotiation where prejudice becomes visible and solidarity becomes possible.

The study argues that Axone operates as a counter-narrative within Indian cinema by humanizing Northeastern identities and contesting the homogenizing imagination of the nation. By foregrounding humor, empathy, and everyday conflict, the film contributes to a more inclusive understanding of Indian identity and

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demonstrates how cinema can function as a medium of social awareness and cultural dialogue.

Introduction

India's national identity is often articulated through the idea of cultural plurality; however, this plurality has not always translated into equal visibility within cultural representation. Cinema, as a powerful cultural medium, participates in shaping collective imagination by determining who appears as belonging within the national narrative and who remains peripheral (Devadas, 2013). Within this representational hierarchy, communities from Northeast India have historically occupied a marginal position, frequently depicted through stereotypes, exoticization, or complete absence (McDuie-Ra, 2009; Sultana et al., 2020). Such portrayals reinforce the perception of Northeastern citizens as cultural outsiders despite their constitutional inclusion within the nation.

Scholars argue that this marginalization is rooted in deeper ideological and historical processes. Colonial and postcolonial frameworks produced enduring structures of difference in which visible ethnic markers-appearance, language, and food habits-become grounds for social categorization and exclusion (Cháirez-Garza et al., 2021; Ramirez, 2014). These processes contribute to what has been described as a "racialized" experience of citizenship, where everyday interactions reproduce hierarchies of belonging in metropolitan spaces (Sultana et al., 2020; Niumai & Rajesh, 2024). Consequently, Northeastern migrants frequently encounter misrecognition in urban centers through housing discrimination, stereotyping, and cultural prejudice, reflecting the persistence of internal othering within the national framework (McDuie-Ra, 2009).

Recent scholarship has emphasized that such marginalization cannot be understood solely through ethnicity; it operates at the intersection of gender, class, and migration status (Devi, 2024; Niumai & Rajesh, 2024). Northeastern women in particular experience layered discrimination in which racialized perceptions merge with gendered stereotypes, shaping both social vulnerability and strategies of negotiation. Cultural practices-especially food-also become central to this dynamic. Culinary traditions, often stigmatized as unfamiliar

Ethnic Identity and Marginalized Communities in Northeast India

or impure, act simultaneously as markers of difference and assertions of identity (Kikon, 2021; Mukherjee & Dutta, 2018). Thus, everyday practices reveal broader socio-political tensions between assimilation and cultural continuity.

In this context, cinema becomes a significant site of intervention. Rather than merely reflecting society, films construct and contest meanings of belonging (Haider, 2014; Bordoloi et al., 2023). The film *Axone* (2019), directed by Nicholas Kharkongor, foregrounds the everyday experiences of Northeastern migrants in Delhi and situates ordinary activities—particularly the preparation of a traditional fermented dish—as moments where identity, prejudice, and solidarity intersect. By centering routine interactions instead of dramatic conflict, the film shifts the discourse from spectacle to lived reality and invites reconsideration of dominant national narratives.

While previous discussions on representation have largely focused on stereotypical portrayals or political conflicts, fewer studies examine how everyday cultural practices operate as subtle forms of resistance and negotiation within urban India. Accordingly, this study explores how *Axone* represents the lived experiences of Northeastern migrants and analyzes the ways cinematic narratives engage with racialization and cultural exclusion (Kumar, 2025; McDuie-Ra, 2009; Cháirez-Garza et al., 2021; Sultana et al., 2020). Particular attention is given to the use of food, language, and humor as symbolic tools of cultural identity and resistance (Kikon, 2021; Bhattacharyya et al., 2023). Through this inquiry, the paper also contributes to broader discussions on inclusive national identity and ethical media representation (Niumai & Rajesh, 2024; Jalwal, 2025).

The study therefore asks how *Axone* represents the socio-cultural realities of Northeastern communities in India, in what ways it challenges or reproduces stereotypes of race, gender, and ethnicity, how food operates as a cinematic metaphor for belonging and resistance, and what implications the film holds for national integration and media representation. By addressing these concerns, the paper positions the film as a cultural text that reveals how marginalization is reproduced in everyday interactions while also demonstrating how ordinary practices can challenge homogenizing narratives of Indian culture.

Literature review

This section reviews existing scholarship related to cultural representation, racialization, and everyday identity practices in the Indian context in order to situate the analysis of *Axone* within broader academic debates. Rather than focusing on a single discipline, the review draws from film studies, sociology, and cultural studies to understand how cinema participates in constructing meanings of belonging and difference. Particular attention is given to discussions on national identity formation, internal othering, and the politics of everyday life, as these frameworks help interpret how ordinary interactions in the film communicate larger social hierarchies. The literature is therefore organized into three interconnected areas: representation and national identity, racialization in everyday interaction, and the intersection of food, gender, and cultural practice.

Representation and national identity

Scholars of Indian cinema have long argued that film plays a central role in constructing the imagination of the nation and its cultural boundaries (Devadas, 2013; Haider, 2014). Mainstream narratives have historically privileged a homogenized national identity, often marginalizing peripheral regions and communities (Mukherjee & Dutta, 2018; Chakrabarty, 2024). Within this framework, Northeast India has frequently appeared as either invisible or stereotyped, reinforcing perceptions of difference rather than belonging (McDuié-Ra, 2009; Sultana et al., 2020). Recent studies, however, suggest a gradual shift toward counter-narratives that foreground marginalized perspectives and challenge dominant cultural hierarchies (Bhattacharyya et al., 2023; Jalwal, 2025). Such works position cinema not merely as representation but as a site where national identity is negotiated and contested.

Racialization and everyday othering

The marginal position of Northeastern communities cannot be understood only as regional neglect; scholars identify it as a process of racialization operating within the nation-state (Cháirez-Garza et al., 2021). Everyday interactions—housing access, employment, and public encounters—often reproduce hierarchies of belonging by marking visible ethnic difference as foreign (Sultana et al., 2020; Kumar, 2025). This phenomenon reflects the persistence of colonial categories that

Ethnic Identity and Marginalized Communities in Northeast India

continue to shape social perception in contemporary urban India (Ramirez, 2014; Haokip, 2021). Studies further note that these experiences are embedded in ordinary spaces rather than exceptional events, making exclusion appear normalized (Niumai & Rajesh, 2024). Consequently, cinematic texts that depict routine interactions provide important insight into how marginalization is socially produced and maintained.

Food, gender and intersectionality

Recent scholarship emphasizes that identity is negotiated not only through discourse but also through everyday practices, particularly food and domestic space (Kikon, 2021; Mukherjee & Dutta, 2018). Culinary traditions often become markers of cultural difference and are subject to notions of purity and pollution within broader social hierarchies (James & Mathew, 2023). At the same time, intersectional analysis demonstrates that Northeastern women experience layered marginalization where ethnicity intersects with gendered stereotypes (Devi, 2024; Niumai & Rajesh, 2024). Yet these spaces also enable solidarity and agency, allowing cultural practices to function as subtle forms of resistance (Bordoloi et al., 2023). Therefore, examining everyday cultural activities within cinema offers a productive way to understand both exclusion and assertion of identity.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive approach to examine *Axone* (2019) as a sociocultural text. The objective is not to evaluate cinematic quality but to analyze how meanings related to identity, marginalization, and belonging are constructed through narrative events, character interactions, and visual representation. The film is treated as a cultural document that reflects and negotiates social realities within contemporary urban India (Kayal & Saha, 2022; Wahyuni et al., 2023).

The analysis is guided by an interpretive theoretical orientation combining postcolonial, racialization, and intersectional perspectives. Postcolonial othering explains how colonial legacies continue to shape the perception of Northeastern communities as cultural outsiders within the national imagination (McDuffie, 2009; Ramirez, 2014). A critical race perspective further understands India as a

racialized social structure where visible differences such as appearance, accent, and cuisine create hierarchies of belonging and exclusion (Cháirez-Garza et al., 2021; Sultana et al., 2020). Additionally, intersectionality helps interpret how Northeastern women experience layered marginalization at the overlap of ethnicity, gender, and class (Devi, 2024; Niumai & Rajesh, 2024). Together, these perspectives allow the film to be examined as a cultural discourse that both reflects and contests structures of power.

The study primarily employs qualitative content analysis to identify recurring themes such as racism, identity, food practices, and gendered experience (Hua & Zhao, 2024). Key sequences involving interpersonal conflict, domestic interaction, and public encounters were closely examined to understand how discrimination and negotiation operate in everyday situations. Dialogues, character behavior, spatial arrangements, and narrative progression were systematically observed to determine how marginalization is articulated and normalized.

To deepen interpretation, the study also incorporates semiotic analysis of visual and symbolic elements. Drawing on Barthes' concept of myth and signification, attention is given to recurring motifs such as the preparation of traditional food, reactions to smell, and the framing of shared living spaces (Barthes, 1972; Zhang, 2025). These elements are examined as signs communicating broader cultural meanings related to purity, belonging, and exclusion.

The analysis focuses on three interpretive categories: everyday racialization and social interaction, food as a marker of cultural identity and resistance, and the intersection of gender and ethnicity in shaping lived experience. These categories emerged through repeated viewing and thematic grouping of scenes rather than being imposed prior to observation. Academic literature and critical scholarship support interpretation, while the primary data remains the film itself (McDuie-Ra, 2009; Niumai & Rajesh, 2024).

By combining thematic content analysis with semiotic interpretation, the study evaluates how cinematic narratives may both perpetuate and challenge stereotypes about marginalized communities in India (Eriss & Khoshsaligheh, 2023). This methodological approach enables an understanding of cinema as a

Ethnic Identity and Marginalized Communities in Northeast India

meaning-producing cultural practice rather than merely a narrative medium.

Analysis and discussion

The analysis of *Axone* (2019) examines how the film represents the lived experiences of Northeastern migrants through three interconnected dimensions of marginalization and negotiation. First, the narrative reveals processes of racialization in which characters are repeatedly positioned as outsiders within their own nation through everyday social interaction (McDuie-Ra, 2009; Cháirez-Garza et al., 2021). Second, the preparation of the traditional dish *axone* functions as a symbolic act of cultural assertion, where food becomes a medium through which belonging is contested and defended in urban space (Kikon, 2021; Bhattacharyya et al., 2023). Third, the film foregrounds the intersection of gender and ethnicity by depicting how Northeastern women experience layered discrimination while simultaneously forming networks of solidarity and support (Devi, 2024; Niumai & Rajesh, 2024). Taken together, these thematic strands demonstrate how *Axone* transforms ordinary daily experiences into a critique of social exclusion, presenting resilience and cultural community not as exceptional resistance but as continuous negotiation within everyday life.

Theme 1: Racialization and everyday othering

The film foregrounds how Northeastern migrants are positioned as outsiders within their own nation through routine social interaction rather than exceptional conflict. Instead of presenting racism as isolated violence, the narrative reveals how belonging is constantly negotiated in ordinary encounters shaped by appearance, language, and perception (McDuie-Ra, 2009; Cháirez-Garza et al., 2021). Through casual remarks, suspicion, and public behaviour, discrimination becomes normalized and socially tolerated (Sultana et al., 2020).

A recurring pattern in the film is the reduction of individual identity into collective appearance. A neighbour's sarcastic statement, 'Har din ek naye aadmi dikhte ho, waise bhi tum logon ka chehra ek jaisa lagta hai.' transforms ethnic diversity into a single indistinguishable category. The remark functions as humour within conversation, yet it

reinforces hierarchy by marking the characters as culturally foreign (Kumar, 2025). Similarly, a flashback recounts Bendang being beaten due to his "foreign" looks, demonstrating how visible difference repeatedly triggers hostility. These instances illustrate how racial microaggressions operate cumulatively, embedding exclusion within everyday life.

The normalization of prejudice becomes most evident in public space. In a marketplace confrontation, Chanbi protests derogatory comments made about her ethnicity and is slapped while bystanders remain passive.



Figure 1. Chanbi confronted and assaulted in a public street while bystanders remain passive (Axone, 2019). Source: Screenshot from Axone, directed by Nicholas Kharkongor, 2019.

The visual composition encloses the protagonist within a crowd that does not intervene, suggesting that discrimination persists through collective indifference as much as individual action. Crowded urban surroundings contrast with her social isolation, reinforcing outsider status despite shared citizenship (Niumai & Rajesh, 2024). Through such moments, the film reframes racism from extraordinary violence to normalized practice, demonstrating how repeated micro-interactions construct internal boundaries of belonging. Axone therefore exposes racialization as an everyday social process that makes Northeastern individuals feel foreign within their own country.

Theme 2: Food as cultural identity and resistance

Food functions as the film's central symbolic medium through which belonging and exclusion are negotiated. The preparation of the fermented soybean dish axone becomes more than a culinary activity; it operates as an assertion of cultural continuity within an environment that treats difference as disturbance (Kikon, 2021;

Ethnic Identity and Marginalized Communities in Northeast India

Mukherjee & Dutta, 2018). By foregrounding sensory experience—particularly smell—the narrative demonstrates how minority culture becomes visible and therefore contested in shared urban space (Bhattacharyya et al., 2023).

When the characters attempt to cook the dish, neighbours react with hostility and describe the smell as dirty and intolerable. A remark such as "Yeh kya badboo hai? Tum logon ka khana toh ganda hai!" associates cuisine with impurity and reinforces hierarchies of acceptable culture. The conflict reflects what scholars describe as culinary nationalism, where dominant dietary norms are treated as culturally superior while regional food practices are stigmatized (James & Mathew, 2023). Here, rejection is not directed merely at food but at identity itself. Upasana's response, 'Hamare khane ki badbu se problem hai, lekin hamare hone se bhi to problem hai na?' explicitly connects culinary prejudice to social exclusion, transforming cooking into a form of protest.



Figure 2. Preparation of Axone as a collective activity within shared domestic space (Axone, 2019). Source: Screenshot from Axone, directed by Nicholas Kharkongor, 2019.

The kitchen space consequently shifts from private domesticity to a site of resistance. Collective chopping, stirring, and sharing of memories create community solidarity while refusing pressure to assimilate (Alex & Justin, 2023; Balraj, 2023). The emphasis on smell exposes caste-inflected notions of purity and pollution embedded in everyday interaction (Mukherjee & Dutta, 2018). By insisting on cooking the dish despite opposition, the characters reclaim both space and identity, demonstrating how routine practices can operate as subtle political assertion (Bhattacharyya et al., 2023).

Ultimately, the completed meal signifies more than nourishment; it represents the legitimacy of cultural presence. The act of cooking

Axone therefore becomes a metaphor for recognition, suggesting that coexistence requires acceptance of sensory and cultural difference rather than its erasure.

Theme 3: Intersectionality: Gender, identity and solidarity

The film further demonstrates that marginalization is not experienced uniformly but is shaped by the intersection of ethnicity and gender. Northeastern women are not only marked as culturally different but are also morally judged through stereotypes associated with appearance, clothing, and independence (Devi, 2024; Niumai & Rajesh, 2024). Their bodies become sites where social anxieties about modernity and cultural purity are projected, transforming racial prejudice into gendered suspicion.

In one confrontation, a local woman accuses Chanbi "Main achhe se jaanti hoon tum ladkiyon ko... chhote kapde pehen kar hamare beton ko phasati ho!" The statement frames Northeastern women as sexually immoral outsiders and constructs them as threats to social order. Here, ethnicity is translated into character judgement, revealing how difference is feminized and policed through moral language. Rather than simple hostility, the dialogue exposes a social logic where racialization operates through control over women's behaviour and respectability.



Figure 3. Moral policing of Chanbi by local residents highlighting gendered stereotyping (Axone, 2019). Source: Screenshot from Axone, directed by Nicholas Kharkongor, 2019.

Despite such accusations, the women are not portrayed as passive victims. Chanbi and Upasana respond with assertiveness, negotiation, and refusal to internalize shame. Their reactions demonstrate agency within constraint, showing that resistance often appears as everyday dignity rather than dramatic rebellion (Devi, 2024). The narrative therefore shifts the focus from suffering alone to

Ethnic Identity and Marginalized Communities in Northeast India

self-assertion, presenting identity as something actively defended in daily interaction.

Through these representations, the film challenges the conventional cinematic image of marginalized women as silent sufferers. Instead, it portrays Northeastern women as self-aware individuals navigating layered discrimination, illustrating how gender and ethnicity together structure both vulnerability and resilience.

Conclusion and recommendation

This study examined *Axone* (2019) as a cultural text that foregrounds the lived experiences of Northeastern migrants within metropolitan India. The analysis demonstrates that the film reframes racialization not as extraordinary violence but as a normalized social process embedded in everyday interactions, housing arrangements, language, and public conduct. By situating discrimination within routine encounters, the narrative exposes how hierarchies of belonging are reproduced through casual remarks, moral judgments, and collective indifference (McDuié-Ra, 2009; Cháirez-Garza et al., 2021). In doing so, the film challenges the assumption that national inclusion guarantees social recognition.

Food emerges as the film's central symbolic axis. The preparation of *Axone* operates as a site where sensory difference becomes politicized, revealing how culinary practices are entangled with notions of purity, civility, and cultural legitimacy (Kikon, 2021; Bhattacharyya et al., 2023). Rather than portraying assimilation as the solution to prejudice, the film positions cultural continuity as a form of quiet resistance. The domestic kitchen, often considered apolitical, is transformed into a contested space where identity is defended and negotiated. Through this symbolism, *Axone* demonstrates how ordinary practices can unsettle dominant cultural hierarchies.

The film further complicates representation by foregrounding the intersection of ethnicity and gender. Northeastern women are shown navigating layered marginalization shaped by racialized perception and gendered moral policing (Devi, 2024; Niumai & Rajesh, 2024). However, instead of reinforcing victimhood, the narrative grants them agency through dialogue, negotiation, and solidarity. This portrayal disrupts conventional cinematic tropes that render

marginalized women passive and instead constructs them as active participants in shaping their social realities.

Taken together, these thematic strands suggest that *Axone* functions as a counter-narrative within Indian cinema. It neither romanticizes marginalization nor reduces it to spectacle; rather, it locates exclusion within the textures of everyday life while simultaneously imagining forms of coexistence grounded in empathy and recognition. By humanizing Northeastern identities and centering routine experiences, the film contests homogenizing constructions of Indian national identity and invites a more plural understanding of belonging.

The findings indicate that cinematic representation has the capacity not only to reflect social hierarchies but also to question them. In foregrounding lived experience over spectacle, *Axone* illustrates how film can contribute to ethical media discourse by reconfiguring who is seen, heard, and acknowledged within the national imagination.

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Ethnic Identity and Marginalized Communities in Northeast India

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