



Tribal Women in Bollywood Cinema: The Changing Narrative Structure in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Historically, Indian cinema has been dominated by male-centric narratives, with women largely confined to domestic, sacrificial, or symbolic roles. Among marginalized groups, tribal women occupy an especially precarious position, facing layered exclusions shaped by patriarchy, caste, ethnicity, and class. In Hindi cinema, their representation has often been stereotypical, exoticized, or narratively muted.

In the twenty-first century, however, select Bollywood films—*Laal Salaam* (2002), *Chak De! India* (2007), *Raavan* (2010), *Chakravyuh* (2012), *Mary Kom* (2014), *Newton* (2017), and *Joram* (2023)—appear to signal a shift in how tribal women are portrayed. This study critically examines whether these films genuinely subvert entrenched stereotypes or merely offer surface-level revisions that continue to reproduce dominant ideological frameworks.

Employing qualitative narrative and content analysis grounded in feminist film theory and postcolonial theory, particularly Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of the subaltern, the paper analyzes the narrative agency, characterization, and ideological positioning of tribal women across these films. The study finds that while recent portrayals include moments of resistance and visibility, tribal women are still frequently denied narrative autonomy and full subjectivity, functioning instead as symbols of suffering, national unity, or moral legitimacy. The paper argues that meaningful representational change in Bollywood remains limited unless tribal women are positioned as narrating subjects rather than narrative instruments.

Keywords: *Tribal women, Bollywood cinema, representation, narrative structure, subaltern, feminist film theory*

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Introduction

Cinema in India functions not merely as entertainment but as a powerful cultural institution that reflects, legitimizes, and often reproduces dominant social hierarchies. Bollywood, as the most visible arm of Indian popular cinema, has historically privileged male experiences while marginalizing women and minority communities within narrowly defined representational frameworks (Gopalan, 2002; Viridi, 2003). Within this cinematic hierarchy, tribal women remain among the most underrepresented and

misrepresented groups, frequently depicted as exotic, silent, or peripheral figures (Rekhari, 2010).

Early Hindi cinema confined women to archetypal roles—the dutiful wife, the self-sacrificing mother, or the sexually transgressive vamp—often shaped by mythological ideals derived from figures such as Sita or Durga (Manzar & Aravind, 2019). Simultaneously, tribal communities were portrayed through colonial and nationalist lenses that emphasized primitivism, sensuality, or violence (Sawhney, 2009). Tribal women, positioned at the

intersection of gender and indigeneity, were thus doubly marginalized—excluded both from dominant nationalist narratives and from emerging feminist discourses.

Although recent decades have seen a noticeable shift in the portrayal of women in Bollywood, with films such as *Piku* (2015), *Nil Battey Sannata* (2016), and *Anarkali of Arrah* (2017) foregrounding female agency (Manzar & Aravind, 2019), these transformations remain largely confined to urban, upper-caste, or lower-middle-class protagonists. Tribal women have remained peripheral to this narrative evolution (Kamble & Biswal, 2023).

This study examines seven Hindi films released between 2002 and 2023 to assess whether contemporary Bollywood has moved beyond symbolic inclusion toward more nuanced and autonomous representations of tribal women. Drawing on feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, the paper interrogates who speaks for tribal women in these narratives, how their agency is structured, and whether their stories culminate in transformation or erasure.

Review of Literature

1. Representation of Tribals in Hindi Cinema

Adivasis (tribal communities) have traditionally been represented in Indian film through conventional and simplistic themes. Mainstream Hindi films frequently depict tribal individuals through the lenses of exoticism, primitivism, and vulnerability (Rekhari, 2010). Early depictions in films such as *Naagin* (1954), *Madhumati* (1958), and *Yeh Gulistan Hamara* (1972) used tribal folk as a backdrop for mystical, natural, or romantic visions, obscuring their political and cultural complexities. Rekhari (2010) describes this process as a cinematic "construction of reality" that promotes the colonial and nationalist marginalization of tribal identities, particularly tribal women, who are frequently hypersexualized and denied narrative agency. Later films, such as *Lal Salaam* (2002) and *Chak De! India* (2007), seek to deal with tribal realities more directly, although

they frequently fall into the trap of providing one-dimensional or symbolic depictions (Rekhari, 2010). Tribal characters, particularly women, are usually pushed to the margins of mainstream narratives, portraying them as mute victims or passive participants in social movements. Rekhari contends that even when tribal characters appear in contemporary cinema, they are represented as "ultra-subaltern"—a disadvantaged group inside an already marginalized social mass.

More recently, Khadia and Gupta (2024) investigated the larger representation of tribal tribes in Indian film using a combination of content analysis and interviews. They discovered that tribal characters are still frequently shown as "violent, primitive, and backward," and that important aspects such as language, attire, and communication style are misrepresented. Notably, the study finds a clear lack of nuanced depictions of tribal women, citing this as a significant research need.

2. Representation of Women in Hindi Cinema

The representation of women in Hindi film has changed dramatically over the last century, from mythologically based, subordinate figures to more aggressive, autonomous heroines. Historically, women in Bollywood were limited to binary characters such as loyal wife, caring mother, or sexually charged vamp, which were frequently built using the male gaze (Mulvey, 2005; Viridi, 2003). The impact of Hindu epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* resulted in the idolization of female heroines such as Sita, Kunti, and Durga, creating strict moral and gender rules in early film.

From the 1950s until the 1980s, female characters were frequently used as narrative devices to support the male hero's quest. Even prominent females like Nargis, who played important parts in *Mother India* (1957), were eclipsed by the male star system that dominated the film (Gopalan, 2002; Manzar & Aravind, 2019). The 1980s and 1990s witnessed an increase in representations of women as victims, notably of rape or social violence, in films such as *Insaaf ka Tarazu* (1980) and *Zakhmi Aurat* (1988),

strengthening their status as victims within patriarchal narratives.

The post-liberalization era saw the emergence of two distinct trends. On the one hand, women's commodification has risen, with films such as *Jism* (2002) and *Murder* (2004) emphasizing their sexuality. On the other side, a place began to emerge for more autonomous female characters, notably in films like *Kahaani* (2012), *Queen* (2014), *Piku* (2015), *Nil Battey Sannata* (2016), and *Anarkali of Arrah* (2017). According to Manzar and Aravind (2019), these films signify a dramatic shift in how women are portrayed as agents of resistance and self-definition.

Their research identifies a repeating narrative structure—adversity, resistance, confrontation, change, and transformation—as seen in the stories of *Anarkali*, *Chanda*, and *Piku*. Each woman confronts structural and personal difficulty, defies cultural expectations, and either accomplishes personal change or asserts her individuality. These films represent a departure from passive femininity, depicting women as having autonomy over their bodies, sexual choices, and social mobility. For example, *Piku* is depicted as a financially, emotionally, and sexually autonomous woman who chooses to remain unmarried on her own terms (Manzar & Aravind, 2019).

However, despite these progressive depictions, the authors argue that these films lack narrative complexity and structural depth, limiting their critical and academic influence. According to Manzar and Aravind (2019), these characters frequently live in simplistic urban utopias that do not reflect the larger societal realities that most Indian women experience. For example, *Chanda's* journey from housemaid to role model is aided by an unduly romanticized image of metropolitan support networks.

While the transition from objectification to empowerment is clear, these films frequently follow protective narrative frameworks that favor audience comfort and box office success above risky experimentation (Manzar & Aravind, 2019). As a

result, the "new woman" in Bollywood, despite appearing progressive, may nevertheless be limited by patriarchal ideals and safe storytelling frameworks.

These findings are crucial for understanding the larger context in which indigenous women are (or are not) portrayed in Hindi cinema. While some films increasingly portray women confronting oppression and asserting agency, this tendency seldom extends to oppressed subgroups like tribal women, whose narrative presence is minor or symbolically manufactured.

3. Stereotyping, Marginalization, and the Subaltern Lens

Theoretical frameworks such as Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) have prompted researchers to examine how oppressed groups are denied narrative voice in cultural texts, including film. Kamble and Biswal (2023) apply this concept to Hindi film, demonstrating how Dalit women have historically been portrayed via the prism of victimhood or erasure. However, their research indicates an increasing trend of more aggressive Dalit women characters in films like *Geeli Pucchi* and *Jhund*. These characters begin to regain their voice and agency in the cinematic arena, challenging established power dynamics.

Kamble (2023) also remarks that Dalit women are migrating from the fringes to more powerful roles in cinema, particularly in films made by Dalit artists themselves. However, as both studies indicate, this transformation has not yet occurred for indigenous women, whose tales are underrepresented or filtered via external, generally upper-caste, and male viewpoints.

Rekhari (2010) and Sawhney (2009) argue that Adivasi characters in Bollywood are disadvantaged twice: as tribals and as women. Their image is frequently associated with notions of cultural purity, nature, and victimhood, which tends to exoticize rather than humanize them. In *Chak De! India*, for example, tribal characters like *Rani* and *Soi Moi* has little conversation and are employed as symbols

of national unity rather than as developed persons (Rekhari, 2010).

4. Research Gap: Tribal Women in Mainstream Cinema

While several studies have emerged in recent years analyzing women's changing roles in Hindi cinema (Manzar & Aravind, 2019; Kamble & Biswal, 2023) and the representation of tribal communities (Rekhari, 2010; Khadia & Gupta, 2024), there is still a significant gap in examining tribal women's intersectional identities in Bollywood narratives.

Khadia and Gupta (2024) emphasize the lack of indigenous women's experiences and voices in both cinematic and scholarly depictions. Rekhari (2010) criticizes the depiction of indigenous women as "exotic and eroticized others" who are hardly given agency or narrative closure. Even when tribal women are depicted as victims of systematic abuse, like in *Laal Salaam*, they are frequently given little opportunity for internal character development or self-expression.

This gap supports the current study's focus on examining seven Bollywood films (2002-2023) via feminist and postcolonial lenses to determine if indigenous women's representation is developing or stuck in symbolic, stereotyped forms. This study adds to the larger discussions on inclusion, subalternity, and representational justice in Indian film by concentrating on a doubly disadvantaged identity—tribal and female.

Theoretical Framework

The portrayal of tribal women in Bollywood cinema must be evaluated in the context of gender, ethnicity, class, and power. To account for this complexity, this study combines two key theoretical approaches: feminist theory and postcolonial theory, namely Spivak's idea of the subaltern. These frameworks enable a critical examination of how marginalized tribal women are depicted in Hindi cinema, whether as persons with voice and agency or as silent and symbolic symbols.

Feminist theory

Feminist film theory has long challenged how mainstream filmmaking perpetuates patriarchal ideology by objectifying and marginalizing female characters. Laura Mulvey's (2005) key notion of the male gaze holds that women in popular film are frequently portrayed as passive objects of male desire rather than independent individuals. This approach is valuable for examining how indigenous women's bodies are presented in Bollywood—whether as locations of eroticism, victimization, or purity—and if their wants, decisions, and voices are respected in the story.

Contemporary feminist academics have broadened the discussion to include intersectionality, a concept established by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) that investigates how overlapping identities (gender, race, class, and ethnicity) contribute to distinct types of oppression. Applying intersectionality to tribal women in film illustrates how they are disadvantaged twice—first as women in a patriarchal society, and then as tribal people in a caste-based and urban-centric culture (Kamble & Biswal, 2023). These interlocking oppressive structures frequently exclude indigenous women from mainstream feminist narratives, which favor upper-caste, metropolitan female heroines.

The feminist lens in this study allows in determining whether tribal women in films such as *Lal Salaam* or *Joram* are depicted as active participants in their own lives—with emotional, sexual, and political agency—or whether their stories are filtered through male characters' patriarchal experiences, which frequently serve as symbolic motivation or background.

Postcolonial Theory and the Subaltern

Postcolonial theory offers methods for investigating how historical events such as colonialism, state-building, and nationalism have influenced the depiction of India's tribal inhabitants. Adivasi groups have frequently been demoted to 'noble savages' or 'rebellious dangers' in political and cultural discourse as a result of colonial othering and postcolonial governmental neglect. This dual image is commonly seen in Bollywood films, where

tribal folk are shown as either faithful to the land or violent insurgents.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) idea of the subaltern is very pertinent to this research. Spivak contends that the subaltern—those barred from power structures, such as colonial women—cannot readily "speak" inside dominant discourses because their voices are filtered, co-opted, or eliminated. Using this framework, the research explores whether tribal women in Hindi film are permitted to express their subjectivity or if their narrative are produced by others—often male revolutionaries, state agents, or metropolitan saviors.

Spivak's inquiry, "Can the subaltern speak?" serves as a critical prism through which to evaluate films such as *Chakravayuh*, in which a tribal woman (Juhi) battles as a Naxalite commander, yet her suffering and resistance are recounted mostly from male viewpoints. Similarly, in *Raavan*, Jamuniya's voice and agency are lost as a result of female victimization, with her tale functioning as a trigger for male retribution rather as a platform for her own justice.

Postcolonial theory also criticizes patriotic language that depicts tribal women as symbols of rural innocence, traditional preservation, or Mother India, which sustains rather than challenges patriarchal nationalism (Rekhari, 2010; Khadia & Gupta, 2024). These representations fail to capture the variety of indigenous women's lived experiences across India, reducing their identities to simplistic film tropes.

Integrating the Frameworks

This study examines the gendered power dynamics within cinematic narratives, as well as the colonial-nationalist ideologies that create depictions of tribal identities, using feminist and postcolonial theories. This dual paradigm allows for a more complex understanding of tribal women characters—not just in terms of their roles, but also in terms of how their stories are organized, who narrates them, and whether they are granted emotional, political, or narrative agency.

The study uses this theoretical lens to critically evaluate whether Bollywood films from 2002 to 2023 provide authentic representations of tribal women, or if these characters remain subaltern figures, serving the needs of dominant narrative structures without the ability to speak for them.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach rooted in narrative analysis, informed by feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks. It explores the representation of tribal women in mainstream Hindi cinema between 2002 and 2023, examining how their stories are constructed, shaped, and interpreted within larger sociopolitical and cinematic contexts. Rather than measuring presence or frequency, the focus lies on uncovering narrative strategies and symbolic meanings embedded in the portrayal of tribal women characters.

Research Design

Given the study's interpretative and exploratory nature, a qualitative narrative analysis is ideal for investigating the depth and subtlety of representation. This approach allows for close examination of character development, story arcs, symbolic roles, and ideological framing (Riessman, 2008). The study also draws on elements of content analysis to identify recurring narrative patterns, plot functions, and representational shifts across films (Krippendorff, 2018). The objective is not to quantify screen time or thematic appearances but to understand how meaning is produced through storytelling, how tribal women's identities are framed, and whether these portrayals signify narrative innovation or reinforce conventional tropes.

Selection of Films

The study analyzes seven Bollywood films released between 2002 and 2023 that prominently feature tribal women characters in either lead or significant supporting roles:

1. *Laal Salaam* (2002) – Dir. Gaganvihari Borate
2. *Chak De! India* (2007) – Dir. Shimit Amin

3. Raavan (2010) – Dir. Mani Ratnam
4. Chakravyuh (2012) – Dir. Prakash Jha
5. Mary Kom (2014) – Dir. Omung Kumar
6. Newton (2017) – Dir. Amit V. Masurkar
7. Joram (2023) – Dir. Devashish Makhija

These films were selected based on purposeful sampling, where each film met the following inclusion criteria:

Features tribal women as protagonists or central characters.

Represents distinct tribal cultures or identities within India.

Contains narrative elements relevant to gender, culture, conflict, or resistance.

Released after 2000 to capture 21st-century cinematic trend

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria:

- Bollywood/Hindi language movie.
- Films in which indigenous woman characters are crucial to the plot or concept.

Films on tribal identity, land rights, resistance, and cultural marginalization.

Exclusion criteria:

- Documentaries, short films, and animated movies.
- Films in which indigenous women feature just peripherally and have no narrative relevance.

Regional or non-Hindi films, unless recreated or co-produced in Hindi film.

Unit of Analysis

Each film is analyzed on multiple narrative and symbolic levels using the following units of analysis:

- **Characterization:** The background, agency, motivation, and development of tribal women characters.
- **Narrative Function:** Their role in plot progression—protagonist, victim, catalyst, or symbol.
- **Interactions:** How tribal women are treated by non-tribal characters (police, state, rebels, family).

Themes of Resistance/Victimhood: Whether they are portrayed as agents of change or passive sufferers.

Narrative Coding Model

A circular narrative coding methodology derived from Manzar and Aravind (2019) was used to examine the character arcs of indigenous women in the selected films. The model depicts the progression of tribal female personalities via five interwoven stages: adversity, resistance, confrontation, change, and transformation. These phases depict the character's progression from marginalization to potential empowerment, while also supporting non-linear or partial changes.

This paradigm is especially effective for determining if tribal female characters in Bollywood are given narrative complexity and agency, or if they stay bound in a cycle of victimhood. It also enables comparative cinematic analysis, indicating whether characters advance, stagnate, or are muted.



The limitations of the study

- The study is confined to seven major Hindi films and may not completely reflect the

diversity of indigenous women's presence in regional or indie cinema.

- The study is based exclusively on narrative analysis and does not incorporate audience feedback or voices from indigenous women themselves.

Documentaries, short films, and digital media formats are excluded, yet they may provide alternate areas for more realistic depiction.

Analysis and Discussion

The narrative trajectories of tribal women in Hindi cinema continue to reflect entrenched hierarchies of power, voice, and visibility. Analyzing seven films—*Laal Salaam* (2002), *Chak De! India* (2007), *Raavan* (2010), *Chakravyuh* (2012), *Mary Kom* (2014), *Newton* (2017), and *Joram* (2023)—through the five-stage narrative arc of adversity, resistance, confrontation, change, and transformation reveals how these portrayals oscillate between symbolic victimhood and selective empowerment. While a few characters progress through this arc, many are denied closure or used primarily to serve broader ideological narratives. This model allows a comparative assessment of each character's journey, offering insight into what has evolved—and what remains stagnant—in the cinematic representation of tribal womanhood.

Most tribal women in these films are introduced through adversity, often linked to poverty, marginalization, or state brutality. In *Laal Salaam*, Rupī is portrayed as an innocent village girl aspiring to study, but she becomes a victim of police sexual violence, symbolizing the state's systemic abuse of tribal bodies. Similarly, Jamuniya in *Raavan* begins as joyful and free-spirited, but after she is raped by security forces, her narrative ends in suicide, denying her any voice or agency. In *Chakravyuh*, Juhi also endures custodial rape, yet unlike Jamuniya, she continues to play a central role in the resistance movement. Mary Kom, in contrast, begins her journey in the film as a determined but socially marginalized young woman. Her challenges are familial and cultural rather than

institutional. Malko Netam, in *Newton*, functions within the confines of institutional apathy—though educated and composed, her knowledge is often dismissed by upper-caste election officials. In *Joram*, Phulo Karma starts as a housewife, but the death of her child and the disintegration of her family thrust her into emotional and ideological turmoil. The tribal hockey players Rani and Soi Moi in *Chak De! India* are introduced as part of a diverse national team, yet their backgrounds are never explored, and they remain on the narrative periphery. These introductory portrayals align with what Rekhari (2010) defines as the "ultra-subaltern" status—characters whose purpose is to endure pain rather than to act. The visual treatment of these characters also mirrors Mulvey's (2005) concept of the cinematic gaze, where women are often reduced to symbolic, passive figures rather than subjects with emotional or intellectual depth.

Despite these common beginnings, several characters initiate acts of resistance, though their approaches differ significantly. Rupī gradually begins to question state power after her assault and eventually aligns herself with the Naxalite movement. Juhi, already part of the insurgency when introduced, exemplifies politically mature defiance; she maintains ideological clarity and survives state-inflicted trauma. Phulo's resistance in *Joram* begins as personal grief but escalates into militant action, reflecting a shift from emotional reaction to organized opposition. Malko, in *Newton*, represents a quieter form of resistance—she calmly corrects misinformation, asserts her authority, and challenges the presumptions of outsiders without direct confrontation. Mary Kom resists patriarchal constraints, asserting her right to pursue boxing despite familial and institutional disapproval. In contrast, Jamuniya is denied any opportunity for resistance—her narrative ends in silence, echoing Spivak's (1988) argument that the subaltern woman is not permitted to "speak," even when violated. Rani and Soi Moi demonstrate resistance through their dedication and success in the national team, but their voices are scarcely heard. As Sawhney (2009) notes, tribal figures are often present on screen without narrative consequence—their

existence acknowledged visually but suppressed textually. Resistance, therefore, marks a pivotal moment in some characters' arcs but remains uneven in depth and expression.

The stage of confrontation distinguishes those characters who actively challenge systems of power from those who remain confined to symbolic roles. Juhi directly confronts the state, refusing victimhood and asserting her leadership within the revolutionary movement. She speaks with authority and embodies a rare case of tribal female political agency. Rupi also joins the insurgency in Laal Salaam, but her engagement is more reactive, rooted in trauma rather than ideological formation. Phulo's confrontation in Joram is complex; she leads her deceased husband's militant group but is portrayed more as a grieving mother than a political strategist. Mary Kom confronts male-dominated sports institutions and societal prejudice; however, her resistance is framed as a personal, depoliticized journey. As Waqar Khan (2021) observes, Bollywood often accepts minority characters only when their identities are depoliticized and universalized. Malko's confrontation is subtle—she asserts her knowledge of the local area and questions the ethics of the electoral process, but her voice is sidelined within the film's narrative focus on Newton. Jamuniya, again, is excluded from this stage; her trauma is appropriated into her brother Beera's revenge arc. Rani and Soi Moi help secure a national victory in *Chak De! India*, but their confrontation with marginalization is implied rather than developed. These portrayals suggest that even when tribal women confront oppressive structures, their narrative framing often dilutes their agency through nationalist, masculine, or symbolic lenses.

Change, when it occurs, is frequently represented through shifts in role rather than inner transformation. Juhi remains ideologically consistent and gains leadership within the movement, reflecting narrative change through structural participation. Rupi evolves from a victim into a revolutionary, yet her personal voice is absorbed into the collective resistance. The camera's framing of her transformation—stripped

of sensuality but rich in symbolic posture—reflects Mulvey's (2005) argument that even politically active women can be visualized for narrative effect, rather than as complex individuals. Phulo's transformation into a militant commander suggests external change, but the emotional and ideological depths of her shift remain underexplored. Mary Kom undergoes significant change—rising from obscurity to global fame—yet her tribal identity is left unexamined, reinforcing the trend of success narratives that depoliticize cultural difference. Malko remains consistent in her principles, but the institutional structures around her do not evolve, reinforcing her static role. Jamuniya is absent from this stage due to her premature narrative erasure. Rani and Soi Moi win matches and contribute to national pride, but without narrative focus on their personal growth. As Kamble and Biswal (2023) argue, Dalit women in recent cinema increasingly experience narrative voice and transformation, while tribal women often remain frozen in metaphorical roles. Most tribal female characters in these films undergo surface-level changes rather than full narrative or emotional development.

Transformation, the culmination of the narrative arc, is achieved by few and rarely on their own terms. Juhi arguably completes the arc—she survives violence, leads with clarity, and retains her voice. Yet her transformation is still situated within a male-dominated revolutionary context. Mary Kom's transformation is personal and widely recognized, but disconnected from any exploration of tribal or regional identity. Rupi's transformation remains partial—she gains a new role but not narrative autonomy. Phulo becomes a powerful figure, but her transformation is framed through grief and vengeance rather than conscious ideological agency. Malko remains unchanged—an ethical touchstone, but never a transformative character. Jamuniya's story ends in silence, confirming Spivak's (1988) observation that the subaltern woman often exists only to be erased. Rani and Soi Moi's transformation is symbolic, tied to collective success, not personal resolution. As Khadia and Gupta (2024) point out, tribal women in Hindi cinema are often portrayed as natural, loyal, and

pure—but rarely as fully developed individuals with complex emotional and intellectual lives.

This comparative reading demonstrates that, although some progress has been made in the cinematic portrayal of tribal women, significant limitations remain. The five-stage narrative arc illustrates that while many tribal characters are shown facing adversity and expressing resistance, few are permitted to achieve meaningful transformation. Their stories are frequently interrupted, instrumentalized, or overshadowed by dominant ideological frameworks. Whether as revolutionary leaders like Juhi or quiet observers like Malko, these women rarely define their own journeys. As long as their stories continue to be shaped by trauma, nationalism, or masculine agendas, tribal women in Hindi cinema will remain confined to what Spivak calls the "muted margins" of representation.

Conclusion

This study has critically examined the narrative construction of tribal women in selected Hindi films through a five-stage arc—adversity, resistance, confrontation, change, and transformation. The analysis of seven films—*Laal Salaam* (2002), *Chak De! India* (2007), *Raavan* (2010), *Chakravyuh* (2012), *Mary Kom* (2014), *Newton* (2017), and *Joram* (2023)—shows that while recent portrayals include moments of strength, leadership, and resilience, tribal women are still largely defined through tropes of suffering, silence, and symbolic burden. Although characters such as Juhi in *Chakravyuh* and Mary Kom show boldness and resistance, their stories are often politically overcoded or culturally depersonalized. Others, such as Jamuniya in *Raavan* and Rani or Soi Moi in *Chak De! India*, are entirely denied narrative space or agency, reinforcing Spivak's (1988) argument that the subaltern woman "cannot speak" unless framed by dominant perspectives.

These findings align with Rekhari (2010), who highlights tribal women's "ultra-subaltern" positioning, and Sawhney (2009), who points to their frequent visual presence without narrative

depth. As Khadia and Gupta (2024) observe, tribal women in Bollywood are often idealized as pure or connected to nature and land but are rarely depicted with emotional or intellectual complexity. Even when their stories are foregrounded, such as in *Mary Kom*, there is a noticeable distancing from their tribal identity—supporting Waqar Khan's (2021) argument that minority characters are made acceptable in Bollywood when their distinct cultural identities are softened or depoliticized. Meanwhile, Kamble and Biswal (2023) note that Dalit women in contemporary cinema are beginning to experience more complete and layered narrative journeys, which highlights the continued disparity in how tribal women are represented.

To overcome these narrative limitations, Hindi cinema must begin to represent tribal women as complete individuals rather than as symbols of trauma or resistance. Storytellers should engage directly with tribal communities and draw on lived experiences to ensure authenticity in both dialogue and character portrayal. This involves meaningful collaboration with tribal writers, performers, and scholars throughout the creative process. The overemphasis on pain, violence, and militant resistance as the only means of transformation must also be reconsidered. Kamble (2023) emphasizes that transformation must come from within—from cultural pride and emotional strength—not merely from structural opposition. Tribal women in cinema should be portrayed as thinkers, lovers, mothers, leaders, and citizens, not confined to narratives of suffering. Similarly, institutions like FTII, NFDC, and major streaming platforms must support and promote content created by or in collaboration with tribal voices, rather than simply producing stories about them. Visual inclusion must go hand in hand with narrative agency and authorship.

Future research can build upon these findings by exploring regional and independent films that may offer more nuanced depictions of tribal women beyond the mainstream Bollywood framework. There is also rich ground in examining oral storytelling, folklore adaptations, documentaries, and new media content created by tribal

communities themselves. A comparative study of the representation of tribal women alongside other marginalized groups—such as Dalit or Muslim women—can further explore how caste, ethnicity, and religion intersect with gender in cinematic narratives. In addition, audience reception studies could investigate how tribal viewers engage with and interpret these representations, contributing to a

deeper understanding of how media influences identity, voice, and belonging. Only by centering tribal women as narrative subjects—complex, expressive, and self-defined—can Hindi cinema move beyond its historical tendency toward symbolic victimization and contribute to a more inclusive and reflective cultural imagination.

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