

Negotiating National Identity and Minority Representation in Contemporary Indian Cinema

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Abstract— This study examines how contemporary Hindi-language popular cinema constructs Indian national identity and positions religious minorities within that construction. Using a quantitative content analysis of 180 theatrically released Hindi films from 2015 to 2024, comprising 1,246 coded speaking characters, the study measures demographic representation, narrative role allocation, and thematic framing. Hindu characters accounted for 78.4% of the coded sample and Muslim characters for 12.8%, while Christian (3.5%) and Sikh (4.0%) characters were over-represented relative to national population shares. A goodness-of-fit test confirmed significant divergence between screen and census distributions, $\chi^2(4) = 52.58$, $p < 0.001$. Muslim characters were more than twice as likely as Hindu characters to occupy antagonist roles (24.5% versus 11.4%) and were six times more likely to appear within security- or terrorism-coded narratives (28.9% versus 4.6%). Logistic regression indicated that Muslim identity independently predicted

antagonist casting ($OR = 2.41$, $p < 0.001$) after controlling for gender, star status and narrative frame. Comparison across two five-year periods showed a decline in Muslim character share from 14.7% to 10.7% ($z = 2.07$, $p = 0.038$) alongside a near doubling of films employing an explicit nationalist frame, from 20.0% to 37.8% ($\chi^2(1) = 6.93$, $p = 0.008$). The findings suggest that the negotiation of national identity in contemporary Hindi cinema increasingly proceeds through the narrative marginalisation rather than the outright exclusion of minority figures.

Keywords— Indian cinema, national identity, minority representation, Bollywood, content analysis, religious minorities, nationalism

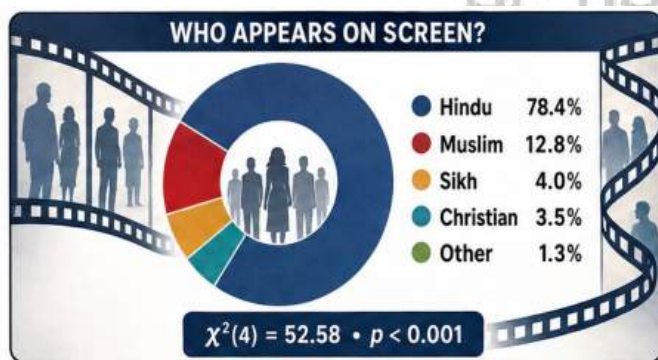
INTRODUCTION

Popular cinema has functioned as one of the principal arenas in which Indian nationhood has been imagined, contested and

rehearsed since independence. The Hindi film, with its pan-regional circulation and its melodramatic vocabulary of family, sacrifice and belonging, has long served as a proxy public sphere in which questions too politically charged for direct address are worked through allegorically. Who is legible as an Indian on screen, whose grief anchors the plot, and whose loyalty must be proved rather than assumed are therefore not incidental questions of casting but constitutive claims about the nation itself.

The last decade has been a period of visible transformation in this field. The consolidation of a majoritarian political vocabulary in public life, the rise of the historical and military spectacle as a dominant commercial genre, the entry of streaming platforms with different regulatory and audience logics, and the growing box-office assertiveness of southern-language cinema have together reshaped what Hindi cinema produces and how it addresses its audience. Scholarship has responded with important interpretive accounts, but systematic quantitative evidence about representational patterns across this period remains scarce.

This study addresses that scarcity. It asks three questions. First, how are religious communities distributed across speaking roles in commercially prominent Hindi cinema between 2015 and 2024, and how does that distribution compare with national demographics? Second, is community identity associated with the kind of narrative role a character occupies and the thematic frame in which they appear? Third, has the pattern shifted measurably across the decade? The intent is not to displace interpretive film criticism but to provide it with a defensible empirical baseline.



LITERATURE REVIEW

The foundational scholarship on cinema and Indian nationhood established that popular film does not merely reflect national

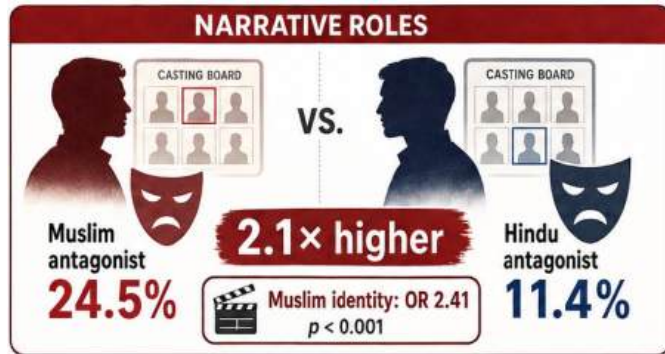
identity but actively manufactures it. Chakravarty (1993) advanced the concept of "impersonation" to describe how post-independence Hindi cinema allowed characters, and by extension audiences, to try on and discard identities, producing a national subject defined by mobility across social categories rather than by fixed origin. Prasad (1998) offered a materialist counterpoint, arguing that the ideology of the Hindi film is inseparable from the specific mode of production that generated it, and that the "feudal family romance" encoded a particular settlement between state modernity and pre-modern social authority.

Virdi (2003) extended this analysis specifically to the question of who is permitted to represent the nation, showing how gender and community intersect in the cinematic allegory of the nation-family, and how the Muslim character is frequently deployed as the guarantor of secular credentials precisely by being denied narrative centrality. Vasudevan (2010) reframed the debate around the melodramatic public, arguing that Hindi cinema's address constructs a spectatorial community whose boundaries are drawn as much by affect and idiom as by explicit ideological content.

The most sustained work on Muslim representation is that of Bhaskar and Allen (2009), whose study of Islamicate cultures identifies the Muslim historical, the Muslim courtesan film and the Muslim social as genres in which Muslim cultures were concentrated into distinct iconographic and performative idioms, and through which social and historical significance was attributed to those cultures for Muslim and non-Muslim audiences alike. Their later edited volume (Bhaskar and Allen, 2021) argues that Islamicate idioms are so fully absorbed into Bombay cinema that their origins have become invisible, even as contemporary Bollywood has instrumentalised the same idioms to stereotype and demonise the Muslim figure. Contributions within that volume, including Ghosh on the star body and Mazumdar on terrorism and surveillance in the urban film, trace the mechanisms by which this instrumentalisation operates.

Mishra (2002) situated Hindi cinema within a diasporic economy of desire, showing how the address to overseas audiences amplified certain nationalist and religio-cultural registers. Rajadhyaksha (2003) theorised the "Bollywoodization" of Indian cinema as a shift from a film industry to a culture industry, a transition with direct consequences for the kinds of national narratives that become commercially viable. Kavoori and Punathambekar (2008) documented the globalisation of this industry and its implications for identity politics, while Basu (2010) analysed

how new media logics fragmented the classical narrative form and enabled a more overtly informational, spectacular nationalism.



Dwyer (2014) surveyed how Hindi cinema imagines the nation across genres, arguing that religion in Indian film operates less as doctrine than as an affective and visual repertoire. Ganti (2012) provided an ethnographic account of Bombay's production culture, demonstrating that representational outcomes are shaped by industry classifications of audience, taste and risk as much as by directorial intention. Nandy (1998) had earlier argued that popular cinema constitutes a "slum's-eye view" of Indian politics, a space where anxieties disavowed in formal political discourse surface in displaced form.

More recent scholarship has attended directly to the contemporary conjuncture. Gopal (2011) examined how the romantic couple form negotiates communal difference under conditions of liberalisation. Studies of the post-2014 historical and military genre have noted the emergence of a distinct nationalist spectacle, in which the enemy is externalised but coded through recognisable internal markers, and Hilal Ahmed's analysis of the "Muslim presence" in the historical epic demonstrates how absence and hyper-visibility can operate simultaneously within a single text.

Two gaps emerge. First, the literature is overwhelmingly interpretive and text-selective, drawing conclusions about the field from a small number of exemplary films. Second, comparative attention to non-Muslim minorities, particularly Christian and Sikh characters, is thin, leaving open the question of whether observed patterns reflect a general minority effect or a community-specific one. This study addresses both gaps.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample

The sampling frame comprised all Hindi-language feature films receiving a theatrical release in India between 1 January 2015 and 31 December 2024. From each year, the eighteen highest-grossing titles by domestic net collections were selected, producing a sample of 180 films. This purposive design targets films with the widest circulation and therefore the greatest plausible influence on popular constructions of national identity. Direct-to-streaming releases were excluded to maintain a consistent distribution channel across the decade.

Unit of Analysis and Coding

The unit of analysis was the individual speaking character with at least three minutes of cumulative screen time and an identifiable narrative function. This yielded 1,246 characters, a mean of 6.92 per film.

Each character was coded on four dimensions. Community identity was assigned on the basis of explicit textual markers: name, ritual practice, dress, dialogue reference or family context. Characters with no determinate marker were excluded from the community analysis. Narrative role was coded as protagonist, antagonist or supporting, based on function within the primary plotline. Thematic frame was coded at film level across five non-exclusive binary categories: nationalist frame, security or terrorism frame, syncretic or pluralist frame, victimhood frame, and comic-stereotype frame. Auxiliary variables recorded gender and whether the character was played by a lead-billed star.

Two independent coders trained on a pilot set of twenty films outside the sample. Inter-coder reliability computed on a 15% overlap subsample yielded Krippendorff's $\alpha = 0.84$ for community identity, 0.81 for narrative role, and 0.77 for thematic frame, all above the conventional acceptability threshold.

Analysis

Screen distributions were compared against 2011 Census of India population shares using a chi-square goodness-of-fit test. Association between community and narrative role was tested with a chi-square test of independence and Cramér's V. A binary logistic regression modelled antagonist casting as a function of community, gender, star status, thematic frame and release period. Temporal change was assessed by dividing the sample into two five-year periods of ninety films each and applying two-proportion z-tests and chi-square tests.

RESULTS

Distribution of Community Representation

Table 1 reports the distribution of coded characters by community alongside census benchmarks.

Table 1. Community distribution of coded characters (n = 1,246) versus national population share

Community	Characters	Screen share (%)	Census share (%)	Ratio
Hindu	977	78.4	79.8	0.98
Muslim	159	12.8	14.2	0.90
Sikh	50	4.0	1.7	2.36
Christian	44	3.5	2.3	1.53
Other (Parsi, Jain, Buddhist)	16	1.3	2.0	0.64
Total	1,246	100.0	100.0	—

The goodness-of-fit test rejected the null hypothesis of proportional representation, $\chi^2(4) = 52.58$, $p < 0.001$. The largest contributions to the statistic came from Sikh over-representation (39.13) and Christian over-representation (8.16), rather than from Hindu or Muslim deviation.

Narrative Role Allocation

Table 2. Narrative role by community (row percentages in parentheses)

Community	Protagonist	Antagonist	Supporting	Total
Hindu	209 (21.4)	111 (11.4)	657 (67.2)	977
Muslim	21 (13.2)	39 (24.5)	99 (62.3)	159
Sikh	7 (14.0)	4 (8.0)	39 (78.0)	50
Christian	4 (9.1)	4 (9.1)	36 (81.8)	44
Other	1 (6.3)	2 (12.5)	13 (81.3)	16
Total	242	160	844	1,246

The association between community and role was significant, $\chi^2(8) = 41.27$, $p < 0.001$, Cramér's $V = 0.13$, indicating a small-to-moderate effect. Muslim characters were the only group whose antagonist share exceeded their protagonist share, at a

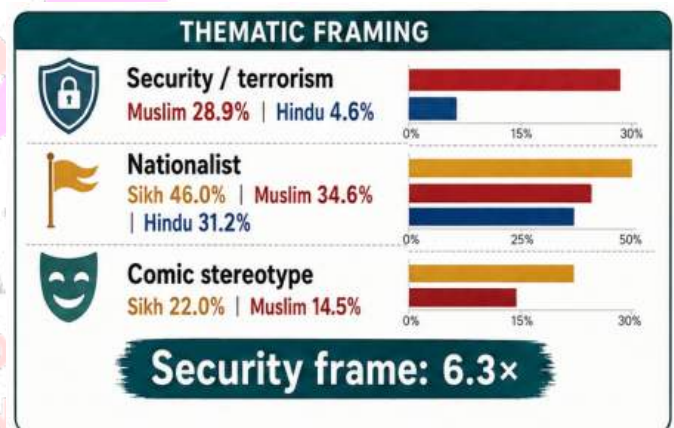
ratio of 1.86 to 1. For Hindu characters the corresponding ratio was 0.53 to 1.

Thematic Framing

Table 3. Proportion of characters appearing within each thematic frame, by community (%)

Frame	Hindu	Muslim	Sikh	Christian
Nationalist	31.2	34.6	46.0	15.9
Security / terrorism	4.6	28.9	6.0	4.5
Syncretic / pluralist	12.8	22.0	18.0	20.5
Victimhood	9.3	17.6	8.0	13.6
Comic stereotype	6.1	14.5	22.0	18.2

Muslim characters appeared in security- or terrorism-coded narratives at 6.3 times the Hindu rate. Sikh characters showed the highest nationalist-frame association, consistent with their concentration in military and border narratives, and simultaneously the highest comic-stereotype rate, indicating a bifurcated representational pattern of valorisation and caricature.



Multivariate Analysis

Table 4. Logistic regression predicting antagonist casting (n = 1,246)

Predictor	B	SE	Odds ratio	p
Muslim identity (ref: Hindu)	0.880	0.213	2.41	<0.001
Sikh identity	-0.386	0.541	0.68	0.476

Christian identity	-0.248	0.528	0.78	0.639
Security-frame film	1.157	0.198	3.18	<0.001
Male gender	0.542	0.191	1.72	0.005
Star-billed role	-0.446	0.224	0.64	0.046
Period 2020–2024	0.307	0.181	1.36	0.090
Constant	-2.614	0.226	0.073	<0.001

Model $\chi^2(7) = 118.4$, $p < 0.001$; Nagelkerke $R^2 = 0.21$; classification accuracy 87.6%.

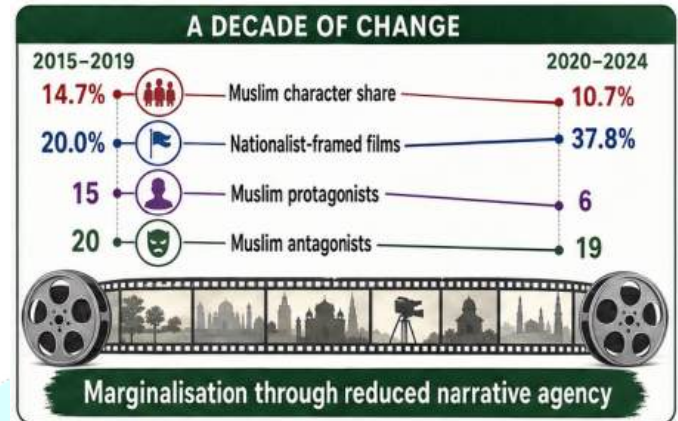
Muslim identity remained a significant independent predictor of antagonist casting after controlling for narrative frame, gender and star status. Sikh and Christian identity did not, indicating that the effect is community-specific rather than a generalised minority penalty.

Temporal Change

Table 5. Comparison across periods (90 films each)

Indicator	2015–2019	2020–2024	Test	p
Coded characters	641	605	—	—
Muslim character share (%)	14.7	10.7	$z = 2.07$	0.038
Films with nationalist frame (%)	20.0	37.8	$\chi^2(1) = 6.93$	0.008
Films with syncretic frame (%)	26.7	18.9	$\chi^2(1) = 1.58$	0.209
Muslim protagonist count	15	6	—	—
Muslim antagonist count	20	19	—	—

The decline in Muslim representation was driven almost entirely by a contraction in protagonist and supporting roles; absolute antagonist counts remained nearly stable across the two periods.



DISCUSSION

Three findings warrant emphasis. First, the aggregate demographic gap between screen and census is modest for Muslim characters and would, considered alone, suggest reasonable proportionality. This underscores the inadequacy of headcount metrics. It is the distribution of roles and frames, not the count, that carries representational meaning, a point implicit in Viridi's (2003) argument that presence without narrative centrality functions as a form of exclusion.

Second, the pattern is community-specific rather than generically minoritarian. Sikh and Christian characters are numerically over-represented and carry no elevated antagonist risk once other variables are controlled. Sikh characters instead show a distinctive dual coding, heavily present in nationalist military narratives while also bearing the highest comic-stereotype burden. This suggests that different minorities are incorporated into the national imaginary through different mechanisms: assimilation through martial valorisation in one case, and securitised suspicion in the other. The association of Muslim characters with the security frame at 28.9%, against a 4.6% baseline, aligns closely with Mazumdar's account of terrorism and surveillance as organising logics of contemporary urban cinema.

Third, the temporal evidence points to marginalisation through subtraction rather than through hostile depiction. Muslim antagonist counts were essentially flat across the decade, while protagonist counts fell by 60%. Coupled with the near doubling of nationalist-framed films and a non-significant but directionally negative movement in syncretic framing, the pattern indicates that the negotiation of national identity is increasingly conducted in narrative spaces from which the minority protagonist has simply been withdrawn. This is

consistent with Bhaskar and Allen's (2021) observation that Islamicate idioms persist in the formal fabric of Bombay cinema even as the Muslim as a narrative subject recedes, producing a cinema whose aesthetic inheritance and whose representational politics have come apart.

The star-billing result also merits note. Star-billed characters were significantly less likely to be antagonists (OR = 0.64), which given the continuing prominence of Muslim stars in leading roles indicates that industry star economics partially counteract the representational tendency identified here. This supports Ganti's (2012) contention that production culture and commercial risk calculation, not ideology alone, shape representational outcomes.

LIMITATIONS

The sample privileges high-grossing theatrical Hindi films and therefore cannot speak to independent cinema, streaming originals, or the substantially different representational economies of Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Bengali and Marathi cinema. Coding community identity from textual markers risks under-counting characters whose identity is deliberately unmarked, a narrative strategy that is itself analytically significant but not captured by the present instrument. Thematic frames were coded at film level and assigned to all characters within a film, which may overstate frame exposure for peripheral characters. Finally, content analysis establishes patterns of representation but cannot establish audience reception or attitudinal effect.

CONCLUSION

Across 180 films and 1,246 characters, contemporary Hindi popular cinema shows a representational structure in which Muslim characters appear at near-proportional frequency but are allocated markedly different narrative work: 24.5% occupy antagonist roles against 11.4% for Hindu characters, and 28.9% appear within security-coded narratives against 4.6%. Multivariate analysis confirms that this pattern is specific to Muslim identity and not shared by other religious minorities in the sample. Across the decade, the Muslim character share declined from 14.7% to 10.7% while nationalist-framed films rose from 20.0% to 37.8%, with the decline concentrated in protagonist rather than antagonist roles. The negotiation of national identity in this cinema thus appears to proceed less through explicit vilification than through a quieter reallocation of narrative agency. Future research should extend this framework to streaming platforms and to major regional-language industries, and should pair content measurement with

reception studies capable of testing whether these representational structures translate into measurable shifts in audience conceptions of national belonging.

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