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DIGITAL REVOLUTION IN CASTE NARRATIVES: HOW JAI BHIM AND ASURAN USE OTT TO CHALLENGE POWER STRUCTURES

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Abstract:

The advent and rise of OTT platforms have revolutionized the way marginalized narratives, particularly Dalit experiences, are represented in Indian cinema. This study critically examines how the films Jai Bhim (2021) and Asuran (2019) leverage digital streaming services to challenge entrenched caste hierarchies and power structures. Unlike mainstream Bollywood productions, which often erase or misrepresent Dalit struggles, these films offer an unfiltered portrayal of caste-based oppression, resistance, and justice. Through an analytical comparison, this paper explores how OTT platforms have provided a space for politically charged storytelling that mainstream cinema has historically sidelined. Both Asuran, which depicts caste violence and vengeance in rural areas, and Jai Bhim, which highlights systemic caste inequality in its courtroom drama, use digital media to reach a larger, worldwide audience. This study also examines audience reception, the role of digital discourse in shaping caste narratives, and whether the commercial success of such films indicates a shift in public consciousness. By situating Jai Bhim and Asuran within the broader landscape of Dalit representation, this research underscores the transformative potential of OTT platforms in fostering social awareness and dismantling dominant caste narratives. The study ultimately questions whether this digital revolution in caste storytelling signals lasting change or remains confined to niche audiences.

Keywords: OTT Platforms, Dalit Narratives, Caste Representation, Digital Media and Social Justice, Cinema and Power Structures

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Introduction:

The digital revolution has not only altered the mechanics of film production and distribution but has also reconfigured the ideological terrain of Indian cinema. In particular, the emergence of Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms such as Amazon Prime Video has enabled the articulation of narratives that were historically suppressed, distorted, or sidelined by mainstream film industries. *Jai Bhim* (2021) and *Asuran* (2019) exemplify this paradigm shift, offering caste narratives that do not merely seek visibility but interrogate the very foundations of caste hegemony embedded within India's cinematic and social order. These films leverage the affordances of digital distribution to bypass traditional gatekeeping structures, engaging directly with audiences and disrupting caste-neutral mythologies perpetuated by dominant media forms (Rajadhyaksha, 2021; Guru, 2018). Mainstream Indian cinema, especially Bollywood has long functioned as a "cultural apparatus" that perpetuates the savarna worldview, often rendering Dalit experiences through the lens of victimhood, criminality, or exceptionalism (Gopal, 2020; Rao, 2009). Even when Dalit characters appear, their presence is often structured around moral redemption mediated through upper-caste agency. This cinematic marginalization is not incidental but deeply ideological. As Gopal Guru argues, mainstream representations of Dalits tend to rely on a "grammar of silence," where agency is systematically denied and suffering is aestheticized for savarna consumption (Guru, 2018). In contrast, *Jai Bhim* and *Asuran* assert Dalit-Bahujan subjectivity not as an aesthetic device but as a structural critique.

By situating caste not as an isolated theme but as a material and historical force that structures institutions, social interactions, and even cinematic form, these films perform what can be described as "counter-hegemonic storytelling" (Tharu & Satyanarayana, 2011). *Jai Bhim*, rooted in the real-life legal struggle led by Justice K. Chandru, interrogates the complicity of the police and judicial systems in maintaining caste hierarchies. *Asuran*, adapted from Poomani's novel *Vekkai*, exposes the cyclical and generational nature of caste violence and resistance in rural Tamil Nadu. Both narratives deploy a cinematic realism that foregrounds trauma, rage, and resilience, not as abstractions, but as historically embodied experiences.

The role of OTT platforms in this process is not merely logistical but ideological. As Rajadhyaksha (2021) notes, digital platforms have decentered traditional circuits of distribution and reception, creating new publics and altering the semiotics of cultural legitimacy. Unlike theatrical releases, which are often subject to regional censorship boards and commercial constraints, OTT platforms offer greater narrative autonomy. This autonomy allows *Jai Bhim* and *Asuran* to present unvarnished portrayals of systemic injustice, while also enabling the films to circulate across linguistic, caste, and national boundaries. As a result, these works are not only consumed but actively discussed, dissected, and integrated into digital public spheres that were once inaccessible to caste-subaltern voices.

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This study undertakes a comparative analysis of *Jai Bhim* and *Asuran* to examine how digital platforms reshape the terrain of caste discourse in Indian cinema. It draws from Dalit studies, media theory, and postcolonial critique to explore how these films function as cinematic counter-publics, disrupting savarna dominance, archiving subaltern memory, and reconfiguring the politics of spectatorship (Fraser, 1990; Paik, 2014). More critically, it interrogates whether this digital turn represents a lasting epistemological shift or remains confined to niche, symbolic visibility. Ultimately, this inquiry situates the digital revolution not merely as a technological evolution, but as a political opportunity: a chance to democratize representation, reclaim narrative agency, and confront the deep structures of caste-based inequality that persist both on and off screen.

Research Objectives:

1). To analyze the portrayal of caste oppression and resistance in Jai Bhim and Asuran.
2). To examine how OTT platforms have facilitated the representation of Dalit narratives in mainstream discourse.
3). To explore audience reception and engagement with these films in digital spaces.
4). To assess whether the emergence of such narratives on OTT signifies a long-term shift in caste representation in Indian cinema.
5). To understand the role of digital storytelling in shaping contemporary caste discourse.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This research adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing content analysis and audience reception studies. The study incorporates the following methodologies:

a). Content Analysis: Examining Jai Bhim and Asuran to identify dominant themes, narrative structures, and representational strategies related to caste.

b). Comparative Analysis: Evaluating how both films depict caste struggles differently and what this suggests about digital-era storytelling.

c). Audience Reception Analysis: Assessing reviews, social media discussions, and critical analyses to understand audience perceptions of these films.

d). **Secondary Research:** Reviewing literature on caste representation in Indian cinema, the role of OTT platforms, and their impact on marginalized narratives.

Literature Review:

Caste Representation in Indian Cinema:-Indian cinema has historically been dominated by upper-caste narratives, often sidelining Dalit experiences or depicting them through a savarna gaze. Scholars like Shyam Benegal and Gopal Guru argue that Dalits in mainstream films are either victims without agency or absent altogether. The rise of regional cinema has challenged this, with Tamil and Marathi films offering more direct caste-conscious storytelling.

The Role of OTT in Expanding Narrative Spaces: - OTT platforms have provided greater creative freedom, allowing politically charged and socially conscious films to find a wider audience. As streaming services do not rely on theatrical releases, filmmakers can address sensitive issues without the fear of censorship or box-office pressures. This shift has allowed

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for the emergence of Dalit-centered narratives that previously struggled to gain mainstream visibility.

Analysis: Jai Bhim And Asuran As Digital Caste Narratives

A). Jai Bhim: Law, Justice, and Systemic Oppression

The 2021 Tamil-language film Jai Bhim, directed by T. J. Gnanavel and distributed via Amazon Prime Video, represents a pivotal moment in the intersection of cinema, law, and social justice in India. Inspired by a real legal case handled by Justice K. Chandru, the film explores the themes of caste discrimination, police brutality, and the quest for justice through the lens of the oppressed Irular tribe. The film's title itself is a political statement, invoking the iconic slogan "Jai Bhim," used widely by followers of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar to signal resistance and demand equality. Crucially, Jai Bhim exists within the domain of digital media, bypassing traditional cinematic gatekeeping through its OTT (Over-The-Top) platform release. This digital mode of circulation situates the film within a new genre of "digital caste narratives", stories of caste-based marginalization and resistance that utilize digital platforms to challenge hegemonic discourse.

Themes: Law, Justice, and Systemic Oppression

At its core, Jai Bhim interrogates the systemic failures of legal and state institutions when dealing with marginalized communities. The film is centered around Rajakannu, a member of the Irular tribe, who is falsely accused of theft, brutally tortured in police custody, and subsequently disappears. His wife, Senggeni, seeks justice with the help of advocate Chandru, a character modeled on the real-life Justice K. Chandru. Thematically, the film operates on multiple levels. It portrays how institutional casteism manifests in routine police procedures, legal processes, and societal structures. The invisibilization of tribal communities in the justice system is not an isolated theme but a recurring social reality. In presenting this narrative, the film critiques the illusion of impartiality often associated with the law. Instead, it exposes how legal institutions, often dominated by upper-caste individuals can act as extensions of caste-based violence.

The film is particularly powerful in showing the gap between law as an abstract ideal and law in practice. While the Constitution of India guarantees equality before the law (Article 14) and protection against discrimination (Article 15), Jai Bhim lays bare how these rights are frequently denied to the most vulnerable citizens.

Impact: Reframing the Caste Discourse

Jai Bhim has had a significant socio-cultural impact, particularly in the way it has reshaped mainstream engagement with caste narratives. Historically, Indian cinema especially in the mainstream has either ignored caste or represented it in reductive ways. Jai Bhim, however, centers caste as both a theme and a structural force.

Key areas of impact include:

Public Discourse: The film catalyzed widespread discussion on caste-based violence, custodial deaths, and police accountability across social media platforms, academic circles,

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and civil society forums. It provided a visual grammar to conversations that were previously confined to academic or activist spaces.

Representation and Voice: By focusing on the Irular community, a tribal group largely absent from public discourse, the film expands the representational politics of Indian cinema. It gives narrative agency to Senggeni, a woman from the margins, rather than reducing her to a victim or side character.

Legal Consciousness: Jai Bhim also serves as a cinematic tool of legal education. The courtroom scenes, though dramatized, provide insight into legal mechanisms such as the writ of habeas corpus, burden of proof, and custodial jurisprudence.

Allyship and Ethics: While advocate Chandru is instrumental in securing justice, the film avoids the trope of the savior complex by framing his actions as constitutional duty rather than moral charity. The emphasis remains on structural reform rather than individual heroism.

The Role of OTT Platforms and Digital Caste Narratives

The release of Jai Bhim on an OTT platform was not merely a distribution strategy, it was an ideological shift. Digital platforms, unlike traditional cinema halls, democratize access to content and enable politically charged narratives to reach global audiences without commercial   constraints.

In the context of Jai Bhim, this digital circulation achieves several things:

Accessibility and Reach: Audiences from varied socio-cultural and linguistic backgrounds could engage with the film simultaneously, allowing it to become a tool of pan-Indian caste consciousness.

Subversion of Hegemony: The film challenges the dominance of upper-caste perspectives in Indian storytelling by prioritizing the lived experiences of the marginalized. It resists sanitized portrayals and instead insists on structural critique.

Digital Archiving and Activism: OTT platforms allow films like Jai Bhim to exist as long-term cultural texts. They can be re-watched, studied, and referenced, thus contributing to the growing archive of Dalit-Bahujan and Adivasi resistance in digital media.

Dialogic Potential: Viewers can immediately discuss, critique, and share their interpretations online, making digital caste narratives part of an ongoing, decentralized public dialogue rather than a one-time theatrical event.

This evolution signals the emergence of a new cinematic vocabulary—one that is political, accessible, and deeply engaged with the realities of caste. Jai Bhim, in this context, is not just a film but part of a broader movement of counter-hegemonic storytelling.

B). Asuran: Caste Violence and Resistance

Vetrimaaran's Tamil-language action-drama Asuran, which was based on Poomani's Vekkai novel, came out in 2019. Starring Dhanush in the lead role, the film is set in the rural landscapes of Tamil Nadu and narrates a gripping tale of a Dalit family's struggle against upper-caste oppression. Unlike many films that treat caste as a backdrop, Asuran places caste violence and resistance at the center of its narrative, drawing a visceral and unapologetic portrait of rural feudalism and generational trauma. Asuran stands out in the landscape of

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caste cinema not only for its raw storytelling but also for the nuanced depiction of resistance, legal, cultural, and violent by the oppressed. Though it was initially released in theatres, its subsequent distribution on OTT platforms such as Amazon Prime Video significantly expanded its audience and re-contextualized it as a part of a growing corpus of digital caste narratives. The digital accessibility allowed it to participate in broader discussions about caste, class, and power dynamics, especially among younger and more diverse audiences.

Themes: Caste-Based Violence and Cycles of Resistance

Thematically, Asuran explores how systemic caste-based violence is not only historical but deeply entrenched in contemporary rural life. The film revolves around Sivasami, a Dalit farmer, who must protect his family from violent upper-caste landlords who seek to seize his land. The narrative is structured around a series of flashbacks, revealing Sivasami's own violent past and the cyclical nature of caste oppression and retaliation. The representation of caste in Asuran is multi-layered. The dominant caste's entitlement to land, social status, and legal impunity is juxtaposed against the Dalit community's constant struggle for dignity and survival. The film starkly depicts the socio-political structures that perpetuate inequality: from the feudal ownership of land to the collusion of police and judiciary in upholding upper-caste interests. One of the most striking elements of Asuran is its exploration of violence, not as a glorified trope, but as a political response. While legal and peaceful means of protest are portrayed as noble, the film refuses to morally condemn the violent resistance of the oppressed when legal avenues are blocked. This nuanced stance repositions violence as a desperate and sometimes necessary act of reclaiming agency.

Impact: Subverting Cinematic Norms and Reframing Caste Discourse

Asuran made a significant impact both critically and culturally. Its success lies not just in its compelling performances or gripping storytelling, but in how it reframed the discourse on caste violence in Tamil and Indian cinema more broadly.

Key areas of impact include:

Cultural Subversion: The film challenges the dominant cinematic grammar of heroism, power, and justice. Sivasami is not a typical 'hero' in mainstream terms—he is vulnerable, conflicted, and shaped by trauma. His resistance is not individualistic, but rooted in collective memory and generational suffering.

Intergenerational Narrative: The intergenerational dynamic between Sivasami and his son reflects two paradigms of resistance, subtle endurance versus open retaliation. This duality adds depth to the narrative and mirrors real-life tensions within oppressed communities over strategies of resistance.

Language and Aesthetics: The film uses colloquial Tamil, folk music, and rural imagery to authentically represent Dalit lifeworlds. It consciously avoids the 'sanskritized' or elite forms of expression commonly found in mainstream Tamil cinema.

Reception and Discourse: Upon its release, Asuran became a focal point of discussion in both media and academia. It was praised for its honest portrayal of caste hierarchies and became an example of how commercial cinema could address political issues without compromise.

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OTT Platforms and Digital Circulation

Although Asuran had a successful theatrical release, its afterlife on OTT platforms like Amazon Prime Video marked a significant shift in its reach and relevance. In the context of digital caste narratives, the film's availability online transformed it into a widely accessible socio-political text that transcended geographical and linguistic boundaries.

The digital circulation of Asuran achieved the following:

Democratization of Access: Viewers from marginalized communities, academic institutions, and global audiences could engage with the film on their own terms, bypassing the structural and spatial limitations of cinema halls.

Reinvigoration of Discourse: Through social media and online reviews, the film entered conversations on caste justice, land rights, and cultural representation. Hashtags, memes, and think pieces helped disseminate its core themes in diverse and dynamic ways.

Archival and Pedagogical Utility: Asuran now functions as a pedagogical resource in classrooms and academic discussions. The digital format allows for repeated engagement and analysis, making it a valuable cultural document.

Counter-Hegemonic Storytelling: The film challenges the sanitized narratives of rural India often portrayed in digital content. Instead, it uses the digital medium to narrate the brutal and unglamorous reality of caste violence.

Thus, Asuran joins a wave of films that use digital platforms not only for distribution but as tools of ideological dissemination and resistance.

Audience Reception And Digital Discourse

The reception of Jai Bhim and Asuran reveals the transformative power of digital platforms in shaping public discourse around caste narratives. Both films were not only critically acclaimed but also generated massive engagement from diverse audiences, especially after their releases on Amazon Prime Video. These OTT platforms enabled wider accessibility, cutting across regional, linguistic, and socio-economic boundaries. Viewers, particularly from marginalized communities, found these narratives deeply resonant, while others used them as entry points to engage with the realities of caste-based oppression in India. On social media, Jai Bhim quickly went viral, with hashtags like #JaiBhim and #DalitLivesMatter trending widely. Platforms like Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram became forums for passionate discussions, reviews, and debates. People shared personal experiences, historical parallels, and critical reflections, transforming the digital space into a vibrant sphere of political and emotional exchange. Asuran similarly sparked digital conversations about land, caste, and resistance, especially in Tamil-speaking and diaspora communities. Its depiction of generational trauma and rebellion was interpreted as a symbolic assertion of dignity and agency for the oppressed. However, the discourse was also marked by polarization. While many hailed these films as bold representations of caste realities, others particularly from dominant caste groups dismissed them as divisive or "too political." These reactions themselves revealed the discomfort and denial that still exist around caste privilege and oppression. Crucially, the decentralized nature of digital platforms allowed marginalized voices to respond, reclaim the narrative, and assert their truths. This democratization of

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critique, where audiences rather than elite critics shaped interpretation, marked a significant shift. YouTube reviewers, independent scholars, Ambedkarite voices, and everyday users contributed to a collective, crowdsourced understanding of the films' deeper meanings.Moreover, the emotional and political impact of these films extended beyond social media. Viewers, especially from Dalit and Adivasi backgrounds, expressed feeling seen and validated. Many shared how the films mirrored their lived realities, making the experience both cathartic and empowering. Others, particularly from privileged or urban backgrounds, found the films to be consciousness-raising, prompting introspection about their role in sustaining systemic inequality. In classrooms and academic spaces, these films became case studies, prompting debates on law, caste, justice, and media. They functioned as activist and instructional resources in addition to being works of art. In essence, Jai Bhim and Asuran catalyzed a digital discourse that was participatory, political, and deeply rooted in social realities. Their reception proved that OTT content, when it centers marginalized voices, can do more than entertain, it can challenge hegemonic power structures, educate the public, and foster a digital culture of empathy and resistance. In the context of the digital revolution, these films exemplify how cinema and technology together can democratize storytelling and become instruments of social transformation.

Conclusion:

In the contemporary era, where digital media has become a dominant force in shaping public discourse, films like Jai Bhim and Asuran represent a significant cultural and political shift. These two cinematic texts exemplify how the digital revolution particularly the rise of OTT platforms has created a fertile space for caste narratives that challenge entrenched hierarchies and offer alternative perspectives often erased in mainstream media. Both films move beyond mere storytelling; they function as socio-political documents that expose systemic caste-based oppression and foreground the lived realities of marginalized communities. Asuran, with its unvarnished depiction of rural feudalism, and Jai Bhim, with its judicial drama based on actual events, draw attention to the systemic brutality that tribal and Dalit groups must endure and violent resistance, paints a visceral picture of how caste injustice is inherited and resisted across generations. What makes these films revolutionary is not only their content but also their mode of circulation. Their availability on digital platforms like Amazon Prime Video enables wider, more democratic access. Viewers from various regions, castes, and classes, both within and outside India can engage with these narratives without the gatekeeping that often exists in theatrical distribution. The digital medium offers permanence, repeatability, and a forum for discussion, making these films part of an evolving archive of resistance.

In the context of digital caste narratives, these films serve multiple purposes:

Educational: They bring to light socio-legal injustices that are rarely discussed openly, making them important pedagogical tools.

Activist: They provoke critical thinking, social introspection, and encourage calls for structural   reform.

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Cultural: They validate and preserve the experiences and voices of oppressed communities, challenging hegemonic representations.

Global: Their OTT presence allows caste discourse to transcend borders, inviting international solidarity and comparative dialogues on systemic inequality.

The relevance of this topic in today's India cannot be overstated. With rising caste-based violence, erasure of marginalized histories, and institutional apathy, it becomes crucial to use every available medium to counter dominant narratives. Digital films like Jai Bhim and Asuran represent a form of counter-hegemonic storytelling, a resistance not only in content but in form and dissemination. Incorporating such films into academic, legal, and cultural conversations is not merely an intellectual exercise, it is a social necessity. They force us to rethink our assumptions about justice, resistance, and representation. They urge society to confront uncomfortable truths and imagine new possibilities of equality and solidarity. Thus, the digital revolution is not just a technological shift, it is a political opportunity. When wielded with purpose, it becomes a platform to amplify marginalized voices, challenge power structures, and foster a more inclusive, informed, and just society. Jai Bhim and Asuran, as digital caste narratives, are not just films, they are interventions, tools of memory, and catalysts for change.

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