SP Publications
International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)
An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed Journal; **Impact Factor:**8.337(SJIF)
ISSN: 2581-8333|**Volume 8, Issue-11(November);2026**

Reframing Caste and Justice: Representations of Marginalized Communities in "*Jai Bhim* "

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Article Received: 03/10/2026
Article Accepted:05/11/2026
Published Online:06/11/2026
DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.11.23

Abstract:

This research paper delves into the cinematic portrayal of social justice issues in the Tamil film Jai Bhim (2021), directed by T.J. Gnanavel. Through a critical analysis of its narrative, characters, legal dramaturgy, and societal impact, this study examines the film's contribution to shedding light on caste-based discrimination, custodial violence, and the fight for equality in contemporary Indian society. The paper explores the artistic choices made by the filmmakers, the historical context underpinning the narrative, the symbolic use of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's ideology, and the reception of the film, aiming to highlight its role in fostering awareness and advocating for systemic change. Furthermore, the paper situates Jai Bhim within the broader tradition of social-realist cinema in India and evaluates its effectiveness as a vehicle for justice-oriented discourse.

Keywords: social justice, caste discrimination, Dalit rights, custodial violence, societal impact.

Introduction

For a very long time, cinema has been a mirror of society, reflecting its ideals, injustices, and ambitions. Films that critically address issues of inequality have a special moral and political weight in the Indian context, where caste-based discrimination is still a widespread social reality. One such movie is Jai Bhim, a legal drama based on a true story that addresses Tamil Nadu's systematic marginalization of tribal communities, police brutality, and deaths in detention. It was released on Amazon Prime Video in 2021. The film, which was directed by T.J. Gnanavel and starring Suriya as advocate Chandru, based on the real-life Justice K. Chandru, garnered significant attention both domestically and abroad when it was first released. It briefly topped IMDb's global ratings chart and sparked lengthy conversations about caste privilege, police accountability, and access to justice. The story's

ideological focus is immediately apparent from the title, "Jai Bhim," which is a catchphrase associated with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the Dalit rights movement.

This paper argues that *Jai Bhim* marks a significant development in Indian popular cinema's engagement with social justice because it employs a deftly constructed legal and emotional framework to make the invisible visible, that is, to increase awareness of the daily violence experienced by marginalized communities.

2. Historical and Social Context

Understanding the socio-historical circumstances that Jai Bhim portrays is essential to appreciating its significance. The movie, which takes place in the early 1990s, is based on the true story of Rajakannu, a member of the Irula tribe who is detained by police after being falsely accused of stealing. In an effort to fight for justice, his wife Sengeni enlists the aid of activist Chandru after refusing to accept the police version of events.

Historically, the Irula community and other Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes in Tamil Nadu have experienced significant social, economic, and institutional marginalization denied access to political representation, land, education, and legal protections. Members of these communities are disproportionately affected by custodial violence in India, which is defined as torture, abuse, or death inflicted by law enforcement agencies while a person is in official detention. Caste and tribal identity are linked to increased rates of custodial abuse, according to data from advocacy organizations and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC).

The moral compass of the movie revolves around the legacy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Advocate Chandru's arguments are supported both legally and morally by Ambedkar's philosophy, which is based on the ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity. Ambedkar was the primary architect of the Indian Constitution and one of the most well-known supporters of Dalit rights in the 20th century. As a result, the movie places current legal disputes within a longer historical Ambedkarite resistance tradition.

The context of the 1990s is also important. The Mandal Commission's reservation recommendations, large-scale protests, and counter-mobilizations by upper-caste groups all coincided with a decade of escalating caste tensions throughout India. Gnanavel places specific instances of police brutality within a larger system of caste-based power that continues to influence Indian institutions by setting the movie in this era.

3. Narrative Structure and Cinematic Techniques

Jai Bhim uses two different but connected narrative planes. The first is personal and domestic, telling the tale of Sengeni's grief, vulnerability, extraordinary bravery, and search for her missing husband. The second is systemic and legal, following Chandru's unwavering search for truth through courtroom confrontations, witness testimony, and habeas corpus petitions. witness testimony, and habeas corpus petitions. The human cost of systemic

injustice is never abstracted into simple legal procedure thanks to the film's deft integration of these two planes.

The living conditions of the Irula community are portrayed by director T.J. Gnanavel with a documentary-like realism, including small homes, precarious employment, and social invisibility. This artistic choice presents the community's experiences with documentary-like realism rather than melodramatic exaggeration. During police interrogation scenes, the handheld camera effectively implicates the audience in witnessing the violence that is typically hidden from public view, evoking a visceral sense of claustrophobia and terror.
Suriya's portrayal of advocate Chandru, a man motivated by moral conviction rather than self-glorification, is purposefully subdued. This characterization sets Jai Bhim apart from traditional Kollywood hero stories, in which the protagonist usually represents emotional excess and physical dominance. Legal arguments, the methodical gathering of evidence, and an unwavering faith in the ability of constitutional democracy to bring about justice are examples of this quiet, institutional, and methodical heroism.

The film's dedication to truth-telling over entertainment is reinforced by its use of title cards and factual footnotes that state the case's actual outcomes as well as the larger statistics of custodial deaths in India. By blurring the lines between documentary and film, this meta-cinematic technique serves as a reminder to viewers that the injustices portrayed are not limited to the past.

4. Representation of Caste, Gender, and Marginalisation

Jai Bhim's intersectional depiction of oppression is among its most important contributions. The movie illustrates how caste discrimination interacts with gender, poverty, and tribal identity to increase the protagonists' vulnerability rather than treating it in a vacuum. Lijomol Jose's powerful portrayal of Sengeni shows that she is not just a helpless victim but also an agent who advances the legal case by demanding accountability.

She is doubly marginalized because of her gender: as a woman from a Scheduled Tribe, she encounters social pressure to remain silent, bureaucratic indifference from court officials, and disbelief from police officers. Rather than merely using her as the emotional backdrop for a male lawyer's heroics, the film makes a deliberate artistic and political decision to highlight her point of view.

The portrayal of the Irula community's cultural customs, their connection to the land, and their reliance on snake-catching for income helps to humanize a group that is usually either ignored or mocked in mainstream movies. The movie demands that viewers acknowledge the complete humanity of those who are frequently dehumanized by the caste system by giving these details a lot of screen time.

The police officers in the movie are portrayed as institutional actors who are part of a system that rewards impunity and penalizes accountability rather than as cartoonish

villains. A more structural critique of how institutions sustain caste violence through processes of normalization and denial is made possible by this nuanced portrayal, which keeps the movie from devolving into oversimplified moralism.

5. Ambedkar's Legacy and Ideological Symbolism

Throughout Jai Bhim, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's name and philosophy are purposefully and intricately invoked. Ambedkar's philosophy was based on the idea that the Indian Constitution could be a tool of emancipation for the oppressed if it were correctly implemented. Through advocate Chandru's courtroom arguments, which repeatedly invoke constitutional rights particularly Articles 21 (right to life) and 22 (protection against arbitrary detention) to contest police excesses, the movie dramatizes this belief.

The title "Jai Bhim" serves as a declaration of ideological affiliation, a political slogan linked to Dalit assertion, and a salutation ("Victory to Bhim," referring to Ambedkar's first name, Bhimrao). Its use as the title of the movie indicates that the story is not just a courtroom drama but also a Dalit political statement, asserting that justice is achievable only via persistent struggle and unity.

Ambedkar's emphasis on education as liberation is also referenced in the movie. Ambedkar's belief that true equality cannot be achieved without access to education is echoed in the subplot involving Chandru's pro-bono work for students from Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe communities applying to colleges. Even though they are short, these scenes broaden the movie's conception of justice to include a more comprehensive systemic change rather than just one court case.

6. Reception and Societal Impact

In India, the release of Jai Bhim sparked a level of public debate never seen before. The movie surpassed long-standing classics to become the highest-rated Indian film on IMDb within days of its release. The hashtag JaiBhim became popular on social media for several days in a row as users shared firsthand accounts of caste prejudice and demanded police reform. The line between cinema and civic life was blurred when politicians, activists, academics, and regular people interacted with the film's content.

But there was also organized opposition to the movie. A small but vocal group of social media users, mostly from Tamil Nadu's upper-caste communities, objected to some of the movie's depictions and complained about alleged deception. Larger discussions concerning who has the right to tell stories of marginalization, the nature of historical accuracy in activist film, and the ongoing opposition to Dalit representation in mainstream cultural spaces were sparked by this controversy.

Jai Bhim marks a major change in Tamil popular cinema, according to media studies and Dalit studies experts. From K. Balachander's films to more recent works by directors like Pa, the Tamil film industry has a long history of making socially conscious movies. Ranjith: Jai Bhim's mainstream commercial embrace, along with its high-profile streaming platform

release and star-studded production, signifies a new era in which Dalit narratives become more visible in the mainstream cultural economy as well as alternative or art-house circuits. Even though some dramatizations were made for narrative purposes, the real Justice K. Chandru, who is currently retired from the Madras High Court, expressed gratitude for the film's faithfulness to the spirit of his work. His support gave the movie more legitimacy and strengthened its standing as a significant addition to the public's knowledge of this era of Indian legal and social history.

7. Jai Bhim within the Tradition of Social-Realist Indian Cinema

Jai Bhim is part of a long history of Indian social-realist filmmaking that challenges established power structures and stands up for the oppressed. In the Hindi film tradition, films like Govind Nihalani's Ardh Satya (1983) and Shyam Benegal's Ankur (1974) addressed police corruption and feudal hierarchies, respectively. More recently, caste discrimination has been openly addressed in Tamil cinema with films like Mari Selvaraj's Pariyerum Perumal (2018).

Jai Bhim stands out in this tradition because it combines politically radical content with popular commercial appeal.

Jai Bhim was able to reach millions of viewers worldwide through its streaming platform release, which generated both widespread emotional engagement and serious intellectual debate, in contrast to many social-realist films that receive critical acclaim but have a limited popular reach. This twofold accomplishment highlights the changing potential of social justice filmmaking in the digital era.

The movie also exemplifies a type of solidaristic filmmaking in which a male star from a dominant caste and a caste-privileged director put the needs of a Dalit story told with integrity ahead of their own artistic and commercial instincts.

The example of Jai Bhim indicates that such partnerships, when carried out with a sincere commitment to truth-telling, can result in significant cultural interventions, even though discussions about representation and authorship such as whether only Dalit filmmakers should tell Dalit stories continue in academic and activist circles.

8. Conclusion

Jai Bhim stands as one of the most important Indian films of the 21st century precisely because it refuses to separate entertainment from accountability. By grounding its narrative in a true story of custodial violence, foregrounding the agency of its Dalit and tribal protagonists, invoking the intellectual and moral legacy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, and employing a disciplined cinematic realism, the film creates an experience that is simultaneously deeply personal and politically urgent.

The film's outstanding reception and the discussions it sparked are proof of its cultural influence. It proved that audiences are capable of empathy, indignation, and introspection when given truthful accounts of the lives of the marginalized. Additionally, it

showed how important cinema continues to be in the fight for justice, memory, and representation.

Movies like Jai Bhim serve as a reminder that the pursuit of justice is not only a legal or political issue but also a profoundly human one, one that cinema, at its best, is uniquely able to evoke in us as India struggles with enduring caste inequality, violence against detainees, and the unfinished project of constitutional democracy.

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