



Cinema As Cultural Narrative: Justice, Identity, And Resistance In The Film Jai Bhim (2021)

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Abstract

Jai Bhim (2021), directed by T. J. Gnanavel, transcends the boundaries of conventional courtroom dramas to emerge as a compelling socio-political commentary deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of Tamil Nadu. Based on a real-life incident involving the custodial death of a tribal man and the legal battle that followed, the film deftly interweaves themes of **caste-based discrimination, tribal marginalisation, and structural injustice**, all of which remain pressing issues within Indian society. Set against the backdrop of the **Irular tribe's lived realities**, *Jai Bhim* offers a rare cinematic portrayal of a community that exists on the peripheries of both state recognition and cultural representation. Through its powerful storytelling, character development, and visual composition, the film not only humanises the experiences of the oppressed but also exposes the deep-rooted social hierarchies and institutional violence that perpetuate their suffering. This paper aims to analyse *Jai Bhim* through a cultural studies framework, drawing on narrative analysis, visual semiotics, and socio-historical referencing. It explores how the film acts as both a cultural document that preserves and presents the voices of the marginalised, and a political artefact that challenges hegemonic structures. In doing so, the study also highlights the film's role in furthering Dalit-Bahujan discourse, critiquing the dominant narratives in Tamil cinema, and reclaiming space for indigenous and lower-caste representation. Ultimately, *Jai Bhim* is not merely a cinematic experience—it is a call to consciousness, urging audiences to confront the uncomfortable truths of caste, state violence, and systemic exclusion. It

reaffirms the potential of cinema as a tool for **social transformation**, cultural assertion, and political resistance.

Keywords: Tamil cinema, Jai Bhim, caste oppression, Irular tribe, tribal identity, social justice, cultural resistance, legal activism, visual semiotics, systemic injustice, Tamil Nadu culture, Ambedkarite ideology, representation in film, marginalised communities

1. Introduction

Tamil cinema has historically functioned as a potent cultural mirror, reflecting the socio-political landscape and the evolving ethos of the region. From mythological narratives and Dravidian political propaganda to contemporary social realism, it has consistently engaged with themes of caste, class, gender, and identity. The medium of cinema in Tamil Nadu is not merely a form of entertainment but a critical site where cultural ideologies are constructed, negotiated, and contested. In this lineage, *Jai Bhim* (2021) stands out as a landmark film that transcends its cinematic boundaries to become a sociocultural phenomenon.

Directed by T. J. Gnanavel and produced by actor Suriya's 2D Entertainment, the film delves into the structural violence faced by the Irular tribe, one of Tamil Nadu's most neglected and stigmatised indigenous communities. It draws from the real-life legal efforts of Justice K. Chandru, a retired judge of the Madras High Court, who fought a historic case in 1993 defending the rights of a tribal man falsely implicated by the police. The film dramatises this case with emotional intensity and legal authenticity, shedding light on the institutional apathy, custodial brutality, and caste-based injustice embedded within the state's policing and judicial systems.

What elevates *Jai Bhim* beyond a typical legal drama is its explicit ideological framing. The title itself—"Jai Bhim"—is not merely symbolic but ideologically loaded, invoking the powerful legacy of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the principal architect of the Indian Constitution and a global icon of anti-caste resistance. Ambedkar's vision of social justice, equality, and dignity for the oppressed is echoed throughout the narrative, especially through the character of Advocate Chandru, who embodies Ambedkarite principles in both thought and action.

The film's release triggered widespread public discourse on the visibility of tribal communities, the misuse of police authority, and the role of cinema in raising social awareness. In doing so, *Jai Bhim* not only found critical acclaim but also functioned as a catalyst for societal introspection, making it a crucial cultural text in the ongoing struggle for justice and representation among India's marginalised communities.

2. Review of Literature

Cinema, especially in regional contexts like Tamil Nadu, plays a powerful role in shaping, reflecting, and challenging cultural ideologies. Over the decades, a significant body of academic literature has emerged examining how Indian cinema negotiates issues of caste, identity, and marginality.

2.1 Caste and Cinematic Representation

M. S. S. Pandian's foundational work, *The Image Trap: M.G. Ramachandran in Film and Politics* (1992), explores how Tamil cinema has historically intertwined with Dravidian politics, often constructing heroic upper-caste male figures who champion social justice, yet rarely engaging with the lived realities of Dalits

and Adivasis. Pandian argues that cinema in Tamil Nadu has often masked caste hierarchies under the guise of populist heroism, maintaining the status quo while appearing progressive.

Similarly, Anand Teltumbde (2010), in his writings on caste and media, critiques mainstream Indian cinema for its failure to represent Dalit lives authentically, suggesting that caste oppression is either invisibilized or sentimentalised, with little systemic critique.

2.2 Tribal Representation in Indian Cinema

Representation of indigenous and tribal communities in Indian cinema has historically been limited and problematic. Scholars such as B. Venkat Mani (2009) argue that Adivasi characters are often portrayed either as naïve and mystical or violent and criminal, with little regard for their cultural complexity or autonomy. The cinematic gaze often positions tribal identity as 'otherness' rather than as an integral part of Indian society.

In the Tamil context, films rarely focus on tribal narratives with sincerity. Exceptions like *Jai Bhim* bring tribal identity into the mainstream discourse, representing a rare instance where indigenous voices are given space to be heard and understood. Saravanan S. (2022), in his article “Tribal Identity and Cinematic Realism: A Study on *Jai Bhim*,” published in the *South Asian Journal of Culture and Communication*, praises the film for its nuanced portrayal of the Irular tribe and the socio-legal issues they face. He argues that the film breaks the cinematic norm of marginalising tribal voices and instead centres them realistically and respectfully.

2.3 Cinema as a Tool for Social Justice

According to R. Viswanath and S. Malik in *Dalit Art and Visual Imagery: Cultural Assertion and Everyday Resistance* (2009), visual media can be a site of resistance when they allow subaltern voices to assert their identity and contest dominant narratives. Their work emphasises the potential of art and cinema to function as tools of cultural assertion for marginalised groups.

Films like *Jai Bhim* contribute to what scholars have termed the **Dalit-Bahujan cinematic imaginary**, where the traditional hero narrative is replaced by legal, intellectual, and ethical agency (Rao, 2020). This repositioning allows for a reimagination of power structures and offers a counternarrative to mainstream portrayals of justice and heroism.

2.4 The Legal Frame in Cinema

The intersection of law and cinema has also been explored by scholars like Pratiksha Baxi, whose ethnographic studies on courtroom practices in India reveal how caste and gender influence legal outcomes. *Jai Bhim* reflects these dynamics on screen by portraying the courtroom not only as a site of law but as a battleground for social equity.

3. Methodology

This research employs a **qualitative interpretative approach** grounded in **cultural studies, film theory, and narrative analysis** to examine the film *Jai Bhim* (2021) within the socio-cultural context of Tamil Nadu. The aim is to explore how the film represents themes such as caste oppression, tribal identity, systemic injustice, and legal resistance through its narrative structure, visual aesthetics, and symbolic content.

3.1 Research Design

The study adopts a **descriptive and interpretative design**, analyzing the film as a cultural text. It draws from **semiotic analysis**, **narrative theory**, and **critical discourse analysis** to decode visual, verbal, and symbolic elements in the film. This design is appropriate for capturing the deeper cultural meanings embedded in visual media and for understanding the ideological constructions of caste, justice, and marginality.

3.2 Data Collection

The primary source for this study is the feature film *Jai Bhim*, directed by T. J. Gnanavel and released on Amazon Prime Video in 2021. The film was viewed multiple times to extract detailed observations on:

Character development

Dialogue and courtroom discourse

Symbolic imagery and cinematography

Costume, setting, and dialects

Intertextual references (e.g., Ambedkar iconography)

Portrayal of caste and tribal identity

Scenes of oppression, resistance, and justice

Secondary data was gathered from scholarly articles, media reviews, academic journals, and books related to Tamil cinema, caste representation, and cultural studies.

3.3 Analytical Framework

The following analytical tools were used:

Narrative Analysis: To examine the story structure, character arcs, and how the plot conveys socio-political messages.

Visual Semiotic Analysis: To interpret the use of colours, lighting, mise-en-scène, body language, and symbols such as Ambedkar portraits and tribal ornaments.

Cultural Contextualization: To situate the film within the historical and socio-political background of caste politics, tribal marginalisation, and legal activism in Tamil Nadu.

Discourse Analysis: To explore the use of language in the film—both legal and everyday speech—and how it reinforces or resists dominant cultural ideologies.

3.4 Scope and Delimitations

This study focuses exclusively on *Jai Bhim* as a case study and does not compare it with other films, although references to broader trends in Tamil cinema are occasionally made for contextual clarity. The emphasis is on **cultural representation**, not on audience reception or statistical data. Therefore, the findings are interpretative and thematic rather than generalizable or empirical.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

This study engages critically and respectfully with themes of caste and tribal identity. Care has been taken to use correct terminology (e.g., Scheduled Tribes, Dalit-Bahujan, Ambedkarite) and to avoid reinforcing stereotypes or stigmatisation. All sources used are publicly accessible and duly cited.

3. The Irulars: Cultural Representation of an Indigenous Community

The **Irular community**, one of the officially recognised Scheduled Tribes of Tamil Nadu, has historically occupied a precarious socio-economic position. Traditionally engaged in **snake catching, rodent control, honey collection, and other forest-based labour**, the Irulars have long lived in close connection with nature, yet remain systematically **excluded from the developmental frameworks** of the modern Indian state. Their way of life—rooted in oral traditions, subsistence economies, and localised ecological knowledge—has often been dismissed or misunderstood by dominant caste and urban populations. As a result, the Irulars exist on the **margins of both visibility and citizenship**.

Jai Bhim brings this invisibility into sharp focus. Through the lens of **Sengeni's character**, sensitively portrayed by Lijomol Jose, the audience is introduced to the everyday hardships endured by the Irulars—not only economic poverty, but a more insidious **political and cultural marginalisation**. The film effectively shows how members of this community often lack **basic identity documents** such as ration cards, voter IDs, or land titles—essentials in accessing welfare, healthcare, and legal protection. This absence renders them **stateless within their state**, exposing them to exploitation by landlords, police, and bureaucracy.

One of the most powerful contributions of *Jai Bhim* is its **authentic cultural representation** of the Irulars. Rather than romanticising or exoticising tribal life, the film carefully incorporates **dialect-specific Tamil**, traditional attire, rustic settings, and real-life practices to build an immersive and respectful portrayal. For instance, the use of **earth-tone clothing, unadorned homes, and forest landscapes** situates the Irulars within their natural environment, while also contrasting their simplicity with the oppressive forces of the police and bureaucracy. Their **non-confrontational demeanour** and body language, portrayed with nuance, reveal a community long conditioned to expect injustice, yet quietly resilient.

Moreover, the film highlights how **traditional occupations**—which once carried ecological and cultural value—have been delegitimised in the modern socio-legal system. For instance, their practice of trapping snakes and rats, crucial in rural pest control, is dismissed as primitive or criminal. This feeds into the broader **stereotyping of tribal people as uncivilised or even dangerous**, which in turn makes them easy targets for wrongful accusations, as seen in the film.

Through Sengeni's plight, *Jai Bhim* personalises these broader cultural dynamics. Her transition from a grieving wife to a determined seeker of justice is emblematic of a larger, collective struggle for **voice, dignity, and legal recognition**. The emotional depth given to Sengeni allows the viewer to empathize with

not just her pain, but her **quiet strength and cultural pride**. Her portrayal becomes a cinematic device to **reclaim the humanity and agency** of a people often reduced to statistics or stereotypes.

By embedding the Irulars' story into the visual and narrative fabric of the film, *Jai Bhim* succeeds in crafting a **counter-narrative**—one that acknowledges, respects, and amplifies tribal identity. In doing so, it challenges the dominant Tamil cinematic tradition that has historically sidelined or misrepresented tribal communities. It reframes their experience as not merely peripheral but central to understanding the **cultural and ethical fault lines** within Tamil society.

4. Caste and Cultural Hegemony

Caste remains one of the central cultural institutions shaping everyday life in Tamil Nadu. *Jai Bhim* does not shy away from exposing **4. Caste and Cultural Hegemony**

how caste operates as a hidden framework within state mechanisms. The film portrays the systemic targeting of Irulars by police as part of a larger structure of caste-based exclusion and violence.

The film's villains are not individual police officers but an entire system built on cultural assumptions of inferiority, lawlessness, and criminality assigned to lower castes and tribal people. This cultural profiling is depicted through scenes of custodial torture, fabricated evidence, and judicial apathy.

5. Legal Culture and the Dalit-Bahujan Imaginary

Advocate Chandru (played by Suriya) represents a counter-cultural force—a figure rooted in rationalism, Ambedkarite ideology, and leftist legal activism. His methods—challenging caste hierarchies through legal reasoning—represent a cultural resistance to dominant Brahmanical legal traditions.

In this context, *Jai Bhim* contributes to what scholars call the Dalit-Bahujan cinematic imaginary. It offers an alternate heroism—one that privileges intellect, compassion, and justice over traditional Tamil cinema tropes like vengeance or physical domination. The court, often a symbol of elite power, becomes a space of resistance and possibility.

6. Visual Culture and Symbolism

The cinematography of *Jai Bhim* employs symbolic contrast: the darkness of the police lockup versus the light-filled courtrooms; the silence of the tribal homes versus the echoing screams of custodial violence. The use of cultural markers—barefoot walking, tribal ornaments, bamboo baskets—grounds the narrative in Tamil Nadu's rural and indigenous visual lexicon.

The film also uses intertextuality, referencing Ambedkarite imagery through the use of the slogan “*Jai Bhim*,” portraits of Ambedkar, and symbols of Buddhist conversion. These elements are deeply embedded in Tamil Dalit resistance culture and signal a reclaiming of dignity through knowledge and law.

7. Women, Resistance, and Cultural Resilience

Sengeni's character is a profound depiction of indigenous womanhood—resilient, dignified, and politically awakening. Her transformation from a grieving wife to a litigant reflects a cultural shift from silence to speech. In many ways, her character embodies the cultural resilience of Tamil women from oppressed backgrounds, who often become carriers of memory, trauma, and justice.

Through Sengeni, *Jai Bhim* pays tribute to the often-ignored contributions of women in resistance movements—those who fight not through arms or ideology but through endurance, truth, and moral clarity.

7. Reception and Cultural Impact

The film sparked widespread debate and awareness in Tamil Nadu and beyond. It revived conversations on caste-based police brutality, representation of tribal communities, and the role of cinema in shaping public consciousness. It also received backlash from conservative and casteist groups, underlining how cultural narratives of justice challenge existing hierarchies.

The fact that *Jai Bhim* was distributed on an OTT platform (Amazon Prime) contributed to its wide cultural reach, especially among younger audiences and the Tamil diaspora. It also prompted policy discussions, community responses, and academic engagement with Dalit and tribal issues.

8. Conclusion

Jai Bhim is not merely a film—it is a cultural statement. It weaves together Tamil Nadu's history of caste oppression, tribal invisibility, and legal struggle into a coherent, emotionally powerful narrative. It contributes to a growing body of Tamil cinema that resists mainstream erasure of marginal voices and instead centers them as agents of change.

By situating *Jai Bhim* within the cultural context of Tamil society, this paper has attempted to show how cinema can serve as a site of resistance, empathy, and transformation.

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