

Cinema as Constitution:

The Courtroom Narrative of Tamil film Jai Bhim

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Abstract. T. J. Gnanavel's Tamil film *Jai Bhim* (2021) functions as a powerful cinematic enactment of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's constitutional and legal philosophy. The film's deployment of habeas corpus, Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, and its dramatisation of custodial atrocity together translate Ambedkar's written guarantees of liberty into lived, affective experience. The film constitutes a jurisprudential argument about the distance between constitutional promise and ground reality, showing how marginalised communities can reclaim the Constitution as a living instrument of liberation. Drawing on Ambedkar's primary writings, the Indian Constitution, and scholarship from film studies, Dalit Studies, and constitutional law, this paper argues that the courtroom in *Jai Bhim* serves as an Ambedkarite arena where law is restored to its proper function as a tool of social transformation.

keywords: *Jai Bhim*, B. R. Ambedkar, habeas corpus, Article 21, Dalit cinema, constitutional justice, custodial violence, caste, Irular community.

I. Introduction

When the Tamil film *Jai Bhim* was released on Amazon Prime Video on 2 November 2021, it carried a title that is simultaneously a political salutation and a constitutional aspiration. 'Jai Bhim'—Victory to Bhim, or Long Live Bhim—is the greeting coined by followers of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the polymath jurist, social reformer, economist, and principal architect of the Indian Constitution. The phrase, which has greeted Dalit communities for nearly a century, places the film within an explicit ideological genealogy before a single frame is screened.

Directed by T. J. Gnanavel and produced under Suriya's banner 2D Entertainment, the film dramatises a true legal case from 1995 in which advocate K. Chandru—later Justice K. Chandru of the Madras High Court—fought a habeas corpus petition on behalf of Sengeni, a woman from the Irular tribal community whose husband Rajakannu was arrested on false charges and subsequently tortured to death in police custody. Within days of its release, *Jai Bhim* topped IMDb's global ratings, making it one of the most widely watched Indian films on an international streaming platform—a remarkable

achievement for a Tamil-language film centred on custodial torture, caste atrocity, and tribal rights.

Writing in *Feminism in India*, Krishnapriya Rajamani acknowledges that 'the very core of the movie is grounded in an Ambedkarite ideology,' a recognition that the film's Ambedkarism inheres in its jurisprudential logic rather than its visual iconography (Rajamani). This paper investigates the precise ways in which *Jai Bhim* dramatises Ambedkar's constitutional vision—specifically Article 21 and the writ of habeas corpus—and transforms the courtroom into a space where the Indian Constitution is reclaimed as a living instrument of liberation for the marginalised. The paper further examines the film's representational choices and considers their implications for the politics of mainstream Dalit cinema in India.

II. Review of Literature

Scholarship on *Jai Bhim* falls broadly into three intersecting fields: constitutional and legal studies, Dalit Studies, and film theory. Each body of work illuminates a distinct dimension of the film's significance.

In the field of constitutional law, Upendra Baxi's *The Future of Human Rights* (2008) provides the foundational framework for understanding fundamental rights as instruments wrested from the state through organised political struggle rather than concessions granted from above. Baxi's concept of 'socio-legal humanistic inquiry' treats law as a cultural practice embedded in relations of power, and his analysis of Article 21 jurisprudence is directly relevant to the custodial violence the film depicts. Granville Austin's *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation* (1966) offers essential historical context for the Constituent Assembly debates in which Ambedkar's legal vision was forged. The landmark judgment in *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India* (1978) expanded Article 21 to encompass the right to live with human dignity and the right against torture, while *D. K. Basu v. State of West Bengal* (1997) laid down specific guidelines for custodial treatment, both of which bear directly on the film's legal argument.

In Ambedkar Studies, Eleanor Zelliot's *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement* (2013) is the most comprehensive English-language intellectual biography of Ambedkar, tracing the development of his constitutional thought from

his early academic work at Columbia University through his role as chief drafter of the Indian Constitution. Christophe Jaffrelot's *Dr. Ambedkar and Untouchability: Fighting the Indian Caste System* (2005) provides essential political context for Ambedkar's constitutional strategies, particularly his insistence on legal remedies over moral appeals. Suraj Yengde's *Caste Matters* (2019) frames the contemporary relevance of Ambedkar's thought in relation to ongoing caste atrocities, arguing that the caste system continues to operate through state institutions including the police. Gopal Guru's influential essay 'Dalit Women Talk Differently' (1995) establishes the principle that Dalit experience possesses an epistemological specificity that representation must respect.

In film theory and Dalit cinema studies, Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen's *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* (1999) provides historical context for the emergence of socially committed Indian cinema. Criticism of contemporary Tamil Dalit cinema—including scholarship on Pa. Ranjith's *Kabali* (2016) and Karnan (2021) by Mari Selvaraj—establishes the genre within which *Jai Bhim* operates. Sowjanya Tamalapakula's essay in *The News Minute* (2021), Krishnapriya Rajamani's piece in *Feminism in India* (2021), and Ronak Bhatt's analysis in *Outlook India* (2021) constitute the most substantial body of critical writing directly on the film, engaging its representational politics from feminist and Dalit Studies perspectives. S. V. Srinivas's scholarship on the Tamil star system illuminates the ideological implications of Suriya's casting. Together, these bodies of scholarship establish a rich inter-disciplinary context for the present study.

III. Research Gap

The existing scholarship on *Jai Bhim*, while productive, has developed along parallel rather than intersecting lines. Constitutional lawyers and Ambedkar scholars have engaged with the film's legal content, while film theorists and Dalit Studies scholars have examined its representational politics. A study that systematically brings these two streams of inquiry into dialogue—reading the film's cinematic form through Ambedkar's constitutional philosophy and, equally, reading Ambedkar's constitutional philosophy through the film's narrative and visual grammar—has yet to be produced.

Furthermore, existing critical writing on the film has tended to focus either on its achievements (its constitutional argument, its emotional power, its reach) or on its limitations (the dominant-caste protagonist, the partial engagement with Ambedkarite iconography), treating these as separate questions. The present paper argues that the film's

achievements and its representational challenges are inseparable, and that a complete Ambedkarite reading of *Jai Bhim* must hold both in view simultaneously.

There is also a relative absence of close formal analysis of the film's key sequences—the opening lock-up scene, the habeas corpus explanation, the courtroom climax, the final image—as cinematic enactments of specific constitutional provisions. Most existing criticism treats these sequences thematically rather than formally. The present paper addresses this gap by reading each key sequence as a precise constitutional argument, attending to mise-en-scene, narrative structure, and visual rhetoric alongside legal and philosophical content.

Finally, the film's significance as a work of constitutional pedagogy—its capacity to deliver constitutional literacy to mass audiences who would otherwise have little access to it—has received insufficient critical attention. This paper brings that dimension into focus as a specifically Ambedkarite achievement, connecting it to Ambedkar's lifelong commitment to constitutional education as a precondition for Dalit liberation.

Objectives

The present study sets out the following specific objectives:

1. To examine B. R. Ambedkar's constitutional philosophy—particularly his conceptualisation of Article 21, habeas corpus, and constitutional morality as a theoretical framework for reading *Jai Bhim*.
2. To conduct a close reading of the film's narrative structure and visual rhetoric through the lens of Ambedkarite jurisprudence.
3. To analyse the courtroom as a cinematic and constitutional space where the claims of marginalised communities are translated into legal language.
4. To situate *Jai Bhim* within the broader tradition of Dalit and anti-caste cinema in India, mapping its continuities with and departures from earlier works in this genre.
5. To evaluate the film's representational politics and assess whether its cinematic grammar supports or complicates Ambedkar's insistence that Dalit liberation must be led by Dalits themselves.
6. To demonstrate the interpretive productivity of reading cinema through legal-philosophical frameworks, contributing to interdisciplinary scholarship in film studies, constitutional law, and Dalit Studies.

IV. Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology that brings together three distinct but mutually illuminating approaches: textual and cinematic analysis, philosophical-legal inquiry, and critical cultural studies.

The primary analytical method is close reading, applied both to the film *Jai Bhim* and to Ambedkar's written texts. In the context of cinema studies, close reading entails detailed attention to mise-en-scene, narrative sequencing, dialogue, and visual rhetoric—the means by which a film constructs meaning beyond its plot. This method has been widely employed in the study of politically engaged cinema, from Sergei Eisenstein's montage theory to contemporary Dalit film criticism. The close reading in this paper focuses on three nodal sequences: the opening scene in the police lock-up, the custodial violence passages, and the courtroom climax.

The philosophical-legal component involves interpretive analysis of Ambedkar's primary texts alongside specific provisions of the Indian Constitution. This paper reads Ambedkar's writings as a philosophical system—a theory of law, justice, and social transformation—and asks how that system is reflected, embodied, and advanced by the film's narrative choices. This approach is consistent with what Upendra Baxi has called 'socio-legal humanistic inquiry,' which treats law as a cultural practice embedded in relations of power (Baxi 11).

The critical cultural studies component draws on Dalit Studies and subaltern theory to examine the film's representational choices. Scholars such as Gopal Guru, Suraj Yengde, and Sowjanya Tamalapakula are engaged to assess the film's cinematic form and ideological investments. This reflexive dimension of the methodology ensures both a generous and a rigorous assessment of the film's contributions to the Ambedkarite tradition. Data for the study is drawn from the film itself and from the primary and secondary sources detailed below; the paper's claims are interpretive and argumentative rather than statistical.

V. Analysis and Discussion

Ambedkar's Constitutional Philosophy: Law as Social Revolution

Ambedkar's relationship with law was never merely technical. From his doctoral work at Columbia University in 1916 to his tenure as Chairman of the Constitution Drafting

Committee between 1947 and 1949, Ambedkar conceived of law as the primary instrument for dismantling the social order of caste. Mainstream nationalism often treated caste as a social problem amenable to moral persuasion; Ambedkar recognised it as a legal and structural problem that required legal and structural solutions.

In his concluding speech to the Constituent Assembly on 25 November 1949, Ambedkar articulated the central tension that any reading of *Jai Bhim* must engage:

On the 26th of January 1950, we are going to enter into a life of contradictions. In politics we will have equality and in social and economic life we will have inequality. In politics we will be recognising the principle of one man one vote and one vote one value. In our social and economic life, we shall, by reason of our social and economic structure, continue to deny the principle of one man one value. (1202)

The Constitution was, for Ambedkar, a mandate for social transformation. Article 21—'No person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to procedure established by law' (Constitution of India)—was the constitutional answer to centuries of caste-inflicted denial of dignity. The landmark judgment in *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India* (1978) expanded this provision to encompass the right against torture.

Habeas corpus, enshrined in Articles 32 and 226, constituted what Baxi has called an instrument wrested from the state on behalf of those whom the state has most consistently harmed (Baxi 64). Ambedkar's concept of 'constitutional morality'—an internalised commitment to liberty, equality, and fraternity that must supersede social custom—provides the ethical standard against which the film's characters are measured and found wanting or worthy.

Narrative Architecture: Three-Act Constitutional Drama

Gnanavel structures *Jai Bhim* as a three-act constitutional drama. The first act establishes the grammar of caste inequality as enforced through police power. The Irular community to which Rajakannu and Sengeni belong is a Scheduled Tribe from Tamil Nadu—a community at the extreme margin of the social and economic order. When Rajakannu is arrested on suspicion of theft, he lacks the social capital to negotiate with the police, retain legal representation, or communicate in the institutional language of the criminal justice system.

The second act is structured around Sengeni's journey from the site of loss to the site of law. Her search for Rajakannu—through police stations, hospitals, and finally the court—constitutes a navigation of the constitutional landscape. The act culminates in her meeting with Advocate Chandru, who translates habeas corpus into plain speech: the court can order the police to produce Rajakannu; if they are unable to do so, they must account for where he is. The Constitution becomes, in this translation, a concrete human demand.

The third act is the courtroom drama proper. Chandru files the habeas corpus petition before the Madras High Court. The trial sequences are methodical and evidentially rigorous, grounding every constitutional claim in post-mortem reports, medical records, and witness testimony. This methodical quality is itself an Ambedkarite gesture: constitutional argument must be anchored in reason and evidence.

Key Constitutional Moments: Close Reading

The film's opening sequence is a constitutional text in itself. A police officer sorts newly arrested suspects by caste in a lock-up, assigning upper-caste detainees to the clean cells and tribal and lower-caste men to the floor. The visual composition renders the caste system as a spatial diagram and constitutes a simultaneous violation of Article 14 (equality before the law) and Article 15 (prohibition of caste-based discrimination). Gnanavel does not cite these articles; the scene argues them.

The custodial torture sequences show Rajakannu beaten over several days. The camera holds on his body without cutaways or musical relief: this body has a right to exist, and the viewer is compelled to witness its destruction. The guidelines of *D. K. Basu v. State of West Bengal* (1997)—mandating medical examination, the right to inform a relative, and the prohibition of torture—are violated in sequence, and the 1995 historical setting makes the absence of these protections accurate and instructive.

Chandru's explanation of habeas corpus to Sengeni is the film's most quietly transformative moment. One of Ambedkar's most enduring concerns was constitutional literacy—his conviction that the Constitution would function only if the communities it was designed to protect were aware of its existence. He established the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha in 1924 precisely for this educative purpose. Chandru's translation of the writ into Sengeni's language performs that same function on screen: the Constitution reaches a tribal woman in her own terms, alive and operative.

The penultimate sequence—in which Chandru reads into the record the names and brief life histories of all the Irular individuals arrested, tortured, and never properly accounted for—transforms the courtroom from a space of individual adjudication into a space of historical reckoning. Ambedkar had argued that the Constitution must be understood in the context of the history of those it was designed to protect. The list of names makes that constitutional history audible.

The film's final image—a young Irular girl confidently picking up a newspaper—embodies Ambedkar's famous exhortation: 'Educate, Agitate, Organise.' Beginning with literacy, it shows a constitutional subject in formation, carrying the Ambedkarite project forward into the next generation.

Representational Politics: The Dominant-Caste Protagonist

A comprehensive analysis must engage with the scholarly conversation about the film's representational choices. Advocate Chandru is played by Suriya, who belongs to the Gounder community, a dominant OBC caste in Tamil Nadu. His star image—built over two decades—carries the codes of masculine heroism and populist idealism characteristic of the Tamil 'mass hero' genre. Krishnapriya Rajamani raises the question of whether the film constructs constitutional justice as something conferred by a dominant-caste figure upon marginalised communities rather than claimed by those communities themselves (Rajamani). Sowjanya Tamalapakula further observes that the visual grammar of the Ambedkarite movement—the blue flag, the image of Ambedkar himself is largely absent from the film's iconography (Tamalapakula).

These observations are productive because they sharpen the terms on which the film's achievements must be assessed. The meaningful counterweight lies within the film's own text. Lijomol Jose's portrayal of Sengeni is widely recognised as the film's emotional and moral centre presents a woman who initiates the constitutional claim, sustains it through repeated institutional resistance, and persists until the court is compelled to act. The constitutional argument is hers; Chandru is the instrument through whom it is articulated in procedural language. Furthermore, Gnanavel conducted extensive research with the Irular community and worked closely with Justice Chandru in preparing the film. The film's global reach its capacity to carry a constitutional argument about tribal rights and custodial violence to tens of millions of viewers performs an

Ambedkarite function of constitutional pedagogy at a scale that no academic study can match.

VI. Findings

The analysis of *Jai Bhim* through the lens of Ambedkarite constitutional philosophy yields the following significant findings:

1. *Jai Bhim* enacts Ambedkar's constitutional philosophy not through iconography but through jurisprudence. The film's central legal devices—habeas corpus and Article 21 are the precise instruments Ambedkar designed to protect the bodies and liberties of marginalised communities from state violence.
2. The film's three-act narrative structure mirrors the constitutional logic of wrong, evidence, and adjudication, transforming the courtroom from a narrative device into a constitutional arena where Ambedkar's vision of law as social revolution is tested and affirmed.
3. Each of the film's key sequences—the opening lock-up scene, the custodial torture passages, the habeas corpus explanation, the reading of names, and the final image constitutes a precise cinematic argument about a specific constitutional provision or Ambedkarite value.
4. The scene in which Chandru explains habeas corpus to Sengeni is identifiable as the film's most specifically Ambedkarite moment: a direct enactment of Ambedkar's conviction that constitutional literacy must reach the communities for whom the Constitution was written.
5. The scholarly debate about the dominant-caste protagonist reflects a genuine tension between the film's Ambedkarite content and the conventions of mainstream Tamil commercial cinema. Sengeni's agency as the initiator and sustainer of the constitutional claim provides a meaningful qualification of readings that position the Irular community purely as objects of rescue.
6. *Jai Bhim* achieves a scale of constitutional pedagogy delivering knowledge of Article 21 and habeas corpus to a global mass audience that constitutes a distinctly Ambedkarite contribution to the ongoing project of constitutional democracy in India.
7. The film's gaps its partial engagement with Ambedkarite visual culture, its reliance on a dominant-caste hero invite the continuation of the scholarly conversation it

has generated, and point toward the work that remains to be done in Dalit cinema and constitutional studies.

VII. Conclusion

Jai Bhim thinks through Ambedkar, argues with Ambedkar, and at its most powerful moments enacts Ambedkar. Its courtroom is a constitutional arena where the guarantees of Article 21 and the writ of habeas corpus are brought into direct contact with the reality of caste-inflected state violence. In dramatising the distance between constitutional promise and ground truth, the film enacts Ambedkar's central insight: the Constitution requires advocates in the legal and the broadest sense willing to insist, again and again, that the bodies of the marginalised are visible to the law and that the state must account for them.

The scholarly conversation about the film's representational choices performs a valuable function: it holds the film accountable to the tradition it invokes and affirms the principle central to Ambedkar's own project that Dalit liberation must ultimately be led from within the Dalit community. That conversation is itself evidence of the intellectual seriousness the film has generated, and its continuation is among the film's most productive legacies.

The young Irular girl who picks up a newspaper in the film's final frame embodies the deepest Ambedkarite promise of Jai Bhim. She has watched the constitutional drama of her community unfold; she now approaches the written word with the confidence of a citizen who knows the Constitution belongs to her. That is the promise Ambedkar built the Constitution to fulfil. The film, with its achievements and its responsibilities, carries that promise forward making the Constitution, as Ambedkar always intended, a living thing in the hands of those who need it most.

The study of Jai Bhim as constitutional cinema opens productive directions for future research. Comparative analyses with Pa. Ranjith's *Kabali*, Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal*, and Vetrimaran's *Asuran* would illuminate the emerging grammar of Tamil Dalit cinema and its varying engagements with the Ambedkarite tradition. The relationship between film, constitutional literacy, and the lived experience of marginalised communities in India invites sustained interdisciplinary collaboration between film scholars, legal theorists, and Dalit Studies practitioners—a collaboration that Jai Bhim,

in its popular reach and intellectual ambition, makes both more urgent and more possible.

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