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## **Cinema as Social Critique: Representing Caste-Based Oppression in *Jai Bhim*, *Sairat*, and *Fandry***

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### **Abstract:**

Cinema in India has long served as a mirror reflecting social realities, often acting as a catalyst for public debate and reform. Among its many themes, the depiction of caste-based oppression remains one of the most significant and politically charged. This paper explores how three contemporary Indian films—*Jai Bhim* (2021), *Sairat* (2016), and *Fandry* (2013)—represent caste discrimination and the systemic violence endured by marginalised communities. Through textual, thematic, and cinematic analysis, this study situates these films within the larger discourse of social justice, subaltern identity, and cultural resistance. It argues that these films not only expose the entrenched nature of caste hierarchies but also challenge audiences to confront their complicity within this oppressive system. The paper concludes that *Jai Bhim*, *Sairat*, and *Fandry* exemplify the transformative potential of cinema as a form of social critique in contemporary India.

**Keywords: Caste, Oppression, Cinema, Social Critique, Dalit Representation, Social Justice, Cultural Politics.**

### **1. Introduction**

Cinema, since its inception, has been more than a mere form of entertainment; it is a potent medium for reflecting, shaping, and challenging social realities. In the Indian context, cinema occupies a unique cultural position, often serving as a lens through which audiences engage

with complex questions of identity, morality, and social order. As Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen argue, Indian cinema is “a primary site of the production and contestation of meanings that shape public consciousness” (*Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema* 4). Nevertheless, even as it has entertained millions, Indian cinema has been complicit in concealing or simplifying systemic inequalities embedded in society, among which caste-based oppression remains the most persistent and socially entrenched.

The caste system, deeply rooted in India’s social fabric, functions as an enduring structure of hierarchy, division, and exclusion. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and the reform movements led by Mahatma Phule, Dr B. R. Ambedkar, and Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, caste continues to manifest itself in both overt and covert forms. Caste-based discrimination extends beyond rural spaces, infiltrating urban modernity through subtler modes of exclusion and prejudice (Deshpande 22). Within this milieu, cinema becomes a compelling space of representation—both a mirror that reflects the existing order and a tool that can challenge it.

Mainstream Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, has traditionally portrayed caste relations obliquely, often through sanitised or metaphorical depictions. Hindi films have tended to valorise social harmony, celebrate national unity, and present rural India as idyllic, while rarely engaging with the structural violence faced by Dalits and marginalised groups. When lower-caste characters do appear, they are typically reduced to stereotypes—the loyal servant, the comic relief, or the sacrificial rebel—rather than being presented as complex individuals endowed with dignity and agency (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 63). Such depictions, as M. Madhava Prasad observes, serve to “contain dissent and reassert the dominance of the upper-caste social order through aesthetic normalisation” (*Ideology of the Hindi Film* 119).

However, the past two decades have witnessed a significant shift with the emergence of regional and independent filmmakers who use cinema as a vehicle for social critique and

political assertion. Marathi, Tamil, and Malayalam cinema, in particular, have given rise to a form of filmmaking that foregrounds the experiences of the oppressed and questions the dominant social narratives. Nagraj Manjule, Pa. Ranjith, and T. J. Gnanavel belong to a new generation of directors who treat cinema as a site of struggle, where marginalised voices reclaim the right to self-representation (Ravikumar 15). Their films challenge the comfortable distance between art and activism, turning the screen into a space of both resistance and reimagination.

In this context, three films—*Fandry* (2013), *Sairat* (2016), and *Jai Bhim* (2021)—emerge as critical milestones in the cinematic portrayal of caste. Each film dismantles the myth of a “casteless” modern India, exposing the endurance of systemic discrimination across different social contexts. *Fandry*, Manjule’s semi-autobiographical debut, delves into the world of Jabya, a Dalit adolescent grappling with humiliation and yearning for self-respect in a caste-ridden village. *Sairat*, Manjule’s follow-up film, extends this discourse by narrating an inter-caste love story that ends in tragedy, thereby revealing the lethal consequences of transgressing caste boundaries. *Jai Bhim*, directed by T. J. Gnanavel, turns its attention to the institutional machinery of caste oppression—specifically the police and judiciary—through the story of a tribal family’s legal struggle for justice. Collectively, these films map the social, emotional, and institutional dimensions of caste-based violence while envisioning resistance through love, law, and revolt.

These works transcend conventional storytelling; they serve as what Stuart Hall terms “*cultural texts of resistance*” (Hall 442), compelling audiences to confront uncomfortable moral and political truths. Their aesthetic strategies—realism, symbolism, and the deployment of regional dialects—lend authenticity and immediacy to the Dalit experience. In *Fandry*, the climactic scene in which Jabya hurls a stone at the onlookers mocking his family operates as a visual metaphor for centuries of suppressed rage erupting into defiance. In *Sairat*, the film’s

tonal shift—from the vibrant romance of the first half to the stark brutality of the conclusion—exposes how caste infiltrates even the most personal realms of emotion and intimacy. Meanwhile, *Jai Bhim* employs courtroom drama and documentary realism to reveal the casteist underpinnings of state institutions, portraying the struggle for justice as a continuation of Ambedkarite ideals (Sundar 38).

These films also participate in what has come to be known as *Dalit cinema*—a movement that not only seeks visibility but demands transformation. Dalit cinema redefines narrative ownership by asking critical questions: Who has the right to represent? Whose pain is visible, and whose silence is normalised? As Raj Kumar notes, “**Dalit cinema marks a rupture in the Indian cinematic tradition by dismantling the savarna gaze and asserting a politics of self-representation**” (*Dalit Personal Narratives* 58). Manjule, himself from a marginalised caste, infuses his films with autobiographical sincerity and sociopolitical consciousness, bridging the gap between personal trauma and collective struggle. Likewise, Gnanavel’s *Jai Bhim* situates its narrative within the legal and constitutional framework, embodying the Ambedkarite principle that emancipation must be grounded in justice and rationality.

Caste, therefore, functions not only as a thematic concern but also as an invisible structure shaping production, distribution, and reception in Indian cinema. The success of *Fandry* and *Sairat* in Marathi cinema—an industry known for its social realism—reveals the capacity of regional film cultures to challenge dominant narratives. Conversely, *Jai Bhim*’s widespread reception on digital platforms demonstrates how streaming media can democratize access to politically charged stories, circumventing traditional commercial constraints (Ranganathan 27). The critical acclaim and popular resonance of these films indicate an evolving cultural landscape where audiences are increasingly willing to engage with narratives of oppression and resistance.

Thus, this paper examines how *Jai Bhim*, *Sairat*, and *Fandry* operate as cinematic critiques of caste oppression. It investigates the aesthetic and political strategies through which these films expose the social logic of caste while simultaneously envisioning emancipatory possibilities. The analysis also situates these films within broader debates on representation, identity, and justice in Indian cinema. Ultimately, this study contends that these works exemplify the transformative potential of film as social critique, where artistic expression merges with activism and cinema becomes an instrument of social change.

By positioning cinema as an active participant in social transformation rather than a passive reflector of reality, this paper underscores the ethical responsibility of filmmakers and audiences alike. As Ambedkar famously asserted, “Justice has to be fought for, not begged for,” and in this struggle, cinema assumes the role of a moral witness (Ambedkar 145). *Jai Bhim*, *Sairat*, and *Fandry* collectively reaffirm this vision, using the cinematic form to render visible the invisible and to turn art into an act of justice.

## 2. Review of Literature

Scholars have increasingly recognised cinema as a form of “cultural text” that both reflects and reproduces social hierarchies (Prasad, 1998; Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2012). Studies on Dalit representation (Rao, 2019; Thorat, 2020) note the shift from stereotypical portrayals to authentic voices articulating self-representation.

Anand Patwardhan’s documentaries and Nagraj Manjule’s films have been noted for their critical engagement with caste (Srinivas, 2017). Similarly, Tamil cinema has witnessed a parallel trajectory with films like *Pariyerum Perumal* and *Jai Bhim*, foregrounding caste consciousness (Sundar, 2022).

Theoretical frameworks from *Subaltern Studies* (Spivak, 1988) and *Dalit Aesthetics* (Ravikumar, 2018) provide critical tools to interpret these films as acts of resistance. Dalit

cinema, according to scholars like Raj Kumar (2014), is not merely about representation but about reclaiming narrative agency in a society that has long silenced subaltern voices.

“Caste and Justice in Tamil Cinema: Reading *Jai Bhim*.” In his article, Sundar provides a critical examination of caste and justice as represented in *Jai Bhim* (2021), situating the film within the broader socio-political discourse of Tamil cinema. He argues that *Jai Bhim* departs from traditional cinematic depictions of marginalised communities by foregrounding the systemic violence and institutionalised oppression faced by Dalits and Adivasis. Sundar emphasises how the film employs realism, courtroom narrative techniques, and visual symbolism to expose the complicity of the state and the police in perpetuating caste-based injustice. He further interprets the character of Advocate Chandru as a cinematic embodiment of Ambedkarite ideology—portraying law and constitutional rights as instruments of resistance. The article situates *Jai Bhim* within the lineage of socially conscious Tamil cinema, tracing its continuity with earlier films that engaged with themes of caste, labour, and social reform. Sundar concludes that *Jai Bhim* not only amplifies subaltern voices but also challenges the audience to rethink justice as a moral and collective responsibility. His analysis provides a valuable framework for understanding how contemporary cinema can function as a tool of social critique and political advocacy. Sundar, S. (2022) examines how Indian popular cinema mirrors and shapes social transformation. They argue that films reflect evolving cultural identities, addressing issues of class, gender, and caste, while simultaneously reinforcing and challenging dominant ideologies within India’s changing socio-political landscape. (Gokulsing and Dissanayake 2012)

Rajadhyaksha, Ashish, and Paul Willemen (1999) provides a comprehensive account of Indian cinema’s history, evolution, and thematic diversity. Their work contextualises films within India’s socio-political and cultural framework, highlighting how cinema reflects issues like caste, class, and identity while serving as a crucial medium of national and social discourse.

### 3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design based on textual and thematic analysis to explore how *Jai Bhim* (2021), *Sairat* (2016), and *Fandry* (2013) represent and critique caste-based oppression in India. The approach focuses on an in-depth interpretation of each film as a cultural text, investigating how cinematic narratives, techniques, and symbols engage with broader socio-political realities. Rather than relying on quantitative data or audience surveys, this methodology prioritises close reading, contextual understanding, and interpretive critique—tools essential for uncovering the ideological and aesthetic layers embedded in cinematic works.

The study's qualitative framework is grounded in four interrelated analytical dimensions:

#### 1. Narrative Structure (Plot and Characterisation)

The first level of analysis focuses on the films' storytelling techniques—how the plots unfold, the arcs of key characters, and the construction of conflict and resolution. Each film's narrative will be examined for how it positions Dalit and marginalised subjects within the social hierarchy, the representation of caste dynamics in interpersonal relationships, and the portrayal of resistance against systemic oppression. For example, *Jai Bhim* centres on a legal struggle, *Sairat* on a romantic transgression, and *Fandry* on youthful aspiration and humiliation. The study explores how these narrative structures function as political statements, where personal stories become metaphors for collective experience.

#### 2. Cinematic Techniques (Mise-en-scène, Sound, and Camera Angles)

The second level analyses aesthetic and technical choices that reinforce the films' ideological messages. This includes examination of *mise-en-scène*—the arrangement of space, lighting, colour, costume, and setting—to understand how visual composition

communicates social hierarchy and exclusion. For instance, *Fandry*'s rural setting and earthy tones evoke caste segregation, while *Jai Bhim*'s courtroom interiors symbolise institutional power. Camera angles, particularly the frequent use of low-angle or handheld shots, are studied for how they create empathy or distance between characters and viewers. Sound design and background scores are also interpreted for their emotional and symbolic resonance—such as the contrast between silence and noise in moments of violence or oppression.

### 3. Symbolism and Realism

Symbolic imagery and realism form the third dimension of analysis. The study investigates how the directors employ realistic representation to depict the lived experiences of Dalit and marginalised communities, often blurring the boundary between documentary and fiction. Symbols—such as the pig in *Fandry*, the water tank in *Sairat*, or the handcuffs in *Jai Bhim*—are decoded for their metaphorical implications, representing impurity, social surveillance, and systemic bondage, respectively. Through this symbolic realism, the films articulate resistance and human dignity while exposing structural violence and social hypocrisy.

### 4. Socio-Political Context

The fourth analytical dimension situates the films within India's broader socio-political landscape, particularly focusing on caste, class, and state power. The study contextualises the films against the backdrop of Ambedkarite ideology, Dalit movements, and constitutional debates on equality and justice. Each film is examined as part of a historical continuum of cultural resistance—an artistic intervention that aligns with the struggle for social emancipation. *Jai Bhim* is studied for its engagement

with legal reform and human rights; *Sairat* for its commentary on caste violence in love and marriage; and *Fandry* for its critique of everyday humiliation in rural Maharashtra.

To interpret these films critically, the study draws upon theoretical frameworks from:

- **Postcolonial Studies** – to understand how caste operates as a legacy of colonial and feudal hierarchies.
- **Dalit Literature and Aesthetics** – to analyse the films as part of a larger Dalit cultural expression that foregrounds lived experience and self-representation.
- **Critical Race Theory** – to draw parallels between caste-based and race-based discrimination, emphasising systemic inequality and social exclusion as structures of power.

The methodology thus integrates textual interpretation, visual analysis, and theoretical contextualization. Each film is dissected through repeated viewing, note-taking, and scene-by-scene examination, identifying recurring motifs, dialogues, and visual cues that reflect caste dynamics. Supplementary data, such as interviews with directors, critical reviews, and scholarly essays, are consulted to triangulate interpretation and deepen analytical rigour.

Overall, this qualitative approach allows for a holistic understanding of how *Jai Bhim*, *Sairat*, and *Fandry* transform cinema into a medium of social critique and political engagement. By treating these films not merely as entertainment but as sociocultural documents, the study seeks to uncover how cinematic form and content intersect to expose and challenge India's enduring caste hierarchies.

## 4. Analysis and Discussion

### 4.1. *Fandry*: The Birth of Dalit Consciousness

Nagraj Manjule's *Fandry* (2013) is a semi-autobiographical portrayal of a Dalit boy, Jabya, growing up in a caste-ridden village. The film depicts everyday humiliation faced by the lower castes—particularly through the recurring image of the “pig chase,” a metaphor for untouchability and forced labour.

Jabya's love for an upper-caste girl exposes the rigid boundaries of caste purity. His father's submissive acceptance of caste hierarchies contrasts with Jabya's simmering anger, culminating in the film's iconic climax where he throws a stone—a symbolic act of rebellion against centuries of oppression.

**Symbolism:** The black pig symbolises the Dalit's social status—reviled yet indispensable. The contrast between rural innocence and the brutality of caste exposes the hypocrisy of so-called Indian modernity.

**Social Critique:** *Fandry* exposes the psychological violence of caste, revealing how casteism is internalised and normalised within everyday life. Manjule refuses catharsis; instead, he leaves the audience unsettled, forcing confrontation rather than comfort.

### 4.2. *Sairat*: Love as Transgression

*Sairat* (2016), also directed by Nagraj Manjule, reimagines the inter-caste love story—a recurring motif in Indian cinema—but through a Dalit lens. The film follows Parshya (a lower-caste boy) and Archi (an upper-caste girl), whose romance defies caste boundaries.

While the first half resembles a youthful love story, the second half descends into grim realism, culminating in caste-driven honour killing. The transition from vibrant rural colours to muted urban greys visually represents the couple's shift from hope to despair.

**Cinematic Style:** Manjule uses non-professional actors, realistic dialects, and a naturalistic setting to enhance authenticity. The use of Ajay–Atul’s music juxtaposes romantic lyricism with social tragedy, emphasising irony.

**Social Critique:** *Sairat* demonstrates how caste dictates love, marriage, and even mobility. The film indicts both rural patriarchy and urban hypocrisy, showing that caste violence transcends geography.

The brutal ending, showing the couple’s child crawling through blood, starkly visualises the generational continuity of caste violence—a haunting metaphor for India’s failure to transcend caste.

#### **4.3. *Jai Bhim*: Legal Resistance and Institutional Injustice**

T.J. Gnanavel’s *Jai Bhim* (2021) shifts the setting to Tamil Nadu and focuses on the Irular tribe, one of India’s most marginalised communities. Based on real events, it narrates the legal struggle led by advocate Chandru (modelled on Justice K. Chandru) to seek justice for a tribal man wrongfully accused and killed in police custody.

**Representation:** Unlike earlier films where Dalits are passive victims, *Jai Bhim* portrays them as active agents of resistance. Sengeni, the protagonist’s wife, embodies courage, persistence, and dignity amidst systemic oppression.

**Cinematic Language:** The film uses stark realism, courtroom drama, and documentary-style framing to critique institutionalised casteism in the police and judicial systems. The title itself—“Jai Bhim”—invokes Dr B. R. Ambedkar’s emancipatory slogan, linking the narrative to the broader Dalit rights movement.

**Social Critique:** The film indicts the state apparatus for perpetuating caste bias under the guise of law. It transforms the courtroom into a metaphorical battleground for social justice, reaffirming Ambedkarite ideals of equality before law.

### 5. Comparative Discussion

Aspect	Fandry (2013)	Sairat (2016)	Jai Bhim (2021)
<b>Setting</b>	Rural Maharashtra: a caste-segregated village highlighting untouchability and poverty	Rural–Urban transition; semi-urban Maharashtra revealing caste prejudices hidden beneath modernisation	Tamil Nadu, the courtroom and police institutions symbolise systemic discrimination
<b>Focus</b>	Individual humiliation and the quest for dignity	Inter-caste love, social mobility, and violent backlash	Legal injustice, institutional bias, and human rights violations
<b>Protagonist’s Role</b>	Victim-turned-rebel (Jabya) seeking self-worth and identity	Lover-turned-martyr (Parshya) defying social hierarchy through love	Advocate-turned-activist (Chandru) fighting caste oppression through legal reform
<b>Form of Resistance</b>	Symbolic rebellion (stone-throwing as an act of defiance)	Emotional and romantic defiance (love across caste boundaries)	Institutional resistance (using law, justice, and truth as weapons)

Aspect	Fandry (2013)	Sairat (2016)	Jai Bhim (2021)
<b>Outcome</b>	Ambiguous rebellion; symbolic but unresolved liberation	Tragic death; love crushed by caste violence	Moral and ideological victory; justice achieved through constitutional means
<b>Representation of Caste</b>	Visible and crude, caste oppression shapes every aspect of life	Implicit yet lethal, caste appears in everyday social interactions and family honour	Systemic and structural; caste embedded within state and legal institutions
<b>Tone and Aesthetic Style</b>	Realist, minimal dialogue, raw visuals reflecting rural authenticity	Dual tone—romantic escapism followed by stark realism and brutality	Investigative realism with courtroom drama aesthetics and symbolic intensity
<b>Director's Perspective</b>	Autobiographical and deeply personal; rooted in Dalit lived experience	Empathetic but observational; explores the intersection of love and caste	Humanistic and reformist; driven by Ambedkarite legal ethics
<b>Use of Symbolism</b>	The pig, the school walls, and the stone as metaphors for impurity and resistance	Water, music, and class mobility as metaphors for forbidden desire and aspiration	Handcuffs, police cells, and law books as symbols of bondage and liberation

Aspect	Fandry (2013)	Sairat (2016)	Jai Bhim (2021)
<b>Gender Representation</b>	Limited female agency; focus on male humiliation and aspiration	Strong female character (Archi) challenges patriarchy and caste hierarchy	Women are victims of institutional violence, but also moral anchors (Sengeni)
<b>Depiction of Violence</b>	Subtle, psychological, and social humiliation	Explicit and fatal violence rooted in caste pride	Institutional violence—police brutality and custodial torture
<b>Engagement with Dalit Aesthetics</b>	Grounded in Dalit realism and self-representation	Challenges the dominant narrative, but from a mixed-caste perspective	Aligns with Ambedkarite vision; legal realism and advocacy for equality
<b>Audience Impact</b>	Provokes empathy and discomfort; urges reflection on everyday discrimination	Generates emotional shock; exposes hypocrisy of modern society	Inspires social consciousness and faith in law and justice
<b>Cinematic Technique</b>	Handheld camera, natural lighting, non-professional actors	Vibrant cinematography, popular music, and strong contrasts	Controlled mise-en-scène, institutional settings, documentary tone

Aspect	Fandry (2013)	Sairat (2016)	Jai Bhim (2021)
<b>Social Message</b>	Oppression persists in silence; rebellion begins within	Love cannot transcend caste without structural change	Justice requires collective activism and systemic reform
<b>Ideological Position</b>	Assertion of Dalit identity and human dignity	Critique of caste hypocrisy in romantic and social life	Advocacy for constitutional justice and institutional accountability
<b>Emotional Register</b>	Frustration, alienation, suppressed anger	Passion, hope, and eventual despair	Determination, empathy, and moral conviction
<b>Form of Emancipation</b>	Individual awareness and symbolic revolt	Love and defiance as humanistic rebellion	Legal justice and institutional transformation

### Interpretation

Collectively, *Fandry*, *Sairat*, and *Jai Bhim* trace the evolution of Dalit resistance in Indian cinema—from silent endurance and symbolic defiance in *Fandry*, to romantic rebellion and emotional assertion in *Sairat*, culminating in institutional and intellectual activism in *Jai Bhim*. These films together represent a cinematic trilogy of emancipation, mapping the transformation of Dalit representation from invisibility to agency, and from humiliation to justice.

## 6. Conclusion

Indian cinema has historically oscillated between reinforcing and challenging caste hierarchies. However, the emergence of filmmakers like Nagraj Manjule and T.J. Gnanavel signifies a paradigm shift—one where cinema becomes a *weapon of social critique*.

*Fandry*, *Sairat*, and *Jai Bhim* transcend entertainment to embody political acts of resistance. They foreground the lived experiences of the oppressed, demand empathy rather than pity, and call for accountability from viewers and institutions alike.

By articulating the pain, love, and resilience of marginalised voices, these films not only reclaim representational space but also reimagine cinema as an ethical project—one capable of questioning the foundations of casteist society. In doing so, they reaffirm the transformative potential of art in the struggle for equality and justice.

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