

Cinematic Constitutionalism: A Critical Study of Constitutional Values in the Film *Jai Bhim*

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Abstract

This research examines the representation of constitutional values in contemporary Indian cinema through a qualitative and critical analysis of the Tamil film *Jai Bhim* (2021), directed by T. J. Gnanavel. Anchored in real-life events involving custodial violence against members of the Irular tribal community, the film foregrounds fundamental constitutional principles such as equality before the law, social justice, dignity of the individual, protection of fundamental rights, and access to justice for marginalized communities. Drawing upon Critical Legal Theory, Constitutional Morality, Social Realism, and Third Cinema, the study analyses narrative structure, characterization, visual symbolism, and institutional representation. The paper argues that *Jai Bhim* functions as a cinematic constitutional text that exposes systemic caste bias within state institutions while reaffirming the emancipatory potential of the Indian Constitution. The study highlights cinema's role as a pedagogical and political medium capable of reinforcing democratic values, legal consciousness, and social justice in contemporary India.

Keywords: Constitutional Values, Indian Cinema, Jai Bhim, Social Justice, Constitutional Morality, Critical Legal Theory

1. Introduction

Cinema functions as a cultural mirror through which society encounters its own contradictions, conflicts, and aspirations. Far from being a mere source of entertainment, socially conscious cinema in India has historically engaged with pressing social realities such as caste discrimination, gender inequality, political corruption, and institutional violence. Films such as *Toilet: Ek Prem Katha* and *Pad Man* demonstrate how popular cinema can generate public discourse and influence social attitudes. Scholars have emphasized cinema's role in shaping public opinion, values, and collective consciousness, particularly in a diverse and stratified society like India.

Indian cinema, including both mainstream and parallel traditions, has consistently reflected socio-political transformations. While commercial cinema often integrates social issues within melodramatic frameworks, parallel and realist cinema has foregrounded structural inequalities and

marginalized voices. In recent years, OTT platforms have further expanded the reach of socially critical narratives. Within this context, *Jai Bhim* (2021) emerges as a significant legal drama that interrogates caste-based oppression and institutional injustice through the lens of constitutional values.

Based on the real-life legal struggle led by Advocate K. Chandru, the film narrates the custodial death of Rajakannu, an Irular tribal man, and the relentless legal battle undertaken by his wife Sengeni. The narrative situates individual suffering within broader structures of caste, power, and state violence, thereby transforming personal tragedy into a constitutional and political critique.

2. Review of Literature

Scholarly engagement with Indian cinema increasingly recognizes its role in articulating constitutional values and interrogating caste-based oppression. Ganesh Manohar Limbole (2025) emphasizes that literature and cinema function as critical mediums for promoting constitutional ideals, demonstrating through *Jai Bhim* how creative narratives expose systemic injustice and enable the pursuit of equality, justice, and fraternity. Similarly, Prashant Ramprasad Ingole (2022), in his analysis of *Fandry* and *Sairat*, argues that despite constitutional guarantees of rights, entrenched caste and gender hierarchies continue to dominate social relations, highlighting the need for emancipatory cultural interventions.

Broader scholarship on caste representation in Indian cinema reveals a historical marginalization of Dalit and Adivasi voices. Paik (2014) and Guru (2009) observe a gradual shift in cinematic discourse toward challenging dominant caste ideologies by foregrounding discrimination, violence, and social exclusion. Films such as *Article 15*, *Bandit Queen*, and *Court* have been examined for their engagement with constitutional principles, particularly equality before the law and the right to dignity.

V. Gauri Rajan (2025) positions cinema as an effective instrument of social change, arguing that films like *Visaranai* and *Asuran* generate critical discourse and raise awareness about systemic exploitation. From a constitutional standpoint, Mukherjee (2025) situates cinema within the ambit of free speech under Article 19(1)(a), emphasizing its democratic role in fostering public dialogue. Studies focusing specifically on *Jai Bhim* by Dwivedi (2022) and Pandey et al. (2023) analyze the film as a cinematic articulation of human rights, traumatic realism, and legal resistance to institutional oppression. Collectively, these works establish cinema as a powerful vehicle for

constitutional awareness, while these studies acknowledge the film's socio-political significance, there remains scope for an integrated constitutional analysis that foregrounds Critical Legal Theory and Constitutional Morality together. This research addresses that gap by positioning *Jai Bhim* as a cinematic site where constitutional values are both violated and reclaimed.

3. Objective of the Study

1. To examine constitutional values reflected in *Jai Bhim*
2. To analyze how cinema interprets the Indian Constitution

4. Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative research design employing descriptive and analytical methods. The primary source is the film *Jai Bhim* (2021). Secondary sources include books, peer-reviewed journal articles, legal commentaries, and scholarly writings on Indian cinema, caste studies, constitutional law, and human rights. Textual and narrative analysis is used to examine dialogues, character arcs, visual imagery, and institutional representations.

5. Theoretical framework

The research is grounded in four interrelated frameworks:

- **Critical Legal Theory (CLT):** To expose how law operates within power structures shaped by caste and class.
- **Constitutional Morality:** Drawing on Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's vision of ethical constitutional governance beyond procedural legality.
- **Social Realism:** To analyze the film's commitment to authentic representation of subaltern lived experiences.
- **Third Cinema:** To interpret the film as a political intervention that challenges dominant narratives and institutional power.

6. Constitutional Values Reflected in *Jai Bhim*

6.1 Equality Before Law (Article 14) (Narayan, 2023)



Figure:1 One of the first visual of caste-based discrimination

Source. Still from *Jai Bhim*.

According to Article 14 of the Indian Constitution, all citizens are equal before the law. The film *Jai Bhim* strongly emphasizes this constitutional principle while simultaneously exposing how it is violated in practice. In the depicted scene, individuals belonging to tribal and Dalit communities such as Parvar, Megrulu, Otar, Karvar, and Mudaliyar are made to stand on one side, whereas criminals from upper castes are released by police officers. In this scene, when one police constable asks another, “What is their crime?”, the response is, “They were born.” The implication of this dialogue is deeply disturbing—it suggests that being born into a lower caste itself is treated as a crime. This exchange starkly reveals the entrenched caste prejudice and institutional discrimination present within law enforcement agencies. Members of these marginalized caste groups are deliberately separated, falsely implicated in cases for the purpose of police promotions, and once again sent to prison. Although Article 14 guarantees equality before the law, the scene exposes how the very protectors of the law exploit and oppress marginalized communities.

The film powerfully exposes the gap between the constitutional promise of equality and its denial in practice. Scenes depicting highlighting tribal men arrested without evidence reveal how caste identity itself becomes criminalized. Such representations demonstrate how law functions as an instrument of domination rather than neutrality, validating CLT’s critique of legal indeterminacy.

(Figure:1)

6.2 Prohibition of Discrimination (Article 15) (GAUTAM, 2020) and Abolition of Untouchability (Article 17) (Sinha)



Figure:2 when Rajakannu places his hand on the man's shoulder- discrimination and untouchability
Source. Still from Jai Bhim

In the film, Rajakannu, a character belonging to the Irula tribal community, goes to the village headman's house to catch a snake. On the way, a relative from an upper caste gives him a lift in his vehicle. However, when Rajakannu places his hand on the man's shoulder, the latter looks at him angrily. (Figure:2)

This non-verbal act itself signifies a violation of Article 15 of the Indian Constitution, which prohibits discrimination on the grounds of caste, race, sex, or place of birth.

By portraying such instances of injustice, *Jai Bhim* offers a strong critique of the failure in the implementation of constitutional provisions. At the same time, the film reaffirms the moral authority and core values of the Constitution, highlighting the continuing relevance of constitutional ethics in addressing social discrimination. Abolition of Untouchability (Article 17) *Jai Bhim* vividly portrays the dehumanizing consequences of untouchability and caste exclusion, revealing direct violations of Article 17 of the Indian Constitution, which legally abolishes such practices and declares them punishable offenses

Everyday acts of exclusion whether through body language, administrative contempt, or denial of services illustrate persistent caste discrimination. These moments underscore the failure of constitutional implementation while reaffirming the moral authority of constitutional ethics.

6.3 Social Justice and Directive Principles of State Policy (Saggu, 2018)



Figure:3 The denial of caste certificate
Source. Still from *Jai Bhim*

The Constitution of India provides the framework for the establishment of social justice through the concept of social justice and the Directive Principles of State Policy, which are intrinsically interconnected. Enshrined in Articles 36 to 51, these principles guide the State in securing social, economic, and political justice. The constitutional vision of a welfare state seeks to promote equality, uplift marginalized and vulnerable sections of society, ensure the equitable distribution of material resources, and provide access to basic amenities such as education, healthcare, and livelihood opportunities.

However, selected scenes from the film *Jai Bhim* reveal a stark contrast between these constitutional ideals and administrative realities. In the film, Rajukannu, a member of the Irular tribal community, along with his relatives, visits the Tahsildar's office to obtain a caste certificate for a child from their family. During this interaction, the official responds with condescension and prejudice, questioning the relevance of education for tribal communities and asserting that Adivasis belong in forests. Statements such as "Will the world stop because you are uneducated?" and "Why are you troubling me for an ST certificate, instead of staying in the forest?" reflect deep-seated institutional bias. The official further reinforces caste stereotypes by mockingly suggesting that a certificate could be granted only if the child demonstrated traditional activities such as snake-catching.

Rajakannu counters this discriminatory attitude by asserting that the child is academically capable and should pursue education rather than being confined to stereotypical occupational roles. In contrast, when a person from a higher caste enters the office, the same official treats him with respect and offers him a seat, exposing the hierarchical and unequal treatment embedded within administrative practices. When Raju Kannan reiterates his request for the certificate, the official dismisses him by citing the absence of land ownership, ration card, and voter registration, thereby denying the certificate and directing him to approach the Collector's office.

These interactions illustrate that, despite the Constitution's clear articulation of social justice and its binding nature upon the State, administrative authorities often treat members of tribal communities with contempt. By invoking the lack of documentary proof, officials effectively deny their basic rights and, in doing so, implicitly question their citizenship. Through such portrayals, *Jai Bhim* powerfully exposes the disjunction between constitutional guarantees and lived realities, highlighting the failure of administrative systems to uphold the principles of social justice enshrined in the Indian Constitution.



Figure:4 The denial of Voter ID
Source. Still from *Jai Bhim*

A similar situation is depicted in another scene in the film. (Figure:4) In this sequence, a social educator brings members of the Irular tribal community to the Gram Panchayat office to obtain voter identity cards. The officials there insist that voter ID cards cannot be issued because the

individuals do not possess ration cards or have their names included in the electoral rolls. They further argue that, at the very least, the applicants should have a permanent residential address. The educator questions this logic by asking how the responsibility lies with the tribal community when more than fifty years have passed since India attained independence, yet these citizens still do not even possess a residential address. She requests the officials to approach the Election Commission and explore possible solutions to the problem.

At this moment, the village head (Sarpanch), who is present in the office, makes a deeply discriminatory remark, stating that it should be sufficient for people from “lower castes” to bow before others’ houses during elections. He sarcastically adds that if voter identity cards are issued to them, would they now be required to beg for votes outside the huts of these communities? He further mocks the educator’s efforts by asking her to leave and suggesting that the night school for adults should be shut down altogether.

This scene and the accompanying dialogue reveal how the constitutional rights of tribal communities particularly the right to citizenship and the right to education are openly denied by administrative authorities and individuals entrusted with public responsibility. By rejecting the values of social justice, liberty, and fraternity, the scene foregrounds the systematic exclusion faced by marginalized communities and powerfully reminds viewers of the constitutional values that continue to be violated in everyday governance. The film aligns closely with the Directive Principles of State Policy, particularly those related to social justice, protection of weaker sections, and humane working conditions. By foregrounding the plight of tribal communities, *Jai Bhim* reflects the Constitution’s vision of an inclusive and equitable social order.

Administrative encounters shown in the film such as the denial of caste certificates and voter IDs reveal systemic exclusion from citizenship itself. (Figure: 3 & 4) By juxtaposing constitutional ideals with bureaucratic prejudice, the film critiques the erosion of the welfare-state vision.

6.4 Right to Life and Personal Liberty (Article 21) (KANIKA, 2024)



Figure:5 Custodial torture
Source. Still from *Jai Bhim*



Figure:6 Custodial torture
Source. Still from *Jai Bhim*

When a theft occurs at the house of a respected individual in the village, the police arrest Rajakannu as a suspect. He is taken into custody solely because he belongs to the Irula tribal community, which is stereotyped as being inherently criminal. Based on this prejudiced assumption, he is

detained for interrogation despite the absence of any concrete evidence. In order to extract a confession, the police subject him to brutal custodial violence and third-degree torture. (Figure:5) Although the law mandates that an arrested person must be produced before a court within twenty-four hours, this legal safeguard is deliberately violated, and Rajakannu is kept in custody solely to be tortured. His relatives had already been brought into custody earlier, where they were interrogated and assaulted. Under the guise of legal authority, the police engage in conduct that is degrading to human dignity and constitutes a grave violation of fundamental human rights. (Figure:6) As a result of the inhuman torture inflicted upon him Rajakannu dies in police custody. To conceal this custodial death and evade accountability, the police fabricate a false narrative. Custodial torture and death represent the most severe violation of Article 21. The film foregrounds human dignity, emphasizing that even accused individuals retain inviolable rights.

6.5 Right to Constitutional Remedies (Article 32) (SHARMA1, 2021)



Figure:7 The filing of a habeas corpus petition

Source. Still from *Jai Bhim*

Following Raj Kannu's death in police custody, the police fabricate a false narrative. They inform his wife Sengeni and others that the accused had escaped from custody. However, Sengeni finds the circumstances surrounding these events suspicious. With the assistance of advocate Chandru, she files a habeas corpus petition to ascertain what exactly happened to her husband while he was in police custody.

The assertion of this right by an ordinary citizen, as guaranteed by the Constitution, represents the legal awareness imparted to audiences through the film *Jai Bhim*.

The filing of a habeas corpus petition symbolizes legal resistance. Sengeni's transformation from a victim to a rights-bearing citizen illustrates how constitutional remedies empower marginalized subjects. (Figure:7)

7. Constitutional Morality and Ambedkarite Vision (Pruthvirajsinh, 2025)



Figure:8 Democratic institutions
Source. Still from *Jai Bhim*

In this symbolic scene, democracy is visualized as resting upon four foundational pillars the Legislature, the Judiciary, the Executive, and the Media each representing a vital institution of constitutional governance. The positioning of the police as representatives of the Executive and the lawyer as a representative of the Judiciary highlights the functioning of state power and legal authority within this democratic framework. Read through the lens of Constitutional Morality, the scene emphasizes that these institutions can fulfill their democratic purpose only when they operate in alignment with the constitutional values articulated by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, particularly those of accountability, equality, and social responsibility. Justice for ordinary citizens and marginalized communities becomes possible not merely through institutional existence, but through the ethical conduct of these institutions guided by constitutional conscience.

At the center of this visual composition stands the statue of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, functioning as a moral and ideological anchor for all four pillars of democracy. Symbolically, the statue embodies the spirit of Constitutional Morality serving as a constant reminder that constitutional governance must transcend procedural legality and be rooted in ethical commitment to social justice. By placing Ambedkar at the core, the scene reinforces the idea that democratic institutions derive their

legitimacy from their adherence to constitutional values, and that only through such adherence can the legal system genuinely protect the oppressed and marginalized. The visual metaphor thus affirms Constitutional Morality as the guiding force that harmonizes democratic institutions toward the realization of substantive justice.

The symbolic presence of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar in the film visually anchors the narrative in constitutional morality. Democratic institutions judiciary and executives are shown as legitimate only when guided by ethical commitment to equality, dignity, and accountability. The film's title itself invokes Ambedkarite resistance and the struggle for annihilation of caste.

8. Role of Judiciary and Rule of Law (DAVE, 2023)



Figure:9 Portraying the legal process of Judiciary

Source. Still from *Jai Bhim*

The judiciary is portrayed as a site of counter-hegemonic possibility. Advocate Chandru's legal activism demonstrates how law can be reclaimed as a tool of resistance. The verdict against police officials affirms that justice emerges through struggle rather than institutional benevolence, aligning with both CLT and constitutional morality.



Figure:10 The symbolic act of granting Sengeni a house in the city
Source. Still from *Jai Bhim*

When Sengeni learns that her husband has died in police custody due to brutal torture, she initiates a legal struggle against the police and the administrative apparatus despite being pregnant. From the perspective of Critical Legal Theory, this moment exposes how the legal system, rather than functioning as a neutral institution, operates within entrenched power structures that enable custodial violence against marginalized communities. The need for Sengeni to approach the judiciary itself underscores CLT's claim that justice is not automatically accessible but must be wrested from institutions shaped by caste and class hierarchies.

At the same time, the unwavering support provided by Advocate Chandru represents a counter-hegemonic use of law, wherein legal mechanisms are strategically employed to challenge institutional domination. The judge's decision, delivered after a careful evaluation of evidence and legal arguments, reflects the application of Constitutional Morality, privileging human dignity, substantive equality, and ethical responsibility over procedural formalism. This verdict affirms not only justice for the Irula tribal community but also reinforces the constitutional right to live with dignity for marginalized sections across India. (Figure:9)

The symbolic act of granting Sengeni a house in the city further embodies Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's vision of social justice and inclusive citizenship, translating constitutional promises into material reality. (Figure:10) By foregrounding the constitutional ideals of equality, liberty, fraternity, and justice, *Jai Bhim* demonstrates how law, when guided by constitutional morality, can transcend its

role as an instrument of domination and become a vehicle for social transformation. Through its dialogues, performances, and narrative structure, the film thus functions as a cinematic articulation of both Critical Legal Theory's critique of power and Constitutional Morality's ethical framework.

Chart of the Narrative Movement and Theoretical framework explanation

Sr. No.	Key Film Scene / Narrative Moment	Critical Legal Theory (CLT)	Constitutional Morality	Social Realism	Third Cinema
1	Arrest of Rajakannu and Irula men without evidence	Law operates as an instrument of caste-based power; legality masks oppression	Violation of dignity, liberty, and equality under Articles 14 & 21	Realistic portrayal of routine police harassment of tribals	Exposes state violence against subaltern groups
2	Custodial torture and disappearance of Rajakannu	Law legitimizes institutional violence; justice is structurally denied	Collapse of constitutional ethics within law enforcement	Graphic, unromantic depiction of custodial brutality	Political indictment of the coercive state
3	Sengeni's repeated visits to police stations	Access to justice is unequal and class-dependent	Failure of fraternity and equal protection	Focus on everyday suffering of a marginalized woman	Centers subaltern experience over elite narratives
4	Filing of Habeas Corpus petition	Legal meaning emerges through struggle, not neutrality	Assertion of constitutional remedies as moral obligations	Grounded depiction of legal processes	Law used as resistance rather than spectacle
5	Police falsification of FIRs and evidence	Indeterminacy of law allows manipulation by the powerful	Betrayal of rule of law and accountability	Shows bureaucratic corruption as routine	Challenges institutional legitimacy
6	Courtroom interrogation of police officers	Deconstruction of legal neutrality and authority	Judicial ethics reclaim constitutional values	Procedural realism rather than melodrama	Exposes institutions, not individual villains
7	Use of forensic and medical evidence	Law resists truth until forced by counter-power	Demand for rational, ethical governance	Emphasis on material evidence and reality	Knowledge as a political weapon
8	Exposure of caste bias in policing	Law reproduces social hierarchy	Constitutional promise of equality challenged	Honest representation of caste oppression	Cinema as social critique

9	Verdict holding police accountable	Justice as an outcome of resistance, not system design	Partial restoration of constitutional morality	Avoids celebratory tone; justice remains fragile	Victory framed as collective, not heroic
10	Closing images of Irula community	Structural injustice continues beyond the case	Constitutional morality as an ongoing project	Long-term realism over narrative closure	Call for sustained political consciousness

Conclusion

This study has examined *Jai Bhim* as more than a conventional legal drama, positioning it instead as a powerful cinematic articulation of constitutional values in contemporary India. Through its engagement with real-life-inspired narratives of custodial violence, caste-based oppression, and institutional apathy, the film foregrounds the lived realities of marginalized communities and exposes the structural injustices embedded within state mechanisms. By doing so, *Jai Bhim* transforms cinema into a site of constitutional dialogue, where legal principles are not merely abstract ideals but lived experiences shaped by power, resistance, and struggle.

The analysis demonstrates that the film effectively foregrounds core constitutional values such as equality before the law, human dignity, social justice, and access to justice. Its narrative underscores the importance of democratic accountability by critically examining the abuse of state power and the failure of institutions to protect the most vulnerable. In portraying the legal process as a means of resistance against state excesses, *Jai Bhim* reinforces the rule of law as a foundational pillar of democracy, while simultaneously acknowledging the systemic barriers that hinder its realization for marginalized citizens.

Importantly, the film also contributes to the cultivation of constitutional consciousness among its audience. By translating complex legal concepts into an emotionally resonant cinematic language, *Jai Bhim* educates viewers about fundamental rights and constitutional remedies, thereby bridging the gap between constitutional text and public understanding. This pedagogical function of cinema highlights its potential as a tool for social awareness and civic engagement, particularly in a society where legal literacy remains unevenly distributed.

Furthermore, *Jai Bhim* reaffirms faith in the judiciary as a guardian of constitutional morality, presenting the courts as a crucial though not infallible arena for challenging injustice. The film aligns with broader traditions of social justice jurisprudence in India, echoing constitutional

commitments to protect the oppressed and to hold the state accountable for violations of fundamental rights. At the same time, its critical portrayal of law enforcement agencies invites reflection on the need for institutional reform and ethical governance.

In conclusion, *Jai Bhim* stands as a significant cultural text that demonstrates the transformative potential of cinema in shaping constitutional imagination and public discourse. By intertwining law, social justice, and cinematic storytelling, the film contributes meaningfully to debates on rights, dignity, and democracy in India. As this research has shown, cinematic narratives such as *Jai Bhim* play a vital role in reinforcing constitutional values and fostering a more inclusive and egalitarian vision of justice, making them indispensable to both legal scholarship and socio-cultural analysis.

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