



CINEMATIC JUSTICE AND MORAL STATE: REPRESENTING LAW, CASTE, AND ETHICS IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN CINEMA

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Abstract

This paper explores how contemporary Indian cinema portrays justice, morality, and the role of the state, focusing on films *Jai Bhim* (2021), *Article 15* (2019), *Court* (2015), *Fandry* (2013), and *Jolly LLB* (2013). Using Amartya Sen's (2011) idea of justice, Stuart Hall's theory of representation, and Foucault's concept of power and discipline, the study examines how stories, visuals, and emotions work together to convey moral and political meaning. Through detailed scene analysis and critical discourse analysis as a method, the paper shows that cinema does more than depict legal processes; it enacts justice by highlighting ethical dilemmas, social inequalities, and the struggles of individuals that formal institutions often overlook. *Jai Bhim* and *Article 15* reveal how caste shapes access to justice and the moral responsibility of those within the state structures. *Court* and *Jolly LLB* contrasts the slow, indifferent workings of bureaucracy with moments of personal courage that challenge systemic failures. *Fandry* presents justice as lived experience, showing how dignity and fairness exist outside formal law. Overall, these films make visible the social, moral, and ethical dimensions of justice and invite audiences to reflect on empathy, fairness, and responsibility. By connecting law, ethics, and everyday lives, contemporary Indian cinema becomes a space for moral and social engagement, suggesting that justice is not just about verdicts, but also about conscience, courage, and human care.

Keywords: Cinematic Justice, Caste and Morality, State and Law, Social Inequality, Indian Cinema

Introduction

'Justice is not matter of institutions, but the lives that people are able to lead'

—Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (2011)

Amartya Sen's observation captures a central tension in contemporary India: the difference between legal institutions and the lived realities of marginalised communities. While the constitution promises equality and protection, caste hierarchies, social discrimination, and bureaucratic indifference often prevent justice from reaching those who really need it most. In this space between life and law, cinema has emerged as a powerful tool for exploring what justice means, how it imagined, and how it experienced by ordinary people (Mazumdar, 2007; Rajadhyaksha, 2009).

Recent Indian films such as *Jai Bhim*(2021), *Article 15* (2019), *Court* (2014), *Fandry* (2013), and *Jolly LLB* (2013) do more than dramatize legal struggles; they examine the moral and political dimensions of justice. These films foreground caste and social inequality, showing how state institutions- courts, police, and bureaucracies both fail and uphold justice in different ways. As Partha Chatterjee and Gopal Guru write, the Indian state often swings between its legal mandate and moral authority, leaving citizens to navigate a complex terrain of rights, recognition and ethical accountability. Cinema, in this sense, does not merely reflect these tensions; it enacts them, shaping how audiences understand and feel justice.

This paper explores how contemporary Indian cinema constructs the idea of 'moral state' through its depiction of caste, law and social inequality. It asks: how do cinematic narratives mediate the

contradictions between legal institutions and moral responsibility? And what do these narratives reveal about ethical foundations of the state? By analysing films like *Jolly LLB*, *Jai Bhim*, *Article 15*, *Court*, and *Fandry*, this paper tries to examine how cinematic techniques mise- en- scene, sound, editing, and performance translate political and social questions into moral and emotional experiences.

Films like *Jai Bhim* and *Article 15* foreground how caste structures determine access to justice, portraying both the oppression endured by marginalized groups and efforts of individuals working within state system to challenge it. *Court* adopts a procedural lens, revealing the indifference and structural flaws of bureaucracy, whereas *Frandy* frames justice as a moral and emotional struggle existing beyond institutional boundaries. Collectively, these films demonstrate how films serve as medium where moral imagination, social critique, and emotional engagement converge.

Ultimately, this study argues that contemporary Indian cinema does more than represent justice, it enacts it. Through its storytelling and visual language, it brings to light the lives, struggles, and ethical dilemmas that formal legal system often overlooks. The selected films *Jai Bhim*, *Article 15*, *Court*, *Fandry*, and *Jolly LLB* were chosen for their diverse yet complementary portrayal of justice, each engaging with class, caste, and institutional structures in distinct ways. Together they reveal how cinema becomes a medium for performing justice, urging audiences to reflect not only on what justice is, but on what it ought to be in a democratic society (Sen, 2011; Mazumdar, 2007).

Research Questions

This paper includes following research questions:

1. How do contemporary Indian films construct and represent the idea of 'moral state' through their depiction of law, caste, and social inequality?
2. In what ways do cinematic narratives and techniques mediate the contradictions between legal institutions and moral responsibility?
3. What do the selected films reveal about ethical foundations and limits of justice as experienced by marginalized communities?

Literature Review/Theoretical Framework

To understand how contemporary cinema portrays justice, caste, moral order, this paper uses three connected theoretical ideas; Amartya Sen's concept of justice, Stuart Hall's theory of representation and Foucault's idea of power and discipline. It also takes insight from film scholars like M. Madhava Prasad (1998), Ravi Vasudevan (2011), and Herman Kappelhoff (2013). Together, these perspectives help explore how films create moral and political meaning, not only through their stories but also through visuals and emotions.

Amartya Sen (2011) makes a difference between two kinds of justice, one is based on institutions and rules, and other focuses on how justice actually works in people's lives. He says that real justice should be judged not only by fair systems but by the kind of lives people are able to live. This idea helps in understanding films like *Jai Bhim* (2021), *Article 15* (2019), *Court* (2014), *Fandry* (2013), and *Jolly LLB* (2013). In *Jai Bhim* and *Article 15*, official system fails to protect marginalized groups, making personal moral action a key form of justice. *Jolly LLB* shows a similar struggle where justice depends more on human conscience than on perfect institutions. Sen's idea helps us see these films as stories about how justice comes through empathy, ethical action, and moral responsibility, rather than through law and rules alone.

Stuart Hall (1997) views representation as the process by which meaning is produced and circulated through culture. In cinema, this means that images of law, state, or oppressed are never neutral; they carry ideological and emotional meaning. Hall's framework helps us understand how film constructs social realities: how *Article 15* visualises caste hierarchy through spatial segregation and silence; how *Court* represents slow violence of bureaucracy through still frames and long takes; and how *Jolly LLB* uses humour and melodrama to expose the absurdities of legal system. Representation, in this sense, is a form of cultural politics; it determines what counts as justice.

Similarly, Foucault sees power not as something possessed, but as something exercised through institutions, norms, and everyday practices. His ideas about discipline and surveillance help interpret the legal and bureaucratic worlds that these films depict. In *Jai Bhim*, state power manifests as police brutality; in *Article 15*, it appears through bureaucratic control and social exclusion; and *Jolly LLB*, it operates through corruption, hierarchy, and moral compromise within the judicial system. Each film reveals how power is embedded within structures that claim to deliver justice but often perpetuate inequality. Through Foucault's lens, cinema exposes these subtle operations of authority and invites viewers to question moral legitimacy of state power.

Indian film theorist M. Madhava Prasad (1998) argues that Hindi cinema constructs ideological meaning through narrative from spectacle. In contrast Kappelhoff (2013) focuses on how cinematic realism produces emotional engagement, enabling viewers to experience moral and political questions on sensory level. Combining these insights allows for nuanced reading of how films like *Jai Bhim*, *Court*, and *Jolly LLB* use realism and emotional intensity to translate abstract ideas of justice into lived, felt experiences. For instance, *Court* employs minimalism and realism to convey alienation, while *Jolly LLB* uses performance and melodrama to awaken empathy and moral reflection in a mass audience.

Taken together, these frameworks show cinema as a moral apparatus. Sen provides ethical lens to understand justice; Hall offers cultural lens to decode meaning and ideology; Foucault explains how power and discipline shape justice; and film theorists like Prasad and Kappelhoff give insights into how narrative and emotions make these issues felt. By bringing these perspectives together, this study examines how films such as *Jai Bhim*, *Article 15*, *Court*, *Fandry*, and *Jolly LLB* construct cinematic justice, a form of justice imagined, debated, and emotionally realised within the cultural space of cinema.

Plenty of work was done on cinema. Cinema has long explored how films shape public meaning around nation, identity, and social change. Classic work by Rajadhyaksha (2014), Mazumdar (2007), and Vasudevan (2011) shows that film do more than entertain: they archive social life and stage cultural debates. M. Madhava Prasad extends this by analysing how narratives, genre and ideology work together in popular cinema to produce social meanings.

A smaller but growing literature link cinema specifically with question of justice and law. Kappelhoff (2013) and Chaudhari (2014) discuss cinematic realism and spectatorship, highlighting how film form can generate ethical feeling and political reflection. Studies of caste and inter-caste and film, for example, work by Prashant Ramprasad Ingole and analytic pieces on Dalit Representation by Gopal Gurushow how cinema can either reproduce or challenge social hierarchies. Anand Teltumbde's writings on caste provide a useful political context for reading films that address caste violence and exclusion.

Despite these contributions, few studies combine political theory, film, and close analysis of contemporary films that foreground caste and legal conflict. This paper fills that gap by bringing together realisation-focused justice (Sen), representation (Hall), and power/discipline (Foucault) with close readings of *Jai Bhim*, *Article 15*, *Court*, *Fandry*, and *Jolly LLB* to show how cinema stages the moral dilemmas of the state and law.

Methodology

This paper mainly uses a qualitative method, combining with Critical Discourse analysis, visual/semiotics, and close reading of scenes. These methods are appropriate because it aligns with paper's aim of exploring how cinematic elements such as dialogue, framing, editing, and sound create moral and political meaning of justice. The selected films (*Jai Bhim*, *Article 15*, *Court*, *Fandry*, *Jolly LLB*) offer a balanced mix, differing in language, scale, and style from realist drama to social critique and courtroom satire. This variety helps reveal both shared patterns and key differences in how Indian cinema reflects and questions justice.

Selection criteria of films

Films were selected based on three criteria: (a) explicit engagement with law, state or justice, (b) clear focus on caste and social inequality (directly or indirectly), and (c) critical recognition or public impact

since 2010. This purposive sampling allows focused comparison while keeping the scope manageable for a single paper.

Analytical Steps

Scene selection: For each film, I focus on 2-4 important scenes that deal with law, moral choices, or state power, such as courtroom trials, police encounters, or moments of ethical decision-making.

Close reading and CDA: I study these scenes closely, looking at the dialogues and how words are used to frame justice, who gets to speak, whose voice is missing, and how legal or official language hides or reveals power. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) helps uncover hidden power relations and ideas about justice.

Visual analysis: I also look at how visuals create meaning camera angles, movement, lighting, editing, and sound. These techniques shape how viewers feel about justice. For example, close-up shots can create empathy, while long takes can show the slow and heavy nature of bureaucracy. The ideas of scholars like Kappelhoff and Prasad guide this part, showing how realism and ideology work together in film.

Comparative study: I then compare the findings from each film to see what is common and what is different. Some films show justice through personal morality, while others show it through the failures or limits of legal systems.

Ethics and Limitations

This is an interpretive study, based on close reading of films rather than surveys or legal data. The analysis depends on what is seen and heard in the films. Because only a few films are chosen, the results can't represent all of Indian cinema but they offer a wide range of examples in terms of language, style, and social themes. Future research could include audience responses or filmmaker interviews to explore how people actually understand and respond to the idea of justice on screen.

Analysis and Discussion

1. Caste, Justice, and the Moral State

Films like *Jai Bhim* (2021) and *Article 15* (2019) place caste at the heart of how justice works in India. Both show that the law is not neutral; it often reflects social hierarchy and privilege. Amartya Sen's (2009) idea of "realization-focused justice" helps explain this. He argues that justice should be judged not just by how fair institutions are, but by how fair people's real lives are. In *Jai Bhim*, the courtroom becomes a space where truth and power clash. When Chandru cross-examines a police officer who framed a tribal man, the calm questioning exposes how the system hides injustice. The dim light and long silences build tension, showing how moral truth can challenge official lies. Justice here is not about legal rules; it grows out of empathy and persistence.

In *Article 15*, the story follows a privileged police officer who slowly realizes the cruelty of caste. In a key scene, Ayan Ranjan (Ayushman Khurana) steps into a dirty drain to find a Dalit girl's body, a moment that symbolizes his descent into the dark reality of caste. The quietness and dull colours reflect how silence protects inequality. Justice begins when he chooses to face what others ignore. Both films suggest that justice depends less on legal systems and more on the moral awakening of individuals, a vision of a "moral state," where conscience replaces indifference.

2. Law, Bureaucracy, and the Everyday State

While *Jai Bhim* and *Article 15* show justice through moral courage, *Court* (2014) and *Jolly LLB* (2013) explore how law works in daily life. Michel Foucault's (1991) idea of "disciplinary power", that control happens through everyday routines and rules, helps explain their focus.

In *Court*, the legal process itself becomes a punishment. The camera stays still for long periods, showing endless hearings and delays. In one key scene, a folk singer, Narayan Kamble, is accused of encouraging suicide through his songs. The slow pacing and silence make the audience feel the boredom and pain of

the courtroom. The judge seems uninterested, suggesting a system that values paperwork more than people. Justice here is not denied or granted; it just fades away.

In *Jolly LLB*, the tone is lighter but the message similar. *Jolly* begins as a small lawyer looking for fame, but changes after facing corruption. In the final courtroom scene, he refuses a bribe and speaks passionately for a poor victim of a hit-and-run case. His simple Hindi and emotional honesty expose how the law often serves the rich. The camera zooms in as his conviction grows, showing his moral transformation.

Together, *Court* and *Jolly LLB* reveal two faces of India's legal system, one stuck in endless process, the other revived by human conscience. Both remind us that justice depends not on laws themselves but on how they are lived and felt.

3. Justice Beyond the Courtroom

Fandry (2013) takes justice outside the courtroom. It tells the story of *Jabya*, a Dalit boy who dreams of love and respect in a world that constantly humiliates him. The film has few words but deep emotion, showing how justice for some people means simply being treated with dignity. In the final scene, *Jabya* throws a stone at the upper-caste men who mock him. The slow-motion shot freezes his act of anger and pain, not as crime, but as an act of dignity. The open sky and dry landscape around him show both his loneliness and his courage. There is no ending or solution, only a question: what does justice mean for those the law never protects?

Through *Fandry*, justice becomes a lived experience, not a legal one. Stuart Hall's (1997) idea of representation helps explain this; the film gives visibility to those who are usually unseen. *Jabya's* act breaks silence and demands that his pain be recognised.

4. Cinema as a Moral Medium

Across all these films, cinema becomes a space where justice is not only shown but felt. Each film uses its own visual and emotional tools to make viewers think about morality and power:

- *Jai Bhim* uses realism and close-ups to create empathy.
- *Article 15* uses quiet spaces and light to show inequality.
- *Court* uses still frames to expose the slow cruelty of bureaucracy.
- *Fandry* uses powerful imagery to show rebellion.
- *Jolly LLB* uses humour and drama to inspire hope.

As Kappelhoff (2013) explains, cinematic realism allows audiences to feel social realities. These films do not preach justice; they make the audience experience it. They show what the legal system often hides: emotion, inequality, and the human struggle for dignity.

Cinema, then, becomes a kind of moral conversation between the viewer and the state. It asks what kind of justice we believe in, one of rules, or one of empathy. In these films, justice is not about verdicts; it is about courage, compassion, and imagination.

Conclusion

This paper has explored how contemporary Indian films like *Jai Bhim*, *Article 15*, *Court*, *Fandry*, and *Jolly LLB* examine justice, morality, and the role of the state. The analysis shows that these films do more than depict legal procedures; they make visible the ethical dilemmas, social inequalities, and personal struggles that formal institutions often fail to address. Using Amartya Sen's (2011) concept of realization-focused justice, the study highlights that justice cannot be measured only through institutions, but it depends on how it is experienced by marginalized communities and how individuals respond to injustice.

Representation, following Stuart Hall's (1997) framework, plays a key role in shaping audience understanding of justice. Close-ups, static frames, and visual symbolism in these films create empathy and moral reflection. They show that images, narratives, and emotional cues are not neutral; they carry

cultural and political meaning, helping viewers engage with questions of fairness, social hierarchy, and human responsibility.

Foucault's (1991) idea of punishment and discipline explains how these films portray the state and its institutions. Bureaucracy, delays, and social hierarchies are depicted as both obstacles and spaces for moral intervention. Films such as *Jolly LLB* and *Article 15* shows how individual conscience can challenge systemic failures, while *Fandry* shows that justice can also exist beyond courts in everyday acts of dignity and resistance.

Overall, these films present cinema as a space where justice is felt, not just shown. Through narrative, form, and emotion, they invite audiences to reflect on what justice is and what it should be in a democratic society. By making visible the struggles, inequalities, and ethical choices that the legal system often overlooks, Indian cinema becomes more than entertainment; it becomes a platform for moral and social engagement, encouraging viewers to think about responsibility, empathy, and the possibilities of a fairer society.

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