

Research Article

FROM STIGMA TO RESISTANCE: A PSYCHOSOCIAL ANALYSIS OF CASTE, RECOGNITION, AND NARRATIVE AGENCY IN INDIAN CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

Caste is sustained not only through formal hierarchy and unequal control of resources, but also through everyday classifications of bodies, occupations, spaces, emotions, and credibility. Indian cinema participates in this psychosocial order by shaping who appears fully human, whose pain is intelligible, who is believed, and who is permitted to act. This article offers a critical psychosocial analysis of seven films spanning six decades and four language-industrial contexts: *Sujata* (1959), *Ankur* (1974), *Sadgati* (1981), *Fandry* (2013), *Article 15* (2019), *Asuran* (2019), and *Jai Bhim* (2021). Using reflexive thematic analysis, the films were examined across narrative focalization, dialogue, bodily and spatial codes, labour, affect, institutional encounters, and forms of resistance. Ambedkar's account of graded inequality is integrated with theories of stigma, social identity, symbolic power, humiliation, intersectionality, and epistemic injustice. Five themes organize the findings: conditional recognition; embodied and occupational stigma; public humiliation and identity threat; institutional production of disbelief; and the movement from sympathy to dignity, anger, and resistance. The comparison identifies a historical shift from reformist narratives, in which marginalized characters become worthy through sacrifice or dominant-caste recognition, toward anti-caste narratives that foreground situated knowledge and oppositional agency. Yet this shift is uneven. Mainstream films may expose caste violence while retaining a saviour-centred gaze, and legal narratives may translate subaltern experience through institutionally authorized intermediaries. The article proposes a psychosocial circuit of caste representation linking social classification, stigma, affect, narrative authority, and collective action. It argues that ethically consequential representation requires more than visibility: it requires narrative credibility, interiority, agency, and structural explanation.

Keywords: caste; Dalit representation; stigma; social identity; humiliation; Indian cinema; psychosocial analysis; intersectionality.

INTRODUCTION

Caste is simultaneously a structure of material inequality, a system of social classification, and an intimate organization of everyday life. It regulates access to land, labour, education, residence, marriage, religious participation, public space, and institutional protection. It also assigns differential meanings to names, bodies, accents, occupations, food practices, and touch. Ambedkar (1936/2014) therefore rejected any benign description of caste as a division of labour: caste is a division of labourers arranged through graded inequality. Its durability depends not only on coercion but also on the normalization of hierarchy in social perception and interaction.

The constitutional prohibition of untouchability and the promise of equal citizenship transformed the legal status of historically oppressed communities, but legal change did not automatically dissolve social distance, inherited stigma, or institutional discrimination. Contemporary research continues to connect caste with unequal health, education, social status, and psychological distress (Bhoi, 2023, 2025; Gupta & Coffey, 2020; Komanapalli & Rao, 2021; Thapa *et al.*, 2021). These consequences are psychosocial: social power enters subjective life through humiliation, fear, concealment, vigilance, thwarted belonging, anger, and struggles for dignity, while individual and collective responses can reproduce or contest the social order.

Cinema is central to this process because it does not simply document social relations. Through casting, framing, music, dialogue,

focalization, genre, and narrative resolution, film organizes recognition. It tells audiences whose perspective is normal, whose suffering is exceptional, whose testimony is credible, and whose action can transform the world. Representation may naturalize dominance by making dominant-caste identity invisible and universal while marking oppressed-caste characters primarily through poverty, dirt, servitude, or injury (Chauhan, 2019; Singh & Azeez, 2021). Conversely, cinema can disrupt symbolic hierarchy by centring stigmatized experience, restoring interiority, and depicting caste as a structure rather than an individual moral defect (Herrero, 2021; Yengde, 2018).

Scholarship has documented changes in Dalit representation across Hindi, Marathi, and Tamil cinema. Earlier social-reform films exposed untouchability but often asked dominant society to extend compassion. Parallel cinema foregrounded exploitation and feudal power. More recent Dalit and anti-caste cinema has developed visual languages of assertion, memory, anger, and political agency (Bharatvaraj, 2026; Rajapandian *et al.*, 2021; Swamy, 2025; Yengde, 2018). What remains less developed is an integrated account of how these representational changes operate across social structure, subjective experience, and cinematic address.

This article addresses that gap through a comparative analysis of seven influential films: *Sujata* (1959), *Ankur* (1974), *Sadgati* (1981), *Fandry* (2013), *Article 15* (2019), *Asuran* (2019), and *Jai Bhim* (2021). The films do not form an exhaustive history, nor do they represent a single national cinema. They constitute a theoretically selected corpus through which different modes of representing untouchability, stigma, institutional violence, and resistance can be compared.

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The article makes three contributions. First, it reframes cinematic caste representation as a psychosocial process rather than only a sociological theme. Second, it analyzes not merely what oppression is shown, but how point of view distributes voice, credibility, empathy, and agency. Third, it distinguishes visibility from recognition: a film may make marginalized suffering highly visible while still withholding interiority or locating transformative agency in a dominant-caste saviour.

The following research questions guide the analysis:

1. How do selected Indian films represent caste stigma across interactional, institutional, and subjective levels?
2. How do cinematic point of view and narrative authority shape the recognition, credibility, and agency of marginalized characters?
3. How has representation shifted from reformist sympathy and victimhood toward dignity, anger, and resistance?
4. How do caste, class, gender, labour, land, and indigeneity intersect within these narratives?

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Caste as Graded Inequality and Symbolic Order

Ambedkar's analysis remains foundational because it locates caste in an interconnected order of hierarchy, endogamy, separation, and unequal personhood. In a graded system, groups are not simply divided into two opposing classes; they are differentially ranked, and this ranking can fragment solidarity among subordinated groups. A cinematic analysis informed by Ambedkar therefore asks whether a narrative treats caste as individual prejudice or reveals the social mechanisms that reproduce graded inequality.

Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic power clarifies how hierarchy becomes misrecognized as natural. Symbolic power works when social classifications acquire legitimacy and appear self-evident. In cinema, this can occur when dominant-caste characters occupy unmarked, complex, and aspirational roles, while Dalit characters are introduced through stigmatized work, segregated space, bodily degradation, or dependence. Film is thus part of the cultural field in which caste difference is named, hidden, aestheticized, or contested. Hall (1997) similarly emphasizes that representation produces meaning rather than transparently reflecting reality. The issue is not whether a film offers a perfectly accurate copy of society, but what representational regime it constructs: what signs become associated with caste, how difference is made legible, and whether marginalized people appear as speaking subjects or objects of knowledge. Studies of Hindi cinema have shown that even ostensibly progressive films may repeat stereotypes of meekness, destitution, dependency, or moral purity (Chauhan, 2019). Yengde (2018) therefore treats Dalit cinema not merely as cinema containing Dalit characters, but as a counter-discursive field concerned with authorship, perspective, aesthetics, and political self-representation.

Stigma, Social Identity, and Identity Threat

Goffman (1963) described stigma as a social process through which an attribute becomes deeply discrediting. Link and Phelan (2001) expanded the concept by joining labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination under conditions of power. This power-sensitive formulation is especially relevant to caste. A caste name or occupation does not produce stigma by itself; stigma is produced

through institutions and interactions that attach devalued meanings to it and enforce unequal consequences.

Jaspal (2011) argues that caste should be understood as a social and psychological identity category. Caste stigma can threaten continuity, self-esteem, distinctiveness, belonging, and efficacy, particularly when identity is involuntarily exposed or derogated. Individuals may respond through concealment, distancing, reinterpretation, group identification, confrontation, or collective action. These are not fixed personality traits; they are context-dependent strategies within unequal relations.

The distinction between public stigma, anticipated stigma, and internalized stigma helps identify different cinematic processes. Public stigma is visible in insults, avoidance, segregation, and degrading assignments. Anticipated stigma appears when a character monitors speech, clothes, proximity, or desire because exposure may bring humiliation or violence. Internalized stigma is suggested when dominant evaluations shape self-concept or perceived possibilities. Yet analysis must avoid psychologizing oppression: shame or fear should not be treated as personal deficiency when they are socially produced responses to danger. Research on Dalit students shows how everyday discrimination, humiliation, and institutional denial may be associated with mental conflict, discouragement, loss of concentration, frustration, and self-harm (Bhoi, 2023, 2025; Komanapalli & Rao, 2021). The relevant unit of explanation is therefore the relation between person and social structure.

Humiliation, Affect, and the Body

Stigma becomes experientially powerful through affect. Humiliation involves a forced lowering of status before an audience, often combining exposure, powerlessness, and injury to dignity (Guru, 2009). It differs from private shame because it is relational and political: one party claims the authority to place another below. Caste humiliation is frequently embodied through compelled labour, spatial distance, public ridicule, sexual vulnerability, and denial of bodily integrity.

Film is especially capable of representing this affective dimension. Duration, close-up, sound, silence, off-screen space, and the organization of spectators within a scene can make humiliation palpable. However, the cinematic display of wounded bodies is ethically ambivalent. It can bear witness to violence, but repeated spectacle can also reduce marginalized life to suffering and invite pity without political understanding. A psychosocial analysis must therefore examine both represented affect and the affective position offered to the viewer.

Anger requires equally careful interpretation. Dominant discourse often marks subaltern anger as irrational or dangerous while treating endurance as morally admirable. Anti-caste narratives can reverse this coding by presenting anger as a response to violated dignity and as a bridge from private injury to collective consciousness. The question is not whether every act of retaliation is endorsed, but whether anger is granted intelligibility.

Intersectionality and Epistemic Injustice

Caste is lived through gender, class, occupation, region, religion, and other social locations. Crenshaw's (1989) account of intersectionality is useful because it rejects additive models in which caste and gender operate as separable burdens. Dalit women's vulnerability is produced through social relations in which caste hierarchy, patriarchy, labour dependence, and sexual power are mutually constitutive

(Lalitha & Pankaj, 2022). An intersectional film analysis therefore asks not merely whether women are present, but whose vulnerability drives the plot, whose interiority is developed, and whose resistance is recognized.

Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice illuminates institutional scenes. Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice lowers a speaker's credibility; hermeneutical injustice occurs when marginalized experience is obscured by unequal interpretive resources. Police refusal to register a complaint, dominant-caste reinterpretation of violence, or a court's dependence on institutionally authorized translation are not only failures of procedure. They determine whose knowledge counts as knowledge.

This framework also requires terminological care. Dalit and Adivasi identities cannot be collapsed into one category. *Jai Bhim* centres an Irular Scheduled Tribe community. Its narrative intersects with caste-ordered labour, stigma, and state violence, but indigeneity and Scheduled Tribe status have distinct histories and political meanings. Comparison is warranted at the level of marginalization and institutional power, not through an assumption of identical identity.

Cinema, Empathy, and the Politics of Focalization

Film can facilitate empathy by making characters' goals, perceptions, and emotions intelligible (Tan, 2018). Mediated contact research suggests that sustained, individuated representation of out-groups can sometimes reduce prejudice, whereas negative or stereotyped representation can intensify it (Bond, 2021; Schiappa *et al.*, 2005). Yet no textual analysis can demonstrate an actual audience effect. The present study therefore examines the *affective invitation* structured by the films, not the psychological outcomes of viewing.

Focalization is crucial. A film may ask viewers to discover caste through the eyes of a privileged outsider, to endure humiliation alongside a stigmatized child, or to witness violence through a legal investigator. These choices distribute ignorance and expertise. They decide who interprets events for the audience and whether marginalized characters possess knowledge before the saviour arrives. Thus, empathy is not inherently emancipatory. Pity can coexist with hierarchy, while identification with a benevolent dominant-caste protagonist may recentre privilege even in an anti-caste narrative.

METHOD

Research Design

The study uses critical qualitative film analysis combined with reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Films are treated as constructed cultural texts whose formal and narrative choices organize social meaning. The aim is interpretive explanation rather than measurement of film content or causal inference about audiences.

Corpus and Sampling Logic

Seven films were purposively selected using four criteria: (a) caste, untouchability, or a closely connected regime of inherited marginalization is central rather than incidental to the narrative; (b) the film has received scholarly or sustained public attention in discussions of social inequality; (c) the corpus permits historical comparison between post-independence reformism, parallel cinema, and contemporary anti-caste or social-justice cinema; and (d) the selection spans more than one linguistic and industrial context. The

resulting corpus covers Hindi, Marathi, and Tamil productions between 1959 and 2021.

Table 1. Film corpus and principal analytic emphasis

Film	Year	Language	Principal psychosocial emphasis
<i>Sujata</i>	1959	Hindi	Conditional belonging, passing, sacrifice, dominant-caste recognition
<i>Ankur</i>	1974	Hindi	Intersecting caste-class-gender power, sexual exploitation, emergent protest
<i>Sadgati</i>	1981	Hindi	Compelled labour, bodily exhaustion, ritual authority, dehumanization
<i>Fandry</i>	2013	Marathi	Anticipated stigma, adolescent desire, public humiliation, counter-gaze
<i>Article 15</i>	2019	Hindi	Institutional discrimination, privileged discovery, saviour focalization
<i>Asuran</i>	2019	Tamil	Land, collective memory, retaliatory anger, education and survival
<i>Jai Bhim</i>	2021	Tamil	Adivasi marginalization, custodial violence, credibility, legal resistance

The corpus is theoretically informative but not representative of Indian cinema as a whole. It excludes many important anti-caste films and is weighted toward male-directed narratives. These boundaries are acknowledged as limitations rather than treated as evidence of a comprehensive historical progression.

Units and Procedure of Analysis

The unit of analysis was the meaningful sequence rather than an isolated frame or word. Attention was paid to (a) narrative focalization and distribution of screen time; (b) naming, dialogue, silence, and forms of address; (c) bodily distance, touch, costume, and visibility; (d) homes, village boundaries, schools, police stations, courts, fields, and other social spaces; (e) caste-linked labour and control of land or resources; (f) affective patterns such as fear, shame, humiliation, anger, grief, and hope; (g) credibility and institutional response; and (h) individual and collective agency.

Analysis proceeded in four phases. First, each film was reviewed as a complete narrative and descriptive notes were produced. Second, sequences were coded using sensitizing concepts from stigma, identity, symbolic power, intersectionality, and epistemic injustice. Third, a cross-film matrix compared how similar mechanisms appeared in different historical and linguistic contexts. Fourth, themes were revised by testing them against divergent cases. For example, *Article 15* complicates a simple claim that contemporary films necessarily centre subaltern agency, while *Jai Bhim* complicates any easy contrast between saviour narratives and marginalized voice.

Reflexivity is important because caste representation is politically contested, and theoretical vocabulary can reproduce the very abstraction it seeks to criticize. The analysis therefore avoids diagnosing fictional characters, inferring audience effects, or treating Dalit and Adivasi experiences as interchangeable. Interpretations are grounded in recurring narrative and formal patterns and are presented as analytically contestable readings.

FINDINGS

Conditional Recognition: Belonging Without Equality

Sujata constructs untouchability through an intimate contradiction. *Sujata* is raised within a Brahmin household and participates in its emotional life, yet her position remains conditional. Affection does not erase the boundary between inclusion and kinship. She can be cared for without being recognized as an equal daughter. This gap

dramatizes a central psychosocial mechanism of caste: proximity may coexist with categorical distance.

The household functions as a micro-institution in which identity is managed. Sujata's caste is not always visibly marked; it becomes consequential when marriage, lineage, and ritual status are at stake. Her relative ability to move through the household resembles a fragile form of passing, but the narrative repeatedly reminds her that acceptance can be withdrawn. Anticipated stigma therefore precedes open rejection. The threat lies not only in insult but in the knowledge that belonging depends on others' discretion.

The film's reformist power should not be dismissed. In its historical context, it exposed the cruelty of untouchability to a broad audience and challenged endogamous common sense. Yet its resolution also reveals the limits of liberal recognition. Sujata's moral worth is secured through exceptional selflessness, most clearly when her bodily sacrifice sustains the family that has withheld full recognition. The stigmatized subject becomes acceptable by demonstrating purity of character beyond ordinary expectation. Equality is granted after virtue is proved.

Psychosocially, this is a politics of conditional recognition. The dominant group retains the authority to decide when the marked person has transcended stigma. Sujata's interior suffering is visible, but transformation occurs primarily in dominant-caste conscience. This structure anticipates a recurring representational problem: the oppressed character supplies pain and moral evidence; the privileged character supplies recognition and closure.

Embodied and Occupational Stigma: When Hierarchy Enters the Body

Ankur, *Sadgati*, and *Fandry* locate caste not only in belief but in labouring bodies. Their marginalized characters are made socially legible through work that dominant groups need yet devalue. This contradiction is central to caste stigma: stigmatized labour sustains the community, while workers are denied dignity and proximity.

In *Ankur*, Lakshmi's subordination is produced through the convergence of caste location, landlessness, class dependence, and gendered power. The landlord's son possesses economic and sexual access that cannot be reduced to personal immorality. Lakshmi's vulnerability is institutionalized by property relations and patriarchy. Her labour brings her into the dominant household, but proximity increases exposure rather than equality. The film thereby refuses a single-axis account of harm: gendered exploitation occurs through caste-class power, while caste domination is enacted through gendered control.

The final stone thrown by a child at the landlord's window is small in material effect but large in symbolic force. It interrupts the spatial architecture of power. The window separates the privileged interior from those made observable and governable outside it; the stone reverses the direction of action. Protest appears not as a complete political programme but as a breach in normalized obedience.

Sadgati intensifies this embodied analysis. Dukhi approaches a Brahmin priest for ritual assistance and is drawn into unpaid, exhausting labour. Religious authority and material exploitation are mutually reinforcing: his need for ritual recognition becomes the means by which labour is extracted. Extended attention to physical effort makes the body an archive of hierarchy. Exhaustion is not incidental realism; it is the medium through which caste power becomes visible.

Dukhi's death and the subsequent treatment of his corpse expose the ultimate limit of social personhood. The body that could be commanded to work cannot be touched with dignity after death. The priest's dilemma is not represented as grief for a human being but as a problem of disposal under purity rules. The use of distance to move the corpse makes social separation brutally literal. *Sadgati* thus connects stigma, labour, touch, and death: the person's utility is recognized, but personhood is not.

In *Fandry*, occupational stigma enters adolescent identity. Jabya's family's caste-marked task of catching pigs is publicly required and publicly despised. The labour exposes him before classmates and before the girl whose recognition he desires. Stigma operates simultaneously through class, caste, bodily visibility, and anticipated ridicule. Jabya's attempts to manage appearance and proximity are not signs of simple adolescent insecurity; they are strategies for navigating an identity that others can expose and degrade.

The film's psychological force comes from the collision between ordinary desire and inherited status. Jabya wants affection, friendship, and a future not organized by caste. Yet village space repeatedly returns him to a social identity he cannot individually escape. The pig-catching sequence transforms family labour into public theatre. Spectators laugh, and humiliation is produced collectively: the degrading gaze is not located in one villain but distributed across the social audience.

The final stone is therefore more than impulsive aggression. Like the stone in *Ankur*, it reverses the gaze, but *Fandry* directs the gesture with greater affective intensity toward the social world—and, formally, toward the viewing position itself. The ending refuses cathartic reconciliation. Anger becomes a claim to dignity when language, romance, education, and respectable self-presentation have failed to neutralize caste marking.

Public Humiliation and Identity Threat

Across the corpus, humiliation is a mechanism by which hierarchy is taught and enforced. It requires an audience, whether a household, village, school, police station, or courtroom. The audience confirms the lowered status of the targeted person and warns others against crossing boundaries.

The films depict three recurring stages. First, a social marker is activated: birth, name, occupation, residence, or group membership becomes salient. Second, the marked character is separated or exposed through ridicule, physical distance, command, or accusation. Third, institutional or collective response normalizes the event. The harm is therefore not exhausted by an individual's hurt feelings. Humiliation converts structural rank into an immediate experience of the self.

Sujata emphasizes the insecurity of belonging; *Fandry* emphasizes exposure; *Sadgati* emphasizes bodily debasement. *Asuran* adds collective memory. Its violence is rooted in land relations and in a history of humiliation that exceeds one incident. Sivasami's apparent submission is gradually reinterpreted as a survival strategy shaped by remembered catastrophe. What may initially look like weakness becomes protective restraint.

This distinction is psychosocially important. Dominant narratives often classify marginalized responses as either passivity or aggression, ignoring the constrained field in which choices are made. *Asuran* makes visible a repertoire that includes endurance, concealment,

flight, retaliation, education, and intergenerational instruction. Agency does not always take the form of immediate confrontation.

The film also reframes anger. Retaliatory violence is shown as intelligible within prolonged domination, although it is not offered as sufficient for emancipation. The closing emphasis on education and the refusal to surrender dignity gestures toward a longer political horizon. Survival and structural change require resources beyond heroic revenge.

Institutions of Disbelief: Police, Law, and Epistemic Power

Article 15 and *Jai Bhim* move caste representation into police stations, files, investigations, and courts. Here stigma operates through credibility. Marginalized people are not only harmed; their accounts are downgraded, reclassified, or erased by institutions authorized to establish truth.

Article 15 exposes the complicity of local power, policing, and caste hierarchy. The investigation reveals that violence persists not because the law lacks an egalitarian vocabulary, but because institutions selectively apply it. This is a strong structural move beyond the interpersonal reformism of *Sujata*. Constitutional language becomes a measure of institutional failure.

Nevertheless, the film's focalization produces an important contradiction. Viewers enter the caste order largely through Ayan, an educated upper-caste police officer whose initial ignorance anchors the narrative. His moral awakening makes caste legible to an imagined mainstream audience. This strategy may broaden accessibility, but it also positions privileged discovery as the engine of knowledge. Local marginalized characters possess experience before Ayan arrives, yet institutional authority turns his recognition into actionable truth.

The resulting structure can be described as epistemic recentring. The film denounces caste while allowing a privileged protagonist to interpret it for viewers and institutions. Dalit pain supplies the urgency; the officer's conscience supplies coherence and efficacy. The problem is not that cross-caste solidarity is illegitimate or that institutional allies are unnecessary. It is that narrative authority remains unequally distributed. Visibility increases without fully displacing the dominant gaze.

Jai Bhim offers a related but distinct configuration. Sengeni's pursuit of her disappeared husband is the moral and narrative pressure that keeps the case alive. She persists against police intimidation and institutional disbelief. Her testimony is neither an incidental clue nor a passive appeal; it is a form of situated knowledge generated through intimate and communal experience.

At the same time, the legal system requires translation through Advocate Chandru, whose education and professional standing convert marginalized knowledge into admissible argument. The film therefore neither wholly escapes nor simply repeats the saviour structure. Sengeni retains persistence, memory, and ethical authority, while Chandru provides access to an institution designed to discount her. The alliance is productive, but asymmetrical.

An additional distinction is necessary. The Irular community represented in *Jai Bhim* is Adivasi/Scheduled Tribe, not Dalit. The film's police violence, stigmatized labour, spatial marginality, and denial of credibility resonate with caste-ordered exclusion, but the historical relation of indigeneity to the state cannot be absorbed into a generic Dalit category. Preserving this difference strengthens rather than weakens comparison: it shows how multiple regimes of

hierarchy may use similar psychosocial mechanisms of labelling, disbelief, bodily coercion, and forced invisibility.

From Sympathy to Agency: Voice, Anger, and Counter-Gaze

The most visible historical change across the corpus is a movement from moral appeal toward oppositional agency. In *Sujata*, the audience is asked to recognize the humanity of a virtuous stigmatized woman. In *Sadgati*, the extremity of exploitation indicts the social order, but Dukhi is given little possibility of resistance. In *Fandry* and *Asuran*, marginalized anger becomes central to the narrative's moral grammar. In *Jai Bhim*, persistence and legal struggle challenge institutional disappearance.

This is not a linear evolution from bad to good representation. *Ankur* already ends with insurgent symbolism, and contemporary mainstream cinema can recentre privilege. Nor is resistance a single aesthetic. *Fandry* uses frustrated adolescent subjectivity and an unresolved counter-gaze. *Asuran* uses action-film conventions, collective memory, and intergenerational instruction. *Jai Bhim* uses procedural and courtroom forms. What changes is the range of affects and actions granted legitimacy.

Earlier reformist representation often relied on sympathy. Sympathy can challenge cruelty, but it preserves distance between the observer who feels and the sufferer who is evaluated. Anti-caste representation shifts the ethical demand toward dignity: the marginalized character need not be exceptionally pure, grateful, or non-angry to deserve equality. This shift matters because dominant respectability standards can turn recognition into another test administered by the powerful. Agency in these films is also relational. Jabya's stone cannot abolish caste; Sivasami's violence cannot redistribute land by itself; Sengeni's testimony requires collective and legal support. The films are strongest when they present agency without pretending that individual willpower can overcome structure. Conversely, saviour narratives risk converting social transformation into the virtue of one enlightened official.

A Psychosocial Circuit of Caste Representation

The cross-film comparison supports a six-part interpretive model. The components are not a universal sequence, but a circuit through which caste is represented and contested.

Table 2: Psychosocial circuit of caste representation

Component	Social mechanism	Subjective or relational consequence	Cinematic question
Classification	Birth, name, occupation, residence, community marking	Identity salience and constrained belonging	How is caste made visible or kept unmarked?
Separation	Spatial distance, endogamy, untouchability, segregated labour	Anticipated stigma, vigilance, exclusion	Who may enter, touch, desire, speak, or remain?
Devaluation	Stereotype, ridicule, pollution codes, status loss	Shame, humiliation, threatened efficacy	Is injury individualized or linked to power?
Institutionalization	Land control, police practice, ritual authority, legal credibility	Helplessness, fear, disbelief, material loss	Which institution converts prejudice into consequence?
Affective response	Grief, silence, anger, restraint, memory	Coping, identity repair, solidarity	Which emotions are made intelligible or condemned?

Counter-action	Refusal, counter-gaze, protest, education, legal action, collective memory	Dignity, efficacy, resistance	Who acts, who interprets, and who receives narrative closure?
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The model highlights why visibility alone is inadequate. A film may depict classification, separation, and injury vividly yet assign interpretation and counter-action to a privileged protagonist. More equitable representation requires movement across all parts of the circuit: marginalized characters must be granted not only pain but also knowledge, affective complexity, and consequential action.

DISCUSSION

The Psychosocial Contribution

The analysis demonstrates that caste on screen operates across three inseparable levels. At the structural level, land, labour, religion, police, family, and law distribute power. At the interactional level, touch, address, laughter, command, and credibility enact rank. At the subjective level, characters negotiate fear, shame, aspiration, anger, grief, and dignity. The psychosocial perspective prevents any one level from becoming sufficient.

This matters because purely psychological language can individualize structural injury, while purely structural analysis can flatten the lived and affective processes through which domination is reproduced. Jabya's shame is not evidence of personal fragility; it is an effect of public caste marking. Sivasami's restraint is not simply temperament; it is a survival practice shaped by collective memory. Sengen's persistence is not an abstract trait; it develops against an institutional system that repeatedly denies her credibility.

Empirical scholarship on caste and mental health supports this relational approach. Studies have linked caste discrimination and structural inequalities to psychological distress and have criticized professional frameworks that fail to recognize caste as a determinant of mental health (Gupta & Coffey, 2020; Komanapalli & Rao, 2021). Bhoi's (2023, 2025) work is especially relevant to *Fandry* because it describes how everyday stigma and humiliation can affect concentration, belonging, and self-worth. The films cannot be used as clinical evidence, but they can be analyzed as cultural narratives that render such mechanisms visible or obscure them.

Recognition Is More Than Inclusion

Across the corpus, the central ethical issue is not simply inclusion but the terms on which recognition is offered. *Sujata* offers belonging after sacrifice. *Article 15* offers visibility through privileged discovery. *Jai Bhim* offers institutional hearing through legal mediation. Each film challenges exclusion, but each also reveals that recognition may remain controlled by dominant institutions.

A more demanding standard of representation asks four questions. Does the marginalized character possess interiority beyond injury? Is their knowledge credible before validation by a powerful ally? Are anger and refusal treated as intelligible? Does the narrative explain structure rather than resolve injustice through individual benevolence? These questions move criticism beyond the binary of positive versus negative portrayal.

The distinction also clarifies the saviour problem. Allyship is not itself the problem. Anti-caste struggle may require cross-group solidarity, legal expertise, and institutional action. The problem arises when the ally becomes the primary subject of awakening and heroism, while

oppressed people become evidence for the ally's moral development. In narrative terms, the distribution of knowledge, action, and closure matters more than the simple identity of the protagonist.

The Politics of Spectatorial Feeling

Film's capacity to evoke empathy makes caste representation socially significant, but emotional intensity is not equivalent to political transformation. A spectator may grieve for Dukhi, feel Jabya's humiliation, or admire Ayan's courage without revising their understanding of caste power. Narrative transportation and mediated contact research suggests that representation can shape attitudes under some conditions (Bond, 2021; Schiappa *et al.*, 2005), yet identification can also attach the audience more strongly to a privileged interpreter.

The corpus offers three broad spectatorial positions. The reformist position asks viewers to pity an unjustly stigmatized but morally exemplary person. The witness position confronts viewers with bodily or institutional violence. The counter-gaze position unsettles the audience's distance by making humiliation, anger, or refusal address the social gaze itself. *Fandry* is particularly powerful because its ending denies the audience a comfortable rescue and returns the accumulated violence of looking.

These are textual invitations, not measured effects. Reception research is needed to determine how viewers from different caste locations interpret them. Dominant-caste viewers may experience education, denial, defensiveness, or moral self-congratulation; Dalit and Adivasi viewers may experience recognition, anger, retraumatization, disagreement, or empowerment. A rigorous account of cinema's psychosocial significance must leave room for this plurality.

Intersectionality, Gender, and the Limits of the Corpus

The comparison confirms that caste representation cannot be separated from gender and material relations. *Ankur* and *Article 15* place violence against marginalized women within caste power, but the narrative use of women's suffering requires scrutiny. When violated women function mainly as catalysts for male investigation or resistance, visibility can coexist with narrative dispossession.

Sujata grants emotional centrality to a woman but organizes resolution through respectability and sacrifice. *Ankur* gives Lakshmi a sharper voice, yet her vulnerability remains structured through sexual and economic power. *Jai Bhim* gives Sengen sustained persistence, but legal speech remains partly mediated by a male professional. These differences show why counting screen presence is insufficient. Intersectional analysis must examine narrative authority, bodily vulnerability, labour, and access to institutions.

The corpus itself reflects a wider representational imbalance: most selected narratives are directed by men, and women's agency is often articulated within plots organized around male violence, investigation, or heroism. Future research should centre Dalit and Adivasi women filmmakers, spectators, and critics, as well as queer and disability perspectives within caste representation.

Implications for Filmmakers, Scholars, and Educators

For filmmakers, the analysis suggests that responsible representation requires structural context and narrative redistribution. Marginalized characters should possess ordinary life, contradiction, humour, desire, and relationships beyond suffering. Violence should not

become the sole proof that caste exists. Consultation and participation by communities represented on screen can improve situated knowledge, but inclusion in production must extend beyond symbolic endorsement to authorship and decision-making.

For scholars, the study demonstrates the value of integrating social psychology with sociology and film studies. Stigma, identity threat, and affect help explain how hierarchy is experienced; Ambedkarite and intersectional frameworks prevent those concepts from becoming individualized or dehistoricized. Research should examine production cultures, casting, marketing, censorship, streaming circulation, and reception across caste locations.

For educators, these films can support discussion of caste only when contextualized. Screening a scene of violence without historical and conceptual framing may reproduce voyeurism or distress. Pedagogical use should distinguish Dalit from Adivasi histories, interrogate saviour focalization, and create space for disagreement rather than assuming a uniform emotional response.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The study has four principal limitations. First, seven purposively selected films cannot represent the scale and diversity of Indian cinema. Important works in Malayalam, Telugu, Kannada, Bengali, Punjabi, and other traditions are absent, as are numerous Dalit-centred Tamil and Marathi films. Second, the historical comparison is interpretive rather than a systematic content analysis of all films produced in each period. The apparent movement from sympathy to resistance should therefore be understood as a trajectory within this corpus, not a universal chronology.

Third, the analysis is textual and cannot establish audience effects. Claims concern the positions offered by the films, not how all viewers actually think or feel. Comparative reception studies, including caste-location-sensitive interviews and surveys, would test how saviour narratives, counter-gazes, and depictions of humiliation are received. Fourth, the corpus combines representations of Dalit caste oppression with Adivasi marginalization in *Jai Bhim*. The comparison is analytically useful because institutional stigma and violence overlap, but future research should more fully examine the distinct histories of caste, tribe, indigeneity, land, and state classification.

Future studies should also investigate authorship and production. Who writes dialogue, controls the camera, finances the film, and participates in publicity affects representational authority. Longitudinal work could compare theatrical and streaming circulation, regional and national reception, and the relationship between anti-caste aesthetics and commercial genre conventions.

CONCLUSION

From *Sujata* to *Jai Bhim*, the selected films register a significant but uneven transformation in the cinematic language of caste. Reformist narratives made untouchability visible through moral contradiction and sympathy. Parallel cinema exposed the material and bodily violence of feudal, ritual, and labour relations. Contemporary films increasingly foreground humiliation, anger, collective memory, legal struggle, and anti-caste agency.

The psychosocial perspective shows that caste domination is reproduced through a circuit linking classification, separation, devaluation, institutionalization, affect, and constrained action. Cinema can reinforce this circuit when it marks marginalized communities without granting them interiority or when it converts their

suffering into a privileged protagonist's awakening. It can interrupt the circuit when it exposes structural power, validates situated knowledge, makes subaltern anger intelligible, and relocates agency. The central shift is therefore not simply from invisibility to visibility or from victimhood to heroism. It is a shift in the politics of recognition: from asking whether oppressed people can be accepted by the existing order to asking who has the authority to define reality, whose testimony counts, and whether the hierarchical order itself is legitimate. For anti-caste cinema, the ethical task is not merely to show suffering. It is to redistribute narrative personhood.

Ethics Statement

This study analyzes publicly released films and published scholarship. It involved no human participants, private personal data, or intervention and therefore did not require human-subject ethical approval.

Data Availability

The primary materials are the seven publicly released films listed in the filmography. The coding framework and interpretive categories are described in the Method section.

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