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Review paper

Precarity on Screen: Vulnerability in Indian Cinema from 2013 to 2021: A Comparative Study of Four Films

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how four Indian films make socially produced vulnerability visible and determine whose account of it carries authority. The sample comprises *Fandry* (2013), *Masaan* (2015), *Article 15* (2019), and *Jai Bhim* (2021), selected for their contrasting treatment of caste, gender, labour, and institutional violence. A qualitative comparison of key sequences brings Butler's account of precarious life and Berlant's account of attachment into conversation with Ambedkar's critique of caste, Rege's Dalit feminist standpoint, Guru's work on humiliation, and Das's understanding of violence in ordinary life. The analysis follows public exposure in *Fandry*, the relationship between cremation labour and grief in *Masaan*, investigative authority in *Article 15*, and the movement from a woman's testimony to legal evidence in *Jai Bhim*. These readings develop the concept of conditional legibility: the terms on which a vulnerable person's experience becomes intelligible and credible within a film. Visibility can enforce caste subordination, while institutional recognition can depend on a privileged intermediary. The films also show how refusal, desire, and sustained claims to justice exceed the position of the passive victim. Their different production and circulation contexts are treated as overlapping possibilities within 2013–2021, rather than as stages in a linear history of progress. The article argues that the politics of vulnerability depends on the relationship between exposure and agency, not simply on the presence of marginalized characters or the prestige of an aesthetic form.

Keywords: vulnerability; precarity; caste; humiliation; cinematic form; conditional legibility

Indian cinema can bring an injured body into view without giving the person who inhabits it much authority over what that injury means. A victim may provide the emotional centre of a story while a police officer, lawyer, or sympathetic observer supplies its explanation and resolution. Conversely, a film may devote sustained attention to an ordinary wish, a moment of embarrassment, or a refusal to cooperate, allowing vulnerability to emerge through a character's decisions. The distinction matters because the recognition of suffering can coexist with the social relations that make suffering possible. This article examines that tension through four films: Nagraj Manjule's *Fandry*, Neeraj Ghaywan's *Masaan*, Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15*, and T. J. Gnanavel's *Jai Bhim*.

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The sample is deliberately small. These films do not represent all Indian cinema, and their differences cannot establish a national chronology. They offer a more precise comparative problem: how does cinema show an unequal social order while distributing the power to know, narrate, and challenge it? *Fandry* and *Masaan* develop this problem through caste-marked work and intimate aspiration. *Article 15* and *Jai Bhim* make the police and the law central to the recognition of injury. Reading them together allows a comparison between vulnerability as an ordinary social relation and vulnerability as a claim that must pass through an institution.

The inquiry builds on scholarship that connects cinematic form with changing social and industrial conditions. Ganti (2012) situates Hindi film production within struggles over respectability, markets, and professional value. Gopal (2012) relates transformations in cinematic intimacy to the forms of new Bollywood cinema. Vasudevan (2011) examines the relationship between melodramatic address and public life. Film-specific work by Basu and Tripathi (2023) approaches *Article 15* and *Jai Bhim* through the interaction of caste, class, and masculinity. The present comparison gives particular attention to a related but distinct question: when a film recognizes a vulnerable person, does it also recognize that person's capacity to interpret the harm and define a response?

Vulnerability is used here in a restricted sense. Bodily dependency and exposure are shared conditions of life, but the risks attached to them are distributed unequally. Caste, gender, occupation, and institutional power affect whose body can be publicly degraded, whose desire can be punished, and whose account is presumed credible. Butler (2004, 2009) helps distinguish shared exposure from the political organization of precarious lives. Ambedkar (1936/2014), Rege (2006), and the essays collected by Guru (2009) make it possible to specify forms of caste injury that cannot be reduced to a general language of insecurity. Their work guides the questions asked of the films, rather than serving as an additional vocabulary applied after the analysis.

The argument that emerges is that vulnerability becomes legible under conditions that may also restrict agency. In *Fandry*, caste society makes Jabya's family painfully visible through degrading labour. In *Masaan*, the recognition of private grief remains entangled with work, gendered shame, and the possibility of leaving the city. In *Article 15*, the investigation makes caste violence publicly actionable while assigning much of its interpretive authority to a Brahmin officer. In *Jai Bhim*, legal mediation remains necessary, but Sengeni's insistence that her husband's disappearance be answered gives the claim a source of authority outside the lawyer's expertise. The term conditional legibility names this relationship between recognition and the terms imposed on the person recognized.

This concept does not replace the theories on which it draws. It provides a way of relating them to observable narrative and formal decisions. The article first establishes the sample and its historical limits, then sets out the theoretical questions guiding the readings. The four analyses develop those questions through specific sequences. The comparative discussion brings their findings together, and the conclusion identifies what they reveal about vulnerability, agency, and institutional recognition.

FILM SAMPLE AND HISTORICAL SCOPE

The four films were selected because they share an identifiable concern with socially organized exposure while placing that exposure within different narrative structures. *Fandry* follows a Dalit adolescent whose hopes are inseparable from the public degradation of his family. *Masaan* connects caste-marked cremation work with grief and places a separate story of sexual policing beside it. *Article 15* investigates violence against Dalit girls through a police procedural. *Jai Bhim* follows an Irula woman's search for her husband after his disappearance from custody and the legal struggle that follows. The common ground is unequal power over bodies and testimony; the comparative value lies in how differently the films organize a response.

The sample also keeps social distinctions visible. Irula Adivasi experience in *Jai Bhim* is not treated as interchangeable with the Dalit experiences represented in the other films. Nor is Devi's vulnerability in *Masaan* equated with Deepak's caste position. These differences are part of the analysis. An intersectional approach asks how particular relations of power meet in a character's life, rather than adding identities to a

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general category of disadvantage. The inclusion of Marathi, Hindi, and Tamil films serves this limited comparison, without claiming coverage of the industries to which they belong.

Table 1 identifies the corpus and the sequences around which the readings are organized. The year 2013 for *Fandry* refers to its festival circulation; its Indian theatrical release followed in 2014. The distinction avoids treating production, festival exhibition, and domestic release as a single date. The other years identify the films' initial release periods. Release information establishes routes of availability, not the caste or class composition of actual audiences.

Table 1. Film sample and points of comparison

Film and director	Year and language	Sequences examined	Production and circulation context
Fandry — Nagraj Manjule	2013 festival circulation; 2014 Indian theatrical release. Marathi	Jabya's romantic aspiration; the family pig chase; the final stone throw	Regional production, festival exhibition, and theatrical release; subsequent television circulation
Masaan — Neeraj Ghaywan	2015. Hindi	The hotel raid; Deepak's caste disclosure and grief; the ring linking the two stories	Independent co-production; Cannes exhibition and theatrical release
Article 15 — Anubhav Sinha	2019. Hindi	The police discussion of caste; the manual-scavenging image; Gaura and Nishad's encounter	Star-led Hindi production organized as a theatrical police procedural
Jai Bhim — T. J. Gnanavel	2021. Tamil	Social and custodial exposure; Sengeni's claim and its legal mediation; the closing reading scene	Star-led Tamil production; direct release on Amazon Prime Video

Comparative method

The method is qualitative comparative close reading. Each analysis begins with a concrete situation and follows how the film organizes knowledge of it. The questions are consistent across the sample. Who experiences the harm, and who is permitted to explain it? Does the scene follow the exposed person's experience or an observer's discovery? How do work, space, performance, and narrative sequence make a hierarchy perceptible? What response does the film make available, and what remains unresolved when that response succeeds?

These questions connect formal detail with the relations of power represented. Focalization refers to the character whose knowledge and experience guide a scene or narrative. Interiority is assessed through attention to desire, uncertainty, grief, and choice, rather than through close-ups alone. Institutional mediation describes the movement of a lived experience into an investigation, a record, or a legal argument. Closure is examined by distinguishing what happens to an individual character from what changes in the social arrangement that produced the injury. The same questions are applied to quieter scenes and to dramatic confrontations.

The readings are interpretive arguments about the films, supported where relevant by filmmakers' interviews, the published *Masaan* screenplay, and critical commentary. These sources have different evidentiary roles. A director's account can establish an intention or production decision; it cannot establish the audience's response. A screenplay clarifies narrative relationships but may include material altered or removed from the released film. Theoretical scholarship supplies questions about power and recognition,

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while film-specific sources support the account of narrative and production decisions. The analysis is qualitative and does not measure shot length, commercial performance, or audience response.

Formal and industrial descriptions are kept separate. The police procedural in *Article 15* and the courtroom drama in *Jai Bhim* are identified through their organization of investigation, testimony, and resolution. The more intimate narratives of *Fandry* and *Masaan* are examined through their allocation of attention and their handling of everyday situations. Neither film is assigned to a slow-cinema category on the basis of prestige or restraint. Likewise, a theatrical release or a platform debut is not treated as proof of commercial success. This distinction allows genre and circulation to do analytical work without becoming substitutes for evidence.

An overlapping period of production and circulation

The interval 2013–2021 is useful because the sample juxtaposes independent and regional filmmaking with later star-led social-issue narratives and a direct platform release. The earlier pair places ordinary caste relations within intimate stories; the later pair brings vulnerable lives into investigative and legal genres. This is a comparison of selected possibilities within a defined period. It does not demonstrate that one kind of representation replaced another, or that streaming caused a new political consciousness.

The wider changes described by Ganti (2012) and Gopal (2012) help situate this interval. The segmentation of exhibition and the changing value attached to different film forms provided contexts for works departing from established Hindi narrative conventions. Those accounts illuminate part of the background to *Masaan*. They should not be extended automatically to Marathi or Tamil cinema. *Fandry*'s regional production and circulation, for example, cannot be explained solely through the economics of Hindi multiplex exhibition.

The circulation histories themselves complicate a division between restricted art cinema and accessible popular cinema. *Fandry* moved through festivals, theatres, and television; Zee's archived announcement records a Marathi television premiere in June 2014 (Zee Entertainment Enterprises, 2017). Ghaywan describes independent and larger commercial productions as economically interdependent in his Cannes interview (Festival de Cannes, 2015). These examples support an account of connected routes rather than sealed aesthetic sectors. They do not establish who watched, or what viewers concluded.

Article 15's theatrical release and *Jai Bhim*'s November 2021 platform debut offer different forms of access within the same later interval (Ghosh, 2019; Prime Video India, 2021). Punathambekar and Mohan (2019) provide a useful context for considering how digital circulation reorganizes representation and power in South Asia. The relevant finding here remains modest: a Tamil legal drama could be released directly through a subscription platform while retaining a major star and a recognizable genre. Its political effects require reception evidence beyond this study. Historical context therefore qualifies the comparison; it does not predetermine the readings.

VULNERABILITY AND THE AUTHORITY TO DESCRIBE INJURY

Butler's distinction between bodily exposure and politically differentiated precarity establishes why vulnerability cannot be treated as a synonym for sadness or disadvantage. Lives depend on social conditions that make survival, security, and recognition possible. Those conditions are not equally available, and the frames through which a life is apprehended affect whether its injury registers as a matter of public concern (Butler, 2004, 2009). For film analysis, the question becomes how a narrative invites recognition while deciding which accounts and perspectives organize it.

Ambedkar's critique requires a more specific account of the social order at work. Caste organizes labour and social relations through inherited hierarchy. In *Fandry* and *Masaan*, a character's occupation is therefore more than an indication of income. The work helps locate the person within a system that separates necessary service from equal standing. Ambedkar (1936/2014) directs attention to this contradiction: a society can rely on a community's labour while restricting the relationships and opportunities available to its members. The analysis consequently asks how the films connect what characters do with how others are permitted to treat them.

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The essays in *Humiliation* distinguish social degradation from the private feeling of shame (Guru, 2009). That distinction is central to the reading of *Fandry*. Jabya's embarrassment is not adequate evidence of vulnerability by itself. Its significance lies in the public conditions under which his family is compelled to work and is made available for ridicule. Humiliation occurs through a relationship involving those who impose it and those who witness it. Cinema can reproduce the pleasure of that spectacle, interrupt it, or make the spectator's position difficult to sustain.

Rege (2006) makes the authority of experience an equally important question. Her work on Dalit women's testimonios challenges the extraction of narratives of pain from the histories and political knowledge they contain. Applied to cinema, this prompts a distinction between allowing a marginalized person to appear and allowing that person's account to shape the interpretation. The distinction does not mean that a filmmaker's identity guarantees a film's authority. It asks whether the narrative treats experience as knowledge or merely as material that someone else understands more fully. It is especially useful when comparing the women whose claims animate *Article 15* and *Jai Bhim*.

Das (2007) directs attention to the continuation of life around and after violence. Work, family relations, and ordinary speech can carry an injury that has no single dramatic endpoint. This perspective prevents the analysis from treating the hotel raid in *Masaan* or the arrest in *Jai Bhim* as isolated events. Their force depends on what they alter in everyday relations and on the practical demands they create. A scene of domestic life or labour can therefore be as important as a scene of explicit coercion.

Berlant's account of cruel optimism adds a question about attachment: what happens when an object that promises a better life also keeps a person within conditions that obstruct that life (Berlant, 2011)? The question is relevant to romantic and occupational hopes in the earlier films. It is not used to dismiss those hopes as naïve. Desire can be a claim to equality, and education or employment can offer real possibilities. The analysis asks when the film makes those possibilities depend on individual departure and whether that departure leaves the hierarchy in place.

Together, these approaches focus the readings on exposure, authority, and response. They are not presented as a set of lenses that can be substituted for one another. Butler makes unequal recognition available as a political problem; Ambedkar specifies the organization of caste; Guru sharpens the analysis of public degradation; Rege questions who controls the meaning of testimony. Das and Berlant help trace the persistence of injury and attachment beyond exceptional events. Conditional legibility is developed from the differences these questions reveal in the films, rather than assumed as their shared answer.

FANDRY AND THE BURDEN OF BEING SEEN

Fandry begins from Jabya's wishes rather than from an outsider's discovery of caste. His attraction to Shalu, an upper-caste schoolmate, places romantic possibility within an ordinary adolescent world. Yet the wish also makes him alert to how he is perceived. The social distance between them is carried through the relation between his private hopes and the work assigned to his family. The film asks what it would take for him to be seen as the person he imagines becoming, rather than as someone whose place is already known.

The narrative does not treat this wish as separate from caste. Jabya's efforts to manage his appearance and the circumstances in which Shalu might notice him reveal the work of anticipating another person's judgement. This is a form of exposure that precedes explicit insult. He must imagine himself through a social gaze that can make his family identity disqualifying. Romantic longing therefore becomes one way the film registers hierarchy in everyday perception. The obstacle is not simply whether a girl returns his affection; it is whether an inherited position can be suspended long enough for him to appear differently.

This focus complicates a reading of Jabya as an emblem of deprivation. His desire exceeds the need to be rescued or pitied. At the same time, the film does not establish Shalu's reciprocal desire or give her an equivalent narrative position. Reading through Jabya's hopes should not turn her into a prize whose acquisition would prove equality. The limited access to her perspective marks a constraint in the film's own account of aspiration. A caste critique and a gender critique can therefore coexist without being reduced to the same question.

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The family's pig-catching work brings the social relation into public view. The extended final sequence makes labour physically demanding and exposes the family to the gaze of others, including Jabya's school peers. The contrast between the family's effort and the spectators' mockery identifies two unequal ways of occupying the same space. Some bodies must perform the unwanted work; others can turn that performance into entertainment. The scene makes humiliation a relation between labour and spectatorship, rather than an unfortunate feeling located inside Jabya.

Ambedkar's account of inherited occupational hierarchy clarifies why the work cannot be read as poverty alone. Guru's framework explains why public ridicule adds an injury that wages or material assistance would not exhaust. Jabya is visible, but the visibility confirms a place from which he seeks to move. His family's necessity becomes the means by which others deny him ordinary social standing. The school setting intensifies the contradiction between education as a possible future and caste as a public reminder of a prescribed one.

The sequence also changes the meaning of the film's earlier intimacy. Having followed Jabya's hopes, the viewer cannot receive the pig chase merely as local colour. His fear of being seen has already become comprehensible. The film thus establishes a distance between sharing his knowledge of exposure and joining the people who enjoy it. That distance is not guaranteed by sympathetic intention. It must be maintained by the narrative's commitment to his experience at the point when the spectacle threatens to overpower it.

Jabya's final stone throw interrupts the scene's distribution of looking. Its direction toward the camera has been described as a break in the fourth wall (Singh, 2014). The gesture makes the viewing position itself a target. In the reading proposed here, its force lies less in supplying an answer to caste than in refusing the terms on which humiliation has been offered for observation. The exposed adolescent becomes the person who acts on the scene, however briefly, rather than the object through whom others confirm their superiority.

The ending does not free the family from its work or establish a successful romance. It leaves the practical consequences of Jabya's act unresolved. This makes the distinction between refusal and emancipation important. The refusal has agency because it rejects a relation of degradation; it does not have to transform the entire social order to matter. Equally, the unresolved aftermath prevents anger from being mistaken for a complete political programme. The film ends at a rupture whose limits remain visible.

Manjule's interview connects the film with stories and caste relations he grew up with, and describes his preference for ordinary speech and less demonstrative performance (MarathiStars, 2014). These statements help explain an approach to characterization, without making autobiography an automatic guarantee of standpoint. The stronger evidence lies in how the film centres Jabya's knowledge before making his suffering a public event. *Fandry* contributes the first comparative finding: vulnerability may arise from enforced visibility itself. Recognition becomes injurious when a person is seen only in the role that a hierarchy assigns.

MASAAN AND THE UNEQUAL FREEDOM TO BEGIN AGAIN

Masaan places two narratives beside one another without making their social positions identical. Devi's sexual encounter is interrupted by a police raid, and her subsequent life is shaped by shame and extortion. Deepak, a young man from the Dom community, combines cremation work with the hope of another occupational future and a relationship with an upper-caste woman, Shaalu. The shared city brings these lives into relation, but the film's comparative structure depends on the difference between gendered policing and caste-marked labour.

The hotel raid turns private intimacy into a scene that the police can interpret and exploit. The officer's recording of Devi makes the image itself part of the threat. What matters is not only what happened but what an authority can show, to whom, and with what consequences. The image offers leverage because the social penalties attached to a woman's sexual conduct exceed the event's private meaning. The scene therefore links gendered exposure with institutional power: the police do not simply encounter a vulnerable person; they help produce her vulnerability by controlling the terms of public knowledge.

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Devi's subsequent decisions resist making that police interpretation the entirety of her story. Her pursuit of work and a life elsewhere gives the narrative concerns beyond the scandal through which others would define her. Yet the extortion continues to organize the family's practical life. Money becomes a means of containing exposure, making gendered shame materially consequential. Das's account of violence in the ordinary is useful here because the raid persists through daily negotiations. Its effects are not confined to a dramatic moment of assault or accusation.

The reading also requires care about caste. Devi's name and family background locate her differently from Deepak; her vulnerability does not authorize treating her as a Dalit woman. Nor should sexual policing be described as affecting only women. Piyush's death makes its violence toward men explicit. The asymmetry concerns how reputation, survival, and the authority to continue living are organized around the encounter. Rege's work is relevant as a methodological reminder that shared exposure does not erase differences of social position.

Deepak's work at the cremation ghats supplies a different relation between public necessity and social exclusion. The labour is indispensable to the city's ritual life, but it also helps mark the boundaries around his future. His technical education and romance open possibilities that the occupational inheritance restricts. The film locates caste in this relationship between work and desire, rather than allowing it to appear only as an insult delivered by a prejudiced individual. Ambedkar's critique makes that organization of labour central to the reading.

The disclosure of Deepak's caste to Shaalu turns recognition into a risk. He anticipates the loss of an intimate future because he knows what the information can mean. Her willingness to imagine a life with him matters: it shows that the film does not treat every attachment as an inevitable repetition of hierarchy. However, acceptance within a relationship cannot by itself remove the social conditions around it. The scene keeps personal possibility and structural constraint in contact, making their difference visible without cancelling either.

When Shaalu's body comes to the ghat after an accident, work and loss meet in the same place. Her death is not presented as an act of caste violence, and it should not be redescribed as one. The caste relation lies in the position from which Deepak encounters and must absorb the loss. A space of routine labour becomes the site at which the person he loves returns as a body to be cremated. Mortality may be shared, but the labour of managing it is not. The scene thus resists an easy claim that death renders social difference irrelevant.

Deepak's grief also complicates the association of independent cinema with muted affect. In an interview, Ghaywan explains that the domestic version allows more of the character's vocal expression of grief than the international version (Gupta, 2015). This is evidence of a stated editing decision and an anticipated difference in address, not proof of how either audience actually responded. It matters because it shows that restraint is neither a uniform property of the film nor a self-evidently superior way to represent injury. The character's audible pain can be part of granting him an interior life.

The ring provides the most concrete link between the two stories. Deepak throws it into the river in grief; its later recovery by Jhonta helps Devi's father meet the police demand. The screenplay makes this material connection explicit (Grover, 2014). The object moves between intimate memory, monetary value, and institutional extortion. Reading its movement alongside the separate narratives shows how one person's loss can become a resource in another person's attempt to escape exposure. The connection does not imply that the two injuries are equivalent or that either character understands the other's situation.

This circulation of the ring qualifies the hopeful movement toward a new life. Relief arrives through contingency and the conversion of an intimate object into money, rather than through a challenge that makes the extorting officer answerable. Deepak's employment prospects likewise offer an individual route away from inherited work without reorganizing the conditions of everyone who remains at the ghats. Berlant's account of attachment helps formulate the question posed by these endings: what does a promise of a better life make possible, and what must remain unchallenged for that promise to hold?

Masaan therefore does more than bring different categories of suffering into one film. Its narrative connection makes vulnerability material: bodies, work, images, and money bind private experience to relations that exceed it. Its allocation of attention allows Devi and Deepak to remain more than the

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conditions that expose them. Yet the possibility of beginning again depends largely on managing or moving away from those conditions. The comparative finding is that interiority can challenge the identity of the victim while leaving emancipation attached to individual mobility. The film's hope is meaningful because its structural limits remain perceptible.

ARTICLE 15 AND THE AUTHORITY OF THE INVESTIGATOR

Article 15 places the recognition of caste violence within a police procedural. Ayan Ranjan, a newly posted Brahmin officer, investigates the deaths of Dalit girls and searches for another missing girl. The genre supplies a sequence of discovery, obstruction, and action. It also supplies a hierarchy of knowledge: the person leading the investigation can connect evidence, identify institutional failure, and determine what the narrative treats as a possible remedy. Vulnerability becomes a public claim through this organization of investigative authority.

The police discussion of caste makes graded inequality audible. Ayan's colleagues explain distinctions that govern touch, affiliation, and relative standing. The scene challenges any image of caste as a simple divide between a unified privileged group and a unified oppressed group. It also reveals how familiar classifications can persist within a state institution formally charged with equal protection. The casual delivery of the explanation is part of the argument. The officers do not have to abandon their official roles to speak through caste hierarchy.

At the same time, the scene centres Ayan's confusion. The information is organized as something he needs to learn, even though the people subject to its consequences already know it. This creates a productive but unequal relation between disclosure and authority. The film makes caste intelligible through the protagonist's discovery, granting a privileged observer the narrative space in which explanation can become action. The scene's critique of hierarchy therefore coexists with a distribution of attention that follows the person best placed to intervene.

Sinha explicitly describes the Brahmin protagonist as someone with the power to challenge privilege (Ghosh, 2019). That intention supports a reading of Ayan as an argument about responsibility within the dominant group, rather than requiring every supportive action to be dismissed as appropriation. The critical question is more precise: does the film's assignment of responsibility also make the officer the principal source of knowledge and moral legitimacy? A useful evaluation distinguishes the need for an ally from the narrative assumption that an ally must organize the meaning of the injury.

The manual-scavenging image offers a second test. A worker emerges covered in sludge, making caste-marked labour impossible to overlook. The image condenses a relation between bodily exposure, necessary work, and public neglect. In that respect it brings an ordinary practice into the political world of the investigation. Its limitation is equally concrete. The worker's body carries a strong explanatory burden, while the narrative gives far less attention to his own account of that work than to the officer's capacity to respond to injustice. Physical visibility and authority over interpretation are unevenly distributed.

The deaths under investigation also connect caste hierarchy with gender and labour. The film ties violence against the girls to their attempt to secure a small increase in wages, making the demand for payment inseparable from the punishment of assertion. The atrocity is not merely an illustration of general cruelty. It reveals how a labour relation can be defended through control over Dalit girls' bodies. Rege's approach cautions against allowing their pain to become a detachable symbol while the relationships that made their claim dangerous recede from view.

The film is not uniformly organized around silent victims. Gaura's search for her sister and Nishad's political commitments provide knowledge and demands that precede Ayan's intervention. Their intimate encounter is particularly important because it allows the cost of struggle to appear as the loss of an ordinary future together. The scene gives them a private relation that cannot be exhausted by their usefulness to the investigation. Solanki's account of developing these characters and the thriller structure confirms that they were deliberate parts of the film's argument (Sharma, 2019).

That moment also complicates a simple division between independent interiority and popular spectacle. A mainstream procedural can interrupt its investigative movement to register vulnerable characters' desire

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and exhaustion. Basu and Tripathi (2023) help situate the film within questions about caste and masculine power. The present reading stresses the unevenness of its formal allocation: Gaura and Nishad receive meaningful attention, while the capacity to convert injury into an authoritative institutional response remains concentrated around Ayan.

The procedural ending gives intervention a coherent shape. Evidence can be assembled, obstruction can be challenged, and a missing person can be sought through the officer's determination. This offers more than the consoling claim that individual kindness is sufficient. Nevertheless, the genre risks making the exceptional officer's persistence stand in for a dependable relation between the institution and the people it should protect. The resolution of a case and the transformation of an institutional order remain different achievements.

The film's contribution to conditional legibility is consequently ambivalent. Caste violence becomes intelligible as a matter demanding action, and marginalized characters are not wholly denied agency. Yet much of the claim's public authority passes through an investigator whose institutional and caste position enable him to act. The problem is not that the film fails to depict suffering. It is that recognition depends heavily on an intermediary's ability to translate suffering into a form the institution will acknowledge. This is a formal finding about narrative power, not an inference that the film's actual viewers all shared Ayan's social position.

JAI BHIM AND THE PERSISTENCE OF A CLAIMANT

Jai Bhim also makes institutional recognition central, but the vulnerable person whose claim sustains the narrative occupies a different position. Sengeni seeks an answer to her husband Rajakannu's disappearance from police custody. Their Irula community is exposed to the combined effects of economic dependence, social stigma, and police power. The film's anti-caste address does not justify collapsing Adivasi identity into a generic Dalit category. Its specific concern is how a community's subordinate position makes coercion easy to impose and its account of that coercion difficult to establish.

The scenes of livelihood before the legal struggle matter because they give Rajakannu and Sengeni a life beyond the case. Work and family attachment establish forms of knowledge and competence that the coercive institution refuses to recognize. Rajakannu's skills can be useful to others without granting him protection from suspicion. This is related to the earlier films' treatment of caste-marked work, but the link should be made through the social valuation of labour rather than an assumption of identical histories. Useful bodies can remain bodies against which accusation is readily directed.

The arrest and custodial violence convert that social exposure into a problem of institutional control over truth. The police can inflict harm and then produce an account in which responsibility disappears. The official explanation competes with the experience of those who witnessed detention and abuse. This is a struggle over who can make a statement that counts, as well as over who can survive violence. Read alongside Butler, the film shows that the recognition of a life can be obstructed by institutions that should make its protection possible.

The courtroom narrative changes the form in which the experience must be presented. Chandru's legal work assembles evidence capable of challenging the police account. The genre gives a recognizable movement from a disputed claim toward a judicial response. It also makes a hierarchy of expertise visible. Sengeni knows why the disappearance demands an answer, but she does not possess the same access to legal language, records, or institutional authority. Dependence on an intermediary is therefore part of the film's account of vulnerability, even when that intermediary acts in solidarity.

This dependence does not exhaust Sengeni's position. Her search and continuing insistence establish the demand to which the lawyer responds. The case does not arise simply because an enlightened professional notices an injustice. It remains connected to a woman who refuses to accept the account offered to her. Rege's concern with testimony as political knowledge helps clarify the distinction. Sengeni's experience supplies more than emotional urgency; it identifies the discrepancy that the institution must be made to confront.

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The film thus distributes authority between the claimant and her advocate, although not equally. Chandru has the resources to make the demand institutionally effective. Sengeni sustains the demand and its meaning as a claim about her husband and family. To describe her solely as a victim saved by a lawyer would obscure that role. To describe the legal mediation as fully emancipatory would obscure the unequal conditions under which she must seek it. The force of the reading lies in holding these two observations together.

The prominence of Suriya as Chandru remains relevant. His performance and the legal plot can draw narrative attention toward professional intervention, even when the film gives extensive attention to Sengeni and Rajakannu. Gnanavel's discussion of the film acknowledges a saviour figure while emphasizing education and the capacity of oppressed people to act for themselves (Press Information Bureau, 2022). This statement establishes an intention, not a settled answer to the film's representational tension. The question remains how far the scenes allow solidarity to support a claimant's agency without displacing it.

The closing scene of Sengeni's daughter reading a newspaper beside Chandru gives that question an ordinary bodily form. The child takes up a seated posture and an activity associated with confident participation in public knowledge (Subramanian, 2021). The reading proposed here understands the moment as a small rehearsal of equality. It shifts attention from the injured body and the lawyer's courtroom performance toward a child occupying space without the posture of deference. The image suggests a possible future rather than demonstrating that exclusion has ended.

Das's account of ordinary life helps explain why such a quiet scene matters after an emphatic legal narrative. The recognition of injury must have consequences for how life can continue. A judgement cannot undo Rajakannu's death, and the child's gesture cannot repair the whole social order. Nevertheless, the ending places the possibility of dignity in an everyday act that is not itself a scene of victimhood. The film's resolution therefore has two scales: an institutional answer to the case and a less assured image of life beyond it.

The distinction from *Article 15* is one of emphasis and distribution, not an absolute contrast between a bad and a good model of advocacy. Both films depend on an intermediary with institutional resources. *Jai Bhim* gives the claimant's persistence a more sustained role in defining what recognition must answer. It contributes a further finding to the comparison: dependence and agency need not be opposites. A person can require another's expertise while remaining the source of the demand, provided that the narrative does not convert that dependence into an inability to know or act.

CONDITIONAL LEGIBILITY ACROSS THE FOUR FILMS

The comparison establishes that the visibility of vulnerability has no uniform political effect. Jabya's family is visible because the village compels its labour and makes that labour a spectacle. Devi is visible through a recording that becomes a means of extortion. The worker in *Article 15* is visible as evidence of a social order, but has limited space to describe that order. Sengeni's experience becomes institutionally credible through a legal process whose requirements she cannot control alone. These instances show why increasing the visibility of marginalized people is an incomplete measure of a film's politics.

Conditional legibility refers to the terms on which an experience becomes intelligible and credible within a film's social world and narrative organization. It can be examined by following the exposed person, the perspective through which that person is interpreted, and the conditions attached to an effective response. The concept is relational. It does not assign films to fixed types or require each scene to fall into the same category. A film may make a character legible through more than one relation, and those relations may conflict.

The first relation concerns exposure and self-definition. In *Fandry*, Jabya's wishes become understandable before the public spectacle tries to reduce him to an inherited role. His final action contests that reduction. In *Masaan*, Devi and Deepak receive attention beyond the scandal and occupation through which others could define them. These films make a claim to interiority by allowing social injury to remain part of a life rather than the entirety of it. The finding arises from narrative attention, not from an assumption that quiet performance is automatically ethical.

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The second relation concerns testimony and translation. *Article 15* and *Jai Bhim* show that institutions may recognize a harm only after someone with access and authority makes it fit an actionable form. The difference is how much control the vulnerable person retains over the purpose and meaning of that translation. Ayan's investigation centres an authorized observer's discovery. Sengeni's insistence keeps the legal case tied to a claimant's demand. Neither arrangement is free of mediation, but their distribution of agency is not the same.

The third relation concerns closure and the scale of change. Jabya's rupture does not abolish caste. The possibility of departure in *Masaan* does not reorganize the work and policing left behind. Investigative success in *Article 15* does not establish institutional reliability. Legal recognition in *Jai Bhim* cannot restore the life taken. These limits do not make every ending politically empty. They allow a distinction between a meaningful response to an individual injury and a resolution that would remove the conditions producing it.

This framework brings the theoretical traditions into a shared analytical problem without making them interchangeable. Butler's account of unequal recognition helps explain why an injury may fail to register. Ambedkar and Guru explain why registering it as generic suffering can still miss its organization through caste and humiliation. Rege makes the authority of the person's account central to the assessment. Das directs attention to the ordinary life that neither spectacular exposure nor a decisive institutional scene can fully contain. Berlant helps interrogate the promises attached to escape and a new beginning. Their conjunction is useful because the film readings require these distinctions.

The concept also refines the relationship between form and historical context. Within the earlier part of the selected interval, *Fandry* and *Masaan* organize vulnerability through intimate aspiration and work. Within the later part, *Article 15* and *Jai Bhim* use genres that make an institutional response part of the narrative promise. The sample supports this comparison. It does not support a claim that Indian cinema moved from silence to standpoint and then to mass recognition. Festival, theatrical, television, and platform routes overlap, and each film carries formal choices that exceed a single industrial label.

Ghaywan's account of different edits for domestic and international versions of *Masaan* offers a particularly useful connection between circulation and form. Anticipated viewers can shape how much grief a film allows a character to express. Solanki's explanation that a thriller could carry *Article 15* beyond a narrow conversation offers another connection between genre and intended address (Gupta, 2015; Sharma, 2019). These are specific production decisions. They support an analysis of how filmmakers negotiate legibility, while leaving the actual reception of those decisions open to investigation.

The comparative result is therefore a qualified argument about narrative authority. The presence of a vulnerable body, the number of issue-oriented films, or a larger route of distribution cannot establish whether marginalized experience has gained greater control over its representation. The more revealing question is what the film asks a person to become in order to be recognized: a spectacle of degradation, an intimate subject, evidence for an investigation, or a claimant whose insistence the narrative must answer. The films can move among these positions. Their politics lies partly in that movement and in who is allowed to initiate it.

LIMITS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Four selected films cannot establish the typical practices of three language industries or the history of vulnerability across post-1990 Indian cinema. The sample foregrounds films that make social hierarchy explicitly consequential. It offers no basis for claiming that hierarchy is absent from romances, comedies, or action films not included here. The interval 2013–2021 bounds the comparison; it is not presented as a complete industrial period shared by Marathi, Hindi, and Tamil filmmaking.

The study also distinguishes formal address from reception. Festival selection, theatrical release, television broadcast, and platform availability can establish routes through which a film becomes accessible. They cannot establish the social composition of viewers, the meanings viewers attach to a scene, or the political action that follows. Audience research would be needed to test whether viewers identify

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primarily with a claimant, an institutional intermediary, or the people whose gaze produces exposure. This is a direct extension of the comparative findings rather than an assumed consequence of wider circulation.

Further textual work could test conditional legibility against films in which marginalized characters occupy positions of collective leadership or exercise agency within popular action genres. A larger study could also examine how different versions, translations, or release contexts alter a scene's distribution of authority. Such work would challenge the framework's limits: whether an intermediary is always necessary, whether refusal can be represented collectively, and how recognition changes when a film asks its audience to follow a vulnerable person's knowledge from the outset.

CONCLUSION

The four readings show that vulnerability is organized through relations of looking, labour, testimony, and institutional power. *Fandry* demonstrates that being seen can enforce subordination, and that refusal can interrupt the spectator's access to humiliation. *Masaan* connects private injury with the movement of bodies, images, and money, granting its protagonists an interior life while leaving their new beginnings dependent on uneven opportunities. *Article 15* turns caste violence into an actionable investigation but concentrates much of its authority in the officer who interprets it. *Jai Bhim* preserves a stronger relation between the legal claim and Sengeni's persistent demand, even as her access to justice depends on professional mediation.

From these differences, the article develops conditional legibility as a way to examine the terms of recognition. Its main finding is that cinematic recognition and social agency can diverge. A film may acknowledge an injury while requiring the injured person to remain an object of explanation. It may also show dependence without denying agency, when the vulnerable person retains the capacity to define what a response must address. The distinction is visible in the relation between public exposure and refusal in *Fandry*, and between institutional advocacy and a claimant's persistence in *Jai Bhim*.

The comparison also revises how the selected years should be understood. The interval permits an examination of intimate narratives alongside investigative and legal genres across different circulation routes. It establishes coexistence and negotiation rather than a sequence of progressively more emancipatory phases. The available evidence supports claims about textual organization and specific production decisions; it leaves audience response and wider political effect for empirical study.

Vulnerability's political significance therefore depends on more than the attention given to suffering. It depends on whether a person can appear as someone with desires, knowledge, and a claim on the future, and on whether the narrative allows that person to contest the terms of recognition. The four films make those terms visible in different ways. Reading their differences closely yields a more precise account of precarity than a taxonomy of marginalized identities or a hierarchy of cinematic styles can provide.

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Ethical statement

This article examines representations of vulnerability and precarity in Indian cinema through a comparative analysis of four films released between 2013 and 2021. It does not involve human participants, interviews, or the collection of personal data. Therefore, institutional review board approval was not applicable.

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Competing interests

The author declares that there are no competing interests related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Author contributions

S. was solely responsible for all aspects of the research, including conceptualisation, literature review, analysis, interpretation, and manuscript preparation.

Data availability

The materials analysed in this study consist of four films released between 2013 and 2021, together with relevant scholarly literature and other publicly available sources. The sources used in the analysis are identified in the article's references.

AI disclosure

The author declares that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the research, analysis, or preparation of this manuscript.

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