

Precarious Identity and Vulnerable Enunciations: The Problem of Language in *Jai Bhim*

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T.J Ganavel's 2021 Tamil language film *Jai Bhim* portrays the lives of the Irula/Iruga community, a Dravidian ethnic group, and their struggles to survive in a casteist society. The community, comprising more than 200000 people, lives around the states of Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu. Based on a real case from 1993, the film focuses on the violence and discrimination against the Irula community by the upper caste and state agencies. It tells the story of Rajakannu, an Irula community member, who is arrested by the police for an alleged theft in an upper-class family household. The police refuse to accept his innocence and, later, cook up a story against him to prove before the court that they have caught the actual perpetrator. Then Sengeni, Rajakannu's wife, seeks legal help from the advocate cum activist Chandru, modelled on Justice Krishnaswami Chandru, a former judge of Madras High Court. This paper explores the representations of language and argues that the politics of caste portrayed in *Jai Bhim* are manifested by constructing a persuading narrative made by verbal language.

Keywords: caste, language, discourse, film, subjugation, vulnerability

The movie *Jai Bhim* puts forward the theme of caste system and its impact on the society. although the movie is inspired by a real-life incident that occurred in 1993, it is very relevant in this current

scenario too. A caste-ridden society is a host to discrimination and injustice. Discrimination could be found in the places they live, the food they eat, the cloth they wear, and the way they speak. (BBC News, 2019). The film *Jai Bhim* features the plight of a lower caste community, in a caste-oriented society. It portrays the helplessness and miserable plight of the Irula people, when they are in trouble, they are alone and even disregarded by the state policing system. Rajakannu, the key character in the film who hails from the Irula community, is accused of a theft that took place in a landlord's house. Even though the culprits were known to the police inspector, the corrupt policeman within him lead to putting this allegation upon Rajakannu. When Rajakannu and his friends were not ready to accept the blame for theft, they were brutally beaten to death in custody. To hush up this murder the police announced it as a lock-up escape. The rest of the film is about Senganni the fight for justice, Rajakannu's wife. Senganni's struggle for justice is very much difficult as she is from a lower caste woman. This paper focuses on the language of the film and how and by whom this discourse is created and enforced in society. The role of caste in the creation of a language discourse, and its impact on different caste communities within the society. The caste identities played a major role in the creation of a language discourse, so since time immemorial lower caste people were discriminated against and subjugated by the upper caste using the hegemony of language.

The caste system in India has had a great historical background since ancient times. According to Amencia (2022)

The Hindu belief says that the people are classified into 4 castes, and these castes define what jobs they can do, what duties, and what privileges they have. These four castes are the *Brahmins* (priests, teachers), *Kshatriyas* (rulers, warriors), *Vaishyas* (landowners, merchants), and *Sudras* (servants), and the 5th group is the group of the untouchables, called Dalits. One of Hinduism's holy books, the *Srimad Bhagavatam* has a part (7.11.35), which clearly says these castes must be based on skills, qualities, and activities. However, in real-life tradition, castes separate people according to their birth.

So, in reality, Indian society has multiple practices of the caste system. Sociologists like Antre Behte's study on Tanjore village and M.N Srinivas's concepts of Dominant caste are demonstrating the length and breadth of the caste system in India. Every caste-based society maintains many norms and rules to differentiate them from the other caste groups. Language is one of the important features which distinguish different caste communities.

Language enables people to communicate, it's a cultural artifact and it binds all together in harmony and peace. The movie, *Jai Bhim*, highlights the deep-rootedness of caste issues by portraying the linguistic differences among different sections of people, particularly between the upper and the lower caste. Caste hierarchies and upper caste hegemony is portrayed in terms of their language usage and differences. The comradeship, duties, love, care, family bonds, and other discussions in the Irula community are manifested by depicting their language use in the movie. Though their language positions them safely within the boundaries of their community, they confront their inferiority (linguistic/social) when they confront the upper-caste communities. That is to say, language(s) have a decisive role in making communities and also communal divisions. In other words, when the Irula community is in their own space, their local dialects bring a kind of meaningful communication, that ensured community bonding. At the same time, language creates division among the people based on their caste segregation. This movie, while storying caste, reiterates language usages to exemplify the casteist society.

In the film *Jai Bhim*, there are many caste practices of the upper caste society, that create inhuman conditions for lower caste Irula people. The very first scene in the film depicts that, there is no one in the society to question injustice against the Irula community, illegal arrest, and imprisonment of the Irula people. Most of the atrocities faced by the Irula community are rooted in their caste as well as their inability to articulate in a language that is known to mainstream society. Illiteracy and lack of modern education in the Irula community make them voiceless. It is necessary to understand how the caste system creates a kind of discourse in society that suits to upper caste's legitimacy and visibility. Language discourse

developed in the society ensured an upper hand to higher caste people, furthermore, it reflected in their presence in most of the public institutions with higher positions. Consequently, lower castes are not part of the discourse, as they are intentionally sidelined. Michel Foucault (1981, pp. 66-67) in his *The Order of Discourse* pointed out that, discourse as meaningful utterances needs to be followed certain criteria like sanity /insanity, taboo, and institutional ratification. In short, any conversation or command could not be part of discourse, if it is not followed above mentioned criteria. In fact, the Irula community does not follow or is not situated in such a position in society. In this film, the caste system has brought certain discourse in its language which needs to be analyzed with the Foucault idea of discourse.

Foucault's (1981, pp. 69) idea of 'normal situations' is agreed upon and recognized by mainstream society, in a way entire society follows it as normal as we all are institutionalized without knowing it. For instance, the acceptance of modern medicine in comparison to traditional one. In the film, the caste system brings a clear-cut distinction between 'normal people' and 'abnormal people' based on caste. Lower caste people are not recognized as normal, and as a result, their language has not been recognized as normal. In the beginning of the film, the landlady insult Rajakannu by saying 'you do not belong to our village, if we give you a space, you will say we are relatives too' (Gnanavel, 2021, 13:00). In another situation, the Panchayath president uses the labour of the Irula community and blames them 'as you have dug up the farm like an adman flock of pigs! Big mistake let you in the village, offer a place to sit, you'll ask for a place to lie down!' (Gnanavel, 2021, 7:26). It shows how caste consciousness among the higher caste restricts others to enter their space. In contrast, they demanded the labour of the lower caste, as a traditional snake catcher, the Irula communities' skills are used by other communities in the society. Besides the upper caste, sanity/insanity is practiced among the lower caste. Specifically, labourer who works in household jobs on feudal landlords belongs to the upper class of lower caste and do not like the other lower caste community. This class consciousness is explicitly seen in the first half of the film. Whereas Rajakannu is not allowed to

touch the body of the landlord's clerk, while they are traveling in the same scooter.

A caste-oriented society creates taboo to demarcate social hierarchy (BBC News, 2019). It works as a restriction on lower caste people in their actions. Being in jail is taboo to an upper caste person, hence in the introductory scene of the movie, the police officers divide ex-convicts based on caste. Then some other officials take the lower caste people to other prisons on false cases, where upper caste prisoners are let free. At this injustice a subordinate policeman asks his colleague "why has nobody come to receive them? Are they orphans?" (Gnanavel, 2021, 3:16) then he replies "you could say that" (Gnanavel, 2021, 3:21). In another context, Advocate General says "You let a tribal woman enter the High court. a Dalit makes us bow down in front of a judge, that too a woman" (Gnanavel, 2021, 1:24:07). It shows that Dalits do not deserve to be there in a court. Furthermore, they are not given any official identity proof as it gives them the right to a scheduled tribe. For example, village teacher Mytra takes initiative to add the Irula communities to the voter's list, she visits the concerned officer with the community. She says: "these all are new voters, so kindly add them to the voter's list." The officer replied: "even without a ration card how can I add them to the list, don't they need proof of residence?" (Gnanavel, 2021, 23:26) In the same scene, the panchayath president is also present and he says: "isn't that bad enough to plead with folks from lower caste to get their votes?" (Gnanavel, 2021, 23:30). The panchayath president's words themselves prove that, as a representative of the village people, he didn't take any effort to ensure their basic needs, if they socially mobilize and come forward in future, he cannot request them to vote. Therefore, he ensures that these lower caste people should not get any identity, as they may go for the next level of mobilization through education.

Even though the community has lived on this land since time immemorial, the official records haven't noticed their existence so far. So, when the Irula people approach the village officer for a caste certificate, he asks "you have no land to live on. You have no ration card. Your names are not on the voter list. On what grounds do I give you a scheduled tribe certificate?" (Gnanavel, 2021, 15:08). That is to

say, they are officially unrecognized/unrecorded citizens of India although they live and plough this land for more than thousand decades. As Griffin (2005, p. 94) rightly pointed out the “discourse analysis will create a discussive framework, which demarcates the boundaries within which we can negotiate”. Therefore, this demarcation was made by upper the caste people to curb the uplift of the lower caste community. It ensured their availability for labour on different occasions and the division of labour maintained. Consequently, the space for exploring skills and knowledge acquisition remains stagnant. Citizenship for a lower caste person remains a right, that is never accomplished. Henri Lefebvre (1991, p. 72) in his work *Production of Space*, noted that “spaces are actively involved in the formation of our identity”. Therefore, it can be said that the caste society always maintains a limited space to lower caste people to restrict their holistic development, which ensures the status quo of the upper caste.

Institutional ratifications always give authority and power to a word and a command from certain institutions. Foucault (1981, p. 70) points out that, institutional ratification is one of the criteria to recognize discourse. In another view, Griffin (2005, p. 97) conceptualizes that, “every discourse has a different function, it depends on who says it, how they said it, etc”. Accordingly, a request made by Senganni was not clear and loud for the police authorities. The same through the institution of court becomes powerful and executed by the authorities. The Panchayath President’s voice has more power than Mythra, who supported the Irula community in acquiring voter id, so they didn’t receive the same. Within the society language has a vital role in determining power structure based on the institution involved. The upshot of all this is that the Irula community was not considered human enough to be or not considered rightful inheritors of the earth. Thus, their voice is always unheard, and not taken into consideration. The first scene in the movie depicts that, no one is there to question the injustice faced by the Irula tribe. As Griffin (2005, p. 97) rightly points out in a caste society “access to discourse is not equal”. Indeed, there should be some social acceptance and recognition to become a part of the discourse, which Irula people are never part of. The movie unfolds the caste atrocities against the Irula people by

the casteist legal/social conditions which solidify the absence of a language for the lower caste people in Indian society.

The problem of the Irula community is not only their inferior caste position but also their “lack” of linguistic capability to represent themselves in public realms. In other words, they are not potential storytellers, so they are destined to remain invisible or dark [as the word “Irula” connotes] in various domains of the social system. If one does not tell their story by himself/herself, then he/she will be misrepresented/unrepresented. Here the monopoly of story-telling lies in the hands of the upper-caste/class men, and they distort the story of people in the lower strata of the society. In all those stories, the Dalits are either culprits or demons. The upper caste decides the discourse based on their hidden agenda, which is executed through the different institutions in the society. In the film, there is no proper infrastructure to provide education to the Irula community. Mytra, the community teacher tried her best to provide them with basic education for livelihood, which is given in the common space of the village. One way the upper caste ensures poor social infrastructure for the Irula community is evident with the intervention of the Panchayath President, who was reluctant to cater to the needs of the community. On the other side, they were used for all kinds of menial jobs which made upper-caste communities’ life better. Furthermore, they always blamed the Irula people for everything done to them, to ensure Irula’s should not feel they are doing a favor to them.

Modern languages like English and skills in these languages are mostly accessible to the upper caste, thus they become positioned in most of the institutions which require language skills. Consequently, it brings more power and authority to people in the upper caste, as they decide upon this discourse. In short, lower caste people were exploited and subjugated again and again. Rajakannu and his friends go through a lot of trauma, without any proper reason. to summarize, upper caste dominance over modern education overruled and discriminated against lower castes from educating themselves as it empowers them. Indeed Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar (2018) said before in his work ‘*Annihilation of Caste*’ that untouchability can be removed by modern education so he put forward the slogan ‘Educate, Agitate

and Organise'. Thus, the movie attempts to reclaim the language of Dalits and, in the process, their identity.

As Ambedkar (2018) rightly said modern education is the finest tool to empower the lower caste community. Here in this film, the lack of modern education makes the Irula community in a lower position once they involve with modern social institutions. Education has empowered people to be aware of their rights and power. The Indian constitution ensures the right to education as part of fundamental rights through the 86th constitutional amendment act. Education gives awareness regardless to all its citizens of what is right, equality, justice, liberty, etc. If a group of people grow up in a society without knowing what is their rights and equality, they simply follow what others say. Consequently, the Irula community did so for long decades, thus injustice continued misusing their ignorance. Rajakannu used for snake catching was later blamed for the theft. All these kinds of discrimination always reminded the Irula community of the importance of education. However, caste dominance always ensured that lower-caste people should not receive modern education. As a result, they were not given proper access to modern education.

The film focuses mainly on the problems of caste identity and social positioning in the Indian context. It is delivered by representing the language bias and barriers that exists between different caste communities. Here, the command over language would bring each community closer to power and representation, and vice versa. Caste practices and their consistency continued for a long period, which has institutionalized the community to remain obedient. Lower-caste communities believe the narratives of educated upper-caste; hence social mobility stagnates for them. Limited space in social life gives limed opportunities to the Irula community, they just explore their working place and back to the village. Therefore, the space outside their village does not provide them any identity, just manual workers. When Rajakannu was put into jail for the fake case with his relatives and neighbors, no one among them was able to help. Lack of familiarity among them with state institutions or any official space, delayed justice for Rajakannu. Later involvement of Mytra, Adv Chandru, and revolutionary party members take Irula people into the space of the

judicial system. Foucault (1981, p. 67) agrees that institutional ratification is one of the criteria to become part of the discourse. And there should be a proper institutional affiliation to become part of the discourse. Which is not available to Irula communities. Hence, on behalf of the Irula community Adv Chandru, Mytra, and party members fight for justice, which is very loud and clear as they are part of the discourse. Exclusion from the discourse creates a lot of struggles in the life of lower caste communities, hence efforts of Adv Chandru and others are great relief to these kinds of communities. This gives hope and inspiration to them to live for themselves as well as others.

The film introduces two central characters, advocate Chandru and the village teacher Mytra who stand for the emancipation of the Irula community. These characters are exposed to modern education and democratic politics hence they actively engage in reviving the community in terms of literacy, legal rights, and inculcating self-respect. What makes them unique is their ability to use language in the desired manner thereby challenging the oppressive discourses. The resistant voice made by these characters gives strength and also awareness about the human rights to the community that they legally deserve.

Adv. Chandru in the movie argues for the sake of Dalits both inside and outside the court. His character portrayal is an amalgamation of an investigator and a legal activist. As part of an institution, his words are powerful and need to be considered as well as executed. His reasoning, arguments, clarity, and enunciation exemplify his command over the language. In the different court scenes, Adv Chandru counters public pleaders through logical arguments with proof. When a public pleader stereotypes tribals as habitual offenders and serial robbers, Adv Chandru replied “cops who foist false cases are the habitual offenders, serial fake-case makers” (Gnanavel, 2021, 32:58). His command over the language and its worth use make others act in favor of justice, for instance: High court judge decided to release 7000 tribal prisoners, who were jailed in a week under different police stations. Adv Chandru proves it is a fake case for getting promotions to the police officers.

Here Adv Chandru's words are represent quest for justice, where a community are denied their justice, as they are not part of a discourse. The film highlights the importance of the right to justice among all without any discrimination, and Adv Chandru acts to ensure early justice to avoid justice delayed justice denied, he points out the same in court "Justice denied to victims can create more damage than the injustice suffered by them" (Gnanavel, 2021, 1:14:37). As a symbol of inspiration and motivation, he supported Senganni to face all kinds of problems. Once Alli was taken to the police station by constable Kribalan, Adv Chandru informed Senganni to go to the police station and his quick intervention released Alli from the station. This gave a kind of protection and empowerment to Senganni, which is reflected in her actions thereafter. Therefore, it could be concluded that language itself has power/authority as well as it can provide power to others since Senganni stands with her decisions.

Mytra, the community teacher in the film, highlights the women's voice in the discourse. Efforts to sideline lower caste, specifically women are seen throughout the film. As an educated person, Mytra is already part of the discourse, hence she provides support to the Irula people through literate as well as promoting their traditional knowledge. Her efforts to uplift the community create a kind of deep relationship among them. Accordingly, Mytra understood their lack of linguistic capability as well as the necessity to uplift them to become part of the language discourse. Initially, she tries to make voter IDs for them but fails to do the same due to objections from the upper caste Panchayath President. Later she involves in providing justice to Senganni when her husband was jailed for a fake case. Mytra is another best example who overcomes barriers in society and supports downtrodden people for their inclusivity.

The film *Jai Bhim* pictures a caste-oriented society, where people belong to different social stratifications, and those in the lowest position has exploited the most. This classification functions in a manner that is very much suitable for the betterment of upper-caste communities. And the language discourse is created which is suited to the upper caste, and they ensured lower caste people are not equipped to enjoy privileges out of it. Lower caste communities are

sidelined from all kinds of social well-being even not considered rightful inheritors of the earth. Lack of linguistic capability and illiteracy ensures their status quo in the lowest strata, which is exploited by the upper caste from time immemorial. As they are outside the purview of language discourse, their voice remains unheard. Adv Chandru and Mytra, who belong to the upper caste came to support these lower caste people and to ensure an inclusive society. In conclusion, T J Gnanavel, director of the film, lights up on the multiple atrocities faced by lower caste communities. These discriminations continue using government institutions, where upper caste communities positioned always. Language discourse plays a major in this film, which used to subjugate lower caste people without providing access to it. Furthermore, people belonging to higher castes come and support this community for their uplift and inclusion into the mainstream society.

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