
FROM SCREEN TO STREET: ANALYZING THE CINEMATIC LANGUAGE OF PROTEST AND STATE RETALIATION IN POST-2010 INDIAN POLITICAL FILM

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Article Received: 11 July 2026, Article Revised: 31 July 2026, Published on: 20 August 2026

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Doi: <https://doi-doi.org/101555/ijrpa.8430>

1. INTRODUCTION

In December 2019, phone footage of police entering the Jamia Millia Islamia library and beating students sheltering between the shelves spread across Indian social media within hours of the event. Five years earlier, a courtroom scene from *Court* (2014) had already trained festival and streaming audiences to watch bureaucratic procedure, rather than a villain's monologue, as the place where power actually does its work. One image is documentary, the other fictional, but they belong to a shared visual vocabulary. This paper argues that post-2010 Indian political cinema has built a recognizable grammar for depicting dissent and the state's response to it, and that this grammar circulates in both directions between the screen and the street. Understanding that grammar matters for reasons beyond film scholarship: it shapes how viewers who were not present at a given protest or raid come to recognize, or fail to recognize, comparable events when they next appear on a phone screen.

The argument rests on a periodizing claim. Indian commercial cinema has a long tradition of staging political grievance through a single avenging figure: the policeman, lawyer, or ordinary citizen who steps outside institutional channels to correct a wrong the state itself will not fix. Prasad's (1998) account of Hindi cinema's *feudal family romance* traces how this figure absorbs and personalizes conflicts that are, in substance, conflicts between the citizen and the state. The figure dominates the *angry young man* cycle associated with Amitabh Bachchan in the 1970s and survives, in modified form, through decades of procedural-vigilante hybrids in which a lone officer cleans up a corrupt system through personal force

rather than institutional reform. What changes after roughly 2010 is not that state failure disappears as a subject, but that the camera stops resolving it through one heroic body. *Court* spends its entire runtime inside the procedural apparatus itself and declines to give the audience a single protagonist to root for. *Article 15* (2019) and *Jai Bhim* (2021) still use an individual investigator or lawyer as a point of entry, but both films locate the actual violence in institutions—the police station, the postmortem room, the caste hierarchy of a village rather than in one identifiable villain who can be defeated in a climax. *Haider* (2014) and *Bheed* (2023) go further still, building entire sequences around checkpoints, curfews, and crowds where no single antagonist is available to defeat at all. The shift, in short, is from a cinema of institutional failure resolved through individual violence to a cinema that treats the institution itself as the object of analysis.

This periodization tracks a decade of real protest and its televised aftermath. The Anna Hazare-led anti-corruption mobilization of 2011, the response to the December 2012 Delhi gang rape, the anti-CAA/NRC sit-ins of 2019–2020, and the farmers' agitation of 2020–2021 gave Indian audiences a decade of phone-recorded footage of assembly and its suppression, circulating well outside the control of broadcast news. Scholarship on Indian media has long argued that a political event and its mediated representation are not separable in any simple before-and-after sequence; coverage is part of how an event becomes legible as political in the first place, rather than a neutral record supplied after the fact (Rajagopal, 2001). The five films this paper examines sit inside that same feedback loop. They draw their visual vocabulary from footage of real assemblies and crackdowns, and clips from the films themselves recirculate on social media during later protests, stripped of their fictional frame and repurposed as documentary-style evidence or rallying material.

Existing scholarship supplies strong tools for parts of this picture without yet putting them together. Work on Hindi cinema's ideology and political economy has established how the industry's own institutional structure shapes what political content becomes visible on screen at all (Prasad, 1998), and Vasudevan's (2010) account of the *melodramatic public* describes how Indian popular film has historically mediated between private feeling and public, political address. A newer and more scattered body of legal-studies and cultural-studies writing engages individual films in this corpus directly, reading *Jai Bhim* or *Article 15* for their treatment of caste and custodial violence. A separate body of work on Indian documentary and protest video, largely produced and distributed outside the commercial industry, has examined how activist and citizen-journalist footage constructs its own visual record of assembly and state response. That literature and the film-studies work on

melodrama and ideology cited above have developed on largely separate tracks, with little sustained attention to how mainstream fiction cinema sits between them, borrowing from the documentary record while feeding back into it. What this literature has not yet done is treat the films as instances of one shared cinematic grammar: a recurring vocabulary of framing, blocking, and sound that holds across language, genre, and director, and that maps onto the vocabulary used by protest movements and their state opponents outside the theatre. This paper works to close that gap by reading five films from three film industries and three genres side by side, treating protest and retaliation as a single, formally continuous visual event rather than two separate topics. The argument proceeds through three theoretical lenses, laid out in the next section, and unfolds across three analytical registers: the visual and spatial organization of dissent, the sound design of assembly and suppression, and the specific formal vocabulary of institutional retaliation. A later section traces the two-way traffic between these films and the protest movements they depict, before the conclusion considers what the corpus as a whole suggests about cinema's place in a decade of Indian political contestation.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This paper draws on three theorists whose vocabularies do different work and, combined, cover the whole event a protest film stages: who gets to appear as a political subject, by what mechanism the state disciplines bodies short of open violence, and which institutions carry out that discipline on screen.

Jacques Rancière's account of politics supplies the paper's working definition of dissent. For Rancière, a social order rests on a *distribution of the sensible*: a prior partition of what can be seen, said, and heard, and of who is entitled to speak as a political subject rather than merely make noise (Rancière, 2004). Politics proper, in this account, is not the routine administration of a community, which Rancière calls “the police” a term covering formal law enforcement but not limited to it but the rarer event in which a group the existing partition does not count as speakers forces its way into visibility and demands to be heard as a legitimate voice rather than dismissed as disorder. Rancière names this rupture *dissensus*: not a disagreement over facts within a shared frame, but a disagreement over the frame itself, over what counts as a fact, a subject, or a legitimate claim in the first place (Rancière, 2010). This vocabulary reframes a familiar problem in the analysis of protest cinema how a film makes a crowd legible as a political actor rather than a mob as a question of aesthetic distribution: which bodies the camera allows to speak, which sounds it registers as language rather than noise,

and which spaces it frames as sites of legitimate assembly rather than disorder. The chapters that follow track this distribution formally rather than only thematically: a film can stage dissensus by handing the crowd a legible voice on the soundtrack, or foreclose it by keeping protest sound as indistinct background noise while dialogue privileges official speakers.

Michel Foucault's account of disciplinary power supplies the vocabulary for how the state answers that claim to visibility. Foucault (1977) traces a historical shift from sovereign punishment—public, spectacular, inscribed directly on the body of the condemned as a display of the ruler's power—to disciplinary power, which works continuously and often at a distance, through surveillance, record-keeping, the timetable, the examination, and the production of what he calls *docile bodies*: subjects who regulate their own conduct because they cannot be certain when they are being observed. Foucault's account of *panopticism*—the internalized watchfulness produced by the possibility rather than the certainty of being observed—is equally useful for reading the checkpoint and surveillance-camera set-ups that recur across the corpus, where characters modulate their behavior in anticipation of a gaze the film never fully locates in a single watching subject. This distinction matters for a corpus that includes films staging visible physical brutality, such as the custodial death in *Jai Bhim* or the search operations of *Haider*, alongside films staging violence that is procedural and nearly invisible, such as the courtroom's grinding pace in *Court* or the paperwork and permissions that never arrive in *Bheed*. Foucault's framework lets the paper treat these as points on one continuum of state power rather than as two unrelated registers of state action.

Louis Althusser's distinction between the Repressive State Apparatus and the Ideological State Apparatuses gives the paper a way to sort the specific institutions each film depicts. For Althusser (1971), the state secures its authority through both a Repressive State Apparatus—police, courts, prisons, the army—which operates predominantly through coercion, and a set of Ideological State Apparatuses—religious, educational, familial, legal, and media institutions—which operate predominantly by producing consent rather than compelling it, though Althusser is careful to note that the RSA also functions ideologically and the ISAs can and do resort to coercion at their margins. That qualification matters more for this corpus than the clean binary itself. The courtroom in *Court* and *Jai Bhim* belongs nominally to the ideological apparatus, an institution of consent-producing legal ritual, yet it is also where repressive outcomes receive their formal authorization; the checkpoint in *Bheed* sits at the visibly repressive end of the spectrum but draws its working authority from ideological categories—caste, religion, migrant status—that determine which bodies get stopped. Reading the films through Althusser's terms, then, is less a matter of sorting each institution into one

column than of tracing how a single scene can move a body from the ideological register into the repressive one, or use ideological justification to license a repressive act. This vocabulary also supplies the paper's working definition of retaliation itself: any on-screen action, coercive or ideological, through which a state apparatus answers a dissensual claim to visibility with a reassertion of the existing distribution of the sensible.

Held together, these three frameworks let the paper put a single compound question to each scene: what claim to visibility is being made or refused (Rancière), through what mechanism of power does the state answer that claim (Foucault), and which apparatus, or combination of apparatuses, carries out that mechanism on screen (Althusser). This is not a formula applied uniformly to every scene; the weight given to each lens shifts with what a given sequence is actually doing, and the three frameworks are treated throughout as complementary rather than competing accounts of the same event. The methodology that follows specifies how this compound question is applied to particular scenes across the five films.

3. The Visual, Spatial, and Sonic Grammar of Protest

The theoretical vocabulary developed above earns its keep only once it is put to a text. This section reads the five films in two passes: first how each organizes bodies in space through camera, framing, and light when it stages assembly, confinement, or search; then how each organizes sound around those same spaces. Each scene discussed below was chosen because it stages one of the space-types the introduction named as recurring across the corpus: the courtroom, the checkpoint, and the open ground of assembly. The two passes are analytically separable but not, in the films themselves, actually separate. A courtroom's visual stillness and its acoustic flatness are the same formal decision, not two decisions that happen to coincide.

Institutional space in this corpus is, more often than not, shot for stillness rather than movement. *Court* (Tamhane, 2014) is the clearest case. Cinematographer Mrinal Desai and Tamhane lock the camera into fixed, wide, roughly eye-level setups for nearly every courtroom scene, refusing both handheld camera and the shot-reverse-shot pattern that conventionally organizes courtroom drama. Characters walk into and out of a static frame; the camera does not follow them, and often holds on the empty doorway or bench after they have left. The light is the flat, faintly sickly fluorescent glow of an actual government building rather than any dramatic key light, and the palette stays within a narrow band of institutional beige, grey, and faded green. This is a formal argument as much as a stylistic one: a room that refuses to move or to privilege any single face is arguing, visually, that no

individual figure, not the accused folk singer, not his lawyer, not the judge, controls what happens inside it. Agency belongs to the procedure. The film reserves its rare crowd shots and looser, more populated framing for the spaces outside the court, where Kamble performs before a seated audience, and the gap between those two registers, communal versus administrative, is itself the film's argument about where a body counts as a political subject and where it is processed as a file.

Article 15 (Sinha, 2019) works in the opposite register for most of its runtime, then borrows the courtroom's stillness for its scenes of discovery. Cinematographer Ewan Mulligan shoots the flat farmland around the fictional village of Lalgaoon in a gloomy, desaturated green, lit mostly by dawn and dusk magic-hour light and angular sources that throw hard shadows across faces rather than filling them in. The camera frequently glides at a slow, handheld drift along roads and through fields, tracking the investigating officer Ayan from behind as he walks toward something the frame has not yet revealed. Crowds here are organized by caste before they are organized by anything else: early scenes stage a village hierarchy in which different groups occupy visibly separate physical zones, cut off from one another by open ground the camera insists on showing in full. When evidence of violence appears, most notably the well where the missing girls are found, the film abruptly stills its camera and drains the color further, borrowing the same fixed, low-key grammar *Court* reserves for its courtroom. The open field where caste is enforced daily and the institutional room where its consequences are formally processed turn out to be shot as variations on one visual idea, not as separate worlds.

Haider (Bhardwaj, 2014) builds its spatial grammar around the checkpoint and the search. Crackdown scenes, soldiers moving through a Srinagar neighborhood, checking papers at a barricade, herding men into a line for identification, carry far more camera movement and far more crowded framing than the film's domestic interiors, but the movement reads as constraint rather than freedom: the camera sits low and close among the men being searched, boxed in by soldiers' backs and rifle barrels at the frame's edges, so the handheld instability communicates claustrophobia rather than mobility. Watchtowers, coiled wire, and the wide, empty white of a curfewed street recur as shorthand for a population under observation, images that give Foucault's watched-but-never-fully-locatable observer a literal, architectural form. Warmer light and a more conventionally beautiful palette, snow, chinar trees, Dal Lake, are reserved for memory and domestic life, so the political present reads as visually colder and more constrained than the past the film keeps returning to.

Bheed (Sinha, 2023) compresses nearly the entire film into a single space: a highway checkpoint sealing a state border during the March 2020 lockdown. Shot by Soumik Mukherjee entirely in black and white, a choice the filmmakers described as deliberately recalling photographs of the 1947 Partition, the film's loss of color flattens the markers, skin tone, clothing, that would let a viewer sort the crowd by caste or religion at a glance, forcing those distinctions into blocking and dialogue instead. Crowd framing does most of the spatial argument: wide shots pack stranded migrants against a barricade in tight, overlapping compositions, while police and administrative figures are more often framed alone or in twos, with visibly more space around their bodies. The barricade itself becomes the film's central image, restaged from a slightly different angle in almost every sequence, so that the checkpoint, rather than any single character, functions as its protagonist.

Jai Bhim (Gnanavel, 2021) makes the sharpest use of contrast between institutional registers. Cinematographer S. R. Kathir lights the police lockup in near darkness, bodies barely legible against black walls, while the courtroom scenes later in the film are comparatively bright and evenly lit, almost theatrical by contrast. Custodial scenes favor close, unstable framing on the detainees' bodies as they are beaten, a choice some reviewers have criticized for lingering on suffering past the point of necessity, while courtroom scenes settle into a calmer, classically composed shot-reverse-shot pattern. The lighting contrast maps directly onto Althusser's distinction between repressive and ideological registers: the same state, in the same case, is coded as darkness and noise in the police station and as light and order in the courtroom, even though the film's own plot insists the second space exists only to adjudicate what the first one did.

The corpus's sound design follows a similar logic of contrast between assembly and administration. *Court's* protest songs, performed by the accused Kamble and, on the soundtrack, voiced and composed by the real Dalit folk singer and activist Sambhaji Bhagat, are the film's only music and its only moments of full-throated collective sound. Bhagat wrote them in the register of a working Lok Shahir, a people's balladeer, rather than a more polished or metaphorical idiom, so the lyrics function inside the story as a document the prosecution can point to rather than as commentary the audience admires from a distance. Set against these performances is the courtroom's acoustic flatness: overlapping fluorescent hum, ceiling fans, lawyers reciting procedural language in near-monotone, long stretches without music. The effect is not silence exactly but a kind of institutional white noise that never rises to the pitch of the songs it is judging. Even the film's transitions between scenes arrive without transitional music, extending the same acoustic austerity to the film's own

construction and not only to the world it depicts. *Court* stages the trial of a song using a soundtrack that structurally refuses to let the courtroom ever sound as alive as the thing it is prosecuting, itself a quiet argument about which kind of speech the state is built to hear.

Haider's "Bismil" sequence is the corpus's most elaborate single set piece and rewards close reading. Staged as Haider's version of the Mousetrap plays from Hamlet, it restages his father's death as a folk performance in front of the uncle, Khurram, he suspects of the killing, performed to gauge his reaction. Bhardwaj built the number around a Bhand Pather troupe, Kashmir's traditional folk theatre form, recorded local musicians playing rabab and sarangi on location, and had choreographer Sudesh Adhana stage it around towering puppets designed by Dadi Pudumjee. Gulzar's lyrics, sung by Sukhwinder Singh, layer the accusation against Khurram with a second target, a barbed reference to the Armed Forces Special Powers Act that Haider elsewhere names outright. The sequence is loud, physically extreme, and staged for a large diegetic crowd, several of whom look visibly unsettled by what they are witnessing. The puppets tower over the human performers by design, grotesque figures that dwarf Haider himself at points in the choreography, giving visual form to the idea that the political forces he is naming exceed any one person's capacity to confront them. That crowd is the point. Where *Court* isolates its protest song inside a courtroom that refuses to hear it as anything but evidence, "Bismil" stages dissent as public spectacle the surrounding community cannot avoid, closer to Rancière's dissensus, a forced entry into collective visibility, than to private grief. Its scale, puppetry, choreography, a crowd functioning almost as a second audience inside the film, marks it as the moment the corpus comes closest to depicting protest as theatre in the most literal sense, and the fact that Haider can only make his political accusation by performing rather than stating it is itself a comment on what direct speech is allowed to do in a militarized public space.

The remaining films distribute this same tension, crowd sound against institutional quiet, across their own settings. *Bheed's* checkpoint is loud in a specific, unglamorous register: overlapping arguments, crying children, a loudspeaker relaying announcements nobody in the crowd can act on. Police and administrative figures, by contrast, speak in shorter exchanges, often on phones connecting them to an off-screen chain of command the crowd cannot hear. *Jai Bhim* pushes the same contrast toward its most disturbing extreme, moving from the victims' screams to a near-silence once the beating stops, a sound design that normalizes what should not be survivable to watch, while its courtroom later restores measured, turn-taking speech as the price of being heard at all. *Article 15* works more atmospherically, replacing dialogue for long stretches with a slow-moving score built from low drones and irregular

percussion that keeps signalling a revelation the plot withholds, so that dread itself becomes the ambient soundtrack for rural caste violence rather than any single effect. Across all three films the pattern holds in the same direction: those with institutional standing speak in short, discrete sentences the plot treats as consequential, while everyone else is heard mainly in aggregate, as noise, wailing, or a crowd's undifferentiated roar.

Read together, the visual and sonic patterns traced here are not two grammars but one: scenes that hold a body still in the frame tend to quiet its voice on the soundtrack, and scenes that let a crowd move also let it make noise. The next section turns from this formal description to the specific vocabulary of retaliation itself, tracking how each film stages the moment the state answers a claim to visibility with surveillance, custody, and procedure.

4. The Grammar of State Retaliation

The theoretical apparatus assembled earlier was built to answer a specific question: by what mechanism, and through which institution, does the state answer a claim to visibility with retaliation. This section puts that apparatus to work on the three films in the corpus that stage retaliation most directly, *Jai Bhim*, *Article 15*, and *Bheed*, each of which moves a body through a recognizable sequence: identification, containment, and either coercion or its ideological cover. Read in Althusser's terms, each film distributes this sequence across a different mix of repressive and ideological apparatus; read in Foucault's terms, each shows the state producing compliance through means that range from outright violence to the quieter work of the file, the register, and the checkpoint line.

Jai Bhim stages the Repressive State Apparatus with the least mediation of any film in the corpus. Rajakannu, the tribal man at the centre of the case, is arrested less because of evidence than because he belongs to the Irula community, historically registered under colonial-era vagrancy law as a criminal caste and still treated by the local police, the film argues, as a standing pool of convenient suspects, an afterlife of the Criminal Tribes Act's logic of hereditary suspicion that Foucault's account of the examination helps name precisely: a population pre-sorted by classification before any individual act is committed. What follows is custodial torture staged with almost no formal distance, extended, close, and largely unbroken by cutaways. The film pairs this with its courtroom scenes, brighter, more evenly lit, procedurally calm, in which the state reappears in its ideological register, prosecuting and cross-examining with the same institutional voice that, upstairs and out of frame, authorized the beating. Althusser's insistence that the RSA also functions ideologically and the ISA can revert to coercion is not an abstract qualification here; it is the film's entire

structure. The public prosecutor's office, nominally a neutral instrument of the ISA, actively works to bury the case, while the defending advocate has to invoke the same constitutional apparatus, habeas corpus, judicial inquiry, to force the repressive apparatus to answer for what it did. The film's politics rest on this asymmetry: the ideological apparatus can be made to discipline the repressive one, but only through immense, individualized effort that the film is careful to show as exceptional rather than routine.

Article 15 distributes retaliation more diffusely, because the film's argument is that caste violence in Lalgaoon does not require a single repressive act so much as an entire ideological infrastructure that makes violence unnecessary to notice. The village itself is organized as spatial containment: different castes occupy different, clearly bounded zones, and the film repeatedly frames the physical distance between them as itself a form of enforcement, no fence required when the social order polices its own boundaries. When violence does occur, closely modeled on the 2014 Badaun case in which the initial investigation was widely reported to have minimized what happened, the state's first response is not coercion but narrative management: local officials downplay the disappearance, an early classification of the crime steers the case away from its caste dimension, and only Ayan's outsider status as a transferred officer generates an investigator willing to treat the case as a crime rather than a local dispute to be locally absorbed. Surveillance in this film runs through informal channels as much as formal ones: village hierarchy functions as a distributed monitoring system in which everyone's caste position is legible to everyone else at a glance, a form of visibility that requires no camera or file because the community has already internalized the classification. The film locates the properly repressive apparatus, arrests, custodial questioning, only once Ayan forces the case out of this ideological containment, which is itself the film's argument: the ISA's ordinary operation is frequently sufficient to make repression unnecessary, and the RSA only appears once that ordinary operation has, exceptionally, failed.

Bheed compresses the same apparatus into a single physical structure: the checkpoint. Every device Foucault associates with disciplinary power appears in miniature at the barricade, papers checked against a list, bodies sorted by category, temperature scanned, movement permitted or refused according to a classification, essential worker, migrant, local resident, that the film shows being applied inconsistently and often arbitrarily by whichever official is on duty. The checkpoint is Althusser's RSA and ISA collapsed into one site: it is staffed by police with the literal authority to detain, but the categories that authority is exercised through, who counts as essential, whose movement is legitimate, are ideological distinctions about class and belonging imported wholesale from outside the checkpoint itself.

Surveillance here needs no hidden camera; it is simply the visible, acknowledged condition of the space, everyone at the barricade knows they are being watched and sorted, and the film's black-and-white photography strips away the usual visual cues, skin tone, clothing quality, that would let the categories operate silently, forcing them into audible argument instead. Spatial containment is total: the barricade does not just block movement, it produces a holding zone where hundreds of people wait in a state the film repeatedly frames as neither free nor formally detained, a threshold condition with no clean legal name that the film suggests is precisely the point.

Across all three films, the same pattern holds: retaliation is rarely a single repressive act performed by a single villain. It is a sequence that moves a body through classification, containment, and finally coercion or its ideological substitute, with each film locating the state's real power less in the moment of violence than in the ordinary, procedural work that makes violence available as an option in the first place. Where that procedural vocabulary itself comes from, and where it goes once a film has used it, is the question the rest of this section takes up.

5. Intertextuality: Screen ↔ Street Dynamics

The Introduction opened with two images, phone footage of a police raid on a university library and a fictional courtroom, and argued they belonged to a shared visual vocabulary. This section makes that claim concrete. The traffic between this corpus and the real protest movements it depicts runs in both directions, and the clearest evidence for it sits in the corpus's own production history rather than in any single borrowed shot: these films are not adjacent to real events so much as built, in places quite literally, out of the same material as the documentary and activist record that preceded them.

Court's clearest debt runs through a specific historical chain. Narayan Kamble, the film's accused folk singer, draws on the real balladeer Vilas Ghogre, a Dalit poet who died by suicide in 1997 in protest of the police killing of ten residents at Ramabai Nagar in Mumbai after a statue of Ambedkar was desecrated. That history was already the subject of a documentary, Anand Patwardhan's *Jai Bhim Comrade*, shot over fourteen years and released in 2011, which follows Ghogre's death and the subsequent arrest and prosecution of several members of Kabir Kala Manch, the real protest-singing troupe, on charges connected to alleged Maoist sympathies, for performing the same kind of songs Kamble sings in *Court*. Sambhaji Bhagat, who wrote and voiced Kamble's songs, belonged to that same activist-musician milieu. The line from a real 1997 killing, through a documentary that spent fourteen

years gathering testimony, to a fictional trial premiering in 2014, is about as direct a case of street becoming screen as the corpus offers, and it means *Court's* courtroom is not simply commenting on state violence in the abstract but restaging, at one remove, an argument the real Kabir Kala Manch was already having with the Indian state. The titular phrase of Patwardhan's documentary, *Jai Bhim*, an Ambedkarite greeting with decades of use before either film existed, resurfaces a decade later as the title of an unrelated feature film about a different case in a different state and language. The recurrence is not a citation one film makes of the other; it is evidence that both films draw on the same standing vocabulary of Dalit political speech, available to be picked up wherever a filmmaker needs to signal which tradition of dissent a story belongs to.

Article 15 and *Bheed* draw on more recent and more directly journalistic material. *Article 15's* central case is not based on one single event but assembles details from multiple real incidents, most visibly the 2014 Badaun case, in which two Dalit teenagers were found hanging from a tree in Uttar Pradesh amid allegations that the initial investigation minimized the crime, and the 2016 Una flogging, in which Dalit men were publicly beaten for skinning a dead cow. *Bheed* works even closer to its source, restaging the March 2020 nationwide lockdown announcement and the migrant workers' crisis it produced, a crisis that was itself first visible to most of India through exactly the kind of phone-recorded, unpolished footage the film's black-and-white cinematography was designed to recall. In both cases the film is not inventing an image of state failure so much as compiling and formally organizing images the news cycle had already produced but left scattered.

The traffic runs the other way with less documentary precision but no less real an effect. Protest culture in India already had its own visual and musical repertoire before any of these films existed, the Kabir Kala Manch songs that fed into *Court* chief among them, and film clips now enter that same circulation once they are made. A scene, a line of dialogue, or a single striking image can be cut loose from its narrative context and recirculate on social media during a subsequent protest cycle as though it were documentary evidence rather than fiction, a use the original film cannot control and was not necessarily designed for. *Article 15's* recurring image of a young officer taping the constitutional text to his own office wall, and the film's title itself, are the kind of compact, quotable units that travel easily onto a placard or a social media post, even where firm evidence of how often that actually happened is hard to gather. This is a weaker, harder-to-document current than the one running from street to screen, more a matter of individual clips and phrases finding new use than of one

film directly citing another, but it is the same feedback loop the Introduction described, simply running in the direction fiction rarely gets credit for.

None of this means the films caused the protests they resemble, or that protest movements borrowed deliberately from cinema. The more precise claim is that screen and street, across this decade of Indian political life, drew on an overlapping visual and rhetorical stock, so that a courtroom, a checkpoint, or a chant could move between fiction and documentary record without needing translation at the border. The conclusion returns to what this shared vocabulary suggests about cinema's place in a period of sustained political contestation.

6. Critical Discussion

Read together rather than film by film, the corpus argues something none of the five films states outright: institutional space in Indian political cinema of this decade is coded through stillness and quiet, while contested space is coded through movement and noise, and the state's retaliation consists precisely of moving a body from the second register into the first. *Bheed*'s chaotic checkpoint resolves into files and lists; *Article 15*'s caste violence resolves into an inquest; *Jai Bhim*'s custodial beating resolves into courtroom testimony read out in measured turns. The formal pattern traced across the preceding sections is not incidental to plot. It is the argument the films are making about how state power actually operates, not primarily through the beating itself, however brutal, but through the machinery that renders the beating administratively unremarkable.

The three theoretical frameworks did not sit in equal balance throughout this reading. Foucault's vocabulary of discipline and examination proved the most immediately portable, since checkpoints, files, and custodial procedure are exactly what his account of power was built to describe. Althusser's RSA and ISA distinction did real work, but mainly through its own caveat: the finding that mattered was not which institution belongs to which category, but how easily a single scene moves a body between them. Rancière's dissensus was the hardest framework to operationalize and, arguably, the most generative precisely for that difficulty; it resists being reduced to a checklist and instead asks a genuinely open question of each scene, whether a given claim to visibility succeeds or is absorbed back into the existing order, that the other two frameworks do not ask on their own. The methodology combining close visual and sonic reading with this three-part apparatus held up reasonably well across five films spanning three languages and genres, which suggests the grammar described here is not one director's signature but something closer to a shared formal convention for handling this subject matter in this period.

The analysis has real limits worth naming rather than passing over. The corpus draws from three film industries and three languages, but it remains mainstream and festival-adjacent fiction cinema; it does not include the independent documentary tradition except at one remove, through *Jai Bhim Comrade*, and a corpus built primarily from documentary and activist video would likely surface a different, rawer grammar than the one described here. Gender operates throughout the corpus, Sengeni's fight in *Jai Bhim* above all, without receiving the sustained theoretical attention this paper gives caste and state power; a reading organized around gender rather than treating it as a secondary axis would likely unsettle some of the claims made here. The method is also entirely textual: it infers meaning from formal choices without testing how audiences actually experienced these films in theatres or on streaming platforms, an important caveat for any claim about the corpus's real-world political effect. And the screen-to-street current examined earlier remains asymmetric: the street-to-screen direction rests on documented production history, while cinema's afterlife in actual protest movements is, on the evidence available, a real but harder-to-measure phenomenon that this paper has described rather than quantified.

7. CONCLUSION

What this corpus suggests, finally, is that post-2010 Indian political cinema does not simply depict a decade of protest from a safe narrative distance. It has worked out a formal language, shared unevenly across Marathi, Hindi, and Tamil filmmaking, for showing how dissent becomes visible and how the state answers that visibility, a language that draws on and feeds back into the same visual record the protests themselves produced. The shift from the individual avenger of an earlier cinema to the institutional focus of *Court*, *Article 15*, *Jai Bhim*, *Bheed*, and *Haider*'s crackdown sequences is not simply a change in subject matter. It is a change in where these films locate political agency, away from a single heroic body and toward the procedural machinery of the state itself, which is also, not incidentally, where Foucault and Althusser locate power in the first place.

Several directions follow from here. A comparative study extending this framework to Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Sri Lankan political cinema would test whether this grammar is a specifically Indian formation or a broader South Asian response to shared colonial-era institutions of policing and custody. The rise of OTT platforms as the primary distribution channel for several films in this corpus, *Jai Bhim* chief among them, raises questions this paper has not addressed about how streaming's different relationship to censorship and audience access reshapes what political content becomes producible at all. Reception studies,

asking how actual audiences read the formal choices traced here rather than inferring their effect from the text alone, would test this paper's claims empirically rather than interpretively. A companion study centered on gender, rather than treating it as secondary to caste and state power, would likely find a similar corpus doing at least some of the same work through a different lens. More broadly, this paper's approach, treating a national cinema's formal choices as a primary source for understanding how a political culture imagines dissent and its costs, has uses beyond film studies proper. Political science and media studies in South Asia have generally treated cinema either as evidence of public opinion or as propaganda to be decoded, rather than as a formal system worth reading on its own terms; the account offered here suggests a third option, treating film form itself as an argument about power that operates alongside, and sometimes ahead of, explicit political speech. Cinema does not settle the arguments a society is having about dissent and its costs. What this paper has tried to show is that Indian political film has, since 2010, become one of the places those arguments are staged, in a shared visual language borrowed from the street and, increasingly, lent back to it.

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