

India: 'Jai Bhim' director Tha Se Gnanavel: 'More brutal than lock-up torture is the silence of society'

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The Suriya-led legal drama is based on an actual incident of police brutality in Tamil Nadu.

Tha Se Gnanavel's phone has been ringing non-stop ever since his movie [Jai Bhim](#) started streaming on Amazon Prime Video on November 2. "I thought people would say this is a good film, but the response has been far more than expected," Gnanavel told *Scroll.in*. "The film has now led to a discussion. In a sense a circle has been completed."

Jai Bhim is designed to provoke a debate. Gnanavel's screenplay closely follows BR Ambedkar's message "Educate, agitate, organise." The Tamil film combines the conventions of the social justice melodrama, the detective thriller and the legal drama to reveal how power structures can hurt those they are meant to protect.

Jai Bhim is based on an actual case from 1993. The movie highlights the attempts of an activist-lawyer to obtain justice for a tribal woman whose husband and two relatives have gone missing. The men have been falsely accused of theft.

Rather than conducting a proper investigation, the police attempt to prove their case the usual way: they mercilessly beat up the prisoners and then claim that they have escaped from custody.

The harrowing scenes of custodial torture and the gradual unpeeling of the police's attempts to cover their tracks indicate that *Jai Bhim* is not interested in equivalence. Rather than taking the easy way out - suggesting that the police might have just cause, or that the advocate is cynically exploiting his clients for personal gain - the movie sticks resolutely to its course.

The machinery of the state can sometimes be the source of injustice and exploitation, especially of the most vulnerable sections of the population, Gnanavel pointed out. "The quest for justice itself is the struggle," Gnanavel added.

Gnanavel also suggested that an alert and fair-minded citizenry was needed to prevent the perversion of justice.

"People are talking about the scenes of police brutality, but what is even more brutal is the silence of society, where such things happen and nobody says or does anything," he said. "This silence is even more brutal than what goes on in the lock-up. People who are invisible, without ration cards or proper documentation, are taken away from our midst and nobody objects to it. They are not even considered citizens. The film is about breaking the silence, about accepting that all of us have responsibility and a role to play."

The key figure who stands up for these forgotten Indians is the lawyer Chandru, played by Tamil

movie star Suriya. Chandru is based on the former Madras High Court judge, [K Chandru](#). A former member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), Chandru is widely respected as much for his activist advocacy as he is for his tenure at the Madras High Court.

“The cases handled by me relating to human rights issues definitely showed the true character of the state and how much it is a violent machine,” Chandru told the website [Live Law](#) in an interview after the film’s release. “If only there is a timely punishment of the offenders, the faith of the victims on the judiciary will increase.”

Gnanavel had met Chandru on several occasions during his previous stint as a reporter with the Tamil magazine *Vikatan*. “I initially thought of making a documentary on Justice Chandru, but he said no, don’t focus on the individual,” Gnanavel recalled.

When Gnanavel asked Chandru about his most interesting cases during his years as a lawyer, Chandru cited an incident from 1993. Rajakannu, a member of the Kurava tribe, was arrested and killed in police custody. Chandru filed a habeas corpus petition on behalf of Rajakannu’s wife Parvathy (called Sengani in *Jai Bhim*) and ensured that the police officers were prosecuted.

Gnanavel began writing the film three years ago. He changed Rajakannu’s tribe from Kurava to Irula. He reasoned that in terms of marginalisation, the Irulas, whose traditional occupations include catching snakes and rats, are even worse off.

In *Jai Bhim*, Rajakannu (played by Manikandan) gets into trouble precisely because of his trade. Called in to remove a snake from a landlord’s house, Rajakannu and his relatives are the first to be accused of stealing the landlord’s jewellery.

“The homework that went into the legal aspects and the life of the Irulas took the most time,” said the 40-year-old director, who directed *Kootathil Oruthan* (One Man in the Crowd) in 2017.

Jai Bhim has been produced by 2D Entertainment, the production company that Suriya runs with his wife, the actor Jyotika. “I initially approached them to produce the film, and within five minutes, they said they would do it,” Gnanavel said. “Suriya also said, if no one else has been cast as the advocate, I would like to do the role.”

Suriya’s presence gave the film a bigger canvas, Gnanavel acknowledged. Suriya’s casting also helped Gnanavel push the idea that for [every glorified supercop](#) in the movies (some of whom have been played by Suriya), [there is another side](#) that needs to be shown and seen.

Production began in 2019 but was interrupted by Covid-19 lockdowns. *Jai Bhim* was originally intended for a conventional theatrical release, but was instead premiered on Amazon Prime Video because of a lack of clarity about when cinemas would reopen in Tamil Nadu.

“We did want the film’s impact to be seen in a theatre, but the flip side is that it is now available all over the world,” Gnanavel said. A movie about a specific case has the power to resonate wherever similar instances of the abuse of power exists – which is everywhere.

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