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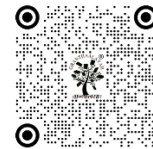
BEYOND THE SCREEN: THE SUBALTERN LIBRARY OF NARRATIVES IN TAMIL CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

This study conceptualizes contemporary Tamil cinema as a subaltern library, arguing that films can preserve, organize, and circulate lived experiences, cultural memories, and resistance narratives that are weakly represented in official historical records. Although scholarship has examined Tamil cinema through caste, identity, political resistance, and social justice, less attention has been given to cinema as an alternative knowledge institution that combines representation with audiovisual preservation. Using Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), complemented by Foucault's power-knowledge perspective and Spivak's concept of the subaltern, the study analyses *Visaranai* (2015), *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Kaala* (2018), and *Jai Bhim* (2021). The findings indicate that the films construct counter-discourses around caste, institutional violence, spatial displacement, and constitutional justice while preserving embodied and cultural dimensions of marginalized experience. The study proposes the subaltern library as an interdisciplinary framework that connects film studies, Subaltern Studies, cultural memory, and archival scholarship, shifting analytical attention from representation alone toward preservation, circulation, and contested knowledge production.

Keywords: Tamil Cinema, Subaltern Library, Critical Discourse Analysis, Cultural Memory, Marginalized Histories, Audiovisual Archive, Subaltern Studies

INTRODUCTION

Cinema is more than a medium of entertainment; it is a cultural form through which societies represent experience, negotiate identity, and construct collective memory. Because film communicates through image, sound, performance, dialogue, and spatial composition, it can preserve dimensions of social experience that conventional textual records may overlook [Erll \(2011\)](#), [Turner \(2019\)](#). Audiovisual media can therefore participate in the formation and circulation of cultural memory [Assmann \(2011\)](#), [Landsberg, \(2004\)](#).

Contemporary Tamil cinema provides a productive context for examining this archival potential. Scholarship has documented an increasing engagement with caste, Dalit politics, social inequality, and political resistance [Damodaran and Gorringe \(2017\)](#), [Gopalkrishnan \(2019\)](#), [Bharatvaraj \(2026\)](#). Recent studies also show how contemporary films foreground caste and identity through narrative, visual symbolism, and everyday social experience [Valan \(2022\)](#), [Gopalkrishnan \(2019\)](#), [Rajapandian et al. \(2021\)](#).

Although this scholarship has enriched debates on representation and political cinema, much of it remains centred on representation, ideology, and resistance. Less attention has been given to the institutional and archival function of cinema: how films

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can preserve and circulate marginalized experiences as forms of public memory. Archive scholarship emphasizes that archives are not neutral containers but sites where evidence, memory, identity, and community are organized and interpreted [Cook \(2013\)](#), [Gilliland \(2014\)](#), [Ketelaar \(2001\)](#).

This study addresses that gap through the concept of the subaltern library. The term refers not to a literal library but to an audiovisual repository in which marginalized histories, cultural practices, emotions, and struggles are preserved through cinematic form. The concept extends ideas of counter-memory and counter-archives by emphasizing preservation, circulation, and public accessibility.

The notion of the subaltern library is grounded in Subaltern Studies and cultural memory. [Guha \(1982\)](#) shows how elite-centred historiography can marginalize subordinate experiences, while [Spivak \(1988\)](#) highlights the epistemic difficulties faced by marginalized subjects within dominant systems of representation. Cinema can respond to such historical silences by making excluded experiences visible and culturally transmissible. To investigate this proposition, the study employs Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), complemented by Foucault's power-knowledge perspective and Spivak's concept of the subaltern [Fairclough \(1995\)](#), [Fairclough \(2013\)](#), [Foucault \(1980\)](#), [Spivak \(1988\)](#).

The empirical analysis focuses on four films—*Visaranai* (2015), *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), *Kaala* (2018), and *Jai Bhim* (2021)—selected because they address different but interconnected dimensions of marginalization, including custodial violence, caste discrimination, urban displacement, land rights, constitutional justice, and Indigenous marginalization. The study makes three contributions: it develops the subaltern library as an interdisciplinary framework; applies CDA to connect cinematic form with discursive and social practice; and demonstrates comparatively how selected Tamil films preserve marginalized histories as audiovisual cultural memory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

TAMIL CINEMA, CASTE, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Caste has become a major concern in scholarship on contemporary Tamil cinema. Recent films increasingly place caste, Dalit identity, and structural inequality at the centre of narrative conflict. [Damodaran and Gorringer \(2017\)](#) connect Tamil cinema with Dalit political movements, while [Gopalkrishnan \(2019\)](#) identifies contemporary Tamil film as an arena for negotiating Dalit politics and representation.

Recent scholarship further indicates that caste is represented through everyday spaces, language, institutions, and cultural symbols. [Valan \(2022\)](#) examines caste and identity in *Pariyerum Perumal*, while Leonard (2015) approach contemporary Tamil cinema through critical discourse. [Valan \(2022\)](#) likewise highlights the relationship between caste and identity in recent Tamil films. Together with recent work on Dalit-centred cinema [Yengde \(2018\)](#), [Divya \(2024\)](#), these studies establish Tamil cinema as a significant site of social discourse and counter-representation.

SUBALTERN STUDIES AND CINEMATIC REPRESENTATION

Subaltern Studies emerged as a critique of elite-centred historiography. [Guha \(1982\)](#) challenged histories that treated subordinate groups as passive objects rather than historical agents. [Spivak \(1988\)](#) examined the representational and epistemic conditions under which marginalized subjects can be heard, while [Chakrabarty \(2000\)](#) questioned universalizing historical narratives by emphasizing uneven experiences of modernity.

These perspectives are relevant to film because cinema selects, frames, voices, and circulates meanings. [Hall \(1997\)](#) emphasizes that representation is a cultural process through which meaning is produced rather than a transparent reflection of reality. Film scholarship likewise recognizes the importance of narrative, visual organization, sound, and editing in meaning production [Barthes \(1977\)](#), [Bordwell and Thompson \(2019\)](#), [Stam \(2000\)](#). Yet scholarship on subaltern cinema has more often emphasized representation and resistance than the archival function of films as repositories of marginalized knowledge.

CINEMA, CULTURAL MEMORY, AND ALTERNATIVE ARCHIVES

Cultural memory scholarship provides a second foundation. [Assmann \(2011\)](#) and [Erl \(2011\)](#) show how communities preserve and transmit meaningful representations of the past through cultural and media forms. [Landsberg \(2004\)](#) further demonstrates how mass culture can generate mediated forms of memory, while [Nora \(1989\)](#) emphasizes the cultural sites through which remembrance is organized.

Archive scholarship also challenges the idea of the archive as a neutral storehouse. [Cook \(2013\)](#) emphasizes the relationships among evidence, memory, identity, and community; [Ketelaar \(2001\)](#) draws attention to tacit archival meanings; and [Gilliland \(2014\)](#) conceptualizes archives as dynamic knowledge environments. These perspectives help explain why cinema can function as an alternative archive.

Within this framework, contemporary Tamil cinema provides audiovisual records of caste discrimination, custodial violence, urban displacement, Indigenous rights, and constitutional struggle. The present study extends concepts such as counter-memory and counter-archive by proposing the subaltern library as a more explicit knowledge-institutional metaphor.

RESEARCH GAP AND CONCEPTUAL CONTRIBUTION

The literature establishes three relevant points: contemporary Tamil cinema is a site of caste politics and resistance [Damodaran & Gorringer \(2017\)](#), [Bharatvaraj \(2026\)](#), [Swamy \(2022\)](#); Subaltern Studies explains the exclusion of subordinate experiences from dominant historical knowledge [Guha \(1982\)](#), [Spivak \(1988\)](#), and cultural-memory and archival scholarship shows how mediated forms preserve and circulate memory [Assmann \(2011\)](#), [Cook \(2013\)](#), [Erl \(2011\)](#).

What remains underdeveloped is the conceptual connection among these fields. Existing approaches generally ask how marginalized communities are represented, how cinema challenges dominant ideology, or how audiovisual media contribute to memory. This study instead asks how cinema can function as an alternative knowledge repository. The concept of the subaltern library therefore shifts the emphasis from representation alone to the combined functions of preservation, circulation, and public remembrance. The study examines four films comparatively to determine how they collectively construct such an audiovisual repository.

Taken together, the model links four scholarly fields: Subaltern Studies explains the problem of historical and epistemic exclusion; film studies explains how audiovisual form produces meaning; cultural-memory studies explains how mediated representations circulate remembrance; and archival studies explains how preservation and access are shaped by institutional and social practices. The contribution of the present study lies in bringing these strands into a single analytical vocabulary and applying that vocabulary comparatively to four Tamil films.

The model also requires a distinction between visibility and voice. Spivak's critique cautions against assuming that the appearance of marginalized subjects on screen constitutes an uncomplicated recovery of subaltern agency. A film is still a mediated cultural product produced within unequal institutional and industrial conditions. Accordingly, the subaltern library does not claim that the selected films provide transparent access to subaltern experience. Instead, it identifies a space in which marginalized histories are made available for interpretation, remembrance, and political debate. This qualification is central to the present study because it prevents the concept from becoming a celebratory claim about representation.

This distinction also clarifies the relationship between the subaltern library and the counter-archive. The counter-archive generally emphasizes the challenge to dominant archival arrangements and the recovery of excluded histories. The subaltern library incorporates this critical function but gives additional attention to how audiovisual narratives become culturally accessible and pedagogically reusable. The metaphor is particularly useful for cinema because film can preserve affective and sensory dimensions that are difficult to reproduce in conventional textual records. A police station, a segregated educational space, a threatened settlement, or a courtroom can be represented not merely as an event but as an atmosphere of fear, humiliation, belonging, or resistance.

Three dimensions are central to the model. First, preservation refers to the transformation of experiences, cultural practices, and historical conflicts into durable audiovisual representations. Second, circulation refers to the movement of those representations across exhibition, streaming, teaching, criticism, and public discussion. Third, contestation refers to the fact that cinematic preservation is never neutral. Filmmakers select characters, events, spaces, symbols, and narrative perspectives; those choices can challenge dominant histories but can also simplify or aestheticize complex social realities. The subaltern library must consequently be understood as a contested repository whose contents are shaped by authorship, production conditions, genre conventions, distribution, and audience interpretation.

The subaltern-library concept is intended as a conceptual model rather than a claim that films are equivalent to institutional libraries or archives. The distinction matters because libraries and archives operate through identifiable systems of acquisition, cataloguing, preservation, description, access, and institutional stewardship. A film does not perform all of these functions. Its archival value is instead mediated through audiovisual form: narrative, image, sound, performance, landscape, gesture, and embodied experience become the means through which social knowledge is selected and transmitted. The metaphor therefore highlights a functional relationship rather than an institutional equivalence.

THE SUBALTERN LIBRARY AS A CONCEPTUAL MODEL THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical Discourse Analysis is the principal theoretical framework. [Fairclough \(1995\)](#), [Fairclough \(2013\)](#) conceptualizes discourse as social practice through which power, ideology, and meaning are produced and contested. His three-dimensional model links textual analysis with discursive practice and social practice. Applied to film, textual analysis includes dialogue, narrative, characterization, cinematography, mise-en-scene, sound, editing, and symbolism; discursive practice concerns production, circulation, and interpretation; and social practice situates meanings within wider historical and political relations. At the textual

level, the study examines how audiovisual form constructs meanings about caste, justice, identity, and resistance. At the discursive-practice level, it considers how films are produced, circulated, and interpreted. At the social-practice level, it relates cinematic discourse to institutional and historical structures of power Fairclough (2013).

Discursive practice concerns the production, circulation, and interpretation of films. Contemporary Tamil films addressing caste, state violence, and constitutional rights circulate through theatres, streaming platforms, academic discussion, and public debate. These processes extend cinematic narratives beyond the screen and make them available for wider cultural interpretation.

Social practice situates cinematic discourse within broader structures of caste, state power, spatial exclusion, and legal inequality. The films are therefore read as counter-discourses that challenge dominant explanations of social reality rather than as isolated artistic texts Fairclough (2013). Foucault's Foucault (1977) Foucault (1980) power-knowledge perspective strengthens the analysis by emphasizing that institutions participate in defining legitimate knowledge and truth. Police, courts, bureaucracies, education systems, and development discourses can therefore be examined as sites where particular versions of reality become authoritative.

Spivak (1988) concept of the subaltern provides a further critical lens. It directs attention to structural exclusion from dominant representational systems rather than simply to the presence of marginalized characters. The subaltern library consequently does not assume that cinema automatically provides an authentic subaltern voice; it identifies a contested audiovisual space in which marginalized histories can become visible, circulated, and debated. Integrating CDA, power-knowledge theory, and Subaltern Studies allows the study to conceptualize Tamil cinema as a subaltern library: an alternative audiovisual archive that participates in the preservation and circulation of marginalized cultural memory.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative research design using Critical Discourse Analysis to investigate how contemporary Tamil cinema preserves and circulates marginalized histories. The research follows Fairclough (1995), Fairclough (2013) three-dimensional model. Textual analysis examines dialogues, narrative structure, characterization, cinematography, mise-en-scène, visual symbolism, sound, and editing. Discursive practice addresses production, circulation, and interpretation, while social practice situates the films within caste, institutional violence, constitutional justice, land rights, and social exclusion.

A purposive sample of four films-Visaranai (2015), Pariyerum Perumal (2018), Kaala (2018), and Jai Bhim (2021)-was selected because each represents a distinct dimension of subaltern experience while sharing a concern with structural inequality and social justice. Each film was repeatedly viewed to identify discursive patterns relating to caste, state power, institutional discrimination, resistance, cultural identity, and historical memory. Dialogues, visual symbols, narrative sequences, spatial representations, and recurring motifs were documented and coded.

Data analysis combined thematic interpretation with CDA. Significant textual features were interpreted in relation to production and circulation and then situated within broader social and ideological contexts. Foucault's power-knowledge perspective and Spivak's subaltern framework were used as interpretive lenses. A final comparative reading examined how the four films collectively contribute to the subaltern-library concept. Interpretive credibility was strengthened through repeated viewing, systematic coding, and consistent application of the framework. The study seeks conceptual rather than statistical generalization.

The researcher's interpretive position was treated as part of the analytical process rather than as an invisible element. The study does not claim objective recovery of an unmediated social reality from fictional texts. Instead, it offers a theoretically informed reading of how selected films construct knowledge about marginalized experience. The analysis consequently aims for conceptual transferability rather than statistical generalization. The framework may be extended to other films and regional cinemas, but such extension requires attention to different historical, linguistic, industrial, and cultural contexts.

Interpretive credibility was strengthened through repeated viewing and cross-film comparison. Rather than treating a single striking image as representative of an entire film, the analysis considered recurring patterns and their relationship to narrative development. Attention was also given to tensions and contradictions within the films. For example, a narrative may challenge institutional power while still relying on conventional heroic structures; similarly, a film may foreground marginalized space while filtering that space through a commercially recognizable protagonist. Such tensions are analytically important because they demonstrate that counter-discourse can coexist with familiar cinematic conventions.

The unit of analysis was therefore not a single shot or line of dialogue in isolation but a meaningful cinematic sequence in which textual form and social meaning could be interpreted together. Coding was organized around six recurrent categories: (1) caste and social hierarchy, (2) institutional power and violence, (3) spatial exclusion and belonging, (4) cultural identity and memory, (5) resistance and collective agency, and (6) law, citizenship, and recognition. These categories were not treated as rigid quantitative variables; rather, they served as an interpretive framework for comparing how different films organized related forms of subaltern experience.

The analytical procedure followed a structured sequence. First, each film was viewed in full to establish narrative context and identify recurring sites of marginalization. Second, relevant scenes were revisited and recorded according to the three dimensions

of Fairclough's model. Textual observations included dialogue, visual composition, characterization, spatial organization, sound, editing, and recurring symbols. Discursive-practice observations considered the film's narrative positioning, production context, modes of circulation, and the interpretive meanings made available by the text. Social-practice observations connected the selected scenes to broader structures of caste hierarchy, institutional authority, spatial inequality, citizenship, and legal power.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES

Research Questions

- 1) How does contemporary Tamil cinema function as a subaltern library that preserves and circulates marginalized histories?
- 2) How do the four selected films construct counter-discourses around caste, institutional power, and social exclusion?
- 3) How does the subaltern-library concept contribute to understanding cinema as an alternative institution of cultural memory?

Research Objectives

- 1) Examine how contemporary Tamil cinema preserves marginalized histories and cultural memory.
- 2) Analyse how the selected films construct counter-discourses using Fairclough's CDA.
- 3) Evaluate cinema's contribution as an audiovisual archive of marginalized histories.

CINEMATIC ARCHIVES OF SUBALTERN EXPERIENCE

TAMIL CINEMA AS A SUBALTERN LIBRARY: CONCEPTUALIZING CINEMA AS A CULTURAL REPOSITORY

The central argument is that contemporary Tamil cinema can be understood as a subaltern library: a dynamic audiovisual repository that preserves experiences weakly represented in official archives. The analogy is functional rather than literal. Like libraries and archives, films select, organize, preserve, and circulate knowledge; unlike them, cinema also preserves gesture, voice, performance, landscape, atmosphere, and emotion [Erlil \(2011\)](#), [Gilliland \(2014\)](#).

The concept is especially useful for caste and institutional injustice. Contemporary Tamil cinema has increasingly brought Dalit politics, caste identity, and social resistance into mainstream cultural discourse [Damodaran and Gorringer \(2017\)](#); [Gopalkrishnan \(2019\)](#), [Swamy \(2022\)](#). The selected films extend this tendency by preserving different forms of lived history. Viewed through Fairclough's model, the archival function operates across textual, discursive, and social dimensions. Cinematic form makes marginalized experience visible; circulation extends it into public discussion; and social practice connects individual narratives to institutional structures of power [Fairclough \(1995\)](#), [Fairclough \(2013\)](#).

The four films can be viewed as complementary holdings within one conceptual repository. Visaranai preserves experiences of custodial violence and migrant vulnerability; Pariyerum Perumal records everyday caste discrimination and educational exclusion; Kaala preserves struggle over urban space, land, and collective identity; and Jai Bhim documents Indigenous marginalization and constitutional justice. The conceptual relationship among the four films is summarized in Figure 1.

Figure 1

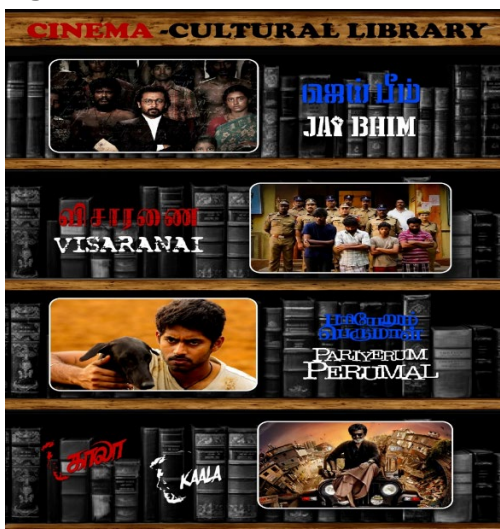


Figure 1 Cinema as a Subaltern Library of Marginalized Narratives

Visual language strengthens this archival function. Mise-en-scene, framing, editing, lighting, sound, and performance preserve not only events but also the emotional and cultural meanings attached to them (Barthes, 1977; Bordwell & Thompson, 2019). Unlike conventional archives, the subaltern library is dynamic: each new film can add narratives, memories, and cultural experiences to an expanding audiovisual repository. The concept consequently redefines the relationship among cinema, history, and cultural memory. Contemporary Tamil cinema can operate simultaneously as representation, counter-archive, and a public space in which marginalized histories acquire visibility.

VISARANAI (2015): ARCHIVING STATE VIOLENCE AND INSTITUTIONAL INJUSTICE

Visaranai (2015) foregrounds custodial violence, migrant vulnerability, and institutional corruption. Its significance for the subaltern library lies in making experiences within spaces of state authority objects of public memory. Confined police-station spaces, physical coercion, silence, and documentary realism construct a discourse in which institutional power is experienced bodily rather than abstractly (Fairclough, 1995, 2013).

At the textual level, visual symbolism, colour, and spatial representation are central. Black is transformed from a conventional negative symbol into an emblem of dignity and resistance, while streets, murals, neighbourhood gatherings, and domestic spaces become signs of collective identity. These strategies challenge development narratives that render marginalized settlements disposable. At the level of discursive practice, Visaranai departs from heroic commercial conventions by centring vulnerable labouring subjects. Its circulation through festivals, academic discussion, and digital platforms extends the narrative into wider debates on police accountability and human rights.

Within social practice, the film exposes how bureaucratic and legal procedures can authorize versions of truth while suppressing marginalized testimony. This resonates with Foucault's (1980) account of power-knowledge and Spivak's (1988) concern with exclusion from dominant representational systems. As a subaltern-library text, Visaranai preserves a form of institutional experience in which violence, paperwork, confession, and authority intersect, converting individual suffering into publicly circulating audiovisual memory.

The film's archival significance is also connected to its treatment of evidence. Documents, confessions, bodily injuries, and official procedures do not appear as neutral forms of information; they are embedded in a struggle over who has the authority to define what happened. The institutional setting consequently becomes a site of epistemic conflict. The subaltern library is produced here not simply by recording suffering but by exposing the mechanisms through which suffering can be denied, translated into official language, or rendered administratively invisible.

PARIYERUM PERUMAL (2018): PRESERVING EVERYDAY CASTE EXPERIENCE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Pariyerum Perumal (2018) shifts the archive from spectacular institutional violence to the everyday operation of caste. It places discrimination within educational spaces, rural social relations, language, friendship, and public interaction. This emphasis is significant because exclusion often operates through routine practices rather than formal rules (Valan, 2022).

At the textual level, regional speech, spatial contrasts, characterization, and recurring symbols make caste visible as an embodied and cultural experience. Karuppi, Pariyan's dog, becomes a symbol of attachment, dignity, vulnerability, and loss. The educational setting exposes the tension between constitutional equality and lived hierarchy.

At the level of discursive practice, the film places Dalit experience at the centre of the narrative and generated discussion about caste in higher education and everyday life. Its circulation through academic and digital spaces strengthens its role in public cultural memory. Within social practice, the film interrogates how institutions imagined as spaces of merit and inclusion can reproduce caste privilege through routine interactions. This can be read through Foucault's account of dispersed power and Spivak's concern with marginalized voices within dominant knowledge systems (Foucault, 1980; Spivak, 1988).

As a subaltern-library text, Pariyerum Perumal archives not only discrimination but also aspiration, resilience, and cultural identity. It preserves the everyday emotional and social worlds through which caste inequality is experienced.

The film's educational setting is particularly important to the library metaphor because education conventionally signifies social mobility and equal citizenship. The repeated experience of humiliation within that setting exposes the distance between institutional ideals and everyday practice. The film therefore preserves a contradiction that is central to subaltern memory: formal access to an institution does not necessarily produce equal belonging within it. Its use of regional speech, rural landscapes, interpersonal encounters, and affective relationships gives this contradiction a sensory and emotional form.

KAALA (2018): ARCHIVING URBAN SPACE, LAND RIGHTS, AND COLLECTIVE RESISTANCE

Kaala (2018) expands the subaltern library into urban space and land. Set in Dharavi, the film presents the settlement as a lived community shaped by migration, labour, cultural diversity, and collective belonging rather than simply as a space of poverty. This

resonates with scholarship on Tamil cinema as a site of political culture and resistance [Bharatvaraj \(2026\)](#), [Damodaran and Gorringer \(2017\)](#). At the textual level, visual symbolism, colour, and spatial representation are central. Black is transformed from a conventional negative symbol into an emblem of dignity and resistance, while streets, murals, neighbourhood gatherings, and domestic spaces become signs of collective identity. These strategies challenge development narratives that render marginalized settlements disposable.

At the level of discursive practice, *Kaala* intervenes in mainstream Tamil cinema by emphasizing collective action rather than individual heroism. Its circulation generated public discussion around land rights, urban inequality, Dalit politics, and inclusive development.

Within social practice, the film critiques the unequal distribution of urban resources and the displacement of marginalized communities. [Foucault \(1980\)](#) power-knowledge perspective helps explain how development discourse can legitimize spatial exclusion by presenting redevelopment as unquestioned social progress. *Kaala* therefore archives spatial memory: the right to remain, the cultural meaning of neighbourhood, and the political significance of collective resistance.

Kaala also demonstrates that archival preservation can concern spatial memory rather than only individual biography. The neighbourhood is represented as a repository of relationships, labour histories, domestic routines, cultural practices, and collective belonging. When redevelopment is framed as a technical or economic project, these forms of social memory can disappear from official accounts. The film counters that abstraction by presenting land as lived space and by connecting the politics of redevelopment to questions of dignity, citizenship, and collective ownership.

JAI BHIM (2021): PRESERVING CONSTITUTIONAL JUSTICE AND INDIGENOUS HISTORIES

Jai Bhim (2021) brings the subaltern library into constitutional justice. The film centres the Irular community and the struggle surrounding Rajakannu's disappearance and the pursuit of justice. Its courtroom narrative connects an individual case to wider questions of institutional accountability, dignity, and citizenship. At the textual level, courtroom dialogue, restrained performance, bureaucratic language, and visual realism construct competing versions of truth. Petitions, testimony, records, and legal arguments become signs of the struggle over whose knowledge will be recognized. These features can be connected to [Fairclough \(2013\)](#) relationship between discourse and institutional practice.

At the level of discursive practice, *Jai Bhim* circulated through theatrical and digital exhibition and became part of wider discussions of constitutional rights, police accountability, and Indigenous justice. Its legal narrative was thereby transformed into an accessible resource for cultural memory. Within social practice, the film highlights the tension between constitutional ideals and lived inequality. [Foucault \(1980\)](#) framework illuminates the institutional authority to define legitimate evidence and truth, while [Spivak \(1988\)](#) framework draws attention to the structural exclusion of marginalized voices. As a subaltern-library text, *Jai Bhim* preserves constitutional memory by connecting legal procedure with the lived struggle for dignity, equality, and recognition.

The film also illustrates how legal discourse can become a form of cultural memory. Courtroom procedure, petitions, testimony, and the language of rights translate an individual disappearance into a broader narrative about citizenship and institutional accountability. The movement from local suffering to constitutional argument is important to the subaltern-library model because it shows how marginalized experience can be preserved simultaneously as memory and as a claim to public recognition. At the same time, the prominence of the lawyer and courtroom structure reminds us that access to legal language is mediated by institutional actors rather than produced autonomously by the marginalized subject.

COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION: CONSTRUCTING THE SUBALTERN LIBRARY

The four films collectively construct a multidimensional subaltern library. *Visaranai* archives custodial violence; *Pariyerum Perumal* preserves everyday caste discrimination; *Kaala* documents urban displacement and land struggle; and *Jai Bhim* preserves Indigenous marginalization and constitutional justice. Their differences show that subaltern memory cannot be reduced to one social issue. Across [Fairclough's](#) three dimensions, the films share a counter-discursive orientation. Their textual strategies make marginalized experience visible; their circulation moves these experiences into public debate; and their social-practice dimension connects individual stories to wider structures of power. This pattern is consistent with scholarship that understands Tamil cinema as a site of political and cultural negotiation [Gopalkrishnan \(2019\)](#), [Bharatvaraj \(2026\)](#), [Swamy \(2022\)](#).

Viewed through [Fairclough's](#) model, the archival function operates across textual, discursive, and social dimensions. Cinematic form makes marginalized experience visible; circulation extends it into public discussion; and social practice connects individual narratives to institutional structures of power [Fairclough \(1995\)](#), [Fairclough \(2013\)](#). [Spivak's](#) concern with subaltern representation adds a necessary qualification: cinematic visibility does not automatically eliminate structural exclusion. The subaltern library is therefore a contested space of mediated visibility rather than a transparent recovery of an unmediated voice [Spivak \(1988\)](#).

Collectively, the films perform functions associated with cultural memory and archival practice by preserving and circulating histories of caste discrimination, state violence, land struggle, constitutional rights, and cultural resistance. They therefore support the usefulness of the subaltern library as a complementary-not replacement-knowledge space [Cook \(2013\)](#).

The comparison also demonstrates that the films do not offer identical models of resistance. Resistance appears through survival, assertion of dignity, collective organization, legal action, and challenges to dominant definitions of space and identity. Consequently, the subaltern library should not be understood as a catalogue of victimhood. It preserves histories of agency as well as histories of violence. This distinction strengthens the framework because a repository centred only on suffering could reproduce the very reduction of marginalized subjects to passive victims that Subaltern Studies has sought to challenge.

Comparison across the four cases reveals a movement from bodily experience to institutional knowledge. Visaranai foregrounds the body under coercive authority; Pariyerum Perumal foregrounds everyday caste as an embodied social relation; Kaala foregrounds the spatial organization of collective life; and Jai Bhim foregrounds the transformation of marginalization into a constitutional claim. The subaltern library therefore operates through multiple scales of memory—from the intimate and every day to the spatial, institutional, and legal. This multiscalar quality is one of the concept's principal analytical advantages.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that cinema can perform archival functions without becoming an archive in the institutional sense. The selected films preserve marginalized histories by transforming experiences of violence, discrimination, displacement, and legal struggle into durable audiovisual narratives. This extends cultural-memory scholarship by emphasizing not only remembrance but also the circulation of marginalized knowledge [Assmann \(2011\)](#), [Erl \(2011\)](#). Fairclough's framework shows that this process operates simultaneously at textual, discursive, and social levels: cinematic form constructs counter-discourses; circulation extends them into public debate; and social practice connects them to institutional questions of caste, state power, land, law, and citizenship [Fairclough \(1995\)](#), [Fairclough \(2013\)](#).

[Foucault \(1980\)](#) power-knowledge perspective clarifies how institutional records can privilege dominant versions of reality, while the films preserve lived experiences that may remain underrepresented. [Spivak \(1988\)](#) framework nevertheless cautions against treating representation as an uncomplicated recovery of subaltern voice. The principal contribution is the subaltern library as an interdisciplinary concept connecting film studies with CDA, Subaltern Studies, cultural memory, and archival scholarship. The framework shifts attention from representation alone toward preservation, circulation, and knowledge production.

The selected films also have pedagogical significance because they provide accessible narratives through which audiences can engage questions of caste, institutional violence, constitutional justice, and citizenship. The study is limited to four contemporary Tamil films and therefore cannot represent the full diversity of subaltern cinema. It is also interpretive rather than an empirical study of audience reception. Future research could extend the framework to women-centred cinema, Indigenous filmmaking, LGBTQ+ narratives, documentary cinema, and comparative regional or Global South traditions.

The study also suggests a pedagogical application. Films can be used alongside archival documents, legal records, oral histories, scholarly literature, and community-produced materials to create layered approaches to social history. In such a setting, the film is neither a substitute for documentary evidence nor merely an illustration of it. It becomes a cultural text through which students can examine how memory is constructed, whose experiences become visible, and how audiovisual form shapes the interpretation of social conflict. Such use is consistent with the study's central claim that the subaltern library is complementary to, rather than a replacement for, institutional archives.

At the same time, the concept should not be romanticized. A film can preserve marginalized experience while remaining commercially produced, aesthetically selective, and dependent on industrial structures that may themselves reproduce hierarchy. The very accessibility that gives cinema mnemonic power can also simplify historical complexity. A dramatic narrative may condense multiple experiences into one protagonist or transform structural conflict into a recognizable genre pattern. The present analysis therefore treats the subaltern library as a contested and mediated repository. Its value lies not in guaranteeing authentic truth but in creating additional cultural evidence and interpretive possibilities that can enter public memory.

The concept also contributes to debates about the politics of cultural memory. Cultural memory is not simply the survival of information from the past; it is a process through which societies select, narrate, repeat, and interpret what is worth remembering. Cinema participates in this process by making certain experiences emotionally and visually available to audiences. The selected films can therefore be understood as mnemonic interventions. They do not merely preserve events; they organize those events into narratives of injustice, dignity, resistance, and recognition. In this sense, the subaltern library describes a mode of cultural mediation rather than a static storehouse.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued that contemporary Tamil cinema can function as a subaltern library— an audiovisual repository that records, preserves, and circulates marginalized histories. Through CDA of Visaranai, Pariyerum Perumal, Kaala, and Jai Bhim, the analysis identifies cinematic preservation of custodial violence, caste discrimination, urban and land struggles, Indigenous marginalization, and constitutional justice.

The framework brings together film studies, Subaltern Studies, Critical Discourse Analysis, cultural memory, and archival scholarship. Its central contribution is to shift attention from representation alone toward preservation, circulation, and knowledge production. Cinema does not replace official archives or libraries; it can complement them by preserving embodied, emotional, spatial, and everyday dimensions of marginalized experience.

The subaltern library therefore offers an interdisciplinary way to study how films participate in the production and preservation of historical knowledge. Beyond its theoretical contribution, the study highlights the social significance of cinema as a medium through which marginalized histories remain visible within public memory. Future research may test the framework across other Indian regional cinemas, Indigenous filmmaking, documentary cinema, and digital audiovisual platforms. In conclusion, audiovisual storytelling can function as a form of historical preservation. The subaltern library is best understood as a dynamic, contested archive through which marginalized histories acquire visibility, cultural memory, and public circulation.

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