

Film Review

Understanding Caste and Its Unperturbed Continuation in *Article 15*

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ABSTRACT

This review of Article 15 explores the problematics of visual representation of caste-based atrocities and tries to bring into focus the triply marginalised position of Dalit women due to the intersectionalities of class, caste and gender. The contrasting notions of Dalit Robin Hood and Brahmin Messiah are developed in course of the analysis.

KEYWORDS: *Casteism, Dalit, Brahmin, Varna, Untouchable, Resistance*

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Films have the potential to amalgamate the auditory and visual media to help the audience visualize the events that rupture the societal fabric. Anubhav Sinha's 2019-film *Article 15* is one such film, a major mainstream Bollywood film in fact, to have captured the issues of caste-based violence and atrocities in contemporary India.

The institution of caste and the compartmentalization or categorization of a certain community as Dalit is a material reality and a national signifier in India. Every Indian is indoctrinated into a class and caste consciousness since his/her birth. After seventy years of independence still at some places the occupation of a person is determined not by his/her inclination or choice but by the hereditary occupations. Caste atrocities also persist. As Surinder S. Jodhka has observed "more recent studies of caste look at it as a dynamic force which, though weakened over the last five decades of developmental experience in certain respects, has grown stronger in some others. Caste has, in some crucial senses seen a 'revival' (1813). Apparently, it seems that the inclusion of certain laws in favour of the minority communities has elevated the social status of those who are at the receiving end of the hierarchical system; but on the contrary the daily reports of Dalit lynching, atrocities and rape of Dalit women by the dominant castes prove such conjecture futile.

At a surface level, *Article 15* upholds with stench of honesty the indignities endorsed by the notorious persistence of caste discrimination in the twenty-first century India. As the title of the film suggests, it articulates Indian constitution's rejection of the caste, religion, race and gender-based discrimination enshrined in Article 15. The story is based on the 2014 Badaun gang rape where dead bodies of two teenage girls of lower caste were found hanging from a mango tree. Post-mortem report confirmed that they were gang-raped multiple times before being murdered. During the investigation five persons including two policemen were accused of the gruesome murder. As the investigation slowly pointed finger at the government's inefficiency, negligence and reluctance, Akhil Yadav's government recommended the case for handling by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI). The CBI, however, came up with an entirely fabricated narrative whereby the prime suspects got released.

With this incident at the backdrop which have the potential to generate a traditional noirish crime thriller, *Article 15* begins with the Additional Superintendent of Police, Ayan's transfer as a punishment to an extremely remote fictional village of Lalgaon, Uttar Pradesh. On the day of his arrival, he is shocked on witnessing the codes maintained in the village where each person is introduced with his last name, where half of the population abhors the other half, and where the population is divided between "Us" and "Them." He is even more flabbergasted with his driver's absurdly arcane reply when he asks for a bottle of water from the village of Pasis—"They're lower caste, sir. We don't drink the water they touch. We can't touch them. Even their shadows can't fall on us." Ayan is portrayed as a foreign educated, townish, *out-of-sync* character who is unaware of the ongoing caste-politics and the convoluted matrix of power structures. In one humorous scene when he matter-of-factly quizzes his subordinates regarding their individual caste identities, he is maddened on hearing the even more complicated intra-class hierarchies within the Brahmins (Kanyakubjs who are apparently superior to Saryuparins) and Dalits (Chamars who are allegedly superior to Pasis). All these encounters with the *real* India manifest the paramount importance of abjection borne out of the gauche, feudal, antediluvian caste-system. The naïveté in his character is repeatedly underscored so as to highlight the deracinated perspective of the urban population. However, his far-removed-in-time appearance and apparent ignorance of the unabashed, routinized horror of contemporary India is little problematic, because such incidents of Dalit lynching or rape are the grass-root realities of the country. Quite contradictorily Ayan's politically woke girlfriend Aditi is least shocked on hearing such casteist things; she deliberately brings into focus the privilege media or newspapers accord to the rape cases of upper-caste girls like Nirbhaya who find place in the frontline of newspapers while the cases involving girls from among the minorities are granted little coverage.

At the very opening scene of *Article 15*, a Dalit woman, Gaura is seen leading a group of minor people singing a folk song on poverty and disparity—*Kahab toh Lag Jayee Dhak Se...* which translates into: "Big people study in schools and Colleges/ And brother, in addition they get tuitions/ Our children are obliged to do hard labor/ They are told, what will studying get you?" (Vetticad). The thought-provoking lyrics is a scathing attack to the glaring gaps of the hierarchical system where the Dalits are

deprived of the basic right to education so that they can be easily duped and exploited. Ayan, however, is a Brahmin with a good background in education. His liberal background combined with his caste privilege has allowed him to have a posh, luxurious life. While Ayan is always clean-shaven, impeccably groomed in blazer and tie, Dalits are portrayed in shattered, torn, unkempt dresses muddled with dirt.



Figure 1: The unsurmountable gap between the moneyed upper-castes and the labouring lower-castes as portrayed in *Article 15*

A student of anti-caste history may immediately note the continuation of the past into the present. During the era of Manu, the Brahmin lawmakers set the rule of pouring molten lead on to the ears of a Shudra if he intentionally or accidentally listened to the Vedas, cutting off his tongue if he utters the Shlokas. In such cases, the bodies of the victims were either shredded, tattered or hanged as exemplary lesson for daring to access the scriptures regulated by Brahminical hegemony. In the narrative flow of the film, one is shocked to discover that the three girls were brutally raped for their audacity to ask for three rupees raise in daily wage. Apart from caste-based oppression, Dalit women become the victims of hegemonic patriarchy and gender discrimination. As Bheemaiah notes, “Thanks to Manu’s *Dharmasastra* which has been adopted by the upper caste dominant society in letter and spirit, woman is always deprived of her natural rights and freedom. Men of dominant castes do not see caste as a bar for their sexual intercourse with women of the lower order in Indian social milieu” (456). How

ironical it is to see that all the accused five men including Bhramadatta belong to the upper castes, who socio-historically fear to cross the shadow of the *Shudras* in daylight, but denude and dismantle the same *untouchable* bodies at night to satisfy their sexual appetite. In case of amorous activities caste no more appears as a barrier.



Figure 2: Exhibiting Dalit Bodies as an Exemplary Lesson to the Minors in *Article 15*.

One can say that the tactful exploitation of the existential angst of the unprivileged Other by political aspirants has been succinctly articulated in *Article 15*. Simmering in the background of the film is an election where the upper caste right wing politician Mahant tries to form alliance with the local Dalit leader. Taking advantage of their poverty, haplessness and gullibility he projects the vision of establishing a casteless and classless society, to unite the Dalits and Brahmins in order to save the “Hindu” tradition and religion from erosion. His primary propaganda is to build a Hindu Rashtra. Attracting the attention of the media he visits the village of the untouchables and shares meal with the villagers. But the crude reality is that all food, even the plates are brought from his home were kept under the veil of silence.

Even though the film accords a minimal space to the leader of Bhim Sangharsh Sena Nishad who has been introduced as “Dalit Robin Hood,” he actually appears as the real-life superhero not in cap and spandex but in ordinary clothes who despite being in a disadvantaged social stratum, retaliates and seeks for justice. He along with his peers recognizes the government’s conspiracy of shutting the case by forcibly making false

allegations of honour-killing against the girls' fathers. We are first introduced to Nishad as a voiceover, preaching a message to all Dalits: "You and I are invisible to them, but their lives depend on us. We work on their farmlands, we clean their shit, we deliver their babies, burn their corpses on funeral pyres. Don't beg for justice anymore. You've already begged for too long. Now, whatever work you do, just stop" (Anwer and Arora, 22). His clarion call to Dalits for work cessation is to make the Brahminical society realize the lower castes are needed in this society. Despite his ephemeral presence in the film, his words leave a mark on the audience. During a conversation when he is asked "Has nothing changed in 70 years?," Nishad replies "Yes it has. Sometimes we are called untouchable citizens or scheduled caste citizens. But we're never counted just as citizens" (Article 15). This strong statement challenges M. K. Gandhi's social movements against untouchability, his classification of the Dalits as *Harijan* (Children of God) because in reality they are not even recognized as *Jan* (India's general citizenry). With his anti-caste vision of politics, his fearlessness and bravery, Nishad becomes the actual "Gardener in the Wasteland" in the sense in which the phrase is used by Natarajan and Ninan in their book on Jyotirao Phule.

Ayan, on the other hand with his neat and clean outlook, with an aura of smartness and intelligence appears as a pseudo-firang figure as he himself says – "They are looking at me like the British are back." His metro-masculine image with authoritative attitude and skewed, cautious posture makes him an alien, an outsider to the rural habitus. It becomes an unresolved conundrum for him as he failed to understand the complex nature and detrimental impact of casteism from his ideological positionality. For him it can be an interesting topic for discussion, or a favourite subject for critical debate, but can he really feel the pernicious pain at stake? It is certainly true that despite prohibitions from his superior Ayan investigates the entire murder case putting his own life in danger, but the film seems to be focused more on highlighting Ayan's political awakening, his *Brahminical saviour complex* and the risks he takes to bring justice than the brutal murder and rape. Issues such as how Ayan's modern metropolitan caste-blindness gets unsettled and how his romanticized view of pollution free Lalgaoon is metamorphosed on seeing the polluted reality emerge as the centrepiece. In the words of Anwer and Arora, "Article 15 has been read as an exercise in savarna

narcissism and self-aggrandizement, wherein both the brutalizers and liberators of Dalits are Brahmin; marginalized voices remain marginal in the film” (17).



Figure 3: Portraying Ayan as a Superhero Figure in *Article 15*.

The film ends with Ayan rescuing the missing girl Pooja, carrying her with his strong Brahmin arms almost like a distinct Messiah figure. It appears like a “coming of age” moment for Ayan when the oppression of a community instigates him to tear down the caste cauldron. It somehow reinforces the idea that the wronged world is reformed by the upper-caste men and the lower castes are destined to remain under their shadow of generosity and benevolence. Such representations make the audience think, is Bollywood too dominated by upper-caste normativity? However, keeping aside these shortcomings, with the cinematographic excellence and directorial creativity the film effectively conveys the ominous atmosphere created by the system of graded inequality. But we are not told what happens to Pooja. The film concludes by airing some questions—does she remain segregated within her community for being raped? Does she remain silent forever with her victimized status and uncanny experience of trauma? Would the socially ordained convention ever permit her to move on in a ruthless temporality?

Article 15 projects India as a neo-liberal nation fighting against the legacies of caste and centuries of ceaseless oppression. Caste system cannot be wiped out or annihilated abruptly in the material sense from the map of India. It has to be a gradual process in which all powers and the stakeholders of society have to take an agential role.

The fight against Caste can hardly be spearheaded by one community or one political party. As long as religious scribes dictate the state, the hapless caste is governed by the dominant caste and education remains inaccessible to the minors, the nation shall remain a living inferno. The struggle for liberty, equality and fraternity did neither end with the Phules' fight for planting the seeds of education amongst the minors nor with Ambedkar's burning of the *Manusmriti*. There is neither a *deus ex machina* nor a readymade solution to get rid of the codified exploitation. The fight for emancipation must continue and must be inspired by the suffering faces and/or murdered bodies of those who died due to caste discrimination or dedicated their entire life for the liberation of the caste subaltern.

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