

Article 15: A Tale of an Upper Caste Ally or an Exposé of Savarna Saviour Complex

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Abstract— *Article 15, directed and produced by Anubhav Sinha, is a hard-hitting film that attempts, and to some extent succeeds, to depict the ramifications of the pernicious caste system in India. What makes this film special is the fact that it is a rare attempt by mainstream Hindi cinema to address the caste issue, an issue typically reserved for independent or art houses films. Article 15 follows the journey of a freshly-minted upper caste IPS officer who investigates the disappearance of three Dalit girls from a small village. In the process, he unveils the violent history of caste-based oppression. This paper aims to analyse whether the upper caste hero is an ally to the cruelly marginalised Dalits or if he serves as an on-screen manifestation of the Savarna saviour complex.*

With the help of the newly emerging Dalit literary theory, this paper will attempt to unpack the caste politics of this film and address some pertinent questions regarding the issue. Does Article 15 reinforce the fallacious idea that caste exists only in the villages? Do Dalits really need a Savarna saviour to rescue them from the clutches of caste discrimination? And more importantly, is the 'hero' actually trying to question and fight the system or is it a tale of Savarna man's burden?

Caste is an undeniable reality of India, and despite various laws and systems, it continues to haunt people from lower castes. This paper argues that Article 15, by relegating caste to a remote village, undermines the complexity and monstrosity of this system. By playing on the binaries of 'good Savarna' vs 'bad Savarna', the film posits Ayaan as the saviour of Dalits—a saviour who wants nothing to do with this system of discrimination. But the film fails to address the privilege of the upper caste hero. It ends up becoming a tale of a power struggle between the good Savarna and the bad Savarna, and the Dalits and their problems are sidelined. Instead of questioning the system of oppression, the film inevitably falls into the trap of endorsing the Savarna saviour as a solution to the problems faced by Dalits.

Index Terms— *Article 15, Savarna saviour complex, Dalit representation in films, Caste.*

Dalit characters typically don't feature in mainstream Hindi films. There is no mention of caste or caste system, except the stereotype that certain characters are from an upper caste or a lower caste. But it is broadly acknowledged that minor characters who perform menial tasks or dark-skinned villains come from a lower caste. *Article 15* is a hard-hitting Indian film that delves deep into the complex web of the caste system and attempts to expose the ongoing discrimination against Dalits. But who are Dalits? "The etymology of the term 'Dalit' can be traced to the root word 'dal' in Sanskrit, which means to crack, split, be broken or torn asunder, trodden down, scattered, crushed, destroyed, and is understood in all Indian languages that are derived from Sanskrit" (Kumar 4). Dalits, who were earlier known as "untouchables," are a group of people who have historically faced discrimination and oppression due to their lower caste status. Despite numerous efforts to abolish caste discrimination in India, Dalits continue to face discrimination and exploitation in various forms, such as caste-based violence, lack of access to education, employment, and even basic human rights.

Directed by Anubhav Sinha, the film's title alludes to the Article 15 of the constitution which outlaws discrimination on the basis of caste, race, religion, sex or place of birth. The film follows the journey of a freshly minted IPS officer, Ayan Ranjan, into a rural area of Uttar Pradesh rife with caste-based atrocities. It is in this remote corner of the country that he discovers the brutality of the caste system—the

horrific nature of violence and discrimination perpetrated on Dalits. He is forced to negotiate the complexities of his privileged position as an educated upper-caste male and his inadvertent role in sustaining the ruthless caste system.

Despite tall claims about its eradication, the caste issue is as real as ever. The practice of Untouchability was outlawed in 1950 but it continues to persist in every nook and corner of the country. The practice has mutated to adapt to meet the demands of modernisation and globalisation. As Aditi states that even though there isn't outright discrimination in the urban settings, people tend to serve food to their house help and other labourers in separate utensils. Caste system is very much alive!

Even today, hundreds of Dalits are exploited by the upper castes every day. Here are some statistics to get a clear picture of the issue. For crime-related statistics in 2021, a new edition of "Crime in India," the National Crime Records Bureau's (NCRB) annual report, was published on August 29. According to the research, crimes or atrocities committed against Scheduled Castes (SCs) increased by 1.2% in 2021, with Uttar Pradesh recording the highest number of incidents—25.82%—followed by Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, each with 14.7% and 14.1% respectively. The research also reveals that in 2021, atrocities committed against Scheduled Tribes (ST) increased by 6.4%, with Madhya Pradesh reporting the greatest number of cases—29.8%—followed by Rajasthan and Odisha, each with 24% and 7.6%, respectively. There has been an increase

in violence against Dalit and Adivasi women as well. Out of the total incidents reported, cases of rape against SC women (including minors) make up 7.64%, and crimes against ST women make up 15%. But with so many laws in place, is justice being served? According to the report, combining incidents from the previous year, there were a total of 70,818 cases of atrocities committed against SCs that were still under investigation by the end of 2021. Similarly, 42,512 cases of atrocities against STs and 2,63,512 cases of atrocities against SCs were scheduled for court trials, and 12,159 cases of atrocities against STs were still under investigation. The execution of the revised SCs and STs (PoA) Amended Act 2015 remains challenging even after the amendments took effect in 2016, giving the Dalit and Adivasi victims hope for swift justice (“NCRB Report Shows Rise in Atrocities Towards Dalits and Adivasis | NewsClick”).

Article 15 takes up the issue of caste-based atrocities. The film depicts authorities covering up the murder and gang rape of three 15-year-old girls because they are from a lower caste. It was inspired by the real-life Badaun killings and pays poignant homage to Alan Parker's 1988 procedural thriller *Mississippi Burning*. The film is lauded by several reputable news agencies for its scathing depiction of the deeply embedded caste system that persists in Indian society. For example, *The Hindustan Times* labels it “a grim, unrelenting and essential film, one throwing up truths we choose to forget” (“*Article 15* movie review: Ayushmann Khurrana hunts for inconvenient truths in an essential film | *The Hindustan Times*”). *The National News* calls it “a hard-hitting film that tackles the caste discrimination that is rampant in India – and, as this story shows, fatally so at times” (“*Article 15* movie review: this is a film that everyone in India needs to see | *National News*”). This film is significant and all the acclaim it has garnered is justified because it is a rare endeavour by mainstream Hindi cinema to confront the caste issue, a subject usually left to independent or art house productions.

However, the film, by relegating caste to a remote village, falls into the trap of undermining the complexity and monstrosity of this system. The film depicts it as something that only thrives in rural, remote terrain, it has no place in the modern urban setting. For instance, Ayan seems to discover the existence of the caste system after reaching the village. It seems almost absurd and ironic that a high-rank police officer backed by caste and class privilege is unaware of his caste. While the film needs to be applauded for highlighting the problem of violence and discrimination based on caste, it often depicts the issue in an overly simplified way. The movie makes extensive use of clichés and stereotypes, which could not adequately capture the nuanced nature of caste conflicts in India.

“Countryside India is so beautiful” –the hero's opening lines in the film convey his innocence and naivety. By telling the audience that he is unaware of the horrors of the caste system he is about to confront, he is absolved of his part in

perpetuating the system. It is his girlfriend, Aditi, who is more in touch with reality and exposes the irony and absurdity behind this ignorance. The film harks on the familiar idea of the White Man's Burden. But, instead of a white man, there is an upper-caste outsider who takes it upon himself to protect Dalits and help them rise above the issues like caste-based discrimination.

Another fundamental flaw with the film is that in an effort to portray an upper caste hero who is an ally to the Dalits, the movie inadvertently produces a hero who acts as an on-screen embodiment of the Savarna saviour complex. But what is the Savarna Saviour Complex? The phrase “Savarna saviour complex” describes the tendency of members of privileged or dominant castes, also referred to as “Savarnas” in India, to believe they can “save” or “rescue” oppressed or downtrodden communities without actually grasping or addressing the fundamental causes of the issue. The Savarna saviour complex notion is significant because it underlines the need for people from privileged backgrounds to be conscious of their own prejudices and assumptions and to engage in meaningful discourse and action with marginalized people instead of imposing their own solutions or perspectives.

The Brahmin hero is the sole focus of the film which further strengthens the stereotype of Brahmin saviour. It is his actions and journey that take the centre stage—the caste issue is sidelined and reduced to a mere plotline. Addressing this issue in an interview with Scroll, Anubhav Sinha states:

Ayan is not a Brahmin because only Brahmins can save Dalits, though I understand that some people see it that way. I wanted the hero to be a Brahmin for a reason – so that he is not just at the top order of the hierarchy in policing, but also in caste. I wanted him to have the power to go either way, but he chooses the right way. It is privileged who should challenge privilege because the privileged have created this system (“Anubhav Sinha on why ‘Article 15’ has a Brahmin hero: ‘The privileged should challenge privilege’ | Scroll”).

He further goes on to say that “All white people are not saviours, sure, but all white people are also not tyrants. Only if you don't see every man with power as a villain can there be dialogue. Otherwise, you are increasing the divide further” (“Anubhav Sinha on why ‘Article 15’ has a Brahmin hero: ‘The privileged should challenge privilege’ | Scroll”). The film posits binary distinctions between “good” and “bad” brahmins, defining Ayan as a “good” brahmin who has set out to right the wrongs done by his community. As Nandhana Prem in her article ‘A Critique on Article 15: Unravelling the Brahmin Saviour Complex’ writes, “This kind of representation does not make an attempt to call out the brutality committed by the Savarnas. The very presence of a binary makes it easier for the filmmaker to justify Ayan” (Prem). However, what the film fails to grasp is that it is not an issue of privileged versus privileged. The system operates to privilege the upper caste and dehumanises the lower castes. Therefore, it is oppressed who need to recognise their

exploitation and revolt against it to end their suffering. Dalits don't need a Savarna saviour, what they truly need is a strong Dalit leader who can mobilise them and help them realise the power of the collective.

Instead of showcasing the angst of ever-suffering Dalits, the film labels Dalits themselves as casteist. It is not through the Savarna hero, but a lower caste police officer that we learn about caste discrimination prevalent in the area. The film fails to critique the perpetrators of caste-based violence. Instead, it ends up making Dalits the propagators of the caste system. It shifts the onus of their sufferings on them. When Jatav is asked if he belongs to the same caste as the boys beaten for entering a temple, he replies, "I am a Chamar. They are Pasis. We are superior to them". In the film, we rarely see upper castes practising untouchability—these laws are followed more strictly by Dalits.

Another important theme that warrants unpacking is the politics of representation in *Article 15*. When it comes to Hindi films, Dalit characters don't seem to exist beyond the upper caste imagination. These films also completely exclude the newly emerged educated Dalit middle class. If Dalit characters ever find their way into the plotlines of these films, they have to suffice with token representations. Even *Article 15*, a film that is claimed to voice the struggles of Dalits fails to actually give voice or agency to them. Their experiences and sufferings are always voiced by the upper caste, they are never in charge of their narrative. The Brahminical gaze of the film works to further marginalise the Dalits by vesting all the power in the hands of their upper caste messiah. Foucault's concept of knowledge and power is particularly useful to understand how the Savarnas in power can use it to appropriate the struggles of Dalits by misdirecting the discourse. He argues, "What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it does not only weigh on us as a force that says no but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasures, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as negative instance whose function is repression" (Foucault 119).

Additionally, the film uses indicators and cultural markers to clearly differentiate between upper castes and Dalits. The upper caste characters are portrayed as articulate, well-dressed, strongly built and often with a fair complexion. On the other hand, Dalits are depicted as dirt-smudged, meek, submissive, frail humans with dark complexion and shabby clothes. Even characters like Jatav and Malti who have benefited from reservation policies and entered the government services, seem to lack courage. They need the assurance of a Savarna male hero to stand up for what's right. Through this stark distinction, a film that aims to address the caste issue ends up reinstating caste stereotypes. The persistence of these stereotypes emphasises how the film industry needs to be more diverse and inclusive. To produce more authentic and realistic depictions of the community,

more Dalit actors, writers, and directors must be included in the cinema industry. It is absurd that a film about a marginalised community features almost no actors from the community. Although there were few Dalit characters in the film, most of them were given minimal screen time and dialogues. For example, the actor playing the role of a manual scavenger is a Dalit.

In the climax of the film, Ayan enters the swamp to rescue the girl. On being questioned by Jatav, he replies "Someday Brahmins will have to enter the swamp". By expressing his Brahmin identity he is affirming his superiority and reestablishing the binary of "us" and "them" that he appeared to be questioning in the film. The notion of an ally is shattered and it is made clear that the gap between a "Brahmin" and Dalits is unbridgeable.

Dalit women belong to the lowest rung of Indian society as they are triply marginalised. Due to their marginal position, Dalit women are often subject to violence—both physical and sexual. But why? The intersection of caste and gender puts Dalit women at an increased risk of sexual violence and exploitation, as they are subjected to both caste discrimination and gender-based violence. Jyoti Diwakar argues: "Despite all the constitutional safeguards as well as the enactment of several laws to support women's honour and dignity, the strong impact of caste even on the judicial system has been seen across the country on several occasions. Inequality of resources, opportunity and discriminatory treatment towards Dalit women is the prime cause of their vulnerability and social exclusion in society (Diwakar 122). The acts of violence against these women serve as a way to "punish" Dalit men and women for advocating for their rights in defiance of the caste system. The majority of these incidents, gang rape, naked parade, etc.—have a significant impact on Dalit society as a whole and women in particular.

In the film, two young girls are raped and murdered just for asking for increasing their daily wage by three rupees. The upper caste contractor admits during the investigation that while three rupees are inconsequential, the girls nevertheless need to be disciplined and shown their place to set an example for their community. It is not a regular instance of violence. The girls are killed and hanged on a tree to warn Dalits against transgression. It is important to pay attention to the caste of these girls as the violence against them is an attack on their community. "Crimes such as rape often amount to attaining power, dominance, and control rather than mere sexual fulfilments" (Diwakar 125). She goes on to state:

When a Dalit woman is raped, it is not a sexual act that is committed on one individual but an act of violation of the human rights of the social group that she belongs to. What is being asserted here is not merely male superiority, but caste, and community superiority as well. The upper caste men or their communities as a whole violate all norms of 'pollution' (impurity) when they touch the body of a Dalit woman (Diwakar 126).

Like other Dalit characters in the film, these Dalit women are also portrayed as silent victims. We never get to hear their side of the story. Even the girl who is rescued at the end is never allowed to address the audience and share her sufferings. As Sharmila Rege states, “there was either complete invisibility of the experiences of Dalit women or at best only a token representation of their voices. There was thus a masculinisation of Dalithood and a Savarnisation of womanhood, leading to a classical exclusion of Dalit womanhood” (Rege 91). The film offers no powerful Dalit female characters that the women of these marginalised communities can look up to. While we see Gaura, a local activist, try to get the voice of her community heard, she is not successful in her endeavour. In the world of *Article 15*, only Savarna Ayan and his liber girlfriend can bring some semblance of change.

Hindu religious and social life has been largely governed by caste for ages, with each group occupying a specific position within this intricate hierarchy. While the system bestowed unlimited privilege on the upper castes, it subjected the lower-caste Dalits to inhumane oppression and subjugation. The fact that the caste system is often bolstered by Hindu religious scriptures may be one of the fundamental reasons why it has persisted so strongly in Indian society. Even after the caste system was legally challenged, these religious sanctions often assisted in lending it renewed legitimacy. Untouchability was outlawed in India in 1950 when the constitution took effect, but it is still present to varying degrees throughout the country. To this day, Dalits are constantly struggling to reclaim their dignity and self-respect. It is this balance of the caste system, ordained by gods, that Ayaan is continually cautioned not to upset. And he doesn't seem too keen on disrupting the balance. He seems convinced by his fellow police officer's argument, “If everyone becomes equal, who will be the king”. It is not the hero but Aditi, who asks the pertinent question: “But why do we need a king”?

The film presents the implementation of laws as the solution. However, it fails to address the internalisation of caste among the people. While laws can provide justice to Dalits, the atrocities will never stop until there is a conscious effort by the privileged to stop these practices—there is a need for systemic change. The film also posits Gandhi's idea of caste against Ambedkar's idea of caste. “Gandhi was bent on assimilating the untouchable into the Hindu fold, his programme for their rehabilitation not surprisingly focused on practices such as interdining, intermarriage and temple entry”(Ganguly 76). It is the same patronising attitude towards Dalits that manifests in *Article 15*.

While Ayan represents the Gandhian idea of caste, on the other hand, there is a radical Dalit activist modelled on Ambedkar's ideas. “Ambedkar through his historical analysis and experiences arrived at the conclusion that untouchability is inseparable from the caste system and Hinduism. In his view, the untouchables and the Shudras constituted the

sustaining bases of the ‘graded inequality’ of the caste system, whose legitimization was provided by the dogma of human inequality that is central to Brahmanic Hinduism”(Pantham 186). Nishad voices his angst and resentment against upper-caste leaders who try to homogenise them as Hindus only for their material gains “Sometimes we are called Harijans, sometimes we are called Bahujans, but never counted as citizens”. Even though there is no radical call to abandon Hinduism, he understands that there is no way out. Because he understood that accepting their Hindu identity necessarily implied accepting their caste, Ambedkar constantly opposed the Gandhian perspective on caste. Once the elections are won, they are dehumanised and relegated to the margin to suffer. He urges his people to stop waiting for a saviour and rise up for their rights. It comes as a little surprise that he is killed off in the end. His ideas that threaten the privilege of upper castes have no place in the world dictated by the rules of the caste system.

The film ends on a utopian note with Gandhi's famous bhajan ‘Vaishnava Jana to’ as we see policemen from different castes dining together. But what it fails to address is that the caste system exists, as vicious as ever—sharing a meal does not solve anything. It is not the triumph of Dalits, it is merely a triumph of a Savarna hero who had taken it upon himself to protect the Dalits.

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