

Article 15

Year : (2019)

Director : Anubhav Sinha

Cast : Ayushmann Khurrana, Sayani Gupta and others

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After a variety of mainstream entertainers such as the romantic drama, *Tum Bin*, the action thriller *Dus* and the super hero film *Ra One*, writer-director Anubhav Sinha made a significant foray into politically realist cinema in 2018 and 2019 with *Mulk* and *Article 15* respectively, both made under his own banner, Benares Media Works. Both films drew upon real-life incidents around which Sinha wove his imaginary tales, skilfully integrating into the plot his reflections on burning contemporary social issues.

*Article 15* has Ayushman Khurana playing Ayan Ranjan, a city bred police officer who lands in the deep interiors of India for his debut posting in the police force, and is rudely confronted with the caste system that has for generations festered as a wound in India's ugly underbelly. He finds himself initially overwhelmed by the experience especially as it comes bundled with a brutal rape and murder of two lower caste girls by upper caste men. In the end however, young Ayan manages to negotiate the challenges and redeem himself.

The incident from which the quasi-realist *Article 15* draws its inspiration from the Badaun district of Uttar Pradesh in 2014. It concerned two minor Dalit girl cousins, who had been brutally gangraped, murdered, and their bodies suspended from a tree in a nearby field. Spurred by shock and rage the villagers took to the streets and blocked a nearby highway for nearly six hours demanding action against the three upper caste men, suspected of having committed the

crime, and the police officials who were allegedly involved in abetting it. The parents and relatives of the murdered girls were abused and roughed up when they tried to lodge a complaint at the local police station. It was even alleged that the 'murder' was in fact an act of honour killing by the parents of both girls who had discovered that they were involved in a lesbian relationship.

The film dramatizes this incident into a tale of three girls, two of them cousins, who go missing from a fictional village, Lalgaon, in India's heartland. The cousins are subsequently found dead while the third girl is untraceable. Ayan Ranjan arrives at the Lalgaon police station to assume charge as the Additional Commissioner of police and almost immediately walks into the grim scene of the two murdered girls hanging motionless from a tree branch. His urban, college educated, briefly- domiciled- in- Europe background, places Ayan totally at odds with the heavily casteist mindsets of the villagers and the other station house policemen, and threatens to defeat all his efforts to get to the bottom of the horrific crime. He describes the situation to his girlfriend on the phone as being as bad as living in the lawless wild wild west!

The young Ayan refuses to be cowed by the obstacles and dangers that threaten his survival in the area, and resolves to rescue the missing third girl before nabbing the culprits.

The film's main purpose is to deliver the unequivocal message enshrined in Article 15 of the Indian Constitution from which the film gets its name. It prohibits all forms of discrimination on the basis of caste, religion, race, gender or place of birth. Focusing on caste discrimination in particular, Sinha follows a clear mandate to condemn the bigotry behind caste and sensitise society against the toxic mix of caste and rape that has emerged as a dangerous truth for Indian society.

In the light of statistics that bear out the fact that more than 60% of hate crimes in India are targeted against Dalits, and that rape is a device of subjugation very commonly used by upper

caste men, this message is of critical importance. The NCRB (National Crime Record Bureau) in its report (2016) records that more than four Dalit women are raped every day, and the figures do not include unreported cases.

There are many things that *Article 15* gets right as a film. It has the correct aesthetics of realistic cinema. There is an overall realistic portrayal of life as it is lived in India's small towns and villages. Unlike mainstream Bollywood cinema, the characters and locations are not caricatures of real life – the archetypal policeman, or village belle, and a village *choupal* under a banyan tree etc. They radiate a local flavour that feels authentic. Anubhav Sinha creates a sombre mood befitting the subject. Ayushman Khurana is believable as an upright and strict man with ideals, who wavers momentarily but finds his footing as he readies to meet the challenges before him. In an exclusive chat with ZoomTV, Ayushmann said that the 'grimness' of the film caused him 'sleepless nights. His role in *Article 15* was one-of-a-kind, he said, as it afforded him an opportunity to fulfil a personal mission, to make socially relevant films. "It is a big shift for sure and more than the character, I am the one who is interested in the story and it's a very relevant story, very important to our society, and discrimination is everywhere in our country especially caste-based discrimination. We don't talk about it but this is the first time that we have brutally spoken about this kind of discrimination in mainstream Indian cinema."

Yet the film's pragmatics do not centralise any one meaning. Designed like a crime thriller the film presents a hodgepodge of voices and issues which fragment its unity – police complicity in crime, Naxalism, the class divide, caste and gangrape.

*Article 15* ends up being more mainstream than realist cinema for it serves up improbable, quick fix solutions to some of these burning issues. It offers a sense of justice redeemed by showing that the system will not always win. It has a good-looking hero who fights for justice, even though Ayushman plays the saviour act convincingly. The film's message depicting the

victory of good over evil is too simple and far removed from real life for, an angry speech from Ayan Ranjan, an “outsider” to the place as well as to the system, would not expunge the hardened caste lines that divided just about everyone else in the film, the villagers and policemen included. And again, unlike the film, reality is nowhere near the conveniently arranged happy ending of the film where the name of the old lady cooking the meal is drowned by the noise of passing vehicles, and the policemen eat the meal she has prepared, happily, without giving a second thought to her caste.

But the key question is, did Anubhav Sinha’s film tackle the issue of caste effectively? Dillip Mandal, a former managing editor of the India Today Hindi magazine, raises a couple of pertinent questions in this regard on his signature program Dillip ki Pathshala in The Print’s YouTube channel. a) To his mind the film poses no threat to caste in India. All it ends up doing is to confirm the many casual misconceptions about caste that prevail in the common man’s mind. In that respect it fails to get any kind of lasting audience engagement with the subject as the audience remains comfortably removed both in place and time. b) A Brahmin protagonist is shown coming to the defence of the downtrodden Dalits, which Mandal believes only undermines the Dalit’s sense of empowerment. He says,

To his credit Sinha responds by justifying his choosing a Brahmin hero. In an interview to Scroll.in, the filmmaker says, “Ayan is not a Brahmin because only Brahmins can save Dalits, though I understand that some people see it that way... I wanted him to have the power to go either way, but he chooses the right way.” And again, he says, “the privileged should challenge the privilege.”

The film, takes a unidimensional approach to this important constitutional guarantee, addressing as it does only clause one of *Article 15* and failing to address the other clauses especially clauses two and three which deal with the concerns of social justice.

In addition to Dillip Mandal's observations one may point out yet another problem with the film, which is its depiction of caste as a typically rural phenomenon. Ayushman's character seems to have had no truck with the issue in the past, having been a sheltered youth studying at Delhi's prestigious St. Stephens college with no prior exposure to the ugliness of the caste system that prevails in India's interiors. This is simply not true. Caste has a ubiquitous presence in the country. It lurks in the hallowed environs of the judiciary, taints the country's politics, its economic and trade practices, and infects some of its universities like a disease. The media too is not left untouched. Indeed, it would not be too far from the truth to say that caste infiltrates city life much more than it does our villages.

There are also certain elements in the film that detract from its overall cinematic integrity. The helping hand's father unexpectedly turns out to be one of the rapists and ends his life in a dramatically abrupt manner; Ayushman's girlfriend who perhaps should have remained as a disembodied voice over the phone actually makes an appearance without doing anything for the film; the village girl Gaura's face is impassive in places, which is shocking given that it is her own sister who is missing; Police Inspector Bramhadutt's characterization and the actor essaying the role are both flawed – considering he has a major negative role in the film, Sinha ought to have etched his character with more care. All of this takes away from the worth of an otherwise well-made film.

However, looking at the bright side, *Article 15* has many of the marks of a Govind Nihalani film in look and feel, and its maker may be commended for carrying forward the legacy of that legendary film maker who took on the unique challenge of mainstreaming parallel cinema. Nihalani's films were made on serious social and political real-life themes, earning critical acclaim while at the same time retaining a popular appeal.

There are many parallels that could be drawn between Govind Nihalani's iconic *Ardh Satya*, for example, and Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15*.

The protagonists of both films are upright policemen battling a corrupt political system and an insensitive police force which they have joined against their will (Ayan explains that he had to come away from Europe at the behest of his father while *Ardh Satya*'s Anant Velankar, brilliantly portrayed by Om Puri, is forced into a police career by an abusive father).

Like *Ardh Satya*, Sinha's film too is defined by the ugly and dark aspects of Indian society; the grimy location and ambience (a residential neighbourhood constituted of shanties, dark streets, the ubiquitous tea-stall), the depiction of upper caste atrocities against Dalits, the corrupt politician and equally corrupt police, and the unabashed coarseness of the cops' language, are all echoes from a Govind Nihalani film. Like *Ardh Satya*, the protagonist of *Article 15* too has a conflict with his own weaknesses even as he sets out to battle the system. Like *Ardh Satya* and unlike a commercial film, *Article 15* is not about an individual criminal(s) or bad cop; it is about the system. Both films are situated at the intersection of a corrupt and inept police, crime, caste bias and a rotten political system. Like the protagonist of *Ardh Satya*, Ayan too has a girlfriend who challenges his belief system and the system he serves. She stands up for what she believes in and makes sure that her man knows it, too.

But the similarities stop here. Nihalani's film writer Vijay Tendulkar was an established writer with immense literary talent and was a social commentator to boot. His screenplay for *Ardh Satya* gives it an edge over *Article 15* as it is more politically hard-hitting and psychologically intense than the screenplay prepared by Gaurav Solanki and Anubhav Sinha, who wrote the script for *Article 15*. Tendulkar created content which relied not just on plot and screenplay, but on the characters for its success. He delves deep into the heart of the protagonist to reveal the torment of a man destroyed both by his brutish cop father and the rotting system of which

he is a part. *Ardh Satya*'s characters are carefully crafted. Om Puri as the brooding police inspector, Anant Velankar, who is thwarted time and again from doing the right thing by the political clout of the villain; his fiancé Jyotsna (Smita Patil) as the college professor who looks on in anguish while Velankar's world crumbles around him, his abusive father (Amrish Puri), and above all Rama Shetty, (a brilliant Sadashiv Amrapurkar) the film's anti-hero, a petty don mocking the might of the legal system and wielding his power over the political class with sinister ease; together they create a world from which it is hard to stay detached.

*Article 15* falls short in its aspirations to be as politically engaged as Nihalani's film, and manages to address its subject, the stresses and pathos of caste, in a very limited way. However, it serves its overall purpose of communicating a social message meaningfully without losing its ability to entertain. To that extent Anubhav Sinha has to be congratulated for making a film that is relevant to the times.