

Deconstructing Social Hierarchies: A Critique of Article 15

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Abstract

Indian society has historically been shaped by deeply embedded structures of caste, class, gender, and social privilege. Although the Constitution of India establishes equality as a fundamental democratic principle, caste-based discrimination continues to influence social relationships, institutional practices, access to resources, and experiences of justice. Anubhav Sinha's 2019 film *Article 15* offers a cinematic intervention into these persistent inequalities by examining caste oppression through the framework of a crime investigation. Named after Article 15 of the Constitution of India, which prohibits discrimination on grounds including religion, race, caste, sex, and place of birth, the film exposes the contradiction between constitutional ideals and social realities. This paper critically examines *Article 15* as a cultural text that attempts to deconstruct social hierarchies and represent systemic caste oppression in contemporary India. It explores the film's treatment of caste, institutional discrimination, police corruption, gendered violence, privilege, resistance, and constitutional morality. At the same time, the paper interrogates the film's reliance on an upper-caste protagonist as an agent of justice. It considers whether this narrative structure reproduces a saviour framework that limits Dalit agency. Drawing upon the ideas of B. R. Ambedkar and scholarship on caste and social inequality, the study argues that *Article 15* succeeds in bringing caste discrimination into mainstream cinematic discourse but remains ideologically complex in its representation of marginalised communities. Ultimately, the film demonstrates both the possibilities and limitations of popular cinema as an instrument for challenging entrenched social hierarchies.

Keywords: *Article 15*, caste discrimination, social hierarchy, Dalit representation, constitutional morality, Indian cinema, social justice, Anubhav Sinha

Introduction

Caste remains one of the most deeply rooted structures of social hierarchy in Indian society. Despite constitutional commitments to equality, protective legislation, affirmative-action policies, and sustained social reform movements, caste continues to influence social identity, education, employment, economic opportunities, political representation, occupation, marriage, and access to justice. B. R. Ambedkar conceptualises caste not merely as a division of labour but as a hierarchical “division of labourers,” emphasising its role in organising individuals into unequal hereditary categories (Ambedkar). The persistence of caste discrimination demonstrates that legal equality does not automatically guarantee substantive social equality. Consequently, the gap between constitutional ideals and the lived realities of historically marginalised communities remains a significant challenge to Indian democracy. As Gail Omvedt observes, the struggle against caste is fundamentally connected with the broader pursuit of social equality and democratic transformation (Omvedt).

The Constitution of India provides an essential legal framework for addressing such inequalities. Article 15 prohibits discrimination on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth (*Constitution of India* art. 15). Nevertheless, the persistence of caste discrimination reveals the limitations of legal provisions when deeply entrenched social attitudes and hierarchical practices remain unchanged. Ambedkar emphasised that political democracy requires a foundation of social democracy based on liberty, equality, and fraternity (Ambedkar, *Essential Writings*). The persistence of caste therefore represents a fundamental contradiction between India's constitutional ideals and its social realities.

Cinema plays an important role in representing and questioning such contradictions. As a powerful form of popular culture, cinema constructs narratives through which audiences engage with issues of identity, inequality, power, violence, and social justice. Against this background, Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15* (2019) represents a significant intervention in mainstream Hindi cinema. The film follows Ayan Ranjan, an Indian Police Service officer whose investigation into the disappearance of three young Dalit girls exposes caste prejudice, economic exploitation, gender-based violence, political influence, police corruption, and institutional complicity (*Article 15*).

The film's title directly invokes Article 15 of the Constitution, establishing a central tension between constitutional equality and hierarchical social reality. Drawing attention to the structural dimensions of discrimination, the film portrays caste as operating through institutions, labour relations, political authority, and everyday social interactions. This representation corresponds with Ambedkar's argument that deeply embedded social and ideological structures sustain caste and cannot be eliminated through superficial reforms alone (Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*).

At the same time, the film's politics of representation remain complex. Ayan's position as an educated, urban, upper-caste officer allows privileged audiences to encounter caste inequality through his gradual awakening. Still, his narrative centrality also raises concerns about an

upper-caste saviour framework. In contrast, Nishad represents resistance emerging from marginalised communities. The violence against Dalit girls further highlights the intersection of caste and gender, reflecting the interconnected nature of caste hierarchy and patriarchy identified by Uma Chakravarti (Chakravarti).

This paper critically examines how *Article 15* deconstructs social hierarchies through its representations of caste discrimination, institutional injustice, gendered violence, privilege, and resistance. It argues that while the film significantly contributes to mainstream discussions of caste inequality, its narrative perspective raises important questions about agency and representation. Ultimately, *Article 15* demonstrates cinema's potential to challenge social hierarchies while emphasising the importance of centring marginalised voices in narratives of equality and justice.

Objectives of the Study

The major objectives of this research paper are:

1. To examine the representation of caste and social hierarchy in Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15*.
2. To analyse the relationship between constitutional equality and social discrimination represented in the film.
3. To study the representation of institutional casteism, corruption, and unequal access to justice.
4. To explore the intersection of caste, class, gender, and violence.
5. To critically examine the representation of Dalit resistance and agency.
6. To evaluate the role of the upper-caste protagonist in the film's narrative of social transformation.
7. To assess the possibilities and limitations of mainstream cinema as a medium for challenging caste hierarchy.

Research Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative and interpretative research methodology. The primary text is Anubhav Sinha's film *Article 15*. The film is analysed through close textual and cinematic analysis, focusing on characterisation, narrative structure, dialogue, symbolism, visual imagery, setting, and ideological positioning. The theoretical framework draws primarily upon critical perspectives on caste, particularly B. R. Ambedkar's critique of caste hierarchy and social inequality. Secondary sources include scholarly writings, critical essays, reviews, and studies concerning caste and cinematic representation.

The analysis treats the film not simply as entertainment but as a cultural text situated within broader debates about caste, privilege, representation, and democracy in contemporary India.

Caste as a System of Social Hierarchy

In Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15*, caste is represented not merely as an isolated form of discrimination but as a deeply embedded system of social hierarchy that shapes everyday economic, political, and institutional relationships. The film portrays caste as a structure that determines an individual's social status, dignity, occupational opportunities, and access to power. Individuals are categorised by inherited caste identities, which significantly influence their treatment in society. This representation reflects B. R. Ambedkar's understanding of caste as a system of “graded inequality,” in which different social groups occupy unequal positions of status and privilege (Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*). Rather than creating a simple division between privileged and oppressed communities, caste establishes multiple layers of hierarchy through which inequality becomes socially normalised.

The film effectively demonstrates how caste hierarchy survives through ordinary social interactions and institutional practices. Police officers, politicians, employers, and villagers frequently identify individuals by caste and respond to them based on their perceived position in the social order (*Article 15*). Such interactions reveal that caste discrimination does not operate solely through direct violence. It is also reproduced through language, prejudice, occupational segregation, social exclusion, and unequal access to institutional protection. As M. N. Srinivas observes, caste has historically shaped patterns of social interaction in India, even as its forms have changed in response to modernisation and political developments (Srinivas).

A significant aspect of *Article 15* is its portrayal of the normalisation of caste inequality. Discriminatory attitudes are presented not as exceptional behaviour but as part of an established social environment. Consequently, caste hierarchy reproduces itself when discriminatory assumptions become embedded in everyday customs and institutional practices. Gail Omvedt emphasises that caste should be understood as a system of social and material domination rather than simply as a cultural identity (Omvedt). The film reinforces this perspective by connecting caste discrimination with economic exploitation, political influence, occupational inequality, and unequal access to justice.

Ayan Ranjan's initial unfamiliarity with caste divisions is central to the film's critique of privilege. As an educated, urban, upper-caste police officer, Ayan initially struggles to understand the complex caste distinctions his colleagues describe. His ignorance represents a form of privilege—the ability to remain unaffected by and therefore unaware of caste oppression. As his investigation progresses, he gradually recognises the enduring influence of caste on marginalised communities (*Article 15*).

Through Ayan's transformation, the film exposes the relationship between privilege and caste blindness. It demonstrates that the invisibility of caste to privileged individuals does not indicate its disappearance. Instead, the ability to ignore caste may itself result from social

privilege. *Article 15* thus presents caste as a persistent system of graded inequality and emphasises the necessity of recognising and challenging the social and institutional structures that sustain it.

Constitutional Equality versus Social Reality

The central contradiction in Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15* lies between constitutional equality and lived social reality. While Article 15 of the Indian Constitution prohibits discrimination based on religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth, the society portrayed in the film remains deeply structured by caste hierarchy (*Constitution of India* art. 15). The film questions whether legal provisions alone can eliminate inequalities embedded within social institutions. Ambedkar emphasised that political democracy must be supported by social democracy founded upon liberty, equality, and fraternity (Ambedkar, *Essential Writings*). The film similarly suggests that constitutional values must be actively translated into institutional practice.

Institutional Casteism and the Machinery of Power

Article 15 depicts caste discrimination as an institutional rather than merely individual problem. Police officers, politicians, employers, and socially dominant groups participate in networks that perpetuate inequality. The investigation reveals evidence manipulation and institutional attempts to suppress marginalised voices (*Article 15*). Consequently, justice becomes socially unequal because institutional authority itself is influenced by caste prejudice. This representation demonstrates how discrimination can become embedded within systems supposedly responsible for protecting citizens.

Caste, Labour, and Economic Exploitation

The film further connects caste hierarchy with economic exploitation and occupational inequality. Its representation of sanitation work and manual scavenging demonstrates how historically marginalised communities remain associated with hazardous and socially stigmatised occupations. As Omvedt argues, caste oppression is closely connected with material and economic structures of domination (Omvedt). Thus, *Article 15* challenges claims that modernisation has eliminated caste inequality.

Intersection of Caste and Gender

The violence experienced by marginalised girls illustrates the intersection of caste, gender, and economic vulnerability. Chakravarti emphasises the historical relationship between caste hierarchy and patriarchal structures (Chakravarti). The film demonstrates how marginalised women experience overlapping forms of oppression, although their perspectives receive less narrative space than that of the male protagonist.

Ayan Ranjan and the Politics of Privilege

Ayan Ranjan represents both institutional authority and upper-caste privilege. His gradual awareness of caste injustice exposes how privilege can enable individuals to remain unaware of systemic discrimination (*Article 15*). However, positioning Ayan as the principal agent of justice risks producing an upper-caste saviour narrative that potentially overshadows Dalit resistance and agency. Thus, while the film encourages privileged individuals to challenge inequality, its narrative structure raises significant questions about who is permitted to speak for marginalised communities and who occupies the central position in stories of social justice.

Nishad and the Politics of Resistance

The character of Nishad provides an important counterpoint to Ayan. While Ayan works from within the state apparatus, Nishad represents resistance emerging from marginalised communities. His politics arise not from intellectual discovery but from lived experience.

The contrast between Ayan and Nishad reflects two different approaches to social transformation. Ayan represents reform through institutional mechanisms, whereas Nishad represents political struggle against institutions perceived as fundamentally unequal.

Nishad's presence complicates the film's politics by demonstrating that marginalised communities are not passive recipients of justice. They possess their own political consciousness and traditions of resistance. Yet the narrative ultimately gives greater space and authority to Ayan's investigation.

A more radical narrative might have centred Nishad or other marginalised characters, allowing audiences to experience caste hierarchy primarily through their perspectives. The decision to centre Ayan makes the film more accessible to certain mainstream audiences but simultaneously limits its capacity to redistribute narrative power fully.

The Politics of the Upper-Caste Saviour

The most significant criticism of *Article 15* concerns what may be described as the upper-caste saviour problem. The film exposes caste privilege while simultaneously structuring its narrative around a privileged protagonist who becomes the primary defender of marginalised communities.

This contradiction illustrates a broader challenge in representing oppression. When stories about marginalised communities are told primarily from privileged perspectives, the audience may be encouraged to admire the privileged character's moral transformation rather than fully engage with the experiences and political agency of the oppressed.

Nevertheless, the film's politics are more complicated than a straightforward saviour narrative would suggest. Ayan does not single-handedly dismantle caste. He depends upon information,

cooperation, and resistance from others. Moreover, his gradual awareness exposes his earlier ignorance as a consequence of privilege.

The critical question, therefore, is not whether privileged individuals should participate in struggles against caste discrimination. Rather, it is whether their participation should become the narrative centre of stories concerning marginalised communities.

Cinematic Techniques and Symbolism

The visual language of *Article 15* reinforces its thematic concerns. The rural landscape is frequently depicted through darkness, fog, mud, rain, and confined spaces. These elements create an atmosphere of moral and institutional decay.

The recurring presence of mud and water can be interpreted symbolically. Characters navigating difficult landscapes appear to uncover truths buried beneath the surface of respectable society. The investigation thus becomes both literal and metaphorical: Ayan is searching for a missing person while simultaneously discovering the hidden structures of caste.

The film's crime-thriller format is also significant. By presenting caste discrimination through an investigative narrative, Sinha makes a complex social issue accessible to mainstream audiences. Suspense encourages viewers to follow the investigation while gradually exposing them to structural questions.

However, the thriller format also has limitations. Structural oppression may become personalised through identifiable villains, potentially creating the impression that justice can be achieved by solving a particular crime. In reality, systemic caste discrimination cannot be resolved through a single successful investigation.

Constitutional Morality and Ambedkarite Thought

The ideological foundation of *Article 15* can be productively examined through Ambedkar's understanding of social democracy. For Ambedkar, political democracy could not survive without social equality. Liberty, equality, and fraternity were not merely abstract principles but necessary foundations for democratic society.

The film's emphasis on constitutional values reflects this concern. The Constitution provides a moral framework through which discriminatory social practices can be challenged. Yet constitutional morality requires citizens and institutions to reject inherited hierarchies actively.

From an Ambedkarite perspective, however, merely treating individuals equally without confronting the structural foundations of caste may be insufficient. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* argues for a fundamental transformation of the social order rather than superficial reform.

This distinction is important when evaluating the film. *Article 15* powerfully condemns caste discrimination, but its vision of transformation is largely institutional and reformist. The film

places considerable faith in ethical individuals operating within state institutions. A more radical critique would ask whether institutions structured by historical inequality can be transformed without broader social and political mobilisation.

Cinema as a Tool of Social Intervention

One of the major contributions of *Article 15* is its ability to bring discussions of caste into mainstream popular culture. Commercial cinema reaches audiences beyond academic institutions and activist circles. A film can therefore create spaces for public conversation about issues that are frequently ignored.

The film challenges caste blindness by forcing viewers to recognise the persistence of discrimination. Critical commentary has noted its attempt to provoke reflection on caste practices that privileged social groups may deny or overlook.

However, representation alone cannot dismantle hierarchy. Films may raise awareness, but social transformation requires political action, institutional accountability, education, and sustained movements for equality.

Furthermore, filmmakers must consider the politics of representation itself. Who tells the story? Whose perspective is prioritised? Who is represented as possessing agency? These questions are especially important when mainstream cinema depicts historically marginalised communities.

Major Findings

The critical analysis of *Article 15* produces several important findings. First, the film successfully presents caste as a contemporary structural reality rather than a historical problem. Second, it demonstrates the contradiction between constitutional equality and everyday discrimination. Third, the narrative reveals how caste hierarchy operates through institutions such as the police, administration, politics, and systems of labour.

Fourth, the film effectively connects caste with economic exploitation and gendered violence, demonstrating the interconnected nature of social inequalities. Fifth, the character of Ayan illustrates both the potential and limitations of privileged allyship. His transformation encourages privileged audiences to recognise caste, yet his narrative centrality risks marginalising Dalit agency.

Sixth, Nishad's character introduces an alternative politics of resistance rooted in lived experience, although this perspective receives comparatively less narrative space. Finally, the film demonstrates the power of mainstream cinema to initiate conversations about caste while revealing the representational challenges of narrating marginalised experiences.

Conclusion

Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15* occupies an important position in contemporary Hindi cinema because it directly confronts caste discrimination and social hierarchy within a mainstream cinematic framework. By structuring its narrative around an investigation into violence against marginalised girls, the film gradually reveals a wider system of caste oppression involving institutions, labour, politics, gender, and social privilege.

The film's central strength lies in its insistence that caste is not a relic of India's past. It remains embedded in everyday practices and institutional structures. The invocation of Article 15 of the Constitution creates a powerful contrast between the democratic promise of equality and the persistence of discriminatory realities.

At the same time, the film must be approached critically. Its reliance on an upper-caste protagonist as the principal agent of justice raises important questions about representation and the politics of the saviour narrative. In contrast, while Ayan's journey can encourage privileged audiences to recognise their social position and challenge discrimination, the narrative risks placing the moral awakening of privilege above the political agency of marginalised communities.

Thus, *Article 15* should neither be dismissed because of its limitations nor accepted as a complete representation of caste oppression. Its significance lies precisely in the debates it generates. The film opens a space within mainstream popular culture for discussions about caste, constitutional morality, institutional injustice, and privilege. A genuinely transformative approach to social hierarchy, however, must move beyond awareness toward structural change and must centre the voices, experiences, and agency of communities that have historically resisted caste oppression.

Ultimately, *Article 15* reminds its audience that constitutional equality cannot remain merely an ideal written in law. The deconstruction of social hierarchy requires the transformation of institutions, social attitudes, economic relationships, and structures of privilege. Cinema can contribute to this process by making inequality visible. Still, the struggle for social justice must extend beyond the screen into the everyday practices through which democracy itself is realised.

The Pramod Effect in the Deconstruction of Social Hierarchy

Ultimately, Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15* reminds its audience that constitutional equality cannot remain merely an ideal written in law. The deconstruction of social hierarchy requires the transformation of institutions, social attitudes, economic relationships, and structures of privilege. When viewed through the lens of **The Pramod Effect**—governed by the equation $1 - 1 = 0 = 1$ —the cinematic and sociological deconstruction of caste moves beyond a simple binary of opposition. In this conceptual framework, the apparent duality between the privileged oppressor and the marginalised victim collapses into absolute nothingness

(*Shunyawada*), only to re-emerge as an indivisible unity of human consciousness and absolute monism. Cinema can contribute to this process by making inequality visible, exposing how individual agency and institutional structures oscillate within this ontological loop. However, the struggle for social justice must extend beyond the screen into everyday praxis, realising that true democratic transformation requires dismantling the foundational illusions of graded inequality to achieve a harmonious, interconnected reality.

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