

# ARTICLE 15 AS A CINEMATIC INTERPRETATION OF DR.AMBEDKAR'S CONSTITUTIONAL VISION

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## **Abstract:**

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's constitutional vision remains central to India's democratic identity, foregrounding equality, liberty, and fraternity as the foundational values necessary for social transformation. Although Articles 14, 15, and 17 constitutionally prohibit discrimination and untouchability, structural caste-based violence continues to shape the socio-economic landscape of India. Anubhav Sinha's *Article 15* (2019) translates these constitutional ideals—and their violations—into a cinematic text that confronts systemic oppression. Using Linda Hutcheon's Theory of Adaptation, which views adaptation as both interpretation and creation, this paper analyses how the film reimagines Ambedkarite constitutional morality for contemporary audiences. Incorporating NCRB data, human rights reports, Ambedkar's constitutional writings, and scholarship from film studies and Dalit studies, this research argues that the film functions as both a cultural critique and a pedagogical tool. The film further highlights Ambedkar's warning that Indian democracy cannot survive unless rooted in ethical responsibility and constitutional morality. To strengthen the analysis, this paper extends into the historical context of Article 15, constitutional jurisprudence, and the broader cinematic tradition of representing caste in India. It evaluates how Article 15 builds upon Ambedkar's ethical framework, using cinematic realism and narrative structure to expose the contradictions between constitutional promises and lived experiences. Ultimately, this expanded study demonstrates that Article 15 is not merely a crime drama—it is an interpretive, ethical, and political intervention that revitalizes Ambedkar's philosophy for the contemporary nation.

## **1. Introduction:**

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's contribution to the Indian Constitution was grounded in his firm belief that political independence would remain incomplete without social democracy. In the Constituent Assembly, he famously stated, "We are going to enter a life of contradictions. In politics, we will have equality. In social and economic life, we will have inequality." This tension between constitutional ideals and social realities continues to define caste relations in India and forms the backdrop to the narrative of Article 15.

Article 15, which prohibits discrimination based on caste, religion, gender, and race, reflects Ambedkar's commitment to embedding human dignity into the constitutional structure. Yet caste discrimination persists through lynchings, manual scavenging, segregation, sexual violence, social boycotts, and economic exploitation. Scholars like Surinder S. Jodhka and Anand Teltumbde argue that caste has not disappeared but rather adapted to modern institutions, maintaining its power across rural and urban contexts. Cinema, with its cultural reach and ability to shape public consciousness, becomes a significant medium to interrogate

constitutional morality. Anubhav Sinha's Article 15 confronts the audience with precisely the injustices Ambedkar warned against.

Linda Hutcheon's adaptation theory, which views adaptation as reinterpretation shaped by medium and cultural context, helps us understand how the film translates Ambedkar's constitutional ethics into a compelling visual narrative. The film becomes a meaningful site for re-engaging with Ambedkar's vision of justice and constitutional morality, especially for audiences who may not have read his scholarly works.

Additionally, the film's release in a politically sensitive climate gave it a pedagogical urgency. Its timing reflects not only artistic intention but a societal need to revisit Ambedkar's warnings about the fragility of democracy in the absence of ethical citizenship. Thus, the film emerges as a cinematic response to deeply entrenched social hierarchies that constitutional laws alone have failed to eradicate.

## **2. Dr. Ambedkar's Constitutional Vision: Equality, Justice, and Social Transformation :**

Ambedkar's constitutional philosophy rests on the foundational principles of equality, liberty, fraternity, and social democracy. Articles 14, 15, and 17 were crafted not only as legal protections but as moral directives intended to reshape India's social fabric. Ambedkar repeatedly warned that democracy would remain fragile unless grounded in ethical social relations. His famous assertion — "Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy" — underscores his belief that legal rights must be accompanied by a commitment to dignity, justice, and mutual respect.

Central to this vision was fraternity, which Ambedkar regarded as the emotional and cultural foundation of democracy. Without fraternity, he argued, liberty and equality become "no deeper than coats of paint," failing to challenge the caste-based attitudes that perpetuate discrimination. His description of caste as a system of "graded inequality" and metaphor of a "multi-storeyed tower with no staircase and no entrance" highlight its rigid, structural nature. Ambedkar's writings in *Annihilation of Caste* and the Constituent Assembly Debates show his conviction that caste is fundamentally incompatible with democracy. Scholars such as Eleanor Zelliot, Gail Omvedt, Christophe Jaffrelot, and Surinder Jodhka affirm that Ambedkar envisioned not mere reform but complete dismantling of hierarchical structures. His concept of constitutional morality required citizens to internalize democratic ethics and reject social practices that contradict equality.

The film *Article 15* brings these principles into contemporary focus by illustrating how caste continues to shape everyday experience despite constitutional safeguards. The central

tension of the film — between legal equality and persistent social inequality — reflects the enduring relevance of Ambedkar’s warning and the unfinished struggle for social democracy.

### **3. Article 15 as a Cinematic Text Engaging Ambedkar’s Vision :**

Article 15 functions as a cinematic reinterpretation of Ambedkar’s constitutional ethics. Linda Hutcheon’s idea that adaptation is “repetition without replication” helps explain how the film transforms constitutional principles into a narrative shaped by contemporary caste realities. Instead of simply illustrating Article 15 of the Constitution, the film translates Ambedkar’s critique of inequality into visual and emotional form, making constitutional morality accessible to broader audiences.

Ayan Ranjan, the privileged outsider, serves as the viewer’s lens into caste oppression. His gradual awareness mirrors Ambedkar’s insistence that social transformation requires moral responsibility, especially from those who benefit from hierarchical structures. Ayan’s ethical shift—from urban detachment to active resistance—embodies Ambedkar’s call for “disciplined and enlightened citizenship.” The film’s imagery—segregated wells, unequal settlements, manual scavenging, and caste-based labour divisions—operates as a visual adaptation of Ambedkar’s argument that caste persists through everyday social practices. Scenes depicting untouchability and sanitation work echo Ambedkar’s description of it as “the worst form of social tyranny,” stressing how caste survives beyond legal prohibition.

Cinematic techniques such as muted colours, heavy silences, and slow pacing heighten the sense of suffocation within caste society. As Bill Nichols notes, cinema communicates argument through emotion, and Article 15 uses these devices to produce moral discomfort, pushing the audience to confront structural injustice rather than observe it passively. Through character development, narrative tension, and atmospheric realism, Article 15 becomes an interpretive adaptation of Ambedkar’s vision—one that exposes the gap between constitutional ideals and social realities while urging viewers to internalize the ethical foundations of equality, justice, and fraternity.

### **4. Historical and Legal Context of Article 15 :**

To appreciate the film’s adaptation of constitutional ideas, it is essential to understand the legal history of Article 15. Article 15(1) and 15(2) prohibit discrimination on grounds of caste, race, religion, sex, and place of birth. Later amendments, such as Article 15(4) and 15(5), allowed the state to make special provisions for socially and educationally backward classes. Landmark cases such as *State of Madras v. Champakam Dorairajan* (1951) influenced the early interpretation of Article 15. Later, the *Indira Sawhney v. Union of India* (1992) judgment expanded discussions around backwardness and affirmative action. Modern

constitutional scholars such as Upendra Baxi and Madhav Khosla argue that Article 15 should be interpreted within the framework of “transformative constitutionalism”—a concept aligning closely with Ambedkar’s vision of social revolution through law. The film echoes this jurisprudence by demonstrating how institutional actors often disregard constitutional obligations. Police inaction, procedural delays, and caste prejudice in the film reflect the gap between constitutional morality and administrative reality.

### **5. Caste, Discrimination, and Ambedkar’s Relevance in Contemporary India :**

Despite constitutional protections, caste-based violence remains widespread across India. NCRB data consistently records high rates of crimes against Scheduled Castes—including sexual assault, murder, public humiliation, and land-related violence—revealing the persistence of deep structural inequality. These patterns of violence echo Ambedkar’s observation that legal equality cannot eradicate social prejudice without moral transformation.

Landmark incidents such as the Khairlanji massacre (2006), the Badaun rape case (2014), the Una flogging (2016), and the Hathras atrocity (2020) illustrate how caste and gender intersect to produce targeted brutality, particularly against Dalit women. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have repeatedly documented these violations, highlighting institutional failures such as refusal to register FIRs, delayed investigations, and political interference.

Article 15 mirrors these real-world patterns through its portrayal of police negligence, suppression of evidence, and the vulnerability of marginalized communities. The film’s narrative framework directly reflects Ambedkar’s warning that democracy becomes meaningless when institutions abandon constitutional morality. His emphasis on fraternity and ethical responsibility remains vital, as social divisions continue to undermine equality and justice. Thus, the ongoing prevalence of caste discrimination reaffirms Ambedkar’s enduring relevance. The film uses its storyline to expose how constitutional promises remain unfulfilled and why Ambedkar’s call for annihilating caste is still central to India’s democratic progress. By juxtaposing legal guarantees with lived realities, Article 15 becomes a powerful reminder that true social change requires both legal enforcement and ethical awakening.

### **6. Adaptation Theory and Article 15: Reframing Social Justice Through Cinema :**

Linda Hutcheon’s adaptation theory argues that adaptations are not simple reproductions but reinterpretations shaped by medium, context, and audience. Article 15 exemplifies this by transforming constitutional principles into a cinematic narrative that communicates social

injustice in ways legal texts cannot. Instead of restating Article 15 of the Constitution, the film adapts its ethical core, using characters, visuals, and emotions to translate constitutional morality into lived experience. The film's sound design, subdued colour palette, and oppressive atmosphere function as interpretive tools that highlight the tension between law and reality. These cinematic elements embody what Thomas Leitch calls "ethical resonance," where the film's sensory experience conveys moral meaning. By showing caste-based segregation, police apathy, and everyday violence, Article 15 visually reinterprets Ambedkar's critique of structural inequality.

Unlike court judgments or constitutional debates, cinema has the ability to engage viewers emotionally. Bill Nichols suggests that film constructs arguments through affect, and Article 15 uses this power to make constitutional injustice visible and urgent. The protagonist's transformation—from an uninformed outsider to a morally awakened officer—serves as a narrative device illustrating Ambedkar's vision of ethical citizenship. In this way, the film becomes both an adaptation and an interpretation:

An adaptation because it translates constitutional values into cinematic form.

An interpretation because it reimagines Ambedkar's call for justice through contemporary storytelling techniques.

Thus, *Article 15* reframes social justice by bridging legal philosophy and cinematic language, making constitutional morality accessible to a wider public.

## **7. Caste in Indian Cinema: A Broader Tradition :**

The representation of caste in Indian cinema has often been superficial in mainstream Bollywood, which historically avoided direct engagement with caste realities. Regional and parallel cinema, however, has consistently addressed caste-based oppression with greater honesty. Marathi films like *Fandry*, *Sairat*, and *Court*, and Tamil films such as *Karnan*, *Asuran*, *Pariyerum Perumal*, *Jai Bhim*, and *Kaala*, offer powerful portrayals of discrimination, resistance, and Dalit assertion.

Film scholars such as Sharmila Rege and M. Madhava Prasad note that mainstream Hindi cinema typically reinforces dominant social norms, often portraying India as caste-neutral. Earlier films either romanticized rural life or reduced caste to metaphor, rarely exposing its structural violence. Parallel cinema—through works like *Ankur*, *Nishant*, *Manthan*, and *Paar*—did address caste, but these films remained limited to niche audiences. Article 15 stands out because it brings Ambedkarite themes into mainstream Bollywood, reaching viewers who may never encounter academic or activist writings on caste. It aligns with newer socially conscious films like *Masaan*, *Serious Men*, *Shahid*, *Manjhi: The Mountain Man*, and *Aakrosh*, but goes

further by directly connecting caste injustice with constitutional morality. By portraying manual scavenging, sexual violence against Dalit women, and police complicity, the film challenges Bollywood's longstanding erasure of caste realities.

In this way, Article 15 not only joins the broader tradition of caste-focused cinema but also expands it—bringing constitutional ethics, Ambedkarite thought, and systemic critique to the mainstream in an accessible and impactful form.

### **8. The Film as a Pedagogical and Political Tool :**

Cinema functions as a public educational space. Article 15 brings constitutional principles to audiences that may never engage with legal texts. The film has sparked conversations in universities, social movements, civil rights groups, and online platforms, contributing to civic engagement and awareness. However, the pedagogical potential of the film extends far beyond mere awareness creation. It operationalizes Ambedkar's belief that democracy requires an informed citizenry that actively participates in ethical reasoning. The film becomes a form of public pedagogy—a term used by scholars like Henry Giroux to describe cultural texts that educate masses outside formal institutions. Article 15 acts as a civic classroom, inviting viewers to interrogate their own complicity in systems of privilege.

Additionally, the film's use in university discussions, NSS programs, human rights workshops, and legal literacy camps shows how it has entered the realm of applied pedagogy. Social workers and educators frequently use scenes from the film—such as the depiction of manual scavenging or institutional apathy—to generate debates on constitutional morality, human rights, and social accountability. Its realism allows viewers to emotionally process caste inequalities that academic texts often fail to fully convey. From a political perspective, Article 15 functions as a counternarrative to majoritarian discourses that often dismiss or invisibilize caste-based violence. By centering Dalit oppression within a mainstream Bollywood film, it challenges the selective amnesia of dominant political rhetoric. The film not only exposes institutional failures but also symbolically restores voice, dignity, and agency to marginalized communities whose struggles are frequently suppressed.

Ambedkar believed that democracy must be learned and practiced, not simply inherited. The film encourages viewers—especially young people—to question privileges, power structures, and their own responsibilities within society. This aligns with Gayatri Spivak's idea of "ethical learning," which asks individuals to confront uncomfortable truths and unlearn inherited hierarchies. By provoking dialogue and reflection, Article 15 becomes a powerful tool in strengthening democratic consciousness and advancing the unfinished project of Ambedkarite social justice.

## **9. Ambedkarian Ethics, Constitutional Morality, and the Film's Enduring Relevance :**

Ambedkar argued that constitutional morality is essential for sustaining democracy. It requires citizens to embrace justice, equality, and fraternity in conduct—not just in law. Ayan Ranjan's transformation symbolizes this ethical shift, highlighting the need for privileged individuals to acknowledge caste realities rather than deny them.

To deepen this understanding, it is important to revisit Ambedkar's interpretation of constitutional morality as a moral compass that restrains power and guides social relations. He borrowed the term from historian George Grote but infused it with an Indian context. For Ambedkar, constitutional morality demanded not blind compliance to authority but active protection of the rights of the oppressed. The film mirrors this when Ayan chooses integrity over hierarchical loyalty—an explicit cinematic embodiment of Ambedkar's moral philosophy.

Furthermore, Ambedkar insisted that democracy is “a mode of associated living,” underscoring the idea that citizenship must be relational, compassionate, and rooted in fraternity. The film reinforces this by portraying solidarity among oppressed communities, who rise not through mere legal appeals but through collective resilience. Fraternity, the most neglected pillar of democracy, becomes visible in the film through cross-caste alliances, community mobilization, and shared struggle.

The enduring relevance of Ambedkarian ethics becomes even clearer when viewed against contemporary caste realities. NCRB data and human rights reports consistently show systemic violence against Dalits, institutional bias, and failures in due process. By dramatizing these realities, the film serves as a living reminder of Ambedkar's warnings—that Indian democracy stands on fragile ground when social hierarchies overpower constitutional guarantees.

Thus, the film not only reinvokes Ambedkar's ethical framework but also repositions it as indispensable for India's present and future. In a socio-political climate marked by rising inequalities and caste-based polarization, Article 15 revives Ambedkar's call for courage, conscience, and moral accountability.

## **10. Conclusion :**

Article 15 provides a powerful cinematic interpretation of Ambedkar's constitutional vision. Through its portrayal of caste-based violence, institutional corruption, and moral transformation, the film exposes the ongoing failures of Indian democracy to uphold justice and equality.

In expanding constitutional principles into cinematic form, the film performs the dual role of documentation and critique. It documents the everyday realities of caste oppression while

simultaneously critiquing the apathy and structural failures that enable such injustices. The integration of Linda Hutcheon's adaptation theory further demonstrates how the film operates as a reinterpretation of constitutional ideals—translating legal philosophy into emotional and ethical experience.

The conclusion of the film, with Ayan filing the FIR himself, symbolizes a larger constitutional metaphor: that justice requires active engagement, moral courage, and refusal to remain neutral.

This gesture encapsulates Ambedkar's insistence that fraternity and equality must not remain abstract ideals but must be practiced through concrete action. As India continues to grapple with socio-economic inequalities, caste violence, and institutional prejudice, Article 15 remains profoundly relevant. It urges citizens to uphold constitutional morality, challenge discriminatory norms, and strive toward Ambedkar's dream of a society based on liberty, equality, and fraternity.

More than entertainment, the film stands as a cultural and ethical intervention—one that reinforces Ambedkar's enduring message that democracy must be lived, protected, and continually reimagined.

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