

October 2021

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### Recommended Citation

Pal, Bidisha; Bhattacharjee, Partha; and Tripathi, Priyanka (2021). Gendered and Casteist Body: Cast(e)ing and Castigating the Female Body in select Bollywood Films. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(10), 57-67.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol22/iss10/6>

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## Gendered and Casteist Body: Cast(e)ing and Castigating the Female Body in select Bollywood Films

By Bidisha Pal<sup>1</sup>, Partha Bhattacharjee<sup>2</sup>, Priyanka Tripathi<sup>3</sup>

### Abstract

This study analyzes the lopsided relationship between gender and caste and the intertwining body politics in select Bollywood films. *Bandit Queen* (1994) and *Article 15* (2019) are films that depict marginalized Dalit women—victims of (s)exploitation and twofold oppressions of graded patriarchy. Based upon real incidents, *Bandit Queen* tells the tale of Phoolan Devi who is gang-raped by the upper caste Thakur Shri Ram and his clans of the village while *Article 15* takes recourse to the gruesome Badayun rape case of 2014 and presents the murder and possible rape of two lower caste young girls. In both the films, the marginalized women are imprisoned and ghettoized in the “mutual bracketing” (Guru 112) of caste and gender. Their bodies thus become the ploys of the power dynamics of a caste-ridden society. The body is to be captured, controlled, and incarcerated by both the apparatus of hegemonic masculinity and the hierarchical ladder of the caste system. Dalit women’s bodies are the territories that are to be possessed through the weapons of sexual violence; the gang rape “perpetrated by the conquerors is a metonymic celebration of territorial acquisition” (Spivak 303). Within the framework triad of caste studies, gender studies, and body politics studies, this paper investigates dynamics of power through a detailed analysis of the films and aims to point out whether and how the films make any differentiations from the real incidents. These films produce socially conscious visual landscapes directed at a society that horridly bears spectacular and brutal realities that are often swept under the rug.

*Keywords:* Dalit body, Caste, Gender, Female bodies, (S)exploitation, Bollywood films.

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## Introduction

The *Ati Shudras*, also designated as ‘Untouchables,’ are generally considered outside the casteist hierarchical ladder of the Indian Hindu society and are forced to perform the most ‘polluted’ and menial work (Ambedkar, 1989). These *Ati Shudras* acquire the term ‘Dalits’ later on (earlier known as ‘the depressed classes’ by the British rulers of pre-independent India) and are considered to hold servile positions. However, the term ‘Dalit’ is not bound within the coded structures of the caste of Indian society as it refers to dimensions that are beyond the confined politics of casteism in India and is an umbrella term for any person who faces crisis and torment owing to his/her existence and identity, be it any man, woman, or child. Suraj Yengde observes: “The Dalit is a universal conversation; it is a global narrative of suffering” (2018, 12). The term shares association with all the people who belong to the fourth world as well, including the communities who are in the marginalized and stateless positions (the Native Americans in North America, the Maoris in New Zealand, the aboriginals in Australia, the Burakumins in Japan, the Osu in Nigeria, the Baekjeong in pre-colonial Korea, etc.).

Writer Meena Kandasamy argues that womanhood, in general, is associated with Dalithood. Kandasamy mentions in her article published in *The Hindu* (2008), “For a man, the woman is the Dalit of the house” (qt. in Zecchini 62). Women are often considered the vulnerable race irrespective of caste, class, and position. Patriarchy subjects women to a reduced gendered frame that forces them into an objectified state of existence.

The #MeToo India movement began nearly two years ago; many mainstream women raised oppositional voices against sexual harassment by many well-known public figures. This necessitates the very fact that women (despite hailing from respected positions) have been facing tortured conditions for ages together and such things often remain under the rug. Notably, the early feminist movement was initiated by women who belonged to the cultured and educated elite group, white feminist women; mainstream feminist movements, unfortunately, have not focused adequately on Dalit women’s problems. In his essay, “Dalit Women Talk Differently”, Gopal Guru points out the fact that “Beneath the call for women’s solidarity the identity of the Dalit woman as ‘Dalit’ gets whitewashed” (1995, 2549). Dalit women fall under the homogenized and sweeping generalization of *Savarna* feminism which does not include intersectionality.

Dalit women are considered a “neglected class on the margins (*hashiye par*)” (Samuelson 11) of society which frames them into a separate category. It is “what Uma Chakravarti has termed as graded patriarchies operating within the grid of Brahminical patriarchy” (Sathe 28) that Dalit women negotiate with. There are notable examples and instances of systemic violence against Dalit women. On December 31, 2019, a 19-year-old Dalit girl went missing, and later on January 5, she was found hanging from a tree in Modasa, Gujarat. The girl was reportedly gang-raped by four men then hanged.<sup>1</sup> In April 2018, a priest allegedly raped a 22-year-old Dalit girl in Chhattisgarh.<sup>2</sup> Earlier in February 2016 in Haryana, the upper-caste agricultural Jat<sup>3</sup> community

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<sup>1</sup>Sen, Sumanti. ‘Four Dalit Women Raped Every Day’: Why Caste Matters In Sexual Assault.’ <https://thelocalindian.com/story-feed/awareness/dalit-women-sexual-violence/?infinitemscroll=1>. Accessed on 13 Jan 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> The Jat community people originally hail from various places of the northern belt of India (Punjab, Haryana, New Delhi, Rajasthan, and Western Uttar Pradesh) that are known as landowning communities. The Jats are mainly peasants by profession; however, they have begun to shun agriculture in favor of gaining socio-economic power and status in society.

led an agitation on the issue of reservation in government jobs.<sup>4</sup> During an outbreak of frenzy and violence, some lynch mobs pulled nine Dalit women from their houses and brutally gang-raped them. Incidents such as these frequent the news and are never-ending. Recently, on 14<sup>th</sup> September 2020, a 19-year-old Dalit girl was allegedly gang-raped and brutally mortified by four upper-caste men in Hathras district, Uttar Pradesh, India. She battled for her life for nearly two weeks before she died. Her body was said to be forcefully cremated by the State Police, and this incident created a stir in the media. Notably, most of these instances involve violence against the bodies of Dalit women. Forms of sexual abuse (such as the act of rape) leave deep impacts, both physically and psychologically. The atrocious acts of violence showcase how Dalit women must bear the brunt of being both a gendered body and a casteist body.

Dalit women face existential crises every single day. The interlacing between gender and caste is an important motif in popular films, in which the caste status of a woman creates a problematic position for the hero. Some movies project the caste-gender intertwining in various regions of India. Notable among these are *Achhut Kannya* (The Untouchable Girl, Hindi, 1936), *Bharathi Kannamma* (Bharathi Kannamma, Tamil, 1997), *Malapialla* (The Outcast Girl, Telegu, 1938), *Sujata* (Sujata, Hindi, 1959), *Oruththi* (A Girl, Tamil, 2003), *Papilio Buddha* (The Malabar Banded Peacock Butterfly, Malayalam, 2013), *Sairat* (Wild, Marathi, 2016), and *Dhadak* (Heartbeat, Hindi, 2018). *Achhut Kannya* is an Indian Hindi-Urdu film that depicts the social position of Dalit girls, and this film is based on the Reformist movement of 1867. *Bharathi Kannamma*, *Sujata*, *Sairat*, and *Dhadak* are stories about the lives of couples who must bear the tragic consequences of the uneven relationship due to caste and class conflicts. *Oruththi* is an adaptation of a classic tale and records the indomitable will of a girl who throws challenges to the prevailing social norms and customs and paves the way for the emancipation of women. *Papilio Buddha* is an Indian feature film that narrates atrocities against women, Dalits, and the environment. Pradnya Waghule (2016) points out:

The recent Marathi film “Sairat” reinforces the fact that gender is also about caste. [...] the protagonist of the film, Archana, or Archie as she is referred to through the film, becomes the locus of this same struggle. It is her body and desire that have to be curbed for the prevailing caste norms to continue undisturbed. (71)

This article embarks on an analytical study of two Bollywood<sup>5</sup> films, *Bandit Queen* (1994) directed by Shekhar Kapur and *Article 15* (2019) directed by Anubhav Sinha. In these films, marginalized women are imprisoned and ghettoized in the “mutual bracketing” (Guru 112) of caste and gender. Their bodies thus become the spaces where the power dynamics of a caste-ridden society are observed. The female body is to be captured, controlled, and incarcerated with the apparatus of hegemonic masculinity as well as the hierarchical caste system. Dalit women's bodies are the territories that are to be possessed through weapons of sexual violence; gang rapes "perpetrated by the conquerors is a metonymic celebration of territorial acquisition" (Spivak 303). Films broadcast the issue of violence in a provoking manner primarily for visual appeals and therefore titillate the

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<sup>4</sup> Sen, Sumanti. ‘Four Dalit Women Raped Every Day’: Why Caste Matters In Sexual Assault’. <https://thelocalindian.com/story-feed/awareness/dalit-women-sexual-violence/?infinite-scroll=1>. Accessed on 13 Jan 2020.

<sup>5</sup> The term ‘Bollywood’ is a portmanteau word derived from ‘Bombay’ and ‘Hollywood’. Bollywood was earlier known as *Bombay Cinema*. Primarily known as Indian-Hindi language film industry Bollywood also shares a connection with the cinema of South India and other film industries, thus making up the whole of Indian cinema and existing as one of the largest producing film industries.

sense and sensibility of people. The chapter "cinema as an institution" in the book *An Introduction to the Film Studies* (1999) edited by Jill Nelms argues that films do not exist in a vacuum: they are conceived, produced, distributed, and consumed within specific economic and social contexts. Both *Bandit Queen* and *Article 15* act as the socially conscious visual landscapes to establish interaction with such a society that horribly bears spectacular and brutal realities that are often swept under the carpet.

### **The Intertwining of Caste and Gender in Films**

In a recent study published by Vishal Chavan (2017), a media studies scholar at Birmingham City University raises pertinent questions regarding the representation of the backward classes in the Indian film industry by pointing out that the Dalit and Bahujan populations, comprising SCs, STs, and OBCs, in India is 85% but their representation in Indian cinema is only 0.1%. One reason behind this is the relatively small presence of the Dalit communities as central characters and this owes its origin to the very hierarchy that the society nurtures as Gopal Guru (2000) observes, "On moral grounds, the relationship between the margin and the core is always hierarchical. It is dichotomous, in which the core exists only at the cost of the margin" (115).

The plotlines of both *Bandit Queen* and *Article 15* revolve around discourses of Dalit women's subjugation and tortured existences. *Bandit Queen*, with its earlier Bengali adaptation *Phoolan Devi* (1985), is based on chronological entries of the prison diary of the notorious dacoit turned political persona, Phoolan Devi. It recounts the tale of her passing through a series of rapes and mutilations by men of different spheres from her days of being a childhood bride through adulthood. Later, she rebels to exact revenge on twenty-two Rajput *thakurs*<sup>6</sup> in Behmai<sup>7</sup> and carries on with limitless plunders, arsons, dacoity, murders, and kidnapping and subsequently becomes a constant lookout for the police. The film ends by showing Phoolan surrendering in public.

*Article 15* takes its recourse to the real instance of the gruesome Badayun rape case<sup>8</sup> of 2014 and presents the murder and possible rape of two young Dalit girls in a well-crafted story. The act of rape is exercised as a form of punishment for the 'sin' of demanding an increase in 3 rupees in wages, and the act of hanging the girls serves as a form of teaching the entire community a lesson about their status and position. The film inspires the audience to revisit Article 15 of the Indian constitution (Basu 2008) that denotes any type of caste discrimination is a criminal offense, with a hint to the possible depletion of caste discrimination. The Indian Police Officer Ayan Ranjan acts as a choric narrator and commentator who showcases the problems that are deep-rooted in the caste system. The film ends with a positive note of obliterating the hierarchical borders.

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<sup>6</sup> *Thakurs* are known as the Rajputs in the colonial period. They are considered the *rajas* (kings), *zamindars* (landowners), and *taluqdars* (officer responsible for collecting tax) of Uttar Pradesh state of India and are said to hold control over 50 percent of the land, although they are a very small population (nearly 7-8 percent of total).

<sup>7</sup> Behmai is an obscure place of *Chaurasi gaon* (as it is named after 84 adjacent hamlets) in Uttar Pradesh which is notoriously famous for a historical incident that occurred nearly 39 years ago when on 14<sup>th</sup> February 1981 Phoolan Devi (also known as the 'Bandit Queen of India') shot and murdered twenty-two people of the Rajput Thakur clans as a means of revenge of her gang-rape in the same village. This incident is known as the Behmai massacre.

<sup>8</sup> The Badayun rape case took place on 27 May 2014. It narrates the rapes and subsequent murders of two Dalit girls in Katra village of Badayun district of Uttar Pradesh. The incident left a wide mark in the press reports in both India and abroad. Although initially, the CBI attempted to throttle the authenticity of the incident by announcing that no rape occurred and thus set free the convicts after investigation (as *Daily Mail* 11 December 2014 reports), the POSCO court on 28 October 2015 rejected the claims of the CBI by drawing out the actual truth.

The films become critical commentaries on the social injustice that Dalits especially the Dalit women meet due to their threatened identities and social positions. Violence and social castrations exercised by both men and women of dominant castes as well as the men of their community loom large throughout their lives. The films produce contexts to re-visit the gender-caste intersectional binary that wreaks havoc on the lives of Dalit women.

### **(S)exploitation and Dalit Women's Bodies**

Apartheid was a resultant condition of racial segregation and economic and political discrimination against non-white citizens of South Africa. Dalits in India are also victims of the politics of segregation. There is hidden apartheid within mainstream Indian society which precipitates that very idea of segregation. This is nothing but a kind of physical apartheid which owes its origin to the hierarchical ladder of the caste system. However, Dalit women face separate identity politics and existential crises due to their reduction as 'impure' bodies. Mala Sen, the author of *India's Bandit Queen/The True Story of Phoolan Devi* (1991) points out a pertinent fact,

It is not unusual for women *and especially the Dalit women* all over the world, and particularly in India, to resist discussing the sexual abuse they have been subjected to, surrounded as they are by a society that holds them responsible for the acts of violence against them and taints them with self-images of weakness and impurity.  
(8) [emphasis added]

Dalit women's bodies are 'polluted' and are not meant to be touched openly in public as it would pollute society; thus, they bear the stigma of untouchability and threaten the existing hierarchy. Ironically, the same body becomes a consumable body that can be controlled and incarcerated by the same hierarchical society which tends to castigate the bodies. Dalit bodies are, thus presented on the screen as forms of abstract labor.

As Sekhar observes with respect to gender and caste dynamics: "The social relations of caste and gender are based on the exercise of power through the use of force" (Sekhar 223). The matrix and structures of domination in Indian society are embedded in the caste hierarchy which creates an asymmetry of burden, forms of exploitation, social location, and nature of oppression. Ayyar and Khandare explain that "caste' locations due to entrenched sociocultural hierarchies" (Ayyar and Khandare 86). The act of rape is normalized within the patriarchal 'norms' of Hindu society and is associated with the inevitable outcome of staunch orthodoxy. Jean Chapman (2014) argues that Brahmanical Hinduism normalizes subtleties of misogynistic activities, and this leads him into saying that "Rape is not random. It is structured" (52). This is evident in *Bandit Queen* (1994) through the nature and characteristics of torments perpetrated on Phoolan's body by the upper-caste males. Apart from being infused with sexist philosophy and intermittent episodes reflecting the same, the film depicts forms of physical, verbal, and sexual abuse in both private and public spaces. Phoolan is not more than a sexual object to several men including her husband of early marriage (Phoolan is married at the age of eleven), to the son of the village headman, to the police officers, to the upper caste leader of the rubber gang Babu Gujjar, and finally, to the gang members of Thakur Sri Ram and Lala Ram. The sexual perpetrations are coupled with prevalent casteist practices and factions. In one particular sequence of the film, Phoolan is stripped of all her clothes and made to walk naked in front of the villagers. The act of incessant gang rapes and physical tortures bear marks of hegemonic masculine power to capture and incarcerate a Dalit

woman's body and with this act, the purpose of controlling the body is fulfilled. Similarly, in *Article 15* (2019) the two Dalit girls are victims of gang rapes and their bodies are hanged and displayed as a form of 'punishment' and 'lesson' for other marginalized people of the village. The upper caste Anshu Naharia imposes violence over the hapless girls to prove their control and dominance over the place. Gaura, a Dalit woman who serves as the spokesperson of the village community people, lays bare the actual story, the hypocrisy, and discriminatory politics that act behind the gang rape and murder. Vasanth and Kalpana Kannabiran argue that "the 'manhood' of the caste is defined both by the degree of control men exercise over women and the degree of the passivity of the women of the caste" (2131). Women's bodies in both the films above, metaphorically, become territories that are conquered through violent acts and manipulative strategies, and in this way, both casteism and sexism restore power and control. Charu Gupta explicates the dual aspects of body politics that act for Dalit women:

The Dalit female body was both at the same time – repulsive and desirable, untouchable and available, reproductive and productive. Sexual exploitation of Dalit women was an everyday fact, which was often expressed in terms of the alleged “loose” character of Dalit women themselves. (25)

Another dimension regarding the bodies is particularly noted in both *Bandit Queen* and *Article 15*. Sexual gratification and 'sexual colonization' (Christy K. J. 115) operate within both films. Phoolan Devi and the two Dalit girls of *Article 15* are simultaneous subjects of constant sexual gratification and torments. Both public and private spaces in the films symbolize tortured existences on part of the victims and sexual gratification on part of the perpetrators. Many Dalit women writers and novelists earlier focused on the exploitations of the bodies of Dalit women in their narratives. Baby Kamble's autobiography *The Prisons We Broke* (2003), Shivakami's semi-autobiographical novel *The Grip of Change* (2006), Meena Kandasamy's autobiographical novel *When I Hit You: Or, The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Wife* (2017), and poetry collections such as *Touch* (2006) and *Ms. Militancy* (2010) all present deep and moving studies of how Dalit women are victims of 'sexual colonization' (Christy K.J. 115). However, contrary to the representations in literature, films are very provocative and bring out the 'lived experience' of the Dalit women in a more glaring manner. The bodies of the women are easily accessible and can be used as ploys for manual labor as well as sexual control. Shailaja Paik (2014) enunciates in her article:

According to upper castes, Dalit women were already in the public gaze and did not need to concern themselves with issues of dignity and honor. Paradoxically, then, while their “femaleness” made them sexually vulnerable to racist and casteist domination, their Blackness and Dalitness effectively denied them any protection. (87)

Though there is a considerable time gap (nearly 25 years) between *Bandit Queen* and *Article 15*, the nature of perpetration witnesses a similar barbarity which proves that although the age progresses to a large extent, the hegemonic frame of mind remains the same. Dalit women were vandalized before and are being vandalized to date. Ania Loomba discusses the everyday violence which Dalits face in which violence is "woven into the fabric of everyday life" (220) and Dalit women "remain subject to constant assault by upper-caste men" (220). Thus, for Dalit women, the upper-caste male gaze becomes the panopticon that imprisons the bodies and controls constantly.

## Provoking Visual Spectacle of Films and Authenticity of Representation(s)

Eschholz et al. point out the following regarding the power of the media:

Understanding the power of the media in the social construction of reality is important, particularly when we have such a wealth of evidence describing how films, television, and other media sources continue to somewhat rigidly define roles and expectations for less powerful groups in society. (326)

Projecting the lives of those who reside at the fringes of society and barely communicate with the mainstream is a challenging task as several things are involved there such as the manner of representing, the question of authenticity, audience reaction, criticism, and negation. The expressive contents in films generate observant participant emotions among the audience when they tend to believe in the emotions expressed within the films and become parts of the cinematic world. In his essay "Representation, Reality, and Emotions Across Media" (2006) Jonathan Frome brings in the concept of Noel Carroll's "thought theory" which explains the lingering aspects of emotional outburst which has transmediation after-effects, "Emotions can be generated just by the thought of things...If we actually visualize this scenario, we can be genuinely scared by it even if we believe that we are firmly on the safe ground" (qt. in Frome 13). Films generate emotions in a cathartic mode of story-telling and involve the audience in it. Films that deal with perceptive issues of society garner wide attention and performability of the audience in a larger spectrum by communicating with "more people simultaneously" (Misrahi-Barak and Thiara 104) and hence, "the experience of watching a movie in a theatre or an auditorium is a collective act, and it is unique" (Misrahi-Barak and Thiara 104). The visual landscape of cinema provides a strong communicative bond.

There is a long-drawn history of the caste and casteist system in the cultural field of Indian films. However, the way it has been depicted has met sharp criticism. Critics often condemn the process of representation as biased which displays the hegemonic *homo-hierarchichus* (Dumont 69) society and Brahmanical ideology and culture. Although the films revolve around issues of Dalit lives and communities, the marginalized remain marginalized. The notion of hierarchy is prevalent when the films propagate the caste-gender binary in portraying Dalit women as the characters or protagonists of the films.

Violence becomes a recurring motif throughout the events of *Bandit Queen*. Phoolan's casteist/feminine body is a visible portrayal in every turning point of the film where the camera focuses on. In the journey from a hapless childhood bride to the notorious bandit queen, Phoolan's body performs the role of a determiner of her fate. The spectacle of cinema depicts a sustained form of Savarna patriarchy in the act of 'public rape.' The film is a continuous narrative of cause and effect where Devi's character is projected as a person who tends to react vehemently at the series of events that befall her; be it her rape as a child bride by her husband, the gang rape in Babu Gujjar's gang and Thakur Sri Ram's clans, rape at the police station, death of Vikram Mallaah, or the retaliations followed thereafter. The actions and reactions are exterior and those do not seemingly reflect the inner psychological conflicts that Phoolan Devi as an actual persona feels.

The trope of rape has an absent presence in *Article 15*. The film is a cursory representational story of the two young Dalit girls who are projected in a scripted *mise-en-scène* portrayal. The violated and deceased bodies of the girls act as the *tour de force* and prime mover of the plot entwined with the narrations of the villagers. Notably, in *Article 15* the police inspector Ayan Ranjan is an upper-caste Brahmin who initiates the rescue process of the third girl Pooja hiding in



a pipe. It is Ayan again who carries forward the rest of the story and subsequently becomes the representational voice of the marginalized people in a manner of *splaining* i. e. speaking or explaining on behalf of a group although not being a part of it. He brings out the portion of Article 15 of the Indian constitution and thereby tends to eradicate the prevalent discrimination based on caste and casteist practice and petty village politics. Ironically, the film projects a Savarna hero who acts as the messiah to attempt to set free the villagers from the clutches of Savarna patriarchy and casteist politics.

Some parallel paratextual layers hold considerable importance. Questions may arise such as who is watching the films? Are the presentations of characters justified? Are the filmmakers and associated persons all Dalits? Do they share the lived experiences of Dalit women? These are the obvious reasons that problematize the narrative implications of the films. Notably, both films are directed by men who belong to the upper caste belts. Hence, the presence of Savarna patriarchy behind the lenses cannot be taken in abeyance. The politics of representation result in divided opinions and observations. *Bandit Queen* is adapted from the storyline of Mala Sen's book *India's Bandit Queen/The True Story of Phoolan Devi* (1991). Hence, the authorial intervention cannot be denied regarding the authenticity of representation. *Bandit Queen* was one of the most controversial films and in the Toronto International Film Festival (1996), an article by CineAction shows, it arrested several moments of controversy and heated debates as well as agitations from the audience which act as the subsequent hypes or publicity stunts for the promotion of the film. Even, Phoolan Devi (whose life is showcased in the film) severely condemned the film questioning its authenticity (since the film claimed to be based on the diary entries of Phoolan). Phoolan Devi also posed a threatening message to the festival authority indicating her grudges and grievances against showcasing the film. When the director was asked about the fact, he replied that Phoolan is "being manipulated." He elaborated: "In a country where women can only enter politics as post-menopausal asexual beings, she objects to her portrayal as a sexual being" (1996, 2). Arundhati Roy in her essay "The Great Indian Rape Trick" (1994) blatantly reviews how the film depiction of Phoolan Devi, the bandit queen acts as a foil to the sourcebook as well as the original personality of Phoolan Devi by using the trope of rape and reducing the gendered frame from a combatant warrior to nothing beyond "a raped woman" (Roy, par. 20). Roy even states the fact that in the film "Rape is the main dish. Caste is the sauce that it swims in" (par. 42).

The moot point of *Article 15* centers around the display of the mutilated bodies of the Dalit girls, but the rest of the film continues as a crime thriller sequence with the occasional discourse on caste. *The Hindustan Times* (2019) reviews this as "a grim, unrelenting and essential film, one throwing up truths we choose to forget" (par. 2). Although *Bandit Queen* makes us witness the emergence of a warring female hero who can fight back against the injustice but must surrender in the end, *Article 15* never does so. Instead, the film involves "political intricacies and a multitude of characters seep in" (*The Times of India*, par. 6) which thrusts the intersectional discourse of Dalit women within a limited ghetto. We tend to look at the deceased girls as pitied objects who have to satisfy the sexist and casteist masculine ego and not as persons who hold enough potentiality to threaten the status quo and power structure. Such contexts cater to divergence criticism. Filmic presentations should provide alternative ways of constructing the switching frames of the gendered subaltern, a platform where the reduced body frames of Dalit women are transcended and their identities are re-instated as empowering subjects.

It is significant to study the casting of the Dalits in cinema, considerably the most popular medium to reach a wider audience. Despite the politics of representation, what matters most is "not the presence of an actual link with physical reality but the 'acknowledgment' of what a film as a

medium is expected to do and what a film as a work of art chooses to do" (Casetti 96). Films can create larger impacts and lingering motives to inculcate a changing outcome.

### **Conclusion**

The article discusses the controlling forces of masculine hegemony on the bodies of the Dalit women through analysis of *Bandit Queen* (1994) and *Article 15* (2019). The intersectionality of gender and caste is the marked feature in the films, although shown in a lopsided relationship. Both *Bandit Queen* and *Article 15* can be grouped under the 'socially-conscious cinema,' where society and social surroundings play key roles and have their recurring appearances. Together the socio-political scenario of Indian culture, urban and rural belts, village folk, traditions, and customs are narrativized with embedded ideologies. The films construct a cinematopo(gra)phy where the margin can make interactions with the center and frame questions on its existential position. In this way, the muted margins attain speakability and performability. Cinema as the dialectics of social change provides the desired space where interaction and communication can be established. The fact that the Dalits and more precisely Dalit women appear less in popular mediums like cinema and often play inconsiderate roles is a matter of concern that requires attention.

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