



Review of

Neeraj Ghaywan's

*Geeli Pucchi* from *Ajeeb Dastaans*

(Netflix, 2021)

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Hindi films are attempting to resurrect from its ailing phase through experimenting with novel themes. New digital platforms have impacted the transformation of diverse language films across India. *Geeli Pucchi* is one of the short films in the anthology of Hindi films, *Ajeeb Daastaans* (Director : Neeraj Ghaywan, Netflix). Questions of caste, gender and sexuality are inextricably linked to the India's social and political terrains. This short film attempts to map the various linkages of subordination and domination related to the complex caste-gender-sexuality relations. Bharti Mandal, a Dalit woman is the central character of this film. She works in a factory as a craftsperson irrespective of her sound educational qualifications. The factory is a male dominated space and she has to undergo bullying from her macho colleagues on a day to day basis. At the same time, Priya Sharma, a Brahmin woman, joins the factory as an accountant without adequate qualifications. Bharti's colleague, a Dalit man convinces her that she won't get Priya's post due to Bharthi's lower caste identity. Stereotypes of femininity and masculinity are juxtaposed via the reception of Priya Sharma and the marginalization of Bharthi Mandal. The manager tries to justify Bharti's subordinate professional location by differentiating her as the only craftswoman among the machine men. It is also a way to sideline Bharthi's competence. At the same time, the manager provides a job for Priya Sharma irrespective of her lack of competence and educational qualifications. Professional aspirations of Dalits are shown in the midst of the larger constraints on their social mobility grounded in caste. Priya Sharma befriends Bharathi without knowing her caste identity.

However, their friendship is also determined by caste. Initially their interactions operate through the silence about their caste. Anonymity in the so-called modern spaces in India is always challenged by caste. Priya asks Bharathi's caste identity and Bharathi hides her Dalit identity. She deploys the Bengali brahmin surname, Banerjee, to overcome the shame of being a Dalit. Their friendship is also built on the recognition of their repressed, lesbian identities. Bharti is a Dalit divorcee who lives a lonely life. She fondly remembers her female partner and their consequential separation due to her marriage. Priya too shares her relation with her female friend. Both of them seek their lost partner through their amity. Repression of the past is thus recovered through the new bondage between them. Priya and Bharti understand their same sex sexual orientation. Bharti shares her caste location as the child of Dalit mid wives as a sign of their friendship. Priya does not express her shock directly but the film shows the nuances of human relations that are fragmented by superior and inferior caste locations. Bharti's revelation of her caste identity leads to the tensions of acceptance and rejection of a Dalit as a friend. Patriarchal bargain and caste functions as undercurrents to such troubled relations. Caste and labor also operate as subtext of the film and Bharathi asks Priya how she got the job in the factory without required technical knowledge. Priya says that the Manager was impressed by her palm reading skills. It shows the caste-based networks and its persistence in the private sector. Priya also shares her repressed, lesbian identity and her disinterest to give birth to a baby. Bharathi talks to her about pregnancy and mothering in a compulsory, heterosexual space of Indian family. While discussing these aspects, Priya asks Bharathi, how she knows different aspects of pregnancy, mothering etc. Bharathi taunts her saying that like Priya knows palmistry, she knows about all these aspects due to her caste location/caste related labor. Priya's mother-in-law did not allow her to work in the factory after the birth of her child. She insists that Priya leaves the job and take care of the child. Her mother-in-law also says that since Bharti is from the mid wife-caste, she may be better informed than Priya. When Bharti visits Priya's home, they offer her tea in a different tumbler. Priya's husband also appreciates Bharathi for her efforts to convince Priya about mothering and other related domestic chores. Paradoxical coexistence of the appeasement of Dalits and caste-based discrimination unfolds the manner in which caste, gender, patriarchy and sexuality divide Bharti and Priya's family. Bharti realizes that there is a stark caste division between them and encourages Priya to leave the job and

take care of her child. She recognizes that this is the only way to enter into a highly Brahminic, higher professional arena. It can be also read as an act of revenge by Bharthi against socially regulated professional arenas. Claims related to merit is also debunked through the acceptance of Priya in the factory. The film thus captures shifting forms of caste, gender, patriarchy and sexuality.

For a Rawlsian reading of the film, family and justice need to be probed in a systematic fashion. Family, as a social institution, for both Bharathi and Priya are rooted in the larger questions of gender and caste. On the contrary to Rawlsian take on family as a basic institution that grants rights and duties becomes a hazard for Bharti due to her intersections of her identity as a Dalit, a woman, and a divorcee. Fair opportunity and its relations with family, in Rawlsian sense, could not operate in the context of Bharti due to her subjugated, social locations (Rawls, 2013:74). Free choice and individual rights of Bharti and Priya cannot be equated on the same parameters of the west in general and India in particular. One of the key questions that need to be asked here is whether societal and political institutions in India are able to create any common ground for the justice and equality for those women who do not conform to the homophobic, casteist ideologies and its practices. The principle of justice as fairness related to same sex marriage is contested within the field of family (Gray,2013:158-170). Liberal underpinnings of Rawlsian premises also need to be revisited according to the neoliberal moorings of the contemporary capitalism. Reading a film on Rawlsian grounds becomes complicated due to the geopolitics of visual cultures and geopolitics of nation-state, nature of citizenship, renewed understanding of rights and duties.

## References

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