

Critique

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Prithvi Konanur's *Seventeeners*: A Director to Watch Out For



Hadinelethu (Seventeeners) Kannada, 2022, by Prithvi Konanur

With the emergence of OTT platforms as an exhibition space, filmmaking has opened for those who might have remained amateurs. This means there is a burgeoning of new talent trying out the medium. Purists in cinema – especially established art film directors – may not be happy with the OTT space. However, art cinema has not given us much to be enthusiastic about in the past two decades; the OTT platform at least does that. The Indian Panorama (judging by IFFI 22) is virtually dead as a guide to the best in Indian cinema, and other all-India film competitions like the Fipresci-India Grand Prix are where one needs to find new talent. But on scrutinising the new cinema thus made available, one still finds an awkwardness that tends to attenuate one's zeal. This is especially true of Bengali and Malayalam cinema which were once beacons of hope for the art film. The new filmmakers whose sensibilities hold the greatest promise (like Sanal

Kumar Sashidharan whose intriguing and highly original *A'hr* was tarnished by its mystical pretensions) are often too whimsical, and one looks for purpose, method and clarity in the new cinema, stories told well, primarily. In this context, the new Kannada film *Hadinelethu (Seventeeners)* by Prithvi Konanur needs to be regarded.

Hadinelethu is Prithvi Konanur's fourth feature film, but it shows a surer grasp of the medium and subtler social observation than the earlier films. He uses non-actors mainly but contrives to get good performances. This is not so much (I propose) because of his directing of the actors as much as the sureness with which the roles are written; he does not use them to fill up inadequacies in the plot through emotions but places them in precise social situations recognisable from our own experiences. The strategy of not putting too much pressure to 'act' on non-actors is a way of getting good performances. In its

observations, the film also says things that might be taboo, but Konanur does it so lightly that he gets away.

Hadineleentu is set in a college and deals with a sex scandal involving two intermediate students when a selfie of the two minors in the act goes viral. Hari (Neeraj Mathew) and Deepa (Sherlyn Bhosale) face expulsion, and the situation seems resolvable, but other factors gradually surface. The senior staff members - Principal Badri (Ravi Hebali), Vice-Principal Seetha (Rekha Kudligi), the lecturers Abdul (Lakshmi Narayana) and another woman faculty – convene a meeting, and it is decided that Deepa will be expelled but not Hari since she has a record for past mischief. The personal details of the two then become an issue because Hari is Brahmin while Deepa is Dalit, and the constitution of the committee is raised by Abdul. Abdul is an OBC (although Muslim), but all the others are upper-caste, with Seetha being Brahmin. Both families are aghast at the developments, and various other considerations are operating. Will the singling out of a Dalit girl for punishment – one of the governors of the board is for it – not amount to caste discrimination, and could it not attract needless attention?

Deepa comes from an impoverished background, and her mother sold their land to get her educated. She was admitted based on her prowess at volleyball but has been involved in squabbles. It is also alleged that she scrawled an obscene English word ('F*K') on the wall of the lavatory and was caught in the act, but she protests that the word had already been scrawled and she simply turned it into something nonsensical ('FUCKART'). Why she did this is not certain, but 'young people often do things beyond reason.' The deliberations are often acutely funny, but it is not the kind of humour that Indian audiences are accustomed to. Hari and Deepa are expelled from college but can still take the examination. But this is of no use to Deepa, who has to play volleyball and make an attempt to get into the national team and then procure an engineering seat. Hari, his family feels, should emigrate to Canada, but he is not enthusiastic. Can he take tuition and then the examinations, as Badri has agreed? Getting into tutorial institutes in the middle of a semester is

difficult, and his marks (70%) are already wanting; every way seems to be closed for him.

The most admirable thing about *Hadineleentu* is that perhaps it conveys the sense of private education today, bringing young people together romantically when their families stand starkly apart in the social hierarchy. This impression of moving up socially has perhaps never been conveyed so subtly in art cinema, which still treats class as determined by one's birth. The new economy has helped turn many from the lower strata into IT professionals, but this is not widely acknowledged. Hari's parents are middle-class, but Deepa's family is so lowly placed that her mother offers to work as a domestic help in their house!

If all this is complicated, Jesse (Bhavani Prakash) is an activist who takes up on behalf of Deepa's family and threatens to go to court with caste atrocity as the basis. Still, it also turns out that Deepa is over 18 (the SSC certificate was fudged) and is culpable of having taken sexual advantage of a minor boy. She can now actually find herself behind bars. Principal Badri seeks to resign, unable to handle the pressure from so many directions. Still, Seetha – willing to take over - is intimidated by the Dalit students who feel that Deepa is being victimised and finds herself helpless.

Prithvi Konanur does not spell out much with regard to the class aspects but uses recognisable physiognomies and accents to make his observations. He does not, for instance, identify people clearly as victims but highlights the absurdity of the social system where there are so many legal minefields at every turn. He plays one of the lawyers involved in the proceedings, the astute one assisting the college. He is impressive alongside Rekha Kudligi as Seetha, although his role is not big. Where most films show conflict entirely created by individuals acting in bad faith, disputes here are amplified by the convoluted system. Even the police (who are portrayed sympathetically) are without a remedy but still do their best; when Deepa is to be arrested, she faints; the inspector quickly suggests that Jesse convey her to a hospital but arranges to have her at the police station the next day.

Hadineuntu invites comparison with Chaitanya Tamhane's *Court* (2014) – one of the best films of that decade – because of the legal issues it highlights. Still, I propose that it scores over Tamhane's film in many areas, although it may seem more lightweight. While *Court* still could not avoid dividing its characters into those earnest ones fighting the system and those fattened by it, *Hadineuntu* is subtler when it shows a legal/social system as unviable and destined for collapse even if everyone acts correctly. Structure seems to have a stultifying impact independent of the intentions of those populating it.

Lastly, I was impressed by the film's minimal reliance on music. I don't mean songs here, but simply the ever-present instrumental music on the soundtrack imposing a mood upon the action. This goes along with Indian cinema's transmitting 'messages' instead of relying on unmediated observation. *Hadineuntu* is preoccupied with observing a structure so convoluted socially and legally, which means no messages can be relayed - since 'messages' imply moral/social certainties. Perhaps with this recognition in mind, the film's director declines to use background music in most of its scenes.

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