



Court

Director: Chaitanya Tamhane
Country: India
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A review by Jay Weissberg for *Variety*:

An impressive debut that flays alive India's judicial system thanks to an intelligent, superbly understated script.

There are courtroom dramas, and then there's "Court," Chaitanya Tamhane's impressive debut, which flays alive India's justice system while commenting on class, education and access to power. Managing to be both extremely rational and extremely humane, the film works so well thanks to an intelligent, superbly understated script and a feel for naturalism that extends beyond mere performance. Tamhane's judicious entry into lives outside the courtroom provides texture and depth, making this well-rounded depiction of a dysfunctional judiciary an engrossing piece of cinema. Possibly too cerebral for the "Lunchbox" crowd, "Court" could use fest exposure to propel itself onto specialty screens.

Outdated, elephantine courts are an easy target, yet it's the way Tamhane coolly exposes the flaws that renders the film so powerful, making clear that the problem isn't simply with what's on the books, but also with the people pedantically interpreting them. Narayan Kamble (Vira Sathidar), 65, is a part-time tutor and social activist bard who tours with his troupe around working-class communities in the Mumbai vicinity. He's arrested and charged with inciting a sewage worker to kill himself after listening to one of Kamble's songs.



The charge is patently ridiculous – it's claimed the worker deliberately went into a manhole without protective gear in order to kill himself. Defense attorney Vinay Vora (Vivek Gomber, also producing) argues the case before Judge Sadavarte (Pradeep Joshi), with public prosecutor Nutan (Geetanjali Kulkarni) across the aisle laboriously reading aloud from obsolete laws, and relying on the testimony of a lone witness who has obviously been coached. Vora objects to Nutan's leading questions and irrelevant arguments, yet the judge isn't especially interested in anything apart from procedural issues.

Where the trial scenes use the legal system's ponderous rules to hang itself, sequences showing the attorneys outside working hours reveal, via exceptionally nuanced observations, the sorts of influences and lives led by the two sides. Vora shops for fine Western cheeses and wines in an upscale market and goes drinking at a chic bar where an Indian singer performs English and Brazilian ballads. He's firmly a member of India's globalized elite, yet he also participates on panels about social responsibility. Implied in all this is that his social connections could easily get him a high-paying position, but instead he chooses to be a public defender.

In contrast, when Nutan leaves work, she picks her son up from school, then goes home to make dinner, which is consumed by the family in front of the TV. If they go out, it's not to a fancy restaurant but a greasy spoon — in terms of class, she's closer to the people she's prosecuting than Vora is, although the concept of empathy seems remote from her mindset. Nutan is parochial and lacking broad compassion,

but she's not wicked: Beyond criticism of India's judiciary, the director implicitly implicates the country's education system, which creates professionals skilled in rote learning yet completely lacking in independent thinking.

Tamhane's outstanding script gets the different spheres just right, from a cool-headed recitation of an arcane Victorian-era law, read in court as if its relevance must go unchallenged, to a terrific scene at the lunch table with Vora's parents (Bipin Maniar, Panna Mehta), their passive-aggressive approach to their son saying everything needed about his filial relationship. Many viewers will criticize the placement of one sequence: Just when it seems Tamhane has found the perfect, chilling grace note to end the film, he unexpectedly continues with a coda that further censures those working in the legal system. The scenes are so well done, so naturally played, that their necessity isn't called into question, just their position within the body of the film.



People like Vora, from a high social caste, have not only a sense of social justice but also the luxury of concerning themselves with people lower on the class scale; for Nutan and Judge Sadavarte, such an interest is unthinkable. And then there's Kamble, a Dalit, or "untouchable," whose calling is to make the masses aware of their rights, and expose the injustice of a system designed to keep them down. Sathidar, an activist rather than an actor, is a terrifically charismatic performer, changing from a rather drab, sickly figure to a compelling entertainer

when onstage. Tamhane's skill at handling actors is apparent not only from the fine perfs by the professionals — Gomber and Kulkarni — but how smoothly they integrate with the non-professionals. Worth singling out in this regard is Usha Bane as the dead sewer worker's widow, in a role not far removed from her own story.

In a reflection of the hidebound and slothlike qualities of the tribunals, Tamhane and d.p. Mrinal Desai ("Nainsukh") use a fixed camera in the courtrooms. The rigid choice functions not only as a visual manifestation of legal paralysis, but also keeps the image absolutely clear, as if the director is lifting the lid off this broken judiciary and forcing audiences to rationally confront the causes of such inequality. Sensitivity to color is also exceptional, contrasting the bright, almost garish colors in lower caste houses such as that in the very beginning, with the muted tonalities and warm lighting in the fashionable bar.

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