

## Politics and Propaganda in the Films: Critical Engagement with *the Kashmir Files*

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### (Abstract)

Films are not the only source of entertainment but also the medium of politics. The political establishments use some genres of the films to justify a particular ideology and worldview. Like many film industries in the world, Bollywood also produced films representing the worldview of a specific ideology and framed the marginalized communities as the 'other'. The recent Bollywood film – *The Kashmir Files* by Vivek Agnihotri depicts the episode of migration of the Kashmiris Brahmin Population in the early period of the 1990s. Film critics categorise this film as ideological-driven and serving the vested interest of the present-day regime in India. Using the content analysis, this paper critically engages with the film, its plot, cinematography and dialogues of the characters and sees how the film serotyped the Kashmiri Muslim as the 'other'. The paper will also use the secondary literature and the interviews to see how far the film is based on actual events.

**Key words:** Bollywood, Propaganda, The Kashmir Files, Brahmin Migration, Politics

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Date of Submission: 06-06-2022

Date of Acceptance: 21-06-2022

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### I. Introduction

No art form is devoid of the politics of its maker. Role of Films are not only confined to entertaining the viewers but its highlights the socio-economic and political issues. Some genre of films illuminates the audience with the historical event or the personality from the past. Apart from this, films are also the medium of politics. Politicians, conservative ideologues, and advocates of a specific social belief system have used cinema, like other modern mediums, to remodel and reframe the archaeologies of the fictional world portrayed on cinema in a way that serves their own agenda. On the one side, Films promote glorification of group of people, following a particular kind of ideology and on the other hand it equally demonizes and de-humanizes the 'other'. For instance, the film *Triumph of the Will* directed by Leni Riefenstahl in 1934 was made to glorify the ideology of the Nazi party in Germany and the antisemitic films, such as *Jud Suss* portrayed the Jewish population as greedy and inhuman. Similarly films were made in United Kingdom and Soviet Union also during the onslaught of world war -II as a propaganda to shape the beliefs and attitudes of the people to support their respective governments. The relationship between films and politics is more prominent with totalitarian states maintaining autocratic and iron-fisted control over their nation's film industries even in the 21st century (Tiwari, 2019). In India, Bollywood constitutes the main film industry which is in business of film production from the colonial era. Apart from brining entertainment for the masses, it produced films on the historical events, socio-economic problems and the contemporary political issues which pose challenge to the state. Like, many film industries in the world, Bollywood too produced the films representing the worldview of a particular ideology and framed the marginalized communities as the 'other'

Vivek Agnihotri who made many attempts in the Bollywood cinema in past (Chocolate, 2005; Hate Story, 2007 and Buddha in Traffic Jam, 2016) to be counted among the successful directors was acknowledged few years back for his film – *The Tashkent Files* (2019) . Although this film of Agnihotri was criticized of being ideologically driven and representing a particular narrative on the death of then Prime Minister of India, but he received the National Award in the category of best screenplay from the present dispensation. Recently he came up with his new release, *The Kashmir Files* (2022) which he claimed to be based on the true events around the post-1990s Kashmir which led to the displacement of minority Brahmin community. Prior to this, many Bollywood films (Roja, 1993; Mission Kashmir, 2001) represented the political situation of Jammu Kashmir in early 1990s with a small section or few scenes related to the migration of Kashmiri Brahmins. In contrast, the film, *The Kashmir Files* focuses on the question of Kashmiri Brahmin minority who migrated to the different

parts of mainland India amidst rise of violence in Kashmir. Using the content and discourse analysis method of evaluating films, this paper critically engages with the story-line, plot, characters, monologues and dialogues of various characters and cinematography to assess the fidelity of the film. The paper also analyses the film in the larger context of the politics prevailing in South Asia where there is a persistent attempt to create a demonized narrative of the 'Muslim Other'.

### **Politics over the Game: Which side are you:**

Cricket is one of the important sports in the South Asia and most of the newly independent states, such as India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Afghanistan represent this game through their respective national teams. Over the period of time, this sports acclaimed the position in the discourse of the nationalism in these states and the support to a cricket team became a litmus test for the patriotism. In Jammu Kashmir which is a bone of contention between the two state of India and Pakistan for last seven decades (Varshney, 1991), watching a cricket match played between these two arch rivals has political connotations. The opening scene of *The Kashmir Files* shows the children playing a friendly cricket match and simultaneously listening to a commentary of India – Pakistan cricket match. In the same scene, some boys (Muslim boys) beat another boy (Brahmin boy) as he hails the Indian cricket player for his performance against the Pakistan. . The Kashmiri Muslim boys are shown frown in anger by the chanting of Child and abusing *Maro in Salo Ko, tendulkar ke pilo, Indian dogs chakha marega, kya ho batta, dale gadva, bol Pakistan Zindabad, Islam Zindabad*. With this opening scene showing the corelation of the support of cricket team with that of religious denomination of Kashmiri young boys, Vivek Agnihotri sets the tune of this film for the audience. The whole film revolves round this binary of Kashmiri Muslim and Kashmiri Brahmin, where the former is stereotyped as the supporter of the team across the border, while as the Brahmin is shown full of the nationalist fervour supporting the team of this own nation.

This narrative of cross border loyalty of Kashmir Muslims on the basis of religion is portrayed in multiple scenes in the films by showing the long processions and protests of Kashmiri Muslims raising the slogans in favour of Islam and Pakistan. Though the film does not have any characters representing the state of Pakistan or its indigence agency -ISI but the characters representing the militant groups are being shown working on behest of their masters across the border. The plot of the film coincides the time period of early 1990s Kashmir with the emergence of militant groups which challenged the sovereignty of the Indian state (Bose, 2003). Neither the film made an attempt to bring in the historicity of the Kashmir conflict nor does it even unfold the events, such as Election rigging, corruption and unemployment of 1980s which became the ignition point of the violence in Jammu Kashmir (Kumar, 2022). On watching the opening scenes of the film, the viewers, who are unaware of the political history of Jammu Kashmir are impressed upon that the Kashmir conflict and the violence is merely a communal violence, where the Muslim majority target the members of the Brahmin minority community. The macro politics of India-Pakistan relations or the debates over the regional autonomy are kept deliberately in dark as it does not fir the narrative of the right wing political discourse which bases itself on the binary of Hindu-Muslim divide.

### **Migration of Minority: A Single Narrative**

The narrative of the migration of the minority Brahmin community from Kashmir is revealed to the audience when the main protagonist of the Film, Krishna, who is a student at one of the premier universities in Delhi know the 'real' story of Kashmir from the friends of his late grandfather. Prior to this, Krishna is shown as an obedient student who believes the narrative told to him by his liberal left leaning teacher, Radhika Menon. The friends of his father become the mouth-piece for the revelation about the causes of the 'exodus' of Kashmiri Brahmins where the brutality of the Muslim militant groups supported by the larger sections of Muslim population is shown as the main cause. In this narrative, one more character Bitta comes to limelight, who is shown in the film as the leader of the militant outfit responsible for the atrocities against the minority community. In this part of the film, Agnihotri has used the camera to capture the dark, brooding shades of valley and the scenes are full of bloodshed, torture and 'otherization' of Kashmiri Brahmins. Not only the militant groups are shown barbarous against the minority community but the larger population too, as it depicted in the scene showing the Kashmiri Muslim women denying share of ration to the scared Kashmiri Brahmin women. It shows that majority Muslim population supported of the *Raliv, Galiv, or Chaliv* (convert, die, or leave) against the Kashmiri Brahmins, which created an atmosphere of fear among them. While Killing Pushkar Nath's son, Bitta is shown saying "If you wish to live in Kashmir you have to say Allah-u-Akbar". By showing the graphic details of the violence perpetuated by the Kashmiri Muslims, Agnihotri attempts to demonize the whole Muslim population of Kashmir, which in turn leads to 'othering' of them. Even the Film projects the places of worship, such as mosques and shrines as a places to mobilize Muslims against the Kashmiri Brahmins. It is true that mosques and shrines - the places of large gatherings - were used as places of protest, which Puri (1990) and Bose (2003) attribute to lack of democratic space to launch a protest. Militant groups used to communicate their

messages and warning to those alleged to have affiliation with the National Conference, the police, administration or intelligence, which included Muslims and Brahmins equally (Hassan, 2010)

Unlike this single narrative projected in *The Kashmir Files*, there are multiple narratives on the causes of migration of the Brahmin community, which vary from source to source - Brahmin migrants, Pandits still in valley, and Kashmiri Muslims in general. According to the majority of the Kashmiri Brahmins who have settled down in various cities of India, the 'displacement' of their community took place in an atmosphere of fear created by Muslim separatists who killed members of the Brahmin community (Hassan, 2010). It is noteworthy that Pandits use the term 'forced displacement' instead of migration.<sup>i</sup> The Delhi based, organization of Kashmiri Brahmins, *Panun Kashmir* believe in a narrative similar to that represented in the film as it points, "*the fact is that Kashmiri Pandits were driven from their homeland after a campaign of intimidation and harassment was launched against them by the military-wing of the secessionists*".<sup>ii</sup> In reality, more than real attacks it was the atmosphere of fear and the threat perception from the 'other' that played a major role in driving Pandits from the valley in large numbers. Kashmiri Brahmins shared the ethno-nationalist identity of their Muslim counterparts, but as the self-determination movement gained momentum in 1989-90, they began to feel an increasing sense of vulnerability and insecurity in response to what they perceived as a threatening atmosphere in the region (Behera 2000; Evans 2002). The Muslims claim and the refugees agree that there were no communal incidents or burning and looting of houses, misbehavior with women etc. as is being shown in the film.

### **Missing Links: State failure and People who stayed back**

Some of the crisp scenes in *The Kashmir Files* point out towards the failure of the state and central government to provide protection and safety to the minority Brahmin community. But to continue the binary of bad Muslim versus good Hindu, Agnihotri projects the Muslim politicians of the mainstream parties hand-in-glove with the militant groups, while as a Hindu bureaucrat, played by a senior actor Mithun Chakravarty as the savior. Though there is a narrative about the failure of the state machinery but it is different from the one shown in the film. At the time of the migration of Kashmiri Brahmins, it was the Governor who was at the helm of affairs in the state of Jammu Kashmir. During his regime, Jagmohan acted as the sole authority in Jammu and Kashmir. Under Article 92 of the State Constitution, Governor's Rule implies absolute power, which unlike President's Rule in other states, is not accountable to Parliament. He dissolved the State Legislative Assembly and justified it too - without dissolution there was no moral legitimacy to use force, nor was it possible to secure obedience of orders from local officials (Jagmohan 1990). The state machinery, especially the police and bureaucracy came directly under his control, he even controlled the press - press releases issued by Governor Jagmohan's office in *Raj-bhawan* was the main source of news for the media (Puri 1993).

*The Kashmir Files* is salient about the narrative of the Kashmiri Brahmins who did not migrate and stayed back in the Muslim neighborhood of towns and villages. There are Kashmiri Brahmins families living in the valley that did not migrate in the 1990s and there are some who returned after leaving the valley for some time. Their narrative is different from those who migrated to Jammu, Delhi and other parts of India. Though they do not agree that the exodus of Brahmins was Governor Jagmohan's conspiracy, they are nevertheless critical of the State's inability to provide security to minorities. They do not hold the entire Muslim population of the valley responsible for the migration and acknowledge the support and protection provided by the Muslim neighbors. There were numerous reports of Muslim neighbours and friends looking after the houses, farms and places of worship of the Pandits. "If anyone could have run away from the valley, it would have been Muslims," says a Kashmiri Brahmin who lives in the valley along with Muslim neighbours, while talking about the atrocities committed by the para-military troops on the common people. He is sympathetic towards self-determination movement but feels that slogans like Allah-u-Akbar hardly provide any space for non-Muslims in it.<sup>iii</sup>

### **Conclusion: Author, Text and Context**

The film is regarded as one of the art form in the modern world that represents the culture, language, politics, society and emotions. The story-line, plot and dialogues of various characters act like the text in a novel or fiction, while as the writer and director of the film attains the position equivalent to the author. The socio-economic and political atmosphere of the region where the film is released acts as the context. The way for reading and understanding the book, not only text is important but also the author and context, similarly for critically evaluating the film, along with the director's ideological leaning, the context at the time of its production is important. Vivek Agnihotri through his earlier project of the Tashkent Files and his personal commitment to the ideology of the ruling right-wing *Bhartiya Janta Party* has openly shared his stand in the larger politics of the contemporary India. It also very well reveals his selective projection of the facts and over emphasis on the binary of Hindu-Muslim throughout the film. The release of the film coincided with the elections in one of the largest federal states, Uttar Pradesh where the ruling BJP was facing anti-incumbency problems over the issues of development and prize-rise. The film which was supported by the Central

Government by making it tax free and encoring the Government employees to watch it in theatres could shift the debate from the failure of economic policies of the government in Uttar Pradesh to that of Hindu-Muslim question. The film focuses only on the misery of Kashmiri Pandits and makes extensive use of Islamophobic clichés — all Muslims in the film are aggressive, barbarous, sexually predatory, deceitful, or filthy. The film, which is purportedly structured as a counter-argument and conversation, is a continuous effort to condemn and delegitimise Kashmiri Muslim misery or opinions by linking and compressing all of them into Bitta Karate, who is accused of killing Kashmiri Brahmins.

The Film assimilates Kashmiri Pandits within the majoritarian community and embeds them within the culture of Hindus of the country. At one point, character even says that it is not Kashmiri Pandits who suffered but Indians. It portrays a specific 'Hindu' image of India and a Hindu image of Kashmiri Pandits, including limiting Kashmiri Pandit cuisine to vegetarian dishes. Sharma and Chaudhury (2002) categorize the films, such as the Kashmir Files as a right wing Brahminical cultural reaction emanating from the anxieties of the upper caste with the Bollywood industry. According to them, this reaction was a result of the earlier films, such as *Article 15* and *Jai Bheem*, which started a conversation about the contemporary issues concerning the marginalized sections in India, thus making discomfort among the elite upper caste sections. This film comes at an appropriate time with a vindictive plan to help the government derive legitimacy among its supporters. As Nishita Saral (2019) puts it, “*I grew up in a family where this rage and trauma were visceral. This sense of loss and erasure is precisely what Hindutva, or Hindu nationalist forces, have capitalized on since 1989. Instead of treating Kashmir as a political matter, the Bharatiya Janata Party and its allies have turned it primarily into a communal and economic one. They have stoked Kashmiri Pandits’s felt experience of injustice by pitting Pandit and Muslim suffering against each other*”.

#### Endnotes:

<sup>i</sup> The Migrant Kashmiri Brahmins call it as exodus or forced displacement. According to them they did not move out of Kashmir valley of their own choice.

<sup>ii</sup> The Organization called Panun Kashmir was founded by Kashmiri Brahmins in 1991 in Delhi. It means 'Our own Kashmir'. [www.panunkashmir.com](http://www.panunkashmir.com) (Checked on 22/03/2020)

<sup>iii</sup> Member of Kashmir Bar Association, who is from Brahmin community in Kashmir.

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