

The Exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the Valley of Kashmir: A Negative Critique of their Traumatic Past Reflected in The Kashmir Files Perpetuating the Ethno-religious Tension

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Abstract:

The Kashmir Files, directed by Vivek Agnihotri, a 2022 film is based on the mass exodus of the minority Kashmiri Pandits from their homeland. The film extensively deals with the contested land of Kashmir. The mass exodus of the Kashmiri Pandits in the wake of garrulous ethno-religious tension marks the tragic history in the memory of the people of Kashmir. The miserable displacement of 1989 has rendered them homeless for ages with no recluse. Thousands of them have dispersed to various regions of the country. The exact number of deaths and casualties varies according to various research. Agnihotri uses their bitter experiences as insidious instrument to manipulate the religious tension existing between two communities, Hindus and Muslims. He has masterfully constructed the half-truth, thus giving a deadly concoction with half-lie. The film is made to rouse the grudge against a particular community specifically the “murderous Indian Muslims”, who do not have any conscience. Agnihotri champions in grabbing the attention of the audience by weaponizing the painful experience of the Pandits. With all its strategic dramatic presentation, the film, blurs the boundary of truth and propaganda. The manufactured truth with its vicious presentation castes the Muslims collectively in negative light. Therefore, the present paper examines the film and seeks to find answers to the following questions: firstly, how far the narrative of *The Kashmir Files* gives a true projection of Kashmir ordeal; secondly, it observes whether thirty years of institutional silence has now been heard only to be used for diplomatic gain; and finally, how far the narrative of *The Kashmir Files* is a propaganda narrative examining the political fabrication of their painful experiences.

Keywords: *The Kashmir Files*, Pandit, Exodus, Ethno-religious tension, Militant, Propaganda, Communal violence.

“The Pandits of Kashmir were left to rot in their slum camps, to rot while the army and the insurgency fought over bloodied and broken valley, to dream of return, to die while dreaming of return, to die after the dream of return died so that they could not even die dreaming of it, why was that why was that why was that why was that (259).”

~ Salman Rushdie in *Shalimar the Clown*

Kashmir is the long-cherished crown in the map of India. In the lap of the Himalaya, it sits with its pristine beauty and remarkable aura of scenic presence. The bountiful valley of sufis and saints, rivers and mountains, riches and cultural heritage has been the bone of contention between India and Pakistan for

ages. The valley is the melting pot of various identities, culture, religions and ethnicities. The spectrum of diversity evokes a sense of pride in Kashmiri minds. G.M.D Sufi contemplates in his seminal work, *Kashir*, “the cult of Buddha, the teachings of *Vedanta*, the mysticism of Islam have one after another found a congenial home in Kashmir” (The Garden of Solitude). The fraught history between India and Pakistan makes it a contested land. For untold number of times the cradle of beauty has been shrouded with innocent blood in the hands of militancy, terrorism and in the name of ethnic cleansing. The misery and persecution of the Kashmiri Pandits forms a part of that brutal history which still bleeds its soul. *The Kashmir Files*, a Vivek Agnihotri film claiming to delineate the brutal sufferings of the Kashmiri Pandits actually, does so with a pinch of salt and spice. The film begins with the cricket match airing on radio and some children also playing cricket. With the passing moments, the playful match becomes a ground of hatred and violence. The religious fanaticism and an exalted sense of nationalism debasing the other country which was once part of us, is clearly visible in the very beginning. It starts with the timeline of 19th January, 1990, marking the sixth exodus of the Kashmiri pandits from their homeland. With the slogan “Kashmir will become Pakistan” (The Kashmir Files), Agnihotri shows the anti-national fervour running and mounting in the valley. The cruelty of the militants mixed with religious fanaticism brings out the main ethos of the film. With the strong actors like Darshan Kumar and Anupam Kher, Agnihotri masterfully aggravates Hindu nationalism, playing with the tension filled area of Kashmir.

Hindsight of the tragedy: This paper seeks to explore the history behind the Kashmir ordeal, which brings us to the hindsight of the tragedy. The question what led to the earthly paradise being lost, takes us back to history, where lies the root of the conflict. Balraj Puri in his book *Kashmir Insurgency and After*, talks about the socio-political condition of the then Kashmir which led to the insurgency. The history is traced right from the Indian independence, when Kashmir acceded to Indian loyalty under the leadership of the Maharaja of the state. It was difficult for Maharaja Hari Sing to win Indian loyalty of his Muslim population, when the boundary between the two countries was drawn on communal lines (147). Responding to the ideological and moral appeal of Gandhi and Nehru, under the guidance of the chief architect of the Kashmiri nationalism, Sheikh Abdullah, the people of Kashmir unequivocally supported the Indian loyalty of Kashmir. The democratic aspirations of the Kashmiri people for freedom, Identity, autonomy and dignity enabled them to resist Pakistani invasion and to join the secular ethos of the Indian state. It was claimed as a

‘peaceful settlement’ by the United Nations Security Council. Through this settlement it was decided that the fate of Kashmir will be decided with a plebiscite. But the issue of plebiscite is thrown to ashes with the imprisonment of Sheikh Abdullah, the national hero of Kashmir on August 9, 1953. The then Indian Home Minister Pandit Govind Ballabh Pant, declared Jammu and Kashmir, as the integral part of India and he rejected the idea of plebiscite during his visit to Srinagar in 1957. The chain of bloody events initiates with the detention of Sheikh Abdullah, the democratically elected leader of Kashmir. The tension reaches to its boiling point with the kidnap of Dr. Rubiya Sayeed, the daughter of Indian Minister of Home Affairs on December 8, 1989, by the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front. The Indian Government paid heavy price for her release. The kidnappers demanded the liberation of some incarcerated members of unlawful groups in lieu of her life. In the process of hasty negotiation, the Government acceded to their felonious demands, which in turn led to terrorist uprising killing the innocent people of Kashmir. Confronting several Islamic militant groups more than 2,00,000 Hindu people known as Pandits had to flee their homeland. The mounting toll of death and dismay made the people refugee in their own rich soil.

The Kashmir Files is a movie, projected to weaponize the institutional hatred. A shared history is contaminated in an attempted proliferation of Islamophobia, in which a noble Hindu is fighting a barbaric Muslim man. Liberal intellectuals compare it with the Nazi films like *Jew Suss*. The film justifies a state sanctioned hatred for the Muslim community. An attempted historical revisionism is layered upon constructed truths. Nuggets of realities constructed for the camera ranges from the abrogation of Article 370 to the heart-rending violence thrust upon the bodies of innocent child. The film uses a very insidious tool with a thoughtful graphic landscape which starts with a protagonist who negates any kind of communalism forced upon his own Pandit community, but Krishna, the main protagonist gradually becomes disillusioned and is compelled to accept the communal violence drawn on the line of religious intolerance. Susan Sontag talks extensively about the constructed reality in her analysis of Leni Riefenstahl's *The Last of the Nuba* (1974). According to Sontag, "in *Triumph of the Will*, the document (the image) not only is the record of reality but is one reason for which reality has been constructed, and must eventually supersede it". As Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* (1935), is a masterpiece in propaganda, so is, Vivek Ranjan Agnihotri's *The Kashmir Files* (*The Wire*).

Few highlights of the film: The film shows the institute ANU (a subtle implication of JNU) as a hot-bed of anti-nationalist activities. The young Kashmiri boy leaves for Delhi to complete his higher education. Brought up by his grandfather and shielded by his parents' death Krishna, gradually comes to know about his past. He takes up a journey to excavate the truth of his parents' death. The time frame moves between the past and the present. The movie completely obliterates the nuances of the history of Kashmir by simplifying the events in an epic morality tale of black and white. Through multi-pronged humiliation and political machination, the film fails to capture the beautiful solidarity between the two communities by blaming the communal tension only on the Muslims: "This film is politically driven, made with the intent to manipulate the traumas that the Pandit community have gone through to further a religious divide in Kashmir and in India. This film specifically promotes discrimination and violence against Muslim communities across India and Kashmir."

("Uncovering India's Propaganda Movie 'The Kashmir Files'") With the plethora of movies ranging from *Uri* to *The Kashmir Files* India glides through an era of consented art.

Factual Inaccuracies: Images replete with factual inaccuracies call our attention. In this film Agnihotri targets the Leftist nationalist, the institution like JNU and the people who supports Article 370. Anupam Kher, one of the central protagonists, playing Krishna's grand father is cast to highlight the malicious effect of Article 370 on the life of Kashmiri people. The political machination regarding the abrogation of Article 370, conforms to the current efforts to rule over Kashmir, by evading its special position in the constitution. The Muslims of *The Kashmir Files* are unambiguously barbaric, malicious and cruel at heart. Shiva while playing with the children is forced to say that he wants a masjid, along with them. A Muslim neighbour who asks the Kashmiri Pandit family to leave for few days to ensure their safety, is shown at the next moment telling the militant, their exact location. An old teacher who expresses his concern for Sharda, also shows repulsive sexual humiliation. In *Covering*

Islam, Edward W. Said Writes, "The deliberately created associations between Islam and fundamentalism ensure that the average reader comes to see Islam and fundamentalism as essentially the same thing... then the reinforcement of every negative fact associated with Islam — its violence, primitiveness, atavism, threatening qualities — is perpetuated" (12).

Ancient Hatred Theory: To explain the ethno-religious tension, a theory of "ancient hatreds" has been established which exclusively simplifies the inter-state conflicts in the South Asian nations. This film

recording the misery of Kashmiri Pandits also plays with this venomous theory. It gives currency to the popular and over-simplified narrative that the conflict is between the Hindus and Muslims with its wide journalistic usage in today's world. Sumit Ganguly explains the limitations of this theory in his essay "Explaining the Kashmir Insurgency". He agrees that Islam came to South Asia as a conquering force and few Muslim rulers exhibited intolerance towards other religions, "yet the record of Hindu-Muslim relations during the period of Muslim rule in South Asia is not one of unrelieved discord and ethnic hatred". The harmonious co-existence of these two communities has added beautiful feathers to the existing cap of literature, art and architecture. "Perhaps the jingoistic rhetoric used by many modern-day politicians in India and Pakistan to distort the historical record to achieve short term political ends invites the application of the "ancient hatreds" theory but a dispassionate examination of the historical record suggests that the theory, like the rhetoric is wrong" (86).

Propaganda: Political mobilization of the Kashmiri Pandit families from their homeland is over-simplified in order to further India's political agenda in Kashmir, and to nullify the dissent in the area. Moreover, the exclusive focus on one community's exile from Kashmir overlooks the fact that Kashmir's repressive history has resulted in the mass migration of Muslims too. The propaganda is aimed to indoctrinate the communal hatred. Jacques Ellul talks extensively about the potentials of a propaganda in his ground breaking work, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*: "Propaganda is a manipulation of psychological symbols having goals of which listener is not conscious... the aim to indoctrinate – particularly in regard to political, economic, and social matters – has been regarded as the hallmark of propaganda" (xi, Preface). This psychological manipulation is done by Agnihotri with a pinch of salt. The narrative failed to address the facts, which led to the exodus of the Pandits. The film has all the elements, that the ruling party wants to propagate. The grandfather (Anupam Kher) is trying to teach Krishna (Darshan Kumar), his grandson that Azadi is a slogan of *tukde tukde*(separatist) gang and *Urban Naxals*. The film also plays well, the card of Hindu Victimization and fans the flame of Right-Wing slogan "Hindu khatre mein hai" (Hindus are in danger): "Often, in the three-hour long movie where sometimes hollow propaganda is not backed up with convincing arguments, it feels that in the age of populism, selective and biased reading of past events can keep the ball rolling" ("The Kashmir Files': India's 'Schindler's list' or Right-Wing Extremist Propaganda?"). In short it is a classic example of cinematic propaganda. "Prime minister Narendra Modi said, with regards to the film, that the entire 'ecosystem' worked to hide the truth, and that a truth suppressed for so long is coming out" ("The Kashmir Files holds no 'grand truth' to 'open your third eye'"). Kashmiri Hindus relate to the film because it presents the tragic events on the celluloid. On the other hand, it shows the biases of projection. It does not uncover the truth as stated by the director rather it sells the facade of truth. An effort to extract truth of the historical event through cinematic medium is a very complex task. What matters is not the factual details but the psychological effect which is produced through presentation. This truth telling machinery, automatically leaves out what is outside the frame. The film has been banned in Singapore which is a multireligious and multiracial country. Singapore exhibits a classic example of a cohesion among the dominant religions of the world, with a striking distribution of various religious communities: 31.11% Buddhism, 20% No Religion, 18.9% Christianity, 15.6% Islam, 8.8% Taoism, 5.0% Hinduism, 0.6% Others (Wikipedia). A statement by the country's Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) along with Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth and the Ministry of Home affairs has confirmed the refusal of classification under film classification guideline in their country: "The film will be refused classification

for its provocative and one-sided portrayal of Muslims and the depictions of Hindus being persecuted in the on-going conflict in Kashmir.” (“Singapore

Bans ‘The Kashmir Files’, Says ‘Potential To Cause Enmity...’”)

Technicalities: The 1917 Russian Revolution has shown the different connotation of Propaganda. It pushed the role of propaganda into cinema. Earlier it was considered as an activity to enlighten people to agitate their revolutionary thoughts. The montage theory of Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein, is one of the most prominent editing techniques used in Hollywood and Bollywood today. Agnihotri uses it as an insidious tool to camouflage the communal disharmony. In the projection of the bisection of Sharda’s body and the heinous torture on children provokes the very idea of his own ‘truth’. As a film maker the director is very much aware of the meaning of the scenes, he just taps the subconscious mind of the audience to make them aware of the same meaning he wants to propagate: “As far as Kashmiri Pandits are concerned, they have every right to present their version of story but for a filmmaker with clear bias towards the right-wing fundamentalist politics of the BJP government could create irreparable fault lines that will ultimately help the incumbent political party to dismantle democracy in the garb portraying the true accounts of victims”

(Ajit Singh).

Comparative analysis of Shikara and The Kashmir Files: There are plethora of films based on Kashmir ordeal. This paper also offers a comparative analysis of The Kashmir Files and Shikara. Shikara (2020) is also a film based on the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits. It did not do well in the box-office because it lacked the state support. The Kashmir Files ran tax-free in various states. Shikara projects the misery of Kashmiri pandits in the form of a love story. Many of its scenes are inspired from Rahul Pandita’s novel on the same topic, Our Moon Has Blood Clot. It also showed the impeccable horror inflicted upon the Kashmiri pandits, who had to leave their inimical homeland under the backdrop of the 1990, insurgency. The churning out of death toll, an unpremeditated ring of disaster, unsurmountable cry of misery all are heard in this movie. But the difference lies in the art of projection. With artistic liberty, Vidhu Vinod Chopra shows the urgency which should be initiated with regard to rehabilitation of the Pandit families. On the other hand, with its propagandist indoctrination, Vivek Agnihotri shows a distorted world view, “which is not at all an understanding of the past, but a manipulation of the present” (*The Holocaust Industry*, 37). A thorough examination of the film *Shikara* reveals, that Vidhu Vinod Chopra works like an intellectual in Saidian terms. Edward w. Said elaborates on the role of intellectuals in his seminal essay, “The Public Role of Writers and Intellectuals”. In his view, it is the duty of the “intellectuals” to revisit trauma to historicise the past and reflect on it for the next generation, thereby rewriting, revisiting, and healing the past through narratives: “The intellectual’s role generally is to uncover and elucidate the contest, to challenge and defeat both an imposed silence and the normalized quiet of unseen power, wherever and whenever possible” (4).

Divisive Politics: The questions pertaining to the issue, are still unanswered today:

what happened between January and March 1990? how many were killed? why were not they protected at that time? Why were they left at the transit camps? why were Kashmiri Pandits never able to return to their valley? who is profiting by selling this tragedy? The answers of these questions are intricately associated with the history of Kashmir. With the death of sheikh Abdullah in 1982, the national conference comes under the control of Farooq Abdullah. He wins the 1983 election. However, the central government divided the national conference and Gulam Mohammad shah is made the Chief Minister. It flames the fire of political instability and JKLf movement in Kashmir. In 1986, Rajiv Gandhi Government breaks open

the door of the controversial Babri Masjid and allows puja ceremony there. In that response, Pakistani backed players got opportunity to divide people of Kashmir. Hindu temples were attacked and the divisive policy was on the rampage. By 1986, Gulam Muhammad Shah Government fails in Kashmir and Farooq Abdullah is again declared the

Chief Minister. The 1987 election shook the faith of Kashmiri people in Indian Democracy. Farooq Abdullah comes in power but the democracy is killed and Kashmiri youth turns to militancy. Then in 1989, the JKLF kidnaps the daughter of Mufti Mahammad, Rubiya Sayed.

They demanded release of some militants as ransom. The release of the militants by the V. P. Singh Government works as a catalyst for the militant uprising in the valley. Throughout history the model of spreading terrorism is same by attacking the minorities. It is the same model in case of Germany as well as Kashmir, which is irrespective of time and place. In the case of Germany, it was the Jew and in case of Kashmir it is the Pandit community. With the high-profile killings starting from retired judge Neelkanth Ganjoo, BJP leader Tika Lal Taploo to journalist and lawyer Prem Nath Bhat, an atmosphere of fear was inevitable in the valley. A local newspaper prints a message from allegedly Hizbul Mujahidin of Pakistan, which advises the Pandits to leave Kashmir. The government failed to handle the terror informed propaganda running rampant in the valley. On January 19, 1990, the Farooq Abdullah Government was dissolved and governor's rule was imposed. Pakistani pawns raised pro-Pakistan and anti-Hindu slogans. The Pandit community was not given any support of safety and security. To ensure their own safety they left their home on January, 20, 1990, and took up a perilous journey towards the unknown, unsecured, unimaginable.

Gawkadal Massacre and aftermath: On January 21, 1990, CRPF killed over fifty Kashmiri Muslim protesters on Gawkadal bridge. It is considered as the first massacre in the long history of Kashmir. Militancy was on the rise and the army started searching for weapons hidden in the homes of the civilians. Reports of ill treatment with women came up. So, protesters gathered on the street and the situation was out of control. The Pandit exodus, on one hand, and the Gawkadal massacre, on the other, made the divisive political machination successful. According to Pandit Sangharsh Samiti, 70000 Kashmiri Pandits left the valley between 1990 to 1992. The migration continued till 2000. 400 were killed between 1990 to 2011. The then governor Jagmohan can be held accountable for the incident. Various people have opined that he has encouraged the exodus. On the other hand, many Kashmiri Pandits think that they are given safe passage by him. It is surprising, that instead of protecting them the government constructed refugee camps for them. The question why this exodus was encouraged, remains unanswered. Today in Jagit Township of Jammu, 40005000 Kashmiri Pandits live there. They do want to return to their homeland but it seems like a distant dream to them. Numerous elected governments made tall claims and promises of secure township, home with high walls in their own soil but the situation in the valley has only worsened.

Kashmir Today: The abrogation of Article 370, on August 5, 2019, gives a renewed hope to the displaced Pandit community. But unfortunately, the Kashmiri Pandits left in the valley face immense political and administrative isolation. Sanjay Ticoo, the president of Kashmiri Pandit Sangharsh Samiti, fasted unto death only to be heard by the ruling government. The non-migrant Kashmiri Pandits who did not leave despite the terror are still neglected. After the repeal of Article 370 and the Corona pandemic, the situation in the valley further deteriorated. In 2014, the BJP government promised in their manifesto a safe, secured, and dignified rehabilitation of the Kashmiri Pandits. However, after eight years of tall claims they are still living with same dismay and disillusionment waiting for the justice which has not been delivered in the

twilight years of their lives. Even today, the children born with the same legacy of sufferings in the valley. Nothing has changed for them.

Conclusion:

A thorough discussion of the historical background of Kashmir gives an incisive insight into the ongoing conflict relating to the film *The Kashmir Files*. Through this film this is not asked that, why did not the Kashmiri Pandits get justice, rather this being shown whom to hate. It is a harrowing fact that their tragedy is being sold to make profit out of it. After thirty years of targeting a community, the same jingoistic rhetoric is capable enough to play the divisive role. As far as the issue of Kashmir is concerned, it still bleeds the heart of India. This paper deals with a very small slice of a broader spectrum. To explore these multi-layered voices an unbiased and unflinching insight is needed, which cannot be achieved through a biased film like *The Kashmir Files*.

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