

Critique

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The Kashmir Files
The History of Conflict and Its Portrayal in Cinema



The Kashmir Files reminds me of ace cinematographer-Director Govind Nihalanis' *Tamas*, which I watched on TV and in the cinema hall. Based on Visham Sahni's novel of the same title portraying the plight of emigrants of Sikh and Hindu families to India from Pakistan after the partition of India in 1947, *Tamas* not only received instant fame but is considered a classic and one of the best films about troubled and turbulent times of partition. The infamous and gruesome Jallianabagh massacre comes alive in films like Omprakash Mehra's *Rang De Basanti* and Shoojit Sircars' *Sardar Udham*, besides Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi*. But their brilliant and inventive portrayal inevitably makes viewers furious without evoking any racial hatred for the

British. And the numerous films made on the 2nd world war and in particular about the holocaust by many great filmmakers, who gave cinema masterpieces like Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, Roman Polansky's *The Pianist*, Robert Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*, Elem Klimmov's *Come and See*, Paweł Pawlikowski's *Ida*, Peter Bebjak's *The Auschwitz Report* and László Nemes's *Son of Saul*. However, the maker's made them more from a humanist perspective than with explicit racist overtones. Moreover, these films leave a lasting impact on viewers not because of the grotesque, gruesome and graphic depiction of extreme violence but for minimalist, suggestive and sensitive portrayal of actual events. *The Kashmir Files* allows me to

reminisce and introspect about these classics but also reminds me about two particular films titled *Pieta* by Late Kim Ki Duk and *The Golden Glove* by Faith Akin; both are notorious and, as such nauseating for their spine-chilling violent scenes.

I knew about the tragic exodus or displacement of Kashmiri Pandits from their ancestral homeland in the early nineties due to communal frenzy and brutal persecution. I can also understand their pain, anguish, suffering and irretrievable losses; their lives and materials; land and properties. I did not know that the valley had been ruled by the Hindu Khasa tribe members' dynasty until the 14th century, when it gave away to the Muslim rulers for its weakness and corruption. Suhadeva, the last stable king of the Lohara dynasty, ruled until 1320 CE. His benevolence in giving shelter and position to Shah Mir and Bulbul Shah and trusting them unequivocally backfired because his death had coincided with the Turkish invasion in 1320. Kashmir Valley fell into massive confusion following this attack, and in no time, the friends became schemers to bring the Valley to its knees. Queen Kota Rani, the widow of Suhadeva's brother, Udayanadeva, offered resistance for a while. However, according to a popular version of the Kashmiri Pandits, she married Shah Mir but died in a mysterious circumstance on the wedding night. Kashmiris were "feeling extraordinarily pinched by the Arab aggression in the Indus valley", according to historian Ronald Davidson. By the end of the 14th century, most of Kashmir had become Muslim. However, the Brahmins still maintained their traditional roles as learned administrators until the accession of Sultan Sikandar Butshikan of the Shah Mir dynasty. Kashmir was under Muslim rule for four centuries until 1819, when the control of the Durrani Empire of Afghanistan ended with the conquering armies of the Sikhs under Ranjit Singh of Punjab.

In 1845, when the outcome of the first Anglo-Sikh War had gone in favour of the British, the reigning king Gulab Singh became a helpful mediator and the trusted advisor of Sir Henry Lawrence. Two treaties were concluded, and one of these two gave him authority to rule the valley of Kashmir hill countries between the rivers Beas and Indus;

however, the state of Kashmir came under the suzerainty of the British Crown after the Indian Rebellion of 1857, in which Kashmir sided with the British. Maharaja Hari Singh was the reigning monarch in 1947 after British rule of the subcontinent and the subsequent partition of the British Indian Empire into the newly independent Dominion of India and the Dominion of Pakistan. Burton Stein's 'History of India', though it was anticipated that the maharaja would accede to Pakistan when the British rule ended on 14–15 August, was hesitant. As Pakistan immediately launched a guerrilla onslaught to scare him into submission, the Maharaja sought assistance from Mountbatten. The governor-general agreed on the condition that the ruler accedes to India. Indian soldiers entered Kashmir and drove the Pakistani-sponsored irregulars from all but a small section of the state, which is what is today called India's Kashmir.

The unabated attempt for ethnic cleansing and exile of Kashmiri Pandits is entirely bigoted, communal and Pakistan sponsored; it is rooted in the historical feud between Pakistan and India even today since Maharaja Hari Singh, the reigning monarch of Kashmir in 1947 unexpectedly acceded to India. The all-out endeavour of Pakistan to continue a proxy war through the Azadis or Jihadis has just one objective: to achieve secession of Jammu & Kashmir from India. In 1990, Pakistan came with all its force to accomplish this objective by arming the JKLF and other pro-Pakistani forces to unleash a reign of terror by brutal savagery. The terrorists maimed, killed, lynched and looted many Kashmiri Pandits and other natives. The terror-stricken Pandits had to run for life, leaving their homes and hearths behind them. The choice of exile was forced on the Kashmiri Pandit community by Pakistan-sponsored terrorists who imposed their writ on Kashmir by unleashing death and destruction. And worse, the state government at that time abdicated its constitutional duties and thereby created a socio-political vacuum and left people's life and liberty at the mercy of looters, marauders and terror groups.

In such a terrifying time, when allegedly the then Indian government at the centre failed to act decisively, the Kashmiri Pandits began to leave in

much greater numbers in the 1990s during the eruption of militancy, following persecution and threats by radical Islamists and militants. The events of 19th January 1990 were particularly vicious. On that day, mosques issued declarations that the Kashmiri Pandits were Kafirs and that the males had to leave Kashmir, convert to Islam or be killed. Those who chose the first of these were told to leave their women behind. The Kashmiri Muslims were instructed to identify Pandit homes so they could be systematically targeted for conversion or killing.

Like *Tamas*, or any other remarkable film on the partition, could *The Kashmir Files* truly portrays the terrifying time of the late ninety's Kashmir when in the event of Pak-sponsored genocide and not to forget, amid the baffling apathy of both state and central government, the Kashmiri Pandits had to leave their homeland frantically. Before looking out for answers, one must be clear that this film is not about the larger picture of the tragic exodus of the Kashmiri people. Still, it is a tapered, constricted portrayal of a few ghastly murders of those days in the backdrop of the ill-fated flight, in which even the setting remains sketchy. Neither is this film an objective account of the politics of the time in its larger perspective. For the film, the director Vivek Agnihotri creates an imaginary but unconvincing plot that often switches between the contemporary period set in the year 2020 and the tumultuous period of 1989-1990's Kashmir. It unfolds with the tense and vitriolic situation of 19th January 1990, when the Kashmiri militants storm and banish Kashmiri Hindu Pandits from the Kashmir valley using slogans like *Raliv Galiv ya Chaliv* (convert (to Islam), leave or die) and *Mustafa Batte Safa* (with god's grace Kashmiri Pandit should leave the valley). The narrative develops at the right pace until it gets absorbed by horrific violence when militant commander Farooq Malik Bitta breaks into his former teacher Pushkar Nath Pandit's house to kill his son, Karan, an RSS worker. Bitta found him hiding in a rice container and pumped bullets from his Kalashnikov despite the pleas of his wife and Pushkar Pandit. However, when the extremities of the scene have gone to the furthest, as Bitta compels Karan's wife Sharda to eat blood-soaked rice to save their

lives in an extended set, one can sense that the director has a purpose beyond the obvious.

Interestingly, many Kashmiri Pandits now claim that the scene reminds them of the murder of the engineer BK Ganju, then employed with MTNL. While talking to *Dainik Bhaskar* recently, BK Ganju's brother Shiban Krishna Ganju recalls that BK Ganju was getting ready to go to the office when four terrorists barged into their house. "When they did not find my brother, the neighbours told the terrorists that he was hiding on the top floor. The terrorists found him hiding in a rice drum and fired eight bullets into his chest. After killing him, the terrorists came down and left BK Ganju's wife and child unhurt, saying there should be someone to cry to". However, Shiban claims, he knew nothing about his sister-in-law being fed blood-soaked rice by the militants; neither has she ever told him anything like that or anyone. The film has gone too far concerning the scene, albeit with a motive. Amidst the breathtaking narrative, however, a lighter moment emerges when the scene of dead bodies nailed on tree trunks at an improbable height could be perceived as cut out of cardboard!

In the film, the surviving son is the character of Krishna, whom his grandfather Pushkar Pandit brought up. Krishna is now a university student, and despite sounding flimsy, he believes his parents had died in an accident. At the same time, he is contesting in the student body election of ANU (JNU?) under the influence of a separatist-sympathizer, Professor Radhika Menon. Krishna's grandfather dies during his campaign. Krishna travels to Kashmir to disperse the ashes in their ancestral home, per Pushkar's last wish. Upon his arrival, Krishna meets Pushkar's friends Brahma Dutta, a retired IAS officer; Vishnu Ram, a journalist; Dr Mahesh Kumar, a physician; and retired DGP Hari Narain, all of whom had served in Kashmir when his father Karan was killed. While they recall the events of Kashmir from their memory, the skeletons are out of the closet.

The misconception fed by Professor Menon milled into thin air when he came to know about the assassination of his father and, much later, how brutally the militants killed his mother and elder brother Shiva. In his unrestrained best, Director

Agnihotri prefers to unfold the horrific events as graphically as possible. He seems oblivious to the fact that cinema is essentially a representational art. Therefore, the scenes of militants coming in disguise of the Indian Army and outraging the modesty of Sharda Pandit before butchering her on a woodcutter appeared agonising for the weak-hearted. A little later, the terrorists lined up young Shiva and many elders to shoot them in their heads. These scenes were so gory, horrific, spine-chilling and unbearable that at least it gave me a feeling that the last bullet which pierced Shiva's head could have been hit by none but by the director himself. It appears that the *pelages-*

rem, or the primary intention of this film, has been to shock, horrify and ignite hatred and anger in viewers' minds against a particular community. If the director claims this is the 'true' portrayal of the immeasurable, indescribable horror, carnage, exodus and displacement of the Kashmiri Pandits during the late nineties, I believe it is not. At best, this film can be summed up as an instance of betrayal in portrayal because it could not become one such film in which the inexplicable woes and miseries of the displaced Kashmiris are reflected in right earnest lest chronicle the most terrible occurrence of Kashmir in true spirit after India attained independence.

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