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A QUEST TO UNEARTH THE TRUTH: REVIEW OF THE FILM THE KASHMIR FILES

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The Kashmir Files attempts to take on the contentious subject of Kashmir Pandit's (Hindus) forced exodus from the disputed region— of Kashmir Valley in India during the 1990s', which has been hogging the headings in media since its release in cinema theatres and on OTT (Over-The-Top) platforms throughout India and abroad. *The Kashmir Files*, scripted and directed by the Indian nationalist film director Vivek Ranjan Agnihotri (2022), is a feature film in the drama genre. It is based on a true catastrophe and exodus of Kashmiri Pandits— a recognised religious minority from the Kashmir valley of India in the early 1990s', who were given a choice by the Islamic militants to renunciate their Hinduism, convert to Islam or die or run away.

For those who were too young to remember the events that resulted in the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits and made them refugees in their nation, this 2022 film, *The Kashmir Files*, shows what happened during the 1990s' Kashmir insurgency along with the trauma and plight of Kashmir Pandits. In addition, the film also argues that the phenomenon wasn't just an exodus but also a ferocious genocide that lingers to put out of sight for several political motives.

In this film, documenting the ordeal of the Kashmir pandit households and bringing forth the lamentable and dark chapter of Indian history, the director has tried to show the truth of the ghastly event— Kashmir pandit's exodus, which was hidden away from Indians for thirty-two years now. Screening the mayhem in Kashmir Valley, *The Kashmir Files opened in the* 1990s with kids playing in the piercing and biting extreme cold weather. While commentary on Indian cricketer Sachin Tendulkar's performance on a vintage radio set continues to play, a group of Muslim men beats a young Hindu boy, Shiva, asking him to raise the pro-Pakistan slogan '*Pakistan Zindabad'*. Seeing him getting beaten up, his fellow player and friend 'Abdul' holds his hand and asks him to run away from the scene of barbarity and hide nearby. Soon after the scene, we see a massive rally of Kashmiri Muslim youths holding guns and flags and setting Pandits' houses on fire while asking them to '*Raliv Galiv ya Chaliv*' (Convert, Die or Leave), which shows the callousness of Kashmir separatists.

In this film, the audience has acknowledged the history of attacks on Kashmiri Pandits and their evacuation from the Kashmir Valley. Unlike earlier Bollywood films, this film is different as it briefly screens modern India's historical events and the politics behind them. There are numerous great Indian directors who could mark their filmmaking skills by directing films and making politicians and gangsters their subjects. But unlike everyone else, Agnihotri has uniquely created history by venturing into a much-debated story with the backing of shreds of evidence.

Agnihotri defines the character supremely well and enlivens the movie with accomplished and dramatic sequences. He has dramatically succeeded in doing what other directors haven't been able to accomplish in the past thirty-two years. His roaring call for attention to the ignorant subject, clear vision and painstaking efforts are crystal clear, and the audience has understood the reality just by watching a 170-minute film. Since most of the viewers in South India lack mastery over Hindi, South India had the major challenge of better understanding the film compared to North Indians.

The film becomes a subject for the audiences to dote on and is made appealing not only by the vibrant storyline but also by the way the narrative unfurls through a continuum, accompanied by the acting of a stellar cast—Anupam Kher, who dies while fighting for the rights of Kashmiri Pandits after their exodus in the film, Mithun Chakraborty, Atul Srivastava, Puneet Issar and Prakash Belawadi. With such a phenomenal group of actors coming together along with the film's intriguing plot, *The Kashmir Files* grabs the attention of sundry audiences. Although the characters in the film are few, the director goes into setting forth what he wants to delegate to the audience using minimalist characters. As the film picks up pace, we connect closely with those characters.

Holding the viewers' extreme attention, the second half of the film turns out to be decisive in bringing out the essence of the film. The audiences see Professor Radhika Menon (Pallavi Joshi) and her induced behaviour, which prompts Pushkar Nath's grandson Krishna (Darshan Kumar), a distracted JNU (Jawaharlal Nehru University) student, to run for the post of president of the University students' union so he could support

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the demands of Kashmiri separationists. But to accomplish his grandfather Pushkar Nath's last wish, Krishna travels to the Kashmir valley to keep Pushkar Nath's ashes at his home in Kashmir and Pushkar Nath's four friends. Then, Krishna comes to know about the reality of the Kashmir Pandit's exodus and the reasons behind his mother, father and elder brother Shiva's death. Later on, Krishna decides to inform the entire JNU student fraternity about the grounding reality through his first-rate speech before the student body elections. In the speech, Professor Radhika Menon hoped Krishna would speak out against the Indian government and praise Kashmir separatists. But in a way that no one expected, Krishna starts to tell the history of the Pandits and their role in turning Kashmir into an intellectual centre. Making herself a loser, Professor Radhika, who is sitting in the auditorium there along with the students, suddenly walks away without being heard as Krishna begins to speak in support of the Kashmiri Pandits.

There's a gruesome delinquency scene where Pushkar Nath's son-in-law (Krishna's father) is mercilessly shot dead by Islamic militants while hiding in a grain-filled drum. His spouse had been forced to eat rice mixed with her husband's blood to save the remaining members of her family from being killed by Islamic militants. The film, in the end, also reconstructs the 2003 Nadimarg (a village located in the Pulwama district of Jammu and Kashmir) holocaust, where twenty-four Kashmiri Pandits were brutally shot and killed by militants outfitted in counterfeit army uniforms. Watching all this, we as human beings can understand how horrible the cruelty seen by Kashmiri pandits was. Also, the director presented the act of savagery experienced by women belonging to the Kashmir pandit fraternity and many such atrocities that wet our eyes.

In terms of acting, Anupam Kher enlivened the film with his gripping and enthralling performance of pain and agony on screen, which will last forever in his life. The audience watches Kher's heart-wrenching performance in the film, reminiscing Kher's acting in his debut film, which he starred 37 years ago in Mahesh Bhatt's Hindi film *Saaransh* (1984). Particularly, the dialogues by Kher in the film break down the audience throughout the film. For example, in the second half of the film, viewers in the theatres turn out to be despondent, and they witness tears rolling down their cheeks with unrelenting grief when Anupam Kher, on his deathbed, says to his grandson Krishna sprinkles his ashes on his lost house in Kashmir.

Unlike most films, this is two hours and fifty minutes long, which is abnormal within the Hindi screenland. However, the audience wouldn't get fed up at any point in the scenes throughout watching. Especially before the end of the first half of the film, Pushkar Nath, together with his daughter Sharda, grandsons Krishna and Shiva, and other Kashmiri Pandits, are seen departing Kashmir valley in a truck to the Jammu region before dawn without taking any belongings for survival. We later see plenty of dead Kashmiri pandits hung from the trees, and it touches the emotions of people who believe in humanity, and it adds emotional value to the film.

Many films about the Kashmir issue and the insurgency were made just before *The Kashmir Files*, but only a few films were exclusively based on the Kashmir pandits within the Kashmir issue. For example, the Indian Hindi-language film *Shikara* (2020), directed by Vidhu Vinod Chopra, is primarily centred on two aspects: (i) the love story of a Kashmiri Pandit couple during the 1990s uprising in Jammu and Kashmir and (ii) the ensuing forced exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the Valley on the orders of Islamic militants. Ashoke Pandit Helmed *Sheen* (2004) is an Indian Bollywood film that depicts the predicament of Kashmiri Pandits, who run away from their residences as refugees during the insurgency in Kashmir during the 1990s'. Sanjay Amar directed another Hindi film titled *19th January* (2014), which shows the socio-political reality of contemporary Kashmir between 1989 and early 1998.

The director could not sow the seed of the film where it would be easy for him to sidestep, delving into political snags. However, it may not represent all aspects of the disputed Kashmir region in India. Still, it, unlike other films, clearly depicts the perpetuated atrocities, forced migration of Kashmiri Pandits, and perpetrators of violence during the 1990s. The film does not set foot into too much detail on any further characters apart from the Pushkar Nath family. It would have been more interesting if the director pivoted on other characters as well. Though the film lacks distinctive thrilling moments around every corner for an audience, it drives the viewers to sing the blues.

Since the film has been certified under the 'A' category—restricted to viewers aged 18 or above, by the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC)—a film certification authority in India, adolescents will not be able to watch this film, despite the film showcasing roles played by adolescent boys (Awasthi, 2022).

Over the centuries, history of any type has been recorded and disseminated through books. But at present, with the emerging novel media technologies and upsurge in their usage, visual media gained momentum, and it has also turned out to be a significant and influential medium to display the events of historical grandness. *The Kashmir files* released in 2022 should be seen as one such fair effort to portray the historical events of Modern India. Irrespective of ideology and faith, all such supreme efforts should unceasingly be welcomed and invigorated by the Nation.

The history of the Kashmir Pandits' exodus and the uproar of living as refugees in their own country should be taught in educational establishments. Most importantly, the government must learn from this experience and ensure that future generations do not experience such grief in any further part of the country in the coming years.

Nothing can suppress an unembellished truth. Straight through this gut-wrenching Bollywood film, the director proves that a film can bring forth and unfurl truth of any kind.

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