

After *The Kashmir Files* – A Perspective

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A film is, essentially, for entertainment. But unlike most filmmakers, some may pursue some 'higher purpose' than to just conform. Such as those with a gift may have an itch to perform. Many, with a zeal, try to reform, or even go further, to attempt a transform. Others, with some deep insight, may wish to inform. And these days, for some perfectly honourable purpose, you may even stoop to misinform. No matter what fetish you fancy, O filmmaker, it is almost written in stone that if you want a big audience and mega bucks, entertain you must. So goes conventional wisdom. And even those, who often see themselves as unconventionally wise, don't disagree. Over the decades, to entertain has been a strong justification for most filmmakers to get away with even gory murders and graphic rapes, quite literally.

Over the decades, 'guaranteed successes' at the 'box-office' often follow a certain formula. Three common prerequisites—superstars, super banners and super budgets—are a given. What they churn out are super films. Everything about such films is an attempt at redefining the super. Super locations, super stunts, super animations, super special effects...the works. It is through this 'superdom' that their success is almost as good as underwritten. And that happens the day they are rumoured about in the grapevine, much before they are even formally announced. In the run-up to their release, they are so hyped and pumped through the media, as if to miss such a film is a life wasted. And when they are released, they suck away all the screens like a vacuum cleaner, leaving no other option should you feel like a movie those couple of weeks. It is a surreal world, ironically, paid for by real people. In this terrain, *The*

Kashmir Files, is an unpretentiously modest movie which has no song n dance, no romance, no skin, no oomph, no mystery, no perverse sexuality, no incest, no promiscuity, not even colourful expletives. To make such a film that didn't even promise to entertain, much less, expect to break-even, takes something special.

The film was formally released for public viewing on 11 March this year. The director, producer & author Vivek Ranjan Agnihotri, and his team had organised a preview in Delhi on the preceding Sunday, 6 March. I was one of the few who were invited to the preview. Incidentally, the earlier film that didn't keep the promise to tell the 'untold story of Kashmiri Pandits,' was previewed at the very venue three years back. And that experience was such an infliction that the mind was unwilling to ignore even this bit of inconsequential similarity. This time, I was consciously trying to keep my expectations in check. Yet, more than my several expectations, it was the apprehensions that were bothering me.

From the larger issues like, 'how much dilution will the story of our genocide suffer this time over,' or, 'what price will the "compulsions of film-making in India" extract this time around' and 'what will be the net takeout by the audience from this film,' to the finer issues related to the craft of cinema, such as, 'is the fictionalisation of the events straining too much credibility,' 'is the casting of the characters gelling,' or 'are the characters making that critical connect with the viewer.' Frankly, it was not Vivek's film anymore. It felt as if it was my own first ever job-interview. So much seemed to be riding on it.

I had been hearing of the impact *The Kashmir Files* had had on the audiences, in its preview tour in the USA. I also heard about the response it evoked in Jammu a few days earlier. Yet, it wasn't reassuring enough. Perhaps, I have seen too many people respond in many strange ways to cinema. Perhaps, I have seen too many such films that were rather not made at all. Film makers may be somewhat special humans, but humans, after all.

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The film's huge commercial success has surprised the opponents and the supporters alike. This is despite the widespread belief that there wasn't much juice left in the issue after it was given a saturated coverage and debated to death in the news shows.

The logic being that the people, therefore, already had more than a general idea about what happened to the Hindus there. Even then, why would so many flock to the theatres has befuddled many. It wasn't a Ramleela that people would watch despite knowing the entire story of Prabhu Shri Ram, some may argue.

In my view, there are several reasons for the film to succeed so well:

- i) Kashmir is a huge issue now in India's public discourse. There isn't a district that hasn't lost a son defending India in Kashmir. India has lost more soldiers in Kashmir than in all the wars put together since independence.
- ii) The point above is sustained by the fact that Kashmir is the most topical issue in the national news almost all through the year, year after year.
- iii) To know about any issue and to stay conscious about it in such a sustained manner builds and whets an appetite for experiencing its depiction.
- iv) For all those who suffered in Kashmir and suffered for Kashmir, and then live day in and day out, with the vehement denials and polemical distortions, this film was a vindication of their lived truth. It was time to stand with, in solidarity if you may, those who dared to defy all attempts at obfuscation and dilution of our genocide.
- v) And finally, we, all who are aching and suffering deep within and all those who suffer with us for our predicament, this was an immersive cathartic experience, a pseudo relief as it were, in the absence of a real one.

Yet, my scepticism was not without reason. Over the last three decades, I have met many a reasonable and well-meaning person, jump to strange conclusions on Kashmir. Some, often due to inadequate information and a lack of familiarity with Kashmir. That bit is understandable. But quite a few who do so, owe it to their mind-set, or call it conditioning, if you may. This conditioning is the outcome of what the 'establishment' repeatedly hands down as a unique insight about Kashmir. Such insights are not just happily corroborated but further embroidered by the handmaiden media, patronised by the very same establishment. One such myth propagated was that Kashmir has been, for centuries, an epitome of Hindu-Muslim harmony and a syncretic culture, whatever that means. And to make that stick, history is happily

doctored, inconvenient facts were buried, lies concocted, contradictions denied and an entire community that followed the indigenous culture and traditions, not just abandoned but repeatedly offered to a predatory order as hostages, as some kind of a *carte blanche* guarantee by the Indian State.

There are repeated cycles of how our establishment stitches together a patchwork peace—by paying a ransom to postpone conflict, make concessions to win hearts and minds, allow long-term damages for petty short-term gains, ignore blatant challenges to the state's authority and nation's sovereignty—all in the name of managing Kashmir. Here, we must not confuse the establishment with any party in power or, for that matter, a certain leader in office. Establishment is a transcendental creature. It comprises senior and middle level bureaucracy; higher judiciary including the bar as much as the bench; leading media owners and opinion pushers, especially of the cosy-club; political busybodies; bankrolled NGOs with agendas, masquerading as think-tanks; and finally, the crony money-bags. Some of my friends like to add a shadowy touch to the list by including the deep-state in it. This establishment is the Indian state. Governments come and go every five years, if not sooner. But the establishment goes on. Not that it is immortal. But it lasts far longer than a life time and evolves at a glacial pace.

This seemingly motely group is remarkably connected and symbiotic. Over the decades, the establishment has grown fascinatingly immune to the big changes, like an inconvenient electoral verdict, neutering of Constitutional provisions that were used as a sanctuary or for that matter even the reorganisation of the State of Jammu & Kashmir into two Union Territories. But the establishment, paradoxically, is inherently allergic to any substantive change in the status quo across the administration, across important instruments and organs of the state on the ground like education, police, lower judiciary, public works, academia, media, key businesses as tourism, retail, real-estate, or for that matter, the return of the expelled Kashmiri Hindus, no matter how critical that may be to the imperatives of national security or nation building.

There is a looming crisis in sectors like education, health, water, food-safety, energy, sanitation, justice and more, which serve as building blocks for the nation. Simultaneously, we face a crying need for judicial reforms, electoral reforms, administrative reforms, police reforms, building regulatory mechanisms, institutions, systemic accountability and more. And, while addressing all this, we also need to survive the myriad challenges to national security on the borders and within. Do the responses coming from the establishment, across the board, even appear mindful of the situation?

The more charitable diagnosis of the pathogens causing this are the OCD rooted in virtue-signalling and political correctness. The less charitable and certainly more credible view is that the enemy has penetrated and captured the mind-space of our apex. The Indian state's Kashmir policy is the most eloquent testimony of the later view.

Media biases spawned by cocksure ideological persuasions have also added their share to the confusion. This type of malaise is incorrigible, no matter how many times a 'veteran journalist' visits Srinagar or meets his or her sundry list of usual suspects. Prejudice has a sly seductive way to draw the 'ground reporter', repeatedly, to her favourite echo-chamber and feed her with the concoctions masquerading as facts.