

**Framing Kashmir:
Analysing *The Kashmir Files* as Hindutva Political Cinema**

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Bachelor Thesis

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Date: 18 June 2025

Word Count: 10200

Introduction

Few films in recent Indian cinema have sparked as much public debate and political controversy as *The Kashmir Files* (2022). Written and directed by Vivek Agnihotri, the film was released across Indian cinemas in March 2022. Its premise is based on a historical event, the mass exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the Kashmir Valley in the late 1980s and early 1990s.¹ It purports to reveal the “true story” behind this displacement and the violent circumstances under which it occurred.² In doing so, however, it presents an overtly dramatized and ahistorical account of events, framed through a lens of Hindu victimhood and Muslim aggression, while disregarding broader socio-political and historical contexts. Unsurprisingly, *The Kashmir Files* received polarised responses. It was banned in Singapore for its “provocative and one-sided portrayal of Muslims,” deemed likely to disrupt social harmony.³ At the 53rd International Film Festival of India, jury head Nadav Lapid—an Israeli filmmaker—publicly denounced the film as “vulgar” and “propaganda.”⁴ Within India, too, the film drew criticism from journalists, scholars, and film critics who argued that it promoted communal hatred and simplified a complex conflict in order to advance a Hindu nationalist agenda. Yet the film also attracted strong public support, particularly from those who viewed it as long overdue in addressing the suffering of Kashmiri Pandits.⁵ Those who criticised the film often faced backlash—including Nadav Lapid himself, whose comments sparked a national uproar and prompted a public reprimand from the Israeli ambassador to India.⁶ The director, Agnihotri,

¹ Alexander Evans, ‘A Departure from History: Kashmiri Pandits, 1990-2001’, *Contemporary South Asia* 11, no. 1 (1 March 2002): 20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/095849302200000341>.

² Sanjay Kak, ‘The Dangerous “Truth” of The Kashmir Files’, Al Jazeera, accessed 14 April 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/4/13/the-dangerous-truth-of-the-kashmiri-files>.

³ ‘The Kashmir Files: Singapore Bans Film Praised by India’s Modi’, Al Jazeera, 10 May 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/5/10/singapore-bans-controversial-kashmir-film-praised-by-indias-modi>.

⁴ ‘Explained: The IFFI Row over The Kashmir Files and the Controversial Israeli Filmmaker behind It’, Firstpost, 29 November 2022, <https://www.firstpost.com/explainers/explained-iffi-row-the-kashmir-files-vulgar-israeli-filmmaker-nadav-lapid-11714921.html>.

⁵ ‘Film on Expulsion of Kashmir’s Hindus Is Polarizing and Popular in India - The New York Times’, accessed 18 June 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/26/world/asia/india-film-kashmir-files.html>.

⁶ ‘The IFFI Row Explained’.

responded to the widespread criticism by suggesting that detractors were “self-evidently” affiliated with terrorist groups.⁷

Despite its controversial nature, *The Kashmir Files* was an immense box-office success, grossing over \$30 million domestically and ranking among the highest-grossing Hindi-language films of 2022.⁸ This contrasts sharply with *Shikara* (2020), another film on the same topic, which only earned around \$1 million.⁹ *Shikara* was criticised for its subdued and insufficient portrayal of the events surrounding the exodus,¹⁰ with its director, Vidhu Vinod Chopra, accused of failing to adequately represent the depth of suffering experienced by the Kashmiri Pandit community.¹¹

In this context, *The Kashmir Files* was seen as correcting the narrative failures of its predecessor, delivering what was promoted as the Kashmiri Pandit community’s #RightToJustice—a hashtag that featured prominently in the film’s marketing campaign.¹² However, the film’s popularity cannot be attributed to marketing alone. It received unprecedented political backing from India’s ruling establishment. Prime Minister Narendra Modi publicly endorsed the film, stating: “The film has shown the truth which has been suppressed for years… [It] is a very good movie. All of you should watch it.”¹³ Eight BJP-governed states—Haryana, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Goa, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand—took additional steps to support its circulation by making it tax-free, hosting special screenings, and offering government employees time off to

⁷ Kak, ‘The Dangerous “Truth” of The Kashmir Files’.

⁸ ‘The Kashmir Files Box Office Collection’, Bollywood Hungama, 11 March 2022, <https://www.bollywoodhungama.com/movie/the-kashmir-files/box-office/>.

⁹ ‘Shikara Box Office Collection’, Bollywood Hungama, 7 February 2020, <https://www.bollywoodhungama.com/movie/shikara/box-office/>.

¹⁰ Aditi Mishra and Sthitaprajna, ‘The Unforgettable Plight: Bollywood’s Wilful Amnesia Towards Kashmiri Pandits’, *Journal of Advanced Zoology* 44, no. S5 (18 November 2023): 2525–31, <https://doi.org/10.17762/jaz.v44iS-5.1936>.

¹¹ ‘Vidhu Vinod Chopra Responds to Open Letter That Critiques “Shikara”’, *The Times of India*, 26 May 2020, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/hindi/bollywood/news/vidhu-vinod-chopra-responds-to-open-letter-that-critiques-shikara/articleshow/76001080.cms>.

¹² TheKashmirFiles (@KashmirFiles), ‘4th Week’s Advance Booking for the Astonishing #TheKashmirFiles Is Open Now! Book Your Tickets Now . #RightToJustice [Https://T.Co/hFVGFI5TOG](https://T.Co/hFVGFI5TOG)’, Twitter, *Tweet*, April 1, 2022, <https://x.com/KashmirFiles/status/1509762468309917696>.

¹³ ‘“Truth Suppressed for Long Is Coming out”: PM Modi on “The Kashmir Files”, *The Times of India*, 15 March 2022, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/truth-suppressed-for-long-is-coming-out-pm-modi-on-the-kashmir-files/articleshow/90220573.cms>.

view the film. BJP leaders actively promoted the film on social media and WhatsApp, often framing it as essential viewing “for those interested in the future.”¹⁴

While political support for films is not unique to *The Kashmir Files*,¹⁵ the scale and intensity of this endorsement is significant. It raises crucial questions about the ideological functions of such cinematic productions. Why would a government so forcefully promote a film accused of fuelling communal tensions and distorting history? What role does this film play within the broader political narrative of the ruling government? This thesis aims to examine how Indian cinema—through films like *The Kashmir Files*—functions as an apparatus for ideological dissemination. This thesis argues that *The Kashmir Files* is not merely a portrayal of historical trauma, but a politically charged cultural artefact that actively contributes to the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) broader project of reshaping public memory through a Hindu nationalist lens—ultimately serving its ambition to establish an ethnonationalist state.

Before doing so, the thesis will begin by contextualising Hindu nationalism through the ideological contributions of V.D. Savarkar and M.S. Golwalkar, whose works provide the foundational framework for Hindutva. It then examines how this ideology imagines the Indian nation-state as an essentially Hindu polity, in which religious minorities—particularly Muslims and Christians—are cast as internal outsiders. The thesis further explores the BJP’s long-standing project of historical revisionism, and the role played by state-sanctioned cultural production, including cinema, in advancing this ideological agenda. Subsequently, a review of existing literature on *The Kashmir Files*, outlines how the present study contributes to ongoing scholarly debates and identifying the methodological approach it adopts. This section aims to situate the thesis within current academic discourse and highlight the specific gaps it seeks to address. The thesis will then briefly describe the film’s plot, structure, and visual

¹⁴ ‘How the BJP Is Promoting Vivek Agnihotri’s The Kashmir Files’, accessed 9 June 2025, <https://scroll.in/article/1019708/how-the-bjp-is-promoting-the-kashmir-files-modis-endorsement-tax-breaks-leave-from-work>.

¹⁵ ‘Is Cinema India’s New Political Battleground? Modi-Backed Article 370 Film Stirs Kashmiri Outrage | South China Morning Post’, accessed 18 June 2025, https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3253529/indias-kashmir-residents-outraged-modi-backed-article-370-propaganda-film-over-historical-distortion?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

style, before undertaking a close analysis of selected scenes and narrative strategies. This analysis will be informed by Louis Althusser's theory of the Ideological State Apparatus and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model. The concluding section will reflect on the broader implications of the film's reception and state-sponsored promotion, arguing that *The Kashmir Files* exemplifies how popular cinema is increasingly mobilised to legitimise Hindu nationalist ideology in contemporary India.

Hindu Nationalism: Savarkar, Golwalkar, and the Rise of Hindutva

Contemporary Hindu nationalism is rooted in the ideology of *Hindutva*, which reimagines India not as a secular and pluralist state but as a Hindu homeland defined by religious and cultural unity. The term was first theorised by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in his 1923 treatise *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?*, in which he conceptualised India as a fundamentally *Hindu Rashtra* (Hindu Nation). He reduced the question of Hindu identity to two criteria: *Pitribhū*, described as the land of one's ancestors stretching from *Sindhu* (the Indus) to the seas; *Punyabhū*, the same territory that also serves as the centre of one's sacred geography and worship. He writes: "A Hindu ... is he who looks upon the land that extends from Sindhu to Sindhu (from the Indus to the Seas) as the land of his forefathers—his Fatherland (Pitribhū) ... and who above all, addresses this land, this Sindhusthan as his Holyland (Punyabhū)." ¹⁶ On this basis, Muslims and Christians are excluded from the definition of a Hindu, as their sacred geographies lie outside the Indian subcontinent; even though they meet—if their ancestors were indigenous to the land—the criteria of *Pitribhū*. The *Hindu Rashtra*, as envisioned by Savarkar, is thus a sacred homeland extending beyond current geopolitical borders, in which national belonging depends on adherence to a culturally Hindu ethos. In practice, this vision leaves little room for religious minorities—especially Muslims and Christians—who are construed as foreign to the land.

Savarkar's ideological framework was later expanded and institutionalised by M.S. Golwalkar, the second *Sarsanghchalak* (chief) of the Rashtriya

¹⁶ Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, *Essentials of Hindutva* (Independently published, 1923), 43–44, <https://savarkar.org/en/encyc/2017/5/23/Essentials-of-Hindutva.html>.

Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), a Hindu nationalist paramilitary organisation founded in 1925 with the vision “to build a Hindu nation through close adherence to religious discipline.”¹⁷ In *We or Our Nationhood Defined* (1939), Golwalkar radicalised Savarkar’s ideas, asserting that genuine nationhood requires the fusion of five “unities.” He states that, “for the Nation concept to exist and be manifest, it must have as its indissoluble component parts the famous five unities ‘Geographical, (Country) Racial (Race), Religions (Religion), Cultural (Culture) and Linguistic (Language),’ that the loss or destruction of any one of these means the end of the Nation as a Nation.”¹⁸ Golwalkar explicitly presents religious minorities as incompatible with this vision unless they wholly assimilate. Further, he writes,

The foreign races in Hindusthan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language, must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no idea but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture, i.e., of the Hindu nation and must lose their separate existence to merge in the Hindu race, or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu Nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment—not even citizen's rights. There is, at least should be, no other course for them to adopt.¹⁹

The ideological foundations laid by Savarkar and Golwalkar have been the subject of significant scholarly analysis concerning the rise of Hindu nationalism and extremism in postcolonial India. Scholars such as Christophe Jaffrelot and Phil Gurski provide critical frameworks for understanding how Hindutva has evolved from a cultural ideology into a political programme with state backing. Both historicise the consolidation of Hindu nationalist sentiment and analyse the mechanisms by which this sentiment has been institutionalised and normalised.

¹⁷ Phil Gurski, *When Religion Kills: How Extremists Justify Violence Through Faith* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2022), 78, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781626378674>.

¹⁸ Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar, *WE or Our Nationhood Defined* (Nagpur: Bharat Publications, 1939), 83–84.

¹⁹ Golwalkar, 104–5.

In his introduction to *Hindu Nationalism*, Jaffrelot offers a genealogical account of Hindutva's development—from its origins as a 19th-century revivalist reaction to colonialism to its current manifestation as a form of ethnic nationalism. Despite Hinduism's internal diversity, he argues, Hindu nationalism seeks to impose a singular religious and cultural identity on the Indian nation-state. He writes, “the doctrine that was to become known by the name ‘Hindutva’ fulfilled the criteria of ethnic nationalism. Its motto, ‘Hindu, Hindi, Hindustan’, echoed many other European nationalisms based on religious identity, a common language, or even racial feeling.”²⁰ The primary vehicle of this ideology, from the time of Savarkar to the contemporary period, has been the RSS. Its foundational aim, Jaffrelot explains, was to consolidate the Hindu majority in response to what it perceived as internal threats, particularly the Muslim minority. The RSS feared that Muslims, due to their pan-Islamic affiliations and greater organisational coherence, posed a serious challenge to the Hindu majority, which it viewed as weakened by caste divisions and a lack of collective mobilisation. As Jaffrelot notes, “Being more aggressive and better organised, they [Muslims] could outmanoeuvre Hindus, who remained effete and divided into many castes and sects.”²¹

To counter this, the RSS sought to revitalise Hindu society through the propagation of Hindutva ideology and the recruitment of volunteers (*swayamsevaks*) to build a grassroots movement. While initially non-political in its orientation, this stance shifted after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi in 1948—committed by Nathuram Godse, a former RSS volunteer. In response to changing political circumstances, the organisation formed a political wing, which eventually evolved into the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).²² Beyond electoral politics, however, the RSS expanded its influence across civil society by establishing a wide network of affiliated organisations. These included unions for students, labourers, and professionals, as well as bodies focused on welfare, education, and social outreach. These various organisations were collectively grouped under the umbrella of the *Sangh Parivar* (literally, “the family of the

²⁰ Christophe Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism: A Reader* (Princeton University Press, 2009), 5, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400828036>.

²¹ Jaffrelot, 16.

²² Jaffrelot, 16–17.

Sangh”). The *Sangh Parivar* pursues a dual strategy in its attempt to reshape India into an ethno-nationalist Hindu state. The first is socio-political, which involves positioning itself as a patriotic force in defence of national unity, often employing populist rhetoric to appeal to the masses. The second is more militant, involving the promotion of an aggressive form of “Hinduness,” which ranges from the imposition of Hindi as the national language to the protection of cows—sacred in Hindu tradition—sometimes through violent means. These two approaches, Jaffrelot argues, are not contradictory but complementary, forming a comprehensive strategy for cultural hegemony and ideological transformation.²³

While Jaffrelot offers a detailed account of the organisational expansion and ideological ambitions of the Sangh Parivar, he stops short of foregrounding the systematic use of violence that often accompanies its mobilisation. It is this dimension that Phil Gurski takes up more directly in *When Religion Kills*, shifting the focus from institutional strategy to the role of religiously motivated violence in advancing Hindutva ideology. Building on the ideological foundations laid by the RSS, Gurski draws a striking parallel between the movement’s vision of a Hindu purist society and Nazi Germany’s pursuit of racial purity. He claims that “in some ways, the RSS, a Hindu purist organization, has similarities with the Nazi goal of a pure Aryan Race.”²⁴ Gurski contends that the realisation of this ideological vision involves not only cultural dominance but also the strategic use of religiously motivated violence. He characterises the RSS and BJP as active instigators of such conflict. One manifestation of this is what has come to be referred to—both colloquially and academically—as “saffron terror”: a form of religious extremism committed by Hindu nationalist groups. This includes hate crimes, mob lynchings, and the systemic demonisation of minorities through both policy and propaganda. Besides noting a broader and growing climate of Islamophobia, Gurski classifies cases of saffron terror into four primary domains: (1) cow vigilantism, (2) the campaign against so-called “love jihad,” (3) the unsettled situation in Kashmir, and (4) the citizenship crisis in Assam.

²³ Jaffrelot, 18–19.

²⁴ Gurski, *When Religion Kills*, 78.

Through detailed evidence—including examples of state complicity in mob violence and political glorification of lynch mobs—Gurski argues that the BJP, under Narendra Modi, does not merely tolerate extremism but actively cultivates an atmosphere in which it flourishes. The party’s strategic deployment of religious polarisation, he asserts, serves to consolidate electoral support and normalise majoritarian ideology.²⁵ Both Jaffrelot and Gurski point to the instrumental use of victimhood narratives as a core strategy of Hindutva mobilisation. Gurski highlights the RSS’s rhetorical motif, “*Hindu khatre mein hai* (‘Hindus are in danger’),”²⁶ while Jaffrelot describes Hindutva as arising from an ambivalent imitation of the West and Islam—adopting perceived strengths of the “Other” in order to resist them more effectively and writes that, “Hindutva doctrine resulted from an ambivalent reaction to the West and Islam. Hindu nationalists imitated features of the Other—to whom they attributed superiority—in order to resist the Other more effectively.”²⁷ This attempt at inculcated senses of grievance and persecution function as powerful ideological device and is key to understanding the political context in which films like *The Kashmir Files* are both produced and received.

Historical Cinema and Ideological Mobilisation

Films in India often served as flashpoints for social unrest, and in some cases, even violence. A prominent example is the 2018 blockbuster *Padmaavat*, which triggered nationwide protests and threats of violence.²⁸ The film recounts an allegorical epic poem written in the 16th century by the Sufi poet Malik Muhammad Jayasi, depicting the (likely fictional) Rajput queen Padmavati and her encounter with the historical Sultan of Delhi, Alauddin Khilji. The controversy centred on the perceived “disrespect” shown to Padmavati’s character—particularly regarding her attire and an imagined romantic or physical proximity to Khilji, leading to three-hundred Hindu women threatening to kill themselves.²⁹ The reaction was driven less by historical fact than by a perceived

²⁵ Gurski, 89–90.

²⁶ Gurski, 92.

²⁷ Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism*, 24.

²⁸ ‘Padmavat: Violence after India Top Court Lifts Ban on Film’, 22 January 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-42771328>.

²⁹ Gurski, *When Religion Kills*, 87.

affront to Hindu honour, revealing broader anxieties about Hindu femininity, Islamic power, and historical injustice.

A more recent example is *Chhaava* (2025), a film that, like *The Kashmir Files*, received Modi's explicit praise and government tax-breaks.³⁰ The film rapidly became the highest-grossing Hindi-language film of the year, earning over \$25 million within its first week.³¹ It centres on the 17th-century Maratha ruler Sambhaji Maharaj and his military confrontation with the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb. Like *Padmaavat*, *Chhaava* attracted criticism for its simplistic portrayal of Hindu–Muslim relations and for representing Aurangzeb as a monolithically cruel and fanatical oppressor. The film's ideological framing sparked social tensions, particularly in the city of Nagpur, where Aurangzeb's tomb is located. Following its release, mobs targeted the tomb, leading to violent clashes with security forces and the imposition of a police curfew.³² It also ignited a wave of anti-Muslim sentiment online, with Hindutva-aligned politicians and supporters derogatorily referring to Indian Muslims as “*Aurangzeb ki aulad*” (“children of Aurangzeb”).³³ Aurangzeb is cast as the tyrannical Muslim “other,” a figure invoked to consolidate Hindu identity. It reflects the sectarian tensions and “imagined threats” of modern India, where figures like Aurangzeb become symbolic stand-ins for a Muslim “Other” perceived as permanently antagonistic to Hindu identity.³⁴ As discussed earlier, this cinematic othering mirrors what Christophe Jaffrelot identifies as a defining feature of Hindutva: the construction of national selfhood through antagonism to an internalised religious outsider. The depiction of minorities has shifted from secular inclusion to a Hindutva logic that renders the Muslim, and increasingly the Christian, a stranger within their own country.³⁵ *Chhaava* exemplifies how historical cinema—particularly when aligned

³⁰ Rana Ayyub, ‘Opinion | This 17th-Century Hatred Is Fueling India’s Politics’, *The Washington Post*, 14 April 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2025/04/14/india-mughals-movie-muslim-hatred-chhaava/>.

³¹ Bollywood Hungama, ‘Chhaava Box Office Collection | India | Day Wise | Box Office - Bollywood Hungama’, 14 February 2025, <https://www.bollywoodhungama.com/movie/chhaava/box-office/>.

³² Ayyub, ‘Opinion | This 17th-Century Hatred Is Fueling India’s Politics’.

³³ Sayima Ahmad, ““Chhaava” Triggers Online Religious Hate Wave Targeting Minorities”, The Siasat Daily, 22 February 2025, <https://www.siasat.com/chhaava-triggers-online-religious-hate-wave-targetting-minorities-3184102/>.

³⁴ San Chirico and Kerry P. C, ‘Dharma and the Religious Other in Hindi Popular Cinema: From Nehru through Modi’, *JRJM*, 2020, 39, <http://unipub.uni-graz.at/jrjm/4921438>.

³⁵ Chirico and C, 93.

with Hindutva ideology—can function as a tool for political and emotional mobilisation. It reframes complex historical episodes into binary moral allegories that serve nationalist ends. Such cinematic revisionism is not isolated; rather, it forms part of a broader pedagogical shift in Indian education and popular culture, where history is selectively reinterpreted to support a majoritarian, ethnonationalist worldview.

One of the most powerful instruments of Hindutva’s ideological consolidation has been education. As Christophe Jaffrelot explains, “education occupies a central position in the Hindu nationalist agenda since it pertains to the very mission of the RSS … ‘character building.’”³⁶ Through the establishment of *Vidya Bharti* (Indian Knowledge) schools and influence over educational state institutions, the Sangh Parivar has worked to reshape public education in line with its worldview. This includes efforts to revise history textbooks, diminish the role of secular and Marxist scholarship, and elevate Hindu historical figures and themes central to the nationalist narrative.³⁷ Just as education has become a key site of ideological contestation under the BJP, cinema has likewise been transformed into a vehicle for state-sanctioned historical revisionism and cultural messaging. As Ajay Gehlawat notes, the Hindi film industry—once derided as escapist “masala” fare—has undergone a notable shift in both form and content since Narendra Modi’s election in 2014, with the emergence of films that increasingly endorse nationalist and Islamophobic narratives.³⁸ The government-appointed censor board, inherited from colonial-era morality laws, now acts as a powerful gatekeeper, regulating content under expansive pretexts such as public decency, national security, or the prevention of offence—criteria easily aligned with Hindutva objectives.³⁹ Gehlawat further observes that dissent within the industry is increasingly punished, particularly in the case of Muslim actors and filmmakers who are often branded as “anti-national” and subjected to targeted boycotts.⁴⁰ These dynamics, he argues, have created a new cinematic ecosystem in

³⁶ Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism*, 269.

³⁷ Jaffrelot, 269–70.

³⁸ Ajay Gehlawat, *Bollywoodpolitics: Popular Hindi Cinema and Hindutva*, 1st ed., World Cinema (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024), 3–4, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/rug/detail.action?docID=31205125>.

³⁹ Gehlawat, 4–5.

⁴⁰ Gehlawat, 5.

which films like *Padmaavat* (2018), *Kesari* (2019), and *The Kashmir Files* (2022) reflect a turning away from the old Bollywood model.⁴¹

Literature Review: Kashmir and the Hindu Nation

In the context of rising Hindu nationalism and the expanding cultural influence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), scholars have argued that popular films increasingly reflect—and reinforce—Hindutva ideology. This literature review surveys key academic contributions that interrogate how cinema mediates the relationship between religion, national identity, and the construction of the Muslim “Other,” with a specific focus on Kashmir, history, and moral narrative structures.

In her essay *The Kashmiri as Muslim*, Ananya Jahanara Kabir examines the evolving representation of Kashmir and Kashmiri Muslims in Indian cinema. She identifies a shift from earlier portrayals that romanticised the landscape and effaced religious identity, to more recent depictions in which Muslimness is both hyper visible and politically charged. According to Kabir, films increasingly associate Kashmiri Muslim identity with sedition, presenting Muslim characters as either passive victims or existential threats. This transformation, she argues, reflects the movement of cinematic narratives from explorations of modernity and tradition in the 1960s to alignments with national and global identity politics in the 1990s, shaped by both the rise of Hindutva and the Kashmiri demand for *azaadi* (freedom).⁴² Expanding on the ideological implications of these shifts, Dhillon and Gwynne argue that contemporary Hindi cinema has undergone a “post-secular” transformation, wherein religion is conflated with national identity. In their article *Saffronizing Bollywood*, they analyse how Hindu nationalist tropes are embedded in cinematic narratives, framing Muslims as “redeemable” only when they submit to Hindutva values. They warn that cinema, as a powerful cultural apparatus in India, serves as a tool of ideological interpellation—shaping

⁴¹ Gehlawat, 3.

⁴² Ananya Jahanara Kabir, ‘The Kashmiri as Muslim in Bollywood’s “New Kashmir Films”’, in *Kashmir: History, Politics, Representation*, ed. Chitralekha Zutshi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 285–86, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316855607.016>.

spectators' sense of national identity in ways that align with Hindu majoritarianism.⁴³

Mridu Rai extends this cultural critique into the political sphere, arguing that Kashmiri Muslims serve as essential “contrapuntal symbols” in the construction of what she terms a “mythical Hindu nation.” Within this nationalist imaginary, Kashmiris are cast as embodiments of “terrorist violence, illegitimate religious impulses and sedition,” functioning as the ideological foil through which the Hindu nation can define itself.⁴⁴ As she writes, “an ever-restive Muslim Kashmir has provided a valuable foil against which both dissent and difference in India itself has been sought to be erased to support the construction of a monolithic upper-caste-dominated Hindu rashtra.”⁴⁵ Her work demonstrates how Kashmir is not only politically marginalised but discursively essential to the ideological reproduction of Hindutva, offering a lens through which national identity is purified and reasserted.

And lastly, Kerry P.C. San Chirico observes that as national ideologies have shifted toward Hindutva, cinematic portrayals of religious minorities have grown more polarised. He also provides an essential theoretical foundation for understanding how religion functions structurally and ideologically in Hindi cinema. He argues that the concept of *dharma*, often translated as “cosmic order” or “moral duty,” is not merely thematic but embedded into the very form and structure of the *sāmājik* (social film), which continues to dominate mainstream Hindi cinema. These films typically follow a moral arc of *dharma-adharma-dharma*, reinforcing a normative Hindu worldview in which disruptions to social and moral order are ultimately resolved in favour of an idealised restoration of righteousness. Although Hindi cinema is not formally categorised as “religious,” San Chirico shows that it is deeply *dhārmik*, drawing heavily on epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, and reinforcing Brahmanical social norms.⁴⁶ This religious grounding, he argues, has serious implications for the depiction of

⁴³ Narinderjit Kaur Dhillon and Joel Gwynne, ‘Saffronizing Bollywood Cinema’, *Film International* (16516826) 12, no. 2 (June 2014): 54–55, https://doi.org/10.1386/fiin.12.2.47_1.

⁴⁴ Mridu Rai, ‘Kashmiris in the Hindu Rashtra’, in *Majoritarian State: How Hindu Nationalism Is Changing India*, ed. Angana P. Chatterji, Thomas Blom Hansen, and Christophe Jaffrelot (Oxford University Press, 2019), 260, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190078171.003.0015>.

⁴⁵ Rai, 265.

⁴⁶ Chirico and C, ‘Dharma and the Religious Other in Hindi Popular Cinema’, 79–82.

minorities. The Hindu framework becomes so pervasive as to be “the invisible norm, the standard default position,”⁴⁷ leading to the marginalisation or vilification of religious Others—especially Muslims—whose representation, he notes, has shifted dramatically since the 1990s. The Muslim male, in particular, is now commonly cast as either the servile sidekick or the violent antagonist—with links to Pakistan, Islamist networks, or Kashmiri militancy. Chirico writes that Hindi films increasingly depict Indian Muslims as “disguised Pakistanis,” a veiled internal threat undermining the nation from within.⁴⁸ These depictions, he argues, mirror a political transition from secular pluralism to a majoritarian ideology that defines the nation as fundamentally Hindu and Muslims as peripheral or dangerous outsider.⁴⁹

This thesis aims to contribute to existing literature on the ideological functions of Hindi cinema, particularly its entanglement with religious nationalism, representations of minorities, and the politics of historical memory. In particular, this paper will examine how Indian cinema—particularly popular films like *The Kashmir Files*—functions as an apparatus for ideological dissemination. Unlike earlier representations of Kashmir and its conflict, this film was promoted directly by the Indian state and framed as historical truth, despite its ideological partiality. Analysing this film allows for a deeper understanding of how narrative and dramatic representation are used to reframe national memory and justify current political agendas. *The Kashmir Files* is especially instructive because it combines overt propaganda with popular cinematic tropes in the service of nationalist narratives.

Methodology

To address the research question, this thesis adopts a qualitative methodology rooted in critical film analysis and cultural studies. Its primary object of study is the 2022 Hindi-language film *The Kashmir Files*, written and directed by Vivek Agnihotri. The analysis focuses on selected, character arcs, and narrative structures that serve as vehicles for ideological messaging and historical

⁴⁷ Chirico and C, 83.

⁴⁸ Chirico and C, 87.

⁴⁹ Chirico and C, 86–87.

reframing. The scenes chosen for this analysis portray two topics that are paramount to Hindutva discourse on Kashmir: *azaadi* (freedom) and the abrogation of Article 370. Cinematic elements are interpreted through tools of narrative analysis, including character development, dialogue, and visual symbolism, with the aim of understanding how they advance the film's affective and ideological objectives. The thesis is informed by a cultural studies approach that conceptualises cinema as a site of ideological production and contestation. It draws on Louis Althusser's theory of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISAs) to explore how the film operates as a cultural mechanism that disseminates state-aligned narratives. Louis Althusser's theory posits that cultural institutions such as media, education, and religion play a crucial role in reproducing the ruling ideology by interpellating individuals as subjects. In this framework, cinema functions not merely as a reflection of social reality but as an active participant in shaping it. Althusser's framework is especially appropriate here because it helps explain how ideological work is performed through the form and structure of popular media, without explicit state coercion.

In addition, this paper uses Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model to account for the potential plurality of interpretations.⁵⁰ The model distinguishes between three different types of reading a media text: (1) dominant-hegemonic, where the viewer accepts the intended meaning encoded by the producer; (2) negotiated, where the viewer partially accepts the encoded meaning but questions or modifies it based on personal experience or alternative viewpoints; and (3) oppositional, where the viewer rejects the intended meaning and interprets the text in a way that challenges or subverts its ideological message. His model provides a way to analyse how meaning is "encoded" into the film by its creators—particularly through narrative, characterisation, and affect—and how it invites specific ideological responses. While audience reception is not directly studied in this thesis, Hall's framework is valuable in assessing how the film's form and message are constructed to elicit a preferred ideological reading aligned with Hindutva narratives.

⁵⁰ Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding", in *In Culture, Media, Language* (London: Routledge, 1980), 117–27.

To operationalise this theoretical framework, the thesis undertakes a close analysis of selected scenes from *The Kashmir Files*. This involves both narrative and visual analysis to show how the film constructs its ideological world. These methods were selected over other possible approaches—such as audience reception studies—because this thesis is primarily concerned with how the film tries to create an understanding, that is, a worldview, that is in line with Hindutva nationalism; not how it was received or the accuracy of its ideological or historical claims. While such approaches would be useful in understanding on, for example, what effect *The Kashmir Files* had had on popular understanding of the issues addressed in the film, it is beyond the scope of this paper to study them here.

Plot, Structure, and Visual Style in *The Kashmir Files*

The Kashmir Files is a film that adopts an unrelentingly dark tone—visually, narratively, and thematically. This stylistic choice makes sense in that the film purports to recount one of the darker chapters in Kashmiri history, that of the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the Valley between 1989–1990, attributed in the film to Islamic militancy allegedly supported by Pakistan. A disclaimer at the beginning states: “The film is based on true incidents as narrated in video-recorded testimonials of the victims and their families of the Kashmir Genocide of 1990... While inspired by true events... This film doesn’t claim accurateness or factuality of historic events.”⁵¹ Despite this caution, the film employs an emotional and visual approach designed to present its narrative as the definitive truth. It adopts a subdued, documentary-like realism that enhances its claim to authenticity. Unlike conventional Bollywood productions, *The Kashmir Files* avoids the typical formula of song and dance, aiming instead for a sombre, grounded portrayal. This aesthetic choice, however, does not translate into narrative neutrality. Rather, the serious tone serves to heighten the film’s persuasive impact, positioning its interpretation of the exodus as objective truth.

The narrative centres on the Pandit family headed by Pushkar Nath, a philosophy teacher. He lives with his son, daughter-in-law, and two

⁵¹ *The Kashmir Files*, directed by Vivek Agnihotri (Zee Studios, 2022), 00:33

grandchildren, Shiva and Krishna, in their ancestral home in Kashmir. At the time the story opens—in the winter of 1990—Shiva is a child of around six years, while Krishna is an infant. The film spans several decades, shifting between 1989 (pre-exodus), the 1990s (during the violence and displacement), 2016 (when Krishna is a university student), and a post-2019 period following the abrogation of Article 370. These temporal shifts serve to frame the abrogation as a definitive rupture in Kashmir's history—one that retrospectively justifies the political decisions of the Indian state. The film's structure weaves together personal and collective tragedy, focusing on Krishna's gradual discovery of his family's past and, by extension, of the 'truth' about Kashmir. His intellectual and emotional journey is central to the film's didactic purpose. As Krishna begins to uncover what the film posits as suppressed or distorted history, the viewer is also taken through a process of ideological re-education. Krishna's confusion—about the nature of the conflict, about whether to support Kashmiri azadi or the Indian state—is meant to mirror the audience's own ambivalence. By the film's end, both Krishna and the viewer are meant to arrive at a definitive moral clarity, one that aligns with the film's narrative of Hindu victimhood and nationalistic redemption.

The present-day timeline culminates with Krishna visiting his grandfather's surviving friends in the wake of Article 370's removal. In his final moments, Pushkar requests that his ashes be scattered at his ancestral home in Kashmir—a symbolic act of return and restitution. Having lived in Delhi since leaving the refugee camps, Pushkar's dying wish encapsulates the film's nostalgic yearning for a lost Hindu homeland, and implicitly, for the restoration of a Hindu-majority identity to the region.

The Threat from Within: *Azaadi*

On 28 May 2023, Prime Minister Narendra Modi inaugurated India's new Parliament building in a grand ceremony. A mural unveiled within the new complex drew strong rebuke from several of India's neighbouring states. Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal condemned the depiction of a map that, according to them,

represented *Akhand Bharat* or “Undivided India.”⁵² The mural visually suggested that territories currently belonging to Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and parts of Afghanistan were part of a greater Indian civilisational entity. In effect, the image presented an extended territorial vision in which these sovereign nations appeared to be subsumed under a singular Indian identity. The Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Pralhad Joshi affirmed this interpretation of the mural, declaring on social media, “The resolve is clear—Akhand Bharat.”⁵³ Whether the mural was indeed intended to symbolise *Akhand Bharat* or whether Joshi’s statement was politically opportunistic, what remains certain is that the concept of an undivided India holds deep ideological significance within Hindu nationalist ideology, which naturally includes the region of Kashmir.

Jaffrelot explains why Kashmir has occupied a central place in Hindu nationalist discourse since the moment of India’s independence and its simultaneous partition into two separate states—India and Pakistan.⁵⁴ As discussed earlier, and also noted by Jaffrelot, a core tenet of Savarkar’s Hindutva ideology is the sanctity of India as a Hindu homeland; a homeland whose borders stretch far beyond India’s contemporary geopolitical boundaries. In line with this worldview, is that the lands lost during partition—especially those constituting modern-day Pakistan and Bangladesh—remain part of a sacred geography. Consequently, partition is perceived by Hindu nationalists as a historical wound that must be reversed to restore *Akhand Bharat*.⁵⁵ From this perspective, the very notion of Kashmiri independence—or worse, integration with Pakistan—is not merely undesirable but inconceivable. Kashmir is, in this formulation, not just a territorial concern but a symbol of national and religious unity. Jaffrelot’s analysis underscores how the ideological and pragmatic aspects of Hindutva converge in the case of Kashmir, making the region indispensable to both nationalist sentiment and state strategy.

⁵² ‘Why a Map in India’s New Parliament Has Riled Its Neighbours’, Al Jazeera, accessed 18 March 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/6/7/why-a-map-in-indias-new-parliament-has-riled-its-neighbours>.

⁵³ Pralhad Joshi [@JoshiPralhad], ‘ಸಂಕಲ್ಪ ಸ್ವಾಷ್ಟವಾಗಿದೆ - ಅಖಂಡ ಭಾರತೆ IN #NewParliamentBuilding #MyParliamentMyPride <https://t.co/tkVtu3CCoh>’, Tweet, Twitter, 28 May 2023, <https://x.com/JoshiPralhad/status/1662685877209006081>.

⁵⁴ Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalism*, 193.

⁵⁵ Jaffrelot, 194.

In his article, Giorgio Shani observes that “the spectres of Partition continue to haunt India today.”⁵⁶ He argues that the trauma of the 1947 Partition played a crucial role in the emergence of Hindu nationalism and the growth of the RSS. The mass violence and dislocation accompanying Partition, he suggests, undermined Nehru’s secularist vision of a pluralistic Indian state. In its place, the nation now appears to be drifting toward the realisation of a Hindu ethnocratic state—or *Hindu Rashtra*—something which, as has been argued, “could not have been envisaged even 20 years ago.”⁵⁷ The abrogation of Article 370 and the subsequent full integration of Kashmir into the Indian Union (discussed further below) marks a pivotal moment in this ideological trajectory.

Shani attributes this shift in large part to the leadership of Narendra Modi, under whom the country has witnessed a rise in what he terms “authoritarian populism” and a transition from a “soft” to “hard” form of contemporary Hindutva. Authoritarian populism, in Shani’s definition, involves “the centralisation of power by the state in the name of the people against an ‘elite’ and/or stigmatised minority.”⁵⁸ Modi is positioned as the archetypal representative of the Hindu majority, standing in opposition to both the Muslim “Other” and their so-called “protectors.” Shani identifies two types of Others: the *external* Muslim, primarily represented by Pakistan, and the *internal* Muslim—the Indian Muslim—who is seen as incapable of assimilation into the Hindu Rashtra without relinquishing their religious identity. Those who align with these Others, particularly “corrupt, secular elites who have protected the interests of ‘Others,’” are likewise viewed as threats to the unity and integrity of the nation.⁵⁹ Under Modi’s leadership, India has increasingly witnessed the consolidation of a “hard” Hindutva agenda. This is evident in the rise of anti-Muslim violence in BJP-ruled states, the controversial constitutional move to integrate Kashmir fully into the Indian Union, and the enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which, as Shani notes, strips Muslim refugees of their right to citizenship on the

⁵⁶ Giorgio Shani, ‘Towards a Hindu Rashtra: Hindutva, Religion, and Nationalism in India’, *Religion, State and Society* 49, no. 3 (27 May 2021): 269, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2021.1947731>.

⁵⁷ Shani, 265.

⁵⁸ Shani, 271.

⁵⁹ Shani, 271–72.

basis of religion.⁶⁰ These developments signal a broader ideological reorientation of the Indian state, one that aligns closely with the RSS's long-standing vision of cultural homogeneity, majoritarian dominance, and the marginalisation of minorities. This ideological trajectory—marked by the vilification of internal enemies and the consolidation of majoritarian power—is an important driving narrative of *The Kashmir Files*. A key scene featuring Professor Radhika Menon encapsulates the perceived threat of internal dissent to the unity of the Hindu nation.⁶¹

Professor Radhika Menon, a lecturer at ANU University where Krishna is studying, delivers a speech to a relatively large group of students gathered outdoors on the university premises. She is portrayed as a traditional Hindu woman, wearing a black and red embroidered saree and a bindi on her forehead. Positioned at the centre of the assembly—reminiscent of an amphitheatre setting—Menon holds a microphone in one hand and her speech notes in the other, passionately addressing the crowd on the subject of Kashmiri independence. The scene opens with Menon declaring emphatically in English: “Kashmir has never been an integral part of India, and this is a historical fact!” For the remainder of her speech, she primarily speaks in Hindi, with occasional English interjections, actively engaging her audience. “In fact,” she continues, “when Kashmir acceded to Bharat, it was on one condition: that as soon as the situation normalised, a plebiscite would be held—a people’s vote. Has such a vote ever taken place?” The students respond loudly and in unison: “No! Never!” At this moment, a young female student rises, holding a placard that reads “FREE KASHMIR,” and shouts, “Free Kashmir!”—prompting others to join her in the chant. Menon then poses three rhetorical questions to her now-energised audience: “If political parties are allowed their own flags, then why not Kashmir? If India could fight Britain for its independence, then why not Kashmir? If Bhagat Singh is celebrated, then why not Burhan Wani?” In response, one student shouts, “Burhan Wani Zindabaad! (Long live Burhan Wani!),” followed by others echoing the chant.

⁶⁰ Shani, 273.

⁶¹ *The Kashmir Files* (Zee Studios, 2022). 24:00-28:10

When Menon turns to the disparity in how the Indian government treats different kinds of “terrorists”—those from Kashmir versus others—she mentions Afzal Guru, a Kashmiri executed by the Indian state for his alleged involvement in terrorist activities. At this, another student stands up and exclaims, voice heavy with emotion, “Afzal! We are ashamed!”—to which the crowd responds in chorus, “Because your killers are still alive!” This chant is repeated once more before Menon resumes her speech. Later in her address, she asserts, “We know that if today’s students don’t raise their voice for Kashmir, then one day Kashmir will become a vast, unmarked grave.” She adds defiantly, “We will bring Kashmir out of this darkness. We will get our freedom from them!” Raising her voice, she asks the crowd, “What do we want?”—and the students respond with fervour: “Azaadi! Azaadi! Azaadi!” Menon continues, “We want freedom from federalism. And we want freedom from Hindu ideologies.” She then passes the microphone to one of the students, who leads the rest in a chant: “We want our freedom from them! *Azaadi!* It is our right! *Azaadi!* We will take it by force! *Azaadi!* Bharat, you will break into pieces! *Insha’Allah! Insha’Allah!*” The crowd erupts together: “Azaadi! Azaadi! Azaadi! ...”

This scene serves as one of the most ideologically charged moments in *The Kashmir Files*. It dramatizes the perceived threat of internal dissent and anti-national sentiment on the grounds of an elite Indian university, the (not so) fictional ANU in Delhi (the film does not elaborate the name of the university but is a clear substitute for the JNU—the Jawaharlal Nehru University, also in Delhi).⁶² The scene centres on Professor Radhika Menon (Krishna’s mentor) who embodies the film’s depiction of the liberal, secular academic class as morally and politically compromised. Her speech, delivered with conviction and rhetorical flair, articulates a pro-*azaadi* stance on Kashmir and encourages student mobilisation against the Indian state. The university is constructed as a breeding ground for treachery and anti-national propaganda—a university that resembles the real-world institutions often accused by Hindu nationalists of harbouring anti-

⁶² Bollywood Hungama, ‘BREAKING: Vivek Agnihotri’s The Kashmir Files Passed with an “A” Certificate and 7 Minor Cuts by CBFC; Name of the University Changed from JNU to ANU : Bollywood News - Bollywood Hungama’, 8 March 2022, <https://www.bollywoodhungama.com/news/bollywood/breaking-vivek-agnihotris-kashmir-files-passed-certificate-7-minor-cuts-cbfc-name-university-changed-jnu-anu/>.

India sentiments —which serves as both a literal and symbolic battleground for the legitimacy of Kashmir's place within the Indian nation-state.

Menon's claim that "Kashmir has never been an integral part of India" is immediately provocative, marking a direct challenge to the dominant national narrative. Delivered in English, this opening line positions Menon as cosmopolitan and Westernised, reinforcing the film's suspicion of elite liberal discourse. It is not only a polemical provocation but a defining ideological rupture, one where Kashmir's accession is settled and absolute. In Hindutva discourse, such a statement does not merely constitute academic dissent—it is tantamount to treason. The threat is amplified by the fact that this declaration comes from within India's borders, and from an educator no less. In this context, separatism is not geographically external (e.g., Pakistan or militant insurgency), but internal, ideological, and therefore more insidious. Throughout the speech, the camera frequently cuts to the audience, capturing not only their vocal affirmations but also their placards, raised fists, and synchronised chants. Such display of enthusiasm illustrates the university as a site where separatist ideology has taken root and flourishing.

The threat posed by Menon is intensified as the scene unfolds. Her speech shifts from historical grievance to emotional incitement, and her rhetorical strategy reframes the demand for *azaadi* not just as a call for democratic rights, but as a justified struggle against a colonising Indian state. The crowd's escalating chants—"Free Kashmir!" and "Azaadi!"—culminate in the chilling slogan: "Bharat, you will break into pieces! *Insha 'Allah!*" This phrase is weaponised to conflate separatism with Islamic radicalism. The film deliberately chooses not to nuance this slogan or distinguish between calls for political autonomy and aspirations for national disintegration. The ideological stakes are heightened through language that explicitly connects calls for Kashmiri freedom to broader denunciations of Indian federalism and Hinduism. In doing so, it constructs separatism as an existential threat: not just to territory, but to Indian identity itself.

Menon's invocation of figures like Burhan Wani and Afzal Guru further compounds this threat. By equating Kashmiri militants with Indian freedom fighters such as Bhagat Singh, she undermines the moral distinction between state

violence and terrorism. From the film’s perspective, this is not merely a distortion of history and reality—it is a dangerous inversion of the national moral order. The scene collapses distinctions between political grievance and terrorist glorification, portraying the former as a façade for the latter. The university setting intensifies the ideological stakes: young, impressionable students are seen absorbing and amplifying this subversive message, chanting for *azaadi* with revolutionary fervour. The film, at this stage and for the remaining narrative, offers no counterpoint to Menon’s speech or the students’ demands to contextualise the students’ grievances and the complexities of the conflict. In fact, later in the film it becomes clear that Menon is in cahoots with separatist militants and in direct contact with the terrorist commander Bitta (the film’s chief antagonist and murderer of Krishna’s parents). This absence of nuance is central to the film’s ideological function. By collapsing dissent into sedition, and equating student protest with anti-state conspiracy, the film legitimises a zero-tolerance stance toward intellectual and political opposition. In this way, it echoes the BJP’s broader strategy of framing universities as sites of cultural decay and leftist subversion.

Using Althusser’s framework, Professor Radhika Menon can be read as a figure who attempts to disrupt the dominant ideological order rather than reproduce it. Althusser theorises that ideology “interpellates” individuals as subjects—meaning it recruits them into recognising themselves within the social roles required by the ruling ideology. This interpellation typically occurs through institutions like schools, media, and religion, which Althusser collectively terms Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). In *The Kashmir Files*, however, the university is depicted not as a vehicle of state ideology, but as an oppositional ISA—a space that has been ideologically “captured” by separatist rhetoric.

Menon’s speech, and the film’s representation of the students’ enthusiastic responses, attempts to show how a subversive ideology—here, the demand for Kashmiri *azaadi*—interpellates individuals into an alternative national subjectivity. In this framework, the Indian state is recast as an occupying force, and Kashmiri separatism is rearticulated as a liberation struggle. The crowd’s slogans—“Free Kashmir!”, “Burhan Wani Zindabaad!”, and “Azaadi!”—are not

merely emotional or rhetorical outbursts; they function as performative declarations that reshape how the individuals see themselves, aligning their identities with a separatist cause and positioning them in opposition to the Indian state. Yet, the film positions this interpellation as illegitimate. Menon is not a sympathetic character; she is an agent of ideological perversion. Her traditional attire (saree, bindi) masks her subversive agenda, casting her as a cultural traitor. In this reversal, *The Kashmir Files* reasserts the hegemonic order: by showing what a “bad subject” looks like, it implicitly reaffirms what the “good subject” should be—one who rejects *azaadi* and affirms the indivisibility of the Indian nation.

The film does not simply challenge Menon’s political views; it uses her character as a tool to dramatically reaffirm nationalist ideology. Through the emotionally charged atmosphere of the scene—with its choreographed chants, loud slogans, and escalating intensity—the film portrays separatism as more than just a political disagreement. It becomes a dangerous, even existential, threat to the unity of the nation. Any space for debate or alternative views is shut down, as Menon’s arguments are framed not as legitimate dissent but as extreme, corrupting, and harmful to national stability.

Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model is particularly useful in assessing the contested reception of this scene. According to Hall, cultural texts—such as films—are “encoded” with preferred meanings by their creators, but audiences may “decode” them differently based on their own social, cultural, and ideological positions. In the case of Professor Menon’s speech, the film’s encoded message is unambiguous: separatist ideology is morally and politically abhorrent, and those who espouse it are to be discredited and rejected.

A dominant-hegemonic reading would accept the film’s portrayal of Menon and the students as anti-national actors. This mode of reading aligns with the BJP’s broader political narrative that universities have become hotbeds of sedition, and that slogans like “*Bharat tere tukde honge*” (India, you will break

into pieces) reflect a genuine threat to national unity.⁶³ From this perspective, the scene acts as a cinematic vindication of the government's disciplinary stance against campus dissent. A negotiated reading, however, may accept the film's concern with national cohesion but question the reductive way it equates dissent with disloyalty. Such a viewer might acknowledge the controversial nature of Menon's speech while still defending the legitimacy of academic freedom and the right to political critique. Finally, an oppositional reading would interpret the entire scene as a form of ideological scapegoating. This reading would argue that the film constructs a moral panic around the idea of *azaadi* by cherry-picking extreme slogans and using them to characterise all dissent as treasonous. From this perspective, the scene simplifies the complex historical and political roots of Kashmiri self-determination and repositions them within a moral binary: to question the state is to betray it. The slogan "Bharat, you will break into pieces! Insha'Allah!"—whether actually spoken at real-world protests or not—is here weaponised to evoke fear, reaffirm cultural majoritarianism, and legitimise ideological policing. Thus, the film encodes a clear warning: those who call for freedom (*azaadi*) are not merely mistaken—they are dangerous.

The Promise of National Unity: *Article 370*

In August 2019, the BJP government abrogated Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, extending the Indian Constitution to the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K). This action annulled the region's constitutionally guaranteed autonomy and allowed for its reorganisation into two federally administered union territories: Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh. As a result, Indian laws concerning property rights, citizenship, and anti-terrorism—which were previously inapplicable—were now fully applicable to J&K. Under widespread criticism from more secular corners of society, Narendra Modi's government defended its decision as a necessary step toward national integration, suppression of separatist movements, and promotion of economic development.⁶⁴ The abrogation of Article

⁶³ 'Fifth Column: Celebrating India's Destruction', *The Indian Express* (blog), 21 February 2016, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/fifth-column-celebrating-indias-destruction-jnu-protest-kanhaiya-kumar/>.

⁶⁴ 'What's Article 370? What to Know about India Top Court Verdict on Kashmir', Al Jazeera, accessed 4 May 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/11/whats-article-370-what-to-know-about-india-top-court-verdict-on-kashmir>.

370 has been a well-known, long-term objective of the BJP. In the years following the revocation, the issue increasingly featured in Indian cinema. The films *Article 370* (2024) and *The Kashmir Files* have taken the constitutional change and the broader Kashmir conflict as their subject matter.

The simultaneous revocation of Article 35A removed J&K's exclusive provisions for "permanent residents," particularly those concerning land ownership and access to government employment. These changes allows individuals from other parts of India to purchase property and apply for public sector jobs within Jammu and Kashmir. In the wake of the abrogation, many Kashmiris expressed fears that the Indian government intends to forcibly alter the region's demographic composition in order to establish a Hindu majority—thereby easing its integration into the *Hindu Rashtra*.⁶⁵ Such demographic engineering, if realised, would be more than a policy initiative; it would mark a profound transformation of the region's identity. As discussed earlier, the vision of a *Hindu Rashtra* to be fully actualised, it is implied that Muslims must assimilate into Hindu cultural norms and practices, thereby erasing key aspects of their distinct religious and social identity. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which provides pathways to Indian citizenship for non-Muslim refugees while excluding Muslims, is indicative of this broader agenda. It reflects a legal and ideological shift towards an exclusivist conception of Indian nationhood rooted in Hindu majoritarianism. This vision of demographic transformation and national assimilation is also rendered emotionally and symbolically in *The Kashmir Files*, where the political stakes of Article 370 are personified through the figure of Pushkar Nath. His portrayal transforms a constitutional provision into a moral and existential struggle that reflects the broader ideological aims of the Hindu nationalist project.

In one particularly emotionally charged scene,⁶⁶ Pushkar Nath returns home after a day of campaigning and giving charity. His grandson, Krishna, is studying in the living room that Pushkar enters. Upon entering, he is seen wearing a string around his neck, bearing approximately seven standard-sized (6 by 4

⁶⁵ 'Article 370: What Happened with Kashmir and Why It Matters', 5 August 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-49234708>.

⁶⁶ *The Kashmir Files*, 2022. 48:30-52:30

inches) portrait photographs—presumably of Kashmiri Pandit victims. He also carries a placard with the words “ARTICLE 370” in English, accompanied by a sentence in Hindi, of which only the word “save” is discernible to the viewer (the placard is partially obscured as Nath carries it under his arm). In his other hand, he carries a bag, probably containing some of the charitable donations that Krishna later references. The living room is modestly furnished with a few sofas, a table, and a large bookcase. Portraits of Hindu deities adorn the walls, and the mantelpiece functions as a makeshift place of worship, decorated with several *mūrtis* (devotional images/statues of deities). Pushkar places the Article 370 placard behind these *mūrtis* on the mantelpiece. He attempts to hang the string of photographs on the wall, but it falls; Krishna subsequently takes over and hangs it properly. Pushkar is shown to have severely impaired eyesight—possibly even partial blindness—which began deteriorating during his time in the refugee camp due to his diabetic condition. The lack of adequate medical care and financial support exacerbated his illness. Krishna scolds his uncle for venturing out again to perform charity work, expressing concern for his well-being, particularly given the dangers posed by his poor eyesight. However, Pushkar stands his ground and replies with determination that “nothing will happen to me until Article 370 is removed.” He is adamant that he must live to witness its abrogation.

In another scene,⁶⁷ set during Pushkar’s time in the refugee camp, he is shown protesting in front of a visiting government official. The official arrives with his advisor, Brahma Dutt. After disembarking from their vehicle, Dutt and the camp’s doctor begin describing the dire conditions to the official as they walk through the camp. While the official surveys the camp, he offers perfunctory greetings to the residents but largely dismisses the crisis, remarking, “It’s natural. It’s so hot out here, anyone will die. This is the first time in a hundred generations they have stepped outside of Kashmir’s cold climate.” Dutt immediately corrects him: “Not stepped out, sir. They were thrown out.” The official proceeds to interact with refugees, inviting them to voice their concerns. Several individuals protest the abysmal conditions and complain that the compensation they receive is meagre compared to the financial incentives granted to former militants. Their

⁶⁷ *The Kashmir Files*. 1:34:00-1:35:00

grievances are swiftly suppressed by the Governor's secretary, who interjects by asking whether anyone else wishes to make a request.

At this point, a placard is held aloft from within the crowd. The holder's face is initially obscured, but it soon becomes clear that it is Pushkar. The placard reads: "Remove Article 370." Pushkar appears dishevelled and walks slowly, somewhat unsteadily—perhaps due to his worsening eyesight. He says, "I am used to applying Boroline. They don't have any in this camp." (Boroline is a popular ayurvedic antiseptic cream.) The official appears eager to fulfil this minor request and instructs his secretary to immediately ensure the medicine is supplied to the camp. But Pushkar quickly continues: "One more thing," he says. "I have sent more than a hundred letters to your office requesting removal of Article 370, but your office did not reply to a single letter of mine." The official responds patiently: "Look, that is a different issue. I have now come here to help you." Nath interrupts him once again: "This is the only help I want from you. Remove Article 370 and rehabilitate Kashmiri Pandits." The surrounding crowd then erupts into a chant: "Remove Article 370! Remove Article 370! Remove Article 370!"

These two scenes together form a deliberate emotional arc that reinforces the film's central message: that the Kashmiri Pandit community was not only violently displaced but systematically neglected by an apathetic, or even, complicit government apparatus. Through the character of Pushkar Nath, the film personalises this broader political argument. In the first scene, set many years after the initial exodus, Pushkar is shown to be steadfast in realising the abrogation of Article 370 despite his physical frailty. His dedication to the cause—manifest in the photographs he wears and the placard he reverently places among his religious icons—transforms Article 370 into a sacred object of political struggle. By placing the placard among the *murtis*, the film elevates the revocation of Article 370 to the level of a divine mandate, not just a legal or political goal. Furthermore, Pushkar's physical weaknesses symbolise the long-term costs of the state's inaction. Krishna's concern for Pushkar's safety is overruled by Pushkar's assertion that he will not die until Article 370 is revoked. This moment underlines

the moral urgency of the political demand: it is not merely a policy issue, but a matter of existential and generational justice.

The second scene, set in the refugee camp during the 1990s, focuses on a critique of governmental negligence and irresponsibility. The Governor's dismissive response—"It's natural. It's so hot out here, anyone will die"—illustrates a bureaucratic mindset that trivialises the suffering of the refugees. His remark about the climate marks a failure of both empathy and accountability, revealing a disregard for the actual causes of the humanitarian crisis. Brahma Dutt's retort, "Not stepped out, Sir. They were thrown out," functions as a direct condemnation of the Governor's minimisation of the situation. The exchange between the Governor, his advisor, and the camp's doctor encompasses the broader argument of the film: that official narratives obscured the coercive and violent nature of the Pandits' displacement. Furthermore, the juxtaposition between the official's passive reception of grievances and Pushkar's assertive interjection serves to re-centre the Pandits as active political subjects rather than mere victims. Pushkar's insistence that the "only help" he wants is the revocation of Article 370, followed by the crowd's collective chant, constructs a moment of mass mobilisation. Thus, the prolonged existence of Article 370 symbolises state betrayal, historical injustice, and the denial of belonging.

The film contrasts the generosity shown to surrendered militants (in the form of government incentives) with the meagre aid given to displaced Pandits. This juxtaposition reinforces the film's narrative of inverted morality: where victims are neglected, and perpetrators are rewarded. By highlighting this imbalance, the film appeals to a sense of moral outrage among its viewers, especially those inclined to interpret Indian state secularism as an ideology that has favoured minorities at the expense of Hindus. Taken together, these scenes work to legitimise the BJP-led government's 2019 abrogation of Article 370, portraying it not merely as a political decision but as a form of justice that is long overdue. The scenes do not seek to explain the constitutional complexities of the Article, nor do they engage with the perspectives of Kashmiri Muslims or other affected groups. Instead, they frame the issue through the lens of emotional

justice, where political action is evaluated in terms of its capacity to redeem the suffering of the Pandits.

The portrayal of Article 370 in *The Kashmir Files* functions as a key ideological device that aligns the suffering of Kashmiri Pandits with the political aims of the present-day Indian state. As described above, Pushkar Nath Pandit, one of the film's central characters, is shown to dedicate the entirety of his life in exile to the removal of this constitutional provision. He is visually depicted in scenes carrying placards reading "Remove Article 370" and adorned with photographs of victims, transforming his personal sorrow into a public political statement. To understand the ideological function of this representation, Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) proves useful. According to Althusser, ISAs—such as schools, media, religion, and culture—function not through coercion but through ideology: they "hail" individuals into subject positions that support the reproduction of the dominant social order. In this case, the film may be seen as an ISA that works to produce the ideal nationalist subject.

Using Louis Althusser's framework, Pushkar may be read as one such interpellated subject. The film presents him not simply as a grieving father or displaced refugee, but as an ideal citizen whose suffering is given meaning only through his unwavering loyalty to the Indian state and his demand for the revocation of Article 370. Moreover, his unwavering faith in the Indian state is framed as sacred and unconditional. By placing his political message—"Remove Article 370"—among the *mūrtis*, the film fuses nationalism with spirituality, sacralising his demand. Pushkar is thus interpellated into a subject-position where justice is equated not with autonomy, compensation, or accountability, but with the absorption of Kashmir into the Hindu Rashtra. The film interpellates the viewer similarly: through the emotive suffering of Nath, the viewer is invited to identify with the cause of abrogation as a moral imperative. The film presents this desire as self-evident, never clarifying what Article 370 entails or why it might have protected Kashmir's autonomy. Instead, it depends on a presumed ideological consensus, reflecting Althusser's notion of ideology as a "representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions

of existence.”⁶⁸ Through its emotive aesthetic and moral tone, the film acts as an ISA, cultivating consent for a Hindu nationalist vision of Kashmir wherein the removal of Article 370 is not only legitimate, but necessary for justice.

However, not every viewer will interpret and accept the above line of reasoning. Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model reveals the complexities of how this message of the film might actually be received. Hall argues that media texts are encoded by producers with certain intended meanings, but audiences decode these texts in different ways depending on their social positions, experiences, and ideologies. He outlines three primary modes of reading: dominant-hegemonic, negotiated, and oppositional. These modes allow us to map how *The Kashmir Files* might be received across different ideological spectrums.

From a dominant-hegemonic position, the film validates the BJP’s 2019 abrogation of Article 370, casting it as a long-overdue rectification of historical injustice. Viewers in this category are likely to accept the film’s message at face value, where Pushkar Nath’s dedication symbolises national perseverance, and the policy change marks a moral victory. By contrast, a negotiated reading might sympathise with Pushkar’s suffering while also questioning the erasure of political complexity and the film’s one-sided portrayal of Kashmiri Muslims. Recognising the pain of displaced Kashmiri Pandits, they may accept the need for integration, while still expressing unease at film’s instrumentalization of trauma for political ends. Lastly, an oppositional reading of the narrative could interpret these scenes as cinematic propaganda, utilising emotional trauma to justify an authoritarian move that revoked a region’s autonomy without democratic consent. From this perspective, Pushkar’s deathbed desire to see Article 370 removed is read not as tragic heroism but as a carefully crafted affective device designed to neutralise dissent. Notably, the resolution of Pushkar’s struggle—his inability to recognise the article’s removal due to dementia—introduces a paradox: even as the state claims to deliver justice, the victim is not at the receiving end of it and his unfulfilled wish hints at the limits of symbolic justice, raising the possibility that

⁶⁸ Louis Althusser, *The Reproduction Of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (London: New Left Books, 2014), 256.

state action alone is insufficient to repair historical trauma, even as the film tries to argue the contrary.

Conclusion

As the analyses exemplify, *The Kashmir Files* is not merely a cinematic retelling of historical trauma; it is a potent ideological instrument that reframes Kashmir's complex history through the lens of Hindutva nationalism. By dramatizing the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits as a singular narrative of Hindu victimhood and Muslim aggression, the film reinforces a majoritarian worldview that aligns with the Bharatiya Janata Party's political agenda. Through its selective portrayal of history, emotional manipulation, and demonization of dissent, the film functions as a cultural apparatus that legitimizes state power while marginalizing alternative perspectives. The film's ideological work is most evident in its depiction of Kashmiri Muslims as inherently violent and Kashmiri Pandits as passive victims of an existential religious conflict. Scenes such as the university protest, where calls for *azaadi* are equated with sedition, and Pushkar Nath's lifelong battle against Article 370, which is sacralised as a divine mandate, illustrate how the film constructs a binary moral universe. In this framework, loyalty to the Indian state is valorised, while any critique of its policies is rendered illegitimate or treasonous. The film's affective power—its ability to evoke outrage, grief, and vindication—serves to naturalize Hindutva's historical revisionism, positioning the BJP's abrogation of Kashmir's autonomy not as a contested political decision but as an inevitable act of justice.

The political endorsement and state-backed promotion of *The Kashmir Files* further underscore its role as an Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), in Althusserian terms. By granting the film tax exemptions, organizing mass screenings, and publicly praising it, the BJP transformed a commercial film into a state-sanctioned pedagogical tool. This kind of governmental involvement in Indian cinema reflects a broader strategy of using cultural production to reshape public memory and consolidate Hindu nationalist hegemony. The film's commercial success, juxtaposed with the muted reception of more nuanced depictions like *Shikara*, suggests that such narratives resonate with audiences already primed by Hindutva's victimhood rhetoric. However, as Stuart Hall's

encoding/decoding model also shows, the film's reception is not monolithic. While dominant-hegemonic readings may uncritically absorb its messaging, negotiated or oppositional readings can challenge its reductive historiography and political instrumentalization. The controversy surrounding the film—from international bans to heated domestic debates—reveals the tensions inherent in its narrative. For critics, *The Kashmir Files* exemplifies the dangers of historical distortion in service of political propaganda; for supporters, it is a long-overdue acknowledgment of suppressed trauma. Ultimately, *The Kashmir Files* exemplifies how cinema in Modi's India is increasingly weaponized to advance a Hindu nationalist agenda. By collapsing complex historical events into a Manichean struggle between Hindu suffering and Muslim villainy, the film not only simplifies Kashmir's past but also legitimizes present-day policies of exclusion and authoritarian control. Its significance extends beyond the screen, serving as both a reflection and an accelerant of India's deepening communal polarization. As Hindutva continues to reshape India's cultural and political landscape, *The Kashmir Files* stands as a stark reminder of cinema's power to rewrite history—and, in doing so, to reshape the nation itself.

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