

**The Power of Visual Politics: Examining the Impact of 'The  
Kashmir Files' on Political Discourse in India**



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A thesis submitted to the National University of Sciences and Technology, Islamabad,

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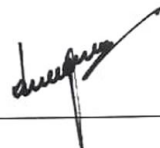
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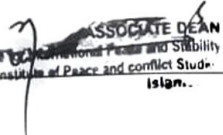
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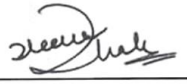
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## **Abstract**

This thesis investigates the nexus of visual politics, narrative formation, and political communication in modern Indian politics, focusing on the role of the 2022 film *The Kashmir Files*. The study looks into how the Modi government has used visual media, notably Bollywood, to affect public opinion of the repeal of Article 370 and rally support for its broader nationalist goal. Using the frameworks of political communication theory and narrative building, this paper examines how *The Kashmir Files* has been used for political maneuvering, impacting national discourse on Kashmir. This thesis examines secondary data sources such as YouTube reviews, online interviews, and the film's narrative structure to identify how the film has been presented to promote a specific political narrative. It is important to note that the study was ongoing, with the need for continuous adaptation of findings in light of the evolving political context, notably the 2024 Indian elections. The data shows that *The Kashmir Files* is not merely a platform for reliving historical events but also a strategic tool in the BJP's political resource, aiming at cementing voter support and marginalizing dissent. This study contributes to the more extensive discussion of the use of visual media in political propaganda and the manipulation of public in India by examining the film's depiction of the Kashmiri Pandit migration.

# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Visual Politics and Power Display

Visual politics plays a crucial role in the assertion of power within human societies. The use of verbal and nonverbal cues has been a longstanding method to convey strength, indicate the capacity for defense, and identify competent individuals tasked with maintaining harmony and well-being within a community. Bucy and Joo (2020) emphasize that organized politics has consistently integrated visual elements to communicate the symbolism of influential groups and the expressive qualities of leaders aspiring to govern. In contemporary politics, visual communication is increasingly significant, forming the core of the "politics of illusion" and populist rhetoric. Visuals, through their ability to evoke emotions, engage an often-disengaged electorate, playing a pivotal role in modern political dynamics (Novelli, 2019, p. 153).

The idea that images always convey truth is compelling yet warrants reconsideration. Pictures are not always comprehensive in their narrative; subtle manipulation or selective use of images can significantly shape public perception. This is problematic because images tap into fundamental aspects of human cognition, evoking intense emotions ranging from fear and dislike to love and hate. Politics and media have long been interrelated, influencing each other in unique ways (Nur Safira, 2023). People have devised various strategies to explore and exploit this relationship, often introducing emotion into logical arguments to manipulate outcomes (Ashfaq & Hussein, 2013).

Visual politics is a holistic method that employs a range of visual media to deliver political messages, elicit emotions, and shape public discourse. The role of visual politics in contemporary society is illustrated by the significant impact visual media can have on political movements and societal change, as seen in the case of Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation, which sparked the Tunisian revolution and eventually led to the downfall of the Ben Ali regime (Veneti, Jackson, & Lilleker, 2019).

Political cinema has emerged as a powerful tool in visual politics, serving to convey and promote specific political ideologies. It encompasses various genres, including documentaries, short films, feature films, and experimental works. These films, while not necessarily pure propaganda, are

instrumental in shaping public narrative on political issues. Political cinema is particularly effective due to its ability to present ideological messages within a compelling narrative framework. The influence of social media on visual politics is a rapidly developing area of study, investigating how platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook facilitate political activism and public involvement through visual content (Lilleker, Veneti, & Jackson, 2019).

The emergence of visual politics can be traced back to the 20th century when independent publications like newspapers and magazines began to produce content outside the mainstream media's traditional boundaries. These publications combined text and images to promote oppositional political views, allowing readers to define themselves and reinforce group identities. Over time, visual politics has transformed, becoming increasingly central to political communication. Visuals have played a critical role in establishing leadership, institutions, and nation-states, evoking emotions and encouraging active participation (Bucy & Joo, 2020).

Political cinema employs a range of techniques to convey and promote specific political ideologies. These techniques include portraying historical events from a partisan perspective, creating ideological narratives that influence the audience's interpretation, and serving as powerful tools in political campaigns (Ashfaq & Hussein, 2013). The ability of political cinema to influence public opinion rapidly and effectively highlights its role in shaping political discourse.

## **1.2 Research Questions**

This research is guided by three central questions:

1. How has the Modi government utilized visual politics to influence and shape the political discourse surrounding the revocation of Article 370?
2. In what ways have films, particularly those produced by the Indian film industry, supported the Modi government's strategy during the 2024 elections?
3. How has 'The Kashmir Files' contributed to the political discourse on the Kashmir conflict within the context of narrative building?

The conceptual model of political communication will be used to address the first two questions, while the concept of narrative building will be employed to explore the third.

### **1.3 Case Study: ‘The Kashmir Files’**

The Kashmir Files, a 2022 Indian film, portrays and magnifies India's developing Islamophobia. The film depicts the widespread mistreatment and expulsion of Hindu Pandits in Kashmir, attributing the violence to the Muslim community's hatred of non-Muslims. The release of this film coincided with the contentious repeal of Article 370 in 2019, which granted unique rights to the people of Jammu and Kashmir for nearly 70 years. The revocation of Article 370 sparked widespread demonstrations, notably among Kashmir's predominantly Muslim population. Critics such as Rana Ayyub, writing for The Washington Post in 2022, claim that the film incites hatred against Muslims by portraying them as terrorists and encouraging bloodshed. During screenings, complaints surfaced of hate speech directed at Muslims, with some viewers expressing enmity towards the whole Muslim community (Lehren TV, 2022, 0:30).

‘The Kashmir Files’ serves as a poignant example of how visual politics can influence political discourse by providing content that politicians can use to further their agendas. As seen in the research below, the film’s depiction of key scenes, coupled with its promotion by influential politicians, created an alternate discourse that legitimized the revocation of Article 370. The portrayal of Kashmiri Pandits as the true victims of the Kashmir conflict since the 1990s, and the framing of their plight as a longstanding demand for justice, positioned Prime Minister Modi as the savior who fulfilled this demand. This narrative, amplified by public endorsements from credible politicians, successfully shifted the conversation towards viewing Modi as the leader capable of addressing India’s complex issues, further solidifying his political authority. Images within the film tap into attitudes but do not always impact viewers in the same way. The believability of an image is closely tied to its perceived truthfulness, which can be manipulated to align with specific viewpoints. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the spread of fake news, where visually convincing images can reinforce false narratives (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017).

Bollywood has historically been strategically employed as a political asset, adept at molding public mindsets to garner support and ensure the acceptance of India's status as the largest democratic state. A critical inquiry into the relationship between the film industry and political elites reveals how they collaboratively craft visual narratives that significantly impact viewers. This research

focuses on variables such as media, politics, public perception, and the dynamics of peace and conflict, with 'The Kashmir Files' as a central case study.

Key variables in this research include the film's content, political symbolism, and the selective representation of events. The study examines how these elements contribute to shaping public perceptions of the Kashmir conflict and influence voting behavior, particularly in relation to the government's actions and their legitimacy (Ashfaq & Hussein, 2013). The overarching goal is to understand how the symbiotic relationship between the film industry and political elites affects public discourse and solidifies political power.

This study also consults academic literature on the influence of films. In her article in "Between Knowing and not knowing: A Study of Trauma, History and 'Memory,' and the 'Crying Wound' in The Kashmir Files," Savita V. Deogirkar investigates the psychological discomfort and recollections produced by the film within the Kashmiri Hindu community (Deogirkar, 2023). Venkat Rao Pulla's essay in Space and Culture, "Movies that Actually Get History: The Case and a Half of Kashmir Files: A Study in Social Blogging," India, uses Critical Discourse Analysis to examine social media responses to the film (Pulla, 2022). Both analyses highlight the film's plot, which portrays Kashmiri Muslims as wrongdoers against Hindus, and raise concerns about its historical accuracy and influence on the escalation of anti-Muslim sentiments in Indian culture.

The film's producer, director and screenwriter, Vivek Agnihotri, leveraged PM Modi's endorsement to build public sympathy for the film's narrative, aiming to convince viewers of its authenticity. The producer strategically shared photos on Twitter of the film production team's meeting with PM Modi, which successfully garnered widespread support from artists, politicians, and civilians alike (Entertainment Bureau, 2022). The positive reactions from Indian officials further bolstered the Hindu community's acceptance of the film's narrative, which contains anti-Islamic propaganda. This government-backed narrative heightened existing anti-Islamic sentiments in India, leading to increased discrimination and marginalization of Muslims.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Several theoretical frameworks are applied to dissect the dynamics between visual narratives, political communication, and conflict in this study. Cultural studies explore how films serve as cultural agents that shape and reflect societal ideologies and power structures. Media framing

theory is essential for understanding how films like ‘The Kashmir Files’ construct and shape public perceptions of the Kashmir dispute (Entman, 1993).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) offers a methodological approach to unveil power relations and ideologies embedded in language and visuals, aiding in the exploration of visual politics in Indian cinema and its impact on Kashmir discourse (Pulla, 2022). Narrative theory, as conceptualized by Fisher and Barthes, provides a lens through which the storytelling strategies in films contribute to the construction of narratives surrounding the Kashmir dispute, influencing audience understanding (Fisher, 1984; Barthes, 1977).

Political communication theory is also integral to this study, focusing on the transmission of information among politicians, media, and the public. This theory encompasses various approaches, including information processing theories, media impact theories, and subjective theories, to understand how visual politics shapes public opinion and political outcomes (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2015).

This study will demonstrate how ‘The Kashmir Files’ was utilized by political figures to further their agendas, aligning with the principles of political communication theory. Specific examples, such as the film’s promotion by BJP leaders, tax exemptions in BJP-ruled states, and endorsements by prominent politicians, will be discussed in detail in the subsequent sections to illustrate how the film served as a tool in shaping the political discourse surrounding the abrogation of Article 370.

In conducting this study on visual politics and the impact of ‘The Kashmir Files’ on political discourse, it was essential to carefully select theoretical frameworks that would provide the most effective lens for analysis. By applying these frameworks, the study seeks to understand how ‘The Kashmir Files’ and similar films influence political discourse and, ultimately, the sociopolitical landscape in India. Throughout this process, several theories were considered but ultimately found unsuitable due to their limitations in addressing the complex, interpretive nature of visual politics.

One of the theories considered was behaviorist communication theory (Danley, James, Mims, & Simms, n.d.), which focuses on the direct stimulus-response mechanisms in media consumption. While this theory is valuable in understanding basic media effects, it falls short when applied to the nuanced and multifaceted processes involved in visual political communication. Specifically,



behaviorist theory does not adequately account for the subjective interpretation of visual content, the influence of cultural and socio-political contexts, or the active role viewers play in constructing meaning from visual stimuli. Given that 'The Kashmir Files' relies heavily on symbolism, a theoretical approach was necessary. The simplicity of behaviorist theory made it unsuitable for this study, as it could not capture the complexity of how films like 'The Kashmir Files' influence political discourse and shape public narrative.

Another theory that was considered but ultimately excluded was the uses and gratifications theory. This theory explores how individuals actively select media to fulfill specific needs, such as entertainment or information (Rogers, 2020). While it highlights the agency of the audience in media consumption, it lacks a critical perspective on how media content is framed and how power dynamics shape those choices. The theory assumes that viewers are fully aware of their media preferences and the gratifications they seek, but it does not sufficiently address how media content is strategically constructed to influence those preferences. Moreover, it overlooks the role of media in reinforcing ideological positions, which is central to understanding the impact of visual politics in a politically charged context like 'The Kashmir Files'. Given the need to critically engage with how visual media influence public perception beyond individual gratifications, uses and gratifications theory was deemed inadequate for this research.

In place of these theories, media framing theory, narrative theory, critical discourse analysis (CDA), and semiotics were chosen as the primary frameworks for analysis. Media framing theory, as articulated by Entman (1993), was selected because it provides a robust framework for understanding how visual content is selectively constructed to promote specific interpretations of political events. This theory was particularly relevant in analyzing how 'The Kashmir Files' constructs a narrative that aligns with or challenges political ideologies. Narrative theory, especially the works of Fisher and Barthes, was employed to dissect the storytelling strategies within the film. Given that the film's power lies in its narrative structure and emotional resonance, narrative theory offered valuable tools for exploring how the film's story influences viewers' understanding of the Kashmir conflict.

In summary, the exclusion of theories like behaviorist communication, uses and gratifications, and agenda-setting was driven by their limitations in addressing the interpretive and discursive nature

of visual politics. Instead, narrative theory and political communications theory were selected for their ability to offer a comprehensive understanding of how visual media like ‘The Kashmir Files’ construct and influence political discourse. These frameworks collectively provided the depth of analysis required to explore the intricate relationship between visual narratives and political power, making them particularly suitable for this study.

#### **1.4 Limitations**

This research faced several challenges that affected the study's scope and depth. Initially, ‘The Kashmir Files’ was inaccessible to a large Muslim audience. Despite several efforts, I could not watch the movie on sites where it was released and available, like ZEE5. Moreover, upon asking a Canadian friend of mine to subscribe to the website on my behalf, we discovered that she also faced access restrictions due to her Muslim identity, showing bias in the movie's availability. This made it challenging to analyze the movie directly, despite these challenges I found the movie online through other resources. I had to majorly rely on secondary sources and evaluations to understand its content.

Another challenge was constantly monitoring the 2024 Indian elections and updating my research findings. Since my research focuses on the film's political and electoral influence, I had to continually update and revise it to ensure its relevance in the current political landscape.

## Chapter 2

### THEORY OF VISUAL POLITICS

Visual culture has been the distinguishing feature of subsequent human societies throughout history. In ancient times, paintings and sculptures were the predominant source of information regarding the prevalent socio-cultural and political practices. However, with the dawn of the twentieth century, remarkable innovations in information technology led us to an era where moving imagery on televisions, cinemas, and other digital platforms took the central stage in the socio-cultural and political spheres. This is a visual age, thanks to the recent digital revolution. The significance of images and visuals has increased manifold due to the omnipresence of imagery in this era of rapidly evolving digital technologies. As the role of visuality increases in our surroundings, it has become increasingly significant in politics (Torres Pacheco, 2019).

The term ‘Visual Politics’ refers to the role of images in politics and international relations. This theoretical framework examines how the world of visuals and pictures impacts political dynamics. It considers how visual communication can be skewed, precisely shaped, and manipulated to achieve the desired outcomes (Williams, 2018). The theory of visual politics entails that visuals can perform various tasks ranging from influencing people’s behaviour and attitudes to triggering an emotional response and shaping overall public perception. The famous maxim that a ‘picture is worth a thousand words’ elucidates the tremendous persuasive potential of images in the public sphere. Images always have a purpose; more often than not, they have a carefully set target audience, and each image is designed to generate a specific impression (Bleiker 2018, 14).

Furthermore, visuals, per se, have been the central feature of political dynamics; they are a political force for shaping politics and depicting it. They delineate what consumers see and what they do not, and above all, how politics is perceived, sensed, framed, articulated, carried out and legitimized (Ranciere, 2004). Images are always constructed with overt and covert manipulation. Due to the pervasive influence of visuals, W.J.T. Mitchell characterizes the contemporary world as a ‘visual or pictorial turn’ where visuals determine public perception of critical events more than verbal accounts (Mitchell, 1986). This tendency can be attributed to the generally held notion

that visuals are more rhetorical, emotive, and manipulative than other forms of political communication (Lilleker, Veneti, & Jackson, 2019).

The power of images can be ascertained from the fact that Alex Danchev (2016) contended that artists, not politicians, are the creators of the new world order. Take, for example, the historic Guernica painting of Pablo Picasso, serving as the most iconic and influential anti-war statement (Bleiker, 2018, p. 16). This painting depicts not the factual but the distressing emotional and psychological aspects of wars. It has become emblematic of the socio-political hazards of wars and constantly reminds the public and political elite of the far-reaching repercussions of war. Go back to 2003 to understand the symbolic significance of this sculpture further, when the then Secretary of State, Collin Powell, presented the case for war with Iraq to the United Nations Security Council. He plead outside the Security Council chamber, which features a large tapestry reproduction of Guernica, and during his address to the chamber, Guernica is hidden behind blue covers (Bleiker, 2018, p. 16).

Images have the potential to trigger and galvanize emotions, as they provide emotional insight that words, more often than not, cannot express. Thus, due to their ability to generate emotional responses, images are central to how audiences perceive, comprehend, and respond to a situation or crisis (Hutchison, 2016). Among the visual content, movies appeal the most to public feelings and emotions through their meticulously constructed scenes. Cinematic depictions of political issues offer the viewer a visceral experience, partly because they combine narratives, visual images and sound (Bleiker, 2016). These films, often politically motivated, portray certain groups or communities as dangerous based on their religious or ethnic composition.

Thus, in contrast to the real or lived reality, images can construct an alternative pseudo-reality to project counter-narratives to existing political narratives. Therefore, images serve as an eye we cannot shut (Berger 1991). The emotional significance of the images in depicting an event - be humanitarian or political in nature - delineates the incontrovertible nexus between images and emotions. An image of a child under attack, for instance, can generate not just emotional reactions among consumers but also political responses (Lee-Koo 2011). The visual appearance of any face in cinematic representation triggers our feelings and emotions. This provides an explanation of

why cinematic scenes are often filled with emotions to carefully convey a particular message to the desired audiences.

In the same way, actors also utilize strong and sensitive symbols to trigger the desired emotional response or appeal. This content is usually based on prejudices and targets sacred emblems of particular communities. This is evident from the blasphemous Charlie Hebdo cartoons in France that elicited widespread outcry and anger (Baider & Constantinou, 2020). Furthermore, using visual content repeatedly to reinforce existing beliefs or ideology is another essential weapon in the toolkit of visual politics. Moreover, in visual politics, the content is framed so that it often drives the viewers to carry out selective and contextual interpretations of the visuals serving the framers' purpose (Grabe & Bucy, 2009, pp. 52–84).

## **2.1 Visuals, Socialization and Affect Resonance**

Movies divide characters into heroes and villains based on appearance, role, and behaviour. The images and visuals provide cues necessary for the process of socialization, whereby individuals and societies internalize certain norms and ideologies. Through socialization, one acquires the fixed and dynamic schema, the cognitive categorization of information that defines objects, but more importantly, political parties, leaders, candidates, and policy stances (Lilleker, 2014). Schema allows individuals to judge real-world happenings vis-à-vis existing norms and expectations, thereby facilitating perceptions of what is normal or anomalous and, ergo, constitutes crucial components on which political communication stands. This also indicates schemas can be manipulated through meticulously crafted strategic political communication, thereby engineering perceptions.

Images are a powerful tool in shaping any society's ideal characters, behaviours, norms, values, and roles. They depict how an ideal leader should look, how they can appear more honest, compassionate, and above all, a true statesman. Zelizer (2004) argues that media, through the strategic use of imagery, plays a crucial role in propagating common perceptions and controlling societal norms. In political campaigns, leaders use this power to manipulate public perception of right and wrong through visual juxtaposition between good and evil. This strategic use of imagery captivates audiences and influences their perceptions.

Images are instrumental in conveying messages frequently used in electoral campaigns. The values and the norms internalized through the process of socialization regulate human affect- the emotional response triggered when one is exposed to images and visuals. Images elicit reactions ranging from enjoyment to disgust, fear and whatnot. All these reactions are forms of affect resonance, where an emotional response is triggered that is internally meaningful to the receiver, and this is the affect resonance which underpins attitude formation and shapes behavioural responses (Magai, 1999). Politicians worldwide employ the same strategy of eliciting effect during their electoral campaigns. Politicians on the stump pledging to bring change, rejuvenate, and reunify their nation often accentuate their rhetoric through visual depictions. In this way, they engender feelings of hope and trust and solidify the commitment of their supporters who believe their leaders are honest, dedicated and tenable.

Leaders employ visual artifacts as a propaganda tool to depict threats and dangers to their country's politico-economic security if their rival is elected; and with each image comes the schema and affect resonance which engender myriad of feelings and behaviors among target audiences. Consider, for instance, the campaign visuals depicting leaders interacting with ordinary citizens and workers, thereby displaying them as more authentic, accessible and compassionate in character; this effect was seen among the young UK voters who supported Jeremy Corbyn at the 2017 General Election (Lilleker & Liefbroer, 2018). Excessive exposure to images of Jeremy Corbyn with ordinary people, rappers and other underprivileged segment of the society ultimately constructed a schema projecting him as caring and accessible. In this way, visual campaign communication impacts and resonates with those individuals who lack deeper understanding of politics and usually rely on populist rhetoric, and therefore, are political cognitive misers.

## **2.2 Visuals and Cognitive Misers**

In an era of information overload, where images are prevalent, there are prospects of attaching too much importance to some visuals at the expense of others. Those visuals which trigger emotional response will captivate some and inevitably lead to error in judgment for instead of attention to detail people will process summarily information. This is due mainly to the fact that across the world majority of people lack significant interest and expertise in minutiae of politics; therefore, they resort to quick absorption and processing of information available.

In order to analyze the US electoral environment during Presidential campaigns, Popkin (2004) applied the concept of ‘cognitive miser’. He contended that humans, in an attempt to preserve their mental processing resources, harness instinctive mechanisms and strategies to lessen their cognitive effort while navigating the intricacies of socio-political world.

In case of the United States’ Presidential campaign, an average citizen looks for unique promises and offers of each potential candidate which make them an ideal candidate for Presidency. Therefore, instead of making decisions on the basis of detailed introspection of the offers and promises, citizens rely on more accessible and partial information, and hence are easily manipulated. Here visuals play an indispensable role in triggering human affect, as evident from the Presidential electoral campaign of 2008 when energetic and vibrant images of Barack Obama took precedence over frail-looking John McCain. These images and visuals disseminated through print and electronic media in the form of advertisements, news clips, and memes, thereby providing information to the schema of cognitive misers who continuously pay partial attention to election visuals (Lilleker, 2019).

Research carried out by Joo et al. (2014) delineated a direct link between interpretations of images of electoral campaigns of 2012 and fluctuations in his approval ratings. He unequivocally demonstrated that images which projected Obama as competent, compassionate and honest resulted in higher approval rate for him, while reverse was observed when unfavorable images were circulated.

### **2.3 The Heuristics and Bias Approach**

By applying the heuristics and bias approach to cognitive psychology, let’s explore how cognitive misers are more vulnerable to manipulation and biased judgment in a contemporary environment flooded with contested electoral information. This approach suggests that each image creates an impression, which may more often than not be incomplete or false, and this impression in return develops a schema which not only impacts attitudinal development but also undermines the ability to analyze or interrogate information. Daniel Kahnman (2011), a pioneer of research in the realm of automacy and decision-making, proposed two cognitive processes: system one thinking and system two thinking; former involves making snap decisions without serious consideration and reflection, while the latter constitutes a system of serious reflection and analysis. According to this

approach there exists a direct link between emotions and decision making in system one thinking. Cognitive psychologists argue that most people invest less cognitive effort in areas where they have little or minimal knowledge or interest; in such cases people inherently rely on available information, therefore, candidates who stand out as having persistently positive associations in a schema will gain more public support (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973).

Similarly, Elaboration Likelihood Model, which is a dual-process theory that explains change in attitude and behaviors as a result of communication and the consequent persuasion, suggests that people are prone to peripheral cues. The proponents of this model, Petty and Cacioppo (1986) contended that people with little or no interest or knowledge of any field will internalize simple impressions, which can adjoin with other similar impressions form attitude or belief system. The peripheral processing of visuals generates impressions, which in turn can lead to attitudinal or behavioral development. Once a particular attitude is developed, people disregard the contrasting information as this may lead to cognitive dissonance, the discomfort of having two contrasting sets of information and so an inconsistent schema. Therefore, once people have developed a certain attitude or behavior, they will seek not for information rather for affirmation. The same argument is propounded by confirmation bias theory which proposes that once a particular attitude is formed, people seek consistency and continuous reinforcement.

In short, heuristics and peripheral cues as deciphered above are information shortcuts; summaries of individuals, their characters and potential (Lilleker 2019, p.45). These peripheral cues or heuristics can be misleading, which means they can be manipulated to influence judgment. Hence, visual imagery is a powerful instrument in political communication whereby visuals can be harnessed to turn up at mental shortcuts and assist decision-making.

#### **2.4 Visual Politics and Mental Imagery Processing Model**

In order to describe processual connection between visual processing, associated emotional response, and cognitive appraisal, Goossens proposed Mental Imagery Processing Model (Goossens, 2003). This model suggests that greater affect resonance of an image or visual happens under the circumstances of ‘seeing as doing’. This means that images that depict actions, where audience realize that visualizing an action is actually becoming part of it, have more affect resonance than other visuals. The intensified emotional affect is due mainly to the fact that such



visuals, simultaneously, trigger range of emotions as well as physical reaction. Goossens, therefore, established that greater the potency of any communication, greater will be the intensity of consumers' emotions, and hence, greater will be its overall impact on decision-making. Therefore, we more often find leaders interacting with average citizens during their campaign which portray them more as empathetic, accessible, and genuine representative. As images have the ability to elicit strong emotional response, religious fundamentalists and populist leaders often appropriate images, and videos to invoke heightened emotional reactions to further their cause.

After taking into account the role of visuals in developing public perception, in the light of different approaches, let us explore how world leaders utilize visuals as their strategic statecraft. First, as indicated above, images, symbols and videos are far more powerful in creating an immediate and long-lasting impact on its viewers than the traditional verbal communication mechanism. It is employed in variety of ways to achieve the desired political and ideological objectives. For instance, one notable way of using imagery for political and strategic purpose is the selective use of images, symbols and other visual content that support an idea or a narrative while completely ignoring or hiding the visuals contradictory to it.

One of the most pressing issues, yet growing new norm of the day, is use of deep-fakes to create an illusion of reality, thereby sabotaging and demonizing the adversaries. This is the strategy in which images and videos are deliberately edited and doctored to give an altogether different dimension to the original content. Photographs embody the illusion of authenticity that makes them more powerful when it comes to depicting an event in a particular way (Garry & Gerrie, 2005, pp. 321-325). This makes them capable of generating a near-compulsive draw to analyze different political and humanitarian crises. In this way, these images not only shape individual's perception but also impacts collective imagination of communities worldwide.

In other words, images do not provide impartial or value-free knowledge or evidence of any event rather it creates a mirage of reality by masking the political values that they embody. While one may always succumb to the seductiveness of reality, but as David Perlmutter (1998, p.28) puts in, one must not forget that the lens is focused by a hand directed by a human eye. What adds insult to injury is that cognitive misers barely realizes that cinemas, electronic media houses and other

similar platforms disseminating politically motivated visuals are nothing but purveyors of commercially profitable constructed stories.

Thus, images, almost always deceive us, as Anderson and Winawer (2005, p.79) stipulate that images create ‘lightness illusion’ for each image is set against a particular background which portray the desired perspective. Images always project a particular perspective. They, as a matter of course, include as much as they exclude. They are always composed and designed by a particular person and always express simulacrum in a certain manner, thereby excluding the unwanted and alternative angles as much as possible, therefore, they cannot be neutral. Moreover, there are, more often than not, political interests at stake in any visual, and that these photographs are composed to tell a politically charged story (Strauss, 2003).

As indicated above, photographs and other visuals have the potential to trigger emotions, illustrating how visual politics work. Although it appears that images, videos and other visual content usually provide the accurate content, this claim is misplaced. Images usually deceive. They provide us with an enticing notion that whatever is projected through image is the real face of the world: a slice of life that elucidates what was actually happening at that particular moment. This is why Roland Barthes declares photograph a ‘message without code’. The power of photographs lies in illusion of authenticity through which political events are disseminated to distant audiences. Leaders usually portray the doctored and constructed images to misguide public regarding any particular aspect. Consider, for example, how Donald Trump and his affiliates used doctored images to build public perception that immigrants from Muslim countries are endangering the survival of American citizens.

There is no denying the fact that images, per se, make no sense. This is the interpretation of images that gives meaning to them and makes them worthwhile. The interpretation of any photograph is always done in the backdrop of social norms, values and individual and societal assumptions that surround our environment. This is why an image always embodies two aspects. One is the ‘denoted message’ which is the visual representation of any photograph; while other is the ‘connoted message’ which is associated with the interpretation of that image (Barthes, 1977). This clearly suggests that it is not just the mere image and its content rather its interpretation and the context against which it is constructed are also crucial in visual politics. In short, every image is always

for someone and for some purpose. It is an established fact that images do not always display the reality. Recall, for instance, 2003, when Collin Powel displayed satellite images as irrefutable evidence against Iraq showcasing its weapons of mass destruction. But, later on, it was found that those images served strategic interests of the United States at that time, and there were no weapons of mass destruction at all (Finn, 2008).

## **2.5 Visuals and Identity**

Another interesting aspect of images and visual artifacts is their ability to perform and politically frame a sense of identity and community (Bleiker, 2018). Identity gives people a sense of common purpose and since images and other visuals continuously produce and reproduce visuals depicting certain people and ideas as innocuous and friendly while others as hostile and an existential threat to the very existence of their community. It goes without saying that communities are constituted in a stark inside/out manner and vis-à-vis communities endangering others. Due to the immense potential of images and visuals in framing an identity and creating a sense of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ Dodds (2005) analyses how does ‘reel and real’ interact and co-constitute each other. To make this point further clear, consider, for instance, the depiction of terrorist incidents of September 11, 2001. The way televisions depicted these terrorist attacks is premised on the techniques employed in Hollywood disaster movies. In this way not only this coverage triggered political response but also made sense to the public at large. This pre-defined script not only delineated how to respond in times of crisis but also put forth the significance of standing behind the state in weal and woe. This, resultantly, unleashed War on Terror which not only reinforced hostile perceptions of others but also opened the floodgate of more violence and terrorism (Bleiker 2018, p.38).

Finally, another distinguishing feature of images and visual artifacts is that they are neither progressive nor regressive in their essence. They may either reinforce or solidify the existing power structure or they may uproot it altogether. There are scores of examples that indicate the role of images and other visuals in entrenching the existing political structures, even authoritarian regimes. Recall *Triumph of the Will* or *Olympia* movies of Leni Riefenstahl which helped Nazi regimes turn state-sponsored propaganda into broader mythology that proved to be instrumental in securing massive popular support for fascist and racist anti-Semitic policies of Hitler: “fascinating fascism” as Susan Sontag termed it (Sontag 1975). The same propaganda tools were

employed by socialist authoritarian regimes in legitimizing their cruel Communist practices in erstwhile Soviet Union. Moreover, some experts argue that the current trends of fascism as evident from the rising right-wing populism across the world are due mostly to the visual and rhetorical strategies which exploit cognitively vulnerable and resentful economic class.

## **2.6 Visual Politics and its Practical Global Illustrations**

There is no denying the fact that states harness visual content to undercut their rival states both during war and peace; leaders also employ the same tactics to downgrade their opponents. When one delves deep into history, one finds that during World War II actors from Allies and Axis powers actively utilized posters, cartoons, and films to disparage each other and to garner public support. During 1930s, Nazis actively used anti-Semitic imagery to disseminate hatred against the Jews. Although researchers have identified that anti-Semitic sentiments have historically been entrenched among the Germans, Hitler magnified this hatred through tactful use of art, media and entertainment. Through this visual propaganda, Hitler achieved two objectives. First, he mobilized massive public support in favor of his ideology of racial superiority and in this way solidified his reign. Second, through this propaganda, he legitimized his ruthless persecution against Jews before and during the World War-II. Nazi propaganda established the idea that the Jews were basically to be suspected of revolutionary and subversive ambitions and that killing them during the war was therefore a kind of social prophylaxis (Dulffer 1996, .68). This indicates that through diverse visual content, Nazi regime elicited strong emotional response from Germans against Jews.

Another practical illustration of visual politics in global arena can be found in the Arab Spring. These were the pictures and graphic images of Tunisian street vendor who self-immolated in front of police station due to police abuse (Lilleker, Venetti, & Jackson 2019, 2). When these heartening visuals circulated worldwide within hours and days, mass-scale public demonstrations started which not only ousted President Abidine, but also triggered similar massive demonstrations against oppressive authoritarian regimes in other regional states. This indicates that the visuals can have such a profound visceral impact that it can lead to a revolutionary political change.

Besides that, there are certain realms where impact of visuals is more obvious. Icons, ubiquitous and popularly-known images that portray any historic event of immense significance and trigger strong emotional response, indicate that it is the visual representation and not the actual content

through which people recognizes any event. To corroborate this claim, it is crucial to refer to another historic event that signifies the importance of visual representation in shaping public approach. It was Nick Ut's Pulitzer Prize-winning Vietnam War iconic photograph of 1972 which depicted the miserable state of badly burned nine-year-old Kim Phuck. This widely circulated photograph depicted the scale of ruthless atrocities committed against the innocent South Vietnamese. This visual transformed public opinion and perception vis-à-vis Vietnam War so much so that war completely lost its legitimacy in the public eye (Hariman and Lucaites 2003). These Iconic images are described as 'visual quotations' due to their direct role in shaping public opinion and perception of the event (Sontag 2003, 22).

Although images have been the part and parcel of mankind from centuries, the role of visuals in politics has been transformed in two ways. First is the global outreach and that too instantaneously. The speed at which visual content circulates across the globe makes an event happening in one part of the world the global one within seconds. Gone are the days when photographs of an event, say Vietnam War, would have taken days if not weeks to reach on the front page of any newspaper. Now it takes seconds to make any local event an international one. Second way in which the visual politics has undergone tremendous change is the democratization of visual politics (Bleiker, 2018). Decades ago, generating and disseminating visual content was within the reach of few, mostly states and media channels, now, everyone with one click can circulate it across the globe. But states and leaders have maintained historic monopoly over visual politics. They have been strategically employing the mainstream media and other virtual tools to propagate their political narratives. Contemporary diversity and versatility has only supplemented their strategic toolkit with much more precision and efficacy.

## **2.7 Instruments of Visual Politics**

After taking into account the role of visual politics in achieving political interests, this research now aims to explore different avenues of visual politics with particular focus on cinema, posters, advertisements, and mainstream media. Let us examine the role of these platforms in the propagation of political narratives one by one. The word propaganda is defined as any form of communication that is used to influence people's beliefs, attitudes, opinions, or behaviors toward a particular cause, ideology, or agenda (Qureshi, 2023). It involves advertent dissemination of

prejudicial and biased information to highlight particular viewpoint. There propagandists more often than not employ techniques which include but are not limited to emotional appeals, manipulation of facts, selective and one-sided presentation of the picture, and other similar to achieve the desired objectives.

## Cinema

Cinema can be used as a powerful tool for political purposes, leveraging its reach, impact, and storytelling capabilities to shape public opinion and advance political agendas. Cinemas propagate political message in variety of ways. First, films can be produced to highlight particular political rhetoric, ideology and agendas. Films employ powerful storytelling techniques to persuade public and shape its perception. Films, more often than not, propagate state's particular policy vis-à-vis any dispute or matter. To garner public support, films are often furnished with strong emotions to evoke patriotism and nationalism in viewers. Thus, through variety of techniques like demonizing enemies, maintaining dichotomy of hero and villain, emotional manipulation, and repetition and reinforcement of particular viewpoint, films often serve the purpose of state in projecting its stance vis-à-vis issues (Dukalskis & Hooker, 2011, p. 53). Ever since their creation, cinemas –primarily in Hollywood and Bollywood have been the crucial source of propaganda and political messaging. In Bollywood, India has consistently been producing propaganda films to disseminate state's official rhetoric. Consider, for example, the Uri Attack movie in which India tried to corroborate the Modi-government stance that India conducted surgical strike inside Pakistan after this incident. Although there were no traces of this surgical strike as indicated by national and international media, India tried to propagate its false narrative through this movie. This is how movies can, irrespective of authenticity, can help propagate any particular narrative.

## Posters

After taking into account the role of cinemas in promoting state propaganda, this research now delves deep to analyze the similar role of posters. Poster is one of the traditional sources of political campaigns but its relevance in the contemporary political milieu needs no explanation. Posters, highly enriched traditional source of political campaigns, are considered to be an important tool in the visual political communication. As typically printed, non-periodical, persuasive visual mass media, posters are materially fixated in public space communicating one-directionally with disperse audience (Geise 2015, 1). They are still powerful source of conveying politically

motivated information to all people, irrespective of their affiliation. It is usually employed during electoral period wherein each contestant tries to present its candidacy before the masses. The emergence of poster is often linked with the freedom of press and media, as the first poster originated in Netherlands against the Spanish occupation during the liberation wars. Nowadays, whether it is a political rally or civil society movement, one observes posters everywhere in the nook and corner. Posters can activate certain associations, induce emotional reactions (Brader, 2006) and generally influence candidate evaluations. They can increase the knowledge of voters about candidates or political positions; such learning effects can also increase the general interest in the election (Podschuweit, 2007). During the G-20 summit in Indian Occupied Kashmir in 2023, roads of Srinagar were adorned with posters depicting stability in Kashmir which again substantiated the view point of PM Modi regarding the revocation of special status of Kashmir (Chebrolu et al., 2023).

#### Advertisements

Advertisements are another potent source of visual politics for they propagate well-organized and controlled peace of information in visual and textual form. Political ads, both through electronic and print media, are crucial source of political communication as they are ubiquitous and influential repositories of political narratives by leaders their affiliates. Televised and printed ads are the most common form of advertisements serving the political purpose of actors through visuals. TV advertisements are also an interesting way of disseminating one's political narrative, success stories of their previous tenures and overall political manifestoes. Advertisements are one of the most dominant forms of projecting political viewpoints across the world (Holtz-Bacha, 2018, p. 179). They follow the same principle of operation as they involve selectively targeting the visuals to show the public. These visuals either promote nationalistic sentiments, or glorify the culture, art, economic and technological progress to persuade the viewers. In recently held Indian elections of 2024, Modi government has incessantly utilized this forum to highlight its visceral actions, such as revocation of article 370, inauguration of Ayodhya temple, hatred against Pakistan and Muslims to trigger the emotional sentiments in order to bolster its political support base for the elections 2024 (Al Jazeera, 2024).

#### Media

Finally, media is another dominant tool of propagating political narratives across the world. States usually employ different tactics ranging from galvanizing media to circulate favorable information while completely off-airing the relatively less-favorable information. Furthermore, highlighting positive features of state and its incumbent government, demonizing enemies from both within and abroad, and manipulating the information are the potential ways in which media can impact masses. Media is considered to be a powerful source of making opinions, building and breaking perceptions, and influencing values and behaviors at large. Media sets the agenda in such a way that it prioritizes which news to break first and give maximum coverage. In this way it delineates which news is more important and which is of less significance. Accounting for both content and perceptions, theories of framing and second-level agenda setting establish that how media cover issues influences the way people think about those issues (Peacock and Hoewe 2019). Thus, media is another potent source of political propagation, effectively employed by states to achieve their political objectives.



## **Chapter 3**

# **VISUAL POLITICS, ABROGATION OF ARTICLE 370, AND POLITICAL COMMUNICATION MODEL**

### **3.1 Introduction to Political Communication Theory**

To begin with, Political Communication Theory analyzes the role of information in influencing public opinion. It examines how electoral campaigns, advertising, speeches of leaders, film industry, and media content play their part in shaping public view of any particular event. Political Communication emerged as an important sub-field of both political science and media studies in the 20th century. It examines the possible ways in which media can influence public perceptions and opinions- including agenda-setting, framing and priming (Gervais 2016). As per the Agenda setting theory, issues and matters which receive maximum media coverage are the one which public regard as important. The order in which news are disseminated also delineates that public prioritizes the news coming earlier in the bulletin. In the same way, when media frames an issue in such a way that it highlights certain aspects of it as salient and more crucial it also shapes public attitude vis-à-vis that issue.

This theory meticulously focuses on certain key aspects. First, it examines how political information is crafted, and what expressions, visuals and symbols are utilized. It also analyzes how the same political message is presented before the audiences as framing plays an indispensable role in shaping public opinions and approaches. It also takes into account the mediums through which messages are disseminated to public. Electronic media, digital or print media can have stupendous impact on the way information is received and interpreted. Furthermore, political communication theorists also examine who are the target audiences and what is their socio-cultural and religious background. These factors determine how the distributed information is going to impact particular community. Moreover, it also addresses in which ways any particular political rhetoric has impacted the audience, which may be evident from voting patterns and policy support.

### **3.2 Modi's Strategic Use of Political Communication Theory**

The connection between The Kashmir Files and the broader political strategy of the Modi government lies in the shared themes and narratives that resonate with the BJP's core electorate.

While the film itself may not have been explicitly mentioned in every instance of political communication, its portrayal of the Kashmir conflict aligns with the government's broader messaging strategy, which includes the revocation of Article 370 and anti-Muslim sentiments. This pattern of communication, which leverages emotional and nationalistic sentiments, underscores how *The Kashmir Files* contributed to altering the political discourse in favor of the BJP, serving as a cultural extension of the party's political agenda.

Now, applying the same theory to examine how PM Modi has employed the same strategies to impact public opinion vis-à-vis the abrogation of article 370. The most prominent aspect of Modi's policy of visual politics focused on strategic creation and framing of rhetoric regarding article 370. Modi has been the proponent of revocation of article 370 ever since he started his political career; however, his hardline opposition against article 370 began to surface from 2002 onwards. He has been an ultra-nationalist personality fond of igniting the flames of nationalism and Hindu religious and cultural identity (Abi-Habib & Yasir, 2021). Thus, in successive public addresses he vowed for scrapping this article 370 after assuming power. He declared this article discriminatory in nature which halted the development of Kashmir and denied other communities the so-called due representation (Hall, 2019).

In doing so, he effectively utilized print, electronic, and social media, and Bollywood industry which propagated this move as historic one. First, Modi subtly abrogated the article 370 which reminds us of the fact that he pursued hard move first, and then carefully segregated the target audience from which he faced opposition. The entire Indian community was divided primarily into two groups; on the one hand were Muslims and secular class of India who were strictly opposing this move, and on the other hand were Hindus (Predominantly BJP voters) who hailed this move as an indispensable one. Successive manifestoes of the BJP reveal that, it has maintained an inflexible stance regarding stripping Kashmir of its special status. Although the BJP came in power back in 2014, due to thin majority it could not implement this agenda. The entire electoral campaign of 2019 focused on the abrogation of article 370, and his successive interviews and public address he demanded an absolute majority from Indian masses to execute its plans.

This is how, as per Political Communication Theory, leaders captivate their viewers by selectively portraying their core agenda (Nelson, Oxley, & Clawson, 1997). This appealed hard-liner Hindus

in Northern India to greater extent, and finally his party grabbed absolute majority in his second term, and helped him secure premiership for the third consecutive term. In order to dissuade criticism after abrogation from within and without, Narendra Modi and cronies employed visual tactics to declare this move as the one that Kashmiris celebrated. It maintained strict curfew in Kashmir, imprisoned 8 million Kashmiris under 9,00,000 troops (UNHCR, 2019), went for complete media and internet blackout and started projecting before the world that Kashmir has become stable, and the move has opened the doors for real-democracy and comprehensive development.

### **3.3 Instruments of Control: Media and Bollywood**

The main instruments in his strategic toolkit were controlled main-stream media of the Centre, and Indian film industry. The media consistently toed the line of the Modi vis-à-vis abrogation of article 370. Furthermore, to further influence public opinion and distort the well-known history, Modi directed the Bollywood film industry to back his measure. Thus, films like the ‘The Kashmir Files’ and ‘Article 370’ were featured to develop public perception of his controversial move (Qayoom, 2022). What adds fuel to the fire is the deliberate construction of Kashmir dispute as an issue which is religiously motivated and depicting freedom fighters as terrorists who carried out persecution of Kashmiri Pandits. Besides that, Modi also linked it to the history projecting abrogation as the dream of Jana Sangh founder Syama Prasad Mookerjee. Thus, variety of visual tactics was employed to influence public perception of article 370 (Sharma, 2024).

To begin with, McNair delineates political communication as a ‘purposeful communication about politics’, and demarcates the ‘intentions of senders to influence the behavior of receivers’ (McNair 2010, p.24). Swanson and Nimmo elaborate political communication as ‘the strategic use of communication to influence public knowledge, beliefs and actions on political matters’ (Swanson & Nimmo 1990, p.9). From both these definitions, one may imply that political communication is almost always strategic in nature, and is desired to achieve some purpose. Political Communication Theory entails the production and potential impact of cogent political discourse through media, mainly mass media, in the form of electoral campaigns, advertisement, and news coverage.

### **3.4 The Evolution of Political Communication**

Political Communication emerged as an important sub-field of both political science and media studies in the 20th century; but its roots trace back to ancient civilizations when subsequent rulers utilized sculptures and symbols to depict their might and authority. Political communication has historically been carried out in an organic manner in the form of propaganda whereby the selective set of desired content has been disseminated. Therefore, political communication, ever since it found itself in the limelight, has been instrumental in constructing public discourse and rallying support of masses. With the dawn of 20th century and the subsequent mediatization, global landscape of political communication has been revolutionized engendering diverse political discourse in the forms of advertising, propaganda, and other visuals.

This theory meticulously focuses on certain key aspects. First, it examines how political information is crafted, and what expressions, visuals and symbols are utilized. It also analyzes how the same political message is presented before the audiences as framing plays an indispensable role in shaping public opinions and approaches. It also takes into account the mediums through which messages are disseminated to public. Electronic media, digital or print media can have stupendous impact on the way information is received and interpreted. Therefore, media plays an indispensable role in influencing public cognition, attitudes, and behaviors. Furthermore, political communication theorists also examine who are the target audiences and what is their socio-cultural and religious background. These factors determine how the distributed information is going to impact particular community. Moreover, it also addresses in which ways any particular political rhetoric has impacted the audience, which may be evident from voting patterns and policy support.

#### *Agenda-Setting and Framing Theories in Media*

There are two widely-accepted theories that delineate the role of media in shaping public behavior: agenda-setting and framing. As per the Agenda-Setting theory, issues and matters which receive maximum media coverage are the one which public regard as important. Agenda-setting, per se, refers to the ability of media to signal to the public what is more important (Moy, Tewksbury & Rinkey 2016). Media, by dint of providing varying coverage to issues at hand, shape public view of the significance and salience of the news featuring. The term ‘agenda-setting’ was originally coined by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw. Media, as Cohen elucidates, more often than not

stimulate people ‘what to think about’ (Cohen 1963, p.38). To understand the extent to which agenda-setting can impact the perception of people, consider the experiment carried out by McCombs and Shaw in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. They examined the greatest concerns of people at the time irrespective of their political affiliations. Unsurprisingly, they found that people regarded those issues as their matter of concern, and that too in the similar rank-order, that were in the limelight in multiple media outlets and news broadcasts at that time (McCombs & Shaw 1972, p.178). Similar effects of agenda-setting were also observed vis-à-vis broadcast television news.

Framing involves summarizing the topic and meticulously developing story to present it before the audience in a more appealing fashion. Robert Entman, a renowned media analyst, describes framing as: ‘To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation for the item described’ (Entman 1993, p. 52). Framing is all about the content of media, which can be an image, phrase, or a metaphor, that is framed or construed by a journalist for viewers. According to researchers of political communication, there are two primary phases in the framing processes; frame-building and frame-setting (Scheufele 1999). Former entails the construction of frames and their subsequent inclusion in news stories; later refers to the ways audiences consume framed news and then adopt the same frames to contemplate issues and problems. Frame-building happens when journalists give a particular shape to any news out of the bits and pieces of socio-political and economic realm.

Three forces, more often than not, drive production of frames in media: culture and social norms, organizational pressures and constraints, and frame advocates (Shoemaker & Reese 2014). To begin with, culture and social norms play fundamental role in framing process. This is the culture and social norms that define and determine what is normal and what is aberrant. Thus, journalists frame stories and present news in ways that are in line with the culture and norms of their organization. In the same way, organizational pressures and constraints also play an indispensable role during framing process. Every media organization has defined rules and regulations that provide framework to how and when to apply frames on issues and problems. Furthermore, there are certain frame advocates (influential groups) who, often, influence media houses to frame news in ways that serve their interests. Frame-setting delineates the impact of frames on consumers’

emotions, feelings and beliefs vis-à-vis issues and problems. Frame shapes public perception, and ergo public opinion. If agenda-setting describes how the public accessibility of a problem is affected by how much the media cover that problem, frame-setting describes how public perceptions of what is applicable to explaining a problem are influenced by how the media frame that problem (Price & Tewksbury, 1997).

### *Strategic Use of Political Communication in Electoral Campaigns*

The order in which news are disseminated also delineates that public prioritizes the news coming earlier in the bulletin. In the same way, when media frames an issue in such a way that it highlights certain aspects of it as salient and more crucial it also shapes public attitude vis-à-vis that issue. The strategic employment of political communication is evident, mainly, during electoral campaigns when leaders, through mass media and other digital platforms, strive for public support and approval for their political measures.

### **3.5 Modi's Use of Visual Politics in the Abrogation of Article 370**

Now, applying the same theory to examine how PM Modi has employed the same strategies to impact public opinion vis-à-vis the abrogation of article 370. The most prominent aspect of Modi's policy of visual politics focused on strategic creation and framing of rhetoric regarding article 370. Modi has been the proponent of revocation of article 370 ever since he started his political career; however, his hardline opposition against article 370 began to surface from 2002 onwards. He has been an ultra-nationalist personality fond of igniting the flames of nationalism and Hindu religious and cultural identity. Thus, in successive public addresses he vowed for scrapping this article 370 after assuming power. He declared this article discriminatory in nature which halted the development of Kashmir and denied other communities the so-called due representation.

In doing so, he effectively utilized print, electronic, and social media, and Bollywood industry which propagated this move as historic one. First, Modi subtly abrogated the article 370 (even most of his cabinet ministers were unaware) which reminds us of the fact that he silently pursued hard move first, and then carefully segregated the target audiences from which he faced opposition. Thus, he took into account the nature and intensity of opposition and pursued measures to combat this challenge accordingly. In pursuit of this, he maintained firm control over mainstream Indian

media; PM Modi disseminated state-sponsored narrative regarding abrogation of article 370. The mainstream media headlines, primetime programs, and documentaries projected the image of Kashmir dispute as propounded by Modi and his allies. Media disseminated tickers of ‘National Integration,’ ‘One India’ and ‘Development in Kashmir’ to influence the public perception and opinion vis-à-vis abrogation of Article 370.

His entire visual campaign regarding Article 370 focused on two kinds of target audiences. On the one hand were Hindu nationalists, who hailed this move, and in order to further accelerate his support from this class, Modi-backed media continuously propagated this move as the one which paved the way towards unification and integration of India. Print and electronic media kept on featuring tickers like ‘One Nation, One Constitutions’, ‘Era of Progress and Development’, ‘Beacon of Hope’, ‘Kashmir Reclaimed’, ‘Modi ka Naya Kashmir (Modi’s New Kashmir)’ and ‘Historical Decision’ to create an illusion of indispensability of the decision. As indicated above, agenda-setting theorists argue that leaders, in order to seek support and approval of their decisions, utilize media as a strategic instrument whereby images, visuals and rhetoric favoring the policy stance of those leaders are prioritized and featured the most. Therefore, Indian-media set the agenda vis-à-vis abrogation of article 370 in such a way that, most of the times, they disseminated news and visuals that strived to validate the move.

BJP politicians who used Twitter to promote ‘The Kashmir Files’ include Chief Ministers Yogi Adityanath (Uttar Pradesh), Pramod Sawant (Goa), Biplab Deb (Tripura), Shivraj Singh Chouhan (Madhya Pradesh), Basavaraj Bommai (Karnataka), ML Khattar (Haryana), Bhupendra Patel (Gujarat), and Pushkar Singh Dhami (Uttarakhand) (hindustimes.com, 2022). The government's endorsement of the film was a strategic move to gain public support. Prime Minister Narendra Modi praised the film, claiming it accurately portrays the truth about the massacres of Hindu Pandits in Kashmir and reflects the realities in India.

The film's producer leveraged PM Modi's endorsement to build public sympathy for the film's narrative, aiming to convince viewers of its authenticity. The producer strategically shared photos on Twitter of the film production team's meeting with PM Modi, which successfully garnered widespread support from artists, politicians, and civilians alike. The extensive promotion and discussions surrounding ‘The Kashmir Files’ on social media, particularly Twitter, highlight how

these platforms are now essential tools for analyzing the impact and influence of political narratives among the public. The positive reactions from Indian officials further bolstered the Hindu community's acceptance of the film's narrative, which contains anti-Islamic propaganda. This government-backed narrative heightened existing anti-Islamic sentiments in India, leading to increased discrimination and marginalization of Muslims.

Furthermore, media framed news headlines and stories in such a way that it selectively portrayed the visuals backing the revocation of Article 370. Therefore, by repetitively propagating the salient features (potential advantages) of this decision, Indian media primed public to view this move from politico-economic and security perspective. Another aspect of Modi's strategic employment of visual politics to influence public opinion vis-à-vis Article 370 was associating this move with economic development, security, and above all, the prosperity of citizens of Jammu and Kashmir (BusinessToday.In, 2019). Therefore, through successive propaganda campaigns Modi government tried to portray that this indispensable step was aimed to bring economic development in the region as Article 370 was the biggest stumbling block in the way of investment. Furthermore, he continuously propagated that this article is discriminatory in nature and it is an instrument of suppression against minorities of Jammu and Kashmir.

He, unremittingly, reiterated that stripping Kashmir of its special status is actually a much-awaited step towards equality and will erode the menace of terrorism from the region. To further substantiate his controversial decision, he organized G-20 summit 2023 in Srinagar to depict before the world that Kashmir has been normalized (Ashiq, 2024). By organizing this summit, he tried to project the façade of normalcy in the region which opened avenues for investment in tourism and other sectors in the region, in the post-abrogation era. Furthermore, to further propagate normalcy in Kashmir, recently, Modi organized massive rally at Bakshi stadium in Srinagar amid 'Viksit Bharat Viksit Jammu and Kashmir' event (Jeelani, 2024). Visuals, depicting thousands of men, women, children and families carrying tricolor Indian flags with smiling faces expressing contentment and enthusiasm on Modi's visit to Kashmir. Through this event he tried to portray that people of Kashmir have welcomed the abrogation of Article 370, and people have started participating in internal development initiatives instead of resorting to violence.



Moreover, in order to stave off any massive demonstrations, Narendra Modi silenced the entire valley by blacking out media and internet coverage while maintaining strict armed curfew in the region; and on the other hand utilized mainstream media to propagate that Kashmir has been normalized, peace is restored and Kashmiris have welcomed this move. This is how visual politics is manipulated to selectively portray what is favorable and blackout what is unfavorable. Furthermore, Narendra Modi employed Bollywood Film Industry to influence public perception of Kashmir dispute in its entirety. Films like ‘The Kashmir Files’ and ‘Article 370’ were released to shape public opinion vis-à-vis Kashmir dispute. The Kashmir Files projected Kashmir as an issue which is religiously-fueled, and is not a matter of right to self-determination but a state-sponsored terrorism. Similarly, this movie framed the exodus of 1989 as a forced persecution (even termed it genocide) of Kashmiri Pundits by Muslims of Jammu and Kashmir. Some visuals depicting the massacre of men, women and even innocuous children of Pundit community in the migration camps by so-called Muslims was another attempt to manipulate visuals to trigger emotional response among the Hindus. Furthermore, this movie also showcased visuals in which people unequivocally demanded abrogation of Article 370.

To further sideline and dissuade the critics (usually the secular class and youth of India) of this controversial measure, this movie projected the secular class in general, and youth in particular as brainwashed, ill-informed, and misguided community who are unaware of the ins and outs of the Kashmir dispute. Similarly, the entire story of Article 370 movie concentrated on expressing how removing Article 370 was indispensable for the security and economic prosperity of Jammu and Kashmir. This clearly indicates how film industry toed the line of Narendra Modi in projecting state-sponsored narrative of Kashmir dispute and tried to reshape public perception vis-à-vis Kashmir. Successive manifestoes of the BJP reveal that, it has maintained an inflexible stance regarding stripping Kashmir of its special status. Although the BJP came in power back in 2014, due to thin majority it could not implement this agenda. The entire electoral campaign of 2019 focused on the abrogation of article 370, and in his successive interviews and public address he demanded an absolute majority from Indian masses to execute its plans. This is how, as per Political Communication Theory, leaders captivate their viewers by selectively portraying their core agenda. This appealed hard-liner Hindus in Northern India to greater extent, and finally his party grabbed absolute majority in his second term, and helped him secure premiership for the second consecutive term. In order to dissuade criticism after abrogation from within and without,

Narendra Modi and his affiliates employed visual tactics to declare this move as the one that Kashmiris celebrated.

### **Modi's Electoral Performance, Bollywood and Political Communication Theory**

Now by utilizing the same provisions of Political Communication Theory, let us explore the second research question which exclusively focuses on how the films produced by Indian Film Industry have impacted the electoral performance of Modi in 2024 elections. India's multibillion-dollar movie industry produces around 1,500 to 2,000 films per year in over 20 languages – more than any other country. And most of these are Hindi films, meaning Bollywood holds an outsized influence on the country's culture, identity and economy (Mogul and Yeung 2024).

The closer analysis of past ten years reveals that the Bollywood has steadily moved away from secular lines and veered to the right. Its successive projects have perpetuated anti-Muslim prejudices, more often than not demonizing them as terrorists. These movies often depict Hindus as hero, and Muslims as villains who at the end are destroyed by Hindu supremo. Similarly, these movies project Muslims as enemies of Hindus who want to destroy their (Hindus) community, in this way propagating the agenda of hatred of Modi government. Tanul Thakur, a journalist based in Delhi opined that “The degree to which we are seeing the infusion of politics in popular Hindi cinema, coupled with ... this very blatant disregard for India's religious minorities, and any kind of multiplicity of narratives ... has been very disconcerting.”

Ever since the BJP came into power, more often than not, Bollywood film industry moved in lockstep with the BJP government while carrying out its propaganda campaigns. The comprehensive analysis of production of films under Modi's leadership indicates that three themes have recurrently been produced in Bollywood to serve Modi's aims and policies: taking ownership of welfare projects, implanting grandiose Hindu-nationalist sentiments, and intensifying tensions and animosity between Hindus and Muslims depicting later as the arch-rival of Hindus' very existence. Take a look at, for instance, the movies like 'Toilet: A Love Story' which projected Modi as a 'messiah' of poor and the underprivileged segment of the society who realized the long-awaited dream of Mahatma Gandhi of clean environment by providing budgetary allocations for nationwide toilets. Similarly biopic genre of movies has increasingly become attractive for right-wing Hindu nationals who cherish the idea of Hindu-first. To influence public sentiments and

garner support from cognitive misers, movies like ‘The PM Narendra Modi’ which depicted emotional scenes of how Modi came out of poverty, was due to release just before 2019 elections, but due to massive propaganda visuals aimed at influencing voters the Election Commission of India allowed it to be released only after elections (Maqbool 2024). Similarly, another movie ‘Swatantrya Veer Savarkar’ a biopic on an avid advocate of pristine Hindu nationalism was premiered weeks before 2024 general elections.

The third category of the movies premiering out from Bollywood has gained significant approval in the aftermath of 2014. This theme focuses on demonizing Muslims, projecting them as enemies of Hindus, distorting facts of historical events, dramatizing biased and communally polarizing narratives in which Hindus are depicted as victims and Muslims are the iniquitous perpetrators. This widely hailed genre of movies includes ‘Article 370’ of 2024, ‘Kerala Story’ of 2023, and ‘The Kashmir Files’ of 2022. Article 370, released in February 2024, tried to portray the indispensability in terms of socio-economic, political and security parameters of stripping Kashmir of its special status. Similarly, Kerala Story, premiered in May 2023, is premised on the Hindutva conspiracy theory of ‘love jihad’ and falsely portrays recruitment of thousands of Hindu and Christian women from Kerala in the Islamic State (IS) after being converted to Islam. The Kashmir Files of 2022 goes a step ahead in supporting the Modi’s self-constructed tale of Kashmir dispute and relegated the entire chapter of Kashmir dispute to state-sponsored terrorism whereby Kashmiri Hindus, no Muslims, are the victims of bloodshed.

Scholars have opined that the gradual transition of Bollywood film industry from secular and pluralistic lines to the one echoing Modi’s ultra-nationalist views (Sen, 2016, p. 98) has far reaching implications for India’s overall electoral environment as Bollywood has, historically, been maintaining an outsized influence over culture, identity, economy (Kishore, 2013, p. 119) and politics of India (Bose, 2009). In stark contrast to his tally in 2014 and 2019 general elections when he secured 282 and 303 seats respectively, this time Modi barely managed to grab 240 seats out of 543 parliamentary seats- well below his much chanted slogan of ‘Ab Ki Bar, 400 Par’. Although his party came out to be the largest party in general elections yet analysts regard his apparent electoral win as a ‘defeat hidden in the victory’. North India, where majority population is Hindi-speaking, has been the fortress of Narendra Modi and his party for past ten years but this time Modi lost swathes of territory across North India. Take, for instance, Uttar Pradesh, where

BJP secured landslide victory in previous two terms in 2014 and 2019 by grabbing 71 and 63 seats respectively, this time Modi barely managed to win 33 seats with his allies winning three more. Similarly, in Western state of Maharashtra where the BJP secured 41 seats out of 48 in his previous terms, here too, this time Modi could win only 17 seats. What is more humiliating for Narendra Modi is that his candidate could not secure his seat in Faizabad constituency of Ayodhya where PM Modi recently inaugurated grand Ram temple on the site of 16<sup>th</sup> century Babri mosque. Since Lord Ram has been the greatest political mascot of the BJP, Modi anticipated that consecration of Ram temple would usher in an era of renewed Hindu nationalist pride among the Hindus and, in this way, guarantee his landslide victory in 2024 elections. Let's explore, using the conceptual framework delineated above, how Narendra Modi has been cut to size in this election wherein he seized victory with the shades of defeat. There are numerous factors which contributed to, what some referred to as, the demise of one-party system in India. To begin with, from past ten years Narendra Modi has been employing similar tactics (fueling communal divide, exaggerating social welfare initiatives, and galvanizing Hindu-nationalism through every platform) in an incessant manner. Although these tactics worked phenomenally in past, this time they failed to captivate voters. This is due mainly to the fact that, in visual politics, as authors suggest, never downplay the value of boredom. It goes without saying that Modi has incessantly employed visuals to propagate his core agenda of divisive campaigns aimed at maligning Muslims of India besides stimulating wave of Hindu-nationalism, though it worked in past, but overexposure to same kind of information has led to message fatigue among the users. As per the proponents of visual politics, in electoral campaigns people always look for something new and unique that respective candidates offer. Since Narendra Modi is repeatedly employing the same tactics to disseminate similar message over and over again, it has reached to saturation level for Indian voters, as a result, voters have increasingly become desensitized vis-à-vis these message. It is the lack of affect resonance due to overexposure to these visuals which resulted in the apathetic attitude of voters towards Modi, ergo, he lost swathes of territory in Northern India to Congress and other regional parties. As Narendra Modi had nothing new to offer to electorate in this election, therefore, he resorted to expressing same welfare programs and exploiting ethno-religious fault-lines thereby, exacerbating the ethnic and religious nationalism in India. But, the saturation level of electorate has been reached and these visuals are no more captivating for voters.

The second important factor which adversely impacted the electoral performance of Narendra Modi is his overreliance on divisive campaigns against Muslims and other minorities. This identity politics which finds its ideological underpinnings in the Hindutva alienated certain segments of Indian community. Consider, for instance, Uttar Pradesh, where Narendra Modi lost more than half seats, is home to more than 20 per cent Muslims; and Modi's Muslim bigotry and demonizing campaign, undoubtedly, estranged Muslims. Muslim bashing has not excited the voter much rather analysts are of the view that excessive disparaging of Muslims annoyed certain factions of his own support-base for they know that Muslims are the largest minority in India accounting for 14 per cent of the population. Similarly, Modi's rhetoric of absolute Hinduism also raised concerns among Dalit community who feared that absolute mandate for Modi would result in abolition of reserve seats for minorities in socio-economic fabric.

Another significant factor that impacted electoral performance of Modi in 2024 elections is the role of resurging opposition under purview of INDIA alliance. This alliance efficiently propagated counter narratives that dented the Modi's public image. The opposition parties relied on issues and challenges (unemployment, inflation and poverty) that were close to people heart and in this way garnered public support. They also galvanized support from secular class of India who believes in democracy, pluralism and equality. Thus, for consumers (voters) on the one hand was narrative of one person branding himself as messiah sent by God, striving to establish one-party system or absolute authoritarian rule by silencing all dissenting voices through state oppression, propagating Islamophobia, and fueling ethnic absolutism, and on the other hand were those vowing for saving democracy, constitution and fundamental rights for people of India. They successfully projected that, Modi if reelected with landslide victory, would scrap Indian constitution and unleash new reign of terror. Thus, visuals depicting excessive propaganda against Muslims, other minorities and secular class of India in Bollywood films were faded out by the visuals carrying issues closer to the hearts of ordinary citizens of India. This adversely impacted the electoral performance of Modi in Northern India.

Moreover, changing socio-political landscape of India has also proved to be crucial determinant of electoral performance. Gone are the days when divisive politics and nationalism were sufficient tools to influence public perception and decision-making (though such propaganda tools still work for cognitive misers), now people in general, and youth in particular seek solutions for more

pressing issues of the time. As voters' priorities and demands evolve with the passage of time, what has been appealing for people in previous two terms does not hold the same appeal anymore. Therefore, Bollywood films portraying simulacrum of polarized society on ethnic and religious lines has probably backfired in this general election. This clearly indicates that visuals are neither progressive nor regressive in nature; they may engender an authoritarian rule and may also demolish it as evident from recent trounce of Modi in his strongholds.

The recently featured films are 'The Kashmir Files' and "The Kerala Story" released in 2022 and 2023 respectively, are known for stereotypical content against Muslims, equating them with terrorists, and enemies of Hindus. This has intensified the religious divide in India (Mogul and Yeung 2024). Modi and its ministers publicly supported both movies and encouraged people to watch both movies (Hindustan Times, 2022). Another movie, 'Article 370', also backed the Modi government's controversial decision to abrogate Article 370. This film portrayed the official policy stance of Modi's government, attempting to establish that the biggest stumbling block in the development of Kashmir was Article 370, and that scrapping this article actually paved the way for investment and development. Prime Minister Narendra Modi commented on the upcoming release of the film, stating, "I have heard that a film on Article 370 is going to be released this week. It is a good thing as it will help people in getting correct information." The video, shared on a channel with 3.26 million subscribers, has garnered 1.8k likes and 106,188 views, highlighting the significant reach and influence of the content (The Indian Express, 2024, 0:25).

### **Importance of Analyzing This Film in the Context of Visual Politics:**

Visual politics has become an increasingly significant tool in shaping public opinion and political narratives. The release of 'The Kashmir Files' is a pertinent example of how visual media can be employed to influence perceptions and legitimize political actions. Prime Minister Narendra Modi, during a BJP parliamentary party meeting, urged all members present to watch the newly released film, 'The Kashmir Files'. He praised the film as "very good" and emphasized that such movies should be made more frequently. The film has garnered widespread attention and endorsement from high-ranking political figures in India, including Modi himself. A few days after its release, Modi addressed the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) parliamentary group, stating, "All of you should watch it. The film has shown the truth which has been suppressed for years. The truth

prevailed in 'The Kashmir Files'." This endorsement underscores the political capital invested in the film and highlights its role in shaping public narratives about the Kashmir conflict (India Today, 2022, 1:00). The video of this endorsement, shared on a channel with 9.54 million subscribers and viewed 4,305 times, showcases the film's significant impact on political discourse among the public.

## Chapter 4

### ‘The Kashmir Files’ AND POLITICAL DISCOURSE

#### 4.1 Significance and Implications in the Current Political Discourse

##### *Political Endorsement and Amplification:*

‘The Kashmir Files,’ directed by Vivek Agnihotri, has emerged as a significant piece of visual media in India’s current political landscape. The film, which dramatizes the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits from the Kashmir Valley during the 1990s, has received strong endorsements from high-profile political figures, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi (Kak, 2022). Modi’s endorsement, stating that the film reveals long-suppressed truths, underscores the political capital invested in the film and highlights its role in shaping public narratives about the Kashmir conflict. Mr. Modi also denounced the criticism as a "conspiracy to discredit" the film (Sebastian, 2022).

Further illustrating the political endorsement of the film, Assam Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma announced half-day special leave for all government staff in his state if they wanted to watch ‘The Kashmir Files.’ Government employees were only required to inform their superior officers and submit the tickets the next day to avail of this special leave (Hindustan Times, 2022). Sarma praised the film after watching it with his Cabinet colleagues and other state MLAs, stating on Twitter, "The Kashmiri Pandit genocide and their exodus are a blot on humanity. Moved by the heart-wrenching portrayal of their plight in The Kashmir Files" (Times of India, 2022). This resounding support from political leaders not only amplifies the film’s reach but also validates its narrative as aligned with the government’s stance (The Indian Express, 2023).

Another primary endorsement appears to be from BJP ministers - Women and Child Development minister Smriti Irani tweeted, urging people to watch the film "so that this history soaked in the blood of innocents may never repeat itself" (Irani, 2022). Amit Malviya the head of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) Information Technology (IT), said: “For the longest time, people even denied the Holocaust and called Schindler’s List a propaganda, just like some are doing to *Kashmir Files*. Truth eventually triumphs, no matter what.” (The Indian Express, 2022). Kavinder Gupta, former BJP deputy chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir, expressed that certain groups are attempting to



tarnish India's reputation through the Islamic movement and the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). He also stated, “much more has happened to Kashmiri Pandits than what was shown in the movie ‘The Kashmir Files’”. When The Kashmir Files was released in March, it received strong backing from the BJP. Six BJP-governed states—Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Haryana, Goa, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh—declared the film tax-free. On March 13, Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan announced the tax exemption, stating that the film needed “to be watched by the maximum people.” He further remarked, “Movie The Kashmir Files is a heart-wrenching narration of the pain, suffering, struggle, and trauma faced by Kashmiri Hindus in the 90s.” The Madhya Pradesh government granted leave to policemen to watch the film and announced the creation of a genocide museum for Kashmiri Pandits at an event, which was also attended by Vivek Agnihotri. At the time, BJP national spokesperson R P Singh provided complimentary tickets to ‘The Kashmir Files’ to college students in Rajinder Nagar, the Delhi seat from which he contested in 2020. "Let the new generation visit the history which scarred the soul of the nation," a tweet from him read. In Karnataka, BJP MLA Basanagouda Patil Yatnal promised to finance one screening of the film per day for a week in his Vijayapura constituency, assuring that people may see it "free of cost."

In a significant move, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal, a high-profile leader from the AAP, addressed the BJP's push to make ‘The Kashmir Files’ tax-free by not only acknowledging the importance of the film's subject but also suggesting that it be uploaded on YouTube to reach a wider audience. This proposal, made during an Assembly session, signals that the suffering of Kashmiri Pandits in the 1990s has now become a central topic in political discourse. The fact that Kejriwal, a prominent figure from the opposition, was present in such a high-profile setting and chose to support the film's promotion lends it a new level of credibility. It implies that if even political opponents are backing the film and offering ways to amplify its reach, the subject matter depicted in ‘The Kashmir Files’ is not only accurate but also highly significant and worthy of broader public attention (The Indian Express, 2022).

#### *Incitement of Communal Tensions:*

The film's portrayal of Hindu suffering at the hands of Muslim militants during the 1990s incited a provocative tableau during the Ram Navami procession on April 10, 2022, sponsored by a Shiv Sena leader. This installation, designed to mimic a brutal scene from the film, included a

mannequin and an ominous soundtrack, creating a highly charged atmosphere at a town square near a mosque. To maximize the impact, the district president of Shiv Sena mixed the woman's sobs from the film with belligerent cries of "Jai Shri Ram" and "Har Har Mahadev." The Hindu procession, marked by this provocative music and chants, clashed with the Muslim community during their evening prayers, leading to widespread violence, rioting, and arson. The provocative soundtrack during the procession amplified the communal discord, contributing to the violence that ensued.

The aftermath of the violence saw the Madhya Pradesh government sanction a series of demolitions targeting Muslim-owned properties under the guise of an "anti-encroachment drive." These actions, perceived as punitive measures, involved bulldozing homes, shops, and even a hotel owned by Muslims, while similar properties owned by Hindus were spared. This selective demolition sparked further fear and resentment among the Muslim population, exacerbating communal divisions and escalating tensions.

The influence of 'The Kashmir Files' extended beyond Khargone, inciting similar actions in Gujarat and North Delhi, and amplifying national Muslim fears of being both provoked and punished. The state's biased response, favoring Hindu narratives and disproportionately targeting Muslims, exacerbated communal sentiments. Politicians' inflammatory rhetoric, inspired by the film, perpetuated a cycle of fear and hostility, leading to a pervasive atmosphere of distrust and insecurity. This underscores the potent impact of media on communal relations and highlights the dangers of state-endorsed narratives that exacerbate societal fractures.

#### *Questions of Transparency and Accuracy:*

From the perspective of a documentary filmmaker and writer whose work has centered on Kashmir for almost two decades, the portrayal in 'The Kashmir Files' raises questions about the transparency and accuracy of its narrative. Despite extensive interviews conducted by the film's director, certain significant perspectives, such as those of other Kashmiri Pandits who were not included, suggest a selective approach to the film's research. Moreover, statistical data indicating that more Muslims were killed than Hindus during the same period adds complexity to the narrative. The general violence in Kashmir at the time involved targeted killings of both Hindus and Muslims, part of a wider political upheaval.

Sanjay Raut, a Shiv Sena politician, recognised that films like ‘The Kashmir Files’ should be made, but he criticised their goal, accusing them of fostering enmity and confusing political opponents. The producers of ‘The Kashmir Files’ had earlier released ‘The Tashkent Files’, which, according to Raut, implied that the Gandhi family was solely responsible for the killing of former Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri. Raut contended that while ‘The Kashmir Files’ reveals some truths, it also seeks to conceal other terrible realities as 32 years ago, the situation in Kashmir was dreadful not only for Kashmiri Pandits, who were disproportionately affected but for everyone in the region. He mentioned that Kashmiri Sikhs and Muslims were also killed during that time (The Economic Times,2022). The first political assassination in Kashmir was that of National Conference leader Mohammed Yousuf Halwai in August 1989. Before that, an attack on the inspector general of police resulted in the death of the officer's bodyguard (The New Indian Express, 2019).

#### *Selective Narrative Construction:*

The film depicts the exodus of Kashmiri Pandit families as a permanent and inevitable consequence, portraying their departure as a strategic survival move. This contrasts with historical accounts suggesting that many families initially intended their departure to be temporary. The film also selectively presents the motivations and actions of characters, reinforcing a narrative that aligns with the government’s position. For instance, in the movie of discussion ‘The Kashmir Files’, the portrayal of a Muslim neighbor advising a Hindu protagonist to leave is framed negatively, casting suspicion and portraying the neighbor as having ulterior motives. Conversely, a similar suggestion by the protagonist’s wife is framed positively, showing her as wise and caring. This selective portrayal not only influences the audience's emotional response but also subtly reinforces a biased depiction of intentions based on the characters' religious and political affiliations. By doing so, the film supports the government's narrative and legitimizes its policies by framing certain actions and motivations in a manner that aligns with its political agenda.

#### *Simplification of Complex Political Demands:*

The narrative also simplifies the complex political demands in Kashmir, presenting the desire for independence or union with Pakistan as extremist positions, while ignoring broader historical and political contexts. The portrayal of the Kashmiri Pandits' wish for India to claim Kashmir supports

the narrative that the revocation of Article 370 was a response to a long-standing demand, thus legitimizing the government's action.

## **4.2 Overview of the Revocation of Article 370 and the Political Climate in India**

### *Historical Context and the Rise of Separatism:*

The political climate in Indian-administered Kashmir has been volatile, marked by frequent protests and violence, particularly since July 2016. The killing of Burhan Wani, a 22-year-old separatist leader of Hizbul Mujahedin, by Indian security forces sparked widespread demonstrations and unrest. Wani's death on July 8, 2016, had a profound impact due to his popularity, which stemmed from his ability to galvanize Kashmiri youth through social media, his independence from foreign support, and his symbolic representation of the Kashmiri struggle. His killing triggered intense anti-Indian demonstrations throughout Jammu and Kashmir, leading to a curfew that lasted for 53 consecutive days, highlighting the severe political, economic, and security repercussions.

### *Autonomy and Articles 370 and 35-A:*

The roots of the conflict trace back to 1947, when the subcontinent gained independence from British colonial rule and was partitioned into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. The status of Kashmir became a point of tension between the two countries, both of whom wanted Kashmir within their borders. Initially, the Hindu maharaja of Muslim-majority Kashmir declared it an independent princely state. However, upon the threat of a Pakistani takeover, he acceded to joining India under certain conditions of autonomy, which were institutionalized through Articles 370 and 35-A in the Indian Constitution.

These articles granted Jammu and Kashmir significant autonomy, allowing the state to form its own legislature and create its own laws, particularly those restricting permanent residency and land ownership to local Kashmiris. This autonomy was seen as providing some protection to the Kashmiri population in a heavily contested region. However, the revocation of Articles 370 and 35-A in August 2019 wrested this autonomy from the population of Jammu and Kashmir, transferring control to the central government. This move allowed non-Kashmiris to settle and

purchase land in the region, a change viewed by many Kashmiris as an attempt by the Hindu-nationalist BJP to alter the Muslim-majority demography of Jammu and Kashmir.

#### *Political Motivations Behind the Revocation:*

The BJP, viewing India as a fundamentally Hindu nation, had long opposed the special privileges granted to Jammu and Kashmir under these articles. The annulment of this legislation was a prominent feature in the BJP's electoral campaigns. Prime Minister Modi and BJP leaders argued that Articles 370 and 35-A hindered Kashmiri prosperity, fostered corruption, and nurtured terrorism and separatism. The BJP's victory in the 2019 general elections and the enthusiastic public support among BJP constituents for the revocation indicate that Modi's stance resonated with a significant portion of the Indian public.

### **4.3 The Kashmir Files and Visual Politics**

#### *Principles of Narrative Theory*

Narrative is viewed primarily as a rhetorical act rather than merely an object. It is seen as a purposeful communication from one person (or group of persons) to one or more others. The foundational definition is as follows: Narrative is somebody telling somebody else, on some occasion, and for some purposes, that something happened to someone or something. Before delving into details, it is important to identify six main principles that underlie the approach to narrative-building rhetoric. These principles include intentional communication, contextual relevance, purposeful structuring, audience engagement, event representation, and character involvement. Understanding and applying these principles enhances the effectiveness of narrative building, ensuring that stories are not only told but also meaningfully received and interpreted by the audience. This analysis helps understand how narrative theory shapes public narrative, demonstrating the power of storytelling in cinema.

All of these six principles have been observed in the film "The Kashmir Files." The film's intent to present the extremely poor treatment of Hindu Pandits in Kashmir communicates their unfair expulsion from their homes and forced displacement due to religious extremism. Despite not participating in the conflicts, they faced inhumane and barbaric treatment. The contextual relevance is evident in the film's message, portraying the Kashmiri Hindu Pandits as the original

inhabitants who supported the revocation of Article 370. Their educated class fought for this cause and were vocal about it throughout history, yet their pleas were ignored.

The purposeful structuring of animosity, stemming from the perceived ignorance and barbaric actions of Muslims in Kashmir, is depicted in several scenes. Regardless of their role, Muslims are shown causing harm to Hindu Pandits, with extremist militants treating them in the most inhumane ways possible. The film suggests that the revocation of Kashmir's special status was a step to do justice for these long-suffering Hindus, giving their murdered ancestors and their descendants a sense of belonging and validation.

Audience engagement is targeted to create a narrative that Muslims are harmful and to remember and honor the forgotten Hindu Pandits. This narrative encourages the audience to support the government's decision to revoke Article 370 and to cherish Kashmir by expelling extremist and violent Muslims. Event representation is achieved through the selection of specific incidents occurring during a politically and socially turbulent time in Kashmir, aligning with the BJP government's narrative on the legitimacy of the revocation.

Given the film's controversial and complex subject matter, many viewers seek further discussion and clarification, often turning to online platforms like Quora to share their views, ask questions, or seek information about scenes that left them confused or seeking more context. These platforms serve as popular spaces where a large viewership can engage in discourse, further solidifying or challenging the perceptions created by the film.

The characters are portrayed in ways that evoke strong emotional responses: a desperate mother, a helpless father, wailing children, butchered people, raped women, and shot men. The character development is designed to elicit sympathy and support for the Hindu Pandits, reinforcing the need for the public to back the government's decision on Article 370. Through these narrative elements, the film effectively shapes public perception, demonstrating the power of storytelling in cinema.

Stories have long been a vital mode of communication, preserving collective wisdom, cultural identities, and shared experiences across civilizations. The Narrative Paradigm, introduced by Walter Fisher, is a key theoretical framework that highlights the crucial role of storytelling in shaping human perceptions and decisions. According to this paradigm, people are naturally

inclined to understand and navigate the world through narratives rather than relying solely on logic or empirical evidence. Fisher argues that narratives are persuasive because they resonate with our values, emotions, and cultural experiences, providing a meaningful framework for interpreting information. The Narrative Paradigm suggests that the credibility of a message is judged not just on facts but also on the coherence, fidelity, and emotional appeal of the story. This emphasizes storytelling as a core aspect of human communication.

According to Fisher's narrative paradigm, people naturally share stories and that stories are how we make sense of the world. Fisher's paradigm contends that narratives are assessed based on their coherence (narrative probability) and fidelity, as opposed to conventional forms of argumentation, which only use logic and proof. The internal consistency of a story is called its narrative coherence. It means whether the story makes sense within its own framework and its plot makes sense. On the other hand, narrative fidelity looks at how true and trustworthy the story is, as well as how well it fits with the audience's own experiences and ideals and how well it fits with how they see the world. Along with these ideas, narratives can be judged not only on how true their facts are, but also on how well they make sense and interest readers on both a mental and an emotional level.

In political communication, narratives are particularly influential. Politicians and campaigns use storytelling to convey their visions and ideologies, shaping public perceptions and voter attitudes. Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign is a prime example, where powerful narratives of hope and change resonated with a diverse electorate, contributing significantly to his historic election as the first African American president of the United States.

Fisher's narrative paradigm provides a compelling lens through which to analyze "The Kashmir Files," particularly in the context of how the film constructs its narrative to resonate with its audience. According to Fisher, humans are natural storytellers, and we understand and interpret the world around us primarily through narratives rather than through pure logic or empirical evidence alone. This paradigm emphasizes that the power of a narrative lies not just in its factual accuracy, but in its ability to be coherent (narrative probability) and resonate with the audience's lived experiences and values (narrative fidelity).

Narrative Coherence in 'The Kashmir Files'

Narrative coherence, or narrative probability, refers to the internal consistency of a story—how well it hangs together within its own framework without contradictions. In "The Kashmir Files," the narrative is crafted to depict the exodus of Kashmiri Pandits as a systematic and genocidal campaign against them, led by militant groups during the 1990s. The film builds a story that is consistent within its own narrative framework: it portrays the Hindu community as victims and highlights their suffering, fear, and eventual displacement. The plot, character motivations, and events are aligned to create a story that appears logical and seamless to the viewer.

However, this coherence is achieved through selective storytelling. The film emphasizes certain events and perspectives while downplaying or omitting others, particularly those that might complicate the narrative of a one-sided victimhood. For example, while the film highlights the atrocities faced by Kashmiri Pandits, it pays little attention to the broader context of violence that also affected other communities in Kashmir during that period, including Muslims. This selective focus helps to maintain the coherence of the narrative within the film's framework, making the story appear straightforward and convincing to its audience, even if it simplifies or distorts the complex reality of the conflict.

Narrative Fidelity in 'The Kashmir Files':

Narrative fidelity, on the other hand, refers to the truthfulness and credibility of the narrative—whether it resonates with the audience's own experiences and values. In the case of "The Kashmir Files," the narrative's fidelity is crucial to its impact on the audience. The film's portrayal of the exodus and suffering of Kashmiri Pandits is designed to resonate deeply with certain segments of the Indian population, particularly those who may already hold views aligned with the film's depiction of the conflict. The story appeals to emotions, drawing on feelings of injustice, loss, and anger, which are powerful motivators for audience engagement.

The film's narrative fidelity is further reinforced by the socio-political climate in India, where there is a growing sentiment among certain groups that the history and suffering of Kashmiri Pandits have been underreported or neglected. By presenting itself as revealing a "suppressed truth," the film aligns its narrative with these pre-existing beliefs and sentiments, thus enhancing its credibility and emotional impact. For many viewers, the film's depiction of events, even if



selective, feels truthful because it resonates with their understanding of the conflict and their values, leading them to accept the narrative as a valid and accurate representation of reality.

#### The Intersection of Coherence and Fidelity:

The effectiveness of 'The Kashmir Files' as a narrative, therefore, lies in its ability to balance coherence and fidelity. The film constructs a narrative that is internally consistent and logical within its own framework (coherence), while also aligning that narrative with the values, experiences, and preconceptions of its target audience (fidelity). This combination allows the film to be persuasive and impactful, not because it provides a comprehensive or entirely accurate portrayal of the events, but because it tells a story that the audience finds both believable and emotionally compelling.

It's important to note that Fisher's narrative paradigm does not necessitate historical accuracy or completeness in storytelling. Instead, the paradigm emphasizes narrative coherence—how well a story is internally consistent and logical within its own framework—and narrative fidelity—how well the story resonates with the audience's values and experiences. A story can be compelling and persuasive even if it selectively omits details or presents a one-sided perspective, as long as it maintains internal coherence and aligns with what the audience perceives as truthful or credible. In the case of "The Kashmir Files," the film's narrative is coherent and resonates with its audience, despite potentially simplifying or distorting the broader historical context. This selective storytelling does not undermine the narrative's effectiveness within Fisher's framework, as the film successfully engages the audience by presenting a consistent story that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs and emotions (Kak, 2022).

#### *Synopsis and Key Themes of 'The Kashmir Files'*

The movie cuts back and forth between the year 2020 and scenes from 1989 and 1990. Anupam Kher's portrayal of Pushkar Nath Pandit depicts a teacher who is concerned about the safety of his son, Karan, following militant charges that he is an Indian spy.

Pushkar seeks help from his friend Brahma Dutt, a civil servant, who witnesses the violence against Kashmiri Pandits when they visit Kashmir. Dutt's efforts to protect Karan lead to his suspension by the Jammu and Kashmir chief minister. In 1989-90, militants force Kashmiri Pandits to flee the

valley, chanting slogans like "convert, leave, or die." Farooq Malik Bitta, a former student of Pushkar, breaks into Pushkar's house where Karan is hiding in a rice container. Bitta discovers Karan and fatally shoots him, forcing Sharda, Karan's wife, to eat rice soaked in his blood in exchange for their lives. Despite Pushkar's pleas to a doctor friend, Karan dies as the militants have taken control of the hospital, forbidding treatment for non-Muslims.

Pushkar and his family are taken to safety by their journalist friend Vishnu Ram, who brings them to Kaul, a Hindu poet. However, militants later kill Kaul and his son. The Pandit refugees are relocated to Jammu, living in dire conditions. Brahma Dutt, now an advisor to the Governor, arranges a job for Sharda in Nadimarg, Kashmir. Tragedy strikes again when militants disguised as Indian soldiers, led by Bitta, attack Nadimarg. Sharda is brutally murdered, and other Pandits are massacred, with Pushkar spared to spread the word of the atrocities.

In 2020, Krishna, Pushkar's grandson raised under the belief that his parents died in an accident, is a student at JNU influenced by his professor, Radhika Menon, an advocate for Kashmiri separatism. After Pushkar's death, Krishna visits Kashmir to scatter his grandfather's ashes and uncovers the truth about his family's fate, contradicting Bitta's claims of non-violence. Returning to JNU, Krishna shocks the university by recounting the true history of his family's suffering, challenging the narratives pushed by his professor.

The major themes presented in 'The Kashmir Files' include:

#### 1. Victimhood:

The theme of victimhood is central to the film, focusing primarily on the suffering of Kashmiri Pandits during the 1989-90 exodus. The film portrays this community as victims of a systematic and violent campaign led by Islamic militants, highlighting their displacement, the brutal killings, and the psychological trauma they endured. Characters like Pushkar Nath and his family embody this victimhood, as they experience firsthand the atrocities committed against their community, including the loss of loved ones and the struggle for survival. The film emphasizes the long-term effects of this victimhood, depicting how these events continue to impact the survivors and their descendants, particularly in Krishna's journey to uncover the truth about his family's past.

Some racist words are made early in the video, about 3:30. A trio of frustrated adults encircle a child in a field. Each of the three adults is using inappropriate language towards the child. One of the males is attempting to seize the child's shirt, which may cause him injury. The child's body takes a rigid stance due to fear in dealing with his fear. In this discussion, a propaganda message is discreetly sent out, depicting Muslims as intolerant of other religions, regardless of who they are confronting, even a small child. The scenario implies that, despite being adults who should have empathy and the ability to reason, the three Muslim characters swiftly turn to violence, use harsh language, and threaten a tiny child to resolve a dispute. This representation feeds a propaganda message to the audience, depicting Islam as intolerant of religious and ethnic differences, without compassion even for children, and resorting to violence to resolve difficulties.

## 2. Nationalism:

Nationalism is another prominent theme in the film, expressed through the portrayal of the Kashmiri Pandits' loyalty to India and their desire for the Indian government to protect them. The film contrasts this with the separatist movements in Kashmir, represented by characters like Farooq Malik Bitta, who are depicted as enemies of the state. The film's narrative suggests that the revocation of Article 370 and the integration of Kashmir into India is a fulfillment of the wishes of the Kashmiri Pandits, who are portrayed as staunch patriots. Krishna's transformation from a student influenced by separatist ideology to one who embraces the nationalist cause further reinforces this theme, suggesting that true understanding and loyalty to the nation come from recognizing the sacrifices and suffering of those who have been victimized.

In a specific scene at 01:34:03, the repeal of Article 370, which grants special privileges to the autonomous territory of Kashmir, is portrayed as a necessary action to alleviate the suffering of Hindu Pandits who were forcibly driven from their homes. These refugees are depicted living in miserable conditions, including hunger, water scarcity, and marginalisation. When the Indian Minister of Home Affairs visits the Jammu refugee camp to hear their complaints, Pushkar directly urges the deletion of Article 370, identifying it as the root cause of the Hindu Pandits' suffering. However, the Minister confesses that he cannot fulfil this request, prompting Pushkar and the other refugees to band together and demand the article's repeal.

The discussion in this picture sends a clear propaganda message to the Hindu community, implying that Article 370 is the primary reason for the displacement and oppression of Hindu Pandits in Kashmir. The conversation invites the Hindu community to support repealing Article 370 to improve the lives of Hindu Pandits and allow them to return to their homeland. In another connected moment, the spectator is emotionally dragged into Pushkar's lifelong battle to repeal the article, which he blames for his family's deaths. This passionate appeal is designed to hit home with the viewer, confirming the propaganda narrative that repealing Article 370 is critical for the well-being of Hindu Pandits in Kashmir.

### 3. Conflict:

The theme of conflict is explored on multiple levels in the film. Firstly, there is the obvious physical conflict between the Kashmiri Pandits and the Islamic militants, depicted through violent confrontations, forced evictions, and massacres. This conflict is rooted in religious and ethnic divisions, with the film focusing on the persecution of Hindus in a predominantly Muslim region. Secondly, there is an ideological conflict portrayed through the character of Krishna, who is caught between the separatist views of his professor and the nationalist sentiments he inherits from his family. This internal conflict drives much of the film's narrative, as Krishna struggles to reconcile these opposing viewpoints before ultimately embracing the nationalist cause. The film also touches on the broader political conflict between the Indian state and separatist forces in Kashmir, illustrating how this struggle has deeply affected the lives of ordinary people.

At 1:04:09, three men enter a hospital room with a sense of urgency, one of them urgently requesting medical assistance for a dying companion in need of O Negative blood. Despite the doctor's resistance, they compel the doctor to comply using weapons. A Hindu volunteer provides the necessary blood, but when the doctor tries to halt the transfusion after it's done, one of the men forces the tube out, leading to the donor bleeding to death.

This scene depicts the rebel using intimidation and violence to coerce the doctor, with little regard for the safety or well-being of the other patients. The character portraying the Muslim man is shown as prioritizing his own interests and being willing to harm others, especially those of different religions, to achieve his objectives. The language and actions convey the underlying message that Muslims are portrayed as materialistic, unfeeling, and ungrateful, perpetuating the

harmful stereotype that they are vengeful and hostile, particularly towards individuals of other faiths.

#### 4. Historical Memory and Truth:

In several scenes from 'The Kashmir Files', the producer introduces propagandist elements aimed at shaping the audience's perception of Muslims. According to the director, the film portrays Muslims as lacking diversity, humanity, and gratitude, often resorting to violence to resolve conflicts, acting selfishly, imposing their will, and showing no mercy. This approach employs the propaganda technique known as Name Calling, depicting Muslims in a negative light to tarnish their reputation and create an adversarial image of them in the viewer's mind.

The film further aims to create a negative image and rewrite the viewer's understanding of historical events. It delves into the theme of historical memory, exploring how the past is remembered, interpreted, and transmitted across generations. The narrative suggests that the true history of the Kashmiri Pandit exodus has been suppressed or forgotten, positioning the film as an attempt to reveal this "hidden" history. By contrasting official narratives with the lived experiences of its characters, the film raises critical questions about the nature of truth and how it is shaped by those in power (Filmfare, 2022). Krishna's journey to uncover the truth about his family's past serves as a broader quest for historical justice, emphasizing the importance of acknowledging and remembering the suffering of the Kashmiri Pandits.

#### 5. Trauma and Survival:

The film also explores the themes of trauma and survival, illustrating how the characters cope with the horrific events they have witnessed. The trauma of losing family members, being uprooted from their homes, and living in constant fear is portrayed through the experiences of Pushkar Nath and his family. Despite these challenges, the characters' survival instincts and resilience are highlighted, particularly in the way they continue to fight for recognition and justice. The theme of survival is also reflected in Krishna's ultimate decision to confront the truth and honor the memory of his ancestors, suggesting that survival is not just about physical endurance but also about preserving one's history and identity.

These themes are woven throughout the film's narrative, shaping the characters' actions and the overall message of the film. They reflect the complex interplay between individual experiences and broader socio-political dynamics, offering a perspective on the Kashmir conflict that emphasizes the suffering and resilience of the Kashmiri Pandit community.

In the film's climactic scene, Krishna delivers a powerful monologue reclaiming the land of Kashmir, which he describes as the original hub of knowledge, art, and culture. This speech serves as a symbolic reclaiming of both the physical and cultural heritage of Kashmir, reinforcing the film's narrative that the rightful history and identity of the region must be restored and preserved. Through this monologue, the film solidifies its message, linking the personal journey of the protagonist to a broader cultural and political reclamation.

#### *Influence on Public Behavior and Political Outcomes:*

The Kashmir Files is a work of fiction inspired by real events, yet it is being promoted as a true story and a docufilm, which makes all the difference (The Indian Express, 2022). The reason cinema and television were divided into different categories called genres is that there is a sense of organization in the industry and among viewers, so they could attract the suitable kind of audience. When a project is announced to be of a genre, people go into cinemas with a certain mindset, a mindset which will help them understand the film and enjoy it much more. Accept what the director is trying to tell them, engage with what the crew is presenting to them, and completely immerse in the visuals so that when they leave the cinema, they take a certain feeling with them. Something etched in their memory, something that they will associate with whenever they see something similar in real life. They will be forced to recall the scene from the film or at least instigate the feeling in them which was created while they were watching that film (Green et al., 2008, p. 512). This is due to the impact that still or moving pictorial projects have on the human brain. It retains far quicker and with greater intensity.

Filmmaking nowadays has taken into context the psychological impact of a certain production on the mind and behavior. There are heaps of studies that illustrate how these things impact people and their perception. And then there are numerous theories which have been developed and used by not only psychologists and film students but other domains as well due to the multidisciplinary nature of academics and also because all these things are interconnected as they impact other

spheres of people's lives (Ewbank et al., 2009, p. 127). A perfect example here is *The Kashmir Files*. People saw *The Kashmir Files* and developed a notion of how the historical events unfolded as shown in the film, and because they treat it as a credible source of information because that is how it is being promoted, they developed a perspective and then started acting on those perspectives (The Express Tribune, 2022).

We have seen a rise in Islamophobic content in the industry as well as among the public. India has a significant percentage of Muslims, who are a minority and are now being unfairly treated, more than ever, because of the emotions that were triggered by the audiences of this film. The people who watched the film have been monumental in acting as the voter bank and supporters for BJP over the years. They have helped Modi gain prominence, recognition, and have complied in accepting and implementing Modi's policies (Bhatnagar, 2022, p. 554). Because he has tapped into their emotions which is triggering such a response, positive for him as the results are in his favor.

Popular movies grab and hold our attention, not only because storytelling is culturally significant but also because narrative formulae have been honed over millennia and perfected into a specific filmic form over the last century. This has resulted in a highly effective format that facilitates the rapid processing of complex narratives. Understanding narrative structure has engaged various disciplines across the humanities and social sciences.

Narrative theory in films often distinguishes between the story (fabula) and the plot (syuzhet), terms originating from Russian formalist theory. The fabula encompasses all events in their complete chronological and causal detail, initially existing in the minds of story creators (such as scriptwriters and directors) and later, in a condensed form, in the minds of the audience. The syuzhet, on the other hand, represents how the story is presented, including the specific arrangement and style of events as they appear on screen. This may involve non-linear elements like flashbacks and parallel actions. The art of storytelling lies in transforming the fabula into the syuzhet, crafting an engaging narrative structure (Cohn, 2013, p. 413).

Narrative theory is crucial to film analysis as it provides a structured approach to understanding how stories are constructed and conveyed to the audience. This theory examines the relationship between the story (what happens) and the discourse (how it is told), helping analysts dissect how

filmmakers organize events, use visual and auditory elements, and manipulate time and space to craft a coherent and compelling narrative.

Applying narrative theory in film analysis allows critics to explore the sequencing of events, character development, and thematic elements, contributing to the overall impact of a film. Understanding the use of non-linear storytelling, flashbacks, or parallel plotlines can reveal deeper insights into the film's message and emotional resonance. By examining these narrative structures and techniques, analysts can better appreciate the filmmaker's craft and how films communicate complex ideas and evoke specific responses from audiences. This analysis helps understand how narrative theory shapes public perception, demonstrating the power of storytelling in cinema.

For instance, in a live reaction video of 'The Kashmir Files', a couple who watched the entire movie expressed profound sadness and empathy, despite having no personal connection to the events depicted. This reaction illustrates the film's ability to evoke strong emotions, even in those who were not directly impacted by the historical events. However, a review of the over 2,000 comments from Indian Hindus on this video reveals the film's broader implications. While many expressed sympathy for the plight of the Hindu Pandits, these sentiments were frequently accompanied by comments expressing hatred toward Muslims, Islam, and Pakistan. This highlights how the film's narrative not only evokes sympathy but also fosters divisive and hostile attitudes, demonstrating the potent influence of storytelling in shaping public perceptions and social attitudes.

Moreover, the couple had to add a disclaimer to their video, noting that they might have to cut out more content than usual due to the graphic nature of the film. They expressed concerns about potential YouTube penalties, including demonetization or blocking of the video for violating community guidelines. This disclaimer underscores the intense and controversial nature of the content, further illustrating the film's powerful, yet polarizing, impact on its audience. The video has garnered 622,228 views, and the channel boasts 2.35 million subscribers, highlighting the significant reach and influence of this content. The vast audience and the resulting discussions indicate how deeply the film's portrayal has permeated public perception, potentially contributing to a broader narrative of prejudice against the general Muslim population.



Through the lens of Fisher's narrative paradigm, the success of 'The Kashmir Files' in shaping public narrative can be understood as a result of its narrative coherence and fidelity. The film's selective storytelling and emotional appeal resonate with the audience's values and beliefs, making it a powerful tool for reinforcing certain political narratives. This has significant implications for how historical events are understood and remembered in the public consciousness, as the film's narrative, though not fully representative of the complex reality, becomes a dominant story that influences public opinion and potentially even policy discussions.

By analyzing 'The Kashmir Files' through the concepts of narrative coherence and fidelity, it becomes clear that the film's impact extends beyond mere entertainment. It plays a crucial role in the ongoing narrative about Kashmir, shaping how the conflict is viewed and understood by a wide audience. This underscores the importance of critically examining the narratives presented in visual media, particularly in politically charged contexts, where the line between storytelling and historical accuracy can significantly influence public discourse and opinion.

Narrative theory and visual politics are intrinsically linked, as the stories told through films have a profound ability to shape political narratives and influence public perceptions. In the realm of visual politics, films serve as powerful tools for constructing and disseminating narratives that resonate with audiences on both emotional and intellectual levels. Through carefully crafted narratives, filmmakers can frame historical events, social issues, or political conflicts in ways that align with specific ideological perspectives. This framing not only reinforces particular viewpoints but also molds the collective memory and understanding of these issues among viewers. As narrative theory suggests, the effectiveness of these stories lies in their coherence and fidelity—how logically they unfold within their own framework and how well they align with the audience's values and experiences. When applied to visual politics, these narratives can legitimize political actions, shape public discourse, and even influence voter behavior, as audiences internalize and respond to the stories presented on screen. Thus, narrative theory provides a critical lens for analyzing how visual media, particularly films, can be strategically used to advance political agendas and shape public opinion in powerful and lasting ways.

In summary, this thesis has illustrated that films are not neutral forms of media; instead, they are infused with values and influenced by the socio-political landscapes in which they originate. 'The

Kashmir Files' serves as a stark example of how cinematic storytelling can be manipulated to convey underlying meanings that shape the audience's perceptions of reality. Through this investigation, it has become evident that the film's narrative is deeply swayed by the prevailing anti-Islamic sentiments within India's social and political sphere, projecting the plight of Hindu Kashmiris as a central theme while also propagating Islamophobic views. Consequently, the film has contributed to reinforcing existing Islamophobic attitudes in India, resulting in the further marginalization and discrimination against Muslim communities.

This study sheds light on how the susceptibility of Indian society to manipulation has exacerbated rifts within communities of diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds. The release of 'The Kashmir Files' has been associated with a discernible increase in anti-Islamic sentiments, manifested in negative actions by certain Hindu groups and supportive responses from the Indian government. As a consequence, there has been a surge in discriminatory incidents against Muslims in India.

While this research acknowledges its limitations in fully capturing the intricacies of societal responses, it underscores the substantial influence of propaganda films on public perceptions and societal cohesion. Future studies should delve deeper into the broader ramifications of such films on Indian society and stress the significance of promoting public awareness and critical analysis of cinematic content to mitigate the divisive impact of propaganda.

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