



EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN KASHMIRI PANDIT MILLENNIALS AND HINDI CINEMA POST-MIGRATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY (ICSSR FUNDED RESEARCH)

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ABSTRACT

The migration of Kashmiri Pandits from Kashmir during the years 1989 and 1990 due to violence and unrest left an unforgettable mark on their lives, particularly on the younger generation known as millennials. This paper aims to examine the relationship between Kashmiri Pandit millennials and Hindi cinema post-migration, shedding light on how cinema served as a refuge and a source of aspiration amidst the challenges of displacement and adaptation. The study investigates the experiences of Kashmiri Pandit millennials who grew up in the aftermath of the mass exodus, witnessing their families' struggles for basic necessities and survival. Despite the hardships, Hindi cinema emerged as a significant cultural touchstone, offering moments of escape and inspiration. Through in-depth interviews, this research explores how these individuals engaged with cinema beyond the traditional theatre experience, incorporating it into their daily lives through activities such as singing songs, collecting memorabilia, and emulating their favourite stars.

By examining the intersection of personal narratives and cultural influences, this study seeks to understand the role of Hindi cinema in shaping the identities and experiences of Kashmiri Pandit millennials post-migration. Through their interactions with cinema, these individuals navigated complex emotions and forged connections to a broader cultural landscape, providing insights into the resilience and adaptability of displaced communities.

Keywords: Kashmiri Pandit, millennials, migration, Hindi cinema, qualitative study, catharsis

INTRODUCTION

*Bollywood and Cricket are the only religions in India- Rashmi Lamba, Filmmaker - Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media (Indian Council lead)*¹

Cinema is a surreal world- layered, complex and inherently subjective (Bordwell et al, 2023). In the words of S.T Coleridge (Wordsworth and Coleridge, 1978) any kind of art especially literature leads to 'Willing suspension of disbelief'; you want to be in that world of fiction for a specific time and become oblivious of what is reality. Cinema has the

power of willing suspension of disbelief², it is also capable to providing a catharsis³ or the realisation of a *rasic*⁴ experience (Roy, 2022). Cinema as a medium of entertainment (Ganti, 2013) or as art (Bordwell, 2024) or as resistance (Sarris, 2008) has been heard, experienced and felt. It has been able to create a relationship with its audience and has left a deep impact on them; sometimes it has also co-constructed concepts like politics, identity, sex and romance for them (Banaji, 2004; Banaji, 2006).

¹ During a Film Festival *Samabhav* (Organised by MAVA (Men Against Violence) NGO at DY Patil University, Nerul; I had a conversation regarding my roots, and as soon as I mentioned Kashmiri Pandit she said conversed back starting with this statement.

² For audiences to become emotionally involved in a narrative, they must respond as though the characters are real and the events are happening in the present, despite knowing it is merely a story (Suspension of Disbelief, n.d.)

³ The process of releasing and providing relief from repressed and strong emotions.

⁴ Roy (2017) discusses the concept of *rasa* in his thesis

India is a country where popular cinema is aspirational and provides inspiration and dreams to the new middle class to grow and aspire for more (Dwyer, 2014).

Kashmir, the beautiful valley in the state of Jammu Kashmir went through a terrible bloodshed in the years 1989-90 and the minority Hindus in the region had to forcibly migrate to Jammu and other regions of the country, some who could afford even moved out of India (Kaul, 2020; Evans 2010). This small community had to face tough times as suddenly they were out of their safe space in a foreign land; language was different so was culture and lifestyle; even weather was not a respite. Many elders of the community died due to extreme heat and poor living conditions in camps established by the state government at the outskirts of Jammu (Sarkaria, 2009; Bhat and Bashir, 2023; Pandita, 2014). The most innocent of all were children, teenagers and adolescents who migrated with their family and had to adjust to new places, language, culture, lifestyle; they had not much of an idea of what kind of social, psychological and financial stress their families were going through. Occasionally they would be bullied in school, peer group would call them *lola*⁵ or *migrant*⁶; it was painful and the children felt alienated and formed groups among themselves. Because their Hindi also had a different accent due to mother tongue being Kashmiri, they were made fun of⁷. These kids though they did not understand the gravity of the displacement but were going through stresses of their own growing up, trying to adjust to cultural nuances of a new place, peer pressure and could sense the tense atmosphere at home. Their source of entertainment was their play time or watching television, the best part was the films that could be seen on weekends besides song shows like *Philips Top Ten*, *Rangoli* or *Chitrahaar*. Occasionally they would be taken out to cinema theatre, that experience was very special as children could bond over these outings and have a willing suspension of disbelief (Pandita, 2018).

⁵ Timid person

⁶ A term that was used by laymen in Jammu to address Kashmiri Pandits

⁷ This account is based on the experiences of millennials I interviewed as well as my own personal encounters.

Children would collect postcards or stickers of their favourite films or stars and make scrapbooks out of cuttings from newspapers or magazines⁸. Cinema watching was a surreal experience, especially Bollywood films which post 1990s started showing exuberant sets and costumes and an elite living style (Malhotra and Alagh, 2004) which made these kids aspirational maybe for a bright future (Dwyer, 2015). Ideas of romance, family relations and individuality were to some extent affected by the movie watching experience. Ideas about Music, dance and storytelling were also taken from this pop culture artefact (Banaji, 2006). Parents could spend scant time with kids as economics of home had to be managed on a daily basis, grandparents were going through the stresses of cultural loss (*Aes kar gaso kashir panun ghari*⁹). It was the community feeling among these kids as cousins, friends or relatives that kept them going and cinema watching and interaction with the films post watching experience like emulating the hair style of favourite star, wearing the near similar costume of the star, singing songs from films together, emulating the dance steps, crying over emotional scenes were some of the interactions these kids had with Hindi Cinema (Testoni et al., 2021).

With the help of semi-structured interviews with Kashmiri Pandit millennials, an attempt has been made to understand their sense of migration and how Hindi cinema helped them even if for a minuscule period to experience entertainment, willing suspension of disbelief or catharsis or a *rasic* experience. The sense of being a migrant or being rootless is too deep and complex, as I understand from interviews, deeper immersion will be required to understand and observe that phenomenon but their relationship with Hindi cinema could be captured and it had mixed response, some were too passionate about their interactions and others had a feeble response. Overall, the study is exploratory and can be a start to many more that can be conducted to understand how Kashmiri Pandits post their exodus interacted with different forms of media,

⁸ From the accounts of participants during interviews

⁹ Many senior citizens wanted to go back for once to their homeland. I too am a Kashmiri Pandit millennial but cannot read and write Kashmiri, can only speak it

especially films. The interviews also opened conversations on memories of migration, cultural loss due to forced displacement and *migrant batta's*¹⁰ plight since; future studies may explore these topics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Film and Catharsis

Nokas (Skjoldbjærg, 2020) addresses the cultural impact of the 2004 bank robbery in Stavanger, Norway, by meticulously recreating the event to dispel myths. The film's realistic, minimalistic approach allows the audience to experience the trauma intensely, creating a communal space for emotional responses. This aligns with Winnicott's concept of a holding environment¹¹, where viewers can process trauma, express emotions, and achieve acceptance, facilitating catharsis and emotional healing (Røkeberg, 2012). A study on catharsis through cinema during the COVID-19 pandemic found that participants initially felt distress watching epidemic-related films but eventually experienced hope and relief. This cathartic identification helped counterbalance fear and anxiety, offering a source of hope and emotional clarification¹² (Testoni et al., 2021). Cinematic drama exposure, coupled with self-reflection, leads to better health outcomes and lower depression

levels compared to reading-based drama. This improvement is mediated by identification and emotional self-efficacy, demonstrating that regular engagement with cinematic dramas can enhance emotional well-being. Establishing film clubs or moderated discussions can further enhance these benefits (Khoo & Oliver, 2013; Khusumadewi & Juliantika, 2024).

Art reflects societal ethos, offering catharsis and hedonic value. Films, as a prevalent form of artistic expression, address societal issues and emotions. Creative arts therapies, including therapeutic filmmaking and creative video therapy, provide emotional and cognitive benefits. Cinematherapy, similar to bibliotherapy, uses films to help patient's model behaviour and understand their conditions, promoting empathy and reflective thinking. Films also serve as educational tools for medical and psychology students, enhancing learning through various interactive formats (Mangot & Murthy, 2017; Platinga, 2009).

Wiley (2003) contrasts everyday emotion with movie emotion: everyday emotion is loose in context but controlled in content, while movie emotion is tightly framed yet permissive in content. Movie emotions are safe and inconsequential but satisfying, acting as symbolic modeling clay for human troubles. Wiley views catharsis in movies as providing symbolic relief and imaginary solutions to life's problems, offering temporary escapist satisfaction. This aligns with Arlie Hochschild's symbolic interactionist approach to the sociology of emotions, which bridges psychoanalysis and cognitive theories. Wiley's model helps understand the distinct functions of emotions in movies versus everyday life (The Sociological Cinema, n.d.).

Aristotle's concept of tragedy as a 'mimesis of a serious and complete action' is key to understanding catharsis—emotional cleansing experienced by the audience. Tragedies evoke pity and fear, purging these emotions and resulting in emotional purification. Bernays and Rudnytsky (2004) discuss how catharsis taps into the unconscious, fostering self-awareness. Leon Golden (1973) offers alternative views of catharsis, including moral and intellectual purification, and traces the theory's evolution. In modern films and TV,

¹⁰ *Batta* is what Kashmiri Pandits are referred to as in Kashmiri Language, it means the learned one (Madan, 1981)

¹¹ Donald Winnicott, a British psychoanalyst and pediatrician, introduced the concept of the 'transitional space' in his work on child development and psychoanalysis. The transitional space is a psychological area of experience between the inner reality of the individual and the external world shared with others (Orozco, n.d.).

¹² Edgar Morin, a French philosopher and sociologist, described cinema as an 'anthropologic mirror' of human nature. He argued that cinema creates a dual perception: an illusory one where viewers identify with the story, and a real one where they remain grounded in everyday life. This duality allows viewers to immerse themselves in new worlds without disorientation, fostering an aesthetic transformation that enhances their understanding of reality. According to Morin, the emotional engagement with a film can trigger a cognitive metamorphosis, deepening their insight into both the film and their own lives (Shoonover, 2006).

catharsis involves releasing pent-up emotions through overcoming adversity and authentic portrayals of grief. Examples include *The Shawshank Redemption* (Darabont, 1994), *Good Will Hunting* (Sant, 1997), and *Dead Poets Society* (Weir, 1989). These moments build deep emotional connections, providing safe emotional release and resonating with universal human experiences (DeGuzman, 2021; Hellerman, 2024).

Hindi Cinema and Audience Interaction

Derne's (1999) ethnographic study on Indian male viewers of Hindi cinema reveals that these films often glorify sexual violence, portraying it as a way to win a woman's affection. Detailed interviews show a similarity between the portrayal of ideal marriages in Hindi films and men's perceptions of heterosexual relationships. Observations in male-dominated cinema halls show these spaces as places of sexual harassment, depicted in films as generating female friendliness. Banaji's (2004, 2006, and 2007) research indicates that young viewers interpret Hindi films differently based on their identities, viewing context, and experiences. Interviews show varied responses to films, with strong links between discourses on gender, politics, and sexuality. Banaji notes that viewers often critique films for their ideological content but find romance psychologically compelling. Her studies highlight the diverse and emotionally engaging nature of Hindi film spectatorship. Srinivas (2002) argues that Indian film studies have largely ignored the culture of spectatorship. He emphasizes that the Indian audience, deeply familiar with commercial cinema, actively engages with films through selective, participatory, and performative viewing.

The collective movie-going experience in India involves family and friends, contrasting with the solitary experience typical in the West. Sinha (2009) discusses the unique presentation style and diverse audience of Bollywood, the most visible segment of Indian cinema. He highlights the social dimension of movie-watching in India, where films serve as a collective experience involving family and friends. The study notes the fragmentation of audiences with the advent of multiplexes and the enduring popularity of Bollywood among the Indian diaspora.

A Context to Kashmiri Pandit Community

The Kashmiri Pandits, an upper-class Brahmin minority from Kashmir Valley, faced forced displacement in 1989-1990. Traditionally, they did not engage in artisan or service tasks, which were performed by Kashmiri Muslims. Despite no intermarriage or commensal relations with Kashmiri Muslims, they shared some cultural elements, such as common family names like *Bhat* or *Dhar*. Pandits value patience, restraint, and moral consciousness, integral to their identity. Historically, since Islam's arrival in the 14th century, Pandits faced numerous challenges. Their households typically possessed religious texts like the *Bhagavadgītā* and occasionally epics such as the *Mahābhārata*.

The householder (*grhastha*) played a central role in Pandit society, emphasizing traditional practices and disciplined life for personal growth. The Pandit ideology extends to a broader human ideal, where conduct and rituals lead to various degrees of perfection. This highlights the unique cultural and religious perspectives of the Kashmiri Pandits (Madan, 1981; Dyczkowski, 2020; Sarvapriyananda, 2022; Zargar, 2022; Kaul, 2022; Pandit Kashmir, n.d.; Essa, 2011).

The 1947 partition of British India created India and Pakistan, with Kashmir as a contentious point. The forced exodus of Kashmiri Pandits in the early 1990s, due to militant violence and political unrest, left the community marginalized. They have struggled for rehabilitation and recognition of their suffering, often feeling politically orphaned. Despite shifting loyalties from the Indian National Congress to the Bharatiya Janata Party, tangible support has been lacking, and the community remains fragmented (Kaul, 2020). The exodus (1990-2001) was driven by escalating militant violence targeting the Pandits, threats from militant groups, and brutal massacres like the 1998 *Wandhama* massacre. Political unrest and governance challenges further fuelled insecurity. This mass migration, often termed ethnic cleansing, saw around 95% of the community leave the Kashmir Valley due to pervasive violence and communal tensions (Evans, 2010; Sarkaria, 2009; Bhat and Bashir, 2023).



Fig 1: A metaphoric depiction of Kashmiri Pandits in their traditional attires¹³

Forced Migration/ Displacement stories

Armed conflict and displacement severely affect children and families, limiting children's opportunities to play and learn. Ethnographic case studies of four young Iraqi and Syrian refugees in Beirut, Lebanon, provide insights into their family lives, play activities, and rights violations. Grounded in Froebelian principles¹⁴, the study explores how 'childhood' is constructed in Lebanon amid the global refugee crisis and suggests enhancing play opportunities for refugee children in Beirut's northern suburbs, highlighting their 'in-between-ness.' Using a 'day in the life' methodology, the study involved four children aged 4-8, questionnaires from 100 adults, interviews with professionals, and school observations. Findings reveal persistent infringements on children's rights, including poverty, poor living conditions, child labor, inadequate education, and family separation. These issues are worsened by policy contradictions, organizational tensions, and limited play resources, leading to restricted play and increased parental surveillance. Despite hardships, play remains a crucial escape for children, allowing them to transcend their circumstances through media, transformation, and imagination (Gemayel, 2020).

¹³ Kaul, S. (2023, March 15). A myopic biopic of Kashmiri Pandits. *The Wire*. <https://thewire.in/rights/a-myopic-biopic-of-kashmiri-pandits>

¹⁴ Friedrich Froebel, a 19th-century German educator and the creator of the kindergarten, is arguably the most significant pioneer in early childhood education and care (Froebel Trust, n.d.).

Forced migration significantly affects Kurdish women's mental health due to traumatic events like gender-based and institutional violence, leading to high levels of post-traumatic stress and health issues. Clinicians must consider the combined impact of traumatic migration experiences and post-migration problems on mental health. Effective mental health support for Kurdish women requires understanding their cultural context and tailoring interventions to their specific needs and challenges (Gülşen, Knipscheer, & Kleber, 2010).

Kashmiri Pandits express deep nostalgia for their past life in Kashmir, contrasting sharply with their current struggles in Jammu. They reminisce about superior quality of life, relationships, and the physical environment they once enjoyed. This nostalgia reveals tensions between reclaiming their former home and facing present uncertainties. Discussions of place and home highlight the importance of objects, the physical environment, and communal relationships in shaping migration experiences and place-making efforts. Pandits nostalgically recall spacious homes, picturesque landscapes, and strong kinship bonds, viewing these memories as superior to their current situation (Datta, 2016).

Cinema plays its part in achieving catharsis and release of repressed emotions, it helps achieve closure through containment (Røkeberg, 2012). Cinema through catharsis helps us in self-identification and self-reflection leading to self-efficacy and emotional clarification (Testoni et al., 2021). Hindi cinema has a strong tradition of existence in India and abroad where the Indian Diaspora stays or even amongst Russians and Japanese due to strong acceptance of Bollywood films among this audience (Rajadhakshya, 2003). When Pandits left Kashmir they were in a difficult scenario where children besides play time and school time, peer interaction and media interaction they didn't have much to look up-to; also it was very pressurising situation at home (Pandita, 2013). Thus media, especially cinema became an important part of their childhood helping them get entertained, have group watching experiences, films and film stars to be discussed among peers, Bollywood songs heard and sung and enjoyed, theatre

experiences which were pure happiness- an experience which is similar to the willing suspension of disbelief. Interviews revealed that though as children the whole magnitude of forced displacement was not clear but the tense atmosphere at home, economic paucity , *kiraye ka ghar*¹⁵ , everyday struggles to do with language and identity were deeply felt. Media, especially TV and films either watching on TV or occasional theatre experience was deeply cathartic and brought happiness and relaxation.

There are studies which discuss the identity issues or the turmoil of migration and coping strategies of Pandits (Evans, 2010; Sarkaria, 2009; Bhat and Bashir, 2023) but Kashmiri Pandit children, especially in the age group 6 to 10 years (born between 1980 and 1985-millennials); how migration affected them and still does is an interesting area to explore especially how they coped up with identity issues, migration, displacement, language hurdles and peer group challenges. Media was an important part of their play, in this niche I am attempting to understand how they interacted with Hindi cinema. Hindi cinema provides entertainment, is a product which caters to masses (Gupta, 2008); it has strong audience interactions and stark reactions (Banaji, 2004, 2006; Srinivas, 2002, Sinha, 2009). Through semi structured interviews, I attempted to understand how Kashmiri Pandit millennials interacted with Hindi cinema in their precarious times; one interesting observation was that they still use Hindi cinema to understand or come to terms with their displacement.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. Examine how Hindi cinema provided emotional and psychological support to Kashmiri Pandit millennials post-migration.
2. Investigate the ways in which cinema served as a form of escapism and relief from the harsh realities of displacement
3. Collect and analyze in-depth personal stories and testimonials of Kashmiri Pandit millennials regarding their relationship with Hindi cinema.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Cinema is cathartic, leads to containment, self-reflection, self-efficacy and emotional stability. It helps us understand our emotions and deal with them, viewers know that the film is a fictional representation, yet they temporarily set aside this knowledge to immerse themselves in the narrative. This allows them to respond emotionally as if the events were real. Film techniques, such as cinematography, editing, sound, and music also shape viewers' emotional and cognitive experiences. These elements guide viewers' attention, create mood, and enhance emotional impact (Platinga, 2009; Testeroni et al, 2021). We use the framework of Catharsis film theory to understand how Kashmiri Pandit millennials have interacted with Hindi cinema and how has it provided them emotional stability, psychological release and identification with pan Indian Bollywood culture. We use semi structured interviews to understand how and what our participants interact and feel, how they created and still have a relationship with Hindi cinema. We use thematic analysis to understand the pattern of relationship and interaction between Hindi cinema and our participants.

Verstehen, which involves studying people's lived experiences within specific historical and social contexts, emphasizes understanding individuals from their own viewpoints and using their own language and concepts to describe their lives. The emic perspective, representing insiders' viewpoints, offers insights into their perceptions, beliefs, and cultural meanings attached to various phenomena, while the etic perspective reflects outsiders' views and opinions. Acknowledging the researcher's background, position, and emotions as integral parts of data production, the interpretive approach recognizes the subjectivity inherent in the research process. Reflexivity, a key component, involves considering one's own biases and perspectives and how they may influence data collection and interpretation. Incorporating theory into the study design helps provide a framework for understanding the world and simplifying complex phenomena, offering a conceptual view of reality.

Thematic analysis can be used to analyze various data sets, from small case studies to

¹⁵ Living on rent

large interview studies, and can capture both manifest and latent meaning in the data. The flexibility of thematic analysis allows for inductive and deductive analysis, making it suitable for a wide range of qualitative research questions and designs. It involves several key steps: familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing these themes, defining and naming them, and finally producing a report. This method is highly flexible and accessible, allowing researchers to systematically interpret data and uncover deeper meanings. While it offers rich, nuanced insights into participant experiences, thematic analysis can be time-consuming and subject to researcher bias (Hennink; Inge; Bailey, 2010; Clarke and Virginia Braun, 2016; Creswell, 2009; Hennink; Inge; Bailey, 2010; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017; Leask & Carroll, 2015).

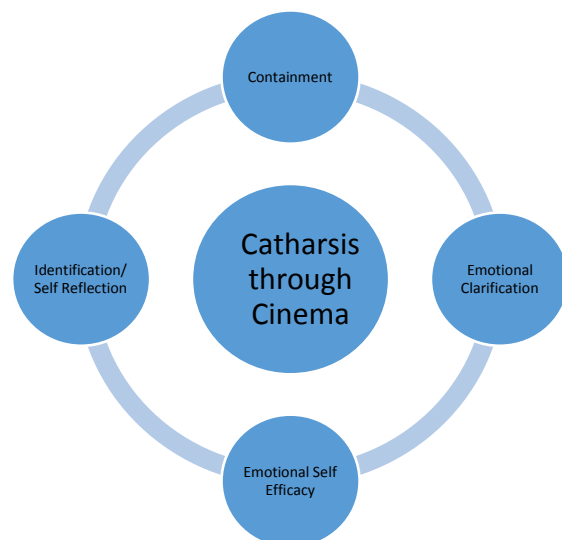


Figure 2: How cinema helps in achieving a cathartic experience

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

We interacted with ten Kashmiri Pandit millennials through semi structured interviews that were conducted online due to geographical distance and time and work issues. Though conducted online the interviews had some very interesting revelations. The sample that I chose was a purposive sample collected through snowball sampling. There are two reasons for the choice of sample one, I am myself a Kashmiri Pandit millennial and have lived through the whole experience of forced displacement and survival post migration. The people I contacted were open to discussion, could

connect easily and were very forthcoming due to empathy we share for each other as a community. I told them in detail about the study and they were interested as well as curious. Second reason is the availability of the sample; as I have friends and relatives who belong to the same community finding the sample and interacting with them became relatively easy.

FINDINGS

1. Hindi Cinema as recreational watch

One thought that came out dominantly through the discussions was how watching Hindi cinema on TV or occasionally in theatres was a happiness filled activity which also included group watching experience with family and friends. The discussions in the middle of commercial breaks, singing the popular songs when they played in the midst of the movie watching and engrossment with the story and characters –the smile and the tears took them away from the harsh realities of migration and displacement for some time–this was emphasised on again and again. Ashutosh Raina, an entrepreneur now settled in Brisbane with his family very heartily shared the nostalgic moment that Hindi cinema gave him recently, ‘We had a Kumar Shanu concert in Brisbane, and it brought all the old memories... *Aashiqi*, *Sadak*, all those songs, we sung so loudly it felt like such a release’. Almost half of our participants were Bollywood music lovers; they said Bollywood music helped them through the stressed mundane realities of those times; Parents wanted them to study all the time, ‘*padhai karo to film mein kuch nhi rakha*’¹⁶– reminisces Vidushi Tickoo, owner of a real estate firm and settled in Toronto. Bollywood music is what helped them relax and understand different emotions, Akriti Dhar, one of our participants who is a software engineer settled in Ohio, USA says, ‘film songs of the 1990s...Music especially film music was my therapy’. There are many who mentioned Hindi film music time and again to emphasise their love for it and the affection that still continues. Besides the time that watching a film gave with friends and family and the warmth they received in those moments, the relaxation, emotional satisfaction and psychological release they felt while watching

¹⁶ Study watching films is a waste of time

films was mentioned repeatedly. These patterns are similar to concepts of Emotional Self-Efficacy and Emotional Clarification mentioned in the studies by Testoni (2021), Wiley (2003) and Platinga (2009).

2. Willing Suspension of Disbelief through Hindi Cinema

*'Kaho na Pyaar hai dekhi thi yaad hai oh that time with cousins aur screen pe hrithik kya happy and relaxed time'*¹⁷- Neha Dhar, Talent Acquisition Manager based in Gurgaon. While interacting with my participants an urge to escape from mundane in those post migration years was a dominant thought and watching cinema, especially Bollywood cinema provided them that escape and also made them aspirational about their future, *'Yash Chopra films were my most favourite, they gave a break from real life'*- Aakriti Dhar; *'1990s cinema it was aspirational once I started college i.e. early 2000's it kind of helped me cope up with moving out of my city'*- Vidushi Tickoo. Our participants remember that there was not much recreation except TV, Films and play time and parents always emphasised on *'Padhai'*¹⁸ because that was their only way out to good life. Dancing on Bollywood songs was another activity that many of our participants were reminiscent of, *'...hum apke hain kaun kitna maza aaya theatre mein dekhe so much happiness...Bollywood songs pe dance karna was happiness, stress buster, used to feel so calm after that'*¹⁹- Neha Dhar. These findings have affinity with the studies that observe how Indian audiences interact with Hindi cinema (Banaji, 2006; Srinivas, 2002; Sinha, 2009).

While talking about Hindi cinema the participants also discussed their present consumption and mentioned one film repeatedly, *Kashmir Files* (Agnihotri, 2022). *'jo isme dikhaya isse bhi zyada'*- Neha reminisces her mom saying this to her while watching the film teary eyed, she wanted to tell her that the atrocities that they encountered in Kashmir during the turmoil years were much more than portrayed in the film. Many of our

participants mentioned the film having a cathartic effect on them, one of the participants Arval Kaul, Lawyer based in Noida, said, -It made me cry profusely...reminded me of my grandfather...*aes kar gasav kashir panun ghar'*²⁰. Many of them mentioned watching more realistic cinema now; realistic for them meant films inspired from real incidents like *Kashmir Files*, Article 370 (Jambhale, 2024) and *Tashkent Files* (Agnihotri, 2019). Nipun Tickoo, a civil servant based in Jammu said that though she didn't go through migration herself as she was born immediately after that in 1991 but she heard stories from her family, *'...but these films when I watch them it reminds me of those stories'*. The concept of containment (Røkeberg, 2012) is very similar to what our findings reveal to us. A point of concern was the films mentioned above were severely criticized by international media and film community for propagating hate against a certain community but our participants having cathartic moment with especially one film made us realise maybe deeper probing of popular narratives is required²¹.

3. Contemporary Interactions with Hindi Cinema

'The happiest moment was seeing my mom cheer up watching a film', says Akanksha Bhatt, a Talent Acquisition senior lead based in Dadar, Mumbai reminiscing how watching films, especially Hindi films in post migration years was. Watching Hindi cinema in years immediately after migration was cathartic, relaxing, would bring happy and family time but the consumption tastes and media have changed with time. *'We took to TV, films or music and learned there... like we were exposed to a bigger world through cinema ...Aspirational thi films'*²² like DDLJ...'- Vidushi Tickoo, these findings are similar to the observations that Dwyer (2014) has made in her works which deal with new middle class and consumption of Bollywood films. But when we spoke to the participants about their present consumption they joked and waived

¹⁷ Watching *Kaho Na Pyaar Hai* (Roshan, 2000) was a surreal experience for the participant

¹⁸ Studies

¹⁹ Watching *HAHK* (Barjatya, 1994) was a happy experience and dancing on Bollywood songs was what she enjoyed the most

²⁰ When will we go to Kashmir our Home...

²¹ Nadav Lapid, the jury chief at the International Film Festival of India (IFFI), expressed criticism over the inclusion of *The Kashmir Files* at the event. Labeling the film as 'propaganda, he had stated that he was 'shocked' it was selected for the competition category (BBC News, 2022).

²² These films were aspirational

off what they watched in 1990s decade or early 2000s; says, Shobhit Kaul, a Software Engineer based in Navi Mumbai, 'Bollywood romantic cinema...it's not for me but for a special section of people. I like realistic genre of cinema'. Many of our participants mentioned watching more of OTT content than *masala* Hindi cinema, they also liked films which were based on real incidents or especially films that portrayed their stories they were really sensitive to speak about those films, especially *Kashmir Files*; 'I haven't even watched Kashmir files couldnt go through that what happened to my community'- Akanksha Bhatt. These findings relate more to the concepts of emotional self-efficacy, self-reflection and identification through cinema watching experience (Wiley, 2003; Platinga, 2009; Testoni et al, 2021).

4. *Ghar Ka Pata*²³

Madhulika Jalai, a filmmaker based in Mumbai stood out as a unique case for us; she felt a strong sense of rootlessness after marriage as she had to move out of living with her parents to Mumbai, here she stays with her husband who is a non-Kashmiri. She felt the loss of communicating in Kashmiri, home cooked Kashmiri food made by mom and the festivities, typically Kashmiri festivals like *hearth* that she used to celebrate heartily with her family. These experiences provoked her to pick up her camera and visit Kashmir to as she says, 'connect with her roots'. Madhulika's documentary is a personal narrative which makes us sift through the landscape of Kashmir, the narrow *gullies*²⁴ of *Rainawari* (her ancestral village) in search of her home. Hand held camera, natural lighting, close-up of people interviewed, especially an emphasis on their emotional faces and teary eyed expressions makes one feel the pain of turmoil years. She is accompanied by her elder sister, who sets on a nostalgic journey to look for her house, school, friends and childhood memories. All the Kashmir moments are juxtaposed by interviews with her family settled in Ghaziabad and Delhi; their longing to go back, painful memories of migration versus Kashmir seen through the camera or Madhulika's vision. The participant achieved her catharsis towards the feeling of loss and rootlessness through making this film.

²³ The address of my home

²⁴ lanes

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study highlight the multifaceted role that Hindi cinema has played in the lives of Kashmiri Pandits. Firstly, the recreational aspect of watching Hindi films emerged as a significant source of happiness and social bonding. Participants frequently mentioned the joy of group watching with family and friends, along with the emotional engagement provided by the films. This experience of shared happiness and emotional immersion in film narratives temporarily allowed participants to escape the harsh realities of migration and displacement. These experiences align with concepts of Emotional Self-Efficacy and Emotional Clarification, as discussed in studies by Testoni (2021), Wiley (2003), and Platinga (2009). Secondly, the concept of 'Willing Suspension of Disbelief' through Hindi cinema provided a critical escape from mundane realities. Participants recalled specific films and moments that were aspirational and provided a temporary respite from their real-life struggles. Films from directors like Yash Chopra were particularly noted for their ability to offer an idealized vision of life. The cathartic effect of watching films like *The Kashmir Files* was also noted, with many participants experiencing a profound emotional release while reflecting on their past traumas. This aligns with the concept of containment as discussed by Røkeberg (2012), despite the controversial reception of these films in the international community.

Lastly, the interaction with Hindi cinema has evolved over time. While films provided relaxation and emotional release in the past, contemporary consumption has shifted towards more realistic and diverse content available on OTT platforms. This change reflects a broader trend observed in the studies by Dwyer (2014), who noted the evolving tastes of the new middle class in relation to Bollywood films. Participants now show a preference for content that resonates with their personal and community experiences, indicating a shift towards self-reflection and identification through cinema.

CONCLUSION

Hindi cinema has played a significant role in the lives of Kashmiri Pandit millennials, offering a means of emotional escape, social bonding, and personal reflection. The

nostalgic connection to Bollywood films of the past contrasts with a contemporary preference for realistic and relatable content. This shift underscores the evolving relationship between viewers and cinema, where films not only provide entertainment but also serve as a medium for emotional processing and community identity. The findings suggest that further research into popular narratives and their impact on migrant communities is necessary, especially in understanding the psychological and emotional dimensions of film consumption. There are some limitations to this study. The sample size was relatively small, and participants were predominantly from similar socio-economic backgrounds, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Future research can explore a more diverse demographic to provide a broader understanding of the role of Hindi cinema in the lives of Kashmiri Pandits. Moreover, examining the long-term psychological effects of film consumption and how it influences identity and cultural preservation among migrant communities could provide deeper insights. Further studies could also delve into the reception and impact of controversial films like *The Kashmir Files* on different communities to understand the nuances of narrative influence in cinema.

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