

Bollywood and conspiracy theories

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IT is often alleged that Hindi cinema has misrepresented the past. Indian history has been depicted with popular myths and stating wrong historical facts in several Bollywood movies. In particular, the depiction of the Sultanate period, the Mughal period, and its aftermath in various films have been notorious and, on many counts, visualizes a systematic pattern of stereotyped and prejudiced images of Muslims.¹

In contrast, this paper highlights *The Tashkent Files* (2019), a film that deals with a more recent episode of contemporary Indian history during the 1960s. The film focuses on the death of India's second Prime Minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, in Tashkent. The movie dabbles with conspiracy theory while making direct accusations of a planned murder by international secret agencies and insiders of the Congress party that would have eventually benefited Indira Gandhi to become the next prime minister following the death of Shastri. It is directed by Vivek

Agnihotri, a vocal supporter of India's majoritarian nationalist party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), who had also published a book around the same theme, *Who Killed Shastri? The Tashkent Files* (2020). Journalist Anuj Dhar's book, *Your Prime Minister is Dead* (2018), has also inspired the film. Dhar has been propagating another conspiracy theory on the death of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose for several years.

The timing of the release of the film on 12 April 2019, the following day of the first phase of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections spanning seven phases that ended on 19 May with right wing populist propaganda, must be seen in such an appropriate context.

The movie problematically celebrates the assertion of high moral ground of a young journalist, Ragini Phule (role played by Shweta Prasad), who is known to be a fake news reporter within the journalist community.² She is known for getting

1. Maidul Islam, *Indian Muslim(s) after Liberalization*. Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2019, pp. 91-149.

2. The names of various characters and actors in the film are taken from <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8108268> accessed on 20/10/2021.

political scoops for the newspaper, *India Times*. The film's main protagonist alleges how the Congress party is a party of the elites sitting in Lutyens Delhi. Moreover, she asserts that the Lutyens elite feels threatened whenever a prime minister of India hails from a modest socioeconomic background. The director made a subtle connection to remind us how the Lutyens elite has been often ignored and snubbed by the current prime minister, who also hails from humble origins.

The movie directly accuses that politicians, professional historians and intellectuals are sell-outs to various foreign countries. The film also unswervingly asserts against ideas of secularism and socialism and accuses that India became a colony of the Soviet Union in the following decade after Shastri's death.

The film sets the background that under Shastri's leadership, India defeated Pakistan in the 1965 war. Soon after the victory against Pakistan, Shastri reached Uzbekistan in the former Soviet Union to sign the Tashkent agreement with Pakistan. After six days of complicated negotiations, the treaty was signed on 10 January 1966. A few hours after the signing of the Tashkent agreement, Shastri died. The film claims that how he died has been kept secret, and thus his death remains a mystery.

The film opens with a scene in which a former Soviet spy, Vasili Nikitich Mitrokhin (role played by Francisco Raymond), met an official in the British embassy in Riga, Latvia, in 1992. Mitrokhin admits that he was appointed as a foreign intelligence officer in 1948 and retired as the director of KGB archives in 1985. He had several documents of the KGB archives spanning several decades. It will later become the Mitrokhin archive. He had

copiously taken handwritten notes for twenty-five years of various files of the KGB archives that cover almost every country in the world. The film shows that the official historians of the country have given a false narrative that Shastri died because of a heart attack. The film openly declares that his death was not natural. The main narrative of the movie asserts that Shastri was poisoned. The movie points out that the historians have not adequately cultivated the Mitrokhin archives, which hints that Indira Gandhi, whose code name was Vano in the KGB repertoire, was the sole beneficiary of Shastri's death.

The film shows that a committee was formed to find out the exact reasons for Shastri's death. The committee consisted of only one renowned historian, Padmashree Aisha Ali Shah (role played by actor Pallavi Joshi).³ The historian in the film is differently abled, smokes and part of the elite circle of New Delhi. In contrast, the journalist who is part of the committee is not interested in facts, as shown in the early part of the film. She belongs to the internet generation who is not interested in serious political journalism but wants to be famous on Twitter and plans to open up a news site start-up. For the start-up, she is desperately looking for funding.

In a conversation between the journalist and her editor, she says that 'it is not about Shastri but let us pin down the government.' Naseeruddin Shah, who plays the role of home minister P.K.R. Natrajan, forms a nine-member high power committee to investigate Shastri's death with members from both the government and the opposition. There would not

3. Joshi won the Silver Lotus Award in the 2021 National Film Awards for best supporting actress for her role in the film. Joshi also happens to be a producer of the film and the wife of director and writer Vivek Agnihotri.

be any media coverage, but the veto power of the committee will be with the chairman, the veteran opposition politician, Shyamsundar Tripathi. Mithun Chakraborty plays Tripathi's role in the film. Tripathi wants that journalist Ragini should be part of the committee as his eye and camera. He also has no interest in Shastri but claims that there is no truth in politics and that a politician has nothing except his image. He argues that people do not like the truth but like the stories about truth.

Apart from the politician Tripathi, the journalist Ragini and the historian Aisha, the nine-member committee comprises of ex-RAW chief: G.K.S. Anantha Suresh (role played by Prakash Belawadi), youth leader of the ruling party – Vishwendra Pratap Singh (role played by Prashantt Guptha), a retired Supreme Court judge, Kurian Abraham (role played by Vishwa Mohan Badola), director of Archives India, Omkar Kashyap (role played by Rajesh Sharma), the socialite Indira Joseph Roy (role played by Mandira Bedi) and director of the Indian scientific research council, Gangaram Jha (role played by Pankaj Tripathi). Various committee members discussed how Shastri's stay at Tashkent was changed from a tourist hotel to a Dacha (Russian for a bungalow or cottage). The historian justifies that a DIG from the central government had approved of his residence in Tashkent. In the hotel, there were steps that were not suitable for a heart patient.

The committee members did talk about two medical reports: one given to the Indian government and another to the then government of the Soviet Union and how the Dacha in which he stayed did not have provision for Oxygen although Shastri was a known heart patient with two previous attacks.

In contrast, the director of Archives India expresses that the DIG had approved the ground floor of an in-tourist hotel in which Shastri was supposed to stay in which there were provisions for both a makeshift operation theatre and oxygen. The last minute changes were made after the intervention of two top bureaucrats from India. The socialite, Indira Joseph, asks why there was no bell in Shastri's room which the historians have ignored. Ragini argues that six Soviet doctors have signed the medical report, and Dr R.N. Chugh, the PM's official doctor, gave an intramuscular injection to Shastri. Soon after the intramuscular injection was given, India's second prime minister died. However, a senior Russian doctor, E.G. Yermenko, who first saw Shastri's dead body, did not sign the medical report given to the Indian government.

Ragini asks that is it possible that Yermenko had refused to sign because she feared something? Ragini argues that why Shastri was not given oxygen which was required for heart patients. Is it because there was no oxygen? The scientist Jha asks why Shastri was given an intramuscular injection instead of an intravenous injection. In the former case, the medicine reacts late to a patient's body during an emergency. It is common sense. He asks whether the doctor did not know about such a medical practice or was it a deliberate ploy to kill Shastri. Ragini asks whether Shastri was already dead, and the injection was given later, and that is why Dr Yermenko did not sign the medical report. Indira Joseph asserts that any prima facie evidence must have been destroyed. In contrast to six Soviet doctors who had signed the medical report submitted to the Indian government, a different medical report was deposited to the Soviet

government signed by eight Soviet doctors.

Ragini presents a case before the committee of why there was no post-mortem report and why there were cut marks on Shastri's body with bloodstains. She speculates that the KGB used to take out organs from the body to cover up any act of poisoning. Various committee members were already convinced that Shastri was killed. The committee members discussed various facts, narratives and counter-narratives. Then there were debates about the mistakes in the Russian translation of two medical reports, which were disputed as two different medical reports instead of identical ones. Questions like why the red diary of Shastri and the flask in which he used to drink milk were not returned to the Indian government were asked. Some members of the committee enquired whether there was any poison mixed in the flask.

Ragini asks why two witnesses of Shastri's death—Dr Chugh and Shastri's assistant Ramnath later died in two separate car accidents. In one scene, there is a reference to another conspiracy theory that there was a secret meeting between Shastri and Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose in Tashkent. More conspiracy theories were floated like Subhash Bose was staying in India as Gumnam Baba and how the nuclear scientist Homi J. Bhabha got killed by the CIA in a plane crash, just thirteen days after Shastri's death. Some committee members discussed how several scams were not adequately investigated in the past because the truth is a luxury in our country.

The profound tussle between several members of the committee and the historian who attempted to provide more or less reasonable explanations as portrayed in the film shows a tremendous contradiction between a

worldview of rationalist discourses and popular sentiment trying to get justified through rational lenses of asking missing questions in a plot.

Intellectuals have a very legitimate scepticism towards conspiracy theories because conspiracy theorists have an irrational tendency to continue to believe in those theories, even when such conspiracy theorization degenerates an entire research programme on any particular issue. At the same time, conspiracy theories have been often used by anti-elitist and anti-intellectual populists in many instances.⁴ Conspiracy theories are obscure attempts to understand the reality of sociability from the myopic perspective based on esoteric epistemology.⁵

In this context, one must be clear that theorizing about conspiracies like the Watergate scandal and the Iran-contra affair may not be necessarily wrong because they were indeed the handiwork of small groups of influential individuals. Thus, there are good and lousy conspiracy theories.⁶ Many people believe in conspiracy theories because of deficiencies in cognitive abilities, the absence of available information, and the motivation to think critically. Therefore, current research in the field of psychology has shown that belief in conspiracy theories is guided by

4. Steve Clarke, 'Conspiracy Theories and Conspiracy Theorizing', *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 32(2), June 2002, pp. 131-150.

5. Mark Featherstone, 'The Obscure Politics of Conspiracy Theory', in Jane Parish and Martin Parker (eds.), *The Age of Anxiety: Conspiracy Theory and the Human Sciences*. Blackwell, Oxford, 2001, p. 43; Edmund Griffiths, *Towards a Science of Belief Systems*. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2014, pp. 85-102.

6. Brian L. Keeley, 'Of Conspiracy Theories', *The Journal of Philosophy* 96(3), March 1999, pp. 109-126.

motives that are epistemic (by an attempt to understand one's environment), existential (trying to be safe and in control of one's environment), and social (to maintain a positive image of the self and the social group that a person belongs).⁷

Some prominent examples of conspiracy theories in the past range from accusing the Bush Administration behind the 9/11 terror attacks, the assassination of US President John F. Kennedy by the CIA and alleging scientists, communists, and the United Nations for global climate change. Conspiracy theorists tend to influence people to reject scientific agreements, most notably the consensus around anthropogenic climate change. In this regard, more recent studies in political psychology have shown that conspiracy theories do more harm than good.⁸

In this respect, one can argue that Bollywood's attempt to utilize conspiracy theories as a mode of challenging established historical facts is different from the known trope of misrepresentation of Indian history. Through its various characters, the film reveals that no one knows how politics in the world is controlled. It was a narrative by a double agent of the KGB and RAW, Mukhtar (role played by Vinay Pathak), whom Ragini visits in Tashkent to learn more about the so-called mysterious death of Shastri, the enigmatic personality of the former editor of India Times, Mr Bakshi (a

cameo played by late Yusuf Hussain) and that of minister Natrajan. Here, one must note that conspiracy theorists believe that an unknown power controls the universe.

It is generally believed by the powerless who have limited control in a world of uncertainty that the world is run by a single government or few oligarchic power centres, which conspire against revealing the truth to the people. In this regard, the movie directly challenges the task of the historians. While historians have been painstakingly involved in collecting archival materials and official facts about any event or set of past events, conspiracy theorists build up their propaganda based on missing links in any historical narrative. In such a context, how should historians respond to conspiracy theories? Do they ignore them?

Ignoring conspiracy theories is one approach because giving too much attention to them might further rekindle more enthusiasm for conspiracy theorists, who by and large suffer from an attention-seeking syndrome. At the same time, how would historians respond to conspiracy theories in a world of post-truth where fake news, bogus campaigns, and popular myths continuously circulate on several social media platforms? It has become increasingly difficult to ignore conspiracy theories other than a progressive counter-narrative based on scientific evidence and rational explanations to bust myths and fake propaganda.

In this case, The Tashkent Files directly challenges the historian's approach to objective research with a substantial prejudice against historians and contempt for politicians. One must remember that the film was also made at a time when activists of the RSS have regularly castigated scores of progres-

sive historians in the name of *Shiksha Bachao Andolan Samity* (Save Education Movement Association) that actively engages in banning history books, putting pressure to change existing university curriculum by dumping high standard of historical and literary texts and opposes academic freedom. Such a propaganda machine is complemented by an everyday dose of so-called WhatsApp University made up of mass forwards of fake news, forged campaigns, religious superstitions and conservative viewpoints. It is a counter-discourse and a counter-narrative of facts, figures and histories.⁹

The RSS propaganda machine and several umbrella organizations backed and financially supported by local Hindutva groups are systematically targeting progressive historians and activists. In the last three decades, they have also taken recourse to hooliganism to put pressure on relevant authorities to ban films, censor a film, or create a ruckus in the cinema theatres. Needless to say that the approach towards authenticity for many trained historians has been severely lacking in the counter-narratives told by the mobs controlled by the RSS and its affiliates. Bollywood has so far seen the misrepresentation of authentic histories. The Tashkent Files adds a new dimension of conspiracy theory to the counter-narrative produced by the RSS and its various organizations. It is a dangerous trend and quite symptomatic of the surge of communal fascism of the RSS and the right wing populist discourses of the BJP in contemporary India.

9. A recent study on the right wing populist discourses and majoritarian nationalism of the BJP and the communal-fascist designs of the RSS in stabilizing the political regime in India with a brute electoral majority can be seen in Maidul Islam, *Political Theory and South Asian Counter-Narratives*. Routledge, London, 2021, pp. 136-186.

7. Karen M. Douglas, Robbie M. Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichočka, 'The Psychology of Conspiracy Theories', *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26(6), 2017, pp. 538-542.

8. Karen M. Douglas, Joseph E. Uscinski, Robbie M. Sutton, Aleksandra Cichočka, Turkey Nefes, Chee Siang Ang and Farzin Deravi, 'Understanding Conspiracy Theories', *Advances in Political Psychology* 40(Suppl. 1), 2019, pp. 3-35.