

Legitimising hate

The ruling BJP has been constantly using Bollywood to advance its Hindutva agenda at the cost of communal harmony in India

The recently released Bollywood film *The Kashmir Files* has not only triggered an intensive debate about the forgotten story of the displacement of the Kashmiri Pandits — the high caste Hindus, from the Kashmir valley in the 1990s but has also reopened old wounds.

The *Kashmir Files* is one of the most-watched films in India so far. The 170-minute movie is a part of the Bollywood series of films featuring Hindus resisting Muslim rulers in the pre-British era that is backed by Hindu revisionists.

The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has been constantly using Bollywood to advance its Hindutva agenda at the cost of communal harmony. The *Kashmir Files* has stirred a wave of considerable anger against the Kashmiri Muslim communities across India. Several right-wing groups and individuals have expressed their anger on social media using hashtags like #WakeUpHindu. The Indian media has reported that after watching the film, many people vowed to take revenge or expressed hate for the Kashmiri Muslim community which is already facing harsh treatment in major cities.

The film has been instrumental in the bid to legitimize the state's repressive approach and create public support for its warmongering policies. In this background, Debasish Roy Chowdhury has aptly summarised the key objectives of this film in his recent piece, appearing in the *Time* magazine: "The purpose of *The Kashmir Files* is to inflame hatred against Muslims; against secular parties that

Modi's followers brand anti-Hindu; liberal intellectuals and activists, whose faith in India's inclusive democracy runs contrary to the supremacist tenets of Hindu nationalism; and against the liberal media..."

There are conflicting perspectives about the tragic events of the 1990s that forced the tiny Kashmiri Pandits community to abandon their homeland. A great deal of literature was produced by the displaced Pandit scholars as well as the writers from outside the region on the above subject. Regardless of competing viewpoints, it is a matter of fact that the Pandits community's en masse flight from the Indian-held Kashmir was a heartbreaking episode in modern history.

Coincidentally, I twice got a chance to stop over Pandits' refugee camps in the outskirts of the Indian-held Jammu city in 2001 and 2006. I found the living conditions terrible. Sanjay Tickoo, a Pandit community leader who never left Kashmir, took a group of visiting Pakistanis/Azad Kashmiris to show them dozens of deserted homes previously owned by Kashmiri Pandits in the posh localities of the Srinagar city. Meeting with Pandit leaders, activists and intellectuals, I found them warmly remembering and missing their soil, ancient culture, historical sites and the composite Kashmiri identity.

The agony and pain caused by the Kashmiri Pandits' dislocation from the valley are no different from the sentiments resulting from the similar displacement of the Muslims who crossed the LoC to avoid state persecution in the early 1990s.

The refugee camps located in the suburbs of Muzaffarabad remind us of the time when Kashmiri families and young people were arriving in Muzaffarabad every night to take sanctuary having dodged Indian security forces stationed along the LoC. The Indian authorities have been using the Kashmiri Pandits to fuel hatred and advance propaganda instead of finding a peaceful way for their return to the valley. To counter the Kashmiris' Azadi narrative, several Pandit organisations were established (like the Panun Kashmir). These organisations were pitched against Kashmiri Muslims and demanded a separate homeland within the Kashmir valley for the displaced Pandits' resettlement. Pandit organisations were also formed across the world to build a narrative of Pandit's genocide. These groups radicalised a generation of Kashmiri Pandits who have traditionally been peace-loving people. Now, even the educated Kashmiri Muslims and Pandits do not see eye to eye with each other in any matter. Therefore, the possibility of their return to the valley has grown remote.

It is difficult to figure out exactly how many Pandits were killed during the conflict in the early 1990s. The Kashmir Police, India's Ministry of Internal Affairs and various groups of Pandits offer contradictory data on the subject. The most liberal estimates suggest that 219 Kashmiri Pandits were killed from 1989 to 2004. The Muslim community leaders in Kashmir feel that their suffering and pain are greater than that of anyone else. Pandits have indeed left their homeland but



the Kashmiri Muslims have been facing the worst kind of human rights abuses, molestation and systemic discrimination on a daily bases for the last 31 years. Dozens of human rights reports published by various Kashmiri, Indian and international organisations illustrate an ugly story of torture, imprisonment and disappearance of the Kashmiris.

Released in Indian theaters, *The Kashmir Files* has further reduced the prospects of Kashmiri Pandits' early return to their homes. It has pitched a small minority community against a majority, making their return home an uphill task. The way the BJP government is trying to highlight the pain and suffering of the Pandits community is seen in the Kashmir valley quite differently from the rest of India. The film reinforces suspicions that the Kashmiri Pandit community has been a partner in the anti-Kashmir policies of New Delhi. The displaced Kash-

miri Pandits can return to their homes if the local community accepts them as neighbours and fellow citizens rather than strangers. Meanwhile, nearly 400 Pandits are still living in Muslim neighbourhoods in Kashmir without any fear of reprisals. A sincere dialogue between the Kashmiri Muslims and Pandit leaders is needed to find a peaceful and lasting solution to the Pandits' woes. Also, several domestic Kashmir issues are impacting the state of India-Pakistan relations. In this context, the resumption of India-Pakistan diplomatic ties leading to a dialogue about the Kashmir issue is a need of the hour. The change of government in Islamabad offers an opportunity for New Delhi to come forward with a fresh approach and chart a new beginning, picking up the dialogue thread from where it was left in 2016 when India unilaterally suspended all formal diplomatic engagement with Pakistan.

She paints to transform — reality

Shahnaz Akhtar's solo exhibition at Hamail Art Gallery shows that the painter picks her models, still-life arrangements, and interiors to express something "beyond, big, and supreme"



viewer is unable to read or understand the couplet, they can still connect with the painter's vision and enjoy it as an independent visual/idea.

Her canvases are a blend of reality and imagination. They are so convincing that one is unable to find the boundary between the two hemispheres. A similar approach is evident in the way Akhtar converts her observations on her canvases. To an ordinary viewer, individuals like Zeenat, Nighat Nasser and the unnamed characters are not familiar, but what makes them attached to these paintings is the way Akhtar deals with the factual details in her pursuit of the essence of reality. Her art is a contract between what is witnessed as neutral, objective and physical, and what is experienced as its recollection in the archives of our memory. Art is a form of bringing our memories to the surface. These memories may be long-distance and short-lived, of something we encountered years ago, maybe as a child, or what we saw a moment ago. This process (of art-making) involves an act of internalisation. Because no matter if a spectator is looking at the amaryllis flowers, a bougainvillea or a eucalyptus tree, or oranges, pears, or a polio victim, they are actually seeing all this through the eyes — and hands — of Shahnaz Akhtar, who is able to add a segment of her creative self into what she represents. On the other hand, Akhtar infuses her particular vision into arrangements on the table, segments of houses, sections of nature, groups of people et al. That personal imprint that we recognise while looking at her paintings is the hallmark of her work.

Akhtar acquired her MFA from the University of the Punjab, before she went to Columbia University, NYC, for courses in painting. Her educational training and professional practice aside, it is her natural gift as a painter that pervades her work. She demonstrates the ability to transform the outside world into a realm of lines, strokes, daubs, forms and colours in works that are based entirely on reality. Perhaps, the most important quality of her work is not what she chooses to paint but how she paints it. One may also find cultural and societal traces in her work. Akhtar captures an audience with the brightness of her colour palette, strong



compositions, the variations of light, and a maturity in handling the medium. Akhtar merges, or navigates the outside and the inside, the public and the private, art history and a painter's individuality. Her application of paint — which occasionally reminds us of the master of modern art, Paul Cezanne — is what distinguishes her work. The movement of hand (which includes eye and mind also) makes her canvases delightful to look at and connect with.

The sheer pleasure and power in rendering her themes are evident in her landscapes and figurative compositions. An amazing dimension of her work from different periods of her life (the exhibition at Hamail was a retrospective) is that Shahnaz Akhtar is among the Pakistani artists who draw with paint rather than fill a space mechanically and laboriously. This brilliance, energy, and sensitivity is apparent in a variety of artworks, be it about the trees at night, or a woman washing clothes, or a young girl standing in the doorway. Someone who looks at these paintings is able to recognise vegetation, human bodies, fruits, pottery, interiors, but they will also read it as a personal message from the artist, through her individual way of transcribing — and trans-



This black flat from Sulafah is peak 1999. This specific heel and thong straps were staples of the footwear of the time, and we all owned something that featured one or both — in black — at some point or the other. It went great with our balloon jeans and mom jeans, which back in the day were referred to simply as "jeans", as well as the huge shalwar painchas that accompanied our fitted, half-sleeved kameezes. Okay so the square toe is back with a geometric bang, and while some of these styles bring some not-great flashbacks, we can actually appreciate the space and design the new millennium had brought with it, over two decades later. This sandal from Outfitters is cute and looks comfy, and is a summer must-have IOHO. We know how everyone calls this color 'millennial pink', but we would like to alter the narrative here slightly. Yes this is millennial pink, but it's geriatric millennial pink. Your prettiest friend with the amazing blow-dried hair owned a pair of similar strappy sandals — now available at Sapphire — and personified grace and femininity for all young women around her. We saved the best for last: Magnolia Design House brings you the very shoe that very cool girl who studied Textile Design in 1998 and went on to

The shoe goes on

work for Shamael Ansari wore with her beautiful, floral, lawn jora. If you think this is really specific, it's only because it is. Also, hold this picture up against your own lawn floral and tell us if we got the lewk right.



Ensuring women empowerment

Androulla Kaminara has completed her three-year tenure as ambassador of the European Union to Pakistan.

Now she is nearing her retirement. In November 2019, she had presented her credentials to President Arif Alvi. The EU is driven by a spirit of multilateralism. Formed in 1950, hardly five years after the United Nation (UN), the EU has acquired a reputation for being the most successful supranational forum functioning at present.

According to Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis, about 2.5 million Pakistanis are living in 25 EU countries and the UK. Most of them are economic migrants. A large number of them have also gone there for studies. During Kaminara's tenure, Pakistanis became the third most frequent recipients of European scholarships. Since the Higher Education Commission (HEC) has speeded up efforts to facilitate foreign degree-holders, these students are conveniently placed in Pakistani universities.

Kaminara has led a grand forum dedicated to tolerance and interfaith harmony



issues and matters of interfaith harmony. She also visited EidGah Sharif, a shrine in Khyaban-i-Sir Syed, Islamabad. Custodians of this shrine have considerable influence on politics of the region. Apart from tolerance and interfaith harmony, shrines in Pakistan are also centres of political power. Former prime minister Imran Khan used to sit at the shrine of Baba Farid and pay his respects. His predecessor Nawaz Sharif has a regular visitor to Data Darbar in Lahore. Shaheed Benazir Bhutto would frequent the shrine of LalShahbazQalandar in Sindh. So, Kaminara's visit to EidGah Sharif has a political dimension to it. She also visited several churches and met Christian and Hindu leaders on various occasions. It was not an easy ride. She was always quick to highlight achievements of Shir-inMazari. Recently, the name of Turkish ambassador was mistakenly put in Urdu translation of an appeal by over 20 European ambassadors to Pakistan to condemn Russian attack on Ukraine as a signatory. The error was later rectified, but Mazari tweeted it to imply that it was a deliberate deception. Then former prime minister Imran Khan publicly linked this appeal to a conspiracy against his government.



in Pakistan. Many politicians, women, religious scholars and interfaith harmony activists are part of this forum. One of their big achievements was the signing of Lahore Declaration that among other things stressed the need for women empowerment. Throughout her tenure, she dedicated considerable time to activities for women empowerment and protection. She says there is a pressing need for substantive research on the problems faced by women. Kaminara visited Balochistan several times to put in place a judicial system for protection of women. Supreme Court judges and other stakeholders were taken on board and laws were introduced to meet this end. During her visits, she interacted with many Baloch girls. Recently, she also visited Kalash women. The EU is currently among top donors facilitating the couples choosing birth control practices.

She is fond of art and literature, especially paintings. She takes special interest in the paintings depicting women

Some months earlier, Mazari tagged Kaminara in a tweet accusing the EU of keeping silent on Indian atrocities in Occupied Kashmir. Kaminarasaid that that was not the case but became a target of trolling. When EU ambassadors were thanking Pakistan for rescuing them to Islamabad after takeover of Kabul by the Taliban, then information minister Fawad Khan joined Mazari in grilling them for restricting PIA operations in EU. At the time of re-evaluation of Pakistan's GSP+ status, a lot of hate was generated through conspiracy theories against the EU and Kaminara had to explain on Twitter that Pakistan had to take care of its minorities, women, journalists and vulnerable segments of society to deserve the favourable extended to the poorest countries by the EU. Her meetings with Army Chief Gen QammarJavedBajwa also became a subject of criticism.