[**Propaganda in films is old hat**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1724910/propaganda-in-films-is-old-hat)

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ISRAELI filmmaker Nadav Lapid and all foreign members of the jury at the film festival in Goa have criticised The Kashmir Files in separate interviews. It was a propaganda film in a vulgar trope purporting to empathise with a great tragedy that befell the minority Brahmin community in predominantly Muslim Kashmir. This it sought to achieve by shabbily caricaturing the killers, as they do in Hindi movies, by giving the villain a tick with a fluttering eye and a lust for gore.

The vulgarity didn’t end there. The movie also became an insidious messenger of hate against Muslims and received the applause and support of the government, prime minister downwards. For propaganda, vulgarity, and messaging of hate, no movie should be admitted to a reputed film festival. It was a political decision to push the film’s entry, one of the foreign juries said in their interview.

The criticism has excited both sides — those who fear or dislike the movie and those who see in its insidious half-truths a truer reality about the exodus of a powerful community that gave India its first and two other prime ministers.

Having turned much of the media into its kitchen garden of hate, whipping Indian cinema into line was hardly a surprising objective for the ruling Hindutva establishment. Recent signs came with the violence against those that were found not standing for the national anthem at the start of the movies. In the old days, the playing of the anthem came at the end. Some stayed put and others shuffled out. People didn’t have to wear patriotism on their sleeves in a confident nation.

The disconcerting fact is that ‘The Kashmir Files’ was extremely successful with audiences in India and the diaspora abroad.

So Lapid’s brief point was that the movie was not fit to qualify for a major festival. But that’s hardly a reason for the film’s opponents to exult. On the contrary, it was good that the movie was screened at an international festival. It allowed the world to get a closer look at the mischief afoot. The real harm was done elsewhere. The disconcerting fact is that The Kashmir Files was extremely successful with audiences in India and the diaspora abroad. Hate-spewing Indian movies have, however, existed since independence, in a subterranean zone, while the bulk of the cinema shored up Gandhian mores and Nehruvian secularism as the ideal.

For example, L.K. Advani was information minister when he retrieved from the archives a 1950s movie that seemed inspired by Golwalkar’s anti-Christian vitriol. Swayamsiddha was shown on Doordarshan when India had just restored democracy after Indira Gandhi had suspended it. A Hindu woman’s husband is deaf and mute.

Her family priest says the man was ill due to the work of Christian missionaries in the village. The woman leads a violent campaign to throw out the missionaries. As they leave, the husband begins to hear and speak again. Anti-Christian propaganda found insufficient traction and Advani dressed up Emperor Babar as a Muslim bigot. The rest is history.

Propaganda on its own is not a problem. Hollywood recently celebrated 60 years of James Bond.

Liberal democracies allow citizens to propagate their views, including religion, freely. This freedom excludes hate speech, especially against minority communities.

Regardless of the clear statute, overt and covert prejudice continues to thrive, for example, as a relic of white-hooded KKK in the avatar of Donald Trump or as Enoch Powell’s “rivers of blood” threat that has mutated into Rishi Sunak’s plans to deport future immigrants to Rwanda. India has adopted Israel’s model of open prison for Kashmiris as has been done with Palestine.

‘Propaganda’ and ‘propagate’ have a common root though. The word ‘propagate’ is found crucially in the Indian constitution, which permits free propagation of religion as a fundamental right. In the 17th century, the Pope formed a “committee of cardinals in charge of foreign missions of the Catholic Church”, called Congregatio de Propaganda Fide, congregation for the propagation of the faith.

The modern political sense of propaganda came with World War I. It was not originally intended to deliberately mislead. Its less benign use was honed with World War II. Churchill, Hitler and Stalin used propaganda to rally political support among their masses and with allies. They used the improved radio to good effect.

The advent of the cinema brought a handier tool for mass messaging. The word ‘agitprop’ is of Soviet origin and is short for ‘agitation’ and ‘propaganda’. The Indian Peoples Theatre Association, popular as IPTA, borrowed the idea and spawned an entire trope of performing arts in practically every Indian language and region. There’s nothing wrong with propaganda per se provided it doesn’t harm or target communities.

The advantage with cinema is that it can more deftly dress up propaganda as entertainment. Who would have thought that Charlton Heston as Moses in The Ten Commandments was signalling a revolt against Stalin’s communist rule by invoking the Egyptian slaves to overthrow the pharaoh? This angle to the deceptively benign movie surfaced in the works of Tanner Mirrlees, professor of communication and digital media studies at Ontario Tech University.

Where Hollywood had been producing frothy films made to distract and entertain, the onset of war meant that it would now get into the business of persuading Americans to support the war effort, says Mirrlees, who’s also written several books about Hollywood’s cultural empire, including Hearts and Mines: The US Empire’s Culture Industry.

The US Office of War Information had a unit dedicated exclusively to Hollywood, the Bureau of Motion Pictures, Mirlees says.

Mirlees quotes the head of the Office of War Information, Elmer Davis, as saying, “The easiest way to inject a propaganda idea into most people’s minds is to let it go through the medium of an entertainment picture when they do not realise they’re being propagandised.” Among its other follies, The Kashmir Files misses the subtle point about entertainment.

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