



The Kerala Story: Cinema, State, and the Industry It reflects

Hindi cinema has rarely existed outside the currents of Indian politics. From the disillusioned “angry young man” of the 1970s to the uniformed patriot of the post-Kargil era, mainstream films have mirrored and amplified the popular anxieties of their time. This conventional role of cinema as a conduit of socio-political concerns finds a contemporary, albeit more polarized manifestation, in the increasingly pervasive and ascendant ideological project of Hindutva. This ideological undercurrent did not appear suddenly, but the decisive acceleration occurred after 2014.¹ These ideologically-loaded movies or ‘propaganda films²’, typically associated with autocracies like North Korea, Russia, and Nazi-era Germany, have found a home in India too. One can trace a visible trail of such films in India, with a notable shift after 2019. While cinema has always responded to political currents, that engagement has been subtle and covert, mediated through metaphor or a genre. This thin line of separation between the State and cinema has more or less disappeared since 2019. The principal target of these bigoted movies in every frame is always the same: a fundamentally untrustworthy Muslim male figure who is perpetually demonised and criminalised. This type of quintessential Muslim villain has been a staple of Indian war dramas, espionage thrillers, and weekend blockbusters. To this has been added the charge of “love jihad”, a Hindutva conspiracy theory, with no basis in reality, which claims that Muslim men are courting Hindu women so they can force them to convert to Islam and thus wage demographic war against the State. *The Kashmir Files*, *Article 370*, *Bastar: The Naxal Story*, *Hamare Barah*, each arrived with the same political messaging and the same indifference to the distinction between allegation and demonstrated fact. But the most egregious and successful of this set of Hindutva aligned films is *The Kerala Story franchise*.

The Kerala Story Franchise: Politics of Communal Storytelling and The Legal Reception

The first film was released in 2023 with a claim that made headlines around the country - 32,000 Hindu and Christian women from Kerala seduced and forcefully converted by Muslim men and eventually trafficked into ISIS networks in Afghanistan, Yemen, and Syria. The number had no evidentiary basis. When the Supreme Court asked the filmmakers to substantiate it, they couldn't offer any evidence. The Supreme Court ordered the filmmakers to withdraw this claim and add a disclaimer that this was a fictional story.³ But this disclaimer did nothing to repair the damage the film did to Hindu perceptions of their Muslim compatriots across the country. But the damage that the makers had intended was already done by the time the order was passed. BJP leaders organized screenings. Madhya Pradesh exempted it from tax, its Chief Minister explaining that the film created awareness and that parents should bring their daughters to watch it.⁴ Prime Minister Modi commended the film publicly.⁵ It collected over 300 crore rupees at the box office and won two National Film Awards in 2025.

Sudipto Sen's *The Kerala Story* (2023) presented itself as a social drama inspired by real events, but it turned out to be nothing but one in a series of propaganda films with made-up statistics for political mileage intended to advance an overtly communal narrative. Directed by Kamakhya Narayan Singh, the sequel of the film, *Kerela story 2- Goes beyond* shifts this narrative inward, bringing the same suspicion and hostility toward Muslims into their homes. This film is a textbook example of polarising cinema that reduces its audience to a Hindu–Muslim binary. Released on 27 February 2026, the film triggered a set of political statements, television arguments, and a petition in Kerala High Court contending that the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) did not adequately apply the statutory safeguards outlined in Section 5B of the Cinematograph Act, 1952. This section prohibits certification of films that threaten public order, morality, decency, or are likely to incite criminal acts. On 26 February, a single-judge bench led by Justice Bechu Kurian Thomas imposed a 15-day interim stay and directed the Central Board of Film Certification to re-examine the film after petitions alleged that certain scenes could spread hatred and disturb communal harmony. In a dramatic reversal within 24 hours, the Kerala High Court allowed the release of the film, lifting the interim stay that had put its debut on hold. A Division Bench comprising Justices Sushrut Arvind Dharmadhikari and P. V. Balakrishnan set aside the stay and permitted the release.⁶ Recently, the Kerala High Court refused to entertain a public interest litigation (PIL) seeking removal of 'Kerala' from the film, citing that it would be improper for the court to entertain the plea since a writ petition and an appeal regarding the matter were already pending before the court.⁷

The sequel follows three Hindu women across Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Kerala, each in relationship with a Muslim man who subsequently coerces them into marriage, forced conversion, and eventual confinement. The film abandons all semblance of plausibility when a cleric character declares the goal of such activities to demographically transform India into an Islamic state under Sharia law - the film's wildest narrative lurch that collapses insinuation into an explicit conspiracy and the story for an ideological spectacle. The film connects individual relationships to a broader alleged conspiracy of "Ghazwa-e-Hind". The film's promotional tagline makes this bigoted argument explicit: "They targeted our daughters. They broke their trust. They stole their futures. This time, we do not stay silent." In these three short phrases, the film achieves its most significant rhetorical manoeuvre - the illusion of "love Jihad".

The most inflammatory and infuriating portrayal in the movie has to be of the Malayali character Surekha, specifically of the scene where she is forced to eat beef as part of an Islamic conversion, an act seen as sacrilegious by many Hindus. The symbolism relies on a crude misrepresentation of food culture in India. It is built on a fiction that the film has no interest in acknowledging that beef consumption in Kerala and in other parts of India crosses religious lines.⁸ The current regime has created an atmosphere where eating beef has been turned into a political weapon but nevertheless does not hesitate to collect crores in donation from beef exporting companies.⁹ The overall categorical imagery of the film is deliberate in its targeting that depicts the entirety of the Muslim community as extremist savages. To drive home the point, every individual in the film who is a Muslim and every marker of their religious and cultural life, whether acts of worship or establishments such as dargahs are presented through a lens of totalising evil. The scenes set in the Hindu homes, in contrast, are filled with light, love, and laughter. By contrast,

the portions in the Muslim ghettos are dark, cramped, and claustrophobic. The contrast operates as a visual shorthand, creating a moral cartography in which the backdrop itself becomes an instrument of ideological sorting.

The Collapse of Institutional Safeguards

Hindi cinema has always reflected the anxieties of its time, but a critical shift can be seen in the wake of the Babri Masjid movement. This phase saw the villanization and othering of the entire community in commercial cinema. While in films like *Kerala Story* or the *Kashmir Files*, the binary is explicit, there is a softer, more insidious strand operating beneath the rhetoric of “Hindu victim and Muslim predator”. *Dhurandhar*, released recently, is one such example, not merely a historically and factually compromised spy thriller but a cinematic manifesto that glorifies authoritarian instinct, undermines democratic legitimacy, and asks audiences to become comfortable with the idea of ultranationalism. What makes this possible, what allows films like *Dhurandhar*, *The Kashmir Files* and *The Kerala Story* to move through the certification process largely undisturbed, is an institution that has quietly abandoned any pretence of neutrality. The CBFC, tasked constitutionally with applying a consistent standard of public order and decency, has in practice developed a remarkably selective eye. *The Kerala Story* passed with a disclaimer so inadequate it changed nothing. *Dhurandhar* received the same quiet accommodation.¹⁰ On the other hand, a movie like *Homebound*, that is honest, socially urgent, and rooted in documented realities - the movie was also India's official Oscar submission - was held for months without a screening date and eventually certified only after eleven modifications.¹¹ *Phule*, a biopic on Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule who spent their lives fighting caste injustice, was delayed and released only after accommodating the board's amendments.¹² *L2: Empuraan* was pulled and re-released within its first week after at least seventeen cuts were demanded from a scene depicting a Hindu right-wing mob killing a Muslim family.¹³ None of these films depicted violence that did not happen, or communities that do not exist, or history that was not recorded. Taken together, these developments indicate that Hindutva ideology, which once found its expression in street mobilization and electoral campaigns, has found one more durable vehicle in commercial cinema - one that reaches further and costs less to defend.

A Nation Still Watching Itself

The Kerala Story 2: Goes Beyond is a film that states its agenda plainly, rendering an entire community as a monolith of malice, unfeeling villains with singular purpose of expanding their population and making India an “Islamic state” by any means necessary - a vision the film pursues with such blunt certainty that it leads us to question whether it even succeeds as propaganda. This film announces itself so loudly, so relentlessly, that it forfeits the very persuasion it is after. It will find its audience, and that audience already agrees with it. In an era where media consumption is at an all-time high, such films are more effective than ever in commanding inordinate influence amongst all age groups. These films are being used to fuel distrust, hatred, and othering of millions of Muslim citizens of the country.

But cinema is also a tool for truth, for resistance, for questioning power. Just as films can be used to push an agenda, they can also expose it and challenge dominant narratives. The counter is already underway, through humour and different kinds of media - artists, reel-makers, troll-makers, common people are coming to realise that the Muslim

community around them has no resemblance to the villain on screen. In these social-media-driven post-truth times, the real power lies with the audience, to question this trend of popular cinema, the silence of an industry that profits from it, and to scrutinize this state-sponsored endorsement of divisive political narratives.

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