

**RECLAIMING THE LOST PARADISE: THE JAMMU
AND KASHMIR REORGANISATION ACT AND INDIA'S
NEW HISTORICAL NARRATIVE ON KASHMIR**

by Emanuela Mangiarotti

Introduction

This article examines the role historical narratives have played in the context of India's interventions in Kashmir. The research draws on broader research on the Indian state's changing political discourse and policies towards and in Kashmir and offers some reflections on how the 2019 passing of the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act (JKRA) was predicated on the mainstreaming of a statist historical narrative on Kashmir. A narrative, which has served the purposes of the current government's right-wing ethno-nationalist agenda.

The article shows how the trope of the Indian "paradise on Earth" narrative propagated by India's government has informed the trajectories of India's statist narratives about Kashmir turning into a call to action to recover and reclaim what the government call a 'lost paradise.' The new discursive direction was foregrounded by, among other themes, a renewed interest in the situation of the Kashmiri Pandits – the community of brahmins native to the Valley of Kashmir – whose collective identity is deeply entrenched in the history and socio-cultural distinctiveness of the region. Many Kashmiri Pandits fled the Vale of Srinagar during the height of the armed militancy against Indian occupation in the early 1990s, as the community became the target of intimidations, armed violence and killings. Those with poor economic means and less personal connections ended up living in ghettos and refugee camps in Jammu and New Delhi¹. The final waves of departures followed three horrific massacres: 7 people

Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali, Università di Pavia.

¹ S. SANA, *Mapping the Claims of History and Memory in Theorizing of the Kashmir Question*, in "South Asian Review", vol. 43, n. 1-2, 2022, pp. 6–27.

were killed in Sangrampora village (21 March 1997), 23 in Wandhama (25 January 1998) and 24 in Nadimard (23 March 2003).

The number Pandits living in the Valley shrunk from an estimated 140,000² in the late 1980s to 19,865 by 1998. While the actual numbers of the Pandits' exodus have always been a matter of controversy attached to opposing claims about history and trauma, today's estimates range from 3,400 to around 2,700 Pandits currently living in Kashmir³.

The debate regarding the circumstances, numbers and modes of the Pandits' flight from the Valley and their relocation in Jammu, New Delhi and elsewhere in and outside India has become instrumental to a broader communalisation of the Kashmir conflict. The increasing tendency to interpret past events in light of a Hindu-India vs. Muslim-Pakistan framework in the context of a growing influence of the right-wing Hindu nationalist movement in the Indian public debate, have facilitated the latter's deliberate self-association with the Pandit's cause⁴. Today, mainstreaming the memory of the Pandit's recent history has become key to the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP)'s political agenda and to the wider *Hindutva* (the right-wing Hindu nationalist ideology) movement's effort to construct a revisionist historical narrative about Kashmir.

The article thus situates the renewed political and public interest in the history of the Pandits' flight from Kashmir within a broader statist narrative that underscores the current phase of India's Kashmir policy.

1. *The fraught legacy of India's interventions in Kashmir*

As a Muslim-majority borderland at the centre of a conflict between India and Pakistan, and a place of resurgent claims to self-

² M. RAI, *Narratives from exile. Kashmiri Pandits and their construction of the past*, in S. BOSE, A. JALAL (eds) "Kashmir and the Future of South Asia", London & New York, Routledge, 2020, pp. 91-115.

³ According to author Mridu Rai, this ambiguity is due mostly to the fact that the numbers of Pandits living in the Valley before 1990 could only be adduced from the 1941 census (the last time the Pandit were counted separately from the broader category of Kashmiri Hindus). Also, the total numbers of displaced Pandits often includes those who voluntarily migrated from the Valley before 1990. M. RAI, *Narratives from exile. Kashmiri Pandits and their construction of the past*, cit.

⁴ I have discussed this in E. MANGIAROTTI, *La costruzione di maggioranze e*

determination in opposition to the central state, Kashmir has occupied a central place in India's nationalist narrative⁵. Kashmir was annexed by India on 27 October 1947, on the basis of an agreement, called the Instrument of Accession, between the then ruler of the Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir – the Maharaja Hari Singh – and the newly formed government of independent India. The Instrument of Accession, provided the basis for the ratification of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which granted special status to the state of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K)⁶. However, in the context of New Delhi's enduring conflicts with neighbouring Pakistan and China and the changing dynamics between various political actors in India, J&K's autonomy progressively eroded, leading up to the centre's increasing interference in the state's electoral processes and the imposition of presidential powers to tame the growing political instability. From the 1990s onwards, along with the militarisation of the territory, India began to enforce special laws to curb the armed resistance and the mounting popular opposition to what had turned into an outright military occupation of the Kashmir Valley.

Yet, prior to the inception of the first Modi government in 2014 and, chiefly, to the passing of the JKRA in August 2019, New Delhi had not formally questioned the former state's autonomous status within the Union. On the contrary, the right-wing Hindu nationalist movement has always decried J&K's special autonomous status as a barrier to the Kashmiri people's full identification with the Indian nation⁷. The JKRA must be understood in the context of this enduring obsession with the assimilation of Kashmir as a necessary step in the reconstitution of the (Hindu) nation. At its core, the bill cancelled the former state's special status within the Indian Union, by repealing article 370 and related

minoranze in conflitto: i pandit kashmiri, in G.P. CALCHI NOVATI (ed), "Uguali e diversi. Diaspore, emigrazione, minoranze", Roma, Viella, 2014, pp. 103-116.

⁵ E. MANGIAROTTI, *Kashmir as Frontier in Narendra Modi's Ethno-Nationalist Idea of India* in S. BERETTA, A. BERKOFKY, G. IANNINI (eds) "India's Foreign Policy and Economic Challenges", Springer, 2023, pp. 135-148.

⁶ A.G. NOORANI, *Article 370: A Constitutional History of Jammu and Kashmir*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2014; V. SCHOFIELD, *Kashmir in Conflict: India, Pakistan and the Unending War*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2010.

⁷ E. MANGIAROTTI, *Kashmir as Frontier in Narendra Modi's Ethno-Nationalist Idea of India*, cit..

section 35a⁸. Substantially, it demoted the J&K state and carved out the two separate Union Territories⁹ of Jammu-Kashmir and Ladakh. The JKRA effected the BJP's longstanding promise to return Kashmir to the wider Indian national community and cemented a certain reading of the past within a narrative about the Modi government's nationalist aspirations.

2. *History and collective memory in conflict zones*

Historical narratives and collective memory have been central to the study of group identity formation, various forms of nationalism and conflicts. Scholars have discussed how history functions as a resource for political power and a source of political capital, which sustains projects of dominance and struggles for resistance¹⁰. Hence, states often become preoccupied with mainstreaming certain readings of the past, which anchor specific imaginings of community and the nation to a recognisable cultural repository. In that respect, historical narratives have been regarded as focal points of mass mobilisation, especially against the background of tensions over a state's nationalistic aspirations¹¹. Scholars have also discussed how, in situations of conflict, statist historical narratives often legitimise the use of institutional violence to suppress dissent and silence alternative historical tellings. In such contexts, the state's interest in history materialises in the production of official readings of the past, which contrast oppositional, localised versions of the same. Official historical tellings are thus deeply entangled with the shaping of collective memory, intended here as a "changeable but consensual interpretation of a given past¹²". According to Richard Roberts,

⁸ A.G. NOORANI, *Article 370: A Constitutional History of Jammu and Kashmir*, cit.

⁹ Union Territories are administrative units directly controlled by the central government in New Delhi.

¹⁰ S. SANA, *Mapping the Claims of History and Memory in Theorizing of the Kashmir Question*, cit.

¹¹ T. SUNSERI, *Statist Narratives and Maji Maji Ellipses*, in "The International Journal of African Historical Studies", vol. 33, n. 3, 2000, pp. 567-584.

¹² S. SANA, *Mapping the Claims of History and Memory in Theorizing of the Kashmir Question*, cit. p. 7.

collective memory¹³ emerges from the framing of historical events in the shape of affectively charged narratives¹⁴ about places, events, cultural products, becoming in turn a product of identity transmission. Similarly, Confino argues that, in order to shape collective memory, a certain telling of the past needs to become a “socio-cultural mode of action¹⁵”, capable of mobilising people’s emotions around a shared historical trajectory. Yet, according to Mridu Rai “a collective memory is an ideological and affective fiction” because “communities do not ‘remember’ collectively, democratically or uniformly¹⁶”. Collective memories can be multiple and oppositional to one another and entangled with official readings of the past engraved in history textbooks, geographical maps but also in popular culture and the places and forms of memorialisation. In conflict zones, different sites of memory become battlegrounds for the assertion of community and nationhood. The relationship between history and collective memory is thus entwined with the power to define the discursive, imaginative and geographical boundaries of nation, community and belonging.

These considerations are particularly apt to understand the relevance of history and memory to the competing claims which inform the Kashmir conflict¹⁷. Today, the profound interlocking of time and place that underscores historical narratives about Kashmir manifests itself as a “politics of the past¹⁸”, featuring oppositional demands on the right to define, demarcate, narrate and inhabit Kashmir. With respect to the history of the Pandits, Rai argues that the effort to evoke a singular collective memory has been predicated on the capacity of

¹³ As Confino notes, the concept of collective memory is often used to “denote very different things which nonetheless share a topical common denominator: the ways in which people construct a sense of the past”. A. CONFINO, *Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method*, in “The American Historical Review”, vol. 102, n. 5, 1997, p. 1386.

¹⁴ R. ROBERTS, *History and Memory: The Power of Statist Narratives*, in “The International Journal of African Historical Studies”, 2000, vol.33, n.3, 2000, pp. 513-522.

¹⁵ A. CONFINO, *Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method*, cit. p. 1390.

¹⁶ M. RAI, *Narratives from exile. Kashmiri Pandits and their construction of the past*, cit. p. 92.

¹⁷ S. SANA, *Mapping the Claims of History and Memory in Theorizing of the Kashmir Question*, cit..

¹⁸ C. ZUTSHI, *Kashmir’s Contested Pasts: Narratives, Geographies, and the Historical Imagination*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014, p. 13.

certain privileged members of the community, such as journalists, writers and politicians, to tell their stories and have them mainstreamed as “legitimate” within the wider political debate¹⁹.

As the prolonged conflict has impinged on the possibility to conduct sustained research in and on the region, the central state has also actively participated in withholding or severely restricting access to historical records in an effort to control narratives of the past and support the emergence of a certain collective memory about Kashmir²⁰. Contested histories have thus become part and parcel of Kashmiri political culture, configuring a space where local challenges to India’s assertion to power and the production of contentious memories of conflict, trauma and belonging are met with renewed efforts from the State to appropriate and control how the past is remembered and invoked.

3. *Statist narratives about Kashmir*

The trajectory of India’s interventions in Kashmir has been sustained by statist narratives, which have sought to romanticise New Delhi’s claims of territorial ownership over the region. Such tellings have been modelled on familiar established tropes of origin, landscape and culture, the sources of which rest in the oral and textual narrative traditions of the region²¹. These imaginings have informed various opposing attempts to trace historical and geographical boundaries, underpinning antagonistic claims to identity and belonging within contemporary Kashmiri political culture and becoming integral to the conflict dynamics.

In 1940, Jawaharlal Nehru, the future Prime Minister of independent India and himself a Kashmiri Pandit, described his own fascination with the Valley by associating its landscape with feminised tropes: “Like some supremely beautiful woman, whose beauty is almost impersonal and above human desire, such was Kashmir in all its feminine beauty of river

¹⁹ C. ZUTSHI, *Kashmir’s Contested Pasts: Narratives, Geographies, and the Historical Imagination*, cit. p. 93.

²⁰ I. KANTH, *Writing History in Conflict Zones*, in “Economic and Political Weekly”, vol. 46, n. 26/27, 2011, pp. 30-32.

²¹ C. ZUTSHI, *Kashmir’s Contested Pasts: Narratives, Geographies, and the Historical Imagination*, cit. p. 13.

and valley”. In the same passage, Nehru added that “Kashmir calls back, its pull is stronger than ever; it whispers its magic to the ears, and its memory disturbs the mind. How can they who have fallen under its spell release themselves from this enchantment?²²”.

Literary historian Ananya Jahanara Kabir has convincingly shown how the repeated depiction of Kashmir as a celestial place of unparalleled beauty has contributed to fuel popular nationalistic fantasies, turning the region into a territory of collective desire²³. The mainstreaming of this shared imaginative repertoire has heavily relied on popular culture. For example, Nishat Haider²⁴ has explored the nexus of “cultural memory, history, and cinema as a contextual archive”, mapping out the “shifting gaze” on Kashmir projected by the Indian cinematic imagination²⁵. Haider argues that, while the depiction of the Kashmir Valley as “paradise on earth” has persisted throughout the history of India’s relationship with Kashmir, its specific connotations have changed to serve the purposes of the contemporary nationalist ideology. Thus, in the context of the increasing stormy relationship between New Delhi and the people of the Kashmir Valley, and especially after the outbreak of armed insurgency in the Vale of Srinagar in the 1990s, Kashmir’s image shifted from a vulnerable and entrancing heavenly territory of desire into a site of conflict and violence, staging “a dialectic encounter between Islam, the Kashmir insurgency, and the State²⁶”.

²² *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru, First Series*, XI, New Delhi, Orient Longman, 1978, p. 403. Available at: <https://nehruselectedworks.com>, last accessed on 16 March 2023.

²³ A.J. KABIR, *Territory of Desire. Representing the Valley of Kashmir*, University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

²⁴ N. HAIDER, *The vale of desire: Framing Kashmir in Vishal Bhardwaj's Haider*, in N. T. LANGAH, R. SENGUPTA, (eds) “Film, Media, and Representation in Postcolonial South Asia”, London & New York, Routledge, pp. 62-82.

²⁵ Since its inception in the 1950s, Hindi cinema has been a platform for discussing and conveying discourses of nationhood, although the film industry’s positioning with respect to the dominant political ideologies progressively changed with the changing political landscape. J. SZIVAK, *Trouble in paradise The Portrayal of the Kashmir Insurgency in Hindi cinema* in N.T. LANGAH, R. SENGUPTA, (eds) “Film, Media, and Representation in Postcolonial South Asia”, London & New York, Routledge, pp. 46-47.

²⁶ N. HAIDER, *The vale of desire: Framing Kashmir in Vishal Bhardwaj's Haider*, cit. p. 66.

In the same period, the trope of the disturbed heaven underpinned statist narratives constructed through the prism of national security, law and order and development gaps, which in turn justified the state's military occupation²⁷. The nationalist imagination, early on mobilised around a sentiment of longing, was thus turned towards a muscular effort to tame the forces threatening the national body. On 15 August 1998, during the traditional PM's Independence Day Address, then Prime Minister Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee (BJP) said: "In the last few days terrorist activities have increased in Jammu and Kashmir [...] Such terrorist activities every day, from across the border, are like a proxy war [...] We are facing them with all our might and we will not rest content until we have defeated these²⁸". Vajpayee was here alluding to a Pakistani hand fuelling the terrorist violence in Kashmir, in the midst of increasing diplomatic tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad and the 1998 nuclear testing escalation. In 2003, during an official address at the University of Kashmir in Srinagar, Vajpayee evoked the image of the "troubled paradise", saying that "anyone who experiences the beauty and serenity of Jammu & Kashmir is bound to conclude that God has been partial to this place, making it the Paradise on Earth. However, the same person, looking at the strife and violence that have marred the State's tranquility, might also wonder: Why has Peace eluded this Paradise for so long²⁹?"

The more recent shift in the Indian state's narratives about Kashmir followed the rise to power of the Hindu nationalist movement and consolidated with the premiership of Narendra Modi. In 2013, in the run up for the national election, Modi tweeted: "it is said about J&K: if there is heaven on earth it is here. We all need to work to make J&K a heaven of peace, integration & diversity"³⁰. Since then, the Hindu nationalist rhetoric about Kashmir has increasingly centred in the exhortation to reclaim the Kashmir paradise, lost at the hands of the

²⁷ N. KHAUL, *Coloniality and/as development in Kashmir: econationalism*, in "Feminist Review", n. 128, 2021, pp. 114-131.

²⁸ <https://archivepmo.nic.in/abv/speech-details.php?nodeid=9238>, last accessed on 16 March 2023.

²⁹ <https://archivepmo.nic.in/abv/speech-details.php?nodeid=9213>, last accessed on 16 March 2023.

³⁰ <https://twitter.com/narendramodi/status/407446462574768128?lang=en>. Accessed on 16 March 2023.

BJP's three paradigmatic foes: Pakistan, Kashmiri Muslims, and previous Congress governments. As I mentioned above, the passing of the JKRA clearly signalled a move towards fulfilling this mission. In his address to the nation on 8 August 2019, three days after the implementation of the JKRA, Modi said that "article 370 and 35a have given nothing but secessionism, terrorism, nepotism and widespread corruption on a large scale to Jammu-Kashmir. Both these articles were used as a weapon by Pakistan to flare up the emotions of some people". On 19 September 2019, while addressing a political rally Modi said: "We always knew and said: 'Kashmir is ours'" (हम हमेशा से जानते और कहते थे: 'कश्मीर हमारा है') [...] "Now let's make together a new Kashmir. Kashmir has to be made heaven once again" ('अब मिलकर एक नया कश्मीर बनाना है। फिर एक बार, कश्मीर को स्वर्ग बनाना है')³¹. Concomitantly, several media titled "Make Kashmir paradise again"³² echoing the common metonymy, this time attached to the PM's nationalist rhetoric, of a supposedly civilising mission of the Indian State in Kashmir.

To support its assertive Kashmir policy, the Modi government relied extensively on the mainstreaming of certain historical narratives that, as Shah has aptly remarked, were relayed through the revision of school textbooks³³ and changes in the forms of historical memorialisation concerning the former state of J&K³⁴. In fact, the issue of history and the relationship between history and ideology has always been at the core of the *Hindutva* discourse. According to the preamble to the constitution of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) – the leading organisation of right-wing Hindu nationalism – the movement should work "to make Hindus realise the greatness of their past" as a necessary condition to "bring about an all-round regeneration of the *Hindu Samaj*" (Hindu

³¹ <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/pm-narendra-modi-addresses-rally-in-nashik-maharashtra-new-kashmir-new-paradise-2103666>, last accessed 9 March 2023.

³² <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/politics/190919/make-kashmir-paradise-again-pm-modis-outreach-at-maharashtra-rally.html>; <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/prime-minister-narendra-modi-addresses-a-huge-rally-in-nashik/article29457043.ece>, last accessed 9 March 2023.

³³ *History textbooks in Jammu & Kashmir schools to be revised*, "The Indian Express" 31 December 2019. Available at: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2019/dec/31/history-textbooks-in-jammu--kashmir-schools-to-be-revised-2083051.html>, last accessed on 16 March 2023

³⁴ S. SANA, *Mapping the Claims of History and Memory in Theorizing of the Kashmir Question*, cit.

collectivity)³⁵. From the end of the 1990s, alongside the BJP's political growth, the teaching and writing of history gained centre-stage in the Indian public debate³⁶, with *Hindutva*-led government coalitions pushing for the amendment of history schoolbooks and university curricula³⁷. This trend has accelerated since the inception of the first Modi government in 2014, with certain BJP-led states, the central government, as well as various institutions and organisations linked to the *Hindutva* movement actively promoting the revisitation of historical sources, questioning the methodologies of historical research and delegitimising recognised intellectuals who would not adhere to the state's historical narratives. As Anand and Lall contend, statist interventions in education policy under the BJP rule have allowed right-wing Hindu nationalism to push its own discourse of citizenship at the national and state levels³⁸.

In Kashmir the promotion of a new historical imagination, which purports the region as an integral part of the Indian nation, has also underpinned renewed attempts to shape a national collective memory about the Valley. In this context, the mainstreaming of a historical narrative on and collective identification with the plight of the Kashmiri pandits has become central in mobilising popular support around the need to recover and reclaim the “lost paradise”.

³⁵ <https://archive.org/details/the-constitution-of-rashtriya-swayamsevak-sangh/page/n1/mode/2up>, last accessed on 16 March 2023.

³⁶ M. HASAN, *The BJP's intellectual agenda: Textbooks and imagined history*, in “Journal of South Asian Studies”, vol. 25, n. 3, 2002, pp. 187-209; C. JAFFRELOT, *Modi's India. Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, cit. pp. 172-174; S. MAHAJAN, *Hindutva agenda and history writing: Imaginings of the nation*, in “Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses”, n. 76, 2018 pp. 211-221; K. VISWESWARAN, M. WITZEL, N. MANJREKAR, BHOG D., U. CHAKRAVARTI, *The Hindutva View of History: Rewriting Textbooks in India and the United States*, in “Georgetown Journal of International Affairs”, vol. 10, n. 1, 2009, pp. 101–112.

³⁷ K. ANAND, M. LALL, *The debate between secularism and Hindu nationalism – how India's textbooks have become the government's medium for political communication*, in “India Review”, vol. 21, n. 1, 2022, pp. 77-107. See also, S. JAIN, *Rajasthan Textbooks Revised to Glorify Modi Government*, in “The Wire”, 16 June 2017. Available at: <https://thewire.in/education/rajasthan-textbooks-revised-glorify-modi-government>; K. CHOWDHURY, *School Social Science Textbook Revisions in India Kick Up Controversy*, in “The Diplomat”, 27 July 2022. Available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/07/school-social-science-textbook-revisions-in-india-kick-up-controversy/>, last accessed on 16 March 2023.

³⁸ K. ANAND, M. LALL, *The debate between secularism and Hindu nationalism – how India's textbooks have become the government's medium for political communication*, cit.

4. *The Kashmir Files*

Released on 11 March 2022, the film *The Kashmir Files* by director Vivek Agnihotri promised to tell the hidden story of the 1990 Pandits' flight from Kashmir. Early reviews in the Indian media were mixed, with some describing the film as islamophobic, dishonest and provocative³⁹ and others praising it for revealing the truth about the Pandit exodus. Concomitantly, the Modi government began to sponsor the film publicly, linking it to a broader rhetoric about the need to establish the historical truth about Kashmir.

Some BJP-ruled states declared the film's screenings tax-free⁴⁰ and provided government employees with work permits to attend the projections, as Prime Minister Modi blatantly endorsed Agnihotri's historical narrative. At a BJP parliamentary group meeting on 15 March 2022, Modi was reported saying: "All of you should watch it. The film has shown the truth which has been suppressed for years. The truth prevailed in Kashmir Files". During the same meeting, Modi also said that "history has to be presented in the correct perspective before society from time to time. Just as books, poetry and literature are important, so are films⁴¹".

It soon became clear that the government had invested enormous political capital in mainstreaming one of the film's core messages, namely that historical truths had been deliberately hidden or manipulated by a purported alliance of Kashmiri Muslims, the Pakistani government and Indian left-wing intellectuals, to cover the victimisation of the Hindus of Kashmir. In that sense, the film entrenches some core right-wing Hindu nationalist tropes. Firstly, it depicts Kashmir as the lost heavenly homeland of the (Hindu) Pandits. Secondly, it condemns the term "exodus", usually employed to refer

³⁹ <https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/the-kashmir-files-movie-review-a-disturbing-take-which-grips-and-gripes-in-turns/article65223787.ece>; <https://www.newindianexpress.com/entertainment/review/2022/mar/12/movie-review-kashmir-files-a-limp-attempt-at-provocation-2429076.html>. Accessed 9 March 2023, last accessed on 16 March 2023.

⁴⁰ <https://scroll.in/article/1019708/how-the-bjp-is-promoting-the-kashmir-files-modis-endorsement-tax-breaks-leave-from-work>, last accessed on 16 March 2023.

⁴¹ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/truth-suppressed-for-long-is-coming-out-pm-modi-on-the-kashmir-files/articleshow/90220573.cms>, last accessed on 16 March 2023.

the Pandits' flight from the Valley, as a discursive device which hides the reality of what the film instead labels as a genocide. Thirdly, the film depicts Kashmiri Muslims as terrorists and disloyal and left-wing intellectuals (epitomised by a university professor who manipulates her student and the film's protagonist Krishna to question the Government of India's actions in Kashmir) as anti-national. In so doing, the film also builds on some recurring features of the Indian government's narrative about Kashmir. In a long monologue delivered towards the end of the film the protagonist, Krishna, suggests that all of India's greatness is tied in with Kashmir. He blames the larger Hindu society's decline on a history of Muslim atrocities, the pick of which supposedly came with the persecution of Pandits.

Apart from portraying Kashmiri Muslims as hostile and treacherous, the film is punctuated with a problematic storyline, presented as a work of fiction in a disclaimer at the beginning, but upholding the right-wing Hindu nationalist historical narrative throughout.

Here, the attempt to mould the collective memory about the displaced Pandit community supports a certain view of the Indian national community. According to filmmaker Sanjay Kak, himself a Kashmiri Pandit, the movie posits a "Hindu nationalist vision for Kashmir, constructed around the idea of the recovered homeland, not just for Kashmiri Pandits but for all Hindus⁴²" in opposition to the Muslim other. The whole *Kashmir Files* debate fuelled communal overtones as the film's screenings throughout India and abroad were accompanied by anti-Muslim chants and slogans⁴³. In the end, while the film advocates the right to justice for the Pandits (exemplified by the hashtag #righttojustice on the film's poster), its narrative appeals to a Hindu nationalist sentiment which, as mentioned throughout this paper, has been the subject of an elaborate policy by the *Hindutva* movement, particularly after 2014. Specifically, the film adheres to an idea of India obsessed with the place the Hindus and "the Others" occupy in the history of India and, consequently, in the imaginative and socio-political spaces of the Indian nation state.

⁴² <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2022/4/13/the-dangerous-truth-of-the-kashmiri-files>, last accessed on 16 March 2023.

⁴³ <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/the-kashmir-files-anti-muslim-hate-slogans-enter-theatres-across-country>, last accessed on 16 March 2023.

Conclusions

Historical narratives and collective memory matter to competing claims to community, territory and belonging attached to the Kashmir conflict. They have been central in shaping the India's national imagination and mobilising support for New Delhi's claims of ownership over the territory. The trajectory of the Indian government's historical narratives about the region has also informed the dynamics of conflict, occupation and violence in the Kashmir Valley.

Since the inception of the Modi government in 2014, attempts to construct a collective historical consciousness purporting a Hindu nationalist idea of India, have elicited a renewed interest in framing the history of Kashmir within familiar *Hindutva* themes. The new national mandate to reclaim the lost paradise discussed in this article can be situated in the context of this wider preoccupation with the way history and memory are evoked to sustain the Government of India's current political agenda in and outside Kashmir. Against this background, while sanctioning a visual repository for how Kashmir is to be imagined and remembered, the government's endorsement and promotion of the film "The Kashmir Files" contributes to convey certain ideas about what is indigenous to the nation and what is not or what must become so by force.

Riassunto - Le narrazioni storiche e la memoria collettiva sono rilevanti per le rivendicazioni riguardanti comunità, territorio e identità legate al conflitto del Kashmir. Sono state centrali nel plasmare l'immaginario nazionale indiano e nel mobilitare il sostegno per le politiche di New Delhi nella regione. L'articolo analizza come il *topos* del "paradiso in terra" abbia informato le traiettorie delle narrazioni dello stato indiano sul Kashmir trasformandosi, sotto il governo Modi, in una chiamata all'azione per recuperare e reclamare il paradiso perduto. La nuova direzione discorsiva è stata sostenuta da un rinnovato interesse per la situazione dei Pandit kashmiri

— la comunità di bramini originaria della valle del Kashmir — la cui identità collettiva è profondamente radicata nella storia e nella distintività socio-culturale della regione. L'articolo colloca quindi il rinnovato interesse politico e pubblico per la storia della fuga dei Pandit dal Kashmir all'interno di una più ampia narrazione dello stato che sottende all'attuale fase della politica indiana per il Kashmir. In questo modo, l'articolo fornisce una prospettiva su come la traiettoria delle narrazioni storiche del governo indiano sulla regione abbia informato le dinamiche di conflitto, occupazione e violenza nella Valle del Kashmir.