

The Kerala Story

The Kerala Story is a 2023 Indian Hindi-language drama film directed by Sudipto Sen and produced by Vipul Amrutlal Shah.^[1] It stars Adah Sharma, Yogita Bihani, Sonia Balani, and Siddhi Idnani. The plot follows a group of women from Kerala who are coerced into converting to Islam and joining the Islamic State.^{[5][6]} Marketed as a true story, the film is premised on the Hindutva conspiracy theory of "love jihad",^[7] and falsely claims that thousands of Hindu women from Kerala have been converted to Islam and recruited in the Islamic State.^{[8][9]}

The Kerala Story was released in theatres on 5 May 2023. With a worldwide gross of ₹303.97 crore (US\$38 million), it became the ninth-highest-grossing Hindi film of 2023.^{[10][11]} It was heavily promoted by the incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which leveraged the film in its campaigning for the Karnataka assembly election.^{[12][13]} However, film critics accorded it overwhelmingly negative reviews, characterizing the work as Islamophobic propaganda.^{[14][15][6]} The film has also faced protracted litigation and protests, primarily in Kerala, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu.

Plot

Shalini Unnikrishnan, a woman who converted to Islam, shares her journey of aspiring to become a nurse, only to be coerced by extremist Muslims in her college who posed as friends. She was eventually manipulated into joining the Islamic State and ended up imprisoned in Afghanistan.

Cast

- Adah Sharma as Shalini Unnikrishnan / Fatima Ba
- Yogita Bihani as Nimah Mathews
- Sonia Balani as Asifa Ba
- Siddhi Idnani as Geethanjali Menon / Anisha Ba
- Devadarshini as Shalini's mother
- Vijay Krishna as Ishak
- Pranay Pachauri as Rameez
- Pranav Misshra as Abdul
- Pranali Ghogare as Shaziya

Production and release

The Kerala Story



Theatrical release poster

Directed by	Sudipto Sen
Written by	Suryapal Singh Sudipto Sen Vipul Amrutlal Shah
Produced by	Vipul Amrutlal Shah
Starring	Adah Sharma Yogita Bihani Sonia Balani Siddhi Idnani
Cinematography	Prasantanu Mohapatra
Edited by	Sanjay Sharma
Music by	Viresh Sreevalsa Bishakh Jyoti
Production company	Sunshine Pictures ^[1]
Release date	5 May 2023
Running time	138 minutes ^[2]

The film was produced by Vipul Amrutlal Shah, who is also the creative director of the film.^[1] It was released in theatres on 5 May 2023.^[16] The digital streaming rights of the film was purchased by ZEE5.^[17] The film premiered on ZEE5 from 16 February 2024.^{[18][19]} Prior to its domestic release, the film went through CBFC scrutiny and received an adults only classification following a number of requested changes.^[20]

Country	India
Language	Hindi
Budget	₹15–20 crore ^[3]
Box office	est. ₹303.97 crore ^[4]

Premise and factual accuracy

The teaser released on 3 November 2022,^[21] featuring the character of Fathima Ba, a Hindu Malayali nurse who had converted to Islam and joined the Islamic State, before ending up in an Afghan jail.^[22] She claimed to be one of 32,000 girls from the Hindu and Christian communities, who are missing from Kerala and have been recruited into the Islamic State after being converted to Islam.^[8] Sen, the director of the film, has made such claims for years.^{[22][8]} In 2018, he had directed a documentary on what he claimed to be the involuntary mass conversion of 32,000 Hindu and Christian girls to Islam as part of an "international conspiracy" to render Kerala an Islamic state.^{[23][24][25]}

While the events portrayed in the film are loosely based on the accounts of three women from Kerala, namely: Nimisha Nair, Sonia Sebastian, and Merin Jacob, who converted to Islam and traveled with their respective husbands to Afghanistan to join the Islamic State between 2016 and 2018, the claimed figures in the film are wildly inaccurate, being based on mistranslations, misquotes, and misrepresentations of unrelated statistics.^{[26][27][8]} No more than 100-200 Indians have joined the group from the entire country, with people from Kerala accounting for less than a quarter of them.^[8] The figures posited in the film also exceed the entire strength of the Islamic State.^[28]

Later, in response to litigation, the film-makers removed all promotional materials, including the teaser, that had the erroneous figure.^[29] However, the film repeated the claims multiple times and once raised it even higher to 50,000.^[30] In response to further litigation, Sen admitted to all figures in the film being inauthentic, and that the film was a "fictionalized" portrayal of real-life events.^[31]

Response

Promotion by ruling party

The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its associated organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) have supported the film; the party used it for their political messaging in the campaigning for Karnataka assembly elections.^{[28][32]} Prime Minister Narendra Modi endorsed the film at an election rally in Karnataka, claimed that it had unearthed a "conspiracy", and alleged the Indian National Congress — which opposed the film — to support terrorism.^{[32][33]} BJP President J. P. Nadda held special screenings of the film and invited "young [Hindu] girls" to watch it with them.^[32] The film was made tax free in Madhya Pradesh as well as Uttar Pradesh; both the states have BJP governments.^[34] *Organiser*, the official mouthpiece of RSS, described the film as a "dangerous truth".^[28]

Political opposition

In Kerala, both the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and Indian National Congress, the only two parties to have governed the state since Independence, have objected to the film for spreading "communal misinformation" in tune with the agenda of the Sangh Parivar.^{[22][35][36]} In Tamil Nadu, protests were held by Naam Tamilar Katchi (NTK) and multiple Muslim political organizations.^[14]

Public protests

The film has attracted public protests in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.^{[33][37]} It fared poorly in Tamil Nadu, apparently forcing the Tamil Nadu Multiplex Association to stop further screenings; however, the filmmakers dispute the claims and allege political censorship.^[14] The film had a similar fate in Kerala.^[37]

Bans and litigation

On the eve of release, several petitions were filed at the Madras High Court, Kerala High Court and the Supreme Court of India, calling for a ban on grounds of promoting communal disharmony.^[38] The petitions were either declined to be heard or dismissed by the courts;^[39] however, the film-makers were asked to remove all promotional materials, including the teaser, that claimed thirty two thousand girls to have converted to Islam and joined the Islamic State in real life.^[29]

On 8 May, the Government of West Bengal banned the movie, characterizing the film as "hate speech", and citing adverse intelligence reports that had reported increased communal tensions in the audience.^[40] The filmmakers challenged the decision in the Supreme Court and the ban was stayed.^[41] However, the filmmakers had to accept the addition of two disclaimers — that the figures in the film were inauthentic, and that the film was a "fictionalized" portrayal of real-life events.^[31]

Reception

Critical reception

On the review aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes, 14% of 7 critics' reviews are positive, with an average rating of 3.5/10.^[42]

Saibal Chatterjee of NDTV rated the film 0.5 out of 5 stars, calling it a "lengthy WhatsApp forward", and writing that Sen's work was laughably inept and in pursuance of an insidious agenda.^[43] Shubhra Gupta of The Indian Express gave the film 1 out of 5 stars, characterizing it as a "poorly-made, poorly-acted rant" that flattened Muslims into absolute evils.^[44] Nandini Ramnath of Scroll.in found the *raison d'être* of the film to lie in propagating Islamophobia, with every Muslim character being coded as a fanatic.^[45] Anuj Kumar of The Hindu described the work as "burlesque" propaganda that borrowed its understanding of Islam, from "hate-filled Whatsapp groups" and sought to turn the audience into purveyors of hate by peddling "half-truths".^[46]

Deepanjana Pal, reviewing for Film Companion, commented that the film was a "Giant Whatsapp forward" that could be hardly called a film, critiquing it for being political propaganda aimed at demonizing Keralite Muslims and tapping into contemporary Hindu nationalist anxieties; Sen was "glaringly inept" in tackling the causes of radicalization with sensitivity and merely preyed upon the grief of real survivors and

victims.^[47] Sowmya Rajendran, reviewing for *The News Minute*, rated the film 1 star out of 5 star; she panned the film as "no-nuance propaganda" where women were treated as objects who were to be fought for between religions and ideologies by men.^{[30][48][49][50][51][52]}

Box office

On its opening day, the film grossed ₹8.03 crore in India,^[53] making it the fifth highest opener in India for 2023.^[54] As of 15 June 2023, the film has grossed ₹288.04 crore (US\$36 million) in India and ₹15.64 crore (US\$2.0 million) overseas for a worldwide gross collection of ₹303.97 crore (US\$38 million), becoming the seventh-highest grossing Hindi film of 2023.^[4] The film performed well in northern India but underperformed in the south.^[37]

Music

The music of the film is composed by Viresh Sreevalsa and Bishakh Jyoti.

No.	Title	Lyrics	Singer(s)	Length
1.	"Pagal Parindey"	Ozil Dalal	Sunidhi Chauhan, Bishakh Jyoti	2:04
2.	"Ambo Ambambo"	Viresh Sreevalsa	Athul Narukara	1:52
3.	"Athira Ravil"	Viresh Sreevalsa	K. S. Chithra	2:07
4.	"Tu Mila"	Ozil Dalal	K. S. Chithra	2:07
5.	"Aakhir Kyun"	Anant, Porshia (Kurdish), Mahalakshmi Iyer	Bishakh Jyoti	5:01
6.	"Aakhir Kyun Unplugged"	Anant	Bishakh Jyoti	5:08

See also

- *The Kashmir Files*

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