

MERC TIMES



MEDIA EDUCATION RESEARCH CENTRE
UNIVERSITY OF KASHMIR



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Covid-19 and the Current Education Scenario in Kashmir

Toiba Bashir

As Covid-19 pandemic lingers in the world impacting almost all spheres of life and people striving to come to terms with the new set normal. Be it the graphs of world economies witnessing massive downfalls or the health sectors put in shambles, Covid-19 outbreak is being considered as one of the worst catastrophes of human history.

Along with other sectors Education is considered as one of the worst hit areas amid pandemic. This coronavirus outbreak has led to the shutdown of schools, colleges and universities and forced them to operate via digital media. Kashmir has again been hard-hit with limited resources and a snail-paced education system the aspirants only see their anxiety levels sky rocketing.

To know more about what is inside the minds of the educands of the Kashmir valley, Toiba Bashir, from *MERC Times* takes an extensive go through vox pop to know the opinions and concerns of the people around.

Here is what they have to say:

Mir Hazim, 5th grade Student of Goodwill Public School, Sopore

“Somehow, I am able to grab the concepts pertaining to other subjects but Mathematics goes like a bouncer. Also, there are internet disruptions because of which I get disconnected and disheartened at times. I had to convince my father to buy me a new smart phone so that I could join the

classes but we can't replace physical classes with these online gadgets. I miss everything about my school,”

Masrat Mushtaq, 12th class Student of Government Girls Higher Secondary School, Rohama, Baramulla

“My father is a farmer and during these hard times he cannot afford to bring me a smart phone. I fear that knowing nothing of my syllabus; I may fail to pass the board examinations. Although, I dreamed of going to college next year but it all seems

could be that most of them come from poor families and cannot afford smart phones or laptops. Some come from far flung areas of Baramulla where connectivity is very low due to lack of mobile towers. There are also some who may not attend willingly because they cannot understand things online.

Yasmeena Anwar, PG Student in the University of Kashmir

“I really miss my days in the university. Although, it was for short span of time but we used to learn a lot among each other. We are already late in our degree because of recent unrest in the valley and this virus outbreak has added more troubles,”

Nisar Mir, PhD scholar at SKUAST

“I am in third year of my PhD. The situation in Kashmir from last year has almost extended one more year in my submission. I hardly get access to web pages and journals online. It seems my five year PhD will get over in seven years, still not sure,”

Parveena Begum, Mother of Two School Going Children

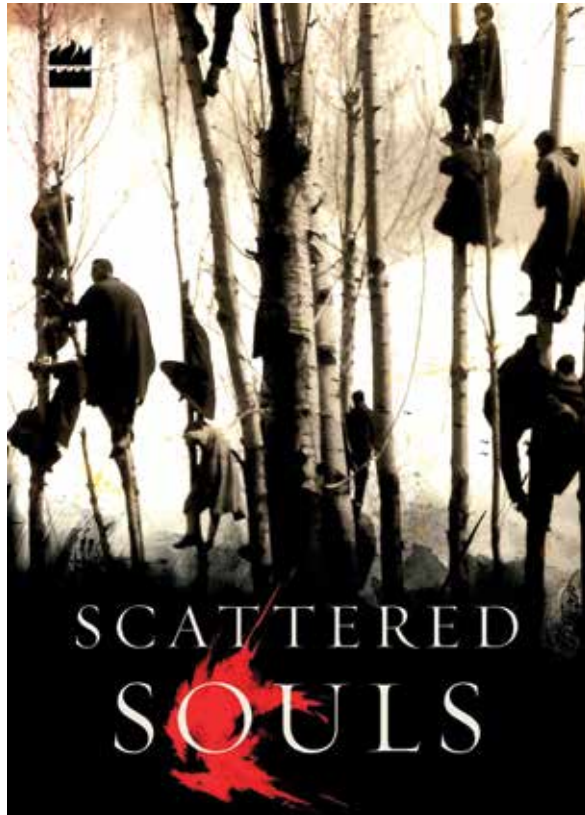
“I have two children; one is in 5th standard and the other in 9th. Both are in government school. We have bought them smart phones to take online classes but I feel like they hardly understand anything as there are many technical problems they face. Moreover, sometimes they have clash in their timings of classes and the other has to compromise. I feel like education system is sinking in all its aspects,”

bleak.”

Zahoor Ahmad, Lecturer Government Boys Higher Secondary School, Baramulla

“As we have taken up to the online system, rarely I find some 15 to 20 students in the class. The same number was usually 60 – 70 when I used to take classes in the school before this pandemic. The reason for such less number of students online





The tales depicts misfortune, catastrophe, vulnerability, trust, love, Sacrifice and so forth amidst an area of contention. Stories are written in an exceptionally straight manner and easily hook the reader



Book Review

Scattered Souls

Touching, powerful and a hard-hitting read

Khalid Hassan

'Scattered Souls', written by a youthful Kashmiri author Shahnaz Bashir, is an assortment of 13 fictional stories written in the point of view of the Kashmir conflict. It journeys through a destroyed Kashmir swaddled in the memories of its fragile beauty.

Shahnaz Bashir, a novelist and academician, was born and raised in Kashmir. His widely reviewed and critically lauded debut novel *The Half Mother* won the Muse India Young Writer Award 2015. His short fiction, journal papers, verse and reportage have been broadly distributed and anthologised. In its New Year special issue of January 2016, *Kashmir Life*, a popular weekly tabloid of Jammu & Kashmir, profiled Shahnaz as 'one of the nine impact makers to stand out in the 12.5 million population of the state'.

Starting from 1990, *Scattered Soul* although comprising of short stories is with a central

theme that revolves around the lives of ordinary people who just want a peaceful and happy life, which is really a distant dream in the midst of all the terrorists and the army. There is always collateral damage when people fight and when the fighters are armed. Sometimes the damage is of life, dignity, love, hope and all the good things in the world.

The piercing episodes of torment and misery have been portrayed in a mercilessly legit manner. The delineation of adoration in the delightful valleys of Kashmir and simultaneously the accounts of brutal torment chambers, infamous cross examination places sends the chills down the spine. There is an amazing parity in the narratives since it isn't just the state savagery that the writer alludes here, yet additionally the viciousness performed by the agitators who killed numerous innocent people on the doubt of being government agents. Readers can imagine the alarming moments. This is

author's subsequent book and shows how crude laws and unreasonable militarization of the state have assaulted the lives of common Kashmiris. It is an account of spirits dispersed by the contention in Kashmir.

The stories in this 192-pages book is with a focal topic which rotates around the lives of conventional individuals who simply need a tranquil and upbeat life, which is actually a far off dream amidst all the fear mongers and the military.

This book is a decent read. The tales depicts misfortune, catastrophe, vulnerability, trust, love, Sacrifice and so forth amidst an area of contention. Stories are written in an exceptionally straight manner and easily hook the reader. It is a cathartic experience because of extremely powerful and shocking stories.

Scattered Souls is a must read for every Kashmiri. In my opinion, it is not a fiction or non-fiction, rather a reality. It is a certifiable method of expressions by Shahnaz Bashir.



Nagbal Residents Aghast Over lack of Basic Sanitation Facilities

Saaifah Bhat

Amid pandemic residents of Nagbal area of Ganderbal district are aghast over the continuous absence of basic municipal facilities at their locality.

Nagbal is a village in Ganderbal district which is almost 18.3 kilometres away from Srinagar and is one of the nearest villages to the capital city.

As per the locals, there is a lack of basic facilities like drainage system, cleaning of roads, sanitation and foul smell of garbage. They alleged that despite repeated attempts to reach municipal authorities, their problems remain unresolved. People further purported that they have been forced to compromise on the sanitation of their area even during this pandemic.

Talking to MERC Times, Ghulam Ahmad Najar, 62, a local resident said, "I made several attempts to reach out the concerned authorities but they say that our

area is not registered with them."

"I don't understand why they are creating more problems for the people during these uncertain times," he added.

Javid Ahmad, 40, a local shopkeeper in the area said, "Municipal committee doesn't even repair the damaged drainage pipelines of our locality."

"Water gushes out of these damaged water pipelines during rains, thereby, worsening the overall situation," he added.

Nagbal didn't have the services of a municipal dumper bin till couple of years. Road corners could be seen filled with piles of household wastes and had turned into garbage points. This gave birth not only to foul smell but many diseases. It also paves way for straying dogs which make life tough for the people especially children.

It was after several applications from the locals which they had filed in the municipality office that a dumper bin was put in place. A single dumper bin has been

provided to the entire village of Nagbal in which more than 100 households are residing. The commercial population of the area is increasing with each passing day.

Expressing disappointment over the issue, Maqbool Ahmad, 51, a local said, "In these times when world governments are taking efforts to sanitize and clean their countries, not a single sanitation drive has taken place in our area since a long time."

"We are facing huge inconveniences by this irresponsible behaviour of municipal authorities", Maqbool added.

"The improper municipal facilities are worsening the situation for us in times of Covid-19 pandemic, when everything needs to be sanitized." Younis Bhat, 32, a young local shopkeeper said.

The residents pleaded to the authorities to look into the matter so that they can take a sigh of relief. However, when the concerned municipal body was contacted there was no response from them as the phone kept on ringing.



Rang De Basanti

A patriotic movie inspiring youth to fight against corruption

SS Irfan

Directed by Rakesh Omprakash Mehra, Rang De Basanti is a 2006 new-age patriotic drama film starring Aamir Khan, Soha Ali Khan, R. Madhvan, Sharman Joshi, Siddharth Narayan, Atul Kulkarni, Kunal Kapoor, Kiran Kher, Waheeda Rahman and British actress Alice Patten. The film seems to have borrowed its structure from a Canadian film 'Jesus of Montreal' (1989).

Rakesh Omprakash is an Indian filmmaker and screenwriter known for his famous movies- Delhi-6 (2009) and Bhaag Milkha Bhaag (2013) respectively.

Set in Delhi, the story of the movie revolves around five university students whose life completely change as they act in Alice's documentary film based on Indian revolutionaries. Inspired by freedom fighters, they end up assassinating corrupt Defense Minister responsible for the death

of their friend, an Indian Air Force Pilot.

The film draws two parallel narratives; one is about the present time and the other about the struggle during the Indian Freedom movement. The latter is a cinematic illusion to create more emotional appeal.

The freedom fighters are substituted with the film characters that play dual identities as students and freedom fighters at the same time which gives audience a sense of deep insight into the events and scenario of the freedom struggle.

The film portrays a strong message against corruption in political system. However, the steps taken against it were totally irrelevant. A known filmmaker Mehra could have shown it in a different way instead of avenging Madhvan's death by assassinating a minister, which promotes violence and extremism.

The music of the film was composed by A.R. Rahman and most of the songs were sung by him. One of the emotional and

melodious songs "Lukka Chuppi" was sung by Rahman along with a veteran singer Lata Mangeshkar. The song beautifully presents the pain of a mother who lost her son. I liked the film's music album overall.

The film contains some comic punches but as it gains the momentum one witnesses powerful & motivating dialogues that paves the way towards amazing progression. The dialogues penned by Praseon Joshi and Rensil d Silva had added more color to film. Binod Pradhan's cinematography is commendable and has provided an immediacy and sense of personal involvement at some instances.

It's one of those few films that revolved around all the aspects of Indian politics including the left-right debate. Without justifying or propagating any ideologies, it puts an emphasis to take personal responsibility of the matters concerning the nation. For this reason the movie is worth watching, especially for youth.

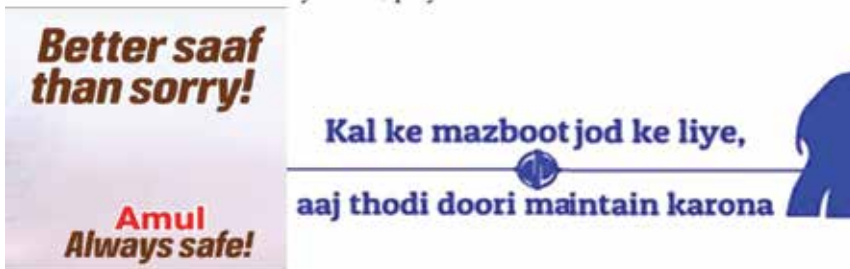


COVID-19 and Advertising by Famous Brands



IF YOU EVER DREAMED OF PLAYING FOR MILLIONS AROUND THE WORLD, NOW IS YOUR CHANCE.

Play inside, play for the world.



Arbeena

COVID-19 lockdown has affected almost every sector-business, education, finance, entertainment industry, transport, etc. and advertising is, undoubtedly, one among them. The pandemic has caged the people inside the four walls, thereby, pushing down the buying patterns. As such, several well-known brands are facing tough times. However, brands are switching towards social marketing and taking on the mantle of communicating responsibly in these hard times, leading to surge in the CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) initiatives.

Brands are finding new and different ways to connect and reconnect with consumers using different forms of communication in order to spread positive messages and behaviours in these challenging times through their creative ad campaigns. They have switched over to positive and direct messaging with the aim to inform, provide solutions and inculcate good behaviour among the customers.

Here are some of the brands and their creative ad campaigns in these hard times:

1. Nike

The famous shoe brand, Nike, has nailed it with their messaging. As the brand is aspirational for many global athletes, its ad reads "Play inside, play for the world."

2. McDonald's

This famous American fast food company has separated its golden arches of the logo in order to spread the awareness regarding social distancing.

3. Hershey's

One of the biggest chocolate manufacturers in the world, Herhey's, an American company, has given out its message about social distancing with a safe and cute message, "Spread love from a distance."

4. Amul

This Indian dairy brand put out a series of messages, featuring famed Amul girl, in order to encourage people to wash hands, greet others without shaking hands (Namaste), work from home and take other necessary precautions. One of its ads read "Better saaf than sorry!....Amul Always safe!"

5. Coca-Cola

Coca-Cola bought an ad in New York City's Times Square

and increased the space between the letters in order to give out the message of social distancing. The ad read "Staying apart is the best way to stay united."

6. Fevicol

Fevicol, the famous Indian adhesive brand, created a sensitive and unique message regarding social distancing that displayed two elephants pulling away from each other with a tagline that read "Kal ke mazboot jod ke liye, aaj thodi doori maintain karona."

7. Uber

This American multinational ride-hailing company released a latest video ad that gave the message of staying indoors. The ad said, "Thank You for not riding."

8. Asian Paints

This Indian paint company bought back its 2007 ad film "Har ghar chup chap se kuch kehta hai" to lift the spirit and motivate the people to stay indoors.

9. Parle G

This Indian biscuit manufacturing company requested people to stay indoors by removing Parle G girl from the biscuit cover. Below it, the message read "Parle G baby requests you to socially distance yourself. Stay indoors!"

10. Starbucks India

Starbucks India removed Starbucks Siren in one of its social media posts saying "Don't worry, your beloved Siren is at home practicing social distancing

Brands are finding new and different ways to connect and reconnect with consumers using different forms of communication in order to spread positive messages and behaviours in these challenging times through their creative ad campaigns.



The Outsider: My Life in Intrigue

'We all make mistakes, but starting the Third World War would have been a rather larger one'

Umer Mukhtar

Written by Frederick Forsyth 'The Outsider: My Life in Intrigue' is a treatise to young journalists. Published by Penguin Random House India, this best-selling book from 2015 gives the account of events journalists encounter in their working career. It is an autobiography that presents the life of Fredrick Forsyth, a Royal Air Force (RAF) pilot and his journey into a deserted journalist covering war in Nigeria on its own.

Fredrick Forsyth is known for his works like 'The Odessa File' (1972) and 'The Day of the Jackal' (1971). Serving as a professional guide, this book illustrates the risks journalists face in the form of secret service agents and being interrogated by the Ex-Nazi cops. It also illustrates the voyage of author from his childhood till his last flight-ride in a Spitfire. In simplistic terms, minute but sufficient wordily depiction of events has been presented before the readers like Muslim hostility for French in Africa, first familiarity of author with Muslims and the first-hand experience of taking over as a journalist while leaving Royal Air Force at the same time.

Insights into the conflict have been one of the major advantages of this book which can engulf the readers to read more about a particular happening. Mutiny in Algeria, turmoil in Paris and the political scenario in East and West Germany are some of the chapters which contribute towards the historical literature.

Frederick, once a pilot who worked in Eastern Daily Press and later served in the news giants like Reuters and BBC shares the instances of love and romance in his book.

Priced at Rs 399, this 366-pages book is better suited for young people eager to try their hands in journalistic field where office politics, struggling to remain fair and sacrificing the job to cover a significant story are inescapable. However, it also indicates the disasters the author withered during his majoritarian term in journalism field. This book is best suited for journalists as it mentions all the thrills that come with this job.

Train to PAKISTAN

An emotional story where love endures and transcends the ravages of war

Yasir Rather

'Train to Pakistan' is an acclaimed historical novel written by Khushwant Singh. This 181-pages book was published by Chatto & Windus in 1956.

Born in Punjab, Khushwant Singh was an Indian author, journalist, diplomat and lawyer. He had been the recipient of several well-known awards- Padma Bhushan (1974), Padma Vibhushan (2007), Lifetime Achievement Award by Tata Literature (2013). He is also known for his other famous books- I Shall not hear the nightingale, A History of Sikhs, The Portrait of a Lady.

Set in a fictional village of Mano Majra, Train to Pakistan deals with the immediate aftermath of the partition of British India in the summer of 1947, into India and Pakistan.

As the partition was announced, there was mayhem all around- communal riots between Hindus and Muslims, looting and arson, accompanied by the most significant human migration seen in modern times. The novel's plot is centred around the communal violence and a train which arrives in the village full of dead bodies of Hindus from Pakistan. As rumours fly thick and fast, this remote village plunges in chaos.

The book reveals the struggles of both religious sects with the help of the main character Juggat Singh, who is in love with a Muslim girl, Noora, of the village. The main attraction of this book is the love angle which Khushwant has created in the middle of all the chaos. It is beautiful to see that no matter what the situations are, love finds its way. At a time when the two communities are at each other throats these two love each other passionately and sincerely. The novel depicts love winning over religion. Juggat Singh, sacrifices his life to save the life of Noora, his love and many other Muslims.

The author beautifully narrates the incidents taking the reader deep into the happenings of the village. His detailed description of the characters creates a deep impression on the reader. Although, the story is slow in the beginning but, picks on gradually as the events unfold with an emotional ending.

The simplicity of the plot and the characters is the book's positive essence in addition to the heart-rending end. Through this novel, the author tells us how it is easy for ordinary people to be manipulated by religion and accompanying emotions. Singh's narration of events makes it clear that there is no such thing as good or bad, as the events around them sway all human beings. But at the same time, he brings the importance of values, friendship and empathy when one is surrounded by hypocrisy, falsehood, betrayal and intolerance. This lively and engaging novel illustrates how rapidly communal solidarity can collapse as religious divides harden.

The book due to its simplicity and the distinct writing style of the author remains a classic. It is a must-read for anyone who wants to understand how ordinary folks were caught in the middle of a historic event in South Asia.



Kashmir's 'Chota Punjab' Paving Way for Prosperity

Meer Manzar

By its huge vegetable export into the markets outside Kashmir, Bugam, a small hamlet of central Kashmir is bringing home prosperity in terms of economic development through its agricultural activities.

Located in Chadoora, Bugam is around 17 km from Srinagar and its net cultivation area is 131.80 hectare, and its total vegetable production stands at 1,60,533 quintals. As per the last report of Agriculture Department of Kashmir, Bugam is leading in vegetable farming in Chadoora and BK Pora belt.

Almost 80 percent of the inhabitants of Bugam do farming for their living and thus this hamlet becomes a top supplier of vegetables to Kashmiri as well as non Kashmiri markets.

"Our economy mostly depends on these growing fields and almost all the people residing in this belt cultivate one or the other thing in their lands," Feroz Rather, 45, a farmer by profession said.

"Due to our enormous export we have earned a new name: 'chota Punjab,' for our village," Feroz added smilingly.

Around 25 truckloads of vegetables leave Bugam for different markets every day, Mohammad Yaqoob Bhat, who owns 25 hectares of land, says. Besides that, many traders visit the hamlet to directly buy their bulk stock.

Earlier farmers used the traditional ways of farming but with the help of the scientific technologies the village is only seeing massive increase in its production. And, it is just helping people better their lives. They are seeing better results with the application of scientific tools and technologies.

"Bugam is into production of vegetables. Especially after irrigation facilities were developed, the hamlet boomed more in vegetable farming," Mohammad Yaqoob added.

"I earn Rs 15,000 per month on an average," Gulzar Ahmad, who has been cultivating his land for last seven years says, "One can earn more in times of high demand and prices."



Series Review

The Walking Dead

A terrific zombie drama that takes a monotonous turn

Akhood Faisal

Starting with a deserted road and a protagonist who wakes up from coma after several months, 'The Walking Dead' is a horror television serial based on a comic book series by Robert Kirkman, Tony Moore and Charles Adlard.

Directed by Frank Darabont, it was presented as a TV series on American channel- AMC from the year 2010 to 2020. Frank has spent his whole life on this TV series. It consists of ten seasons, and each season comprises of sixteen episodes on an average. It is based on an apocalyptic event where people develop a certain disease which turns them into zombies.

The Walking Dead depicts the sabotage and struggle of humans to command limited resources left for the mankind. Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln) in the lead role plays the life of a cop, family man and then a commander. Originally, the cast in this series believes that only a bite from a zombie can turn a human into a mad creature but their fears take a different turn when the protagonist's relative face a natural death and turn into a zombie, thus, changing the whole scenario of the series. An airborne disease which engraves itself into the human system and corrupts their instincts at the time of their death make them turn into a zombie.

This series presents a human being's urge for survival especially during the pandemic when resources get extinguished day-by-day, and they resort to violence either to maintain their control or to take over the control by force and brutality. First eight seasons deal with the horrors of the zombie apocalyptic events and then from the next season onwards people start to create mutual agreement over the resources. However, human villains have not been excluded in this show; the actual thrill is missing without the human villains when it comes to Negan (Jeffery Dean Morgan) and later taken over by Alpha Group.

It is so far one of the biggest TV Series created on the pandemic which has a good reputation in the fictional world after it bagged Golden Globe Awards for Best Television Series. This TV series is a must watch for those who want to get an insight into a global zombie pandemic but this TV series starts to get boring as a viewer tags along. Also, the lack of humorous dialogues and frequent family scuffles makes it dull and waste the viewer's considerable amount of time. However, people may consider watching it up to season 8.



Enthralling till the film reveals its own inherent bias

The humour dies as the movie progresses from first half to second and thus ruins what would otherwise had been a memorable watch

Danish Noor

It is often said that the hair is your best accessory. A well kept hair brings additional good looks to all. But, not all are fortunate to decorate themselves with it for their entire lives. This movie takes us through the protagonist Bala aka Balamukund Shukla's transition from a sumptuous head of hair to premature baldness in his 20's, from narcissism to irksome and heart-rending complex.

The narrative further speaks of his woes, dwindling confidence and the societal pressure that makes it even more difficult for him to face the society. Bala is directed by Amar Kaushik, whose carte de visite for now is his phantasmagorical horror comedy 'Stree' progresses smoothly till pre interval. The film tends to get preachy in the second half with the message about societal prejudices hammered down repeatedly. This takes away from the film's fun quotient. Writer Niren Bhatt is intelligent in making her point clearly about bald men and their sense of self worth.

Though, in the second half the film takes a sharp dip in humour and intellect. Yami Gautam, who plays Pari in the movie, falls in love with Bala played by Ayushman Khurrana but rejects him immediately after discovering his baldness. Still the tone of movie has been kept sober and doesn't turn intense at any point despite Pari leaving abruptly after her wedding night. That is intelligently done because the makers wanted to keep it humorous. Yami Gautam is shown as a superficial being for whom appearance and luxury matters most.

Bala is about the society's perception of a bald man and how he sees himself conclusively as an ugly mark of existence.

The establishing shot of the movie demonstrating a boy less than 15 years of age sporting attractive hair is praise worthy. Excitingly, people name him as "Balmukund" because of his sporty hair but later the lustrous locks are transforming into a receding hairline. The receding hairline becomes the desperation of the protagonist who tries everything to hold on to his receding hair.

On the other hand we see a dark complexioned female protagonist Latika Trivedi, played by Bhumi Pednekar, a lawyer by profession who is continuously ridiculed for her skin color in the film. She doesn't have low self worth as Bala and is shown full of confidence in the movie.

Bala's loss of love and his job are a depiction of the present scenario where looks precede over one's character and nature. This movie is a message and a source of strength for those who are being psychologically assassinated for their physical appearance. It passes on a message that we should stop caring for how people look at us and start valuing ourselves; only then the world will do the same.

Anuj Rakesh Dhawan's cinematography is refreshing. Though the movie might seem lengthy to some but is a decent watch. Both Yami Gautam and Bhumi Pednekar add a worthy value to the narrative. Ayushman Khurrana has done justice to his role as he does always. But making Bhumi Padnekar look dark and not casting a black heroine instead unmasks the underlying prejudice of the movie. It gives out a notion that black women aren't eligible for lead roles.

This 131 minutes long movie with all the flaws will just get 3 stars out of 5 from me.



Cast: Ayushmann Khurrana, Bhumi Pednekar, Yami Gautam

Director: Amar Kaushik

Genre: Comedy

Duration: 2 Hour 13 minute

Language: Hindi