

Film review: 'The Tashkent Files' rakes up a long-dead issue at last



CHENNAI: Much like the deaths of US President John F. Kennedy and actress and socialite Marilyn Monroe, the sudden demise of India's second prime minister, Lal Bahadur Shastri, in Tashkent on Jan. 11, 1966, remains shrouded in mystery. While it was officially declared that he died as a result of a massive heart attack, just hours after signing a peace treaty with Pakistan in the aftermath of a war between the two neighbors, doubts remain. One theory is that he was murdered by the Soviet secret service, the KGB, for refusing to be drawn into closer ties with the communist superpower. Vivek Agnihotri's latest outing, "The Tashkent Files," digs into this disturbing question, but still leaves viewers none the wiser.

At the center of the plot is a young journalist, Raagini Phule (played by Shweta Basu Prasad), desperate for a scoop after her editor lambasts her for posting "fake news." A character akin to the anonymous source from the Watergate scandal made famous by the 1976 film "All the President's Men," comes to her aid, pushing her into the murky world of Indian politics. Phule's reports force the government to set up an expert investigative committee, including a historian, a scientist and the chief of India's

Research and Analysis Wing (RAW). The panel is chaired by a politician, Shyam Sundaripathi (Mithun Chakraborty).

Much of the film's 144 minutes is devoted to the arguments between the panelists, often turning dramatic and hysterical. Though intriguing, Phule's character sometimes comes across as exaggerated, including a painful moment when a halo is, quite literally, placed around her head, depicting her transformation from fake news spinner to crusading celebrity. Prasad seems ill-at-ease playing the scribe swimming in shark infested waters — the actor who steals the show is Chakraborty, at first unimpressive and limping, but bursting with depth of character.

“The Tashkent Files” is a far cry from the kind of depiction of an authentic study “All the President's Men” offered up, or the more recent “Spotlight” about the Boston Globe investigation into the Catholic Church, but Agnihotri has, nonetheless, raked up a long-dead issue ripe for reinvestigation. It is a start.
