

# Animal: Looking into the mirror

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## The film starring Ranbir Kapoor and Bobby Deol unleashes the desires of many Indians accustomed to violence

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When I revealed to my colleagues and friends last Saturday that I was going to watch *Animal*, the violent action-thriller directed by Sandeep Reddy Vanga, last Saturday, they wanted to know: “Why?” We were at a colleague’s house for an afternoon party; the host had laid out a generous spread along with red wine and rosé. It seemed a strange decision to exit this merrymaking on a mild December afternoon to go to watch a film that had been unanimously dismissed by critics for its misogyny, gratuitous violence, and Islamophobia. “Academic interest,” I told my colleagues, while secretly regretting the decision.

Released on December 1, the film, starring Ranbir Kapoor, Bobby Deol, Anil Kapoor, Rashmika Mandanna, and Tripti Dimri in lead roles, has become a monster box office hit,

already earning nearly Rs 500 crore. Critical opinion on the film, however, has been a sharp contrast to the public endorsement. Shubhra Gupta of the *Indian Express* has described it as “pointless” and “vile”. Rahul Desai of the *Film Companion* writes that it is “essentially a middle finger masquerading as a movie”, director Reddy Vanga’s response to the critics of his previous film — the sexist, domestic-violence-justifying *Kabir Singh* (2019). Uday Bhatia of the *Mint* calls it “one of the ugliest Hindi films ever, cynically engineered to court audience outrage”.

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The violence and misogyny in *Animal* are indeed over-the-top, but it is hardly new ground for Bollywood. The plot, which comprises set pieces of increasingly extravagant action sequences punctuated by Ekta Kapoor-style family melodrama, is banal, to say the least. The actions of the film’s protagonist Ranvijay Singh Balbir (Ranbir Kapoor), who sets out on a murderous vendetta after an estranged cousin tries to assassinate his father Balbir Singh (Anil Kapoor), is also completely off-kilter. Even Ranvijay’s daddy issues do not justify it: the Singhs are billionaire steel manufacturers who could have easily got someone else to do their dirty work without Ranvijay becoming a gangster. So, to put it academically, my research question was: What in the film was attracting the hundreds of thousands who were watching it?

Political journalist Aditya Menon, in an incisive article for *The Quint*, reflects on why the film’s villain is a Muslim. Played by Bobby Deol, Abrar Haque is Ranvijay’s cousin, but from a branch of the family that has been thrown out of the family business and seeks revenge. Why they turned Muslim — except, of course, to marry more than once — remains a mystery. Menon writes: “*Animal*’s psychological universe is the same one that is inhabited by many right-wing male ‘incels’ on social media. Some of them are also called ‘trads’ in the Indian context. ... The film connects at a deep, visceral level. It is almost as if their favourite memes and fantasies have been put on the big screen.” The film’s visual cues — slitting throats of Muslims, the humiliation of women, obsession with the Alpha male, and constant reference to one’s penis are common themes for trads, writes Menon.

The rising Islamophobia in Indian cinema has been the subject of numerous academic studies since 2014. Film scholar Ashvin Devasundaram writes: “Bollywood blockbusters espousing triumphalist ultranationalistic themes, valorizing war against India’s archrival Pakistan, and promoting Hindu religious values and rituals as synonyms of Indian identity have been commercially successful thanks in part to political patronage.” Cinema scholar Ajay Gehlawat writes: ““(I)mplicit (and complicit) in all of this are the everyday people who patronize the films and attendant ideologies... whether those publics do so for pure pleasure or for more doctrinaire reasons.” More recent films such as *The Kashmir Files* (2022), *The Kerala Story* (2023) — and now *Animal* — have only intensified this hateful rhetoric. But what desires of the audience do they reveal?

One of the key narrative tropes of *Animal* is Ranvijay's obsession with his father Balbir. Daddy issues are not new to Hindi films, of course. In films like *Trishul* (Yash Chopra, 1978) or *Shakti* (Ramesh Sippy, 1982), the protagonist Vijay — played in both by Amitabh Bachchan — finds motivation for his violent trajectories because of their complicated relations with their father. Film scholar Priya Joshi in her ground-breaking work on these two films, as well as *Deewaar* (Yash Chopra, 1975), writes that the three films reveal the collapse of the myth of the nation and displaces social violence into the family, which is also a metonym for the nation. Drawing upon Freud, she describes these films as “family romances”, a narrative mechanism which enables a protagonist, almost always male, to create an alternative to a world in which he is powerless.

*Animal*, too, is a “family romance” in this sense. Ranvijay is fighting not external threats but his cousin — a narrative trope familiar to every Indian through the Mahabharata. (References to the epic, both direct and subtle, are embedded in the narrative.) The state is completely absent in the film, except in a vague reference to a chief minister who comes for Balbir's birthday party. (My friend who went to watch the film with me joked that in older Hindi films, the police would turn up late, while in this one, they don't turn up at all.) Our contemporary socio-political conflicts are transposed onto the sphere of the family, where Ranvijay's love for his father justifies his violent actions. The father is a stand-in for the state — it is no coincidence that their business is called Swastik Steel, though with an upright swastika.

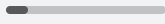
Thomas Blom Hansen, who has written extensively on India, in his book *The Law of Force* (2021), writes that violence is a “routinized and integral part of Indian political life.” He also argues that the Indian state and its enforcement agencies impose a “force of law”, that while middle classes and upper castes are able to get their interests served non-elite Indians encounter the violent face of the state. Without any avenue for justice or redressal, their frustrations often find outlets in violence against religious minorities and socially marginalised people.

Ranvijay is as much a messiah for angry and powerless people as Bachchan's Angry Young Man was for his contemporary audience. Like Bachchan's Vijay in *Deewaar* wears the uniform of a dockworker, Ranvijay, too, claims the position of a working-class hero by wearing the uniform of his factory's workers while declaring to the world that he will kill those who tried to assassinate his father. *Animal's* success reveals the not-so-secret desires of those who experience the violence embedded in our society every day. Their anger is nurtured in a popular-culture ecosystem of which mainstream cinema is a spearhead.

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