

## Analysing the Appeal of the Gangster Genre in Bollywood

**Shashank Nath Mishra**

BA English (Honours) Graduate, Department of English  
Ramanujan College (University of Delhi), Kalkaji, New Delhi  
&

**Dr Prabuddh Ananda**

Associate Professor, Department of English  
Ramanujan College (University of Delhi), Kalkaji, New Delhi

### Abstract

From Chandra Barot's *'Don'* (1978) to Vishal Bhardwaj's *'Maqbool'* (2004), the gangster genre of Bollywood has something to offer to everyone. Even if one isn't the biggest fan of this genre, it is hard to deny that it has produced some of Bollywood's most memorable movies. This research paper analyses the appeal of this particular genre and will focus mainly on gangster movies from 1990 onwards. The poet, screenwriter, and director Gulzar once said, "Cinema is a reflection of your society, what is happening (around)." movies in the gangster genre are perfect examples of that. This paper explores the nature of Bollywood gangster movies and the many factors that shape their form and content. A critical analysis will be made of the portrayal of Mumbai city life, the tension between various criminal gangs and its impact on ordinary people, the nature of gang-related violence, the religious tensions that often filter into the criminal gangster narrative and how tragically, individuals get trapped into the nexus of gangster violence. This paper will focus on cult-classic gangster movies by directors like Ram Gopal Varma, Saeed Akhtar Mirza and Vidhu Vinod Chopra.

**Keywords:** Gangster genre, Crime, Bollywood, Movies, Violence, Narrative etc.

### Introduction

Before analysing the gangster genre and its characteristics, it's essential first to take a look at the history of events that inspired this genre in the first place. The first impression of Mumbai is its posh, high-class areas, the vast opportunities that await those who want to start a new life there, and Bollywood. But there is one more side to Mumbai's history that many are still uncomfortable discussing: the city's relationship with gangsters and the underworld. For the sake of this research paper, it's essential to reopen and explore a chapter of India's "city of dreams" that people often try to forget. Since Bollywood is located in Mumbai, it's no surprise that it has been

affected by its gangster culture throughout the years. Multiple movies in the gangster genre reflect the history of Mumbai's underworld saga. From *Vaastav: The Reality* (1999) to *Shootout at Lokhandwala* (2007), multiple movies are loosely based on the lives of different Mumbai gangsters and various incidents revolving around them. From the 1940s to the 1980s, the Mumbai underworld was under the control of three prominent individuals; Karim Lala, Haji Mastan, and Vardarajan Mudaliar. Their primary sources of income were hashish trafficking, extortion, illegal gambling, illegal liquor trade, gold smuggling, and extortion rackets.

Certain economic conditions at the time led these gangsters to thrive to such an extent. The illegal liquor trade was the primary source of income for these gangs. In 1939, the Bombay Provincial Congress government prohibited liquor in Maharashtra. Following this, the 1949 Bombay Prohibition Act was implemented by the then Chief Minister, Morarji Desai. This created a massive opportunity for the Mumbai underworld, and they wasted no time capitalising on it. Black marketing for alcohol became a thriving business, and illegal shops were opened in multiple parts of the city. After independence, the Indian government pursued a 'protectionist' policy to ensure that local manufacturers weren't crushed by their foreign counterparts. Tariffs and restrictions were imposed on imports of certain items, and their scarcity in the market led to people seeing them as symbols of wealth and status, increasing their demand. Underworld fulfilled this demand by illegally importing such items. Bombay being near coastal boundaries and having access to Mumbai Port Trust, played a massive role in becoming a hotspot for such activities.

In the 1990s, when India's forex reserves were depleting at an alarming rate, the then Prime Minister, P.V. Narsimha Rao's government, introduced multiple economic reforms in 1991 to liberalise and globalise the Indian economy. This was a massive blow to Mumbai's underworld as it slowly began losing its monopoly over these products. This was made worse by Liquor Prohibition Laws becoming diluted in Maharashtra, making liquor availability easier. In a desperate attempt, gangsters moved to more aggressive methods of earning money like extortion, kidnapping, and murder. They mainly targeted wealthy businessmen and builders and threatened them so that they could collect 'protection money'. Another prime target of these gangs was Bollywood celebrities like Gulshan Kumar, the founder of T-Series, who was murdered in August 1997 by Dawood Ibrahim's D-Company members. This led to serious confrontations between the state and the gangs.

### ***Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro: A Starting Point. Rise of the "Tapori" Gangster Archetype***

Bollywood's first movie based on a real-life gangster was Amitabh Bachchan's blockbuster and all-time classic *Deewar* (1975), which was based on the life of Haji Mastan. The movie hugely popularised the angry young man trope widely used in Bollywood. With that being said, a better starting point for the gangster genre would be *Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro* (1989), as it laid the groundwork for not only the characters of gangsters but also the various other elements that are present in different movies of this genre. This includes an emphasis on Bombay city life, the stark class divide present there, corruption and its role in increasing the underworld's influence, violence, gang wars, focus on gangs instead of just individual criminals, religious segregation and its relation to the underworld.

The movie revolves around Salim Pasha, a man with a limp leg, and his friends Peera and Abdul, who commit petty crimes like collecting protection money<sup>1</sup> and smuggling goods to earn a living. This film is one of Bollywood's earliest portrayals of the "tapori" archetype. From their unique fashion sense, loose yet confident body demeanour, and hot-headed attitude to their language is bastardised amalgamation of Hindi and Marathi (or Bumbaiya Hindi), these characters are easily identifiable in contrast to all the others that are on screen. This rise of "tapers" in Bollywood coincides with a real-life phenomenon in Mumbai, as many young people were left unemployed due to a shortage of jobs. Brimming with the energy of youth and having no proper outlet to use it on, such people turned to the street for guidance, and that's how they ended up getting involved with the life of crime that starts with petty things like pick-pocketing but can also lead to more severe crimes like murder or extortions. This archetype later became so popular that many consider it to be the Bollywood equivalent of Hollywood's gangsters.



*Salim and his friends are in typical tapori attire. Folded sleeves, open buttons, half-tucked clothing, a switchblade in hand, and dirty clothes reflect their economic background. They constantly use common tapori phrases like "appan log" and "bole to".*

1. Money paid, especially at regular intervals, to criminals or to corrupt officials who threaten to cause harm to the payer or his or her business if the money is not paid.  
[https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/protection\\_money#:~:text=Noun,the%20money%20is%20not%20paid.](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/protection_money#:~:text=Noun,the%20money%20is%20not%20paid.)

The opening scene introduces the gang by showing them committing a failed robbery on the tempo of a rival gang leader Rajan. The territorial nature that gangs have is at full display here. This is followed by a montage of the gang's day-to-day activities, like messing around in restaurants, visiting different stores, gambling, and hanging out with each other. A heavy emphasis is placed on the busy roads of Bombay that resonates throughout the movie while also showcasing its tall buildings and high-class areas that only a few have access to. The shots are taken at night, and the buildings being well-lit and roads being crowded give us a sense of rush in Bombay's atmosphere, which earned it the nickname 'city that never sleeps. Immediately after this, the focus shifts to Salim's family and financial struggles. A picture of his deceased brother Javed who used to work as an electrician but died in an accident can be seen in the background. Later in the movie, he becomes important as the importance of having the right role models in one's life is brought up. People like Peera are often shown as looking up to Ibrahim. This well-renowned gangster has connections with the police, like their idol, but they fail to understand that only a handful of people come out on top with such a lifestyle while others keep getting exploited by the said "dadas" and "bhais".

It should be noticed that there isn't much happening story-wise. The natural progression throughout the movie happens to Salim as a person and his ideals. Salim grows from someone who feels alienated from society due to his religious identity and cannot help but feel hatred towards Hindus to someone who has finally found the motivation to lead a better lifestyle and has also managed to find his identity as a Hindustani.

Hindus and Muslims treat each other as the "other" who cannot fit in, leading to polarisation. The mentality of 'us' vs 'them' is what gets deconstructed in the movie. But it's also made clear that this mentality is a symptom of a much bigger problem. The characters give an insight into how Muslims perceive and are affected by communal issues. While some Muslims, like Peera, believe that they are being antagonised and the police openly support Hindus at times of these riots, some have a more reasonable approach on these issues, like Salim's father and Aslam, a proof-reader for a news outlet who wants to marry Salim's sister. Police being present everywhere to ensure stability and recover the dead bodies of those targeted during communal riots adds a sense of tension in the film while also symbolising the delicate state of Bombay's society, where riots can erupt anytime if not for administrative intervention.

While on the one hand, the movie shows the helpless state that lower and lower-middle-class Muslims live in due to people not willing to trust them and give them employment opportunities which leads them to depend on criminals and criminal activities to survive; on the other hand, it also points out that Muslims themselves are also not free of blame either.

When Aslam raises the issue of Muslim girls not being allowed to study in colleges and attain higher education, he is harassed by other Muslims for propagating his supposed anti-Islam views. The topic of Partition comes up, and Aslam narrates the atrocities that ensued between Hindus and Muslims. The illusion that religion alone is enough to unite people was shattered when tensions rose between East and West Pakistan despite both being Muslim-majority, ultimately leading to the creation of Bangladesh. Aslam talks about Javed and how he dared to live a righteous life despite all the hardships, and this becomes a motivation for Salim. The



importance of human life is a recurring theme throughout the movie, whether it be Johnny narrating the Hiroshima bombing or the police inspector brushing aside Vilas's death as one more minor criminal to deal with. When Salim watches a documentary-style film on Bhiwandi communal violence, he again starts thinking about his conversation with Aslam. Countless lives, be it Hindus or Muslims, are getting destroyed and uprooted in a matter of days, ~~women~~ getting violated, and children having their innocence taken away from them. If both communities suffer, why do they continue to spread such hatred? Who's the one benefiting from all this? The documentary provokes such questions among the crowd. To Salim's surprise, the documentary director is a Hindu doing this to make people realise that they must put religion aside and focus on real issues like unemployment.



*People's reaction to the documentary. Some of them understood its message and are now asking honest questions.*

After being humiliated by a police inspector and witnessing another death related to communal violence, Salim decides it's time to change. He starts working as a mechanic and is dedicated to getting his life on the right track. His development is made apparent when he refuses Ibrahim's offer to kill Shankar while Ibrahim offers to finance his sister's wedding. Just as he's seen happily celebrating his sister's marriage, he is stabbed to death by Rajan as an act of revenge for informing the police. This triviality of death in Mumbai's gangland becomes a recurring trope in the genre as a means to highlight the social standings of such individuals and also as a reminder that these gangsters are still humans. It doesn't matter how invincible they might seem or if they have a genuine change of heart to redeem themselves; their fate is ultimately to die and be forgotten for being outcasts by society's standards. It reinforces the point that the path of crime never leads to anything good, and even though entering it is a choice, leaving it isn't.

Ironic to its name, the movie makes the audience sympathise with Salim. There was potential in him to turn around his life for good and make a name for himself, but all that was thrown away for some petty revenge. His death will lead to even more communal violence as Salim, a Muslim, was killed by a Rajan, a Hindu. This cycle will continue until people really realise indoctrinated they have become. That will only happen when they start viewing their beliefs with a more critical approach and see others as humans instead of Hindus or Muslims.

### **Violence, Grittiness and the Dark Atmosphere of *Parinda***

Movies in the gangster genre are known for their violence and the ability to create a dark and unsettling atmosphere that fills viewers with a sense of dread and helplessness. This trend can be tracked down to the 1989 smash-hit '*Parinda*' that many critics consider to be the turning point in introducing realism in Hindi cinema. The ordinariness of *Parinda*'s revenge plot is set apart from other films by its clever cinematography that plays around with darkness and sound to create a noir-esque experience and its portrayal of violence in a much more extreme manner than what was standard at the time.

It opens with an aerial shot of Mumbai and its tall buildings, the gateway of India, and a seashore in the background in dim lighting. The still photos slowly transition from afternoon to the complete darkness of night, where lights from multiple vehicles on the busy roads of Mumbai can be seen. It's as if the city takes a new life when night comes. The camera transitions to Anna's house, that's also covered in darkness with an eerily mechanical noise in the background. Focus shifts on a toy that presumably belonged to Anna's son and later to a picture of his family on the wall, decorated with *phool mala* (garland of flowers). A lot is told about Anna's character without him saying anything or needing a flashback. Regarding flashbacks, only one short sequence shows how his wife died, but never the entirety. A considerable emphasis is put on Anna's guilt and how he's coping with the fact that he burned his wife and son alive. The theme of the past and how it shapes a person's present reality is explored through the protagonists and the antagonist, but their way of perceiving it is in direct contrast.

While Krishen and Karan had a rough childhood due to being forced to fend for themselves early, Karan remembers their fond memories with Paro and Prakash. At the same time, Kishen despises it for reminding him of the innocence of childhood and the passion of his youth that was stripped from him. On the other hand, Anna's approach to his past is entirely different. His continual efforts to forget this horrific crime and escape his guilt are rendered useless by his pyrophobia, reminding him of the said event whenever he sees fire, often resulting in panic attacks. The screeching mechanical noises and the dim lighting between the all-consuming darkness of Anna's factory (which he uses as a base for his operations) compliment the crime and torture inside it.



*First, look at Anna. He's engulfed in darkness, creating an ominous vibe around him. The picture and toys in the background symbolise the past that continues to haunt him.*



*Usage of light and shadows to highlight the contrast between Karan and Kishen.*

The movie focuses on the gruesomeness of violence in the world of gangsters. Anna's gang members kill someone from a rival gang at the film's beginning. His killer is seen holding a

weapon covered in blood while the victim's body is later hidden and crushed in the rubble. The unsettling nature of the violence in the film is one of its defining features. Karan's multiple failed attempts at murdering Francis before finally succeeding show how difficult it is to take another person's life, even if one harbours immense hatred for them. Throughout the film, Karan slowly becomes desensitised to killing and manages to kill Abdul like he killed Prakash.

The film's violence isn't limited to punches and kicks but goes as far as showing the torturous methods that gangsters use to instil fear in their underlings, like Anna piercing a hole in Iqbal's leg through a drill machine. The film destroys the audience's idea of intimacy. Just when Karan and Kishen are shown having a heartfelt moment with each other, they are attacked by Abdul and his men. The constant barrage of bullets shatters the moment of intimacy between the two brothers fired on them. When Kishen luckily survives, we are shown that even the doctor who examined him is working for Anna. Later, Abdul uses the nurse he sends to them to threaten Karan. Kishen's injured and vulnerable state and trust in the nurse take the viewer's sense of safety and turn it upside down. Another shocking moment happens when Karan is making love with his childhood friend, Paro (Madhuri Dixit), while Anna and his men are approaching him to take revenge for killing his gang members. Paro and Karan are shown lying together, finally consummating their marriage and happily discussing their child's name. At the same time, suddenly, Anna barges in through the door and ruthlessly guns them both down. Their lifeless bodies fall next to each other, and viewers are left shocked. The bar that *Parinda* set for the on-screen portrayal of violence was raised even further by *Bandit Queen* (1994), which played a significant role in normalising a detailed account of violence in Bollywood cinema.



*Karan and Paro discuss their future son Siddharth and how he will bring peace to the world, only to get murdered by Anna a few seconds later.*



### **Satya: A Maturing Point for the Gangster Genre**

Released in 1998, *Satya* encapsulates multiple elements that make the gangster genre unique. From high-intensity gang wars, violent shootout scenes, intense chase sequences, and exploration of the deep nexus that the underworld had with politicians and Bollywood stars to a gang of characters that are brimming with personality and have great chemistry with each other, the movie has almost every element that defines the gangster genre. Satya, the protagonist of the film, is an immigrant who comes to Mumbai looking for a job but ends up joining Bhiku Mhatre's gang, taking a step into Mumbai's underworld. Throughout the film, Satya is never shown having a monologue and only rarely expresses his emotions openly. His past remains ambiguous till the very end. He's like any other person who comes to Mumbai seeking opportunities for a new life. All these qualities make him a self-insert character for the audience through whose eyes they will explore the dynamics of the Mumbai underworld.

The movie explores its gangsters as not just criminals but as multi-layered characters who have a life outside of the underworld as well. In one of his interviews, Ram Gopal Varma said:

"In making an action film, I bumped into some people in the underworld. And I realised their human side attracted me much more than they did. It never occurs to us that anyone who is shot dead in an encounter by the police has a face. He is just a name in print to be forgotten the next day."<sup>2</sup>

On the one hand, Bhiku Mahatre commits crimes like extortion and murder, but the moment he enters his home, he behaves not like a gangster but like a husband. He bickers his wife over getting drunk late at night, and they argue as an average couple would. This complexity is also explored through the chemistry between Bhiku and his gang members. They are shown joking around and celebrating each other's success as if it was their own and staying loyal to one another even when times are grim. A great example of said chemistry is when Bhiku and his gang weep over Chander's death as if they've lost a close family member, not just a foot soldier who's quickly replaceable. These details make moments like Mule's betrayal and Kallu's mama's sacrifice more impactful.

---

2. Ranjani Mazumdar. *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. Chapter five- Gangland Bombay, page 175.



*The gang's celebration over Bhiku being proven innocent in court.*

The movie contains multiple shots of shawls and slums to show Mumbai's congested and claustrophobic environment, in contrast to its sequel, *Company*, whose narrative fluidly transitions from Bombay to Hong Kong to Kenya and back. Even in Satya's first appearance, he's seen along with a humassiverowd of people who have their own identities and aspirations that get lost in the city's traffic, adding to a sense of rush that's present in it. There are also multiple shots of seashores, like the one where he convinces Bhiku to kill Guru Narayan. Satya's line of reasoning is that if they don't kill Guru Narayan, he will kill them. Another noticeable aspect of this scene is its mise-en-scene. The shots include a view of Mumbai's tall, high-class buildings along with its seemingly endless-looking seashores adding to the grandeur and vastness of the city. This image of Mumbai is why so many people are drawn to it in the first place.



*A shot from the movie's opening scene shows the busy roads of Mumbai. This is, in many ways, the essence of Mumbai. A place where countless people come to make a name for themselves, and while some succeed, others get left behind in the race.*



*Another shot from the opening scene displays the class divide in Mumbai. The friction caused by this segregation sparked the flames of the Mumbai underworld.*

As is tradition, the movie also has a corrupt politician Bhau Thakurdas Jhawle who kills Bhiku for murdering Guru Narayan despite him ordering otherwise. Even though Bhiku's feelings for

Bhau might have been genuine, for him, he's nothing but a tool that can easily be replaced. After finding out about this, Satya decides to take revenge for Bhiku instead of leaving for Dubai. The climax occurs during Ganesh Chaturthi as the intense background music adds a sense of triumph over Bhau's murder. Satya kills Bhau and escapes with Kallu's mama, albeit getting injured. He then returns to Vidya's apartment to tell her the truth, only to find that she already knows everything. When Satya finally manages to break open the door, the police officers immediately kill him before being able to say anything. Satya drops dead in front of the love of his life, Vidya. His last wish remains unfinished. The movie ends with a note from the director saying that the film is an effort to reach out to those who have made violence their means of living. The pain they inflict on others will one day return to them, and even if one such person who watches this movie decides to change his ways, he will consider it a success.



*A shot of Ganapati Visarjan during which Satya murders Bhau.*

Their narrative structure separates films like *Satya* from *Wanted* (2009) despite dealing with gangs and the underworld. *Wanted* is the story of a cop staying undercover as a criminal and how he single-handedly manages to disturb the underworld nexus of Gani Bhai. It shows an external force (police authorities) interacting and interfering with the Underworld machinery via Raadhe's character. While on the other hand, *Satya* is more about the underworld's functioning. It doesn't concern itself with showing an outside force coming in at the end to put a stop to gangsters. There's no triumph of good over evil to provide catharsis for the audience. Instead, it deals with



characters whose moralities are questionable, to say the least, and their lifestyle. While there's overlap in how they deal with some aspects, like gang rivalries and corruption, the events of these movies are very different.

## Conclusion

People have always been fascinated with violence and crimes, which is part of the reason behind the success of the gangster genre in Bollywood. Whether it be the morbid curiosity inside of us or the desire to explore what lies behind the façade of a morally just and ideal society, such things are given a means of exploration in the form of gangster films. These films provide viewers with a world where law and justice don't exist; death is an everyday occurrence, the story preys over the week, violence is the norm, and despair engulfs everything. It's the gateway to a world everyone has heard or read about yet seems so foreign. This genre is a reflection of India's complex socio-economic status as a society and, naturally, deals with multiple issues that were or still are plaguing our community, whether it be corruption that's present in virtually all the films of his genre or issues like communal tensions as explored in *Salim Langde pe Mat Ro*(1989). The unique nature of the genre provides filmmakers with a broad scope of possibilities in terms of storytelling. *Vaastav: The Reality*(1999) is about the tragedy of a man unwillingly drawn into a life of crime. *Satya*(1998) explores the culture of gangsters and what life in Mumbai's underworld is like from an insider's perspective. The film *Company*(2002) deals with the conflict between individuality and what's suitable for an organisation, while *Maqbool*(2004) is a film filled with literary nuances and subtle symbolism which brings Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to Mumbai's gangland. All this goes to show the variety that the gangster genre has to offer. This makes the genre entertaining for viewers and provides an excellent tool for story writers and directors to convey a message to the public through a gripping story. With all this considered, it's no surprise that the genre is so popular and will keep relevant for years to come.

## Works Cited

- Mazumdar, Ranjani. *Bombay Cinema: An Archive of the City*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.
- Study IQ education. *Mumbai Underworld complete timeline, How 1991 Economic Reforms & Police action wiped out underworld?* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3f0E70rraY>
- PTI. "Cinema is a reflection of your society: Gulzar". *The Times of India*, 2018. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/life-style/books/features/cinema-is-a-reflection-of-your-society-gulzar/articleshow/66160133.cms>
- Akhtar Mirza, Saeed. *Salim Langde Pe Mat Ro*. National Film Development Corporation of India, 1989.
- Vinod Chopra, Vidhu. *Parinda*. Vinod Chopra Films, 1989.
- Gopal Varma, Ram. *Satya*. EROS International, 1998.
- Gopal Varma, Ram. *Company*. Shemaroo Entertainment, 2002.