

Article

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**Not Just Another Bollywood Bad Guy:
Examining the Subversive Stardom of Danny Denzongpa**

Abstract

This paper examines the stardom of actor Danny Denzongpa and his iconic villain roles to shed light on issues of representation, identity, diversity, and cultural tokenism in Indian cinema. As one of the few successful actors from Sikkim in Bollywood, Denzongpa's career reveals how minority identities are often stereotyped and exoticised on screen. Through close analysis of his famous villain characters like Thakur Ranjit Singh in *Dhund* (1973), Kancha Cheena in *Agneepath* (1990), and Katya in *Ghatak: Lethal* (1996), the paper argues that Denzongpa's "non-Indian" identity was frequently tokenised and equated with villainy or foreignness. His distinctive appearance and Nepali heritage made him an outsider, allowing him to effectively embody the archetype of the threatening, evil "Other." However, this typecasting reflects the limited and problematic representation of Northeast identities in Bollywood. While Denzongpa's success was groundbreaking, it did not necessarily lead to a more humanised, inclusive representation of Northeastern stories and characters in mainstream Hindi films. The paper concludes by advocating for greater diversity and authenticity in Bollywood's depictions of marginalised identities.

Keywords: Danny Denzongpa, villain, stardom, representation, identity, Indian cinema.

Introduction

"Apna ussool kehta hai... agar fayda ho toh jhoot ko sach maan lo... dushman ko dost bana lo."
(My principles say, if it is beneficial, then accept the lie as truth; Make your enemy your friend.)

- Kancha Cheena¹

Danny Denzongpa, born Tshering Phintso Denzongpa, is one of the few actors from Sikkim who have achieved widespread success and recognition in Bollywood. Over a prolific career spanning five decades, Denzongpa has portrayed a diverse range of characters, from dashing heroes to iconic villains. However, his path to stardom was not without challenges. Growing up in Sikkim, Denzongpa initially aspired to join the army and even qualified for the Armed Forces Medical College in Pune. However, he ultimately pursued acting and enrolled in the Film and Television Institute of India (FTII). There, he adopted the stage name "Danny" at the suggestion of his batchmate Jaya Bachchan, as many found his real name difficult to pronounce.²

¹ played by Danny Denzongpa in *Agneeth Path* (dir. Mukul S. Anand, 1990)

² This anecdote highlights how even before entering the industry, Denzongpa had to navigate the politics of identity and cultural difference.

Despite graduating from FTII, Denzongpa struggled to find meaningful roles early in his career. He faced blatant discrimination due to his features and was once even mockingly offered a job as a watchman by director Mohan Kumar (Singh, 2024). This incident underscores the prejudices and lack of diversity in Bollywood, where actors from marginalised regions often struggle to be taken seriously. Denzongpa's early experiences echo the broader issues of cultural tokenism and stereotyping that actors from the Northeast continue to face in the Hindi film industry.

Denzongpa's breakthrough, however, came with his villainous turn in the 1973 thriller *Dhund*, which established him as a versatile actor. He went on to portray a series of memorable antagonists in films like *Agneepath* (1990) and *Ghatak* (1996), earning a reputation as one of Bollywood's most iconic villains. Denzongpa's stylish and menacing screen presence set him apart from other popular villains of the era, like Amrish Puri and Amjad Khan. However, his typecasting as the "foreign" or "exotic" villain also reflects the problematic tendencies of cultural othering in Bollywood that are dominated by a "North-Indian experience" (Mazumdar, 2007, p. 42).

While Denzongpa's success was groundbreaking for an actor from Sikkim, it did not necessarily lead to greater representation of Northeastern stories and identities in mainstream Hindi cinema. His stardom raises essential questions about the fine line between representation and tokenism. By examining Denzongpa's career and star text, this paper aims to shed light on the complex dynamics of identity, diversity, and cultural representation in Bollywood. As the film industry continues to grapple with issues of inclusivity and authentic storytelling, Denzongpa's legacy serves as a reminder of both the barriers and the possibilities for actors from marginalised communities in popular Hindi cinema, offering what Mazumdar writes as the "potential to destabilise the "North-Indianness" of the hero" (p. 42).

The Good and The Bad

The world of Indian cinema, particularly in Bollywood, is a fascinating place where the notion of stardom occupies a preeminent position. It is a world where actors are not merely performers but are transformed into larger-than-life personalities who, through their on-screen personas, hold an almost mythical status in the public imagination. These leading actors wield a tremendous influence on the triumph and attractiveness of movies, as their star appeal can significantly affect the box office results.



Image 1.

However, the public's fascination with these celebrities goes far beyond the cinematic realm. Fans avidly track their personal lives, fashion preferences, and social commitments, making them an integral part of their daily lives (Iqbal and C.M., 2020). The media, too, plays a significant role in keeping their fans updated with every detail and development, creating a sense of closeness and familiarity that further enhances their appeal. The charm and allure of these actors are so intense that they have become an integral part of the Indian cultural landscape. Their ability to connect with the masses transcends the boundaries of language, religion, and geography, making them a unifying force in the diverse and complex fabric of Indian society. In the Indian cinema industry, the idea of a star system holds significant power over the audience. Fans often idolise their favourite stars, and there is a strong sense of admiration and devotion towards them. It is not uncommon for fans to aspire to emulate the appearance, behaviour, and lifestyle of their favourite stars, or "fan bhakti" (Prasad, 2009).

In Bollywood films, the characters of heroes and villains are distinct and serve different purposes. The hero is typically portrayed as embodying virtue, bravery, and righteousness. He is often depicted as a romantic lead, a saviour figure, or a symbol of national pride. The hero's actions and behaviour are meant to inspire and motivate the audience, while his character is an aspirational figure for people to look up to (Prasad, 2009). On the other hand, villains and vamps represent evil, corruption, and immorality. They serve as the antithesis to the hero, creating obstacles and conflicts that the protagonist must overcome. They are often portrayed as greedy, power-hungry, and cruel, and their presence in a film adds tension and drama to the story. The villain's character is designed to evoke a sense of fear and disgust in the audience, and their defeat at the hands of the hero is meant to provide a satisfying conclusion to the story.

Based on common traits of iconic Bollywood villains, some key characteristics emerge:

1. Distinctive appearance and style: Villains like Amjad Khan's Gabbar Singh, Amrish Puri's Mogambo, and Kulbhushan Kharbanda's Shakaal had unique, menacing looks enhanced by their costumes, accessories, and mannerisms. Gabbar's unkempt hair and beard, Mogambo's ornate military-style coat, and Shakaal's bald head and rings became their signature.
2. Powerful dialogue delivery: These villains were known for their fiery dialogue and punchlines delivered in a dramatic, threatening style. Lines like Gabbar's "Kitne aadmi the" Mogambo's "Mogambo khush hua," and Shakaal's knuckle cracking became iconic.
3. Megalomaniacal ambitions: Most villains harboured grand ambitions of power, frequently seeking to take over the country or world. They operated large criminal networks and were driven by an insatiable hunger for power and control.
4. Pitted against the hero: The villain's evil directly contradicts the hero's goodness. His cruelty and cunning tested the hero's strength and resolve, with the villain often holding the upper hand until the climax.

Villains, however, have evolved from one-dimensional caricatures to more complex and nuanced characters. While they are used to represent the Other, whether in terms of identity, culture, or socio-economic status, they are often portrayed as outsiders who threaten the established order or the traditional values of society. This othering can take various forms, such as depicting villains as foreign invaders, corrupt politicians, or marginalised community members. By casting the Other, Indian cinema reinforces dominant cultural narratives and ideologies while reflecting societal anxieties and prejudices (Sharma, 2013).



Image 2.

Whether it is a “*kitne aadmi the?*” or an “*arre o Samba!*” some iconic villains have left an indelible mark on the industry and the audience's collective memory (Keshri, 2023). The following sections will discuss the characters of Thakur Ranjit Singh, Kancha Cheena, and Katya, played by Denzongpa, to explore his star power as an iconic villain.

Thakur Ranjit Singh

Thakur Ranjit Singh, portrayed by Danny Denzongpa in the 1973 film *Dhund* (dir. B.R. Chopra), is a complex and intriguing character despite his limited screen time. Ranjit is introduced as the disabled husband of the young and beautiful Rani Ranjit Singh, played by Zeenat Aman. From the outset, it is clear that their marriage is an unhappy one, marred by Ranjit's abusive and controlling behaviour towards his wife. Ranjit is depicted as a frustrated and bitter man, confined to a wheelchair, who leads an isolated existence in his bungalow near the jungle. He takes out his anger and resentment on his wife, subjecting her to verbal abuse and humiliation at every opportunity. This toxic dynamic sets the stage for the central mystery of the film when Ranjit is found murdered and shot in the chest, and suspicion falls on Rani and her lover, Suresh Saxena.



Image 3.

Danny Denzongpa's portrayal of Ranjit is crucial in establishing the character's menacing presence and the oppressive atmosphere that permeates the film. Ranjit exudes a sense of power and control over his wife and household despite his physical limitations. His cruel treatment of Rani elicits both sympathy for her plight and growing unease about the secrets that may lie beneath the surface of their troubled marriage. As the story unfolds, the true nature of Ranjit's character comes into question. While initially presented as a villain, a victim of his bitterness and cruelty, there are hints that there may be more to his story than meets the eye. The circumstances surrounding his murder and the revelation of his wife's affair cast doubt on the simplicity of the narrative and invite the audience to consider the complexities of the relationships at play.

Denzongpa's nuanced performance brings depth to what could have been a one-dimensional antagonist. He imbues Ranjit with a sense of pain and vulnerability beneath the harsh exterior, hinting at a man broken by his circumstances and lashing out at those around him. This layered portrayal adds to the overall mystery and tension of the film, as the audience is left to wonder about each character's true motivations and secrets. In many ways, Thakur Ranjit Singh catalyses the events of the film, his murder setting in motion a chain of revelations and deceptions that keep the audience guessing until the very end. His character, though not physically present for much of the story, looms large over the proceedings, a shadow of the past that continues to influence the actions and decisions of those left behind.

Denzongpa's portrayal of Ranjit in *Dhund* showcases the actor's versatility and ability to bring depth to even the most unlikable characters. His performance is a testament to the power of nuanced characterisation in elevating a film beyond its central mystery and creating a truly engaging and thought-provoking viewing experience. Interestingly, nearly two decades later, Danny Denzongpa would go on to portray another iconic villain in the 1990 film *Agneepath* - the ruthless and flamboyant drug lord Kancha Cheena. Compared to the physically limited and embittered Thakur Ranjit Singh, Kancha Cheena was a larger-than-life antagonist known for his distinctive appearance, powerful dialogue delivery, and sadistic nature. Denzongpa's portrayal of Kancha Cheena set a new standard for Bollywood villains and remains one of his most memorable performances.

Kancha Cheena

Kancha Cheena, portrayed by Danny Denzongpa in the 1990 film *Agneepath* (dir. Mukul S. Anand), is a quintessential example of the archetypal Bollywood villain of that era. Ruthless, cunning, and driven by an insatiable hunger for power, Kancha is the main antagonist who sets the plot in motion with his nefarious actions. Kancha's introduction establishes his villainous persona - he is shown as an underworld don and drug smuggler who brutally murders the noble village schoolmaster Dinanath Chauhan for opposing his criminal activities. This sets up the central conflict and the path of revenge for the protagonist, Vijay Chauhan (Amitabh Bachchan).

Throughout the film, Kancha is depicted as a formidable foe, always one step ahead of the hero. He is shrewd, manipulative, and completely devoid of any moral compass. Kancha's sole aim is to expand his criminal empire and crush anyone who dares to stand in his way. Denzongpa's portrayal of Kancha Cheena is a masterclass in menacing villainy. With his stylised appearance, mannerisms, and powerful dialogue delivery, Denzongpa creates an antagonist that audiences love to hate. He imbues Kancha with a sense of arrogance and entitlement that is characteristic of many Bollywood mega villains.



Image 4.

He is wealthy and influential, operating a vast criminal network. He is pitted against the righteous hero in a battle of good versus evil. His wickedness is absolute, with no shades of grey or hints of humanity. The conflict between Vijay and Kancha forms the crux of the narrative, as the hero must walk the "path of fire" or *Agneepath* to vanquish his nemesis ultimately. In this, Kancha Cheena and Vijay Chauhan represent the age-old duality of villain and hero, a hallmark of Bollywood masala films. Interestingly, while Kancha Cheena is the primary villain, the film also features the character of Krishnan Iyer M.A., Vijay's loyal friend, played by Mithun Chakraborty. Krishnan acts as a foil to both Vijay and Kancha - his educated, idealistic persona contrasts with Vijay's criminal life, while his integrity and humour further highlight Kancha's pure malevolence.

Agneepath's Kancha Cheena remains one of the most iconic villains of Hindi cinema, setting a high benchmark for Bollywood antagonists. The lasting impact of the character is evident from the fact that even in the 2012 remake of *Agneepath*, Sanjay Dutt's version of Kancha Cheena was the film's most anticipated and memorable aspect. Another villain in the mould of Kancha Cheena who left an indelible mark in the 90s was Katya, played by Danny Denzongpa, in the 1996 action film *Ghatak: Lethal*. Katya redefined the Bollywood villain archetype for a new decade with his distinctive ushanka, menacing grin, and penchant for keeping a pet panther.

Katya

Katya, portrayed by Danny Denzongpa in the 1996 action thriller *Ghatak: Lethal* (dir. Rajkumar Santoshi), is a memorable and formidable antagonist who leaves a lasting impact on the audience. As the city's ruthless and cunning crime boss, Katya is the epitome of power, wealth, and evil. From his very introduction, Katya establishes himself as a force to be reckoned with. With his signature ushanka, he exudes an aura of danger and sophistication; his lair, adorned with luxurious furnishings and guarded by loyal henchmen, is a testament to his influence and control over the criminal underworld.



Image 5.

Katya's character is defined by his intelligence, ruthlessness, and a sadistic streak that sets him apart from the typical Bollywood villain. He is always one step ahead of the protagonist, Kashi (Sunny Deol), and takes great pleasure in toying with his enemies before destroying them. Denzongpa's portrayal of Katya is a masterclass in understated menace. He imbues the character with a sense of calm and calculated cruelty, rarely raising his voice but always conveying a palpable threat through his actions and demeanour. His interactions with the other characters, particularly his confrontations with Kashi, are charged with tension and a sense of impending violence.

One of the most striking aspects of Katya's character is his penchant for keeping a pet panther. This choice adds to his aura of power and exoticism and serves as a metaphor for his predatory nature. Like his panther, Katya is always on the prowl, ready to strike at the slightest sign of weakness in his enemies. As the main antagonist, Katya's presence looms large over the entire film, driving the plot forward and raising the stakes for the protagonist. His ultimate showdown with Kashi in the climax is a thrilling and satisfying conclusion to their battle of wits and brawn, showcasing Denzongpa's skill in portraying a genuinely formidable villain.

Interestingly, Katya's character also touches upon the issue of representation in Bollywood. As an actor from Sikkim, Danny Denzongpa's portrayal of a Russian crime boss in Ghatak subverts the typical casting of actors from the North-East in stereotypical roles. Denzongpa's commanding performance as Katya showcases his versatility and challenges the notion that actors from certain regions can only play limited types of characters. Moreover, with his distinctive appearance and mannerisms, Katya's character also highlights the trend of Bollywood villains often being portrayed as foreign or Other. This othering of the antagonist creates a clear distinction between the hero, who represents the ideal Indian man, and the villain, who embodies a corrupting external influence.

In this context, Denzongpa's portrayal of Katya in Ghatak becomes even more significant as it subverts these stereotypes and expectations. By bringing depth, charisma, and variation to the character, he demonstrates that a compelling villain can transcend the limitations of typecasting and cultural stereotyping, allowing us to explore the nuances of representation.

Beyond Representation

Cultural tokenism is the practice of including a small number of people from underrepresented groups to give the appearance of diversity and inclusiveness without genuinely engaging with those groups or depicting them authentically. For example, the monolithic portrayal of the Northeast in ANEK (dir. Anubhav Sinha, 2022) and the need for a North Indian saviour to solve issues of the region or the name Kancha Cheena (which itself is loaded with racial undertones).

Danny Denzongpa's iconic villain roles in Bollywood, while memorable, frequently amounted to a form of tokenism that capitalised on his ethnic identity to represent a foreign, exotic, or threatening Other, used to mark his characters as outside the Indian mainstream - Russian, Afghan, or otherwise foreign.

This othering of Denzongpa's villains played into stereotypical assumptions about natives from the Northeast and Himalayan regions as less Indian and more prone to criminality or immorality. By repeatedly casting him as a stylish, ruthless antagonist, these films elevated Denzongpa's star power. However, it confined him to a narrow villainous archetype that emphasised his perceived foreignness over his actual talent and range. Other minority actors in Bollywood have faced similar typecasting and cultural stereotyping. Actors from South India are often depicted as buffoonish or as punchlines, their accents and mannerisms exaggerated for comic effect, much like the character of Krishnan Iyer M.A in *Agneepath* or where language becomes a mark of rurality (Mazumdar, 2007). These reductive portrayals stem from and perpetuate real-life prejudices against these groups. Similarly, while the stardom of Denzongpa is a *hapax legomenon*, the industry's obsession with stardom is prey to appropriation, like Priyanka Chopra's portrayal of Mary Kom, in hopes of higher box-office revenues.

To move past tokenism and appropriation, the industry must strive for more genuine and humanised portrayals of minority identities rather than relying on tired stereotypes. It is essential to normalise characters from diverse regional, religious, and ethnic backgrounds as fully realised individuals rather than simply as one-dimensional villains or comedic sidekicks. Representation need not be defined only in the nationalist or assimilation sense, which is often portrayed by the "I am also an Indian" scenes. Moreover, actors like Denzongpa have portrayed complex and multi-faceted roles that are not solely defined by ethnicity. However, achieving this requires the industry to be open to casting minorities across all types of roles and a dedication to telling more nuanced stories about underrepresented groups and experiences. Only then can the industry begin to represent the full diversity of India.

Conclusion

Danny Denzongpa's illustrious career is a compelling case study of the complex dynamics of representation, tokenism, and appropriation in Indian cinema. As one of the few actors from Sikkim to achieve mainstream success, Denzongpa's stardom was groundbreaking. However, it also reveals the limitations and stereotypes that minority actors often face in the industry. Through iconic villain roles like Thakur Ranjit Singh, Kancha Cheena, and Katya, Denzongpa showcased his immense talent and versatility. However, these characters also frequently relied on their ethnic identity to represent the foreign, the exotic, or the threatening Other. By casting him as the stylish and ruthless antagonist, these films elevated Denzongpa's star power. However, they simultaneously confined him to a narrow archetype, emphasising his perceived foreignness over his acting prowess.

This pattern of tokenism, where minority actors are included to give the appearance of diversity without authentic representation, is a broader issue in Bollywood. Actors from marginalised regions and communities often face typecasting in stereotypical or caricatured roles that perpetuate real-life prejudices. To move beyond tokenism, the industry must embrace more nuanced, humanised portrayals of diverse identities, allowing actors like Denzongpa to explore a broader range of multidimensional characters.

Denzongpa's stardom, while groundbreaking, did not necessarily lead to a more inclusive representation of Northeastern stories and experiences in mainstream Hindi cinema. His success story underscores both the barriers and the possibilities for minority actors in an industry that a narrow, homogenised vision of Indian identity has long dominated.

As the industry grapples with questions of representation and diversity, it is crucial to recognise the need for more authentic, nuanced storytelling that reflects the full spectrum of Indian society. By challenging stereotypes, casting actors in non-traditional roles, and amplifying marginalised voices, the industry can begin to dismantle the legacy of cultural tokenism and create a more equitable and inclusive cinematic landscape. Maybe it is time for the region to speak for itself (and it is) against the appropriated grammar of mainstream aesthetics and sensibilities.

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Appendix.

Image 1. Amjad Khan as Gabbar Singh in *Sholay* (1975, Ramesh Sippy).

(<https://www.koimoi.com/bollywood-news/gabbar-singh-amjad-khan-once-lost-rs-1-25-crores-to-producers-tricks-sholay-actors-son-said-a-gangster-from-the-middle-east-called/>)

Image 2. Amrish Puri as Mogambo in *Mr. India* (1987, Shekhar Kapoor).

(<https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/bollywood/amrish-puri-refused-mr-india-mogambo-cast-after-half-film-shot-7982199/>)

Image 3. From left to right - Thakur Ranjit Singh, Suresh Saxena, and Rani Ranjit Singh in *Dhund*.

(<https://x.com/filmyguftgu/status/1299038501191614466>)

Image 4. Poster of Kancha Cheena in *Agneepath*. (<https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/once-upon-a-cinema-danny-denzongpa-kancha-cheena-and-other-adventures-11226671.html>)

Image 5. Katya in *Ghatak* with his iconic ushanka.

(<https://www.mensxp.com/entertainment/celebrities/132767-ghatak-ghayal-sunny-deol-90s-films-which-redefined-masculinity.html>)

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