

# [***How Dev Patel got 'Monkey Man,' his directorial debut beset by challenges, to the finish line***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BPX-M2R1-JC5B-G14X-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

BEVERLY HILLS, Calif. — [*Dev Patel*](https://apnews.com/hub/dev-patel) first pitched “Monkey Man” as “a revenge film about faith.”

“Faith can be such a beautiful, powerful thing. It can bring us together. At its best, it should make us fight for each other instead of fighting against each other,” says Patel, who is making his feature directorial and screenwriting debut with the action thriller out Friday.

“Monkey Man” was inspired by the [*legend of Hanuman*](https://apnews.com/general-news-9111a26a92c7466e8d3047892125ceb5) — a Hindu deity revered for his strength, loyalty and courage. Patel says that he saw a lot of parallels between [*Hindu mythology*](https://apnews.com/article/india-chennai-religion-b923af321098373475913c2619214f2d) and the iconography of the superheroes that we know of today, like Superman.

The film centers on a character named Kid — played by Patel — who makes a living working in an underground fight club and who later seeks to avenge his mother’s horrific death by infiltrating the elite class of a Mumbai-like city.

“Every day I’ve prayed for a way to protect the weak,” Kid says in a scene from the film's trailer. Throughout the film, we learn that his mission extends beyond his family. Patel’s character becomes a symbol of freedom, seeking justice for those who have been oppressed and displaced in the name of power, money and religion.

“We’re talking about religion and how religion can weaponize a large mass of people. And it can be used to a horrible extent to inflict violence. At the same time, it can be such a beautiful teacher,” Patel says. “The iconographies, the stories, the morals of right and wrong and courage, there’s this duality to it. ... You look at these old temple carvings in India and it was so much more free, open, and radical in a way.”

The Oscar-nominated British actor grew up inspired by action heroes [*like Bruce Lee*](https://apnews.com/article/hong-kong-bruce-lee-50th-anniversary-death-f565701718f996a02e60d2fda96ed2c8) and fell in love with [*action films*](https://apnews.com/article/bollywood-box-office-shah-rukh-khan-masculinity-0611dc57ac808c3ccee9a09b265eb859) at a young age.

“I was like, ‘I can use a genre that I love so dearly to talk about the caste system,’” he says. “It came from a place of rage too, against what was happening in India. And it happens everywhere, really.”

The film is “is pointedly political in its fictionalized echoes of [*modern, Modi-led India*](https://apnews.com/hub/narendra-modi),” Associated Press film critic Jake Coyle [*wrote in his review,*](https://apnews.com/article/monkey-man-movie-review-dev-patel-47d28b09ee9b123ec9efc138a446a927) referencing its skewering of [*Hindu nationalism.*](https://apnews.com/article/india-election-opposition-modi-kejriwal-396a85e3fc4e4ed43018436b690b0fe0) ( [*In India,*](https://apnews.com/article/india-election-modi-bjp-democracy-8998fe6aba5fa26debc0f82c4e2ccf69) where [*movies and* ***politics*** *are often intertwined,*](https://apnews.com/article/india-general-elections-2024-bollywood-modi-nationalism-2aea78fec4324d805d74ddc2bff9f633) “Monkey Man” is still awaiting clearance by the country's censor board and doesn't yet have a confirmed release date.) For Patel, the film, which features many Indian actors, speaks to issues of [*violence against women*](https://apnews.com/article/india-sexual-violence-rape-b9016c82074c08583080db846d64055b), the [*caste system*](https://apnews.com/article/india-6ffa3736a8154dcfb9efb69b14d51b54) and [*police brutality*](https://apnews.com/article/virus-outbreak-police-international-news-india-police-brutality-434547757272fecb25777597c8cb333c) — all issues that he says that, while taking place in India in the film, are also universal.

“I've got a place here in LA, and, you don’t need to look far to look at cases of police brutality or, you know, every society faces a sort of caste system,” Patel says.

He describes the action film's commentary as a way to reach individuals who might be on the wrong side of history.

“How do I get them to watch this and feed them vegetables through a sort of entertaining Trojan horse so it doesn’t feel like a lesson in ***politics*** or morals or whatever?” he asks.

In addition to the fraught topic, the directorial debut was beset with challenges during production, including the [*coronavirus pandemic-driven shutdown,*](https://apnews.com/article/pandemic-changing-hollywood-movies-virus-5f81a684ba027f47d8e968c6212bd5f8) limited crew members and a series of physical injuries.

“I broke my hand, I broke my foot, I tore my shoulder. Everything that could have possibly gone wrong in the making of this film did go wrong,” he told reporters at SXSW. “And it’s really been a humbling experience.”

[*Sharlto Copley,*](https://apnews.com/movies-8617d2e3e6304241b41ed3ec5fb5d822) who plays Tiger, says Patel went through an unusual hell during the filming process.

“I'm just filled with gratitude, really," Copley says. "I keep saying to Dev, it’s like this grace that helped us through this one.”

After surviving the grueling production process, the film was dropped by Netflix. Netflix did not respond to multiple requests for comment from the AP.

“The studio that first acquired it, they didn’t really know what they’d bargained for," Patel says. “The actual film itself is a lot denser and it’s saying a lot. Let’s say that it’s not your usual action scene on page one, and then you continue fighting nonstop. It’s trying to do a bit more.”

It was “just sitting there gathering dust,” Patel says. He was ready to let it go when [*Oscar-winning writer and director Jordan Peele*](https://apnews.com/hub/jordan-peele) — and Founder of Monkeypaw Productions — swooped in to save the day, purchasing the film through his production partnership with Universal Pictures.

“He saw me as a filmmaker. He saw the pain I’d been through,” recalls Patel. “He said, ‘I hope you don’t mind. I’ve shared it with Universal and we’re going to buy it.’ I literally — I fell off my seat.”

For Peele, “Monkey Man” reminded him of the ’80s and ’90s, when “movies were good.”

“It was iconic. I felt passionately that it was demanding to be on the big screen,” Peele says. “I could immediately see that this was a director who had gone through lengths and pushed and pushed and pushed because it really makes it to the screen. I mean, you have a film that is just absolutely huge, and the story of it is really intoxicating."

“Monkey Man” received a standing ovation at its SXSW premiere. Video shows Patel standing on stage, moved to tears.

“I did cry. I couldn’t help it, man. You feel so raw up there, and the response was just magical,” he says.

After investing so much time into this debut, Patel says it was a quote from the [*legendary writer Rabindranath Tagore*](https://apnews.com/article/db0d703bb24a4084a04c062de4065351) his father shared with him that finally allowed him to let go and release “Monkey Man” to the masses.

“It’s something about ‘I’ve spent many days stringing and unstringing my instrument. And the song I came to sing remains unsung.’ Something like that,” Patel says. “I was like, ‘Dad, I get you, man. I got to sing this song. I got to let it go.’ And it’s the biggest leap of faith when you finally just say, ‘It’s not perfect, but it’s me. It represents me in this moment in time, in history, warts and all.’”

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Watson reported from London.

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