



## FILM REVIEW

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# *Dunki*: Immigrating No Matter the Cost

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### *Dunki*

Film (2023)

Directed by Rajkumar Hirani

Runtime: 2 hours, 40 minutes

Original language: Hindi

More information at:

<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt15428134/>

### “What’s the difference between dying from no food or a bullet?”

*Dunki*, directed by Rajkumar Hirani, is a Hindi-language film that explores the illegal immigration technique “donkey flight”—commonly known as “dunki”—from India to the United Kingdom. Set against the backdrop of 1990s India, the adventure comedy-drama follows the journey of friends Manu Randhawa, Buggy Lakhnawal, Balli Kakkad, and Hardy Singh, as they attempt to immigrate to London from their village of Laltu, Punjab, in search of financial security for their families, social acceptance, and long-term employment.

Beyond its humour and misadventures, *Dunki* ultimately draws the audience into a deeply emotional journey through the realities of illegal immigration. As Manu and her friends confront betrayal, danger, and the weight of their dreams, the film shifts from a light-hearted comedy to an authentic exploration of loyalty, sacrifice, and the cost of chasing a better life against all odds. The characters are repeatedly tested throughout their “dunki” route; however, even during the most perilous moments, they stick together and refuse to leave anyone behind. During this journey, Hirani explores several social dynamics, including family separation, trauma bonding, friendship, and belonging. The result is a strong thematic blend of warmth and social commentary, making the film both entertaining and emotionally



moving, inviting the audience to follow the characters all the way to the film’s poignant conclusion.

Through this blend of emotions, Hirani masterfully captures the harsh realities faced by thousands of Punjabi youth. Punjab, one of India’s most populous states, is heavily reliant on informal agricultural labour, where daily wages average between ₹73 and ₹95 (roughly \$2 USD) (Ghuman et al. 2007). In contrast, educated individuals from the upper-middle class often earn significantly more, with office jobs starting at around \$250

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per month (Smith 2014). For those without access to quality education or pre-existing financial stability, like Manu, migration often appears to be the only viable path towards a higher quality of life. The United Kingdom is a common destination due to the belief that there are significantly higher wages there, more accessible educational resources, and a higher quality of life (Smith 2014). This aspiration drives many young people to engage in migration in search of fortune abroad, hoping to uplift their families from economic hardship.

Initially, Manu and her friends pursue legal immigration routes, investing their families' life savings into a visa agency that promises guaranteed entry through deceptive means such as sham marriages, fake dance troupes, or student visas for colleges that do not exist. However, just before their departure, they discover they have been scammed—the agency had vanished with their money, leaving them financially devastated and helpless. Left with no other option, the group turns to the illegal “donkey flight” route, embarking on a treacherous journey through dense forests, dangerous militia-controlled areas, and enduring months hidden in shipping containers. *Dunki* sheds light on the desperation, resilience, and risks that define the migrant experience for many Punjabi youth searching for a better life.

The film depicts the predatory practices of travel agencies across India, particularly preying on financially vulnerable families desperate to send their children abroad in search of a better financial future. In Punjab, so-called visa agents are a common sight in rural villages, agricultural centres, and urban areas, seeking to profit from the aspirations of economic migrants (Smith 2014). Lured by the prospects of social prestige and large paychecks to send back home, thousands of young people are willing to pay exorbitant fees to migrate, despite the risks. These agents often claim to have insider connections at European embassies, charging between ₹900,000 and ₹1.2 million for various “visa packages” that allow immigration for migrants who have little education, English proficiency, or professional-sector experience (Smith 2014).

Among the most common schemes are “cultural program” visas, where fake dance or religious groups are sent to countries like the United Kingdom or the United States under the guise of performing at weddings, competitions or festivals. During these trips, two or three members typically “disappear”, overstaying their visitor visas in hopes of settling illegally (Smith 2014). Another method involves orchestrated sham marriages, complete with elaborate ceremonies, guests, and gifts. These marriages, often between strangers, are designed to appear as traditional arranged marriages—a common practice in Indian culture—but are purely transactional, intended to bypass immigration barriers and then immediately split afterward (Smith 2014). Similarly, student visas are widely misused to

deceive immigration authorities. In areas in Punjab known as “visa factories”, agencies charge high fees to secure student visas for fake institutions (Smith 2014). These fraudulent colleges exist only on paper, but due to the high volume of student visa applicants, many migrants manage to slip through immigration checks and gain entry.

In response, the British government has introduced several measures to combat immigration fraud and illegal entry. As pictured in *Dunki*, these include stricter family reunification policies, limiting opportunities for student visa-holders to work, and more rigorous visa interviews (Electronic Immigration Network 2013). As a result, 150 Indian-nationals who reach the United Kingdom illegally are deported back every month (Smith 2014).

However, as *Dunki* highlights, the issue of illegal immigration cannot be fixed solely by border enforcement authorities, but rather through an approach that addresses deeply rooted systemic inequality and exploitation in the immigration system. Due to current frameworks that favour wealthy individuals (who can often invest large sums in exchange for residency), those from disadvantaged backgrounds who may have limited access to education and financial resources are denied entry. Although less-privileged migrants may possess similar ambitions and could be integral members of the host nation's economy, they are refused visas in preference for short-term guaranteed financial investment, causing many to pursue dangerous illegal means of entry instead. This creates a deeply inequitable system in which borders serve as barriers to exclude disadvantaged migrants, while posing only minor financial inconveniences for wealthy migrants who can easily bypass them. For migration to be fair, legal avenues must be made accessible to people from all socioeconomic backgrounds, in the process discouraging illegal immigration and streamlining the migration process.

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