

## Indian Slum Children in Western Cinema: Sensitive Portrayal of Stark Reality or Crass Exploitation?

VIPIN M VASHISHTHA

*Consulting Pediatrician, Mangla Hospital, Bijnor-246 701, UP, India. E-mail: vmv@manglahospital.org*

Reports that a 'Slumdog Millionaire' (SM) child star was offered for sale by her father has led to criticism of the film-makers, the girl's family and the British media- responsible for the sting operation and subsequent scoop all over the globe(1). At the center of the story is 9-year-old Rubina, one of only two child actors in the film to actually come from the communities where it is set. There have long been competing claims about her treatment. Was she paid properly? Has she been looked after appropriately in the months since the film came out? Was it right for her to be transported to a film set - and eventually to the expansive, spotlit stage of the Oscars and a day trip to Disneyland - only to be deposited back to a community where access to clean water, let alone education, is a struggle? Would it distort her life too much?

Slumdog Millionaire, which won 8 Academy Awards in 2009, has been the subject of a number of controversies(2), notably regarding how it portrays Indian society and whether any of the people involved in it were exploited. Following its release in India, the film faced criticism from different sections of the society alleging that the film fuels Western stereotypes about poverty in India and that it peddles "poverty porn". Earlier also, in 1988, a film centered on Mumbai's slum-street-kids, 'Salaam Bombay' (SB), attracted international attention and similar allegations.

### THE CONTENTIOUS ISSUES

The above incident brings certain issues to the fore. Does Western cinema indeed exploit our poverty? Why do they only focus on our impoverishment and

ignore our rapid economic progress and major strides in other sectors? Why do they cast only poor slum kids in their films? To get as authentic as possible in their attempt to portray reality? Or is it a ploy to exploit their miserable existence to garner wide international acclaim and accolades? Don't they exploit their existence and violate human rights by 'fiddling' with their milieu and creating disharmony in their family lives? Are the incidents of child trafficking, child labor, child molestation, extortion, juvenile delinquency, etc are exaggerated to create a sensational impact at international arena for voyeuristic delight of their viewers. Can we do something to prevent a repetition of this in future? What role Indian Academy of Pediatrics (IAP), the greatest custodian of child health and children in the country, can play in safeguarding the interest of these marginalized kids?

It is alleged that the film producers exploited the slum children who had worked in the film by paying them very paltry sum as their fee, which was even less than what was received by the Afghan child stars of a recently released documentary film! They were forced to work for many hours a day during the shooting. Wouldn't it be yet another example of child labor? At the end of the movie, both of the child actors continued to live in makeshift shacks in the slums of Bandra, a suburb of Mumbai. The grotesque violence and scenes of child torture and brutal maiming are certainly going to have a negative impact on the psyche of young, growing kids. While dealing with these sensitive issues, one should be careful enough of the broader consequences of these on the society, especially the impact on vast child fraternity.

**COUNTERPOINTS**

Every coin has got two sides. Let us be candid and honest in accepting the facts. And the fact is extreme poverty, child labor, child abuse, illegal trafficking, illicit drug use, sibling rivalry, forced beggary, child prostitution, etc are quite prevalent in some sections of our society. They exist in almost every city in some forms or others. It seems that we cannot bear too much reality, and are certainly not willing to pay to see it when we are confronted with it on the streets every day! Whatever the film showed is a part of India - the part which we educated and well doing Indian refuse to acknowledge. If we are so uncomfortable with slums sullyng India's image abroad then why don't we do something for those who have no other options but to live there.

The allegations of exploitation of kids are also non-existent as the producers not only paid a very handsome sum to the child artists, but also developed funds to take care of their future needs of education and healthcare expenditure. Also because of these films, the lives of some of the slum kids and their families had improved a lot. The positive impact of the film, 'SM' on the lives of slum child artists can be summed up by the statement of Rubina's mother, "They made a poor child a heroine - other people would have given a rich child the chance and set aside the disadvantaged one".

**EPILOGUE**

The main criticism of the films like SM and SB stems from the brutal way they portray our poverty, state of our slums, and the people residing in them. These films have created a deep divide among India's 'urban intelligentsia', where none should exist. India is too diverse to be portrayed in totality in any one film or a documentary but that doesn't mean that the poverty and misery portrayed in these films is unreal! Poverty, like AIDS, is not shameful. What is shameful is that more than 60 years after independence poverty continues to exist in our midst, like a curable, or least preventable, but chronically neglected disease. The reaction against SM and other works of its kind that have shown us the face of our disowned poverty is rooted in a misplaced sense of shame. What we are or ought to

be ashamed of is not our poverty but of our attempts to wish it away, to sweep it under the carpet, to decry all depictions of it as commercial exploitation and social and cultural voyeurism.

On the other issues raised by these films, we need to take proper remedial actions to safeguard the interests of our poor kids working in these projects to prevent them from exploitation in the hands of film makers. Institutions like Censor Board, Children Film Society of India, Ministry of Woman and Child Development, other child welfare organizations and groups, and human right organizations must keep a strict vigil on any incident of exploitations by them. Even IAP and its sub group like CRPP and CANCL can help these institutions by bringing any such incident in the knowledge of authorities. Even media has to play a serious, mature role as a watchdog. The prospective film makers should be asked to ensure respect of child rights and must be warned in advanced against occurrence of any untoward incidents on these counts. They should be asked to donate a part of their earnings from the project to help these kids and their families lead a better life and improving the conditions of urban slums from where these kids are drawn. Another option would be to ask these film-makers to stick to professional child actors, rather than create such havoc in the lives of poor children. It is not at all the fault of the film producers - they have gone beyond the call of duty ... but the negative impact of this on children - to be taken to stratospheric heights from their lives in a slum, and then brought back to ground zero in a week - that process is so brutal!

*Funding:* None.

*Competing interests:* None stated.

**REFERENCES**

1. Did Slumdog star's dad try to sell her? Available from: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/Opinion/Editorial/Slumdog-star-Rubinas-father-offers-her-in-sale-Report-/articleshow/4420908.cms>. Accessed May 3, 2009.
2. Controversial issues surrounding Slumdog Millionaire. Available from: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Controversial\\_issues\\_surrounding\\_Slumdog\\_Millionaire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Controversial_issues_surrounding_Slumdog_Millionaire). Accessed May 3, 2009.