The Real Slum Heroes

By Harsh Mander

Tens of thousands of children in every city in India are forced to make the streets their home. They often escape abusive and violent guardians, alcoholic fathers, cruel step-mothers, incest, starvation, and sometimes horrendous massacres. Some are abandoned, orphaned or lost. A small film that affectionately celebrates their spirit as they brave the mean city streets – Slumdog Millionaire - has unexpectedly caught the imagination of the entire world.

More than two hundred of these children have become an important part of my own life, and those of my young colleagues. We met them over many months on the streets – on pavements, under bridges, in market and temple courtyards, at traffic signals – and over time they agreed to leave the streets behind them, and begin a new life with us, in four homes we run for them in Delhi. It was in the company some of these children that I wanted to see the film Slumdog Millionaire, to watch it from their eyes.

With thirty of these former street boys, I went one evening to a cinema in West Delhi. The children were scrubbed, wore their best clothes, and were very excited. Before the film started, we gathered in the yard outside the cinema and I explained to them why we were there. A foreigner had made a film about their lives; therefore we thought they would enjoy seeing it. As it unfolded on the screen, they watched the film rapt, between popcorn and samosas. We had a couple of rows to ourselves, and others in the audience were curious as one child would run across, and lean his head against my shoulder and then another. Some children became pensive, saddened by memories, but most seemed infected by the film's mood of celebrating their resilience and hope in the hardest of times.

Later when we spoke together of the film, what most said they liked best was the portrayal in the film of the younger street children, their cheeky attitude and the ways the film affirmed that they could never be crushed by the grimmest of trials. A favourite moment for many was the one in which one child suspends another from the roof of a

running train with a rope, to steal food through the train window. For another, it was the defiant retort of the children even when they were thrown out of the speeding train: 'What do they think? Is this train their fathers' property?' Another enjoyed how the children give the police a run when they chase them as they play cricket. Yet another recalled with laughter how even when trapped by the sinister beggars' mafia, the boy refuses to sing unless the dangerous mafia leader gives him fifty rupees.

The train sequence reminded me of a conversation with a group of street boys in Hanuman Mandir in Delhi. They had decided to take a vacation to Hardwar, and said they had travelled by train, without buying a ticket, dodging the ticket checker throughout the journey. One said he had a poem to describe their situation. It went: *Aana free! Jana free! Pakde gaye to khana free!* (We go free of charge! We return free of charge! If we get caught, we then get food free of charge!)

For me as well, what worked best in the film - with which I did have a number of other problems – was its ability to capture this never-say-die spirit of these children. It is this unique mettle of children on the streets that makes them so attractive when you come to know them: their capacity to draw laughter and fun from their darkest moments, their refusal to be crushed by the most oppressive circumstances, their cheeky resistance to those who are immeasurably more powerful than them, their courage, resilience, and their impatience with self-pity. These are children who typically choose to resolutely walk away from violence and injustice at home, sometimes at as young age an age as six or eight years, and instead fend for themselves on the streets, whatever it takes. They survive the most brutal violence and want of the streets, mainly with the weapons of their laughter, comradeship and nimble feet. The film may not ring true in many of its literal portrayals, and even less in its political and social analysis, but it is completely truthful in its recreation of the spirit of the children who makes the streets their home.

Many of the former street children who I watched the film with also saw in it also a morality play relevant to their own lives. They applauded that the main protagonist Jamaal won the game by never cheating once. He won also because he did not let the arrogant game host bully him or crush his confidence. They remembered with

appreciation little moments of kindness that may have escaped others in the audience: the American couple who rescues the street child from the driver who was beating him; and that the boy gave away the 'American rupee note' that the foreign couple had given him, to his blinded comrade whom he found begging in the subway. Many defended the older brother despite his lapse into crime. They identified closely with him, because many of them had themselves traversed paths in the dark side of the law. They said that he may have become a criminal, but when his brother needed him, he risked and ultimately gave up his life for the sake of his brother. There was therefore goodness also within him - a boy who adopted crime - and not just in Jamaal who steadily walked the straight path.

None identified with the stereotypical sequences of the beggars' mafia, which thrive much more in the middle class imagination than in real life. Only one in ten street children beg for a living, and of those who beg not more than one in several hundred are part of organised begging mafias. We find among many of the street girls and boys who used to live by begging - and who have now come into our care - that it is mainly smaller children who beg, either because they have no parents, or because their parents are destitute or abuse alcohol or drugs, and therefore do not feed their children. The children are let out onto the streets each morning to find their own food. Others are sent out to beg by homeless mothers or disabled parents, who are themselves desperate and defeated by destitution. Children typically hate the humiliation of begging, and as they grow even a little older, they prefer to earn their food by picking rags and recycling waste, by foraging day-long in trash dumps with large plastic sacks slung over their little shoulders; recycling plastic bottles in trains; selling odds and ends at traffic lights; carrying lights in wedding processions; or serving in roadside eateries.

As they grow older, many are drawn into petty crime, but this is far more gritty and unglamorous than the glittering depiction in the film. It is the petty slitting of pockets, lifting of baggage on railway platforms, house-breaking, casual and ugly street-based sex work by both boys and girls, brandishing knives – and surviving sexual abuse by older men, blades that slash their faces, regular onslaughts of police batons, and thrashing in police stations. Many of the children spend many years of their lives

trapped and escaping – and being caught again –in state detention centres or adult jails. Unprotected, they typically stumble into drugs, which destroy their young bodies, already at risk because of poor nutrition. There is hardly a glimpse of this in the film. My complaint about the film is not that it portrays the poverty of the slums and streets of India – which are a pervasive reality and whose stories deserve to be told and retold– but that it enquires too little into the lived experience of surviving the streets, and what it is that ejects children and older people into such desperate lives of want.

The most beautiful observation that the children made while assessing the film made about their lives, was that Jamaal was able to overcome his circumstances not because of the chance of his winning a game show. This does not happen in real life. It happened, they said, *because he found love*. In the film, it happened to be the love of a girl that Jamaal encountered. But in life, it could be the love of an elder, a mentor, a friend: anyone who really cares about the child's future. It is love alone that can provide the anchor that steadies children tossed in the streets. It is love that can alone save them from drugs and crime and help them walk a life of kindness, honesty and goodness, to which they aspire. There is no one else I have met who took away this particular lesson from the film Slumdog Millionaire. But because it spoke of this to my children, I am happy the film - flaws and all - was made. And that it caught the imagination of the world.