

Printed from

THE TIMES OF INDIA

City City Bang Bang

Slum not the other India

25 Jan 2009, 2051 hrs IST, Santosh Desai

Nobody complained when Vikas Swaroop wrote it, nobody batted an eyelid when the film was shot and released internationally. After all, so many films — both features and documentaries — have been made around the subject of poverty in India. The protests started only when Slumdog Millionaire started winning international awards. The unkind way of looking at this is to argue that there is no value in complaining about the obscure — only protests about the famous can become famous. But then, it is equally true that only popular films actually do impact the way people see things and hence Slumdog Millionaire is worth complaining only now, that it is an Oscar nominated film. The celebration of the film is an implicit certification of its authenticity and this raises questions if indeed this is so.

Does the West have a vested interest in pinning India to its poverty by refusing to acknowledge the progress it has undoubtedly made in the last few years? Is India interesting only because it is poor? Is the gratuitous use of poverty nothing but an exploitative use of someone else's misery for one's diversion?

Of course, India is stereotyped by the West. Take away spirituality and poverty, and India to the outside eye is just a large country with an unnervingly diverse topography and poor sanitation. India's progress is in some ways an act of poor sportsmanship; it was always believed that India would be timeless and enigmatic in a deep spiritual kind of way. The New India story is thus disruptive and disturbing for it changes the accepted order of the world.

But if cinematic representations about India are stereotyped, so are those for all countries. Popular cinema uses the currency of stereotypes because it is accessible to all, most particularly to the American audience whose capacity for cultural nuance is limited. So you cannot show Brazil without the carnival (or its slums), Russia without the KGB and/or the mafia and England without Hugh Grant. Equally, when an Indian film shows New York, it does not focus on the homeless there, for our dominant perception about the city does not include poverty, however real it might be.

The question to ask is if our dominant perception about this New India is in fact the reality. Does the Westerner have to dig out poverty and then amplify it for audiences abroad? In the India of today, any mention of poverty is seen as being faintly treacherous; there exists a tacit conspiracy of silence about the state of the urban majority. By shrivelling the misery of millions into a single word, we banish the slum by giving it a name. We don't make movies about it anymore, except as a prop in a crime thriller. We don't cover it on TV; airport delays attract breathless outrage while nobody would look twice at a story about water scarcity in the slums. More importantly, it as if we have stopped noticing the vast numbers of the urban poor who surround us. We genuinely believe that Mumbai can be summed up by the Taj. So when someone from outside smells Mumbai in all its fetid rotteness, we are appalled. So what if the story told is one of a New Indian, corkscrewing his way out of his circumstances?

It was perhaps more understandable why we were touchy about the representation of Indian poverty 20 years ago. At that time, we feared that to be our unchanging reality and it made us deeply ashamed. Today, when we believe that India is on its way up, why do we still respond negatively?

Perhaps it is time to take all the blathering we do about Brand India more seriously. India is unique because it can potentially show the world a new way. In the slums of Dharavi, we find ambition that doesn't lose its way and joy that comes from knowing what is truly precious about life. We can see more clearly why material growth is not the same as progress and how meaning in life is independent of one's means. India will not become valuable to the world by becoming a pale shadow of someone else's ideas, but by asserting the power of its own distinctive take on the world.

The slum is not the other India and Dharavi is not an aberration. It is both a condemnation and a celebration of who we are. We need to own it, change it, admire it and hate it. We don't need to ignore it. And if some Western director makes a film about it, we don't need to fear it.

[About Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Careers @ TIL](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Feedback](#) | [Sitemap](#)

Copyright © 2009 Bennett Coleman & Co. Ltd. All rights reserved. For reprint rights: [Times Syndication Service](#)

This site is best viewed with Internet Explorer 6.0 or higher; Firefox 2.0 or higher at a minimum screen resolution of 1024x768