

A VERY BRIEF REVIEW OF THE ENVIRONMENT OF CHILD-LABOURERS IN SIX BOLLYWOOD FILMS

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Abstract

The word 'environment' usually indicates 'the natural world, especially as affected by human activity'. However, the word also means 'the surroundings or conditions in which a person lives'. Therefore, when someone seeks to focus, in a seminar-paper, on the theme of 'Environment and Popular Culture', it is not absolutely necessary that the proposer should confine herself/himself to reviewing the representation of nature and surroundings in different mediums of popular culture. 'Environment' might mean 'society' as well, and the paper could be focussing on the movie-based representation of plight of child labourers in different societies. This is precisely what this paper proposes to do: attempting a review of representation of child labourers in select films. Due to constrains of space and time, the proposer seeks to confine her paper to addressing six Indian (Bollywood) films: Boot Polish (1954), Salaam Bombay! (1988), Slumdog Millionaire (2008), Stanley ka Dabba (2011), Chillar Party (2011), and I am Kalam (2011). Though the Hindi film-industry started to seriously focus on the grave issue of the employment and exploitation of child labourers from 1954 onwards, the decades of the 2000s and 2010s have witnessed a spurt in the production of films related to child-labourers, all focussing on an environment fraught with greed, exploitative mentality, and sexual perversion. With approximately 10.1 million child-labourers presently employed in India, it is important that their piteous plight be taken to as many people as possible so that steps could be taken to ameliorate their conditions. Though the Indian government has passed the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000, and the P.O.S.C.O. Act 2012, the condition of child workers have not improved. The present paper will examine how in the environment of greed and exploitation, the child-labourers continue to suffer without an end reflected in six Bollywood films.

Key Words : environment, child-labour, Bollywood, films...

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The word 'environment' usually indicates 'the natural world, especially as affected by human activity'. However, the word also means 'the surroundings or conditions in which a person lives'. Therefore, when someone seeks to present a seminar-paper on the sub-theme of 'Environment and Popular Culture', it is not absolutely necessary that the paper should be confined to reviewing the representation of nature and surroundings in different mediums of popular culture. 'Environment' means 'society' as well, and the paper could be focussing on the movie-based-representations of the plight of Indian child labourers in different societies. This is precisely what the present seminar-paper seeks to do: it attempts to offer a very brief review of representation of Indian child labourers in select films.

Due to constrains of space and time, the present seminar-paper focuses on six Indian (principally-Bollywood) films: Prakash Arora's *Boot Polish* (1954), Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay* (1988), Daniel F. Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), Amole Gupte's *Stanley ka Dabba* (2011), Nitesh Tiwari and Vikas Bahl's *Chillar Party* (2011), and Nila M. Panda's *I am Kalam* (2011). It is not that this list of six films is all-inclusive in their contents. Several other films touching the issue of Indian child-labour have been released in Mumbai over the years. However, these six (principally) Bollywood-films seem to have most exhaustively focussed on the themes of child-labour and exploitation.

Though the Hindi film-industry started to seriously focus on the employment and exploitation of child labourers from 1954 onwards – with the release of *Boot Polish* –

the decades of the 2000s' and 2010s' have witnessed a particular spurt in production of films related to child-labourers, almost all of which are set in an environment fraught with greed, exploitative mentality, and sexual perversion. With approximately 10.1 million child-labourers presently employed in India¹, it is important that their piteous plight be taken to as many people as possible. This could lead to further steps being taken to ameliorate their conditions. Though the Indian government has passed the *Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2000*, and the *P.O.S.C.O. Act 2012*, the condition of child workers have not improved significantly. The 'activism' of Bollywood films has drawn widespread intra-national and international attention to the issue of child-labouring in India, and many more steps are being officially considered to rehabilitate as many Indian child labourers as possible.

In *Boot Polish*, the writer Bhanu Pratap (and the director Prakash Arora) show(s) a pair of sister-and-brother: 'Belu' and 'Bhola' – enacted, respectively, by Salma Baig (1944-95) and Syed Nazir Ali Rizvi (1941-2016). From the very beginning of the film, the two children are shown as beggars – working as child-labourers as they beg on behalf of their aunt, Kamala (enacted by Chand Burke, the real-life grandmother of actor Ranveer Singh), who is a prostitute and regularly mistreats them. Regarding the representation of prostitutes in Hindi cinema, Ruth Vanita reviews how they have shaped the development of Bollywood-films (5-6). However, if the portrayal of prostitutes in Hindi cinema were to merely depict female sexuality and objectification (Vanita 10-11), Kamala of *Boot Polish* defies any such aim of the filmmaker. Rather, she symbolically serves as a medium to further highlight the mistreatment of child-labourers in India.

The lives of the sister and brother Belu and Bhola undergo a transformation when they meet their neighbour, a bootlegger 'John Uncle' (enacted by David Abraham Cheulkar, 1908-81), who teaches them the 'virtue' of working and the 'impropriety' of begging. It is not that the condition of the child-labourers undergoes a radical

change. But they begin to transform themselves into a comparatively-‘organised’ workers, and save money out of their daily collections to purchase a shoe-polishing kit. They are discovered, and their infuriated aunt, Kamala, beats them out of the house.

What is observable in this 1954-film is how labouring, when directed towards the correct path, changes the attitude of the workers. It must be mentioned here that boot-polishing is not the labour in which children should usually engage. But it is – at least – a better earning-option than begging. Moreover, one should recall that *Boot Polish* was released in August 1954. It was a time when neither the *Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act – 1986* nor the *Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Amendment Act – 2016* had been passed in India. So, there was scarcely any legal provision to safeguard the interests of Belu and Bhola. But their perception of labouring, which hardens their attitude towards begging, also indirectly protects them from being exploited by their aunt. Bhola decides never to accept alms again, even when their ‘John Uncle’ is arrested for illegally dealing in liquor. During the rains, when people stop getting their boots polished, Belu and Bhola face the danger of starvation, but still they do not beg. Later, Bhola is arrested by police but Belu is adopted by a rich family, which saddens her. Later, when Bhola comes out of custody and escapes from an orphanage, he has no option left other than begging. He tries to beg at the same station where Belu and her adopted-family-members are trying to board a train. Finally, at the railway station, Belu and Bhola meet with each other once again, and are firmly reunited (as the rich family-members adopt Bhola as well), in the presence of John Uncle.

I repeat here that *Boot Polish* is perhaps the first Hindi-language-film to have exclusively and seriously focussed on the issue of employment of child labour. For *Boot Polish’s* direct addressing of the menace of child-labour, Surabhi Redkar of *Koimoi* (2015) identifies it as “one of the most honest films made in Hindi cinema”². In the film, the issue of poverty is shown as the sole source for the perpetuation of

child-labouring. Shriram Iyengar, commemorating the film's famous (Hindi) song, "Nanhe Munhe Bachchhe Tere Mutthi Mein Kya Hain?" ('O, innocent Children! What do you hold in your Hands?', sung by Muhammad Rafi and Asha Bhosle), comments, "The song is a reminder of how in the past, as today, the country needs to protect children from poverty and hunger"³. Corey Creekmur pays attention to the film because childhood in Hindi films is usually 'staged as a primal scene projecting the adult protagonist's identity, actions, and fate' (Pomerance and Gateward 350).

The story of Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay!* (1988) was written by the director herself. Dealing with the life of children working for their daily bread in Mumbai-slums, *Salaam Bombay!* was put on the list of "The Best One Thousand Movies ever made" by *The New York Times* in September 2011⁴. Nair's film is a violent one, but what exceptionalises it is that the director used actual street-children to take part in the film after teaching them to act at a Mumbai-workshop. After the film was released in September 1988, Nair and her mother Praveen Nair, started a non-governmental organisation, *Salaam Balak Trust*, in New Delhi and Mumbai to help the rehabilitation of the child-actors of the film (Muir 61). The N.G.O. still rehabilitates street-children.

Salaam Bombay!, unlike *Boot Polish*, does not have a happy or idealised ending. As the film concludes, the principal protagonist Krishna – enacted by Shafiq Syed (b. 1976; who worked as an autorickshaw-driver for sometime at Bengaluru) – finds himself exactly at the same spot from where he started his 'journey' of finding Five Hundred Rupees to pay to his bullying elder-brother whose motorcycle he has had set ablaze. Krishna's mother makes him a child-labourer with *Apollo Circus*, and when he loses his 'job' at the circus, Krishna finds company with some thieves at Falkland Road, Mumbai, which is a 'red-light area'. He is employed at a tea-stall and mentored by Chillum (a drug-peddler, enacted by Raghuvir Yadab), who, in turn, is employed by Baba (a drug-dealer, enacted by Nana Patekar). Krishna, the child-labourer, falls in love with 'Sola Saal' (played by Chanda Sharma), a so-called 'virgin' girl, who later loses interest in him and goes off with Baba to begin services as a prostitute. Krishna

kills Baba in order to save Baba's wife Rekha (enacted by Anita Kanwar) from him (after Chillum is dead), but is ultimately separated from Rekha, and loses all his possessions as before. Mira Nair, in the film, tries to rule out any sort of hope or reprieve for the child-labourers. I think that of all the films I am going to review here, *Salaam Bombay!* is the most authentic portrayal of the hapless condition of child labourers in India.

I have used the term 'Bollywood films' to describe all the six films under review. However, *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008), though extremely popular in Mumbai and translated into a Hindi version for release on behalf of Bollywood, is not exactly a 'Bollywood movie'. Directed by the Lancashire-born English film-director, Daniel Francis Boyle (b. 1956), the film – in which Dev Patel ('Jamal Malik', a Mumbai-based Muslim boy who takes part in the Indian version of *Who wants to be a Millionaire?* To find out his ladylove), Freida Pinto ('Latika', a street-girl who is Jamal's love-interest), Madhur Mittal ('Salim Malik', Jamal's brother who becomes a powerful criminal), Mahesh Manjrekar ('Javed Khan', a crime-ring leader), and Ankur Vikal ('Maman', a child-kidnapper and crime-lord) play the principal roles – is an English crime-drama-film, based on Vikas Swarup's *Q and A* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), and distributed internationally by *Warner Brothers Pictures*. Jamal, Salim, and Latika escape from the 1992-93 Mumbai Riots and work as beggars under Maman. Later, Latika is raised by Maman to be a prostitute while Salim becomes a criminal, and Jamal a tea-seller at an Indian call-centre. In order to find Latika, who has been separated from Jamal, he joins the *Who wants to be a Millionaire?*-show and performs brilliantly, finally winning the prize-money and Latika.

Slumdog Millionaire, like *Salaam Bombay!*, deals with the issues of child-labour, and about the life of children in Mumbai-slums. The arbitrariness of their arrests and police torture, and how they become susceptible to criminal influences are also shown. Anthony Lane of *The New Yorker* compares Boyle's Mumbai to Charles

Dickens's London in *Hard Times* (1854) (both of which were/are known centres for employing child-labourers), and writes,

“There is a mismatch here. Boyle and his team, headed by the director of photography, Anthony Dod Mantle, clearly believe that a city like Mumbai, with its shifting skyline and a population of more than fifteen million, is as ripe for storytelling as Dickens's London, and they may be right; hence the need to get their lenses dirty on its clogged streets. At the same time, the story they chose is sheer fantasy, not in its glancing details but in its emotional momentum. How else could Boyle get away with assembling his cast for a Bollywood dance number, at a railroad station, over the closing credits? You can either chide the film, at this point, for relinquishing any claim to realism or you can go with the flow—surely the wiser choice”⁵.

I personally feel that in spite of all the awards and accolades, *Slumdog Millionaire* is more a White Westerner's perception of the so-called 'Indian squalor' rather than anything else. I have watched the movie several times, and have found, for example, Freida Pinto's portrayal of 'Latika' very much unconvincing. I feel that Nair's film is a far more realistic picture of Indian child-labourers.

Stanley Ka Dabba (2011), rather than *Slumdog Millionaire*, could be another poignant and valuable addition to the list of films dealing with the issue of child-labour in India. Enacted principally by Partho Gupte (the film's director Amole Gupte's son, as 'Stanley'), Divya Dutta (as the benevolent English teacher 'Rosy Miss'), Amole Gupte (as the ravenous Hindi-teacher 'Babubhai Verma'), Rahul Singh (as the school-principal), and Divya Jagdale (as the unimaginative science-teacher, 'Mrs. Iyer'), the film, written by Amole Gupte himself, reveals only at the end that Stanley, who is quite popular as a pupil of *Holy Family School* in Mumbai and is confronted by the gluttonous Babubhai Verma for not bringing food for lunch break to such an extent that he is briefly debarred from attending school, is actually a child-labourer who is an orphan. Only the school-principal knows that he stays with his abusive uncle

(enacted by Shashank Shinde) and works at a Mumbai-restaurant. The film ends with Verma having had resigned out of guilt, and Stanley befooling his friends about his real familial background as he has had done before. I feel that the film realistically captures the embarrassment of numerous such child labourers who have to conceal their poverty in order to gain acceptance in the class-conscious and unsympathetic society.

Nidhu Srivastava has added another interpretation to such films. She argues that the films only show what is actually practised in India regarding the employment of child-labourers:

“Bollywood cinema has been showing th[e] [...] reality [of child-labour] through different films in different genres. It is also interesting to note that these characters have gained a lot of popularity through the ages. Modern cinema also brings out cases where cosmopolitan youngsters approve the idea of a boy working at a traffic signal in *Break Ke Baad*; or how a progressive residential society in Mumbai shoulders a child named ‘Fatka’ washing their cars for money in *Chillar Party*. *Traffic Signal*, by Madhur Bhandarkar, takes no different view on the issue; it presents a megastore where both children and adults work as salesmen. The elites of the society, who passes through the signals, prefer ignoring the existence of the children selling variety of items there. This popular societal approach of accepting child labour and its invisibility as a part of routine life may be supplemented by a study conducted by Hanumantha Rao and M. Madhusudhana Rao. The study shows that in India, the practice of child labour is highly desirable. Employers argue that they employ children to provide livelihood or to supplement their family income. Also, the children themselves are inclined to work in many cases as they know that they have to do a similar kind of work their entire life. Most of the employers also prefer this kind of labour because it is easily available and involves low maintenance cost” (99).

Chillar Party (released by *U.T.V. SpotBoy* and *S.K.B.H. Productions* in July 2011, and based on a story written by the two directors Nitesh Tiwari and Vikas Bahl themselves) is a comedy based on the carefree lives of a group of poor children from Chandan Nagar Colony. The film is not exactly about child-labourers, but helps its watchers to get an idea about the poverty-struck and untidy life of the Mumbai-based street-children and child-labourers. Basically, the film (enacted by Sanath Menon as 'Encyclopaedia', Rohan Grover as 'Akram', Naman Jain as 'Jhangiya', Araav Khanna as 'Aflatoon', Vishesh Tiwari as 'Second Hand', Chinmai Chandranshuh as 'Panauti', Vedant Desai as 'Silencer', Divij Handa as 'Shaolin', Rajesh Sharma as 'L.N. Tondon' and Shashank Shende as 'Minister Shashikant Bhide') is about the struggle of eight colony-living-boys to save 'Fatka' (a car-washer, played by Irfan Khan) a dog, 'Bhidu' from the clutches of a villainous minister Shashikant Bhide. But it also focuses on the daily hardships and exploitative atmosphere young and abandoned children in India face on a daily-basis, which leads them to find vocation as child-labourers. Positively reviewed all around, *Chillar Party* won the 2011 *National Film Award for Best Children's Film*.

I would like to end my review with a focus on *I am Kalam* (2011) by Nila Madhab Panda (b. 1973), a Sonapur-Odisha-born director. Written by Sanjay Chauhan, and shot in Bikaner, *I am Kalam* depicts the struggle a poor boy Chhotu (enacted by Harsh Mayar) – who names himself 'Kalam' after the eleventh Indian President Avul Pakir Jainulabdeen Abdul Kalam (1931-2015) – has to undergo in order to change his poverty-struck condition and to fulfil his desire to meet his ideal person whom 'met' on television-screen. Working at a roadside-restaurant ('dhaba') off Bikaner, Chhotu engages himself in hard studies, and wins over a lot of people on his side. It is erroneous to assume that Panda, in the film, is indirectly supporting child-labour – because Chhotu is usually shown to be happy and meets with a royal-family-descendant while working at the 'dhaba'. But, he tries to show that if a child-worker has the desire to elevate himself socially, s/he can achieve it through hard-labour,

dedication, and presence of mind. Regarding the 2011-film, the reviewer Vinayak Chakravorty writes,

“For a film shot on a shoestring budget, *I Am Kalam* looks polished. Mohana Krishna’s camera brings alive the colours of a Rajasthani palace with the same fervour as it captures the tiny, dingy shack behind the tea shop that passes off a Chhotu and Laptan’s home. Prashant Naik’s editing ensures the right cuts. The film belongs to its little hero Harsh Mayar. A Delhi slum-kid in real life, Harsh impresses with his natural timing as an actor. There are no raw edges in his act. Pitobash Tripathy, back after his brilliant roles in *Shor in the City* and *Mirch*, lives his role well as the jealous ‘older kid’ in Bhati’s tea stall who clearly lacks Chhotu’s spark. This film is an example of how a children’s film can regale with solid storytelling, at the same time creating space for undercurrent comment”⁶.

Though child-labourers are thought to be ‘carefully maintained’ in India because they are sources of cheap labour, the attention of the Bollywood films is forcing the Indian government to think and rethink about ways to minimise the number of such labourers and to uplift their conditions. Nidhi Srivastava writes at length:

“Popular cinema in India, since the very beginning, has been depicting child labour as an accepted practice in the society, which has not witnessed any movement of change. The perception of the society towards the problem has not changed much, and though the policies of the government have, the change has been nevertheless to no one’s benefit. The picture of child labour as presented by Indian cinema hits at the root causes and coincides with the idea of necessity more than an evil. Without addressing the root causes of child labour, India cannot bring in a total ban on the practice of child labour. And even if India does, it cannot be enforced as it would directly affect the question of survival for millions of poor people. [...] At this juncture, what India should aim at is a comprehensive and coherent approach to child labour, which should first address the causes of child labour by providing for poverty reduction,

provision of quality education, and social protection measures; followed by a complete ban on child labour and complete implementation of the *Right to Free and Compulsory Education Act-2010* to allow everyone equal chance to participate. The intimidating issues of implementation have to be addressed at the earliest to allow current system to work, so that the effects thereof can be assessed and future course of action can be decided” (113-14).

If child-labouring is successfully done away with in near future, it could be stated that the Bollywood-movies have had played a vital role in sensitising the government about the pitiable conditions of the child-labourers in India. They have also forced the Indian audience to think about improving the conditions of child-labourers by appealing to their conscience.

Notes:

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