

SDM –Downsizing India or objet d'art

As Slum Dog Millionaire is showered with accolades, many are left wondering whether the film is meant to depict India in a poor light in an attempt to stop its super power growth or the film really is a work of art. An analysis by Editor Dr. Neelam Verma.

When Slumdog Millionaire went on to receive award after award, a debate started raging not only in India but amongst Indians round the globe-whether we should be celebrating the win as an Indian film and embrace it as our own or it should be shunned as merely aiming to tickle the Westerners and win awards. The phrase “poverty porn” was born and spread across Indian media even as the film opened up to audiences in India and abroad.

London Times columnist Alice Miles wrote “As the film revels in the violence, degradation and horror, it invites you, the Westerner, to enjoy it, too...Slumdog Millionaire is poverty porn.” She hammered the writers and critics who've labelled "Slumdog" as a feel-good film when it is filled with "scenes of utter misery and depravity." Dennis Lim, a regular contributor to both the New York Times and Los Angeles Times, scoffed at Boyle's "fairytale vision of squalid poverty," arguing that Boyle is guilty of "aestheticizing poverty."

The phrase “poverty porn” spread across the Indian media as commentators nodded in agreement or shook their heads while Danny Boyle celebrated his successful film. Though it is not an Indian film, as its producers, writers, script writers are not Indian yet the film is made in India with Indian characters and based on a book by Indian writer. The depiction of poverty in the slums of Mumbai is nothing new yet catches the attention of Westerners not having seen the slums in their own countries. Not that poverty does not exist in the West. New York has its own share of poor people living on the outskirts and so does Canada. Except they live differently and since are not allowed to install tents, are not as visible as the slums of Asia where governments have to turn a blind eye due to the population.

The theme of rags to riches is an old Bollywood leitmotif yet the compelling performances of the actors in the film and an energetic pace of direction by Danny Boyle, known for his off-beat films like *Trainspotting*, cannot but be appreciated. While Danny never claimed that his film is an expose of Indian poverty, yet it is treated as a simulation of the real India. The question now being playing in the minds of billion strong Indian population is why all of a sudden an old Indian theme is being awarded when excellent films like ‘*Taare Zameen Par*’ bounced at the Oscars? Is it because TZP showed well fed and cared kids whose parents could afford to send the kids to private schools while SDM showed hungry children dipping in human faeces? Or because TZP was made by an Indian while SDM by a Westerner? Or is it time now to pull India down from its high flying economic status which it has been enjoying for a few years and make sure it does not become a super power?

As economic recession looms and as many as 50,000 jobs are lost in one day in the US alone, maybe it is time to show the world that the days for outsourcing are over. In an aim to keep the jobs in their own country, the West is trying to tell the outsourcing companies to look at the ‘slum dogs’ they are sending their work to...to take a look at the people who are managing their call centres to the extent that even a ‘chaiwala’ or peon is allowed to take calls. By acclaiming SDM, the message perhaps is that by outsourcing, quality suffers because the Indian owners do not have control over their staff. So, better keep the jobs home.

Poverty as highlighted in the film may be a novelty for the West. What they don't know is that what they perceive as poverty or a life of deprivation is a lifestyle which many don't want to give up. To understand the phenomenon of poverty, it is important that Indian poverty be studied with a perspective rooted in culture and tradition and not materialistically. For the West, lack of housing and begging for food is construed as poverty but for millions of sadhus living on one meal a day, is a way of life which they embraced happily with no regrets. For these sadhus, they are rich in themselves as they consider themselves blessed and close to God...they consider themselves rich as they are rich spiritually while they would consider anyone driving a Rolls Royce poor for they know not what they(the sadhus) know. The sadhus or the Nagas as they are called, live simply with no materialistic needs or aspirations. They do not consider themselves poor as per the definition of the Westerners.

This is not to say all beggars do it by choice. Certainly poverty exists in India and it is a common sight to see slums with silhouettes of high rise buildings and shopping malls. India is a land of diversity and extremities. Beggars on the roads are not necessarily poor yet it is their way of life and as per their tradition, working is not an option for them. The last time I gave alms to a beggar at a crossing in New Delhi last year, I was told not to give to "that" particular beggar as he owned four houses in the neighbourhood and was getting substantial rent from all of them. Yet he begged, as he had nothing to do. He told me, "Begging is my family profession. Owning houses does not mean that we stop begging. My grandfather begged and my children will continue to do so." By the way this particular beggar's kid went to school and he wants them to beg once they are out!!

Remember the time when India was opening up to the world and globalization was "the" word in the early nineties, all of a sudden Indian beauties started winning awards abroad. Though India has been sending its beauties to the Miss Universe and Miss World pageant since 1953, it was only in 1994 when India was opening up to the world, that Indian beauties started winning all awards. The year 1994 put India on the world beauty map when Miss India Sushmita Sen became Miss Universe while the Miss World title went to Aishwarya Rai in the same year. By the way, Reita Faria was the first Indian beauty to win the Miss World title in 1966.

That was the year when beauty products L'Oréal made its entry in India trying to beat the Indian brand, Godrej hair dye which was the most prominent brand of hair colour in India. Despite all its advertising and Aishwarya Rai endorsing L'Oréal for more than a decade now, yet it could not beat the local brand Godrej. Decades later, Garnier and L'Oréal have only been able to capture a very small market share. Coming back, the strings of wins continued in the late nineties with Diana Hayden winning the Miss India World title in 1997 followed by Yukta Mookhey in 1999.

Then came the landmark year for India in 2000 when Miss India winners won three respective international pageants- Lara Dutta for Miss Universe, Priyanka Chopra was Miss World, and Diya Mirza was declared a Miss Asia-Pacific. Australia in 1972, was the only other country to have won all three titles in one year alone.

Taking into context all previous events and analyzing the facts, one can humbly conclude that the West has always tried to make India dance to its tunes. Not that in the world of globalization, economies of different countries can be separated as all are interdependent. Yet, the game that the West has been playing with India, is there for the world to see. When 9/11 happened, America invaded Iraq and annihilated its leader Saddam Hussain. But when 26/11 happened, US Secretary of State Condoleezza

Rice was dispatched to India to ease tensions between India and Pakistan, though none of the two countries want wars.

India's streets are a melting pot of her culture. People take to streets on important festive occasions, whether celebrating a wedding, a victory or a religious event. For a large population of India, the streets are the stage where drama of their entire life unfolds and where all the action is. Despite having homes, most are used to spending time just gossiping on the streets. In fact, this is a way of socializing. By first advertising that the SDM is based on a true story and later claiming to be a work of fiction, SDM had already captured the imagination of the people.

Arindam Chaudhuri, noted Economist and Management Guru summed up the movie in these words, on his blog "Slumdog' is just every scrap of dirt picked up from every corner and piled up together to try and hit back at the growing might of India. And the awards almost seem like a sadistic effort to show the world — look we knew that this was India, and these are the slumdogs we are outsourcing our jobs to." Hopefully many are able to understand the sudden attention the world is showering on India.