

( K.P. Jayasankar and Anjali Monteiro )

JAI HO SHANGHAI





## The Invisible Poor in Slumdog Millionaire<sup>3</sup>

There is a new road in the making – a road from Mumbai to Shanghai. This new road is adorned with glass and Alucobond, vinyl and chrome. It is lined with shiny malls, multiplexes and towering apartment blocks. This façade hides half the population of Mumbai – the people who live in 'slums'.

The multiplexes play a new film: Slumdog Millionaire (SM). It takes you to a placeless place – the slums of Dharavi, Jarimari, Versova... And strangely lands up on the same road to Shanghai.

Peeping through the banisters of the bar graphs that proclaim 8% growth (or is it now 5%?), the upper class imagination that inhabits the high rises along the new road is at once elated and shocked by this new film. Elated by the Oscars, dismayed by the blot on the towering cut outs of shining India Inc<sup>4</sup>. Jai ho!

What do the inhabitants of the new road see from their living rooms? Slums as places of anomie. They see vice. They see crime. They see filth. They see migrants, ethnic violence, ignorance, illiteracy and unemployment. They see the slum as a speed breaker on their new road to Shanghai. A speck of dust on the windshields of their shiny new automobiles. Slums need elimination, or rehabilitation perhaps? They stink. They take up too much floor space. They obliterate the view from the sanitised rectangular living rooms in the highrises. The slums

are irrational spaces where terrorism and caste and gender violence are endemic.

What does the film SM show? The camera is a predator from the skies that steadycams down the unlit alleys, precariously treading fragile pathways across dank gutters choked with plastic bags and excreta. The sun rarely shines on the slums of SM. It is an endless nightmare that completely excises the everyday. People in the slums appear only to defecate, mob film stars, commit crime and kill each other in inexplicable riots. The slum is a space populated by venal adults who gouge out children's eyes, traffic young girls and manage begging rackets. That is almost 50% of the city's population in gainful employment. Jai ho! The only good, caring person, Jamal's mother, is already dead – killed in ethnic riots. After the riots, the three main protagonists are cast adrift in the Dickensian space of the slum. There are no traces of any community or familial structures to care for these orphaned children. Dharavi alone has 800,000 inhabitants. Where have they all gone?

Within this callous tortured space, the three children stand out in sharp relief as the only luminous, innocent presence. The audience is drawn into the narrative of their heroic efforts to transcend the brutality of the criminal underworld that sucks them in. While one bites the dust, two are able to escape, uniting in eternal love. Slums are bad, inhuman and exploitative, but it is always possible for the extraordinary individual with talent and courage to escape from these spaces. How does Jamal fly over the cuckoo's nest? He makes it through the madness of a call centre that attends to the quotidian turmoil of the developed world. Through a game show hosted by a transnational television empire for India

<sup>2</sup> Jai ho: the theme song of the film Slumdog Millionaire – May victory be yours! It is interesting that the Indian National Congress has bought the rights to this piece of music, to be used in their May 2009 election campaign. Considering the fact that the media constantly refers to the coming general election as the "dance of democracy", this choice does not appear to be ill advised. Policy makers in Mumbai always wanted to transform the city into other 'world class' cities, by erasing all traces of the poor and the spaces they occupy. Some years ago, it was Singapore. The current favourite is Shanghai; the title alludes to this unfortunate pipe dream too. For more, see Kalpana Sharma, 2003, Can Mumbai become Shanghai? (<http://www.hindu.com/2003/10/11/stories/2003101100941000.htm>) and [www.dharavi.org](http://www.dharavi.org)

<sup>3</sup> Slumdog Millionaire, 2009, directed by Danny Boyle, winner of 8 Oscars and numerous other awards.

<sup>4</sup> A pet phrase used often by the press to describe India the superpower in the waiting.



Inc. A great feel-good narrative closure. Hope at hand for the marginalised millions of Mumbai. Jai ho!



What does the upper class refuse to see that SM refuses to show? A 'slum' like Dharavi has a history of over a hundred years. Unlike many upper class settlements, it is not a new blip on the nouveau riche horizon of Mumbai, with its "L'Oreal sunsets (...) botoxed with vanity"<sup>5</sup>. It is a beacon of hope for people displaced by the large dams that supply water and electricity to the city. It is home to many disenfranchised by caste violence, dysfunctional agriculture, special economic zones, failed monsoons...



Slums are spaces of extreme industry that play a key role in the political economy of the city. 80% of Dharavi brims with commercial activity. It produces goods worth over 50 million dollars a year. It produces tonnes of idlis a day and most of the papads (pappadoms) in the city. It has very large communities of potters and leather workers. It produces designer labels for apparel and leather goods that end up in the glittering malls that line the new road to Shanghai, travelling down to New York, London, Paris...

Dharavi has perhaps among the strongest networks of communities in the city, a far cry from the fragmented anonymity of many upper class neighbourhoods of Mumbai. It has seen no riots since 1992-93. Its chaotic calm and purposive energy is legendary. It is relatively safe. It has a very successful Mohalla (neighbourhood) committee movement for conflict resolution that ensures dialogue across the myriad communities and ethnic groups that live in this

<sup>5</sup> Arundhati Subramaniam, *Where I Live*, Allied Publishers, Mumbai, 2005

compacted fractal of India. What actually happened after the 1992<sup>6</sup> riots?

After the riots, we formed a committee to co-ordinate relief, to those who needed food and shelter and to claim the deceased from the hospitals. We did all this in our area. It was well organised. It was a collective effort of both Hindus and Muslims... (The late Waqar Khan, social activist and garment manufacturer from Dharavi in *Naata*, 2003<sup>7</sup>)

The upper class, if they stepped down from the new road and took a guided tour that is popular with first world tourists these days, would be able to walk down from Kashmir to Kanyakumari<sup>8</sup>, in a matter of minutes. They would see the space that they despise, without ever having experienced it.

When the poor migrate to Mumbai from various states of India, they feel that in Dharavi, they will find shelter, some work and food to get by. This is why Dharavi is like a mini India. (Bhau Korde, social activist from Dharavi, in *Naata*, 2003)

Are we romanticising Dharavi and other slums? Doesn't Dharavi have crime? Yes, it does, so does Malabar Hill<sup>9</sup>. Doesn't it have exploitation? Yes, so does London. Doesn't it have filth? Yes, so does... Should a critique of a film like *SM* hinge on the inauthenticity of its representation of slums? After all is it not a work of fiction, with its right to poetic licence? Certainly, films cannot be judged from the standpoint of their faithfulness to 'reality'. The fantastic and the absurd, the bizarre and the imaginary all fuse together within most cinematic texts, offering us pleasure and engaging our affect. What makes *SM* problematic is its unspoken promise (which is eagerly seized upon by many audiences) to 'show' us the gritty



<sup>6</sup> Subsequent to the demolition of the Babari mosque in December 1992, by Hindu fundamentalists, ethnic violence broke out all over India.

<sup>7</sup> Monteiro and Jayasankar, *Naata*, 2003, a documentary film on Dharavi, produced by the Centre of Media and Cultural Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences.

<sup>8</sup> Kashmir is the northernmost frontier of India and Kanyakumari is the southernmost tip of the subcontinent.

<sup>9</sup> An up market residential area of Mumbai



'reality' of slums in Mumbai, to grant us entry into the lives of the poor. It is thus the politics of representation within the film that is worrisome. The film's orientalist, colonial gaze renders invisible the contribution of such spaces to the city. It renders invisible the dignity of the poorest of the poor in Mumbai and in other parts of the world. It strengthens the hand of the upper class imagination that would like to see these places erased. Dharavi was on the margins of the city decades ago, when the poor migrants reclaimed its marshes and built their modest homes; today it is in the centre of the city. The price of land here is astronomical; part of it has been gentrified. If it is completely razed, not only will the view from the upper class homes improve, but this will also bring much more than Oscars to many city builders and politicians. Slum redevelopment is a euphemism for the destruction of lives and livelihoods. SM writes the copy for this lethal game show: Who does not want to be a millionaire? It is written. Jai ho!

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Dharavi's ecological footprint is minuscule and its carbon credits worth a thousand green Oscars. It takes too little and gives back a lot. If places like Dharavi were destroyed, almost all the plumbers of the city would disappear, so would many policemen, taxi drivers, domestic helps, vendors, garbage recyclers... The invisible political economy of the slum is a compassionate bulwark that shores up Mumbai. Without these vital spaces, Mumbai would collapse and rot in its waste. But for these spaces, 'India' would have missed eight Oscars and 15 x 8 seconds of fame. Jai ho!

If you walk around Dharavi, you are bound to encounter at least 10 to 15 people with paper and pen in hand, doing research, collecting data. So much has been written about Dharavi, so much paper – more garbage than we in Dharavi could ever

generate! Sometimes I feel that perhaps it is good for them if Dharavi remained as it is. If it remained the same, a lot of research could be done, films could be made. Many things can be done (Bhau Korde, social activist from Dharavi, in Naata, 2003).

