

2nd Opinion: Christâs love among the âslumdogsâ

February 6, 2009

Slumdog Millionaire—already a Golden Globe Award-winner for best motion picture and a nominee for an Oscar in the same category—is a slap-in-your-face wakeup call to the breadth and depth of injustice and poverty still active on a large scale in one of the 10 most-populated cities of the world, Mumbai, India.

It zooms in on three innocent victims of slum life and the millions who rally around the hope that one of their own might escape by winning a game show.

Ayush Mahesh Khedekar as Jamal in *Slumdog Millionaire* (Fox Searchlight Photo)

How should we respond to the images when some Indians criticize the film as “poverty porn” and others say it is true to life?

One of my American friends said it made her sick. Several of my university students were impressed with the cinematography. And another wondered why, with their sheer numbers, the slum dwellers simply don’t revolt to bring about change. Although education and globalization have swelled the middle class ranks, nearly half of Mumbai’s 19 million residents still are slum dwellers caught in a real-life prison with no “made for movie-goers” happy ending.

The movie sent my husband and me into deep reflection over the 10 years we lived in India, working in urban slums among an indigenous people known as the Banjara Gypsies. We are well acquainted with the sights and smells of sewage running through narrow pathways between tin and tarp huts, flowing into canals and rivers in which bodies, clothing, animals and

vehicles all are washed.

In one such slum—on a narrow tract of land between a factory and a  sewage canal—lived 100 families who migrated from villages to find work in construction or other labor jobs. When we first visited, we found young children playing in the dirty canal, older children working, no running water or electricity and the factory waste running across the entrance to their homes and into the canal. The Banjara are bold and hard-working people, and they agreed to dig a trench for the pipe we purchased so they could divert the wastewater underground.

The one Christian family in their midst invited us to worship on Sunday on a mat in front of their hut.

Out of these small steps of friendship and God's amazing love, wonderful things happened over the years. One of the Banjara couples from our training school moved into the slum community. The husband became pastor of the church, and the wife became the teacher of the school. Both the church and the school now are housed in the same concrete building, filled with children studying during the week and church members in worship on Sunday.

Following the example of Christ, their incarnational ministry transformed lives. In partnership with churches in our mission and other nongovernmental organizations, we started a rickshaw—taxi—business to provide jobs for the men, tailoring classes for the women, an informal school for the children, monthly medical clinics and a community wash area with a bore well.

As business and health flourished, concrete homes replaced tin and tarp huts, working children went to school, and people came to worship Jesus Christ as a community.

Jesus Christ came to mediate justice to the nations and provide liberating

light and salvation for the captives, the suffering children, the broken, the lost. He did not change the world by force, but with the power of a sacrificial love.

It is too small a thing for anyone to focus on themselves while others wait for justice. The world is too big for anything but truth and too small for anything but love.

Robbi Francovich served as a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missionary in India from 1996 to 2006. Now, she is the cross-cultural specialist at the Longhorn Baptist Student Ministry in Austin and an adjunct instructor in cross-cultural ministry and missions at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor in Belton.