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Seeing Beyond the Slumdogs: Representations of Poverty in Western Media

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Abstract

Seeing Beyond the Slumdogs; Representations of Poverty in Western Media

Why do you only portray India as a land of poverty and squalor?
What about our economic development and hosting the Commonwealth Games in 2010?[1]
Indian broadcast journalism student in UK

This paper will address the frequent developing world complaint that Western media coverage of their affairs are partial and prejudicial, preferring disaster and desperation to development and self-determination. Equally, it will confront the societal divide within Indian society that concentrates their fast-evolving media in the hands of the wealthy and educated. It will test the argument that pictures of aspiration and achievement are therefore routinely marginalised by both Western and Indian media and attempt to answer, if that is so, what images of their lives would the poor have the media portray, and to what effect.

The paper will be the first output of a new practice research project on imaging poverty, based on fieldwork undertaken with the support of the Hope Foundation in Kolkata, and focusing on that central dilemma for Western media reporting the developing world. At a time of audience fragmentation in a burgeoning multimedia landscape, commercial considerations have overridden political principles in agenda setting, making it increasingly difficult to place positive pictures of other worlds in a self-referential, consumerist market place that requires sensational material to make its mark. Yet developing understanding of the needs and rights of all people to determine their own representation demands a more inclusive and less ethnocentric picture of other realities, which also recognises divisions within those societies. Caught between these contrary poles, what should we educate the news reporter and the documentary filmmaker to do: respect their subject or serve their object, of grabbing an audience?

Dependent, as so many journalist operations in the developing world are, on NGOs for everything from access to information, it is valuable to use their experience as a useful guide as go how to reconcile these opposites. To work in these communities, both Third Sector and Fourth Estate need the welcome and trust of the people they aim to serve; but, to attract the support and funding of the wealthy West, NGOs must stimulate its interest, empathy and generosity. The classic image of need is the pot-bellied child with the giant, fly-blown eyes, an effective cliché at least since the famine relief efforts of Live Aid in 1985. Since then, the UK charity sector has grown to over 200,000 organisations competing for the priorities and purses of the nation, using ever more sophisticated campaigns to attract attention. The NGO PR sector has grown exponentially, taking on experienced print and broadcast journalists who know what will make the cut in their former newsrooms. This triumph of tabloid values sits uneasily with a more nuanced approach to issues of representation.

The Hope Foundation's experience - won over the ten years in which it has become the leading NGO in Kolkata, unique in being the only Western charity winning the Indian recognition of the Bharat Nirman award – provides a proptypical learning curve. This paper charts that evolution - from problem identification, rescue and care, through rehabilitation and development, to issues of advocacy – as a process consistently predicated on finding sustainable models of development that increasingly restore the powers of self-determination to the poor. With input from local agencies, filmmakers and community groups, it aims to suggest a methodological process for capturing images of the poor which are both ethical and effective. As slum children took the stage to

[1] The XIX Commonwealth Games will take place in New Delhi, 3-14 October 2010

campaign against child labour in Kolkata in November 2009, it was just possible to conceive a future in which the poor forswear their victimhood to represent themselves. Even child workers, traditionally denied a right to a voice or future, were liberated sufficiently to express their dreams of a better life, while shrewdly downplaying their chances.

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How should we show the poor? Should we persist with images of abject poverty, the hapless victims of fate in need of our charity, or should we be more proactive on their part, aware that their representation is a significant part of the structure and systematisation of their plight? This paper is an attempt to frame and answer those questions, with a clear application for both journalists and aid workers engaged in the developing world. My primary and ongoing case study is of Kolkata.

When I went to India 22 years ago, interviewing child labourers for a BBC documentary and book, I presumed to ask children, who worked up to fourteen hours a day for a few rupees, for their opinion. It soon dawned upon me that the very concept - of an independent opinion freely arrived at - was unknown to them, just as improbable as their prospects of a progressive future. They had never been allowed the opportunity to develop an opinion, let alone express it. Our work could at best represent their plight, reveal the reasons, and express anger and pressure for change on their behalf. This form of what I would call 'journalist advocacy' was a key feature of the work of my generation, from the frequently marginalized documentaries of John Pilger - none of whose 55 films have been shown on an American network - to the world-affecting reports by Michael Buerk for BBC News of the Ethiopian famine in 1985. The progressive departure from the previous straitjackets of 'impartiality' and 'balance' seemed more than enough, allowing the politics of principle and the emotions of engagement. Having more recently withdrawn from the frontline fray, I now recognize that we are at a new crossroads, where our motives and judgement are not good enough, where there are other interests nearer to those subjects who claim superior right to define those viewpoints in their own terms and voice.

Teaching an international MA in Television Journalism, I find those views often forcefully expressed at Goldsmiths. I am frequently challenged on the agenda that promotes stories about abuses in the developing world, and for the accompanying images that routinely deploy people as hapless victims. Coincidentally, I had been asked by the Hope Foundation – the largest NGO working with street children in Kolkata – to help edit the films for their UK launch in 2008 and subsequently for their website, and had found myself falling back on the easy images of large-eyed children in extremis - the fastest way to an audience's heart and wallet. I felt it was time to revisit India to see whether change had rendered my views anachronistic, ideally to redefine what representation the poor would prefer. Is there a more inclusive way to represent poverty and need without objectifying it - and therefore endorsing the very inequalities that cause it?

Through Hope I had exceptional access to poor communities across India's fourth largest city, enabling me to meet with children, families and aid workers. This paper attempts to chart some of the complex cross currents we need to confront, if we are to prepare the next generation of journalists to operate sensitively and responsibly in other, less advantaged cultures.

Arriving back in Kolkata for the first time in twenty years, I am immediately struck by the phalanx of concrete tower blocks springing up in the fields on the way in from the airport. My local companion draws attention to the new glass-fronted office blocks and shopping malls on the roads of the city, but soon my Western eye is more captivated by the familiar throng of a thousand small businesses covering every square foot of the pavements surrounding these buildings, servicing every conceivable want of the wealthier souls immured within. That astonishing, age-old entrepreneurial culture constantly adapts to changing needs, and necessarily escapes the state controls that would crush it in more ordered societies, such as the UK. That is the intriguing, filmic difference that we are bound to note, much more than the banal spread of concrete and glass that we have everywhere at home, which architecture, like other aspects of globalisation, threatens to reduce us all to the same dull existence. It has always been a given that we fly in the same planes, to identical airports, staying in such identikit hotels that we sometime wake unsure which country we are in. We meet people just like us - with jobs, families and homes they are struggling to maintain - but our editors rarely send us to find the routine and common cause. To justify the expense of foreign travel they want difference, something exotic and extreme to arrest their declining audience. Twenty years ago, the then Head of Documentaries at the BBC had already said to me: 'Foreign films cost twice as much and get half the audience, so why should we do them?' Well, one of the six core purposes of the BBC is 'to bring the world to the UK'. But things in the UK have since got a lot more competitive – and that means a lot worse.

A desperate reliance on celebrity presenters means that far fewer unmediated documentaries get made. An International Broadcasting Trust report in June 2009, *The World in Focus*, subtitled 'how UK audiences connect with the wider world and the international content of news in 2009', found that people were turned off by 'negative news' and 'charity appeal TV' but recommended they could be interested with formats and famous faces, like *Ross Kemp in Afghanistan*. The report concluded:

> *While television content about developing countries has the potential to engage all audiences, this can only be achieved if a broad range of relevant connections to the lives of those in the audience is made in all genres of programming.*[2]

It helps explain why a major series of documentaries about India, commissioned by the BBC to celebrate the 60th anniversary of Indian independence in 2007, featured none made by an Indian production company - or featuring an Indian perspective.

This mercantile myopia, or self-referential tunnel vision, affects most parts of the broadcast journalism spectrum. As most news organisations have reduced their number of foreign correspondents, while increasing their output in hours and platforms, foreign coverage is skewed increasingly towards wars, outrages and natural disasters. Too often news seems a passing spectator at someone else's misfortune, a form of 'tragedy tourism' that majors on the misery and is all too light on context. Acres of broadcast footage of survivors from the rubble of Port-au-Prince largely managed to ignore the obscenity of American cruise ships continuing to disgorge tourists to disport and gorge themselves a few miles away on the north coast of Haiti. There was no linkage drawn between the starving victims and the causal connections with structures of inequality, and its attendant displacement of resources and infrastructure.

There is an inbuilt presumption in News' uncritical discourses that all this is the natural order; every disaster is – as the secular sophists of the insurance world have it – an 'act of God'. But this fatalistic determinism is being challenged, not just by those who resent the notion of an immutable world order, but also by serious academic investigation combining cross-cultural strengths in recalibrating our understanding of poverty, its causes and implications. As Mary Kaldor, Professor of Global Governance at the London School of Economics said, launching their Global Civil Society Yearbook on *Poverty and Activism* last year: 'Poverty is not an absolute state – it's impoverishment, and Indians don't like the idea of a global civil society'[3]; which position Teresa Hanley, of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation amplified by saying: 'The media mentions poverty, but superficially and non-causally, rarely giving voice to the poor or challenging the stereotypes'[4]. Their report notes that, between 1990 and 2004, India took 250 million people out of poverty – not a fact widely reported, despite the currency of the 'Make Poverty History' lobby. Yet it is clear that representation is an integral part of democratic

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[2] *The World in Focus* (2009) International Broadcasting Trust
http://www.ibt.org.uk/all_documents/research_reports/TheWorldinFocus.pdf
[3] Mary Kaldor, speaking at the LSE, 6 May 2009
[4] Teresa Hanley, speaking at the LSE, 6 May 2009

processes that empower people, enabling them to emerge from poverty. As the *Poverty and Activism* report says:

> *Poverty alleviation efforts must first raise marginalised groups and socially excluded classes/castes to a position of 'collective equality' before civil society begins the process of what Habermas calls 'rational communication' between free and equal citizens…The authors of this Yearbook treat the 'poverty reduction project' as an open-ended process whereby inegalitarian structures of power, discrimination and exclusion are interrogated, criticised, challenged and reversed.*[5]

Following that logic, the LSE commissioned five photographers to record images of poverty in five cities of the world, resulting in an exhibition: Viewing Restricted: [Re]presenting Poverty. The catalogue explains: 'The overarching aim of Viewing Restricted is to spark thinking and debate among a diverse audience about how visual representations of 'poor people' influence our perceptions, shape policies, and catalyse action'[6]. India was represented by Subash Sharma's shots of people in Mumbai. He writes:

> *In the past, the poor in Mumbai have always been represented and viewed as a collective, a crowd, and not as individuals with unique wants, aspirations, emotions, dreams and concerns. Representing poverty in this crowded, exploding city has usually been achieved through the depiction of tattered slums and unhygienic conditions, perhaps because such visuals are dramatic and appealing to audiences. So I chose to show the poor enjoying themselves in their leisure time and living their lives as individuals with passions and aspirations*[7].

And Sharma's charming photographs are of Johnny Flower - a Christian part-time Bollywood extra – Akhtar - a young pigeon breeder – and Abdul Rashid – a 74-year old tailor who enjoys spending much of his small income at the races. They fulfil his objective, of humanising and respecting his subjects – and I am sure that they are happy with their representation - but we have to ask the uncomfortable question: what does a Western audience more used to harsher visions of the Mumbai slums, not least as portrayed in *Slumdog Millionaire*, take from these pictures? An NGO CEO said to me: 'I am afraid they look at pictures of happiness and say: What's the problem?'

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[5] Mary Kaldor et al, (2009) *Global Civil Society 2009: Poverty and Activism* London: Sage p.23
[6] Fiona Holland, (2009) *Global Civil Society 2009: Poverty and Activism* London: Sage p.186
[7] Subhash Sharma, (2009) *Global Civil Society 2009: Poverty and Activism* London: Sage p.188

For often the best of motives, we are locked into a presumptive imperative – 'if it's India it must be bad' - reducing our reactions to a simple binary, can we help or is it hopeless? This encourages fatalism, cast by Sontag and Moeller as 'compassion fatigue', in a world saturated with images of misery. Certainly there is widespread cynicism about the vulture-like tendencies of the press pack, the tragedy tourism I mentioned a minute ago, or what the Bangladeshi photographer Shahidul Alam refers to as 'the usual subjects of international photographers, like prostitution and floods'[8]. But the political geographer David Campbell takes issue with the simplicities of the 'compassion fatigue' charge, indicating how generous people are with their empathy and money at events like the Haiti earthquake. He says that 'we have an abundance of compassion, an excess of compassion', which is only given vent at such times of disaster emergency, but which cries out for a more constructive engagement with the context and causes, 'a more political response'[9].

Broadcast journalist Andrea Catherwood came to a similar conclusion, on her first trip to Kolkata as the Hope Foundation's new UK ambassador. She went, keen to meet the street children in the homes, health centres and education facilities Hope runs to give them a new start, and this she did. But she was most struck by the plight of the sex workers, some of whom are mothers to the children Hope cares for. On her return to London, Catherwood wrote a *Life in the Day* feature for *The Sunday Times magazine* on Mariam Laskar, a 42-year old prostitute in Kalighat, the poorest red light district in Kolkata. It is a miserable tale, of having been sold into sex slavery when 14, and a gradual decline in earning power, with her one surviving daughter in Hope's care. 'I visit her on the last Sunday of every month. I tell her I sweep in a hospital, and I wish I did, but no-one would employ me now'[10]. The photograph is honest, but does Mariam no favours. Yet this simple, unadorned story unleashed an extraordinary tsunami of response from the paper's readership, with people phoning Hope day and night to offer money to help her out of poverty. This enabled a whole rehabilitation programme to be set up, with counselling and craft training for older sex workers. And Mariam can now tell her daughter that she really does work in a hospital, as an auxiliary at the Hope Hospital.

This is journalist advocacy functioning effectively now with the quiet tool of empathy. The photograph does not set out to shock, nor does Mariam in the dispassionate tone of voice that Catherwood captures. Unlike the IBT suggestion that television now needs its Ross Kemps to

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[8] Shahidul Alam, (2010) 'Emerging from the Shadows' in *Where Three Dreams Cross: 150 Years of Photography from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh* London: Whitechapel Gallery/Steidl

[9] David Campbell, speaking at the Third Frame conference, London College of Communications, 10 March 2010

[10] Andrea Catherwood, 'A Life in the Day: Mariam Laskar, sex worker, *The Sunday Times*, 17 May 2009

connect, there is no sign of the reporter in the *Times* piece - and that first person narrative clearly speaks directly to thousands. Arguably it is precisely the insertion of Western reporters that not only distances the audience from these subjects, but makes these countries, with their rapidly developing home media, increasingly distrustful of our motives. There is a view, which may explain the relative buoyancy of charitable giving in times of recession, that our collapsed empire and declining economy produces a greater need for images of poverty that reassure us that we are still, at least, better off. In this reading, the embattled bourgeois reasserts his relative status and maybe absolution through the act of charity. The success of the Channel 4 series *Secret Millionaire*, which parachutes wealthy people into poor British communities, is seen as an example. It is really a triumphant revival of Victorian philanthropy, in place of a political response to social inequality. It is not an elevated perspective from which to pontificate about other cultures.

Working in India is both facilitated by the centuries of shared history, language and culture – and complicated by it. While the overriding approach of photojournalists and filmmakers in the post-colonial period has been sympathetic - from the countercultural embrace of Indian music and religion to the non-judgemental aesthetics of street photography - Indian media has developed at a different pace, inevitably reflecting different stages of evolution and terms of engagement. A recent exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, of 150 years of photography from the sub-continent, celebrated the Indian love of film drama and portraiture, a visual culture in which as studio photographer Vijay Vayas says: 'Everyone wants to look their best'[11]. Notwithstanding some key exceptions – like Pablo Bartholomew's literally ground-breaking photography of the Bhopal victims in 1984 - there is much less of the social realism of photojournalism that characterises 20th century Western photography, just as documentary is not so significant a part of either Indian film tradition or current television schedules. Despite an apparently free press, their visual media generally take a less invasive approach. In part it may be because in this world, the Habermasian distinction between private and public spheres becomes hard to define, with much of what we consider private spilling onto the street. Filming in India usually involves quite sophisticated logistics to ensure that every shot is not framed by faces clamouring to be included. An early *Video Diaries* film shot by a young volunteer in Kolkata was noticeable for its absence of these mechanisms, and the consequent documentary captured that constant surrounding press of humanity garlanding every frame.

The Whitechapel exhibition did, however, suggest other imperatives determining a different vision, reflecting the perspective of my Indian students who so dislike Western media emphases on Indian

[11] Quoted by Christopher Pinney, (2010) 'Coming Out Better' in *Where Three Dreams Cross: 150 Years of Photography from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh* London: Whitechapel Gallery/Steidl p.28

poverty. One whole section concentrates on 'The Family', and in the accompanying catalogue Geeta Kapur describes how the photographer Dayanita Singh has abandoned the street and its denizens.

> *From the early to mid-1990s she had turned her back on international photojournalist assignments that exhorted her to capture the abject face of metropolitan India. She began to feel that she, like her subjects, became the more bereft for making public representations with no succour, and without agency for change. She was not cut out to be an activist, she felt, and decided to represent, instead, her own class whose privileges left her free to be free – as photographer/artist and global nomad.*[12]

More recently, Singh has obsessively photographed empty rooms and industrial sites, notably in her *Blue Book*[13], in which Kapoor divines 'the classic phenomenology of absence'[14]. It could be argued that these depopulated images may reflect a natural extension of a bourgeois vision, that seeks to airbrush out the pulsating humanity that threatens to occlude every shot, and distracts the Western photographer from admiring the new developments of glass and concrete – and the air-conditioned comfort they confer. Yet I know no country in Asia where the spirit of activism is more alive than in India, more invigorated by the agencies of change. The Hope Foundation, through whom I made contacts on this last visit, may be a Western charity, but they work with hundreds of local people and through a network of local NGOs who reflect an empowerment strategy that aims to dismantle, not maintain, the structures of inequality. Their frontline work is saving children from abandonment to crime, abuse and early death on the streets, but they recognise that the real work must be in the slums from which these children come – evolving networks of health and education that offer better prospects to them. And the locals who work in these local agencies are well placed to translate local sensibilities while recognising the need for attracting the Western interest that supports their work.

When I was in Kolkata last November, I worked with a young Indian filmmaker, Supratim Bhol, who was making a film for Hope about child labour. It was part of an exciting development - reflecting the charity's evolution from social provision to political advocacy - premiered on a day of action in which children returned to the streets to protest child abuse and child labour. Former child workers took to improvised street stages to share their experience - alongside magicians hired to attract the crowds. They spoke passionately and fluently about harsh lives lived on the margins of a society in which 23 million children are fulltime labourers. That mixture – the

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[12] Geeta Kapur (2010) 'Familial Narratives and their Accidental Denouement' in *ibid.* p.57
[13] Dayanita Singh (2008) *Blue Book* Gottingen: Steidl
[14] Geeta Kapur (2010) *op.cit.* p. 60

message of principled pleas framed by enticing entertainment - neatly parallels television, but does not call for the insertion of star personalities. Both in public and on camera, the children spoke better for themselves than they had for me a generation ago, not least because of the ubiquity of cameras today - and because the camera operatives were nearer in age, language and culture. Familiarity and ease are important. But I think there is more than that going on. The provision of drop-in health clinics in illegal slums, like this one in the Shalimar slum, don't just identify diseases like TB and scabies early and help educate mothers in child health care, they validate people's marginal experience[15]. Kindergartens not only provide early learning coaching without which these children would not be eligible for places in the state school system but, through supplying food and uniforms, visibly confer the status of opportunity every child craves. Of course everyone wants to look their best – and, just as in our reality TV culture – most would like to have their fleeting fifteen minutes in the camera's lens. Being noticed, having their story told, seeing their image instantly replayed on the digital camera's screen, are the validation sought. Unlike their British contemporaries, they don't want to hit the 'Delete' button for fear an unflattering image appears on Facebook.

Those working on their behalf in local NGOs would oppose exploitative photography, but know that pictures are a powerful means of informing opinion at home and abroad. For the NGO, as for the journalist, the challenge is to make the image match the personal narrative. Save the Children are also currently researching the impact of representation on target groups they serve in Asia and Africa. Their Photography and Film Manager, Rachel Palmer, admits:

> *There is too often a gap between the images we use for fund-raising purposes and the qualities and the standards we strive for as a development agency… How do we depict need without loss of dignity? How can we depict injustice while inspiring our supporters to respond?*[16].

This is a live issue being discussed in the more politically aware NGOs, though the growth of NGO press departments in the last decade, as the field has become more competitive for attention and income, has tended to produce a contrary effect. Established journalists and filmmakers of my generation, displaced from contracting newsrooms and other mainstream media, have put their expertise to the service of these good causes. This has found the focuses, the pictures and stories, that their former editors are willing to run, but by that same token can easily revert to the default

[15] Source: UNICEF *State of the World's Street Children 2007* reproduced in Sarah Thomas de Benitez (2007) *State of the World's Street Children: Violence* London: Consortium for Street Children
[16] Rachel Palmer, speaking at the Third Frame conference, London College of Communications, 10 March 2010

setting of the heart-rending image. Both platform and PR know ‘what works’. In running those images, as well as formulating them, television and picture editors need to consider this solecism, just as the NGOs have to reconcile these contrary imperatives. The tub-thumping has to be in the same key as the main statement of the piece, endorsing the long-term message, which arguably should be about transforming systems as well as individuals’ opportunities. It is not even enough to empower local organisations sufficiently to supplant the outside organisation. They should also be equipped with the means of challenging and changing their society’s perceptions and political organisation. Clearly nothing could be further from the objectives of commercially cautious and politically risk-averse Western media, but this is the potential – the technology and the understanding - now increasingly available to those working with the poor.

Whereas traditional coverage, however sympathetic, has cast Indians as ‘the crowd’ – as Sharma comments – fuelling our employers’ taste for the exotic ‘other’, there is a growing awareness of what the late Roger Silverstone called ‘the immorality of distance’. If globalisation is to mean anything good, it should portend common cause. Just as the ‘human story’ has become the standard trope of domestic broadcast journalism, it needs to become the default setting for foreign coverage too. Of course television will always trick out its messages with the bells and whistles its paymasters believes the audiences need if they are to pay attention, just as Kolkata street magicians conjure up an audience for the harder fare. The children and the activists understand and accept that in service of their grander purpose. They are more concerned with the tendency of their local politicians and media to ignore the plight of the dispossessed and deny them a voice. The Western media still have the power to make a difference by raising issues and embarrassing the powers that be. The emergence of a new generation of filmmakers in India are making even the most marginalised more familiar with the technology and the process. This is a prospect that does not require a Ross Kemp to get them to talk; it questions whether that is the only way to get a Western audience to listen. The Mariam Laskar story suggests not. There are a million individual stories to tell – always more powerful in the first person - which, collectively, can serve the wider political picture Campbell and the poor call for. This is what we might call ‘collaborative advocacy’.

How collaborative advocacy works in practice is being developed by Hope in Kolkata as I speak. The clinics in these illegal squatter slums are used as foci for community groups to form, that evolve their own platforms and demands, which are filmed. Since these people are mostly illiterate and ill-equipped for political debate, these filmed statements become the key expression of their collective need and identity, framing their demands of and to local government. In Thatcher’s

Britain in the 1980s, the BBC Community Programme Unit for which I then worked offered a similar opportunity to the threatened workforces and communities of the time, putting on television voices and views denied a platform elsewhere. These are objectives few communities disapprove of, then or now, at home or abroad. Our attempts to extend that platform to the dispossessed of the world foundered then, not least on the BBC's failure to develop that benign form of globalisation. That opportunity I believe exists once again, with contemporary improved access to camera technology and means of distribution, enabling us to engage any of our subjects to assert a greater degree of control of their images and, more importantly, the purposes to which they are put. Each story will still survive or fail on its own merits. But the originality of their individual stories and voices clearly remains the poor's best hope. Every slumdog deserves his day.

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