

**"A delightful and charming comedy,
with some great performances. I thoroughly enjoyed myself."**

- Aamir Khan

"Brilliant film... So well executed! Raja Menon is a great storyteller."

- John Abraham

"A charming slap in the face. Barah Aana makes you think."

- Zoya Akhtar

**"A wonderfully funny and extremely relevant film. With exceptional
performances, the actors create the most unlikely heroes."**

- Imran Khan

A COMEDY OF REAL LIFE

BANDRA WEST PICTURES PRESENTS

BARAH AANA

A FILM BY RAJA MENON

www.barahaana.com

WASEERUDDIN SHAH VIJAY RAAZ ARJUN MATHUR

VIOLANTE PLACIDO TANNISHTHA CHATTERJEE JAYATI BHATIA BENJAMIN GILANI MAHABANOOD MODY-KOTWAL

*A Select Media Release through Shringar Films**



Dear cinema



CROSSWORD



INDIAN PRESS

Because Jamal could have given the wrong answer

Sunday, March 8, 2009

From DNA, by Rohena Gera

Mumbai: It's curious the kind of love and hate that *Slumdog* inspired in India when it was first released. So many articles, blogs, comments... It spoke to the conscience of the multiplex elite, particularly sensitised after the horrors of late November. But it seemed to annoy those who may have felt that 'our' misery was being cashed in on by the west. Or that the chest-thumping Arcelor-buying India was having its dirty laundry washed in front of the world.

Now that 'we' have won all these Oscars, the enthusiasm may wash away all traces of the initial indifference the audience showed. Despite the hype, *Slumdog* (millionaire and crorepati combined) earned approximately 9 crore rupees in the first week of its release; and although 60 per cent of the 350 prints released were in Hindi, only 30 per cent of the collections came from the Hindi version. For some reason, Indian audiences, particularly the Hindi audiences, were not swept away by the film.

There is a small independent film releasing this week that serves as an interesting counterpoint to *Slumdog* and may address this question of what *Slumdog* missed. Set in Dharavi, *Barah Aana* is also about faceless India: a driver, a watchman and a waiter. The people who surround us but whom we may not recognise if we saw them on the street. They are all migrants, fatigued to the bone, but with dreams in their eyes. Not far from *Slumdog*, in that they dream big. But that's where the parallel ends...

Slumdog is an an outsider's view of Bombay, the slums, and poverty. It fears poverty, and therefore portrays the slum kids' lives as unmitigated misery. It's how we, the privileged, see the lives of the them. Aren't we lucky to be born where we are? It's true we are. And we should feel guilty and question the injustice built into the system that affords us our comforts. This is what *Slumdog* does so effectively: it appeals to our conscience as the script wends its way around various social ills—from domestic violence to communalism to classism—and it simply doesn't allow us to turn a blind eye.

Yet, for us to leave our seats satisfied, *Slumdog* needs to show the protagonist escape forever the grime and squalor that have turned our insides for the first hour or so. When you leave singing *Jai Ho*, you can leave far behind you the kids who are still waiting in line to use that vile toilet.

To be fair to the film, it is a story, and it has a right to a happy ending. It shouldn't be forced to carry the burden of societal problems that persist. Without its happy ending, it may not have reached the millions that it did. And Azharuddin and Rubina wouldn't have walked the red carpet.

But that happy ending may be exactly why the single screen audiences have not loved the film. Jamal gets to rise above his misfortunes because he is destined to. Just as

some of us were destined or lucky enough to be born where we were. So what does that mean for those who aren't feeling lucky?

While Slumdog reached millions across the globe, Barah Aana has had trouble finding distribution; most likely because it doesn't have the kind of happy ending that allows us to get away from what makes us deeply uncomfortable about our society. Although it is definitely a less miserable film than Slumdog, it doesn't force a hokey happy ending to save our protagonist and make us feel good.

Because everyone doesn't get saved. At least not by getting a crore, and the girl. But it suggests that there is redemption within real life. And happiness without the crore. Unlike Slumdog, Barah Aana is an insider's view. It does not fear poverty as some kind of

awful third world disease. Yes, there is poverty, misery and hardship.

But there are also friendships and laughter, hope and flirtation...

Barah Aana actually enters the homes of our protagonists. And in their kholis we see the relationships that make India India. The forced intimacy of a shared space that grows into a real friendship, the sentimental outburst that shows real vulnerability and despair, the handing over of one's savings without so much as a word said...

The happiness it allows is happiness that is possible. It values small gestures between friends, tenderness towards an unrequited love... and the winning of respect by standing up for oneself. The ultimate difference is that it respects the miserable lives that Slumdog wants to escape. The question is, do we, for some reason, prefer to believe in impossible happy endings instead of seeing joy in the lives we live? Or did a section of Bombay reject Slumdog because it missed what sustains us: a bindaas attitude, humour and friendships?

Cast: Naseeruddin Shah, Vijay Raaz, Arjun Mathur, Tannishtha Chatterjee
Director: Raja Menon
Anupama Chopra, Consulting Editor, Films, NDTV

In Barah Anna, director Raja Menon performs a magic trick. He makes visible all those invisible people who intersect your life everyday and even enter your home but whom you never see – your driver, your watchman, the waiter who brings you your coffee.

The three, Aman the waiter, played by Arjun Mather; Yadav the watchman, played by Vijay Raaz and Shukla the driver, played by Naseeruddin Shah, are friends. Bereft of any family, they look out for each other in the crowded slum where they live. They spend their evenings, drinking and exchanging notes on their lives, especially on Aman's budding romance with an attractive Italian girl who comes to the restaurant.

When Yadav's son in the village takes seriously ill and he is unable to send him money, the three become accidental criminals. And sadly, they discover that crime does pay.

Menon, working from his own script, with excellent dialogue written by Aamir director Raj Kumar Gupta, plays out this grim story as a tragi-comedy. His observations on India's class system are both sharply funny and sad. At one point, when Yadav doing double duty, falls asleep at his post, an intoxicated building resident tells him: Tum watchman logon ki wajah se is desh ki lagi hui hai.

Shukla's memsaab treats him as a sub-species. She uses his services every day but can't tolerate his body odor or even remember his name.

When Yadav requests a loan for his son's treatment, nobody helps. Weeping bitterly, the driver asks why people who live in one crore rupee flats and order 2000 rupees worth of take-out food in one night, can't spare 200 bucks to help him.

The performances are uniformly good. Arjun Mathur is sweetly bumbling as the waiter aspiring for romance and Naseeruddin Shah gives Shukla's rage an innate dignity. But Barah Aana belongs to Vijay Raaz. Why Hindi cinema doesn't utilize this actor more is an enduring mystery.

Vijay as Yadav is gut wrenchingly sad and yet superbly funny – watch how his body language changes once he decides to wrench a decent life out of Mumbai by any means, fair or foul.

I strongly recommend that you watch Barah Aana. It will teach you in the best possible way to treat people with more dignity.

The Hindu- Anuj Kumar

The biggest casualty, as the chasm between the haves and the have-nots deepens, is human dignity. This is what Raja Menon encapsulates in this realistic take on the making of a criminal.

Raja tracks the life of three men, a driver (Naseer again), a waiter (Arjun Mathur) and a watchman (Vijay Raaz), who are robbed of their self-esteem by their masters and circumstances. His basic story is not much different from the masala movies of the 1970s when the hero used to avenge the ill-treatment meted out by the zamindar. Here Raja has shorn all the masala off the premise and put the authentic soul in the credible setting of Mumbai's underbelly. It doesn't mean the audience loses out on the entertainment quotient, for Raja is an intriguing story teller. Like literary writing, he stops short of revealing everything to the audience, and the moment you begin to feel left out he returns to hold your hand. Unfortunately, he consumes too much time in establishing the vulnerability of the protagonists. The film grips in the second half and culminates into a stinging climax. After quite a while Vijay Raaz has given a restrained performance as the friendly watchman who transforms into a conniving kidnapper because the society he guards refuses to help him in his hour of need. Then there is Naseer once more, efficient as ever. Worth a watch!

Barah Aana: Your money's worth in a small movie with a big heart By Kaveree Bamzai, India Today, 20 March 2009

All right. So this is not exactly Aravind Adiga's White Tiger. But it is very much part of the zeitgeist. It is Mumbai's underbelly, which could be the underbelly anywhere in India's metropolises. And it hurts to be there.

Ask the waiter, the driver and the watchman who comprise Raja Menon's unlikely heroes in Barah Aana. The waiter is Arjun Mathur, as Aman. The watchman is Vijay Raaz as Yadav. And the driver, Shuklaji, who doesn't open his mouth until the last moments of the film, is Naseeruddin Shah. Mathur, last seen in Luck by Chance as the bitter struggler, has the sort of sad sack face that is charming as well as appropriately loser-like. Raaz hasn't been in such crackling form for a long time. And Shah just chews up the scenery even without opening his mouth.

The screenplay is by Rajkumar Gupta, who last directed the taut Aamir. The film is an unexpected little gripper, as it traces the arc of how the powerless becomes empowered, learning not to stay quiet, learning to speak up and demand their rights. If not by the right means, then the wrong. *Maangne se kuch nahin milta yaha, chheenna padta hai* (You don't get anything by asking for it, you have to snatch it), says Raaz, who needs money to send home as his son is dying of typhoid. Mathur wants to impress a drug-peddling young Italian who is clearly pulling a fast one on him. And Shuklaji, well, he's just had it with the rude rich bitch, his employer's wife, who treats him worse than vermin. When the apartmentwallahs refuse to lend Raaz money for his dying child, he decides to grab an opportunity that has come his way. The three

are sucked into a life of crime, and there's nothing pathetic about it. It's their assertion of power, their way of getting noticed.

Not all their problems are solved. Nor do they all get their just desserts. Like life, their resolution is also fifty-fifty. So why's the film good? For one, it has black humour. For another, it is liberating to see poor people not as hapless victims of the rich but as aggressive characters. No, not that I am advocating crime as way of life to get ahead. Just as I don't advocate that every spoilt brat run over people with his BMW. It's just that it's about time the underclass was portrayed on the big screen, without necessarily all of them ending up as Dawood Ibrahim or Chhota Shakeel.

The direction is assured. The gutters, the tiny shops, the cheek by jowl chawls are well photographed. And the characters are well researched, down to the local accents. And it's a joy to watch Shah on screen. He inhabits each character like a second skin.

Go watch it. In a very dark way, it's most enjoyable.

By Subhash K. Jha- Bollywood Hungama News Network

A mellow, mirthful at times moving tale of three North Indian migrants, this tale of tantalizing possibilities may not be Mr. Raj Thackeray's idea of an evening out. Dammit, it may not be ANYONE's idea of an entertainer. But for a discerning audience, Barah Aana brings in a sense of un-visited surprise.

There are three main characters, a quiet driver Shukla (Naseeruddin Shah), a watchman Yadav (Vijay Raaz) and a waiter Aman (Arjun Mathur) all driven to the doors of despair but stopped in time by a self-directed sense of humour that saves them from self-destruction. The 3-way interactive story gathers momentum when the trio hits on an age-old formula for survival: crime.

Superbly scripted by Raj Kumar Gupta who recently directed the riveting Aamir, Barah Aana derives its strength from the frailties and vulnerabilities of the three migrant characters who seem to be drawn into the dark side of life without knowing where they're heading. Debutant director Raja Menon seems to view the people in his plot with a reasonable degree of detachment. There's a sense of riveting finesse in the way these unsophisticated characters chart their course without self pity.

Of course the film would've never worked without the cast. What does one say about Naseeruddin Shah without sounding completely like a fan? He's seen in two totally different avatars this week. Naseer's bullied embittered silently-seething driver's part in this film is as distant from his disoriented classical maestro's role in Firaq as only Naseer can make them. Vijay Raaz, always in top form when given to play a man who has seen life without rose-tinted glasses, gives a sly snarling spin to his role. His performance has both bark and bite. Watch Vijay play the watchman.

The youngest and most inexperienced member of the trio Arjun Mathur seen in sensitive parts in Farhan Akhtar's AIDS film Positive and Zoya Akhtar's Luck By Chance has a tough time holding his own against Naseer and Vijay Raaz and also holding his Bihari accent in place. But Mathur leaves a positive impression. Another

riveting performance comes from Tannishtha Chatterjee as the flamboyant Rani who shocks you after her quiet performance in Brick Lane. She should be seen more often.

With the message on migrant's plight Barah Aana would hardly appeal to multiplex audiences. Films on lives of migrants whether it's Muzaffar Ali's Daman or Sudhir Mishra's Dharavi score high as cinematic works but low on mass appeal.

See Barah Aana for its terrific cast, first-rate production values (Preeti Sethi's camera goes through Mumbai's lanes with the least fuss) and the director's firm grip on the grammar of grass-root politics.

Barah Aana - Raja Menon

By Sourav Roy | March 23rd, 2009 |

Empathy, according to the dictionary, is the identification with and understanding of another's situation, feelings, and motives. It is neither a common occurrence in life nor in films. Definitely much rarer than apathy. The emotion or the lack of it that makes us look the other way most of the times. That is why your heart both shrinks in shame and swells up in warmth to see it in such abundance in a movie.

Barah Aana by Raja Menon is a tragic-comedy about three migrants from Uttar Pradesh who share a kholi in Dharavi. Shuklaji (Naseeruddin Shah) is a driver who has nothing bright in his life except his immaculately white uniform. Yadav (Vijay Raaz) is the doorman in a housing society where he is also the resident doormat. Aman (Arjun Mathur) is a waiter in a fancy coffee bar where he serves cappuccino Italiano to Kate (Violante Placido) and dreams about being with her on a regular basis. Money is always in short supply and all three have learned to live with it till one day it slaps it in their faces. Yadav's son has fallen seriously ill at the village and apparently nobody in the whole housing society can afford to pay him an advance of a couple of hundred rupees. Kate quietly shuts the door on Aman's romantic advances, saying she needs money more than a man in her life. One event leads to another and three of them chance upon kidnapping, which they decide to take up as a second profession. Meanwhile, the odds are slowly stacking up against them and when they try to pull off the biggest one, they get caught. But in a surprising turn of events, they have the last laugh. Cruel humour makes the climax genuinely gasp-worthy. What would be more cruel is to give away the ending here, so I won't.

This second feature from Raja Menon took seven years in making and the preparation shows. The script twists and turns in the most unexpected ways, yet manages to keep it real. The dialogues by Aamir director Raj Kumar Gupta rings true with ringing trite. Priya Seth's cinematography and the sync sound keep it grungy and down-to-earth. What impresses one most is the care that has been taken about casting. The script started with Naseer in mind. "If I didn't get Naseer, I would have reworked the script," said the director. But thankfully Naseer said yes the moment he read the script. Casting for Aman proved to be a problem. "Most young actors are nowadays built like trucks. Realism has gone out." Says Raja ruefully, till he found the promising Arjun Mathur, last seen as Abhimanyu in Luck by Chance. With Kate, played by Violante Placido, an Italian actress, came the little connection to The Godfather as her mother had played Apollonia, the Sicilian beauty Michael Corleone marries while exiled to Sicily. Even the smallest of characters jump out of the screen

with realism. The casting director Nandini Shrikent assisted by Sushma Reddy, the third assistant, surely deserve a round of applause.

The performances are uniformly good. Naseeruddin Shah's character is a man of few words but his expressions speak volumes. Arjun Mathur is sweet and convincing as the bumbling young man. Vijay Raaz is over the top at times but brilliant throughout. Rani played by Tannishtha Chatterjee (Aman's neighbour who has the hots for him), the drunk man played by Ashwin Kaushal, Jayati Bhatia as the harridan malkin of Shuklaji deserve special mentions too.

Why would you want to watch this movie? Because despite the media's attempt to pigeonhole the film into a 'comedy', 'another Dharavi story', a 'masala' film, or a 'controversial' story, it manages to defy genres, bust cliches and wells up a bunch of mixed feelings inside you, just like any good film. Because it will remind you that everybody's life, no matter how rich or poor, is only three fourth or barah aanas complete, missing char aanas - unfulfilled dreams, repressed desires and depressing tedium. If nothing else, it will make you treat the almost invisible denizens of your life – the newspaperwallahs, the doodhwallahs, the watchmen, the drivers with a little more dignity. It did for me.

EXCERPTS

“Vijay Raaz got his second festival outing in Raja Menon's tightly narrated *Barah Aana*, the story of three have-nots (Raaz, Naseeruddin Shah, Arjun Mathur) who decide to make life better for themselves by extorting money from the haves.... Watch Raaz graduate from *bidi-maachis* to cigarettes and lighters, watch his corresponding amplification in swagger, and then wonder why we see so little of this marvellous actor these days, even in the multiplexes.” – **Baradwaj Rangan, noted film critic, Indian Express**

“After winning accolades for his performance in A Wednesday, Naseeruddin Shah is now all set to get an encore for his sterling performance in Raja Menon's maiden venture as a director - *Barah Aana*.” – **Sampurn Media (entertainment news agency)**

“The film is comparable to the Brazilian 'City of God' in that it manages to do for Bombay what the latter does for Rio de Janeiro. It is funky and hip, and yet socially relevant and daring as a film. It is a big achievement, and will be the biggest film to come out of India since *Monsoon Wedding*.” - **Amana Khan (Pakistani Filmmaker)**

Wealth Hazard

INTERVAL BY CHAKO : Beware: He's all over bollywood, informed and informing

Monday, March 30, 2009

Aravind Adiga's Booker Prize winning *The White Tiger* delves into the frustration of a driver who resorts to killing his employer, a well-off local politician, when out of options (read: means to survive). Rumour has it, many local and international film production companies are vying for the rights of making this into a movie next year. Last week's release, Raja Menon's *Baraah Ana*, set in Mumbai, a gem of a film, wonderfully captures the plight of a driver who is treated horribly every day, a docile building watchman who notices vast wealth squandered while he can barely afford medical expenses for his family, and a hopeful waiter whose only mistake is to fall in love without the economic means to do so.

In the late 19th century, E.M. Forster on a visit to India famously remarked (at the fact that at the height of empire, approximately 35,000 British soldiers governed over 200 million Indians), "why don't they just cut our heads off?"

Nothing creates more panic in elite India than occasional newspaper stories of drivers, servants and cooks, killing members of households they worked in and making off with their money. High society banter is filled with discourse on how this could happen. Given there are perhaps 250 million domestic help in cities across India (surviving on a few thousand a month) and perhaps 50 million who can afford having domestic help (with an exponential earning at least a hundred times that of their servants), in the vein of the Forster comment, perhaps the question to ask at posh dinner parties is not why servants kill their bosses but why doesn't it happen more often?

India's poor have fascinated western media, sociologists, philosophers, the French, and most recently, Hollywood. The question asked was simple and continues from movies like *Salaam Bombay* to *City of Joy* to Satyajit Ray and now *Slumdog...*, "How can anyone live like this and how can anyone in privileged Indian society allow it to happen?" Since the phenomenal rise of modern India, the children of cable, cell phones, 8% growth and \$15 million (Armani wearing) Shah Rukh Khan global blockbusters shot in Manhattan, no one in our cinema bothered to ask about those who didn't benefit from new India- the "menial labor" as sociologists define maids and drivers etc. Those who saw films made about the boundless opportunity of success, wealth and fame available to the middle classes (Porches in London, penthouses in Malaysia, the norm for the young hero in today's cinema), those who saw shiny Hondas, Raheja skyscrapers, Fendi Boutiques and Vogue magazine enjoyed by those that pass them everyday - but remained as poor and as limited as 1980's socialist India.

The trouble with the country suddenly flushed with new money was that those that continued to live in shanties were in awe or jealous at the possibilities of magnificent wealth, suddenly round the corner (malls, multiplexes, boutiques, hotels). A recent magazine photo from Liz Hurley's wedding sums it up -200 Rajasthani beggars

staring at 100 trays of dry martinis being carried by liveried waiters for the posh guests to sip over snooker.

Very few countries in the world (except perhaps sub-Saharan Africa) have the kind of in-your-face poverty that hit foreigners two minutes out of the airport. Whatever the national statistics may suggest in improvements of people climbing above poverty lines and malnutrition numbers reducing, the fact is, under hoardings advertising some luxury skyscraper with special Mercedes parking and private pools, there live, cooking and defecating on the streets, masses of impoverished homeless. This in the wealthiest neighborhoods of our wealthiest city. One can imagine what the poorer neighborhoods might look like. Except, nobody did. Nobody cared to imagine what life in post-liberalised India was for those who were not a part of, as Thomas Freidman calls it, 'the world's greatest middle class'. And there was good reason for it. The filmmakers themselves were part of the educated elite, riding the new wave making the new India and they wanted to tell autobiographical stories of young people who worked for and created money and fame out of nothing. India had finally broken through its provincial chains of caste, arranged marriage, to a land of opportunity for anyone willing to work hard enough to make it. This was the new American land of opportunity for the educated, English speaking and literate. There was no time to make movies about cooks and maids and drivers and waiters.

Increasingly though, after the economic bubble has burst and recession is making us aware of how much of India's potential was fantasy vs. reality, some artists (like Mr. Adiga and Mr. Menon) are beginning to examine those who got nothing from India's boom. Finally, a set of storytellers from the very same middle class are trying to understand the thankless masses whose sweating and rigor were the cog in the wheels running today's modern urban India.

Finally, they get a voice to have their stories told.

Perhaps the question to ask at posh dinner parties is not why servants kill their bosses but why doesn't it happen more often?

INTERNATIONAL PRESS

Memo From Mumbai

Exploring India's Prosperity Through the Eyes of the Invisible Men

From the New York Times, By ANAND GIRIDHARADAS

Published: August 14, 2008

Link: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/15/world/asia/15india.html?ref=world>

MUMBAI, India — Here in the Taj Mahal Palace & Tower, what you think of the new India may depend on whether you are the person having soap squeezed onto your hands or the person squeezing the soap.

In every men's washroom at the Taj is a helper. As you approach the sink, he salutes you. Before you can turn on the tap, he does it for you. Before you can apply soap, he presses the dispenser. Before you can get a towel, he dangles one. As you leave, he salutes you again and mutters: "Right, sir. O.K., sir. Thank you, sir."

Step outside, and you see sedans reeking of new affluence. Inside are drivers, many of them asleep because they work 20-hour shifts, waking up at 6 a.m. to catch a train, taking the boss to and from work, then to his dinner, then to drinks, then dropping him off at home at 1 a.m. and catching a taxi to go back to the tenements.

At 1 a.m. back in the boss's apartment, the hallways are often littered with servants and sweepers who work inside by day but sleep outside by night. They learn to sleep on cold tile, with tenants stepping over them when returning from evenings out.

India may be changing at a disorienting pace, but one thing remains stubbornly the same: a tendency to treat the hired help like chattel, to behave as though some humans were born to serve and others to be served.

"Indians are perhaps the world's most unde mocratic people, living in the world's largest and most plural democracy," Sudhir Kakar and Katharina Kakar, two well-known scholars of Indian culture, wrote in a recent book, "The Indians: Portrait of a People."

The subject, usually overlooked, has been raised by a provocative new film depicting India from a servant's-eye view. The movie, "Barah Aana," by Raja Menon, tells the story of three migrants to Mumbai from the ailing villages of northern India. They work as a chauffeur, a waiter and a security guard, sending most of their earnings home. They are heroes in their villages, but in Mumbai they are invisible men, enduring the callousness that comes with being an accessory to other people's lives.

In one scene, a wealthy homemaker, plump and accessorized with Louis Vuitton, zips through this city, formerly Bombay, in the back of her black sport utility vehicle, pattering on the phone. Suddenly, her chauffeur slams on the brakes, jostling the woman and interrupting her conversation.

“That beggar child came in front of my car,” she explains indignantly to her friend after resuming her call. “That idiotic driver just put on the brake.”

In another scene, a security guard, Yadav, discovers that his son is ill and will die if he does not receive treatment costing \$150. He goes around his building asking for loans from tenants who think nothing of spending \$40 on pizza.

The tenants, glued to their televisions, treat him like a puppy to be shooed away.

That night, as he sits with friends and fills himself with drink, he contemplates what it would mean to bury a son.

“Why is it,” he wails, “that people can only feel their own pain, not others’?”

The director’s answer is that India has something deeper than a poverty problem. It has, in his view, a “dehumanization” problem. In an interview, he described India’s employers and servants as living as “two different species.”

The movie’s first half chronicles India’s small humiliations with a chilling realism. The second half prophesies an outbreak of violent revolts in a country where the elite have long comforted themselves with the thought that the poor will stoically accept their lot. The director’s belief is that such stoicism is drying up as the rich become ever more visibly rich, and the left-behind are ever more aware of their deprivation.

The poor were long told that their poverty was deserved, Mr. Menon, the director, said. But now they see wealth everywhere, and they are starting to believe that poverty is circumstantial and can be reversed.

“That’s when the dam bursts,” he said, “the moment the person feels, ‘It’s not true that this is my place.’ ”

Such a moment seemed to occur one recent evening. The movie was shown to an audience of young, middle-class Indians, representatives of the country’s new prosperity. But one of them, a marketing manager named Mitesh Thakkar, 30, arrived with a taxi driver he often employs, and he injected diversity into the screening by inviting the driver in to watch the film.

Mr. Thakkar reacted as one might when one’s social class has been indicted. The film was good but “one-sided,” he said. “Maybe there are 70 percent of the people who treat them bad, but there are 30 percent who treat them good.”

But for the taxi driver, Javed Ali, 20, the movie was an instant classic.

“This story is the truth,” he said. “Whatever was in my mind, the movie showed.”

Mr. Ali said he knew the film’s humiliations firsthand. Sometimes people take his taxi and refuse to pay. Sometimes they are drunk and mistreat him. Some simply scream at him and say, “You’re no good,” he said.

After the screening, some audience members, including Mr. Thakkar and Mr. Ali, went out for dinner. (Perhaps it was the film's influence: to dine with a taxi driver in India is to cross a rarely traversed line.)

The other diners wanted to know what Mr. Ali thought of the film. He answered, rather casually, that he understood their hunger, after so many years of humiliation, for revenge.

"He said the part where the driver kidnaps his female boss — that he did the right thing," Mr. Thakkar said later, recalling Mr. Ali's comments. "Even though he got caught, she needed that kidnapping."

On that evening, at that table, with prosperous and poor side by side, India's parallel realities fleetingly, ominously collided. It did not seem, from this admittedly limited evidence, that they would be reconciled anytime soon.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/india/2682688/Indian-wealthy-under-fire-for-cruelty-to-servants-in-new-Bollywood-film-Barah-Aana.html>

Telegraph

6 Sep 2008

Indian wealthy under fire for cruelty to servants in new Bollywood film Barah Aana

By Amrit Dhillon in Delhi

In all the thousands of glitzy Bollywood films one character is rarely found: the driver consumed with hatred for his stingy master who makes fun of his accent, dress sense and body odour

Yet millions of maids, drivers, and servants slave for rich Indians every day without anyone knowing what they think about their dreadful living conditions and unkind bosses.

Now a new film and a prize-winning novel have changed things - brutally laying bare what the poor feel about the rich, but never dare to say out loud.

Raja Menon's film Barah Aana ("Short-Changed") and Aravind Adiga's novel White Tiger are searing indictments of how affluent Indians behave towards their domestic staff.

They offer, for the first time, a provocative insight into how the "have-nots" perceive the new India - a fast-changing and rich society where wealth is flaunted and where there is no place for them.

Mr Adiga shows a wealthy couple setting up Balram, their illiterate driver from an impoverished village, to take the rap for a crime the wife commits.

Drunk after a night out, she insists on driving. When she hits and kills a beggar child who runs across the road, the family compel Balram to sign a confession saying that he was behind the wheel.

Balram's life is already difficult. While he ferries his master around Delhi with bags stuffed with millions of rupees to use as bribes, he is castigated for losing a five rupee coin in the car.

A wide-eyed Balram sees the immense wealth and opportunity in the city – the malls, restaurants and hotels - and knows that he can never have access to any of it. Even walking into a shopping mall requires mustering up courage.

"What is astonishing, given the mad disparities of wealth, is the phenomenally low level of crime by servants," said Mr Adiga whose novel is on the long list for this year's Man Booker prize and is hotly tipped to make it to the final short list next week.

Servants often endure cruelty and indignities. Having cooked, cleaned, mopped, polished, washed, baked, dusted, and ironed all day, seven days a week for a monthly salary of 2,500 rupees (£30), if a maid asks for a day off, the reaction is frequently one of outrage.

At meal times, "mehsaib" doles out the food onto their plates lest the servants eat too much. Families dine in restaurants while making the "ayah" or nanny (taken along to mind the children) stand beside their table.

"You haven't really had films depicting the world from a servant's point of view," said film critic Parsa Venkateshwar Rao. "Even if you have a driver as a main character, he turns out later to be a prince."

Departing from tradition, Mr Menon's film takes a brutal look at how the poor in Bombay, a teeming metropolis full of extremes, cope with their everyday problems.

When Yadav tries to borrow money – the equivalent of what a family would spend on a pizza - from the tenants in the building where he works, they brush him off without a thought for the fact that he needs it for his son's medical treatment.

Mr Menon, who plans to release his film in the UK, said: "Some employers here don't even call drivers by their name. They'll just summon him with 'Driver!'" But I'm seeing small reactions to these indignities. People want to be treated as human."