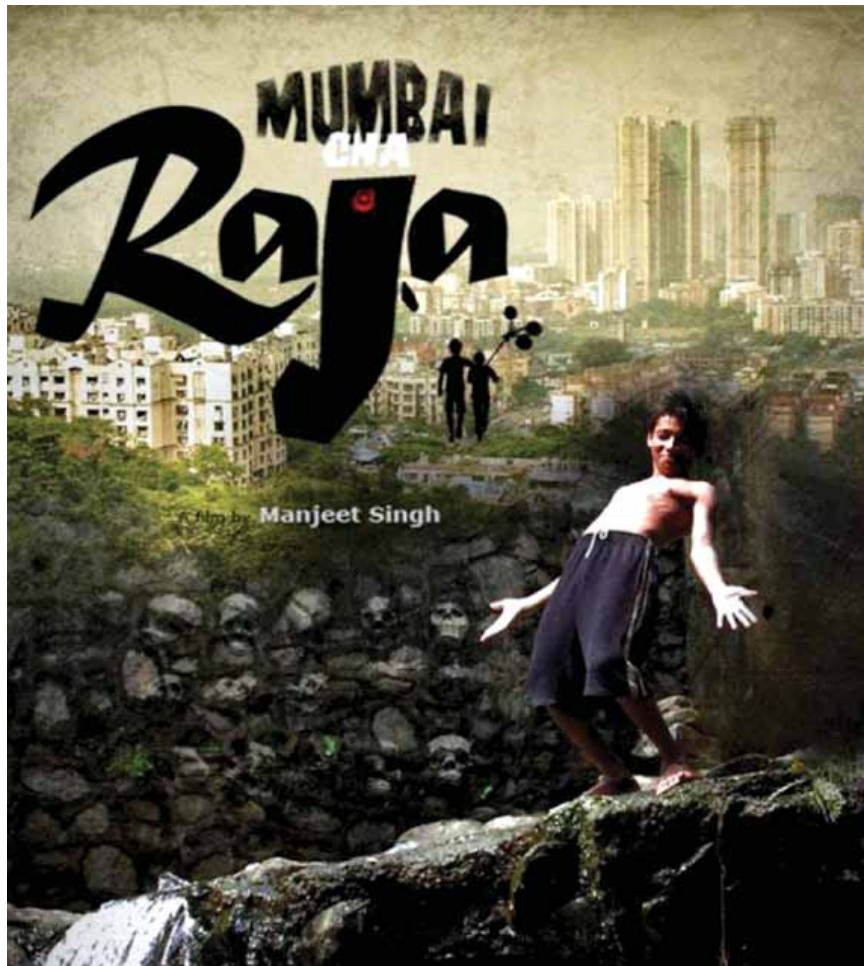


cinema



* A promotional poster from *Mumbai Cha Raja*, directed by Manjeet Singh, and playing at the ongoing Abu Dhabi Film Festival.

Child is the father of man

Mumbai Cha Raja's main protagonists are children, but this is not a children's film, says

Gautaman Bhaskaran

Often there is a misconception in India that child protagonists in a film means that the movie concerned is children's

cinema. This fallacy has remained and refused to go away, despite some brilliant fare by masters like Satyajit Ray in which young boys and girls may have held the centre screen, but their dramatics have

been savoured and sought after by adults as they have by children. But of course.

At the Abu Dhabi Film Festival's sixth edition, now on, Manjeet Singh's *Mumbai Cha Raja*

(Mumbai's King) lends itself to the debate on whether child actors playing title or important roles will at once give the movie a children's cinema tag. Singh's work is by no means for children alone.

Singh's hero is Rahul, a teen whose drunken father and long suffering mother could hardly be expected to make a happy home for the boy. He drops out of school, befriends a younger boy who sells balloons, and together they set out to lead a life of pranks, deriving from these what can be seen as harmless fun.

Often battered by his father, though loved and cared for by his stepmother, Rahul roams the streets of Mumbai, where money is the mantra and crime a way of life, particularly in the city's slums. Rahul and balloon-seller Arbaaz help Singh explore this grimy underbelly during one rain-soaked Ganesh festival. Singh does uncover the fascinating life beyond this dark existence.

There is a wonderful camaraderie among the people, whose poverty and misery seldom stop them from caring and sharing. And when Rahul's kid stepbrother is found missing, the crisis the family faces serves as a reminder that tragedy unites men, whatever be the animosity among them.

Although *Mumbai Cha Raja* does appear to have been inspired by films like *City of God* and *Slumdog Millionaire*, Singh disagrees during a freewheeling chat at Abu Dhabi's magnificent Emirates Palace Hotel.

"I have been inspired by life around me", he says, the note of conviction unmistakable in his gentle voice. "Some of the events you see in my movie have been taken from my own childhood, the pranks we used to play with friends. I distinctly remember the slums close to where I grew up in Mumbai, which was next to Film City.

"The whole place used to come alive during the Ganesh Festival, and I wanted to capture this beautiful cocktail of joy and sorrow, celebration and misfortune..."

Singh sets his story of a dysfunctional family against this backdrop of gaiety and merriment of the religious festival, contrasting the cheerlessness of the slum existence with moments of cheerfulness.

There is this television mechanic, who is drunk for most of his waking hours, and his second wife (the first had killed herself) works as a maid, stoically bearing the humiliation and the beating heaped on her by her husband. She puts on a brave smile.

Rahul played by Rahul Bairagi is her stepson, and she also has her own little child. Rahul runs away from home, unable to bear his father's beastliness, and how this

leads to a crisis forms the rest of the tale.

Interestingly, a lot of the film's authenticity comes from the fact that Singh was able to find a slum boy, Rahul, whose life ran parallel to the story.

Rahul has an alcoholic father, a mother who has to frequently disappear from her own house to escape her husband's cruelty and a home that is far from happy. As Singh says, Rahul was able to emote with considerable ease, and together with Arbaaz Khan, essaying the balloon-selling boy, Arbaaz, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, the battered boy seems extraordinarily real. Ditto Arbaaz, who in real life does sell balloons next to where Singh lives.

As Singh avers, his original narrative was different: the woman loses her kid and Rahul, a neighbourhood boy, offers to help her find the little one. But as Jaihind Kumar and Singh were penning the plot, they thought it best to get all of them together in one family, one unhappy family.

An engineer by profession, a painter by passion, Singh finally found his own little bliss when he decided to push his paintings into motion pictures, perhaps using his mechanical skills to bind the frames together into an impatient image which talked and sang and danced. All these must have fired his zeal so much that he has spent some Rs800,000 on making *Mumbai Cha Raja*, all his own money. There have been no sponsors, no funding agencies.

The effort has paid off splendidly. The movie premiered at the Toronto Film Festival, and Abu Dhabi, where it plays in the section titled *New Horizons*, is the film's second international halt.

An avid movie buff, Singh loves the cinema from Iran, East Asia, Latin America and the Philippines, as he does Ray's and Kurosawa's classics. A recent Indian work that he particularly liked was *Miss Lovely*, which premiered at one of the sidebars in Cannes this May.

Singh has no immediate plans, but has a collection of scripts he has written. But how does he get his ideas. "I get them from something that moves me, something that touches me", he answers. Literature is not his forte. "So far my ideas have emerged from the life around me".

Although he is not definitive, one can harbour a guess as to what his next movie is going to be all about. "I am really disturbed by this class conflict and violence. I am shocked and baffled that we could in this day and age be so backward and so atrociously narrow-minded".

Are we so stupid, Singh poses the question.

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