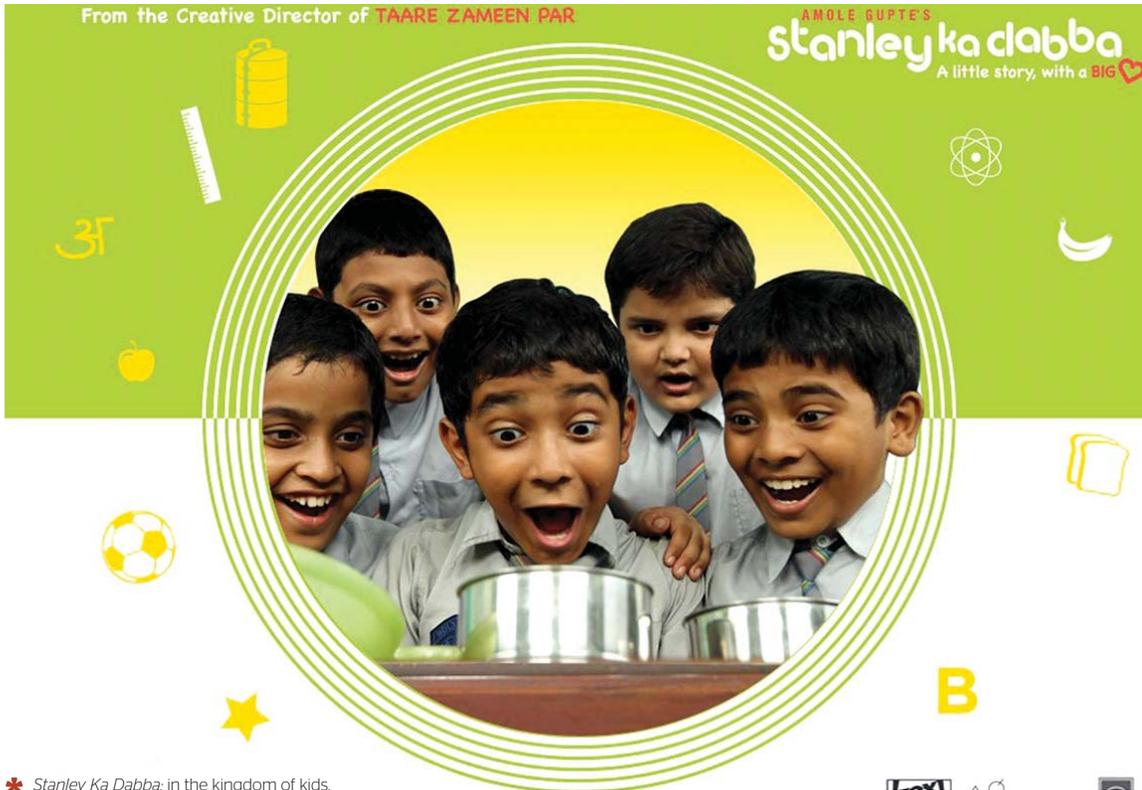


cinema



* *Stanley Ka Dabba*: in the kingdom of kids.

Labouring over lunch

Stanley Ka Dabba tries to take us into the sad world of child workers, though rather half-heartedly, rues **Gautaman Bhaskaran**

There is this little lad that I see every morning while I jog in Chennai. Unkempt and barely 14, Murugan, as he calls himself, can be seen setting up his mobile restaurant at a street corner that meets a vital arterial road on which Tamil Nadu state's chief ministers and top bureaucrats drive through every day. Murugan, who works for an uncle of his, leaves for school later in the day, but returns in the afternoon to run the eatery selling south Indian snacks, like idly, dosai, puri and pongal. Murugan is one among the millions of child workers in India.

Independent estimates say

there are 50-60mn child labourers in the country, about 12mn of them working in some of the most dangerous industries, like firecrackers and glassware.

Many of them are barely 10 or 12 years old, and are forced to toil 14 hours a day in gruelling conditions. Moin Khan, 10, was one, who was recently beaten to death by his uncle-employer in Delhi, because he was slow at rolling beedis in the sweatshop where he had to slog. Moin's parents in Bihar sent him away to Delhi when he was just seven, and he had not seen them in three years. He died without seeing them.

Amole Gupte's *Stanley Ka Dabba*

(*Stanley's Lunch Box*) sets out to awaken us to this grim Indian scenario, where contrary to the much touted "Incredible India" and "India Shining" political slogans, children lead dark lives that remind us of Charles Dickens' Victorian England. Little boys and girls were often cruelly treated there. In an important way, Gupte's work is socially relevant and fits into what I would term entertainment with meaning.

Gupte, who was the creative director and scriptwriter for Aamir Khan's helming debut, *Taare Zameen Par*, says he shot *Stanley Ka Dabba* with hundreds of schoolchildren on Saturdays,

Sundays and other holidays, "unobtrusively capturing them in their kingdom". Made on an unbelievably small budget and shot on a DSLR camera, Canon 7D, the film used no artificial lighting or props — à la *Dogma 95* that European directors, Lars Von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg among others founded to take cinema back to its unpretentious roots.

But Gupte himself does not sound modest. Rather, he is quite pompous — and he does not care to hide it. His movie starts with a reference to some Indian cinema classics, such as Ritwick Ghatak's *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and Damle's and Fattelal's *Sant Tukaram*. And Gupte says unabashedly that he is trying to enter the same league decades later. His film then goes on to show a catchy animation by Gitanjali Rao, before embarking on a school journey with boys.

The children are naturals, and Gupte's son, Partho, has done a splendid job as 10-year-old Stanley. Expressive without being overtly emotional, he draws you into his sweet and sour world. Which pretty much shines by the day, when he is at school with friends and teachers who adore him. But as dusk falls, Stanley's magic moments disappear into the depressive, seedy roadside restaurant that his uncle owns.

Stanley's parents are dead, and his uncle is not really his uncle, and he beats the boy for the smallest of offences, even for harmless playfulness. However, like Chennai's Murugan, Stanley is

allowed to attend school.

At school, everything is hunky-dory, but for his Hindi master, Babubhai Verma, played by Gupte himself. Verma is an insensitive glutton. If he admonishes Stanley for being a left-hander, he orders him to stay out of school for failing to bring his own "dabba" or snack pack. Verma, of course, brings nothing himself, gorging on the food the other teachers bring or, worse, polishing off his students' lunch. His ravenous appetite spares none, and knows no decency.

Fed up with Verma's nasty habit of eating up whatever they bring from home, the boys find a hideout to have their lunch, misleading the master into a merry march. Hungry and angry at being fooled every afternoon, he finally catches up with them to dish out a harsh punishment.

Stanley, who is the poorest of the lot, but the brightest, is singled out and told to attend class only if brings his own food. The boy, already at a loss, often drinking water to quieten his growling stomach when he is too embarrassed to accept his friends' snacks, is left wandering the streets at school hours.

In some ways, the story is engaging, but slips on characterisation and script. Along with the food, Gupte stuffs into Verma mannerisms and attitude that are at best silly and exaggerated. No teacher is going to puff and huff around a large school campus to grab a bite from a student's lunch box as Verma is shown doing. Nor will any teacher hug her fiancée outside her school campus with the boys prying on her — as Divya Dutta's Rosy Miss does. (I found her aping Simi in Raj Kapoor's *Mera Naam Joker*.) If Divya Jagdale essays science teacher Miss Iyer with the same clichéd stupidity that yesteryear Bollywood movies (like *Padosan*) portrayed Tamils, Rahul Singh just does not jell as the principal. He appears too self-conscious and weak for the role.

Yes, the boys are lovely, acting with a natural ease that will shame adults. It is not easy to handle children in cinema, and Gupte must be credited for this. Not many have been able to do this as well as Satyajit Ray and Vittoria De Sica once did.

Finally, as much as the school antics are enjoyable in *Stanley Ka Dabba*, I certainly missed a sense of balance in it. Stanley's other life at the eatery is treated too casually to make the impact one would have expected from a work that purports to draw us to the harsh reality of child workers. In his eagerness to keep the boy's dark side in the dark till the close, Gupte ends up finishing most of his running time at school.

(Gautaman Bhaskaran has been writing on Indian and foreign cinema for over three decades, and may be contacted at gautamanbhaskaran@yahoo.in)