

Children of the Pyre: Rajesh S. Jala's Documenting of India's Caste System

Robert Cross

Doshisha University, Faculty of Global and Regional Studies, Kyoto, Japan, email: rcross@mail.doshisha.ac.jp

Abstract

In the decades following Indian Independence in 1947, documentary filmmaking in India became synonymous with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's nation building project. Documentarians made bland films about steel mills and dams and shied away from contentious themes such as the caste system and untouchability. As a result, documentary in India became a much-maligned genre. From the 1980s on, however, younger filmmakers such as Anand Patwardhan, have begun to concern themselves with the pressing social issues facing modern Indian society. More recently an emerging generation of filmmakers, many of them influenced by Patwardhan, has taken upon itself the task of examining some of the darker aspects of Indian society such as caste and untouchability. Rajesh S. Jala (born 1970) is among this generation of young directors that seeks to investigate and report on some of the social problems of the modern India economic powerhouse. Jala's award-winning documentary *Children of the Pyre* (2008) shows the lives of untouchable children from the Dom community in Varanasi who are forced to burn corpses at Manikarnika Ghat, the busiest cremation ground in India. This paper looks at how Jala went about making the film and explores some of the ethical implications that arise from making a document about a disempowered community.

Keywords: Rajesh S. Jala; documentary; caste system; India

1. Introduction: Rajesh Jala and new Indian documentary

During the three decades or more following Independence in August 1947, documentary filmmaking in India became associated with the paternal output of the Films Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (renamed the Films Division in 1948). The FD had been established under the auspices of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, the socialist architect of the new India who "sincerely believed that the short film could be used . . . to further the interests of a developing nation just as it was used in wartime for propaganda purposes" (Narwekar 1992: 26). Consequently, a pattern was set that made documentary films synonymous with such 'five-year-plan' topics as steel mills, dams, and agricultural productivity. As a result, disillusionment with the heavy-handed Nehruvian ideology informing the FD's output set in (MacLay

2004: para. 7). The preoccupation during the Nehruvian era (1947-64) and the decade after with building the nation and fostering intercommunal harmony meant that potentially divisive issues—the caste system and untouchability in particular—were taboo for filmmakers. This situation began to change in the 1980s when documentarians such as Anand Patwardhan and others like Deepa Dhanraj, Meera Dewan, Tapan Sinha and Suhasini Mulay, who approached their filmmaking as a form of social activism, shook off the yoke of official sponsorship and control and found their independent voices. These filmmakers set about redefining the style, content, purpose and remit of documentary filmmaking in India, steering it away from bland and paternalistic exposition towards searing investigation of social ills. Patwardhan's documentary *Bombay: Our City* (1985), which details the oppressed lives of slum dwellers in Bombay, set an important new benchmark in investigative reportage. Now, this emerging generation of documentary filmmakers, following

the example set by Patwardhan and others, is making films that show Indian society in all its problematic complexity. A landmark film in this context is Stalin K's documentary *India Untouched: Stories of a People Apart* (2007), which shows the continuing and ubiquitous existence of untouchability and the violence and prejudice faced by dalits every day in every part in modern India.

Another filmmaker of this emerging generation who has sought to raise public awareness of uncomfortable caste-related themes is Rajesh S. Jala, the subject of this paper. Rajesh S. Jala (born 1970) was among the more than 300,000 Kashmiri Hindu Pundits forced to abandon everything and flee for their lives in the early 1990s as a result of attacks by Mujahadeen insurgents. Jala ended up in a refugee camp in New Delhi where he endured eight difficult years living in intolerable conditions. Longing to become a documentary filmmaker, he began to teach himself the necessary skills to become a cameraman and director. He has now been making documentaries for more than twelve years. His choice of themes point to his humanistic interest in individuals or groups that face marginalization or prejudice in Indian society, whether the inmates of a psychiatric institution in Kashmir or the Hindu widows living out their last days in Varanasi awaiting death. My concern in this paper is with his 2008 film *Children of the Pyre*, the film that secured his international reputation as a filmmaker. *Children*, which depicts the lives of untouchable children in Varanasi whose work is to cremate bodies, has received worldwide acclaim, winning prizes at numerous film festivals around the world.

The discussion below will proceed in the following way. In section two I give a brief description of the key features of the Hindu caste system and locate the untouchable community to which the children in the film belong within the Hindu socio-religious hierarchy. I also describe the nature of the work conducted by the children at the cremation ground and how this affects the way in which they are viewed and treated by caste Hindus. Section three, which draws upon an interview about the film that I conducted with Mr. Jala, describes and examines five points concerned with the making of *Children*: 1) how Jala came to take the lives of the Dom children as his theme; 2) the problems related to the local people and

community that he had to overcome both before and during the shooting; 3) the content of the film; 4) the modes of representation adopted by Jala in his direction and camerawork; and 5) Jala's intention in making the film. In section four, I look at the ethical implications of making documentaries about disempowered individuals such the children in Varanasi and examine how different modes of representation reflect the relationship between filmmaker and (subaltern) subject.

2. Caste and the dom community

In contrast to Stalin K's *India Untouched*, which is a 'horizontal' depiction of untouchability across the whole sub-continent, Jala's *Children* is a 'vertical' case study of one particular dalit community located at the Manikarnika Ghat, India's busiest cremation ground, next to the River Ganges in Varanasi. The film reveals the grim lives of seven boys from the untouchable Dom community whose job is to cremate corpses all day, every day. Jala's film is an understated yet forceful and account of the gruelling struggle of these children to earn enough rupees to support not only themselves but also their families, which often have alcoholic and drug-dependent fathers as their heads. The film is a damning report on the iniquitous operation of the Hindu caste system in the microcosm of the cremation ground, yet it is also a more general indictment of untouchability. In this section, I describe the location and reputation of the Dom community within the Hindu socio-religious hierarchy, and the nature of the mortuary work they carry out, since these matters underpin my discussion of Jala's film.

The Hindu caste system is a highly complex and contested socio-religious hierarchy, and a thorough description of it lies outside the scope of this paper. For present purposes, it is sufficient to note that Hindu society is divided into groups, known as varnas (castes), with varying degrees of respectability and circles of social intercourse. The four primary castes, ranked in descending order of supposed prestige and purity, are the brahman (priests and scholars), kshatriya (warriors), vaishya (farmers and merchants), and shudra (labourers). Ranked below the castes and thus excluded from the varna system are the literally outcaste "untouchables" whose touch or even shadow, as orthodox belief has it, can defile caste Hindus. All

Hindus, both with or without caste, are further subdivided into thousands of occupation-specific and endogamous clans, tribes and communities known as *jāti* (Dumont 1980). The supposed uncleanness of the untouchables derives from the impure occupations they are “born to” in their given *jāti*. No work is more polluted than that of mortuary labourer or funeral attendant, the occupation traditionally assigned to the members of the Dom community. Consequently, the Dom have always been treated with contempt not only by members of the four castes but also by members of other outcaste groups. The members of the Dom *jāti*, therefore, occupy the lowest and most oppressed stratum of Hindu society in Varanasi.

The Dom funeral attendants earn money at the ghat in two ways. Firstly, they receive payment for performing certain essential mortuary tasks, namely arranging and constructing the cremation pyre from sandalwood logs; providing the chief mourner (traditionally the eldest son of the deceased) with the never-extinguished fire of the cremation ground with which he ignites the pyre; and tending the pyre carefully throughout the cremation in order to ensure the complete and continuous burning of the body with the least number of the expensive fragrant logs. Secondly, as the anthropologist Jonathan P. Parry describes in his *Death in Banaras*, they also remunerate themselves by claiming possession of certain traditional perquisites of the work which include:

the shroud, the bier and its appurtenances, and five [carbonized charcoal] logs on the fire. More valuable than these, however, is the right to sift and wash the ashes for the gold and silver which was left on the corpse in the form of rings, jewellery or other ornaments. (Parry 1994: 91)

As Parry notes, the eagerness with which the Dom funeral attendants have always laid claim to these perks has given them an “infamous reputation for rapacity” (ibid.: 90). The adult Dom labourers take possession of the heavier items (the charcoal logs and bier) and the most valuable (the gold and silver). The Dom children, for their part, spirit away from under the noses of the Dom adults and the mourners the easiest item to ‘lift’, namely the embroidered funerary shrouds, which they sell to local shopkeepers for recycling. In Jala’s film, we witness the seven boys engaged not only in burning corpses but also in this so-called “shroud picking.”

The profits from snatching the coverings are very slim; the boys receive a mere two rupees for each ‘recovered’ shroud, which the Manikarnika shopkeepers clean and resell for 25-30 rupees. Moreover, the boys are frequently beaten and abused by both irate mourners and the adult Dom attendants. The whole cycle, from snatching the shrouds in order to survive, through the beatings and abuse that follow, to their exploitation by the shopkeepers, is the story of the boys’ oppressed position in Varanasi society and forms the core subject matter of *Children*.

3. The making of children

Jala, long fascinated by Varanasi, went there in 2006 in order to see what might capture his interest and provide the theme for a film. He found himself repeatedly drawn to the Manikarnika Ghat, where he observed the Dom children cremating corpses and snatching shrouds, laughing and joking around, and surviving poverty and abuse. Knowing that he had chanced upon his theme, Jala had first to work at overcoming all the people-related obstacles that might prevent him from gaining unfettered access to the ghat and from being able to film the children’s participation in cremations. Initially, these problems concerned the children themselves, the city and religious authorities, and the tourist touts at the cremation ground; subsequently, occasional difficulties also arose from disgruntled mourners at the funerals.

Approximately two hundred Doms work at Manikarnika, of which around thirty are young boys. Jala’s film focuses on seven of them—Ravi, Gagan, Sunil, Kapil, Yogi, Manish and Ashish—who ranged in age from nine to fifteen years old at the time of the shooting. The boys were understandably wary of him at first, so he spent the first month interacting with them in order to develop a relationship of trust. These “shroud boys,” made hard and cynical by the terrible circumstances of their daily struggle to survive, were well accustomed to the intrusive cameras of tourists, and to the physical and verbal abuse dished out to them by alcoholic fathers, money-hungry touts, and irate mourners. They did not know how to position Jala, since he neither vanished with the tourists nor abused them like the various denizens of the ghat. Nevertheless, the boys soon became used to Jala’s presence and allowed

him to follow them with his camera, to which they gradually paid less heed. The next access problem concerned what Jala calls the “three-tier permission.” First, the filmmaker had to gain official permission to film on the ghat both from the city authorities through a district magistrate and from the priests at Manikarnika. This done, he then needed to approach the Dom cremator community. At first, he recalls, “they wouldn’t pay attention to me. But when they saw that this guy was very serious about the kids and that he wasn’t disturbing us, they started warming up to me, particularly these seven families” (Cross 2011). After that, he had to win over the touts at the cremation ground who extract money from the tourists by acting as unofficial guides. Jala’s camera at the ghat was a big threat to them. The support of the Dom families was the decisive factor in convincing the touts that he would not be interfering with their dodgy business operations. Once filming went ahead a final occasional source of opposition came from the members of mourning families who might demand that he stop shooting. When this happened, he would immediately pack up his camera and leave. Once when he was told to stop filming, however, he received support from an adult Dom who told the relative: “If you want to cremate your dead body, then let him be, because he belongs to our community” (ibid.). This reveals the extent to which Jala had succeeded in becoming an insider in the Dom community.

Jala spent eighteen months interviewing and filming the seven boys in more than 100 hours of footage. Throughout the film the gaze of Jala’s camera settles not just on the seven boys but also on the grim locale of the cremation ground. The camera records the relentless ubiquity of death at the ghat—its awful stench and grisly presence—and the effect of its constant proximity to these young lives. There is no dramatic or narrative structure to the film as such, no artfully crafted resolution towards a happy ending for these children. Rather, the film presents a seemingly unending round of cremations and shroud pickings, interspersed with the boys talking about their lives, hopes, fears, and feelings of resignation. The task of cremating bodies on open fires is disgusting work, and the dangers and horrors of it are captured by Jala’s camerawork. The film contains recurring images of cremations, with close-ups of heads and limbs burning. The illuminated faces of the

children tending the fires give a clear sense of how the experience affects them. The film depicts the full range of the oppressive and dangerous aspects of the boys’ work. The health hazards are numerous. The heat of the pyres, exacerbated by mid-summer temperatures, leaves the skin on their young bodies blistered. The smoke attacks their lungs, and sleeping rough on the ghat ruins their bodies. Not surprisingly, they are also damaged psychologically by the work they are “born to” as outcaste Doms. The gruesome sights to which they are exposed day after day result in recurrent nightmares. In order to survive these terribly oppressive conditions, the boys abuse and become addicted to tobacco, alcohol and marijuana. This is how Ravi justifies his marijuana addiction: “A corpse arrives here every five minutes and I have to burn it up. If I don’t smoke marijuana, what do I do, worship the corpse? Marijuana freshens the mood a bit. I smoke it under compulsion.” Gagan, for his part, declares: “Here, many small children smoke this. If one gets addicted, can one leave it? I tried hard many times but couldn’t leave it.”

On top of the health hazards of the job and the effects of substance abuse, the Dom children face prejudice and ostracism as outcasts. At one point Sunil declares: “We are considered untouchables. But these motherfuckers [the mourners] don’t understand that at the last moment only we help them. We touch what is considered untouchable by all. Because we handle corpses and touch shrouds, they find us repulsive and keep away from us.” Very often the boys are beaten by the mourners for picking a shroud from a corpse before the flames can touch it. They are fatalistically resigned to such brutal ill-treatment. As Yogi expresses it: “We are young, what can we do? It’s our fate to be kicked.” There is cruel irony in the abuse faced by these Dom children, since it is the very performance of their allotted duties at a funeral that, according to orthodox Hindu belief, ensures the untroubled passage of the soul of the deceased caste Hindu from this life into eternal salvation.

Jala’s predominant filmmaking approach in *Children* exemplifies what Bill Nichols has described in *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* as the observational mode of representation. In this mode, he states:

Recurring images or situations tend to strengthen a “reality effect,” anchoring the film to the historical facticity [sic] of time and place and certifying to the continuing centrality of specific locations. These refrains add affective texture to an argument; they stress the historical specificity of the observed world. (Nichols 1991: 41)

Observational films, he goes on, are “rooted in the present,” affording the viewer “an opportunity to look in on and overhear something of the lived experience of others, to gain some sense of the distinct rhythms of everyday life” (ibid.). The detached style of Jala’s filming puts viewers in the privileged position of watching many aspects of the boys’ lives as they unfold naturally. Thus, we see the youngsters in work-related situations, toiling at the pyres, snatching shrouds, being abused by mourners or adult Doms, and so on. There are also scenes in which we witness them teasing and fighting each other, dancing at a festival, intoxicating themselves, yawning exhausted before a Bollywood movie on a TV in a neighbourhood shop, and sleeping rough at the ghat. Jala, mostly an observant filmmaker behind his camera, remains unseen throughout the film. He explained to me that “I consciously chose to be an observer because I thought my presence on screen would dilute the intensity of the children’s suffering. I didn’t want to interrupt the viewer or to be an interpreter. I attempted to observe and capture reality and tried to present the same in its true form” (Cross 2011). This is not to say, however, that Jala completely effaces his presence in the film. In some sequences, as we shall see below, he also employs a more interactive mode of representation that involves his vocal presence.

There are numerous scenes in which the children are filmed talking about themselves directly to the camera. In these sequences we mostly hear only one half of the conversation as the children answer questions that Jala has, we assume, put to them. These interview-derived monologues give voice and agency to each boy, allowing him to describe and to complain about his lot in life, and thus provide viewers with a subject-driven perspective of the experiences and worldview of a shroud boy at Manikarnika. As Jala puts it, “I didn’t narrate the film myself. I let the kids speak themselves and I wove their bytes to form the narrative.” What comes through mostly with their voices is a sense of resignation. The oldest boy,

Ravi, who is 15 in the film and has been cremating bodies since he was five, declares: “When few bodies arrive, I feel sad because I lose my earnings. I pray that all the oldies in the world die and are brought here.” Talking about the torture of the summer heat, another of the boys declares: “It even makes us dizzy—but we can’t help it, we are compelled to do it. In the summers we turn black, develop fever, go mad . . . still, this is our work, and we have to come. If we don’t earn how will we fill our bellies and survive.” They hate this work and all that it entails, yet they wish for more of it. Such is the karmic trap of their existence.

In the latter part of the film, with the daily lives of the children well established for viewers, there are moments when Jala’s interaction with the boys in the interviews becomes more apparent. We hear his voice, and the boys, especially the eldest, Ravi, sometimes answer him back sharply. Thus, even when interacting with them, Jala allows the boys to retain control over the exchange and over their own interpretation of their lives. This is an example of what Macdougall discusses in his essay “Beyond Observational Cinema,” where he argues for a more participatory cinema in which the filmmaker invites his or her subjects to imprint themselves and their culture directly upon the film. It is by giving them access to the film, he adds, that the filmmaker “makes possible the corrections, additions, and illuminations that only their response to the material can elicit. Through such an exchange a film can begin to reflect the ways in which its subjects perceive the world” (1985: 282-3). An example of this is when Jala asks Ravi how much chewing tobacco he consumes every day. The lad retorts: “Is it necessary to answer that question?” Then, when Jala asks him about his smoking and suggests that he is too young, Ravi snaps back:

Aren’t you ashamed of this question? Being so young, if I can earn, why can’t I smoke? If you have so much sympathy for me then send 5,000 rupees to my home as dole and I won’t even peek at this wretched place . . . otherwise leave me to my state.

This is an interactive moment in which Jala clearly allows Ravi to steer the conversation in his own direction and even to challenge the director’s own liberal subject position.

On another occasion, Jala's interaction, again with Ravi, takes on a more interventionist tone. After Ravi has told Jala that the flag-draped bodies of political leaders are sometimes brought to Manikarnika for cremation, the filmmaker asks leading questions, spurring the boy into uttering political opinions that we might expect Jala himself to hold:

Jala: What kind of people are these leaders?

Ravi: They are motherfuckers. They fleece the poor and feed the rich.

Jala: OK, suppose you became a leader tomorrow. What would you do?

Ravi: If the Lord of this cremation ground [the god Shiva] wills it, I'll do what no one has done. I will have a house built for every poor person and say live happily in it. And in houses without the hearth fire, I will light the fire. And I will provide medicines to the sick, only to the poor not the rich.

This exchange, which comes towards the end of the film, allows Ravi the opportunity to express what is the only overt political opinion in *Children* about the economic hardship faced by those at the bottom of India's caste system. It is the subtle shift in Jala's approach from observational to interactive and, finally, to mildly interventionist that sets up that critique of the Indian political and caste establishment.

This leads one to consider the important question of the ideology and intention behind Jala's making of *Children*. In my interview with Jala I asked him about the political ideology that he brought to the film. Did he, for example, align himself with the anti-caste and anti-untouchability project of the secular and socialist architect of modern India, Jawaharlar Nehru? He denied this possibility, adding that the closest ideology with which he would associate himself was "that of Gandhi's individual vision about the love for humanity and equality" (Cross 2011). Regarding his intention in making *Children*, Jala told me that:

I think one of the intentions I had with this film, apart from wanting to reach out to the world and show the miserable existence of these kids, was to show that India is not only about shining. There is a particular class or community that is shining. More than 40 or 50% of India is not shining. They're being marginalized. So the top layer of India is shining, but the people who live

at the grassroots level, they're not shining. India is a land full of inequalities. We have to get rid of our corrupt system, our corrupt bureaucracy and political class. And then India would shine only when you see that every family has a house to live in, however little, every family has basic facilities, which any human being requires to live. (Cross 2011)

The wish Jala expresses here for every family to have a house of its own gives a hint of how his personal ideological concerns have entered into the discourse of the film. By this I do not mean to suggest that Jala set out to influence the opinions of the children, but what he as director chose to include in the film—Ravi's tirade against the rich, for example—must be seen as the reflecting of his own perspective and agenda within this documentary.

One of Jala's key intentions in this film was to show that these kids, for all that they are dalits engaged in the worst possible work, are as much children of Mother India as any Brahman priest. This comes through in one sequence late in the film that features an Independence Day celebration in the neighbourhood of the ghat. We see the boys singing the national anthem and raising the national flag. This sequence demonstrates that the children, though suffering terrible oppression and abuse in their lives, still proclaim a sense of belonging to the same Indian society that oppresses them. When the national flag is raised, the boys clap and shout "Long live Mother India!" When I asked Jala why he had inserted this particular scene into the film, he responded that as a filmmaker his intention was "to include those [patriotic] opinions of the kids was to reach out to the people of this country and to say that we have ignored them. They remember at this extreme juncture of their life, where it is so full of miseries, they are aware of their patriotic beliefs." (Cross 2011). The film, as mentioned, has no narrative arc as such, but it does betray a developing pattern of intention on the part of its director. From an initially detached observational mode of representation the film shifts to a position of advocacy. What are the ethical implications of intervening in subaltern lives in this way?

4. Conclusion: what to do with people?

From its very beginnings the realist documentary as a genre has tended towards the

observation, representation and investigation of victimhood and suffering. Indeed, Brian Winston writes in his *Claiming the Real* of “the dominance of the victim as the realist documentary subject” (1995: 230). Among audiences in the developed world there is a fascination with documentaries that deliver narratives and images of subaltern misery, particularly when the subjects are poor and oppressed children. Such ‘victim discourses’ achieve their greatest success with Western audiences when they are delivered through the mitigating medium of the English language and from the reassuring perspective of Western filmmakers. A recent example of this is Zana Briski’s *Born Into Brothels* (2005), a film about the lives of the children of Kolkata prostitutes which won the 2005 Oscar for Best Documentary. Such discourses may be appealing to Western audiences because they reinforce and confirm orientalist constructions of an impoverished Third World and allow viewers to become voyeurs of subaltern poverty and misery.

The very concept of the ‘victim documentary’ raises ethical questions about how documentarians position themselves vis-à-vis their subjects and how, in particular, they depict and make use of disempowered individuals and communities. Bill Nichols singles out a matter of crucial importance for any documentary filmmaker: “If there is one overriding ethical/political/ideological question to documentary filmmaking it may be, What to do with people? How can people and issues be represented appropriately? Each mode [of representation] addresses this question somewhat differently and poses distinct ethical questions for the practitioner” (Nichols 1991: 34). Essentially, it boils down to the key ethical question of possible exploitation. This is particularly so in the case of Western documentarians who take subaltern subjects as the themes of their films. *Born into Brothels* is a good example. The Oscar that Briski won ensured that the lives of the Kolkata children received worldwide attention. Yet Briski has faced criticism for what has been seen as her exploitation of the children for the furtherance of their own filmmaking careers. Some of the key complaints are that Briski herself is excessively ‘present’ both visually and vocally to the extent that she dominates the film whether on- or off-screen. Her voice, which provides not only the expository

narration of the film, also offers statements about herself, her ‘mission’, and her efforts ‘to do something’ for these kids. Crucially, Briski is seen to take up a hegemonic position in relation to her subaltern subjects. Her lack of Bengali positions her on the fringes of the community, speaking English to the kids through an interpreter. It is an approach that smacks of cultural condescension.

Jala, by contrast, being both an Indian who films other Indians and being a former refugee who has had his own share of suffering, has been spared such criticism. Moreover, as we have seen, Jala was accepted into the Dom community as an insider, and he only speaks Hindi with the boys throughout. Finally, Jala employs an almost completely self-effacing mode of observational shooting. One could never seriously assert, therefore, that Jala takes up center stage in *Children*. He is rather a voice from the wings. It goes without saying that complete objectivity in documentary filmmaking—in any kind of reporting—is an elusive goal. Nevertheless, with his detached observational camerawork and by allowing the children to tell their own stories, Jala comes as close as it is perhaps possible in presenting an objective account of the lives of these young Dom cremators.

Finally, it is appropriate to mention what Jala has undertaken on behalf of the boys since making the film. We have seen that once he had found the theme for his film, he set out with the intention of making the plight of the Dom children publicly known. In this sense, Jala’s purpose was to report as objectively as possible in order to focus public awareness on this problem. He did not start the shooting with the intention of undertaking any other non-filmic action on behalf of the children. This situation changed, he explained to me, on the final day of the shoot:

When I was shooting the film I got very close with these kids. I asked myself, am I exploiting these kids? Am I making a film for my own benefit so it would fetch me some awards? . . . I remember the last day of the shoot. I was sitting with Yogi. He was one of the kids who throughout had been most keen to study and to come out of the cremation ground. I was getting a little emotional, thinking, you know, my film is done. And Yogi turned to me and said: “Sir, are you going to do something for us? Is there any way of coming out of this place? I want to go to

school." So, I said to him, "I won't promise you anything, but I can promise you I'll do whatever I can do."(Cross 2011)

What Jala did was to set up a trust to help rehabilitate the children through education. In September 2009, Jala and his associates launched the "Bhagirathi" project in collaboration with the NGO PLAN International, with the aim of transforming the lives not only of the seven boys in the film but also of 300 underprivileged children in Varanasi.

For all its much vaunted prosperity and rapid modernization, India is still a society that is structured first and foremost around the prescriptions of the caste system, a system that still enslaves and abuses a greater number of people in the subcontinent than the total population of the United States. As historian Nicholas B. Dirks has observed, far from dying out, caste "remains the

single most powerful category for reminding the nation of the resilience of poverty, oppression, domination, exclusion, and the social life of privilege" (Dirks 2001: 16). The central importance accorded to caste has ensured that untouchability, the dark underbelly of the varna system, also thrives. Gandhi had tried to eradicate the evil of untouchability, and Nehru ensured that the new constitution specifically outlawed untouchability. Despite these best intentions, however, the practice of untouchability lives on, particularly with the demise of Nehru's vision of a secular and casteless India and the rise of radical Hindu fundamentalism (hindutva), which since the 1980s has reified Brahmanic hegemony. There is thus a great need for documentaries by the new generation of Indian filmmakers such as Rajesh S. Jala that examine the continuing impact of the caste system and untouchability on modern India with dignity and understanding.

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