

Salaam Bombay! (1988, director Mira Nair)

A short review

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Salaam Bombay follows the lives of a few street children living in the slums of Bombay (Mumbai) and those with whom their lives intertwine. It is both an intimate and panoramic view of their lives, their suffering but also their joys. The narrative although meandering follows one main character in particular, Krishna or as he is at times called in the film, Chaipau. We find him at the beginning of the film abandoned and alone taking a train to Bombay. He was left by his mother at a circus to make 500 rupees to be paid back for damages caused when he set fire to his brother's motorbike. In Bombay he lives with a few other children, works as a tea delivery boy in the red light district. It is his life here, his friendship with Chillum, a small-scale drug dealer and a little girl Manju, along with his crush on a seventeen-year-old girl sold into prostitution that drives the narrative. He aims to make the 500 rupees so that he can go back home, but is always thwarted. We are left at the end of the film with a look of utmost dejection on his face because he is again all alone and has to begin anew once more. An important aspect is money, the threat of not having it and the need to make it, which drives the film, it's characters and their relationships to each other. Exclusion, abandonment, neglect and being outside the system are core themes, where the system uses them to serve its purpose and discards them when they expire their use. There is no safety net except for the relationships they have built, but even that is no guarantee, because as Krishna is reminded at the end of the film, there are too many children like him; they are interchangeable and easily disposed of.

The movie engages with varying forms of asymmetrical relationships that are forced primarily upon children and women. They are pushed to megacity by various factors but mainly by poverty. Here, the city is not just a place of arrival, it becomes a dreamscape. People initially conceive it as a place of hope; hence the allure of (push towards) the city. However, soon after their arrival, they end up bound in extreme forms of asymmetrical relationships such as in brothels or slums where their lives further unravel. As a social formation, like villages, the city has its underlying logic of patriarchy and casteism which deeply structure people's lives. The movie clearly portrays how people are forced into extreme forms of asymmetrical dependencies. Money, men, and power are inextricably connected to the lives of the socially destitute and deprivations flourish, while those on the streets become interchangeable.