

“ UNDENIABLY POWERFUL ”

~ *Variety, USA*

“ PROFOUNDLY BEAUTIFUL...DEVASTATING ”

★★★★★ ~ *The Gazette, Canada*

“ MUST WATCH FILM AT PIFF ”

~ *Korean Times*

CHILDREN OF THE PYRE

a film by Rajesh S. Jala

‘Children of the Pyre’ is a compelling real-life, self-narrative of 7 extraordinary children who make their living out of the dead at *Manikarnika*, the busiest cremation ground in India.

Produced by:



Duration: 74 mins. Colour

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CREDITS

Director	Rajesh S. Jala
Production Company	The Elements
Executive Producer	Sharmistha Mukherjee
Camera	Rajesh S. Jala
Location Sound	Raj Kishore
	Giriraj Sharma
Editor	Sheetal Koul
Music	Roy Menezes
Sound Design	Mateen Ahmad

FEATURING

Ravi
Gagan
Ashish
Kapil
Manish
Sunil
Yogi

TECHNICAL DETAILS

INDIA 2008, DV CAM, 1:3:3, Colour, Digital, 74 mins
Language: Hindi, Subtittles: English

SYNOPSIS

Varanasi, for many a synonym of India, perhaps owes a large part of its fame to Manikarnika, the busiest cremation ground in India. Over 150 bodies are consigned to flames here everyday with the guarantee of instant *moksha* or liberation from the cycle of births and rebirths. No wonder so many people come here to die or to be cremated after death.

Understandably, death is big business here – involving all kinds of professionals – big and small. Amidst grieving relatives, profit hungry shopkeepers and somber cremators can be spotted groups of frolicking children who have turned this graveyard into their playground and a source of their livelihood.

'Children of the Pyre' is a compelling real-life, self-narrative of seven such extraordinary children who make their living out of the dead. They collect, snatch or steal used coffin shrouds and sell them for petty amounts in order to ensure their own and their family's survival

Tempered by the heat of the pyre, strengthened in the face of adversities and crafted by a volley of abuses, these imps weave through the pyres and struggle through disdain in this land of the dead. Laughing, smiling, weeping, fighting and shouting, these children run the race for survival - winning it again and again – everyday.

The film is a terrible saga of exploitation that celebrates the victory of innocence over the most harrowing realities of life. It's a torturous journey through seared bodies, callous minds and dead consciences that constitute the human reality of the ghats at Varanasi

FILMMAKER'S STATEMENT

Manikarnika, in Varanasi is India's busiest, most sacred and ancient cremation ground. About a 150 dead are torched to salvation everyday. Each dead body is draped with colorful shrouds. Six kids: Kapil, Sunil, Manish, Ashish, Yogi and Gagan; belonging to the Dom (untouchable) community are constantly on the hunt to snatch these shrouds and sell them for survival. These shrouds get recycled and the kids get a meager sum, just about sufficient to buy their food. Another boy, Ravi, aged fourteen is probably the youngest cremator at Manikarnika. Between 9 and 14 years of age, he claims to have cremated a thousand dead bodies!

This film is a real and disturbing journey through the tattered childhood of these seven extraordinary children.

For last one and a half years I have been living on and off with these children; observing, following and filming them at the most harrowing place I have ever seen. Initially, I was extremely perturbed at Manikarnika. But the courage of these kids encouraged and inspired me to fight the fears which had intruded my mind – the fear of being surrounded by charred dead bodies!

To my utter surprise these kids have conquered this fear. A dead body to them is a means of survival. A dead body to them is a corpse which can't stop them from snatching the shrouds unlike the relatives accompanying the dead body.

In August 2007, I encountered perhaps the most difficult shooting experience I ever had. An unclaimed dead body was lying semi-naked adjacent to Manikarnika. Kapil draped the body with one of his snatched shrouds. And I started rolling the camera just on time. Soon after, Ravi arrived at the spot. And then followed a shocking event.

Ravi and Kapil started performing the last rites of the dead body solely to entertain themselves. Watching the kids mocking at the body, I lost my strength to respond.

My so-called civilized sensibility prompted me to stop rolling.....which I did for a moment.....but the selfish film maker in me resisted this moral judgment. My inner conflict started wandering through my mind. And I failed to seek refuge in any argument. One has to watch this "unclaimed dead body" sequence featuring in the film to understand the agony and dilemma I encountered then and many other times at Manikarnika. There are a number of other sequences in the film which bear testimony to my emotional struggles while shooting with these kids.

And I believe, hopefully, this film would leave a profound impact on the viewers' mind.

Millions of ill-fated children in India are laborers. It is indeed a burning social issue. But these kids at Manikarnika cremation ground are extreme examples of child labor. These children work in perhaps the most ruthless and inhuman conditions one could imagine.

In summers the temperature touches up to 50 degree celsius and these kids spend the scorching days in the lap of this cremation ground. It seems that the sun above and the burning ground below are steadily evaporating the childhood of these underprivileged kids.

Hope! They have NONE.....but I have one.

I hope to generate awareness through this film. Awareness at a global level to bring back the lost childhood of not only these 7 kids but millions of miserable children who never get an opportunity to go to school.

Films don't bring revolution. But they change or influence perception. And firm perception to fight for justice and humanity is the solid foundation for revolution.

This film is a humble attempt to influence people's perception and generate an awareness to transform the lives of these kids. Many more such attempts would, hopefully, one day transform the lives of millions of neglected children who are exploited and abused everyday.

Children of the pyre is a mission embodied in a film.
A mission to serve humanity through cinema.

REVIEWS



Posted: Tue., Sep. 2, 2008, 11:37pm PT

Children of the Pyre

(Documentary -- India) A the Elements production. (International sales: the Elements, New Delhi.) Produced by Rajesh S. Jala. Executive producer, Sharmishtha Mukharjee. Directed by Rajesh S. Jala.

By [EDDIE COCKRELL](#)

A harrowing vision of a hell on earth, not-for-the-squeamish docu "Children of the Pyre" profiles seven Indian boys who tend an ancient, sprawling, 24/7 open-air crematorium. Helmer Rajesh S. Jala shot for 18 months, and though the narrative momentum is scattershot, his images of children at risk are undeniably powerful. A lock for human-rights-themed fests, the pic will need gutsy cablers and a dignified homevid push to reach appropriate auds.

Manikarnika, which means "earring" in Hindi, is the oldest and largest such facility in northeastern Indian city Varanasi. On the bank of the mighty Ganges, its 14 funeral pyres on ghats, or steps, burn constantly with the bodies of loved ones brought by pilgrims. It's the "untouchable" kids' job to stoke fires, pluck errant limbs off the ground, elude adult fists as they scrounge for brightly colored shrouds for resale and keep traffic moving. Appalling work conditions are ameliorated by marijuana and adolescent variations on gallows humor. Pic is dedicated to the "millions of ill-fated children who never get an opportunity to have a normal childhood"; the helmer has begun a fund to raise money and awareness.

Camera (color, DV), Jala; editor, Sheetal Koul; music, Roy Menezes. Reviewed at Montreal World Film Festival (Documentaries of the World), Aug. 26, 2008. Running time: 73 MIN.

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The Gazette

The Gazette

Published: Monday, September 01 2008

Children of the Pyre (India) **** Rajesh S. Jala's profoundly beautiful, deeply unsettling story about kids who hustle the dead and tend the fires at India's largest cremation ground has led him to establish a education trust for these vibrant, scrappy kids living at the edge of society. Screens at Quartier Latin at 10:20 a.m.

John Griffin

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The Dead and the Alive

Vandana Kalra Posted: Oct 26, 2008 at 2345 hrs

Delhiite Rajesh Jala on his Children of the Pyre that has won the best documentary award in Montreal

This is Manikarnika — the busiest cremation ground in India. Here people come with the hope of dying quietly and attaining nirvana. Here, ironically, a clutch of children comes face to face with death everyday. They make a living here, they play games here. Young feet quietly scurry through pyres glinting in the dark and young hands search bodies to steal shrouds. This is where Delhi-based filmmaker Rajesh S. Jala spent days and nights with his camera and those kids, filming the documentary *Children of the Pyre*.

In the crowded halls of Montreal and Pusan film festivals where *Children of the Pyre* was screened — at the former, it won the Best Documentary Award — the 74-minute film had a chilling effect from the very first shot. As drum beats pound, orange flames flickering from a pyre fill the dark screen and a shadow scampers across, tightly clutching a shroud. The camera zooms in to disclose the face of 11-year-old Gagan. Dressed in faded clothes, his face deprived of innocence, he is one of Jala's seven protagonists. They are all 9-to-15-year-olds, who sell shrouds stolen from the bodies at Manikarnika. "The seven of them are representatives of several others across India," says Jala, 39.

The filmmaker knows every little detail of the children who were complete strangers until two years ago, when he first visited Varanasi with the intention of making a film in the city. "The place lures filmmakers," smiles Jala, who spent more than a month walking by the ghats and through the narrow lanes. He finally reached Manikarnika to film the life of a widow, but it was the children who caught his attention. "They belong to the Dom community and are considered untouchable. They work here to earn a few rupees and I was convinced that I had to film them," says Jala, who had earlier made the film *Floating Lamp of the Shadow Valley* about the nine-year-old boatman Arif in his hometown Kashmir.

A few months later, Jala returned to Varanasi with his crew. “We were stationed there 24x7,” he says. Even though the inhabitants of Manikarnika were initially unsure of his intentions and conscious of the camera, soon the ice was broken. So, in his narrative he pans from children fighting for shrouds to sell them in the market, to them facing the angry relatives of the dead. In some lighthearted moments, Gagan enjoys a dance with girls during the Navratri festival and Ravi shares details of a romance. However, the humour gives way to dissonance, for even their games revolve around the dead — in one shot, they perform a mock cremation of an abandoned body.

While Jala awaits the premiere here at the International Film Festival of India in Goa in November, before that he travels to Germany for the Leipzig International Film Festival. But there won't be any more films until he establishes a trust to rehabilitate the children of Manikarnika. “I want the kids out of there and in school,” says Jala, as he plans another trip to Varanasi — this time to show the children their own tale that has given them recognition worldwide.

Where dreams perish

Rajesh S Jala's award-winning documentary 'Children of the Pyre' leaves a lump in the throat



Reality bites Left, a still from the film and right, director Rajesh S. Jala with the kids

Normally, how many minutes can you spend around a cremation ground when you don't have a funeral to attend? While most people avoid graveyards even when they sometimes make for great short-cuts, filmmaker Rajesh S. Jala spent 18 months of his life around death, just to bring us the story of seven children who make a living by selling shrouds of corpses at Manikarnika, the country's busiest cremation grounds, in Benares.

His efforts were rewarded when his film 'Children of the Pyre' was chosen the Best Documentary at the Montreal Film Festival last month and has also been selected for International film festivals in Pusan, Leipzig and Sao Paulo.

No matter how much you try to prepare yourself for the horror, the plight of the children is heartbreakingly tragic and Jala brings out the bleakness employing dark humour. This is one of those rare films where even smiling faces of mischievous children can leave a lump in your throat. Yes, there are moments when children get all teary-eyed choked with emotion but it's the moments where they laugh it off that are far more unsettling.

There's also every documentary filmmaker's favourite agenda of politician-bashing when he asks the kids what they think of their leaders but Jala is more effective when he lets us form our opinions, showing us a sequence of events (the segment where the kids try to sell the national flag used for covering a leader's corpse, for instance) rather than have the kids spell it out for the camera. The perspective is so candid that it could have only come from someone living there. For 18 months, Jala stayed at a guest house 20 metres from the cremation grounds and eventually won the trust of the seven children and their families.

“I have a fond relationship with them. They even wished me luck before the film premiered at the Montreal Film Festival. When I told them it won the Best Documentary Award, one of them wanted to know if that would change their lives. I told him it would. I’m starting a trust for their rehabilitation,” Jala said .

Adapting

How did he personally adapt to living there? “In the summer, it gets extremely hot on the cremation grounds. Sometimes, about 150 bodies are brought there in a day and all that smell... But more than physically tiring, it was mentally exhausting in the beginning to just get used to the idea of being around corpses. But these children do it every day.”

When he sat down to edit, he had over 130 hours of footage with the children. As we can see in the film, the kids try to put up a brave front when they are talking to the camera.



It’s only when the camera zooms in on to them from a distance do we see how vulnerable they really are – getting roughed up for snatching shrouds, fighting among themselves and are completely desensitised to dead bodies.

The children eat around 25-30 packets of gutka every day, smoke marijuana and drink, initially to get over the nausea of being around corpses and later, hooked and addicted to the habit.

Though they talk to the camera about how some corpses are so disfigured that they can only dream of corpses, we also see them perform a mock ceremony of last rites around an unclaimed body and tease one of them by referring to the corpse as his father-in-law – this is one of their only avenues of entertainment, apart from sharing the stage with underage nautch girls once-a-year and growing up faster than they should.

It’s visuals of these ‘fun’ moments in their lives that make ‘Children of the Pyre’ deeply disturbing.

SUDHISH KAMATH

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THE KOREA TIMES

Must-See Movie at 13th Pusan Film Festival



``Children of the Pyre'' (Rajesh S. Jala, India, 2008; Wide Angle — Documentary Competition) ``This is a shocking documentary from India that portrays children earning their living on a funeral pyre. Seven children dig through corpses and steal personal belongings in order to support their families.''

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Staring Death In The Eye



Rajesh S Jala speaks to **SHRIYA MOHAN** about his new film *Children of the Pyre* and an experience of a lifetime

First you hear the drum roll in the dark. Then you see it — a funeral pyre being lit from underneath, in slow motion. Just as the flames start to lick the body, a young boy, barely 14, dressed in shorts and a dirty vest, runs toward it and grabs the golden shroud that covers the pyre. The drums roll fast as the boy runs away; he is unstoppable, his face telling you that his life depends on this moment. His fingers grip the edge of the shroud and as he runs, the gold flutters in the night, reflecting the light of the burning pyre until his silhouette merges in the darkness, leaving you to see the last glimmer fade away.

This is the opening shot of Rajesh S. Jala's film *Children of the Pyre* – a disturbing journey through the lives of seven child labourers in Manikarnika, India's busiest cremation ground in Varanasi. The only income they get is by selling shrouds stolen off the bodies before the flames reach up. They walk without a care in the world, staring death in the eye. In a candid interview, Rajesh S Jala, winner of Best Documentary at the Montreal World Film Festival, speaks about his film and how it is an attempt to reach across to different sections of society and draw their attention to the issue of child labour.

How did you find the theme for *Children of the Pyre*?

Varanasi has always fascinated me. One has to go there to actually see what I mean. It's got so much. Apart from all the life, it is also home to the busiest cremation ground in India. Two years ago I went there on a mission to see and absorb Varanasi, purely to understand the surroundings from the perspective of a filmmaker. And then one day, I met these kids. That's when I decided, "This is the film I should make".

How did you deal with such a repulsive environment?

It's beyond the imagination. If you encounter a funeral, you get hypnotised. Death is so threatening. Everyone is scared of death. It was very difficult for me psychologically. The smell of burning bodies would make me sick and my eyes would burn with the smoke. Sometimes I would have to get very close to the fire and my skin would burn. But as a passionate filmmaker, the only thing that kept me going was the kids. They were the main force inspiring me to be there. Every time I felt repulsed, I would think "If kids can be there, why can't I?"

How tough was it to make the children feel no sense of selfconsciousness while shooting?

I spent 18 months with the kids to get to that point. Initially, I started rolling the camera and the kids would get very conscious of it, and behave unnaturally. But when you're constantly there, through every single waking and sleeping moment, there comes a point when they start ignoring that camera. One has to invest that much time and warmth to build a relationship. They treated me like a friend and gave me their trust. That's when my film started rolling for me — the day they forgot to be self-conscious.

What is the message you're looking to give and to whom?

First, as a filmmaker I want to generate some kind of awareness about this issue. I want to reach out to all sections of society — the intellectuals, policy makers, the activists and just ordinary citizens, that here is another side of India that cannot be ignored. I want to bring them together. Growth shouldn't be one sided with development only in certain classes. The under privileged should be taken care of.

In the film, one of the kids, Gagan, says, "We run this place. If we don't do this, who will?"

The workers at the cremation grounds are members of the 'Dom' community who are called 'the untouchables'. These kids are Dom kids, so they feel they have no choice. As a filmmaker who spent so much time with them, my goal is to somehow rehabilitate all the 25 children working there and completely stop kids from entering the cremation grounds. There is the alternative of an electrical crematorium in the vicinity called Harishchandra. There, they don't use manual labour, the rates are cheaper and there is no waste of wood. The underlying problem, however, is the religious belief and the social stigma attached.

Tell me about your plans to start a Children of the Pyre trust.

Yes, very much. My immediate task is to promote my film. It has been nominated at the Pusan International Film Festival. But importantly, there are friends who have invested in my film, and for that I have to earn returns. Once that is done, I will approach people for the trust. I want to see the kids out of there, in school. I have spoken at length to them. They want to leave the place. I am still in touch with them. They give me a missed call on my mobile phone to speak to me. When I came back from Montreal, I told them that we won an award. They asked excitedly on the phone, "Is it going to change our life?" I said, "Of course it is!"

How did this whole experience change you?

I have had quite a traumatic life myself. I almost lived as an orphan. I belong to the community of Kashmiri pundits. We were uprooted from Kashmir in 1995. I spent nine years in a camp where 100 people lived under a small roof. So I have seen my fair bit.

But now, when I see them, I see no reason to complain. They have given me a mission to live for. I have learnt a lesson that there are people who have a worse life than mine.

How do you plan to reach audiences who have the power to change such ground realities?

I want to show it in universities. Maybe find a way to reach politicians. Film festivals also play a big role. If they select my film at IFFI, I will be reaching out to certain Indian audiences. I want to screen it in India and I am negotiating right now. I'm also exploring options to see if there is a way we can theatrically release this film in India.

Are you planning to show the film to the kids?

Absolutely. I plan to visit Varanasi in two months time, when I'm done with promoting my film. They should be happy about most things. Lets see, I'm excited to see their faces when they watch it.



Tale of the pyre children

Suparna Thombare

Rajesh Jala's documentary — on kids handling corpses — wins accolades at the Montreal Film Festival

While documentaries are still made for festivals abroad and one doesn't expect to earn profits from screening them in India, awards definitely give boost to the filmmakers.

Delhi-based Rajesh Jala's latest documentary Children of the Pyre which premiered at the Montreal Film Festival last week won the best documentary award there.

It has also been nominated at the Pusan International Film Festival, Korea, Leipzig International Film Festival, Brazil and Sao Paulo International Film Festival, Germany.

And the victory has made Jala determined to reach out to common people with his latest documentary. The film is based on the life of seven kids who make their living from tending to dead bodies that come to Manikarnika in Varanasi - India's biggest cremation ground. "I was in Varanasi for a month looking for something interesting and I came across kids working at the biggest cremation ground in India. Over 150 bodies are brought there every day," says Jala who has been making documentaries for the past 11 years.

The story about children earning by recycling shrouds and performing the cremation rites, touched the maker. "There are hundreds of kids doing this but I chose to focus on the lives of seven," he says.

With this documentary, Jala is determined to take the documentary beyond festival screening. "I have got some positive feedback at Montreal. Though it's too early to say, some distributors have shown interest and I plan to release it in multiplexes if things go well. "

Jala is also working on setting up a trust to rehabilitate these children. "It's not just a film for me. I will dedicate the next five months to forming the trust," he says.

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FILM IRELAND

32nd Montreal Film Festival

Anthony Kirby reports on the Montreal World Film Festival (21 August–1 September 2008, Montreal)

‘Thank you,’ said a surprised Rajesh S. Jala, on winning the prize for best documentary at the recently concluded 32nd Montreal Film Festival. ‘Working on my documentary changed my life. I intend to remain engaged with these children and am setting up a trust fund to help them remain in school and also help their families.’

Reminiscent of *Salaam Bombay!*, *Children of the Pyre* is the gut-wrenching chronicle of the lives of seven boys ranging in age from five to fifteen, who stoke the funeral pyres at Manikarnika, the busiest cremation ground in India.

Considered ‘untouchables’, these members of the Dom Caste have laboured for generations in Manikarnika. Fires have burned at this site for centuries. For devout Hindus it is the only cremation ground if one wants to go directly to the afterlife and avoid further reincarnation. To further increase their income the children often steal the ceremonial sari covering bodies. For these they get two rupee. Using the spontaneous language of the children as narration, Jala has crafted a very moving film. The guilelessness and *joie de vivre* of these innocents captivate the viewer.

]

Utpal Borpujari

Of childhoods burnt to ashes

A powerful film on child workers in Varanasi's Manikarnika cremation ground aims at opening the world's eyes to their plight, writes **Utpal Borpujari**

They steal shrouds from dead bodies to earn a livelihood, often sleep at night at the cremation ground, and some of them do drugs and marijuana to escape nightmares of grotesque-shaped human limbs burning on the pyre. Very few children anywhere else would be living day in and day out in more macabre a setting as they do. But though they live in Varanasi, the eternal city and favourite tourist destination that has been fodder for many a media and film stories, their story has never been told before.

Now, a documentary by a filmmaker uprooted from Kashmir following the outbreak of 1989 insurgency for the first time has brought their story out before the world, leaving viewers shocked at the horrid atmosphere they live in, and winning accolades and awards at international film festivals because of its unflinching and courageous narrative structure.

Children of the Pyre, by Rajesh S Jala and winner of the Best Documentary Award at the Montreal World Film Festival, is indeed a visual journey not for the weak-hearted. And though its protagonists are children, no film certification board in the world would probably allow children to watch it, thanks to the gory visuals of bodies burning on the pyres that the director says he has used to emphasise and re-emphasise the thankless setting these children live in.

There are about 30 kids who are into the "business" of making a livelihood out of activities in Manikarnika, believed by Hindus to be the most-sacred and ancient cremation ground – and therefore, probably getting the maximum number of bodies to burn every day, so much so that more than one body is said to be burning at any given point of time anytime of the year, year after year.

If Ravi, now 15, has been living amidst these burning bodies since he was just five years old, Yogi, Manish, Sunil, Ashish, Kapil are among those who are much younger but already veterans of the trade that primarily comprises stealing of the shrouds covering dead bodies, selling them as cheap as Rs two a piece to local shopkeepers who clean and re-sell them in the market for Rs 25-30. And to ply their trade, they have to be at the place where all the action is – the cremation ground on the banks of the Ganga.

Interspersed with frequent close up shots of body parts burning on various pyres – “I have used many of these shots to drive home the point in what kind of brutal surroundings these kids live,” says Jala in response to criticisms from some quarters on this – the kids, tell in the film their life stories in a matter of fact manner, often their innocence seeping through the harshness that the surroundings have bestowed upon them.

Belonging to the ‘Dom’ community that traditionally is involved in cremation ground work and are considered “untouchables” by the society, these children have families that live in the Dom quarters of the city, but by choice prefer to live almost like orphans, often even sleeping over at the cremation ground after long hours of work.

“It is question of our survival. If we don’t work here, how will we earn our livelihood,” philosophically offers Gagan, the one who is hated by all his “workmates” for his free use of invectives. And that is the story of every kid working there. Not surprisingly, Ravi is quite nonchalant when he says that they have to smoke pot, “even though we know it is a bad habit”, to take their minds away from the sights of burning bodies. But it is not always business – very often, they do a service to humanity too, by burning unclaimed bodies on their own, even though they do it with mock rituals aimed at ‘entertaining’ themselves.

Jala, who spent around Rs 40 lakh – raised through his friends and well wishers – to make the film, and hopes to get the investment back by selling it to various TV networks abroad. With the Montreal award and selections to Sao Paulo, Pusan and Leipzig film festivals, and also to the Indian Panorama Section of the forthcoming 39th International Film Festival of India (IFFI), he is hoping to get a deal sooner than latter.

The film, which intersperses some poetically-composed images to soften the often-hard hitting imagery, virtually never leaves the Manikarnika Ghat, giving only a glimpse of the families of the kids. Jala says he did it deliberately. “We had a lot of footage of the kids with the families, but at the end of the day I realised that if I went out of Manikarnika, the film would lose focus as then I have to show the families of all the seven kids featured,” says the self-taught filmmaker whose earlier film Shadow Valley had studied the violence in Kashmir through the eyes of a nine-year-old boat boy on the Dal lake in Srinagar.

The kids, initially suspicious of his intentions, opened up enough to Jala over the 18-month period he shot the film to confide in him that they want to escape of the drudgery of their lives and get educated, some dreaming of becoming a pilot or of owning a big house someday. Unlike many other documentary filmmakers, Jala has kept in regular touch with the kids, as he wants to take the whole thing much beyond his film. “I want to rehabilitate these kids, and am starting a trust for the purpose. At least 3-4 of the kids are highly interested in going to school,” he says.

For a filmmaker who always wanted to make a film on some aspect of Varanasi but only accidentally discovered this untouched subject, Jala has made a highly-evocative film that reaches a philosophical high with Kumar Gandharv’s rendering of a Kabir couplet on life and afterlife.

“I hope to generate awareness through this film, awareness at a global level to bring back the lost childhood of not only these seven kids but millions of miserable children who never get an opportunity to go to school,” Jala, a strong believer of the dictum that even though films cannot bring revolution, they have the power to change or influence perception.

(An abridged version was carried in Sakaal Times, www.sakaaltimes.com, 31-10-2008)

Indian docu-feature 'Children of the Pyre' wins Award at Montreal

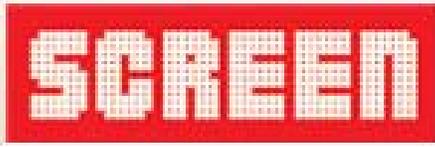
NEW DELHI: *Children of the Pyre*, a docu-feature shot in Varanasi by Delhi-based filmmaker Rajesh Jala, has been awarded the audience award for the Best Feature Documentary at the recently concluded Montreal World Film Festival.

The 74-minute film, that is about seven young boys who work at the Manikarnika Cremation Grounds on the banks of the Ganges, "created a stir at the festival right from the beginning", Gautam Hooja of Indo-Canadian Films International told *indiantelevision.com*.

The award was given away at the closing ceremonies at the Theatre Maisonneuve.

Children of the Pyre has been nominated for competition in major well-known international film festivals in Pusan, Leipzig and Sao Paulo.

Rajesh Jala attended the Montreal Film Festival and was present on closing night to personally receive the prize, the only award at the festival for documentaries.



The Dead and the Alive

Rajesh Jala on his Children of the Pyre that has won the best documentary award in Montreal

This is Manikarnika — the busiest cremation ground in India. Here people come with the hope of dying quietly and attaining nirvana. Here, ironically, a clutch of children comes face to face with death everyday. They make a living here, they play games here. Young feet quietly scurry through pyres glinting in the dark and young hands search bodies to steal shrouds. This is where Delhi-based filmmaker Rajesh S. Jala spent days and nights with his camera and those kids, filming the documentary Children of the Pyre.

In the crowded halls of Montreal and Pusan film festivals where Children of the Pyre was screened — at the former, it won the Best Documentary Award — the 74-minute film had a chilling effect from the very first shot. As drum beats pound, orange flames flickering from a pyre fill the dark screen and a shadow scampers across, tightly clutching a shroud. The camera zooms in to disclose the face of 11-year-old Gagan. Dressed in faded clothes, his face deprived of innocence, he is one of Jala's seven protagonists. They are all 9-to-15-year-olds, who sell shrouds stolen from the bodies at Manikarnika. "The seven of them are representatives of several others across India," says Jala, 39.

The filmmaker knows every little detail of the children who were complete strangers until two years ago, when he first visited Varanasi with the intention of making a film in the city. "The place lures filmmakers," smiles Jala, who spent more than a month walking by the ghats and through the narrow lanes.

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He finally reached Manikarnika to film the life of a widow, but it was the children who caught his attention. “They belong to the Dom community and are considered untouchable. They work here to earn a few rupees and I was convinced that I had to film them,” says Jala, who had earlier made the film *Floating Lamp of the Shadow Valley* about the nine-year-old boatman Arif in his hometown Kashmir.

A few months later, Jala returned to Varanasi with his crew. “We were stationed there 24x7,” he says. Even though the inhabitants of Manikarnika were initially unsure of his intentions and conscious of the camera, soon the ice was broken. So, in his narrative he pans from children fighting for shrouds to sell them in the market, to them facing the angry relatives of the dead. In some lighthearted moments, Gagan enjoys a dance with girls during the Navratri festival and Ravi shares details of a romance. However, the humour gives way to dissonance, for even their games revolve around the dead — in one shot, they perform a mock cremation of an abandoned body.

While Jala awaits the premiere here at the International Film Festival of India in Goa in November, before that he travels to Germany for the Leipzig International Film Festival. But there won't be any more films until he establishes a trust to rehabilitate the children of Manikarnika. “I want the kids out of there and in school,” says Jala, as he plans another trip to Varanasi — this time to show the children their own tale that has given them recognition worldwide.

THE HINDU

Baptism by fire!

SHUJAAT BUKHARI

Rajesh Jalla's "Children of the Pyre" brings to fore a grim reality. Jalla has been directing and producing documentaries since 1997.



THE REAL WORLD Rajesh Jalla with the protagonists of the "Children of Pyre".

Rajesh Jalla's "Children of the Pyre" is a grim reminder about an uncovered truth about the 'real' India. A deeply disturbing story, Jalla has brought to the fore how the children of untouchables are forced to survive on the dead. Ravi, Yogi, Manish, Sunil, Ashish, Kapil and Gagan are seven children in the age group of 12-15 years and their job is not so pleasant. They live on the shrouds of the dead. Over a period of time they have mastered removing the shrouds from the dead within seconds the fire is lit on corpse in Manikarnika cremation ground in Varanasi, one of the biggest in India.

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These 'shroud boys' belong to 'Dom' community, supposed to be untouchables. "They (people) think we touch corpses so we are untouchables and they would not even allow our shadow to fall on them," says Ravi Chowdhary, their leader. The well-crafted documentary highlights how these boys are fighting the most unimaginable situation. Even an ordinary man would maintain a distance from the scorching heat at the cremation but they are the ones who jump at the time as it is the question of their survival. Ravi, in this tender age, has put on fire more than 1000 dead bodies and confesses that when the number is less on any day he gets sad. Average number of dead which arrive here is 150. Tempered by the heat of the pyre, strengthened in the face of adversities, crafted by the volleys of abuses, these intrepid children weave their way through the pyres to snatch their livelihoods.

Good response

Produced by The Elements, the film has already won accolades as it has been awarded Best Documentary Film at Montreal World Film Festival, Canada. It has been nominated for Pusan International Film Festival, Korea, Leipzig International Film Festival, Germany and Sao Paulo International Film Festival, Brazil. Buoyed by the response he got, Jalla is now thinking about setting "Children of the Pyre Trust" for which he expects to get good support. Talking about the difficulties he faced to get the children around his theme he said it took him 18 months to negotiate that curve. "I did not want to make them conscious and that was the biggest challenge but I finally succeeded in doing that." His main objective, he says is to make people aware about this real human issue. "I do not want a very disturbing issue should get eclipsed in the gaze of development and prosperity in India." This is one of the real faces of our country and "we need to look at this compassionately." His immediate task is to make this film known to everyone and then work on the Trust. Jalla wants them out of this hell and put them in school to move on a way to lead a dignified life. He is optimistic about the success of this Trust.

Himself a Kashmiri Pandit migrant who lived in a camp with 100 people in a small room, Jalla has tried to identify his traumatic life, though not on that scale with them. He has been directing and producing documentaries since 1997. His works have been shown in international festivals and have been broadcast on Indian and foreign television networks.



From the valley to the ghats

An exclusive interview

by Zafar Anjum

Young Indian filmmaker Rajesh S. Jala's new documentary *Children of the Pyre* (2008) has recently won the best documentary film award at this year's Montreal Film Festival. This documentary features about 7 children working at Manikarnika, Banaras, India's busiest, most sacred and ancient cremation ground.

Though this director-producer-cinematographer relishes the honour, it behoves his hard work. Rajesh has been making films, primarily documentaries, for the last 11 years. He has directed more than 10 documentary films and a number of television series for leading international and Indian television channels. One of his earlier documentary films *Floating lamp of the shadow valley* (2006) was nominated at the International Amsterdam Film Festival and was officially selected at the Palm Spring Film Festival, US and the Raindance Film Festival, London.



Here's an exclusive interview with the young filmmaker:

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How did "Children of the Pyre" come about? What attracted you to this serious theme?

For many years I was keen to make a film on Banaras. Two years back I went to Banaras for a recci and I spent a month there. And during this period I got an opportunity to meet these extraordinary 7 children. Immediately I decided to do this film. This unusual subject, children working at the busiest cremation ground in India, attracted me to do this film.

Was it a difficult subject to research and write on? Or did you shoot the film first and then edited it down to whip out a meaningful narrative?

There wasn't much of research involved. We followed the children for 18 months (off and on), and shot more than 100 hours of footage. The film is a self-narrative of these kids who narrate their lives very candidly. And it took us 7 months to edit the film.

As has been mentioned elsewhere, you took several months to shoot and edit the documentary. When you were making the documentary, what was going through your mind?

This film has left a deep impact on me. Filming at a cremation ground, where almost 150 dead bodies are cremated each day was one of the most difficult experiences I have gone through. Especially in the beginning it was an emotional torture to shoot at this cremation ground. Dead bodies coming after every 10 minutes with the chants of *Ram naam satya hai* (Lord Rama's name is the truth) echoing in the air almost created a haunting environment. During the peak summer schedule last year, the temperature at the ground was above 50 degrees and we shot for many days. The whole crew got sick. Our energy was drained out. I was limping and I could hardly talk.

What sort of relationship developed between you and the principal characters of your film? Did you face any hurdles in shooting as Varansi is a religious place?

Initially the kids treated me like any other visitor but when they saw me spending most of the time with them, following them through days and nights, their perception changed and so did their approach towards me. Gradually we became friends.



Shooting at Manikarnika cremation ground was the biggest shooting challenge in my 11 years of filmmaking career. Besides physical and emotional challenges, there were lots of hurdles we had to go through. At times we had to face the wrath of the relatives accompanying the dead body. And some times the local cremators or touts would intimidate us. But gradually, we built up a good rapport with the locals and eventually, almost everybody supported us.

Did you expect to win accolades (such as the best documentary film award at Montreal film festival) when you were working on the film? How do you feel getting appreciated for your work?

When I was making the film I didn't think of winning awards. But I was hopeful that this film would generate awareness about this extreme form of childhood. Thankfully, I am getting a lot of appreciation and it really encourages me.

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You have said that you will form a trust for the children who have worked in your film? Are you thinking of something on the lines of Salam Balak Trust that Mira Nair started after her 'Salaam Bombay'?

We are in the process of forming a trust to rehabilitate these underprivileged children. I don't know much about the Salaam Bombay Trust but our mission is to transform the lives of these kids. Hopefully, we will see them in school very soon.

Most talented youngsters in India are attracted to fiction (Bollywood, TV soaps etc). How come you started out with non-fiction (documentaries)? Any plans to try out other narrative styles?

I love both documentaries and narratives. More than genres, my preference is to depict inspiring human stories which would touch the heart of the viewer.

2008-The Real Star: Rajesh Jala, Director, Children of Pyre

By Bikas Mishra • Jan 6th, 2009 • Filed under: Recently Featured, featured

Rajesh S. Jala

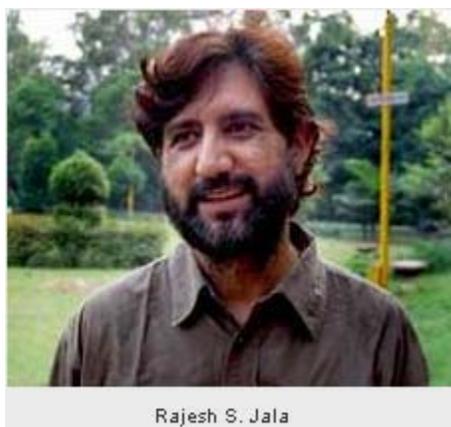
As the old Hindu belief goes dead cremated at Varanashi's Manikarnika Ghat goes straight to heaven. And that's why on this picturesque riverside of the holy Ganga nearly 150 dead bodies are brought everyday in the hope of salvation. Nobody knows what fate awaits the dead but the elaborate cremation gives livelihood to seven children. Rajesh Jala's documentary "Children of the pyre" tells stories of these kids.

Rajesh, 39, based in Delhi, has been making documentaries for more than a decade and his last film "Floating lamp of the shadow valley" (2006), a documentary film about a nine year old son of a Kashmiri militant, was screened at various international film festivals such as the Amsterdam Documentary Film Festival, the Palm Springs Film Festival, US and Raindance Film Festival, London.

He always wanted to make a film on the holy city of Banaras and got drawn to the kids during a visit to the city.

These children Ravi, Gagan, Sunil, Yogi, Kapil, Manish and Ashish are all aged between nine to fifteen. Ravi started cremating bodies since he was five.

Dealing with dead comes with a price tag for these young minds, they are haunted by them in their nightmares, however the social and physical aspect of it is even more costlier. Nobody would let them even come close because they are considered untouchables and heat emanating from the pyre ruins their health as well. The lack of respect, hardship and dread attached to the profession has already lured these kids to smoke, marijuana and heroine.



Rajesh tells that it wasn't easy for him to win trust of the kids. They were used to tourists, photographers and foreign visitors and more than anything being in the profession of dealing with the dead, they understood the frigidity and precariousness of life. It took Rajesh about a month to make friends with them and the next eighteen months he became a part of the gang of salvation, spending time and shooting with them.

Rajesh started shooting himself first. After he convinced his friends to invest in the project, he hired a crew, however, he also continued shooting himself.

Raesh's hard work paid off when "Children of Pyre" was voted the best documentary film by the audience at the Montreal World Film Festival, Canada (August 21- September 1, 2008). The film had three screenings at Montreal, all packed. First screening was followed by a question-answer session that lasted for one hour and Rajesh recounts "every single viewer had a question to ask". The film went on to win the best documentary film award at the Sao Paulo International Film Festivals, Brazil (October 23 to November 5, 2008)

The film has also traveled to Pusan International Film Festival (South Korea, 2-10 October, 2008) and Dok-Leipzig (Germany, October 27-November 2, 2008). However Rajesh is still exploring ways to screen and distribute his film back home in India.

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Children of Pyre

With the film's success at international festivals, Rajesh is hopeful he would be able to return the money that his friends have put in to the project. He says finding a producer for a documentary film isn't easy in India because platforms for exhibiting such films are very limited.

In 15 year old cremator Kapil's words "if you look at a corpse for too long it gets into your head and comes back to you again and again". However, what keeps coming back to Rajesh after completing the film are the faces of these kids who work in the extreme conditions, are often beaten and are considered outcasts. Before he sets out to make his next film, Rajesh's next project is to set up a trust to rehabilitate the kids.

OUTLOOK

The Fire Dwellers

By Namrata Joshi

It may not have been able to make much noise in the Indian media, but a small Indian film made waves at Montreal's world film festival early this month by bagging the prestigious Best Documentary award. Rajesh S. Jala's *Children of the Pyre* is set in Varanasi's Manikarnika Ghat. However, instead of India's most famous cremation ground, Jala's camera zooms in on the children who make a living there, and presents varied facets of their lost childhood.

On the face of it, Varanasi and Manikarnika are subjects that have been done to death and also rather easily fit in with a westerner's expectations of exotic India.

It is the seven winsome kids here who hold the viewer's interest. Jala shot with them over 18 months and gathered over 100 hours of footage that took about seven months to edit. The kids may be illiterate but they are acutely intelligent, they are that the ghat is nothing more than a "factory" that trades in death. Some help cremate the dead, others are shroud-stealers, who run away with the piece of cloth, and sell it for Rs 2 in the market, where it is recycled and sold again for Rs 25-30 for another funeral.



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You have Ravi, a 15-year-old who has been working at Manikarnika since he was five and has helped cremate around 1,000 bodies. There are others Gagan, Yogi, sunil, Manish, Ashish, Kapil. They display a deep reverence for their karambhoomi, a precocious awareness of sins and salvation, and a philosophical bent of mind that sorrows are as inevitable and necessary as happiness, that though they are untouchables they help people get deliverance.

There is a remarkable candidness and ease in their interaction with the camera. They reveal the technical details of their trade in a matter-of-fact way for instance, that bodies can take between two to seven hours to burn, depending upon water retention. And they declare guilelessly that they want old people to keep dying so that their own livelihoods are ensured.

In many ways they resemble regular kids, who fight and play pranks, but their conversations often echo an intimate knowledge of life's eternal cycles, and of the rules and jargon of different religious sects. One of them, talking of an extremely naughty child, wonders how he managed to remain contained in the womb before his birth, gives his proclivity for mischief. Another says he worships Vishnu, but wants to switch allegiance to Shiva because then he would be allowed to have meat.

The film highlights the precariousness of their lives, as well as the physical problems that plague them the urine that is deep yellow colour because of the searing heat they work in, prickly heat that covers their bodies because of their constant proximity to burning pyres, and the breathing problems they suffer from due to the smoke. Then there's a physical abuse they regularly face from clients, often distraught relatives of the dead. Worse are the Psychological effects the traumas and fears, how the images of the dead refuse to leave their minds, how the line "Ram Naam Satya Hai" keeps playing even in their sleep. Then there is addiction Tobacco, and worse still, marijuana and heroin. But they are impatient with well meaning advice and sympathy; "If you feel sympathetic, just give us Rs 5000."

In many ways, these individuals stories reflect the problems of child labour in any professions in any part of the world. Jala himself has a larger mission: "I am not just a filmmaker. My mission is to rehabilitate the kids and I'm forming a trust for that" he says.

The film has created a buzz in the international circuit, but some bits irk. The horrifying scenes of burning bodies play out far too long, turning the viewer into a Voyeur. Surely the dead need their dignity and privacy in their final hours on earth.

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Children of the Pyre

India 2008, 74 min.

Director: Rajesh S. Jala
Production: The Elements
World Sales: The Elements
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In Varanasi, on the banks of the Ganges river, lies Manikarnika, one of the largest cremation grounds in India. There, numerous fires rage day and night, burning bodies and releasing their spirits to roam free. The hell fires are operated by Indian men, but are also tended to by many young boys. These boys do the work that no one wants to do: stoking the fires and removing burned limbs. The youths also collect the shrouds from the burned bodies in order to sell them to hawkers.

This environment would be a horrific scene for any passerby or worker, but here it is the children who suffer the most. They not only expose themselves to major health hazards and spend their time working a terrible job instead of going to school, but they are also faced with a frightening “mise-en-scene” that permeates their dreams with fires, dead bodies and the fear of spirits. These children are forced to deal closely with death, when they have barely begun to experience their own life.

Rajesh S. Jala filmed these boys for 18 months. He talks with them,

spends time with them and follows them as they do their jobs. The effect is that of being there in the literal hell of this cremation world. The camera captures the strength of the fire and the disturbing images of skulls and limbs amongst the flames (not for the faint of heart – it is very graphic). You can feel the heat as you see the blisters on the boys’ backs and the sweat pouring down their faces. And while the kids attempt to be tough in front of the camera, Jala also manages to glimpse more nuanced and private moments: when one of the tougher kids sleeps on the rock steps with his slipper as a headrest and is awoken by nightmares, or when another boy’s father drinks too much.

The children, though strong and resigned to the job, recognise the horror of it and even the aspect that they are losing their childhood. In one scene, after Jala catches them in a silly moment, one of the boys says, “We’re kids. If we don’t joke, what should we do?...”

Jala gets amazing access to the kids, although there is sometimes a lack of depth and consistency in his portraiture of their lives. Without a strong narrative structure, the meandering storylines become jumbled and the scenes don’t always flow together. Since much of the “hell” happens at night, most of the film is shot by the light of the fire. It is dark and hard to acclimate to the people and place. The daylight scenes are almost a relief when they happen, as the context suddenly becomes more understandable. If Jala’s purpose is to expose these circumstances in a more humane and less investigative fashion, he succeeds in creating a stirring portrait of these “untouchable” boys.

Karen Cirillo

Children of a lesser God

At Varanasi's Manikarnika cremation ghat, pyres are said to have been burning without a break since centuries, as Hindus believe that last rites there would ensure a passage to heaven for the departed soul. It is in this setting that one would see a few young boys busy as bees. For them, it is the source of livelihood, though they are at an age when they should have been going to school. They steal shrouds from dead bodies, often sleep at the cremation ground, some of them even doing drugs and marijuana to escape nightmares of grotesqueshaped human limbs burning on the pyres. Very few children anywhere else would be living in more macabre a setting as they do. Though they live in Varanasi, the eternal city and hot tourist destination that has been fodder for many a media and film stories, their story has never been told before. But now, a documentary that has brought out their story before the world is earning global accolades, bringing alive through an unflinching and courageous narrative, their thankless lives before audiences that have been left spellbound and shocked.

Children of the Pyre, by Rajesh S Jala, is indeed a visual journey not for the weakhearted. And though its protagonists are children, no film certification board in the world would probably allow children to watch it, thanks to the gory visuals of bodies burning on the pyres that the director says he has used to emphasise the thankless setting these children live in. Already a winner of the Best Documentary Awards at the Montreal World Film Festival and the Sao Paulo Film Festival (Best documentary), and having attracted encomium as part of the competition section of Pusan and Leipzig International Film Festivals, the film is literally going places. It has also been shown in the International Film Festival of India in Goa as part of the Indian Panorama section and in the Eastern Stories section of the just-concluded Amsterdam Film Festival, and is soon going to be screened at leading festivals like those in Thessaloniki in Greece, Tampere in Finland, Munich International Documentary Film Festival and the IFFLA in Los Angeles. The film explores the lives of about 30 children who are into the "business" of making a livelihood out of activities in Manikarnika, believed by Hindus to be the most-sacred and ancient cremation ground.



CHILDREN OF THE PYRE Jala with the seven children, whose lives he explores in the film; and a still from the film.

Lost years

If Ravi, now 15, has been living amidst these burning bodies since he was just five years old, Yogi, Manish, Sunil, Ashish, Kapil are among those who are much younger but already veterans of the trade that primarily comprises stealing of the shrouds that cover dead bodies, selling them as cheap as Rs2 a piece to local shopkeepers who clean and re-sell them in the market for Rs 25-30. And to ply their trade, they have to be at the place where all the action is — the cremation ground on the banks of the Ganga. Interspersed with frequent close up shots of body parts burning on various pyres —“I have used many of these shots to drive home the point in what kind of brutal surroundings these kids live,” says Jala in response to criticisms from some quarters on this —the children tell their life stories in a matter of fact manner, often their innocence seeping through the harshness that the surroundings have bestowed upon them. Belonging to the ‘Dom’ community that is traditionally involved in cremation work and considered “untouchables” in society, these children have families that live in the Dom quarters of the city, but the children prefer to live almost like orphans, often even sleeping at the cremation ground after long hours of work.

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“It is question of our survival. If we don’t work here, how will we earn our livelihood,” philosophises Gagan, the one who is hated by all his “workmates” for his free use of invectives. And that is the story of every child working here. Not surprisingly, Ravi is quite nonchalant when he says that they have to smoke pot, “even though we know it is a bad habit”, to take their minds away from the sights of burning bodies. But it is not always business — very often, they do a service to humanity too, by burning unclaimed bodies on their own, even though they do it with mock rituals aimed at ‘entertaining’ themselves. Jala, who spent around Rs 40 lakh —raised through his friends and well wishers —to make the film, and hopes to get the investment back by selling it to various TV networks abroad. “I am in negotiation with around five firms for selling international distribution rights. Also I am trying to find some collaborator or a production house to get my film released commercially in New York and Los Angeles so that it can be pitched for the Academy Awards,” says Jala. The film, which intersperses some poetically-composed images to soften the often hard hitting imagery, virtually never leaves the Manikarnika Ghat, giving only a glimpse of the families of the children. Jala says he did it deliberately. “We had a lot of footage of the children with the families, but at the end of the day I realised that if I went out of Manikarnika, the film would lose focus,” says the self-taught filmmaker whose earlier film *Shadow Valley* had studied the violence in Kashmir through the eyes of a nine-year-old boat boy on the Dal lake in Srinagar.

Escape route

The children, initially suspicious of his intentions, opened up enough to Jala over the 18-month period he shot the film to confide in him that they want to escape the drudgery of their lives and get educated, some dreaming of becoming a pilot or of owning a big house someday. Unlike many other documentary filmmakers, Jala has kept in regular touch with them, as he wants to take the issue beyond his film. “I want to rehabilitate these children, and am starting a trust for the purpose. At least three-four children are very interested in going to school,” he says. For a filmmaker who always wanted to make a film on some aspect of Varanasi but only accidentally discovered this untouched subject, Jala has made a highly-evocative film that reaches a philosophical high with Kumar Gandharv’s rendering of a Kabir couplet on life and afterlife.

Utpal Borpujari

Turun Sanomat

Rajesh S. Jala kuvasi lapsia kuoleman porteilla

Elämää roviolla

KAISA KUJANPÄÄ

Intialainen Rajesh S. Jala kuvasi Manikarnikan polttohautausmaalla eläviä lapsia.

- Ajattelin, että minun on pystyttävä työskentelemään hiiltyneiden ruumiiden keskellä, jos dokumenttini lapsetkin pystyvät siihen.

Mutta kun mittari kesän kuumimpina päivinä nousi yli 50 asteen, oli kymmenien rovioiden polttava hehku hänelle liikaa.

Hindujen suurin ja pyhin polttohautauspaikka, Manikarnika, on kuolleille suora tie pelastukseen ja vapautumiseen jälleensyntymisen kierrosta. Tuhansia ruumiita polttaneelle 15-vuotiaalle **Raville** se on kuuma ja nokinen työpaikka, josta ei ole näkyvissä minkäänlaista vapautusta.

Ganges-joen varressa sijaitsevan Manikarnikan rovioista huolehtivat Intian kastiajaon pohjasakkaan kuuluvat kastittomat eli koskemattomat.



TS/Janne Ruotsalainen

Intialainen Rajesh. S. Jala löysi Varanasista lapsia, jotka työskentelivät hindujen pyhimillä hautarovioilla saattamassa kuolleita pelastukseen. Ohjaaja haluaisi pelastaa myös nämä lapset

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TS/Elina Tuukkanen

Intian Varanasissa Gangesin jokimaisemaa reunustavat polttohautausghatit.

Yhteisön nuorimmat hankkivat elantonsa pihistämällä ruumiiden peittona käytettyjä kultakoristeisia liinoja, jotka he myyvät eteenpäin muutamasta rupiasta. Vanhemmiten heistäkin tulee polttohautajia.

- Yksi kuvaamistani lapsista totesi, että liinojen myymisestä saa enemmän rahaa kuin krematoinnista, mutta niiden sieppaamisen aiheuttamaa nöyryytystä ei voi kestää enää aikuisena, ohjaaja Rajesh S. Jala kertoo.

Jalan dokumentti *Rovion lapset* (Children of the Pyre) seuraa seitsemän pojan elämää pyhällä hautauspaikalla. He kuuluvat noin 300-400 aikuisen ja 25-30 lapsen yhteisöön, jonka vanhemmista suuri osa on alkoholisteja ja huumeenkäyttäjiä, ja lapsetkin polttavat piipullisia päästäkseen edes hetkeksi pois kuoleman ja köyhyyden keskeltä.

- En halunnut näyttää heitä enkeleinä, koska he eivät ole sitä. He ovat vähäosaisia lapsia, joilla on kova kohtalo ja halusin näyttää heidän todellisuutensa, Jala kertoo.

Lasten toinen selvitysmiskeino oli dokumentaristille vaikea pala nieltäväksi.

- Roviopaikalla makasi hylätty ruumis, ja pojat alkoivat suorittaa sen ympärillä pilkkaseremoniaa. Pysäytin jo kamerani ja ajattelin, etten voi katsoa, miten kuolleesta tehdään pilaa, mutta sitten itsekäs filmintekijä sisälläni kysyi, miksi en kuvaisi, olen täällä kuvaamassa elämää, en muuttamassa sitä.

Kun sama toistui myöhemmin, ohjaaja kysyi pojilta, miksi he eivät kunnioittaneet ruumiita.

Ravi vastasi, että heidän on purettava vihansa ja pelkonsa johonkin. Heidän oli pakko kohdella ruumiita tunteettomasti, että he olisivat uskaltaneet elää kuolleiden keskellä.

Elokuva *Rovion lapset* voitti viime vuonna parhaan dokumentin palkinnon Montrealissa ja Sao Paulossa. Ohjaaja on kiertänyt dokumenttinsa mukana maailmalla ja nyt se on tuonut hänet Tampereen elokuvajuhlille, lumen keskelle. Pohjois-Intiasta, Kashmirista kotoisin oleva mies tunsu kylmässä ilmastossa heti olonsa kotoisaksi.

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Jala on taustaltaan Kashmirin hindu ja hän joutui jättämään kotinsa 1990-luvulla terrori-iskujen takia.

- 350 000 Kashmirin hindua joutui silloin muuttamaan muualle Intiaan. Pakenin Delhiin, jossa asuin kahdeksan vuotta suuressa hallissa yli sadan perheen kanssa. Olin liian köyhä mennäkseni elokuvakouluun, mutta olen aina halunnut tehdä elokuvia ja olen toteuttanut tätä unelmaani, noin 12 vuotta dokumentteja tehnyt Jala kertoo.

Ohjaaja aikoo tehdä kaikkensa, että rovioiden lapsilla olisi valoisampi tulevaisuus.

- Minulle tämä ei ole vain elokuva, vaan missio muuttaa heidän elämänsä. Olen luvannut itselleni, etten tee mitään muuta ennen kuin olen tehnyt jotain heidän hyväkseen. Tämä elokuva on antanut minulle niin paljon, sekä ammatillisesti että tunnepuolella, olen saanut palkintoja ja siitä on ollut kritiikkejä johtavissa lehdissä. Kun olen itse saanut niin paljon, haluan antaa jotain myös näille lapsille.

Hän uskoo, että kansalaisjärjestöjen kautta kanavoitava apu tai säätiön perustaminen voisi pelastaa lapset.

- Uskon, että heillä on vaikeasta menneisyydestään huolimatta mahdollisuus toisenlaiseen elämään, koska olen keskustellut siitä heidän kanssaan paljon ja he haluavat muutosta.

Polttohautauskulttuurin hän ei usko lähivuosina poistuvan, eivätkä sähköiset polttohautauspaikatkaan ole lyöneet itseään läpi Intiassa.

- Kastittomien asema sen sijaan on parinkymmenen vuoden aikana muuttunut ja varsinkin suurkaupungeissa tilanne on parempi. Maaseudulla asenteiden muuttuminen kestää pidempään.

Polttohautojen poikien kanssa Rajesh S. Jala puhuu puhelimesta pari kertaa viikossa.

- Kaverini ovat sanoneet, että sinun pitäisi vain nostaa ongelma esiin elokuvassasi ja jatkaa eteenpäin, mutta minä jämähdän aiheisiini, emotionaalisesti ja muutenkin. En voi jatkaa eteenpäin, ellen tee jotain muutakin. En lupaa, että teen näin jokaisen dokumenttini aiheen suhteen, mutta teen sitä niin kauan kuin minulla on siihen varaa.

Edellisessä dokumentissaan hän seurasi 9-vuotiaan kashmirilaisen **Arifin** elämää. Poika oli perheen pää ja tienasi veneellään elannon kuusilapsiselle perheelle. Talvella päivät alkoivat sillä, että poika hakkasi veneensä irti jäistä.

Dokumentin nähnyt amerikkalaisnainen tuki hänen koulunkäyntiään vuoden ja muuten olen itse pitänyt hänestä huolta, Jala kertoo pojan kuulumisia.

Vaikka lapset ovatkin pääosassa Jalan uusimmissa dokumenteissa, ei hän ole etsinyt heitä tietoisesti.

- Minusta he ovat todellisia sankareita, kypsempinä, fiksumpina ja rohkeampia kuin minä itse. Teen mielelläni dokumentteja ihmisistä, joita katson ylöspäin ja joissa on mielestäni jotain poikkeuksellista tai erityistä.

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Oscar-palkintoja vastikään niittänyt brittituotanto *Slummien miljonääri* on nostanut Intian vähäosaiset lapset kansainvälisen huomion keskipisteeksi. Jala on iloinen Mumbaissa kuvatun elokuvan menestyksestä.

- Mutta tuntuu, että elokuva on satu, menestystarina, jota amerikkalaiset talouskriisin aikana tarvitsivat.

Hän on tietoinen myös Bollywoodin nosteesta maailmalla, vaikkei itse niin viihteellisten elokuvien ystäväksi lukeudukaan.

- Intialla on myös kukoistava puolensa, mutta se ei ole se puoli, josta haluan ihmisille kertoa. Haluan näyttää sen toisen puolen, jonka pitää myös pystyä kehittymään, sillä muuten kukoistus ei ole tasapuolista.

Rajesh S. Jala osallistuu lauantaina Tampereella seminaariin, jossa pohditaan, voiko dokumentti muuttaa maailmaa.

- Väkevät dokumentit muuttavat varmasti maailmaa, sillä ne muuttavat yksittäisten ihmisten ja yhteisöjen asennetta tiettyä asiaa kohtaan. Siten pitkällä tähtäimellä dokumentit muuttavat yhteiskuntaa inhimillisempään ja parempaan suuntaan.

Ongelmana on kuitenkin se, että dokumentteja tehdään niukin varoin.

- Kun ajattelee intialaisia, jotka asuvat kehitysmaassa, jossa on hädin tuskin varaa elää ja jotka ryhtyvät vielä dokumentintekijöiksi, niin siinä on tuplasti haastetta.

Hän on sitä mieltä, että nousevia dokumentintekijöitä pitäisi tukea enemmän ja dokumenteille pitäisi saada enemmän tilaa televisiosta.

Vaikka Intiassa Rovion lasten kaltaisille dokumenteille ei juuri ole esityspaikkoja, on todennäköistä, että se pääsee myös kotimaan katsojien nähtäväksi.

- Meillä elokuvatarkastamo antaa sertifikaatin kaikille teatterilevitykseen kelpaaville elokuville ja ihme kyllä dokumenttini oli yksi harvoista intialaisista dokumenteista, jotka ovat ylipäänsä saaneet tuon todistuksen. Meidän on siis mahdollista esittää sitä teattereissa Intiassa, tosin todistus on A-kategoriaa, eli aikuisille.

Dokumentissa esiintyville lapsille se täytyy näyttää salaa, heidän elämänsä kun on tarkastamon mukaan lapsilta kielletty.

Tampereen elokuvajuhlat 8.3. asti.

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