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India's elephant in the room

The success of Slumdog Millionaire obscures the real cause of poverty in India – the caste system



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Slumdog Millionaire, which swept the board at the Baftas at the weekend and is hotly tipped to do the same at the Oscars later in the month, has ignited a debate across the world and on Cif on the poverty faced by millions in the slums of India.

However, as always, the Indian elephant in the room is the caste system – the root cause of poverty in India and seemingly the number one issue to be avoided at all costs by commentators.

In particular, no one seems willing to touch on the issue of "untouchability", despite the fact that 90% of the poorest of the poor in India are Dalits (who consider the term "untouchable" offensive). Though there are an estimated 170 million Dalits in India it would be almost impossible for a Dalit to overcome the hurdles faced by Jamal (played by Dev Patel) in the film.

Consider the romantic premise at the heart of Slumdog – that Jamal was able to answer all the questions on the Indian version of Who Wants to Be a Millionaire, not through luck, knowledge, or even cheating, but because it was "written".

However, for Dalits, Hindu notions of destiny offer no such hope. As Dalits fall outside the caste system they are unable to be-reborn into a higher caste and so are consigned to poverty, in this life and the next. Their "unclean" status means they are forced to do work that higher-caste people consider polluting and refuse to do, such as cleaning human waste or dealing with death.

A new report by Anti-Slavery International has emphasised that caste discrimination is

at the heart of debt bondage in India and across South Asia. Most Dalits are paid less than the cost of living, forcing millions to borrow money at exorbitant interest rates from unscrupulous bosses who trick them into perpetual slavery.

Characters in the film joke that a humble call centre chai-wallah from the Mumbai slums is able to make it onto the quiz show. However, even this is out of kilter with reality: there is no evidence of any Dalits working in the 1.6 million-strong Indian call centre industry.

Unfortunately, many of the more brutal aspects of the film correspond more closely to the everyday experiences of Dalits. For a start, Dalit children are far more likely to have to eke out an existence scavenging on rubbish tips, or being forced to beg to survive. It is not unheard of for some Dalit children to be permanently disabled in order to increase their earning potential as beggars. Forced prostitution (which was to be fate of the leading lady until her rescue) is also far more likely to affect Dalit women.

Even the comic scene of a young Jamal covered in human excrement mirrors the experiences of 1.3 million Dalits forced by the surrounding community to become "manual scavengers" collecting waste from dry toilets with their bare hands. Thousands only find work by cleaning open sewers, which they have to do without gloves, goggles or protective clothing.

The young Jamal was lucky, for his efforts he was rewarded with an autograph from a famous Bollywood star. For most Dalits working with human waste the long-term effects will be disease and a plummeting life expectancy.

Even the fact that in the film Jamal was a Muslim doesn't neutralise the issue. In India, the caste system is so pervasive that the poorest members of the Muslim, Sikh and Christian community are usually also Dalits.

Of course, there is always a discrepancy between the movies and real life and *Slumdog Millionaire* does an excellent job lifting the lid on the experiences of the poor in urban India. But, perhaps it's time we started to ask why the world's largest democracy, which officially banned caste discrimination over 60 years ago, is unwilling to tackle the real causes that keep hundreds of millions of its own citizens trapped in poverty.