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SALAAM 'SLUMDOGS'

Shobha John | TNN

The fantasy looks set to continue for 10-year-old Azharuddin Ismail and nine-year-old Rubina Ali, the child stars of *Slumdog*. There are plans for a musical and Rs 3.6 cr has already been raised for them. They're the lucky ones. Generally, when the arc lights die, the red carpet rolled up and Kodak moments of bow-ties and silken dresses forgotten, one-film child stars have to return to their grimy daily lives.

So it was with the 28 street children in Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay*. In the 21 years since the film became a hit, three children have died — one in an accident, another of HIV and the third of pneumonia, says film-maker Dinaz Stafford, who is a founding trustee of Salaam Baalak Trust, a street-children's charity. Today, the film's lead protagonist, Shafiq Syed, is an auto-rickshaw driver in Mumbai. His wife (also from the streets) and four children live in Chennai. Babu, another actor, heads a catering unit in Mumbai, while Sharfu lives in Patna, adds Stafford.

Shafiq's remuneration was put in a fixed deposit, but didn't last long. This illiterate actor was forced to struggle even after he received a fee of Rs 30,000. He may be the best example of a deprived child actor who makes it big all too briefly. Shafiq is reported to have been asked later, "Why should you work, you won a National Award?"

Dr Samir Parikh, consultant psychiatrist, Max Healthcare, says therein lies the tragedy. "When the have-nots see what the haves have, the feeling of discrimination increases. It may end in them breaking rules."

Master Raju, well-known child star who debuted in 1969, wonders if the *Slumdog* children can ever fit into ordinary cinema roles. "This role was tailor-made for them. They would need

The slum-dwelling child stars of 'Slumdog' look set to have an easier life than before the film. But it wasn't so easy for other underaged one-hit wonders



Sai Kumar in 'Bommallata' (2007) for which he got a National Award



Preeti Mukherjee who acted in 'Born Into Brothels' (2005)



Shafiq Syed (left), lead actor of 'Salaam Bombay' (1988)

to be groomed properly for the future," he says.

Preeti Mukherjee may be a case in point. The Kolkata girl was 16 when she, along with other children, was part of the 2005 Oscar-winning documentary *Born Into Brothels*. Her brush with stardom didn't change her life. Like her mother, she's a

prostitute in Sonagachi, Asia's largest red-light district. The directors kept their word of lifting these children out of their poverty. But Preeti couldn't break free of her past.

Today, she's 20 and says the Oscar moment seems like a fairy tale. "When the award was announced, my head was swim-

ming, the deafening applause, so many cameras flashing..." she trails off. But she doesn't regret her life today. "I have a flat in Salt Lake, a laptop, expensive phones, money. What do I lack?"

There are some real-life happy endings too. Sai Kumar, the 12-year-old son of a Secunderabad barber, won a national award for best child actor in 2007 for a film about a boy who wants to go to school. *Bommallata* (A Bellyful of Dreams) producer Rana Daggubati remembers, "We had auditioned nearly 300 children. The minute Kumar walked in, we knew our search was over. There was something in his eyes."

Daggubati helped Kumar join a proper school. Director K Prakash paid his fees directly to his school and assured the eager student he would pay for his college too. But Kumar, now in Class IX, had to

(With inputs from Bharati Dubey in Mumbai; Jimili Mukherjee Pandey in Kolkata and Sushil Rao in Hyderabad)



STARRY EYES: Rubina of 'Slumdog' has the world at her feet now



'We gave them a chance'

Children from deprived communities are also used by ad film-makers. The 2004 India Shining film which advertised a resurgent India, shows a poor child happily flying a tri-coloured kite against the setting sun on Marine Beach. "We went to the beach where a cluster of children was peddling wares. We zeroed in on one child and

after an hour's shoot, gave him Rs 500," says Prathap Suthan, National Creative Director, Cheil Worldwide, an ad agency. He admits he doesn't remember his name, but insists "we gave the child an opportunity." India's poorest children often make the best actors, says Sam Mathews, an independent ad film-maker.

Recalling an ad-shoot in which he used slum children, he says, "They were hanging around the entrance of film studios and we used 3-4 children for a popcorn ad. They had to dance around a popcorn machine and would do it at the drop of a hat. They were street-smart, good at disco dancing and one even claimed to be Junior Mehmood. They seemed like seasoned NSD actors." They were paid Rs 500 each. "I never saw them after that."