

MY SAY: The making of 'bottom millionaires'

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The alleviation of poverty has always been an important part of the socio-economic agenda. At the global level, for example, the UN aims to reduce the number of the poor to half by 2015, as set out in its Millennium Development Goals blueprint. The eradication of extreme poverty was one of the eight goals the UN adopted at a summit of 189 nations in 2000. Numerous attempts have been made to turn this vision into reality.

When Paul Collier wrote *The Bottom Billion* (2007), he asked: "Why are the poorest countries failing and what can be done about it?" In his book, he tells you why impoverished countries have failed to progress despite international aid and support. He makes reference to about 60 economies where almost one billion people live in what he calls "trapped countries". Their average life expectancy is said to be just 50 years and about one in seven children is expected to die before the age of five.

In 2005, Jeffrey Sachs in *The End of Poverty*, focused on Africa where those in extreme poverty live on less than US\$1 a day. This was followed by C K Prahalad's *The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid* (2006), in which he wrote about the four billion people at the bottom of the "pyramid" who live on less than US\$2 a day, which is typical in many developing countries. More new approaches were advocated to solve this longstanding problem.

But not until recently did we see how one could get out of poverty in a captivating manner. Watch the award-winning movie *Slumdog Millionaire*. It has a love-hate theme and revolves around a teenager named Jamal Malik, an orphan from a slum in Mumbai, India. Upon winning a staggering 20 million rupees on the Indian version of *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*, his life takes a drastic turn. That he is a slum dweller, born to a mother who is later killed in an anti-Muslim riot, makes the storyline even more intriguing. Overnight, Jamal manages to reshape his destiny in the old-fashioned rags-to-riches way.



A scene from *Slumdog Millionaire*... the award-winning movie has shown us a 'captivating' way of getting out of poverty

The film won eight Oscars recently, including for Best Picture and Best Director. It also grossed more than US\$175 million (RM652 million) worldwide.

Some say they love the movie because it has a happy ending. Unfortunately, in reality this happy ending was short-lived despite all the accolades. Not only is the film a subject of numerous controversies — it has been labelled insensitive and exploitative — but the actor who played the young Jamal — Azharuddin Ismail — has been in some unpleasant situations, according to *The Economist* (Feb 28).

Azharuddin was reportedly slapped and kicked by his father in public when he refused to be paraded "like a trophy" in front of the media after he flew home from Los Angeles. Later, the father admitted his guilt.

Perhaps, like the father, we, too, ought to confess our guilt for patronising a subtly "dehumanising" movie, which enabled it to rake in many millions at the box office. To be sure, it is the Hollywood appeal that makes this frenzy possible. An all-Bollywood version could never have whipped up such excitement because it is not Hollywood.

It is not as if the Bollywood film wizards have not highlighted such rags-to-riches stories. Or that they have not done a wonderful job of it. It's just that it is not Hollywood stuff. And therefore, it is not box-office material, period.

In human terms, however, *Slumdog* will have a transient impact at best. The slums in many cities of the developing world are here to stay. Except that now, they have moved up the entertainment value chain, thanks

to the Oscar endorsement. Slums are the new-found resources for wealth creation on a value chain that is entirely devoid of humanity, at least as far as the bottom billion is concerned.

This is aptly summed up by the film's popular song *Jai Ho*, which means "May victory be yours" — that is, the blessed handful of "new" millionaires. As for the rest, tough luck.

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