



The Revolutionary Optimists Discussion Guide

Directors: Nicole Newnham, Maren Grainger-Monsen

Year: 2013

Time: 95 min

You might know Nicole Newnham from:

The Rape of Europa (2006)

Sentenced Home (2006)

FILM SUMMARY

Amlan Ganguly was not born into poverty. Raised in a royal palace, he was introduced to a life filled with opportunity and promise. Instead of turning a blind eye to the impoverished conditions of his fellow citizens, Ganguly chose to use the power granted him to bring change to those most in need.

“They were born in this, they will die in this, so what is the point showing them a different world? I’m not showing them a dream world. I’m just saying that if you’re focused, you can have your way.” Such is the mission of Ganguly and team working through the Prayasam program, which offers the tools of possibility to willing children. A true believer in children as potential agents for change, Ganguly brings education, recreation, and hope for an equal world to a portion of Indian society that has long been left to the gutter.

THE REVOLUTIONARY OPTIMISTS focuses on the slums of Kolkata: the health issues people face, their back-breaking work in brickfields, and their hour-long treks to find fresh water. These realities are met with Ganguly’s positive, inspiring energy. Two children, Salim Sheikh and Sikha Patra, inspire real change in their community, lobbying for a water supply and putting their rung of society on the map of life. Such an entrepreneurial endeavor is not without its ups and down, but THE REVOLUTIONARY OPTIMISTS uncovers a secret: that the mind is the greatest obstacle we must all overcome in order to live the life of which we believe ourselves worthy.

FILM THEMES

Is one's path preordained, or is the future negotiable? Ganguly and the children he motivates inspire a tidal wave of change in the Kolkata slums.

FATE VS. WILL

The Indian caste system is a long-established way of defining the outcomes of life according to the class one is born into. The poor remain poor, never questioning their lot in life, never wondering why some have running water, flushing toilets, and windows that close, while they constantly fall ill from their contaminated conditions. Amlan Ganguly and his program, Prayasam, put destiny to the test. By teaching slum-dwellers that life is in their hands, that it does not rest in some greater force or unseen deity, he begins questioning age-old notions. Fate is what happens when will is abandoned.

CHANGE = CHILDREN

With fresh minds and a future stretching before them, children do not usually embrace societal norms. By empowering them and filling their minds with potential, Ganguly turns children into agents of change. While the majority of their parents and grandparents accept the preordained future they were handed at birth, the children involved in Prayasam are given the opportunity to choose and shape their fate. Some prove themselves ready for the exciting challenges, soaking up the positive energy and reaching for the possibilities. Other children, however, yield to the forces working against them. Ganguly understands that there is work to be done, but change is certainly underway.

BOYS VS. GIRLS

Often referred to as "the second sex," girls in India are allotted very different life opportunities than their male counterparts. While their brothers are free to roam the neighborhood, play ball, and explore the world around them, girls are confined to the household. They cook, clean, and care for the family as their mothers and grandmothers have done before them. Just as they are entering womanhood, girls are commonly married off, many becoming mothers themselves by age 20. With education being a luxury and independence being a god-given right, Indian girls have a steep mountain of prejudice to overcome.

THE LIFE FORCE

Water is a crucial, nonnegotiable part of human existence. Without it, we perish. If our water sources are contaminated, we suffer. With a fresh, ever-flowing supply, we thrive. Since this basic need for water is not being met in the slums of India, how can people be expected to rise above the humdrum motions of daily survival and become anything more than just slaves to survival? If they didn't have to struggle so much to meet this physical need, dignity and a brighter future might follow, as Amlan and the Prayasam program work to champion.

“We should forget about fate, and as much as we can, we should put in our own effort.”

Sikha Patra

“They have to internalize that life is beautiful. If their mindset is changed, they can change their surroundings.”

Amlan Ganguly

FURTHER DISCUSSIONS:

1. Have you ever been to India? If so, did you witness slum life? If you have not traveled to India, would you like to?
2. What was the most shocking bit of imagery from the film?
3. Having witnessed the struggles that many rural Indians are faced with to obtain water, do you now view water differently? Is access to safe drinking water taken for granted in your community, or has there ever been debate about it?
4. Why do you think Priyanka left the Prayasam program? What is the greatest obstacle she must overcome in her life?
5. What is Amlan Ganguly's greatest strength? Why is his program proving to be so successful?
6. Does the wider global community have a responsibility to help eradicate child labor in India, particularly in the brickfields?
7. Are inequalities between girls and boys apparent where you live? Can you share any examples of girls being treated as "the second sex"?
8. Did the film leave you with any lingering questions or emotions? If so, explain.
9. What was your impression of the families of Salim and Sikha? Do you believe that a supportive family is essential for a child to have confidence and success in life?
10. How might director Maren Grainger-Monsen's medical background inform her filmmaking? Does being a physician herself affect her perspective on the subject matter?

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- Including suburbs and surrounding areas, the population of Kolkata (formerly known as Calcutta) is 14.1 million, making it the 3rd most populous urban area in India. There are 899 females to every 1,000 males, partly due to the influx of working males from rural areas. Kolkata's literacy rate is 87%, above the Indian average of 74%. Bengali, the official state language, is spoken by the majority.
- 180 million people in India live below the poverty line (\$1.25 per day), meaning that 20% of the world's poorest people live in India.
- India is the worst country for women among the G20 countries. According to a 2011 survey, India was rated the 4th most dangerous place for women, being subjected to crimes such as acid throwing, child marriage, domestic violence, sex-selective abortion, rape, sexual harassment, child labor, and trafficking.
- 21% of communicable diseases in India are related to unsafe water, and diarrhea alone causes more than 1,600 deaths daily. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 89% of the rural population has access to improved water, while only 24% have access to improved sanitation. Indian Minister of Rural Development, Jairam Ramesh said that India is the world's largest "open air toilet," as an estimated 626 million people defecate in the open, contaminating the water systems.
- Director Maren Grainger-Monsen, also a physician, founded the Program in Bioethics and Film at Stanford University in 1998, which utilizes film as a way of raising issues of healthcare. She continues to work as the program director.
- Director Nicole Newnham works as a writer and filmmaker-in-residence at the Stanford Center for Biomedical Ethics Program in Bioethics and Film. She is involved in Map Your World, a mobile tool facilitating youth-led community mapping projects that were inspired by the film.
- Amlan Ganguly was working as an apprentice to a criminal lawyer in Kolkata when he became disillusioned with the injustices of a legal system that offered little recourse to the poor. He abandoned his law career and joined Lutheran World Services (LWS) in 1996. He founded Prayasam in 1999, funded by selling clothes in a boutique he set up along with LWS. He continues to raise money through consulting and hosting TV and radio programs.
- India's brick industry employs an estimated 10 million workers, who are paid on average USD \$2 per 12-hour working day. Each worker produces over 1,500 bricks per day. The brick industry has been widely referred to as "modern-day slavery."
- India was declared polio free in 2014 when new cases went unreported for 3 years. In the 1980s, India reported 350,000 new cases per year.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others the chance to be touched and inspired by it.
2. Consider donating to [Prayasam](#), the organization featured the film. Alternatively, visit their website for information on volunteer abroad opportunities.
3. Join [Map Your World](#), a global network of young people inspired by the film to make real change.
4. Consider donating or participating in a fundraiser to help [Water](#), an organisation that is actively working to bring safe drinking water to many Indian communities.
5. Help, in any way you can. [UNICEF](#) provides many opportunities to help improve educational opportunities for girls in India.

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