

# SALUTE TO BOMBAY / SAALAM BOMBAY 1988

Mira Nair

(Hindi language)

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## OVERVIEW

Mira Nair's award-winning film about street children in Bombay was her first feature, following on from several successful documentaries, including one about sex workers in Bombay. *Salute to Bombay* benefits from this sociological vision—not a single scene was shot in the studio—although some critics felt it revealed the director's 'foreignness.' (Nair was born in India but lives in the US, where she was also educated). Whatever the arguments of critics, the film was extremely popular both inside and outside India, and most people felt it was an authentic picture of life on the streets. It is not, however, a 'feel-good' film. It focuses on the suffering of a young boy, Krishna (aka Chaipau), who is thrown out of his home (he can only return when he has earned enough money to replace a motorbike he has damaged). Krishna's misadventures involve a circus, drug-gangs, prostitutes and thieves. There is a brief interlude of 'love', but the final shot shows him alone and destitute.

## CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

*Salute to Bombay* became an instant cultural phenomenon. The condition of street children, about which no Indian could be ignorant, suddenly became a cause celebre. The conscience of the nation was stirred by a film-maker who lives in New York. A few domestic critics were not impressed, however, citing a supposed lack of 'authenticity.' It is true that Nair did not use many Hindi songs, but she and her crew worked hard to present a realistic story. Every single scene was shot on location, and most of the child actors in the film were actually living on the street. There is a degree of melodrama in the film, but its semi-documentary style recalls Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali*, another film about poverty and children, this time in the countryside. More than three decades later *Salute to Bombay* stands as an unrivalled indictment of poverty among children in the cities. As a film it may be flawed, but it continues to present an uncomfortable truth about India that is still hotly debated.

## STORY

*Abandoned* The film begins with Krishna, the little boy who is the protagonist, abandoned by a travelling circus for which he works. We later learn that he was sent to the circus by his mother, who told him not to return home until he had earned enough money (500 rupees) to fix his brother's motorbike, which he has burned. Thrown out by his mother, he is now abandoned by his employer.

*Big city* Not lacking in pluck, Krishna goes to the nearest train station and buys a ticket 'to the nearest town.' When he gets the ticket and asks which town it will take him to, the man says, 'Bombay. Come back a movie star.' On the streets of the big city, he falls in with a group of urchins who steal what little he has. Then he wanders around and gets a job as a 'tea boy' carrying trays of hot tea to people in shops and apartments in a slum neighbourhood filled with drug-addicts, pimps and prostitutes. Chief among these low-life figures is Baba, a retired pimp, and his underling, Chillum, a still active drug-addict who also deals drugs.

*'Sixteen'* Krishna sees a young girl in the back of a taxi. It turns out that she has been sold by her family in Nepal and is now 'owned' by a particularly venal madam, who plans to sell her to the highest bidder. Krishna makes friends with this unfortunate girl (Sola Saal, or 'Sixteen') while he continues to work to earn the money needed to return home. At one point, he buys a little chick in the market and gives it to Sixteen, which makes her happy. He also becomes friends with Baba's wife, Rekha (who is

a prostitute) and her little daughter, Manju, with whom he plays, creating a rare moment of happiness when children are children.

*Drugs and sex* Chillum introduces Krishna to hashish smoking, cheating tourists and visiting prostitutes. Although he is a 'bad influence,' Chillum is a happy-go-lucky man who cares for Krishna and becomes his 'big brother.' A similarly desperate relationship is shown between Rekha (Baba's wife and prostitute) and her little girl. She slaps the child for hanging around when she's 'working' and then tells her a tender bedtime story. The older women in the brothel prepare Sixteen for her first sexual intercourse. Krishna sneaks into the room after the women have left and comforts the girl who is writhing in pain. Chillum is warned by Baba, his boss, not to sell drugs on his own because he works for him and him alone.

*Failed rescue* Krishna tries to rescue Sixteen from the brothel and escape with her. He sets fire to her room, to create a distraction, but the plan fails and they are caught. Krishna is beaten, and Baba sleeps with Sixteen and grooms her to be his mistress. Baba says that he will buy her off the madam and that she must be patient. Krishna pays a 'writer' to write a letter home, in which he tells his mother not to worry about him and that he will come back as soon as he earns 500 rupees.

*Losses* Chillum is fired by Baba and goes into a downward spiral that concludes with his death from an overdose of heroin that he bought with the money saved up by Krishna. Then Krishna loses his 'tea boy' job. Desperate, he joins in with a group of urchins, who find various ways of making money, including taking advantage of old people and stealing from them.

*Institutions* Finally, the law catches up with this gang of kids and they are put in a jail for juveniles. Life 'inside' is not much better than outside, except that Krishna and his friends don't have to scrounge for food. But when Krishna realises that he might languish there for years, he plans an escape. Meanwhile, Rekha's young daughter has been taken into a different state institution, which looks after children whose parents are deemed 'incompetent.'

*Escape* Krishna escapes and runs through the streets to visit Sixteen, but everything is different. No longer a virgin, she is dressed like the other prostitutes in the brothel. Unfazed, Krishna asks her to come away with her. Without answering, she shows him a picture of her with Baba. Even that dream is shattered by the next scene, in which she is bought by another man and taken away in a car.

*Retribution* Krishna then stabs and kills Baba. He takes Rekha by the hand and the two of them rush out into a crowd celebrating a festival. They get separated in the melee, and the final shot shows Krishna abandoned, just as he was at the beginning.

## THEMES

**Abandonment** The dominant theme in this bleak film is the abandonment of children. Its protagonist, Krishna, is repeatedly left behind. The story begins when he is abandoned by the circus he works for. Later, we learn that he had already been cast out by his mother (for damaging a brother's motorbike). In Bombay, he is let go from his job as a tea-boy and he ends up in a juvenile detention centre, where one of his friends says, 'In here, everyone forgets us. You won't get out for years.' As if these instances were not enough, the film ends with abandonment, as well. Having stabbed Baba, he and Rekha (Baba's wife) flee the murder scene and run out into the streets, where a large crowd is celebrating a festival. They hold on to each other, but soon Krishna loses her and is by himself once again. This is the tragedy of the street children—they have no stability, no continuity, no one to give them constant support. They are alone.

**State solutions** Although it would be misleading to regard this as a campaigning film, it nevertheless does ask questions. The central question is: what should be done about children like Krishna? In the absence of family support, they are vulnerable on the streets. One solution is the state's programme of child protection, which includes a detention centre for male children. Inside, the boys are fed and clothed and given some semblance of discipline, but there is also bullying and neglect. Another solution is a similar institution run by the state for destitute girls, in this case, for

Manju, whose parents are a pimp and a prostitute. When Rekha, the mother, tries to get her released back into her care, the censorious female official tells her that the state has decided she must be 'kept in its care until she is of age.' 'But she's my daughter,' Rekha says. 'How can the state be her mother?' The lady shakes her head and mumbles, 'Women like you....' It is a disturbing scene in a disturbing movie. At the end, we begin to wonder if life on the streets, however hard, might be preferable to incarceration by the state.

## CHARACTERS

**Krishna** Krishna is the protagonist, a young boy known as 'chaipau' or tea-boy. Krishna is a boy of about twelve, who is also known as 'chaipau' or 'tea-boy'. A tea-boy is little more than a street urchin who earns a pittance by taking racks of hot tea to various shops and houses in a district. This tea-boy, however, is resourceful, intelligent (though illiterate), kind, stubborn and wily. Never once does he show anything but kindness amid the squalor, desperation and petty crime that swirls around him.

**Protective** Krishna is protected by no one, but he is protective toward others. The best illustration of this quality is his gift of a chick to the trafficked Nepalese girl (Sixteen). He met her earlier, when she was brought into the brothel where he delivers tea; he offered her a free glass and she knocked it from his hand in anger. Now, these two desperate children have become friends—the street urchin and the girl who will be sold to the highest bidder for her virginity. Krishna has procured (probably stolen) a little chick from a market and takes it to the girl. Since she doesn't speak Hindi he merely presents it in his outstretched hand. She takes it and gently strokes the trembling bird with a finger. For the first time, her face lights up with happiness, which brings a huge smile to Krishna, also. It is a scene of delicate tenderness, the children and the little yellow chick, three defenceless creatures close together, almost like a religious painting.

**Lonely** We know that Krishna has been abandoned by his mother but we do not have access to his thoughts until a key scene about halfway through the story. Krishna goes to a man on the street who makes a living writing letters for illiterates. Krishna dictates a letter for him to write: 'Dear mother, I am well and hope you are, too. I didn't run away. the circus had left and I had nowhere to go. I work in a tea shop. As soon as I get the 500 rupees, I will come home. Don't worry about me.' He stops, the man reads the letter back and then Krishna adds, 'Whenever I fall asleep, I think of you.' The man raises his head and says, 'That line will cost you an extra rupee.' Krishna thinks for a moment and says, 'Then drop it.' It is a heart-breaking scene. The poor little lad cannot afford to add that final line in which he expresses his love and loneliness.

**Wily** Krishna, like all his companions, is also street-wise, otherwise he wouldn't survive. We watch him negotiate his way through many tight spots, but the highlight of them all is his escape from the juvenile detention centre in which he is held. With a clean uniform and a fresh haircut, Krishna endures the regime of discipline, which includes physical exercise and chanting patriotic slogans. Then he hears that he might be held there for five or even ten years—'whenever they get around to finding your papers and setting a court date.' He doesn't say anything, but we see that he conceives an escape plan. He chooses an afternoon when the guards are engrossed in watching cricket on television. He slips out and races to the boiler room where he knows there is a ladder. He climbs onto the roof and leaps to a wall mounted by barbed-wire fencing. Finding a hole, he squeezes through but is still on a wall fifty feet high. He waits until an open-bed truck pulls up and leaps down into the soft hay. It's James Bond as a boy in Bombay.

**Defiant** Krishna is generally passive throughout the film, until the very end when his pent-up defiance bursts forth. All the hurt and suffering that Krishna endures and witnesses has built up inside him. He has never been violent himself—except when he knocks down a bully in the juvenile detention centre—but he has absorbed a great deal of violence and cruelty from his surroundings. He is powerless to protect himself or others from these forces. At the end, though, he picks up a knife and stabs Baba to death. Baba represents the brutality and greed that have ruined the lives of everyone he knows, especially Sixteen. Krishna doesn't hesitate when Baba has his back turned and the knife is on the floor. It is murder, but it is motivated by kindness. This is clear when we see Krishna take Rekha's hand and lead her away. Krishna could not save Sixteen, but he has removed evil from Rekha in a final, defiant act of retributive justice.

**Rekha** Rekha is Baba's wife and also a prostitute. Rekha is the wife of Baba, the pimp, and the mother of Manju. She is also a prostitute herself. Like all the characters in the story, she is mired in a life of crime, cruelty and sadness. But she is perhaps the most tragic of all, even more than Krishna, because she ruins not only her own life but that of her daughter, too. Her relationship with Baba is at times tender but always underscored by money. Once, after making love with Baba, she says sarcastically, 'You're just like a customer.' She does love him, though, in her own way.

*Hard-hearted* As a prostitute, and as the wife of Baba, the pimp, Rekha has learned to numb herself to the suffering around her. A good example of this hardness occurs when she is 'servicing' one of her customers behind closed doors. Her small daughter is outside playing jacks but then begins to scratch the door. When the customer leaves, Rekha says, 'How many times do I have to tell you? Don't bother me when I'm working.' Then she slaps her hard, stunning the girl into silence. Rekha cannot let her maternal emotions get in the way of her earning money. She steels herself every time she mistreats her daughter, grinding her teeth and wearing a scowl.

*Loving* Underneath that hard surface, however, is a loving mother. There are many instances when the cruel prostitute metamorphoses into the sweet mother, but the most affecting illustration of her maternal love occurs on a visit to a state institution for children taken away from their parents. She is sitting on a bench when Manju, her daughter, is led to her by an attendant. As soon as the little girl, dressed in a white smock, steps into the room, Rekha embraces her and cries, 'My love, my life.' She strokes her hair, puts her on her lap and asks, 'Are you all right? Tell me.' When Manju remains silent, her mother breaks down and sobs. 'Don't worry, sweetheart,' she says, 'we'll take you home soon.' Rekha knows that that is not possible, which makes her all the more contrite. The mother knows that the reason she cannot be with her daughter is her own behaviour. She is in turmoil. She cannot stop working and she cannot stop loving her daughter.

**Baba** Baba is a pimp who controls the neighbourhood.

**Manju** Manju is their little daughter.

**Sixteen** 'Sixteen' is a young Nepali girl who is trafficked.

**Chillum** Chillum is a drug-addict who works for Baba and becomes Krishna's friend.



(Krishna in the final shot)



(Baba consoles Sixteen as a way of grooming her)



(Krishna gives Sixteen a chick)



(Rekha is told she cannot keep her daughter)