

## CRIPPLING CHILDREN FOR PROFIT

So just who would chop off the leg of a healthy child? The boys are victims of India's so-called 'beggar mafia' — criminals so violent and amoral that they are prepared to hack the limbs off children, as well as steal new-born babies from hospitals.

They use the children as begging 'props' to maximise their earnings from sympathetic passers-by. The plight of India's child beggars has been thrust into the international spotlight by Slumdog Millionaire, the British-made film tipped for Oscar glory with a staggering ten nominations. It has already won an unprecedented four Hollywood Golden Globes.

Branded 'poverty porn' by some Indian critics, the film has caused controversy in a country that wants to promote itself as a modern economic super-power. In a hard moment of the film, one child is blinded with acid to get more money begging. The critics didn't like this cruel portrayal of India.

Yet the truth, as I discovered during a chilling week-long investigation, is more disturbing than anything dreamt up by the creators of Slumdog Millionaire.

For in Mumbai, as well as in other major Indian cities, hundreds of young children have had their arms and legs chopped off; scores of others have been blinded. The gangs also pour acid on to the children's bodies, leaving them with suppurating wounds.

Their suffering comes down to one thing: money. In a country of 1.2 billion people, where the gulf between rich and poor is vast, there are an estimated 300,000 child beggars.

By no means all are mutilated by the beggar mafia, but those with the worst injuries do make the most money — up to £10 a day for deformed children, a fortune in a country where millions survive on just a tenth of that.

Not that Aamir and Dalbeer saw any of their earnings. After being crippled and put to work on the streets, the children are forced to hand over the cash to gang masters each evening. And if they don't hit their 'targets', they are beaten and tortured.

Mutilated children don't want to talk about their "accidents": there is a code of silence. 'The gang masters cut out your tongue if they think you have informed,' says Flintoff, 18, a 'reformed' local Indian gangster and former child beggar who wears a T-shirt with a picture of the rapper Eminem.

Two other children were abducted by the mafia in a single day last week: Asiya, aged three, disappeared from outside her home in a slum to the east of the city, while Faiz Sheikh, 13, was taken from another slum to the west. Both girls' parents blamed 'beggar mafia goons' for stealing their children.

Complaints to the police are pointless. With the beggar mafia making more than £20 million a year in Mumbai alone, corrupt officers ensure that the trade continues. According to official figures, as many as 44,000 children fall into the clutches of the beggar mafia in India each year and of these, hundreds are deliberately mutilated.

However, some charities say that the figure could be as high as a million. Most of the victims are under ten. 'They are taught the most appropriate place to beg, the kind of people one should approach, and the kind of mannerisms that would make people sympathise,' says Mufti Imran, a researcher with Save the Children.

The shocking truth about the beggar mafia emerged last year. In what was dubbed the 'arms for alms' scandal, doctors were filmed by Indian journalists agreeing to cut off the healthy limbs of children for just £100.

The mutilation of children is now so widespread that even devoutly religious locals refuse to give disabled children money, knowing that it is passed straight to their 'handlers' and that they are the pawns of a growing organised crime syndicate.

'I don't give them a penny,' says Father Barnabe D'Souza, a Catholic priest, 'If they approach me on the street, I offer them food, which they don't want,' he says. 'There is no room for emotion. This is a business — a mafia. These children are taught how to look as pitiful as possible to get money — and what they earn just gets taken from them.'

Swami Agnivesh, a child-rights activist, says: 'The beggar mafia is a huge industry and the perpetrators get away unpunished every time. There is a secret agreement between the lawmakers and lawbreakers.'

Not all the 'disappeared' children are maimed or turned into beggars. But all face a truly grim future. According to human rights groups, some are forced into child pornography and used as sex slaves. Others are killed and have their organs sold to wealthy Indians.

And, despite India's economic boom, the future looks bleak for millions of the nation's children.

'They never really get old,' says Father Barnabe. 'They just get replaced with new ones — and cast out on to the street to become beggars or die. That's the way life is here — it never changes.'

## **CRIPPLING CHILDREN FOR PROFIT**

- 1. Beggar mafias mutilate children to get money.**
  - A. TRUE
  - B. FALSE
- 2. Everyone was happy with the Slumdog Millionaire film.**
  - A. TRUE
  - B. FALSE
- 3. Some beggar children are mutilated and others are blinded.**
  - A. TRUE
  - B. FALSE
- 4. Children with serious injuries don't get a lot of money.**
  - A. TRUE
  - B. FALSE
- 5. The masters cut the children's tongues if they tell the police about the mafias.**
  - A. TRUE
  - B. FALSE
- 6. The police are trying to stop this children abuse.**
  - A. TRUE
  - B. FALSE
- 7. The mafias get more than 20 million pounds every year.**
  - A. TRUE
  - B. FALSE
- 8. A lot of doctors agree to chop off children's limbs for money.**
  - A. TRUE
  - B. FALSE
- 9. Father Barnabe gives children money to help them.**
  - A. TRUE
  - B. FALSE
- 10. All the mafias are severely punished by the police.**
  - A. TRUE
  - B. FALSE

**KEY:**

1T

2F

3T

4F

5T

6F

7T

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9F

10F