

Power of sport in a life of a marginalised child

– Written by Yu Maruyama

A foreign volunteer working for Magic Bus India, shares his experiences on his first ever visit to the 'slums' of Mumbai. He soon finds rejection of his own stereotypes, compassions with the sensitivity and complexity of their problems. A short passage ultimately leads to a rudimentary view of the concept of Sport-In-Development, and how it impacts a child living in marginalised circumstances.



Magic Bus Football Team, playing in an ALL INDIA Open Tournament in Dharavi, Maharashtra
(Credit: Yu Maruyama)

SINDHU JOGI, a Magic Bus community relationship manager, sips her CHAI in a local restaurant in Mumbai and recites, 'our work takes a lot of time... but we remain optimistic'. MS JOGI, an NGO professional with over 25 years of experience, her eminence and the contrasting difficulties still observable in slums today provoked deep feelings and thoughts. Thoughts of what the true focus of sport should be, in order to make the most significant changes.

My first experiences of 'slums' in Mumbai somehow left me with a unique astonishment that coincided with my stereotypical views of a slum. It is true that problems of hygiene, sanitation, latrines, and economic deprivation did exist, and are signs of poverty that require alleviation. However, each 'slum' community had different facets, and there were varieties of ways people lived, and most importantly, there were distinctions in the standards of living. In some of the so-called "slums", I was impressed by how well people settled in such clustered areas. For example, I came across communities that had well-tiled streets, communal water systems, a communal toilet, electrical systems and well-managed shelters that generated a genuine community atmosphere. Secondly, I found out that their problems are not often materialistic such as the lack of food, or lack of electricity. Frankly speaking, many of them had running electricity 24hrs a day with a refrigerator, TV and washing machine. And thirdly, people: I realized how bright and inspirational people in the 'slum' areas can be, and no matter how illiterate they may be, they were very smart, with genuine intelligence of socializing and interacting.

However, problems are, more often than not, hidden. In slum areas, despite the economic extravaganza of 21st century India, enduring chains of social malfunction are still preeminent. Having talked to other NGO workers in India, the problem was apparently down to the misrepresentation of the 'people in the slums', and a genuine alienation that exists within the Indian societal strata. This has led to a continuation of social malpractices such as the problem of childhood marriages, or patriarchy – a highly male orientated and dominant society. And typically, women and children are likely to be left to their household sphere of life, and end up having little interaction with the rest of the society. Domestic violence and sexual abuse are often recited as one of the reoccurring difficulties experienced by the people.

My experiences therefore left me to think, that perhaps empowerment of the people does not often derive from materialistic comfort but from positive experiences. For example, meeting inspirational people, or people from different backgrounds allows you to learn who you are and you are internally motivated. Understanding of the wider picture of a society and life instantly instigates beliefs and challenges. These things are something I have learnt

throughout my life. I appreciated playing football because it made me go out and see the world, and meet people rather than sitting at home playing computer games. It's the same here. Simple changes of sport-for-development for these children are behavioral: you either sit at home or you learn to interact and meet people. Moreover, for children who are marginalized in a true sense – ESSENTIALLY, the choice for them is either you wander on streets, you do some odd jobs, you sniff glue, you join 'gang groups' that often involve violence and misdemeanors OR you devote your youths playing sports. Sport has the pull factor and: *'Creates habits- using energies in a good way, rather than going to the street or devoting to violence, but sport teaches them a habit, that they will keep forever'*, said a man of over 50 years of experience heading a government-funded orphanage. When I heard his observation of how it changed his children, in that moment, it made sense. This is what many Sport-In-Development reports term LONG TERM BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE, and that was my answer to the power of sport in a marginalised child.

I've always believed that the work of an NGO is about persistence. The truth is, changes are never easily pertained. Neither are they apparent regardless of the cause. So rationalising the relationship of sport and how it contributes to clear-cut evidence of social change; it is a critical issue that requires further discussions. The true power of Sport –in -Development lies not in a short-term 'short-cut' intervention or diplomatic rhetoric, but it is fundamentally about who a child grows up to be.