

THE REVOLUTIONARY OPTIMISTS



a film by Nicole Newnham & Maren Grainger-Monsen

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SHORT SYNOPSIS

THE REVOLUTIONARY OPTIMISTS draws us into the world of two 11-year olds with no access to clean drinking water, a girl forced to labor inside a brick kiln, and a teenage dancer on the precipice of choosing child marriage to escape from her abusive family. From these fragile lives, lawyer turned change-agent Amlan Ganguly mines the strength and vision to build a most unlikely revolution. The film follows Ganguly and 4 children from Kolkata's poorest slums on an intimate journey through their adolescence. Together they fight seemingly insurmountable odds to build a better future for themselves and their community, challenging the notion that marginalization is written into their destiny.

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FULL SYNOPSIS

The Revolutionary Optimists is a character-driven and highly cinematic documentary that reveals the work of Bengali visionary, Amlan Ganguly. Ganguly, a hot-headed former attorney, doesn't rescue slum children -- he empowers them to become change agents, battling poverty and transforming their neighborhoods with dramatic results. Filmed over the course of three and a half years, *The Revolutionary Optimists* follows Amlan and three of the children he works with on an intimate journey through adolescence, as they challenge the idea that marginalization is written into their destiny.

Using theater, dance, and data, the children have cut malaria rates and turned garbage dumps into playing fields. Now, Amlan and the children have set their sights on goals that push at the limits of optimism: trying bring clean water to a slum long denied it, and bringing education and hope to the migrant children working in brick fields on the outskirts of the booming city.

Twelve-year-old Kajal lives inside a brick field gate, and spends her days washing dishes and carrying bricks, and dreams of becoming a tailor. After Amlan sets up a makeshift school inside the brickfield, Kajal suddenly has the chance to have an education, and find her voice. But when her mother falls ill, she and Amlan must balance her desire to learn and make change with her need to survive.

Priyanka is the teenage leader of a dance group founded by Amlan to keep slum girls in school and dissuade them from early marriage. But Priyanka's parents are abusing her and she sees only one way out - to marry her young boyfriend. Amlan fights to encourage Priyanka and the rest of the girls to stay in school and keep their eyes on her future. Priyanka's eventual decision to elope breaks Amlan's heart, but he resolves to keep fighting - for Priyanka's children, who one day may know the kind of life he tried to help her lead.

Shika and Salim are fiery 12-year-olds - best friends - who live in a neighborhood where everyone must walk 3 km at 4:00 every morning to take water from a neighboring slum. The film explores the cost of not having clean water on their families and lives, as it follows their incredible efforts to take action on the matter. By mapping their un-mapped community, and collecting data, Salim and Shika hope to convince the Colony Committee to give them a drinking water tap. Then fate intervenes, and they are tapped to speak in Delhi in front of Parliament on behalf of their group. Can these children bring about desperately needed change for the whole community?

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PRODUCTION NOTES

Five years ago filmmakers Nicole Newnham and Maren Grainger-Monsen were searching the world for stories about agents of great change. Their goal was lofty--- to find people who were trying to deal with the impossible problems in global health, problems so big that you probably can't solve them, but so bad that you have to try. Casting a wide net, they looked at polio, child labor, girls' rights, and water-borne illness. The original concept was to make several short films, each about a different issue. In 2007, when they met Amlan Ganguly, an Ashoka fellow and the charismatic founder of the Kolkata based NGO, Prayasam, everything changed.

Co-Director/Producer Maren Grainger-Monsen: "I did a lot of global health work during medical school and residency and most of the programs I saw were about the quick fix -- bringing in one big piece of equipment, or flying medical personnel in for a short period of time. Not only do these things have very limited impact, but I think they actually can destabilize the existing health system. When we saw what Amlan was doing with the kids in India, I thought, here is something completely different and truly sustainable.

Amlan isn't an Executive Director type, he is an on the ground, street level, 'I am here with you in this slum too, so let's solve this problem together' type of guy. He has this unique mission, which sounds crazy to pull off, but he is absolutely dedicated to it - that is to change the aspiration level of the people he engages with. He actually teaches children to believe that they can change their communities - or as he says, "If you change your mindset, you can change your surroundings." And it works - once these children see themselves as change agents, they accomplish things that large NGOs never could - they've turned trash dumps into playing fields, given girls the right to play - and we actually were able to film that process as it unfolded. For me that was the most inspiring part, and the part that I really hope it will allow his techniques to be replicated."

After spending a week or so with Amlan and his Praysam team in Kolkata, the filmmakers took on a much more ambitious and lengthy production plan. They would embark on a four-year long process to document change on many levels in the lives of several children and their families in Kolkata."

Co-Director/Producer Nicole Newnham: "We believed that what would make the story honest and real, to get beyond a birds-eye view of an issue or a problem was to be with the same people for years. If you want to make real change in poverty it takes time, and we wanted to show that process. Amlan's model is holistic, encouraging communities to seek change on multiple levels. If you want to make a change in water born disease, you have to get clean water. If you want to help end child marriage, you have to empower girls to get educated. And if you want families to educate their girls you have to help give them access to economic opportunity. All of these things are interrelated; you can't just step in and address one issue. We wanted our film to show these interrelations, and to show how powerful, if slow, this method for alleviating poverty can be. That

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required staying with the story, and staying with individual characters as their inner and outer landscapes changed.”

Maren Grainger-Monsen: “Before we began filming what was immediately clear was that establishing the trust in us as filmmakers, both from Amlan, and from the families in Kolkata, was going to be challenging. When Nicole and I arrived in India, the film ‘Slumdog Millionaire’ had just come out, and the people we spoke with who lived in slums weren’t happy with the way life in the slum was portrayed in that film. They wouldn’t participate in a documentary that they perceived might represent them in that way. They said, ‘we don’t want to be your subjects, we want to be your partners – we have problems in this community that need solving, and if the film can help, that’s great.’ So that was a unique dynamic, and once it was clear to them that our goals were aligned, they began to trust us.”

Nicole Newnham: “Over the course of four years we shot more than two hundred and fifty hours of footage. All together we took five trips to India, and Cara Mertes (Sundance Institute) and Claire Aguilar (ITVS) set us up with two incredible Indian DP’s Ranu Ghosh and Ranjan Palit, documentary legends in India, who were based in Kolkata. Working with them was fantastic, and essential. They also became close with the kids, which was essential, because we couldn’t afford to jump on a plane every time something important was happening, so they did some shooting without us, and were great partners. Ranu did a great thing by holding a filmmaking workshop for the kids in the film, showing how to shoot and make films. That helped the children understand the process and the purpose of what we were doing more, and through them, their families, which was really important to us.”

Maren Grainger-Monsen: “In the end, all of the amazing things we were witness too and able to film, like opening a school for children who work in a brick field, seeing Salim speak in front of Indian Parliament about the water access work he was doing as a twelve year old, watching girls get the right to play soccer on the community field, all of those achievements are such a credit to the process that Amlan began more than fifteen years ago. He has such a vision for improvement and change, and he has the patience to understand that the payoff might be years and years, or even generations down the line, but if you can instill a sense of belief in someone who hasn’t had it, you will see real change.”

Nicole Newnham: “One unusual aspect of the project is that in addition to making an intimate film about these children and their lives, we actually also partnered with them to create a technological tool that can help them and other kids around the world to follow in their footsteps as young change agents. The kids were making a community map as part of their struggle to get clean water – collecting data about how bad their water situation is and putting it into a map. We thought that adding technology to that work would be powerful. So we’ve worked with them to develop **Map Your World**, a multi-platform project that enables kids to use mobile technology to improve health in their community. We were able to bring Amlan to a new media lab in San Francisco to work with us to develop the project. So now the kids in India are piloting and using the MYW tool to expand their own work and leading the way for other kids from

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around the world to learn from them and try to take on solving the problems in their own communities.”

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THE FILMMAKERS



NICOLE NEWNHAM - CO-DIRECTOR/PRODUCER

Nicole Newnham is a documentary filmmaker and writer, currently co-producing *The Revolutionary Optimists* with Maren Grainger-Monsen as a filmmaker-in-residence at the Stanford Center for Biomedical Ethics Program in Bioethics and Film. Nicole recently co-produced and directed the critically acclaimed *The Rape of Europa*, about the fate of Europe's art treasures during WWII. *The Rape of Europa* played theatrically in 80 cities across the country, has been a much-broadcast PBS primetime special, was nominated for two national Emmys and a WGA award, and shortlisted for the 2007 Documentary Oscar.

Nicole was also nominated for a national Emmy Award for co-producing and directing the documentary *Sentenced Home* (2006), broadcast on the PBS series *Independent Lens*, which follows three Cambodian refugees in Seattle who are deported back to Cambodia after 9/11. With Pulitzer-Prize winning photographer Brian Lanker, she co-produced *They Drew Fire* (2000), a widely-acclaimed special for PBS about the combat artists of World War II, and wrote the companion book distributed by Harper Collins. She lives in Oakland with her husband Tom Malarkey and sons Finn and Blaine.

MAREN GRAINGER-MONSEN - CO-DIRECTOR/PRODUCER

Maren Grainger-Monsen is a physician, filmmaker-in-residence and director of the Program in Bioethics in Film at the Stanford University Center for Biomedical Ethics, currently Co-Producing *The Revolutionary Optimists* with Nicole Newnham. Maren directed *Hold Your Breath* and *Worlds Apart*, a large-scale project on cross-cultural conflicts in medicine, which was broadcast on national public television and is currently being used in 63% of US medical schools.

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Maren also directed *The Vanishing Line*, her journey toward understanding the art and issues of dying, which was broadcast on the Emmy Award winning national PBS "Point of View" series. She also directed *Where the Highway Ends: Rural Healthcare in Crisis*, which won a regional Emmy Award, and *Grave Words*, which was awarded first place in the American Medical Association Film Festival. Maren studied film at the London International Film School, received her medical doctorate from the University of Washington and emergency medicine and palliative care training at Stanford University School of Medicine. She founded the Program in Bioethics and Film at Stanford University Center for Biomedical Ethics in 1998. Maren lives near Stanford with her husband, medical device entrepreneur and mandolin player Jeff Grainger, her two children Solenn and Tilson, and eight chickens.

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CHARACTER NOTES

AMLAN GANGULY



A qualified lawyer, Amlan began his career as an apprentice to the most reputed criminal lawyer in Calcutta. He was soon disillusioned with a legal system that provided little justice to the poor unable to pay fees and withstand the long drawn legal process. In 1996, Amlan decided to make a complete switch

and joined Lutheran World Service India. In 1999, Amlan created a slum community centered non-profit called Prayasam with a few friends. The founding principle was to enable children to participate in the decisions and factors that affect their lives. Under Amlan's leadership, Prayasam has emerged as a regional expert and trailblazer in child rights programming and workshops.

Amlan's ideas about education have been recognized worldwide as both timely and important. In 2006, he became an Ashoka Fellow, part of an association of the world's leading social entrepreneurs. In July 2007, Amlan was invited by the Rockefeller Foundation to attend the Global Urban Summit on Innovations for an Urban World in Bellagio, Italy. In 2011 Amlan was awarded the Ford Fellowship by the Ford Motor Company Fund and the Picker Center for Executive Education at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs.

Prayasam continues to introduce its peer education and child empowerment concepts to impoverished sectors of society. Notably, Prayasam is working with the West Bengal government to uplift brick kiln migrant worker communities – the first such collaboration between government and NGO in India – through its signature “Multiple Activity Centres.” In addition to his work in West Bengal, Amlan facilitates leadership, soft skills and gender trainings across India, most recently with World Vision India in all over West Bengal and under the aegis of the Xavier Institute of Social Sciences in Bangalore, India.

SALIM SHEKH

Salim was eleven years old at the outset of filming. He was a precocious and eager member of Dakabuko (*The Daredevils*) the empowerment group run by teenagers in his slum colony. Part of the inspiration for his work to improve water access in his community was his own



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stomach illness, which hospitalized him for more than a month when he was ten years old. Salim and his family are Muslims who moved to a Kolkata slum colony seeking more opportunities for work. His father works in a box factory and they face many hardships-- but their primary concern is the lack of access to clean water. In the four years of filming with Salim he has become one of the leaders of Prayasam, with a focus on clean water access. Two years ago he was tapped to speak at the Indian Parliament in Delhi, and last year he spoke at the Skoll world forum in Oxford, England. He wants to be a lawyer.

SIKHA PATRA

Sikha joined Prayasam four years ago at the suggestion of her best friend and neighbor Salim Shekh. Since then Sikha has risen to become one of the most



powerful voices in her community on girls' rights issues. Specifically her focus is to help dissuade her peers from child marriage and to advocate for equal rights for girls. She helped girls in her community gain the right to play soccer outside on the community field, and join the boys in games where they were previously not

allowed. She was also the youngest participant chosen among four adolescents to speak on National Girl Child Day, hosted by the Ministry of Women and Child Development in New Delhi, to share her experiences of the problems faced by adolescent girls, especially early marriage and the innovative strategies being implemented by her group in the community.. She is also a star field hockey player. Her sister ran away from home and was married as a child which devastated the family, so her parents are extremely committed to her education. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation nominated her to be a "Vaccine Hero." Sikha recently made her own short film, and is considering a career in law or journalism.

KAJAL KAHAR

Kajal, is one of 9 million Indian children who live and work inside a brick field. Her family are part of the Bihari minority in West Bengal. Kajal was only twelve years old when filming began, but already spent hours every day in the hot sun with bricks piled on top of her head. At that time she had hardly set



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foot inside a classroom. She didn't know how to read signs, and she couldn't count the wages she was being paid. Her mother, who fell ill during the filming process, is still unable to work so Kajal is the sole wage earner in her family. She is now sixteen years old and still fighting to continue her education with the support of Amlan, while working full time inside a brick kiln-- the same brick kiln that her grandmother worked in two generations ago. She has developed an interest in photography and takes all the photos for Prayasam's publications.

PRIYANKA MANDAL



Priyanka was fifteen years old at the outset of filming. She was the leader of the Allhadi (*Dear Ones*) dance group and was paid a small stipend to teach dance lessons. She had been a part of Prayasam since she was eight years old, and Amlan was particularly hopeful that she could break the cycle of child marriage and go onto a

career in dance. But as the film shows, she was unable to avoid this fate, and a significant factor in her decision to marry her boyfriend at the age of seventeen was the abuse that was occurring in her home. This year Priyanka gave birth to a baby girl and hopes to return to teaching dance with her former colleagues from the Allhadi dance group.

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FACTS AND FIGURES

There are more than 5,500 slum communities in Kolkata, India.

12% of Indian children age 5–14 are currently engaged in child labor.

Less than half of all girls in India enroll in secondary school.

47% of Indian girls are married by the time they reach 18.

Today, almost 1 billion people – one in seven of us – live in an urban slum.

The world's slum population grows by 6 million every year.

Today 884 million people do not have access to safe drinking water.

3.4 million people die each year from a water related disease.

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