

## ASIAN CORNER

# Missing drive in Indian children's cinema



A scene from Amir Khan's "Taare Zameen Par" (Stars on the Earth)

By Gautaman Bhaskaran

Children's cinema has never been easy to produce. Many have even questioned the point of making children's films at all. But there are solid reasons for getting kids going to the movies.

For example, Canada in the 1990s, faced with shrinking cinemagoers, hit upon a cunning idea. By producing quality films for children and screening them in schools, boys and girls were soon hooked. Young students became regular cinema attendees and eventually parents found themselves accompanying their children. It made good business sense.

In Iran, established directors tried to beat the rigid censorship laws of the 1980s by making films for children. With subjects involving sex, love and politics banned under Khomeini's cultural revolution, filmmakers had to be allegorical in their work. Abbas Kiarostami's "Where Is My Friend's House" (1987) is a fine example of this, using children to ensure it was beyond such curbs and social critique. The role of the family, for instance, is

often highlighted in these films as a point of tension and conflict arising from the surrounding social and economic circumstances.

India has never faced such coercions. It has witnessed neither significant drop in theatrical attendance or state curbs in the strict sense of the term. Therefore there has never been a great need to make children's cinema.

But this did not mean that it wasn't produced. It was there, but often the attempts were half-hearted, with unrealistically low budgets, B-grade actors and poor scripts. Many directors treated children's cinema as a means for self-development, as a stepping-stone towards adult filmmaking.

Shyam Benegal, one of India's most distinguished directors and among the pioneers of the 1970s new wave movement, made the excellent children's offering "Charandas Chor" (Charandas, the Thief) in 1975. India's auteur-director Satyajit Ray also made several quality movies for children, although he didn't label them as such.

In recent years, filmmakers have taken the lead from Ray, particularly Gupte's

"Stanley Ka Dabba" (Stanley's Lunch Box) and Amir Khan's "Taare Zameen Par" (Stars on the Earth).

But the general consensus in India is that movies for the young are not a priority. Nandita Das, Chairperson of the Children's Film Society of India, which helps produce kids' films and organises the biennial International Children's Film Festival of India, agrees with this sentiment. "Although there has been some lovely cinema for children from time to time, there is not enough money going for production and marketing," she says.

Das claims that India compares poorly with many other countries in children's cinema. "We do not have the kind of budgets to make the Harry Potters of the world, but we are strong in good storytelling and we have tons of children's literature that is waiting to be told through cinema" she says.

Although it may not rank alongside Harry Potter, Iran has been making splendid cinema at unbelievably low budgets. If India cannot do the same, surely the question is not one of funding, but of will.