

6th Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Competition 2025: Certificate of Merit

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Jhund: A Critical Analysis



Jhund: Directed by Nagraj Manjule Duration 176 minutes Released on 4th March 2022

On the 21st of August 2021, there was a news in The Times of India” “Wagon breakers, mobile thieves targeting trains in Nagpur Outer”.

On the 4th of March 2022, a film called *Jhund* was released in the theatres of India. This was acclaimed Marathi director Nagraj Manjule’s maiden venture in Hindi. The central characters of this film are wagon breakers living in a slum by the railway track in Nagpur. They are school drop outs, junkies and make a living by chain snatching, wagon breaking, mobile snatching, sorting scrap and rummaging through garbage. A lot of the

garbage comes from across the high wall that separates their world from the world of the genteel folk who live by the law of the land.

The slum folk on this side of the wall dodge the law of the land in their everyday struggle for existence. They make their own law and set their own agenda for survival. When they are not engaged in “unlawful activities”, they sit by the railway track and smoke pot or inhale dendride. A rusty carcass of a Maruti van is their club house, where they gather to have their sundowner and sometimes make music with scrap and thrown away objects. The perfect unison of their

musical performance is symbolic of their unity as a “jhund” or horde. The natural leader of this jhund is Don Masram, son of an alcoholic father and a struggling mother. He is athletic, reckless and hard wired to have his way around. As his jhund performs in the car-club, he sits on the roof of the car and looks up. Camera follows Don’s gaze and slowly tilts up to the sky.

Straddling the two worlds on the two sides of the high wall is Vijay Borade, a football coach at St. John’s College situated across the wall. Borade (enacted by Amitabh Bachchan) and his red and white football are the agents of change that are poised to challenge the wall.

In this three-hour long film, Nagraj Manjule has lovingly painted the picture of low life in India in its multifarious shades. His camera is not a neutral observer that maintains its distance and objectivity. His camera is a participant observer of the low life. The camera stations itself in hide outs and on roofs of goods trains. The camera meanders through the alleys of the Gaddi Gudam slum and its neighbourhood. It goes from the local police station to the sprawling football ground of St. John’s College.

The “jhund” and its activities are mostly captured in the soft warm glow of the afternoon sun, adding a touch of glamour to their backlit frames. The movements in slow motion lend a poetic touch to their low lives. The lyrics of the songs penned by Amitabh Bhattacharya and set to rap like tune by Ajay Atul echo the world view of the reckless herd.

About half way through the film, Karthik, the youngest member of the herd asks, “Bharat manjhe kya?” (What is the meaning of Bharat?) Everybody is

flabbergasted by the question. And then somebody says, “Bharat is our Gaddi Gudam slum”. The Gaddi Gudam slum in Nagpur could have been anywhere in India. *Jhund* is the saga of every slum – precarious lives on the edge of a precipice, violence lurking just beneath the skin, wasted talents and deprived dignity.

Yet, the saga of Gaddi Gudam slum is special because in its neighbourhood lives Vijay Borade, who notices the unusual talent of the kids to ‘kick the bucket’. It happens one rainy day when he notices the kids playing around with a plastic jerry can. He is amazed by their natural flair for the scissor kick and the rainbow flick.

The next day he arrives with a red and white football, but the kids are missing. They are out to take revenge on their adversary and his cronies. Camera captures them in low angle, making them larger than life, walking with iron rods, chains and cricket bats. In step with their menacing strides, the song “Feast, drink to wash you clean/ We are here this wild horde” plays on the sound track. Later lines of the song go like this “Fate’s a bitch, she has bitten us/Yet this horde is hotter than fire”.

Blissfully ignorant of the dangerous mission of the jhund, Borade returns the next day with his football. He lures them with a reward of 500/- for playing football for half an hour. Soon enough, football becomes the new addiction of the Gaddi Gudam jhund. Money or no money, they must have their dose of football every evening. Borade realizes that the time is just ripe to break down the boundary wall. A goodwill match with the college football team is proposed. The principal agrees reluctantly, as a farewell gesture to Borade who is about to retire; but

Borade's colleague is scandalized by the idea. He says, "*gandagi ko college ke andar na laye*" ("Don't bring the dirt in the college campus").

Suddenly the *jhund* has a mission in life – a collective goal, something to look forward to. It is a new experience for them which helps them to get focused and channelize their energy. On the other side of the wall too, as preparations get going for the goodwill match, we get glimpses of inequity. The guard who protects the campus from intruders from across the wall, is chided for playfully dribbling a football. A little girl sits on the ground and collects the cut grass into a basket in her attempt to level the playing field with her tiny hands.

Would the playing field be levelled? The D-Day arrives and the Gaddi Gudam team scales the wall to enter the arena. They are dressed to kill. The football match takes up more than 25 minutes of the screen time and brings out the dynamics between the privileged and the underprivileged, the disciplined and the quibbling, the clash between cool confidence and desperate aspiration. Will the underdogs come on top? The spectator is hooked to the game as are the cheerleaders. By how much margin Gaddi Gudam would clinch their win and what would be their path to victory? The victory of the Gaddi Gudam team proves that the playing field can be made level if one wishes to. Interestingly, a level playing field in the sports arena helps to even out the playing field in life's arena too.

Jhund is a film about the transformative power of sports. It is also a film about the tactful strategies of a coach to bring out the best in his trainees, to have faith

in the potential of a player, to be non judgemental and forgiving where necessary. Vijay Borade's character is inspired by the real life football coach Vijay Barse and his exemplary work with the marginalized community of Nagpur. In this film he is like Dronacharya, but he embraces the Eklavyas and brings them under his wings, instead of asking for their thumb. Borade's *gurudakshina* is the actualization of his trainees' true potential.

Amitabh Bachchan has given out a restrained performance as the football coach Borade. Witty and tactful, observant and alert, self respecting yet humble, you rarely see him losing his temper. Nor do you see him over indulging and patronizing to his underprivileged trainees. You do not see him running across the football field, chasing the ball. But you see him tirelessly doing the training exercises with the slum kids.

The post victory celebration in Borade's house becomes the occasion for all the team members to narrate their stories of life – why they dropped out of school, what turns them on, how their parents make both ends meet. They talk about their addiction to substance but they do not talk about their unlawful activities. Don Masram says that his life is nothing special. It is like the life of any other slum kid.

Yogesh plays "*Sare jahan se achha*" on his banjo – a dream that everybody would like to cherish, a belonging that all Indians would like to believe in. The person solely responsible for drawing the grandfathers of these kids into the process of development of our newly independent nation, was B.R Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Constitution of India. Ambedkar Jayanti is a

big day in Maharashtra. At the Gaddi Godam slum, under the benign gaze of Babasaheb Ambedkar, the entire slum dances to the tune of “Curvy and crooked. Twisty and Round”. The camera zeroes in on every member of the jhund twisting and turning in gay abandon. Borade quietly winds his way through the merriment and pays his tribute to the great visionary Ambedkar.

Soon one member of the jhund drops off almost in the blink of an eye. Banjo player Yogesh, who is also an ace wagon breaker, slips and falls off the moving train. The tragedy is a reminder of the precarious lives led by the slum dwellers.

At this point the film suddenly opens up. Its canvas becomes wider.

Charged by their victory in the goodwill match, the jhund wants to have another match with the children of the neighbouring slum. Eventually they plan a national tournament of slum football. The news spreads like wildfire on the social media. Slum football teams congregate to Nagpur to participate in the tournament. The St. John College football ground is once again the arena. This time the well manicured college ground gets literally littered with the dirt of low life India – so much so that Borade is asked to halt the tournament with immediate effect. He asks for a second chance and his jhund does not disappoint him.

Jhund is not the first Indian film set in an urban slum. We have seen glimpses of slum life in *Do Bigha Zameen*, *Awara*, *Deewar* and many other films. In Ravindra Dharmaraj’s 1981 film *Chakra* the protagonists struggle for survival in a Bombay slum. Sudhir Mishra’s 1991 film *Dharavi* tells the story of a taxi driver living

in Asia’s largest slum. *Gully Boy*, released in 2019, follows the life of a rapper from Dharavi. *Jhund* is not the first film in which slum boys played the role of slum boys. We have had Mira Nair’s *Salaam Bombay* and Danny Boyle’s *Slumdog Millionaire*.

So what makes *Jhund* special? First, it is the visceral experience of slum life that the film offers its viewers. The director’s vision is neither romanticizing nor patronizing. It seems to have come from a direct lived experience. Director Nagraj Manjule even plays a not so cameo role in this film as a scrap dealer. He is the one who partly sponsors the celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti and he plans to expand his scrap business by partly encroaching the playground of the jhund. The entire slum vehemently resists this plan and in a symbolic gesture they cleanse their slum of all the scrap and garbage, including a scrap god whom they have been worshipping till now. Don Masram comes forward to uproot this god from its position and dump it on the van taking away all the scrap. The ground, thus cleaned up, is now converted into a football ground. In an aerial drone shot we see two football grounds on two sides of the wall.

The second point that makes *Jhund* special is the wide canvas of the film. From being the story of one particular slum in Nagpur, the film opens out to a pan Indian picture. After the success of the All India Slum Football Tournament, Borade gets an invitation to participate in Homeless Soccer. It is a great honour and a big opportunity for the best of slum footballers all over India. But to be able to represent India in a foreign land, they have to prove their identity and their Indian citizenship by producing the necessary

papers. The film explores relentlessly how a girl growing up in a remote village goes from pillar to post to prove her identity as an Indian citizen.

The saga of this girl and her father and the Muslim girl Razia and her husband hint at the struggles of grassroots Indian women in asserting their identity. The other two women who stand out in the ensemble cast of *Jhund* are Vijay Borade's wife, who is like a rock of support in Borade's crazy projects and the stylish Bhavna – a student of St. John's College and a member of their football team. Bhavna and Don strike a friendship through social media. The social media turns out to be a great equalizer.

Jhund is like a Mahabharata of the invisible Indian and one man's quiet resolve to give them visibility and dignity. Vijay Borade's impassioned speech in the courtroom underlines all his concerns about lost opportunity, unrecognized talent and untapped human resource that makes the nation poorer. One such human resource is Don Mashram whose passport is held up at the police station because of his past criminal record. His team bids him goodbye and moves off to Mumbai in a big bus, on their way to

the Homeless Soccer tournament. Don proceeds to the police station to kill the police officer with a small pen knife. If the red and white football and the wall are two leitmotifs in *Jhund*, this pen knife is the third leitmotif – a small weapon that Don uses for self defence. It was a desperate use of this pen knife that landed Don into trouble earlier and marked him as a criminal in police records.

Mercifully, the Indian administrative machinery does have a human face and Don's passport does arrive at the nick of time. Don's love interest Bhavna drives him all the way to the Mumbai airport. There, during security check, the small pen knife is detected by the metal detector. He is made to throw away this little weapon of self defence before he gets the rite of passage into the international arena. Don breaks down from the grueling experience of coming out clean.

The Indian slum football team and their Dronacharya make way to the aircraft. As they walk, the digitally generated red and white football appears as a blessing to prod them on. The aircraft takes off and flies over the wall. Thus, the *jhund* rises above the wall that separated their world from the 'other' world.

*Footnote: The **Homeless World Cup (HWC)** is an annual association football tournament organized by the Homeless World Cup Foundation, a social organization which advocates the end of homelessness through the sport. The organization puts together an annual football tournament where teams of homeless people from various countries compete. Since 2007, India has been represented in the tournament by teams organised through Slum Soccer. Slum Soccer has been founded by Vijay Barse, after whom Vijay Borade's character has been created.*

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