

December, 2024 SMILE PINKI dvd review by Kino Ken



SMILE PINKI is a December, 2024 LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below is Kino Ken's review of that dvd film and bonuses.

**Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance
(j) designates a juvenile**

10 of a possible 20 points = a mediocre film

**India 2008 color 39 minutes subtitled live action short documentary
HBO Documentary Films / Principe Productions / Smile Train
Producer: Megan Mylan**

Points:

- 1 Direction: Megan Mylan**
- 0 Editing: Purcell Carson**
- 1 Cinematography: Nick Doob and Jon Shenk**
- 1 Lighting**
Graphic Design: Heather Crank
- 2 Music: Prasanna Ramaswamy***
- 1 Interviews**
- 0 Sound**
Sound Editing: Lidia Tamplenizza
Sound Mixing: Gabriel Monts, Megan Mylan, Sean Garnhart
- 1 Research**
- 1 Creativity**

2 Insightfulness

10 total points

Cast: Anti Chauhan, Ghutaru Chauhan (j), Virendra Kumar Das, Ravi Anand Many, Nirmala Pal, Surendar Pal, Lalchand Sankar, Manoj Sharma, Shruti Shukla, Pankaj Kumar Singh, Ramesh Singh, Dr. Subodh Kumar Singh, Vinay Kumar Singh, Pinki Kumari Sonkar (j), Rajendra Sonkar (Pinki's father)

Smile Pinki won an Academy Award® for Best Documentary Short 2008, probably due to its humanitarian upbeat subject matter. Technically, Megan Mylan's film is simply of average quality, with inferior sound recording and editing, overly small subtitles, and merely acceptable lighting of exteriors.

Focusing on two peninsular Indian children, one born with a cleft lip, the other with a cleft palate, director Mylan's picture provides insight into negative social consequences of those birth defects.

One of these children is Pinki (or Pinka) Kumari Sonkar, who lived and still does in Rampur Dhabahi village. She was recruited at age five or six by social worker Pankaj Kumar Singh as a likely candidate for surgery at the G. S. Memorial Plastic Surgery Hospital in Varanasi, India. Apparently a gap of roughly two years existed between registration for that operation and the operation itself. The waiting list for that type of hospital treatment is enormous. Registration seems to have occurred in Benares, but the surgery itself took place in Varanasi.

A second recruit featured was nine-year-old boy Ghutaru Chauhan. He was age eleven at the time of his Varanasi operation.

Most sufferers of these disfigurements reside in impoverished third-world countries where plastic surgery is seldom affordable or available, although one in seven hundred babies born in the United States exhibit this deformity according to Boston Children's Hospital.

The Smile Train organization provides local surgeons with skills essential to executing successful cleft lip and cleft palate operations in such underserved nations. It sponsored and partially funded this documentary where viewers can observe both physical and socioeconomic consequences

of its viable and financially conservative solution to a problem posed by genetic facial deformation. Smile Train has funded more than thirty thousand such surgeries over a ten-year-period thanks to its expansive donor base, which included the late Colin Powell.

There are an estimated ten thousand cleft lip children born in India each year. Through the stories of Pinki and Ghutaru, their struggles are brought home to international audiences. For social ostracism, banning from education, inability to speak and eat properly, ineligibility for marriage – all these drawbacks will haunt them as they mature.

In Pinki's case, children of her village taunted her with the label "honth katiya" which meant "cut lip." They refused to play with what to them was a horror show freak. Thus, despite the girl's eagerness to take her schoolbag and run off to school, that elementary privilege was denied her. Pinki's mom believed her cleft lip was due to an eclipse happening when the child was still in her womb.

Eager for medical treatment promising a whole new personality change, Pinki was a willing and calm patient, despite the unfamiliarity of people and places outside her home community.

For Ghutaru Chauhan the situation was even more desperate. He could neither speak nor eat without the greatest difficulty. Education was impossible. So was participation in peer sports activities. Ghutaru was a complete outcast, living a wretchedly unfulfilling existence.

We see what appear to be optimal outcomes for this pair as faces are repaired and inclusion opportunities afforded to them. Accepted post-operatively by playmates in Rampur Dhabahi, a smiling, giggling Pinki leads certainly a better life than before. When Ghutaru returns home, school and cricket become part of his routine. He can now speak and eat like other boys his age.

The first recorded cleft lip operation took place in China as early as 390 B.C. There a team of surgeons supervised by an Arab named Albucasis tried preparing eighteen-year-old Wey Young-Chi for an army career. In Wey's case, great post-operative achievement ensued, with ultimate attainment of governor-generalship of six provinces.

Europe proved more stubbornly backward. Spartans left babies born with cleft lips exposed to die on Mt. Targete. Romans were no more enlightened.

They murdered infants of that sort by drowning them in the Tiber River or throwing them off the Tarpeian Rock. Medieval Europeans and even rural twentieth-century Chinese often abandoned these seemingly “cursed” newborns by the roadside, believing them to be demon-possessed.

There is a dark curtain beyond what we see at *Smile Pinki*'s conclusion. For despite trips to the United States when its director won an Oscar® award in 2009 and to the United Kingdom for a coin toss at Wimbledon's Men's Singles Tennis Final, Pinki ultimately returned to a two-room house with no door, three siblings, and a bottom-paying job selling her father's homegrown fruits and vegetables. Thanks to funding from Mamta Carroll, Smile Train's Senior Vice-President and Regional Director for Smile Train Asia, India's famous poster girl had the chance to attend Lucknow Public School and SRVS Inter College in AHIRAURA, located nine kilometers or about five and one-half miles from her home. At age twenty, she was a Class 12 student in the latter institution when not working in family fields, still hoping to become a police officer in order to help save India's at-risk girls from abuse. This more recent Pinki can be seen at YouTube on the video “Smile Pinki: Where is Pinki Now?”

Sadly, interviews with the two child stars are brief and not particularly incisive. Editing too often engages in collages of fast-moving shots featuring persons and places we never get better acquainted with.

However, a special kudo to Berklee College alumna Prasanna Ramaswamy for an engagingly atmospheric score which bypasses Bollywood in favor of Indian folk melodies and chamber music orchestration.

HBO's dvd release includes a passel of extras. An all-too-brief Pinki update is one of them. Others are testimonials from such luminaries supporting Smile Train as Tom Brokaw, Walter Cronkite, Christie Brinkley, Chris Meloni and Alex Trebek. Smile Train work in Haiti, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan prior to Taliban return to power are revealing and heart-rending.

Sentimental, compassionate, and humane, *Smile Pinki* wins over audiences by being refreshingly optimistic. It triumphantly showcases significant changes brought about by unswerving dedication to a dream of achieving a better world “one smile at a time.”

Thanks to the following for information about cleft lips, India, and Pinki's life: 1. Sudhir Kumar's article in the Hindustan Times online at

www.hindustantimes.com/india - news/smile-pinki-the-inspiring-story-of-overcoming-poverty-and-cleft-lip-surgery -to ...

2. “Reminiscing the Genetics of Orofacial Clefting” by Subhra Mandal, Prabir Mandal and Swapan Bhattacharjee at

<https://www.ijmhr.org/ijar3.2/UAR.2015.164.PDF>

3. Oliver Frederick’s report titled “For 2009 Oscars Star Pinki Promises & Smile Gone: ‘Fairytale Over, Back to Poverty in UP’ (News18 Special online)

4. “Cleft Lip: The historical perspective” in Indian Journal of Plastic Surgery, October 2009 Supplement to ISSUE 42 by S. Bhattacharya, V. Khanna and R. Kohli of Lucknow, India at

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2825059>.

5. <https://www.children’shospital.org/conditions/cleft-lip-and-cleft-palate> (Boston Children’s Hospital)

6. Wikipedia article on Smile Train