

## Reviews and resources

**Behind the Beautiful Forevers:  
Life, Death and Hope in a  
Mumbai Undercity**

Katherine Boo

2012, Random House, ISBN  
9781400067558, US\$27, CA\$32

Katherine Boo is a winner of the Pulitzer Prize for journalism, MacArthur grant awardee, staff writer at the *New Yorker*, and former reporter and editor for the *Washington Post*. She is a committed journalist with a reputation for in-depth reporting on social justice and poverty issues in the United States. Boo's Pulitzer Prize in 2000 was for her research and reporting on the treatment and deaths of people with learning disabilities in 'for-profit' facilities that led to closures and a criminal investigation. And yet, Boo's first book, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, is full of character and colour, reading like fiction, reminiscent of Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*.

*Behind the Beautiful Forevers* tells the story of slum dwellers in Annawadi, Mumbai – people literally scavenging an existence in deplorable conditions in one of the world's most upscale cities. Mumbai is classed as a 'global city', and is the wealthiest metropolis not only in India, but also in central, south, and western Asia. This wealth gives rise to all kinds of garbage that

give hope to our hero, Abdul. Abdul has a gift for sorting refuse and extracting every rupee possible from an assortment of plastics, papers, metals, glass, and other materials.

Other than being a triumph of investigative journalism and an excellent read, you might wonder what relevance this book has for the readers of *EDM*. I think there are three main areas of interest: how poverty is measured; globalization and its impact on the marginalized during crisis; and the absence of microfinance and enterprise development (and other effective) programmes in these communities.

First, the slum dwellers of Annawadi are not considered 'poor' by Indian government statistics. They are instead listed among the 1 million who Boo tells us have 'officially' escaped from poverty since 1991. To the inhabitants of Annawadi, there is some truth in this; they are better off than migrant workers and homeless families who eat grass and rats, and risk life and limb to earn a meagre income. But the living conditions, sickness and lack of health care, negligible schooling, and poor nutrition of these households are evidence of real poverty. During the rains 'hut walls grew green and black with mold, the contents of the public toilet

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spewed out into the maidan, and fungi protruded from feet like tiny sculptures' (p. 73).

Second, we all read during the financial crisis how India would continue unscathed, and initially India's economy did continue to grow at about 6 per cent per year. However, with liberalization over the past 10 or so years, India's growth had been significantly bolstered by trade, and the effects of the global economic turndown were felt in India. The result for Abdul and other Annawadians was disastrous. As a community that survives on selling recyclable scrap, their markets and livelihoods began to dry up. 'A kilo of empty water bottles once worth twenty-five rupees was now worth ten, and a kilo of newspaper once worth five rupees was now worth two. This was how the global crisis was understood' (p. 190). Those who had been close to moving from the slum through diligence and thriftiness sank into deeper poverty than ever. The despair of relentless poverty descended into greater lateral violence, and tragedies compounded as the story unfolds. 'The addict, Mahmoud, would already have told the police that Abdul had been standing on the road with Kalu the night before. This would be the evidence on which Abdul would be convicted [of murder]' (p. 167).

Third, there are no micro-finance or enterprise development projects in this slum raising

people out of poverty. There are sham projects that siphon off development dollars, and can be quickly visited for a few rupees when evaluators arrive on the scene. But the real money is absorbed by corrupt politicians, slumlords, and their factotums.

A government-sponsored ... program was supposed to encourage financially vulnerable women to pool their savings and make low-interest loans to one another in times of need. But Asha's self-help group preferred to lend the pooled money at high interest to poorer women they'd excluded from the collective. (p. 28)

In fact, as Boo tells us, 'But for the poor of a country where corruption thieved a great deal of opportunity, corruption was one of the genuine opportunities that remained' (p.28).

This book is a compelling read. It is disturbing because the reader becomes absorbed in the story as it unfolds, forgets these are real people, and then remembers at the darkest moments. If your work has become routine in any way, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* will remind you why you chose this path. And the stories of Abdul, Meena, and Sunil, will make you care, and give you hope.

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