

Katherine Boo, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Slum*

Portobello Books: London 2012, £14.99, paperback

256 pp, 978 1 84627 449 7

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LIFE AND DEATH IN ANNAWADI

Slums are the habitat *par excellence* for a very substantial part of the world's informal workforce. These settlements can be either urban or rural, but their defining feature at first sight is the poor quality of the housing and the paltry provisioning of basic utilities. There is no dearth of writing on slums, as Mike Davis's panoramic survey in *Planet of Slums* made clear. Within this extensive literature, Mumbai in particular—where the slums that house half the population occupy less than a tenth of the land—has been the subject of a vast number of studies. Nevertheless, Katherine Boo's chronicle of Annawadi stands out as a striking account of work and life at the margins of the urban economy. Crouched in the shadow of the city's international airport, Annawadi was born in 1991 when a gang of construction workers brought in from Tamil Nadu to repair a runway decided to stay on when their job was finished, fabricating a settlement out of a swamp; its name comes from the Tamil word *anna*, a respectful term for 'older brother'. Today's inhabitants live on the leftovers of the opulence nearby—the waste from a cluster of gleaming luxury hotels, offices and airport buildings. If not salvaging trash, they resort to pilfering material from construction sites or warehouses scattered around the airport.

The stark contrast between Annawadi and the wealth all around is one reason why Boo—previously a reporter at the *Washington Post*, winning a Pulitzer in 2000 for her work on mental homes, and since 2001 a staff writer at the *New Yorker*—chose this terrain for her investigation. Its somewhat mawkish title derives from the repeated slogan of an advertisement for Italian floor-tiles, plastered on a concrete wall that hides the slum from view. A second reason for focusing on this enclave was its small scale,

allowing for door-to-door surveys and what Boo calls the vagrant-sociology approach. Over the course of more than three years, from late 2007 to early 2011, she repeatedly returned to Annawadi. Monitoring the day-to-day life experiences of the slum-dwellers over such an extended stretch of time enabled her to change her initial perspective as outsider to something closer to that of an insider. If she has to a certain extent overlooked the wider context, Boo has managed to get close to the ups and downs of a small number of households on which she has zoomed in, and their tales are extensively documented.

The settlement that has come under her lens consists of 335 huts in which more than three thousand people are packed. Slums have a complex class configuration, and Annawadi is no exception. A few of the households aspire to the lifestyle of the petty bourgeoisie; these are the people who connect the other residents to the powermongers in the overcity—politicians, bureaucrats and NGOs in particular—whose help is sought to get out of trouble, gain a free benefit or ward off some threat. The class identity of the large majority of slum-dwellers is sub-proletarian, while a residue of the good-for-nothing constitute the *lumpen* element—eaters of rats, frogs and scrub grass—whose presence is required as a reminder that life can still be worse than it has been so far. Overlaid onto these socio-economic patterns are confessional, caste, ethnic and regional identities: the two central families in the narrative are Muslim and Hindu, originally from Uttar Pradesh and the interior of Maharashtra respectively, but the slum also contains Nepalis, Tamils and many others.

Boo's account opens with the arrival of the police at midnight to arrest Abdul Hakim Husain, a young garbage-sorter, and his father, accused of a faked crime for which they will nevertheless spend time in prison, during a prolonged wait for their case to come to trial. The events leading up to the fateful crime, and then the Husain family's tortuous progress through the criminal justice system, form one of the book's main narrative strands; the other focuses on the family of Asha, an enterprising Shiv Sena activist who aspires to become the slum's overlord, 'then ride the city's inexorable corruption into the middle class'. The author's techniques are ultimately those of an investigative journalist, yet throughout, Boo's prose recounts developments in much the same way a novel would: terse, evocative descriptions and dialogue alternating with renditions in free indirect style of a given individual's feelings and thoughts. Only at the end, in an author's note, does the narrator herself appear, and the nature of her interaction with the slum-dwellers, as visiting outsider-investigator accompanied by research associates-cum-translators, gets spelled out.

Events in Annawadi are often portrayed through the eyes of youngsters. As Boo points out in her author's endnote, children can indeed be

more dependable witnesses, more open-minded in discussing the deeds and misdeeds of adults, and their undoings. Among this same generation, however, hopes for a better future are inevitably dampened by realism; trajectories leading out of abject poverty can be dreamt of, but all too often turn out to be dead-ends. There is a matter-of-fact acceptance that the heartfelt desire to ascend from undercitizenship to citizenship implies a claim to respectability that is more often denied than granted. No doubt, there are occasional windfalls, unexpected gains which bring temporary relief, but these are soon reversed. The sense of deprivation is all the more stark because a short distance away, glitter and glamour abound; as Abdul's younger brother Mirchi puts it, 'Everything around us is roses, and we are the shit in between.'

For the vast majority of Boo's protagonists, then, setbacks are the order of the day. This bitter lesson has much to do with the lack of decent work and adequate income for almost all slum-dwellers. Among the more than three thousand inhabitants of Annawadi, only six had access to a permanent job. What kind of daily work schedule do the rest of the slum's men, women and children have?

One by one, construction workers departed for an intersection where site supervisors chose day labourers. Young girls began threading marigolds into garlands that they would hawk in the evening's rush-hour traffic. Older women sewed patches onto pink-and-blue cotton quilts for a company that paid by the piece. In a small, sweltering plastic-moulding factory, bare-chested men cranked gears that would turn coloured beads into ornaments to be hung from rearview mirrors—smiling ducks and pink cats with jewels around their necks that they couldn't imagine anyone, anywhere buying. And Abdul crouched on the maidan, beginning to sort two weeks' worth of purchased trash, a stained shirt hitching up his knobby spine.

Leaving aside their inadequate food intake and the appalling sanitary conditions in which they have to live, slum-dwellers have to cope with pollution that is highly hazardous to their health, whether they work in the open air or in workshops; the terms of employment are so abysmal as to constitute a further danger in themselves. Conditions in an industry-heavy slum nearby provide a good example:

Among Saki Naka's acres of sheds were metal-melting and plastic-shredding machines owned by men in starched kurtas—white kurtas, to announce the owners' distance from the filth of their trade. Some of the workers at the plants were black-faced from carbon dust, and surely black-lunged from breathing iron shavings. A few weeks ago, Abdul had seen a boy's hand cut clean off when he was putting plastic into one of the shredders. The boy's eyes were filled with tears but he hadn't screamed. Instead he'd stood there with his blood-spurting stump, his ability to earn a living ended, and started

apologizing to the owner of the plant. 'Sa'ab, I'm sorry', he'd said to the man in white. 'I won't cause you any problems by reporting this. You will have no trouble from me.'

Heavy drinking and drug addiction, which for youngsters takes the shape of sniffing correction fluid, are vices that weaken their ability to work and result in a downward spiral marked by lumpenization. Boo's narrative is replete with illness, injuries, either temporary or chronic invalidity and a protracted debilitation of body or mind leading to premature loss of life. Yet on top of this formidable toll come a number of self-inflicted deaths: young women swallow rat poison, for example, unable to endure further physical or mental agony.

This brings us to the remarkably shallow demographic range of Annawadi's population: elderly people are almost entirely absent, and interaction between the generations is confined to that between parents and their children. High morbidity leading to death at or only slightly beyond middle age cannot be the only explanation for the lack of grandparents in the slum. A more likely cause seems to be that those who have lost their ability to work, and can no longer chip in to what the household requires for mere survival, cannot depend on the other members to take care of them. Households may every now and then tolerate members unable to contribute fully to the budget, because bouts of unemployment frequently occur. But growing old and losing one's capacity to labour is a burden too heavy for the next generation to carry, and forces people facing that predicament to disappear from the scene. Ill-equipped for survival, most of them return to their place of origin to fade away in slow starvation.

The continual passage through Annawadi of people from all over India is a striking feature of the settlement. Whether they move on or not is conditioned, as Boo explains, by the paucity of regular work: without earning an income it is well-nigh impossible to hold on to whatever foothold they have established in Annawadi. Yet Boo has little to say about these people's points of departure: although she did make trips into the rural hinterland—one chapter recounts Asha and her daughter Manju's visit to their family's village in Vidarbha—she is clearly more familiar with the Mumbai slum on which she has focused her book. As a result, she touches only briefly on a range of issues—the Maoist movement, the wave of farmers' suicides, the public employment programme for the rural poor, vain attempts to find work in the city—that would require more space and context to become meaningful.

The very diversity of the slum population makes it all the more necessary for them to delineate sharply separate identities. Cementing bonds along lines of ethnicity, religion, caste and language becomes instrumental in

the search for work or political patronage. Those who simply walk into the urban labour market, bereft of such links, are doomed to failure, as Anil, one of Manju's village cousins, found out. Seeing no future as an agricultural labourer, he became one of the half-a-million rural Indians who annually try their luck in Mumbai:

Each dawn, he stood with other work-seekers at Marol Naka, an intersection near the airport where construction supervisors come in trucks to pick up day labourers. A thousand unemployed men and women came to this crossroads every morning; a few hundred got picked . . . After a month of rejection, he'd gone home.

Economic misfortune is not the only reason why migrants leave. They can also become footloose again as a result of political or communitarian turmoil, such as that instigated by Shiv Sena. This virulent Hindu nationalist organization aspires to purge Mumbai of outsiders—Muslims in particular—seeking to replace them with Marathis. When Boo started her research, Annawadi was only a decade and a half old, but already three waves of migrants had passed through.

By 2002, the Maharashtrians had disempowered the Tamil labourers who had first cleared the land. But a majority is a hard thing to maintain in a slum where almost no one has permanent work. Annawadians came and went, selling or renting their huts in a thriving underground trade, and by early 2008, the North Indian migrants against whom Shiv Sena campaigned had become a plurality.

The latest wave of settlers live under a looming threat which threatens to put an end to Annawadi's short life cycle: the airport has been privatized, purchased by an 'image-conscious conglomerate called GVK' which plans to raze Annawadi and thirty other settlements to make way for a new terminal. As Boo recounts, the state of Maharashtra has promised to rehouse slum-dwellers who can prove residency there since 2000, and many have already started to position themselves for relocation. Two-thirds of the inhabitants, however, have not lived in their huts long enough to qualify; they have no option but to move on to other slums or squat on waste land elsewhere.

The designation of 'undercity' does not only refer to the inadequate living conditions and lack of basic amenities with which slum-dwellers have to make do. Simply living in Annawadi is illegal, bringing with it a stigma of subversion and criminality which people from the overcity are by definition spared. It means that from cradle to grave, undercitizens do not qualify for even a modicum of respectability or honour. Why, then, do they participate in elections? As is well known, the poor do so with more fervour than the

better-off segments of the Indian electorate. Boo suggests that their eagerness to turn out demonstrates their claim to inclusion:

The crucial thing was the act of casting a ballot. Slum-dwellers, who were criminalized by where they lived, and the work they did, living there, were in this one instance equal to every other citizen of India. They were a legitimate part of the state, if they could get on the rolls.

To vote is to step over the barrier that the authorities have erected to keep the masses firmly beyond the purview of the state. To be registered is to be acknowledged as local residents, and gives the *sans papiers* a claim on legality. This is why Annawadians are so eager to get a voting card—more as an official document of their presence than as a means of suffrage. Conversely, the political bosses in the overcity need the vote banks in the undercity to maintain their hold on power. Slumlords are indispensable for this, doing the canvassing and distributing the cash and booze required to gain or consolidate a seat in the municipal or state assembly. Where and when the poor do cast their votes, of course, it does not mean that the political outcome favours them.

Exasperated by the deep layers of misery in Annawadi that she has brought to the surface, Boo wonders: 'Why don't more of our unequal societies implode?' The somewhat facile answer given to this crucial question is that, regrettably, she has found no basis for the idea of a mutually supportive community of the poor:

Powerless individuals blamed other powerless individuals for what they lacked. Sometimes they tried to destroy one another. Sometimes . . . they destroyed themselves in the process. When they were fortunate, like Asha, they improved their lots by begging the life chances of other poor people.

While sympathizing with Boo's disillusionment about the lack of solidarity among the downtrodden—their envy and suspicion of each other—I thoroughly disagree that their exploitation and oppression are caused by an inability or unwillingness to unite in concerted action. It is not that her factual evidence is flawed or twisted, but it is incomplete. Collective action along vertical lines of dependency suits some of her informants better than investing in horizontalized bonds of reciprocity and commonality. For example, Asha does not mind having sex with a policeman or a politician, if that is what is required to be designated slumlord, and in the end to be within reach of overcitizenship. (The children of Annawadi are uncomfortable witnesses to many such instances of extra-marital intercourse.) I do not dispute Boo's view that the slum is a vicious battleground, where people are apt to advance their self-interest rather than trying to transcend what keeps them divided. As Zehrunisa Husain, Abdul's mother, laments, 'we are so alone in

this city'. However, to seek the origin of poverty in their midst, and accuse them of failing to remedy their deprivation through collective action, in my reading comes close to blaming the victims.

Boo may have been led to express this view by the fact that the locale of her research also remained the frame of her analysis; in her search for a rationale, she may have stayed too close to the people portrayed. Here it might be objected that Boo did reach out to comprehend and contextualize local affairs in a wider setting; she made the effort to go through more than three thousand public records, to which she gained access after petitioning various government agencies under the Right of Information Act. Procuring these documents enabled her to survey the interactions between Annawadi's population and the Mumbai police, the public health and education authorities, electoral and city-ward officials, the courts and the morgues. This commendable extension in the scale of her research enabled Boo to reveal the means by which a mixture of corruption and indifference erases the day-to-day experiences of poor citizens from the public record.

The rampant practices of extortion to which the slum-dwellers fall prey are committed by officials and politicians who privatize their public authority, exemplifying what I have called the informalization of politics and administration. Far from showing any concern for the well-being of its undercitizens, the Indian government does not even acknowledge their intense misery. Boo sarcastically sums up the received wisdom of the state:

Almost no one in this slum was considered poor by official Indian benchmarks. Rather, Annawadians were among roughly one hundred million Indians freed from poverty since 1991, when, around the same moment as the small slum's founding, the central government embraced economic liberalization. The Annawadians were thus part of one of the most stirring success narratives in the modern history of global market capitalism, a narrative still unfolding.

If state officials appear in an unflattering light, do-gooders from civil society do not have a much better reputation. Non-government agencies are strikingly absent in Annawadi, but in the few cases where these voluntary suppliers of benefaction happen to come on stage, they are not less corrupt than most state officials. Sister Paulette, who runs the Handmaids of the Blessed Trinity orphanage, sells the food and clothing donated for her needy wards; the use of phrases like 'AIDS orphan' helps her get money from foreigners—though she turns the children out when they see through the racket on which her charity work is based.

Boo has given us an incisive portrait of slum life, and I do not agree with those who have suggested that her criticisms of politicians and bureaucrats indicate a subtle alignment with the neoliberal credo, bent on scaling

back the state and promoting free enterprise. This seems to me an unfair distortion: she clearly has a critical view of the impact of globalization on the lives of the poor. It is also fair enough, on one level, that Boo is not interested in presenting her findings as social scientists are accustomed to doing, by framing them within a larger canvas. Still, there is something slightly myopic about the narrative's gaze, akin to Isherwood's perspective on the company he kept in Germany in the 1930s, writing at the beginning of *Goodbye to Berlin*: 'I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking.' Boo might have benefited, for instance, from studying the scrap trade that connects the trash heaps and no-go areas where scavengers operate to the markets where waste is sold and reused. Though she mentions the fact that more than half of Mumbai's population are slum-dwellers, Annawadi is not set in the wider fabric of the city's economy. Simply pointing out that Mukesh Ambani is looking down on the undercities of Mumbai from his 27-storey skyscraper, in which his family of five is waited on by six hundred servants, does not compensate for the lack of a broader perspective on a society bent on inequality, and a predatory capitalist economy unwilling to incorporate the labouring poor in decent conditions of employment.

Missing from Boo's account, above all, is the regime of informality, although it forms the backdrop to everything that transpires in Annawadi. This goes far beyond the absence of togetherness among the slum-dwellers, their steadfast refusal to share the scarce work and resources available, about which Boo is rightly distraught. Why can't these households team up, putting an end to their mutual antagonism? Because investment in kinship can be a risky and costly business, and the tendency is not to heed too readily calls for help, even from close relatives. Of course, the real question here is how to overcome the commodification of relationships as the organizing principle that structures not only interaction between neighbours, but also among members of the same household. Annawadi's children have told Boo how the ties binding them to their parents are instrumental and contractual, often void of love and care; the labour power they command becomes the true measure of their standing in the home. During their upbringing, they gradually lose the feelings of empathy that they had expressed freely and generously at a more tender age—a morality they cannot afford to nurture in the desperate quest for survival. In her afterword, Boo writes:

In my reporting, I am continually struck by the ethical imaginations of young people, even those in circumstances so desperate that selfishness would be an asset. Children have little power to act on those imaginations, and by the time they grow up, they may have become the adults who keep walking as a bleeding waste-picker slowly dies on the roadside, who turn away when a burned woman writhes, whose first reaction when a vibrant teenager drinks rat poison is a shrug.

The multiple forces that account for this moral shift before puberty are not spelled out. But shedding light on the process of commodification, whose consequences are so intimately and powerfully narrated, and focusing on the informal economy as the heart of the matter, might have been a good beginning. It would also require a different kind of analysis, reaching far beyond the locus of investigations. What is certain is that remaining mired in poverty is not the product of shortcomings of the down and out, but stems from outside, from the politics and policies imposed by the overcity. That verdict, if Boo were willing to sign up to it, could have been substantiated in more explicit terms.