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BEHIND THE BEAUTIFUL FOREVERS: UNVEILING THE HIDDEN LIFE IN A GHETTO

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ABSTRACT

Slum dwellers are often treated as social pariahs and have become a marginalized section in any society. In fact, a burgeoning population of the metropolitan Mumbai city, which is the third most expensive office market, lives in slums like 'Annawadi'. Unfortunately, these people find hard to escape from the endless dilemmas of day to day life, even though unprecedented economic booming has taken place for more than two decades as a result of global market capitalism. Katherine Boo, in her remarkable book "Behind the beautiful forevers" unfolds the world beyond 'undercity' people who are the residents of Mumbai slum named Annawadi, which is located beside the road to Mumbai airport in the shadow of luxury hotels. By documenting the deplorable status of those who live under poor housing conditions, despicable sanitation and a non-existent sewage system, she tries to figure out those whose life in a heap of hope and despair, by fighting out every day in Mumbai streets. Boo exposes how the wavery in the global economy affects these poverty stricken communities and the hurdles they face while striving for better life. Nevertheless twenty five years of globalization caused quirky economic growth and rise of standard of living in Mumbai. Yet 40% of Mumbai residents live in slum even though it has been listed as largest city in India with its luxury goods and glimmering facilities. This paper traces out how the economic growth in metropolitan cities has failed to deliver much to the most needed, vulnerable poor living in slums like Annawadi and the hindrances before them on their way of ameliorating their standard of living in the light of Katherine Boo's popular book "Behind the beautiful forevers: life, death, and hope in a Mumbai undercity.

Key words: slum dwellers, Annawadi, corruption, marginalized

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In a world of corruption, it becomes hard for one to live morally ,behave thoughtfully when the stench of corruption pervades in all spheres like public services ,education, health care etc."If the house is crooked and crumbling, and the land on which it sits uneven, is it possible to make anything lie straight?"(Katherine Boo). These two lines reflect the heartrending reality of inhabitants of Annawadi where jobbery permeates everywhere. "Behind the

beautiful forevers", a notable book by Katherine Boo brings forth a visceral account on the life, death and hope of the inhabitants of Annawadi slum in Mumbai.

Annawadi slum consists of three thousand residents who live in cramped huts, where running water is available only for three hours a day and some of them trap frogs and rats for filling out their meals and, a few among them have scrub grass and

weeds. Besides, the frog-eaters gave other non-frog eating, non-weed eating Annawadians "a felt sense of their upward mobility" (Boo Chapter 1). Nevertheless, Boo exposes the distressing picture of the slum residents, their struggles to escape from devastating poverty and most significantly, the conflicts under the clutches of corrupt officials by focusing on three families of – Abdul, expert sifter of garbage, Fatima, the emotionally troubled cripple and, Asha, the unofficial slum lord. The most significant thing is that "almost no one in the slum was counted poor by official Indian bench marks"(Boo 1) since the economic liberalization began. Out of these only six residents have permanent jobs. Annawadi sits on "a stretch where new India and old India collided and made new India late" (Boo 1) and even though the physical setting of slum is brimming with possibilities, most of them make their living through scavenging and trash sorting.

'Beautiful forever', the slogan for ads of Italianate floor tiles from which the title of Boo's book is originated, is plastered on the concrete wall which separates the airport and the Annawadi slum. It brings out the grim reality of the impoverished poor who live in small patch of land 'behind' the shining international airport which is 'beautiful forever' with its elegant outlook and striking facilities. Once Cabinet minister had announced regarding the new gleaming airport terminal, "the most magnificent building since independence". The boy named Mirchi says "Everything around is roses. And we're the shit in between" (Boo Prologue) owing to glitzy hotels and glossy new international airport around them. Boo outlines the life inside undercity by narrating the circumstances in which certain key residents of this slum live. At all times, these people live with a foreboding that their shelter might be bulldozed by government or corporate authorities. They always mope over the agonies before them like getting a steady job for themselves, providing their children basic education, leading a life without any water-borne illness etc. The pivotal figure among the residents is Abdul of Husain's family, a young resident of this slum who purchases garbage from waste-pickers and resells to recycling plants and sees "fortune beyond counting"(Boo 3) in

the garbage that elite rich people throw away. As Boo writes "some called him garbage and left it at that" (Boo 1). Other garbage pickers like Sunil, an adolescent boy of twelve years old after booting out from orphanage, struggles hard to escape from harsh reality, as Boo states "He was therefore used to the transition: reaccustoming himself to scavenging work, to rats that emerged from the woodpile to bite him as he slept, and to a state of almost constant hunger" (Boo 3).

Some has to get involved in thievery to survive as Kalu who is a fifteen year old, homeless metal scrap thief, believes they may get the good times which they "fully enjoy"(Boo 2). A few do some temporary jobs in nearby hotels as Rahul, Asha's son who once says to Mirchi, Abdul's brother, "if the manager sees you looking at the guests, he'll fire you, take your whole pay –You have to focus on the tables and the rug. Seriously, you can't look. Not even at the rich people's toilets. Security will chuck you out."(Boo 1). This is what the life of destitute inhabitants who make their living out of the cast-offs and leftovers of opulent class. Asha, the one who fights to become slumlord goes through unscrupulous ways to allay her children's poverty. "Tell me, bastard. Shall I strip naked and dance for you now?" These are the replies to men who walk over her "large breasts and her small drunken husband" (Boo 2). Manju, Asha's daughter, Annawadi's most idealistic person, believes that her graduation in English and teacher training may favour her way out of the slum.

The crux of the plot lies in the self-immolation of Fatima, the crippled woman who lived next doors to Husain's family, and the dismal circumstances this Muslim migrant family face due to the false accusation of inciting her to suicide. "It seemed to him that in Annawadi, fortunes derived not just from what people did, or how well they did it, but from the accidents and catastrophes they dodged."(Boo Prologue). Having said that, the havoc engendered owing to this horrendous incident in Abdul's family ushered them into unforeseen occurrences. The interconnected life of these 'undercity' people elicits interpersonal conflicts and traumatic incidents they undergo owing to the so called 'overcity' people, obstructing the meager of

earnings of these destitute people and smashing their hopes and ambitions.

Nevertheless, twenty five years of globalization caused quirky economic growth and rise of standard of living in Mumbai. Yet 40% of Mumbai residents live in slums even though it has been listed as largest city in India with its luxury goods and glimmering facilities. On the peripheries of the society these dispossessed people are trying to find niche in global market economic system. The hurdles they confront in their persistent search for the ways to escape from painful awareness of their life are hard. The significant reasons which hinder the progress of this community are the corruption of all kinds they encounter in their daily life, disunity among slum dwellers and even the global recession. Indeed the impregnable work ethics of Abdul, the main bread winner of Husain's family enriched the status of the family. All of them have imaginations, hopes and dreams as anybody else in the world. They always speak "of better lives casually, as if fortune were a cousin arriving on Sunday, as if the future would look nothing like the past." Abdul "believed his own dreams properly aligned to his capacities" (Boo Prologue); and his indomitable effort to reach to a position of prosperity can also be seen here. In fact, these people have fervid desires in their life and all of them are striving for a better life through all possible ways.

"As every slum dweller knew, there were three main ways out of poverty: finding an entrepreneurial niche, as the Husains had found in garbage; politics and corruption, in which Asha placed her hopes; and education" (Boo 4).

Abdul of Husain's family, having eight siblings, with mother Zehrunisa and tuberculosis affected father had been putting aside the money from his growing garbage-sorting business for the land in Vasai with the cherished dream to settle down outside Mumbai for long. On the very day when he was placing floor tiles and inserting new cooking shelf to upgrade his hut, Fatima, sharing the wall of Husain's hut creates rage by pouring kerosene over herself due to her envy towards Husain's upward mobility. "And at the heart of envy was possibly hope - that the good fortune of others might one day be hers" (Boo 6). At the same time

the very incident brings about drastic change in Husain's family. The most gut-wrenching occurrences happen after he gets arrested. The police force, who is supposed to protect, whips prisoners without any proper evidence and 5,000 rupees is needed from Abdul's mother just to see his charge sheet. To extort money from Abdul's family, police officers prompt Fatima to revile against them. Abdul says "The Indian criminal justice system was a market like garbage, Abdul now understood. Innocence and guilt could be bought and sold like a kilo of polyurethane bags" (Boo 7). A number of people demand bribes from him and his family during his jail period – firstly police officers to release him; then Asha to assist him if they are ready to give the money she asks for; next the prison doctor demands 2000 rupees to remain him in juvenile detention centre otherwise he will be considered as an adult of 20 years old, so that he will have to move to terror-stricken Arthur Road Jail. Anyhow, an outrageous act of bribery can be seen at all places. As a result of these, they had to encounter several nerve-wracking situations. So many years of their precious life got drained by copious fraudulent officials like Poornima Paikrao; their garbage collecting business is in dire straits; Mirchi, his brother had to drop out of school to aid the family to move on. At the end of the book, special executive officer's attempt to wring money out of them, by his offer to withdraw the case even though it can be done only by public prosecutor can also be seen.

Then there is Asha, a part time school teacher who tries to be the unofficial slum lord through shadier ways. She cannot be inculpated altogether, even though she uses unscrupulous ways, to win favors from policemen and wield political powers. In the wake of corrupt social system, "where corruption thieved a great deal of opportunity, corruption was one of the genuine opportunities that remained" (Boo 2). She makes an outrageous amount of money through various schemes by acting as a linkage between community and political authorities. "Her temp work, teaching kindergartners at a large municipal school for modest pay, was a sinecure the Corporator had helped her obtain, overlooking the fact that her formal schooling had stopped at

seventh grade" (Boo 2). She gives the government-subsidized loans at higher interest to poorer women in slum. In an interview Manju, Asha's daughter says shyly, "But the allegations are true. I mean her extramarital affairs and the corruption. This is how life is here. She is a single mother and did these things as there was no other option. She protects us." Asha assists Bhimrao Gaikwad, an administrator of Maharashtra Department of Education, for siphoning off government money allotted for central government education scheme - Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, a scheme for making elementary education universal, by bringing crores of child laborers, girls, and disabled children to school for the first time.

In fact, they also believed that education is another possible way out of these grievous situations. Though central government funded for education, the beneficiaries of these were relatives and friends of political officials, who started nonprofits by securing the government money. Even, most of the teachers in state's public school were unqualified, and permanent teachers paid substantial amount of money to officials to get their positions secured. Adarsh, the nepali boy described the municipal school curriculum as the place where "we play, take recess, play again, then have lunch," (Boo 4). Most often, teachers were absent in schools, but the free lunches for them were advantageous. They also knew that competence in English and superior education may pave the way for lessening their distressful conditions. But most of them couldn't even finish eighth grade in municipal school due to their dreadful poverty, and several parents had to subsist on mal-nutritious meals in order to provide private tuition class for their children.

This tormenting narrative brings about ground breaking realities in hospitals where reusing of syringes, the unavailability of medicines due to the reselling of medicines outside on the black market at high prices by hospital staff, and non treatment of dying patients without the money doctors require. The deplorable status in the orphanage, where a local nun, Sister Paulette resells the foods donated by airport catering companies to "poor women and children, who in turn tried to resell them" (Boo 10) can also be seen. Then, all six public water faucets have been charged by Shivsena

gangs there. The hard-bitten police officials in Annawadi didn't investigate the identities of several murdered boys in Annawadi, so that they can send these unclaimed corpses to medical schools. The clutches of corruption in public hospitals, charity centres, educational system, police force wear this community down. Economic misfortunes and communitarian turmoil generate enmity among themselves. In this hyper-connected economic system, even the fluctuation in global financial market ails their growth. The ignorance by the government, the so called elite people in 'over-city', degraded legal system etc erect barriers for them.

Indeed a plethora of poverty alleviating schemes and programs turns out to be damp squib. Though Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA), a government agency was formed in the year 1995 to obliterate the slum problem, they have terribly failed to bring forth solid housing schemes for slum dwellers. One of the main purposes of Mumbai SRA was to rehabilitate all the slum dwellers in Mumbai; but they could amend the status of only around 1.5 million slum dwellers out of around 40 million in a span of 18 years. Due to its builder-friendly approach, most probably such rehabilitation schemes become an attempt to cater to the needs of private developers, not of deserving or needy people. In July 2006, the Bombay high court had observed that "the SRA scheme has become a profitable business venture attracting persons, who are forcing their decision on the slum dwellers by the posts they are holding..." . The recent studies say that the conspicuous reasons behind the failure of tackling the issue of slum rehabilitation are lack of modest plans, the poor implementation of government policies, non-involvement of community, errant builders, political rivalries, stalling of housing projects, lack of monitoring on development schemes etc. At times, slum dwellers have to endure innumerable threats. As a part of rehabilitation schemes, the houses were built for them at a long distance from cities, where it is hard for them to eke out a living. Most often, all the rehabilitating schemes are in limbo.

Even though there are several constraints for them, there is a ray of hope. For the up gradation of slum, not only the construction of houses, but also

the promotion of decent jobs and economic livelihood is needed. Untiring endeavors for slum rehabilitation may bring sustainable solution. Enhancement of work opportunities, refinement of education system and improvement of basic amenities may bring graceful life for them. Still Annawadians live with a hope that everything will turn out for the best.

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