

ANAND VAIDYA

A Subtle Alignment

(review of Katherine Boo)

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- **Katherine Boo. *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death, and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity*. Random House, February 2012.**

With a report from McKinsey in hand and the goal to “make Mumbai into Shanghai” in mind, the chief minister of the state of Maharashtra launched Operation Clearance in December 2004. The initiative was a joint venture between investors wishing to free land for private development and politicians eager to clean up Mumbai’s slums. Illegal settlements that sprang up before 1995 were protected by an amendment to the state Slum Rehabilitation Act; by 2004 the settlements built since then numbered in the tens of thousands. During the first two months of Operation Clearance, at least 90,000 homes were destroyed, leaving some 400,000 people homeless. Over the following months, state government ministers protested;

opposition politicians protested; slum residents protested as they were being evicted; and the Nivara Hakk Suraksha Samiti (NHSS) and other slum dwellers' rights groups held large protests in Azad Maidan park and the state government building. By February 2005, Operation Clearance had been called off: structures built before 2000 would not be destroyed. Still, the NHSS continued its demonstrations, demanding that the government allow evicted residents to return to their homes.

Those who moved back to their neighborhoods after Operation Clearance ended were able to do so thanks to large-scale, messy, but coordinated action. In Mumbai, as elsewhere, property is social: we buy it from other people, using money acquired from another set of people, and our claim is recognized by people who act for the state. Even when we have titles, what we can and can't do with our property is subject to negotiations with others. We can't occupy spaces for long without the support of many others—and when people take property by force, they never do it alone. When people occupy property without legal titles—when they simply squat on land—the coordination needed to retain that property is even greater.

In *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, Katherine Boo narrates the lives of several people living without titles in Annawadi, an informal settlement on the enormously valuable land beside Mumbai's airport. Annawadi was settled three decades ago by Tamil-speaking migrants from South India; they have since been joined by Marathi-speaking migrants from outside Mumbai and Hindi- and Urdu-speaking migrants from North India. From her research Boo pulls out a number of individual trajectories: How Abdul and the rest of the Husain family attempt to find a way out of Annawadi and into "the overcity" through Abdul's skill at sorting garbage. How Asha, the Marathi-speaking political leader of Annawadi, tries to gain power and wealth through her connections to politicians and charitable workers. How Asha's daughter Manju tries to improve her lot by studying hard and going to college. Some move up in the world (though most don't), some die, and some move from Annawadi to other poor neighborhoods. What Boo leaves us with is an intricate and empathetic picture of how, even in the wealthiest city in fast-growing and fast-changing India, the bulk of the poor remain poor.

The book was met with a storm of praise in both India and the United States—for the extent and depth of Boo’s research, for her empathy for her subjects, and for avoiding the trap that several recent “big India books” fell into when they took the entire country as their subject and ended up capturing nothing. An almost solitary discordant note came from Mitu Sengupta, a political science professor in Canada. In a [review](#) published on the progressive Indian blog Kafila (and later republished on the *Dissent* website), Sengupta charged the book with having a “subtle alignment with the neoliberal narrative”—that is, a muted but consistent anti-welfare state and pro-market agenda. The chief evidence of Boo’s neoliberalism, according to Sengupta, is the curious fact that none of Boo’s characters participate in any kind of collective activity; when someone does attempt to assert control over her life, it is always in isolation.

It’s true that collective action, which has been necessary to the continued existence of Mumbai’s informal settlements and successfully challenged Operation Clearance two years before Boo’s arrival in Annawadi, is noticeably absent from Boo’s book. Her narratives instead capture individuals struggling amid their physical environment—shacks, trash heaps, gleaming skyscrapers—and broader political and economic processes. Institutions and groups—the political party represented by Asha, for example, and the various charities she defrauds—evaporate upon inspection; when we look closer, we see only another striving individual. In one scene, Asha tries to rally Annawadi residents to the neighborhood temple in order to display her pull to a local politician in the Shiv Sena, Mumbai’s powerful right-wing Marathi-chauvinist and Hindu-nationalist party. Her crowd inadvertently materializes when a *hijra*, a member of the stigmatized trans- and third-gender community, begins to dance in the temple. The politician calls Asha in the middle of the show and is pleased to hear the noise, which he assumes demonstrates the extent of his support; Asha in turn is happy to have demonstrated her following in the neighborhood (and thereby her necessity to the politician). But the following isn’t real; it’s an accident. The collective turns out to have been a mirage, a mistake.

Boo’s defenders, among them a number of Indian critics, argued that it wasn’t fair to fault Boo for not including what she hadn’t seen. If in four years Boo saw no collective activity in Annawadi, how could someone who hadn’t been there argue with her? Yet the question Sengupta raised about Boo’s account lingers: no Indian city has seen collective action on the scale that Mumbai has. Few cities anywhere in

the world have. For many years the city was the home of the Indian left, its mills and docks were the sites of the country's largest and most radical labor unions, and it was in Mumbai that the country's powerful Dalit movement — the movement of the former “untouchable” castes — was born. If these are mirages, they are mirages with powerful effects. If they aren't, then what has happened to Mumbai's collectives?

One muggy July morning during this year's rainless “nonsoon,” I visited Annawadi to try to understand this absence. Annawadi is what in Marathi is called a *zopadpatti*, an arrangement of huts. A *zopadi*, a village hut, is made from hay or coconut tree branches sealed with cow dung. In rural areas it usually has some space around it — farmland, dirt paths, forests — but in the new settlement huts were built right next to each other, often sharing walls. In this way places like Annawadi resemble densely populated villages — scenes of rural life among towers of concrete, steel, and glass.

Migrants from the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu settled what is now Annawadi in 1991, on a “sodden, snake-filled bit of brushland.” Boo describes how “the Tamils set to work, hacking down the brush that harbored the snakes, digging up dirt in drier places and packing it into the mud. After a month, their bamboo poles stopped flopping over when they were stuck in the ground. Draping empty cement sacks over the poles for cover, they had a settlement.” Their homes gradually came to be built from the sturdier materials on hand in the city.

In one of the book's scenes, Asha touches her new ceramic floor tiles and reflects on her upward trajectory: “Eight years back, when Annawadi was a flimsy encampment, her three children had jumped truckbeds to steal the wood and aluminum scrap from which the family had hammered up a shack. Now the hut had plaster walls, a ceiling fan, a wooden shrine with an electric candle, and a high-status, if nonfunctioning, refrigerator.” Annawadi consists entirely of these small homes, some with their plaster walls painted peach or sky blue, some with their brick structure left exposed. There are small shops, factories, a school, and a temple on the street that faces the road to the airport, but the rest of the neighborhood is largely residential. Huts cluster around small clearings with wells or common toilets. Boo explains that only six of the approximately three thousand people who live in Annawadi are formally and regularly employed. The rest labor informally on work

sites and in factories, or, like the Husain family, sell scrap, wringing exchange value from what “the overcity” no longer has use for.

I wandered down an Annawadi alley, past kids playing in the temple courtyard and toward a clearing where women were drawing water from a well. Across the way, a neatly dressed man in his thirties chatted with an older man and woman who were ironing his clothes. The man turned out to be a doctor who lives in the zopadpatti; the couple had moved from the state of Uttar Pradesh a few years earlier and found Annawadi an ideal place to start an ironing business. Land prices were relatively low, and though few locals had clothes that needed ironing, the surrounding neighborhoods were richer and full of professionals. The couple bought the land from an older man who was leaving the city, and over the years had been able to save enough to build a solid and comfortable hut for themselves and their two daughters. They vote for the Congress Party, they told me, but the rival Shiv Sena dominates Annawadi.

Private developers looking to build on Annawadi’s land have strong ties to the Sena and to the Congress Party, and are already beginning to redevelop the neighborhood. To lure residents off desirable territory, the developers are offering Annawadi residents new apartments with legal titles in other parts of the city. The couple told me that the Congress is negotiating their (still unsatisfactory) resettlement package: in exchange for their land, the builders want to give them a crumbling apartment further north in the city, isolated from middle-class customers. I asked about the electricity powering the ceiling fan and the irons. They told me that the local *chawl* committee (a generic name for informal and nongovernmental residents’ associations), to which all residents belong, had negotiated for a connection about a decade earlier, as it had also negotiated for water, toilets, government schools, and paving stones that would keep their feet clean if it ever rained.

In other words, an infrastructure of collective agency does exist in Annawadi—in political parties, chawl committees, and presumably other forms as well—and it keeps the settlement in existence. Boo somehow doesn’t see this infrastructure, or rather she sees it but reduces it to the individuals who comprise it. There’s no reason to think Boo is hiding anything. She is palpably honest, to the extent of providing the real names of all of her characters—all of whom, without exception, break at least one law in the course of the book. And contrary to Sengupta’s claims, she does not

advance a neoliberal agenda: Boo records the failure of the market to bring justice to her characters at least as frequently as she records the failure of the state to do the same. The police are corrupt and the neighborhood school is a scheme for Asha to make money, but the greatest threat to Annawadi's residents is private developers looking to raze their illegal settlement and build legally and profitably in its place.

Boo does have an agenda, though, which she explains in an author's note. After visiting India with her husband, the political scientist Sunil Khilnani, she wanted to understand how and why poverty and inequality persist in India, and why the market and state policy have failed to reduce both. "What is the infrastructure of opportunity in this society?" she asks. "Whose capabilities are given wing by the market and a government's economic and social policy? Whose capabilities are squandered?" These are the questions of a policy-oriented development economist — and specifically those of the economist Amartya Sen, whose work Boo has said she admires (and who gave the book a very favorable blurb). Sen's capabilities approach (originally outlined in papers coauthored with the philosopher Martha Nussbaum) holds that the aim of development policy should be neither a narrow focus on GDP growth nor the expansion of fixed legal rights, but rather "the expansion of the 'capabilities' of people to lead the kind of lives they value — and have reason to value." A larger national economy or a new legal right to education, for example, does not make a society more just unless it actually contributes to an individual's ability to gain access to education.

Sen's model has many merits. It's a corrective to purely rights-based understandings of justice, which either determine a universal set of rights without taking into account the lives people would like to live or set legal rather than practical rights as the horizon of political action. The capabilities of collectives, however, have no place in Sen's vision. Boo takes this normative framework for what people should be able to do, and maps it onto a description of what people actually do. Boo's "subtle alignment," then, isn't with the pro-market and anti-welfare state agenda of neoliberalism, as Sengupta argues, but with the individualist approach of economists like Sen.

Of course, collectives make trickier objects of study than individuals. They don't exist in every moment, for one thing, so they can only be observed when their members are brought together. Collectives also don't experience the world as individuals do,

so when a collective acts, it's meaningless to speak of its intentions. For this reason, so-called "methodological individualists," among whom Sen might be counted, argue that the basic unit of social-scientific explanation must be the acting individual.

Social-scientific writing has struggled to find ways to describe collectives – but what of other kinds of writing? Nearly everyone who praised *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* praised it for reading like a novel, and in fact the ability to grant access to another's consciousness accounts for both the book's power and its limitations. Written almost entirely from inside the heads of its characters ("The smell of the one leg's burning was fainter in the shed, given the competing stink of trash and the fear-sweat that befouled Abdul's clothing"), the book manages, unlike a conventional work of social science, to move the reader when one character is sent to jail unjustly or when another dies.

In limiting its scale to the experiencing individual, however, *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* shares the novel's tendency to neglect depictions of larger groups. Historians of literature have argued that the 18th-century rise of the European novel was a complement, and correlate, to the rise of pre-French Revolution "bourgeois individualism." In these accounts, the European novel fostered in readers an imaginative empathy with unknown individuals, who could then be understood as having rights. This is not to say that novelistic techniques only allowed the rendering of individuals: the later history of the novel offers plenty of examples of characters belonging to an invisible, intangible network (as in Dickens and Balzac) or a "seamless web" (as in *Middlemarch*); a single character may even stand for an entire nation (as in *Midnight's Children*). But all of these aggregates appear to the reader through their individual representatives or members; collectives as the novel tends to portray them are hostile to interiorities and often appear (as with the railroad strike at the climax of *Sister Carrie*) as exceptional events.

Whether or not the individual is the only possible subject of rights or object of empathy, action isn't always individual, and collective action can never be reduced to the intentions of those who partake in it. A number of social scientists have fought against the inheritance of methodological individualism. For example, the anthropologist Marc Edelman, in *Peasants Against Globalization*, captured the way associations and movements in 1980s Costa Rica formed in response to the structural adjustments mandated by the IMF. For Edelman, the terms and forms of

Costa Rican collective action were not simply a reaction to the situation at hand, but drew upon a historical grammar of political action: as any accurate depiction of halting, discontinuous collective action must, the book extends its scale to reach back in time. Experiments in the novel, too, have attempted to cast off the “bourgeois individualist” inheritance of the European classics—whether through depictions of crowds, like those pulsing through Victor Serge’s *Conquered City*, or of social transformation, as in the development of the peasantry into a working class in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Petals of Blood*. In these works, collectives become agents, social forces. But they are exceptions. Little social-scientific writing matches Boo’s in sheer power, and the novels that depict collectives are rare. We have yet to see a form that both conveys collective agency and tells an engaging, empathetic story. Collectives are tricky things: inhuman, and sometimes inhumane.

The case of Mumbai’s missing collectives, however, has another wrinkle. When Asha, Annawadi’s aspiring political boss, accidentally conjured a mirage of collective support for Sawant, she was attempting to strengthen her position in the Marathi chauvinist party, the Shiv Sena. The Sena’s rise since the late 1960s has led to the city’s official renaming as Mumbai and—through riots, pogroms, and boycotts—has redrawn the city’s religious and linguistic boundaries. The Sena represents a new form of collective in the city, but it’s one that has nearly destroyed the progressive groups that left-wing social scientists like Sengupta would like to see. It’s easy for progressives to forget that collectives exist on both the left and the right, and that the decline of left-wing collectives doesn’t necessarily result in the absence of collectives more generally. History in Mumbai and elsewhere has shown that it doesn’t take long for empty space to be occupied by other groups, often from the political right. These right-wing collectives in turn can unify otherwise disorganized members of society—often in order to isolate the poorest and most vulnerable.

The Shiv Sena (the name means “the army” of the 17th-century Marathi-speaking King Shivaji) was founded with a 1966 rally in Mumbai’s Shivaji Park that drew a crowd of 250,000 people. Bal Thackeray, the movement’s leader, denounced the government of the state of Maharashtra—created only six years earlier to unite Marathi speakers—for its failure to protect the interests of its constituents, who he said were losing jobs and housing to recent migrants. The Sena, which has explicitly invoked European fascist movements from the outset, describes itself in its founding

documents as a “volunteer organization” rather than a political party or union; it was created to defend a Marathi claim to Maharashtra and to Mumbai. This claim was initially defended at the expense of South Indians and Communists. Later, as an ideology of Hindu nationalism became ascendant in national politics, the Marathi claim to Maharashtra and Mumbai was made at the expense of Muslim inhabitants. The Sena spread through the city’s neighborhoods, establishing *shakhas* (neighborhood organizations) in zopadpattis and chawls. For the Marathi-speaking people they represented, the shakhas succeeded in obtaining services from local officials that the state had never before provided: water connections, electricity, even employment. For non-Marathi speakers, the Sena was at best exclusionary; at worst, it boycotted their stores, harassed them on the street, and smashed their windows.

As the Sena made its way into the Marathi-speaking parts of Mumbai, it began an assault on the city’s Communists, at the polls and on the streets. Shiv Sainiks attacked the Mumbai Communist Party headquarters in 1967 and are assumed to have been responsible for killing the Communist state assemblyman Krishna Desai in 1970. As anthropologist Thomas Blom Hansen has pointed out, the working population of the city was growing rapidly during this period — it doubled between 1951 and 1971 — and as the historian Juned Shaikh has argued, this labor surplus both weakened the left unions, as any strike easily could be broken, and provided a fertile substrate for the Shiv Sena.

The Sena initially was beaten back by the strength of Mumbai’s organized working class. By the close of the 1970s, the Sena had lost its hold on the city government and failed to dislodge the left from the mills. As recently as 1982, independent and left unions in Mumbai were able to hold a strike of 250,000 workers from fifty textile mills for eighteen months. Demanding official recognition of unions and regularization of contract workers, the striking workers were able to keep the mill gates shut — not a single scab or manager entered — for six months. But the mill owners never conceded to their demands. Instead the owners began building new mills in the docile neighboring state of Gujarat, and ultimately produced more during the strike than they had before it. The owners also made plans to sell their valuable Mumbai real estate, pushing out the city’s industrial economy and ushering in a new era of real estate speculation. Today most of Mumbai’s eighty mills are

closed, and the land they were built on is quickly being turned over to malls and luxury apartments.

The failure of the 1982 strike killed both the mills and the unions, leaving the city with an even larger unemployed population and base for Thackeray's Sena. As Mumbai's economy shifted from manufacturing to real estate, and as mills and slums were cleared for redevelopment, the Shiv Sena emerged as the party with the strongest local organization, the one most able to both represent neighborhoods under threat and profit from their clearance. The housing-rights movements that arose in the middle of the century have folded in the face of a powerful real estate lobby almost identical to the city's political class. The NHSS, which helped defeat Operation Clearance, now negotiates for the displaced to receive apartments in private developments, not for a general right to decent housing. The people who were left out of the unions and associated groups — the unemployed, small business owners, white-collar workers — were the Sena's first constituents. Eventually the Sena replaced the old collectives altogether.

The Shiv Sena has a strong presence in Annawadi. The couple who run the ironing business were themselves excluded from the committee that keeps their neighborhood in existence and that won their electricity, water, schools, and paving stones. "We don't go to the chawl committee meetings," the husband told me. The two are native Hindi speakers from Uttar Pradesh, and the meetings are "only for Marathi people." The doctor was born in Uttar Pradesh too, and he didn't go to the meetings either. Two autorickshaw drivers I spoke to had migrated from Bihar; they spoke Bhojpuri, and they also said they never went to the meetings. Except the aspiring political leader Asha and her daughter Manju, none of Boo's central characters are Marathi speakers: the Husains are Muslims from Uttar Pradesh who speak Urdu, as is Fatima, with whom the Husains get into a fight early in the book. These, the poorest of Mumbai's poor, are left out of the chawl committee, the group that makes their existence in Annawadi possible, and so they survive in the only way allowed them: as individuals.

An earlier online version and the print version of this piece stated that in Boo's book the Shiv Sena politician attends Asha's rally. In fact Boo only describes the politician calling the rally.