

Behind the Beautiful Forever: insights into poverty

by Ashlee Betteridge
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A friend told me I absolutely had to read Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forever*, so I dutifully downloaded it to my Kindle months ago and promptly forgot about it.

When I finally got around to it, I read the whole thing in a weekend. But I had to do a quick Google search a few chapters in to check if I was reading fiction or non-fiction because it was difficult to tell.

It is non-fiction—from a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist—but it certainly isn't conventional for the genre.

Rich description and novel-style storytelling pull you into the world of the Annawadi slum in Mumbai, a swampy shantytown in the shadow of the luxury hotels serving the international airport. The characters are real and complex—a family of Muslim-minority trash pickers and an aspiring female slum lord take centre stage. The book chronicles their hopes and dreams, and their struggles with corruption, courts, competition, social climbing, grinding poverty and each other.

The book is the product of three years of research by Boo and hundreds of interviews with slum dwellers.

For development wonks, it offers a lot of food for thought.

The book essentially provides a case study on the pervasive effects of corruption, the particularly stinging impact it has on the poorest and most marginalised, and the contextual factors which lead to it becoming widespread.

It also provides a valuable insight into the complexity that exists within the communities where extreme poverty persists. It shows just how hard it is for the poorest to rise up, even in a wider context of economic growth, and hints at reasons for why there has been limited mobilisation from India's poor to push against the systems or organisations that oppress them.

While occasional jibes at aid and development agencies oversimplify their role in the poverty puzzle and the scorn directed at globalisation sometimes seems a bit obvious and unnecessary, overall the book gives a striking and comprehensive view of urban poverty, particularly in contrast to popular narratives that sometimes lean

towards the romanticisation of deprivation (for example, *Slumdog Millionaire*).

Most reviewers gush about the book, while others have been less enamoured. If you are interested in corruption, urban poverty, or development and change in South Asia, or you simply enjoy compelling, complex stories and characters, I would highly recommend it.

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Link: <https://devpolicy.org/behind-the-beautiful-forevers-insights-into-poverty-20131023-1/>