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The Moral High Road in the Undercity: An Examination of Ethics in a Mumbai Slum

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Keywords: *slum, morality, india, poverty.*

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The Moral High Road in the Undercity: An Examination of Ethics in a Mumbai Slum

Mary L. Bauer

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I. Introduction

Katherine Boo's lyrically written book *Beyond the Beautiful Forevers*(2014) reads like a novel, but it is, in fact, a compilation of data from her four years (November 2007 through March 2011) of talking to, gaining the trust of, and ultimately shadowing the residents of a Mumbai slum as they went about their daily business. Meticulously documented with notes, audiotapes, over 6,000 hours of film (Calkin, 2012), door-to-door surveys and more than three thousand public records (Boo, 2014), Boo's book conveys the essence of the daily lives of the inhabitants and provides a wealth of data about their attitudes, actions, choices and motivations. Though Boo's intent in investigating life in this slum was to examine the issues of wealth inequality and to identify opportunities that might help people to rise out of such abject poverty (Boo, 2014 pp. 247-248), her findings also reveal a complex and surprising moral system.

Situated with a sewage lake as its center, this slum, known as Annawadi and informally called the "undercity", is home to three thousand of Mumbai's poorest citizens, only six of whom hold permanent jobs. Too poor to pay rent, these people are squatting on land owned by the Mumbai Airport Authority, living in makeshift huts constructed from whatever scrap materials they could lay their hands on. Some are so poor that they live on frogs and rats they manage to capture, supplemented with scrub grass that grows at the edge of the sewage lake (Boo, 2014, pp. 5-6). One might think that in such dire circumstances, morality would be a luxury. It would be easy to justify engaging in criminal behavior to obtain basic necessities and with fierce competition for scarce resources, violence might be expected. Yet, despite their desperate fight for survival, the inhabitants of Annawadi have a clear moral code that is in many ways stronger than the morality of the police and politicians who interact with them; the children of Annawadi are the strongest adherents to this code.

II. Lying

While both adults and children acknowledge that lying is wrong, the children of Annawadi are much stricter in their adherence to the prohibition against it. In storytelling – an important element of socialization among the boys – exaggeration and fabrication are tolerated for their entertainment value (Boo, 2014, p. 163), yet the truth retains its value even as the rules are bent. One boy, Rahul, is respected by the others because he does not lie in his tales "…at least not more than one sentence out of twenty" (Boo, 2014, p. 9).

The adults, however, believe that lying is justifiable under certain circumstances. An example of this striking contrast between adult and child attitudes regarding lying can be found in the varying accounts of whether and why Annawadi resident Fatima set herself on fire. Fatima has a grudge against her neighbors, the Husains, whose prospering business in reselling recyclable garbage causes Fatima's husband to lose his own garbage-trading enterprise. Encouraged by her best friend, Cynthia Ali, to do something dramatic to incite a police case against the Husains, Fatima seizes the opportunity when a disagreement about construction on a shared wall between their huts culminates in a shoving match with the Husain matriarch, Zehrunisa. Fatima immediately heads to the police station to accuse Zerunisa, falsely, of "violent assault" (Boo, 2014, pp. 90-1, 100).

Back at home after Zerunisa's arrest, Fatima's thirst for revenge still is not sated. She ups the ante by setting herself on fire, then dousing the flames and quickly accusing Husain family members of having burned her (Boo, 2014, pp. 92-6). When this lie is undercut by her young daughter, Noori, who truthfully tells the police that she saw her mother light herself on fire (Boo, 2014, p. 101), Fatima, with the helpful

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prodding of a local government official sent to the hospital to take her statement, shifts to a new lie. This time she says that the Husains drove her to self-immolation, which is a violation of an archaic Indian law. She puts the bulk of the blame on the Husains' eldest son, Abdul, because he is the family's main bread winner. She falsely claims that he beat and throttled her. While she correctly reports that Abdul's sister, Kehkashan, and their father, Karam verbally threatened her, she puts a false spin on the altercation by claiming that these heat-of-the-moment, empty threats prompted her to suicide (101-2). After Fatima's death, these accusations lead to a criminal court case against members of the Husain family and Fatima's husband, Abdul, compounds his wife's lies by falsely testifying that the Husains beat Fatima with a stone and throttled her (Boo, 2014, p. 209). Other adults pile on with false accounts to support the husband's claim; some of them were not even present when the burning took place (203). The only child witness at the trial, Priya, an older girl who was very close to Fatima, contradicts Fatima's story (Boo, 2014, p. 204). Thus, while some of the adults make false claims for revenge or to support one faction against another, the two children involved in the case – Noori and Priya – faithfully tell the truth despite their close attachment to Fatima.

Annawadi adults also prove themselves willing to lie when it becomes a matter of survival. For example, a man named Raja Kamble, agrees to falsify time sheets of other workers in exchange for a permanent job cleaning toilets at the train station (Boo, 2014, p. 24).

Despite the willingness of some adults to lie for survival or for baser purposes, such as revenge, there are other adults who value the truth highly. When the police compel a man named Dinesh to testify against the Husains by filing a false witness report in his name, he defies their intent by telling the truth: He was not present when Fatima set herself on fire (Boo, 2014, p. 204-5). On a more philosophical level, in speaking of Cynthia's intention to commit perjury, Zehrunisa says, "After lying in court, what honor will she have? … If you lose your honor, how can you show your face in Annawadi?" (Boo, 2014, p. 210).

The difference between adult and child attitudes regarding the truth may be explained by a hard truth that Abdul learns. When he is arrested, he wants to stand trial to prove his innocence (Boo, 2014, p. xxii). As the process wears on, however, Abdul comes to understand that in the Indian legal system, innocence and guilt are not based on the truth; they are bought and sold. Once he realizes this, he wants his family to pay whatever money they have to secure his innocence and his father's (Boo, 2014, p. 107).

Along the same lines, Boo also offers her perspective on why the children are less inclined to alter the truth, "I found Annawadi children to be the most dependable witnesses. They were largely indifferent to the political, economic and religious contentions of their elders, and unconcerned about how their accounts might sound" (Boo, 2014, p. 252).

Though Annawadi adults sometimes fall to the temptation to lie, their motivation for engaging in falsehoods is quite different from that of the police and politicians who interact with them. This is seen in the police handling of the murder cases of two children of the slum.

When fifteen-year-old Kalu is found with his eyes gouged out and a sickle up his rectum, the police list the official cause of death as "irrecoverable illness", specifically tuberculosis. While Kalu did suffer from this disease, it clearly was not the cause of his death. The police fabricate this cause of death because they want to claim they have a one hundred percent success rate in solving murders (Boo, 2014, p. 167-8). There is no profit to be made (typically in the form of bribes) from investigating his murder, so they do not want to expend the effort. Instead, the police see to it that his body is quickly burned and the photos taken at the crime scene disappear from his file, neatly erasing any evidence that contradicts the official cause of his death (168-9).

In another case, one of the scavenger boys who has been beaten by police flees south to his mother's house and, despairing, kills himself by consuming rat poison. The police falsely document him as a heroin addict who killed himself because he couldn't afford his next fix (Boo, 2014, p. 171-2). They thus hide the connection between his suicide and their own actions.

Politicians are similarly inclined to alter the truth in their quest for power. The local Corporator, Subhash Sawant, is an excellent example. In an election where only low-caste candidates are allowed to stand, he manufactures a caste certificate, along with a fake birthplace and ancestors to be qualified and he wins the election (Boo, 2014, p. 50-1). Thus, the politicians, like the police, lie not for survival or revenge, but simply for status – the direct opposite of the Annawadi children's view that a truthful boy is to be admired.

III. Stealing

In the desperate fight for survival, stealing is a tempting option, but the thieves of Annawadi are small in number and limited to the demographic of adolescent males. The boys universally recognize stealing as wrong but, at the same time, those who steal for a living have a higher status because of the risky nature of their occupation. Despite the appeal of this "bad boy" status, those who do not steal try to turn their thief friends away from this line of work. This is not motivated by jealousy over the higher income or status, but rather by a genuine concern for their friends' moral well-being. Sunil, a twelve-year-old scavenger who was raised in an orphanage and tossed out onto the streets when he

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reached the age of eleven, is an excellent example of how this complex dynamic functions. He is alarmingly undersized for his age and knows that he needs food to grow (the major concern that preoccupies his thoughts), but has difficulty making enough money at scavenging to obtain sufficient food. In addition, he suffers from competition from other scavengers around the airport who threaten him with knives or beat him up and take what he has gathered (Boo, 2014, p. 37). He sees that thieves make more money and thus get more food than scavengers and they also are less vulnerable to the medical ills associated with waste picking, including maggots, boils and "orange eyes" (Boo, 2014, p. 43, 48).

Not surprisingly, Sunil falls to the temptation of the more lucrative career of stealing when his friend, Kalu, offers him payment to help retrieve some iron he stole, but had to stash when he was being pursued by a security guard. Sunil agrees and for his help, receives one-third of the profit – the first disposable income of his life (Boo, 2014, p. 46-8).

Even with the positive outcome of this adventure, Sunil turns down a second offer by Kalu to help with another theft project. As he makes this decision, he contemplates the price – not only the loss of desperately-needed income, but also the risk of waste-picking health problems (48). He realizes that his stealing adventure with Kalu, "the most profitable day of his life", did not make him happy as the other thieves described it and he thinks that he likes himself as a thief even less than he likes himself as a waste-picker (Boo, 2014, p. 49). Abdul, who describes Sunil as an "almost friend" of whom he feels "vaguely protective," is relieved when Sunil turns away from stealing (Boo, 2014, p. 43, 48-9).

Sunil continues to vacillate back and forth between scavenging and stealing, according to the level of his desperation for food. At one point, when Sunil has resumed stealing, his friend, Sonu slaps him four times, hard. Recognizing that Sonu is right, Sunil does not return the blows, but internally excuses his choice of profession because, unlike Sonu, he has no other family members to help him earn money to survive (Boo, 2014, p. 194).

Sunil's struggle with his occupation demonstrates the harsh reality that the Annawadi residents face. He clearly recognizes stealing as wrong and hates himself for it. Though his non-thief friends do not abandon him when he turns to stealing, they try to dissuade him from this path. Even the boys who do steal on a regular basis seem to hate themselves because they sniff *Eraz-ex*, the Indian equivalent of *Wite Out*, to get high and forget how they feel about themselves (Boo, 2014, p. 43).

Police officers also have a hand in the enterprise of theft. Although they do not purloin goods themselves, they give the "road boys" tips about where they can find building materials to steal and then take a share of the profits (Boo, 2014, p. 45).

Moreover, police solicitation of bribes amounts to the same thing as stealing: illicitly taking what does not belong to them. Unlike the boys of Annawadi who turn to stealing to keep from starving, the police already have a valid income stream, but use bribery as a sideline. In addition, the Annawadi boy thieves do not resort to physical violence while the police use brute force, such as severe beatings, as leverage to get their victims to pay – very much like a street mugging. In the case of Abdul, the police specifically target his hands because they know these are critical to his livelihood (Boo, 2014, p. 111). As Boo (2014, p. 107) explains,

> The idea was to get terrified prisoners to pay everything they had, and everything they could secure from a moneylender, to stop a false criminal charge from being recorded. Beatings, though outlawed in the human rights code, were practical, as they increased the price that detainees would pay for their release.

IV. Violence

Violence is the issue where the adults of Annawadi have the weakest moral structure, though their use of it does not have lethal intent. The motives for violence are a complicated mixture of control, competition for territory and revenge. The children, with few exceptions, not only refrain from violence, but also try to protect others from it, sometimes heroically.

There is a general consensus in Annawadi that physical punishment is necessary to control children, sometimes for their own safety. This castigation, however, sometimes goes too far. For example, when Asha's daughter, Manju, steals money from her mother to buy chocolates, Asha shows her disapproval by striking her daughter with an axe, which leaves a permanent scar on her neck (62). Such violence is a recurring event in some families, such as that of fifteen-year-old Meena, whose parents and older brothers beat her almost daily for disobeying, being slow in her house chores or speaking out against family policies she considers unjust, like denying her access to education. Their justification is that her expressions of discontent are a threat to the marriage they are trying to arrange for her in their native village (Boo, 2014, p. 67). The beatings are so relentless that, when combined with the prospective of an arranged marriage, she commits suicide (Boo, 2014, p. 183-6).

At other times, parental violence seems wanton and/or vengeful. The disabled Fatima, for example, beats her children with her crutches for reasons that are not clear (Boo, 2014, pp. 75-76). Her husband regularly fights with her about the savagery with which she attacks her own offspring (Boo, 2014, p. 207).

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Adult-on-adult violence stems from entirely different motives. Fatima's husband, Abdul – ironically, the same man who complains about Fatima beating their children too viciously – beats his wife when he is drunk (Boo, 2014, p. 207). The slumlord, Robert Pires also beats his wife, but his motives are unclear (Boo, 2014, p. 17). Zehrunisa's husband, Karam, who is too sickly to engage in violence himself, instructs his son, Abdul, to beat Fatima for getting his wife arrested. Fortunately, his oldest daughter, Kehkashan, intervenes to prevent this (94).

Profit is another motive for violence by a subset of adults and older children. Scavengers regularly beat up those who are weaker, either to drive them away from a lucrative territory or to steal what they have already collected. The slum lord's son (unnamed) takes this phenomenon to a new level by offering the undersized Sunil and Sonu protection from older boys who attack them on the road for 30-40 rupees a week (a day's wages). When they don't pay, he beats them up himself (Boo, 2014, p. 158).

The children, who are more frequently the victims of such savagery, are less likely to engage in violence and are remarkably courageous in protecting one another, even taking personal risk to do so. Abdul, for example narrowly escapes arrest when his father is taken by police, but later, he literally runs to the police station, thinking that perhaps he can offer himself to protect his sickly father from police abuse. As he endures a vicious beating, Abdul tells himself that maybe some of these blows would have landed on his father if they had not rained down on him. (Boo, 2014, p. 104).

Even more surprising, ninth grade Rahul courageously intervenes to protect an infant who was not even a relative. When a neighbour, frustrated that his infant son's infection cost the family a lot of money in medical bills, dumps a pot of boiling lentils on the baby, Rahul jumps into the middle of the fray and then runs to get the police. The baby survives (Boo, 2014, p. 76). In a similar intervention, Manju, one of the older girls in the slum, saves a boy, Devo, from a beating by his mother. Manju places herself directly in the line of fire between mother and son. She defuses the tension by capturing the mother in a hug, then gets the boy to promise he won't go out in the road again (Boo, 2014, p. 64-65).

Though violence is a part of everyday life in Annawadi, the justification for and limitations on the use of physical force stand in stark relief to the use of violence by police and the political establishment, which seems to have no moral underpinning. A young Shiv Sena politician, for example, instigates Maharashtrian scavengers to beat up immigrants from the north in Mumbai slums as part of Shiv Sena's campaign against migrants. The real goal of this campaign is to convince the northerners to leave to open up more jobs for the native locals (Boo, 2014, p. 31-2). In a similar vein, though police beatings are outlawed, the police use Kalu's murder as an excuse to round up scavengers and beat them. They threaten to charge the trash pickers with Kalu's murder (despite the fact that they falsely documented his death as resulting from tuberculosis) if they don't stop. The goal is a political one: the improvement of the airport's image (Boo, 2014, p. 169).

V. Tolerance

As Katherine Boo noted in an interview with National Public Radio (2012), the children of Annawadi are much less attuned to cultural and religious divisions than their parents. There are numerous examples of this.

- Though he is a Muslim, Abdul's only "sort of friend" is Kalu, a Hindu (Boo, 2014, p. 12, 44).
- Abdul also says he feels "vaguely protective" of another Hindu boy, Sunil (Boo, 2014, p. 43).
- Mirchi, Abdul's younger brother, also has a Hindu best friend, Rahul. Mirchi believes that prejudice based on class, ethnic or religion is wrong and is fading away (Boo, 2014, p. 14).
- Manju and Meena are best friends even though Meena belongs to the lowly Dalit caste and Manju is a member of the higher Kunbi caste. They meet clandestinely at the public toilet at night to share their secrets (Boo, 2014, p. 66).

At the same time, the adults are not completely intolerant. They have an obvious preference for their own religious and ethnic group when it comes to arranging the marriage of their children, but they do cross ethnic and religious lines in their interpersonal relations, especially in their dealings with children. Zerhunisa is an excellent example. She is fond of Abdul's homeless Hindu friend, Kalu, and thinks he needs mothering. In fact, Kalu calls her "Amma", which means "mother" (Boo, 2014, p. 164). She takes a similar attitude towards another Hindu boy, Sanjay, who is geographically separated from his family. Zerhunisa is the one he comes to when he has difficulties with the police and she, of whom it is said, "Ten men pulling couldn't get her purse out of her pocket (Boo, 2014, p. 41)" puts money in Sanjay's hand as they agree that he should flee (Boo, 2014, p. 170). On a broader level, Zehrunisa and her husband, Karam, raise their children to ignore previous Muslim-Hindu violence. They reinforce this message by teaching the children songs about what a tolerant, multicultural country India is (Boo, 2014, p. 32).

Some of the adults, however, exhibit tolerance for less than altruistic reasons. The manipulative Asha defies her political party's opposition to immigrants from other regions of the country when she decides to rent portions of her house to non-natives of the region (Boo, 2014, p. 22-3). This tolerance, however, swings the

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other way when it is to her advantage to play up religious and social divisions. After Fatima's self-immolation, Asha, who was disappointed in her quest to obtain payment from Zehrunisa for brokering a stand-down in Fatima's false accusations, tells her husband, "What the One Leg [Fatima] should do is tell the police, 'I was born Hindu and these Muslims taunted me and set me on fire because I'm Hindu.' Then these guys would be inside the prison forever" (Boo, 2014, p. 97-8). She shows a similar disregard for children of low-class families who are attending the government-sponsored school in her hut. From her perspective, there is no point in providing education to them because she sees no networking benefit due to the fact that they are from poor families (Boo, 2014, p. 146).

Fatima herself is the living embodiment of tolerance for advantage. Born and raised a Hindu (her real name is Sita), she and her parents agreed she would marry an older Muslim man because no one else would have her due to her deformity (Boo, 2014, p. xvi).

At the opposite end of the spectrum, when the adults do show a preference for their own kind, it can be an extraordinary demonstration of unity in the face of disagreements. The best example of this is that despite Fatima's false accusations against the Husain family, Zerhunisa and her daughter, Kehkashan, wash Fatima's corpse. Zerhunisa says it is the duty of Muslims to join together for sufferings and festivals. Besides physical cleansing, the ritual is also a washing away of sins, so the women are removing Fatima's transgressions against them. In an extraordinary show of generosity, Zerhunisathen covers the casket with her family's best quilt (Boo, 2014, p. 115). Mirchi, one of the younger Husain boys, goes with Fatima's husband to the burial. Even Fatima's daughter, young Noori, demonstrates her lack of malice when she clings to the eldest Husain daughter, Kehkashan, for comfort after her mother dies (Boo, 2014, p. 113). Sometime later, when the holy feast of Eid comes, the Husain family celebrates Eid with Fatima's husband, Abdul Shaikh, and his daughters. He works "shoulder to shoulder" with young Abdul in preparing the slaughtered goat for roasting (Boo, 2014, p. 206).

By contrast, the politicians are proudly intolerant. As mentioned above, the Shiv Sena party is openly opposed to migrants from regions outside Mumbai. Moreover, the nephew of Shiv Sena's founder establishes a new political party that takes this intolerance to a physical level that includes vicious beatings resulting in broken bones, head injuries and people set on fire (Boo, 2014, p. 31-2).

Police intolerance is based on socio-economic factors rather than regional or ethnic considerations. Their beatings encompass victims of all religious and ethnic groups, but specifically target the poor. The motivation is two-fold: The scavengers are an unsightly blemish on the grounds of the beautifully renovated airport and the poor are far more likely to pay the demanded bribes rather than resort to costly lawyers.

VI. Conclusion

As in any society, the people of Annawadi struggle with the temptation to steal, lie or resort to violence to acquire the basic necessities of life and to reach for something a little more. Some fall to the temptation; some choose a life of crime or repeatedly use violence as a tool; some lie to achieve a desired result. Yet, the majority of the community consistently recognizes these behaviors as wrong and condemns them. The children, whose morals and priorities are shaped by their upbringing, somehow manage to outshine their parents in their adherence to a more virtuous life.

The community as a whole exhibits a much deeper moral grounding than the "overcity" officials – police and politicians – who have the power to control their fate. These officials use lies and violence to achieve their aims and show no sign of remorse when they do so.

Annawadi is just one small slum on the outskirts of a big city in India. A study of other slums to determine if the moral code that operates here resembles that of slums in other parts of the world is beyond the scope of this paper Nonetheless, Boo, an investigative journalist who specializes in the plight of the poor, offers this insight:

> In every community, the details differ, and matter. Still, in Annawadi, I was struck by the commonalities with other poor communities in which I've spent time (Boo, 2014, p. 253).

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