

Book Reviews – *Survival*

Teresita C. Schaffer

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

Katherine Boo made her name as an investigative Washington Post reporter writing long-term stories on poverty in the United States, researched with agonizing care and told with exquisite detail and sensitivity to the real people whose lives she was sharing with the newspaper-reading public. Her latest work, and first book, takes those skills to Annawadi, a downtrodden Mumbai neighborhood near the airport. It is a shocking, sometimes inspiring, unforgettable portrait of a part of India foreigners rarely see.

Having decided to delve into the grittiest part of big city life in India, Boo spent three and a half years in Annawadi. She enlisted the children she met in her story-telling enterprise, equipping a few of them with a video camera, and obtaining either direct or virtual access on an intimate level to the families whose roller-coaster lives propel her narrative. She gives us the earnest and the corrupt, with the finest of lines dividing them; the “corporator” (city councilman) on the make, who fades from view instead; Muslims and Hindus, whose religious differences do not necessarily define the battle lines when times get tough; the scavenger turned thief who tries unsuccessfully to get back into the more respectable scavenging business. Many of Boo’s characters despair – either throughout the book or, more typically, after their roller coaster has taken one too many downward swoops. Most simply survive. A few manage to keep hope alive – by hook or by crook: the most successful of the women she describes use a combination of wiles, fraud, education (real and phony), determination and luck to keep their noses metaphorically and literally above the ever-present sewage. The book reads like a novel – except that you couldn’t make up these stories. (Oliver Twist, after all, got rescued by a kind-hearted rich man, and turned out to have been born into a “good” family. Neither of these types appears in Boo’s book.) As one would expect from an accomplished journalist, Boo outlines her methodology in an “Author’s Note” at the end of the book.

Read this book because it is an amazing story, but also because it represents the most intractable part of the background to India’s quest to move out of poverty. India’s economic progress in the past twenty years is real, and some of it has trickled down to the urban underclass. But the process has been messy. Those graphs which show lines moving more or less steadily upward and to the right smooth away a lot of ups and downs, and leave out great numbers of people who don’t quite make it to the upward pointing line.

This book, especially when taken together with the other urban books reviewed here, gives some of the texture and flavor of India’s essential messiness. It is due in part to the unpredictability of democratic government, especially in a multi-ethnic society where people are struggling both to honor tradition and to break out of an ages-old trap. “Governance” is much in the news. In practice, that means turning the chaos of the “Mumbai undercity” into a system that can deliver at least minimum services, on some predictable basis, to its people. It is a tribute to India’s

people that so many have found ways of rising above the “undercity” existence. But the struggle will take a few more generations.

Berenschot, Ward, *Riot Politics: Hindu-Muslim Violence and the Indian State*, London: Hurst & Company, 2011.

There has been a lusty, occasionally nasty academic debate over what causes or encourages communal rioting in India, and what factors push toward harmony. The two explanations that have battled most vigorously seek the answer in violence as a tool of political operators (e.g. Paul Brass’s “entrepreneurs of violence”) and in civic and professional organizations as instruments for building robust cooperation between communities (Ashutosh Varshney).

Ward Berenschot’s study, based on an intense, fourteen-month immersion in three neighborhoods of Ahmedabad about three years after Hindu-Muslim riots convulsed the Indian state of Gujarat, finds elements of truth in both these explanations. But he adds another factor: the reliance of Indians on politicians to help them obtain routine services from the state – and the reliance of politicians on this mediating role as a critical engine of building electoral support. Putting this factor together with the more conventional tools for explaining riots makes this slim volume, not just an arresting way of explaining the collective madness of communal violence, but a compelling explanation of the way the state and politicians function at the grass-roots level in India, and possibly in many other struggling democracies as well.

Berenschot argues that this “mediated state” creates or solidifies ethnic or communal alliances that serve everyone’s purposes. Citizens are able to obtain services that the normal machinery of the state should provide but doesn’t – land records, access to clean water, a channel for redress of many kinds of grievance. Ward politicians build up a following that is loyal to the person who has delivered state services. They also make themselves useful to state and municipal legislators seeking to build larger coalitions. And when times get tough, the dynamics of these relationships suck ordinary people into violence that their patrons are encouraging, egged on by all the anxieties that create fear of “the other” in many diverse neighborhoods around the world – and also by the fear of losing the patronage of the person who has helped them break through the wall of inaction that stands between them and the services they need from a generally unresponsive bureaucracy. The most depressing finding is that communal riots tend to swell the electoral numbers of the more aggressive parties to the riots.

Berenschot lived in a neighborhood that had exploded during the 2002 riots, and studied one other violence-affected neighborhood and one that had remained peaceful despite having a mixed population. He describes in acute detail his conversations with people at all levels of the drama – “corporators” (municipal councilors), social workers, politicians, residents with varying levels of prominence in the neighborhood. His study of the two violent neighborhoods has much in common with the “entrepreneurs of violence” argument. In the one neighborhood that remained peaceful, however, civic associations of the sort Varshney writes about seem to have been a critical factor.

Berenschot's work is a single "deep dive" rather than a comparative study. He opted to change the names of the two violence-prone neighborhoods, an understandable decision to protect his interlocutors but one that makes it hard to revisit his work. Anyone who has toured a city in the developing world in the company of a successful urban politician, however, will recognize the relationship between politicians and city dwellers that emerges from these pages.

Berenschot focuses on the inability of the government to deliver normal services as the key part of the pathology he is describing. The "solution" he describes, however, creates a vicious circle: the last thing politicians want is for state institutions to be able to serve their customers without "customized" political intervention. The human relationships he sketches out are all too believable, and must reading for anyone trying to understand how democratic government in a poor country works in practice.

Inskeep, Steve, *Instant City: Life and Death in Karachi*, New York: Penguin, 2011.

Steve Inskeep, a reporter for U.S. National Public Radio, went to Karachi to report on the story of violence in that multiethnic cauldron, and became fascinated with the city. He seems to have intended the book as a reflection on an "instant city," which he defines as "a metropolis that has grown so rapidly that a returning visitor from a few decades ago would scarcely recognize it." (p. 2) In the process, however, he provides a gripping and beautifully written insight into some of the forces – both frightening and inspiring – that shape contemporary Pakistan.

Karachi, as Inskeep notes, was a Hindu-majority city at the creation of Pakistan. The departure of many Hindus, fearing for their lives, and the arrival of a half million refugees from India, fleeing for the same reason, transformed the demographics of the city. They also created an urban nightmare: infrastructure and housing stock overwhelmed by the sudden human tide. The early civilian governments were not equal to the task of building out the city. The military government under Field Marshal Ayub Khan did little better. It engaged the Greek architect and city planner Constantinos Doxiadis, but his wise and savvy proposals were overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the task and the inadequacy of the human institutions governing the city and the country.

Inskeep's account of what makes the instant city tick starts from the bombing of a Shia religious parade, the traditional Ashura Muharram commemoration of the martyrdom of the Prophet Mohammed's grandson Ali, on December 28, 2009. This tragedy serves as a metaphor for the forces that make Karachi's dysfunctional performance quite logical when viewed from the perspective of those trying to make their living there. The forces that converge start with migration – first the refugees from India, more recently job-seekers from the countryside and truck drivers from Pakistan's northwest (Karachi has more Pashtuns than any city in the predominantly Pashtun province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa). They include government officials who are distracted and unable or unwilling to focus on what people actually need; political parties who treat the city and its developing suburbs and parks as assets with which to reward their followers; municipal officials trying to create a following; and ethnic leaders trying to avoid being squashed by the leaders of other ethnic groups. Cities are believed to erase traditional

social categories. It's not a clean erasure, however: when people are thrown together in a city with no facilities for them, group loyalty becomes more important than ever.

The theme that recurs most persistently is land. At every turn, one is confronted with the scarcity of land, the overwhelming drive to accumulate or distribute it on behalf of one's own party or ethnic group, and the inadequacy of state and municipal institutions to defend allocations of public park space or dedicated housing space.

It is a depressing story, but a must-read for anyone interested in the future of Pakistan. Official figures tell us that 36 percent of Pakistanis live in urban areas. This is probably a misleadingly low estimate, when one considers the ambiguous classification of peri-urban areas and swelling towns. The one element of hope comes from a handful of people who have been able to organize for the welfare of a group or neighborhood. Pakistan's future depends on this type of "civil society" – focused on action to meet people's basic needs.