

ENGLISH – BEHIND THE BEAUTIFUL FOREVERS ESSAY

**“...for the poor of a country where corruption thieved a great deal of opportunity, corruption was one of the genuine opportunities that remained.”
Discuss how corruption affects the lives of Annawadians in Behind the Beautiful Forever: Life, Death & Hope in a Mumbai Undercity.**

“Corruption, it’s all corruption” is the lesson Asha Waghekar teaches her teenage children, seeking to instil an understanding that modern Indian society was essentially governed by dishonest practices and weak institutions. Presenting India’s systematic corruption as far more complex than the conventional western stereotype, Katherine Boo’s non-fiction narrative Behind the Beautiful Forever: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity explores the impact of corruption on both economic opportunity and an individual’s moral compass. The rampant malfeasance within the political and economic structures controlled by the elite is symbolic of the apathy and neglect directed at the plight of slum-dwellers, which permeates the entire social hierarchy to become widely accepted as the norm. There are no genuine opportunities available for the Annawadians as even the education system is undermined, leading to corruption becoming the most viable escape from the slum.

The Indian elite is largely indifferent to the miserable plight of Annawadians, alluded to by the suffering which overcity corruption and propaganda inflict upon the slum-dwellers. The central government steadfastly promotes an optimistic ‘growth story [of]...New India’ where citizens of all socio-economic statuses are supposedly afforded opportunities to rise beyond poverty and into the upper class. Boo dismisses the Indian government’s tokenistic anti-poverty schemes as ‘imaginary businesses’ used for officials to ‘take a hunk of the loan money’, exposing the promises of reform as nothing more than a mere façade. The ulterior motive of the political elite lies in stimulating national pride, driven by an underlying ‘sensitivity about [India’s] slums’ which the overcity ‘widely perceived as a blight’ on India’s international standing - particularly Mumbai’s reputations as the ‘the New Gateway of India’. That the elites’ only purpose for attending to the desperate needs of Annawadians is to enhance their own pecuniary interests, and even that is through a fabrication rather than genuine reform, demonstrates the drastic extent to which the undercitizens are marginalised at the lower echelons of Indian society. Moreover, not only is the overcity’s apathy expressed through indifference to the Annawadians suffering – the elites actively manipulate schemes designed to assist the undercitizens and reap the benefits to increase their own personal wealth. Despite private developers agreeing to build apartments for slum dwellers displaced by airport expansion, ‘overcity people had been buying up shacks...and concocting legal papers’ to attain the apartments for themselves, depriving the Annawadians of their right to basic housing infrastructure. Thus, the apathy of the overcity perpetuates the suffering of the undercitizens through the fabricated narratives of progress and the manipulation of government initiatives for personal gain.

The cesspool of malpractice and corruption which permeates India’s political and economic institutions corrupts citizens’ morality, allowing such practices to become the societal norm. Boo uses the motif of ‘by-hearting’ to demonstrate that the residents of Annawadi are attempting to rise into the Middle Class by emulating the behaviour and practices of ‘overcity people’. Asha believes that people like her - determined to enter the middle class - could ‘pose as a member of the overcity and [then] become one’. Boo extends this notion of mimicking the dress and behaviour of the ‘first-class people’ through the symbolism of the marquee effect. It represents a social migration achieved by emulating superficial, elitist traits and characteristics that are believed to characterise the overcity lifestyle. But the ‘by-hearting’ is not restricted to just dress and mannerisms, as undercitizens who embody this mentality also believe that engaging in corruption is therefore justified. Asha deflects her moral culpability for participating in overcity schemes by asking ‘how can anyone say I am

doing wrong...when the big people say that it's right?'. This reasoning alludes to a scenario whereby those desperate to escape the undercity – like Asha – have come to the realisation that corruption is the means used by the overcity to generate wealth and subsequently emulates this to their own pecuniary advantage. Asha is not concerned about her own morality, citing the example set by the elites as excusing her of personal responsibility, for it was no longer '[her] corruption'. Consequently, the widespread and systematic corruption of the overcity, combined with these practices being emulated by the undercity, leads to malpractice and immoral conduct being accepted and justified as the societal norm.

Due partly to overcity apathy, systematic abuse of institutional power and the drastic inequality of modern India, there is no genuine infrastructure of opportunity for Annawadians, making corruption the most viable route out of the slum. There are supposedly three main ways out of poverty: an 'entrepreneurial niche...politics and corruption...and education'. The Husains' attempt to escape via the entrepreneurial route, with Abdul Husain stoically doing work 'that most Indians found contemptible'. However, during renovations of the family hut, Abdul describes placing the family's possessions out on the maidan as 'throw[ing] ghee on an open flame', indicating the deep-rooted resentment and jealousy in the slum spurred by economic envy. Furthermore, during his interrogation in the unofficial police cell, the officers 'go after [Abdul's] hands, the body part on which his livelihood depended', demonstrating the seemingly insurmountable social and institutionalised obstacles which face prospective entrepreneurs. Education, on the other hand, becomes squandered by the effects of systematic corruption. Most schools are described as 'fraudulent...[and] taught by unqualified teachers' catalysed by the influence of 'politicians who preferred to capitalise on [the] abysmal schools instead of reforming them'. In comparison, Asha's engagement in corrupt local schemes brings material advantages for her children. Although Manju is initially troubled by the morality of the scheme and the legacy it would leave behind, she 'wasn't about to refuse the second-hand computer' which the Waghekars could now afford. Despite her moral objections, when enticed with the material benefits of her mother's corrupt dealings, Manju cannot help but accept the advantages as she is determined not to follow her best friend Meena in becoming the 'hot resister of daughterly responsibilities'. Thus, with two out of the three possible avenues out of poverty seemingly non-existent or suborned, political corruption becomes the most viable option despite the trade off with personal integrity and morality.

Katherine Boo's non-fiction narrative of life in the Annawadi slum explores the effects of corruption in Indian society through the eyes of undercitizens deprived of genuine means for socio-economic development. She presents the overcity as an embodiment of apathy and indifference towards the suffering and marginalisation of the undercity, which leads to the corruption of morals across Indian society. Furthermore, with no genuine opportunity to rise out of the slums, corruption becomes the most appealing and viable avenue of escape for Annawadians. Fundamentally, the text illustrates the multi-faceted role which corruption plays in the Indian social fabric, highlighting that it can simultaneously deprive - and yet in other ways provide - opportunities for India's poor.