



OFF THE WESTERN EXPRESS
KATHERINE BOO

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I came to the Wiko after two and a half years of difficult reporting in the slums of Mumbai, feeling tired, antisocial, and stopped up with events for which I couldn't find words. On arrival, I doubted strongly that stories reported in huts and sheds full of garbage would emerge in a Villa Walther skypad overlooking a lake. But stories did come out, and a book deadline got met. This had a great deal to do with the ensorcelling environment of the Wiko, and the practical support and criticism from some remarkable women among the Fellows and spouses.

Although I use narratives in hopes of engaging an otherwise indifferent readership, my hope in the slum reporting was to be something other than a professional empathy, chronicling poverty qua poverty, with the requisite moments of flies-in-the-eyes abject-

ness. My abiding interest, in India and elsewhere, is in the infrastructure of opportunity that allows people to exercise their capabilities and get out of poverty. As India's break-neck growth promised new distributions of wealth and opportunity, I followed four dozen families in a single slum as they made choices – planned, improvised, re-thought, adjusted – in hopes of improving their social position. The chief impediments the slum dwellers encountered in those efforts led me to broader investigations of public institutions, from the police department to the judiciary to the apparatus of public health, education, and elections. With a dual approach of observation and document-based research, I attempted to take a very rough measure of the gap between lived experience and the official statistical record by which India's growth is widely understood.

To the slum dwellers, most of whom were engaged in the scavenging trades, public institutions functioned as volatile private markets – markets that people with low purchasing power approached at great risk. As Central Government schemes proliferated to rectify educational and income inequality, and were in turn subverted at the local level, I came to believe that in a country with the second-fastest growth rate in the world, the under-reported redistribution was not that of wealth or opportunity, but of the effects of institutional corruption.

I also came to believe more strongly than before in the efficacy of market-based hope as a political instrument. The urban poor believed that interactions with a capricious government were more likely to harm than to help them, a condition under which market competition came to be seen as by far the fairer and more reliable means of alleviating poverty. The low expectations for government served that government nicely; it could continue to be cryptic and unaccountable. Meanwhile the market competition in which popular hopes resided pitted poor people against each other, weakening collective connotations of justice. A profoundly unequal urban society was in no near danger of imploding.

“And all like that,” as Mumbaikars say when they've talked themselves out. I remain surprised to have a book to refer to at the end of my six months at the Wiko and count those months as the most productive, and among the most pleasurable, of my working life.