The Voices of the Poor

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We Are the Poors: Community Struggle in Post-Apartheid South Africa
by Ashwin Desai
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"One of the designer-bedecked (African) councilors began castigating the crowd. She had once lived in a shack, she screamed. Why were the Indians resisting evictions and demanding upgrades? Indians were just too privileged...One elderly aunty... screamed back 'We are not Indians. We are the poors'"(p. 44).

This dramatic moment is the epicentre of Ashwin Desai's *We Are the Poors*. This is a book that can be read in two ways, and most of this review will concern itself with one of those, the extent to which we can use Desai to understand contemporary South Africa analytically and contextually as is appropriate in these pages. However let us give some time to the first. How do we read this book on its own terms? Desai has been a university lecturer and a popular and effective journalist in Durban. Pugnacious and cheeky, he is never willing to release his foot from the door when something meaty requiring dissection lies within. In the days before many Indians in Durban could acquire professional qualifications, there was the phenomenon of the "bush lawyer", the man of all trades who made it his business to identify burning community issues and take up the cudgels against oppression. Such individuals could be flamboyant and ambitious but were critical in creating a sense of community able to act in concert. Thereafter it should also be pointed out that there have really been generations of effective leaders in Durban Indian neighbourhoods, notably including leaders of so-called civics in the 1980s who usually were loyal to the underground ANC.

Nonetheless they were stuck into the same issues long before the end of apartheid as discussed in this book— fighting over bus fares or rents—as Indian townships already enjoyed a basic urban infrastructure, for all the inequities suffered compared to white suburbia. It was in an Indian neighbourhood in Durban, Isipingo, as this book mentions, that an independent candidate from a long-established civic organisation, became the only such post-apartheid figure elected nationally as such. Desai is really a contemporary representative of this tradition and he writes in this spirit.

He has written books before although this is the first to be published internationally. *Arise Ye Coolies* was a militant history of working class Indians in Durban whose strongest pages reflect a personalised intensity bubbling under a more conventional surface. Since then he has learnt to let go more effectively. This volume is a very eloquent piece of reportage - evocative, observant and full of affection for the daily life of ordinary South Africans. What he calls "the collective joy (and also misery)" in the "lived environment" of poor urban South Africans (p. 144) shines forth brightly on these pages.

Desai narrates a number of struggles largely concerned with urban housing and services. They make effective stories populated with colourful and sometimes moving incidents and people. For a readership that wishes to know how ordinary life is lived for many in the "new South Africa", Desai can be strongly recommended. Indeed if anything the poor of this book are probably quite far from the poorest of South Africa's poor; many range at no worse than the national median.

Most of the episodes in this book take place in Durban and the largest number in an extensive former Indian township called Chatsworth. As Desai points out, there are some well-to-do sections of Chatsworth. There are also large sections where the tiny houses built in the days of Verwoerd have been so extended and added on to that they are unrecognisably improved. Most Chatsworth people will testify to the extent to which they were able, despite their resentments when first moved to the area, to forge a real sense of community. For many, the conditions under which they lived before being housed in Chatsworth were both exploitative and miserable in any event. However, Chatsworth also contains dreary council flats difficult to improve upon.

Part of the Indian working class, once largely employed in Durban's factories and public services, have become upwardly mobile but there are also layers who have suffered with the decline in industry in recent years and some who have always lived near the bread line. In the poorest parts of Chatsworth since the end of apartheid, black Africans have also moved in considerable numbers. The embattled condition of these people facing evictions and cut-offs of basic services for which they have no money to pay constitute much of this book, although other neighbourhoods such as Wentworth, a poor Coloured area not unlike the poorer parts of Chatsworth and Mpumalanga, a peripheral African district near what was once a "border" industrial zone now in decay, are also highlighted.

There are other issues that have moved Durban people as well of course—the AIDS issue, Middle Eastern politics, access to land. Thus the other focus of the book is the loosely organised and now defunct Durban Social Forum. The forum, reinforced particularly by visitors from Gauteng Province where Johannesburg is located, had its finest moment during the UNO sponsored World Conference Against Racism. Although partly hijacked by enthusiastic Muslim anti-Zionists, the conference witnessed an impressive march of perhaps 20,000 or more protestors against various aspects of "globalization", a march which seemed to herald the emergence of a new Left politics in South Africa. This in turn was situated by many commentators (although less intrusively by Desai) into a one size fits all worldwide anti-globalization movement where "the same" issues are always dominant.

Readers of *We Are the Poors* will be interested in a reviewer's possible confirmation of the emphasis on class-based anti-nationalist politics that is clearly fundamental for Desai. Here I would give him only a very qualified affirmative. The key element in current struggles certainly is economic and by implication is class-based; everyone knows blacks run the government now. There are struggles based on poverty that do involve poor Indian and Coloured people. However, it should also perhaps be said that it is much easier rousing the poor by talking about the enemy as white or as distant white men overseas presiding over powerful institutions than to get them to consider how much privatisation and other such stratagems are largely designed to promote the interests of the new black power elite. At worst that elite can be denounced as stooges for others. It is one thing to want a nationalist movement to take up class issues and another to reject nationalism entirely. Nor does Desai convey a sense of the scale in which those of Indian working class origins have been upwardly mobile and able to advance their fortunes, often through emigration to rich countries far from Africa these days. The poors may include Indians but hardly a majority of those of Indian descent in South Africa.

Just as controversial and thought-provoking an issue is Desai's almost contemptuous rejection of the ruling African National Congress. "Straddling the official and the grassroots, the regime and the people, the rich and the poor, this organization still commands pockets of emotional support (and rather larger pockets of electoral support). However, as its betrayal of the poor becomes more profound, this support inexorably flows away, month by month" (p. 138). Our opening quote which lends the book its title is even more revealing of Desai's bitterness towards the ANC.

Does the ANC, which currently sustains ad nauseam attempts to raise anodyne cheers for ten years of "our democracy", deserve this opprobrium? It certainly can be looked at in other ways. It perceives itself (or its leader Thabo Mbeki does) as locked in a tough battle to show the world that black South Africans can effectively play a leadership role, that they can run a large, relatively industrialised country efficiently despite the powerful prejudices of the West. Here they have done a lot. They have created big fortunes for a few and allowed social mobility for hundreds of thousands of others locked previously into the apartheid system. They have adopted centre-left policies that in some respects (for instance the institution of fairly advanced labour legislation or the patent hostility to the US occupation of Iraq) can hardly be described as fulfilling the wishes of foreign reactionaries. Some commentators consider the scale of the total vote in the last elections as a sign of growing depoliticisation, especially of youth but the success of the ANC in winning an increased percentage of the vote suggests an intensifying hegemony and a high level of political stability. Militants from the NGOs and the trade unions are usually effectively snapped up as potentially effective junior politicians or officials for the government as Desai himself wryly points out. Policing can be tough and the state's comments on the "ultra-left" increasingly unpleasant but in general the ANC abides by a right-based and very liberal constitution. The poor do sometimes win key victories in the courts. For instance, companies recently lost the right to seize the houses of poor people on the grounds of small-scale debt. Nobody moreover even sees South African elections as in need of "monitoring" to check whether or not they are free and fair.

There is however a terrible systemic failure on the part of the ANC to do much for those locked into what Mbeki has called, in a sense imitating the dualistic formulae of the eras of white rule, the "second economy". What to do about those who do not fit into the busy happy globalized dream world of corporate fantasy because they lack the education, the skills, the business sense, the motivations, the stability in their lives, to fall into line in this way? A huge part of the population (and it is a much larger share of Africans than any of the racial minorities) are unemployed and many of the employed earn pitifully low wages. This is even truer if one counts, as the state now desires, workers in the informal sector as employed, however pathetic their earnings.

The ANC's answer has been "delivery", the handing out of free houses, electricity, water reticulation, education and health on a considerable scale. For instance, something between one to two million new houses have been built by the state since 1994 for occupation by poor people and distributed on a generally fair basis. However, these services are not costless. Use and maintenance require payment, a point not made by militant ANC enthusiasts looking for votes in 1994 and afterwards, and herein come the struggles. The far greater availability of say, electricity, creates tension when it is taken away.

To what extent *can* people pay for water and electricity and housing? This is very difficult to say. As a top official in one of the big South African cities told me, "there is a hard to separate mix between the belief of people that they need not pay, that these things are theirs by right"—something that ANC militants used to promise in more stirring times themselves—and the reality that many are too poor to make a contribution that will even repay costs. The state has been budged in consequence to come up with slightly more generous policies. For instance (as Desai says) few evictions take place anymore. Meters have been installed to prevent service users from running into debt. A limited amount of water and electricity have been made available for nothing. But it does not lead to satisfaction and can only be taken so far within current paradigms. Struggles over poor or non-existent delivery continue as well as those protesting payments—and not only in the big cities.

Desai does not tell his readers that a major source of survival amongst the poor are pensions. After some reforms, the pensions are now being given out on a very wide scale to poor South Africans, although the system is in fact a residue of apartheid days. This does give something basic to all over 65 years of age, in fact shared to a large extent by the wider family. In addition, he does not tell you that the state not only provides child allowances but that these allowances in the last two years have become very much more widely distributed than before. The old system, which he thinks was more generous, did offer considerably more money to those who benefited (these included many single Indian women but very few Africans). Only through the very much wider diffusion of smaller amounts of money could the system be sustained today.

The Congress of South African Trade Unions, which Desai dismisses as totally toothless, has been the leader of voices in asking for a Basic Income Grant (BIG) system, a welfare system where there would be a small lifeline handout to the whole population. I do not think that BIG will make headway. The ANC is afraid of turning the black population into a nation of drones living on the dole, not an entirely contemptible position in my view. This is probably one reason there is such resistance to the mass handout of drugs to mitigate the effects of HIV.

But it forces on us the big questions Desai does not really broach. Can there really be "free basic services for all poor people" in a country no richer than South Africa, as one of the organisations he celebrates demands? (p. 140) How do we create an economy that substantially adds jobs, initially for those with very limited skills and initiative? How do we reform the educational system so that it genuinely enlightens people? How can we narrow the gap between the wages of those in the first and second economy and make sure that low skill jobs also provide a living wage? Is not the *real* land question not about how much is owned by those with pale skins but about providing some security and options for those who want to live in metropolitan and urban areas. (The one notorious South African land invasion story—which gets considerable attention in this book—takes place in Bredell on the periphery of Johannesburg and it is certainly not a story about farmers or agriculture).

This is where the ANC comes very short although in its defense it cannot be said that the contemporary world is rich in answers in the wake of the declining salience of industrial policies on a Keynesian model. Some aspects of the anti-globalization approach help to understand why things are moving in the way they are but they are not very helpful in suggesting solutions. South Africa badly needs a coherent and affordable social welfare policy. Will a crisis, as Desai hopes, sink the ANC? Not very likely, I think. Unless the poor have a coherent basis for organisation centred on a positive vision of change, not merely a *phansi (down with...)* approach, it is not clear where discontents can go politically.

As Desai says, and it is as true today as it was five years ago, "their protests were not driven by ideology but by the need to survive and the desire to live decently" (p.9). For the latter, they have in South Africa a model on a large scale of very pleasant lifestyles experienced by a substantial minority more than anywhere else in Africa. But that model is not going to be sustainable for the majority in the foreseeable future. Of course, the poor may in time vote in a protestor whatever the protestor actually does once in power. Or the ANC may split at some future time as ambitions and tempers rise over the stakes for power.

At the moment, however, Desai is only recording movements that acquire some structure and clear sense of purpose at the level of the local or at special galvanising moments such as the UNO Racism conference. These movements reveal a lot about South African life as it is actually being lived today but those hoping for a new anti-apartheid movement on an anti-globalization basis in line with a vision of international struggles to match the international reach of capital will probably find that Desai offers them a largely chimerical if inviting spectacle in his gripping book.