

(Re)moving Waste:
Caste, Spaces, and Materials in Delhi



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Thesis Abstract

Delhi is faced with a burgeoning growth of discarded materials—commonly referred to as waste. This rapid increase is characterised by chaos and disorder in the management of waste. This thesis examines the disorder and its effects through the lens of materials, spaces, time, people, and infrastructures involved in the flow of waste through the city. I focus on three waste-related sites in Delhi—Balmiki colonies, the Bhalswa landfill, and recycling units in north-west Delhi—and show how discarded materials acquire different meanings in different contexts and subsequently shape the caste-, class-, and gender-based social relations and the social and economic value associated with waste work and waste workers. I demonstrate this by focusing on the technocratic infrastructure of waste management and by examining the human and caste-based infrastructure of waste management. I show how the growing privatisation of the waste management infrastructure and the use of technology alongside the Clean India Campaign are projected as symbols of modernity and cleanliness and are used to invisibilise the human and environmental dimensions of the waste crisis for political and economic profit. Simultaneously, I focus on waste workers—municipal sanitation workers, public private partnership-led garbage collectors, informal waste pickers, and recyclers—to demonstrate the varying nature of stigma, discrimination, and evaluation of waste work and waste workers. I illustrate how urban marginality has pushed not only Scheduled Caste communities' workers but also many non-Scheduled Caste communities, such as Muslim and Hindu OBCs, into waste work, transforming their social relations and caste hierarchies at a micro level. Furthermore, I examine how the value of waste work varies from being reproductive (city's livability) to productive (generating exchange value in waste materials), across different spatio-temporal axes and value chains, and how that shapes the way waste workers perceive themselves and their work.

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List of Abbreviations

AAP	Aam Aadmi Party
AIIMS	All India Medical Institute
AIKMM	All India Kabadi Mazdoor Mahasangh
AIPMA	All India Plastic Member's Association
ASI	Assistant Sanitary Inspector
AQI	Air Quality Index
BJP	Bharatiya Janta Party
BSP	Bahujan Samajwadi Party
CAA	Citizenship Amendment Act
CCO	Chief Commissioner Office
CHO	Chief Health Officer
CPCB	Central Pollution Control Board
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
CWG	Commonwealth Games
DA	Dearness Allowance
DC	Deputy Commissioner
DASAM	Dalit Adivasi Shakti Adhikar Manch
DDA	Delhi Development Authority
DDT	Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane
DJB	Delhi Jal Board
DMSWSL	Municipal Solid Waste Management Solutions Limited
DMC	Delhi Municipal Corporation
DPCC	Delhi Pollution Control Committee
DSA	Delhi State Archive
EDMC	East Delhi Municipality Corporation

EPR	Extended Producers Responsibility
FICCI	Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry
GOI	Government of India
GST	Goods and Service Tax
GAIL	Gas Authority India Limited
HD	High-density
HM	High Molecular
HH	Household
JJ	Jhuggi Jhopdi
LD	Low-density
MBC	Most Backward Castes
MCD	Municipal Corporation of Delhi
MHO	Medical Health Officer
MLA	Member of Legislative Assembly
MOD	Municipal Officer of Delhi
MOEFCC	Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change
NAI	National Archives of India
NCR	National Capital Region
NDMC	North Delhi Municipal Corporation
NDMC	North Delhi Municipal Corporation
NGT	National Green Tribunal
NHAI	National Highway Authority of India
NRC	National Register of Citizenship
OBC	Other Backward Classes
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PET	Polyethylene Terephthalate

PPP	Public Private Partnership
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
PIF	Plastindia Foundation
PP	Polypropylene
PVC	Polyvinyl chloride
PWMR	Plastic Waste Management Rules
RDF	Refuse-derived Fuel
RIL	Reliance India Limited
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
RWA	Resident's Welfare Association
SBA	Swachh Bharat Abhiyan
SC	Schedule Caste
ST	Schedule Tribe
SI	Sanitary Inspector
SWM	Solid Waste Management
TA	Travel Allowance
TOI	Times of India
SP	Samajwadi Party
SUP	Single-Use Plastic
UPSC	Union Public Service Commission

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Introduction

The Waste Crisis in Delhi

Waste matter is rapidly increasing and the crisis of waste has become a global concern. Delhi is presently facing a burgeoning waste crisis; the city generates 12,350 tonnes of solid waste daily (Gandhiok, 2022), much of which is dumped at landfill sites as garbage. This subsequently leads to increasing fire hazards around the three landfills in the city, collapse of the landfills (Bhalswa and Ghazipur), increasing Air Quality Index (AQI) values in the surrounding areas, seeping leachate in the nearby water bodies affecting the water quality in the nearby slum colonies and residential areas (Hargovind, 2022), followed by deleterious effects on animal life, which is crucial to the city's sustenance. (N. Kumar et al., 2019; Doron, 2021).

This research focusses on the processes, people, relationships, and work that shape the waste crisis in the city. Demaria and Schindler argue that the 'materiality and political economy of cities are co-constituted' (2016, p. 293), and Mcfarlane notes that 'waste, in its many forms, is fundamental to the history and geography of the city. Urbanisation has not only produced waste, it has always required it' (2019, p. 1239). Thus, the waste crisis has to be understood in the context of growing urbanisation, the politics of waste-management infrastructure, social relations of production, context-specific labour regimes, distribution of resources, and the spaces of the waste-recycling chain. This thesis, therefore, aims to engage with waste regimes as sites of social and political relationships. In particular, it examines transformations in the nature of the waste crisis, caste relations, questions of value within waste as matter, the social relations

among waste workers—how waste workers perceive themselves vis-à-vis waste and society—and the politics of governing different materials differently.

In this introduction, I bring forth two recent events that show how the waste crisis is inextricably linked with our everyday lives, not only in the form of discarded matter but also in terms of the invisibilised and apparently ‘disposable’ spaces and lives of those embedded therein. Furthermore, I illustrate how waste and the waste crisis remain a contested terrain because, on the one hand, waste matter is considered to be culturally and socially polluting (Kornberg, 2019a), and, on the other, it reaps monetary value for many waste pickers and those engaged in the vast waste management industry.

As one of my informants said, ‘This is our Bharat Mill and waste production never ends here’. His comment indicated that the Bhalswa landfill, which he poignantly called ‘Bharat Mill’, works 24*7- waste is ever increasing at the site. The landfill site and waste has many meanings for wastepickers like him. While they earn their livelihood by selling discarded materials to scrap dealers (converting waste into value), the waste-led environmental pollution is simultaneously detrimental to their health. Moreover, waste, for many waste workers, is a constant reminder that they are performing one of the most stigmatised occupations in Indian society (Harriss-white, 2020; Doron & Jeffrey, 2018). In that sense, the waste crisis that we witness today is also constantly in a state of flux, suggesting it can take multiple forms.

In this thesis, I show, how the waste crisis is linked to the human world in different ways— in our case, waste pickers. The thesis coalesces around the questions of what waste is, and how, why, and to whom it matters (Gregson & Crang, 2010). Through two examples, I show that the crisis is not just of discarded materials and their adequate

disposal but of people and spaces as well. Both humans and materials are imbricated in the crisis and their abjectness (Kristeva, 1982) is an outcome of the mode of governance.

I reached Delhi for a short visit on 17 April 2022 and within a matter of 10 days, I witnessed two unexpected events. First, the outbreak of a fire at the Bhalswa landfill, and second, the Jahangirpuri 'clashes' during Hanuman Jayanti (celebration of Lord Hanuman's birthday—a Hindu deity). The two events may seem unrelated but on careful scrutiny, one can infer that the abjectness of humans and materials binds these two events together.

On 24 April 2022, a massive fire broke out at the Bhalswa landfill—located at the north-west periphery of the city. According to newspaper sources, the fire continued for the next 10 days. *The Indian Express* (2022) reported that around 30 fire tenders were stationed at the site to douse the blazing fire. Although fires at landfill sites are common, especially in summer, this fire was unprecedented. Schools in the vicinity were shut down because smoke had engulfed the classrooms (Outlook, 2022). Officials at the landfill cited multiple reasons for the fire. A senior official at the North Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC) said: 'Methane gas spontaneously ignites under such weather conditions. It is a natural phenomenon. Such a major fire at the Bhalswa landfill has not occurred lately and we will look into the exact cause once the situation is under control' (Hindustan Times, 2022). According to newspaper sources, some officials remarked that the cause cannot be ascertained at the moment (Outlook, 2022). They hinted that sometimes fires are caused by waste pickers while trying to recover metal from discarded wires.

The AQI around the landfill is generally very high (161) and nearby residents suffer from breathing and skin ailments. These problems were further aggravated by the fire and the AQI went up to 287 (Outlook, 2022). The toxic fumes generated by the fire

are composed of carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, and carcinogenic elements (Bisht, 2019). I visited the site for only two hours on the 12th day but it was sufficient enough to give me a severe headache. Although most newspapers reported that the fire lasted for around 10 days, the landfill was still on fire when I visited on the 12th day, albeit not on the same scale. When I asked engineers at the site about the action taken to douse the fire, one of them said, '*hum kuda ulat palat kar rahe hain*' ('we are sifting waste from one side to another'). He explained that this would help dry the waste and release the trapped methane gas. Interestingly, this was followed by continuous dumping of fresh waste (as the NDMC had no other alternative site to dump waste), which could further fuel the fire. This chaos ensued even though the NDMC had instituted 'sophisticated' technical infrastructure to segregate waste—excavators and trommels—at the landfill site (see Chapter 4). A junior engineer at the site explained that they had also installed new excavators to remove legacy waste and mounds of waste from the site in order to douse the fire and ease accessibility for the firemen.

The incident points to growing concerns about waste and the environmental crisis around us. It poses questions about the burgeoning growth of wasted objects, lack of space and infrastructure, and the effect this has on human life. Although the fire gathered widespread media coverage and astounded residents of the city, the immediate consequences were borne by the neighbouring residents and slum dwellers, including waste pickers—Bengali Muslims, Hindu Other Backward Classes (OBCs), and Schedule Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) communities. The fire had a detrimental effect on their health as well as their everyday work routine. Waste pickers often leave sacks of collected items around the landfill site. Many of them lost collected material during the fire and they could not collect waste at the site due to the fire operation, excessive heat, and toxic fumes. The crisis here is not just of the growing burden of discarded materials

and the failure of technological infrastructure at the landfill site but of the physical and social space the landfill occupies and of the marginalised communities living in the surrounding areas. These infrastructures are embedded in larger modes of governance and hence are also shaped by the dominant understanding of the aesthetic order, political economic imperatives, different forms of social relations, and the precarious labour which sustains these infrastructures (Murphy, 2013; Star, 1999). Such events lay bare ‘relations of disposability’ (Fredericks, 2018, p. 6), shedding light on which bodies intersect with discarded materials and what influence this has on their everyday life. Moreover, how are these bodies implicated in the sociopolitical relations of waste management infrastructure?



Figure 1.1: Day 12 of the fire breakout at the Bhalswa landfill.
Source: Photograph clicked by the author, 9 May 2022.

On 20 April 2022, the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP)-led NDMC carried out demolitions of Muslim houses in the Jahangirpuri area in north-west Delhi. Jahangirpuri is barely 2–3 kilometres from the Bhalswa landfill and is home to many waste pickers from Bengal (mostly Muslim), Uttar Pradesh, and Bihar. The demolitions were initiated on the pretext of communal clashes during the Hanuman Jayanti *shobha yatra* (procession) in the area on 16 April 2022. As per *The Indian Express* reportage, the procession congregated in front of a mosque in the area and some individuals raised slogans: ‘Bharat mein rehna hoga toh Jai Sri Ram kehna hoga’, which meant ‘if you want to stay in India you will have to say Jai Sri Ram’ (a Hindu nationalist chant) (Singh Manral & Mohan J, 2022). *The Wire* quoted one of the residents, ‘[T]he mob with members of the Bajrang Dal went outside the mosque and tried to wave the saffron flag here’ (Jain & Pal, 2022). These incidents led to a tense situation in the area and clashes broke out, wherein both sides allegedly (Hindus and Muslims) pelted stones at each other and around 10–12 people were injured. Following this, the Delhi Police made several arrests in the area, which included mostly Muslims. Soon after the incident, many politicians started calling the residents of the area ‘Bangladeshi’. BJP leader Kapil Mishra alleged that the area was known to harbour ‘Bangladeshi infiltrators’. ‘They should be identified and their homes should be bulldozed,’ he said (Singh Manral & Mohan J, 2022). Interestingly, Delhi’s Deputy Chief Minister Manish Sisodia contended,

There is hooliganism across the country because of the BJP today.... I ask them, in the last eight years why did the BJP give shelter to Bangladeshis and Rohingyas across the country? They gave shelter to them and then used them to cause communal disharmony across the nation. (Dey, 2022)

While Sisodia's statement was an accusation directed towards the BJP, it assumed that the migrants in the area were Bangladeshis and not Bengali migrants. All these statements were made without concrete evidence. Soon after, demolition drives were conducted in the Jahangirpuri area, which included the houses of Bengali Muslim waste pickers. Although illegal encroachment was cited as the reason for these demolitions, the ulterior motive was to teach a lesson to the Muslim 'rioters'; as one of BJP's leaders, Adarsh Gupta, said, '[I]llegal encroachments by these rioters should be identified and then should be bulldozed'. The demolitions continued even after the Supreme Court's order of a status quo.

I bring these two seemingly unrelated events together to demonstrate the precarity of life and space borne by Bengali Muslim waste pickers and how their caste and religious status are closely intermeshed with these incidents in the city. Bengali Muslims are one among the many marginal communities in the city. They are categorised as Khotta Muslims¹ (Hossain, 2022; Singh Manral & Mohan J, 2022). Many of them migrated to Delhi in the 1980s in search of jobs and ended up in waste work and scrap dealing. Palpably, their presence around these two particular spaces—the landfill site and the Jahangirpuri area—and the occurrence of these two incidents is not a mere coincidence (in terms of the spatiality of these events and the communities imbricated in it); rather, it is defined by the processes of uneven development² (Smith, 2001). Similar to discarded materials, they have been pushed to the city's periphery in order to be

¹ OBCs, for further explanation, see Chapter 5

² I follow Neil Smith's understanding of Uneven Development. It refers to unequal development of socio-spatial relations because of capitalistic processes. To quote Smith, 'These social and economic contradictions are resolved geographically as different places crystallize as discrete territorial entities, localities, cities, regions, nation states, the global economic system itself—resulting in the production of a nested hierarchy of geographical scales' (2001, 15958).

invisibilised. Now, with the growing communal frenzy across the country, they are being selectively targeted for their religious identity, underlined by their caste status.

On one hand, these workers reproduce city spaces by picking up waste and converting it to value; on the other, they are termed as Bangladeshis and are condemned for their alleged involvement in communal violence. Their inclusion within the waste economy is based on their exclusion. To quote Sarah Moore, '[I]n the case of waste as abject, processes of expelling wasted objects, places, and people are essential to the production of modern spaces and citizens' (2012, p.792). In the Indian context, the production of the Hindu nationalist state is infringing on the rights of Muslims and simultaneously exploiting their labour to maintain the order of the city. During my one-and-a-half-year-long fieldwork, I observed that many middle-class residents of north-west Delhi are unaware of the religious identity of their garbage collectors. However, following the Jahangirpuri demolitions, the same garbage collectors are being seen as a threat. Looking at the events and processes surrounding Delhi's waste crisis and the marginalised communities associated with waste work, I explore the complexities of the waste regime, its contested terrains and examine how it is shaped by sociopolitical and spatial practices.

In the next chapter, I set out the research questions and the main themes of the thesis in detail. I discuss the conceptual and analytical framework, providing context to the materials gathered from the fieldwork.

Chapter 1

Contexts and Concepts

Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 came as a major jolt to India's informal economy. The mass exodus of migrant workers to their home states was compared to the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. The sudden announcement of the lockdown by Prime Minister Narendra Modi left migrant workers in a vulnerable state, more out of the fear of joblessness and being away from home than the fear of COVID. However, given the state of panic and chaos throughout the country, 'essential services' had to carry on. Doctors, police, medical staff, journalists, and cleaners (sanitation workers and waste pickers), in the given order, were categorised as essential workers. Those who fell in this bracket of employment had no option but to go to work in person. The central government and the state government announced varying compensation packages for them. Many of them received a standing ovation and were garlanded at their place of work and neighbourhood, whereas many were socially distanced and discriminated against. Yet the story of these behaviours varies for different fields of work—medicine, police, and sanitation are quite different. Needless to say, cleaning workers have been considered the lowest in the hierarchy of 'essential workers'. Here, cleaning workers refer to sanitation workers, PPP-led waste workers, and waste pickers. Historically, they have not only been

‘socially distanced ’but physically distanced too. COVID-19 only worsened their socio-economic conditions.

Within the first month of the pandemic, a number of major national dailies reported delays in the salaries of sanitation workers in North Delhi, who fall under the jurisdiction of the North Delhi Municipal Corporation. The pandemic had already made it difficult for many of them to afford their daily necessities and the delay in their salaries made the situation worse (Singh, 2020). As soon as the delay in salaries became public knowledge, government authorities—both the Delhi government and North Delhi Municipal Corporation—started the blame game. These delays in salary payments were followed by an absolute lack of care and attention towards municipal sanitation workers, who did not receive gloves, masks, and sanitisers on a regular basis. Many of them often used the same mask or covered their face with a handkerchief or dupatta (scarf). National dailies soon started reporting the deaths of sanitation workers. Sanjay Gehlot, then the head of the Safai Karamchari Ayog (Commission of Sanitation Workers), informed me that municipal corporations in Delhi were reluctant to record these deaths as COVID-related deaths. The family members of the deceased workers were informally intimidated about the cause of death. Similar cases were reported from other states as well (Rawat, 2020). In many cases, municipal authorities were reluctant to provide compensation and in many COVID deaths, the death reports were marked as ‘report awaited ’(Rawat, 2020). Moreover, many contractual workers, within the Municipal Corporation of Delhi, (MCD) who contracted the virus were not provided with any kind of medical facilities. In fact, several of them had to raise money through different sources for their treatment. To make matters worse, their absence from work during COVID was not counted as leave, subsequently resulting in salary cuts. Moreover, early into the pandemic, many sanitation workers had no clue about what to do or how to commute to their workplaces. They were

often irregular or late to work and had to face social censure. Middle-class urban residents (in the area of Delhi where I live) often remarked, ‘Oh these lazy Dalit people [cleaning work is usually done by low caste Dalits] just need a reason not to come to work’.³

A similar situation prevailed amongst the rest of the cleaning workforce—informal waste pickers and waste workers working for public–private partnership (PPP) alliances. Just like government employees, the privatised workforce was not offered any kind of medical assistance and leave if they got COVID. Furthermore, during the first lockdown, inter-state movement between the Delhi–Haryana border was restricted. Many waste workers employed by private companies who commuted from Haryana to Delhi could not do so, resulting in pay cuts. To make things worse, many urban households who contracted COVID did not inform waste management services and disposed of their COVID-related waste along with other trash, endangering the lives of waste workers. Yet the life of the privatised workforce was relatively better than the informal waste pickers. Their (PPP waste workers) uniform and identity cards enabled access to their workplace.

Informal waste pickers have historically been a precarious workforce—even more so during COVID. Unlike *safai karamcharis* (sanitation workers) and PPP-led waste workers, they had to navigate their way to access middle-class residential neighbourhoods and landfills during the early phases of the lockdown. Heavy police presence led to restricted movement across the city. Very often, waste pickers had to dodge police personnel to reach residential areas. Unlike private waste workers, informal waste pickers directly deal with household garbage, which is largely unsorted. This often meant that waste pickers were touching COVID-infected trash because they were not informed if a household was COVID-positive. During the early days of the pandemic, many waste

³ Remark made by a neighbour in my colony on the first day of the COVID-19-led lockdown.

pickers were not allowed inside households because of the fear of the disease. Since they are exposed to trash, they were seen as an obvious source of infection and a threat to health. However, as the initial fears abated, many people started allowing waste pickers to enter their households, which often came at the cost of disposing of COVID-related trash without informing them. The informal nature of this work starkly differentiates waste pickers from private waste workers or municipal sanitation workers. Waste pickers could not make claims to any government or private authorities for their daily living and basic facilities such as masks, gloves, and sanitisers.

Rather, they were often left exposed to used masks and gloves, which they handled with bare hands. Some of them remarked that they even picked up personal protective equipment (PPE) kits at landfill sites and processed them for recycling. Their precarious situation hit another low with a drastic fall in discarded materials. With the closure of factories, malls, hotels, and other 'non-essential' shops, there was a fall in the amount of trash the city generated. This not only affected the livelihood of informal waste pickers but also disrupted the recycling value chain for months to come. The reduction in solid waste was further compounded by the closure of segregation and recycling units—*kabaadiwallas* (scrap dealers) and recycling factories, respectively.

The coming of COVID-19 laid bare not only the vulnerable and precarious work conditions but also the varied forms of discrimination faced by 'essential workers' placed lowest in the hierarchy of work. These narratives reveal the stigma associated with waste work and also how it operates differently at multiple levels. Traditional sanitation workers, employed by municipal corporations, are part of government (*sarkaari*) jobs, whereas private waste workers are all hired on a contractual basis and work as per the rules of the companies. Informal waste pickers are left to fend for themselves, without any safety nets. The public/private distinction and that of informality have shaped the

terms and conditions of work, yet what ties them together is the nature of waste work and the stigma associated with it. During COVID, even as most services came to a standstill, waste management services continued. It shows how waste management is crucial in rejuvenating the city's metabolism and continuously reproducing it. Yet we continue to see exploitative and discriminatory behaviour towards the cleaning workforce (Lee & Swaroop, 2021).

Delhi faces a severe waste management crisis today. In the last three years, there have been several landfill-related crises. In April–May 2022, the Ghazipur and Bhalswa landfills in Delhi were affected by blazing fires, causing unrest among the nearby residents (Dhillon, 2022). Following such accidents, the municipal authorities struggle to find alternative landfill sites in the city, and sewage workers and waste pickers often die due to asphyxiation while cleaning sewage and foraging around landfill sites. All these incidents cannot be seen in isolation from each other. They are all interconnected in terms of how the city's infrastructure was historically organised and how it has changed from colonial to post-colonial times, affecting the communities engaged in waste management services. The materiality of discarded objects and the classification of waste have also changed over time and the spaces to deposit discarded objects have been transformed. I tie together these aspects and examine how cities are reproduced through the lens of waste work.

This thesis starts with the question: How does the changing materiality of waste and waste management infrastructure shape the lives of various caste communities involved in waste work at multiple levels (sweeping, collecting, sorting, and recycling)? How do these changes mediate the social and economic relationships between waste workers and dealers involved in the various circuits and sub-circuits of the urban waste economy? The primary research question is anchored in a micro-understanding of waste

economies. In addressing these questions, I examine how not just the material but the larger political-economic structures and institutions—liberalisation, privatisation, and globalisation, the post-colonial process of urbanisation, growing consumerism, changing caste formations, privatisation of waste management services, and its socio-technical infrastructure—have come together to govern and manage the present-day waste crisis that shapes the lives of waste workers.

The existing literature on waste economies in India acknowledges the association between the waste-picking community and lower-caste communities, without looking into the specific caste and community composition and the unsettling implications for caste structures in general. In this thesis, I study waste-picking communities—including nomadic groups, OBCs and SCs from Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar, and Bengali Muslims—in greater detail than has been done thus far. I map out their journeys, experiences, and social relations vis-à-vis waste work, how they have been affected and repositioned along the caste axis and hierarchies, and how these communities have become the new ‘untouchables’ and ostracised communities in the city of Delhi. Yet members of these communities earn their livelihood from waste work in the context of scarcity of other or better economic opportunities. Thus, I aim to construct a picture that emphasises both upward and downward mobility in waste work.

The different spaces and communities that waste workers inhabit offer insights into varied historical backgrounds, social hierarchies, and experiences. This helps us understand the varied perceptions of waste work among these communities and the social and political implications of the work. Moreover, by looking at three waste sites (sanitation workers’ residential neighbourhoods, the Bhalswa landfill, and scrap shops) in a single study, I attempt to map out the flows of urban waste in present times and its implications for stigmatisation and identity formation, and how different communities

chose to 'value 'themselves and their work in contrast to the label often ascribed to them—'disposable lives 'or 'wasted lives '(Millar, 2018; Sharma, 2022). This would not be possible through a focus on only a particular segment of waste workers, as has been previously done.

I analyse waste workers 'lives with reference to historical contexts and contemporary developments, pertaining to caste formation, changing conceptions of the value attached to both materials and human life, social relations, identity construction, and urbanisation in colonial and post-colonial India. These processes together help us understand the complexities of waste work and waste economies in the city.

Continuities of the Past: Urbanisation in Contemporary Times

There is a political rationality in the way infrastructures are structured (Larkin, 2013). They are not merely technologically abled physical structures. Anand (2017), in the context of Mumbai's water infrastructure, argues:

Colonial histories of limited liberal government, a technopolitical regime that is beholden to regular annual rainfall in a distant (but relatively small) watershed, and present neoliberal modes of governing infrastructures have instead constituted the city's infrastructures as unstable forms that continuously leak, break down, and operate as background in everyday life. While infrastructures occasionally produce and enable the movement of some political subjects or things, they also continue to stall, stick, and bind projects of liberal and neoliberal reform in the city. (p. 7)

There are some significant continuities in the political rationality of urban infrastructure development from colonial to post-colonial times. Even though there have been shifts in

political regimes, the processes and rationalities behind restructuring city spaces—prioritising ruling elites over the masses, mobilising the labour force to perform particular kinds of work, and the control of the urban poor—remain the same.

Delhi's current problems of city infrastructure—whether of sanitation, water, or housing facilities—and the contemporary vision of a world-class city (Bhan, 2009; Ghertner, 2015) are intricately woven with the crisis of governance in colonial times (Sharan, 2014). Historical scholarship on city-making in general and in Delhi (Prashad, 2000; Sharan, 2014; Legg, 2006; Chandavrakar, 2009; Kidambi, 2001) inform us that the growing fear of epidemics such as cholera and construing Indian cities as hotbeds of disease and unhygienic spaces led to segregation within the city. In the late 1880s, Bombay, Calcutta, and Delhi were the main focus of urbanisation. In order to maintain immaculate city centres and protect themselves from disease, it was necessary for the British to maintain clean and hygienic enclaved spaces within the city. These sanitised elite enclaves have been described by Guha as 'little islands of purity in the miasmatic landscape' (1993, p. 389). One of the initial steps to control health, hygiene, and sanitation regulation in India was taken during the Crimean war (Oldenburg, 1984). As per the British authorities, approximately 10,000 British soldiers lost their lives during the war. Out of these 10,000 soldiers, 8,500 died as a result of diseases and unhygienic living conditions in India (Doron & Jeffrey, 2018). Given this startling situation, the British authorities set up a Parliamentary Commission, called 'The Sanitary Commission'. *The Sanitary Report and Survey* produced by The Sanitary Commission, analysed by Florence Nightingale, marked the beginning of the implementation of scientific ideas and modern sanitary practices in the country. One of her remarks regarding hygiene and sanitary condition, as described in *Waste of a Nation* by Doron and Jeffrey, was:

The description given of the native town is astonishing.... So (far) as one judges from the evidence, the sanitary state of entire large cities is as bad as, if not worse than, was the state of the worst part of our worst towns before there was any sanitary knowledge in the modern world at all. (Sanitary State of the Army, p.367. Cited in Doron & Jeffrey, 2018, p. 18)

Given this highly negative description of ‘contaminated’ Indian cities, the British were able to carry out some sanitisation programmes in Indian cities but they remained selective and focused mostly on the health and hygiene of British soldiers. It was only in 1882 when cholera and the bubonic plague (later 1890s) broke out in India that the British government accepted the germ theory and forced its techniques of modernisation on the Indian masses. With the spread of the plague in India, most of the British ships were barred from international trade. They were seen as carriers of germs and a potential cause of the spread of the plague to other European countries. The colonial government’s vested economic interest forced them to impose sanitary practices on the Indians, which often meant intruding into Indian households (Doron & Jeffrey, 2018). Arnold (2013) and McFarlane (2008) have argued that these processes of modernisation and sanitisation were mostly restricted to the British regiments and elite Indians. Slum colonies and working-class areas were left in deplorable conditions, as they were beyond the budget of the British regime (Sharan, 2014; Vanaik, 2021). Their main priority was to treat the British bureaucrats and soldiers.

Not surprisingly, similar practices were carried out in the domain of industrial development and the construction of slaughterhouses in the city. Sharan (2014) observes that Delhi started growing into an industrial city around the 1930s, and that is ‘when the modern industrial landscape emerged as a major urban concern’ (p. 110). Before this, the traditional trades and industries were confined to areas such as Sabzi Mandi. However,

with increasing pressure from industrialists to expand the industrial area and the growing problem of congestion, the colonial government agreed to relocate the industrial zones and labour force on the pretext that this would lead to the decongestion of the older parts of the city. The labour force was seen as an added burden to the city's congestion crisis. Thus, like many other aspects of unequal planning of the city, the industrial area and labour force were relocated to the city's periphery. Sharan elucidates on a number of urban poor housing schemes, such as the Andha Mughal and the Dhota Kidana schemes. The Andha Mughal scheme (1939) was meant for rehousing the urban poor who were displaced because of the reclamation of land for residential settlement in the western extension area of the city. Their presence and occupation—pig rearing and tanning—were seen as detrimental to the market value of the area. Such processes of sanitising and segregating the elite colonial spaces from native settlements were carried forward in the post-independence period as well, albeit with a difference. In the post-independence period, the process of urban development was envisaged along the lines of 'equitable urban planning' (Mehra, 2011, p. 60) and with the idealism of bringing the urban poor into the realm of public life and civil society. However, these visions notably failed. If during the colonial times, natives were associated with dirt, disorder, and diseases, then in the post-independence period of the 1950s and 1960s, slum dwellers were associated with 'disease, illiteracy and limited cultural resources' (Sharan, 2006, p. 4909). As Mehra and Batra (2008) show, the urban poor was never properly integrated into the urban planning processes, primarily because of the lack of resources, as well as not being made a priority.

In the post-1980s and 1990s era, cities such as Delhi have been transformed comprehensively from the perspective of class aesthetics (Ghertner, 2015), reinforced by

the cross-currents of bourgeois environmentalism⁴ (Baviskar, 2018). The post-1990s era was followed by the liberalisation and privatisation of the economy, leading to socio-economic restructuring (Ghertner, 2015; Kohli, 2006). These transformations profoundly influenced the processes of urban development and the way the ‘poor are represented and visualised within the city’ (Bhan, 2009, p. 131). The notions of a ‘world-class city’ were anchored around particular ideas of aesthetics, hygiene, and development—where the poor were seen as a ‘nuisance’ and middle-class patterns of consumption were encouraged. The power to evict the urban poor and call for the demolition of slum settlements was no longer limited to the municipal corporation. In the early 2000s, most of the slum demolitions were a result of public interest litigations (PILs) filed by middle-class residents of the city and the subsequent court judgements. As Bhan (2009) shows, the number of slum demolitions increased manifold in the early 2000s and less than 25 per cent have received any compensation in terms of resettlement. Moreover, all these evictions were conducting in line with judicial rulings.

Like slum demolition, waste management too was driven by judicial rulings in response to judicial interventions sought by middle-class litigants, purporting to uphold the public interest. The case of *B.L. Wadhera vs the Union of India and Others* (1996) and *Almitra Patel vs the Union of India and Others* (1996) were both targeted at the lack of waste management infrastructure and the failure of statutory duties of the municipality in dealing with the waste crisis in Delhi and Bangalore, respectively. In *B.L. Wadhera vs Union of India*, Mr Wadhera argued:

⁴ The term bourgeois environmentalism refers to the concerns of upper-middle-class aesthetics and safety, which shape urban spaces to a great extent. Baviskar explains the growing idea of bourgeois environmentalism through the example of a middle-class neighbourhood in Delhi. She observes how a poor young boy was beaten to death by police constables and middle-class residents because of defecating in a public park in the Ashok Vihar area of Delhi. His act of defecating disturbed their sense of clean space and environment. The colony resident had paid to construct a wall to avoid the dirty slum colonies around their houses. Through this example she questions the struggles around the environment in an urban context.

MCD and the NDMC had been totally remiss in the performance of their statutory duties to scavenge and clean Delhi city, as it was their mandatory duty to collect and dispose of the garbage/waste generated from various sources in the city. (as cited in Gidwani & Chaurvedi, 2011, p. 64)

The outcome of these cases was the enactment of the Bio-Medical Waste (Management and Handling) Rules, 1998, and the introduction of the Municipal Solid Waste (Management and Handling) Rules, 2000, respectively. However, these PILs, filed in the interest of the larger ‘public’ had a negative impact on the livelihoods of the urban poor. In *Almitra Patel vs the Union of India*, the outcome of the judgement led to the enactment of the first set of the Municipal Solid Waste (Management and Handling) Rules, 2000, albeit with a strong anti-poor bias. The judgement primarily concerned itself with middle-class environmentalism—‘clean and green city for those propertied citizens’ (Gidwani & Chaturvedi, 2011, p. 67). Bhan (2009) comments on the court judgement:

Delhi ‘*should be showpiece of the country*’ yet ‘... *no effective initiative of any kind*’ has been taken for ‘... *cleaning up the city*’. Rather than see them as the last resort for shelter, ‘... *slums*’ the court said, were ‘... *large areas of public land, usurped for private use free of cost.*’ The slum dweller was named an ‘*encroacher*’ and the resettlement that had hitherto been mandatory became, suddenly, a matter of injustice, ‘...*rewarding an encroacher on public land with an alternative free site is like giving a reward to a pickpocket for stealing*’. (p. 135)

Evidently, the judgement did not express any consideration for waste pickers—neither in terms of their livelihood nor in terms of their living conditions. Rather, the judgement had a great impact on the slum eviction drive in Delhi that subsequently jeopardised the

housing situation of waste pickers. One of the most shocking examples is of the Yamuna Pushta slums. The residents of the Pushta area were accused of polluting the river and generating unsanitary conditions in the area.

Such evictions are indicative of how the poor population is construed as creating unhygienic and unsanitary living conditions, whereas middle-class residents, such as PIL litigants, are seen as ‘concerned citizens’ with their bourgeois environmental activism. The idea of a world-class city was further compounded by the construction of malls and bypassing of environmental regulations in favour of consumer-oriented aesthetic development of the city. Ghertner (2015) notes that one of the biggest malls, DLF Promenade, was built on the southern ridge of the city in the early 2000s. A local environmental organisation filed a petition challenging the construction of the mall, as it was being built on a protected green zone of the city. However, as Ghertner argues, the project was defended on the following grounds:

... the DDA argued that visual appearance of the future mall was in itself enough to confirm the project’s planned-ness, The Supreme court, despite acknowledging that the project constituted a ‘flagrant violation’ of planning law, sided with the DDA, allowing the mall construction to go forward. (Ghertner, 2015, p. 3).

Moreover, the nearby *jhuggi* (slum) settlement colony in the area was demolished because it disturbed the aesthetics of the neighbourhood and the area surrounding the mall, even though it conformed to the recommendations of the master plan.

Similarly, when Delhi won the bid for the Commonwealth Games (CWG) held in 2010, the city underwent significant infrastructural changes, including a clean-up campaign that ordered bans on street vendors in South Delhi and rickshaw pullers in old Delhi (Bhan, 2009). Some of the infrastructural ‘development’ included the construction

of flyovers (Schindler, 2014), a promenade next to the Yamuna river (Baviskar, 2011), and covering the unsanitary landfill (The Times of India, 2010) in the northwestern part of the city. Schindler in his work on street vendors in Delhi argues that Kabari Bazar near the Jama Masjid area of old Delhi was closed because of the construction of a flyover in 2009 in the wake of the CWG. The construction of the flyover was justified in the name of ‘public interest’ and ‘due to the paucity of space, the proposal for relocating the Sunday Bazar seems unviable’ (Old Edward Park vs K.S. Mehra, 2010, as cited in Schindler, 2014, p. 2605). Delhi’s redevelopment plans created such a frenzy that even *The Guardian* reported,

Although the games are just under three years away, India’s capital is being reshaped as the city prepares for the biggest sporting event in its history. The Delhi government has begun putting up posters saying the capital will be transformed into a ‘world-class city’ by the 2010 deadline. (Ramesh, 2008)

The clean-up campaign during the CWG was not just limited to the eviction of the urban poor and the building of flyovers. These campaigns were followed by a series of environmental reforms, such as setting up of monitoring systems to track pollution levels during the games. The *Down to Earth* magazine quoted then professor Randeep Guleria of the All India Medical Institute (AIIMS), ‘The Commonwealth Games, dubbed Green Games, is an opportunity to clean the air for better public health’ (Chandola, 2010). Some of the purported environmental reforms that were resisted by activists included the clean-up campaign of the Yamuna river. For all these years, the Yamuna banks in the city were reserved for farmers who grew vegetables and fruits. However, before the CWG, the banks were transferred to developers for building luxury flats, promenades, and facilities for athletes.

The ‘world-class’ development during the CWG was inevitably impeded by the visible waste crisis and open dump yards across the city (K, 2010). In the race to create immaculate spaces, sanitising the city and covering up landfills was followed by the privatisation of waste management systems in the city. *The Caravan*, in its reportage on the Delhi waste crisis, quoted the MCD councillor, Rampal:

The city is filthy and the government staff reeks of inefficiency. Thirty to 40 percent of the workers never even show up to work because they’re guaranteed a government job and can’t be fired. Privatisation will allow us to streamline certain processes and make the city’s trash collection run smoothly. (Bibi, 2010)

The reportage further stated that the processes of privatisation of waste management services had already begun before the CWG. These details are further substantiated in Demaria and Schindler’s (2016) work, where they note that the privatisation of waste management services in Delhi started in 2005—it was carried out in three phases and is still ongoing. The first phase began in 2005 when private firms were contracted to transport waste from transfer stations to landfills. The second phase of reforms was marked by the introduction of incinerators in 2011–12. Instead of segregating and recycling the city’s trash, the municipal authorities opted for incineration. The city presently has three incinerator facilities—Okhla, Ghazipur, and Bawana. The third phase, that is, the present phase, includes the household collection of trash via public–private partnership (PPP), transporting it to local receptacles, compressing it, and then transferring it to either landfill facilities or incinerator plants. This ensures substantial control over the city’s trash, which is then incinerated in waste-to-energy plants to generate electricity. These infrastructural and technological changes were introduced to accelerate the city’s metabolism vis-à-vis its waste crisis and project a clean and green image. However, even with the introduction of private waste management services in the

last 17 years, Delhi continues to struggle with its waste crisis. In fact, the crisis has further increased. City dwellers continue to generate 12,350 metric tonnes of waste along with depleting air quality levels. The infrastructural development has not solved the city's waste crisis. On the contrary, these developments have reduced the access of informal waste pickers to the spaces (middle-class colonies, local receptacles, landfills) where they can collect discarded materials.

The notion of world-class city development—skyscrapers, consumerist aspirations, and a clean and green city—have had a deleterious effect on city dwellers and particularly on the urban poor. These aspirations have also shaped the way city dwellers access the city and the materials they consume. Although Delhi, as part of a developing country, generates more organic waste (vegetable and fruit peels, tea leaves, and so on) than dry waste, the amount of dry waste has significantly increased. Technologies to accelerate the process of waste management, such as waste-to-energy plants, might have reduced the geographical footprint of waste disposal. However, as Kornberg (2019a) argues, these advancements have only changed the material form—by generating electricity that leads to the emission of toxic gases—and they do not necessarily ensure a clean and green environment.

Given this context, I map the present-day concerns and processes of waste management in light of the colonial ideology of urbanisation and sanitary practices. Palpably, the issues at stake today have taken a different form from those of colonial times. In the colonial period, the concerning issues were of public health, hygiene, sanitary development, and the building of closed elite spaces. The present-day concerns are of environmental degradation—waste crisis, air quality, along with existing concerns of urban aesthetics, public health, and sanitary development (Sharan, 2014). There is a continuity in the way the colonial regime governed the planning and sanitary

development of the city and the way in which present-day authorities ‘manage’ and ‘govern’ these challenges. The cities then and now are structured along social and spatial segregation based on caste and class divisions. Mcfarlane (2008) states:

If the environmental focus of the contaminated city was on clean environments through infrastructure, demolition and segregation, the focus in the contemporary city is on clean environments through manicured enclaves and demolition.... If colonial comparison underlined the legitimacy of the imperial interest, contemporary ‘world city’ comparison underlines that of the corporate interest and supports an ideology of bourgeois environmentalism. (p. 431)

Based on these continuities and differences, I unravel the present-day waste crisis and examine how it is interwoven with contemporary urban processes and is shaped by the colonial legacies of sanitary and urban development. In doing so, I explore the changing nature and form of the waste crisis in terms of waste management processes, the materiality of waste matter, the space, and the actors (waste workers) involved in managing it.

Complexities of Caste

Caste is a complex social phenomenon and a living reality in India, or as Bayly (1999) argues, caste has a ‘pervading presence in Indian life ’(p. 1). The term caste is a derivation of the Portuguese term, *Casta*, and Guha (2013) defines it as ‘a collective noun that referred to a pure blood-line or species ’(p. 22). It was first used by the British regime to

understand the *jati* and *varna*⁵ system in the country, and for codification and administrative purposes (Ranganathan, 2022).

Caste has been defined and redefined through changing socio-economic structures, lived realities, and bureaucratisation. Ambedkar understood caste as an unequal form of social organisation that divided society across four groups—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Baniyas, and Shudras. Those who were not included in this division were accorded the status of untouchables and were forced to take on ‘polluting’ works. According to Ambedkar, the caste system was the most defining feature of Hindu society. In *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), he remarks: ‘A Hindu’s public is his caste and his responsibility is to his caste’. His loyalty is restricted to his caste. He further defined the caste system as a unique phenomenon based on graded inequality, based not only on the division of labour but also on the division of labourers. In other words, society is divided not just on the basis of labour, but also through those who perform that labour, which is defined by one’s caste and position in the social hierarchy. While traditional caste practices include notions of purity and pollution, caste continues to define and redefine itself through varied practices as the social and economic context changes.

Ambedkar’s ideas significantly shaped the scholarship on caste, and as evidenced above, he situates the caste system in the sphere of Hinduism. However, in this thesis, I analyse caste formation based on historical and material reality (Jodhka, 2015b; Bayly, 1999; Guha, 2013), looking at how caste and economic relations come to shape present-day exploitative conditions. I examine how caste reproduces itself in different contexts, especially in urban scenarios. Jodhka points out that caste as a phenomenon and a ‘system

⁵ Broadly speaking, Varna refers to hierarchical social order Brahmin, Kshatriya, Baniya, and Shudra and Jaati refers multiple sub-caste/units among caste and communities; Jati in that sense is a form of broad and flexible classification (Beteille, 1996)

of hierarchy' has often been defined as a central feature of Hinduism and he critiques Dumont for putting forth an understanding of caste purely based on religious ideology. Such a view of caste renders 'Hinduism as a cohesive faith system with a singular theological structure and without any variation in its social organisation' (Jodhka, 2015a, p. 59). In addition, such an understanding of caste is very static in nature and does not take into account socio-economic transformation. A similar view is put forth by Bayly (1999), who contends that even though caste ideals are eulogised in Hindu scriptures, caste is not a static system, unchanged over time. Rather, the 'universe of caste involves both continuity in its essence and change in its expression' (Guru, 2012). To further quote Guru,

Inequality is a structural condition. Structures underlie and renew this condition. Caste as an ideology forms a part of this condition. Caste not only articulates this condition, but also makes the hierarchical condition applicable and effective. Caste continues to regulate the condition of inequality across time and space. Thus, in contemporary times, caste shows some signs of withdrawal from the public domain but at the same time also betrays its 'soft character' when it explodes into the most pernicious and obnoxious violence in the country side. Difference, on the other hand, is basically defined against the cultural homogenization by the majority. Caste as a signifier of social hierarchy may operate with cultural group which is seeking recognition of its cultural difference.

Palpably, caste as a practice finds its salience in the present times as well. The continuation of caste-based practices and rituals is related to economic changes that offer socio-economic mobility (both upward and downward), albeit in a limited manner (Pai & Shah, 2012; Beteille, 2012). Furthermore, these mobilities lead to the production and

reproduction of caste relations in varying contexts, which produce distinct forms of social hierarchies.

I examine these mobilities and emergent social hierarchies in the context of waste work. Sanitation and sweeping work are primarily performed by SC communities to this day (Shankar & Swaroop, 2021). However, based on the growing scholarship on waste and sanitation work in the Indian subcontinent (Butt, 2019; Kornberg; 2020; Gidwani & Kumar, 2019), one can argue that cleaning work, especially waste picking, is no longer limited to the SC communities. In this work, I aim to understand the processes that have shaped these changes and the lived experiences of various caste communities performing waste work. Although caste pervades Indian social life, it does not operate in isolation from other processes. The changing economic processes, whether good or bad, have come to shape and reshape present-day caste formations. In the light of this, Prashad (2000) demonstrates the historical and economic conditions through which Chuhras were categorised as community of scavengers. He argues that very often it was assumed that the Chuhras had always been a community of scavengers. However, with the help of colonial anthropological journals and based on the archival documents of colonial officials, he observes that the Chuhras were part of the agricultural labour force. The introduction of the census and subsequent commercialisation of land and revenue settlement further cemented and bureaucratised caste hierarchies. The caste census became crucial for colonial officials to govern the population and understand land-holding patterns in the province of Punjab. Moreover, as Rawat (2013) argues, the caste census solidified the occupations associated with the Dalit communities.

Given the understanding of caste formulated above, I further two broad arguments with respect to caste, communities, and discarded materials. First, the work here not only analyses the transformations in caste hierarchies vis-à-vis economic changes but also

closely links it with the changing materiality of discarded objects and how different caste communities value their work differently. Traditional sweeping communities in Delhi—the Balmikis, who have been primarily involved in sweeping the streets and removing human excreta—do not want to engage in this work anymore. The humiliation and stigma associated with the work have socially marginalised the community. However, with an increase in recyclable materials, waste workers from other communities—Masets, Qalandars, Hindu OBCs, and Bengali Muslims—have entered the field. The stigma associated with waste work then gets transposed onto the bodies of new waste workers; yet they continue to perform the work because it provides monetary benefits.

In the colonial and early post-colonial era, the materiality of discarded objects and substances—dust, soil, human excreta, and other organic waste—was not seen as ‘valuable’ in a monetary sense. Even though the work in itself was reproductive—rejuvenating city spaces—it was not seen as productive work, either socially or economically, and the communities of sanitation workers were not valued. However, today, waste recycling has become a million-dollar industry, and those performing it have extended it from reproductive work to productive work (Reno & Catherine, 2012).

Second, scholars in the field of caste studies such as Rawat (2013) and Bathran (2011) argue that it is caste in itself and not so much occupation that regulates the functioning of the stigma associated with SC communities. Bathran, in his work, quotes Ambedkar:

What is the use of telling the scavenger that even a Brahmin is prepared to do scavenging when it is clear that according to Hindu Shastras and Hindu notions even if a Brahmin did scavenging he would never be subject to the disabilities of one who is a born scavenger? For in India a man is not a scavenger because of his

work. He is a scavenger because of his birth irrespective of the question whether he does scavenging or not. (Ambedkar, as cited in Bathran, 2011, p.22)

In fact, Rodrigues also argues that ‘dirt is not associated with any occupation but is considered a permanent attribute of entire communities’ (2009, p. 119). Drawing on this argument, I contend that it is not just caste but also the notion of defiled work that shapes the stigma borne by SC communities. In this thesis, I show that in the present day, many other lower-caste communities perform waste work and bear the burden of stigma. However, this is not to suggest that members of the SC communities such as Balmikis, some of who no longer engage in sweeping or other defiling works, do not face stigma. There is undeniably a continuity in caste-based practices of discrimination. Very often, as Rawat (2013) and Lee (2017) argue, it is the space of caste that lays bare such practices; such as the Balmiki Basti and Sau Quarter in Delhi where Balmiki communities live. There is a continuity in caste-based discrimination, and simultaneously, there is a contradiction in that it is not necessarily limited to the SC communities. Thus, although caste might be understood as a rigid social phenomenon, it is intricately linked with the economic structuring that has pushed many other communities into unemployment and subsequently forced them into the world of waste work because of the monetary benefit it offers. I explicate these transformations by observing the life-world of waste workers across castes and religions at the Bhalswa landfill.

Waste and Waste Infrastructure

Waste is an essential element of human society today. In the most absolute terms, it is defined as an object without any value. Cave defines it as ‘an object that no longer belongs to anyone ... has been abandoned ... *res derelicta*, things over which their former

owners have renounced their property rights '(2017, p. 2). However, if seen closely, it 'slips easily between concept, matter, experience and metaphor '(Campkin & Cox, 2007, p. 1). At once it can be an indeterminate matter (Sanchez & Alexander, 2019), a matter which is ritually polluting (Douglas, 2002), and a matter that has value or is useless in nature (Gidwani, 2013; Gidwani & Corwin, 2017). The classification of what gets classified as waste is rather complex. Its presence has wider salience at multiple levels. The anthropologist, Mary Douglas, has described dirt as disorder and as 'matter out of place '(2002, p.36). It is construed as impure and ritually polluting. However, the semiotic representation of dirt is contingent upon the social and cultural context. It is not a transhistorical category, it is continuously defined by the changing spatio-temporal and cultural complexes (Fredericks, 2014; Strasser, 2000).

In the field of Discard Studies, terms such as dirt, waste, and trash are often used interchangeably because all these matters are seen as an excess of society (Bauman, 2004). Many scholars have transposed the description of dirt onto waste (Fredericks, 2014; Gidwani & Baviskar, 2019). Mary Douglas's definition—dirt is 'matter out of place'—has become the dictum of Discard Studies.

In this thesis, I argue that there is a fine distinction in the meanings of these terms, defined by their materiality, space, time, and the context they inhabit. This then further defines their value in society, because as Viney (2014) argues, waste is not just matter out of place but also matter out of time. These interconnections shape how the workforce engaged in waste work at multiple levels—sweeping, waste picking, household garbage collection, recycling—is perceived by the larger society. Their social status is intricately linked with the nature of the materials they deal with.

As Fardon shows, Douglas defines dirt as ‘any bodily excreta, saliva, vomit, faeces, and anything that has contact with them is dirty. Food is wholesome when served, but soon as someone has eaten a little, and left it, it is “orts”, remains, dirty’ (2010, p.154). Her understanding of dirt, as Campkin (2013) observes, was centred on ‘bodily sensation, physiological, and psychological processes’ (p. 48), cultural symbols, and the ordering of society that is linked to the question of hygiene and pathogens.

Douglas discusses cultural symbolisms vis-à-vis dirt and she situates her understanding within social and cultural contexts. To her credit, she engages with the discussion on purity and pollution at a broader level, wherein she tries to understand what these notions indicate in different contexts. For example, in Chapter 1 on ‘Ritual Cleanliness’, she observes, ‘in Hinduism, for example, the idea that the unclean and the holy could both belong in a single broader linguistic category is ludicrous’ (2002, p.10). However, her understanding of materiality lacks reference to industrial production and consumer-oriented goods, which inundate the world of trash in contemporary times (Kaïka & Swyngedouw, 2000). Moreover, when she argues that dirt is matter out of place, albeit depending on social and cultural context, it is not necessary that every matter that is out of place can be classified as dirt. For example, today with the growing recycling industry, many objects are categorised as recyclables. At the time of discarding, they might be thrown on the streets (for example, pet bottles), local waste receptacles, or trash bins, rendering them ‘useless’ and matter out of place, but, eventually, they are recycled. One cannot simply classify these materials as dirt.

Waste, thus, is not a fixed category. It is at once matter out of place and also matter on the move (Bhattacharya, 2018; Thompson, 2017). The policy discourses on waste limit the understanding of what gets classified as waste (Gille, 2007). As Gregson and Crang have argued,

The different incarnations of waste can be used to suggest the situational and relational character of the category waste. Far from being fixed in advance, waste is seen as historically mutable, geographically contingent, and both expressive of social values and sustaining to them [*sic*] (2010, p. 1027)

Thus, waste as matter is continuously in the process of becoming and unbecoming.

It follows that today, the materiality and sociality of waste are embedded in the capitalist economy.⁶ More precisely, the materiality of an object shapes the market value of the waste product. This relationship between waste and value is termed the ‘waste-value’ dialectic⁷ (Gidwani & Reddy, 2011; Gidwani, 2013; Alexander & Reno, 2012). Waste is described as an excess and the political other of capitalist production, where the end life of an object is also the new life of the object and the labouring lives associated with the object. Thus, the state of worthlessness becomes pertinent for the loss and regeneration of value at the same time. Today, when the growth of waste has increased manifold, vis-à-vis consumerism, it is paramount to acknowledge the relationship between waste and capital. The pertinence of this concept rests on the fact that capitalist production relies on urban waste economies in order to contain the detritus of cities to renew urban spaces (Gidwani & Maringanti, 2016).

In this thesis, I map the transformations of waste management infrastructures and the lives of waste workers from colonial to post-colonial times, which are defined not just by the changing socio-economic contexts but also by the materiality of waste. I elaborate

⁶ Sarah Hodges (2018), in her work ‘Plastic History, Caste and the Government of Things in Modern India’, describes how with the rise in demand for plastic (after the late 1980s), plastic became a valuable object in the waste economies. The materiality of plastic as a waste object started to transform the life of waste workers, who were otherwise involved in butchering, tanning, and cleaning wet waste.

⁷ In Gidwani’s words, ‘waste, immanent to capital’s becoming-being, poses a jeopardy to capital accumulation: it is, on the one hand, capitalist value in-waiting and on the other hand, it is an omnipresent logic of dissipation that evades or exceeds capital’s dialectic, threatening its legitimacy and existence’ (2013, p. 1).

on these infrastructures in the section on urbanisation. In colonial times, modernist visions of hygiene, public health, and cleanliness defined the discourses of waste in India (Kaviraj, 1997; Chakrabarty, 1991). The domination of colonial narratives defined the nature of technology and processes of waste management. In addition to this, the colonial reforms around cleanliness and hygiene became a way to hierarchise spaces and citizen-subjects. Gidwani succinctly defines this form of ‘development’ and urbanisation as a ‘century-long class war against waste’ (2013, p. 176).

These practices still endure in post-colonial India, albeit in different forms and with a different set of concerns. Today, the primary concerns related to the waste crisis are pollution levels, incineration, recycling, adequate space for landfills, and city aesthetics (Gidwani & Baviskar, 2019; Ghertner 2015; Schindler & Demaria, 2016). In colonial times, waste recycling was not a major consideration. However, today, waste poses a direct threat to the environment. As per the *Deccan Herald* reporting, medicinal waste, if not disposed of properly, can lead to major environmental threats and epidemics among humans (Rajagopal, 2018). Similarly, electronic waste in India comprises toxic substances. If not disposed of properly, it can negatively affect humans and the environment. The current Solid Waste Management Act, 2016, focuses on processes of sustainable development, recycling, segregation of dry and wet waste at home, and incineration. The virtues of cleanliness and hygiene and public aesthetics are now equated with environmental concerns (Baviskar, 2018; Sharan, 2014). Scholars such as Gill (2010) and Doron and Jeffrey (2018) observe how, over a period of time, particularly in the post-colonial period, the materiality of discarded materials changed and how that shaped present-day waste economies. In colonial times, the British government restricted access to discarded objects. Doron and Jeffrey quote the Madras City Corporation Board,

‘all things deposited in the depots or place[s] provided or appointed ... shall be the property of corporation’ (2018, p. 133).

However, in post-colonial times, many capitalists and informal sector workers started seeing value in waste. Plastic entered the Indian economy in the 1960s and became all-pervasive in everyday life in the 1990s. Indian capitalists, traders, and recyclers were quick to realise its value and started setting up recycling industries. This then, as Gill argues (2010), also shaped the social relations around plastic recycling. A majority of the workers in the plastic recycling industry belong to the Khatik caste, which is an SC category. They are traditionally associated with pig breeding, butchery, and tanning, which, in the Indian context, have always been construed as dirty and stigmatised work. Gradually, they shifted to exporting human hair collected from pavement barbers but when that remained unsuccessful, they started engaging in work related to plastic. Working in the plastic recycling industry has provided them with a better sense of mobility as the work is less stigmatised and more technology-oriented. Earlier, around 1965, when the plastic market was in a nascent stage, much of the trade was dominated by the Khatik community. Today, the country generates 15,000 tonnes of plastic every day (Doshi, 2017). At present, 20 per cent of godown owners, 11 per cent of itinerant buyers, and 20 per cent of the plastic labourers are Khatiks. This is also the case with other materials such as glass and paper, albeit dependent upon market demands and fluctuations.

Following what is mentioned above, I show that just as the meanings of waste have changed and evolved over time, so have the waste management infrastructures. One of the central aims of the thesis is to examine the contemporary waste management infrastructures and how they are interconnected with materials, people, spaces, technologies, and the governance around them. Larkin defines infrastructures as ‘matter

that enable the movement of other matter. Infrastructure's peculiar ontology lies in the fact that they are things and also relations between things '(2013, p. 329). I aim to explore the meaning of things—in our case of waste and the various networks and relations that enable the flow of things. Bowker, Baker, Millerand & Ribes (2010) argue:

Infrastructure typically exists in the background, it is invisible, and it is frequently taken for granted (Star & Ruhleder, 1994). The work of infrastructure and its maintenance is itself often that of undervalued or invisible workers (Shapin, 1989; Star, 1991). (p. 98)

It is more so in the context of waste management infrastructure. The distinct feature of the flow of waste is that its movement is always outwards; it is an unwanted object. Whereas in the case of other infrastructural services such as electricity, water, and gas connection, they are the inflow resources that are required for everyday functioning. Moreover, in the Indian context, it is not just the outflow and disposability of materials but the social and cultural meaning—ritual pollution associated with those materials that shape the waste management infrastructures and the other actors engaged in managing the infrastructures. The ritualistic pollution is often conflated with physical pollution, subsequently invisibilising both the material and the infrastructure.

The invisibilisation of infrastructure, especially waste management infrastructure, often works in the favour of the governments. As Fredericks argues, 'urban infrastructures, including housing, water, waste, and transport, are not stable edifices of power or technologies of rule. They are key sites of performative government practice as well as claim making by elite and disenfranchised citizens alike '(2018, p. 14). They are 'central to the performance of liberalism '(Anand et al., 2018, p.4). Here the performance of liberalism is anchored around the hope and 'promise of infrastructure '(Anand et al.,

2018), which is that of clean, hygienic, and immaculate spaces. It is no surprise that all three landfills in Delhi are located on the periphery of the city and most of the waste workers, even though visible, are invisible by virtue of their caste, class, and work status.⁸ The invisibilisation of materials and infrastructures is often confused with the systematic disposal and maintenance of the urban order.

Furthermore, here the promise and performance are upheld through modern and technology-oriented machine-led infrastructure that feeds the political interest. For example, the present-day Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) (Clean India Campaign) lends itself credibility by projecting a modernistic approach to the cleanliness campaign and by upholding cleanliness, which is crucial to the sustainable development goals. The SBA is presented as a delivery service to realise the goals of a world-class city and the aspirations of bourgeois environmentalism. The deliberate depoliticisation of waste management services helps governments conceal the gruesome caste inequalities, the profit-oriented vested interest by bringing in private players, and the dysfunctional infrastructures—landfills, incineration facilities, and garbage collection services (See Chapters 3 and 4). However, as Anand et al. (2018) argue:

The material and political lives of infrastructure frequently undermine narratives of technological progress, liberal equality, and economic growth, revealing fragile and often violent relations between people, things, and the institutions that govern or provision them. This tension—between aspiration and failure, provision and abjection, and technical progress and its underbelly—makes infrastructure a

⁸ Robin Nagle (2013), in the context of New York's garbage collection services, demonstrates how workers wearing uniforms and performing the work of cleanliness are conveniently ignored on the streets of New York. She argues that the uniform is the source of invisibilisation. It is the visibility and nature of the work that the uniform reinforces, and subsequently furthers the invisibilisation.

productive location to examine the constitution, maintenance, and reproduction of political and economic life. (pp. 3–4)

In the thesis, I focus on various actors who sustain these infrastructures and hail mostly from marginalised backgrounds, apart from those who are engaged in recycling at the factory level (See Chapter 6). The marginality associated with the materials and labouring bodies lay bare the schism and socio-economic inequalities, discrimination, and stigma imbued with the work. A close examination of these communities also reveals the political potential they afford themselves and the various meanings they attach to waste and cleaning work, and, in the process, unmask the functioning of inadequate infrastructures.

‘Value Relations’

In this section, I aim to understand value at three levels interconnected with one another—materials, work, and social relations. Waste, as mentioned earlier, is often defined as a matter without value. However, waste cannot be understood in simplistic terms as the negative other of value. Rather, it has a dialectical relationship with value—wherein it entails both negative and positive aspects (Gidwani, 2013). It cannot be defined in monolithic terms and is continuously in the process of becoming and unbecoming (Alexandra, 2016). Following this, I seek to understand waste-value relations both in economic and social terms. Gidwani (2013) argues that

... waste can be regarded as the specter that haunts the modern notion of ‘value,’ which itself operates in two entangled registers: first, ‘value’ as the economic coding and logic of wealth in capitalist society (Spivak 1999, 79)—taken up in different but historically related ways by classical political economy, Marxist

political economy, and neoclassical economics; second, ‘value’ as a normative or moral template for conduct—to not waste, to make full or best use of, etc. (p. 174)

He substantiates the understanding of waste in economic terms, where it is continuously slipping the register of value and devaluation. However, my work is also an attempt to examine the social relations that are reproduced among waste workers at different levels and how that is connected to the value of discarded objects. To quote Turner (2008):

Value is the form in which such media represents what Marx called the ‘value relation’, or the distribution of the total social labour in different proportions to the production of different commodities and sector of production, in ways that ultimately lead to the distribution of the values produced in different proportions to different groups or classes of society. (p. 54)

He substantiates this argument by giving examples of bureaucrats and domestic labourers, who are not seen as ‘productive’ labour but rather as reproductive labour. He argues that this is the function of ‘representation of value’ (p.50), of what counts as productive and what does not. Following Turner’s understanding of value, I look at how the lives of waste workers positioned at different levels (sanitation workers, waste pickers, and recyclers) are valued differently depending upon the nature of materials they are dealing with and the value attributed to those materials. The value transformation of these materials and subsequently of human lives (social relations) is contingent upon the relations of production of the time.

Transposing this concept of value on waste workers—specifically sanitation workers, both in colonial and post-colonial times—we see why sanitation (sweeping of streets) has always been understood as reproductive work. The act of sweeping ‘dirt’ and ‘discarded’ objects does not directly involve value production leading to capital

accumulation. Whereas, in the case of waste pickers and recyclers, the economy of recycling—collecting, sorting, segregating, transporting, and recycling—directly involves the act of value production. Thus, based on Turner’s understanding of value, it can be argued ‘that production of value is simultaneously a process of producing the social system of production’ (Elson, 1979, p. 124).

Turner further argues:

Marx’s approach emphasized that the media of representation of value tend to become objects of accumulation in their own right and thereby promote the development of forms of social consciousness based on the alienation of subjective awareness of the real source of value in human (social) productivity (2008, p. 54).

This brings me to the third aspect of waste and value—in what ways do waste workers value their work and themselves? This understandably is a very subjective disposition. Marx and Engels (1998) argue that the production of value involves a whole range of social activities and subsequently producing and reproducing social relations and social and political consciousness. If one compares the everyday lives of sanitation workers and informal waste pickers, both communities of workers inhabit very different life-worlds and social relations. Even though both forms of work are broadly bracketed within the same category, over time the nature of materials, the economy of discarded materials, and the community of waste workers have changed, and so have social relations. The way different communities of workers value their work varies. While this can partly be attributed to their different caste backgrounds, as explained in the previous section on caste, it is also linked to how their work is perceived in terms of its social and economic value. Graeber (2013) succinctly brings together the economic and social aspect of value:

... the fact that we use the same word to describe the benefits and virtues of a commodity for sale on the market (the ‘value’ of a haircut or a curtain rod) and our ideas about what is ultimately important in life (‘values’ such as truth, beauty, justice), is not a coincidence. There is some hidden level where both come down to the same thing. (p. 224)

Thus, even though both waste picking and sweeping entail stigma and untouchability (Harriss-White, 2020; Rodrigues, 2009; Prashad, 2000), the act of waste picking and recycling is materially valued while sweeping is not. This understanding of how their work is valued puts both communities in different positions.

Based on an ethnography of sanitation workers across different parts of Delhi and waste pickers in and around the Bhalswa landfill in the city, I argue that both the communities of workers (not caste communities) have different value systems and social relations. Sanitation workers, as iterated earlier, seek to dissociate themselves from this work and actively participate in political struggles in the form of Ambedkar Jayanti, Valmiki Jayanti, unionisation, and so on. Even though they value their lives, they detest the work they perform.

On the other hand, waste pickers, who are forced to enter the world of waste picking due to unemployment, see value in waste. The monetary value that the work offers keeps many of them going. Waste picking around landfills and residential areas entails vastly different social relations because of multiple factors, such as the informal nature of work, the relationship formed with discarded materials, and living in close proximity to the landfill.

I, thus, analyse identities beyond their bounded notions and examine how different spaces lead to distinctive social practices and social relations, which subsequently lead to

diverse value systems. In fact, a particular space can constitute multiple value systems and social relations.

Space and Identities

In this section, I examine how identities are shaped by urban spaces, albeit not restricted by them. I follow Hall's understanding of social identity, where he argues:

Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. (2015, p. 392)

Identities are in a constant state of flux, always in the process of becoming. In addition, new spaces lead to distinct forms of cultural and social productions. Since my work maps waste work across different spaces (sanitation workers' colonies and areas surrounding landfills), castes, and religious communities, it is crucial to look at the intersection between space and identity. The intersection between space, identity, and work not only produces distinct social relations but also shows how identities are fluid and can take different forms.

Workers from the Balmiki community inhabit very different life-worlds, political subjectivities, and value structures than those of waste workers around the landfill. Their political subjectivity is often informed by an attempt to distance themselves from waste work. Waste workers around the landfill, on the other hand, actively engage in waste picking. By bringing together the two different spaces of waste work, I attempt to examine the complexities within the world of waste work in different spaces. Henry Lefebvre argued that space is a cultural phenomenon (1991). In the Indian context, Guru (2012) has claimed,

Structuring and restructuring of a given space is the result of a specific action carried out by a historically dominant social group, which achieves its hegemonic purpose through a regulated exercise of civilizational violence against those social group that are victims of this kind of violence (p. 82).

Moreover, ‘bodies are turned into cultural space that the Brahminical system could rule over could write on, and could regulate this rule’ (Guru, 2012, p. 86).⁹

In the thesis, Balmiki colonies and landfill sites emerge as a result of Brahminical domination but also of capitalism and subsequent urbanisation. To quote Mirza (2022, n.p), ‘systems of capitalism and urbanization conflate practices that define caste and religion through stigmatized labour and spatial segregation’. Yet both spaces offer starkly different attitudes towards waste work. These attitudes are determined not just by the cultural formation of these spaces but also by the changing political-economic processes. Growing unemployment in cities and the proliferation of waste economies have pushed many individuals into the field of waste work. The entry of OBC communities into waste work shows us that neither the work nor the stigma and practices of untouchability associated with the work are strictly reserved for the SC communities. Gidwani (2019) argues that ‘caste frequently gets a new lease on life in cities by virtue of the matter workers are compelled to handle. The contemporary city propelled by its “world-class” imaginary produces new relations of untouchability and exclusion’ (p. 156). This further helps us in understanding that ‘[t]ime-space is “lived” in vastly different ways by different bodies with profound implications for their survival and re-production’ (p. 159).

⁹ Nandini Gooptu, in ‘The Politics of Urban Poor in Early Twentieth-Century India’, discusses how the urban territorial growth of Uttar Pradesh in the late 19th century fostered job opportunities for lower-caste communities. However, their migration from rural to urban areas did not reverse the ‘segregation and exclusion of untouchables’ (Gooptu, 2001, p. 146). It further rigidified caste boundaries.

Lee (2017) examines the interconnections between space and odour in specific sanitation workers' (Chuhra) colonies in Uttar Pradesh. He argues that spaces are bounded by ideologies and there is a distinctness that every space offers, and that distinctness in this particular case can be traced through smell. However, today, as waste economies are burgeoning across different spaces in the city, the experiences of foul smell, stigma, and untouchability are extended beyond the bounded spaces of SC communities.

In Chapters 3 and 5 of this thesis, I examine the labour processes and political subjectivities of sanitation workers and waste workers and how they often stand at odds with each other. In Balmiki colonies, workers want to overthrow the yoke of defiled work not only because of the nature of work but also because of the rising consciousness against age-old caste-sanctioned occupations. They participate in Valmiki Jayanti and Ambedkar Jayanti to assert their identity and liberate themselves from the burden of purity and pollution that they have borne for decades. At the landfill site, I came across many workers who actively wanted to engage in waste work, saw value in the work, and were looking forward to opening their scrap stores. For many, waste work afforded a flexible rhythm of life; they could be their own boss and go to work according to their own timings. However, there were many who did not see any meaning in this precarious work and wanted to escape it to lead a 'respectable' life. Such contradictions help reveal how urban spaces are linked to 'specific identities, functions, lifestyles, and properties' and yet exist within a 'multiplicity of connotations' that makes it 'always possible to do something different in and with the city than is specified by these domains of power' (Simone, 2004, p. 409).

Thus, in part, the thesis explores how different spaces, positionalities, historical contexts, and changes in the nature of work shape the different ways in which waste workers approach their work.

Chapterisation

The thesis is organised into empirical four chapters that investigate how transformations in modes of technology and governance within waste regimes and materiality have led to changes in the social composition of the communities associated with waste work across the circular waste economy. It examines these transformations vis-à-vis caste communities, labour, and waste work. The different spaces and communities that waste workers inhabit offer insights into varied historical backgrounds, social hierarchies, and experiences. This helps us understand the varied perceptions of waste work and waste materials among these communities and the social and political implications of the work.

Chapter 3 is divided into two parts. In the first part, I analyse the social and political implications of the SBA or Clean India Campaign. I examine the not-so-inevitable contradictions between private waste management services and waste crisis—that of waste workers, cleaning, and waste management infrastructure. In the process of examining failures and expectations from the SBA, I unpack various aspects such as the privatisation and informalisation of waste workers, the invisibilisation of caste questions, and the technologising of the waste crisis.

In the second part of the chapter, I examine the life-world of sanitation workers (Balmiki community) in Delhi and the ongoing privatisation of waste management services in the city. The Balmiki community, as suggested before, has a long and complex history with waste work (Prashad, 2000). Many of them migrated to Delhi in the pre-

independence era, whereas others, following the path of their ancestors, patronage, and kinship relations, migrated in the post-independence era and settled in various parts of the city such as Sau Quarter, Valmiki Colony, Mongolpuri, and so on. Most of the respondents of this study are employed as *safai karamcharis* by the MCD. While the removal of human excreta by hand is no longer prevalent in the city, some of the elderly employees recalled performing this task till as late as the 1960s.¹⁰ Today, their work is mostly limited to sweeping streets and cleaning drains. The community has been systematically forced into this work because of prevailing casteism and the lack of economic opportunities (Shankar & Swaroop, 2021). The existing caste-based order of our society and the stigma attached to waste work has ensured that the community continues to face social discrimination. The historical and primordial association of the Balmiki community with waste work has led to a very wounding experience for the community.

The practice of untouchability is so visceral to the community that many of them have often reflected upon it and have remarked, ‘Are we the real untouchables or them? We clean their dirt, and dirt lies in them’. Here, ‘them’ refers to the upper-caste people. These powerful realisations and their positioning within the waste management infrastructure have often led to alternate forms of politics in terms of unionisation, Ambedkarite movements, and following different religious practices. Therefore, in this chapter, I examine the ways in which members of the Balmiki community conceive their own social and spatial positioning vis-à-vis the upper-caste communities and the institutionalised discrimination meted out to them in the form of untouchability practices,

¹⁰ This is not to deny the prevalence of manual scavenging in the country. It has been officially banned under the Act of 2013: The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act. However, the practice continues across villages and towns in different forms (Shankar & Swaroop, 2021).

stigmatisation, or the recent privatisation and informalisation of waste management services in Delhi.

Chapter 4 engages with the development of colonial and post-independence waste management infrastructure in the city. In particular, I examine the socio-spatial history of the Bhalswa landfill, situated at the far end of the northwestern part of the city. This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part of the chapter examines how technology, governance, and meanings associated with waste change over time and how that shapes the socio-technological infrastructure of waste management. The change in the materiality of discarded materials has significantly transformed the present-day waste management infrastructure. The second part of the chapter examines how the space of Bhalswa Dairy holds multiple contradictions in terms of socio-economic composition, wherein people from various caste and class backgrounds co-exist, giving a distinctive characteristic to the neighbourhood. The chapter sheds light on how marginalised urban neighbourhoods are shaped and how their development is based on multiple complex processes.

In Chapter 5, I focus on the labour processes and life histories of waste workers settled in and around the Bhalswa landfill—Qalandar Colony, Kabaadi Gali, and Bangaali Basti. I explore how different communities (nomadic communities, Bengali Muslims, and Hindu OBCs) residing in these colonies, who were traditionally not associated with waste work, have organised themselves around waste economies and how their lives and social identities (particularly in the case of Qalandars and Masets—both nomadic communities) have been shaped by the experiences of waste work. I focus on how inter-community

relationships¹¹ have been shaped, particularly their experience of facing discrimination and stigma within their neighbourhoods and in the outside world. The Bhalswa landfill site offers a particularly insightful illustration of how different communities performing similar waste work in close proximity and continue to have diverse socio-economic experiences. The diverse experiences help us understand the multiple socials¹² that waste workers inhabit and how this shapes their life-world and the ways in which they ‘value’ themselves and their work.

In the aforementioned chapters, I focus on space, identities, and experiences of waste workers. In Chapter 6, I shift the lens to materials and how materials acquire a new lease of life via various stages of waste processing: collecting, sorting, segregating, trading, and recycling. At every stage, materials are valued differently by waste workers, positioned across the hierarchies of the value chain of waste economies. Thus, in this chapter, I explore how materials re-enter the value chain and what processes are at play in determining the value of these materials. I examine the flow of waste materials from the informal to the formal economy, the infrastructure of waste economies, and the politics of recycling (specifically plastic). By focusing on scrap dealers, traders, and recyclers, I study how materials flow across the infrastructure of waste economies and how their economic value fluctuates according to changing plastic waste management rules.

¹¹ Here, the inter-community relationships refer to the sociocultural background, caste, and gender-based communities.

¹² Guru and Sarukkai (2019) refer to the term social as an ‘analysis of society or aggregation’ located in space and time, where multiple everyday experiences lead to the formation of new socials and it is also understood as a ‘framework of relationships within which people relate to each other based on commonly accepted norms’ (p. 37).

Chapter 2

Methodology: From Entry into the Field to Its Interpretation

Context

This chapter is an attempt to engage with questions of ‘how’ and ‘why’ I chose to deploy specific methods to explore my field and then understand and analyse the narratives I gathered. The thesis topic is a direct outcome of my MPhil fieldwork. In my MPhil thesis, I primarily focused on the politics of the urban poor in Delhi, wherein I examined the everyday struggles of domestic workers and street vendors in the city. While I was conducting the fieldwork, one of my interlocutors, Shashi Bhushan,¹³ questioned: Why do left organisations not engage with waste pickers and their living conditions? He asked me: ‘Is their work not really work for the left?’ While I did not have any answer to his question, his question stayed with me. I started observing waste pickers and landfills (from afar) in my daily life and that is where the journey of understanding the world of waste started. The precarious work conditions of waste pickers were very distinct from

¹³ Shashi, who currently works with the Dalit Adivasi Shakti Adhikar Manch (DASAM) and is a member of the All India Kabadi Mazdoor Mahasangh (AIKMM), has been very crucial for my work. Not only did he advise me to pursue research in the field of waste studies but was a very vital contact in helping me gain access and be introduced to waste workers, scrap dealers, and sanitation workers. Moreover, as someone who has delved deeply in the field for decades now, he helped me clear my doubts at every level—whether they pertained to scrap processing, understanding different types of materials (plastic, paper, and metals), or whether they were related to complex caste structures.

other workers in the informal economy, such as domestic workers, rickshaw pullers, security guards, and so on. However, one of the most crucial aspects of this study came from observing the movement of discarded materials from households to garbage collectors to landfills or scrap dealers. Noticing who (which community of workers) is picking up what kind of materials helped significantly shape my work. Central to this thesis is the idea of unravelling the waste crisis at multiple levels and studying the quiddity of discarded material in different spatial geographies and how that relates to the lives of waste workers across varied caste communities. This is the reason my research is based on multiple sites in the city—Balmiki colonies, the Bhalswa landfill, and various recycling units in the north-west part of the city.

This chapter deals with three primary aspects of research methodology. First, the justification and explanation of research methods and processes deployed. Second, the interpretation of narratives and materials gathered from the field and their representation in writing (Burawoy, 1998; Rabinow, 1986; Jenkin, 1994; Geertz, 1973). Third, understanding the power dynamics between the researcher and the interviewee—concerning the question of positionality and reflexivity (Jenkin, 1994).

The fieldwork was conducted over a span of two years in Delhi. The first phase of the fieldwork was carried out from August 2019 to early March 2020, after which the pandemic hit and disrupted the ongoing work. However, since I had already completed a large part of the fieldwork, my field research was not significantly affected by the pandemic. Rather, the pandemic reshaped my work in a different way. The interviews (based on telephonic conversations) during COVID (from March 2020–August 2021) were not only follow-up interviews but were considerably influenced by the prevailing socio-economic conditions. Thus, effectively, fieldwork was carried out for about one and a half years, although not necessarily in the way I had originally imagined it. During

COVID, neither the waste workers nor I had the luxury to converse in the way one would have liked. The COVID-led circumstances pre-dominantly shaped most of the conversations.¹⁴

Much of the fieldwork is based on a ‘bottom-up’ approach, wherein I observe the life-world and experiences of waste workers across waste economies. However, in parts, the fieldwork also involved conducting elite interviews (municipal engineers and administrators), going through archival documents and newspaper clippings, and observing my own locality on a quotidian basis. In order to understand the built infrastructure around the landfill, the ongoing Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) and policies on waste management in the city, and observe how middle-class residents react to the presence of waste workers in their immediate vicinity, it was important to study the ‘field’ using multiple methods rather than restrict oneself to a particular method and site. In this sense, the work is, as Gupta and Ferguson argue, ‘the interlocking of multiple social-political sites and locations’ (1997, p. 37).

Research Methods

The fieldwork was primarily conducted using ethnographic methods and semi-structured interviews.¹⁵ Ethnography here is understood as

... actively situated between powerful systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders.

Ethnography decodes and recodes, telling the grounds of collective order and

¹⁴ This is not to say that socio-economic circumstances do not shape the conversations otherwise. However, in the case of COVID, as has been evidenced by many activists and scholars (Mander, 2022), the basic act of surviving became a challenge—especially for those who work in the informal sector of the economy.

¹⁵ In order to protect the identity of my interviewees, all the names in the thesis have been pseudonymised.

diversity, inclusion and exclusion. It describes processes of innovation and structuration, and is itself part of these processes. (Clifford, 1986, p. 3)

Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, the fieldwork was conducted at multiple sites. Multi-sited ethnography, Marcus argues, is ‘contextualized by macro-constructions of a larger social order, such as the capitalist world system, to multiple sites of observation and participation that cross-cut dichotomies such as the “local” and the “global”, the “lifeworld” and the “system” ’ (1995, p. 95). He further states that ‘this mobile ethnography takes unexpected trajectories in tracing a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity that destabilizes the distinction, for example, between lifeworld and system, by which ethnography has been conceived’ (1995, p. 96). In this work, multi-sited ethnography was not a planned *modus operandi*. I had initially planned to conduct ethnographic research around the Bhalswa landfill only, however, as the fieldwork progressed, I decided to extend my research to two more sites. In the beginning, this research aimed to understand the socio-spatial history of the Bhalswa landfill and to examine the everyday lives of waste workers and how they relate to their built environment, neighbours, fellow waste workers and scrap dealers, and materials. Examining the complexity of their social and physical world required conversing with them every day. For example, understanding what a regular day looks like in the life of a waste picker could not have been grasped only through interviews. For this, I climbed up the landfill and followed their routes (waste picking routes) to familiarise myself with their work processes. Such intricate relationships could not have been understood on the basis of structured or semi-structured interviews (see the section on research processes). I had to first cultivate friendships with my respondents for them to open up to me. Walking around with a questionnaire intimidated most of the respondents and they tended to perceive me as a government agent surveilling the neighbourhood.

As I walked around the Bhalswa Dairy area and spoke to people, I realised the area encompassed multiple social and physical spaces. Some spaces were dominated by milch-cattle dairy owners, some by nomadic communities and other waste-picker communities, and others were occupied by scrapyards owners. Every space within the locality had its own history and distinct sociality, which helped me explore various aspects of waste geographies. As I started conducting interviews, I found myself moving from site to site, following and observing the cues I got from my field—what Anna Tsing calls the ‘Art of Noticing’ (2015). For example, when I spoke to the milch-cattle dairy owners, I realised how the area was partially an outcome of colonial processes and resettlement projects during the Emergency¹⁶, which prompted me to conduct archival work to understand the history of the area. Similarly, as I spoke to waste pickers and scrap dealers, I was informed about the journey of scrap materials and the recycling units in Delhi, located in Narela and Bawana. All these interactions informed different aspects of my fieldwork. Thus, following the trajectory of both materials and people, I decided to expand the scope of my research to three sites. Even though the three sites are related to each other in terms of economic, caste, and urban transformations, they offer very distinct perspectives in terms of experiences, cultural formations, the social life of the materials, and labour processes.

In order to fully grasp the socio-spatial relations around the landfill, it was necessary to understand the historical context of the area. Since my ethnographic research provided multiple and often contradictory narratives about the making of the landfill, I had to rely on archival sources to validate my respondents’ narratives. The bureaucrats

¹⁶ On 25 June, 1975, Indira Gandhi—the then Prime Minister of India, imposed national emergency in the country on the grounds of ‘internal disturbance’. The orders were officially issued by President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, under article 352, and stayed in effect till March 21, 1977. The imposition was marked by suspension of civil liberties, human rights violence and censorship of press.

working in north-west Delhi stated that the landfill was formed in 1991. Whereas local people in the area, mostly cattle-dairy owners and nomadic communities, informed me that in the late 1970s and early 1980s, they came across iron and steel objects and railroad tracks around the present landfill site, suggesting that there was a dumpsite in the area prior to their settlement. It is these conversations that directed me to examine the colonial history of the landfill site. Much of the archival research in the thesis is based on the Delhi State Archives (DSA)¹⁷. As the DSA archives are mostly digitised, the archival research was conducted online. Moreover, the existing scholarly work on the history of Delhi sanitary infrastructure—like Vijay Prashad’s (2000) *Untouchable Freedom* and Awadhendra Sharan’s (2014) work mapping Delhi’s environmental issues such as pollution, nuisance and water flows, from 1850-2000—helped me locate the relevant files and situate archival documents in the wider historical context (Tosh, 2015; Appleby, 1998). Furthermore, the archival documents in conjunction with existing literature helped me understand the colonial and present-day rationale behind constructing the landfill in a peripheral area (see Chapter 4) and how that influences contemporary social relations and waste economies. I followed the commonly used approach of ‘reading against the grain’ (Stoler, 2009) to interpret the archival documents. As Stoler argues, reading against the grain helps researchers understand and read documents in a critical fashion and not interpret them as static with a pre-given meaning. I read the archival documents, mostly correspondences between colonial bureaucrats, in the context of ‘uneven’ urban development of cities across India (Chandavarkar, 2009; McFarlane, 2008; Oldenburg, 2014) and Delhi in particular (Legg, 2006; Prashad 2000; Sharan 2004; Gupta 1981). Largely, the archival research sought to verify and advance the claim about the making of

¹⁷ All the full forms of abbreviations from the DSA archives are mentioned in the list of abbreviations.

the landfill in present-day times and to understand how our past has a bearing on our present.

Interpretation of Narratives

A crucial methodological aspect of ethnographic work and participant observation is to understand the extent to which a study is objective in terms of the claims it makes. If ethnography is purely a subjective domain as argued by Geertz, ‘ethnographic truths are thus inherently partial—committed and incomplete’ (1986, p. 7), or, as put forth by Jenkins ‘that there cannot be any objective study of the field or “objective uninvolved knowledge” because we as researchers enter the field with our own subjective dispositions’. A pertinent question then arises: How does one move towards a conclusive argument? This methodological exercise is in part an acceptance of the fact that I used narratives selectively and one could even argue that my engagements with the conversations were also selective; what I chose to hear and see, whether consciously or unconsciously, could also be partial. These interactions together come to define how I construct a narrative—which has largely been a subjective approach. As Hammersley and Atkinson argue, if

[W]e interpret ethnography as a process of constructing accounts of the world, then we must acknowledge that, at least in some ways, what it produces will reflect the cultural background and the interpretive work of the ethnographer, as much as the character of the phenomena being studied. (2019, p. 243)

For example, I started my research with the assumption that waste matters are materials that get disposed of at a dump yard or a landfill. I did not focus on the matter cleaned by

sanitation workers, which is dust. Instead, a subjective understanding of what qualifies as waste informed my initial research process.

Next, I show how narratives and their construction into an argument were also shaped by the existing body of literature and academic frameworks. The narratives help us gain insights, which otherwise might not be given significant consideration. Simultaneously, as a researcher, one deploys analytical frameworks that help analyse the material available. In this context, Burawoy (1998) argues:

Reflexive science sets out from a dialogue between us and them, between social scientists and the people we study. It does not spring from an Archimedean point outside space and time. It does not create knowledge theory or tabula rasa. It starts from a stock of academic theory on the one side and existent folk theory or indigenous narratives on the other. Both sides begin their interaction from real locations. (p. 7)

Following Burawoy's argument, I situate the micro-ethnographic narratives within wider analytical literature on caste and value. Even though this work is a micro-ethnography of multiple waste sites in Delhi, it aims to understand the dialectical relation between the macro- and micro-understanding of the waste crisis in the city. There is an underlying assumption in the thesis that the scale of the waste crisis we face today is a direct outcome of the capitalist mode of production and the subsequent ever-increasing consumerism (Harriss-White, 2020; Gidwani, 2016; Gregson & Crang, 2010; Moore, 2011). Within this broader continuum, I examine the lives of waste workers and their emerging social relations, the failure of the waste management infrastructure, processes of privatisation, and the circular waste economy of recycling. These micro-insights into the waste crisis and the subjectivities of waste workers may not be relevant in a different

context or a region; however, they help us understand the idiosyncrasies of the waste crisis in the city and provide a lens to understand the complex social relations and hierarchies that emerge in the process. Following the ethnographic works of various scholars in the field of discard studies (Reno, 2015; Miller, 2018; Fredericks, 2018; Nagle, 2013; Harriss-White, 2020; Kornberg, 2019b), these micro-insights help us understand different forms of the waste crisis and the complexities they entail.

Lastly, narratives are discussed and analysed to understand the various ways in which waste workers value or devalue their work and life-world, and mitigate the stigma and discrimination associated with the work. I often use anecdotes to delve into the life-world of waste workers and to understand their imagination and experiences, which often transcend the existing theoretical framework. To quote Guru, '[I]t is the social nature of experience that anticipates subversive theory and transformative politics' (2012, p. 121). For example, Sanchez (2020) in his scholarship on scrapyards in Jamshedpur, Jharkhand, India, shows how one of his interviewees (named Dipesh), who was employed in the scrapyard, had a very distinct approach towards his work—which albeit came with experience. He observes, '[A]lthough employment in the scrap plastic industry had not paid well, he [Dipesh] enjoyed the work because the trade was complex and took many years to master' (Sanchez, 2020, p. 88). Through Dipesh's story and two others, Sanchez uses the framework of transformative human action¹⁸ as an analytical lens to re-examine the idea of satisfaction and valuing one's work in the context of the waste economy—which he argues is usually socially undervalued. Similarly, through the interpretation of narratives (Geertz, 1973) and wider theoretical literature on urbanisation, space, waste-value dialectics, and discrimination, I am able to offer analytical insights into how waste

¹⁸ Here, the act of engaging with scrap materials and reassembling them into something else or disassembling the metal objects is considered as transformative human action (For more details, see Sanchez, 2020).

workers and sanitation workers experience space, social relations, materials, and their built environment, and how and why these experiences vary in different contexts.

Research Processes

This work is based on a multi-sited and multiple methods (ethnography and qualitative interview methods) approach; however, the primary approach is ethnographic—especially around the landfill area and neighbourhoods, and the scrap yards. My conversations with sanitation workers were carried out in the form of semi-structured interviews, and, at times, informally by spending time with them during their lunch breaks. Elite interviews with municipal officials, traders in recycling units, and the employees of waste management companies were based on structured questionnaires.

It is vital to note here that some neighbourhoods, owing to their social and political conditions, allow one to do ethnographic work while others do not. The sense of collective solidarity and political consciousness in sweepers' colonies in Delhi did not make it very feasible for me to do ethnographic work in these colonies. Most of the community members had a very strong sense of the 'outsider's' gaze or to put it bluntly, the gaze of an upper-caste person who has come to 'observe' them. Unlike my interviewees around the landfill neighbourhood, who were reserved and suspicious in the beginning but opened up later, here it was a conscious decision to not talk to an outsider. Their decades and years of struggle with the successive governments and society at large (see Chapter 3) have been to gain their rights and make a place for themselves in the city and not to be anyone's subject.

Thus, my interviews with sanitation workers and the retired members of the community were mostly targeted interviews. In most cases, my interlocutor, Rakesh, had to go and convince the prospective interviewees and give them a background about me and my research; then they would decide whether they wanted to interact with me or not. However, since my interviews were targeted and interviewees understood the purpose of my research, it was easier to engage in substantive and thick discussions, which were otherwise rare for me in the ethnographic setting. In most cases, I had to ask just one or two questions and then my interviewees spontaneously started narrating their life histories, their experiences with the successive governments, the historic importance of their colony, and their views on the SBA, Gandhi, Ambedkar, and so on.

The interviews with sanitation workers and even with their senior employees, such as assistant sanitary inspectors (ASI), were significantly different from others because they were brimming with suppressed emotions and narratives of systematic exploitation by society and the state. They very often used words such as *ghrina* (revulsion), *chua-chaat* (untouchability), and *jaativaad* (casteism) to describe their social conditions. Once I would start talking to them, there would be no stopping. One of my interviewees said, ‘Madam, you ask questions, we are ready to answer. We are full of anger and there is a lot for us to vent out’. Their anger and frustration were not merely about exploitative working conditions but how they have been systematically kept at the margins of society. This was a narrative common to all the interviewees who worked as sanitation workers. These substantive interviews were vital to navigating and understanding multiple aspects of their life-world and how the community workers understood discrimination and in what forms, be it around their neighbourhood or workplace. Some of the deep insights I gained about the sweepers’ community were from Rakesh’s narratives and his everyday life. Inadvertently, he also became the ‘subject’ of

my study. He accompanied me not only to various Balmiki (sweeper) colonies but also to his own colony (towards the north-west part of the city). I could not help but observe his behaviour with his fellow neighbours and immediate family. Although he always stood in solidarity with fellow community members, primarily Dalits, the kind of remarks he made about ‘uneducated’ members of the community were not in consonance with his politics (see Chapter 3). Such remarks helped me understand the nature of contradiction in his ideas and everyday life. Interestingly, unlike in other settings, I was allowed to record the conversations with sanitation workers. Many of them said, ‘We openly protest, madam. We are not scared of anyone’. Even though their working conditions remain precarious, I believe their sense of solidarity, collective struggles, and years of oppression have given them the confidence to express themselves in an uninhibited manner.

In the case of the landfill and scrapyards, I carried out ethnographic research from August 2019 to December 2019 and then from late January 2020 to early March 2020. The ensuing conversations were further followed up via telephonic interviews and my intermittent visits to the area because of relief work during the pandemic. The life-world of waste pickers, that too from varying communities, was completely different from that of the sanitation workers. If I had asked them a set of semi-structured questions, they would have probably been intimidated by my presence and questions and I may not have had many answers. At the beginning of my fieldwork, as an inexperienced researcher, I asked them very structured and direct questions, to which I did not get any clear answers. Most people, particularly young people, were displeased with my presence. It is only after frequent visits to the area that people started trusting me and started telling me their stories. However, even then, most of the questions I had in mind as part of my research project could not be answered in the form of questions and answers. It was mostly

through our conversations on a daily basis that I could flesh out the narratives and understand what they meant for my research.

Sometimes, I gathered important insights through ‘accidental’ conversations. For example, when I was trying to find the houses of Qalandar and Maset waste pickers and I met a young boy in the neighbourhood (from a Muslim family) and asked him about the houses of waste pickers, he replied, ‘I do not talk to such dirty people’. After that, his mother accompanied me to their house and started narrating her perception of the Masets and Qalandars. She had a very discriminatory attitude towards these communities, more so because they claimed to be Muslims.¹⁹ These conversations were a matter of ‘accident’, which may inadvertently take place in an ethnographic setting. Such conversations help us understand how everyday forms of discrimination and stigmatisation take place, which otherwise is difficult to map in the form of an interview—especially among waste pickers. Although waste picking might come across as a homogenous act, however, looking at it closely, one will realise that the physicality and sociality of the act of picking up waste from a landfill site, collecting it from streets, or from residential areas vary significantly. Those who picked up waste from residential areas had very jarring narratives of discrimination at the behest of colony residents. Whereas those working at the landfill site did not face any outright discrimination; it took on subtler forms.

Their stories of experiencing discrimination came not so much from their own experiences as from that of their neighbours who were involved in other informal sector jobs and were cattle dairy owners—they did not see waste work as respectable work. Thus, several narratives of discrimination, which I elaborate upon in Chapter 5, came out

¹⁹ I explain these discriminatory attitudes in Chapter 5 of the thesis.

during the ethnographic study and through participant observation. Much of this work also involved closely examining the behaviours of residents in my own colony and my household members because the discrimination is institutionalised and systematic. I would sometimes get up sharp at 8:00 a.m. to observe the conversations and attitudes of my colony residents towards garbage collectors.²⁰ I did not actively engage in any conversation with my neighbours but sometimes when I spoke to garbage collectors in my colony, my neighbours looked at me in questionable ways. The very idea of a colony resident speaking to a garbage collector was very unusual and strange to them. These processes together shaped the way I examined forms of discrimination, stigmatisation, and the life-worlds of waste pickers around the landfill.

The interviews with municipal engineers, ex-engineers, employees of waste management companies, and factory dealers (recyclers) were focused and structured. Especially with engineers and factory dealers, there was no scope for unstructured interviews. At every juncture, the factory dealers questioned me about the use of my work and asked how this kind of study is of any help to society. Most of the traders I interviewed were of the same caste as me, which eased my access. However, our similar caste affiliation did not make the interviews any easier. There was a strict no-recording policy and they were very guarded about their business tactics and their frustration with the government over the ban on plastic recycling (see Chapter 6). Municipal engineers, on the other hand, were very uncomfortable with sharing information because of the fear of it being disclosed to media houses. In the last four years (from 2018-2022), as mentioned in the 'Introduction', landfills in Delhi have been the site of controversies, and hence the municipal engineers were very cautious about information getting leaked. Moreover, it was very surprising for them that a social science student was interested in waste

²⁰ Garbage collectors usually frequent my neighbourhood around 8:00 a.m.

management practices and they wondered what I would infer from their answers. On one occasion, I asked a senior municipal official about access to the municipal archives to research the history of the Bhalswa landfill. I was told there are no municipal archives and if I had done a thorough Google search, I probably would not need to look for the archives. Thus, on several occasions, the questions I asked were not taken seriously by on-site engineers and municipal officials.

Positionality

The purpose of writing this section is to engage with the question of positionality at two levels. First, it is partly an acceptance of my privileged identity—an upper-caste- and upper-class Hindu; it is simultaneously an engagement with multiple aspects of my identity/being and how they play out differently in different contexts. Second, it is an attempt to explicate how I analyse the experiences I have witnessed as an ‘outsider’ to the field while also simultaneously being a part of those experiences (by virtue of being part of their conversations). In the second part of this section, I critically examine the standpoint of ‘lived experience’ and claims to authenticity.

In today’s world, the question of identity has become imperative for understanding the relationship between a researcher and their interviewees. Our caste, class, gender, regional, and religious identity shape our interactions with people around us. In the context of this work, there are inevitably multiple power equations between me and my interviewees or my ethnographic ‘subjects’. However, these equations changed depending on my site of work. Most of the fieldwork was conducted among lower-caste communities, yet the nature of interaction changed with every community and was

shaped by the gender of the participants. In addition to this, I conducted some elite interviews with municipal officials and businessmen, where the power dynamics were very different. These varying power dynamics are indicative of the multiple power equations I had with my interviewees and that my own identity cannot be fixed within any one particular category. Stuart Hall (1997) in one of his interviews on culture and power argues:

Identity is not fixed, but it's not nothing either. The task is how to think the fact that identities are important to us, and register some continuities along a spectrum, but we're never just what we were. I think of identity in terms of positionality. Identity is, for me, the point of suture between the social and the psychic. Identity is the sum of the (temporary) positions offered by a social discourse in which you are willing for the moment to invest. It is where the psyche is able to invest in a public space, to locate itself in a public discourse, and from there, act and speak. (Hall et al., 1997, n.p.)

I follow Hall's understanding of positionality in explicating my own experiences and how I understood my positionality vis-à-vis my interviewees and interlocutors. I explain this in three parts—landfill sites, Balmiki *bastis*, and scrap dealers. Given the distinct nature of all four sites, it is inevitable that the nature of the interactions was very different and so were the power hierarchies. In so doing, I show that the aim is not to transcend my own positionality and become an 'objective' researcher but rather to pay attention to the nature of my own interactions with the respondents to make sense of their life-worlds.

My first entry point for this research was the landfill site. It was evident and understandable that my presence in the area was perceived to be slightly odd. As an upper caste, upper class, and female researcher, I was seen as 'out of place'. I was time and

again ‘warned’ by autorickshaw drivers not to venture into the area because many young adults were usually high on drugs and might engage in ‘unruly’ behaviour. After two to three months into the fieldwork, I was again warned by municipal engineers that I should not be walking alone in this area late in the evenings. According to them, there are high chances of theft (usually mobile phones and wallets) and as a lone female researcher, I might be at risk of sexual harassment. While these concerns were pertinent and understandable, they were also shaped by a very stereotyped conception of waste pickers, which is prevalent in the public imagination.

One of my first few interactions in the area was with women from the Qalandar and Maset communities. They engage in waste work intermittently. There was hardly any ground on which they could connect with me and understandably so. In the beginning, our interactions would not even last for more than 20 to 25 minutes and they would ask me to move on. Even though I clarified at the outset that I am a researcher and I want to explore the history of the landfill and observe the daily life of waste workers, I was perceived as a survey official. Interestingly, my interactions with the Masets and Qalandars were not directly shaped by my caste and religious identity.²¹ Unlike others, they never enquired about my background. However, my visible class location had already placed me as an outsider. Their interactions with me were oriented around claim-making—in terms of what I could do for them. Their chequered history with the state during colonial and postcolonial times (see Chapter 5; Datta, 2012; Singha, 1998; Bhukya & Surepally, 2021), in relation to both their governmental and religious identity, followed by a ban on their traditional occupations, has pushed them to the extreme margins of society and has made them sceptical about the state and its functionaries. My sudden

²¹ This is not to deny that caste and religious identity did not play any role but they perhaps did not significantly shape our interactions.

presence in their locality and interest in understanding their past and present made them suspicious of me. So even though I clarified that I am not a government official, they pigeonholed me as one in some ways. An old *baba* (uncle), who, as I was informed, was the oldest member of the Qalandar community, told me ‘arey beti tum aaye ho humari khabar lene warna aaj tak kisi ne hamari khabar hi nahi li’, which meant ‘oh my child, you have come here to talk to us and get to know about us, otherwise nobody has ever bothered to speak to us about our wellbeing’. There was some level of uncertainty about how they perceived my presence, whether as a layperson or as a government official, but their interactions with me were primarily based on the hope that I would do something for the betterment of their conditions.

Religious identity is another aspect that implicitly shaped our interactions. Their religious identity always remained a bit ambiguous to me. Although members of both communities told me they were Muslims, they always asserted their nomadic identity first. Moreover, Qalandars often tried to insinuate that Masets are not ‘real’ Muslims because their first names are Hindu and they have only recently converted to Islam. Similarly, their neighbours suggested that both communities are not ‘proper’ Muslims because they do not perform religious practices properly (see Chapter 5). There were multiple power equations between the two communities and their neighbours, and the ambiguity around their religious status influenced the way their fellow neighbours spoke about them. In part, their suspicion and simultaneous hope in me, followed by my inhibitions while asking about their past (to avoid offending them), influenced the way we spoke to each other.

In one of the alleys around the landfill, Tandoor Wali Gali, where I conducted a considerable amount of fieldwork, I talked to the scrap dealer who employed most of the waste pickers I interacted with. The nature of my interactions with the scrap dealer,

Hurinder (whom I introduce in my chapter on scrap dealers), and with the waste pickers was very distinct. Hurinder was from an SC community and his narratives often had a rather communal undertone. It took at least three to four repeated interactions for him to tell me about the details of his business. The first time I met him he asked me about my caste. After I told him I am from the Baniya community, he further asked me if I am from a business-class family. From the very beginning, he tried to locate my caste and class status and vice versa,²² which significantly shaped our interaction. In one particular interaction, my Hindu religious identity played a defining role. The moment I entered his room, he showed me a Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) booklet and told me, ‘Aparna ji, let me inform you in advance I am an RSS supporter and I uphold their political views’. Although I never challenged his political views and mostly nodded to all his conversations, he sensed that I did not share the same set of ideas. This became more evident when I showed interest in speaking to his employees. Even though his trusted employees were Hindu SCs (Anita and her son), a considerable number of his employees were Bengali Muslim migrants. He often told me, ‘Aparna ji, I have seen you are always very keen on talking to my Bengali employees. You do not need to be so concerned about them, they earn a lot here. Then they go back home, spend two to three months in their villages and build a house for themselves’.

I did not usually respond to these comments and over a period he accepted my silence and let me interact with his employees. It was not easy to interact with the employees in his presence and often I had to meet them on Sundays. Sunday was Hurinder’s only day off. Anita, who was one of his most trusted employees, also talked to

²² In the case of Hurinder, it was very difficult for me to ascertain his caste because from the very beginning, he was very guarded and it was evident that he was not very comfortable with talking about his caste background. I was introduced to Hurinder through a fellow activist—who was his (Hurinder’s) school friend—and helped me navigate the field. He was the one who told me about Hurinder’s caste background.

me openly on Sundays. On other days, she was mostly reserved and nodded to Hurinder's comments. Initially, whenever I asked Anita about other employees in the scrapyards and the neighbourhood, she always replied by saying, 'well I do not talk to Muslims. You can go and talk to them on your own'. Her tone was rather acerbic. As time went by and as I started visiting the employees on Sundays, I noticed a change in Anita's narrative. Not only did she speak more openly about her exploitative working conditions (which I explain in Chapter 5) but I observed that she did not have an estranged relationship with fellow Bengali workers. In fact, towards the end of my fieldwork, she even confided in me by saying how she misses one of her Bengali Muslim friends who was forced to leave the area because of unforeseeable circumstances. As time went by, we developed a close relationship. Whenever she had time, she would talk about one of her sons who worked in Chandigarh in a hotel and why she did not want him to come back to Delhi. After December 2019, I could not visit her for a month. During that time her husband passed away because of a road accident. She told me she had been waiting for me to come to discuss her life situation. I believe my identity as a female researcher helped us to bond better.

Among the most vulnerable participants in my study were Bengali Muslim migrants. They are often labelled as illegal migrants or Bangladeshis by fellow neighbours, local policemen, and sometimes even by fellow activists. Understandably, most of them remained very guarded about their regional identity. As a researcher, I never counter-questioned them on their regional identity. However, whenever I asked them where they are from, they promptly replied that they are from Kolkata. Although most of them were from neighbouring districts, such as Malda, Murshidabad, and Haldia, by saying they are from Kolkata, they somehow felt safe. Initially, my interactions with them were mostly around their labour processes, nature of work, and discrimination at the

behest of middle-class residents in the area they frequented for garbage collection. Surprisingly, as against the observations made by researchers in other contexts (Chatterjee, 2019), I did not come across many narratives of Bengali migrants getting harassed and picked up by the police on the pretext of being Bangladeshi. However, their fear often surfaced in between our conversations. Often, while narrating their experiences and processes of waste picking, they asked me if I have heard anything about the citizenship bill. To quote one of them, ‘I have heard all those who do not have Aadhar [unique identity card] and proper papers will not be allowed to live in the country. Is that true?’ Similarly, one of them told me: ‘Well we labour, we are poor and on the top of it we are Muslim. It is easy to attack us’.

These statements often came in passing, or perhaps, in the early stages of my fieldwork, that is around August/September 2019. At the time, I was slightly indifferent to comments on the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) because it did not directly relate to my area of work. It was only in late October that I realised that the CAA had a direct bearing on Bengali waste pickers. It is difficult for me to ascertain how my presence was perceived as an outsider and as a Hindu researching Bengali waste pickers. I do not know if their narratives would have been any different if I was a researcher from a similar background, whether as a Bengali Hindu or a Bengali Muslim. However, things drastically changed over the months that followed. Even though I managed to form a close relationship with two of my interviewees, most of the other people became suspicious of my presence. There was a constant fear in their minds that I might record the conversations. As time went by, especially between late October 2019 to early March 2020, my conversation with Bengali waste pickers increasingly became about their religious and regional identity than about their labour processes.

One saw the effect of their identity question during the clashes in Jahangirpuri in late April 2022. Following these clashes, the houses of many Muslim and Bengali Muslim residents were razed down by the NDMC and Bengali Muslim residents were quickly labelled as illegal Bangladeshi migrants by media houses. The matrix of interaction significantly changed over the course of three years (2019–2022). If I had started my research in 2022, my relationship with the Bengali Muslim interviewees would probably have been very different. It is not that either of our ascribed identities has changed but the power axis between them has visibly become unbalanced.

The interactions with Hurinder, Anita, and Bengali Muslim waste pickers—three different types of respondents in terms of caste, gender, religion, and work status—are illustrative of how the nature of interaction can significantly vary in a given space. The power equation with each of these respondents was visibly different. In the case of Hurinder, even though he is from the SC community, his zealous businessman streak along with his contempt towards Muslims and macho presence determined the terms of our interactions. Similarly, with Anita, our interactions were determined not only by our gender and caste location but were also contingent on Hurinder’s presence and absence. Lastly, in the case of Bengali Muslim waste pickers, even though their religious and regional identity played a pertinent role in the way we conversed with each other, their 30 years of dominance in the field of waste and around north-west Delhi and know-how of navigating the informal waste economy and Delhi’s middle-class neighbourhoods also significantly shaped our interactions. Sometimes they were candid and confident; at other times they were condescending and ambiguous about their responses. Each of these interactions influenced the way I understood emergent social relations and power hierarchies among the respondents and between me and the respondents.

In the case of the sanitation workers in the Valmiki Basti, my caste identity and sense of social solidarity were outrightly questioned. Most of my interviewees were very politically conscious of their lower-caste identity and did not want to participate in my study. In fact, I could not interview many of the community members without my interlocutor—Rakesh, who was also a member of the Balmiki community. Most of them knew Rakesh as a political activist and his presence lent me some credibility. Else, whenever I interviewed a member of the community, I was directly asked, ‘Madam, what is your caste’ and before I could reply Rakesh would say ‘even though she is an upper caste, she has previously studied from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) and she is a secular person and doesn’t believe in *Sanatan Dharam* [idol worship]’. My Oxford association was quite a disadvantage. It often alienated most of my interviewees. Even though Rakesh’s narrative around my past association with JNU and secular outlook usually worked in my favour, on certain occasions it did not. Once when he was trying to convince young sanitation workers to talk to me, the moment they came to know about my association with JNU and my upper-caste status, they decided not to talk to me and even threatened him by saying, ‘We better not see her around our colony next time’. My identity, both as an upper-caste Hindu and the association with my previous university, which was notoriously defamed for ‘anti-national’ speeches, became an impediment to my research in this particular context. It is very interesting to note how the question of identity here is layered with multiple power equations. The multiplicities of these narratives are reflective of how my identity was perceived by members of the same community in different ways.

One of my interviewees in the Balmiki colony asked me, ‘Madam, you could come and enter my house. Could have I done the same in your house? Can we reverse the equation here?’ I did not have any clear answer to these questions but they certainly

provoked me to rethink the existing power hierarchies at play. Palpably, my upper-caste Hindu identity positioned me as an ‘outsider’ much more amongst the Balmiki sanitation workers than the waste workers from various other communities. Some of them could identify with me on religious grounds (those who followed the Hindu religion) but my upper-caste identity was an immediate red flag for many of them.

Thus, these interactions, the changing dynamics and configurations of power and positionality revealed the nature of the socio-economic hierarchies and power inequalities in each of the settings I studied.

Furthermore, continuous reflections about my positionality helped me engage with the questions of ‘lived experience’—who has the authorship over experience and who can theorise about a particular experience.²³ The question of who owns the experience is always very contentious because an event or occurrence is experienced by multiple aspects of oneself—caste, class, religion, and gender identity, followed by the experiences of other actors who are involved in shaping that experience (Abraham and Mishrahi-Barak, 2018). In that case, only the person experiencing the oppression can speak for themselves and no one else. For example, a Dalit man cannot analyse and understand the experience of a Dalit woman. Such a position does not allow us to move from the content of the experience towards the structure of the experience, which helps us understand the possible reasons behind oppression. Moreover, focusing on the question of lived experience and identities through systematic analysis can push us towards different subjective experiences.

In fact, when Guru argues that ‘the representation of Dalits by non-Dalits becomes problematic ... since it sustains itself on the basis of a permanent exclusion of Dalits from

²³ To be clear, I am not trying to theorise anything here but analyse the material I have gathered from the field.

the intellectual domain' (2015, p.125), his concern is more a moral one rather than an intellectual one. He is not stating that upper-caste people cannot theorise and analyse lower-caste concerns; rather, he is saying that upper-caste intellectuals often tend to monopolise the experiences of lower-caste people to further their own intellectual and academic prospects. Guru further argues,

The task of social experience is to inter-subjectify experience through debate, persuasion, and public exchange of arguments where individualities are transcended, and transformed into a collective but subversive subject. In order to achieve this rather complex task it is necessary to assign due consideration to experience while laying down the metaphysics of emancipation. (2012, p. 127)

Here, he is evidently emphasising that one needs to take a step back from one's own individual experience and transcend individualities in order to arrive at a sophisticated analysis. Thus, my task here has been to engage with the experiences of my interviewees, which I inadvertently became a part of through their narration, and to carry out an analysis that involves both the structure and content of their experience.

Thus, based on the above-mentioned explanations, this chapter has largely been an attempt to reflect on the 'how' and 'why' of the methods used in conducting this research and writing the thesis. The aim of using ethnographic and semi-structured interviews has been to unravel the intricacies of the waste crisis, the social lives of waste workers, and the puzzle that many waste sites offer rather than just describe a 'social reality' out there. Moreover, deploying these methods comes with its own set of complexities, such as narrowing down the field site (prioritising one space over the other), reflecting on positionality and power hierarchies, and constructing and interpreting the narrative. I have tried to engage with these aspects in this chapter and present an analysis based on the

understanding that analysis broadly remains a form of construction. This is shaped by Hammersley and Atkinson's argument:

We can never get access to reality, but that the 'reality' that ethnographers document is no less a construction than the accounts produced by the people that they study. The very assumption that there is a single, available world in which we all live is rejected in favour of the idea that there are 'multiple realities'. And yet, of course, to claim that there are multiple realities is itself a claim to know something about reality per se: that it is multiplex. (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019, p. 244).

As a researcher, one tries to suspend one's own cultural beliefs and pre-existing theoretical training and mitigate power hierarchies; however, they ultimately reflect in the way one approaches one's participant and the field, and its interpretation and analysis. The task here has not been to reach an ultimate truth or suggest a fixed reality but rather to unpack the maze of events, happenings, relations, and experiences through a systematic and coherent analysis.

Chapter 3

Swachh Delhi: Caste is here to Stay

[Gandhi says]: ‘I was at Nellore on the National Day. I met the untouchables there, and I prayed as I have done today. I do want to attain spiritual deliverance. I do not want to be reborn. But if I have to be reborn, I should wish to be reborn as an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, sufferings and the affronts levelled at them from their miserable condition’...

[Gandhi says] ‘I love scavenging’...

Bakha felt thrilled to the very marrow of his bones. That the Mahatma should be want to be born as outcaste! That he should love scavenging. He loved the man. He felt he could put his life in his hands and ask him to do what he liked with it...

[Gandhi says] ‘I am an orthodox Hindu and I know that the Hindus are not sinful by nature’, Bakha heard the Mahatma declaim. ‘They are sunk in ignorance. All public wells, temples, roads, schools, sanatoriums, must be declared open to the untouchables. And, if you all profess to love me, give me a direct proof of your love by carrying on propaganda against the observance of untouchability’...

When the crowd scattered irreverently at the end of Mahatma’s speech, Bakha stood on the branch of the tree spellbound. Each word of the concluding passage seemed to him to echo as deep and intense a feeling of horror and indignation as his own at the distinction which the caste Hindus made between

themselves and the Untouchables. The Mahatma seems to have touched the most intimate corner of his soul. 'Surely he is a good man', Bakha said. (Anand, 2001)

These compelling excerpts are from Mulk Raj Anand's novel *The Untouchable*. The novel narrates the social world of a sanitation worker named Bakha. Set in the colonial period, the novel powerfully captures the pernicious effects of sanitation work and the societal attitude that Bakha had to face in his everyday life. Perturbed by his father's behaviour and the social discrimination that he faced, Bakha lived in perpetual confusion about his existence. Then, one day, Gandhi's visit to his village pushed him to think about his work and the attitude of the upper-caste people in his vicinity. Initially enthralled by Gandhi's speech, Bakha thought that if upper castes could do sanitation work, then why not him? However, Gandhi's speech put Bakha in a new quandary—if he kept on doing sanitation work, then how would he ever liberate himself from the clutches of sanitation work (which at the time also included manual scavenging)? However, at the same time, Gandhi also emphasised the unjust and discriminatory behaviour of upper-caste people. According to him, true Hindus should not practice untouchability; it is a great sin: 'they [untouchables] are cleaning the Hindu society' (p.64). These words stayed with Bakha, although he did not understand what Gandhi meant by 'untouchables are cleaning the Hindu society'. For once, Bakha's world was filled with hope. He wondered what Gandhi's speech entailed for his life. Amidst the crowd that had gathered around for Gandhi's speech, Bakha overheard someone saying that technological advancements would help 'untouchables' overcome the exploitative system of sanitation work. The novel ends on a note of hope and despair that engulfs Bakha's world.

Today, the lives of sanitation workers are still bound by the exploitative caste system, while policy makers hope that technological advancements will liberate them (Prashad, 2000; Gupta, 2022). The situation has changed only in terms of imperceptible alterations in the nature of work and the attitude of urban upper-caste people towards sanitation work and workers. On 23 March 2020, following the outbreak of COVID-19, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared a nationwide lockdown. There was utter chaos the next day. Migrant workers across the country were uncertain about their future. This was followed by a mass exodus of migrant workers travelling back to their home states, which included many waste pickers as well. Understandably, sanitation and waste collection services were disrupted across Delhi. I recollect my own experience of 24 March, when everybody in my residential area was clueless about the waste collection and cleaning services. The informal garbage collectors were nowhere to be seen. The *safai karamcharis* (municipal sanitation workers) who usually come around 8 a.m., came around 11 a.m. By that time, an exasperated Baniya (trading caste) neighbour shouted: 'These Bhangis just need a chance to skip their work. Now that we are in a lockdown, are we going to live with this dirt around us? 'Soon, public-private partnership (PPP)-based waste-management agencies came in (a public-private partnership between a private company and the North Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC)).²⁴ On normal days, they compete over access to waste with informal garbage collectors, but on the morning of 24 March, all the burden of waste collection fell on their shoulders. Everyone wanted to dump their trash in the privately owned mini-van. Very soon, the van outran its capacity, but the residents kept on dumping their trash, which eventually spilt out onto the roads.

²⁴ See section on 'Working Side by Side: A Case of Informal Garbage Collectors and PPP Garbage Collectors'.

This then led to another crisis—who would clean the roads in the absence of sanitation workers? Residents urged the PPP-led waste collectors to clean the streets, but when they refused, the residents were forced to pick up the scattered trash and dump it in the van the next day.

This chapter is an exploration of the social world of sanitation workers and how it is shaped by contemporary social and political developments around sanitation, such as the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission; hereafter SBA), the privatisation of waste management practices, and the informalisation of sanitation workers. Throughout the chapter, I map institutionalised casteism (Salve et al., 2017; Lee & Swaroop, 2021) embedded in the waste management practices in Delhi. I first examine the functioning of the SBA and analyse how it projects itself as a citizen-oriented programme, focusing on a clean and garbage-free city, while conveniently ignoring caste-based human infrastructure (sanitation workers) involved in the cleaning of the city. I then examine the ongoing privatisation of SWM services in the city and investigate how state-led local bodies (municipal corporations) and private entities together reinforce caste-based recruitments in the services. Lastly, I examine the lives of sanitation workers—the Balmikis—and look into how they resist institutionalised casteism in their everyday lives and through cultural practices.

Introduction

This chapter seeks to understand the present-day management and governance of the waste crisis that involves multiple institutions and infrastructures. Growing governmental and civil society concerns around cleanliness (Department of Environment, Delhi) and the aesthetic betterment of Delhi have pushed the government to focus on waste

management programmes (Gidwani & Chaturvedi, 2011). These programmes are instituted through policy measures such as the SBA, with a push towards PPP and modern technocratic infrastructure. However, to date, these advancements have not significantly reduced the burgeoning waste crisis (Demaria & Schindler, 2016; Sambyal, 2017; Kornberg, 2019a). Rather, the condition of sanitation workers and informal garbage collectors in the city has steadily deteriorated (Demaria & Schindler, 2016). To understand these processes, this chapter seeks to ask a series of interconnected questions with respect to the SBA, waste management infrastructure, and the subaltern groups—sanitation workers and garbage collectors—involved in managing the waste crisis. The promise of modernity and development that imbues the SBA and PPP for waste management is primarily concerned with eliminating discarded materials at the point of disposal by urban residents and maintaining immaculate spaces, usually concerning upper- and middle-class residential areas. The technical infrastructure is often projected as neutral and ‘apolitical’, simply furthering the cause of development with respect to waste and the urban environment (Anand, 2017). However, these processes are also intricately enmeshed in the human infrastructure of waste management, which is entangled with caste hierarchies and the informalisation of the sanitary workforce. This chapter examines these contradictions and explores how, over the years, sanitation workers have inserted themselves within the institutions and technical infrastructure of waste management and carved out a space to assert their identity and the salience of their work.

The SBA: Whose Space and Whose Cleanliness?

On 2 October 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the SBA—the Clean India Mission. The campaign aimed to make India clean and free from open defecation in the subsequent five years, that is, by the 170th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. As of today, the campaign boasts of having built 1,071.04 lakh toilets and a 61.24 per cent increase in households (HHs) with toilets (The New Indian Express, 2021). In its first phase, the campaign was primarily aimed at eradicating open defecation; thus, the construction of toilets and the practice of personal hygiene and cleanliness were at the centre of the agenda. Although there have been many such programmes in the past, the SBA is distinct in terms of its widespread media coverage, citizen-oriented outlook, social media-based campaign, and, most importantly, its strategic association with Gandhi. Campaign posters and wall graffiti everywhere are stamped with the image of Gandhi's spectacles, symbolising Gandhi's vision.

Prime Minister Modi flagged off the SBA from Valmiki Basti, Mandir Marg, Delhi. The Basti is historically significant because Gandhi stayed there for 214 days in 1946–47 and one of the main aims of his stay was to improve the living conditions of the Balmiki community, who are sanitation workers in the city. Since then, Valmiki Basti has been a site of great significance—primarily as a strategic site to address the so-called lower-caste vote bank—which many prime ministers have visited in the past. While the launch of the campaign created a great deal of excitement in public, it remained riddled with several contradictions. Sanitation workers in the colony narrated how they were not allowed to step out, their houses were covered with white drapes, and security officers were stationed outside their houses.²⁵ Moreover, on the day the campaign was inaugurated, media coverage was full of the prime minister and other ministers posing

²⁵ Narrated in an interview conducted in the Valmiki Basti (Mandir Marg), December 2019.

with broomsticks (*jhaadoo*). Some of them even complained: 'Why is it that Amitabh Bachchan, Hema Malini and Sachin Tendulkar are brand ambassadors of the SBA? They do not even know how to hold a broom. We are the real champions of the SBA, and yet, nobody ever talks about our labour and living conditions. 'Many of them remarked, 'It's good to have clean cities and programmes like the SBA, but where do we fit in such programmes? What about our rights? 'Such instances made some of the sanitation workers critical of the SBA.

In light of these concerns, I examine the SBA not with respect to its failures and successes but in terms of its social implications for sanitation workers. I aim to look at how the campaign is concerned with aesthetic purification and caters to an urbanised middle-class understanding of cleanliness, overlooking the social and economic inequalities inherent in waste work—in particular, the social and living conditions of sanitation waste workers of the Balmiki community.

There is a growing aspiration among the middle class in India for a bourgeois urban lifestyle, and the question of cleanliness is paramount (Doron & Raja, 2015). However, social inequalities and the condition of sanitation workers, who are the real custodians of cleanliness in the city, are not considered. The present-day concerns and policies around cleanliness are similarly geared towards immaculate spaces without taking into consideration the caste and class divide. Baviskar (2019) argues that 'upper class concerns around aesthetics leisure, safety and health have come to significantly shape the disposition of urban spaces'(p.200). She refers to this phenomenon as 'bourgeois environmentalism' (p. 200). In the same vein, Jack et al. (2022) observe that the sanitary infrastructures and notions of cleanliness are shaped by middle-class and upper-caste subjectivities.

In the current SBA campaign, which anchors itself around urban and sanitary development underpinned by the idea of exclusion, the urban poor are seen as the real polluters and nuisance to the city (Ghertner, 2015; Gooptu, 2015). Doron and Raja (2015) observe,

The poor are once again excluded, not simply for ritual and economic reasons, but for being ‘deficient’ citizens, ‘yet to participate in (a) collective desire’, that celebrates the ‘pleasure of capitalism’, with its ritual of clean hygiene, and the ‘pleasures of privacy’. From this perspective then, ‘pathological spaces’—such as faeces crammed railway tracks, and unruly streets—need to be cured, disciplined or sanitized, instigating a whole slew of state-sponsored actions and public campaigns, often euphemistically labelled as ‘beautification’ programmes or ‘relocation’ of squatter settlement projects. (p. 195)

Moreover, through the use of technology and media-savvy planning, the campaign has managed to instil some amount of fear and shame regarding the ‘inappropriate’ disposal of garbage. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs has enlisted Bollywood actors—such as Shilpa Shetty—who appear in advertisements on television and moralise people who throw garbage on the streets. In a similar vein, there are advertisements and graffiti encouraging citizens to construct toilets in their households and not to defecate in open spaces. However, there is negligible concern about who is cleaning their waste and where the waste is actually going. The glitz and glamour of the campaign have successfully invisibilised the foot soldiers of waste work. These concerns are further co-opted by middle-class activism and shaming, particularly focused on the cleanliness of their surroundings.

During my fieldwork in the north-western part of the city, one day, I met a middle-aged woman who was ‘actively’ working with the NDMC on the SBA campaign. She was very particular about segregating wet waste and dry waste. Post-segregation, she made sure to dump the wet waste in a pit in the local park. However, that day she was particularly upset that the waste workers had not come on time and did not compost the waste as ‘they are supposed to do’. She was very clear that it was not her job to physically put the waste in the composting pit and then cover it. She said, ‘there is a reason why a certain caste of people is assigned this work. It is their task’. After this slightly uncomfortable conversation, the NDMC workers informed me that the woman often comes and stands in front of the composting pit, clicks a selfie, and posts it on social media. Such acts that create a spectacle around the campaign are not uncommon. They show how the SBA is imbued with the performance of cleanliness. Moreover, as Doron (2016) argues, such acts are also embedded in notions of civic modernity and responsible citizenship, which inadvertently lead to social exclusion in society. The focus is not on the cleaners but on the satisfaction derived from cleanliness.

Casteist Underpinnings of the SBA

Even today, the underlying issue of caste-based discrimination remains at the centre of the problem. The SBA has been imbued with a moralistic overtone by making Gandhi the poster boy of the campaign, albeit overlooking his concerns regarding sanitation and caste. If we analyse the SBA graffiti (Figure 3.1), Gandhi is projected as a figure who understood cleanliness as one’s own duty. He is depicted cleaning his own surroundings. In fact, he stayed in the Valmiki Basti not only to understand the condition of sanitation workers but also to grasp the lived experience of the ‘act’ of cleaning and the

surroundings in which the community lived. Yet these attempts to understand the lived experience of sanitation workers did not push Gandhi to question the casteist nature of the work. His writings in his newspaper *Harijan* inform us that Gandhi had a notion of what an ideal Bhangi should be like. In an article titled the 'Ideal Bhangi', he states:

A Bhangi does for society what a mother does for her baby. A mother washes her baby of the dirt and insures his health. Even so the Bhangi protects and safeguards the health of the entire community by maintaining sanitation for it. The Brahmin's duty is to look after the sanitation of the soul, the Bhangi's that of the body of the society. But there is a difference in practice; the Brahmin generally does not live upto his duty, the Bhangi does willy-nilly no doubt. Society is sustained by several services. The Bhangi constitutes the foundation of all services.

In my opinion an ideal Bhangi should have a thorough knowledge of the principles of sanitation. He should know how a right kind of latrine is constructed, the correct way of cleaning it. He should know how to overcome and destroy the odour of excreta and the various disinfectants to render them innocuous. He should likewise know the process of converting night-soil and urine into manure [I]t goes without saying that he would have the usual learning necessary for reaching the standard here laid down for his profession. Such an ideal Bhangi, while deriving his livelihood from his occupation, would approach it only as a sacred duty. (1936, p. 336).

In these writings, he never really confronted the question of the caste order. Rather, he put the onus on the community of how an ideal Bhangi should be to be accepted in society. By moralising and eulogising the work done by Bhangis, he put the community on a pedestal but never questioned the fact of why only Bhangis should do this work. In

fact, as Prashad (2000) observes in his work, during Gandhi's initial visits to the Valmiki Basti, he referred to sanitation workers as 'Bhangi', and it was only later that he renamed them Harijan—children of god. Teltumbde (2014) refers to this paternalistic attitude towards the caste system as 'muted casteism'. In his assertion of '*Mahatmahood*' (Teltumbde, 2014, p. 12) and by referring to cleaning work as a spiritual experience, Gandhi reinforced the existing hierarchies of the caste system. Gandhi's affirmation of the caste-based nature of sanitation work is conveniently appropriated by the present-day government. Prime Minister Modi also has time and again referred to cleaning work as a spiritual experience (Bathran, 2019) and remarked that it is not simply work, but it is their (the Balmikis) duty to do this job for the larger good of society. In his famously authored book, *Karamyog*, Modi states:

I do not believe that they have been doing this job just to sustain their livelihood. Had this been so, they would not have continued with this type of job generation after generation.... At some point of time, somebody must have got the enlightenment that it is their (Valmikis') duty to work for the happiness of the entire society and the Gods; that they have to do this job bestowed upon them by Gods; and that this job of cleaning up should continue as an internal spiritual activity for centuries. This should have continued generation after generation. It is impossible to believe that their ancestors did not have the choice of adopting any other work or business. (2007, p. 48)

It is very evident from this statement that by legitimising cleaning work in a paternalistic fashion, Modi tried to deprive sanitation workers of their own identity and agency—in terms of how they (sanitation workers) view their own work. His applauding of cleaning work was followed by the theatrics of washing the feet of sanitation workers in Varanasi. Similarly, many have argued that Prime Minister Modi never used the 'C'

word (Teltumbde, 2014; Chatterjee, 2019). The ‘C’ word here refers to caste. Rather, the question of caste has been conveniently sanitised and muted. Teltumbde (2014) and Gatade (2015) observe how the Modi government conveniently ignored the agitation and effigy burning led by Dalits in Tamil Nadu in the wake of Modi’s remark on cleaning work as a spiritual experience. Similarly, the government ignored the Safai Karamchari Aandolan’s mobilisation against dry latrines. These observations demonstrate how the politics of symbolism around the SBA by eulogising the cleaning work and workers, albeit by invisibilising the question of caste, has further legitimised the discourse around the SBA and has complicated the socio-economic conditions of waste workers.



Figure 3.1: The photograph depicts Gandhi’s act of cleaning his own dirt. This graffiti is painted in the Connaught Place area of Delhi, as part of the SBA.

Source: Photograph clicked by the author.

Following the earlier discussions, in the next section, I examine the present-day waste-management services in the light of the SBA and how they are cloaked in the language of science and technology and are compounded by the processes of Sanskritisation and caste hierarchies, and their impact on the everyday lives of sanitation workers and informal waste workers. The waste management solutions here based on technology and privatisation are primarily concerned with invisibilising waste and the smell associated with it. Some of the central concerns associated with the waste crisis are

not just those of hygiene and health but also of aesthetic purification and managing the ‘disorderliness’ of discarded materials. These concerns are further aggravated by the presence of waste pickers and sanitation workers—who are often seen as part of the ‘disorderliness’. Private companies, in partnership with local government bodies (in our case, the NDMC), have not only attempted to sanitise the physical environment but also the social environment, wherein waste workers have to work according to the rules and discipline of the company.

The ‘Blurred Boundaries’ of the Public–Private Model

In this section, I examine the case of PPP-led waste-management services in north-west Delhi. Based on my interactions with municipal engineers, company supervisors, sanitation workers, and informal waste pickers, I examine how the whole model of public–private waste-management services is prioritised over informal waste pickers and their recycling services. While the process of privatisation of waste management services has been underway since 2009 (Demaria & Schindler, 2016), it was cemented under the banner of the SBA. Creating a spectacle around cleanliness and hygiene has worked in favour of both the government and private companies. The PPP service is an agreement between the NDMC and the Delhi Municipal Solid Waste Management Solutions Ltd (DMSWSL), a subsidiary of the Hyderabad-based company, Ramky.²⁶

The project is anchored around the axis of modern, technocratic services, but the reality is underlined by caste-based inequalities and hierarchies. In what follows, I

²⁶ The company advertises itself as Asia’s largest waste-management service provider and is present in 12 states of the country. Although the company projects itself as provider of environmental services and takes pride in its ‘sustainable’ method, however it was recently debarred by the World Bank funded projects because of the fraudulent practices of Capacity Building for Industrial Pollution Management Project in the country.

examine the processes of incineration, how senior and upper-caste NDMC and private company employees manage the functioning and performance of waste management services and lower-level employees, respectively. Furthermore, I look at how the overhauling of services has affected informal waste pickers—who are mostly lower caste and Bengali Muslims (particularly in North Delhi). In doing so, I also discuss how these processes are laden with continuities and contradictions. On the one hand, there is a move towards privatisation and professionalisation of waste management services, where incineration of discarded material is seen as the ultimate solution. The primary aim is to eliminate waste from public spaces and to generate electricity from refuse-derived fuel (RDF) and sell it to private companies. This generates value out of waste by incinerating discarded material, which has primarily been the domain of informal waste pickers. On the other hand, the company continues to employ lower-caste employees for waste collection services, most of whom identify as Balmiki. Thus, the exploitation is twofold, whereby at one level, informal waste pickers are deprived of access to waste, and, on the other, the company continues to employ lower-caste employees to directly deal (touch) with waste.

‘Privatisation of Informality’

I examine the introduction of PPP waste-management services in north-west Delhi through the framework of privatisation and informality.²⁷ I do so in the context of

²⁷ This note is an acceptance of the fact this work has overlapping observations with the recent work of Dana Kornberg (2020, 2019b) and Olivia Calleja (2021). All the three works were conducted in the north-west part of Delhi within a time span of four years. Hence, the narratives of privatisation of waste-management services in Rohini are quite similar. Kornberg deploys the framework of state informality and unravels the caste hierarchy between the Balmikis and Bengali Muslims (informal waste pickers), whereas Calleja argues around the lines of waste commons to understand the public–private and caste dynamics of recent changes in the waste-management system. I deploy the framework of informality and privatisation to

growing informality among government-based sanitation workers in the city and the privatisation of waste management infrastructure at large (see Chapter 3) and how that affects the lives of informal waste pickers and sanitation workers. Calleja (2021) terms the present-day functioning of waste management as ‘neoliberal regimes of solid waste management’ (p. 416). The growing privatisation of SWM services is an inevitable outcome of neoliberalisation²⁸. This section seeks to understand the variegated ways in which the privatisation of waste management services is taking place and how this privatisation complements state-led informality of sanitation workers and the informal ways in which state institutions function. Samson, in the context of the Johannesburg waste-management services, argues that ‘privatisation is rooted in material and ideological re-articulations of race, gender and class’ (2010, p. 426). Furthermore, Brenner and Theodore inform us that ‘Neoliberalism is articulated through contextually specific strategies’ (2007, p. 155). It is based on ‘path dependent outcome’.

Following these points, I illustrate two aspects of informality and privatisation. First, how the state, in this case, the NDMC, in cooperation with a private firm, DMSWSL, is giving way to ‘professionalised’ and privatised services, followed by the parallel presence of informal garbage collectors—who collect waste from residential areas. Second, how the privatised services are rooted in prevailing caste relations and

contextualise the increasing informalisation of recruitment processes of sanitation workers in both the public and private sectors. In addition to this, I see this particular site as a part of larger study on waste-management infrastructures (human- and machine-led) in the north-west part of the city, including the Bhalswa landfill, recycling units in Narela and Bawana, followed by the incinerator plant in Bawana. All these infrastructures are interconnected in terms of their jurisdiction, which comes under the NDMC.

²⁸ Here I follow Harvey’s understanding of Neoliberalism, which he defines as ‘maximization of entrepreneurial freedom’ within the set up free-market capitalism (Harvey, 2007). Its emergence can be mapped from the late 20th century. One of the primary characteristics of neoliberalism is limiting the role of the state in the market space, such as restricting the role of welfarist state, privatisation of public enterprises, ease of trade restrictions. It is pertinent here to understand the context specific characteristics of neoliberalism; it can take different forms in different contexts. Discard studies scholars such as Fredericks (2018), Samson (2010), have shown how privatisation of waste management services can take unique and peculiar forms in different countries.

hierarchies. In fact, the recruitment of waste workers in private firms is based on caste positions, where most of the waste collectors are from the Balmiki community, and managerial employees are from upper-caste communities.

Ananya Roy, in her work on informality and urbanisation, argues, 'India's planning regime is itself an informalised entity, one that is in a state of deregulation, ambiguity and exception' (2009, p. 76). In so doing, she explains that deregulation does not mean the withdrawal of state authorities, but rather 'calculated informality'—where state-led authorities work in conjunction with private authorities, leading to a different form of regulation. In the case of the PPP services led by the DMSWSL, one can clearly see the state of deregulation and ambiguity. The fact that PPP services are working parallelly with informal waste pickers is rather perplexing, and it raises many questions about the nature of their association. Delhi is currently witnessing a complex co-dependence between PPP services and informal garbage collectors. Kornberg (2020) explains that this can be attributed to several factors, such as middle-class dependence on informal garbage collectors. Many middle-class residents depend on informal garbage collectors to pick up waste from their doorstep and segregate it on their behalf (See Chapter 5 on Bengali Muslims). Second, the Balmikis have been performing cleaning work in Delhi for decades, and they hold social dominance, both in terms of work and caste. Thus, displacing informal garbage collectors (Bengali Muslims) and their supervisors (Balmikis) from the everyday collection of trash is not an easy task. They are deeply embedded in the everyday social structure of trash collection in the city.

The second aspect of the privatisation of SWM services is its intricate connection with the prevailing social relations (Roberts, 2008). PPP companies claim to be professional service providers, but they are built on existing norms of caste hierarchies

and inadvertently end up reproducing these hierarchies in various ways. The PPP company hires people from the Balmiki caste to perform the work of garbage collection (as they have been the traditional cleaners of the city), reinforcing the existing caste biases towards SC communities. Further, middle-class residents rely on informal garbage collectors²⁹ to pick up their trash from the doorstep. Both these acts are embedded in the existing caste relations and are reproduced through the technologies of waste management.

In the process, we see the 'state's paradoxical dependence, and distance from, the informal waste economy' (Harriss-White, 2020, p. 239), where at once the NDMC authorities are pushing for private waste-management services, and simultaneously, they are unable to displace informal garbage collectors. I unpack these assertions in the following sections and delve into the complexity of technological developments, social relations, and the privatisation of SWM.

Systematic Informalisation of Waste Work and Invisibilisation of Waste

The Ramky-owned Bawana engineered landfill and incineration plant is located in the extreme north-west periphery of the city. It is located right behind the Bawana Industrial Area and is surrounded by denim washing plants, known for contaminating water and soil sources due to the toxins released from the chemical-intensive washing of denim. As I entered the compound of the landfill, I was subjected to two security checks. There were

²⁹ Kornberg (2019b) explores the relationship between middle-class colony residents and the informal waste pickers. She examines how caste relations play out in the everyday context of waste disposal. Most of the colony residents do not step out of their houses to dispose their waste. Instead, they rely on waste pickers to collect their waste from the doorstep. It is because of two reasons. First, it is primarily because of the embodied casteist social relations; they do not want to touch the 'dirty' trash. Second, it is partly because of their laziness to carry the trash cans and dump in the cart of informal waste pickers or PPP collector. Albeit, both the reasons are not exclusive of one another.

surveillance cameras at the entrance of the compound, and I was not allowed to record and click photographs.

The plant was built in 2017 on 100 acres of land (Ramkyenviro) and was 'launched as India's largest WTE plant' (Sharma, 2017). At present, the company collects door-to-door waste from Rohini, Civil Lines, and Keshav Puram, and then transports it to the Bawana incinerator plant. As per the Delhi government website and on-site engineers at the Bawana incinerator plant, the plant has the capacity to incinerate 2,000 metric tonnes on a daily basis to generate 24 megawatts of energy (Department of Environment, accessed on 11 September 2022). However, as Calleja (2021) observes, in 2017, the engineers at the site claimed that the model was not very successful. She further notes, '[T]he company had been facing major issues in selling the compost and RDF they produced' (p. 431).

However, by the time I conducted my fieldwork, there was a slight change in the functioning of the plant. I visited the site in early January 2020. By this time, engineers at the site were relatively confident about the incineration facilities. They informed me that, at the time, the site received 250 metric tonnes of waste on a daily basis. Of the total waste, 60 per cent was dry waste, 20 per cent inert, and 40 per cent wet waste. They use the dry waste for RDF and sell it in the form of electricity for Rs 100 million/month, and they receive Rs 100 million/month from the NDMC to process the waste (known as the tipping fee). The engineers at the site were hopeful that RDF processing would only get better because, according to one of them, 'India is a scaling economy and any scaling economy will naturally produce more dry waste'.

In addition to this, they were quite proud of the fact that now they have sophisticated machinery, such as ballistic machines, trommels, coolers, and covered

trucks, to carry out systematic waste-management processes. However, when I raised concerns about the negative effects of incineration, one of their engineers said, 'The whole process is carried out under the direction and control of Delhi Pollution Control Committee [DPCC]. All the gases released are controlled within the plant. On the whole, incineration does not cause much pollution'. All these claims remain unverified. Moreover, Demaria and Schindler's (2016) research on Delhi's Okhla incinerator plant informs us about its detrimental effects on the health of the residents of that area and the informal waste pickers due to the restricted access to municipal waste.³⁰ Even at that time, supporters of the Okhla incinerator plant stated that the plant would have a minimal negative effect on air quality.

For wet waste, they carry out 28 days of aerobic decomposition and then again for 15 days. After this process, the inert waste is dumped into the engineered landfill, and the rest of the treated waste is used as compost. The engineers at the site believe that this is a very holistic model and an advanced way of dealing with the waste crisis in Delhi.

The engineers at the site see this model as a success by conveniently invisibilising the caste question. The company is primarily concerned with gaining profit. They do so by managing the city's waste while claiming to reduce the geographical footprint of the total waste and by converting waste into energy and selling it in the form of electricity.

It is no surprise that the company and its employees do not see the waste management crisis as a problem of caste (Kornberg, 2019a). According to one of the engineers, 'Caste is an old institution. We rely on technology and productivity'. Even their

³⁰ Informal waste pickers either pick up waste from local municipal *dhalaos*, landfills, or residential colonies. With the coming of PPP waste-management services and incineration facilities, waste pickers' access to municipal *dhalaos* has reduced. The private companies have started guarding the *dhalaos*, so that the waste can be used for incineration.

website states: 'Helping Clean India with smart solutions to handle day-to-day waste.'

However, one does not have to go far to see how the 'technology'-oriented management of waste is embedded in the question of caste and the urban poor. Next to the waste-to-energy plant is an engineered landfill that is used by the company to dump inert waste. As far as I could tell, there were informal waste pickers at the landfill site looking for valuable discards.

If one delves deeper into the functioning of the company's everyday practices of waste management in residential areas, it is inextricably riddled with caste hierarchies and the privatisation and informalisation of the waste workforce. In the following section, I examine how private management services took over the door-to-door garbage collection services in north-west Delhi and how that lays bare the ongoing persistence of caste in terms of the hiring of the waste workers' managerial workforce and the inefficiency of waste management services.

Professionalisation of Waste Management Services

The company promotes itself not only on the basis of sophisticated machinery and physical infrastructure but also through the professionalism of its services. It has employed managerial employees at multiple posts to monitor the functioning of services. Most of these employees are trained to endorse the company's agenda as if it were a social service in the field of waste management. They speak the language of efficiency and productivity. Not surprisingly, at the surface level, most of them talk about the waste crisis as an issue of the non-segregation of waste and the lack of mechanical services. In

the following section, I examine the narrative of a lower-level managerial employee³¹ who works with Ramky. Ranjit, an upper-caste employee, has been working with Ramky for the last five years. He decided to work with the waste management company because he felt close to the cause and wanted to make meaningful changes in the field of waste.

Ranjit deals with efficiency, management, implementation, and training of waste management services. These programmes are carried out in two parts. First, engaging with middle-class residents about waste management practices. Second, engaging with waste workers on issues of safety, health, and rights.

In residential colonies, he is required to monitor waste management programmes. The awareness and training around SWM are carried out on the basis of a three-step process—information, education, and communication (IEC). It includes awareness about waste segregation at the household level, doing door-to-door campaigns, and training members of residential societies in the three fundamentals of waste management—RRR: reduce, reuse, and recycle—followed by training members of various residents' welfare associations (RWAs) in decentralised waste-management practices, which often include practices such as composting of organic waste. Interestingly, in practice, the company operates by making a profit from the tipping fees and by selling RDF; simultaneously, they carry out extensive campaigns in middle-class residential areas, focusing on the importance of waste segregation and recycling. These two practices, in principle, are in contradiction with each other. Ramky's main purpose is to reduce waste through incineration; it is not associated with recycling practices. In fact, it requires the inflow of recyclable material in order to generate higher calorific value for incineration. Yet they

³¹ I am not giving specifics of the job details to protect the privacy of my interlocutors.

continue to carry out the façade of recycling and reuse, to appeal to the sensibilities of middle-class residents and to project their image as saviours of the environment.

Palpably, none of these campaigns includes any form of caste sensitisation and awareness programmes on the working conditions of waste pickers. As substantiated in the previous section, the company has actively worked towards replacing informal waste pickers so that the company has access to the MSW and uses it for incineration.

Ranjit informed me that training includes educating pickers about health check-ups, the importance of wearing masks and gloves, providing them with ID cards, and teaching them about their rights. He framed all this as if the company works in favour of waste pickers. He told me that the company provides ID cards to waste pickers so that they are not harassed by the police; however, I did not have to dig deep to realise that the ID cards were provided to monitor their movements and to note how many informal waste pickers frequent a colony on a daily basis. Talking about the rights of waste pickers, he said that he genuinely believes that the onus of waste segregation is not on the waste pickers but on the generators. He remarked,

We know how waste pickers are exploited by the colony residents. Residents do not want to segregate their waste and they put the entire onus on waste pickers. This is a very casteist practice and we want to get rid of that.

In order to resolve this situation, the company provides capacity building and soft skills training to both their employees and informal waste pickers. As per Ranjit's narrative, soft skills training include teaching waste workers how to talk to the colony residents, how to mitigate a tricky situation, and how to take care of their health. When I asked him if the company provides training on how to segregate waste, he said, 'Well,

informal waste pickers are very efficient in segregation. They know much better than us. Who am I to give training to them’.

The company has steered the waste management sector with a very clear vision of profit making, masked by their claims to the professionalisation of services in terms of delivery mechanism and by whitewashing the prevailing complex and casteist social relations, which form the basis of informal waste services. However, after carefully examining their system and speaking to their managerial employees, I realised that the company’s projected ethics of professionalisation are often at odds with the experiences of managerial staff at the ground level. Managers such as Ranjit, who conduct door-to-door campaigns to spread awareness about the importance of waste segregation, are often faced with casteist slurs and threats. Once Ranjit was walking with the waste workers to generate awareness on waste segregation, and somebody threw their waste on the street from their balcony. When Ranjit confronted the resident, he was threatened with statements such as ‘you do not know who I am’. After having explained this situation, he told me, ‘Madam, these are your Mishra *jis* and Gupta *jis* ’(a reference to upper-caste people). In addition to these experiences, Ranjit acknowledged the fact that informal waste pickers are the backbone of the waste recycling system in the city. However, his conundrum is at odds with the company’s hiring process; the company does not employ informal waste pickers for evident reasons. It believes in the linear management of discarded material, which is that of incineration, whereas waste pickers are part of the recycling value chain. In order to promote the current system of PPP services, the company and NDMC officials often boasted that most of the households segregate their

waste and give it to DMSWSL. Whereas in my own experience³² and as per Ranjit's narrative, 90 per cent of the households did not segregate their waste and relied on informal waste pickers (see Chapter 5).

Working Side by Side: A Case of Informal Garbage Collectors and PPP Garbage Collectors

Before the arrival of the company, waste-collection services in the area were dependent on informal garbage collectors who were supervised by Balmiki *jemaadars* (private cleaners). The Balmikis were the traditional cleaners of the city (Prashad, 2000) who were either employed by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) as *safai karamcharis* or worked as private cleaners. Historically, they divided the areas of the city among themselves for garbage collection informally based on hereditary rights and patronage relations. While the Balmiki *jemaadars* do not have any formal or legal right to collect garbage from Delhi's residential neighbourhoods, they continue to do so. In the process, they have even filled the gaps in garbage collection by servicing areas overlooked and neglected by the municipalities. The municipal authority in North Delhi (NDMC) did not provide any household waste-collection service until 2007. The municipality's sanitation workers only carried garbage from designated local receptacles to nearby landfills. Thus, this gap in municipal provision was filled by the *jemaadars* of

³² The colony where I live is also part of Ramky's model ward, where informal waste pickers and PPP services operate side by side. As part of my participant observation process, I noticed that most of the residents did not give their trash cans to PPP collectors. The PPP van would enter the colony and leave in five minutes, whereas informal collectors took a minimum of one hour to collect waste from 25 houses.

the Balmiki community, who began collecting waste from the households that were previously unserved.³³

By the late 1980s, individual Balmiki cleaners started hiring Bengali workers (in north-west Delhi) while they themselves stepped back from cleaning work. Their withdrawal from this particular work was not only informed by a desire for less work and the privileges of supervision but also a conscious decision to distance themselves from work that was perceived as ‘dirty’ and was the historical reason for the unjust treatment meted out to them (Prashad, 2000). Eventually, with the coming of Bengali Muslim migrants, the Balmikis started distancing themselves from waste work and contracted their work out to these migrant communities (Kornberg, 2019b).

The gap between *dhalaos* (local waste receptacles) and households was filled by the Bengali Muslim garbage collectors. Post collection, they would dump the garbage in the local *dhalaos*, collect ‘useful’ material in their sacks, and sell it to the *kabaadi* (scrap) dealers. However, private companies have been making their way into the colonies and have disrupted the collection process for garbage collectors. Now there are two competing authorities—the informal garbage collectors and the company-based garbage collectors. There is a visible and unsaid competition between the two. Earlier, informal garbage collectors were not put under any kind of surveillance³⁴ because they were the only service providers in the field. Now, they have to mark attendance every day, which is checked by company officials so that their movements can be monitored. At times, they

³³ The Balmiki *jemaadar* in my area has been working there for last 25 years. He supervises the garbage collection process on behalf of his sister, who got control over the locality as part of her dowry. This has been a common practice among Balmiki woman; they get informal control over residential localities as part of neo-customary rights (Calleja, 2021).

³⁴ Their surveillance mechanism is not limited only to informal garbage collectors but also included researchers like me. When I went to speak to the company’s supervisor at their main ward, other employees immediately recognised me because one of their employees had clicked my photograph and circulated in their private WhatsApp group when I had gone there on my previous visit.

also pay *hafta* (bribe) to municipal officials in order to continue providing their services. Even though the informal garbage collectors are allowed to work alongside company-based garbage collectors, they are surveilled and harassed by the municipal and company authorities to establish their control over the area.

Restricted access to waste for informal waste pickers because of the company's presence has jeopardised the financial situation of garbage collectors. Furthermore, in the process of sanitising middle-class areas (in north-west Delhi), the company has closed most of the local *dhalaos*. For example, the *dhalao* in my area has now been converted into an office for the RWA. Now the area has one main collection point, which is directly under the company's surveillance and jurisdiction. The presence of local *dhalaos* helped informal garbage collectors to dump garbage in nearby locations and take any recyclable/reusable materials back home. However, now with the closure of local *dhalaos*, they are forced to sit in a corner under a flyover in the area and segregate the waste before dumping it. This process is rather time-consuming and adds to the burden of collecting garbage twice a day.

Senior-level company employees work in close association with municipal employees such as the sanitary inspector (SI) and the assistant sanitary inspector (ASI) and closely monitor the movements of both informal garbage collectors and their own employees. In fact, when I went to interview the ASI, he was surrounded by Ramky employees discussing daily operations of SWM processes. Earlier, most of the *dhalaos* in the area were untended. Garbage collectors would visit the colonies at their own convenience. Over the years, the company has taken over these *dhalaos* and has established its supervisor's office in front of the main *dhalaos*. Informal garbage collectors are mandated to mark attendance in the supervisor's office. Only those with valid identification cards are allowed to do the daily collection and dump garbage in the

dhalao. Previously, the collectors simply dumped the garbage in the *dhalao*, but now they have to carefully place it into a machine called a compressor. Wet waste dumped in the machine is compressed and then dumped into the nearby landfill.

Unlike informal garbage collectors, company employees are required to wear company uniforms and collect garbage at a particular time. The collection service is typically carried out by two employees—one drives the collection van and another one walks beside the van, assisting residents in dumping their garbage. Unlike informal garbage collectors, company services are very strict about wet waste and dry waste disposal. They do not allow the mixing of waste. Since the company employees' presence is distinctly marked by their uniforms, they are not required to mark attendance. Once the collection process is over, the employees are required to dump wet waste in the compressor and dry waste in a truck which is taken to a separate plant (undisclosed location). The dry waste is subsequently taken to the Bawana incineration plant located in the north-west corner of the city. This process may come across as very meticulous, well-structured, and technology-oriented, but it is marked by caste inequalities. It is not surprising that most of the sanitation workers (attendants who walk along with the municipal garbage van) are from the Balmiki community, whereas the van drivers are from relatively upper-caste communities. The company, in principle, projects an image of 'development' and 'technologically advanced' services, but in reality, it is still perpetuating older forms of hierarchies and oppression. The attendants, who aid colony residents in disposing of their waste in the vans and are directly or indirectly in touch with waste, receive a salary of Rs. 13,000, whereas the van drivers are salaried at Rs. 15,000. The difference in their salaries is not only reflective of caste inequalities but also

of the fact that driving is seen as a more ‘valuable’ skill than waste picking³⁵. Moreover, these recruitments are indicative of the informalisation of services within the privatised system. The sanitation workers recruited by the company are recruited as per the salary bracket of the municipal corporation. Their salaries are equivalent to contractual MCD employees. It is a given understanding that these jobs are not permanent and sanitation workers can be fired at the company’s discretion. Moreover, despite the hazardous nature of the work, sanitation workers are not provided with any medical services under the company’s policies.

So far, in this chapter, we have discussed how the coming of the SBA and the privatisation of waste management have shaped the present-day waste crisis. The introduction of PPP has reduced access to waste for informal garbage collectors and simultaneously continues to reinforce the age-old structure of caste hierarchies. Fredericks (2014), in the context of Dakar’s waste crisis, argues that the promise of modernity and development is upheld through technocratic advancements but also continues to perpetuate exploitative socio-economic conditions. This messy landscape of the SBA and the privatisation of waste management services provide insights into the present-day waste crisis and how it is managed at various levels. The SBA and its objective of eliminating the city’s trash have struck a chord with the masses. There is a growth of paraphernalia around cleanliness. It is compounded by civil society activism, advertisements, hoardings, and awareness campaigns led by municipality employees (Calleja, 2021; Kornberg, 2020; Gidwani & Chaturvedi, 2011; Demaria & Schindler, 2016). Yet, in the process, we see the invisibilisation of the human infrastructure led by marginalised communities. The excessive focus on the SBA and material infrastructure—both in terms of technological development and removal of waste—has alienated the

³⁵ See Advaita Rajendra’s (2022) work on waste work and politics and sociality of skills.

world of sanitation workers. Ferguson, in his work '*Structures of Responsibility*', pointing at the inequality embedded in the infrastructure, observes, '[T]he insistence on materiality is at the same time an insistence on morality' (2012, p. 562). Unfortunately, in this case, the insistence on materiality and waste management infrastructure is not followed by an insistence on morality or attempts to improve the conditions of waste and sanitation workers.



Figure 3.2: A local *dhalao* with unsegregated waste in north-west Delhi, located 2 kilometres away from the model ward under the DMSWSL.
Source: Photograph clicked by the author



Figure 3.3: A model ward in north-west Delhi with a compressor machine.
Source: Photograph clicked by the author

The second part of the chapter focuses on the social and political world of sanitation workers—often referred to as the Balmikis. While the privatisation of waste management services is fairly recent, the impoverished condition of sanitation workers is not (Sakthivel et al., 2019). In the following section, I examine the life-world of sanitation workers in Delhi. In doing so, I look at how they understand their own existence vis-à-vis the imposed social identity and space they are a part of—that is, sanitation work—and, in turn, what are the modes of assertions and politics they adopt. Fredericks (2018) argues, ‘infrastructures are complex ecological arrangements that include feelings and modes of understanding, ritual practices, and spiritual systems of order. The structures of feeling that waste infrastructure evoke emerge out of the material practice of cleaning work ’(p.127). The very nature of work and social relations and institutions associated with the work shape the inner and social being of waste workers. In her work, Frederick demonstrates how Muslim waste workers in Dakar, Senegal, use piety as a way of giving social legitimacy to their work and how the work also shapes their social worth/‘value and vernacular moralities ’(p.126). In the Indian context, cleaning work in conjunction with Hinduism and its notions of purity and pollution determine the social worth of sanitation workers. The social value of waste workers in public spaces is further shaped by the interactions between discarded materials, the social and physical infrastructure of waste management and centuries-old caste-based discrimination. Following this, I show, how sanitation workers perform alternative religious practices and follow political traditions (such as Ambedkarite politics³⁶) in order

³⁶ Based on the narratives of sanitation workers and activists I interviewed, Ambedkarite politics here is understood in very broad terms. Ambedkar’s body of work is vast and complex, he engages with the questions of caste, democracy, socialism, emancipation, and religion among many others. However, here I discuss how his ideas translate in the everyday life of sanitation workers. For most of my respondents Ambedkarite politics stands for liberation of the oppressed and annihilation of caste. In theory they believe in secular and constitutional value and strive for an equitable society.

to transcend everyday discrimination and stigmatisation, and feel socially and morally valued.

The History of the Balmiki Community

Historical scholarship (Prashad, 2000; Atwal, 2019; Ram, 2004; Lee, 2018) on the Bhangi and Chuhra communities informs us that these communities were not always associated with defiling work such as sweeping. Many among these communities were landless peasants and were eventually forced into sweeping and rendered as untouchables. Bhangis and Chuhras vested their faith in heterodox religious traditions such as Bala Shah Nuri in Punjab and Lal Begi in the United Province of India (now Uttar Pradesh, hereafter UP), respectively (Lee, 2018). Prashad (2000), in his work, cites a song by the Chuhra community, 'the Hindus will not allow me here' and the 'Muslims will not read the burial service'. Therefore, the song pledged, 'at resurrection, you will get bliss' and 'I wish to make a community of my own'. He further notes, 'religion to the oppressed is a means to articulate their dreams of freedom. God is the congealed will of the people who cannot afford to exert their own sovereignty against those who monopolise the forces of oppression' (p. 65). Their songs, thus, were a call to liberate themselves from the clutches of societal prejudices and exploitation. Consequently, many members of these communities converted to Christianity and Islam to liberate themselves from everyday forms of discrimination and untouchability. With the rising rate of conversion and the introduction of the Morley Minto reforms in 1909, many radical Hindu forces feared that their population would be reduced to that of a minority. Lee (2015) puts forth Swami Shraddhanand's argument, who said: 'If all the untouchables became Muslims then they will become equivalent to the Hindus and at the time of independence they will not

depend on the Hindus, but will be able to stand on their own legs (Jordens 198, p. 141)'. These fears were further compounded by the Congress's interest in bringing untouchable communities within the fold of Hinduism. As Atwal (2019) observes, various right-wing Hindu organisations, such as the Arya Samaj, the All India Untouchability League, and the Hindu Mahasabha, started redefining the Chuhra community from above and began moulding their religious traditions to bring the community within the larger fold of Hinduism. These organisations were joined by Gandhi's organisation called the Harijan Sevak Sangh (HSS), albeit with slightly different intentions. The HSS strived to bring the untouchable communities within the fold of Hinduism but with the purpose of doing away with untouchability. The acculturation of the community began by introducing the figure of the saint Valmiki and through activities such as *katha* (a form of storytelling), processions, and *rath yatras* (public processions in a chariot).

Atwal (2019) notes that the Balmiki³⁷ community was starting to get formed in the 20th century, and the community members began referring to themselves as Balmiki in the 1930s. These cultural processes were further solidified with the coming of the Poona Pact. In this context, Lee argues:

In the period before the Poona Pact, the religious 'identity' of the Depressed Classes was by no means a settled question, and it remained a possibility, however slight, that the colonial state could confer recognition on the de facto autonomy of the various religious communities that caste subalterns understood themselves to constitute, as it did, briefly, with the Ad-Dharmis in the 1931 census (Juergensmeyer, 2009). This prospect died, however, in the wake of Gandhi's 'epic fast' against the communal award; the Poona Pact politically ratified the

³⁷ The Valmiki identity is linked to the sage Rishi Valmiki, author of the epic *Ramayana*, as the ancestor of sweeping communities, notably the Mehtars.

discursive confinement of the Depressed Classes within the category of the Hindu (Tejani, 2007; Conrad, 2007; Adcock, 2014). As Gandhi triumphantly put it to Ambedkar in February 1933, ‘In accepting the Poona Pact you accept the position that you are Hindus [...] You cannot escape the situation that you are Hindus in spite of your statement to the contrary’ (Gandhi 2000: vol. 59). (2015, p. 5)

Thus, the Hinduised Balmiki identity was imposed on the Chuhra and Bhangi communities, which had social and political repercussions in the years to come. In this chapter, I explore how the community members perceive their Balmiki and sweeper identity in contemporary times, which subsequently shapes their social reality and political actions. As Jaoul (2007) expounds in his work, the foisting of a Sanskritised identity has had ambiguous outcomes. Cultural and religious Brahminical practices have been adopted in parts but community members simultaneously hold a sense of resentment against upper-caste communities and follow autonomous rituals and practices (Lee, 2015; Jaoul, 2007). These measures to bring in the untouchable communities were further institutionalised by the Congress in 1950. In 1936, the SC communities were categorised even within Sikhism and Christianity. However, as Lee observes, the constitution of India stated: ‘[N]o person who professes a religion different from the Hindu religion shall be deemed to be a member of Schedule Caste’. To this, he further adds,

[C]ombined with the raft of political safeguards and economic and educational benefits that the constitution and subsequent legislation made available to Scheduled Castes, this religious restriction on state recognition of disadvantaged status worked, in effect, as a national governmental incentive to ‘profess’ the Hindu religion (2015, p. 5).

These religious restrictions did not necessarily mean that the SC community members were operating strictly within the realm of Hinduism, as has been well documented by various scholars (Rawat, 2013; Ram, 2004; Prashad, 2000; Jaoul, 2007; Lee, 2015). Even in the early post-colonial era, the community members articulated their voices against the imposition of the Valmiki identity through various platforms. One of the early works questioning this imposition in the post-colonial era was *Maharshi Valmiki* by Bhagwan Das³⁸ (2011). In this text, Das engages with the figure of Valmiki and the question of identity in a rather ambiguous way. His writing is set in the context of the Valmiki Jayanti celebrations held at the Valmiki Basti, Panchkuian Marg, Delhi, around the 1960s, where he was invited on the stage to give a speech in honour of the sage Valmiki, to whom the ancestry of this community was sought to be linked. However, realising that he was a staunch critic of this imposed identity, some minister obstructed his speech.

Consequently, he was forced to publish his thoughts to express his concerns to the larger public. In the text, he forcefully argues that Maharshi Valmiki was a Brahmin who wrote the *Ramayana*—a mythological text about the kingdom of lord Ram—and praises the hierarchical caste system where Brahmin-hood is supreme. Simultaneously, Das argues that Valmiki was a well-read, knowledgeable, and saintly person; else, he would not have given refuge to the King's (Ram) wife, Sita, who was ousted from the kingdom on allegations of infidelity. He further argues that the *Ramayana* is a great text, and he is proud that a saint like Valmiki has written this text. However, these descriptions about Valmiki are put in contradiction with the fact that the *Ramayana* is all about asserting Brahminical castehood, whereas Shudras are only meant to pray to Brahmins. Furthermore, he argues, after having closely read the *Ramayana*, that it seems that in

³⁸ Bhagwan Das, born in 1927, was an Ambedkarite activist and part of the Schedule Caste Federation. He also edited Ambedkar's speeches as part of 'Thus Spoke Ambedkar'.

Ramrajya (Ram's kingdom), it is the Brahmins who are supremely happy; Shudras and Chandals are kept on the lowest rung. Yet the community members choose to idolise Valmiki. He asserts that today if Bhangis are uneducated, 'lazy', jobless, and alcohol addicts, it is because of the forceful imposition of the Balmiki identity from above and the prevailing casteist structures. He adds weight to his argument by invoking Ambedkar's idea that the Hindu religion has degraded the social condition of untouchable communities. He relies on Ambedkarite ideas to liberate the community from current social and economic exploitation. The only way to liberation is to educate, organise, and struggle. He believes that Ambedkar was one of the first educated leaders from the untouchable community to come forward and struggle for their liberation. In fact, according to Das, Ambedkar was the one who led the foundation of the Bhangi union in the MCD; yet his ideas did not resonate with the community members. Instead, the community members chose to side with Gandhian leaders who gave them a Harijan identity and kept them within the fold of oppressive Hinduism. Consequently, this restricted the vision of his community members and instead of focusing on the larger picture of struggle, they limited themselves to minuscule demands.

He further claims that progress does not lie in following the path of the *Ramayana*, set out by Valmiki, but rather in becoming a good human. He urged his community members,

We to leave behind these casteist rituals which have obstructed us from accessing education and jobs; if we have come here today to celebrate Valmiki Jayanti, then we should pledge that our coming generation will not do this 'dirty' work, instead they will get training and education to enter into service based jobs.

Based on such contestations of the Balmiki identity and how it has been historically imposed onto the sweeper community, I examine how the community members today traverse through this messy landscape of social identity, sanitation work, and an urge to liberate themselves from exploitative social and work conditions.

Spaces of Caste and Work

This section examines the present-day living conditions of the Balmiki community of sanitation workers and how they navigate the question of the ‘Balmiki’ identity, which is deeply associated with the community. Even though many other communities have entered the sanitation workforce today, I specifically focus on the lives of sanitation workers from the Balmiki community because this community has been historically involved in sanitation work and has been at the receiving end of society’s ostracism. The idea that the work is religiously and culturally seen as defiling shapes the community’s experience and how they further their politics and perceive their own identity. This section explores these concerns, looking at questions that the community faces on a quotidian basis and how these experiences shape their political subjectivity.

As Prashad (2000) notes, many people from the Balmiki community, earlier known as Bhangi and Chuhra, migrated to Delhi in search of work a century ago. Most of them were agricultural labourers in their villages. Delhi, as the capital city of colonial India, saw rapid expansion and urbanisation, demanding a well-planned sanitary infrastructure. People from the Bhangi and Chuhra communities were seen as the perfect fit for sanitation work in the city. Over the years, as migration increased, so did the settlement of sanitation workers. Some of the oldest existing settlements in the city are near Delhi Gate in old Delhi and what is known today as Valmiki Basti on Mandir Marg

Road. Valmiki Basti, which also houses the famous Valmiki Mandir, is situated next to the Birla Mandir and Kali Bari (built by Bengali bureaucrats) in the city and holds a historical significance. Birla Mandir (also known as Lakshmi Narayan Mandir) and Kali Bari were both funded by the Birlas. Birla Mandir is a *Sanatan Dharam mandir*, and a sign outside the temple reads, ‘This is temple to open to all Hindus (including Harijans-subject to the prescribed conditions of cleanliness, full faith and sincere devotion)’ (Prashad, 2000, p. 105). However, interestingly, the Birlas also funded the Valmiki Mandir, which stands very close to the Lakshmi Narayan Mandir. This, Prashad argues, is possibly because ‘to give Balmikis their own temple, dedicated to their own guru, was one way of preventing their frequent presence at the Birla temple’ (2000, p. 105).

Thus, even though there existed crystallised boundaries between upper-caste Hindus and the Balmikis, the Valmiki Basti is still revered as the most important site for all kinds of processions, activism, and even for government programmes because of Mahatama Gandhi’s stay at the *basti*. While the *basti* still holds its historical importance, the social space and the attitudes towards the *basti* are riddled with contradictions and contempt. My access to the *basti* was often via Connaught Place (CP), which is a 10-minute auto ride from the *basti*. It is usually very easy to find autos in CP for short-distance travel. Yet, most of the auto drivers would not agree to take me to Valmiki Basti. It is the deep-seated prejudice against the community that forced most auto drivers to decline my request to go to the *basti*.

As I entered the *basti*, the first thing I saw was a broomstick lying at the entrance and a middle-aged man sitting in a corner repairing his broomstick. The presence of broomsticks strongly symbolises the professional and social identity of the residents of the *basti*. Moreover, the presence of the Valmiki temple in the colony is emblematic of the community’s pride and how they perceive themselves socially—vis-à-vis their work

and the rest of society. One of my first interactions in the *basti* was with Ravi Ram, a veteran worker who strongly associated himself with the Congress party (I explain this in the latter half of this section). For him, the relevance of the *basti* lies in the fact that ‘Azaadi yahin se shuru hui hai’, which means ‘the freedom struggle of the country started from this basti’. More than anything, for him, Azaadi meant that Gandhi came and stayed in the colony for 214 days, and according to his narrative, since then, most prime ministers of the country started their political careers by visiting the *basti*. While it is difficult to ascertain which prime ministers visited the *basti*, it is important to understand how Ravi Ram and his co-workers see Gandhi’s visit as a symbol of national importance that shaped the *basti*’s social history. Even though Ravi Ram expressed his differences with the present ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), he took pride in the fact that the SBA was launched from the Valmiki Basti.

Describing the living conditions of sanitation workers, Ravi Ram selectively criticised the parties in power. As a Congress party worker, he saw little progress or promotion after Gandhi’s visit and during the Congress’s tenure for a move towards the upliftment of the community. He remarked, ‘mano jabse Gandhiji aaye hain tabse sab badal gaya’, which translates to ‘since the time Gandhiji visited, everything has changed’. However, these remarks were full of contradictions. The remark explicitly implied that their living conditions had significantly changed since Gandhi’s visit, but simultaneously, he complained about the living and working conditions of sanitation workers during the 1960s and 1970s, and how many of their leaders, such as Ram Rakha, Ratan Lal Balmiki, and Bhoop Singh, staged protests during the 1970s to improve their living and working conditions. Some of the demands were for promotion and permanent positions in municipal services, followed by the construction of *pakka* (concrete) toilets because the prevalence of *kutcha* (made of mud) toilets meant that sanitation workers had to carry the

human excreta with their hands and dump it in the septic tanks near their own houses. While these problems continue to persist, especially difficulties with promotion and permanent posts, Ravi Ram feels that the Congress provided the community with a better platform to articulate their concerns. He takes pride in the fact that he retired as a foreman from the services.

He believes that since the time the BJP has come to power, there has been an increase in the privatisation and contractualisation of sanitation jobs. As a foreman, he had appointed 1,400 people on a temporary basis, and none of them have been made permanent since 2014. He further echoed the concerns of many other sanitation workers that higher posts such as that of the ASI and chief SI are not openly advertised, and they are unaware of the recruitment procedures. Moreover, even if sanitation workers are promoted to higher positions, they are promoted just two or three years before their retirement age, which means the workers cannot claim the full benefit of their promotion. Some of the workers who gathered around us during the interview also stated that the present government does not provide travelling allowance, dearness allowance (TA/DA), and Diwali bonus. As others expressed their views about the present-day working conditions, Ravi Ram said, 'We do not want to do this job, we want education', but simultaneously, he also remarked, 'There are lot of works that Dalits do, but this is actually pure work'. These statements reveal how the community members at once want to liberate themselves from this work but also simultaneously take pride in it³⁹ and are, in fact, practising Ambedkar's logic of 'graded inequality'⁴⁰. By arguing that sanitary work

³⁹ Such complexities are further exacerbated by the fact many sanitation workers take pride in their work because it gives them the security of a permanent government job. Hence, they find various ways to justify and eulogise their work by calling it as pure work.

⁴⁰ Ambedkar used the term 'graded inequality' specifically in Indian context. Graded inequality, unlike inequality, is unique and central to the caste system in India. There is no one oppressor and the oppressed. Different castes bear the burden and benefits of oppressor and oppressed differently, apart from Brahmins

is better, cleaner, and more 'pure' than others, Ravi Ram is actually hierarchising various forms of defiled work and reinforcing the purity and pollution boundaries. I discuss this contradiction later in the chapter, where I examine how different forms of identity-based assertions and practices, such as Ambedkar Jayanti and ritualistic practices of Valmiki samaj, although contradictory in nature, are celebrated simultaneously by the community members. Such assertions then also reveal multi-layered aspects of their everyday life and social identity.

He further solidified his views about the BJP by commenting that the BJP is a *Baman-Baniya* party, meaning that the party is constituted by upper castes such as Brahmins and Baniyas, and they do not want Balmikis to excel in any other field. They believe that the Balmikis are suited only for sanitation work, and had it not been for the Congress, this government would have destroyed their existence ('Hume mitti mein mila dete'). These concerns also stem from the fact that sanitation workers have repeatedly been asked why they are paid so much for menial work. After expressing his concerns, Ravi Ram said that at least the Congress provided them with the space to articulate their concerns, but it is not the same with the BJP; the BJP wants to keep them in their 'place'.

Contrary to this, another retired sanitation worker from the Valmiki Basti, Sant Ram, had very different views from Ravi Ram. He also retired as a foreman from the services. He was an Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)⁴¹ party worker and claimed that he was the one who gave the party its symbol of the broom. Taking pride in sanitation work, he remarked: 'The symbol of the broom is the symbol of us and how important we are to this

and Ati-shudras (ex-untouchables). Brahmins, here, are the absolute beneficiaries, whereas Ati-shudras are the absolute oppressed. Middle castes in the hierarchy of caste structure are both the beneficiaries and also the oppressed.

⁴¹ AAP is a political party, which made its way into politics in 2012 and is currently in power in Delhi and Punjab.

city.’⁴² While it is difficult to verify this claim that he gave the AAP party its symbol, his association with the party and everyday experiences as a sanitation worker shaped his views, which differ from those of fellow workers such as Ravi Ram.

Before I could ask him any questions, he inquired about my caste background and remarked,

When you came, I was sleeping. I had to get up from my sleep to talk to you, and you could so easily enter my home. Is it possible for me to enter your house in a similar manner? I can never enter your house and talk to you one on one like you are talking to me.

Years of humiliation and the lived experience of working in the sanitation forces had concretised his views about the functioning of caste in city spaces. It is no surprise that most sanitation workers have borne the brunt of untouchability and are looked down upon in their work spaces—both in municipal offices and the residential areas and *dhalaos* they work in. Thus, for Sant Ram to make such a statement came from a deep sense of *ghrina* (contempt) he must have faced at the hands of upper-caste communities.

As Guru (1995, p. 40), writing about the experience of untouchability, argues, ‘spaces determine the emergence and efficacy of thought’. In the same vein, I contextualise Ravi Ram and Sant Ram’s narratives with respect to their social space, occupation, and everyday experiences. For Ravi Ram, his social space mattered tremendously. He was born in the Valmiki Basti. As a veteran worker and an elderly person of the colony, he had seen the *basti* transforming from a *kutchha* settlement into a *pakka* settlement, and his views were shaped by the forms of discrimination meted out to

⁴² As per the description on the party website, the broom symbolises the ‘daunting task of cleaning the country of corruption’. Thus, even though Sant Ram might have given the party its official election symbol but the meaning of the symbol for the party is starkly different from Ravi Ram’s remarks.

him and the community at large. It is difficult to confirm most of his remarks due to the lack of archival information on the area, but, nonetheless, I discuss his comments and remarks to understand his social world and how his identity as a sanitation worker, a Balmiki, and a resident of Valmiki Basti shaped his life-world and political subjectivity.

Sant Ram had a similar set of complaints about the ongoing privatisation of sanitation services in the city. He retired as a foreman from the services, and he remembered how in his younger days, he and his fellow workers used to pick up garbage from the local receptacles in the city and then carry it on their truck to the I.P. (Indraprastha) extension landfill, which is now closed. He recalled, during his tenure, for every one truck, there used to be one truck driver and four *beldaars* (helpers), who would work two shifts, but now, with the ongoing privatisation and mechanisation of waste management services, the number of workers required on the trucks have considerably reduced. He traced back all these changes to Sheila Dixit's time (Delhi's chief Minister from 1998–2013) and remarked that the Congress is equally complicit in worsening conditions as the BJP. Similarly, he discussed how earlier, the broomsticks used to be taller and sturdier; now, the broomsticks are much shorter, and they have to repair the broomsticks themselves. He then described how the community has historically been straitjacketed into sanitation work. He recalled how they were offered jobs in sanitation right after Class 8. Regardless of how educated they were, their socio-economic conditions pushed them into sanitation work. However, he also believed that the governments have deemed them (Balmikis) fit only for sanitation work. So much so that when many of the senior permanent workers get a salary of Rs 40,000–50,000 (£400–500), people question why these workers get such high salaries for 'menial' work. To this, Sant Ram remarked, 'We toil physically for so many hours and we do not even deserve a salary of Rs 40,000 and when these upper-caste people scribble their pen on

papers and they get such high salaries’. He further added, ‘People think they can pay us Rs. 20–30 and make us clean drains. As if our existence and work do not mean anything’.

These frustrations were further articulated through his cynicism towards political parties, in particular, the Congress and the BJP. While he, like Ravi Ram, believes that the BJP is a party of Brahmins and Baniyas and has been detrimental to their existence, the Congress, according to him, has been equally complicit in forcing the Balmikis into sanitation work and has practised ‘silent casteism’ for decades. Unlike many other residents of the *basti* who took pride in Gandhi’s stay in the *basti*, Sant Ram argued, ‘If we are “Harijan”—Children of god—then who are these upper-caste people? Why are we seen differently from others?’ He believes that the callous remarks people make often stem from a lack of concern towards the community and their living and working conditions, and the community has been historically used by political parties to further their ends. He briefly mentioned that the Balmikis have been a big vote bank for the Congress and the BJP, and they have always used the community members to stoke communal violence; yet one sees the precarious work conditions faced by the community even today.

As a historical site that houses sanitation workers in Delhi, the Valmiki Basti has provided a space for political articulation. Whether the sweepers’ community is happy with the preceding or current political regime, they have expressed their concerns through various mediums—either through political activism and unionisation or through cultural processions such as Valmiki Jayanti (which commences from the *basti*). Some of the most pertinent protest demonstrations against informalisation and privatisation of sanitation work, or even in the context of the recent Hathras rape case (Chalwadi & Swaroop, 2020) have been staged in front of the *basti*.

In the next section, I examine the present day socio-economic conditions of sanitation workers and how that shapes their political subjectivity and assertions in the face of exploitative work conditions.

Humiliation and Assertions

The East Delhi Municipality Corporation (EDMC) is notorious for its corruption, and this has significantly affected the living conditions of sanitation workers in the area. As per the reportage in *The Times of India*, a national daily, sanitation workers in East Delhi had not received their salary since December 2020, following which they resorted to strike on 16 January 2021. Usually, during these strikes, sanitation workers refuse to clean the streets and drains, and they often work in close cooperation with informal waste pickers and private waste picking companies to stop them from collecting garbage. These strikes are further exacerbated by sanitation workers by throwing garbage on the streets. The strike held in the second week of January was no different, and its repercussions spread to areas across east Delhi. Concerned by the growing outrage among the middle-class residents of the city and the growing ‘disorder’ caused by the dumping of trash on the streets, the EDMC officials were forced to clear the dues of sanitation workers in the first week of February, following which the strike was called off. However, before the strike was called off, the EDMC filed a plea against sanitation workers for striking and for creating a nuisance for the public by stopping the PPP-led garbage removal trucks. As per the *Hindustan Times’* reportage, The EDMC’s standing counsel, Manu Chaturvedi, argued in the court stating that the sanitation workers were protesting even though their salaries will be cleared till December 2020 (Banka, 2021). The court bench, constituted of

Justice Vipin Sanghi and Justice Rekha Palli, came down heavily on the sanitation workers and said,

Everyone should realise that in a civilised society, such anarchy cannot prevail and it is essential to maintain rule of law and public order, so that all authorities including police can take measures to deal with the menace created by miscreants.

To this, they further added, '[W]e are observing that if the MCD employees have any grievance and resort to a legal strike that does not entitle them to take law into their own hands and create anarchy'. However, in order to 'protect' the interest of the workers, the EDMC mayor gave the statement that the 'sanitation workers are like a family and that no legal action would be taken against any of them' (The Hindustan Times, 2020). Finally, the strike was called off when the EDMC cleared the prior dues.

The statements made by the two judges and the EDMC mayor are emblematic of how these institutions look at the plight of sanitation workers. While the judges agreed that sanitation workers have the right to protest and resort to legal action, their active participation in the strike by resorting to dumping trash on the streets and 'waylaying garbage removal and threatening the driver' of private companies that continued to collect garbage was referred to as anarchy, and those who were involved in these actions were labelled 'miscreants'. It is ironic that depriving sanitation workers of two months' salary—which could affect household expenditure, medical expenses, school/college of children, and delay in paying house rent—due to a lack of funds is accepted as the norm, whereas their active participation in a strike is referred to as anarchy. Moreover, the mayor's act of referring to sanitation workers as family reeks of duplicity. His office was responsible for the delay in the salary, and, as I will explain later in this section, the EDMC office is equally responsible for caste-based discrimination as the residents of the area. Thus, for the workers, the mayor's remark about family only added insult to injury.

My interactions with sanitation workers in East Delhi started on a similar note as the conversations with the workers of Valmiki Basti and Sultanpuri. However, unlike in Valmiki Basti, here, I had the chance to interact with young and middle-aged workers who were furious with their present-day working conditions and were influenced by Ambedkarite activism. One of my key informants was Hukkum Singh, a 50-year-old contractual municipal worker from the Balmiki community. He started this work at the age of 19 and has to date remained a temporary worker. The job of sanitation workers is divided into three categories—permanent, temporary, and casual workers. Permanent workers, as the name suggests, have a permanent job, are relieved from the services at the age of retirement, and get regular increments in their salary. Temporary workers, on the other hand, perform the same task but can be fired at any time and are not eligible for regular salary increments. Most of them have been getting Rs. 13,000 per month for many years and are not eligible for any kind of promotion at the job. Moreover, casual workers are recruited based on demand, that is, when a permanent worker is on leave, and they are reimbursed for their work accordingly.

My interactions with Hukkum Singh spanned the period from late January 2020 to September 2021. After March 2020, all my interactions with Hukkum Singh were via WhatsApp calls wherein he would update me about their work conditions during COVID times and the strike led by the EDMC sanitation workers in January 2021.

During my first interaction with Hukkum Singh, he told me, ‘Madam, you ask whatever you want. I do not even know where to start from. I am full of anger’. With regards to their work conditions, he too complained about the quality of the broomstick and how they have to pay out of their own pocket to replace the stick and peel off the broom so that it is easy to use it. He said that it takes Rs. 250–300 to repair one broom. Similarly, he talked about the instrument he uses to clean drains in the surrounding

areas.⁴³ He told me how he has to replace the stick of the instrument on his own, and moreover, they are not provided with any kind of protective equipment such as gloves and face shields. These conditions are further exacerbated by institutional casteism. According to Hukkum Singh's narrative, in one of the East Delhi areas, there are around 50 Muslim sanitation workers, but they do not really perform sanitation work. Instead, they carry out clerical chores for senior officials of the EDMC. He said the same about OBC and other upper-caste people who were recruited as sanitation workers but never turned up for their duty. Moreover, the upper-caste workers were encouraged to pursue diploma courses and apply for the post of an ASI. Frustrated by these appointments, he remarked, 'If they have the courage to take our post and salaries, then they should also have the courage to work with us'. He feels that while the EDMC has funds to hire upper-caste workers who do not really perform sanitation work, they do not have funds to reimburse their actual sanitation workers for TA and DA. To quote him, 'Do we have the right to live or not? How can you expect us to send our kids to decent schools when we merely survive on a salary of Rs 13,000 every month'. To this, he further added,

Our living conditions are worse than that of animals. Our residential areas are never cleaned. They are never cleaned because our brothers do not get their salaries on time. How can we complain against our own brothers when we face a similar form of discrimination at our workplace?

We often come across an untenable notion that casteism does not exist in urban areas. As I mapped the everyday forms of discrimination faced by sanitation workers, it was evident that not only are caste-based practices prevalent, they are present in a direct and blatant form—untouchability. Whenever sanitation workers need water to quench

⁴³ Drain cleaning is different from manual scavenging. It does not require sanitation workers to step in the manhole and clean it with their hands.

their thirst while working, they are given water in a separate plastic glass or a bottle. The residents do not want to touch the glass or bottle once it has been touched by the sanitation workers. Furthermore, Hukkum Singh described how in the event of a death in their colony, nobody from the upper-caste communities comes to lend their hand to carry the dead body. He remarked, 'To upper-caste people, we are impure in our death also'.

There is no dearth of narratives about the acts of untouchability faced by sanitation workers. In what follows, I examine how Hukkum Singh and his fellow workers have challenged these acts of untouchability—most often in the forms of everyday assertions and by turning the tables on upper-caste people and making them realise that untouchability lies in them (Sarukkai, 2009)⁴⁴. I understand these acts as outcome of a deep sense of humiliation that sanitation workers have felt over the decades. Here humiliation is understood through multiple lenses. Guru, in his work, *Humiliation Claims and Context*, puts forth various definitions of humiliation. In the book, Parekh defines humiliation as 'disrespecting and demeaning others, damaging their self-respect and causing them moral hurt and pain' (2009, p. 6); Palshikar defines it as 'in a radical sense ... an unwelcome assault on human dignity' (2009, p. 7).

In one of our interactions, I was walking with Hukkum Singh to his workplace to see how he performed his work. His main task was to clean the drains in the area. While Hukkum Singh was taking out his tools, I asked him:

Me: 'Are you going to clean the drain wearing your clean clothes? Isn't your shift already over?'

⁴⁴ Sarukkai argues that the site of untouchability lies in the person who practises it. He contends that, 'being an untouchable points to the inability of the toucher rather than any ability of the touched person' (p.43) because the act of touching others includes touching oneself and experiencing one's own self.

Hukkum Singh (slightly annoyed by my question): ‘Can we not wear clean clothes? What is the problem?’

Me (replying hesitantly): ‘I meant to say why would you dirty your clothes just to show me how you work?’

Hukkum Singh: ‘Ok. I get your point. EDMC does not provide us with any uniform, and people think just because we do sanitation work, we must also wear worn-out clothes. They get shocked when they see us in ‘proper’ clothes. Our clean appearance is a mark of danger for upper-caste people because then there is no visible difference between them and us.’

For Hukkum Singh and his friends, wearing ‘clean’, ‘proper’ clothes is also a form of assertion to make themselves visible in society. One of Hukkum Singh’s co-workers, Bhajan Singh, told me how once he was walking past a juice shop on his beat (route) and the shopkeeper asked him to clean the area next to his shop and said: ‘Hey you, clean this area, and I will give you Rs. 10.’ Offended by the tone of the shopkeeper and not so much by the idea of cleaning, Bhajan Singh remarked:

I will give you Rs. 100 for cleaning your own space. Will you do it then? Who are you to ask me to clean this area and pay me Rs. 10? I am a government worker and I get Rs. 30,000 to do this work. I do not need your money.

As Bhajan Singh was narrating this incident, he said it is not the work that is a problem for him but the way they are treated by upper-caste people, and to this, he further added: ‘Had that person spoken to me politely and respectfully, I would have cleaned the area very nicely.’

Many such incidents have propelled sanitation workers to reverse the order of casteist practices. They (sanitation workers) said it was very clear to them that if upper-

caste people were going to practice untouchability, they were also going to do the same with them. Hukkum Singh remarked in a very assertive tone: ‘We clean their dirt every day. So, then who is dirty here? They are the ones producing the dirt, and still, they think we are dirty. What kind of logic is this? Dirt lies in them, not us.’ The reality of their everyday lived experience has forced them to push the gaze of casteist practices onto the upper-caste people. They remarked, ‘We will ignore them before they can ignore us’. They further materialised these practices via everyday acts of refusing to take *baksheesh* (gratuity) that sanitation workers have traditionally received from upper-caste households. In northern India, it is a common practice to give some kind of *baksheesh*—in cash or kind—to sanitation workers during Holi and Diwali. Growing up in Delhi, I often witnessed this practice. My mother would give raw rice, lentils, a packet of sweets, and *baksheesh* of Rs. 20/30 to the sanitation workers. To date, as Hukkum Singh narrated, many households give them Rs. 10 and rotten sweets. However, now they have taken a firm decision to reject these forms of gratuity because they see it as an insult. In rejecting these practices, they have carved a space for themselves and made it clear to upper-caste households that they shall not live their lives at their mercy. Moreover, a continuous sense of abjection at the behest of the municipality and society, in general, has compelled the workers to carve their own space in the area—both physically and metaphorically. It is a known fact that the majority of sanitation workers in Delhi do not have any place to rest in between or after their shifts. Most of them rest either in nearby public parks or find a corner for themselves to sit, have their lunch, or rest. Accessing public spaces also comes at a cost because they are often chided by residents of the area for ‘polluting’ common spaces. These practices have forced sanitation workers to rent a room of their own, which costs around Rs. 3,000–4,000 per month, which is paid out of their own pocket. All my conversations with Hukkum Singh and his colleagues were held in this

room, which could accommodate around seven to eight people. During my first visit, the room had a photograph of B.R. Ambedkar. However, during my second visit, I noticed Ambedkar's photograph had been replaced with Valmiki's photograph. When I asked Hukkum Singh why they replaced Ambedkar's photo with Valmiki, he said they were forced to do so on the orders of their SI. Although the SI and ASI are usually given a separate room (office space) of their own, in this particular zone of East Delhi, that is not the case. With respect to Ambedkar's photograph, they were quick to reply that they were looking forward to Ambedkar Jayanti (celebrated on 14 April). They have a holiday on this day, and they were very keen to celebrate the occasion in their colony and impart the teachings of Dr Ambedkar to their children.

Hukkum Singh is a firm Ambedkarite activist and believes in the power of the constitution; yet, he knows that his children might end up in the same occupation. He once told me that he had sworn on Baba Sahib (Bhim Rao Ambedkar—the father of the Indian constitution) that his children would not end up in this occupation, and still, somewhere at the back of his mind, he is concerned that his children might have the same future. I once asked him: ‘You challenge your work conditions in court and you have filed so many petitions but do you never challenge the work in itself’, and to this he replied, ‘Madam, what are you even saying? For us to even think like this is a crime. This society thinks we are only good for cleaning work and they want to keep us in “our place”’. These sentiments and the visceral feeling of humiliation have compelled him to find strength in Ambedkar's philosophy. On occasions such as Ambedkar Jayanti, Buddh Purnima, and 14 October—the day Ambedkar converted to Buddhism, Hukkum Singh always sent me WhatsApp messages indicating the importance of Buddha and Ambedkar. Unlike many of the other workers, Hukkum Singh consciously never celebrated Holi and Diwali (Hindu festivals) because, for him, these festivals symbolise upper-caste

superiority. Even as I was interacting with him, he asked me, ‘Madam, I am always a bit hesitant to send you these WhatsApp messages because I do not know what you think of Ambedkar’ and then he remarked, ‘I do not understand how can upper-caste women in India think of their freedom without Ambedkar’s contribution. He was the one who fought against the Hindu Code Bill because of which women were granted absolute right to property. Agreeing with his views on the Hindu Code Bill and his assertion of Ambedkarite ideals, we concluded our interview. Hukkum Singh continues to hold onto his anger and struggles against the oppression of untouchability and the living conditions of sanitation workers in his zone.

Identities in Flux: Sanskritisation, Rituals, and Activism

In the following section, I examine how the Balmikis navigate their identities, to understand their social world and political traditions. Many of them are conflicted and confused about how they view their caste identity. Balmiki is a social and religious identity imposed upon them from above, and many of them have accepted it as a given. While many have moved towards Sankritisation⁴⁵ and follow the rituals of *Sanatan Dharam* (a form of idol worship), the past few years have seen a resurgence of Ambedkarite activism—anti-caste politics—amongst the community members, which is antithetical to such rituals. These conflicting developments show that Balmikis oscillate between different forms of identities. Nicolas Jaoul (2011) observes that these identities often intersect with one another in everyday life. Principally, they might be contradictory and inconsistent in nature; however, as one ethnographically maps their everyday social

⁴⁵ The term Sanskritisation was coined by M.N. Srinivas (1956). It is referred to as a set of ‘Brahmanical’ practices adopted by lower-caste groups to ‘improve and uplift’ their social and caste status.

and political life, one realises it is not easy to neatly compartmentalise these identities. In the following section, I show that there are numerous inconsistencies in the perceptions of the Balmikis' social status, ritual, and religious practices. In doing so, I contend that the Balmikis as a community have never emulated upper caste rituals and practices in their totality. Rather, there has always been an ideology of protest, even within these emulative behaviours. Thus, in this section, I explore how members of the Balmiki community put forth different forms of identity and practice different rituals, and what these rituals and identities entail for the community.

Early in my fieldwork, I naively asked one of the union leaders of sanitation workers: 'What do you understand by the term Balmiki? Was it not the saint Valmiki who wrote the *Ramayana*?' To this, he responded,

I also wonder if it was lord Valmiki who wrote *Ramayana*, then why are we considered untouchables? Is the pen not the wisest weapon of all? If Valmiki was a Brahmin, then who are we?

One of the most common responses I encountered to this question was 'Hum hai kaun?', meaning 'who are we?' Most of the community members were unaware of their past and how the overarching Balmiki identity emerged. Such responses propelled me to enquire further into what the present-day Balmiki identity means for sanitation workers.

One of my key informants, who helped me understand the dilemmas of the Balmiki identity, was a priest from the Valmiki temple in Delhi. Valmiki temples in Delhi are mostly headed by Balmiki priests, a post based on the *guru–shishya parampara* (teacher-disciple tradition). My informant told me that most of the people who visit the Valmiki temple are Balmikis and they often see themselves as different from Hindus. Nonetheless, they pray to Hindu gods and goddesses along with *Bhagwan* (god) Valmiki.

In several Valmiki temples across the city (mostly located in Balmiki colonies), we see the presence of Hindu gods and goddesses. Many Balmikis however, do not see any contradiction in following practices of both the religions and celebrating Hindu festivals along with Valmiki traditions.

The priest was quick to point out that Balmikis, as an oppressed community, have often been exploited by the larger Hindu sentiments. He further added, that *Kawar yatra*—a procession carried out by young Hindu men during the nine day Hindu festival of Navratri—is mostly carried out by Dalit men.⁴⁶ Moreover, the community members largely concur that their Dalit identity has been exploited by the Hindu right-wing to cater to their own needs—the 1991 Babri Masjid riots are a case in point⁴⁷ (Prashad, 2000). Given that the fieldwork was carried out in the thick of the anti-CAA⁴⁸ protests, followed by the subsequent riots in north-east Delhi⁴⁹, there was a palpable anti-Hindutva sentiment among many members of the Balmiki community at the time. Contrary to their

⁴⁶ Increasingly, the presence of Kawar Yatris on the streets of Delhi is seen as form of hooliganism—Yatris are mostly drunk and dancing on the streets, often obstructing the traffic. Upper-caste city dwellers often complain that they cause a nuisance on the streets.

⁴⁷ The Babri Masjid riots took place in December 1992. A Hindutva-led mob stormed the mosque arena and demolished parts of it, resulting in clashes between Hindus and Muslims. Prashad (2000) observes, in the 1980s, after being disenchanted with the Congress party, the Balmikis came under the influence of Hindu right-wing organisations, such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and participated in the communal riots.

⁴⁸ The Citizenship Amendment Act was passed in December, 2019. As per the act, Hindu, Sikhs, Jains, Christians and Buddhists migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan can make claims for Indian citizenship. However, this simple principle will not be applied to Muslim communities, as they do not constitute persecuted/threatened minorities in these countries. Given the religious bias of the act, many civil society groups and common citizens in India took to the streets in December to protest against and challenge the validity of the act.

⁴⁹ The Anti-CAA protests quickly spread across the country and Delhi, the capital city, became one of the prominent sites. In February 2020, the protest sites in north-east Delhi were attacked by Hindu right-wing groups and soon riots erupted in the area. The riots were projected as clashes between Hindus and Muslims and the fact that both the communities were injured was repeatedly highlighted. However, as per the reportage of *The Caravan* (Vats, 2020) and *The Wire* (2020), one can safely argue the riots were purposefully instigated towards Muslim community in the wake of anti-CAA protests in areas such as Chandbagh, Maujpur, and Jaffrabad (Muslim dominated areas).

past involvement in the Babri Masjid riots along with upper caste Hindus, Balmikis did not participate in the recent riots, two decades later.

Many members of the community have come to believe today that the Hindu caste order and the present-day dominance of Hindutva forces is responsible for their oppressive and precarious position in society. Yet what we see is the persistence of varied forms of Hindu social and religious practices entrenched in Balmiki traditions, which are often inconsistent with the community's political aspirations challenging the Hindu caste order. The convergence of these practices also reflects how the social world of sanitation workers is riddled with contradiction. There is an aspiration to free themselves from the clutches of the oppressive caste system and, simultaneously, a strong desire social acceptance.

In this section, I first explore the common religious practices and traditions of Valmiki Samaj⁵⁰. Though many of these traditions are influenced by Hinduism, the community distinguishes them from mainstream Hinduism in somewhat ambiguous ways. I also examine the journey of one of my interlocutors, who comes from the Balmiki community and has been an Ambedkarite activist for the last 10 years, and analyse how he moves between the world of activism and the rituals associated with the community. In the process of mapping these various aspects of the community, I examine the meanings of these practices and their repercussions on identity-making for the Balmikis.

⁵⁰ Samaj refers to societal congregation of people to perform religious practices.

Rituals and Practices

These hymns, written on the board outside the Valmiki temple in Valmiki basti, Mandir Marg (Figure 3.5), are a celebration of *Bhagwan* Valmiki's saintly presence, declaring how great he is to have written the *Ramayana* and to have protected Sita from all evils. It is a celebration of his many virtues. An excerpt from the hymn reads as follows:

He is the god of mercy and sympathy, do away with all sorrows. His followers are pleading in the prayers that it is because of him that they get their food, money and happiness. He is the one who consummated *Yagya* for the Pandavas. Everyone who worships him with faith, that person's prayers will be successful.

These words of devotion may have a universal appeal across religions, but in this specific context, they are primarily influenced by and derived from Hinduism's dominant ritualistic practices. The style of these hymns is in the exact image of Hindu *aartis* dedicated to gods and goddesses of Hinduism, except that *Bhagwan* Valmiki appears as their central figure. The prevalence of such hymns, their interpretation as acts of devotion, their repetitions and rhythms, and even the way in which they are sung is deeply imbricated in Hindu religious practices. References to the *Ramayana*, Pandavas, and Sita in these hymns are a clear indication of how the Valmiki Samaj is deeply embedded within the fold of Hinduism. This image is representative of the dichotomy that the Balmikis continue to contend with, of wanting to distinguish themselves from Hindus, while remaining bounded by Hinduism's religious practices.

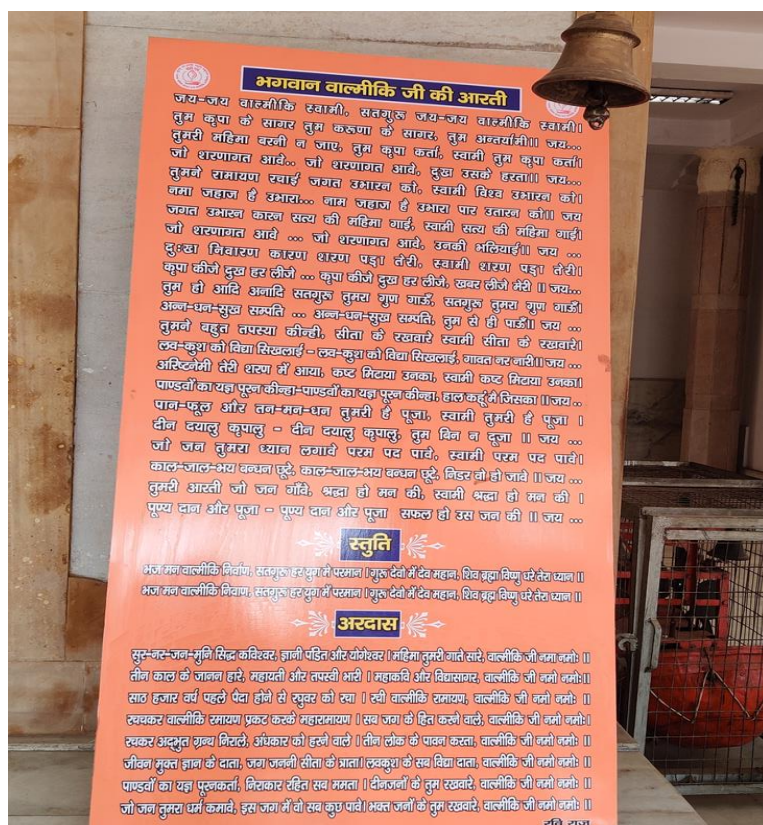


Figure 3.4: A board of hymns outside the Valmiki Temple in Delhi.

Source: Photograph taken by the author

I further verify these assertions by analysing the narratives of the community members during the celebration of Valmiki Jayanti⁵¹ in Delhi. Mapping the everyday rituals of the Balmiki community and getting an insight into their lives was fraught with tension at times, particularly in a colony such as Valmiki Basti in Mandir Marg. The community members in this area are very guarded about their lives and did not easily open up about their quotidian religious practices. Therefore, my understanding of these practices was facilitated by my interlocutor, Rakesh, who covered Valmiki Jayanti processions on my behalf and helped me gain a deeper insight into the community's beliefs and practices.

⁵¹ Valmiki Jayanti is celebrated every year on 28th October to commemorate the birth of lord Valmiki. It typically involves a huge procession starting from Red fort (Delhi) and congregating at Valmiki Basti on Mandir Marg.

On Valmiki Jayanti, many community members proudly asserted their Balimiki identity. For them it is a day to celebrate their god Valmiki and the history of the community. Many of them claimed that they are Valmikis but are also Hindus, and in the same conversation, they hailed Ambedkar as well. One of them said:

We are Balmiki and we are Hindus. It is a different thing that the upper-caste Hindus do not consider us as Hindus but we are descendants of lord Valmiki. He was the one who wrote the *Ramayana*. If Valmiki had not written the *Ramayana*, then there would not have been no lord Ram. And we also pray to Baba Bhimrao Ambedkar. He is the one who showed the path of liberation.

Palpably, many members of the community do not see any inconsistency in following Hinduism while hailing Ambedkar's ideas, despite the latter's lifelong crusade against the dogmas of Hinduism. On Valmiki Jayanti for instance, the practice of distributing sweets in the form of *prasad* (a religious offering), wearing *tilak* (religious mark on the forehead), carrying the *thaali* (religious plate for offerings to the God), along with the visual imagery of marigolds and the colour saffron (a colour typically associated with Hinduism) evoked striking resemblance to Hindu religious celebrations. Thus, even though the community members see Balmiki as their primary social identity and view Ambedkar's ideas as the path to their emancipation, they aspire to fit in the broader fold of Hinduism. I understand these inconsistencies as an outcome of their degraded and devalued caste position, their experience of humiliation in Hindu society, and their anti-caste political aspirations.

A further aspect of these identity conflicts surfaces in other quotidian practices of the community. My interlocutor Rakesh, who identifies as an Ambedkarite, was comfortable taking me around his residential area, Sultanpuri—a rehabilitated colony of

sanitation workers in north-west Delhi. The colony houses members of the Balmiki community from different states (UP, Haryana, and Rajasthan)—most work as sanitation workers, while others are involved in occupations such as pig rearing.

The practice of pig rearing, as argued by Gutgutia (2020), is a traditional activity followed by members of the Balmiki community.⁵² There are a number of reasons for this practice, which are also connected to the community's religious rituals involving animal sacrifice. Gutgutia observes,

The Dalit community also rears pigs because it is the animal preferred and demanded by goddess Masani for sacrifice, a ritual important for the Dalit community. Equally raising pigs is like having a 'prepaid account' said a male participant, which can then easily be sold and used for sacrifice anytime, as the need arises. Pigs are either sold to other households wanting to please the goddess, primarily to traders who sell them on to butchers (Gutgutia, 2020).

An example of pig offering can be seen in goddess Masani's temple, located in Gurgaon (part of the Delhi NCR region). Masani is considered to be one of the supreme goddesses among the Balmikis and animal sacrifices to her are among the community's most popular rituals. It typically involves cutting off a pig's ear and offering the blood of the pig (*khoon ka bhog*)—as a sacrifice *surkhi* (blood)—to the goddess. As per my interlocutor's narrative, devotees usually visit the temple when a baby boy is born to pray for his good health. The visit to the temple is followed by a one-night stay where people come together and roast the pig's meat for a feast. Pig meat is the most common form of religious offering among the Balmikis. This can be seen as stemming from popular Hindu religious beliefs that deem cow meat as sacrilegious, while pig meat does not carry such

⁵² Pig rearing is also a common practice among other lower-caste communities, such as Khatiks, for food and pig bristles for making brushes (Doron & Jeffrey, 2018).

religious connotations. Moreover, other forms of meat are often expensive, making this an economically feasible choice for the Balmikis.

Similarly, another ritual followed is *dhai inth ki pooja* (two-and-a-half bricks prayer). Rakesh told me with a feeling of embarrassment that the ritual is performed to do away with all kinds of sins and bad luck. His wife had been following this ritual for a few years now to bring back financial stability to the house. It is typically conducted outside the household, where two and a half bricks are kept together in triangular form, and a chicken is sacrificed in the name of god (referred to as Bali Maharaj), followed by the lighting of a candle.

Although these rituals are distinct from upper-caste rituals, they broadly fall within the ambit of Hinduism, and even their gods and goddesses, such as Bali Maharaj and Masani Devi, are part of Hindu mythology. However, the coercive Hinduisation of lower-caste communities has forced them to adapt some aspects of these rituals to suit upper-caste sensibilities. For instance, even though the community members offer meat sacrifice in temples, they refrain from following such rituals within the household because of their seemingly ‘polluting’ attributes. Therefore, rituals like the *dhai inth ki pooja* cannot be undertaken within the household premises. Every household, as Rakesh informed me, has their own *bawri* (religious site) and its presence makes the household a ‘sacred’ and ‘pure’ site. The *bawris* are seen as ancestral heads of the household, and community members offer prayers to them. The mythological lineage of these *bawris* can be traced to Rajput (a dominant upper-caste community in Rajasthan) traditions emanating from the Jaharveer temple in the Churu district of Rajasthan, while the insistence on not practising animal sacrifice within the household is influenced by the Hindu logic of ‘purity’ and ‘pollution’ in religious practices (Douglas, 2002).

The adherence to such notions and adaptation of religious practices in accordance with Hindu beliefs demonstrate the community's attempts to sanskritise, a process which has kept them within the fold of Hinduism, albeit from a distance. Such predicaments further reinforce their dilemmas of conflicting identities.

Throughout the chapter, we observe that members of the Balmiki community strive to liberate themselves from prevailing hierarchies embedded within the structures of Hinduism and resist caste-based oppression. Yet we see that many community members follow rituals influenced by the processes of Hinduism. There is a certain ambiguity about how community members navigate their social identities, which, as many scholars (Jaoul, 2007; Gooptu, 2001) have argued, albeit in a different context, is a result of embedded power hierarchies.

Sifting through Ideological Paradigms

The catastrophic second wave of COVID-19 in India led to massive disruptions in people's lives. This also meant that I could not cover Ambedkar Jayanti, which is celebrated every year on 14 April. Dr B.R. Ambedkar was born on this day, and the celebrations on this day usually include processions and fairs around Parliament Street in Delhi. The fair is joined by well-meaning citizens, sanitation workers, and activists. However, this year was different. Most of the sanitation workers were either busy performing their duties in hospitals as frontline workers, and those who managed to take out some time celebrated the day in their residential areas. I was able to virtually access the celebrations through my interlocutor Rakesh, who organised celebrations in the Sultanpuri sanitation workers' colony in north-west Delhi.

During his growing-up years, Rakesh was hugely influenced by the preaching of the Valmiki Samaj and Hinduism and worked as a priest in a local Kaali (Hindu goddess) temple. Later in life, when he was introduced to Ambedkarite literature by fellow community members, he realised how the Balmiki identity was an imposition on the community and, in his words, ‘a form of *Manuwaad*⁵³ and *Brahminism*’. He has since been working as an active Ambedkarite activist and organises programmes in his locality and with other Dalit organisations across the city. As he narrated his journey from being a Balmiki to an Ambedkarite, he told me most of the educated professionals from the community, such as civil servants and politicians, come for Valmiki Jayanti celebrations and donate funds to the temples. However, these people never actively participate in public events that question the status quo of the community and the upper-caste imposition of the Balmiki identity, as it challenges the political opportunism of keeping the community in its place. Jaoul (2011), in his work, draws a similar parallel when he argues,

For pragmatic reasons, the party (BSP) did not attempt to criticise or substitute the Valmiki identity, though its Brahminical connotations were contrary to its own ideology. The party found it practical to rely on caste symbols that could easily be identifiable at the state/regional level. (p. 292)

Jaoul’s argument relates to the Bahujan Samajwadi Party (BSP), which is a party of Dalits and works towards the upliftment of the community. However, Rakesh articulated these concerns with respect to the Congress and the BJP, who have always seen Balmikis as their vote bank and challenging the Hinduised Balmiki identity would go against their very interest.

⁵³ *Manuwaad* as a term is used in a derogatory way against the dominance of prevailing brahminical caste order. It derives its source from the teachings of a Hindu text *Manusmriti*.

Jaoul (2011) discusses the figure of Dev Kumar, an Ambedkarite activist from UP, similar to Rakesh, who fought against Hindutva and worked towards throwing away the yoke of Brahminical identity imposed onto the community. He, along with other young activists, formed the Swayam Sudhar Samiti (Self-improvement Committee), which focused on the ideas of self-reliance and autonomy. These ideas were followed by a dominant focus on the education of the community and doing away with the imitation of upper-caste practices of luxurious weddings and donations in temples. Jaoul specifically points to the use of rhetoric deployed by Dev Kumar to inject Ambedkarite ideas into the community. He would often exploit his Balmiki identity to further his objectives. Similarly, I explore how Rakesh engaged with his community members to discuss Ambedkarite ideas, which were sometimes ambiguous in nature. His speech in his locality on the day of Ambedkar Jayanti was as follows:

Jai Bhim saathiyon [friends]. Today we are here to celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti. Baba Sahib Ambedkar was the biggest reformer of our community and the most educated man in the country. That is the reason he worked on the framing of the constitution and worked towards the liberation of Dalits. It is because of him that today we have the right to education and the right to government jobs, else we would have been still living an animal-like existence. He was from the Mahar caste and the Mahar caste in Maharashtra is an equivalent of Bhangi, Mehtars in North India. They were also part of the sanitation workforce. But as promised, Ambedkar threw away the yoke of caste, educated himself in the best universities of the world and worked towards the liberation of Dalits. Dalits were the most oppressed section of our society, who were forced to do all kinds of manual work and had no right to education and property. Baba Sahib showed us the way and asked us to leave villages and come to urban areas in search of jobs. Until now,

Chamars (Jaatavs) have followed the path of Baba Sahib and have educated themselves and benefitted from the reservations. We have always seen Chamars as our competitors because they are better off than us. Instead, we should get inspired by them and follow Ambedkar's path for the betterment of our community.

To this, Rakesh further added,

Earlier, our community members prayed to local gods and goddesses whose pasts have been erased by upper-caste Hindus. The history of our gods, like Bhairon baba, has been erased by Aryans. We were the real inhabitants of this country. Then Aryans came and took over our land and erased our past.

Unlike other members of the community who criticised Hinduism but were confused about Ambedkarite ideas and their Balmiki identity, Rakesh was very clear about his politics. He repeatedly claimed that he was a secularist and did not invoke the Balmiki identity to inject Ambedkarite ideas among his community members. He even stopped donating money for Valmiki Jayanti celebrations because he believes young and educated people should celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti instead. During our informal conversations, he often told me that he was very perturbed by his wife's Brahminical attitude. He said she fasts during every Navratri (a Hindu festival that spans over nine days and is celebrated in the autumn season) and *amavasya* (new moon) and believes that if she does all this, their financial situation will improve, and their children will get good jobs. Yet his firm commitment to Ambedkarite ideas seemed slightly convoluted and paradoxical when he spoke about the Balmiki people who were not so educated and identified themselves as Mewati. Mewatis in his area (Sultanpuri) worked as sanitation workers and reared pigs for their financial sustenance. Rakesh often referred to them as

‘kaale peelee log’ (Black and Yellow people)—a derogatory way of referring to people with darker skin colour. There was a sense of superiority when he talked about his kids and wife and the educated members of his community, who he felt were dressed properly, ‘good looking and proper’, and fair-skinned. In contrast, he felt that the Mewatis were still living an animal-like existence. He often stopped me from walking down the lanes inhabited by the Mewatis and told me that they are uncultured—they have no sense of hygiene and their women still wear face veils and cook in between the alleys, obstructing the way of passers-by. He preferred to maintain distance from the Mewatis because of their cultural outlook, and yet, he spoke about Ambedkarite ideals in a universal sense.

Thus, although Rakesh’s views on anti-caste struggles are well-informed, and he made claims against graded inequality in his speeches, we also see his discriminatory attitude towards fellow Mewatis. His attitude is reflective of subjective prejudices that were often not in consonance with his Ambedkarite ideals. However, these varied attitudes do not point towards any conclusive understanding of politics but are rather a reflection of subjective disposition and everyday cultural biases.

Conclusion

The first part of the chapter maps how the state engages with the processes of sanitary development, vis-à-vis the old and new institutions of waste management practices. While there have been advancements in waste management infrastructures in terms of machines (trommels and compressors) and incinerators, little has changed with respect to caste privileges and hierarchies. Although other caste communities have now entered the workforce, erstwhile Bhangis, Mehtars, and Chuhars—today known as Balmiki—still dominate the sanitation workforce. As evidenced earlier, with limited socio-economic

progress, the community members feel stuck and exasperated about their conditions. Earlier, they could pass on their jobs to their children, but now, with the increasing privatisation and informalisation of the sanitation workforce, such possibilities are bleak. Moreover, the hype around the SBA and its promotion by celebrities and Bollywood actors has left the community feeling alienated.

These developments around the SBA have whitewashed the question of caste. In the first phase of the SBA, we saw Gandhi being projected as the poster boy of cleanliness without any mention of his objectionable views on caste and cleanliness. His image added a moral legitimacy to the project of cleanliness. Similarly, recently, with the launch of the SBA 2.0, which focuses specifically on waste management and water scarcity, we see Ambedkar's photograph in the launch campaign. It is no surprise that his photo is a form of appeasement to the sweepers' community. Simultaneously, it is ironic how easily Ambedkar and Gandhi's images are brought together. The ideological tussle between the two is well-known (Rodrigues, 2011). It is evident that their views on cleanliness and caste are not compatible with each another. Yet we see a conflation of their symbols in the SBA—evidence of a form of sheer political opportunism.

There is a unique, albeit not new, intersection between the state, private entities, and waste management in Delhi. The process of privatisation started in 2009 (Demaria & Schindler, 2016; Kornberg, 2019). Not surprisingly, the privatisation of waste management services was brought about for more 'efficient' services—with a more 'disciplined workforce', technologically advanced machines, and training programmes. Amidst all this, however, is a caste-based workforce. What appears to be a 'sanitised', 'immaculate', and public-private system of waste management service is riddled with contradictions, with state-led practices of extending caste hierarchies to further caste privileges.

Thus, in the name of ‘casteless’ technological advancements and privatisation, we see the furthering of caste privileges through state-led and societal institutions. We see, to quote Hodges, ‘how avowedly caste-neutral institutions unevenly distribute a visibility of caste’ (Hodges 2018, p. 194). The question of caste is invisibilised either in a way that its hyper visibility is completely acceptable or there is a complete indifference towards the actor who performs the work of cleanliness. In the context of privatisation and waste work, Hodges argues, ‘the performance of caste privilege is central to the perpetuation of these ostensibly casteless institutions’ (2018, p. 193).

In the second part of the chapter, we look at the social and political world of the sweepers’ community. In the chapter, I map the sociocultural life and political subjectivities of the community members from various lenses. From veteran workers to present-day workers, everyone expressed their condition as an outcome of historical injustice and channelised their concerns and asserted their identity through political parties, everyday forms of resistance, or cultural and religious practices. The prevailing Ambedkarite discourse seen among many workers often overlaps with their Balmiki identity. Sometimes the activism is followed by looking down upon fellow caste brethren, as in Rakesh’s case. While I was interviewing workers in the Valmiki Basti, some of them criticised the Hinduised caste-based order and political parties that are dominated by the upper castes, but simultaneously, they practised certain traditions of the Valmiki Samaj and were full of praise for the Valmiki Temple in their vicinity. In the process, we see multiple ways in which sanitation workers construe their identities and how these identities often overlap with one another. Often through these identities—both religious and political, they assert their social value beyond the straight-jacketed notions of being a sanitation worker.

In the subsequent chapters, I shift the focus from sanitation work and workers to landfills, informal waste pickers, and materials. In doing so, I analyse how the dynamics of cleaning work, the human and machine-led infrastructures, the spaces of discarded materials and social relations take on different forms.

Chapter 4

Making of the Bhalswa Landfill: Spaces, People and Infrastructure

Introduction

On 1 September 2017, a part of the 50-metre-high, gigantic Ghazipur landfill, located in the eastern periphery of Delhi, came crashing down, killing two people and injuring five. A large heap of garbage fell into the Kondli canal, adjacent to the landfill. This sudden fall, although not entirely unexpected, came as a rude shock to city dwellers, the Delhi government, and the East Delhi Municipal Corporation (EDMC). While the administration was busy rescuing the injured and concerned itself mainly with clearing the area, the nearby residents and commuters were agonised by this unusual fall; the collapse of the landfill led to massive traffic jams around national highway 24 NH-24 and along the stretch of the Anand Vihar area. Many national dailies published their 'expert opinion' on the immediate cause of the fall, citing rainfall, which led to excessive water accumulation and increased weight on the landfill. The Chief Minister of Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal, visited the site of the accident, expressed concern and sympathy for such a deplorable 'accident', ordered the immediate closure of the Ghazipur landfill along with the Bhalswa landfill, and announced monetary compensation for the family of the deceased/victims. He termed the current system of waste management (un-engineered

landfill) 'ancient'. The chief minister urged an enquiry into 'modern' techniques of waste management along with alternative sites for dumping facilities. And so this unfortunate spectacle that caused a 'nuisance' to public life by aggravating the traffic situation, this 'unorderly' presence of waste on the streets, and the tragic death of two, faded away from public memory. As anticipated, the un-engineered landfill is still functional along with some 'modern-technological' facilities. Following this incident, nothing substantial was investigated beyond the immediate cause of the collapse of the landfill (Bhattacharya & Yadav, 2017). The existing fractured and dilapidated landfill had exhausted its capacity in 2002, exceeding a height of 20 metres. As per a media report, '[O]ver saturation of the site and steep slope that didn't stand at the weight of this daily dump, is likely to have caused the collapse. The heavy rain acted like a trigger to the slide' (Sambyal, 2017).

The collapse of the landfill and the post-fall remedial measures lay bare the shortcomings of the solid waste management (SWM) system and the limited understanding of the waste crisis in the city today. The excessive focus on the need for a modern 'techno-mechanical' infrastructural landscape, that is, the landfill, while invisibilising the spaces of waste, coupled with burgeoning waste production and followed by the labour of waste pickers around the landfill, reveals a lack of insight into the contemporary waste crisis. The landfills as receptacles of the cities' waste are construed as a site of physical infrastructure based on their 'technical-logistical function'. As Fredericks (2014) argues, the rendering of an object as waste and the managerial processes associated with its removal are deeply rooted in the social and economic structuring of society. A similar path is being followed in the context of Delhi.

In this chapter, following the earlier vignette of the landfill collapse, I discuss the socio-spatial history of the Bhalswa landfill. The interactions between material, spaces, and people in conjunction with the governmental ordering of refuse over the colonial and post-colonial periods is the central theme of this chapter. Generally, the waste crisis is associated with SWM and is limited to bureaucratic and managerial concerns. Little attention is given to the 'becoming of waste' (Mirza, 2019). The process of objects taking on the social characteristic of rubbish is rooted in social and cultural values of purity and pollution. From this perspective, an analysis of the continuous efforts at pushing landfills towards the periphery of the city reveals how waste and its infrastructure are intricately enmeshed in urban social and economic value structures and cultural taboos (Tripathy & Mcfarlane, 2022). Taking into consideration the processes of urbanisation and sanitary development (Chaplin, 2011; Prashad, 2000; Sharan, 2014; Gidwani, 2011) during the colonial and early post-colonial periods and present times, I study the continuous making of the Bhalswa landfill and the neighbouring colonies. Furthermore, I suggest, as argued by Mirza (2019), that these processes of the making of a landfill reveal how waste, as a site, is an archive to understand the production of space 'through exercise of power and politics' and the very site of the landfill is reflective of 'epistemic boundaries that define risk and pollution' (p. 36).

The Bhalswa landfill, situated at the north-west periphery of the city, is the repository of at least one-third of the total waste that Delhi produces. Spread over 60 acres of land and battered with 2,000 metric tonnes of waste daily, this visible mountain-like landfill is reflective of Delhi's trash and supposedly 'end-life' of waste materials. Once considered indispensable to the city's existence and renewal, it today stands as a 'disgrace' to the city's aesthetics. Located on G.T. Karnal Road (Grand Trunk) on the

Delhi–Haryana border, the landfill stands as an epitome of defiled and polluted objects signifying the inside and outside boundary of the city's dirt, where waste and dirt are relegated to 'matter out of place' (Douglas, 2002) and beyond the city's reach. Once an insignificant site, a mere receptacle of dump hidden behind Delhi's periphery for around 15 years, the landfill now presents a grave threat to the city's ecology and the lives of the neighbouring residents around the area (Sambyal, 2017).

Visible from the towering concrete and modernist infrastructure of the Delhi Metro, the Haiderpur metro station, the distinct and peculiar presence of the landfill is marked in the eyes of the city dwellers by its gigantic height that is ablaze with fire, circled by carrion birds, and emitting visibly toxic clouds of pollution. The regular commuters often shun its presence with disdain and a sigh of disgust. The landfill is construed merely as a municipal infrastructure—the receptacle of the city's trash. The distant location of the landfill also amounts to detachment and alienation from objects that are relegated as trash, where the subject–object relation between the producer of trash and the trash is automatically diluted in the process (Reno, 2016; Latour, 2005). Once the unwanted objects are disposed of as trash, they are seen as the excess elements of society.

Yet, much to the citizens' dismay, this trash mountain that was once invisible has become one of the pressing concerns of the city. Given Delhi's rapid and expeditious expansion and urban development processes (Ghertner, 2015), concealing and invisibilising landfills across the city has been a rather challenging task for the state government and the three municipal corporations. Today, a passerby cannot possibly escape its unpleasant visual and olfactory effects.

The landfill exhausted its capacity in 2007, but the dumping of 2,000 metric tonnes of waste continued daily for the lack of an alternative site. Since the collapse of the Ghazipur landfill and the rising height and visibility of the Bhalswa landfill, the pressure on the North Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC) to find an alternative site for a more 'modernised' and sophisticated dumping of waste has been ever-mounting. The challenge still remains of identifying sites that are 'empty' lands and are located far away from the common citizen's gaze. The idea is to continuously externalise and invisibilise the landfill sites and push them to the outer boundaries of the city, such that 'waste sites remain relatively inconspicuous to all but to those who know what to look for, or who live close enough that they cannot help but take notice' (Reno, 2016, p. 7).

Focusing on a layered understanding of infrastructures and situating it in the context of the colonial and post-colonial continuum, I elucidate how waste infrastructures are contingent upon political powers and rooted in the social and cultural values of the time.

The chapter is divided into three parts, wherein I explore the making of the landfill across three different time periods. This is anchored to the conception that spaces of waste, or for that matter any space, are inscribed in an ideology (Harvey, 2008; Lee, 2017). In the first section, I examine the making of the landfill in the colonial period. In colonial times, spaces of waste were determined by the notions of a sanitised and civil public sphere, underlined by ideas and practices of ritualistic pollution (Chakrabarty, 1991; Rodrigues, 2009; Arnold, 2016). Resultantly, this led to partial and unequal processes of sanitary development, primarily focusing on New Delhi over other areas (Prashad, 2001). Indian public spaces were seen in terms of 'crowd, dirt and disease', underpinned by the idea of the 'Indian's capacity to remain blind to the unwholesome aspects of their public places' (Chakrabarty, 1991, p. 15). Such an understanding also

shaped the formation of the Bhalswa landfill (then dump) in colonial times. In the second part, I briefly look at the Emergency period, 1975-77, and examine how cattle dairy owners, in the name of hygiene, were relocated to the peripheries of the city and how the subsequent informal dumping started in the area. In the third part of the chapter, I study the official process of the making of the landfill in 1991 and the subsequent technological developments and tentative plans of closure.

I analyse how the margins of the city, in this case, the north-west part of the city, were demarcated to dump the city's waste, affecting the lives of the less privileged sections of the city—cattle dairy owners and migrant workers settled around the landfill. In doing so, I argue how this space has been continuously defined by the varying forms of governance across different time periods. Furthermore, I argue that these technological developments are invested in the city's aesthetic development by invisibilising and incinerating rather than being concerned with ecological dangers and the risk that the waste crisis poses to the lives of waste workers. Such developments are based on the production of unequal spaces and differentiated forms of development (McFarlane, 2008). However, in the thesis, I limit my analysis to the socio-spatial history of the landfill and the social relations of waste workers (Chapter 5) and do not delve into the ecological challenges posed by the contemporary waste crisis.

Background to the Contested Pasts

As I entered the neighbourhood of the Bhalswa landfill, that is, Bhalswa Dairy, in the bylanes of the neighbourhood, I encountered heavy traffic, trucks full of polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottles, and loaded with other municipal waste, children coming back from school, and adults heading for their evening work shifts in vegetable markets and

flea markets. The hustle and bustle and the lively streets of the area (full of small restaurants, repair shops, scrap shops, and butcher shops) signified an exuberant life as opposed to the distant vision that one has from afar of hovering carrion birds, toxic, noxious fumes, and mounting heaps of garbage. Teeming with small shops and restaurants, petty trades, quacks, cowsheds, and dairies, this area inhabits a diversity of trades, occupations, people, and communities that ultimately encouraged me to explore the complex history and the present-day functioning of the Bhalswa landfill.

Walking through the muddy lanes of the area during the monsoon months, I met my first and probably oldest respondent at the research field site of Bhalswa, Ram Bhan—a 96-year-old Jaat (a socially dominant caste in the region) man, who sat on a chair, surrounded by cows and buffaloes, seemingly completely unperturbed by the strong stench from the landfill. He came to Bhalswa in 1976, like many other fellow dairy owners, because of the relocation of cattle dairies from the Kamla Nagar (north Delhi) area to this part of the city during Indira Gandhi's infamous Emergency. Prior to that, he resided near Ghantaghar, situated next to Kamla Nagar in north Delhi. When he first arrived at Bhalswa, the area was sparsely populated, had barely any infrastructure, and was surrounded by the Bhalswa lake, muddy roads, Kikar⁵⁴ trees (*Prosopis Julifara*), and contaminated water. Bhan recounted how the area had been deserted for years, inhabited mainly by the dairy owners and their cows and buffaloes. They would go to the city in the mornings and evenings to deliver milk and come back to this isolated and abandoned land.

⁵⁴ Many residents of the area, whether dairy owners or waste pickers (in this case mostly Qalandars) often talked about the tree. It is extensively planted on the landfill surface. For me, it always remained a puzzle as to why Kikar was always uniquely pointed out by the residents. Baviskar (2018) discusses how the Kikar tree is not common in India and is often grown by suppressing the indigenous plants in the country. It has been an easy quick-fix for greening the surfaces since the colonial period, which explains why the inhabitants of the area were bewildered by the presence of this particular tree.

When I commenced my research, I focused on a straightforward, linear narrative of the spatial history of the landfill, only to realise that it was shaped by multiple aspects of history and contemporary governance. As Bhan delved into his fading memory, he recalled waste being dumped first around 1983. He remembered a railway line passing through the landfill area and how coal and railway waste (iron and steel) accumulated at the site, which, he explained, now had acquired the shape of this gigantic landfill. Initially untroubled by the slow and steady dumping of waste, Bhan's concerns grew more around the settling of the *banjaras* (nomads) around 1984 (nomadic communities—Masets and Qalandars) and the Bengalis around the late 1980s (mostly Bengali-speaking Muslim migrants from eastern India, who are all notoriously referred to as 'Bangladeshis'), who, in his view, have completely disturbed the peace and stability of the area. He felt that the area was not safe anymore because of the presence of Qalandars and Bengalis (see Chapter 5). Given this general impression, most of the residents believe it is because of these Bengalis that the area today has turned into an underbelly of crime and drugs.

These numerous aspects and narratives about the landfill and the surrounding areas—the coming up of cattle dairies, the dumping of waste in 1983, the presence of various migrant communities (Qalandars and Bengali Muslims), followed by the official narrative around the construction of the landfill that it was built in 1991—have together shaped the socio-spatial history of the landfill. I unravel these aspects in the following sections.

The Colonial Bias

Infrastructures, neither in colonial times nor at present, are 'politically neutral'; rather, they are sites of political contestation and are representative of modes of governance

(Anand, 2017). Arnold argues that 'infrastructures signify both the physical elements (roads, railway, cremation and incineration) around and through which the modern city functioned and the assemblage of sociopolitical values and practices (religion, caste and nationhood) that fashioned on critiqued technological goods and processes '(2016, p. 394). I extend this argument in the context of waste infrastructure in Delhi. Delhi's urban development in colonial times was reflective of the hierarchical differences between the new city and the old city, and further, it has had a direct impact on Delhi's contemporary development and city planning (Sharan, 2014). The planning and construction of New Delhi were evidence of the unequal structuring of the city. It was based on the assumption that Indian cities have hitherto been dirty and contaminated with filth, and the dominant colonial vision was to build the city based on rationality and modernist ideas against India's chaos (Sengupta, 2007).

The ideology of modernist sanitation infrastructure developed by colonial authorities has a marked influence on contemporary sanitation infrastructure. Chandavarkar (2009) and Prashad (2001) explore the politics of sanitation infrastructure through the social history of Bombay and Delhi, respectively, and unravel the construction of cities founded on inadequate planning policies. Chandavarkar (2009) analyses how the city of Bombay witnessed a catastrophic bubonic plague in the 1890s. In order to combat the growing unhygienic living conditions and the effects of the plague, the Bombay Development Committee (BDC) adopted the policy of segregated spaces. The western shore of the city's island was reserved for the upper class, while the mills and the workers were confined to the north-east part of the island. In terms of sanitary development, Bombay also had the highest number of drains in the city, specifically around the Girgaum and Kalbaderee Roads. Despite this, the poor backstreets of the

native town seldom enjoyed the benefits of these developments, where the scanty drains remained overflowed and were entirely inadequate to reverse the unhygienic conditions in the city.

Similarly, Prashad (2001) draws an account of Delhi's colonial history of sanitation and technology, focusing on social and spatial inequalities. He argues,

In 1927, the municipality of New Delhi (hereinafter NDMC), the new Imperial capital, lodged a strong complaint against the walled city's practice of dumping garbage on the side facing the new city. The Delhi Gate dump bordered the new city whose aesthetic pretensions and fear of disease led it to censure the DMC in the strongest terms. For this reason, the DMC considered moving its garbage further afield. (p. 129)

The division between the old city and the new Imperial Capital represented uneven socio-spatial development. This decision to 'further afield' determined the fate of the present-day Bhalswa landfill, then known as 'Horse Shoe Jhil', located 10 miles beyond the city's limit.⁵⁵

Exasperated by the regular dumping of waste at the Delhi Gate and Malkaganj receptacles and the consequent 'nuisance' caused by flies and the unmistakable stench of the waste around the area, the colonial government ordered the closing of the Delhi Gate dump,⁵⁶ followed by orders for a new site, Horse Shoe Jhil. Other than citing the reasons of health and hygiene of their colonial subjects, the colonial authorities also had the task of constructing a new hospital at the old site named Irwin Hospital. Before the

⁵⁵ As mentioned in the file DSA, CCO (Education), 1934, 6(29). 10/356: Initially, Sadhora Kalan was chosen as the new dumping site. However, Major Chatterji, then the assistant director of public health, challenged the relocation to Sadhora Kalan, as it was located close to the Civil Lines area.

⁵⁶ DSA, CC (Education), 1928, 6(18).

construction of the hospital could commence, the area necessarily needed to be cleared of its 'nuisance 'and filth. The municipal authorities proposed the following schemes in order to take forward this procedure⁵⁷:

1. Erection of refuse destructor
2. Carriage of night soil refuse beyond Sabzi Mandi by motor-petrol wagons
3. Carriage of night soil and refuse beyond Sabzi Mandi by electrically equipped rail-less trolley lorries.

The British government seemingly took responsibility for the public health and sanitation of its colonial subjects while carrying out these policies and procedures for the health of its own civil and military personnel due to fear of tropical diseases. Much of the sanitary development, and more specifically, the closure of the Delhi Gate dump, as mentioned in the archives, was a result of 'Delhi having been made the capital of India and the consequent birth of New Delhi'.⁵⁸ This is substantiated by the letters issued by the municipal officer of Delhi (MOD) in 1933, expressing concerns over the Government of India's (GoI) insistence on replacing primitive methods of disposal with modern techniques.⁵⁹ Given the limited budget and priority that the British government accorded to the sanitary condition of the city, it was impossible to replace the *dhalaos* (local waste receptacles) and the local carts that were being used at the time. The only mechanism to keep refuse within limits was to erect refuse destructors that, as per the municipal authorities, were beyond the limited budget.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ DSA, CC (Education), 1928, 6(18), p. 6.

⁵⁸ DSA, CCO (Education), 1928, 6(18), p.6.

⁵⁹ DSA, CCO (Education), 1934, 6(29), p. 14.

⁶⁰ DSA, CCO (Education), 1934, 6(29), p. 39.

The sustained efforts of the DMC and public health officers to relocate the dumping site from Delhi Gate were contingent upon externalising the waste and dirt generated to maintain immaculate 'hygienic' spaces within New Delhi's arena. All the locations scouted before Horse Shoe Jhil were either too close to New Delhi or the route to carry the refuse passed via New Delhi, an imprint of which is reflected in the contemporary planning of Delhi's waste infrastructure. Horse Shoe Jhil, considered to be an 'empty' faraway land from Delhi's inhabited spaces, was perfect for the dump, both in terms of its location and its topography. A low land situated next to a *jhil* (lake), with moist loamy soil, was an ideal location to dump the filth and further its decomposition processes for the next two decades.⁶¹ The only limitation of this site was its distance from the main city. Located 10 miles outside Delhi, transportation of refuse and the subsidiary infrastructure next to the landfill was to cost an exorbitant amount to the GoI and the DMC.

The concerned authorities, however, remained committed to the task of transporting refuse outside the city in order to avoid the daily ordeal of facing contaminated and filthy streets. Before selecting Horse Shoe Jhil as the new dump site, a few other areas, such as the south-east side of Nizamuddin Railway Station and Shahdara Kalan, were also explored. The proximity of the former area to New Delhi and the heavy population of the latter discouraged the authorities from choosing these locations. Even though a vast stretch of land was available next to the south-east side of Nizamuddin Railway Station, the possibility of the future extension of New Delhi in that area prevented the municipal authorities from choosing the same as a dump site. Likewise, the areas beyond Jamuna (now Yamuna) and Shahdara were spared 'on account

⁶¹ DSA, CCO, (Education), 1934, 6(29), p. 39.

of passage of stream of refuse carts and lorries over the railway bridge across the river and beyond’.

Thus, approaching the refuse crisis within the constraints of selecting far-off spaces and a restricted budget, Horse Shoe Jhil was chosen as the most appropriate site to tackle the crisis for the next two decades. In order to operationalise the Horse Shoe dump and transport the refuse from the main city to the dump site, a complex and rather ‘expensive’ system of a refuse train scheme was proposed. As finely detailed and elaborated by Prashad (2001), the proposal of the refuse train scheme led to a protracted tussle between the GoI and DMC over the sharing of initial and recurring expenses. Finally, in 1935, it was operationalised in a meticulously charted out route for the train where Qutab Road was the primary refuse station and Sabzi Mandi was the additional collection point, and it involved the mechanism of transferring refuse from carts to wagons:

The platform and the railway line at the refuse receiving station will have pucca floor with proper drainage and flushing arrangements. There will be protecting walls on the outsides of the platform. Raised small ridges on the inner side will be provided to avoid collision of the refuse cart against the train wagons. No space will be left between waggons and the platform and for this reason the inner edges of the platform will just overhang the brims of the railway waggons. This arrangement will prevent falling off refuse between the platforms and the railway lines.⁶²

The re-spatialising of refuse brought respite to the residents of New Delhi, but much to their dismay, they were soon gripped by a similar set of challenges faced by the

⁶² DSA, CCO (Education), 1934, 6(29), p. 45.

zamindars of the Bhalswa/Jahangirpuri area. This reconfiguration was rooted in the British government's predilection for immaculate spaces in their own vicinity while distorting the landscape and living conditions of locals near Horse Shoe Jhil. The subsequent infrastructure built for waste management at Horse Shoe Lake and its lack of technological advancements caused grave inconvenience to the neighbouring residents. In 1936, the zamindars of Bhalswa/Jahangirpuri presented their grievances to the then deputy commissioner of Delhi regarding blockades in their path to the agricultural field resulting from the construction of an embankment as part of the refuse scheme.⁶³ The dumping led to other complaints as well. The area became infested with a fly-breeding nuisance, blocking of the drainage in the area, and the subsequent deterioration of the subsoil water.⁶⁴ The British government was not unaware of these problems and the nuisance caused by the dumping. These were precisely the issues that had led them to relocate the city's refuse.

Initially, acknowledging the difficulties faced by the locals, the chief health officer (CHO) took an active interest in mitigating these problems. He was aware of the bleak possibility of relocating the infrastructure, given the monetary investment and bureaucratic hurdles it involved. 'Technically 'speaking, the problem was primarily caused by the dumping of refuse on both sides of the railways, contrary to the initial agreement, where it was agreed that the dumping would be carried out only on the northern side of the railway line. In an exchange of letters, the CHO advised the medical health officer (MHO) to completely stop the dumping of refuse at the south end of the line and to cover the area with nine layers of rammed earth. Accepting that there can be no 'radical cure 'to the menace caused, he suggested that in order to alleviate the nuisance

⁶³ DSA, DC, 1937, 179, p.10

⁶⁴ DSA, DC, 1945, 321, p.1.

faced by the villagers, dumping should be extended to Horse Shoe Jhil towards Qadipur.⁶⁵ However, to the CHO's dismay, the MHO, Mr Nirula, expressed his reluctance to stop the dumping at the southern side of the railway line. He persistently argued in its favour owing to the North Western Railways '(NWR) request to continue the dumping process in order to strengthen the earthwork required for railway lines.⁶⁶ Nirula voiced his disagreement over the matter of covering the refuse with thick layers of earth. He contended: '[M]ost of the earth available here is from the bed of the *jheel* which has been waterlogged for years, with the result that the earth available is hard and difficult to spread.'⁶⁷

The dumping on the southern side of the tracks was temporarily stopped, which did help in alleviating the fly-breeding nuisance. This was followed by other measures such as fitting of fly traps, distribution of adhesive solutions coated on iron *pattis* (strips) and paper, and spraying houses with anti-malaria spray. While these measures helped the villagers temporarily, the problem of fly breeding continued to resurface until at least 1945 (as last mentioned in the archival records). Skeptical of the gravity of the complaints, the deputy commissioner quit the stringent measures required to deal with the situation. Although initially, he intended to resolve the problem by covering the refuse with earth, over time, it was realised that the shortage of labour made it impossible to do so. Disinfectants and pesticides were the only options available, and to make the situation worse, Nirula suggested the usage of Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT), that too not on a regular basis, or the 'burning of the sloping dump surface'.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ DSA, CC, 1939, 64, pp. 5-18.

⁶⁶ DSA, DC, 1945, 321, p.1.

⁶⁷ DSA, DC, 1945, 321, p.1

⁶⁸ DSA, DC, 1945, 321, p.1

This piecemeal social engineering of refuse infrastructure and the challenges faced by the locals of Old Delhi and the Bhalswa-Jahangirpuri area did little good to the city. It only exacerbated the already existing social and spatial differences in the wake of maintaining clean and hygienic spaces across the city. The infrastructure established then, as Prashad (2001) notes, was 'guided not by what is the best system of sanitation, but by what is the best system which the Municipal funds can afford (p.117).⁶⁹

It had little to offer to the old parts of the city, which were full of local receptacles where the sweepers became the primary force in carrying the filth—first from the cart to receptacles to the train wagons, and finally to the landfills. In fact, the local elites were so exasperated by their sanitary conditions that they staged demonstrations outside the Town Hall and remarked,

New Delhi people have not descended from the heavens.... When the Government can spend millions [on New Delhi people] why should it treat the Delhi people as untouchables? ... All the congestion, insanitation and disease in Delhi today, were due to the advent of the Government of India to Delhi from Calcutta. (Prashad, 2001, p. 131)

The fact that the New Delhi area and areas of the colonial authorities were prioritised over the questionable living conditions in Old Delhi reflected the colonial forms of development, which were also to be incorporated in Delhi's future urban development practices, particularly more so in the context of the Bhalswa landfill. Based on the archival records, the landfill was functional, at least up until 1945.^{70 71} As per the

⁶⁹ National Archives of India (NAI), Education (Sanitary), A Progs, Sept. 1912, pp. 1–18.

⁷⁰ The DSA archives were last accessed in September 2020. Till then the archival records on Bhalswa were digitised only till early 1950s.

⁷¹ DSA, DC, 1945, 321.

government officials, it got a new lease of life in 1991. In the next section, I examine how the Bhalswa landfill and the surrounding areas were shaped in the post-1970s period.

The Post-colonial Restructuring of Bhalswa

The colonial legacy of structuring and restructuring city spaces and infrastructure was deliberately carried forward by the post-colonial government. The menace of dumping grounds, slaughterhouses, and cremation grounds was to haunt post-colonial governments and their bureaucracy in the coming decades. Noticeably, the spaces demarcated for these defiled practices were in 'far-off' and distant locations from New Delhi and the centres of governance.

Maintaining clean and sanitised spaces was essential to the post-colonial mode of governance. Not simply as an issue of protecting public health but also as a virtue of the modern form of development. The construction of dumping grounds and slaughterhouses was planned in accordance with the city's aesthetic scape and regulation of offensive sites (Sharan, 2014). In the early 1950s, the allocation of land for slaughterhouses was planned to be in remote locations such as the Rohtak Road area on the outskirts of Delhi. Similarly, the New Delhi Municipal Committee proposed to acquire the land between the railway line and the river Jamuna located in the area between Humayun's Tomb and Hardinge Bridge for dumping purposes.⁷² All the peripheral areas of the city were acquired for these 'contaminated' practices and were justified in the guise of maintaining hygienic and clean spaces.

⁷² DSA, DC, 1945, 321, p. 14.

These practices of maintaining clean spaces also came to shape the formation of the Bhalswa Dairy and the landfill area. As per the census data of 1991, Bhalswa-Jahangirpuri had a population of 895 people in 1961, 1200 in 1971, with a significant rise of 70,301 in 1981, and followed by 152,339 in 1991 (Census, 1991). This momentous increase was not just a matter of population growth but also of how the area came to be shaped during and after the imposition of the national Emergency in 1975, followed by the slum rehabilitation programme in 1991 and 2004. As per the Gazette notification of the Land and Building Department,⁷³ the land in the area was undertaken for the rehabilitation of *jhuggi jhopdi* (JJ) clusters (unplanned dwelling units).

The imposition of the Emergency in 1975 marks a dark period in the history of Indian democracy. It was characterised by a series of repressive measures, including the infamous sterilisation drives and demolition drives. The intent of the latter was the demolishing of illegal and unauthorised colonies in Delhi and the resettlement of the urban poor at the edges of the city (Tarlo, 2003). The demolished areas were to be redeveloped or reconstructed into parks. These drives were executed mainly by Jagmohan, the then vice-chairman of the Delhi Development Authority (DDA). The notorious face of the Emergency, Jagmohan strongly espoused a social and spatial transformation of the city. Known as an anti-poor bureaucrat, he envisioned the construction of Delhi as a middle-class city without any settlements with squalor (Pati, 2014). His attempts to do so also led to the formation of Bhalswa Dairy. As Clibbens (2014) discusses, Jagmohan's vision of city aesthetics stood in opposition to the presence of the city's poor. He believed that the city's rich cultural heritage was lost to 'traders and shopkeepers' (p. 61) and, worst of all, that the city's poor lacked any kind of culture. He

⁷³ DSA, Gazettes, Land & Building, 2004.

understood aesthetics and beautification in terms of 'planting of trees, removal of ugly hoardings, the demolition of illegal hawkers 'stalls, and the eviction of squatters' (Clibbens, 2014, p. 60). He wanted to demolish settlements around historical monuments and parks so that people could get closer to nature and go for walks. Although Delhi is often assumed as the centre point of the Emergency and the subsequent urban clearance programmes, as Clibbens argues, the Emergency and its damaging effects echoed across the country. Similar urban clearance programmes were carried out in many other states, where often the removal of humans (beggars and poor people) was more pertinent than the removal of slums; for example, the 'Cleaner city drive 'in Bombay (now Mumbai) included the removal of beggars and waste pickers from the city. Thus, these massive demolition drives and clean city programmes were based on a particular understanding of aesthetics and beautification of the cities, which led to the re-spatialising of many communities across the country.

Following this, in 1975, many dairies⁷⁴, such as the Bhalswa Dairy and the Shahbad Dairy, located in the north-west corner of the city, were relocated to the outer areas of the city. Dairies, because of the presence of milch cattle, were considered to be unhygienic and aesthetically unappealing and hence they were relocated to these new sites. As informed by one respondent, they were relocated on the pretext of preserving the hygienic and clean spaces of the city, eventually leading to the clustering of Ahirs, Jaats, Yadavs, and Gujjars in these areas. Though presently the area is inhabited by members of different castes (mostly OBCs and SCs and lower-class communities, it is palpably culturally influenced and dominated by the Ahirs, Jaats, Yadavs and Gujjars—who have traditionally dominated the dairy business.

⁷⁴ Dairy farms inhabited by cows and buffaloes.

As I entered the Bhalswa Dairy colony, I noticed the reserved and unresponsive attitude of the dairy owners. Reluctant to discuss their past, most of them asked me to go elsewhere with my queries and often exclaimed, 'What do you mean by how we started living here ... just like your family must have migrated from somewhere, so did we'. I eventually met an old man from the Yadav community, Ramesh Yadav, who was keenly interested in discussing the controversial past of the area. At present, he resides in the Bhalswa Dairy area with his wife, two daughters, two sons, and a cow. Before shifting to the dairy, Ramesh resided in the Chandrawal area of Kamla Nagar. Bhalswa Dairy and Shahbad Dairy were only two of the many other colonies carved out as cow sheds colonies by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi MCD, in the north-western part of the city, while Gharouli, Jharoda, Najjafgarh, Ghazipur, Maqsoodpur, and Madanpur Khadar were properly constructed and carved out for the same purpose by the DDA. Most of the dairy owners would come to Bhalswa in the morning, look after their cows and buffaloes, collect the milk, and then leave the area in the evening. However, this was a costly and time-consuming exercise for many dairy owners. For the first few years, nobody resided in the area, but gradually, dairy owners started settling in the area with their families. Though initially, the dairy owners were assured of housing facilities next to their dairies, in a couple of years or so, they ended up building their own houses next to the dairies.⁷⁵

As recalled by the residents, in the beginning, the area was a jungle marked by damp land full of potholes—muddy and dusty. To add to their woes, the water available in the area was hard in nature, and it continuously remained so.⁷⁶ In 1975, the area had no

⁷⁵ However, this did not end their ordeal with the MCD. For around 20 years, the MCD did not resist these unauthorised housing constructions. Much to the locals' surprise, MCD authorities filed a case against the dairy owners, challenging the housing constructions. Surprisingly, the court ordered the judgement in favour of the dairy owners.

⁷⁶ It should be noted that the hard water in the area is often associated with the dumping of waste in colonial times. Residents who are settled in the area since 1975 and the late settlers have all complained

water pipeline connections; this became available only in 1978. The residents had no escape from such harsh living conditions, as at the time, the Emergency had gripped the nation. The situation of these dairy owners was particularly grim as they had no recourse to the redressal of their grievances, or as Ramesh puts it, 'hamari us waqt koi sunwai nahi thi', meaning 'nobody listened to us that time'. Interestingly, as Ramesh clearly recalls, the area, although isolated at the time, was not 'dirty'. He argues that the area has become dirty over the years with the presence of the landfill and many other Bengali Muslim and Qalandar settlers. There was displeasure in his tone as he explained the toxic environment of the area. Many times, the filthy conditions of the area were attributed by local bureaucrats to the actions of the Jaats, Gujjars, and Yadavs. The excreta of cows and buffaloes are considered to be the main reason for the blocked drainage in the area. Ramesh explained how he had recently been sent a notice by the National Green Tribunal (NGT) and fined because of blocked drainage. According to him, government officers reprimand/blame dairy owners for the same, but he argued that this behaviour is unjust. He informed me that dairy owners were promised a *gobar gas* (biogas) plant to which they could supply cow dung cakes as raw material. The plan never materialised. He added that it is the overcrowding caused by the sprawling settlements, which he referred to as *jhuggis* (shanties) with the likes of the Qalandar Colony, Patil Nagar, and Vishwanath Puri, that is the actual source of nuisance and dirt in the area. Exasperated by the ever-expanding landfill that witnesses frequent fires and the emission of poisonous and noxious gases, he had always felt victimised by the whole process of relocation to this area.

about the harsh water; some have argued that the groundwater of the area is red in colour. The present deteriorating condition of water is because of the landfill. Many residents of the area are dependent on the Delhi Jal Board's (DJB) water services.

He remained dismayed by the continuous harassment that dairy owners faced at the hands of government authorities. Ramesh recalled the dumping of waste that began back in 1982–83. At the time, waste was dumped in hollow area of a lowland.⁷⁷ He never imagined that that periodic dumping would take such a gigantic shape.

Over time, the locals could exert less and less pressure to control the dumping process in their immediate vicinity. The area has witnessed multiple protests for landfill closure only to see failures. Another dairy owner, Shyam, told me about the 'Khatta Hatao Aandolan', roughly translated as the 'Remove the landfill' protest that was held in 2017. Many local people actively participated in the protest under the leadership of Congress ex-Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) Devender Yadav. However, it failed to catalyse any change in the area. Many locals suffer from asthma, eye infections, cancer, and tuberculosis due to the harmful gases the landfill emits and the contaminated groundwater of the area, yet no strict action has been taken.⁷⁸

Rendered despondent with the failure of these protests, Ramesh showed me a pamphlet of another protest that was scheduled for the next day at the landfill site. It read, 'khushkhabri, khushkhabri, khushkhabri' 'koode ka pahad samapt hone ka karya shuru', which translates into 'good news, good news, good news', 'the work to end the landfill has started'. Understandably, this pamphlet does not hold any meaning for Ramesh. He has witnessed many such protests in the past and feels such protests only appease and fool the masses. He remarked how uneducated people like him end up attending such protests and

⁷⁷ Ramesh and many other inhabitants of the area hazily recalled, as they had been told by others, that there have been traces of bones and metals in the low land, which is evidence of prior dumping practices in the area.

⁷⁸ Moreover, as reported by the *Times of India* (TOI), 'The suspended particulate matter levels in the area is above 30 times the acceptable standards, followed by contaminated water due to excessive leachate, containing high levels of dissolved solids.'

chant slogans such as *zindabad*, *murdabad* (long live so-and-so, down with so-and-so), which only serves the vested interests of politicians and boosts their hollow claims.

Accepting it as their ill-fate, many of these dairy owners have resigned to their quotidian life of carrying out daily chores. Shyam once told me how it has taken three generations of dairy owners to establish themselves in the area and have a stable life. Yet to date, they are harassed by the government and MCD officials on one pretext or the other.

Even though the area was initially inhabited by dairy owners, over the years, as the area has transformed, it has come to be characterised as being occupied by a diverse set of migrant communities and settlers. Going by the narratives of the locals, Qalandar Colony, Vishwanathpuri, and Patil Nagar are some of the slum colonies in the area. In contrast, Rajeev Nagar, Swaroop Nagar, and Shraddhanand Colony are areas where land has been bought by private dealers and has been rented to petty traders.⁷⁹

After the settlement of dairy owners, Qalandars and Masets (they classify themselves as *banjara* or nomadic communities) were the second set of settlers in the region. Qalandar Colony is located towards the dead end of the Bhalswa Dairy area. Engaged in waste picking and other labouring jobs (such as masonry and security guards), these are rare nomadic communities settled in the pockets of Delhi (see Chapter 5). They characterise themselves as ‘maang ke khaane wale’, ‘khanabadosh’ (those who have no permanent homes or itinerants), and *banjaras*.

Similarly, many such communities and a section of informal labourers (street vendors, daily wage labourers, tailors, small shopkeepers) are settled in the different pockets of Bhalswa Dairy. Qalandar Colony, for instance, over the years, has witnessed

⁷⁹ Petty trades here include *kabaadi* shops, *dhaabas* (road-side restaurants), and general stores.

migrant labourers—not restricted to Maset and Qalandar communities—flocking from Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar. Many who can socially afford to engage in waste picking do so, while many avoid it. As the colony extends further towards Swaroop Nagar, Bengali Basti, and Kabaadi Gali, all these areas have sizeable populations of waste pickers and many others who are engaged in various other forms of labour. A large majority of waste pickers in these colonies are Bengali Muslims and migrants from UP, predominantly from the OBC communities. Likewise, at the other end of Bhalswa Dairy are areas such as Rajeev Nagar and Shraddhanand Colony. These areas are bought by private players and are usually rented to scrap dealers (recyclers), repair shops, and *dhabaas* (roadside restaurants) in the area or for housing purposes to street vendors and labourers.

The coming of various communities lends unique social characteristics to the area. Here the socially dominant castes of Ahirs, Yadavs, Gujjars, and Jaats coexist with marginalised communities such as that of Maset, Qalandars, Bengali Muslims, and Telis (*kabaadi* [scrap] dealers). Their economic interests and social relations are often mutually exclusive and stand in contradiction with one another. Noticeably, they have divergent attitudes towards the presence of the landfill wherein dairy owners want the closure of the landfill due to its ill effects on their health, their living conditions, and their declining social status,⁸⁰ whereas waste pickers are dependent on the landfill for their livelihood and survival. Yet their lives are interconnected not only because of the common neighbourhood they inhabit but because of the fact that dairy owners are dependent on waste pickers for feeding their cows. When waste pickers visit middle-class areas to collect garbage, they collect *roti* (flat bread) from them and give it to the dairy owners.

⁸⁰ Declining social status because many dairy owners and other residents of the area, other than waste pickers, have expressed that their relatives do not want to visit them because they reside next to the landfill—which is socially and environmentally degrading their lifestyle.

For many of these households, especially Hindu ones, cows are sacred animals. On an almost daily basis, they spare leftover *rotis* for cattle as a religious and charitable act.⁸¹ In addition to that, as per the narratives of waste pickers and scrap dealers, many dairy owners leave their cows on the landfill to feed off the garbage. Thus, even though they want the closure of the landfill, there is a unique interdependence between the cattle dairy owners, the waste pickers, and the surrounding area (Agarwal, 2022; Doron, 2021).

Over time, this bustling area, situated at the peripheral end of Delhi, has become a nodal point for many businesses, which connect to the larger processes of capital accumulation through waste. The area, casually relegated as the toxic sink of the city, as the 'back end of capitalism' (Gidwani & Maringanti, 2016), is also crucial to the city's waste economy, which through the processes of waste picking and recycling further connects to the process of capital accumulation across the industrial hubs in the country, such as Narela, Bawana, and Tikri in Delhi, and Muzaffarnagar in UP, among many others (see Chapter 6). The waste pickers and itinerant scrap dealers sell the collected *maal* (stash) to the recyclers in the industrial areas, who, after recycling the discarded materials, circulate them in the market for purchase.

However, as explained earlier, the alarming concerns around the height of the landfill and the discussions about its subsequent closure pose a risk to the existing waste economy in the area. In the next section, I discuss the politics around the policies and techniques for containing waste and the closure of the landfill. These policies, as also partly evidenced in the chapter 3, are embedded in the politics of public-private partnerships. However, my primary focus here is to examine the nature of these

⁸¹ Interestingly, most of the garbage collectors at my field site (who visited residential areas in north-west Delhi) were Bengali Muslims. With the growing rash of cow-related crimes in the country, Muslims and Dalits have been the target of violence led by dominant Hindu right-wing groups.

techniques and analyse to what extent they are successful in containing the contemporary waste crisis.

Infrastructures of Hope: Delays and Challenges

Back when I started my fieldwork in July 2019, it appeared that the Bhalswa landfill was close to the completion of its full life circle, from the colonial period of dumping waste to the post-colonial period of exhausting its capacity—completely disturbing the ecological balance of the area, deteriorating the water quality, possessing high Air Quality Index (AQI) levels, and increasing toxic fumes (Clark & Chaudhary, 2022).

When I arrived in Delhi in July 2019, I was informed by many well-meaning friends and relatives that the landfill was about to be shut down. The work was already in progress. I was told I should rethink my topic of research. The question raised here was, once the landfill is closed, what will be left for me to research? Little thought was spared towards the fact that the landfill is not just a dump yard, but also a space of historical contestations. It is associated with the lives of communities that have migrated in and out of that area. It is a land of materials beyond trash, symbolizing countless life experiences, recycling of materials post the dumping process, and waste economies including waste pickers, itinerant buyers, and recyclers around the landfill.

Since 2017, the Delhi government and the NDMC have been a ready target of journalists due to the frequent fires at the landfill site. Although fire eruption at landfill sites is not an unusual phenomenon, in 2016 and 2018, the Bhalswa landfill witnessed a series of fires that raged continuously for four days. It took a massive army of firefighters to bring it under control. Many national dailies reported that such fires often break out

due to the continuous release of methane gas at the site (Scroll, 2018).⁸² In order to combat such instances of fire and the falling of the landfill, the NDMC deliberated upon short-term policy interventions. In 2019, then NDMC's Commissioner, Varsha Joshi, in consultation with senior engineers, proposed the flattening of the landfill surface with a layering of concrete waste (construction and demolition) on the already existing waste. This helped in controlling the number of fires at the site for an extended period of time, only to erupt again in October 2019.

To understand the ongoing developments around the landfill, I spoke to one of the on-site engineers, Mr Trehan. Before getting into any of the details about the landfill, he told me that I should consider his posting as a punishment. He said, 'Maano hum toh bekaar hi hain', which means to just think I am useless. He further added, 'I am as good as in hell'. Located at the entrance of the landfill, the engineer's office is surrounded by trailers, dust, trucks, and nauseous smells and is a rather sordid sight. Barely five minutes into the interview, exasperated, he said, 'Just like Kashmir is heaven on earth, this is hell on earth'. He has been posted in the area for four years and absolutely detests his posting. Initially, he used to fall sick frequently; however, now, over four years into this posting, his body has adjusted itself to the 'work' environment.

Within a few minutes, Trehan vented his frustration about the working conditions. It is not that he was not vested in the waste management of the landfill but being posted right next to the landfill was not an ideal workspace for an engineer like him. As an upper

⁸² Moreover, some of the newspaper reports and the engineers at the landfill site also blamed the waste pickers for the fire. They alleged that often, waste pickers burn plastic waste to extract metal out of those objects which also leads to fires at the landfill site giving rise to highly toxic gases like dioxins that are inundated with carcinogenic elements (*Hindustan Times*, 20 June 2019).

caste, middle-class government employee, the smell and physical presence of the city's discard and the notion of ritualistic pollution associated with it disturbed his mental and physical well-being. After talking about his work conditions, he said that the area is not safe and is crowded by 'Bangladeshis' (referring to Bengali Muslim waste pickers). He warned me that I should not visit the area after 4 p.m. as it is not safe at all, considering the increasing number of thefts and violence. He painted a rather negative picture of the area, which is also indicative of how the landfill and its surrounding areas are possibly perceived by fellow government officials and their attitude towards it.

Informing me about his limited power and discretion at the landfill site, Trehan discussed his concerns about the site and the upcoming decision of the NDMC about the landfill. He started by pointing out the machine-led infrastructure at the landfill. He pointed towards the number of machines, such as excavators and bulldozers (all chain-mounted machines), being used to carry out the task of waste management. He elaborated upon the temporary drains across the periphery of the landfill, which are used to collect leachate seeping out from years of waste (followed by rains) dumped at the plant. Coming back to the primary focus of our discussion, he informed me about the upcoming proposals on the landfill. Given that all three landfills in the city have exhausted their capacities, they have been topics of serious discussion led by the trifurcated MCDs and the Delhi government. Initially, following the path of the South Delhi Municipal Corporation's SDMC Okhla landfill plant, the NDMC officials tentatively finalised the 'green capping' of the landfill. Technically known as 'geomembrane', this process involved an immediate stop to the dumping of fresh garbage, compressing the existing garbage with heavy machines, cutting of slopes, layering of suction pipes to extract

methane, and then finally covering the landfill with a geomembrane,⁸³ which would prevent rainwater from seeping into the landfill.

Although the NDMC officials were diligently considering this proposal, as it supposedly helped in reducing the height of the Okhla landfill from 58 metres to 38 metres, many senior experts, such as Almitra Patel (heading the Supreme Court committee on SWM) and even the NGT expressed their disagreements over the proposal of geomembrane, as in the near future, it would further contaminate the already contaminated ground of the area. Additionally, the project would have been a costly affair of Rs 193 crores. The NDMC was already bidding for tenders to start the process of green capping. In addition to all of this, I spoke to an ex-senior engineer—who claims that he is the landfill man of Delhi—who said that with the process of green capping, they hope to beautify the landfill with grass cover for aesthetic purposes and then possibly consider it for reclamation purposes, as in the case of the Malad landfill in Mumbai (Mirza, 2019). However, the NDMC could not materialise this plan.

Rejecting this short-sighted plan of green capping the landfill, the NGT finally ordered the biomining of the landfill, which was projected as a financially and environmentally sustainable project. Biomining involves the excavation of waste from landfills, followed by the separation of combustible material and inert material. The combustible material is supposed to be burnt in incinerators, and inert material (mostly soil) is to be dumped at Bhatti Mines—part of the Asola Wildlife Sanctuary that is part of the ridge area in Delhi and an ecologically sensitive zone. The mine comprises pits that came during the mining operation, and the operation was closed 35 years back (located near the Chhatarpur area of South Delhi). Although Trehan hinted at the toxicity and

⁸³ A synthetic membrane used to contain the movement of any liquid. In case of landfills, geomembrane is used as a bottom liner to contain the flow leachate from further contaminating groundwater and as a cap to control the gas emanating from the legacy waste at a landfill site.

presence of leachate in the soil to be dumped at Bhatti Mines, it was not given any serious consideration by the NDMC authorities at the time of our interview.

It was very clear from the beginning that the informal waste workers were not integrated into any of the recent developments around waste management practices in the city. However, I still decided to pursue the question with Trehan. He had a very ambiguous response to my question. Guided by his work experience at the site, he suggested that the waste pickers should be formalised. By formalising, he meant that they should be given identification cards, and their movements should be monitored. It was unclear whether he wanted to integrate them as part of the government job, such as *safai karamcharis*, or just provide them with identification cards. On second thoughts, he also mentioned that the 'waste pickers' presence at the landfill site is illegal. If they are out there, then they are putting themselves in danger, and we cannot do much about it'. Such contradictory statements reflected the NDMC's inconsiderate attitude towards waste workers. Moreover, even though they sometimes pretended to be caring towards the waste workers, they had already put barbed wires around the landfill and stationed a guard so that the waste workers could not access the landfill. In the context of Dakar's waste management infrastructure and conditions of waste workers, Fredericks argues that 'infrastructure conditions abjection and contributes to uneven development' (2014, p. 544). Drawing from these, one sees similar parallels in the context of Delhi, where technocratic infrastructures are privileged over human-led infrastructures of waste management.

These techno-infrastructureal developments were further translated into the domain of everyday electoral politics. Affirming Frederick's (2014) and Anand's (2017) argument that infrastructures are precisely the site for contested politics, which is entangled in the

power relations of multiple actors, I show how these developments were strategically used by municipal authorities for political purposes to show their concern and care for the residents of the area and the fact that the ruling party is seriously invested in the SBA. On 21 October 2019, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), led by local councillors and officials of the MCD, staged an opening ceremony of biomining the landfill with all pomp and show. This brings me back to my conversations with Ramesh, who informed me about this ceremony, referring to it as a protest. He did not have much hope from this ceremony, and justifiably so.

A few days before the ceremony, banners and posters were put up all over the neighbouring areas of Bhalswa Dairy and the By-pass Road next to the landfill. The pamphlets spoke of the menace caused by the landfill and conveniently silenced the problems of waste pickers, who live barely 100 metres away from the site. It read, 'Chhetra ki janta thi pareshaan, uska hua purn samadhaan', which means the people of the area were troubled and the whole problem has been resolved. The pamphlet further congratulated the Member of Parliament (MP), Hans Raj Hans, and the MLA, Vijay Bhagat, on making a head start towards the end of the problem. Without detailing the particularities of the biomining process, everyone was invited to the 'Eetihaasik Udghaatan Samaaroh', that is, the historical opening ceremony on 21 October 2019, 9 a.m., at the foothills of the landfill.

As I reached the venue of the ceremony, located right next to the landfill, it was sparsely crowded by some of the local people and *safai karamcharis* of the area, who were called off early from their duty to attend the ceremony. An area usually deserted, today was teeming with local politicians, security forces, and the newly installed machines (trommels) placed next to the landfill. The physical space of the ceremony

inhabited many contradictions. On the one hand stood this toxic landfill, with kites and eagles hovering over it, and not so surprisingly, one noticed the absence of the waste pickers (who are usually present around the landfill to make a living). On the other hand, were these politicians who had assembled there to celebrate the closure of the landfill.

Long speeches in the scorching heat were followed by the garlanding of fellow politicians and chanting of slogans, *bharat maata ki jai* (long live mother India!). The local politicians carried out this empty show in front of a captive audience of *safai karamcharis* (who were least bothered by the closure of the landfill) and a few local people. Focusing on the importance of the SBA, the speakers elucidated the importance of segregating wet waste and dry waste and how the process of segregation would help in reducing the waste crisis. Emphasising the moral responsibility of all in managing waste, they urged the audience to take care of their own waste by mentioning aphorisms, such as our waste is our responsibility. The moral guilt was furthered by invoking the image of Gandhi and 150 years of Gandhi Jayanti (Gandhi's birth anniversary), which India commemorated this year (October, 2019). After moralising about the waste crisis to the audience (which ironically involved mostly *safai karamcharis*), the speakers vehemently stressed the importance of initiatives taken by the NDMC officials in initiating the process of closing down the landfill by carrying out the Rs 75 crore project of biomining and bioremediation at the site.

In their prolonged and dreary speeches, they illuminated the audience about the mechanisms of biomining and the new trommel machines placed at the site. The trommel machines, being boasted about as the latest technology, would help in aiding the segregation of compostable and non-compostable materials, wherein compostable waste would be dumped at the Bhatti Mines, and the non-compostable waste would be incinerated. Back then, in October 2019, nine machines owned by different companies

were placed at the site, which was to facilitate the whole process of waste management. This, according to the local politicians, was the perfect model for closing the landfill and reclaiming the space for 'better' purposes. As the speeches continued, many prominent politicians of the BJP kept on pouring in and were invited to the stage one by one. Manoj Tiwari, MP from northeast Delhi and then Delhi BJP head (2016–2 June 2020), was greeted with grandeur and slogans, such as, 'hamare desh ki aan baan shaan—Manoj Tiwari' (pride of our nation—Manoj Tiwari) followed by the chanting of 'vande mataram',⁸⁴ and 'bharat mata ki jai'.⁸⁵ As Tiwari took over the stage, he frivolously compared the landfill to 'Qutub-e-Minar'⁸⁶ and referred to it as 'Gand-e-Minar' (tower of rubbish). In his speech, he incessantly focused on the filthiness and disorderliness of waste and how this landfill was a blot on the city's beauty, which needed to be closed at the earliest. Even when he focused on the plight of the people residing next to the landfill, he barely said a word about the lives directly dependent upon the daily dumping of waste at the site and the impact of the infrastructure of waste on the waste workers.

⁸⁴ *Vande Mataram*, the national song of the country, is also conceived as a more right-wing assertion towards a jingoistic form of nationalism. The song written in 1870, by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, was subsequently published in the novel *Anandmath* in 1882. According to Tanika Sarkar (2006), the novel is supposed to have implicated Muslims behind the growing starvation and deaths in Bengal in those times. Moreover, the song eventually acquired much nationalist fervour during India's freedom movement. However, given the problematic contextualisation of the song, Jinnah and Nehru raised their objection towards the song and prevented it from becoming the national anthem of the country. Given the growing right-wing assertion in India today, the song has regained its significance in the country.

⁸⁵ Similarly, like *Vande Mataram*, the term 'Bharat Mata' has also been used since 1905, to invoke the idea of India as an equivalent of a goddess (*mata*). The idea of equating the nation with a goddess was first invoked in Bengal, wherein cities, mountains, and river were all inscribed onto the body of this imagined goddess. The slogan 'Bharat mata ki jai' has been repetitively used across colonial and post-colonial India, however, of late, it has been used incessantly by right-wing groups and by members of the BJP to strongly assert the idea of India in a very myopic way.

⁸⁶ The Qutub Minar is a 73-meter-high minaret built in the 12th century by Qutub-ud-din-Aibak. Landfills in Delhi are often compared to this monument because of their soaring heights.



Figure 4.1: The photograph depicts a newly installed trommel machine in front of the Bhalswa landfill. Source: Photograph clicked by the author.

A few months (in 2019) after this event, when I spoke to one of the landfill engineers, I was informed that the NDMC had been denied permission to dump waste (wet waste from the landfill) at the Bhatti Mines. Frustrated by the situation, the senior engineer remarked, 'There is no waste management and development happening here'. The engineers at the site many a time expressed their exasperation about the lack of progress at the landfill site. They often found themselves in a conundrum of promoting the latest technological developments at the site and being aware of the situation, which threw more challenges than the high hopes of infrastructural development.

It has been two years since the time the biomining operation started at the Bhalswa landfill and at the other two landfills in Delhi. Since then, the landfill has faced multiple accidents due to the ever-increasing dumping and soaring temperatures in the

city. In August 2020, amidst the first wave of COVID-19, a mound of the landfill fell on the ground, risking the lives of waste pickers living in the nearby shanties (*Hindustan Times*, 2020). The major damage occurred in Tandoor Waali Gali, located towards the backside of the landfill (see map in Chapter 5). During my earlier visits, there was a distance of at least 100 metres between the shacks of the waste pickers and the landfill. However, this time with the fall, the garbage had reached the doorsteps of those shacks. In the process, at least three waste pickers were injured, and many were worried about climbing up the landfill.

Right after the incident, when I spoke to the on-site engineers, they said ‘the fall was because of the monsoon. Such incidents can happen in the rainy season’. Following this, I inquired about the biomining operation, and they said, ‘It is running successfully’, and remarked, ‘the fall has got nothing to do with the biomining operation’. However, as someone who had been observing the landfill over one year (2019–20), I could see that even after the biomining process, the NDMC did not have permission to dump inert waste at an alternate location. Small mountains of inert waste surrounded the landfill. Besides that, since biomining was carried out at the front side of the landfill, the municipal authorities started dumping fresh waste on the back side, which eventually led to the fall.

While on-site engineers were quick to defend themselves to cover up the embarrassing situation, they were not very sympathetic towards the waste pickers. They remarked, ‘We have repeatedly told them [waste pickers] not to climb up the landfill; it is dangerous. In any case, it is illegal to climb up the landfill. We cannot be held accountable for their condition’. This incident was followed by two more incidents; one was the fall of the landfill in 2021 and the second was the massive fire at the landfill in April 2022 (explained in the Introduction). Thus, these technological developments,

which were hailed as a promising solution to Delhi's ever-increasing waste crisis, have faced serious challenges in the last two years. Moreover, as promised by the local politicians, the closure of the landfill is nowhere in sight.

Based on my interviews and telephonic conversations with municipal employees and landfill engineers in May 2022, the landfill continues to receive 2,000 metric tonnes of waste, that too unsegregated, on a daily basis. While the last three incidents have been a cause of major concern and embarrassment for the NDMC and the engineers, they are still hopeful that the biomining will improve the situation. At present, there are at least 40 trommels, owned by various private companies, such as AG Enviro, Daya Charan, and Sai Enterprise, at the site, which clear around 300 tonnes of waste on a daily basis. According to the on-site engineers, since November 2021, they have excavated 4,35,000 metric tonnes of waste. However, if one looks at the difference between the amount of waste that is dumped on a daily basis and the amount that is cleared, there is a significant difference between the two. It will take many years to clear up the legacy waste.

Moreover, as mentioned in the previous section, the three municipalities in Delhi have been incessantly trying to get permission to dump inert waste at the Bhatti Mines in Delhi. As of now, the NDMC is dumping a part of the inert waste at Rani Khera (West Delhi), construction and demolition waste is sent to the National Highway Authority of India (NHAI), and recyclable waste is sent to the Ramky plant and to the Bawana plant for RDF. Although, as mentioned previously, the permission to use the pits of Bhatti Mines for dumping inert waste was rejected in 2020, the municipalities have again floated the file to look into the possibility of it. As per the *Hindustan Times* reportage, 'Wildlife Institute of India (WII) has now been asked to carry out a study to ascertain whether dumping inert there could harm the ecology' (Singh & Gandhiok, 2022). One of the main

concerns about dumping inert waste at the Bhatti Mines is that the inert waste might contaminate the groundwater. The mines, over the years, have become a water recharge zone and inhabit a wide variety of flora and fauna.

Focussing on the newspaper updates and the engineers' narratives, the ongoing technological developments are projected as the best possible solution available to deal with the current crisis. Yet we see continuous failure and accidents, which raises concerns about the promise of infrastructure. The concern here is not only about the accidents but also about how far these technological developments will sustain us in terms of resolving the waste crisis. The segregated material, post the biomining process, raises major challenges. The NDMC does not have enough takers for inert waste. The dry waste is processed for RDF, which, as evidenced by Schindler and Demaria (2016), is not a long-term sustainable solution. Kornberg, in the context of an ongoing push towards RDF in Delhi, argues,

... shorn of its casteist associations through mechanisation, then, garbage thus becomes a material to be exploited without stigma—burned just like coal or gas—fueling the postcolonial developmentalist desire to be rid of garbage and the low-caste and Muslim people who handle it. (2019, p. 13)

Deploying an urban political ecology approach, Demaria and Schindler argue that urban metabolism is shaped by governance regimes, technological infrastructure and development, and the proliferation of resources. They use this approach to understand the ongoing privatisation of waste management services, the conflict between middle-class residents, and the institution of an incinerator in the city. The current developments around the three landfills are on the same lines for multiple reasons. One, the trommel machines at the landfill site are run by private companies, followed by the tie-up with the

Ramky Company to incinerate dry waste into RDF (refer to Chapter 3). As evidenced by the NDMC notification dated 8 February 2021, the trommel machines are hired based on tenders. The NDMC authorities are required to pay the private players depending on the amount (in tonnes) of legacy waste processed by the trommel machines. To quote the request of one of the private companies, Synergy Waste Management Limited, as mentioned in the notification:

In order to ensure healthy competition from financially sound companies to complete the work in time, we request that the minimum financial eligibility criteria should be increased from one Rs. 1 Crore to Rs. 10 Crores in each of the last three years. This will help the financially sound companies to take up the work and complete the project in time (NDMC, 2021).

Thus, the lure for profit and processes of capital accumulation (Gidwani & Reddy, 2011; Kornberg, 2019), by converting waste material into electricity, shapes these decisions rather than environmental considerations or that of waste pickers—who are actually deploying environmentally sustainable methods of recycling in dealing with discarded materials.

Second, the primary concern is to reduce the physical footprint of waste so that there is enough land and space for future waste. The three municipalities in the city are constantly searching for alternative sites to dump waste because all three landfills have exhausted their capacity. The solutions are not oriented towards reducing the proliferation of discarded materials and consumerist practices, but towards invisibilising the discarded materials either by re-spatialising them or incinerating them—by converting them into different physical forms of toxic fumes, emanating gas such as ammonia, nitrous oxide, and carbon dioxide.

Thus, even as municipal authorities are 'diligently' working towards invisibilising the ill effects of the 'public secret' (Moore, 2012) that is, of the waste crisis, the concerns of aesthetics and profiteering from waste have taken precedence over the actual concerns and ill effects of the waste crisis on city dwellers and slum dwellers including waste pickers living in the surrounding area. Moreover, the visibly modern infrastructure is low functioning and has failed to deliver any substantial outcomes yet. The continuous accidents around the landfill site are a reminder that using the technological infrastructure, that too with a focus on aesthetics and invisibilising and incinerating waste, will not resolve the waste crisis.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the socio-spatial history of the Bhalswa landfill across the colonial and post-colonial periods, and, in the process, I analysed the association of waste with urban marginalities, both socially and physically. As Harvey argues, '[T]he question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire' (2008, p. 23). Throughout the chapter, I have mapped how different time periods, the socio-political values of those times, and the technologies deployed shaped the making and the unmaking of the landfill. In the colonial context, waste was linked to the notions of dirt, impurity, and a possible threat to public health. Likewise, in the post-colonial context, similar concerns shaped planning and deliberation on waste when concerns over hygiene and sanitation were coupled with the city's aesthetics, followed by burgeoning environmental concerns in the present day (Sharan, 2014).

Back in the 1930s, the area was defined by the transportation and dumping of waste; in the mid-1970s, the Emergency and preoccupation with beautifying and cleansing the city pushed cattle dairy owners towards Bhalswa. These developments were followed by the settlement of further waves of low caste and marginal communities of migrants who derived their livelihood from the economy associated with waste, built on the accelerated growth of the landfill site and other ancillary activities. The landfill today stands as an epitome of the city's ecological, social, and economic crisis, wherein contemporary technological developments are further obfuscating the issues of complex ecology, abject spaces, social hierarchies, and the burden borne by marginalised communities by the very virtue of living in that area and picking up waste. Furthermore, the excessive focus on machine-led infrastructure marginalises the labour of waste pickers who are working hard to sustain themselves and are inadvertently rejuvenating and reproducing city spaces.

In the next chapter, I examine the social relations among three different waste-picking communities living in the surrounding areas of the landfill and their relationship with the landfill, discarded materials, neighbouring communities, and the middle-class residents in the nearby areas. In so doing, I also examine how their caste and religious identity, along with the condition of urban precarity, shape their relationship with waste work and their everyday life experiences around the landfill.

Chapter 5

Spheres of Waste: Cast(e)ing Off Materials and Communities

After two months of fieldwork in the areas surrounding the Bhalswa landfill, I finally gathered the courage to climb up the landfill around mid-October, 2019. A day before, I was told by some Qalandar women to come at around 7 a.m. to their colony (Qalandar Colony) and that we would start the climb from there. I was initially a bit perplexed about why they wanted me to come so early in the morning when everyone is otherwise rather flexible about going to the landfill. It was only after reaching the top of the landfill that it all made sense. Sadly, none of the Qalandar women could accompany me that day because they were all very tired from the previous day's work. Although October is known for milder weather, climbing up the landfill and working there through the day can be very tedious and strenuous. They asked a 16-year-old boy, Rameek, to accompany me. Rameek works as a mechanic in a nearby shop, but that day he had not gone to work. As he guided me, he told me that nobody from his family works at the landfill, as one of his elder sisters died while collecting waste. One of the trucks ran her over and killed her. He was very particular that I should be up at the top by 7:40 a.m. and come back as soon as

possible. Although a bit startled by his patronising tone, I chose to keep quiet and follow him.

As we climbed, we came across many wild dogs on the landfill. When we reached the top, several people were sitting idly, gleaning over the previous day's waste and looking around for anything still left to be collected. A few among them had already finished their work and were loitering around, whereas most of them were waiting for the trucks to arrive. The landfill gates open at 8:00 a.m. and close at 6:00 a.m. the next morning. Meanwhile, trucks continue coming in for 22 hours of the day. While many of the workers were sitting and eating breakfast, others were resting on the edge of the landfill, looking at the new machines (trommels), wondering if these new machines and the companies that owned them had come to take over the landfill. Many of them were confused about what was going to happen to their future with the coming of these machines. One of them came to me and said, 'You remember me, right? We met in Bengali Basti! I answered, 'Yes, yes'. He then told me, 'Let's see what these companies will do. I am not scared. I will go somewhere else'. Another man named Kangal Lal, who I had met many times in Kabaadi Gali, was sitting in a corner with his wife. He was eating before the trucks started arriving. I could not recognise him because his clothes in the basti were very different from the clothes he was wearing at the landfill. Similarly, many people were sitting in small groups—a few Maset women, Bengali women, and some people from Kabaadi Gali across the site—all waiting for the trucks to arrive.

A moment later, as the clock struck 8:00 a.m., the trucks started to come in. I was asked to stand in a corner to prevent any injury or accident, which are all too common at the landfill site. The truck drivers were extremely reckless while driving and unloading waste at the site. They probably did not even look at the people who were standing behind the

trucks and handling the waste. A truck did not stop for more than three to four minutes. One of the truck drivers who noticed my odd presence at the site instructed me to stand in a corner while driving off to unload the waste. All the waste pickers wanted to pick up whatever they could out of the fresh waste so they could sell the best quality materials for a good price. While the trucks kept coming one after another, and the waste pickers were busy scavenging the unloaded waste, there was a security guard who stood watching all this. His job was to ward off workers, but he was more often seen chasing away cows and dogs present at the site in order to help the waste workers do their work. The guard had very friendly relations with the waste workers for the most part, and he often helped the workers while they were collecting waste and looked after them when they were resting—in case any truck came in. On many occasions, young boys around the landfill who were not waste pickers would illegally trade oil from the garbage trucks and sell it to nearby shops and bakeries. Some waste pickers preferred to sell their collection at the landfill itself, whereas some preferred to collect material for a month and then sell it.

The landfill is a life-world in itself. For all the waste pickers around, their lives are closely tied to the landfill and its waste. In this chapter, I discuss and analyse these relationships between waste workers, materials, and labour processes based on the caste–community axis. Although labour processes among different communities mostly remain the same, what distinguishes them are their distinct experiences and journeys to the landfill, the forging of social relations, and the ‘becoming’ of a waste picker. This chapter is an exploration of these varied experiences.



Figure 5.1: Early morning scene at the Bhalswa landfill.
Source: Photograph clicked by the author.

Introduction

With the increasing growth in waste materials, many lower-caste communities that had previously not been involved in waste work have now been drawn into the economy of waste (Gidwani, 2019; Kornberg, 2019). Historically, waste work in South Asia was structured around rigid caste hierarchies and was dominated by particular SC communities, previously referred to as untouchables. Other lower-caste communities who had not been ascribed the status of untouchability did not engage in such work. However, waste work is no longer limited to traditional SC communities (such as Chuhra, Mehtar, and Bhangis) (Prasad, 2000). Today, as demonstrated by various scholars, many other communities, such as Muslim and Hindu OBC, de-notified tribes, and others, are also involved in waste work, and they have subsequently come to bear the burden of untouchability and the stigma attached to such work.

Thus, stigma, social discrimination, and humiliation are commonly attributed to everyone engaged in waste work. Jodhka (2015b) argues, caste is not a fixed cultural category; rather, it is produced and reproduced in everyday life along with socio-economic changes. However, Orientalists and scholars such as Louis Dumont (1998) have explained caste as a religious and ideological phenomenon that is legitimized by the Hindu religion. Furthermore, he dismisses the association of caste with material life and limits it to the cultural hierarchy of purity and impurity. Guha concurs Jodhka's argument by saying that Orientalist scholars have not deeply looked into 'how caste shaped the economic and political life of the subcontinent' (2013, p. 1), 'in turn shaped by the regional histories of economic and political processes' (Jodhka, 2012a). Unlike Dumont, I examine caste-based practices and the social stigma faced by waste workers by exploring

how they are rooted in everyday material and economic relations (Jodhka, 2015b). I further develop my argument with reference to Kornberg's scholarship on casteification.⁸⁷ Kornberg, through her ethnographic study of Bengali Muslims (household garbage collectors) in north Delhi, demonstrates how they have accepted the burden of stigma in return for access to waste materials and its resultant monetary benefits. In contrast, their informal supervisors, the Balmikis (*jemaadars*), who historically derived their livelihood from waste work, have now dissociated themselves from garbage collection in an attempt to shake off the associated stigma. I take this study further and explore how, over the years, different castes and community groups have engaged in waste work and, in turn, how their engagement has challenged the traditional caste hierarchies.

In this chapter, I study the transformation of caste-based practices vis-à-vis growing waste economies and waste workers and how this has overturned existing caste-based hierarchies and the ascriptive identity of untouchability primarily associated with SC communities. I study this by observing the acts of discrimination around the workplace and the neighbourhood of waste workers and by mapping the everyday lives of waste workers in order to examine how waste workers from different caste communities create their own social vis-à-vis their past and present experiences, and how that, in turn, shapes their present-day social identity. The waste workers' identity is deeply imbricated with their caste, gender, and community location, the performance of which is contingent on the specific set of sociopolitical conditions they may find themselves in. Sometimes, social and cultural identities are put forth, and at others, the waste pickers' identity is put forth. Thus, the space of the Bhalswa landfill is constitutive of multiple socials, which I will try to flesh out through this chapter. I map these social relations and present-day

⁸⁷ Kornberg explains casteification as 'a term that indicates mundane practices through which casted actors, groups and structures are produced' (2019b, p. 48).

socio-economic conditions—of precarity—and within these conditions of precarity, I examine how waste workers from various communities subjectively understand their experiences of waste work. In the final section of the chapter, I analyse how the waste workers ‘value’ themselves and seek to define meaningful identities for themselves beyond the obvious stigma and precarity associated with the work. I do so by examining the acts of discrimination faced by them and observing the ways in which they navigate their precarious work and living conditions.

Forms of Discrimination

Social discrimination can take varied forms. Harriss-White and Prakash (2010) discuss two forms of discrimination—direct and indirect discrimination. They argue, ‘direct discrimination describes a phenomenon where there is a deliberate and explicit policy to exclude a specific individual or a social group from some possible opportunities. Indirect discrimination occurs when supposedly neutral provisions, criteria or practices disadvantage individual(s) due to their social status or due to capabilities derived from a socialisation differentiated by social status’. My primary focus in this chapter is to examine indirect discrimination in the form of maintenance of hierarchy between different social groups of waste pickers around the landfill and the middle-class colony residents.

With India’s integration into the global economy, it was assumed that caste-based discrimination would come to an end. However, we see now how different forms of inequalities adapted themselves to capitalist modes of exploitation and reproduced caste-based discrimination in various forms (Gupta, 2022). In the same vein, Harriss-White and

Rodrigo (2016) argue that 'rather than accelerating the destruction of old forms of exchange, India's liberalisation may be better understood as increasing the tension between forces dissolving social forms of regulation and those intensifying them or creating new forms (Harriss-White, 2003, World Bank, 2006, p. 179) '(p.5).

Caste as a social phenomenon operates in multiple and unexpected ways. It interacts with social and economic institutions and generates various forms of hierarchies and discriminations (Mosse, 2018; Jodhka, 2015b; Tilly, 1998). Mosse (2018) argues, 'Caste effects are not locational '(p.422). They adapt themselves to different contexts and reproduce hierarchies contingent upon context-specific conditions. As already explained in the Chapter 3, the Balmikis (mostly jemaadars) in Delhi have distanced themselves from garbage collection and hired Bengali workers for this task. Their current socio-economic position allows the Balmikis to transfer the work to other communities. Such situations help us understand how social hierarchies can take different forms.

Within the landfill space, one sees different forms of caste and religion-based discrimination playing out. As Mirza (2022) observes, and as I argue in Chapter 1, caste has typically been understood as a part of Hinduism without having any repercussions on other religions. The work here seeks to understand different forms of discrimination pertaining to waste at the intersection of caste and religion. I argue that ascribed characteristics of the caste system may or may not fade over time, but they get transferred to other marginalised communities in the form of work.

Value within a Precarious World

Guy Standing (2014) defines precarity as casual labour, temporary jobs, and flexible work conditions. He argues that although these conditions have existed in the past, today they are rising significantly because of post-industrial, advanced economies. His work traces this discursive shift from the proletariat to the precariat. Precariat as a category is conventionally defined in terms of 'class-in-itself' rather than 'class-for-itself'. As opposed to this, the proletariat is a category of class that has the potential to translate itself from 'class-in-itself' to 'class-for-itself'. He argues, '[T]he precariat is not part of the "working class" or the "proletariat"' (2014, p.6). However, in the process of bracketing certain marginalised sections as precariats or class-in-itself, Standing limits the possibility of understanding and imagining their political agency. In this work, I see precarity as a given condition of waste workers' lives.⁸⁸ However, within the state of precarity, I explore how waste workers navigate their living and working conditions and add meaning to their work.

Similarly, because waste work falls in the realm of precarity and is carried out by the marginalised sections of society, waste workers are often termed as wasted lives. Bauman (2004) attributes varied meanings to the term 'wasted lives'. He describes the term as 'redundancy' (pp.11-14) and 'disposability' (p.56), indicating that the presence of waste workers is not valuable and that human society can exist well without these lives.⁸⁹ He argues that redundancy and disposability are the unavoidable outcomes of modernity

⁸⁸Here I want to note that although I classify waste workers conditions as precarious, these conditions could vary in different contexts. Moreover, it is not to suggest that the condition of precarity did not exist in the past (Breman 2013a, Chatterjee 2019). In fact, Breman argues, 'The precarious situation of labour was recognized in the nineteenth century as a defining condition of proletarianization, in the classic sense: stripped of the means of subsistence on the land, workers could only survive by selling their labour; the precariousness of their livelihood features in the *Communist Manifesto*' (2013).

⁸⁹Bauman does not attribute these social characteristics to any of these communities. He deploys the term 'wasted lives' to understand their present economic conditions instead of suggesting that their very being is wasted.

and capitalism. Bauman further uses the term 'overpopulation' (p.5) to refer to a set of people whose presence seemingly decelerates the functioning of the economy, and hence they are rendered as wasted lives.

However, the work here takes a different approach towards understanding the lives of waste workers. As iterated in Chapter 1, waste here is not seen in opposition to value but is rather seen as central to capital accumulation, and so are the waste workers (Gidwani & Maringanti, 2016; Butt, 2019; Corwin, 2019; Miller, 2018; Thieme, 2013; Sharma, 2022). Gidwani and Maringanti (2016) deploy a political economy approach to understand the waste-value dialectic and to explain why waste workers are pertinent to capital accumulation and the social and ecological reproduction of society. I, however, take the analysis in a different direction, move away from the perspective of capitalism. I delve into the life-world of waste pickers from different communities and examine how waste pickers deploy different tactics to navigate the precarious world of waste picking, and how, in this way they value themselves with a positive valence in a variety of ways, by forging new social identities, cultural practices and social relationships around their labour and rhythm of work.

Sites of Study: Qalandar Colony, Kabaadi Gali, and Bengali Basti

I examine these changes by exploring the everyday lives of waste workers in and around the Bhalswa landfill—Qalandar Colony, Kabaadi Gali, and Bengali Basti. I explore how different communities residing in these colonies, which were traditionally not associated with waste work, have organised themselves around waste economies and how their lives and social identities (particularly in the case of Qalandars and Masets—previously nomadic communities) have been shaped by the experiences of waste work. I will focus

on how inter-community relationships have been shaped, particularly their experience of facing humiliation and stigma within their neighbourhoods and in the outside world. Bhalswa offers a particularly insightful illustration of different communities performing similar waste work within close proximity and yet having diverse socio-economic experiences.

I study these three colonies in the following order. First, I specifically examine the social lives of the inhabitants of Qalandar Colony—the Qalandars⁹⁰ and the Masets, who have been traditionally classified as nomadic tribes (Datta, 2012; Crooke, 1907; Bhukya & Surepally, 2021) and are locally known as the *khanabadosh* (nomad) community, famous for animal taming and working as snake charmers. They have been scavenging waste materials in and around the Bhalswa landfill for over 20 years now. Both communities are important for their distinct historical background of being categorised as ‘criminal tribes’ in the colonial period and as de-notified tribes in the post-colonial period. I explore how their present precarious circumstances are shaped by poverty and waste work.

The second area is that of the Bengali Muslims living in Bengali Basti. All of them originally hail from West Bengal but have been in Delhi for almost 30 to 35 years. Previously, many of them were either agricultural labourers or rickshaw pullers in Bengal. They migrated to Delhi in the late 1980s and early 1990s in search of work. Unlike many other communities that pursue waste work intermittently, most of the Bengalis are deeply entrenched in the waste economy and have managed to dominate waste work in the north-western part of the city. Some of them have even managed to

⁹⁰ Based on the Commission for Denotified and Semi-nomadic Tribe committee’s report, 2017, Qalandars are classified as nomadic community and are categorised as OBC. Masets are also classified as Nomadic community (based on Haryana state list), however, their caste status remains unknown and needs to be further verified.

climb up the ladder to become scrap dealers, something that is not very common among the inhabitants of the other two colonies.

Third, I study the social lives of the inhabitants of Kabaadi Gali, who are mostly Hindu OBCs and SCs hailing from Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar. Most of them migrated to Delhi in search of work and ended up engaging in waste picking as an ancillary activity due to their poverty-stricken condition and the flexible work opportunities in the landfill that enabled them to simultaneously engage in other work in the informal sector of the city. Many of them do not engage in waste picking on a regular basis. They either intermittently travel to other urban centres for work (such as Mumbai) or work in the various parts of Delhi's informal sector.



Figure 5.2: Map depicting the study area of the Bhalswa landfill.

Source: Designed by the author

From Nomads to Waste Pickers

As one enters the Bhalswa landfill area, the meaning of waste for its inhabitants drastically changes. The area surrounding the landfill is popularly known as Bhalswa Dairy, referring to the dairies located there. However, within a stretch of 300 metres, the demography and social character of the area completely changes. Qalandar Colony is

situated towards the eastern end of Bhalswa Dairy, surrounded by dairy owners. As was said in Chapter 4, the presence of the landfill is a menace and a health hazard for the dairy owners. However, as one enters the narrow lanes of Qalandar Colony, one can see waste becoming a discernible and quotidian part of its residents' life. Their survival is dependent on the landfill. Young boys, children, and women carrying off-white sacks for collecting waste materials is a common sight. However, the colony cannot be straightjacketed as merely a space of waste pickers. For a few years now, the colony has been inhabited by several other casual workers and petty traders such as tailors, masons, and gardeners. If one were to draw a broad cartographic representation of the area, and especially that of the waste-pickers' colonies, Qalandar Colony is the starting point of it, which then stretches towards Kabaadi Gali (Vishwanath Puri), and ends at Bengali Basti (Shraddhanad Colony). These three areas within the vicinity of Bhalswa Dairy primarily constitute the waste pickers' settlements around the area. It is interesting to note how these three areas are also divided on the basis of different communities who have all settled in the area over the years. Qalandar Colony is primarily dominated by Masets and Qalandars, followed by other Muslim communities such as Qureshi, Khan, and Ansari, and a few Hindu SC communities. The northern part of the colony is known for its Muslim presence. As one moves along, Kabaadi Gali is dominated by Hindus from UP and Bihar, and most of these residents are from either OBC communities or SC communities. Finally, there is Bengali Basti, which, as the name suggests, is inhabited only by Bengalis, particularly Bengali Muslims.

On my first visit to the colony, I met one of my first informants, Sarita Bai, who is from the Maset community and is between her late forties and early fifties. She does not remember her exact age. She was dressed in a yellow-coloured salwar kameez with a *dupatta* (scarf) covering her head. Feeling a bit sick and low because of her sugar level

that day, Sarita Bai did not go for her regular rounds around Sanjay Transport Nagar, located close to Bhalswa Dairy, to collect waste. She has been picking waste for many years now, and more so since her husband died of tuberculosis. Although now, with the help of her sister and daughter, she has been able to make a living for herself, she still recalls her early days when she did not have to do any work and lived a comfortable life with her husband. Sarita Bai was born in Ghaziabad and, after her marriage, moved between makeshift houses near Lodhi Road in Delhi. Her husband used to practice their traditional community occupation of animal taming and snake charming. However, over the years, they shifted to this part of the city due to the lack of work and could only carry out their work of snake charming for a brief period of time. After residing in Bhalswa Dairy for a few years, her husband passed away, and she had to take up the work of waste picking. For many Maset and Qalandar women whose husbands have either passed away or those who need to supplement their family income, waste picking is the most common option available, given the vicinity of the landfill and the flexible working hours. Sarita Bai told me that she never climbed up the landfill because she felt disgusted and nauseated at its very sight. Instead, she chooses to visit nearby neighbouring colonies such as Sanjay Transport Nagar, where she scavenges plastic bottles, cardboard, polythene bags, glass items, and so on. Collecting these items is a skill cultivated through years of experience in identifying what items have a high market value at the time. The market value of such items is contingent on many factors—such as weather conditions, oil prices, demand and supply, and so on. The months of April, May, June, and July are the best for waste pickers to earn money. The demand for waste materials (such as PET bottles of aerated drinks, water bottles, and milk pouches) increases in summer. During monsoons, they cannot earn enough because materials get wet and wet materials fetch less money. During the winters, according to waste pickers, consumption levels are low,

and so is the availability of waste materials. However, if waste pickers are able to collect a sufficient amount of *maal* (waste pickers often refer to recyclable/reusable materials as *maal*), then they can earn enough even in winter because in winter, even though the supply is low, the demand for waste materials is high.

Initially, Sarita Bai did not understand what to pick and what not to. She would pick whatever came her way, like biscuit and crisp wrappers, wet cardboard, and foam. These items usually do not have much value for scrap dealers and fetch very little money. Slowly and steadily, learning from the experience and knowledge of fellow waste pickers, she learnt how to pick and what to pick. Since most of their houses are small, Sarita Bai and her family members (sister and sister's daughter-in-law) do not get any of the collected items back to their colony. Instead, they keep all the collected items in a sack at a place in Sanjay Transport Nagar. When they have enough items collected by the end of the month, they sell them to the *kabaadi* dealer (scrap dealer) around the area. However, years of work have taken a toll on her body. Earlier she could at least earn Rs 400 (£4.07) a day, but due to her health condition and a fall in the prices of materials due to market fluctuations, these days, she cannot earn more than Rs 150 (£1.53) a day.

When I met Sarita Bai for the first time, I assumed that she was tired from her previous day's work and that she would resume work in a few days. However, she informed me that her body had been deteriorating steadily for a few years. Whenever I visited Qalandar Colony, she was mostly sleeping in her room, unwilling to talk. Over the course of my fieldwork, I observed that this is a very common phenomenon among waste pickers. Most of them are forced to retire by their late forties and early fifties, given the laborious and physically demanding nature of the work. After my first two meetings, whenever I visited her again, she had only two questions to ask me—if I could contribute

towards her daughter's wedding and if I could get her daughter employed in a garment factory or do some sewing work. Sarita Bai's daughter at present does *beldari* (manual work on construction sites). Though she has herself laboured as a waste picker throughout her life, she does not want her daughter to settle in this work. She would rather see her daughter employed in a factory or in tailoring work. She does not see waste work as respectable and proper work.

While most Qalandar and Maset women in the colony are engaged in waste picking, the men from both communities tend to engage in other work, such as vegetable vending, masonry, and sometimes (if they get the opportunity) engaging in their traditional occupation of tattooing and performing conjuring tricks at birthday parties, in addition to inflating balloons now-a-days as a requirement at celebratory events. Some young men from the community, due to the community's reputation as animal handlers, are also employed in the golf course in the Bhalswa area—where their main work is to chase away monkeys around the golf course while men from upper-middle-class families play golf. However, there exists a clear demarcation between a man's and a woman's work. Women from both communities are not usually engaged in traditional occupations of animal taming and conjuring tricks. One woman even remarked, 'How can a woman do a man's work'. Thus, the restrictions on women engaging in their traditional occupation and the lack of any alternative options have pushed them into waste picking in these areas.

Contextualising Masets and Qalandars

Drawing on these descriptions, I examine the presence of the Qalandar and Maset communities in the area. Both communities are nomadic communities but have separate historical lineages and religious affiliations. Qalandars are known for animal taming (bear and monkey), and Masets are known for snake charming. I look at how, over the years, from the colonial era to post-colonial times, these communities have been pushed into a cycle of poverty and subsequent socio-economic marginalisation. Their increasing marginalisation has further forced them into waste work, which was otherwise alien to both the communities. Further, through my fieldwork, I illustrate how the communities' identities have come to be reshaped around the notions of urban precarity that they are trying to resist by revalorising their older crafts and skills and also highlighting a particular kind of virtuous religiosity, as against their historically, socially, and culturally distinct identity as the *khanabadosh* community who once flocked the city's streets as entertainers. Historically, as Singha (1998) notes, both communities were criminalised by the colonial government under the Criminal Tribes Act of the 1870s. Moreover, they were often viewed under a simultaneously criminalised lens by colonial anthropologists such as Risley and Crooke (Datta, 2012). Singha observes that the colonial officials had a negative attitude towards

'[T]he culture of men on roads—mendicants, peripatetic professions, who frequented forest zones on the fringes of cultivation'. Moreover, such groups seemed to elude the reach of taxation and policing; their way of life was considered motley and suspect. Even an ethnographic interest in certain wandering tribes of India, who were believed to resemble the gypsies of Europe, was tinged with a suspicion of criminality or immorality in their lifestyle. The

religious mendicants were also object of official suspicion, but police measures were reined in because of the veneration in which they were held. (1998, p. 186).

In post-independence India, these communities were de-notified once the Criminal Tribes Act was annulled in 1957. However, there have not been any significant changes in their socio-economic conditions since then. In fact, these communities, who were once recognised for their creative skills in street entertainment, for which India was also once referred to as the land of snake charmers in an Orientalist way, are today seen as a blot on the country's 'modern' image. Recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi took a swipe at the Indian National Congress (INC) leader Priyanka Gandhi after her meeting with the snake charmers' community during her election campaign in Rae Bareilly in 2019. He retorted by saying, 'India is no longer a land of snake charmers but has developed into "mouse charmers" (Modi, 2019). The term 'mouse charmers' here is a reference to the growth of the Information Technology (IT) sector in the country. While his statement in itself did not belittle the community, it subtly conveyed the message that snake charmers are not constitutive of the country's wider imagination of 'modernist development'. Many newspaper articles have frequently reported the impoverished living conditions of the nomadic tribes of the country. They have been pushed into a penurious situation with the coming of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act, 1950, and the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 (Radhakrishna, 2007). Both these Acts are widely used to book Qalandars for bear dancing/animal taming practices. Moreover, Radhakrishna demonstrates that in addition to these Acts, the Bombay Prevention of Begging Act, 1959, is also used to threaten animal tamers. In particular, this act has a clause that prohibits 'exhibiting an animal with injury, deformity etc. for soliciting alms'. However, even though these laws were in place for a long time, they were implemented only in 1993. The entertainment

practice of bear dancing was legally permitted till 1993 based on a licence obtained from assistant conservators of forest or forest officers. This was followed by the registration of the bear owners at the nearest police station in order to obtain 'character certificate and permit for bear dancing '(2007, p. 4223). Such Acts then further reinforce the colonial anxieties and prejudices of viewing these communities with suspicion and fear.

With the imposition of the ban on animal taming practices, many Qalandars and Masets recalled that it was in the era of Rajiv Gandhi that they were forced to leave their traditional and hereditary occupation of animal taming and were pushed into other work such as masonry, street vending, waste picking, and so on. Today they are present in several slum colonies of Delhi—near Gulabi Bagh (north Delhi), Andheria Mor (south-west Delhi), and Bhalswa Dairy, where they rarely practise their traditional occupation and are mostly involved in other informal work.

Set against this backdrop, I concentrate on Qalandars and Masets and explore how these communities perceive themselves vis-à-vis waste work and how waste work has (if at all) transformed their intra-community relations and their sense of social identity. Furthermore, given the prevailing prejudices regarding these two communities among their neighbours and their stereotyping as 'inward looking and traditional communities', I examine how their (neighbours') practices and biases reveal upper-caste and religious prejudices against these communities that do not usually subscribe to 'strict 'religious norms (in this case Islamic norms), and are often termed as *maang ke khaane wale log*, that is, those who earn their living by begging.

One of the longer alleys in the colony was inhabited by a large Qalandar family that has lived in the area for over 30 years now. As I walked through the alley around 4

p.m., I saw a group of Qalandar women sitting outside their homes and chit-chatting with each other.

When I interacted with them, they told me that if I needed to talk to them, then I should visit the colony around 3:30 p.m. when they rest at the end of their day's work as waste pickers. They prefer going to the landfill around 7:00 a.m. and coming back by 11:30 a.m.–12 noon because after that, it gets too hot to work. Moreover, since their husbands leave for work (usually as masons or vegetable sellers) by 10:00 a.m., they have to come back to take care of their children. They feel that it is not very safe to leave their children alone in the house. After they come back from the landfill, they bathe, cook lunch, and sleep till 3:00 p.m., and then they come out in the evening to relax and spend time with each other.

When I asked them how long they had lived in the colony, all of them recalled that they had come there one year before Indira Gandhi's assassination (1984). None of them could recall the exact year, but they all remembered Indira Gandhi's death. The eldest among the women recalled that when they first came there (Qalandar Colony, Bhalswa Dairy), there was nothing but jungle. She said, 'When we came here, we used to roam around with our animals and the area was full of acacia trees'. She further explained that apart from dairy owners, nobody else resided in the area. They used to take their animals (mostly bears and monkeys) to the nearby Bhalswa lake to bathe and practised their traditional occupation of *madari* (street performance with animals) and snake charming. They practised these occupations for years until, as mentioned previously, the coming of the Wild Life Protection Act of 1972 forced them to stop.

When I asked them which *qaum/biraderi*⁹¹ (community or caste) they belonged to, all the women around remarked that they were from the *khanabadosh* community and were *fakirs* (religious ascetics), but an old woman asked me, ‘Madam, ye jo aap jaati ke baare mein pooch rahi hain iska matlab kya hai ’(why are you inquiring about our caste background). While my aim in inquiring about their *qaum/biraderi* was to understand their historical and social background, to my surprise, they never explicitly said they were a Muslim community. Most of the men from both communities regularly went to the *masjid* (mosque) located in the colony. They always stated *khanabadosh* and *fakir* as their primary identity. Their assertion of identity as *fakirs*, as against their Muslim identity, and reservations about discussing their social backgrounds can have multiple implications on how a community chooses to envision itself. First, given the current politics of religious nationalism in the country and rising prejudice against the Muslim community, both communities might feel threatened about their existence and livelihood, and this could explain the reason behind their reservations. Second, since the implementation of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, both communities have been victims of police harassment and are often on the police’s radar. Third, nomadic communities, as historical scholarship is evidence, are often part of syncretic traditions and do not associate themselves strictly with one particular religion and sometimes there is no consensus about their religious status (Datta, 2012). This can be another reason for the community to be ambivalent about their social identity. In fact, Hamid—a middle-aged Qalandar man—had a very different characterisation of the Maset community. While he himself claimed to be a Muslim, he also remarked that they (Masets) were not originally Muslims. They (Maset)

⁹¹ Sumit Guha (2013) suggests, the term *qaum* has been used differently in different regions. In the western part of the country, *qaum* referred to both caste and religion. Whereas in the east, *qaum* was used for religion and the word ‘*zat*’ refers to caste. Therefore, he suggests we should not fixate on these terms, as they acquire distinct meanings in different contexts.

had converted to Islam after reciting the first *kalma* (an Islamic oath) of Islam. He further asked me if I had noticed their names, as they are often Hindu names, even though they refer to themselves as Muslims. Later, Hamid's father told me that Masets did not know which traditions and customs to follow: 'They started following Islamic customs and rituals only after they met us and started imitating our religious practices.' All throughout my fieldwork, I had not noticed this important piece of information. My first informant in Qalandar Colony, Sarita Bai, did have a Hindu name. Hamid's characterisation of the Masets was a bit puzzling for me. I was confused about whether Hamid's narrative was genuine or if he was trying to negatively portray the Masets. Alternatively, it was equally possible that the community had indeed converted to Islam.

Interestingly, the communities' engagement with waste work is unlike other communities in the area. Although waste picking is not their hereditary occupation, they do not particularly feel stigmatised because of the work, unlike other communities (Bengali Muslims, Hindu SCs and OBCs) who are at times forced to hide their waste-picker identity back in their villages in order to maintain their social status and avoid humiliation. Growing poverty, the decline in their traditional occupations, and a lack of education in the community have forced them into waste picking. Thus, waste picking is not hidden among the community members. Their extended families in Ghaziabad (U.P.), Palwal (Haryana), and Dasna (U.P.) are also engaged in waste picking, and for them, their engagement with waste work is a matter of survival and livelihood, like many other communities in the area, and yet not a marker of stigma.

I illustrate both the communities' social history in order to contextualise their present positioning in society and how their social identity has been a determining factor in defining their present waste-picker identity. Second, the communities' social identity is

pertinent in order to understand their complex relationships with their neighbours. In the next section, I examine how the Masets and Qalandars' precarious economic and social condition is often disconcerting for the neighbours in the *basti* who choose to disassociate themselves from both the communities and their waste work.

Caste Privileges and Prejudices

It is undeniable that the stigmatisation of waste-picking communities and sanitation workers is widespread in the country. As mentioned before, communities associated with waste work were historically always socially marginalised and were treated as untouchables. This questionable practice of treating waste workers as social outcasts is generally premised on two points: their association with 'dirty' and socially polluting work, and their association with the SC communities. In the case of the Masets and Qalandars, both communities are stigmatised for various other reasons in addition to their association with waste work. Their lifestyle, which is often perceived to be 'socially and culturally distinct', is often at odds with that of their neighbouring (mostly Muslim) communities. These differences, as I understand, are not merely cultural but often map onto prevailing caste biases among these neighbouring communities who often assert themselves as relatively upper-caste.

Trivedi et al. (2016) and Gyanendra Pandey (2006) have established how caste has historically been part of the social structure of Islam in India. Ashraf (Sayyids, Sheikhs) constitute the respectable class among Muslims, and Razil (Chamars, Julahas, Lohars) constitute the lower class among Muslims. However, Pandey describes Razil as a broad category, where all those participating in 'clean' cultivating activities to those in

'unclean' activities constitute a part of the category, whereas Trivedi et al. (2016) examine the category of Dalit Muslims in particular, who have not been separately identified in the government reports/institutions and are demarcated under the OBC category. However, Dalit Muslims, such as Nats, Shah, Fakir, Lalbegi, and Mochi, have been repeatedly ostracised by the elites of the Muslim community (Ashraf) and are treated as untouchables.

Noticeably, Qalandar Colony is inhabited by many other Muslim communities, such as Khans, Qureshis, and Ansaris, but not everyone is involved in waste work. Once, while walking through the area, I asked a young boy, Omar Ansari, if he knew where the Masets' houses were located. He laughed in response and said, 'We don't talk to such dirty people, and I can't take you to their houses. Neither do I play with their kids. They are waste pickers; I will never go near them'. Startled by his reply, I made my way towards the Masets' houses on my own when I met another woman, Reshma Qureshi (The Qureshis belong to the butcher community among Muslims and are categorised as OBCs. However, the Qureshis are a socially dominant caste in U.P. and Bihar), who took me to her house. She inquired why I was even interested in speaking to Qalandars and Masets, and remarked, 'They are not proper Muslims' and then she went on to assert her own status in the area. According to her, her family was forced to shift to Qalandar Colony because they had incurred a financial loss of Rs 3 lakh (approximately 3,000 pounds), but they soon expected to shift back to Jahangirpuri (in north-west Delhi) to their original house. She also told me that her kids are well-educated: one son owns a mechanic shop, and another one is a state-level football player. These remarks and statements formed the backdrop of her characterisation of Qalandars and Masets in the area. Moreover, she did not consider it important enough to categorise both communities

differently, given their association with Islam. Her grudge against the two communities was primarily because of their association with waste picking and what she saw as their social backwardness. She remarked, 'Earlier, they celebrated both Hindu and Muslim festivals. They didn't know they were supposed to celebrate only Muslim festivals. Moreover, even today, they celebrate Eid within their own households and do not mingle with others'. Furthermore, according to Reshma, their girls either get married at a very young age or run away with other men, and she also hinted at their association with prostitution. She thought the men of these communities were always drunk, and the children barely went to school. They loitered around all day. Her belief in these attributes of the communities really perturbed Reshma and reinforced her hatred for them.

Similar concerns were raised by a woman from the Khan *biraderi* called Saba Khan. While I was talking to a woman from the Maset community and trying to understand their labour processes and engagement with waste work, Saba interrupted me and said how everyone from the Maset *biraderi* does waste work. She proudly said that her *biraderi* does not engage in such work. Her husband was a rickshaw puller, she said, and hopefully, when their kids grew up, they would be able to leave this area. When I pointed out that there were many Khans among the Bengali Muslim community who engaged in waste work, she replied, 'There are many who change their surnames to Khan, but that doesn't mean they can match our social status'. While I will discuss the social status of Bengali Muslim waste pickers in the next section, it is pertinent to note how caste here is a very important identity marker for many like Saba who think that Khans, being upper-caste Muslims, cannot engage in work that is traditionally perceived as 'dirty and lowly'.

While some of the women expressed their concerns and reservations about the two communities in terms of the Qalandar and Maset's 'cultural distinctness' and 'backward' lifestyle, another man named Anwar from the area referred to the people from both communities as 'lazy'. He remarked, 'Now, if someone who is poor and doesn't want to work at all, what will that person do? Obviously waste picking, right?' To this, I replied, 'But waste picking is also work', to which he finally replied, 'Yes, yes, but it is not real work. You go according to your own time, whenever you want. There is no discipline. You sell the waste according to your own convenience. Then obviously, you will remain poor'. Interestingly, he went on to say, 'This is not about *jaati* (in this particular context the term *jaati* meant caste), madam. Everyone here is from different backgrounds; someone is Ansari, someone is Qureshi. Everyone is equal in Islam. It is about what kind of work you choose to do and how you shape your life'.

These narratives illustrate the various ways in which both the communities are socially marginalised. The long-held prejudices of upper-caste communities against these itinerant communities are expressed in varied manners. Some chose to speak directly along caste lines and further cemented their prejudices by mapping them onto waste work, whereas others, such as Anwar, while tacitly admitting the caste hierarchy in Islam, chose to stigmatise the work of waste. To him, caste is part of their social life, but it does not necessarily define the work one chooses to do for their survival and livelihood.

Living in the Past and the Present

In the process of tracing both the communities' precarious past and present, and by observing neighbouring communities' biases and misgivings regarding Qalandars and

Masets, I argue that these communities that were once known for their traditional occupations and entertainment practices are today pushed into the world of informal waste pickers and form a larger mass of the urban poor such as many other migrants in the city who have lost their socially distinct identity. The community members still reminisce about their past and are continuously aspiring for mobility, but due to poverty and a lack of education, their present is tied to waste work. Moreover, the neighbouring communities, in addition to their underlying preconceived notions about both the communities, choose to continuously stigmatise them and maintain a distance because of their association with waste. Thus, unlike many other waste-picking communities, such as Bengali Muslims and Hindu OBCs and SCs, what becomes distinct in the case of nomadic communities, especially in and around the Bhalswa landfill, is the form in which they face discrimination. It is common among waste pickers to face the rebuke of the general public while picking up waste on their route. However, to face discrimination from one's own immediate but relatively upper-caste neighbours based on perceptions of being 'notorious', 'different', and 'not proper practising Muslims', in addition to their association with waste work, is something that stands out in case of the Masets and Qalandars. However, even in the face of precarity, both the communities continue to assert and value themselves in multiple ways, whether it is through their nomadic identity and traditional occupation or waste work. To reduce their existence to precarity is also to deprive them of their rich past.

An old Qalandar woman who had come to visit her relatives in the colony, said, 'Kooda ke kaam se kya sharam? Ye duniya ek khadaan hai aur hum sab iss khadaan ka hissa. Humne sab kuch iss khadaan se hi banaya hai. Aur kooda bhi iss khadaan ka hissa hai' (Why shy away from waste? This world is a mine of resources and we are all part of

it. We have made everything out of this mine and waste is also part of this mine). Her statement, I felt, reverberated the sentiment of Ingold's (2007) work, where he argues that 'human beings ... swim in an ocean of materials' (p. 7). She iterated a very profound understanding that we are all part of this world—whoever we are and whatever we make, it will all one day come to its natural end. This is not to limit the fact that both communities did not feel disgusted by waste work. Through this statement, I put forth the creative ways in which waste workers—here Masets and Qalandars—imagine their work. Later in the chapter, I examine the statement through the framework of value and analyse the possible meanings that the statement could hold in the lives of waste workers.

Datta (2012) in her work examines how a nomadic community, Nats, in the south-west part of Delhi, have lost their traditional occupation of acrobatics, music, and dancing, but they still continue to identify themselves as bards and poets (Datta, 2012).⁹² These descriptions help us understand how even in the face of discrimination and precarity, waste workers from the Qalandar and Maset communities give meaning to their existence through their work, social identity, and past. Around the landfill, every community and even individuals hold a very distinct relation with waste work and with the neighbourhood. They all have varied ways in which they build their relationship with the work, self, and the space they operate in.

The Bengali Basti

⁹² Datta narrates the community's voice, 'We are artistes by tradition. We used to do acrobatics and plays. We also performed for kings and monarchs. Elephant and camel carriage—all of this we used to do.... Women did not do this, only men did so.... Those Nats who did tightrope walking are different. They are called *naare*'. 'We keep moving. Now we are trapped in one place.... We know the *peedhis* (generations) of Thakurs and Raos. *Hum bhat hain, kavish hain*... (We are bards and the best of poets). We sing *dohas* (couplets) in praise of Raos and Thakurs. *Hum raj Nat hain* (We are royal Nats)'.

In this section, I examine the experiences of informal Bengali Muslim waste workers in Delhi with their work and the stigma associated with it. In the process of mapping their experiences, I discuss why Bengali waste workers migrated from West Bengal, leaving behind petty jobs such as those of rickshaw pullers, agricultural labourers, and local fish farmers, and came to Delhi in search of better livelihood opportunities, and how this, in turn, shaped their eventual engagement with waste work. After eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in and around the Bhalswa landfill, I learned that many of the migrants had come to Delhi in the late 1980s and early 1990s in search of employment. They could not make enough money to survive back in Bengal, and that is why they started migrating to Delhi. While many of them initially worked as petty labourers, such as rickshaw pullers, tailors, and as servers in local tea stalls, most of them eventually moved into waste picking because it proved to be much more lucrative and financially sustainable. However, the question that then arises is: How did the Bengali Muslims, who were previously not associated with waste work, navigate their way through Delhi's waste economies? Furthermore, how did they deal with the stigma and everyday discrimination associated with waste work, how did that shape the community and its social relations, and what does that tell us about discrimination based on work and caste hierarchies?

I examine these questions by tracing the life journeys of waste workers working as garbage collectors in the middle-class colonies of Delhi. Many of these reflections are also drawn from my own experiences while growing up and how I myself used to see and understand the presence of garbage collectors in my colony and household. My interactions with both garbage collectors and waste pickers took place in Bengali Basti. Bengali Basti is situated behind the landfill. Unlike Qalandar Colony, it was built more recently. There is widespread prejudice among middle-class people, the local police, and landfill engineers against Bengali Muslim waste workers in Delhi and the common

assumption is that they are all poor Bangladeshis. However, my informants told me that they are predominantly from Haldia, Nandigram, and Kagdeep in West Bengal. Countering the assumption that they are Bangladeshi, many of them happily invited me to their village homes for a visit and spoke about the '*sukoon*' (peace, tranquillity) that they feel back home against the chaos and pollution of Delhi.

Even though Bengali Basti was constructed 10 to 12 years ago, most inhabitants of the colony have been living in Delhi for around 30 years. Before the colony was built, they mostly lived in Jahangirpuri (north-west Delhi), around three kilometres from their present location. As Jahangirpuri became more expensive to live in over time, and Bhalswa provided closer proximity to the landfill, many found it convenient to settle here. Unlike other communities that are engaged in waste work, Bengalis are known to be 'professional' waste workers. They have dominated the work for 30 years now and are present at the lower levels of the waste hierarchy, from picking up waste across the landfills of Delhi to household garbage collection and owning scrap shops. Men, women, and children all participate in the process. However, most community members were not used to the everyday stigma associated with waste work but accepted the work and the consequent stigma in return for relative financial stability.

Spaces of Stigmatisation: Middle Class Colonies and Balmikis Supervisors

As I entered the Bengali Basti area in Bhalswa Dairy, the first family I met in the locality was that of Noor Sheikh and her four children. Like many others, she has lived in the area

for 10 years and has been engaged in waste picking for 30 years until recently. Nowadays, Noor Sheikh has stopped picking up waste. A few years ago, she met with an accident while collecting waste at night near the Lal Bagh area of Delhi. This accident damaged her left leg, and she has been at home since then. Her two sons are actively involved in waste picking—the elder one, Ashfaq Sheikh, goes to the landfill, and the younger one, Ayaz Sheikh, is a household garbage collector.

Like Ayaz, there are many Bengali Muslim boys in the colony who go to the middle-class neighbourhoods of the city and collect garbage from households on a daily basis. It is through their encounters in these middle-class colonies and those with their supervisors (the Balmiki *jemaadars* [private cleaners]) that they experience multiple forms of discrimination and a sense of ‘otherness’ that were unknown to them in their villages.

By the late 1980s, individual Balmiki cleaners started hiring Bengali workers while they themselves stepped back from cleaning work. Their withdrawal from this particular work was informed by not only a desire for less work and the privileges of supervision but also a conscious decision to distance themselves from work that was perceived as ‘dirty’ and that was the historical reason for the unjust treatment meted out to them (Prashad, 2000). Eventually, with the coming of Bengali Muslim migrants, Balmikis started distancing themselves from waste work and contracted their work out to these migrant communities.

The carts that Bengali collectors, such as Ayaz, use to collect waste when they visit middle-class colonies consist of two compartments—one for wet waste, which typically includes items such as sanitary napkins, vegetable peels, leftovers, and so on (all of which is useless for them), and another compartment that is fitted with an off-white

sack meant for the collection of dry waste (which they eventually sell to earn money) such as cardboard, plastic bags, and foam. A few *jemaadars* (Balmiki supervisors) sometimes walk behind them and direct them to households to collect waste. However, most *jemaadars* very often do not accompany garbage collectors and only show up at the beginning or end of the month to collect money from households. For example, the man who frequents my colony has been performing the work of a *jemaadar* on behalf of his sister. He told me he owns a small orchestra band, and his main work is to perform in local events such as marriages and religious gatherings. He does not usually have time to walk with the garbage collectors and supervise them.

Many times, the *jemaadars* do not pay anything to the Bengali collectors for garbage collection. Some *jemaadars*, who are more sympathetic, pay a nominal amount of Rs 2,000 every month. The general understanding is that garbage collectors earn money from selling waste and, therefore, do not need to be paid. Thus, while the informal garbage collectors do all the laborious work, their supervisors reap the benefits of this to achieve some degree of upward social mobility by no longer having to deal with *kooda* (dry waste) and *kachra* (wet waste). These observations highlight two simultaneous processes at play. First, such a process disturbs traditional caste hierarchies where only Dalits—in this case, Balmikis (and more specifically, *jemadaars*)—are no longer physically associated with waste work. Second, the social stigma attached to this work now affects Bengali garbage collectors who, while aware of the stigma and discrimination, have nonetheless accepted this burden in exchange for monetary benefits, as also illustrated by Kornberg (2019). Many Bengali waste pickers have accepted these attributes of stigmatisation and untouchability as it provides them with economic mobility and better living conditions than back in their villages. (I substantiate this in chapter 6, where I trace the journey of a waste picker to a scrap dealer.)

Moreover, all additional benefits of the job are reaped by the *jemadaars* instead of the garbage collectors. On festivals such as Diwali and Holi, everyone receives a bonus that is generally accompanied by a box of sweets. The *jemaadars* receive it, and we do not know if they share anything with the waste pickers. Even the garbage collection fee is determined by the *jemaadars*, who increase it when they deem fit by going and informing the residents of the colony that from next month they will have to pay more. Thus, even though garbage collectors are the ones who visit these households on a daily basis, collect their garbage, clean their stairs, and do all the labour, it is the *jemaadars* who retain more power and control, as well as stronger social relations with the households, because of their presence and familiarity with these areas over several years. These instances demonstrate that even though caste is structured in a particular and hierarchical manner, the present structuring of waste economies allows Balmikis to socially and economically dominate the Bengali Muslim waste pickers in this particular setting. The varied forms of dominating and subjecting a particular community to exploitative work conditions are contingent upon how different communities associate value to waste. This complex situation between the Balmikis and the Bengalis gives us an indication of the intricate relationships between caste, materials, and economy. While on the one hand, the Balmikis have distanced themselves from garbage collection because of the humiliation and stigma they faced for decades, the Bengali Muslims, on the other hand, 'chose' to associate themselves with garbage for a better life and livelihood by finding value in waste.

As people such as Ayaz visit middle-class colonies, they are often asked questions such as 'why have you come so late today?', 'why didn't you come yesterday?', and so on. Such questions are asked by passers-by while they maintain a distance and cover their noses and mouths. One afternoon, when one of the garbage collectors in my area was

very late, everyone became impatient to get rid of their garbage and promptly overburdened his cart with their garbage as soon as he arrived. Since his cart was already full, he refused to take any more garbage. A middle-aged woman, who was keen on throwing away her garbage bag, went ahead and forcibly dumped the garbage in his cart and then shouted at him, 'Aajkal inki jaati ke kaam bhi humein hi karne padte hain', which means, 'nowadays we have to perform the tasks of lower-caste people like them'. Although every garbage collector these days is not necessarily from an SC community, their engagement with waste work is evidence enough to equate them with the former untouchables. Such behaviour and reactions reveal that the problems of untouchability and the stigma associated with waste work and other such occupations (leather tanning, cleaning cow carcasses, and so on) are not limited to traditional caste hierarchies. Rather, it is inflicted onto many others who may not be from the SC categories but are closely associated with such 'polluting' work. What I observed in the process is that it is not just caste status but also the 'work' that forms the material basis of such discriminatory practices—which I shall substantiate in the following paragraphs.

Ayaz, who is nearly 19 years old, informed me that his task is to just collect waste, but nobody comes down from their high-rise buildings or houses to hand over their dustbins. Rather, he has to climb these multi-storied buildings to collect garbage. There exists a thin 'invisible' line that demarcates the entrance to these households, which the likes of Ayaz duly observe. They quietly pick the waste up from the demarcated spaces of the household (usually next to the stairs) and promptly leave. It also explains this classic distinction suggested by Kaviraj (1997) (*ghare/baire*) between the inside and the outside, different from the universal categories of public and private, where garbage is 'thrown over a conceptual boundary' of the outside (p. 98). The inner household space is

considered a pure, hygienic space, whereas the outside is an 'otherised 'space that symbolises the 'negative of the inside '(Kaviraj, 1997, p. 98). Though this conceptualisation by Kaviraj is defined in terms of spaces and filth, it can easily be adapted/transposed to think about the experience of waste workers who, along with waste, are continuously socially exteriorised from the inside spaces of households.

These distinctions become concretised through the discriminatory practices of upper-caste households, such as when they ask garbage collectors to clean the stairs and entrances of their houses after the collection process. Similarly, when handing over garbage dustbins, they often ask garbage collectors to clean the dustbins and then give it back to them. Although reluctant to clean the dustbins, the collectors do not have any option but to comply as otherwise, the middle-class colonies 'residents will end up labelling them as 'rowdy 'and 'callous 'and force their contractors to hire other workers. Interestingly (and expectedly), the COVID-19 pandemic put an end to this practice of garbage collectors entering middle-class households. Seen as potential carriers of the virus, many households prohibited the entry of garbage collectors into their neighbourhoods. Instead, they would keep their dustbins outside their houses and wait for garbage collectors to come and collect the waste. Additionally, many households who would not usually cover their dustbins with a dustbin bag started covering their dustbins with a dustbin bag so that garbage collectors such as Ayaz could not 'touch 'their dustbins. Moreover, when household members contracted the virus, they would neither inform their neighbours nor their garbage collectors so as to ensure uninterrupted service of garbage collection and other everyday activities. Such questionable practices undoubtedly leave a negative impression on garbage collectors who put their lives at risk every day in order to serve middle-class residents. Thus, these contradictions about the

entry of garbage collectors in the household domain are reflective of their prejudice based on their upper-caste privilege and paranoia regarding waste workers and how they choose to patronise them in order to maintain social boundaries and their own 'health 'and 'safety'.

Embracing Waste Work and Mitigating Stigma

While these everyday forms of discrimination and the tacit practice of untouchability have become a part of these Bengali waste workers 'lives, unlike the Balmikis, they have accepted it for multiple reasons, such as monetary benefits and flexible work routine. On a winter morning when I was talking to a few Bengali garbage collectors in my colony they asked me 'didi, you must be thinking that we do this work because we cannot do anything else right'? They told me that they know how to speak in English and have even done an office job, but that they left that job to engage in waste picking because it provides better flexibility in terms of work timing and they do not have to work for a boss. Unlike in an office job, waste pickers do not consider their *jemaadars* as their boss. As iterated previously, in this informal garbage collection system, *jemaadars* rarely frequent the middle-class colonies along with the garbage collectors and they do not interfere in the garbage collection process. Working as garbage collectors or waste pickers provides them with the flexibility they seek to carry out their work and manage their day at their own convenience. In the process, they also challenge the dominant understanding of what constitutes 'real 'work. It is often assumed that a 'real 'job is based on regular work patterns and wage labour. For many waste pickers, it is difficult to adjust to the work patterns of a regular job. The nature of work offers a different rhythm of life

that waste pickers get accustomed to (Millar, 2018; Fredericks, 2021). Waste picking provides them with the flexibility of timing and dividing their day into work and leisure at their own convenience. In doing so, they also demonstrate that amidst all this precarity and stigma that is associated with waste work, they still choose to be part of the waste-picking world.

While walking with one of them at a local *dhalao* (garbage receptacle) where all the garbage collectors dump their waste in Sector 14, Rohini (north-west Delhi), one of the boys remarked: ‘Didi, I look dirty now, na? I must be smelling? But you see me in the evening when I go to the gym; you won’t be able to recognise me’. Evening recreation includes roaming around on bikes, wearing leather jackets, and performing stunts. One of them often sent me his Tiktok (a social media app) videos that were sometimes shot in his Delhi house and sometimes from Bengal. Often, it is through such activities that many of them hope to conceal their waste-picker identity—an identity straitjacketed in the world of waste, dirt, stigma, and hopelessness. While I interviewed many such young Bengali Muslim boys, I observed aspirations of having a distinct identity other than that of a waste picker. I noticed that even when they were on their daily rounds of garbage collection, they would plug in their headphones and listen to local rap singers. However, many of them did agree to feeling humiliated in such middle-class colonies or when they would run into a friend after a long time and feel ashamed of their work. Yet, they never ascribed these feelings of humiliation to their caste identity but to poverty and rising unemployment in their villages.

When I asked them if they are discriminated against in their villages because of their occupation in the city, most of them denied this⁹³ and said, 'We are all Muslims in the village and there is no discrimination in Islam. Everyone is equal in the eyes of Allah. Work is work'. When I persisted with my questioning about caste, they said they were all Sheikhs and Khans. One of the eldest members of the community said there was a saying in their village, 'Sheikh, Sayyid, Mughal, Pathan, uske niche Mullick Gulam' (Lee, 2018; Ahmed, 1981)⁹⁴, which means that Sheikhs, Sayyids, Mughals, and Pathans are the upper castes, whereas Mullicks are lower caste. They indirectly claimed to be upper caste while also claiming that there is no caste in Islam. This was a consistent identification among most Bengali Muslims. Rafiuddin Ahmed's (1981) work on Bengali Muslims informs us that it was a common practice among Muslims to divide themselves into these four racial groups. The Sayyids were ranked top in the hierarchy and were believed to be descendants of the Prophet's daughter, Fatimah, and Ali. Similarly, Sheikhs were believed to be of Arab descent, the Mughal, and 'Afghan conquerors' of India. Most of the local converts used these titles to establish their legitimacy. Ahmed argues that there were no foreign connections among Bengali Muslims and most of the converts used the four racial ranks in accordance with the Hindu caste structure.

Kornberg (2019) demonstrates through her research in the Birbhum district of West Bengal that many such waste workers (primarily Sheikhs) who claim to be upper caste are actually landless farmers, as against the Sayyids who are upper-caste Muslims

⁹³ Many Bengali Muslim waste pickers I interviewed had migrated to Delhi 20 years ago and they did not feel discriminated in their villages. However, the elderly waste pickers who migrated in the late 1980s or early 1990s felt the burden of stigma and discrimination. Back in the 1980s, waste picking was not a common practice among Bengali Muslims. It is only in the last 25 years that we see Bengali Muslims migrating to Delhi in large numbers.

⁹⁴ Lee (2018) and Ahmad (1981) argue how many lower-caste Muslim communities use Sheikh as their title to conceal their caste identity; Sheikh title has become an all-encompassing title for indigenous converts.

and Miyas (honorific title or a respectful form of address for those with high social and economic standing in the village) who are landed and have concrete houses in their villages. She further explains how these economic differences do not translate into social differences among Sayyids and Sheikhs and that perhaps this is what justifies their assertion that there is no caste in Islam.

Thus, even as stigma and humiliation have become quotidian parts of their lives, there is little recognition of how pre-existing caste structures in their villages, as discussed by Kornberg, might have shaped their present socio-economic status and their prolonged spells of unemployment. Furthermore, as explained earlier, these emergent social identities (that of waste workers) have intersected with the erstwhile untouchable communities (Balmikis), where one sees the constant playing out of caste hierarchies between the *jemaadars* and the garbage collectors premised upon their newly acquired upward mobility.⁹⁵ However, *jemaadars* (mainly in Delhi's middle-class colonies) are still treated as untouchables and are disparagingly referred to as Bhangis, along with Bengali Muslim garbage collectors. Delhi's middle class, at least in the colonies where I conducted my fieldwork, is indifferent about who collects their waste. For them, since both communities are associated with waste work, they are to be treated in a similar fashion—which is one of revulsion and disgust. In fact, I noted that the middle classes were unaware of the fact that their present-day garbage collectors are mainly Bengali Muslims and not Balmikis. These observations and their analysis help us understand that

⁹⁵ Here, relative upward mobility is understood in terms of *jemaadars* disassociating themselves from waste work and still being able to earn money from it. Mobility here cannot be understood in any absolute sense. *Jemaadars* are still not entirely liberated from caste-based discrimination. As evidenced earlier, middle-class colony residents still refer to them as Bhangis. However, they do not have to participate in waste work as they did earlier. Through decades of hard work and labour, they have been able to maintain social dominance in areas where they work, which has helped them in altering their work conditions and social status to some extent. For example, if a dog dies in a middle-class colony, the residents will ask the *jemaadar* to ask one of his workers (garbage collectors) to remove the dog. They would not directly ask the *jemaadar* to remove the dead body of the dog.

caste hierarchies are not just a matter of pre-existing caste structures but are continuously defined and redefined by changing economic and material relations in society (Jodhka, 2015b). In this case, a gap left by the upward mobility of the Balmikis, who consciously distanced themselves from garbage collection, was then bridged by Bengali Muslim waste workers who were in search of employment. Thus, even though Balmikis are categorised as a lower-caste community in the country, they have been relatively successful in distancing themselves from the stigma associated with waste work. This results in a transformation of the caste system as new communities, such as those of the Bengalis, enter waste work and therein become embedded in the caste system.

The Kabaadi Gali: Waste Pickers of UP and Bihar



Figure 5.3: Graffiti on the wall of the landfill.

Source: Photograph clicked by the author.

As I walked towards Kabaadi Gali, navigating the serpentine lanes leading to the landfill, I was struck by the gigantic structure of the landfill, and, in particular, the graffiti on the walls surrounding it. One of them read, ‘Tum unnati karo hum aag mein jalen’, which

translates to ‘we burn while you progress’. This caught my attention for two reasons: First, it was sharp and powerful in its use of words, and second, given the lack of any kind of unionisation or the presence of any political organisation in the area, I was doubtful if the residents of the colony had painted the graffiti. On talking to people around the landfill, I found that it was the work of the crew members of a recent Netflix series, *Leila*, an urban dystopian story featuring a right-wing Hindutva political regime that governs the city, leading to its ecological degradation. Though futuristic in its approach, *Leila* successfully captured the environmental degradation around the landfill—black-coloured water, a thick layer of pollution, and the outbreak of fires. Although such representations may seem exaggerated, Delhi frequently witnesses these conditions every year during the months of November and December. I place the graffiti in this section to understand how the phrase ‘we burn while you progress’ resonates with the life of waste workers in Kabaadi Gali. Even though the phrase is used to depict a ‘fictional’ account of events, as in the case of the Netflix series, the essence of this phrase echoes in the anecdotes the waste workers in the colony recounted to me.

The findings of this section rely on the fieldwork conducted in Kabaadi Gali, located a few meters away from the graffiti discussed earlier. As the name suggests, this particular colony has many waste pickers and small-time *kabaadi* dealers (petty scrap dealers) from various backgrounds—Qalandars, Bengali Muslims, and Hindu OBCs. Most of my respondents in Kabaadi Gali were waste pickers. I rarely got to interact with the dealers, as they would open their shops only after 5 p.m., when most of the waste pickers would come back from the landfill and sell their collected materials.

The socio-economic profile of my respondents in Kabaadi Gali consisted of Hindu OBCs and SCs—mainly from UP (Gorakhpur, Azamgarh) and Bihar. While many SC

communities have been historically associated with 'defiled' works, it is uncommon to see the presence of Hindu OBC communities engaged in waste picking—given the strong association of purity and pollution in Hinduism, where only SC communities, that too erstwhile untouchables, were forced to perform the 'dirty' work. The logic of graded inequality in the caste system has been so pervasive that for decades, caste-based communities have not transgressed caste boundaries for work.

In this section, I analyse the present social location of Hindu OBC and SC waste workers vis-à-vis waste work and how they perceive their own social identity while engaging in this work. The Hindu OBC waste pickers, like many other waste-picking communities, have lived a precarious life around the landfill. Leaving behind their traditional occupation, they migrated to Delhi, aspiring for a better life. It is interesting to note how they left their villages for better prospects and engaged in waste work, which reaped monetary benefits but also led to the stigmatisation of the community, be it among their fellow villagers or among those around the landfill. The socio-economic marginalisation of SC communities within waste work has been well evidenced by Prashad (2000) and Lee (2017).

In this section, I try and understand the marginalisation of OBC waste workers who have taken up waste work in the last 20 years. Over the last few years, certain sections of OBC communities, mostly Most Backward Castes (MBCs), have borne a considerable burden of economic marginalisation and have been deprived of the benefits of reservations (Verma, 2010; Jaffrelot, 2020). Reservations, especially in the state of UP, have largely benefited the dominant OBC communities, such as the Yadavs. OBCs, just like Dalits, are not a homogenous caste group. As Jaffrelot (2020) argues, 'Yadavs tend to be richer than Gadariyas, Kushwahas, Telis and Lodhis, who resent Yadav domination

and the way the latter has cornered reservations'. Intra-community discrimination is very prevalent, even among the OBCs. In one of the rare studies conducted on MBC communities, Assa Doron (2014) notes how the Nishad (also called Kevat) community (MBC) has been systemically marginalised in the process of OBC reservations. They were a criminalised community in the pre-independence era. They hoped to have benefited from the state policies. However, they have been pushed to a corner. Today the community members have formed their own political party in UP and have started a drive to achieve SC community status. Some members of the Nishad community are now involved in waste work near the Bhalswa landfill and live in Kabaadi Gali.

The name 'Kabaadi Gali' carries a negative connotation in itself as the term *kabaadi* translates to scrap. Their lives and social existence, consciously or unconsciously, have been associated with scrap. On one occasion, I asked a young girl her name, and a boy in front of us responded, 'Naam hai Khushboo magar aati hai badboo', which means, 'her name is Khushboo (fragrance), but she smells bad'. These anecdotes, I believe, are representative of how waste pickers around the landfill viscerally construe their own sense of self, which is often closely tied to the work and the environment they are surrounded by.

One of my first respondents in the colony was Naresh, from the Kevat/Nishad community in Gorakhpur, UP. His family migrated to Delhi 20 years ago in search of work. On asked when he started working as a waste worker, he said, 'Jabse paida hue hain, tabse khatte ke saath jung chiddhi hui hai', which means, 'since the time I was born, I have been in a struggling relationship with this landfill'. The struggling relationship, as I understand here, refers to the two contradictory aspects that come with living the life of a waste picker. The first is that inadvertently the lives of waste pickers are dependent on the

landfill, and they have no option but to climb up the landfill every day. Second, even though their lives are dependent on the landfill, they have to bear the brunt of the negative ecological and health fallouts at the landfill site—tuberculosis, skin diseases, emission of methane fumes, and heightened pollution levels.

The Kevat community is classified as an OBC community in UP.⁹⁶ The caste members usually identify themselves as the fishermen and boatmen community, and they occasionally 'grow fruits and vegetables along the riverbanks' (Kashyap, 2020, n.p). Since Naresh's parents could not sustain themselves with their meagre income, they chose to migrate to Delhi and engage in waste work. At that time, it was uncommon among the members of the OBC communities to practise waste work. Many such people, who migrated from UP and Bihar, have to make consistent efforts to conceal the truth about their work from their fellow villagers—that they worked as waste pickers. Naresh informed me that most of the people living in this *basti* either did not go to work when their relatives visited them or they did not meet their relatives at all. The stigma attached to waste work is so strong in these villages that most of the individuals migrate with their immediate families in order to maintain distance from their extended families.

Another young man from the Shah community (OBC community in U.P and Bihar), Darbhanga, Bihar, told me that when young men are married, they do not reveal their real source of livelihood. Instead, they lie that they work in factories or work as daily wage labourers or else the stigma prevents people from marrying their daughters to these men. These tendencies persist very strongly among migrants from UP and Bihar. Yet they choose to engage in this work for the same reasons as those of the Bengali

⁹⁶ It is important to note that in 2013, the Samajwadi Party's (SP) government in Uttar Pradesh was pushing for categorising Nishads (among 16 other caste) to give them the status of an SC category. Nishads are categorised among the OBCs. However, over the years, they did not receive any benefits from their OBC status and wanted to be categorised as SC (Narayan, 2014).

Muslims. This work fetches them more money and flexibility in comparison to factory-based work. However, unlike Bengalis, who now dominate the field of waste, many of these migrants from UP and Bihar are still more flexible in terms of their occupational choices.

Naresh engaged in waste picking very intermittently and mostly worked as a house painter in Mumbai. He does not like going to the landfill because it makes him nauseous, and instead, he informally works with a small-time dealer who has contracts with five-star hotels in Delhi to collect their waste. Naresh's work primarily involves driving to these hotels at night, collecting all the leftover food waste after dinners and parties and getting back to Bhalswa by 5 or 6 a.m. The leftover food that he collects is transported to piggeries in Haryana. Sometimes when he is lucky, he gets access to valuable materials that he sells to *kabaadi* dealers around the Bhalswa area. Sometimes, when he 'chooses' to climb up the landfill, it is mostly for recreational purposes, such as catching up with friends and reminiscing about childhood memories of playing cricket at the top of the landfill.

However, now many young boys and girls and middle-aged people have tied their fate to the landfill. Some of the ones I talked to were from the Shah and the Sahu communities. Sahus, like Shahs, are also usually from the OBC community. Many of them, who are from central India, are from the Teli background. Telis in India belong to the labouring community of oil pressers. Earlier, they used to extract oil from mustard and sesame seeds; however, with the spread of technological advancements, they no longer do this work. Many of them are landless labourers and have ended up in waste economies. Kangal Lal, one of my informants whom I introduced at the beginning of this chapter, is also from the Shah community and is a landless peasant from Gorakhpur. He has been working as a waste picker in Delhi for about 20 years now. As per his narrative,

nobody in the village knows about his waste-picking work. He will be completely stigmatised if anyone gets to know about his work. He was so much concerned about his waste-picking identity that initially every time I met him he identified himself with different names.

Similarly, I met an old waste picker from the Sahu community. During each interaction, he emphasised that he only picks up dry bricks from the landfill and nothing else. His explanation for picking up bricks was that they fetch much more money than other materials and that he does not have to deal with other dirty materials while searching for them. The dryness and materiality of the waste were very important to him because it is directly linked to the question of purity and pollution. Wet waste is considered to be much more defiling and polluting than dry waste. Thus, while waste picking is stigmatising work for most of the OBC community workers, within that some of them choose what kind of discarded materials to pick up to avoid the stigma associated with defiled materials. Similar observations have been made by Sharma (2022) in the context of the Deonar landfill in Mumbai.

Furthermore, the fear of stigma is so deeply entrenched in the lives of waste pickers that many of them try to conceal their identity within the same space, especially women. I came across at least three women in the same colony who admitted in private that they go to scavenge waste at 5 a.m. so that nobody knows about their whereabouts. The task is performed so discreetly that not even their immediate neighbours know about it. They would not ideally get into waste picking, but it is the monetary crisis that forced them into it. Simultaneously, I came across women who identified themselves as

Harijan⁹⁷ and said that they do not do waste work for their survival. Instead, they are part of the labour outsourced from factories in the nearby areas.

Kabaadi Gali, thus, provides us with an insight into the multiple contradictory phenomena taking place within the same space. There are many individuals from OBC and SC communities engaged in waste work who feel stigmatised by it. Simultaneously, there are individuals from the SC communities who chose not to engage in waste work and preferred to participate in 'clean' occupations. There exist rigid caste hierarchies in India, and works of cleanliness are still primarily dominated by the SC communities. However, we also see fluidity in terms of different caste communities entering the field of waste work due to the lack of job opportunities and monetary benefits.

'Valuing' Self amidst Wasted Materials

In this chapter, I have explored the emergence of various social relations vis-à-vis caste, gender, religious communities, and waste work and looked at how waste work has exposed workers to numerous experiences and forms of discrimination that were otherwise alien to them. In this section, I focus on the life-worlds of waste workers (mostly waste pickers) and examine how waste workers subjectively understand their experience and seek to define meaningful identities for themselves and attach value to their lives and waste work. Here, value is understood in terms of desires, and desires are not necessarily shaped by any dominant meta-value structures because there exists a

⁹⁷ A term coined by Gandhi for people of SC categories. The term means children of God. Gandhi coined this term to give respect to erstwhile untouchable communities. It should be noted that, in some cases, I have knowingly used blanket caste identities such as Harijan. Given that caste is such a sensitive issue in India, it is not easy to know about the caste of the respondents. I did not force any of respondents to reveal their surnames or caste names.

world of ‘thousand totalities’,⁹⁸ and it is difficult to determine which value structure trumps another (Graeber, 2013). It is these multiple value structures that shape the way waste workers value their life and work. Moreover, Graeber argues that value in the economic sense and values in the social sense (for example, the household domain) are often seen as diametrically opposite to each other; however, they are a ‘refraction of the same thing’ (see Chapter 1). In this section, I explore the ways in which waste workers value their work beyond the monetary benefits they reap from selling discarded materials. However, in so doing, I do not seek to associate their narratives with everyday forms of resistance (Scott, 1985), but rather, I explore the ways in which waste workers navigate their precarious lives and add meaning to their lives.

Thieme (2013) and Unseld (2021) in their work explore the conditions of urban precarity through the framework of hustle. They examine the possibilities of imagination, self-representations, belongingness, and livelihood strategies. Thieme argues that ‘the conceptual lens of “hustle” offers a way to capture the everyday incremental livelihood strategies that inform youth identities and expressions of resistance, in the face of both failed promises and increasingly outmoded cultural expectations’ (2018, p. 592). Similarly, Millar (2018) explores the life-world of waste pickers around a dumpsite in Rio and examines the everyday lives of waste workers—*catadores*—beyond survival strategy. She notes,

⁹⁸ In Graeber’s words, ‘religious, metaphysical, or scientific truth claims are themselves an “ontological gambit,” one way that those who identify themselves with a particular value arena might stake a claim for priority, suggests one way explicit criteria can be introduced. This is not even by taking one value and declaring its priority, that, in good Dumontian fashion, encompasses the rest but rather, by taking the tacit, interior values that inform how ones goes about pursuing value within certain fields (in the case of truth claims, logical consistency, verifiability, etc.) and reassembling them as an explicit value in themselves. We can refer to such tacit interior values as infravalues. Rather than being seen as ends in themselves, they are thought of as necessary prerequisites for, or means to, being able to pursue those forms of value that are socially realized in the kinds of arenas I have been describing’ (p. 233).

[Waste] work is not only a livelihood but also a key site of struggle in everyday efforts to construct the good—not in the sense of normative and prescriptive, but in the sense of what is valued, desired and aimed for in the living out of life—in this case within the precarious conditions. (2018, p. 12)

The condition of precarity certainly exists; however, the life experiences of waste workers (vis-à-vis discarded materials and fellow waste workers) and the different socials that they are part of open up a world of possibilities where waste workers are more than discarded or disposable lives (Millar, 2018; Fredericks, 2018). The meanings and values that waste pickers associate with their lives are deeply imbricated with the work and social sphere they inhabit.

In this case, waste workers around the landfill inhabit a very different life-world than that of sanitation workers. Both sanitation workers and waste workers are part of the cleaning workforce, and yet they have divergent attitudes towards their work. These attitudes are also determined by their caste background, space, and time of work, and the changing economic scenarios, followed by excessive growth of discarded materials—which has essentially pulled many individuals into waste work. In the chapter 3, I examine how the Balmiki community members construe cleaning work. Even though some of them see sanitation work as pure work, they do not want their children to enter into the field of waste work. Decades of exploitative and humiliating living and work conditions have propelled them to organise collective struggles around their work and caste identities, such as Valmiki Jayanti, Ambedkar Jayanti, protests, and strikes. The Balmikis try to distance themselves from cleaning work and contend the fact that their lives are worth more than defiled and polluted work, whereas the waste workers around the landfill see waste picking as a lucrative opportunity. In so doing, they value waste picking in various ways. They value waste work not only in monetary terms but also in

terms of how their everyday lives are stitched together with the world of waste and what it means to them.

As iterated earlier, waste workers have expressed the misery of their lives and how poverty forced many of them to enter the world of waste picking. They see their work as '*majboori*' (helplessness) and have often conveyed their disdain towards waste work. One of the workers I spoke to said: 'Who wants a career in picking up waste? Let us know if you hear of any other work opportunity'. In another instance, a young Qalandar woman who desperately wanted to quit her current job as a waste worker approached me during one of my visits to Kabaadi Gali and asked if I could find her a job as a domestic worker in my neighbourhood. Other waste workers also echoed similar sentiments during our conversations. Although waste pickers often expressed a strong desire to find other jobs, many confessed that they continue to find meaning and value in their current line of work and their social world. It is, thus, important to focus on these narratives because they capture multiple aspects of the lives of waste workers. I explore these aspects by analysing the anecdotes from my conversations.

Qalandars and Masets, who are from nomadic communities, often asserted their nomadic identity more than any other aspect of their lives. They proudly call themselves *khanabadosh* and often lament the fact that they were once animal tamers and some of them also practised conjuring tricks. Through this narrative, they were able to construct a unique social identity. For many of them, waste work is merely a job for survival, but through their nomadic identity, they value their existence amidst the precarity that surrounds them. Similarly, many Bengali Muslims, who are considered 'professional

waste pickers'⁹⁹ by fellow waste pickers from other communities, do not wish to engage in office work. They are happily settled in this field of work as it provides flexibility in terms of timings and allows them to dictate their own terms; similar observations have been made by Millar (2018) and Thieme (2013) in the context of waste work in Rio (Brazil) and Mathare (Kenya), respectively. They have become accustomed to the rhythm of life that waste work offers, and they find it difficult to adjust to 'regular' work patterns. Growing up, I noticed that some of the garbage collectors who frequented my area were not very regular. Their sense of timing was very 'erratic'. Sometimes they would come at 6 a.m. and sometimes around 11 a.m. This exasperated middle-class colony residents. Subsequently, the Balmiki *jemaadar* would replace the older garbage collectors with new ones in the hope that the new ones would come on time. When I asked some of the garbage collectors why they would do so, they said when they do not feel like coming for garbage collection services and that they go to the landfill and look for waste there. It gives them more flexibility in terms of their routine. Moreover, the landfill is also a space of recreation for many of them. Sometimes, when waste workers are tired of their day's work, they sit in a corner and smoke cigarettes, and sometimes play football on the flat surfaces of the landfill.

However, the flexibility of routine is not just about working according to one's own will and rhythm. It also includes conditions of precarity that waste pickers have to confront. For example, many female waste pickers prefer going to the landfill rather than for garbage collection because they need to look after their kids, cook food, and send their husbands to work. They need to finish waste picking by 11:00 a.m. to come back and take

⁹⁹ Many waste pickers around the landfill contended the fact that when a garbage truck arrives, Bengalis are very quick to grab all the fresh waste. A young girl from the Maset community told me, 'Didi, ye Bengali bade harami howe hain, saraa kabaada utha lete hain. Hamare liye kuch bachta hi nahi hai'. It translates as, 'these Bengalis are bastards. They pick up all the waste and nothing is left for us'.

care of their household chores. Thus, what one might interpret as following one's own rhythm and breaking away from the nine-to-five regime of work, as argued by Millar and Thieme, also includes situations of contingencies and precarity that force waste pickers to choose this work over others.

Akhtrum Bibi, a waste picker from the Qalandar community, who, when she spoke about working with waste, said: 'Kooda ke kaam se kya sharam. Ye duniya ek khadaan hai aur hum sab iss khadaan ka hissa. Humne sab kuch iss khadaan se hi banaya hai. Aur kooda bhi iss Khadaan ka hissa hai'. This roughly translates as: 'Why shy away from waste work. This world is a mine of resources and we are all part of it. Everything that we have made is part of this mine. And just like other materials waste is also part of this mine.' I interpret this remark to understand how Akhtrum bibi and many like her add meaning to their life and work, where they do not necessarily see their life and work as separate from each other. One can choose to interpret this narrative in many different ways to understand how she derives a sense of meaning and value from her work. Possibly, such a narrative functions as a coping mechanism that helps her feel better about herself and justifies her work to a society in which waste work is commonly considered dirty, foul, and stigmatising. Another interpretation could be that waste workers do not necessarily envision their life through a reductive lens of 'wasted lives' or 'redundancy' (Millar, 2018, p.5). For many like Akhtrum bibi, accessing waste work is not merely a matter of 'informal survivalism' (Davis, 2006). Precarious life conditions might have forced them into waste work, but that does not explain every aspect of their life. Rather, years of experience at the dumpsite have possibly shaped their 'inner life processes', which are not limited to life's economic and pragmatic aspects. The everyday experiences of waste workers at the dumpsite are intertwined with the social relations

they develop with fellow waste workers and the discarded materials they work with. Through these interactions, they learn to live and value their lives. For Akhtrum bibi, all of us are part of this world and form part of a material continuum. There is no significant difference between our bodies and wasted materials because we are also going to eventually die and take the form of one material or another.

Some social scientists do not give credence to such philosophical ruminations about the everyday visceral experiences with wasted materials and life as a waste worker. This is possibly because of a narrow understanding of experiences within the discourses of the social sciences. In *The Cracked Mirror* (2012), Sunder Sarrukai puts forth different ways of understanding the term experience. Many have argued that experience in itself does not mean anything. Experience in itself does not constitute knowledge production; rather, it is intrinsically associated with feelings. Since feelings are subjective, 'their epistemological status is always in question' (p. 49). Yet, if we focus on Akhtrum bibi's experience, it provides a profound understanding of how waste work can be subjectively conceived through varied lenses and can have multiple meanings for different individuals and communities. Moreover, situating Akhtrum bibi's ideas within her social context helps us understand how her historical and social context has shaped her understanding of waste materials and waste work. Nomadic communities are known to have 'strong ecological connections. Many of them are dependent upon various types of ecological resources and carve out intricate ecological niche for their survival' (Renke Commission report, 2008). It might be possible that Akhtrum bibi's understanding of waste work is influenced by her community's past.

Many people like Akhtrum bibi are a part of multiple socials—ranging from their identity as waste pickers to their gender and community (caste and religion) identities. In

the process, their views about their own existence, which might come across as 'individual' views, are often shaped by the different socials and experiences that they are a part of. Here, an individual is understood not in isolation from the social but rather as continuously shaped by multiple socials. To quote Guru and Sarukkai (2019), '[E]very perception related to human individuals (in a world suffused with the social) is an experience of the social as well as of the individual' (p. 22). Furthermore, the social is of particular importance because 'these experiences of the social influence how the sense of social gets formed into categories such as nation, religion, caste and gender' (2019, p.4). In the case of waste workers, the social is continuously shaped by the historicity of the neighbourhood, urban precarity, waste work, discarded materials, caste, class, religion, gender-based relations, and several other experiences that are beyond my vision of the social.

In the same vein, I discuss Razia's narrative to understand the ways in which she performs her scrap-dealer identity as well as her attempt to be recognised through her associations with NGOs. Thieme (2021), in her ethnography on waste workers, gives a strikingly similar story of a waste worker named Eliza. She argues, 'Her [Eliza] story highlights the way in which the performativity gesture of hustling provides unlikely forms of solidarity and security' (2021, p. 51). By narrating Razia's story, I examine her everyday life vis-à-vis her community members, NGOs, and waste work and the ways in which she negotiate and struggle in order to live up to her own ideals of well-being. Here, the understanding of well-being is not limited to material concerns but involves other attributes, such as being respected and validated by the community and striving for gender equality in her colony. I unravel some of these aspects in the paragraph that follows. At the centre of this analysis lies an attempt to also understand the ways in which

Razia mobilises various aspects of her identity—gender, waste worker, and a Bengali Muslim—in order to protect herself and be ‘valued’ within her community and family. She is exposed to a host of vulnerabilities owing to both her religion and the Bengali Muslim marker. The latter invites suspicion about her citizenship status because she is seen as belonging to Bangladesh. For her, the ideas of well-being and meaning-making are about overcoming life’s precariousness, building a life for one’s own self and working with the self-help group with her community members. It is a ‘complex assemblages of relations not only between people but also between people and places, material objects and less material constituents of places including atmosphere, histories, and values’ (Atkinson, 2013, p. 142). The way Razia kept herself at the centre of everything would often get reflected in how she embodied her attitude. The first time I approached her, she refused to come out of her house and said that she was busy with her work. It took me two to three attempts before I could finally speak with her. Later on, in my conversations with her, it became clear that Razia would not readily speak with ‘outsiders’. The narratives that I lay out below are layered with many complexities and contradictions that also reflect how identities get negotiated and performed in order to navigate perilous living conditions.

My aim here is not to focus on the work of NGOs but to examine how women like Razia envision their life and success vis-à-vis these NGOs and their validation in the eyes of community members. Furthermore, I complicate the relationship between Razia and the NGOs, which is rooted in hierarchical power structures. NGOs claim to provide ID cards and livelihood opportunities for waste workers in the area, but at the same time, workers have expressed their dissatisfaction with the workings of these NGOs. I argue that Razia’s narrative of her experience with these NGOs conceals much more than it

reveals (as I explain in the narratives below). Her relationship with these NGOs is also reflective of how she wants to project herself and how that projection of her identity is illustrative of her dreams and desires.

Numerous NGOs and political unions¹⁰⁰ are engaged with waste workers across Delhi. Razia works with the NGO called Haryali—an environmental research group and organisation. It specialises in waste management services. It focuses on reducing and recycling waste and also on reducing consumption practices; it provides professionalised waste-management jobs for waste pickers and claims to fight against poverty among waste pickers. In this process, the organisation also aims to professionalise waste workers. It provides them training in segregating different kinds of waste and aims to turn them (waste pickers) from scavengers to managers—which often means providing them with ID cards, uniforms, and contracts with housing colonies in the New Delhi area. The organisation claims to have reformed the lives of many waste pickers by recruiting them into daily doorstep collection of waste materials, and then further segregating, sorting, and recycling those materials, and teaching them how to make profits through this process.

Razia, like most other migrants in the colony, hails from West Bengal. She has been working as a waste picker since she was a child and has faced the common allegations of being a Bangladeshi and an ‘illegal’ waste worker. This has often forced her to pay bribes to the local policemen just so she could be allowed to work peacefully. Similar to many other women in the colony, her husband had been an alcoholic who subjected her to domestic violence and often stole money from her savings. This meant

¹⁰⁰ I have not mentioned the name of any of the NGOs and unions in order to protect the interest of the waste workers more than that of the organisations. Waste workers’ experiences with these organisations are very complex and very often their economic fate is contingent upon these organisations. Even though many of the waste workers express their differences in front of researchers like me, however they might end up losing their job and the support that these organisations provide them, if their identities are revealed.

that Razia could not provide her children with a 'good 'upbringing. She claimed that she could not even afford to provide them with a proper education or buy them new clothes on Eid. However, she did not allow her circumstances to break her spirit or prevent her from envisioning a 'good 'life for herself.

After she attended a meeting with the Haryali-led Safai Mazdoor Sanghathan, Razia started building a life for herself. The Safai Mazdoor Sanghathan—the term translates as an organisation of waste workers—is a registered organisation in Delhi which comprises of waste pickers, scrap dealers, and itinerant buyers. The organisation strives for a safe and respectful work environment. Over the years, as stated by some of the members, the organisation has helped them with identity cards and medical facilities (provided by Haryali, the parent organisation), and they hope to be recognised for their work of cleanliness and 'green 'development of the city. With the help of Haryali's Mazdoor Sanghathan, Razia got an ID card and acquired training in picking up electronic waste and selling it to authorised dealers. This also helped with establishing her electronic scrap business. These initiatives and Razia's engagements with the Jeewan organisation have helped her in becoming what she is today. The Jeewan organisation, in cooperation with many other women waste pickers, helped create a self-help group in the area to organise the life of women waste pickers on their own terms by helping them save money and hiding it from the male members of their families. Women waste pickers were asked to keep three-fourths of their savings with the scrap dealers and take home only a quarter of the money so that their husbands could access only a limited amount. The remainder could be used for their household expenditure and savings. Every month they collected the aggregate amount of saved money, and taking turns, they distributed it to the women in need. This, Razia remarked, had a very positive impact on the lives of women waste

pickers in the area, boosting their financial independence by enabling them to save not only for themselves but for their families as well. Razia often took pride in how she contributed to reforming the lives of many individuals in the area. She rejoiced in the fact that now only a few men in her colony consumed alcohol, and as a result, violence against women in the *basti* had reduced considerably. As mentioned previously, she also claimed that she had protected many individuals from getting harassed by the local police on the pretext of being a Bangladeshi.

While no other women in the area talked about the presence of Haryali or the impact of the Jeewan foundation's work on their lives, Razia strongly felt that these two organisations had transformed her life in multiple ways. Today, as per her own narrative, she and her family (her sons and husband) own a 'successful' scrap business in the area, and everyone in her colony gives their collected *maal* exclusively to her. She feels content, especially now that her husband has stopped drinking and is supportive of her decisions.

Razia's narrative comes across as an ideal 'success' story of a waste picker vis-à-vis partnerships with NGOs like Haryali. However, one knows very little about what lies beneath the surface. Nobody else in the colony or in the adjoining colonies referred to Haryali's presence in the area. When I casually asked a waste picker about his experience with Haryali, he smirked and said, 'What kind of training will they give us, madam? We pick up waste on a daily basis. We can give them training'. He further remarked, 'You must be referring to Razia, right? I know her truth. She is in deep debt, don't trust her story'. Similarly, when I talked to other waste pickers in the Bengali Basti and asked them if they usually sold their collected *maal* to Razia, they replied, 'It depends. We give our

maal to anyone who gives us better rates. Our buyers are not fixed. There are so many of them in the *basti*'.

Many waste pickers in the area feel that the ID cards they have been given are of no use to them; the ID cards have not offered them any material benefits. Further, the training that the NGOs carried out in the colony has not reaped any monetary benefits for them. Thus, for most waste pickers in the area, the presence of such organisations does not hold any meaning. Some of them even remarked, 'We are waiting for the day when we will see the benefits of these ID cards'.

These narratives are in contradiction to Razia's narrative, who believes she is a very social person and has done a lot for the community in cooperation with these NGOs. She believes she has given 10 years of her life to building a community network for these organisations and takes pride in the fact, as she metaphorically claimed, 'Whatever she touches turns into gold'. She is hopeful that with the help of her two sons and her scrap business, she will be able to build a prosperous life for her family. She is already content with the fact that she no longer has to soil her hands with waste and climb up the landfill, which is growing in height with every passing day.

Interestingly, when I spoke to Razia right before the second wave of COVID-19 in India, she had a very different narrative about her experience with the NGOs. During our last interview, she laid bare her frustration with Haryali. She started by saying, 'Aaj bhi akeli hun, kal bhi akeli rahungi aur akele hi karke dikahungi'.¹⁰¹ By this, Razia meant that today also I am alone, tomorrow also I will be alone, and I will work on my own and show everyone what I am. Her main concern was even though she had worked very hard

¹⁰¹ Follow up interview conducted in March 2021.

with the organisation for the last 10 years, they did not promote her to a respectable position. Moreover, they neither significantly helped her in setting up her business nor provided any other kind of monetary gain. She claimed that all those individuals who spoke well and dressed well got promoted in the organisation, whereas she was left to her own mercy. She argued, 'If nothing, the organisation could have got her a decent contract to sell any kind of waste, but they did not help with that as well'. In addition to this, she narrated one instance when a senior employee at the organisation asked her to collect cloth waste from the landfill and said that they would buy it for Rs 4 per kg. However, once she collected the *maal* worth Rs 16,000, they ended up paying only Rs 3,000 for everything that she had collected. She had to bear the loss of Rs 12,000 in addition to the time and effort she had put into collecting the *maal*. As she explained all this, she expressed her strong desire to dissociate herself from the organisation and said, 'If I would have spent 10 years working on myself instead of the organisation, I would have probably reached very far in life'. Even though she lamented over the years of hard work she had given to the organisation, she was still determined to navigate her life around the world of waste and make a successful living for herself and her family.

The emphasis of this story is to understand how workers like Razia envision their life and perform their identities as waste pickers in particular ways in order to feel important and maintain cordial relations with the NGOs. Although, unlike other waste pickers who claim that these NGOs do not offer substantial help, Razia finds it important to create networks with the NGOs and establish her social dominance in the area.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the experiences and journeys of different communities—in terms of caste, religion, and gender and how these experiences vis-à-vis waste work have shaped their present social relations within and outside the community. These new social relations suggest exposure to livelihood practices in varied ways and have resulted in both upward and downward mobilities. In the case of Bengalis, waste picking has meant social dominance in the field and has led to better economic opportunities in comparison to their lives in the villages. Similarly, Hindu OBC and SC communities have found in this work an opportunity to escape poverty in their villages. However, all these upward mobilities have come at the cost of social stigmatisation in both cities where they work and in the villages they come from, as discussed elsewhere in this chapter. By analysing these social relations, I demonstrate how communities and individuals from different caste and religious backgrounds associated with waste work have experienced humiliation and stigmatisation in varied ways and how such practices give us an insight into the present-day functioning of caste. Qalandars and Masets are stigmatised by their fellow upper-caste Muslim neighbours, whereas Bengalis have to continuously face the wrath of middle-class colonies in Delhi and sometimes even in their own villages. Similarly, Hindu OBC and SC communities are so apprehensive of their association with waste work that they often distance themselves from their village families and neighbours, and, in some rare cases, as mentioned previously, they even hide their occupation from their immediate neighbours. In other words, these narratives reflect how caste structures are fluid and are not static and rigid as is often assumed. They are not defined strictly by religious beliefs or what Dumont argued as ‘naturalised and legitimized by Hindu religion’ (as cited in Jodhka, 2015b, p. 7). Rather, the continuous remoulding of caste structures, both in terms of *jaati* and *varna*, is defined by material and historical conditions (Bayly, 1999; Jodhka, 2015b). In this given context, it is defined

by the economic structuring of waste work in the city, which in turn is shaping the social relation around waste economies (Kornberg, 2019), and these social relations give us an insights about different forms of discriminations within the same space.

Simultaneously, reconstructing the life-worlds of the waste workers reflects on the emerging social relations in the neighbourhood and how that shapes the individual identities of waste workers vis-à-vis the social. As discussed earlier, every community has its distinct ways of navigating waste work and the challenges that come with it. Stigma and humiliation associated with waste work have led communities to develop unique and ingenious ways of mitigating their situation. This has often meant that the communities and individuals assert their identities in a way that makes them feel valuable. These assertions are often in the form of cherishing their rich past, especially among nomadic communities; Bengali Muslims boast of their dominance in the field of waste. A study at the intersection of space, community, and waste work gives us deep insights into waste workers' subjectivities. Waste workers often find meaning in their work, despite what social scientists see as exploitative and hazardous working conditions. These subjectivities can have multiple interpretations and open up possibilities to understand their world beyond the narrow prism of wasted and precarious lives. Waste workers value themselves not only in material terms but in ontological terms. In the next chapter, I examine the flow of materials from the landfill to recycling factories and processes of material valuation based on scrap economies and plastic waste management rules.

Chapter 6

Governance of Plastic: From Scrap Dealers to Traders

Introduction

On 15 August 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared a ban on single-use plastic (SUP) in the country. The ban did not specify what constituted SUP—whether it referred

to carry bags, cutlery items, or packaging items. This announcement caused mayhem among a wide array of waste dealers and workers, ranging from waste pickers to traders. Industrialists (plastic recyclers) based in the Narela/Bawana industrial area referred to the plastic ban as a second demonetisation (Sirur, 2019). Whenever I spoke with waste pickers around the Bhalswa landfill, they were exasperated because of the plastic ban and the subsequent fall in the rates of recyclable plastic materials. They were confused about what to pick up and what not to pick up. Many of them had stored two months of plastic—often referred to as *maal*, constituting items such as *dudh ki thaili* (milk packets), Polyethylene Terephthalate (PET) bottles, and other kinds of packaging material (often referred to as *panni*)—waiting for the right time to sell. On many occasions, the angry waste pickers refused to even speak with me. While some were apprehensive about my credentials and assumed that I was a government agent who had come to inspect and impose a fine on their collected recyclable materials, others felt that I was simply of no help. Amid this chaos, I came across an elderly person who was casually referred to as HD *wale chacha*, which literally translates to high-density uncle. High-density is a particular type of plastic, amongst many others. When I saw him, he was calmly segregating different kinds of plastics, such as polypropylene (PP), high-density (HD), low-density (LD), to name a few, and was very eager to discuss everything about the market, rates, network, and social relations in the field of plastic.

HD *wale chacha* was a frequent buyer at Hurinder Raj's godown (warehouse) in Tandoor Waali Gali of the Bhalswa Dairy area (see map in Chapter 5). Hurinder Raj is a famous dealer from the area who owns a big *godown* (warehouse) and deals in all kinds of waste material. Like many other jobless youths, HD *wale chacha* came to Delhi looking for a job and to explore the city. He was exposed to the plastic business at a very early age. He had been collecting plastic material from shops and factories for his *seth*

since the late 1980s (*seth*—a Hindi term for an employer from the business-caste community). In fact, in my first two months of fieldwork, HD *wale chacha* was the first person to briefly explain to me the post-collection plastic-recycling process and the differences between various types of plastic. He told me that once a substantial amount of plastic is collected, it is grinded and pummelled into a *gulla* (a plastic ball) and then washed and heated at a particular temperature (depending upon the density of the material). Finally, the melted plastic is used for moulding different items such as buckets, baskets, and trash cans. While explaining the process of plastic recycling, he paused and said, ‘but everything is ruined since the time Modiji has banned plastic’. He said that nowadays, plastic rates are at an all-time low but simultaneously emphasised the fact that he was not particularly affected by the ban because his work was primarily that of a middleman. He would buy materials from one godown and then supply them to the factory dealers in Narela and Bawana. If he bought plastic *maal* at lower rates, then he also sold them at lower rates.

When HD *wale chacha* arrived at Hurinder’s godown, fresh *maal* had just been delivered from a nearby hotel in Rohini (north-west Delhi). The *maal* included different types of packaging material. While sorting the *maal*, *chacha* explained to me the differences between high-molecular (HM), PP, and LD. He held a packet and told me, ‘See this HM. Its thickness is greater than LD. It is mainly used for packaging of clothes and shoes ... LD is thin plastic, it is used in everyday packaging’. While sorting out the different types of plastic at a very fast pace, he told me, ‘One needs to be careful about dirty *maal*. Nobody in factories will take dirty *maal*’. He carefully segregated a soiled packet of plastic into a corner. After sharing some knowledge about the plastic, he insisted that I should have a look at his Aadhar card (Unique Identification card) and

Voter ID.¹⁰² He said that it is necessary to always carry an identity proof in today's time because one never knows what will happen to us. Then he asked me shyly, '*beta waise tum jain ho ya baniya?*', which meant 'are you from the Jain community or Baniya?' (Jain refers to a religious community, members of which are often engaged in commercial activities, and Baniya refers to trading castes or the occupation of trading and money lending). He recognised my caste identity very well and remarked that the plastic business at the higher level is largely dominated by the Baniya community.

In the previous chapters, I focused on the complex relationship between the spaces of discarded materials and the identities of waste workers. In this chapter, I explore the infrastructure through which these materials flow and re-enter the supply chain. Drawing on these interactions, I examine the interconnections between the materiality of discarded materials, their flows through the circular economy (scrap dealers to traders to recyclers), how the value of waste materials is determined in the process, and how these flows are affected by the present-day politics of plastic ban and the market dynamics around it. I further examine the varying effects of the plastic ban on scrap dealers, traders, and recyclers, and how they recover from it through various means such as taking loans, selling *maal* at a later time (depending on the market price) (Gidwani & Kumar, 2019; Sharma, 2022), switching to other materials, and so on.

In so doing, I seek to argue that there is no one dominant factor that shapes the flow of materials, but it is rather shaped by a host of multiple factors. Hodges (2018),

¹⁰² His insistence to show his ID cards stemmed from the fact that he was a Muslim from Aligarh, U.P. At the time I was conducting my fieldwork (in October), debates around National Register of Citizenship (NRC) had already started, and he feared that if he was travelling across Delhi, NCR (national capital region), he might be asked to show his documents at any point of time. Moreover, after August 2019, since the time the plastic ban was declared, many people who were involved in the business were often raided for illegal trading of plastic and hence it was important for HD *wale chacha* to carry his identity card at all times.

through her work on plastics, brings an 'insistence on relationality of matter and the corollary interplay between materiality and sociality 'and shows 'how an analytics of governmentality illuminates the relationships among plastic as an object of governance and plastic as an object through which governance is effected '(p. 181). Her work particularly focuses on the governance of plastics in India and how the flow of discarded plastic materials shapes the sociality of waste workers, particularly itinerant buyers from the SC and ST communities. She argues that the governance of plastic and the discourse around the environmentalisation of plastic further concretise caste inequalities and relations of untouchability. Following her work, I show the relationality between materials (specifically plastic), governance of plastic, and how they shape and are in turn shaped by the market dynamics, which subsequently affects the functioning of waste economies.

I demonstrate the above-mentioned points at three levels. First, I illustrate a brief history of plastic and how it was advertised as a robust material until the 1990s and how, eventually, after the 1990s, it seemingly became a health and environmental hazard. Second, I examine the growing plastic environmentalism and the policies around it, where SUP is seen as a problem of litter, a pollutant, and aesthetically disturbing, and demonstrate how the SUP ban guidelines are interwoven with the interest of industrial lobbies and do not always necessarily serve the purpose of ecological preservation. Third and last, I analyse how these bans affect the waste economies across the informal and formal domains. The positioning of scrap dealers and traders, who usually operate within the domain of the informal economy, lends them to a more precarious position than that of recyclers—who primarily operate in the realm of the formal economy. Such unequal power relations between actors in waste economies show us the volatile nature of waste economy. The actors at the bottom of the economy, who are collecting and assessing the

materials at the most primary level, are also the ones suffering the most due to the unequal and unjust impact of the SUP ban.

'Economizing' Waste Economies

Caliskan and Callon (2009) define markets as 'socio-technical assemblages' (p.384). This enables us to conceptualise the market dynamics of waste economies through the materiality of objects, technological infrastructure, and the human and non-human interactions with materials. Caliskan and Callon argue that by using the term 'economization' (p.369) as opposed to 'economic', they seek to establish the 'economy' as a process-in-motion rather than a pre-given. The term economization, they argue, 'is used to denote the processes that constitute the behaviours, organisations, institutions and, more generally, the objects in a particular society which are tentatively and often controversially qualified, by scholars and/or lay people, as "economic"' (370).

Considering this approach, I examine various assemblages of materials and social relations that contribute towards the making of waste economies. Both the traditional approaches, the formalist economic approach and the substantivist economic approach, focus on the given theoretical construct of the economy. The only difference is that the former focuses on individual choices within the sphere of the market economy, whereas the latter focuses on the political economy and centres around the institutional structuring of the market and the choices within that sphere. These approaches allow little consideration for the ongoing processes that actively determine the marketisation of discarded materials. The New Economic Sociology, as put forth by Caliskan and Callon, suggests that materials cannot be valued based on pre-existing notions of the market.

Valuation is contingent upon the materiality of the objects and the interactions between individuals, in this case, waste workers at different levels of waste economies who assess the value of discarded materials circulating in waste economies. As Appadurai argues, 'from a theoretical point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a methodological point of view it is the thing-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context' (Appadurai, 1986, as cited in Caliskan and Callon 2009, p. 390).

Furthermore, I situate Caliskan and Callon's conception of marketisation in the context of plastic recycling in India. I borrow the framework of political markets from Gregson et al. (2013). They argue that 'recycling is a reflexive intervention in economic activity which extends the boundaries of markets, by internalizing objects formerly externalized as wastes and by attending to the temporal properties of materials' (Gregson et al., 2013, p. 1). Hawkins and Muecke argue, '[I]n the case of recycling, economies and ethical values depend on each other' (2003, p.10). By bringing together the aspects of recycling and the economy, they show that recycling is partly a symbolic act that is influenced by market dynamics and the politics of optics.¹⁰³ However, this is not to argue that market dynamics dominate the functioning of waste economies, rather it is shaped by both material and market dynamics. Recycling economies are often marked by how the materials in question are projected. If a particular discarded material is deemed of no value, then its market value will fall, whereas, if the material is projected as valuable material, then it becomes profitable. I explain this in the next sections through a brief

¹⁰³ In the Indian context, Pathak (2022) shows how corporate firms engage in greenwashing in the name of recycling. She demonstrates the case of reverse vending machines in Mumbai. Some petrochemical firms installed reverse vending machines which accepted PET bottles, just to show to the public that they collected PET bottles and recycled. However, as Pathak shows, these machines were installed only for the purpose of optics and were not of substantial use.

history of the coming of plastics and the case of the SUP ban in India, particularly in Delhi.

Countries across the world are promoting the recycling of discarded objects, but the very basis of recycling ‘challenges the externalising of waste’. It stands as an obstruction to capitalist economies and ‘rest on the explicit questioning of primary resources as the basis for the production of manufactured goods ’(Gregson et al., 2013, p.7). Thus, when countries and corporates promote recycling as part of ethical concerns and corporate social responsibility, they do so by balancing the estimation of profits, paying attention to the nature of materials, and economising the process of recycling. Gregson et al. (2013) show how the recycling process is economised in the context of the ship-breaking industry in the UK. The reason Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries exported old ships to South Asian seaports was because they offered cheap services in terms of surveying the conditions of the ships and provided cheap labour. However, now, the Basel convention prohibits the movement of end-of-life goods because they are classified as hazardous waste. In the context of the UK, Gregson et al. show how the extraction of value and profit-making is contingent upon the nature of objects—where every vessel can be unique in its own way (in terms of material), the process of assaying, technologies in operation, and the geographical space where the ship-breaking takes place; all these aspects together shape the economisation of ship-breaking and the material recovery process.

I substantiate this aspect of marketisation by focusing on the growing market of plastics and how waste workers engage with discarded materials and, in turn, give them value. In doing so, I focus on a range of actors and intermediaries—placed at different levels of waste hierarchies—the mechanisms they develop to sustain, the challenges

posed by the ongoing SUP ban, and how that affects the actors engaged in a circular economy at various levels.

Flows of Materials and Labour: Understanding Formality and Informality in Waste Economies

The conceptual terrain of the informal economy has been discussed time and again. It has been debated at such length that it is now frequently referred to as an ambiguous domain where there is no significant difference between formal and informal economies (Gidwani, 2015; Breman, 2013b). Yet, I chose to re-examine the concept in my work to understand the movements and flow of discarded materials and labour through infrastructures of waste economies. The purpose here is not to map the difference between the two spheres of the economy but rather to observe the processes through which materials are bought and segregated via various labour processes, how they are revalued at different stages, and how these processes and different forms of transactions are intricately tied to both forms of economy. The two spheres are mutually dependent, and I seek to explore this dependence through the infrastructures of waste economies.

Gidwani notes that ‘dualisms such as “formal” and “informal” are useful up to a point, but ultimately tend to flatten and obscure the heterogeneous make-up and functioning of these sectors, including the hybrid nature of operations that straddle the divide’ (2015, p. 581). Furthermore, Tsing (2015), in the context of Matsutake mushroom picking, examines how humans working on the capitalist ruins¹⁰⁴ are connected to the processes of global capitalism. Within these processes are flexible relationships—such as

¹⁰⁴ Anna Tsing uses the term capitalist ruins to refer to damaged landscapes due to industrial transformation in the Oregon region.

modes of payments and contracts, hiring of labour, and forms of trust between the formal and informal sectors, which I explore in this chapter.

In her work on informal economies, Harriss-White (2020) urges us to understand the criticality of the processes and social relations that are at play at the intersection of the formal and informal economy. This offers us a far more complicated understanding of waste economies and their intersection and overlaps with formal and informal economies. Focusing on a small town in south India, Harriss-White provides a contextualised understanding of waste economies. She examines three models of the informal economy—dualist informality, legalist informality, and structuralist informality. I draw on these theoretical frameworks to understand the functioning of waste economies, particularly among waste (scrap) dealers and traders in the north-west parts of Delhi. Dualist informality is primarily concerned with workers who are self-employed and are not credit-worthy. In this chapter, I do not focus on self-employed individual waste pickers who constitute a part of the dualist informality regime. Instead, my focus is on micro-enterprises, both registered and unregistered. First, I examine micro-enterprises that involve family members and one or two labourers and are further connected to bigger traders and factory owners. Many such unregistered enterprises do not follow any state-led regulations, such as those concerning taxes, because it adds to the cost of their already unstable work. Second, I look at micro-enterprises that are registered but evade state regulations. This includes recruiting workers based on informal contracts and selectively recording business payments depending on the nature of dealings. The former approach is characterised as legalist informality and the latter as structuralist informality, which is deeply embedded in the exploitative relations of work (Harriss-White, 2020).

In so doing, I do not merely seek to establish dependence between the two regimes but rather examine the nature of business dynamics and the everyday functioning

of scrap yards and recycling units. These aspects are particularly important because, while analysing the impact of the SUP ban, they help us examine how and in what ways the impact varies across the recycling industry.

The Plasticity of Plastic: Understanding the Social Life of Plastics in India

Nowadays we live a plastic life. See madam, you have come here to conduct your field work. Your pen is plastic, your notebook is covered with a thin layer of plastic, your mobile has a plastic covering, and you are standing amidst the biggest plastic scrap trading market in the country. A trader in Tikri PVC market in Delhi.

Waste economies and infrastructures are as much about the materials and the materiality of those materials as they are about the flows of materials, market dynamics, and social relations. In studies on waste economies, the focus on market relations and dynamics in terms of the supply chain often obscures the materiality of plastic, which determines the increase or decrease in rates along with other factors. In this section, I place the materiality of the discarded materials, more specifically of plastics, as a central analytical category to examine the functioning of waste economies. In doing so, I do not wish to argue that materials solely determine the processes of capital accumulation within waste economies. Rather, I echo Gay Hawkin's (2013) sentiment:

While there is no question that plastic is central to massive and diverse process of industrial and market development ... its economic capacities are not so much intrinsic as enacted. Plastic's economic value have to be elaborated and produced.

This is not to say that they are simply socially constructed. Rather, the economic

capacities of plastic emerge in specific arrangements and processes in which materials enact with any number of other devices—human and non-human—to become valuable. (p. 49)

Hawkins, in her remarkable study on the invention of PET bottles, shows how the coming together of technology, market demand, and the materiality of plastics determines the making of a product, as well as the valuation and devaluation of a product. He notes that by the 1970s, most of the household containers used for shampoo and detergents were replaced by blow-moulded thermoplastic bottles. The same technology was not suitable for carbonated drinks. However, the beverage industry urgently needed to invent a viable plastic product to boost their production and to make carbonated drinks more accessible to consumers. Glass bottles and aluminium cans were not considered consumer friendly. Thus, one soon saw the invention of PET at DuPont lab in the United States. Hawkins further observes, 'while bottle production had always involved blow-moulding, the DuPont lab stretched a small test-tube shape of polyester lengthwise and width wise during the blow-moulding process' (2013, p. 53). In doing so, DuPont lab finally invented one of the most portable, 'durable', and disposable products of our times, which could be used to package carbonated drinks. This complex ecology of processes reveals that the invention of PET bottles was not merely an industrial development catering to market demands but also a moment of discovery 'in which the molecules of plastic revealed new associations' (Hawkins, 2013, p. 54). Hawkins further sheds light on the culture and psyche of disposability that is commonly associated with the growing consumerist culture. While the very design of PET bottles is geared towards portability and disposability, the materiality of plastic further encouraged the making of disposable culture. Tin cans and glass bottles are also disposed of after consumption, but their

disposal needs slightly more careful attention, given the immediate hazard associated with the sharpness of materials. The lightweight and easy-to-use plastic afforded easy disposability practices, or what Hawkins calls 'lightness with litter '(2013, p. 61).

Dey (2021) argues, 'As such, plastics are conceived as a versatile matter, which may be configured 'atom by atom '(Bensaude Vincent 2013: 25), free from nature's constraints to make any material, produce any object '(p. 4). The chemical composition of plastic material is such that it affords itself certain durability that can be used in a wide variety of objects, varying from carrier bags to mobile phones to ships. The applicability of the material has permeated human life to such an extent that today it is difficult to imagine our everyday lives without the existence of plastics. However, even as the plastic materials, in conjunction with human actions, have been vital to our present-day existence, they have also come to shape present-day reality, for good or bad, in multiple ways (Hawkins, 2012).

I extend this analysis to waste economies in Delhi and examine how plastics have taken different forms over time and have, in turn, reshaped the human world. In doing so, I briefly map the entry of plastic into Indian social and economic life and examine how plastic items, which were once aggressively promoted in the country, today stand as a menace to our existence. The socio-material and economic impact of plastic have made it difficult to phase it out from our lives. Today, plastic is not just integrated into our social lives in terms of its portability but is also deeply fused with the waste economy, where millions of lives are dependent on it. On 17 January 2019, *The New Indian Express* reported,

India generates 56 lakh ton of plastic waste annually with Delhi accounting for a huge 689.5 ton daily, according to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB).

As 40 per cent of the plastic waste is not recycled, the daily addition to untreated plastic in the city is estimated at 275.6 ton. (*The New Indian Express*, 2019)

Plastic ventured into the Indian market in the 1940s. Slowly and steadily, it started gaining popularity in the late 1960s (Hodges, 2018), but it was not yet a household product. Its reusability and sustainability were widely advertised in newspapers across the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. The *Times of India* (TOI) carried out advertisements promoting plastic products (Hodges, 2018).

By the late 1990s, children's metal tiffin boxes were replaced by plastic tiffin boxes—popularly known by the brand Tupperware. Carrying Tupperware lunch boxes to school was a matter of pride. In no time, it became the leading kitchenware brand in India. *The Economic Times* reported about Tupperware:

Its India innovations include the classic “roti keeper”, the masala (spice) box”, and its “multi-cook” product. Last year, the company launched a new range of long-lasting, eco-friendly bottles for everyday water storage needs which, given their durability, reduce the load on landfills. (*The Economic Times*, 2010).

The company made its way into the Indian market in a rather interesting way. It entered the Indian market in 1996 and strategised its marketing and distributing technique by placing women at the centre of the networking. The distribution network and product agencies were outsourced to urban middle-class women and the company popularised itself by sharing ‘health tips’, ‘cooking recipes ’and organising Tupperware parties. Thus, palpably, this ‘plastic revolution ’was touted as a force of feminism in the country

(Srivastava, 2007)¹⁰⁵. *The Economic Times* (2010) reported, 'Tupper developed the entrepreneurial skills of thousands of Indian homemakers'. Soon glass bottles of aerated drinks, such as Pepsi and Coca-Cola, were replaced by PET bottles available in different sizes in the market, making it easier for consumers to carry the drinks back home and consume them at their own ease. In my growing-up years, plastic cutlery and plates became very common at social gatherings and birthday parties. Their use-and-throw characteristic attracted middle-class families, who wanted to avoid the bother of washing utensils.

As the material gained its market, soon plastic recycling markets started emerging on the shores of the Indian economy. One of the earliest plastic scrap markets to come up in Delhi was the Jwala Heri market, dominated by Khatiks (Gill, 2010).¹⁰⁶ Today, it has developed into Asia's largest plastic scrap market. Similarly, in the 1960s, many Baniya community businessmen from Haryana travelled to Delhi in search of work and settled in the Trinagar (Hathoda Ram Park) area of Delhi. Initially, Baniyas manufactured footwear using Polyvinyl Chloride (PVC). However, the production of PVC footwear also led to an increased amount of plastic scrap and subsequently led to the emergence of recycling units in the area. Eventually, as the industries started growing, leading to an increase in pollution, they were relocated to Narela and Bawana. Today, this area is famously known

¹⁰⁵ Srivastava argues, with the introduction of Tupperware in the Indian markets and women (mostly housewives) being at the centre of its promotion, marked a turning point in the making of 'work as consumption' and influencing the 'dimensions of housewifeliness' (2007, p.283). He claims, 'the "outside" is brought into the home, and home-ness becomes the sieve for sifting the consumption proper to women' (p.283). In doing so, he shows how the objects of consumptions and consumerist aspirations influence the spheres of domesticity and certain kinds of feminist aspirations.

¹⁰⁶ The plastic market was initially located at Tank Road, Karol Bagh (1971). From here, it shifted to Jwala Puri (1995), then Tikre Kalan, and finally to Mundka. After a series of fires in Jwala Puri market, which gutted a large section of the market, a decision was taken to shift the plastic scrap market to Mundka Village. After a series of relocation drives, the market today is situated in Tikri Kalan Village, which is around 4–5 kms from Mundka.

as Narela/Bawana Industrial Area, and it houses Delhi's plastic recycling units, mostly dominated by Baniyas and Punjabis.

However, in the early 1990s, India and the world were alerted to the adverse effects of plastic in our everyday lives, ranging from its interference in marine life and soil and greenhouse gas emissions to its harmful impact on human bodies. The materiality of plastic and its excessive abuse by the human world started showing its detrimental effects very soon. South Asian countries were the early ones to seek to ban or limit plastic usage in the 1990s (Clapp & Swanston, 2009). Bangladesh imposed a ban on plastics because of the increase in the clogging of drains due to plastic bags. In the case of India, as Krulwich (2008) demonstrates, one of the early instances of a plastic ban was when plastic bags were seen as posing a threat to cows by clogging their digestive systems. Such instances were followed by increasing middle-class discourse on plastic ban, where more than an environmental concern, plastic was seen as a threat to urban beautification (Hodges, 2018). Similarly, Pathak's (2022) recent research on the plastic ban shows us how the All India Plastic Member's Association (AIPMA) members tried to frame the issue of plastic pollution in the form of plastic litter and not production. By framing littering as the central problem, all the onus was put on 'irresponsible' consumers. Given these wide-ranging concerns and framings around plastic pollution, in the following section, I examine how the challenge posed by plastics as a matter is dealt with by the present-day policy discourses such as the SUP ban and Plastic Waste Management Rules (PWMR) (2016, 2019, 2021, 2022) and how they are entangled with the larger political and economic interest around plastics.

Neoliberal Logic of Consumer-Oriented Plastic Ban

Today, in India, plastic consumption and the activism around it has taken centre stage. In the process, the consumers and consumer-oriented plastic goods are the direct targets of the discourse around plastic ban policies. Pathak argues, 'The logic of neoliberal environmentalism, which has permeated global environmental governance, assumes that businesses are influenced by consumer behaviour and that consumers 'pro-environmental choices drive change through the market '(2022, p. 6). Furthermore, Pathak shows that the discourse around the plastic ban is shaped by the concerns of plastic litter, where it is deemed as a 'matter out of place 'rather than a question of plastic as a material in itself. Similarly, Liboiron (2019), in his work, shows how movements such as Keep America Beautiful put the onus on individuals rather than on corporations to keep the country clean. The moral guilt is imposed on the public by deflecting the corporates ' responsibilities (Liboiron, 2019). In the process, the concerns regarding industrial usage of plastic are silenced. In fact, even when I interviewed shopkeepers and recyclers about the impact of the plastic ban on their financial conditions, one of the shopkeepers said, 'why is all the onus put on us. We are just responding to consumer demand. If consumers stop asking for plastic bags we will stop giving them the bags. 'Similarly, in the case of recyclers, they said, 'there is a big market for recycled plastic packaging materials in markets like Sadar Bazaar in Delhi. Why should we stop recycling if there is a demand? People want to buy cheap plastic products and we are operating according to the market dynamics. '

Hawkins (2021) furthers this argument by examining two other movements where consumers become the source of detachment from plastic packaging. The source bulk

foods stores in Australia are the stores where consumers bring their own jars, bags, or containers to carry the items they are purchasing. The emphasis is on non-packaging. Here the ethical duty is on the shoulder of the consumers to detach themselves from plastic packaging and to buy locally. In the process, consumers are green-washed from the larger processes of plastic production. In the case of Ellen MacArthur's Foundation report on 'Reuse: Rethinking Packaging', the argument is made in terms of reusable packaging items. Reusable packaging is presented as a sustainable and environmentally friendly form of packaging without engaging with the aspects of market dynamics; how the shift in packaging will shape the questions of 'branding, product information and stock counts' (Hawkins, 2021, p.413) if customers were to provide their own containers. Hawkins argues that 'in the case of the unpackaged movement, these changes have generated an array of new ontological and political accounts of packaging outlining what it is responsible for beyond its mundane market realities, and how its functions as a market device can be redistributed' (Hawkins, 2021, p. 416).

As per the Plastindia Report, 'India is likely to produce over 500 million tpa of urban waste by 2050; and 80 % of this will come from cities'. At present, India produces 3.5 million tonnes of plastic every year (The Economic Times, 2022) and ranks third in the production of SUP. In addition to this, Reliance India Limited (RIL) is one of the largest producers of plastic in the world and in India (Kapoor, 2022). RIL is followed by other big players in the industry, such as Haldia Petrochemicals (private company), Indian Oil Corporations, and Gas Authority India Limited (GAIL) (Pathak, 2022). Yet, the government chooses to focus only on the SUP ban in the country. As evidenced above, SUP products are deemed an immediate threat to the environment because they either get stuck in the drains or are difficult to recycle and, in general, are a major cause

of plastic litter. However, there is little focus on the life of plastic materials as such and the continuous production of plastic, especially the plastic materials used for industrial goods. In fact, in 2014, the president of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), Sidhant Birla, stated that

[the] plastic industry is making significant contribution to the economic development and growth of various key sectors in the country namely: automotive agriculture, Construction, Electronics, Healthcare, Textiles, and FMCG etc... Due to their versatility, and imperviousness to water they have significant amount of energy and water resources and emit lower quantum of greenhouse gases.

In addition to this, if one examines the Plastindia website, the organisation describes itself as the apex body of major associations, organisations, and institutions connected with plastics, with common objectives to promote the development of the plastics industry and to assist the growth of plastics and related materials. The Foundation is dedicated towards national progress through plastics.

The description 'national progress through plastics 'and' we work to keep the Fantastic and get rid of the Drastic 'is rather intriguing because of the ongoing SUP ban. It shows that primary plastic producers (manufacturers of virgin plastic) are not affected by the SUP ban. At present, the Plastindia Foundation is promoting its upcoming international plastic exhibition, which is promoted by some of the big industrialists and Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In its endorsement section, the organisation has quoted the Prime Minister as saying, 'It is a pleasure to know that the flagship event of PlastIndia Foundation (PIF)-"PLASTINDIA 2018-Empowering Growth" is being organized on 7th February 2018 at Gandhinagar.'

Similarly, this year, in honour of celebrating 75 years of Indian independence, the Indian government promoted the campaign *har ghar tiranga* (flag at every house). It meant encouraging the hoisting of the tricolour national flag in every household. This campaign was followed by amendments to the Flag Code of India 2002. As per the code, earlier, only ‘hand spun and woven wool or cotton or silk khadi bunting’ (Tripathi, 2022) were allowed, and now, in the enthusiasm to celebrate *Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav*¹⁰⁷, polyester and machine-made flags have also been given the green signal, followed by an exemption of the Goods and Service Tax (GST). Notably, one of the reasons for allowing polyester flags is possibly its easy availability and access. However, one does not have to look very far to realise the economics behind promoting the polyester-made national flags. Quite evidently, one of the big corporates manufacturing the flag is RIL. Although one cannot find this in any newspaper articles to bolster the evidence, one can find proof of this on e-commerce websites (Amazon.com, 2022). Such instances are emblematic of the nature of the plastic ban in the country and of the state–corporate nexus, which evidently promotes the interest of bigger corporates in the field. On the one hand, there has been a continuous crackdown on SUPs, and on the other, in the name of nationalism, the present government is promoting polyester flags to mark 75 years of independence.

I have evidenced a broader understanding of how primary plastic items are promoted in the interest of big agglomerates, whereas SUP items are banned in the name of plastic pollution. In the next section, I examine the recent PWMR and its impact on the recycling industry.

¹⁰⁷ Festival celebrating 75 glorious years of India’s Independence (literally translated as ‘Great festival celebrating the elixir of India’s independence’).

The Shifting Specifications of SUP and the Politics of the Plastic Ban

In the past, India introduced a series of initiatives to limit the usage of plastic or ban multi-layered plastic. However, none of these achieved the desired result. India's first PMWR was introduced in 1999. It aimed to limit the use of plastic carrier bags under the thickness of 20 microns or less. Similarly, the Plastic Waste Management and Handling Rules were notified in 2011 and 2016. The latter also proposed to introduce 'advance phasing out of multilayered plastic', stipulated that the 'polluter pays', and 'extended producer responsibility' (Shah, 2021). However, most of it remained a paper tiger. The recent initiative to ban plastic in India also considerably failed. As iterated at the beginning of this chapter, the 2019 plastic ban suddenly introduced a ban on SUP without clearly defining the term and considering the impact it might have on the waste pickers, *kabaadi* dealers, traders, and recyclers. For waste pickers, many SUP items, such as milk pouches, plastic bags used by vegetable vendors, and packaging wrappers form a substantive volume of their daily collections. With the introduction of the ban, many of them could not sell the SUP materials they had collected over months. The sudden announcement jolted the entire sector and rendered many unemployed. The ban also led to a significant fall in the rates of plastic. Moreover, the ban was followed by the sealing of several plastic recycling units in Narela, Bawana, as well as scrap units in Mundka. As per *The Indian Express* reportage, around 109 plastic recycling units were sealed. They were sealed either because they did not comply with the PWMR or because they were recycling SUP purchased from local dealers that contained dirt and had extremely harmful polluting effects. The coming together of the SUP ban and the sealing of the recycling units had a devastating impact on the plastic recycling industry. This forced the government to stay the ban and advance a plan to phase out SUP in 2022.

In the middle of the pandemic, right after the devastating second wave of COVID-19, the government notified the draft Plastic Waste Management (Amendment) Rules, 2021. Unlike other rules, the 2021 rules specify SUP products and put the onus of plastic waste management on recyclers under a broad umbrella category of plastic waste processors (including recyclers—waste pickers, itinerant buyers and sellers, traders, and industrialists) and brand owners. Here, SUP products are broadly defined in terms of plastic flags, candy sticks, ice-cream sticks, and thermocol (extended polystyrene) for decoration. The draft proposes a ban on the manufacturing as well as recycling of SUP items. In addition, the draft also proposes increasing the thickness of plastic carrier bags from 50 microns to 120 microns. This draft bill is a move forward in line with the other bills.

Similarly, the latest in the series of amendments is the Plastic Waste Management (Second Amendment) Rules, 2022. The rules have specified important definitions—SUP and end-of-life disposal. SUP is defined as ‘a plastic commodity intended to be used once for the same purpose before being disposed off or recycled’. This time the rules have again specified 19 items that count as SUP. As per the rules, the carry bag should be at least 75 microns and above and hope to extend it to 120 microns after 31 December 2022. Although these rules are a step forward in terms of concrete definitions and guidelines, however, if one looks closely at the rules since 2016, it shows how the specifications of SUP in terms of microns have changed in the last eight years. More specifically, in the last four years, the specification of SUP has changed three times. Even though the government is trying to phase out SUP, the shifting specifications of SUP puts significant pressure on recyclers as to what kind of plastic to use. According to *The Indian Express*’ reportage, shopkeepers in Sadar Bazaar and Chawari Bazaar, two popular wholesale markets in Delhi, complained about the lack of alternative options. Many of them had

already bought SUP products to sell their items, but now cannot use them. Not only will it lead to major financial losses, but they might be fined for possessing SUP products. These fears were further exacerbated by the rising prices of alternative options such as paper coverings. Some shopkeepers expressed that they switched to paper bags and covers, but the sudden increase in their prices (due to an increase in demand) pushed customers away (Hargovind, 2022).

Moreover, by the time the recyclers and shopkeepers adjust to a given specification, new rules are notified. The shift in microns and the changing specifications of SUP are indicative of the fact it is essentially the plastic material that is a central concern and not just SUP. The primary concern with the materials that are categorised as SUP is that they are designed to be disposable products—discarded after one use. Their use-and-throw characteristic makes them a cause of litter and they are usually not recycled. Most of them are dumped in landfills and oceans or are burned. Their excess visibility in public spaces and the growing concern around SUP breaking down into microplastics have framed them as a major concern. However, the rules do not frame plastic production and the plastic used for industrial purposes as a problem. It is assumed that plastic products other than SUP are recyclable and hence ‘environment friendly’ (explained in the next section).

This time the rules have also specified Extended Producers Responsibility (EPR) and have provided guidelines for the same. As per the rules, the EPR includes brand owners, recyclers, producers, and importers as responsible for recycling, reuse, and end-of-life disposal.¹⁰⁸ They have to register themselves on the online portal led by the Delhi

¹⁰⁸ As per the PWMR2022, the end-of-life disposal is defined as ‘using plastic waste for generation of energy and includes co-processing (e.g. in cement kilns) or waste to oil or for road construction as per Indian Road Congress guidelines, etc.

Pollution Control Committee (DPCC) and other state bodies. According to the Government of India press release statement, 'The EPR guidelines will give a boost for formalization and further development of plastic waste management sector' (Hargovind, 2022). This process of online registration and issuance of a certificate as to who is qualified to be part of the EPR excludes a large body of recyclers (waste pickers, itinerant buyers, scrap dealers) who form the backbone of the recycling economy in the country. Most of the waste pickers and itinerant buyers operate within the realm of the informal economy and are not registered buyers and sellers. Under the EPR offset system, brand owners and producers are required to submit an annual report to the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB). The report should be indicative of the expected management of plastic—collection and processing. They are also expected to make efforts to reuse and recycle a certain percentage of the plastic material that they are producing or using in packaging material. However, there is no third-party audit system to verify the credibility of reports submitted. In addition to that, the new rules do not specify the mechanisms through which brand owners and producers should engage in the collection, reuse, and recycling of the used materials (Shah, 2022).

These anomalies of the rules are further exacerbated by the fact that the government decided to impose GST on domestic plastic scrap (Centre for Science and Environment, 2019). Before the coming of the GST, plastic scrap items were tax-free. However, with the coming of the GST, 18 per cent tax was imposed on both virgin plastic and recycled plastic. Finally, in 2017, after the members of the Delhi Scrap Association met Arun Jaitley, then the finance minister of the country, the GST on recycled plastic was reduced to 5 per cent. This has significantly affected the plastic recycling industry. Many recyclers in Narela, Bawana, and Tikri argued, 'we believe we are doing good for the nation and planet, then why is GST imposed on us. We are the saviours of this

country and yet the government is punishing us'. Some even remarked, 'if they have to punish, they should punish the manufacturer of virgin plastic, who are adding to the waste of this nation. We are just processing what already exists'. The coming of the GST has had a significant detrimental impact on recyclers and more so on informal waster pickers and scrap dealers, who are at the lowest rung of the recycling economy. One of the recyclers in Narela, Rahul (I introduce him later in the chapter), told me that even though the government has reduced GST on the manufacturing of recycled materials from 18 per cent to 5 per cent, the consumers still have to pay 18 per cent GST on the products. This has inadvertently reduced the purchasing power of customers, subsequently affecting all the actors in the recycling chain.

The shifts in the PWMR, in particular the change in microns of SUP products and EPR responsibilities, are telling of how material and market together shape the nature of the ban. First, the fact that there have been frequent changes in the thickness of the microns shows that the materiality of plastic is a major concern. The thinner the plastic, the more difficult it is to recycle. However, every time government make these changes, it takes a major toll on the recycling industry and traders—who frequently use plastic packaging to sell their products. Second, it also forces one to question the intention behind previous bans. The central government has proposed changes in the density of SUP three times in the last four years. Even if the government has been trying to phase out SUP steadily, they have failed to consider the impact it has on the recycling industry as a whole. Pathak (2022) and Nagarajan (2022) show that most of these bans are targeted at consumer-oriented goods, where inadvertently, the consumer becomes the target of excessive plastic consumption. In the context of the SUP ban in Maharashtra, Nagarajan shows the plastic products used by e-commerce retailers and PET manufacturers were conveniently exempted from the ban, whereas the other consumer-oriented SUP items

such as straws, earbuds, and cutlery were banned. The second aspect of the ban, that is EPR, also forces one to question the government's stake in recycling. The rules clearly exclude informal recyclers and inadvertently put them in a disadvantageous position. Moreover, the EPR obligations of recycling and collection of post-consumer plastic, without any strict enforcement rules, lay bare the lack of commitment towards plastic recycling.

The Varying Effects of SUP Plastic Ban—From Scrap Dealers to Traders

Collecting, sorting, and revaluating are intrinsic to waste economies. Landfills reflect this potential for continuous revaluation. They are sites of contradictions where materials are simultaneously discarded and revalued. While some may see landfills as the final destination of discarded materials, for waste pickers and *kabaadi* dealers, these are spaces where value is attributed to these materials and spaces where they transform waste materials into non-waste. Alternatively put, as Gille argues, 'materials are not born to be "waste": They are transformed into waste by identifiable materials and social processes' (2007, p. 18). Every actor contributing to the recovery of discarded materials attributes value to it in different ways. For waste pickers, this involves picking up the right object and examining if it will fetch them enough money. For *kabaadi* dealers and traders, it is about assessing the value and quality of the material of that object and how it can be further sold to recyclers and traders through the various infrastructures of waste economies. Thus, after being discarded, these materials enter into a continuous cycle of valuation and capital accumulation. In this section, I examine the post-recovery process of these materials and the channels (infrastructures of economies) through which they

flow from waste pickers to scrap dealers to traders and recyclers. In the process of doing so, I also examine how these circulations of materials get affected by the politics of the plastic ban and market dynamics.

Maidul hails from Haldia in West Bengal. His makeshift house is located right in front of the Bhalswa landfill in Tandoor Wali Gali. He is a small-time *kabaadi* dealer who deals in plastic sacks that he often refers to as *katta* and operates within the realm of the informal economy. I discuss Maidul's narrative to understand the journey of a waste picker who ascends to become a *kabaadi* dealer and how this entails multiple mobilities, both upwards and downwards, contingent upon the demand and the supply of discarded materials, market prices, their relationship with recyclers and traders in the business, and finally, unseen catastrophes such as COVID-19. His journey is a classic example of a waste picker becoming a *kabaadi* dealer and eventually drowning in the losses.

Like many other waste pickers and scrap dealers, Maidul left his house at a very young age and came to Delhi in search of work. Initially, he worked as a waste picker around the Bhalswa landfill and eventually, he started working with his cousin at a glass warehouse. Part of his job was to segregate different kinds of glass materials based on colour and quality, and, at times, he would travel with godown owners to different locations to supply the materials. His earnings at the time were sufficient for him to maintain his family.

His work at different warehouses gave him adequate exposure and confidence to start working on his own in 2010. He also felt that his cousin did not give him enough money. Whenever I met him over the course of my fieldwork, Maidul remarked that he was sufficiently trained to deal with any kind of material. Yet, he chose to work in the line of plastic sacks. He bought sacks and sometimes *panni* (plastic carrier bags) collected

by waste pickers from the landfills on a daily basis and dried the sacks under the sun in a rented plot next to his makeshift house. The drying of these sacks is an important step because wet items fetch less money. Finally, he sold them off to traders (including recyclers) in Narela and Bawana.¹⁰⁹ Unlike many other *kabaadiwallas*, who would usually sell off their material to bigger *kabaadi* dealers, Maidul was able to directly sell to a trader in the industrial area. This is not a common practice among *kabaadiwallas*, largely due to financial constraints and lack of contacts. Relatively small *kabaadiwallas* and itinerant buyers prefer to sell their *maal* to *kabaadi* dealers instead of traders because *kabaadi* dealers purchase the *maal* at a lower rate and accept lower volumes of materials. Traders expect *kabaadiwallas* to sell their *maal* in bulk and sometimes buy at higher rates, which often leads to delayed payments. The fear of delayed payments often forces small *kabaadiwallas* to sell their *maal* to bigger *kabaadi* dealers. However, Maidul's past experience and relations with the traders help him negotiate better deals.

When I initially met Maidul in the winter of December 2018, he was satisfied with his work and the price of *maal*. He often referred to himself as '*roj kamane khaane wale log*', which means his existence is dependent on daily labour. He was earning approximately 35,000 rupees (INR) a month at the time. However, when I met him again in August 2019, he was extremely dissatisfied with his work and the price of plastic materials. He told me, earlier one *katta* (bale) was priced at 7/7.5 rupees and now it is priced at 5 rupees. Moreover, now it was difficult for him to sell SUP products such as carrier bags below 50 microns. So, in comparison to previous years, he did not earn enough. Nevertheless, he somehow managed to survive the plastic ban and retain his

¹⁰⁹ Narela and Bawana are industrial areas situated towards the far end, north-west corner of the city. Both the areas are well known in the city for their plastic recycling units and are mostly dominated by Baniyas and Punjabis.

foothold in the city. Each time I visited Maidul, he told me '*bas chal raha hai kaam*', which meant work was going on somehow. The continuous increase in losses also forced him to spend more time in his village house so that he could save money. Moreover, the drastic fall in the price of materials meant that Maidul could no longer sell his *maal* to bigger traders. Selling *maal* to bigger traders leads to higher rates for materials but delayed payments. With the increasing losses, Maidul could not afford delayed payments, and moreover, the losses led to a decline in the volume of materials. These conditions forced him to sell his *maal* to smaller traders in Narela and Bawana. While he managed to survive the financial losses caused by the plastic ban, his condition worsened with the disastrous impact of COVID-19 on the Indian economy at large. Due to lack of work and joblessness, many migrant workers were forced to go back to their hometowns. Maidul managed to live through the initial two months of the lockdown, but once he exhausted all savings, he was also forced to travel back to his hometown, Haldia, in June 2021.

Unlike other times, he stayed at home for four months. This was the longest Maidul had stayed in his village after migrating to Delhi. Continuous losses and lack of work forced him to stay on at home. His precarious situation was compounded by multiple factors—the SUP ban, the COVID-19-led lockdown, and the local Bengali mafia. When he finally travelled back to Delhi in October, he had lost access to the space and waste material he dealt in. This was because of the dominance of the local Bengali mafia in the area. This mafia, as Maidul suggested, was run by a group of Bengali men who decided on behalf of other Bengali waste dealers as to who will access what kind of waste and where. The inadvertent outcome of this mafia culture and the COVID-19-related financial loss was that Maidul could no longer engage in the *kabaadi* business in the same way, selling *katta* and plastic bags. Eventually, he bought a minivan on a loan of 15 lakh rupees (INR) and started supplying consignments for other dealers. This helped

him earn 500 rupees/day. On luckier days, he would get *maal* for himself and sell it to the traders. However, for now, Maidul cannot deal in *katta*. When I asked him why he could not climb up the landfill and pick up waste himself, he replied, '*ab hum khaali babuaana wale kaam karte hain*', which means 'now I only do *babu*¹¹⁰ kind of work'.

Rising from the rank of waste pickers to scrap dealers, Maidul somehow managed to survive the SUP ban and other contingencies. However, there are many scrap dealers and itinerant buyers who, in such situations, are forced to resort to waste picking. This then leads to another cycle of a debt crisis.¹¹¹ Due to the losses incurred and lack of purchasing power, many of them have to loan money from other scrap dealers to buy the materials and then they are forced to sell the collected *maal* to the same dealers at a cheaper rate.

Adjacent to Maidul's shack is Hurinder Raj's godown (warehouse). Hurinder is one of the most famous and well-to-do dealers in the area who has maintained a relatively stable business for the last 10 years. He started as a scrap dealer but owns a scrap warehouse today and can be regarded as a trader. He buys *maal* from big contractors, sorts them at this warehouse, and then sells it to bigger traders across Delhi. The nature of his work oscillates between the formal and the informal domains of the economy. While most of his dealings and clientele are based on formal contracts, some are also based on informal contracts or what he refers to as *kuchha bill* (an informal and non-taxable bill usually written on a piece of paper). The labourers at his warehouse are also hired through informal means.

¹¹⁰ *Babuaana* is a colloquial word used by Bengalis and in this context it refers to people who do not do menial work.

¹¹¹ Itinerant buyers and *pheriwallas* usually function on the basis of loans. They require initial capital to purchase discarded materials from households/shops/offices and for this they are dependent on scrap dealers.

Unlike most other scrap dealers in the area, Hurinder does not buy *maal* from *kabaadiwallas* or *pheriwallas*.¹¹² His deals were mostly with government and semi-government institutions, malls, and hotels across the city. Some of his top clients are the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC), India Habitat Centre, Malls, Shangri La Hotel, and so on. Contracts with these institutions and the hotel industry have given him an edge over other dealers in the area. The quality, volume, and variety of *maal* are comparatively better than that of other dealers. Waste items collected from these institutions usually include PET bottles, cutlery items, newspaper, alcohol bottles, beverage cans, and plastic *ghee* (clarified butter) bottles. Hurinder's workers collect these items from the hotels late at night, and the next day, they are sorted through different stages of quality making. The term quality making is a colloquial term used by scrap dealers to refer to the sorting of materials into different categories, such as types of material, thickness, colour, shape, and size. Through careful sorting of materials, Hurinder is able to sell them to specific dealers. For example, plastic waste is sold to traders in Narela and Bawana and paper waste is sold to traders in Muzaffarnagar, in Uttar Pradesh. The act of sorting is in itself value-making, and at every stage, labour expertise is required. The more meticulously the materials are sorted, the more money they fetch; this then also reduces the burden of bigger traders to finely sort out the materials.

The initial stage of sorting includes sorting out newspaper and other sorts of paper in one category, PET bottles/tetra packs/basket materials in a second category, and glass and tin materials such as alcohol bottles/red bull or other canned aerated products in a separate category. All these items are manually sorted out by bare hands. In addition to

¹¹² *Pheriwallas* are a category among scrap dealers who travel on their tricycles and collect scrap from households and offices.

this, sometimes, his warehouse receives big plastic cans that his workers sort out by tapping on them to understand the thickness and quality of the material. There were times when I found the sorting process rather confusing and had to ask the workers at the warehouse time and again to explain the process to me. One time a worker took two separate types of plastic items and broke them into two pieces and then he explained to me that poor-quality plastic products break easily, whereas good quality does not.

The secondary stage includes sorting of the HD plastic materials and keeping them in one corner, and all the transparent PET bottles and the coloured bottles in separate corners. These items are further segregated based on their shapes and sizes. Once the materials are sorted and sufficient in quantity, Hurinder waits for the right time to sell them. The value of materials is contingent upon the ongoing market prices. If the market prices are low, then Hurinder sells the material at a later time. The liquidity of discarded materials helps him evaluate the profit margins. Hurinder's example here offers us an explanation of how a typical scrap warehouse functions in Delhi and how items collected from various hotels are given value through the process of sorting.

I situate his story in the context of the SUP ban in Delhi. As iterated above, the market dynamics considerably determine the economic value of materials, and these dynamics further shape the nature of a deal—whether it is profitable or not. Evidently, in the case of the SUP ban, followed by the GST imposition, the market price of plastic items fell. This was also followed by the rampant sealing of many plastic warehouses across the city. Hurinder and many scrap dealers around the Bhalswa landfill told me 'sealing is going on in full force. Even if they (MCD officials) see a single plastic item

outside the warehouse, they fine us'.¹¹³ All this led to major monetary losses for traders, such as Hurinder, for multiple reasons. One, he was no more receiving SUP items such as cutleries and straws from the hotel industry. Second, he had to sell the already collected *maal* at a very low price without any guarantee of receiving the payment on time. Even though his business was registered and operated mostly on *pakka* bills (formally registered bills), his payment from bigger traders were either delayed or not given at all. He said, 'I don't receive payment from contracts based on *pakka* bill also'. According to his narrative, he certainly cannot make any legal claim on contracts/payments based on *kuccha* bills, but amongst the big traders (waste dealers), his situation is so precarious that he cannot make legal claims in case of a formal contract either. Much of the business in this field operates on the basis of word of mouth and mutual trust. Making a legal claim would amount to jeopardising years of relationship and any future prospect of business. Moreover, dealers like HD *wale chacha*, who mediate between such warehouses and factories, operate within the realm of the informal economy. He did not have any formal contract with Hurinder. He would come to collect *maal* based on the basis of word of mouth and negotiate the rates as per the market prices and the quantity of materials. His payments to Hurinder were also contingent upon the payment from the bigger waste dealers, creating a cycle of debt and uncertainty for traders such as Hurinder.

The Plastic Ban and the Morality of Recycling among Traders

¹¹³ MCD officials are known for harassing scrap dealers and traders from keeping the scrap items outside their designated place. It is illegal to do so, it has got nothing to do with the SUP ban. However, in this particular case, the SUP ban became an opportunity for MCD officials to harass scrap dealers and traders over any possible irregularity and charge *hafta* (bribe) from them.

Rahul, a 29-year-old young Punjabi businessman, told me about the trading of recycled plastic and the effect of the plastic ban on the trading community in the Narela Industrial Area.¹¹⁴ Rahul is famously known as *dhakkan* (cap) master among his fellow traders and scrap dealers across India. He primarily deals in second-hand plastic material, which includes shredding (converting materials into pellets), melting, and moulding of materials, and he claims to be one of the biggest contractors of PET bottle caps across India. Like many other traders in the Narela and Bawana Industrial Area, he also suffered massive losses because of the SUP ban. He used to get his *maal* from major plastic recycling hubs in Delhi, such as Shahbad Dairy, Kamruddin Nagar, and Bhajanpura,¹¹⁵ which were also considerably affected by the ban.

His family has been in the business of recycling for over 30 years now. First, they were located in the Okhla Industrial Area, then they moved to Mundka, and then they finally moved to Tikri,¹¹⁶ and ended up with recycling factories in Narela. In Mundka and Tikri, they primarily dealt with the sorting of second-hand items. The Tikri warehouse was closed down in early 2019 during the sealing of unauthorised warehouses. When I asked Rahul about the reason behind the closure, he told me ‘according to the government officials, we were polluting the environment’. Then he further added, ‘see this plastic stool is kept here, how is it polluting the environment?’ While it was obvious that sorting plastic items did not seemingly cause any pollution, I was not convinced by Rahul’s narrative. I further insisted on knowing the cause, and then he finally told me that his warehouse in Tikri was closed because it was located in an unauthorised location and not

¹¹⁴ This interview was conducted in November 2019

¹¹⁵ Rahul told me that Bhajanpura is a centre for collecting PET bottles. They receive PET bottles from scrap dealers across the country and flatten them using pressing machines. The bottles are then sold to RIL for recycling them into plastic curtains.

¹¹⁶ Tikri Kalan PVC market, located in west Delhi, is Asia’s largest plastic scrap market.

because it caused pollution. I noticed this was a common narrative among traders in Narela and Tikri of blaming the SUP ban for the closure of their warehouses, whereas the actual reason was the unauthorised location of these warehouses. In his Tikri warehouse, Rahul used to receive 5 tonnes of *maal* daily and for which the government provided 200 square *guz* (1782.72 square feet) in Tikri Kalaan, and he required at least 1,000 square *guz* (8913.59 square feet); that is why he could not relocate his warehouse to a government-authorised location. Now there is absolutely no earning from sorting. Now he directly buys sorted *maal* from other dealers, and melts and moulds them into items such as buckets, wipers, bins, and so on. These items are sold in wholesale shops such as China Bazaar and the 99 Store—affordable department stores—and in rural areas. Since recycled material commodities are not of supreme quality, they are not sold in high-end branded stores in urban areas. In addition to that, he also sells grinded pellets to other traders in the industrial area.

At the time of this interview, the sealing of illegal warehouses and those using SUP products was going on in full swing. While Rahul's factory unit was not sealed, many others were closed down because they were using SUP products for recycling purposes (Sharma, 2019). Although Rahul's factory was not directly affected by the ban, he knew that very soon his factory would also face the crackdown, if not because of the SUP ban, then because of not following DPCC regulations. According to the DPCC regulations, all plastic recyclers should install a sophisticated Effluent Treatment Plant (ETP), which many traders have failed to do. At the beginning of our conversation, he told me that none of the grinding machines at his factory were in operation. Then towards the end, he informed me that only one machine was in operation and that too late at night. So, while many other traders were facing losses because of using SUP products for recycling, Rahul was particularly concerned about the sealing of his factory because he

had not installed the proper ETP plant required for plastic recycling purposes. In addition to that, he worried that the government would very soon increase the specifications of microns for plastic carrier bags and other items, and he would also have to shift to either virgin plastic or close down his factory altogether.



Figure 6.1: The photograph depicts grinded plastic pellets in a recycling factory.
Source: Photograph clicked by the author.

Much of his frustration was anchored to the sentiment, '*hum desh ki safai kar rahe hain*', meaning we are cleaning the nation, and he felt that the government should protect them instead of harassing them every now and then. This righteous narrative was expressed by many other traders and scrap dealers. They believe that if they do not engage in recycling, then there will be many landfills such as the Bhalswa landfill across the country¹¹⁷.

¹¹⁷ However, in the process of doing so, many of them conceal the polluting practices they engage in. Even though melting and moulding of plastic items come into the green category activity (Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, 2016), as specified by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MOEFCC), plastic melting essentially leads to the release of dioxins that are toxic in

Exasperated by the situation, Rahul further remarked:

So basically, the government is saying 50 micron carrier bags (polyethene) will not pollute and the ones less than 50 microns will. Moreover, if they really want to enforce the ban, why do they not question big companies like PepsiCo, who use SUP for lays (crisps), and milk companies who sell milk in SUP packets? The government will never attack them because they know people in our country cannot afford to buy glass bottles for milk. Instead, CPCB officials keep on harassing us for pollution certificate(s). When have pollution certificates ever controlled pollution? It has only increased in the last few years. Moreover, they charge us for the certificate. First, they (government) should gather enough knowledge about plastic and then enforce the ban. To enforce the ban, they also need to introduce alternative materials and see how the market reacts. They just cannot do whatever they think is right. If the situation gets really bad for us, then we will finally move to virgin plastic and stop our business of SUP plastic materials.

Rahul gave this statement two years back. Today as the situation stands, many traders have either completely closed down their factories; some are waiting for new notification—in terms of specification of micron—and some are shifting to virgin plastic. Most of these traders are from upper-caste communities. Although the Narela Industrial Area has traders from many castes, it predominantly includes Baniyas and Punjabis. Both the communities' traders are well off and live in the upper-middle-class colonies of the city. While they can afford to shift their work to virgin plastic or adjust to new micron

nature. When I visited plastic recycling factories and stood around melting machines, I felt nauseous and suffocated. Whenever I talked to the workers working around these machines, they all said they also used to feel the same in the beginning but now they have become used to it

specifications, the ones working in the lower rungs of the hierarchy (itinerant buyers and scrap dealers) cannot.

I spoke to many traders, and as also evidenced by Nagarajan (2022), and the ones in the lowest rung of the plastic waste economy suffered the most during the SUP ban. The itinerant buyers (such as Maidul) do not have registered businesses and are part of the lower rungs of the economy; once they supply the *maal* to traders and factory dealers, they are at the mercy of big capitalists to give them their dues. If there is any disruption in the supply-chain process, the suppliers have to bear the immediate losses. For example, suppliers such as Hurinder often buy *maal* in bulk in advance. They invest their own capital to purchase the *maal*. If the demand falls, as it did during the phasing out of SUP in 2019, then suppliers are directly hit by the demand–supply crisis. If the *maal* has already been delivered to traders or factory owners, they will not pay Hurinder his dues until the demand increases. Hurinder had bought *maal* during the plastic ban drive and sold it to traders in Mundka, Narela, and Bawana. Consequently, he incurred a loss of 2–3 lakhs because none of the dealers returned his money. The plastic ban battered many industrialists, and most of the suppliers, such as Hurinder and Maidul, operate on the basis of *udhaar* (loan). *Udhaar* is usually considered to be a profitable business tactic. If you supply the *maal* on *udhaar* you get higher rates, albeit after a longer period of time. Whereas, if you demand immediate payment, then there is scope for bargaining, and buyers usually tend to pay less in comparison to *udhaar*.

Both Maidul and Hurinder followed a similar model to run their business. However, the difference between Hurinder and Maidul was the degree of capital both of them could invest in their business. As a bigger player in the area, Hurinder had invested his private capital in the business and, hence, could sustain his work even during the COVID-19 lockdown and the plastic ban in the latter half of 2019. In contrast, Maidul,

who had risen up from the ranks of waste pickers, had limited savings. He could not invest a substantial amount of private capital in running his business. His immediate concerns were to provide for his family's everyday needs.

The narratives above demonstrate how plastic recycling functions in the factory units, the shortcomings of the SUP ban, and its impact on the traders. While some scholars (Pathak, 2022; Nagarajan, 2022) have analysed the drawbacks of the recent SUP ban, the narratives here help us unravel the complexities of the ground-level situation. The self-righteous attitude of the traders, their financial losses, and the CPCB norms—which seemingly do not work in favour of traders—show that these bans and PWMR guidelines need to be far more inclusive and accommodating in their approach. Moreover, as evidenced above and in the previous section on the SUP ban, these rules do not necessarily help in reducing the amount of plastic generated or the subsequent pollution but are rather designed for the optics of it. While the bigger players such as RIL and Haldia Petrochemicals are not significantly affected by the ban, the smaller players such as Maidul and Hurinder—who are the backbone of the recycling economy and keep the circular economy going—are severely affected by it.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the functioning of waste economies in the context of the ongoing SUP ban. The functioning of waste economies can be told in many ways—by focusing on the social relations of itinerant buyers and scrap dealers (Gidwani & Kumar, 2019) or by focusing on informal ways of buying and selling materials, as demonstrated by Corwin (2020) in the context of the e-waste economy in Delhi. My aim in this chapter has been to bring together the aspects of materials and their governance and how the

politics of governance is shaped by market dynamics and optics of recycling. The relationality between the materials and the politics around them reinforces each other. Hawkins (2013), through his research on the food packaging industry, illustrates how the materiality of plastic shapes the economy of the food industry, and, simultaneously, how the matter is economised for profit purposes. In a similar vein, Hodges (2018) argues:

The environmentalisation of garbage—and plastic within that—has produced relations of power that are necessarily linked through both materiality and sociality. The direction of travel is difficult to disentangle. Does caste power produce particular relations that animate the traffic in used, discarded plastics? Is the conservation on the environment the effect of the particular materiality of plastic? Or, is there a materiality of caste humans that governs the movement of both people and things? Wherever the answers lie to these questions, they are certainly suggestive of the power of matter to produce social relations (p. 190).

Here I do not specifically focus on caste and the sociality of waste economies.¹¹⁸

However, I use Hodges' argument to understand the relationship between materials and the scales of waste economies. Here the power relations are directed towards the different actors positioned in the waste economy, and the attention to these power relations—entanglement between plastic materials and their governance, especially with respect to recycling, shows that inequalities are produced and reproduced in the informal and formal waste economies.

¹¹⁸ In this chapter, I have not focused on the caste question. However, as Gill (2009) observes, the itinerant buyers and scrap dealers in the plastic recycling industry are predominantly from lower-caste communities. My first two informants, Maidul and Hurinder are from Other Backward Class (OBC) and SC communities, respectively. Whereas the recyclers and traders in the Narela Industrial Area are from Punjabi and Baniya communities. The caste–class location here is not an exception. The people in the lower rung of the waste economy are from lower-caste communities and the ones in the upper rungs are from upper-caste communities.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

The problem of refuse has a long history albeit appearing in different forms and scales. (Melosi, 2004). Today, as Delhi is facing a burgeoning waste crisis, it is not just faced with dysfunctionality of SWM infrastructure and the age-old problem of 'nuisance' and disorderliness of discarded materials but that of a host of actors and institutions associated with the waste crisis, such as the governance of waste, human-led infrastructure and caste-class-gender relations, prevailing socio-cultural norms of purity and pollution, techno-infrastructure and privatisation of solid waste management infrastructure, valuation of material through recycling economies, spatial segregation, toxicity of materials and subsequent effects—contamination of ground water and seepage of leachate, emission of carcinogenic fumes, human and non-human relations (Shatkin & Vidyarthi, 2014; Demaria & Schinder, 2016). Melosi argues, 'refuse is primarily an urban

blight. Agrarian societies throughout history have successfully avoided solid waste pollution; cities and towns have faced the gravest dangers '(2004, p. 1). In the same vein, Gidwani and Maringanti (2016) argue, waste is essential to the production of value; capitalism requires a continuous flow of waste to regenerate value and keep itself going. The present-day waste crisis is a result of both capitalism and urbanisation along with the ritual notions of purity and pollution. The contemporary urbanisation of Delhi with the coming of liberalisation and privatisation reforms, the world class vision of the city followed by an increase in population density and spatial congestion have shaped the present-day waste crisis and the nature and amount of waste the city receives today.

Focusing on the present nature of the crisis, I have unravelled some of these aspects in this thesis. I began by asking the question, how do processes of exclusionary urbanism, waste management, and present-day waste-crisis in Delhi affects the lives, attitudes, identities and social relations of those engaged in the waste economy. Given that new types of waste are now generated in India, how does the changing materiality of waste shape the lives and social relations of waste workers? How does it mediate the social and economic relationships between the waste workers and dealers involved in the circuits and sub-circuits of waste economies? Moreover, how do their everyday social and economic relations and their immediate environment (landfill, wasted material) shape their understanding of the contemporary waste crisis? How did spatial ordering of the landfill and the functioning of the Municipal Solid Waste Management Programme mediate the caste and community composition of waste workers at the site of the Bhalswa landfill? I answer these questions below in a thematic order.

As the research unfolded, I started using governance as the primary lens to understand the socio-spatio-infrastructure-material relations associated with waste and the waste crisis. I examined how through the governance of discarded materials, spaces

and labouring bodies associated with waste work, the state-led bodies accord different values to waste at different times. As Fredericks argues, ‘waste in different places and moments performs all different kinds of work’ (2014, p. 534) and Contractor (2021) argues, ‘garbage is ubiquitous in urban settlements, but subject to very different perspectives’ (n.p.). On the one hand, the governance of waste aspires to or is driven by the idea of orderly, clean, and sustainable development and on the other hand, it symbolises urban marginalities of people and spaces associated with waste. In the context of India, campaigns around waste management such as SBA have become effective political tools to mobilise people for electoral purposes and to generate a public discourse around cleanliness. However, human labour, the question of caste, materials, and spaces of waste are conveniently invisibilised. I unpack various aspects of this argument by focussing on different aspects and geographies of waste regimes and the micro insights they bring to the fore.

Methodologically, the chapters are structured to understand the governance and flows of waste and the actors associated with it, beginning with understanding the social and political meanings and values associated with waste in the Indian context, followed by the municipal and PPP led waste management services and the lives of sanitation workers who provide these services, to the journey of waste material to the landfill and its association with waste pickers—with their life worlds and practices of converting waste into value—to the services of recyclers and traders—wherein materials are revaluated at different levels and stages and finally re-enter the market economy. All these different yet interconnected contexts inform various forms of governance of people, social and cultural values associated with waste, materials and infrastructures, and socio-economic hierarchies that shape waste regimes in Delhi.

Infrastructures of Exclusion and Invisibilisation

Infrastructures are essentially socio-technical assemblages and in the context of defiled works, caste and class inequalities get instituted in these infrastructures. From colonial to postcolonial times, processes of urban development have been at the centre of the governance of waste and dealing with the waste crisis. The emphasis on cleanliness and waste management (refuse in colonial times) has more often than not resulted in spatial segregation and exclusion of the urban poor (Prashad, 2000; Chandavarkar, 2009; Sharma 2022; Gidwani & Maringanti, 2016; Ghertner, 2015) and invisibilisation of waste labour and materials (Mcfarlane, 2008; Baviskar & Gidwani 2019). Focussing on the contemporary waste management processes—SBA, PPP-led waste management services, incineration facilities, techno-infrastructure development around the landfill—I argue that discourses on waste management practices in Delhi are based on caste-based practices, urban inequalities, and exclusion, and that cleanliness programmes, such as SBA, further these notions by appropriating the Gandhian understanding of caste and dirt and by invisibilising cast(e)d human infrastructure (Teltumbde, 2014; Bathran, 2018) and privileging the modern technology-led infrastructure.

The aims and objectives of SBA are based on providing ‘clean’ and ‘green’ spaces to the city dweller without acknowledging the fact that lower caste labour sustain SWM services. In the name of creating awareness about cleanliness and waste management services, the central government roped in politicians and Bollywood celebrities, creating a spectacle around the programme. In the process, it whitewashed the ‘dirty’ and laborious aspects of the cleanliness services and focussed instead on the delivery mechanism. The functioning of SBA, which relies on middle-class notions of cleanliness and ‘bourgeois environmentalism’ as well as privatisation of waste management services and caste-based labour, further deteriorates the conditions of waste workers. Moreover, these services

which are projected as highly modern, with technology-oriented infrastructure are intersected by notions of cleanliness and hygiene. As Anand (2020) argues, here the visibilisation and invisibilisation of infrastructures becomes a function of political power. The human-led infrastructure—which is often seen as a source of chaos and disorder in the city, is invisibilised. Whereas, technological infrastructure which is projected as a promising solution to the prevailing crisis is purposely foregrounded. Here the modern-technologies and SBA have become political tools to demonstrate the state capacities and desire to build clean, immaculate and orderly cities.

In Chapter 3, I show, as the burden of the waste-crisis is increasing, the people and government actors are mainly concerned with ‘orderly’ disposal of waste. Here, orderly disposal is often understood in terms of segregating waste—that too rarely—and dumping it in peripheral locations such as local receptacles and landfills. In the large scheme of physical and machine-led infrastructure such as—local receptacles, landfills, trommel machines, excavators and incinerators—the human-led infrastructure of cast(e)d labour is devalued and rendered insignificant (Gidwani, 2015). Although the invisibilisation of human labour is not exclusive to the Indian context (see Nagle, 2013; Millar, 2018; Butt, 2019; Reno, 2015), it acquires a different meaning here. It is not just invisibilised labour but caste-based invisibilised labour which adds to the distinctiveness of the Indian context.

The PPP-led SWM company promotes itself in the name of providing clean and green services, however, their primary agenda lies in making profit out of waste. Today, waste materials and landfills are commodity frontiers (Calleja, 2021). SWM companies earn profit by incinerating waste and converting it into energy through the process of RDF. In the process, the distinctness of materials and the possibility of recycling is not given sufficient consideration. Instead, the dominant focus on profit—converting waste

into value and producing visibly modern and clean spaces— leads to the invisibilisation of waste material—adding to the aesthetic and modern appeal of the city. These processes of invisibilisation and incineration are not the most ‘green’ and environment-friendly methods but they remain prevalent, projecting modern-technology oriented values and protecting capitalist interests, prevailing social hierarchies, and cultural values.

These companies continue to hire workers from the Balmiki community, that too on a contractual basis. Such developments appeal to middle-class sensibilities as the services appear to be more efficient and reliant on technology, where workers wear uniforms provided by the company and walk alongside a mini truck to collect garbage.¹¹⁹ However, in so doing, the PPP services not only continue to impose the burden of waste on the shoulder of the community but further exploit them by informalising the work force and taking away the benefits of permanent government jobs. Furthermore, as evidenced in Chapters 3 and 5, these services also pose a threat to informal garbage collectors—in our case mostly Bengali Muslims—who have been providing their services for over 30 years (Kornberg, 2019b; Calleja 2021). Informal garbage collectors and waste pickers attend to the distinctive properties of waste materials and revalue the materials through the process of collecting, sorting, and selling. Their skills help sustain the recycling economy as against the private companies who simply incinerate the waste.

Similarly, the landfill, as an infrastructure of waste management, facilitates the act of invisibilisation and exclusion. Hawkins (2003) describes waste as ‘public secret’ and the act of invisibilising the landfill is illustrative of that. Presence of waste is public knowledge and yet its disposal is purposefully invisibilised. The very fact that all three

¹¹⁹ Even though these modern and technology oriented services appeal to the middle-class sensibilities, Kornberg (2019b) in her study demonstrates how many middle-class residents tend to rely on the services of informal garbage collectors because of their additional services of collecting waste from households, cleaning the stairs and agreeing to collect unsegregated waste.

landfills in Delhi are built on the city's periphery symbolises the invisibilisation of waste materials. It also simultaneously invisibilises the urban poor residing next to the landfill and excludes them from the process of urban development. Here invisibilisation is a function of power, wherein 'to relegate infrastructures to the background is a powerful act, one which hides the circumstances and lineages of its production and maintenance' (Anand, 2020). The landfill acts as a toxic sink that absorbs the city's waste, while simultaneously imposing the toxicity onto the lives of people residing next to it. As I mentioned in Chapter 5, one graffiti on the wall circumscribing the landfill read '*tum unnati karo hum aag mein jalein*', which literally translates as 'you progress, while we burn in fire'. This is not just a metaphorical quote but the lived reality of people who reside next to the landfill and in the neighbouring areas. The situation is further aggravated by the living and working conditions of waste pickers. Just like PPP-led SWM services invisibilise the labour of municipal and informal garbage collectors, the landfills invisibilise the labour of informal waste pickers rummaging through discarded material in the landfill. The informal nature of their work is often equated with illegal activity and subsequently leads to their exclusion from access to work opportunities. By focussing on the SWM services and landfill infrastructures, I demonstrate how these infrastructures are at once central to the reproduction of the city and are also the source of exclusion of the marginalised population of the city. The fourth chapter on the making of the Bhalswa landfill focussed on the spaces of material, infrastructural politics and how different caste communities living around the landfill responded to these developments. I demonstrated how the physical space of waste materials is shaped by the social reproduction of space and further complicated it by examining the presence of heterogeneous caste communities who form part of the same social space. I argue, the space for the Bhalswa landfill has been continuously defined by the changing socio-political circumstances. In colonial

times, the primary consideration for a dump site was far-off and empty low-lying land characteristic of the area and this shaped the decision of municipal authorities. Even though the area was populated by Jaat farmers and the dumping of refuse significantly affected their living conditions, it did not deter the colonial authorities from demarcating it as a space for a dumpsite. The central concern of the colonial authorities was to relocate the dumpsite at a distant location from New Delhi.

Similarly, in the post-independence period, especially post-emergency, the Bhalswa dairy area was shaped by the modernistic concerns of hygiene and aesthetics. As evidenced in Chapter 3, the rehabilitation of milch cattle dairies, mostly owned by socially dominant communities — Jaats and Gujjars, and nomadic communities—Masets and Qalandars—in the early 1980s, followed by informal dumping of municipal waste in mid-1980s and migration of Bengali Muslims and Hindu OBC and SC people from UP and Bihar, significantly shaped the social composition of the area. From afar, it appears as if all the defiled and unhygienic works were clubbed together in a marginalised area. However, there is a clear power hierarchy among different caste communities and how they relate to each other in terms of their social standing and nature of work. The attitudes of different communities towards the presence of the landfill is illustrative of their caste privilege and social standing in the area. While everyone living in the area bore the brunt of ecological degradation and the stigma associated with the landfill, many were dependent on the landfill for their daily living; others were in favour of closure of the landfill. These reflections from the chapter help us understand how one physical space can have diverse and hierarchical social spaces within it. Situating waste in the context of infrastructures and social relationships helps us understand what the absence of waste in our lives and the presence of waste in the lives of the urban poor means.

Caste, Space and Social Relations

Proliferation of municipal solid waste essentially implies persistence of caste and differentiated spaces. Materials are coded with cultural, political and economic values and a focus on material aspects of the discarded matter illustrates how it can transform the social dynamics among waste workers. I show in Chapters 3 and 5 how waste work has historically been associated with SC communities. However, today with the proliferation of waste materials and waste becoming a million dollar industry, waste work is distributed across various lower caste communities (Muslim OBCs, Hindu OBCs and nomadic communities) and not only SC communities. This thesis has been an exploration of the life-worlds of sanitation and waste workers, looking at their different approaches to waste work and distinct forms of social relations. I show how the work has led to the transformation of caste hierarchies at a very micro level, wherein Balmikis as Jemaadars dominate over the work of Bengali Muslim garbage collectors. Historically, SC communities were forced to perform cleaning work and were (and are still) pushed to the social and physical margins (Lee, 2017; Guru, 2012; Gooptu, 2001; Rawat, 2013). In Chapter 3, I have examined how Balmikis have been at the forefront of maintaining the social and physical order of the city and how decades of oppression has shaped their attitude towards waste work. Furthermore, I show that the growing privatisation and modernisation of SWM services is based on existing caste hierarchies, wherein mostly individuals from the Balmiki community are hired for providing garbage collection services.

By focussing on their life-world and everyday experiences of work, I argue how centuries of socio-spatial inequalities (Guru, 2012; Lee, 2017) has led Balmikis to mount a cultural and political critique against the Brahminical order. The community's

understanding of waste work is full of contempt and disdain; unlike present day waste workers from other caste communities, the Balmikis do not ‘choose’ to engage with waste work of their own volition, and neither do they look for economic ‘value’ in it. For them, waste work is representative of social and structural injustice, which they often refer to as ‘*Baman Baniya ki vyavastha*’. Here ‘*Baman Baniya*’ refers to the caste hierarchy dominated by upper caste Brahmins and Baniyas. The space inhabited by the Balmiki community constitutes a distinctive social infrastructure of waste management. They are well aware that they form the backbone of Delhi’s sanitation infrastructure and without their work, the city will succumb to its disorderly and burgeoning waste-crisis. Their positioning within the waste management infrastructure has invested them with political potential that is often expressed through their protests, which include the flooding of streets with garbage through a refusal to pick waste, holding protest demonstrations in front of the MCD office in the city, and asserting their identity through the celebration of Valmiki Jayanti and Ambedkar Jayanti.

The space of the landfill is distinctive in terms of how caste relations are understood. This distinctiveness, I argue, is shaped by economic structuring and inequalities, growing consumerism, and the subsequent generation of waste and potential value in those materials. The landfill space is not merely a space of SC communities but is populated by a host of marginalised communities who are from various lower caste communities and engage in waste work primarily out of precarity and unemployment but also because of the flexible routine the work offers. Moreover, even though the work is cleaning, the nature of work at a landfill site or even garbage collection is distinct, owing to the materiality of discarded materials. Sanitation workers primarily deal with dust, soil, human and animal refuse whereas waste pickers deal with materials with potential economic value. Hence, the nature of engagement with the work, their socio-economic

condition which pushes them into this work and the space in which they live and work is considerably different. Gidwani and Kumar (2019) argue,

Time-space is ‘lived’ in vastly different ways by different bodies with profound implications for their survival reproduction’ (159)...if space is intimately bound to the body’s it is also intimately bound to the body’s rhythms and the textures of time that infuse space—implicated in the routines, flows, and interaction of social and economic life. (p. 160)

Drawing on this, in Chapter 5, I revisit the question of caste hierarchies and social relations in the context of the Bhalswa landfill and examine different forms of caste hierarchies and social relations that the space produces. Focusing on their everyday routine and interpersonal and community relations, I show how waste pickers from different communities respond when faced with the burden of stigmatised work and discrimination both in middle class residential colonies and in their own neighbourhood. In so doing, I am able to show how certain forms of caste discrimination, which were earlier associated with only ex-untouchable communities, reinforce themselves among other caste communities. In addition, such transformations are also illustrative of the micro subversion of caste hierarchies in particular contexts. Furthermore, by focussing on their quotidian practices, I show how waste workers value themselves vis-à-vis their work, which is very different from sanitation workers and it also varies from an individual waste worker to another (See Chapter 5). The socio-physical environment of the landfill provides them with very different forms of subjectivity. Some prefer waste picking because it gives them a break from routinised work and because there is no one to boss them around, whereas others want to leave the work but they simply cannot because of their caste and religious identity. Similarly, some value themselves because of their dominance in the work and area and their association with local NGOs. Here, the nature

of subjectivity differed because waste workers did not seek to overthrow any dominant capitalist or Brahminical order, neither did they engage in any union-based or organisational politics. Rather, their concerns were of making social and cultural sense of their everyday life.

Between Negative and Positive Value

In mapping the changing caste-based social relations, governance of waste materials and the re-entry of materials in the circular economy, one of the central aspects of the thesis has been to understand how waste-value dialectics operate in both the social and economic realm. The value embedded in waste is both social and economic value and they are co-constitutive of each other (Graeber, 2001). Throughout the thesis, I have shown how the value associated with filth and waste has changed over time. In the colonial context, both the ritual aspect—such as impurity and defilement—and the western notions of dirt and hygiene shaped the discourse around refuse management. Refuse was primarily associated with negative value and its management was shaped by both Brahminical and western notions of cleanliness. Whereas in the post-independence period, especially post-1970s, the disposability of materials other than human and animal excreta started becoming a cause of concern. The industrial production of consumer-oriented goods brought a new form of disorder (Melosi, 2004) and the management of materials was no longer just about hygiene and ordering of refuse. Aspirations to create world-class cities came to the fore alongside the concerns of environmental and urban degradation. Today, waste matter poses an environmental danger, however, waste economies across the world have also shown us how the hazardous and simultaneously indeterminate capacity of waste can be turned into use and exchange value, giving it a new lease of life. In Chapters 5 and 6, I show how informal waste workers work

relentlessly around landfills and local dump yards to convert waste into value and in so doing they absorb the negative value of stigma and discrimination and are victims of ‘new relations of untouchability’ (Gidwani & Kumar, 2019 p. 156), and as Sreenath puts it, ‘ecological shifts have resulted in the intricate suturing of caste power into built systems that channel urbanization’s surplus wastes’ (2019, n.p). In the Indian context, these fluctuations between negative and positive value of materials also gets transposed onto the bodies of waste workers. By focussing on various caste and religious communities of waste workers I argue that the cultural and economic value associated with materials shapes the notion of marginality and determines which community and class of people gets associated with discarded material at different stages of the circular waste economy. Today, by and large, the city’s urban poor—predominantly lower caste labour force—work in the lower rungs of waste economy, mostly as waste pickers and scrap dealers, whereas the trading and recycling aspect of the waste economy is dominated by upper class and upper caste communities with existing capital.

The governance of waste matter and processes of waste management are also centred around potential value in discarded materials. As discussed in Chapter 1 and Chapter 3, the early 2000s marked a shift in waste management processes. Prior to that, waste management processes in Delhi were primarily concerned with the transfer and disposal of waste from local receptacles to landfill sites. However, post-2000s, with the privatisation and modernisation of waste management processes and techniques, SWM concerns moved beyond the orderly disposal and aesthetic maintenance of the city, lured by profit in waste. The waste-to-energy plants instituted by private companies are not just meant for invisibilising and eliminating waste materials but are a way of converting waste into energy and selling it to other private companies for profit. Thus, the metabolic process of waste management has become the frontier of capital accumulation (Schindler

& Demaria, 2015). Furthermore, the value of a material is contingent upon market dynamics and the political economy context. Demaria & Schindler argue, ‘the coevolution of materiality and political economy transforms urban metabolisms and as a result political opportunities are fostered and foreclosed’ (2016, p. 297) and the on-going changes in the PWMR are illustrative of that. The frequently changing specifications of SUP are indicative of how it is not just the material but also economic stakes and corporate entities (See Chapter 6; Pathak 2022; Nagarajan 2022) which shape what gets classified as SUP. As demonstrated in Chapter 6, these changes have an adverse impact on both the informal and formal scrap economy, wherein scrap dealers at the lowest level of the informal economy suffer the most.

Limitations of the thesis

The primary focus of the thesis has been to examine how the changing materiality of discarded materials shapes the social relations of waste workers and around waste economies. However, in the thesis, I do not deeply focus on the distinctness of the materials; I focus primarily on plastic and the politics of plastic waste management rules and recycling in Delhi. During my fieldwork, I observed how different materials require specific skill sets in order for waste pickers and scrap dealers to decipher their value. Some waste pickers were very good at picking up plastic items and sorting different kinds of plastics with great efficiency, whereas others were more efficient in identifying metal objects and segregating different parts of those metal objects. For example, metal objects and wires often require skills to disassemble different parts and extract valuable materials such as copper and materials to be sold to the scrap dealers. Similarly, there were some waste pickers around the landfill who specialised in picking up exquisite items such as jewellery and watches. These insights help us in analysing microscopic details associated

with waste economies and how they shape the everyday socio-economic and moral relations of exchange among waste pickers and scrap dealers. Once waste workers have collected the items they enter into the phase of negotiation with scrap dealers. These negotiations can vary depending upon the skill set of waste pickers, the quality of their maal, their credibility and social networks in the market, followed by their capacity to take and return loan. All these aspects together shape the relationship of interdependence between waste pickers and scrap dealers. Thus, not incorporating a chapter on processes of valuation of materials, their changing market and social value, and moral economies of exchange relations remains one of the biggest limitations of the study.

Part of the reason I did not incorporate this aspect in the thesis is because I could not conduct substantial fieldwork among scrap dealers due to Covid-19 led lockdown. This would have required me to visit scrap shops and observe the relations of exchange—buying and selling of materials and processes of segregating, sorting and disassembling materials on a daily basis. Such observations could not have been made based on telephonic conversations as in the cases of other follow-up interviews. I hope to bring this facet of waste economies in much greater detail in the form of book or article publication in future.

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