Chapter 6

Confrontation and negotiation: The dynamics of stigma and marginality in the work

6.1 Introduction

The prospect of waste pickers finding an infinity of possibilities in waste is definitely a liberating experience. There are social barriers, however. Even though the pickers accustom themselves to abject, substandard, and alien waste matters, it puts their set of practices in the domain of dirt. The reason is that the constant intimacy with other people's waste has become one of the most profound of social divides (Davis, 2006). As waste is often the unvalued and undefinable other, it is expelled by society to shore up individual and societal borders (Moore, 2012). In this sense, the pickers also become the other non-significant others. They are constantly challenged by the assemblages like exclusion/inclusion, formal/informal, risk/safety, and rigidity/flexibility. Such combinations show how distinct forms of populations like the waste pickers stand outside the commonality as urban poor.

Gooptu (2001) deploys the term 'urban poor' to encompass various occupational groups and to highlight the diversity and plurality of their employment and working conditions. There are also vulnerabilities associated with these urban poor whose living-making in the city differs from other working groups. Be it housing or working conditions, that is logically unfit to occupy, the urban poor take resort to and familiarize themselves. The vulnerability even originates from economic relations among different occupational groups, and non-economic relations among groups identified by caste and religious affiliations (Hariss, 1986; Breman, 2004). It later goes on to shape the processes that upheld social, political, and economic marginalization of the poor.

In particular, the marginalization of the pickers pushes them within rigidities. They usually believe in having no easy access to other infrastructures of the city and remain devoid of healthy living conditions and sanitary administrations. The significance of waste in their lives reinforces their characterization in terms of unclean work, and stigmatized identity. The exclusion or silencing of the waste workers reflects and

exacerbates their distancing rhetoric (Bell, 2019). It is the social frontiers of us and others that keep them invisible. The waste work becomes an enduring locus of marginalization as they get interlocked by urban inequalities and is suffused with political non-recognitions. Accumulation of such factors contribute to the creation of problems for the pickers. The waste pickers' status as urban migrant laborers make them seem even more unsettling. This is one of the reasons why their occupation is perceived not a progressive one.

The occupation is enough for the kin or the city dwellers to hold prejudices against the waste pickers. This results in the work being reproduced culturally in a negative way. This approach to waste as unit of the work problematizes it as disorder in the city. Driven by what Girling (2005) terms as 'politics of disgust', the regulation of waste has become essential for maintaining the integrity of the environment and city aesthetics. Thus, the dumping ground has become a convenient option to release waste and that can contain the public concern about littered waste in the city.

Recovering waste from the city and dumping them in the backyards of the city is carried on by Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC). However, these waste pickers' informal waste handling has failed to remain an institution of interest for the GMC. The reason can be attributed to waste pickers remaining fixed and isolated at the city's margin. It is this modality of power that comes to be exercised upon the pickers and their work. Through it different spaces and infrastructures of the city like the dumpsite and settlements get organized. These people are thus not marginal in the sense of 'outside the system', but as asymmetrically integrated into the society (Perlman, 1976).

Naurin, a female waste picker tells of their awareness of the marginality regarding governance by the state. The economic and political scenario is different in their case. They cast their vote with the hope of their work getting recognized or getting direct benefits and are believed not to fall within their lowly occupation of waste picking. It would not take long, in their words, to identify the waste pickers as metaphors for crimes and vices. While the waste pickers are embedded in unravelling waste and its value, negative and stereotypical images keep brewing. Such is their reputation that public perception contributes powerfully to designating a relegated position (Wacquant, 2006).

Leaving by the marginal location also throws light on the origin of a segregated area where occurs a multiplicity of isolated happenings (Wirth,1928). From having to adjust to the lack of development, inadequate infrastructure, isolation of the periphery, they adapt to urban life. And engages with the uncertain context of social experiences through self and group consciousness. They defy the exigencies of life through community trust, loyalty, and solidarity. It is a form of dealing and toleration (Wirth, 1928).

This chapter analyses some of the details of the social and work life of the waste pickers that has experiences of marginalization and stigma. I show how they negotiate forms of stigma, marginality, and the overall containment of inequality. I illustrate how the waste pickers is resilient in ignoring the injustices of work but live and cope with their marginalization. The difficult conditions sharpen their abilities to withstand, demonstrating a form of positivity in challenging the situation. They in fact continue using waste for work as a form of creativity, and innovation which manifests to survive the odds in the city. It is conceptualized as "signs of a living thing, one that continued to live as evidenced by its having left something behind" (Reno, 2014: 20).

Proag (2014) argues that resilience is not a single static system but a dynamic system that involves the ability to absorb, adapt and restore after an adversity. In a similar vein, waste pickers create a space for themselves to continue the work by using their labor to forge relationships and relate to the city. Even though they are victims of ignorance, they tend to pass through the atmosphere of physical expressions of the social distance produced by acts of marginalization and stigma. These become part of their reserve of survival strategies and individual responsibility to endure complex situations.

6.1.1 The nexus of Urban Informality, Stigma, and Marginality

Waste pickers occupy a precarious social location. They navigate a highly visible and stigmatized occupation in public space (Wittmer, 2022). The devaluation of their labour and identity is continually reproduced through the powerful interlocking system of informality, capitalism, and neoliberalism. They are identified according to their precarity, autonomy, income, their non-work rights and claims (Lerche, 2010). While they have contributed substantially to the transformation of waste recycling, they receive little attention due to their status as unorganized labor in the informal sector.

This informal sector has proved to be the overwhelming and enduring reality of Indian urban economies, both past and present (Breman, 1996). For this reason, laboring poor like the waste pickers are assumed to be contend with the economic relations (conditions of labor and experience) as well as non-economic modes of domination, and oppression, based on religion or caste for instance (Gooptu, 2001). This oppositional vocabulary plays a large part in marginalizing their social identities. The fact that waste pickers self-employ themselves in the process of informal recycling, has opened the avenues for their un-acknowledgment.

Informal recycling has been conceptualized as 'infrastructural' to cities, as this precarious labour is essential to enabling capitalist accumulation and consumption, but workers themselves are ignored, excluded, and exploited (Bhaviskar & Gidwani, 2019). Indeed, just under half of the global workforce, both men and women, are self-employed (ILO, 2018). In this context, self-employment is a crucial topic about which Harris-White (2020) notes whether it involves labor, capital, or neither. Since the majority of unpaid self-employed individuals are own-account or contributing family workers who invest more labor than capital in their livelihood pursuits, this can actually be referred to as micro-capitalist activity (NCEUS, 2007a).

While this engagement does not guarantee them entering the formal economies, it predominantly points to its disguised marginalised conditions. The informalised waste work becomes the conversion of workspace into social spaces of judgements, and scrutiny. The waste pickers are not surprised while addressing their plight of facing differences. With the social contexts based on religion, occupation, and migrant status, the unequal differentiated relationship of the waste pickers to others gets produced. But this marginal positionality goes through a process of change. It shows marginality as a location, not merely as a site of deprivation but as a site of resistance and radical possibility from where people articulate their sense of the world (Hooks, 1990). I was informed of the instances where waste pickers themselves erected social boundaries between them and others. It is adopted as a technique to ignore the social fragmentations.

The idea of marginality can be traced back to the early twentieth century and Robert Ezra Park's concept of the marginal man. Within the contexts of the concerns of the

Chicago School, Park posited a relationship between the emergence of modern city life and its attendant complexities caused by migration, mobility and anonymity of human beings leading to a sense of liminality and marginality between two different cultural life worlds (Weisberger, 1992). Today, marginality implies a lack of access to social fields such as politics, education, and the economy by marginal individuals (Muller, 2016). It is conceptually based on the distinction between the social core and the periphery and typically describes the relationship of peripheral, minoritarian individuals or groups to a homogenous majoritarian social core (ibid.).

The state taking up initiatives for its prosperity has also left behind the lopsided results of development that manifest various dimensions of marginality (Deka & Das, 2022). Many urban spaces for example, have lost its significance and the emptiness eventually become a conquest for the everyday life of the poor (ibid.). Here, waste pickers' marginalization can be defined in the ways where they become the marginalized bodies in having to embrace precarious adaptations, get distanced from accessing urban benefits and lack means for exclusive integration. Notable is that they are sidelined by virtue of their rural household residence status that denies them access to many of the entitlements to services and benefits of urban residents, as well through the nature of their employment (Cook, 2020). However, they cannot openly emphasize their interpretations nor are able to show that their presence has some bearing on the reality. This failure, therefore, explains the identity of the urban laboring poor remaining excluded.

A general negative image of the waste pickers is reinforced by the work and its segregation. Interactions with them and observations from the field gave me an idea of what it is like to work and live as waste pickers. As urban poor, they are rejected even when they have work to support themselves, unlike rural poor who did not have to face criticism for being idle and unemployed. They suggest that the city's social geography is what has created a lack of interest in them and their work.

> 'We are not saying that we get severe backlash from the city. But our lack of socialization with majority of the people in the city have left us withdrawn. This do make us feel socially ostracized at times' (Mehrunissa, 61 years old, female waste picker 2021).

Such lived social experiences of the pickers partly explain the stigmatization towards manual labor. There is an existence of the city dwellers' anxiety towards waste and a heightened consciousness of purity and defilement (Sibley, 1995). This is due to the ongoing public pressure to omit material waste, along with a general lack of awareness of waste laborers. Pictures of the waste pickers making adjustments in the challenging working conditions are still hidden. This causes others to build their own ideas about who can be a part of the city. Eventually, it finds the pickers on the edges and get assigned them a lower social status.

On the other hand, the involvement of the pickers in the garbage labor paints a picture of the city as an unfinished project of order and cleanliness. As waste is taken as an index of difference (Fredericks, 2018), their labor contribution is taken as voluntary rather than infrastructural bottleneck of the city. This has led to maintaining a hierarchy of citizens and thus, locating the waste pickers off the map. As they possess low levels of skills and have lower levels of education, they usually remain out of the plan for formalization. This further undermines the self-reliance of the waste picker community, and work invalidated.

Often the market is cited as the logic behind the deregulation of labour, yet we also cannot overlook the role of the state, which is an employer of informal labour, in perpetuating informality (Eswaran & C.K, 2013). Taking the example of Indian planning system, Roy (2009) argues that the state itself is an informalised entity characterized by de-regulation, ambiguity and exception. It is because of this reason that informality has remained isolated for analysis. Even though its governance lay in the hands of the state or formal organization, waste pickers have little or no external force to reach out to the former. This happens because informal practices emerge in areas that a state has not managed to regulate (beyond the state) or the practice replaces allegedly ineffective state mechanisms (in spite of the state) (Polese, et al., 2018).

6.2 Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC) and its governance mechanism

Governing the scenes of waste in the city- in this case, across Guwahati, constitutes concern for the Guwahati Municipal Corporation, the formal body for managing waste. It has been entrusted with the mission to manage waste since 2008 under the aegis of the

Assam state government. To maintain the standard of the city in terms of cleanliness, GMC is expected to deliver adequate service. It is important that solid waste management (SWM) of the city is maximized effectively to solve or at least minimize the problem of waste spilling and dumping. By rule, both GMC and the state has to work by the provisions laid in the Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016.

The SWM rules presume that all people of the city receive services of collection, transportation, and disposal of waste. Likewise, most of the garbage collected from home or those deposited on overflowing garbage bins at different locations of the city are picked up by the GMC hydraulic trucks. It is equipped with a forklift which helps in mechanically lifting the bins, tilt, and empty them, and put them on the ground in very less seconds. One can also see these trucks unloading waste at the dumping ground from morning 4am up to 12 am at night. The truck functions by the method to control and bury garbage at dumping grounds (Rogers, 2005). For instance, three to four excavators will be seen most of the time engaged in excavating the garbage area or trench deep to accommodate more garbage and covering or levelling the area of dumped waste at the dumpsite.

In short, the GMC takes care of urban cleanliness and solid waste precisely through the techno-managerial approach. Driven both by profit-making and urban paradigms of modern hygienic cities, technological solutions to the challenges of collecting, transporting, disposing of and treating waste are being adopted (Fernandez, 2020). But this regime is comprised of a suite of class-biased governance mechanisms and discourses aiming to modernize and clean up cities by solving the problem of solid waste through techno-managerial and capital-intensive fix (Baviskar, 2020; Kornberg, 2020).

This process of taming and managing waste constitutes both building infrastructures and making structural adjustments. For instance, GMC has planned to install a waste-to-power plant in the new dumping ground at *Belor Tol*[1], Guwahati, and help facilitate

[1] Belor Tol- The name of the place where GMC has set up the new dumping ground in a plot of approximately 60 *bighas* of Housing Board land in August 2021. Here, garbage from 60 GMC wards of Guwahati city are piled at this place.

proper waste treatment. But it has become a string of broken promises in the city. Neither the old dumping ground witnessed patching the issue nor has the new dumping ground.

Moore (2012) points out that waste as a governable object helps to create the power it becomes subject to. The power is harnessed in different directions to meet specific ends where its messy properties of waste are governed. For instance, at the behest of the state government order, the *Boragaon* dumping ground has been shifted to *Belor Tol* since 2022. The legacy waste of the former is being removed. According to a GMC official, the waste is first segregated and accumulated as plastics and soil. The plastics have been sold off to the cement company called *Dalmia*. The soil (after segregating from other waste through conveyer belts) is used for earth filling in the city as required by demands.

As said by one of the officials, GMC had given a contract to a city-based company-North East Enviro Tech Private Ltd (NEET) to clean the legacy waste (Das, 2022). However, the contract remains dismissed by the authorities. The unfinished clearance of the dumping ground faced a similar fate in 2012 when a Hyderabad-based company-Ramky Enviro Engineers had been awarded a contract. However, the contract of Rs, 102.15 crore by the GMC could not be utilized properly to set up an integrated solid waste management project at the west *Boragaon* dumping ground. Ramky's journey from 2008 came to an end in 2012 over alleged anomalies in accomplishing the project.

According to another GMC official named Pratik, emphasized the ways through which they operate, and conveys that nothing is done meaningfully unless communicated with the state government. He further argues that the state is involved in major decision making. It is the state that has become increasingly involved in the design, location, construction and management of waste disposal and facilities (Davies, 2008). However, the contradictory indicator of progress and development is also contributed by the public, in his opinion. In many instances, the collection of garbage from household by the NGO's under GMC face hurdles. According to him, people do not segregate garbage into the category of organic and inorganic but deposit mixed waste in plastic bags. So large-scale segregation also does not get materialized. This contributes to the proliferation of plastics in the city.

He admits that the state is becoming overburdened by societal demands for services in an increasingly globalized economic and political environment (Pierre, 2000). While purification impulses (Sennett, 1970) among city dwellers is high, discourse of cleanliness and waste ordering in the city is a challenge. He opines that GMC is taking the best steps possible for progress of waste management and city development. However, he shares that waste is an object of meticulous analysis, and by any means they would strive to control and distance it from the city. While the formal and structural management of waste maximizes, the role of the waste pickers gets diluted.

Drawing on Julia Kristeva's formulations of how processes of abjection repel/expel the other who is deemed polluting (1982), I show how practices of the GMC keep the waste pickers at bay. By way of governing urban subjects like the pickers, GMC operates through the zone of distancing. Without actually practicing rituals of chasing the pickers away from the dumping area (which is under the jurisdiction of the GMC), the former is being consumed by the indifference of GMC. This traces the powerful ways through which an order is maintained by the GMC of not intersecting

Image 18. A GMC truck on way to the new dumping ground, *Belor Tol.*

with the waste pickers. Operating through the said regime of disengagement is a form of contemporary metropolitan governance which is actually for managing bodies and spaces designated as wasteful (Gidwani & Reddy, 2011). In the words of the Additional GMC Commissioner of Guwahati city,

> We appreciate that waste pickers segregate a good volume of waste. But according to law, they cannot legally pick up waste, and we should not allow them here. However, considering their low economic position, we do not hold them unfit to belong to the dumpsite or in the city (Interview, 24/1/2022).

As an outcome, waste is categorized as distinct, and the people associated with it are controlled through state mechanisms. Even though the occupation of waste picking, segregating, and minimizing waste in the dumpsite is a commendable service, it stays invisible. Melosi (2000) argues that service delivery often blends so invisibly into the urban landscape that it become part of what we expect a city to be. While letting waste pickers in their work, and not letting them to be the force that contributes to waste handling, it distinctly separates them.

Image 19. Segregation of plastic and soil through a trommel being undertaken by GMC at the *Boragaon dumping ground.*

Surprisingly, GMC is not aware of the SWM rules, 2016, that require integrating waste dealers and waste pickers within the state's system of waste management for managing urban waste. Championing the cause of improving the dignity of the work by building a strong contract with different stake holders in the value chain actually have better chances of uplifting the waste pickers. It could lead to a gradual transformation of society by reorganizing the waste management industry around formal structures and procedures (Bisen, 2019). From scales or regions of governance, degrees of interaction among and between individuals, organizations, and society to systems or domains of society like the social, political, economic, or ecological, it would have comprised a networked approach to waste management (Parto, 2005).

However, such absence of methods and mechanism hinders the process that could have helped waste pickers to generate mutually binding decisions on waste management. This puts the labor power of the pickers under the governmentality of the GMC. Governmentality focuses on the ways in which power travels, is incorporated, naturalized, and diffused in multiple sites (Benit-Gbaffou, 2018). The fact remains that pickers are managed, regulated, and folded into the governance mechanism of the GMC. Foucault analyses European society and tried to show how the modernist agenda had penetrated people's lives and various technologies and tactics of modern government constituted a strategy, which he defined as governmentality- and that it prepared its citizens to be ruled in the manner that the state desired (Foucault, 1991, as cited in Das, 2022). In the context of this study, it allows us to consider that informal waste work emerges in proximity to the formal body of GMC who seek to exercise a form of power.

Image 20. The new dumping ground at *Belor Tol.*

Waste pickers' role in aiding waste minimization from the dumpsite is not issued due credit. In fact, in the waste management hierarchy, the informal waste management by the waste pickers is at the lowest. It emerges that GMC has not absorbed the responsibility to represent the waste pickers as managers in the quagmire of garbage. This is because the collective mind of the GMC and the state is suffocated with thoughts of viewing waste management from their standpoint. The fact that the pickers could be important agents in upgrading the waste management system has not constituted a winning argument for the GMC. This limits the investigation into the ways that accommodate the conditions under which waste pickers work.

In this regard, I would like to bring in the concept of 'misrecognition' which denies common regard and participation but generates social differentiation. For Bourdieu, misrecognition refers to an everyday and dynamic social process where one thing (say, a situation, process, or action) is not recognized for what it is because it was not previously 'cognized' within the range of dispositions and propensities of the habitus of the person(s) confronting it (Bourdieu, 2000). Instead, the thing is attributed to another realm of meaning, and, in the process, interests, inequities, and effects may be maintained while they remain concealed (James, 2015). For example, waste pickers' work is recognized as labor-intensive and they contribute informally to handling waste. However, they are differently positioned in the eyes of the GMC who denies voice to the former and categorizing them as 'illegal' to recover wastes.

The instance of whom corresponds to rendering of reclaimers or waste pickers as 'human waste' (Bauman, 2004) has been documented in cities across the world (Gidwani & Reddy, 2011). Understanding that reclaimers are framed as 'surplus people' living at the very edges of the economy and society helps to explain why municipalities feel that they do not need to pay reclaimers for the service they provide, include them in the setting of priorities and decision-making, or consider how they are affected by separation at source (Samson, 2020).

Referring to one instance, waste pickers remind how they are asked and advised prior not to appear before the top GMC officials when they visit the dumpsite on inspection. This shows that social distinctions are marked by occupations of dirt that take those down

associated to subordination. Douglas (1996) notes that disorders spoil patterns and order imply restrictions. This is why GMC seeks out to create order and wants it to prevail. It is the marginal status of the occupation that produces this reaction. It is seen how a 'diversion' mode (Dean, 1999) has come to dominate the governmentality of the GMC in addressing waste and waste pickers to be governed.

There appears 'the shadow of hierarchy' (Scharf, 1994, in Whitehead, 2003, pg.8) when it comes to recognizing the contribution of the waste pickers. Precisely, GMC's governance of the waste pickers can be said to organize the conditions which have to be abided by the pickers. Such an account by itself explains the governing practices in the pursuit of controlling and keeping the governed in order. While these strategies by the GMC is deployed not to problematize anything but it manufactures consequence. Such terrorization illuminates tension among the waste pickers on their identity. The analysis differentiates the class structure and how it evidently places one inferior to another in the city space.

6.3 Vigyan Path – an image of exclusion

Waste pickers residing in the GMC area or Vigyan path near the dumping ground along with their residential settlements, stay a potential place of exclusion. The attitude of individuals moving as social beings and their rejection of the place, influences shaping of the place's identity (Sibley, 1995). As a fear of difference is projected onto wastes, it shapes the tendency to pollute the presence of those within (ibid.). The place, therefore, does not fit in the conception of a frequented space. Here, I examine the area of Vigyan path as a locus of stratified location that is unclean, thus commonly neglected, and avoided.

The vocabulary of segregation enters at this point. Segregation can be deciphered as the spatial dis-connectivity caused by the geographical position of an area. It defines who can genuinely belong to the area occupied, and how space influences their gain or loss. It shows that space has become a constraining medium and facilitates boundary maintenance from outsiders. The GMC area thus gets a relegated representation and debarring of the place is exacerbated.

Such representation suggests that the strength of good and bad stereotypes is contingent on place (Sibley, 1995). As highlighted by Yiftachel (2009), such spaces are like the grey space that partially remain out of the sight of state's representatives and bureaucratic machinery. Therefore, more stigma gets attached to the dumping ground and the waste pickers working there. The following quote from one of the officials from the GMC is illustrative of the previous statement,

> 'These people have adapted to living near, and amid the waste. They indulge in waste picking as a progressive way to recreate their lives in this city. As they work independently and without complaints, we find no point in limiting their potential to earn. I believe our attempt to constrain their work or making any intervention, would only result in a bad environment among us. And we do not want that to happen' (Nitin, 30/08/2021)

The idea of the officials is that rather than punctuating the scope of the waste pickers to scout waste, they have been fair to them. In such consideration, waste pickers' disproportionate living in the economically poorer location is not much attended (Rokem & Vaughan, 2018). Such notions arise because waste pickers' occupational importance and recognition are not always socially valued, and the contribution of these groups get shunned. The work is further concealed by its physical nature, and waste being considered as the material abject. Hence, the segregation affects the ability to organize and demand services (Bharathi et al., 2022).

The segregation of this locality in fact, become a major handicap in the process of distinguishing the place having economic capabilities. The GMC is backed up by rule enforcement of not legally allowing the waste pickers to collect waste. Picking waste and facilitating monetary transaction through waste is actually a type of committing theft under Indian Penal Code, 1860. The waste actually is the property of the state municipal corporation; however, the waste pickers break the law and is still allowed to collect waste.

Waste that previously served as commons, today stands as a contested resource tangling between municipalities and the informal waste pickers. The British began to change the perception of commons (waste) as early as 1919 when the Madras (now

Chennai) City Municipal Corporation Act of 1919 declared that "all things deposited in depots or places provided or appointed… shall be the property of the corporation. It meant that the informal waste pickers were breaking the law, but the law was impossible to enforce" (Doron & Jeffrey, 2018). This consideration of illegality and informally legalizing waste-picking under the aegis of the municipal corporation has however, continued.

The area also remains discarded as unwanted and unsavory by the urban citizens. It has become a focal point of the notion that material deprivation, symbolic stains, and geographic isolation intersects. Hence, it remains segregated, excluded and invisible. In a different context, Wacquant (2006) highlights of due differences in social construction and appropriation of space, where United Sates and continental Europe developed opposite and symmetrical spatial configurations. While central places in the city became a haven for the upper and middle classes, the slums or the outskirts are left for the workers and marginal categories (ibid.). This sharply emphasizes how stratified places accentuates different images of people and its occupancy.

My interview with random passers-by and shopkeepers confronted on my way to the dumpsite, explained their avoidance of the place. Citing the reason as a breeding place of germs emanating from dumped wastes, it can just offer health problems if gone near. Perspectives as such are evident among many who analyses the place to be occupied by the waste pickers as a matter of compulsion. Commenting on the residential area that has the topography of standing opposite to the dumping ground, Aziz, a 62 years' male waste picker, said: 'We do feel a sense of alienation from the city. The life we lead here is not an easy one but there aren't many individuals willing to upset the status quo' (Interview, 24/12/2020). This shows that even though they are affected, it is unlikely to draw a collective sense of public sympathy. They have to reel under quite seclusion.

In spite of such experiences, the waste pickers have expressed their satisfaction for being able to access the city's waste on GMC'S property (the dumpsite). If not, it would have made their plight as city dwellers even worse. Bayat (1997) describes this as 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary' which acts as a pivotal juncture in silent assertion of their

presence. It has in fact become a site for restructuring their lives with small-scale and non-confrontational infiltration of edge or interstitial sites in the city (Davis, 2006).

6.4 Coping with Stigma in waste picking

The fear of deprivation from waste and getting curtailed from the waste work network is again combined with concern in the stigma attached. Stigma refers to the signs or attributes that is discrediting and applied to the disgrace itself (Goffman, 1963). With the continuity of general social prejudice, development of stigmas on bounded social categories like religion, occupation, and status become inescapable. This is especially visible with the moral strain that waste pickers have to confront and surpass. There is a difference between work experienced by waste pickers and that perceived by the public.

Goffman (1963) posits that the central feature of the stigmatized individual's situation is acceptance. People who have dealings with him fail to accord him the respect and regard which the uncontaminated aspects of his social identity have led them to anticipate extending and have led him to anticipate receiving; he echoes his denial by finding that some of his own attributes warrant it (ibid.). Similarly, waste pickers find themselves in a tricky situation where their commitment to the waste work is challenged by the stigma. As stigmatized individuals, the pickers become aware of their inferiority and their location of work at the bottom of the stratified spaces.

The stigma in this study refers to how waste and waste collection from the dumpsite surrounding the waste pickers assemble to circulate the differences. In the city, these pickers are labelled as migrants in a situation of social disadvantage. The relationship produced through this labelling highlights how the work of waste picking is devalued. Certain studies observed that since it is not a formal occupation, waste pickers tend to be classified as a social problem (Porras and Climent, 2018). This further reinforces the dimension of stigma making the pickers aware of their stigmatized position. Their defamation is manifested by the separateness and inferiority of the work. It further stresses the increasing weight of symbolic dispossession (Wacquant, 2006) that has turned these pickers into figures of public negative image.

What concerns me here is about the effects that get produced and have to be internalized by the waste pickers. It is hardly possible for the waste pickers to stop the ways that reproduces social taint from offensive public conclusions. In addition, political decisions also contribute to the stigma of the waste pickers (Bulla et al, 2021). For instance, the decision of the state of not paying attention to the inclusion of waste pickers in formal waste management put the latter in a degraded space. If waste pickers had been considered as contributing participants in city's waste management, they would have the chance to escape the shame. The existence of presumption towards the work in language of inattention translates into a symbol of separateness of the waste pickers.

Link and Phelan (2001) note that stigmatization is entirely contingent on access to social, economic, and political power that allows the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, and the separation of labelled persons into distinct categories. This ethnographic study of the waste pickers has produced knowledge about the structure and how such created categories arise and are sustained. Waste pickers' experiences, whether individual or communal, demonstrate that they have little control over how they are portrayed and who they are. They have to deal with and navigate stigma in the context of kinship, religion, and the unclean work of waste picking.

The power struggle between the pickers and those labelling them, therefore, becomes apparent. However, it would be wrong to assume waste pickers being silent and passive receivers. In their own way, they resist what comes before them. This staging of control by the state vs waste pickers' ability to withstand, lets to constantly question the provisions from where the subaltern groups are excluded from. I explore how these waste pickers embed themselves in the situations that arise out of the stigma and seek to secure themselves. The following three stigmas are dealt with in detail in the sections below.

6.4.1 Being Miya Muslims: identity and religious stigma

Tossing between miscellaneous waste materials in the bamboo basket, Nasreen set aside the tetra packets of *Amul Tazza Milk.* She then started to open and throw the lids to the nearby basket and kept the miscellaneous glass bottles in the same basket. Pointing to the *bostas* (sacks) of classified *maal* (waste materials) that was lined up opposite to her, she said that it would be taken to the recycling center tomorrow. Today she was on the

2nd day of her menstrual cycle and looked bit dejected and tired. I enquired about why she doesn't take a day off as it is easily permitable. She was quick to respond, 'No. I do not wish to stay away from work[2]'. After a pause she continued, Jane ami musolman manuh xini ai jagah aru kam tu nijor buli bhabi loisu. Kintu Guwahatir manuh bure sake amak ake nabhabe. Hoi'u bhabibou kio? Ami tu Miya manuh (You know we the Muslims here consider the place and the work as our own. But maybe the people of the city do not take us as one of them. Obviously, why will they think us in similar terms? Perhaps because of our recognition as Miya, they fail to see us like them)'.

Being identified as Miya[3] Muslims of Assam, has social repercussion on them. The relation between private apprehensions and public assumptions regarding the Miyas in Assam stems from a long line of interpretations. Due to the presence of a negative representation of this community in the state, symbolic boundaries are drawn. An atmosphere of hostility gets created (Betz & Meret, 2009) due to the cultural differences, and making it difficult for the pickers to fully integrate in the city. As there is a vocal opposition to the strong presence of the so-called Miya community in Assam, the waste pickers are aware of being scanned through a stigmatized gaze.

Given the history of migration from East Bengal to Assam, these Bengali Muslims are subjected to prejudice, contempt, and derision. According to Hussain (1993), the

[2] Interview, 19/1/22.

[3] Miya- It is also spelt as Miyah. 'Miyah' is an address of reverence in Urdu, which has become a scornful reference to the Bengali Muslim community in Assam (Yasmeen, 2019). Although the Bengali Muslim community has different factions within itself, such as 'Daccaiya', 'Sylhettia', 'Miyah' has primarily come to refer to those from Mymensingh (ibid.). There is now a radical Miya poetry movement in Assam. These young poets seek to reappropriate the word *Miya*- traditionally used by the Assamese as a pejorative word for people of that ethnic background (Baruah, 2021). See Yasmeen, J. (2019). Bengali Muslims in Assam and 'Miyah' poetry: Walking on the shifting terrains of 'Na-Asamiya' and 'Infiltrator'. *Journal of Migration Affairs,* 1 (2), 69-84. See Baruah, S. (2021). *In the name of the nation: India and its Northeast*. Stanford University Press.

majority of Assamese people in the state genuinely believed that both India's sovereignty and their unique national identity would be jeopardized by ongoing migration to Assam from neighboring countries and their registration on the voter lists. A sizable portion of the Asamiya middle class and the rural rich have thus, developed a severe anxiety psychosis as a result of the inflated number of foreign people on the election rolls (ibid.).

Similar to this, Goswami (2011) points out that illegal immigration from Bangladesh had been escalating concerns about land grabbing, demographic flooding, losing indigenous identity, religious minoritization, and losing political representation among the autochthonous populations of Assam, both indigenous and non-indigenous. As a result, these ideas started to represent an imbalance between the Miya and other state populations.

Situated in this milieu, the expression towards these people as outsiders from the state has remained rampant. Despite the low visibility of the waste pickers, there is still a realization of their presence in the state. They become the object of scrutiny on special occasions and their religious identity becomes questionable. The experiences of being marginalized is observed on their collective identity of being Muslims. For instance, being Muslim internal migrants, they are aware of the citizen/foreigner binary prevalent in the state. On account of this, they do not find encouragement by themselves as well as the waste dealers to settle elsewhere other than at *Vigyan path* or the GMC area. This acknowledges how the category of religion functions in an urban context. One waste picker reiterated, '*ami tu musolman, sohorot nu kot bhal jagah pam'* which loosely translates to 'We do not have the possibility of getting a suitable place to settle down in the city owing to our identity as Muslims. This is an example of the social scenario where religion is believed to have declined in value but became centre of uneasiness and judgements.

In India, the stigmatization of waste and recyclers is further complicated and reproduced by the enduring structure of caste, a relational and hierarchal system of social classification and power based on 'structures of cultural, hereditary, and ascriptive traits,' which 'afford some groups high status while others are subordinated, exploited, and even humiliated' (Kornberg, 2019). The cultural relationship shared between caste and waste,

and between ideas of pure and impure, continue to inform everyday practice among large sections of Hindu society (Doron & Jeffrey, 2018).

It complicates matters to the extent that people of lower caste and association with low esteem occupation as waste picking become synonymous. In a Pan-Indian context, where caste identity become a central category in showing that low-caste or low-status groups performs this demeaning work, caste dynamics do not determine the identity of the waste pickers here in the city. The waste pickers as Muslims have not been historically carrying the responsibility to accomplish waste picking. But adoption of the work, and submission of bodily labor and power to gather waste gradually have attracted the social taints. As these pickers are backed by compulsion to continue working, they indicate how such processes of stigma do not seem to erode away.

Stigmatizing practices like mocking religious sartorial markers and food choices are commonly experienced by the waste pickers. For instance, in case of the male waste pickers, some are found in *Lungi*, while few female waste pickers wear nose rings and cover their heads with a veil. While these markers are seen as symbols of waste picker's individual identity and choice, they become symbols of religious stigma. In examining religious stigmatization, Endelstein & Ryan (2013) notes that individuals often choose to wear clothing that will mark them as a member of a religious faith, even as they struggle with the possible stigmatization they incur. However, this separates the pickers from outside affecting their identity.

Waste pickers refer to instances when someone outside of the neighborhood or in any city area like a bus stand or marketplace makes fun of them. These instances are indicative of the sudden stigmatization that they face in the urban spaces in contrast to their rural place of residence. The discussion on perceived uncontrollable fertility among the Miya Muslim community and their meat-eating practice during Eid festival is often overheard by the waste pickers. This show how they are defined in terms of global and local Islamophobia which highlights a civic and political marginalization that the Muslims face (Routray, 2014).

In this sense, the waste pickers fear practicing their religious identity and prefer being in their cluster. The GMC area has been perceived and constructed as a Muslim social

space by the waste pickers. As a social space, it has served as a sanctuary for Muslims, as places where they will be accepted, protected, and free to explore and construct religious identities (Ewing & Grady, 2013). Here, the waste pickers enjoy internal group cohesion which is promoted by their religious affiliation of being followers of Islam. It is where they feel safer about the salience of their identities.

Rewinding to the anti-CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act)[4] protest in Guwahati that started in December 2019, I have been told how the waste pickers were looked with suspicion. The stereotyping of the Miya Muslims that occurred during that time period brought to light the ambiguity surrounding the identity of waste pickers in the state of Assam. In response to my interrogation, many waste pickers told me how they reiterated that they are Indian citizens and hold voter ids. Their identity was contextualized between 'who they actually are' and 'who they were thought to be'. It has therefore remained common for these migrant pickers to confront anxiety in the event of any social issue prejudiced against 'migrants' or 'Muslims'.

The interviews also suggested that in spite of the waste pickers identifying themselves with strong religious identity, and Indian citizens, they were interpreted as symbols to arouse doubt. This is due to the ongoing public discourse around the issue of Miya, their settlement, and the citizenship issue. They are aware of the dynamics around the political currents revolving around the issue of Miya Muslims. So, it is not uncommon for them to expect changes in the wider narrative about the Miyas. This experience, therefore, does not become a question of running away rather of confronting it in their social life. In the words of the waste pickers, such acceptance would not negatively affect them but help them to bypass it.

[4] Anti-CAA- The protest rolled out at Guwahati and other regions of the state of Assam in December, 2019 against CAA (Citizenship Amendment Act) later signed into a bill which seeks to grant citizenship to persecuted minority groups (Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Buddhist, Christians, Parsis) in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

The politics around proof documents actually determine their inclusion or exclusion in the state. The NRC (National Register of Citizens)[5] that was conducted in Assam reminds them of their need to prove their geographical belonging to the city. It in fact connects with the "spatial politics" of "urban citizenship" (Zhang, 2002). This provides the context to analyse how questions around citizenship are also embedded in one's religious identity. In spite of the waste pickers valuing the Indian identity, they opine of being looked suspiciously as Bangladeshi's.

Nasreen, a female waste picker, reflect upon the situation of prevailing cultural norms and political currents, saying,

> 'Any unrest in the state involving the Muslims will have its repercussions on us. We are sure to be booked for interrogation. Thus, it is prudent that we and our families remain together to experience the risk and discomfort. Otherwise, how are we supposed to handle the worries and issues independently? At the very least, when we are all in the same place, we might be able to find a solution together.'

In the view of the waste pickers, the religious salience is embraced to negotiate the Muslim identities that waste pickers see forming. LeBel (2008) points out that stigmatized persons chose certain coping strategies over others in different settings and contexts. This is taken to counter the experiences shaped by uncomfortable or stigmatizing events. To be sure, the stigmatized have distinct standpoints, and develop conceptions of self through everyday encounters with non-stigmatized persons (Naderi & Vossoughi, 2017). These processes constitute their 'moral careers' (Goffman, 1963) whereby they become aware and learn to deal with discredited attributes. The waste pickers in fact know how to solve these crises as they are fully aware of their

[5] National Register of Citizens (NRC)- The Assam NRC of 1951 was updated to detect illegal immigrants and the entire process, carried out between 2014 and 2019, was monitored by the Supreme Court. The final NRC list published in August 2019, found that 1.9 million of the 33 million applicants in the state were not eligible for Indian Citizenship. However, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India has detected large-scale anomalies in the process of updating the NRC for Assam. It officially declared that the intended object of preparing a valid, error-free NRC has not been met.

marginalization and Islamophobia that people have within. They co-exist by solidarity which is sine quo non to confront occasional hostilities by the police or the GMC or any other outsiders for that matter.

6.4.2 Dirty work stigma

Getting linked with inconvenient instances within the space of the dumpsite, or someone initiating idea of waste picking with disregard and stigma, is almost a homogenous experience for the waste pickers. Also, due to the moral anxieties provoked by waste, the yearnings for purity get heightened in people (Hawkins,2006). Hence, civil society accounts the cultivation of dishonor towards the work and the pickers performing it. But a lot of sacrifice is made by these pickers when waste, their bodies, shame, and their work routine had to be intersected. This forms a part of

their everyday and working-class habitus (Simpson et al.,.2014). It is a valiant connotation pertaining to being able to carry the dirty work in unsafe conditions which has been called as the individual 'habits of mind' (Jahoda, 1982).

There is no doubt about the disdain, judgements, and negative vibes towards the work which remain distinct and sharp for the waste pickers. Stigmatizing practices like inquiring if they have cleansed themselves properly after the work is rampant. The people that come to waste picker's dwelling place ask them constantly about their practice of hygiene. Instance like the GMC officials asking the pickers not to appear before the top GMC officials occur regularly. This is a testimony to their suppression which identifies waste pickers' notion of clean and hygiene as not meeting the required standard.

In this light, the status of the pickers stands humiliated. The tag of the pickers and dirty work intersects and reproduces social distinctions and boundaries of purity and pollution. In the interview, Zunaid (who started waste picking for the first time only after 2021 lockdown period got uplifted) told me that he countered one occasion when the GMC official informed about the visit by a senior official. Zunaid was quick to describe the scene on a jocular note,

> It was around 11 am in the morning. I usually do not go so late to the dumpsite, but that Thursday was an exception due to my back ache. I had then just reached the GMC office

> when a man came out from the room. He politely asked me not to be near the office for the next one-two hours and asked to inform the other waste pickers also. Upon my inquiry into if there was something to be of concern and worry, he responded that *dangor sahab* (top officials) are about to arrive and that they may not like the waste pickers around (Interview, 2022).

I asked him how he responded to the official. Zunaid continued,

> This experience was relatively new for me. But I felt bad upon hearing because they hardly bother to get to the depth of the labor that we deliver. They will never understand and acknowledge the challenges we face and also pass through it. But other waste pickers consoled me by saying that this is very common, and there is nothing to feel sad about it. I too feel all these are relatable in our work. No one would like to stand near us due to the overpowering smell and visible dirt on our body. And we also have no right to forcefully keep ourselves before them.

This captures how waste pickers are made to feel as subservient laborers and have to orient themselves towards desires and ideas set by those above them. Press (2022) argues though dirty works are essential, it is morally compromising. The work is basically devalorised and labor of the waste pickers goes unsupported. Because validation of the work from others is rare, they have to normalize to these seemingly ordinary yet difficult circumstances. As dirty contact with waste creates a 'defilement' (Ackroyd, 2007), it is seen as a space of relegating the waste pickers to a lower position. More than the physicality of the work, it the internalization of the stigma and accepting the occupation having less prestige become more challenging. Because the service, sacrifice, and bravery of these workers often remain undermined.

In matters of one's social status, Sarukkai (2009) shows that cultural caste-based practices of subjugation and untouchability are promoted to secure one's upper caste position. In her study of Delhi's informal economy for household garbage collection, Kornberg (2019) pointed out how Muslim migrants from West Bengal are recruited by the Balmikis for collection and sorting work. The study further reveals how these Bengali Muslims find themselves subjected to stigmatizing practices of untouchability, as residents respond to their presence by covering their noses and mouths, telling them to stay far away, and ordering them to move their carts (ibid.). As the work reinforces an

image of disgust, the actions and practices of the waste pickers have to adhere to disciplinary measures set by others.

From the interviews conducted, I found waste pickers narrating about waste and the process of typecasting being absent in their villages. They reiterated that had agricultural output been fruitful, they would not have left their village. In the city, having to touch both wet (*bhija*) and dry (*xukan)* waste has taken a toll on their work identity. For example, one female waste picker explained to me that dirt lodges under their fingernails. People mock them by saying that the dirt permanently settles underneath the nails even after they have washed it. In her opinion, it is not possible to win arguments as such. It is the strength and endurance that has to be embodied to fight off such remarks. I asked her, 'Does work and stigma not hinder your everyday life?'. She responded,

> We have saddled ourselves with this occupation. Feeling unclean and sickened with the work is an outcome of our choice. The *laaz* (shame) associated with the occupation overpower us every time but have not shaped us negatively. We are always reminded that there is a sense of obligation to the work. People's *ghrina* (disgust) towards us is like illness. It is here today, tomorrow it will go away. But thinking about it would only result in our loss (Interview, 11/11/2020).

Waste pickers stress that preoccupying oneself in analyzing the boundaries will affect the viability of the work. They resist stigmas by proactively crafting their work to establish a sense of satisfaction, meaning, and dignity in the dirty job (Deery et al., 2019). This act is taken as a strategy to resist the stigma. Other practices include humor that helps to manage the negative emotions that is provoked through stigmatizing labels. Goffman (1963) noted that humor can be used to reduce tension. Waste pickers also re-approach the work as quintessential and seek to compensate the stigma for the procurement of the ultimate need, i.e. money. It serves as an importance source to procure the necessary material possessions for eating, and survival.

The waste pickers are aware that alternative works in the city is miniscule owing to their limited or no educational qualification. In this sense, they carry a limited potential for upward mobility and therefore, are bound to accept the discriminating set of

experiences. This can be called as the ‘embodied suitability’ whereby forms of dirty work are seen as suitable for some ‘working bodies’ and not others (Simpson et al., 2012).

6.4.3 Kinship stigma

> My sister-in-law smirked at me on hearing my work of waste handling. She was quick to question my ideas of hygiene and pointed out if I have lost the consciousness to distinguish between *saaf* (clean) and *bijanu* (germs). There was a sense of pride in her to be able to pass her time in household chores rather than earning ‘dirty money (Khalida, female waste picker, Interview, 2021).

The experience of being mocked by extended family members or relatives is very common in the lives of the waste pickers. It is among the many discredits that has to be borne. Waste pickers revealed that they were surprised to find how their family members dismissed the labor and effort put to the occupation. As the occupation is physically tainted, it facilitated social demeaning of their work and themselves. Even though they are eager to talk about the struggles and rewards of work, but many a times get snubbed by relatives. There is lack of salutation on how they manage to accomplish the dirty task. Instead, waste pickers found themselves in a state of limbo as their justification of the work fall on deaf ears of their relatives.

Kinship is based on a complex network of intersecting ties and loyalties (Evans-Pritchard, 1940). But kinship as an intimate process also gets detached from family at times. While kinship relations had been created in the villages, in the city those same relations are challenged and negotiated. Family members pity the waste pickers over the fact of ‘choosing’ the work that has greater condemnation. This understanding leads to checking on the instances of mocking that the pickers witness frequently.

There are ‘stigma symbols that convey social information’ (Goffman, 1963) about the waste pickers to their friends and relatives. For example, the cut marks on fingers, scratch marks on their hands and the lingering smell serve as convenient stigma symbols. When the family members discover or watch these, it becomes a matter of declaration how waste actions are intertwined with the idea of bodily degeneration. This draws similarity

to what Khare (1984) had said about the Lucknow Chamars. That Chamar[6] not only collected filth, refuse, remnants, and slurs on behalf of the society, but was also made a prime symbolization of social refuse itself. The status of members of a community is actually defined by the type of relationship they have with objects (Lamont et al., 2015). It is the belief in the 'order of things' that structures people's lives to the extent that it limits and facilitates their action.

In the face of stigma and the dirty work slurs that waste pickers couldn't protest much, they had to pull oneself into existence. No matter to what extent the shaming took place, it has to pass under the eyes of the waste pickers. Instances of times when practical and emotional support from the relatives become less, it negatively impacts the waste pickers. Phrases like *gaor pora eyat ai letera kam koribo he ahiso* (your intention of coming to the city has been to engage in this dirty occupation!), *ami lage nuxua ke thakim kintu ai letera sui nijoke letera nokoru* (we would prefer starving rather than picking up something as filthy as waste and then contaminate ourselves) are examples of the insults/slurs that waste pickers receive.

Three of the waste pickers disclosed that they 'felt like deserting the work and going back to the village' (Interview, 27/01/2021) due to the judgements passed on them. But realization about being unemployed protected them from taking any such step. It is hard to suppress the feelings of objection and disapproval from relatives, but waste pickers have to endure. Pickers disclosed that weird looks, giggles, and showing signs of gawking and imitating nauseated behavior are symbolic of rejecting the work by their kith and kin. But pickers have to pass such outbreak of behaviors, and overcome the crippling feeling of embarrassment. They are required to experience shame while marinating a posture of humble enthusiasm (Pultz, 2018) in the work.

[6] The Chamars are a prominent caste among the Dalits in India. This community had a difficult and chequered history whose occupation, by convention, was to skin dead animals, tan the leather, and make articles out of it. Even though the proportion of Chamars engaged in labor-related work has declined over decades but the occupational stereotype of the Chamar being a leather worker still persists (Yadav, 2012).

There is another dimension to this othering and planting of stigma on the occupation. As waste pickers have the habit of sharing waste work description, revealing about living on the margins, and embracing the precarity, it is taken up by relatives for reproducing abjection. In such circumstances, waste pickers are pressurized to feel shame upon their willingness to take up such a dirty work. However, when interactional exchanges deepen, waste pickers also display expressions of anger as a form of 'everyday resistance' (Scott, 1990). For instance, their overt ways of displaying anger do not consist in arguments or discord in support of the occupation. Rather they resort to keeping quiet, simply nodding, and expressing that they are personally responsible for choosing the work.

Waste pickers' attempt to divert attention of the relatives mocking their work identity is perceived as 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959) strategies. But the family members remark that waste pickers displaying behaviors of work satisfaction is simply a way of hiding the actual condition of the work. The understanding of dirt is more of a cultural and social frame rather than as a physical and material phenomenon with responses to dirt construed as primarily ideological in form (Dantes & Bowles, 2003). This encourages people to associate bodies with the intimacy of waste which highlights how bodies become a source of dirt. During the discussion, waste pickers reminded me that is unimaginable for their family members leading a village life to approve the dumpsite as a field of work.

6.5 Countering the sufferings

When observed from the standpoint of these waste pickers, I observed the aggregate reality of their suffering. Emerging from the micro-level situation, they are marginalized under the pressure to work beneath grim conditions and experience devaluation. Their voices remain underpowered for raising the problems for solutions and there is lack of platforms for vehement discussion on the same. Das & Kleinman (2001) points to how people learn to engage in everyday life even after the overwhelming experiences of social suffering. The reason is fear of being disadvantaged from waste accessibility. From my research familiarity with them, it appears that they prefer silence over speech, and restrain themselves in voicing the concerns publicly.

It is argued here that the experience of suffering has been continuing through the mediation of religion and occupation. These become sites of many disturbing memories of deprivation, slurs, uncomfortable gestures, problems, and stigma. I had my interaction with many shopkeepers and co-passengers in the electric rickshaws on which I hopped in to come to the GMC area of the dumping ground. The dialogues brought to the forefront where waste pickers are considered a religious community first, and then as waste pickers.

Many of them with whom I discussed randomly were clearly indicating that the Miya Muslims have the power to tackle disadvantages. They referred to waste used by the waste pickers as making a useful setting of earning. But one of the co-passenger was quick to add that '*no matter how lucrative waste picking may seem to be, it becomes a source from where disgust definitely springs and I cannot accept it'* [7]. Such dimension of public opinions highlights the disjunction between what waste pickers regard and what the public perceives.

Salma, a second time pregnant female waste picker, poignantly narrates her experience in a doctor's chamber in the city. The visit crushed her confidence, and she felt as though the growth of the baby she was carrying would be stalled due to her disturbing emotions. She describes,

> My purpose of visit was to get recommendation on how to maintain my health. Feeling dizzy is common for me so I wanted to know the causes and solutions. But that man (addressing the doctor with English slangs) fumed over my pregnancy. His concern was about us working and living near the dumpsite rather than realizing our compulsion to be waste pickers. We were scolded because he believed that the second baby was absolute unnecessary (Interview, 4/10/2021).

She further went on to say that the doctor failed to realize their under-privileged position. In her outlook, the difficulties and compulsion of inhabiting a place like dumpsite is a different kind of suffering. The official inattention that she and her fellow waste pickers has to pass every day cannot be contested. What pained her most was the doctor's unfriendly attitude to her at the crucial stage. She refers to her mother and relatives who

[7] Interview (14/12/2020)- Opinion of a male co-passenger whom I met in the electric rickshaw

were protective of her during the first pregnancy. The interrogatory dimension of the doctor punctured her hope of being addressed with care. The lack of a genuine display of concern to the pregnancy lowered her self-esteem. It is a different matter that the doctor pointed to the low gap between the first and second pregnancy which Salma failed to understand.

In recounting her experience, I could observe how she engaged in a strategy to hid her anger and sadness. This was in fact a way of healing and returning to the everyday. But what captured my attention was when Salma placed her counter-narrative to the doctor. For her, childbearing is entrusted by God and humans should not negate. It is the architecture of faith undergirding (Fredericks, 2018) her opinions that her religion approves of a bigger family. According to her, the second pregnancy is a systematic practice of expanding her family.

In spite of the disgust that is inflicted upon their work or labor identity, the notion of the necessity to be in the occupation is held priority. The shame, stigma, and embarrassment attached to the work acknowledges the unbreakable relation between the subject who experiences and the context and content of experience. In this background, while the waste pickers have an option to abandon the present work, seek another, but they do not do so. It is the will with what they have decided to live with the experience. It is the new normality where waste pickers set for themselves.

Das & Kleinman (2001) highlight how communities 'cope' with- endure, work through and transcend insidious forms of social suffering. Even though voice may be silenced, there are efforts at generating contexts that make every day possible again. Many experiences like the one described by Salma are layered upon one another. It not only represents vulnerabilities but also reproduces them in the form of memories. In the face of one's subjectivity being challenged, the experience of subjugation itself became the source of claiming a subject position (butler, 1997). It reflects upon the rejection of what is disapproved of by the victim of suffering and a way of coping up.

In another context, Kimari (2017) demonstrates how youth determinedly maneuvers the informalities of life on the margins in part by exuding confidence in their ability and agility to undertake small experiments that allow them to shape their terrains and survive

extreme tragedies and ecologies of exclusion. Thus, the mechanism to live without recognition is a local potential that is witnessed among the waste pickers. Such management demands moral stamina, and emotional strength to resist dominant confrontation.

Their survival and coexistence in the area of the dumping ground raise important points about everyday stories of self-constructing space of sustainability. It forms a way of domesticating the suffering. In their absence, they would only be punctured by the sense of disconnection to the work identity. Yet during such events of feeling alienated, there is no judicial way to seek attention for the waste pickers. The fact of waste picking not recognized as legal, continues to make it exist as illegal, and henceforth, the brewing of negative representation.

6.5.1 Social security protections for the waste pickers

The sun shone bright on one of the August afternoons while I was on the concrete road heading towards the large settlements of the waste picker families. The plastic sheeting and bamboo scaffolding of the houses always reminded me of their trust in those settlements during windy days. Without any signs of interruption in my thoughts, I was stopped by a passer-by, named Yaseer. He was in his mid-forties and clad in Bermuda shorts. We exchanged pleasantries and he informed me that he has seen me interacting with his acquaintances since the last one year[8] . He immediately said that he assumed me to be a government official busy working on some census on this area and the people. But later Yaseer was corrected by fellow waste pickers that I was a researcher and studying in a university.

Eventually, as we began conversing, I learnt that he had recently resumed his work in waste collection after a hiatus of one year. During the gap, he stayed at his village at *Barpeta* to induce the ritual of doing agriculture. However, due to lack of adequate profit, he relocated to Guwahati. In his opinion, more than waste, it is the money that he cares about. Money served as a physical material and a symbol of pure, abstract possibility (Reno,2016) that stood as a motivation. In his sense, waste are the commodities that is to

[8] Field notes, 17/08/21.

be released from its waiting period at the dumpsite, and this action supplemented favorable monetary return.

As our discussion was heading towards money making, and his justification that substantive needs were fulfilled through it, I started my line of query. Whether he is aware of an *asoni* (welfare scheme) available in the state that would contribute him money after the age of 60, was my first question. It was not surprising to me that Yaseer would say a no. I mentioned about the pension scheme launched on E-shram portal on 5th march, 2019. The scheme is named Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-dhan (PM-SYM)[9]. On his request to explain the scheme and upon my completion, he produced a raised eyebrow at once. He held not having any idea about it and was sure that his fellow pickers must be equally oblivious. He blamed his lack of awareness, and at the same time mocked the government for its double standard.

In his opinion, Yaseer points out the need to sensitise them about such schemes like the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yogana[10] (which thankfully was known to him) that had been advertised frequently. This logic leads to the understanding that more publicity of a scheme would reach them which otherwise would cease to be a marker of their transition. I also found his complaint justified.

He further said that the system has to offer them the convenience of knowing that something exists for their benefit. Else it violates the very objective of providing support to these marginalized groups. He suggests that welfare policies mostly do not reach

[9] Pradhan Mantri Shram Yogi Maan-dhan (PM-SYM)- Waste pickers, domestic workers, street hawkers, etc. can enroll under this scheme. If one has a monthly income not more than Rs. 15000/-, he/she is eligible to register. Here, the monthly contribution from unorganized workers can range from Rs. 55 to Rs. 200 depending upon their entry age (age group of 18 years to 40 years). The equal matching contribution is to be paid by the central government. And finally, upon reaching 60 years of age, they will be entitled to get a monthly pension of Rs. 3000/-.

[10] Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yogana (PMAY-G)- The previously launched Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) in 1985 by the then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, has been restructured as PMAY-G. To overcome the rural housing shortage, the government of India launched it effective from 1st april, 2016. Under it, families belonging to economically weaker sections, middle income groups, and lower income groups of India could avail the benefit of the paying low interest house loans in the houses constructed by the government.

people like them at the lower rung of the economy because of the middlemen or intermediaries. In India, political parties play a significant role in the lives of the people through the intermediaries or brokers *(dalal)* who most of the time control how people would gain access to different welfare schemes and entitlements (Das, 2022). Reacting to such instances of missing on benefits of the schemes, Yaseer rebukes the government for its inability to make a proper arrangement.

Adding to his disappointment, I again had to reference the Solid Waste Management Rules (SWM) 2016, that emphasize the importance of recognising waste-pickers' contribution. One of the highlights of the SWM rules 2016 is the inclusion of waste pickers/rag pickers and waste dealers/kabadiwalas in the formal system, which should be done by state governments, self- help groups, or any other relevant group. Much like his previous null knowledge, SWM stood a distant understanding. While the rules provide a platform for integration, the structure of the municipality does not. The structure only give access to waste but not waste pickers' assimilation within. Moreover, the absence of the provision of site visits by government authorities to educate the waste pickers on the presence of such schemes has only helped to forge ignorance among the latter.

In a bid to enhance the provisions of security and welfare, the government of India introduced Social Security Code, 2020 which subsumes/amalgamate the previous Unorganised Social Security Act, 2008, along with other 8 legislations. The Unorganized Social Security Act, 2008 was brought into force given the continuing predominance of the unorganized workers in the workforce where their skills, working conditions, efficiency, wages, and welfare were considered a need. However, with its several shortcomings, it failed to look into the specific issues of the unorganized workers in detail. For example, there were no mention of provision for women in matters of equal remuneration, decent work conditions, and protection from sexual harassment at the workplace; the act has also maintained silence on the crucial issue of national minimum wage (Goswami, 2009).

The Social Security Code, 2020, which is an integration with the ongoing social security programmes, has been aimed to amend and consolidate the existing labor laws relating to social security with the wider goal of extending social security benefits to all

employees and workers irrespective of belonging to the organized or unorganized sector. This Code brings within itself the self-employed workers, home workers, wage workers, migrant workers, the workers in the unorganized sector, gig workers and platform workers for the purpose of social security schemes, including life insurance, and disability insurance, health and maternity benefits and provident fund. However, there is a major problem which is the complex provisions that allow for dual authorities and overlapping of zones (Mehrotra & Sarkar, 2021).

In the context of Assam, for the betterment of the unorganized workers, aims had been laid out. It had been decided to be implemented by Labour & Employment Department, Govt. of Assam. But till the closure of my field study for this specific research, I haven't come across instance where waste pickers admitted of having been communicated by anyone on this purpose. Registration of unorganized workers and the issue of identity cards, housing, employment injury benefit and others are some of the measures thought to be applied for the socio-economic development of the unorganized workers.

This conveys how schemes have remained tied to paper but conversion to practice could not be materialized effectively. Banerjee and Duflo (2011) point out that understanding the constraints and behavior of these marginalized poor is essential for effective program designs and there has been research progress in that domain too. However, as a matter of addressing its successful implementation, there are rigidities. This entails the understanding that development perspectives have not been able to encompass what it aspired to. In such cases, unorganized workers or the waste pickers in this context continue to live aloof in the geographically remote urban margins.

6.5.2 Waste labor and its non-recognition

Scholars have pointed out how labor became a specific praxis for human existence in the world (Engels, 1934; Marx, 1959; Marcuse, 1973;). One's becoming is a continual active process where he/she must make every situation his/her own by mediating themselves. The labor is in fact grounded in this mediating and conscious doing: in this continual production and reproduction of human existence (Marcuse, 1973). It is these

efforts that have led the representatives of power like the state to believe in waste pickers' voluntary action of improving their life. This has but affected the labor needs of the pickers where their precarious labor practices are unseen as thought-provoking.

Waste labor is incorporated within the unorganized sector but overlooked for its self-structured labor practices and rules. Unorganized labor was and continue to be unprotected by the regulatory regime of the state and deprived of any rights at work (Harriss-White & Gooptu, 2001). Even though this unorganized sector contributes some 45% of GDP (Kumar, 2022) and is one of the distinctive features of Indian capitalism, there is the tendency to see it as an alien space. Waste pickers, stripped of their identities as workers, have to covertly struggle for recognition. As authorities of power release themselves of the responsibilities, a fairer distribution of privileges for the waste pickers is absent.

Waste brings to notice the precarious labor, human capital, migration, and the material quality of labor in urban infrastructures (Doherty & Brown, 2019). But the problem persists in the fact that waste pickers are not considered and engaged as complex, multidimensional people involved in all spheres of social, political, and economic life (Samson, 2020). Throughout this journey, I have encountered that marginalization, and uncertainties are produced which undermines the efforts of the waste pickers. Consequently, they suffer from design and misery by default, and not being able to pull public's attention quicker and forcefully. This pertains to the marginality of the waste pickers where their labor 'arises from criteria of classification and forms of social sorting' (Wacquant, 2006., pg. 136). The sorting operates based on the occupation, its social status, and geographic isolation.

Today, there is clamour and call to mitigate the harmful environmental and health effects believed to be produced from waste generation. Numerous state and non-state actors are supporting designs to cleanse urban environments bombarded with waste materials and as well as groups performing the waste related labor and residing in the urban peripheries. Baviskar (2003) has defined it as bourgeois environmentalism. This is a distinct domain that concentrates in producing and maintaining the urban aesthetics.

But in the process, it tends to deploy mechanisms that exclude the lower-status groups like waste pickers and their hard work. The continual struggle of these pickers of living and working with waste thus, remain an external domain. It becomes decentered and institutionally differentiated (Wacquant, 2006). Both the silence and political invisibility of the waste pickers makes them suffer the disadvantages of their situation. This shows how the question on their unequal position, insecurity, and underdevelopment become dispossessed from the greater representation.

6.6 Conclusion

The chapter has focused on the issues of marginalization and stigma. It relates to the aspects in which waste pickers experience these social processes due to their affiliation with waste work. Urban inequality and a pervasive lack of political recognition largely affect how they live and work. The fact that waste pickers are migrant workers from rural areas adds to their problem of not having opportunity to scout other formal works. They are thus, forced into rigidities and are unable to easily utilize the city's other infrastructures and prospects. They have to manage their vulnerabilities while continuing to live in filthy conditions without access to hygienic facilities. Their line of employment is viewed as dirty, and it serves as a vehicle for the division between them and the society.

Be it the GMC or other city dwellers, an order is maintained of not intersecting with the waste pickers. As the waste pickers handle informal waste, they get positioned at the bottom of the waste management hierarchy. It turns out that GMC has not taken up the duty of standing in for the waste pickers as managers of the urban waste. This is a result of the state and GMC's collective minds becoming choked by ideas that only see waste management from their point of view. Rather than paying attention to urban topics such as the waste pickers, GMC uses the zone of distance. GMC's apathy has consumed the waste pickers without really engaging in rituals of chasing the pickers away from the dumping spot. The pattern of not indulging or interfering in the work of the waste pickers has made the gap between them and the GMC explicit.

The nature of the occupation frequently makes family get-togethers of the waste pickers difficult. They had to force themselves to exist in the face of stigma and

derogatory remarks about their unclean occupation, to which they are powerless to object. The waste pickers thus witness the shame, regardless of the amount to which it occurred. There are instances where they suffer when they receive less emotional and practical assistance from their relatives.

However, interacting with this ambiguous social experience context via individual and collective awareness has become the norm. Through camaraderie, loyalty, and community trust, they resist the rigors of life. It's a way of coping and tolerance towards stigma and marginality. Waste picking is held significant to the waste pickers, and it is believed to be conducive to their growth and progress. Through this activity, they have been able to firmly establish their sense of identity and belonging within the city.

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