

**EVERYDAY LIFE, AGENCY, AND INFORMAL WORK: A
STUDY OF WASTE PICKERS IN GUWAHATI CITY OF
ASSAM**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of**

Doctor of Philosophy

DENIM DEKA

Registration No. TZ203768 of 2021



**DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL
SCIENCES TEZPUR UNIVERSITY**

NAPAAM – 784028

SONITPUR, ASSAM

May, 2024

Chapter 7

Conclusion

Garbage will continue to be unloaded on the dumping ground.

How else will Guwahati look clean and non-smelly?

Rabiya, a female waste picker¹

Waste has remained an inevitable part of the waste pickers since the opening of the *Boragaon* dumping ground in 2008. These pickers have taken into consideration the importance of waste and rejected the notion that it will diminish. They found ways to re-socialize and re-personalize their reliance on waste and ought to care about it (Reno, 2016). Waste pickers gather and sort waste which is handed over to waste dealers for a monetary return. The people of Guwahati who indulge in routine discarding of their waste from households and markets are handled by these waste pickers. They forge a differing relation with it and have endeavored to acquire advantage of the wastes that is no longer needed by the people. This conveys the recognition of waste materiality, its value, and scripting waste pickers' version of progress at the dumpsite in the edge of the city. To them, waste has to be seen, accepted, and taken as a productive presence which otherwise is saturated with notions of disgust.

This thesis has examined how waste has facilitated the waste pickers to mark their existence at Guwahati. It has aided in shifting the perception of waste from one of filth to one of utility by implementing a symbiosis with informal waste labor. The shift from the cultural dichotomies of sacred/profane and clean/dirty have shown that waste has value despite carrying a visual inconvenience. Attention to the materiality of waste depicts that waste makes up the dimension of social life of the waste pickers at and in the vicinity of the dumping ground.

The study also addresses the larger context where marginal and dirty waste labor embedded within waste work falls out of state's recognition. This insight helps us to see how waste materializes to bring difference and othering towards them. Even though their

¹ Interview taken on 16/9/2021

identity as waste pickers, poor, and Miya Muslims remain as categories of stigma, they continue to reject the socially constructed classifications. One could say that they work because it seems logical and necessary for their community's survival in the city. My thesis is an attempt to contribute to the visibility of waste, where waste labor of the waste pickers become a daily project of their efforts to move waste towards recycling.

Building on Millar's (2018) idea that waste pickers' labor is a means of subsistence, the study has acknowledged that waste picking is not just an economic endeavor. It has more or less capsulated surviving by means of a source of money, food, or livelihood. The waste pickers go about their work according to rituals and customs even though there is no formal recognition or state regulation. Through the occupation, waste materials salvaged from the dumpsite's physical space that would otherwise stay unclear are given form.

Waste is thus absorbed to explore its usage in the local contexts of the waste pickers. The collection of waste materials becomes a practice that has been governed by the notions of use connected to informal investment in value-from-waste. All this takes place within a challenging sensorial experience of waste which is resisted by the waste pickers on an everyday basis. In this light, waste pickers experience inescapability from waste encounters. By placing emphasis on their physical and mental labor, we see how they make waste an essence of their everyday life.

While floods and unemployment created havoc in their villages, the indulgence in waste gathering has also forced them to make situational changes in the city. Be it in the event of their identity as migrants or being a community of Miya Muslims, the uproar during the National Register of Citizens, or the Covid-19 pandemic, they have displayed resilience. Within such circumstances, waste work has been the outcome of their struggle to carve an alternative mode of livelihood and considering it a sense of security. Through this mode of living, waste pickers have embedded themselves in an urban life by the force of waste.

7.1 Summary of the chapters

Over the first two chapters, I have introduced the backdrop and research methodology of the study. In chapter 1, I've used an anthropological, social, and philosophical approach to illustrate waste. In chapter 2, I have described the field setting and the methods used for data collection and analysis. Through chapter 3, I have located the study in the context of Guwahati city while first introducing waste and its formal and informal management practices from earlier to present times. In the next three chapters, I have shown how waste pickers reproduce everyday life in the vicinity of the dumpsite by valuing waste. It also shows how other people view waste and waste pickers in the city.

The study illuminates that waste pickers' engagement with waste and its exchanges move along the chain of other activities. In chapter 4, the first with ethnographic details, I have argued that interaction and day-to-day lived practices of the waste pickers make up their everyday life. This forms a basis for forging relations with insiders like the fellow waste pickers, and outsiders like members of civil society. Through this association, the waste pickers attempt to achieve a position in the city. Along with waste work, they stabilize their daily life by carrying out the innumerable practices of domesticity in significant conducts. The waste pickers manage to live in the unaesthetic of settlement, work where everyday life become a paradigm of the production of communication, interaction, and recreation. It creates conditions for expressing oneself and makes the ground for human agencies to emerge and redefine roles.

With everyday life being more closely aligned with waste pickers' contact with waste, it gives account of their mechanism to sustain and accomplish a range of other practices. There are other activities that keep the waste pickers busy apart from waste handling. Household chores are shared by both men and women. But in some instances, male waste pickers displayed aversion towards domestic space. This could be deciphered as one manifestation of the internalization of macro-level gender norms through the process of socialization at a younger age. It, therefore, results in making different choices and preferences over work and functions thus, displaying domesticity to be gendered in nominal instances.

The idea of clean and dirty, however, is common among the waste pickers, irrespective of gender. I found it in their context of addressing the bad smell that is persistent throughout the area of and near the dumpsite. The act of preparing and cooking food for intake becomes an ordeal in such an ambience. It has remained difficult to prevent filthy stench getting mixed with the aroma of the cooked food. To satisfy hunger and considering eating a necessity, food is devoured by them in the dirty odorous ambience. Having to eat in a dirty environment is adequately integrated as a practice. As stench continued to come in, much of the cooking time getting an expression of disgust become common. Yet they have learned to internalize these external factors of odor, space, occupation, and atmosphere as there is no way to opt out from such encounters.

Any unpleasant food intake experience did not demotivate them to leave the work. But contact with filth, stench and dirt of waste exposed them to health concerns of nausea and stomach upsets. Working despite pain in the body has been acts of courage on part of these waste pickers. Defying physical injuries, they would not leave collecting recyclables from the dumpsite. But the waste pickers were caught up in mental fatigue during the Covid-19 pandemic.

With incidents of depression, lethargy, and anxiety rising due to temporary closure of waste picking, they felt neglected. A sense of marginality from social embeddedness overpowered them with uneven government attention. During this time, the social relationship present among the fellow waste pickers has been a boon. In other times, where physical infrastructure of their dwelling units posed as a breach of privacy, it minimized their aloofness during lockdown period. They were content because they could spend their time talking to one another. I, thus, have argued that waste work operates within a broader framework of camaraderie. While individual day-to-day struggle persists, the possibility of care and friendship do not stand isolated.

Some of my research participants hold the view that blood ties are not always required to forge relation with those formed through acquaintances. They showed that generating social capital, values of care and thoughts of well-being for one another can be easily built. It is a common sight to witness everyone extending support to one another in times of need or emergency. The construction of such a congenial bond is found to be

formed with other people residing near the dumpsite. This practice signified the absence of major conflict or discord in the area. It reinforces the idea that non-economic relations seem to represent a way of maintaining human dignity. I did not come across any objections from others regarding waste pickers' presence in the area. It is in this sense, an experience of satisfying social cohesion is achieved among waste pickers and others residing near the dumping ground.

The vision of living amicably has shaped waste pickers life to sustain by being connected to each other. The interpretations of work and living are built in the interplay of both tensions and entertaining moments. Instances of indulging in gossip and making humour have served a means to foster efficiency in work. It usually aids in fostering unity and incorporation among new and old members in waste picking. Their constant encounter with filth, risks, and everyday vulnerability of work, become a source of jokes and banter. Such are the techniques to adopt to the precarious nature of the work and contesting socially constructed notions towards the place.

In this context, I argue that even in the presence of numerous discomfoting experiences in waste picking and informal living, waste pickers utilize the available opportunity. It has given them innovative opportunities to identify with the city's communal existence. Through the laborious investment in waste picking, they highlight it as a religious act. In this context, waste pickers way of looking at way of life and Islam is different. Owing to the demands of the work, they cannot always practice and perform the institutionalized rituals of Islam. Nonetheless, the devotion and spirituality are intact and so is their dependence on Allah's blessings for work productivity, well-being, hope, and peace. Perhaps one lesson to be internalized from the waste pickers is their random religious discussion to motivate everyday living amidst waste. This is an effort to merge faith and labor.

It is crucial for them to be able to hold onto hopes of security in the work they conduct. Waste pickers are compelled to maintain their belief in religious teachings for this reason. Instances when waste dumping shifted to another locality, waste pickers couldn't protest. This speaks of the absence of the chance to reclaim what they believe had their hold. At one corner, their future to work with waste showed a difficult journey

on account of waste dumping in the *Chandrapur* area of Guwahati. On the other hand, they continued to think of ways to settle in that new place if the situation would have compelled them, and then re-establish the relation with waste. I showed how risks and precarity is common in their work, and they have to struggle in the sudden design of uncertainties.

Chapter 5 looks at the work experiences of the waste pickers who have symbolized waste as a necessity for them. They have constructed their means of subsistence through informal survivalism (Davis, 2006) and structured their economic life. I have indicated how waste pickers' consideration of the work as a necessity has its factors. They were open about waste transaction bringing them money that has helped to tame hunger. Picking waste, therefore, constitutes a utilitarian argument which registers waste work as the means to essentials like food. This offers a view of what aspiration in the waste work looks like.

There is a wide acceptance among them of organizing social life around waste. It implies the generative capacity of non-human actants like waste to move and shape the collective attachments of the waste pickers. As waste work involves sensorial ties, they are compelled to move out of their comfort zone and step into the periphery of the dumpsite. This act has a far-reaching transformation of the work into value production. It resonates how waste contributed to waste pickers' improved standard of life through their voluntarism and responsibility. In fact, they have carved out a space amid the dumped wastes to establish a connection between dirt and income. They engage as active and participatory agents in developing their work and accepting the vitality of waste.

From the perspective of the waste pickers, reclaiming waste on the dump entails the work of resurrection, i.e. recognizing life and possibilities in waste. Even though uncertainty is present, the subjective experience of the workers has helped to regard the work as a source of motivation, and well-being. The instance of the Covid-19 pandemic served as a tangible sign of how the work had mattered. While most workers in other informal sectors were forced to walk out of their work, waste pickers were privileged enough to guard the previously packed and stacked wastes. This brings us to focus on

waste handling as an experience of living, persisting through the social quandary, where waste pickers tried to transcend it.

In this setting, we can see a complex ecology of material objects and human labor (Fredericks, 2018) operating visibly and invisibly that make waste work substantial. Through the materiality of everyday life, waste pickers remain consistent in picking waste to transform for re-use. Their genius is seen representing the discarded waste as a powerful material force. Dumped waste in fact does not narrate the end of the materials but shows the practicality of need. Waste picking and buying of waste by recycling centres advocates that waste is not limited to its spatiality. But its functionality does expand in a wide horizon.

The value production from the informal garbage economy, however, is not deemed a priority under the power of neoliberal agendas. This leaves the economy marginalized existing outside of the state's regularity scope. The waste pickers and waste dealers operate informally without well-established laws and policies. It is with the web of trust and loyalty that the work has been sustained through trials and tribulations. I conceptualize this relation between waste pickers and waste dealers being facilitated by the informal nature of waste work. There exists casual camaraderie and closer ties among them.

Prioritizing the concerns of waste pickers, they acknowledged dealers allowing pickers to raise and involve in an occupation with absolutely zero assets or money. Thus, moral, and emotional support from the dealers effectively make this dirty work creditable. No doubt the position of power of the waste dealers at time result in subtle exploitation of waste pickers but that again is short-lived. In circumventing the work, the ethic of care and sociality adds in filling the bond for a long time.

To capture benefit from waste, I have shown waste pickers and dealers immersing themselves in the ambience of waste. However, the findings of the chapter suggest that waste pickers work more in proximity to waste. Their sensory practices become an obvious part of the waste labour. Waste pickers have to surrender the physical body to waste contact representing their adaptation to it. Avoiding sight, touch, and odor of waste is impossible as the space of the dumpsite remains subdued in filth, sludge, and decay.

Even though the sensory aspects of waste underpin the discourse of division through socially constructed notions on dirt, pickers cannot evade the material reality of waste. In making this argument, I analyse the corporeal and psychological processes of functioning with wastes which are interrelated in an intricate process.

Waste pickers' ability to perceive waste differently has been attributed to their senses. Sight, touch, and smell are the senses that are metaphorically opposed to each other in terms of their usefulness. Nonetheless, it is clear that the three senses are given credit for their agency as consenting participants in the waste management process. The pickers consider how waste becomes alluring to the eyes and how the body interprets those waste. It illustrates how people can use their senses to capitalize on their curiosity to perceive and infer things in circumstances.

In a similar fashion, I have argued how touch remains an operative means for inter-corporeal communication between the pickers and wastes. Touching waste has afforded a respectability for waste and erased its untouchability at least among the pickers and dealers. Touch is in fact deemed necessary because the physical act belongs to a corporeal language (Classen, 2012) of benefit. It is fascinating to discover in the study how the tactile contact with waste reflects waste pickers' social position in the lowest rung within their familial ties. On the other hand, the same tactile act is considered bold and daring among the waste picker community.

The above reflects the dichotomy of notions for the same wastes. As the primary aim of the pickers is to transform waste into products of profit, they have learned to withstand its smelly, wet, dry or slimy characteristics. In between the disgust elicited by odor which impacts the work has long ceased to scare waste pickers off. They are in fact habituated to regulate odor and mentally avoid in their everyday life. This art of tolerating the grimy environment of the dumpsite has awakened a sense of belonging to it. A key effect from such olfactory encounter results in trying to encounter and control themselves.

Given the context and nature of the work, waste picking is filthy. Although waste management ought to have been a social and group duty, waste pickers now perform it informally. Moreover, the ever-pervading sensorial abjection from the society creates a symbolic expulsion that effectively build the urban boundaries. Dirty work thereby

continues to be the pattern of crafting a troubling gap between us (who is not involved in waste work) and them (the dumpsite waste pickers). As the very notion of waste pickers collecting waste in the dumpsite is suffocating for the urbanites, waste work gets stigmatized. Still, being on the urban periphery, the waste pickers fashion their own identity and negotiate both physical and imaginative accounts of negativity.

As discussed in chapter 6, waste pickers have learned to confront and live through a series of instances that produce stigmatized notions. Continuous involvement in waste picking has become a defensive tactic to subjugate the socially assumed derogated personhood of the pickers. In particular, the marginalization of the waste pickers pushes them within structural limits due to which they resort to individual maintenance. For the waste pickers, the work is a matter of individual interest and so is the residential dwelling near the dumping ground. In this sense, whatever devaluation they receive, is not captured as a social issue. They have rather tried to subvert this marginalized condition and sidestep it without much in-house interrogation.

It appears that aversion of the city towards physical, manual and the dirty work of waste picking is conditioned by fear of dirt and insanitation. Due to the social frontiers of 'us' and 'others', their work seems more discomforting and invisible. The messy visibility of waste which is the main component in the informal waste handling thus produces the low social categorization of the waste pickers. Their workspace gets converted into social spaces of judgements, and scrutiny. Being interlocked by religious inequalities, class/caste divisions, and political non-recognitions, the waste pickers remain far from getting close to the city.

The problem that arises is about waste pickers becoming marginalized bodies having to embrace precarious adaptations and social fragmentation. They are admittedly open to pointing to the social geography of the city that has shaped differences towards them. The vocabulary of segregation thus enters, defining who can genuinely belong to the area occupied and how the space influences their gain or loss. For instance, by virtue of their rural household residence status, they are denied access to many of the privileges to services and aids of urban residents, as well through the nature of their employment (Cook, 2020).

Even though such encounters are disturbing, they are bound to accept. As there is the danger that if the current status of their living is thwarted, it shall result in a damaging effect to their accessibility to work. Today, in Guwahati, the disciplinary context under which urban cleanliness and solid waste is maintained through techno-managerial approach, waste pickers' work faces a threat. In this light, without wishing to be disconnected from informal waste handling, waste pickers do not challenge the exclusionary tendencies of the GMC, the state or city at large.

I have also shown how practices of the GMC kept the waste pickers at bay and operates through the zone of distancing. Without practicing rituals of chasing waste pickers away from the dumping area, 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 with the waste pickers. Operating through the said regime of disengagement is a form of contemporary metropolitan governance which is for managing bodies and spaces designated as wasteful (Gidwani & Reddy, 2011). Both waste picking and the waste pickers thus get incorporated in relegated representation. The segregation of this locality and work in fact, become a major obstacle in the process of distinguishing the place having economic capabilities. Alongside these boundaries, waste pickers have to but remain an increasingly active workforce in the place as a matter of choice.

Nevertheless, the general social prejudice continues even though waste pickers are making a significant contribution to informal solid waste management. This thesis has moved across waste in varying contexts and how waste pickers have emerged and shaped through the times. In Guwahati, the context of religion, dirty work, and kinship has played a strong role in saturating the waste pickers. Following the vocal opposition to the strong presence of the Miya community in Assam, it is difficult for them to integrate fully in the city. They are aware of the dynamics around the political currents revolving around the issue of Miya Muslims. The politics around proof documents determine their inclusion or exclusion in the state. The specific sartorial choices like Lungi of males and big nose rings of women are identified with the religion of Islam. This tends to put them under the scanner of stigmatized gaze which reproduces the social divides.

Another way of knowing how waste pickers is embedded in other accounts of moral judgement and stigma is based on the physical nature of their work. Waste picking remains out of the contexts of 'clean' occupation. This forms a ground to create the margin between clean and dirty work. It needs to be emphasized that the lived work practices and values pose as identity threats in terms of maintaining waste pickers' esteem. The work is largely stigmatized even in their own social worlds (Millar, 2018). According to the waste pickers, they were surprised to find that the labor and effort put into the occupation is largely dismissed by their family members in village or to the ones who occasionally visit them in the city. No matter how distressing it may seem, the waste pickers navigate these experiences through the social relations with fellow waste pickers and waste dealers.

The theme that unifies the problem of marginality and stigma in Guwahati is that of finely tuned strategies. Waste pickers vocally remain subservient to the dominant trends of indifference towards them. But they continue to reproduce life through patience and hard work that aid in smoothing the work process. The fact that waste pickers are neglected strengthens their morality to establish grounds of defense. These reflections on their attempts lead us to re-emphasize their ability to maintain integrity in the work.

It is common that those who perform the work of waste disposal and circulation are not simply expelled or excluded at moments of time (Butt, 2018). They are kept in a state of abjection through the process. Reddy (2015) argues that abjection refers to waste materialities, the lives of those who have been expelled, and the paradox that informal recyclers who are cast out to maintain the integrity and purity of waste management are central to maintain its purity and vitality. This is extendable to the waste pickers who apply a transformative process to resist the everyday inequalities. Battling the stigma that is imposed on the waste pickers becomes a new normality being adopted.

Importantly, waste labor is incorporated within the unorganized sector and is overlooked for its self-structured labor practices and rules. Even though this unorganised sector is one of the distinctive features of Indian capitalism, it is casually seen. Waste pickers, stripped of their identities as workers, are taken by the state as fortunate recipients of municipal beneficence of city's waste. Moreover, without any ownership to

wastes, the pickers have been granted the right to invade it. In this sense, the state seems to have released themselves of the responsibilities that could ensure a fairer distribution of privileges to the waste pickers.

7.2 Future of waste and waste pickers

Waste picking that constitutes waste pickers' livelihood is less visualized as a ground for ordering waste. What we have failed is to see the conjunction between waste and waste pickers. There is anticipation of a quick escape from the waste problem. These odds and ends that we attempt to detach from ourselves may constitute an unwelcome presence because in 'reality', as Freud noted, the uncanny is 'nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old'². Waste as the uncanny or the freakish is the individual responsibility to be taken care of, but we are urged upon to let go. It ultimately lands up at the dumpsite which captured the responsiveness of this marginalized community of waste pickers.

The waste pickers have often expressed their miserable plight even though there is ease in waste picking. But how long will these waste pickers employ their human body to take up waste? Is it right upon them to sustain without questioning about rights to work? Will the competition for waste of the dumpsite always remain peaceful? To what extent government is responsible to evacuate these people from the unsanitary conditions in and around the dumpsite? Such are complex questions that is required to be explored systematically and in detail. Freire (2000) points out that 'looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who they are so they can more wisely build the future' (p. 83). In this sense, a perspective has to adopted to appropriate labor of the waste pickers and reinterpret waste as commonwealth for common good.

Waste, if seen as residual components, cannot be accommodated as seeds to producing the change. It is relevant therefore, to see waste as a material script (Darr & Pinch, 2013) that participates in the production of organizational narratives (Humphries & Smith, 2014), not the least about the ability of organizations to reinvent themselves on

² Freud, S. (1919). *The Uncanny*. Penguin Classics

their ‘journey’ (Milne et al., 2006) toward a more sustainable economy (Ghisellini et al., 2016). Waste pickers simply should not be seen as a mobile, roving gang of human termites, boring through the dead matter of a thousand lives (Scanlan, 2005). But instead, they are to be seen as medium of order and discipline who is to be accommodated and embedded in the city. This will supplement the agenda of waste management through the lens of waste pickers’ understanding to develop a corresponding sense of responsibility.

To emphasize on the value and merit of waste, I recline upon Reno’s (2014) understanding of waste based on a biosemiotic analogy of waste as scats and of scats as signs for inter-species communication-scats being animal feces in the parlance of animal trackers. This interpretation allows us to theorize about waste in the light of its material vitalism (Corvellec, 2019). The engagement is to encompass waste as an object open for intra and inter-organizational readings and drawing meanings of waste from its production to recovery. The scatologic understanding of waste is to consider waste as unavoidable, seeing it as a sign of life and a lively matter open for interpretation, within organizations and outside of it (ibid.). This purpose to see through scatologic approach to waste would help to understand the entanglements of social and material processes and structures (Hodder, 2012).

As we actually remain blind to the reality of the need to be attentive towards waste, its status gets undermined. Waste at the dumpsites where our contemporaries conceal the intimacy of their consumption (Rathje & Murphy, 2001) however, lead us to see waste as worthy in the later stage of their social life. Waste has developed an agency of its own and impacts human lives and the environment in ways that do not owe everything to human plans and will (Corvellec, 2019). No matter how much humans have attempted to distance it, its value has attended to our senses. Our relationship to materials thus affords particular status positions and ethical stances, and especially so with waste, which for too long has been glossed as a passive object without socially meaningful objects (Gille, 2010).

The waste at the *Boragaon* dumping ground, which is labelled a nuisance in the city, is a matter to be controlled by the GMC, has been serving its usefulness to the waste

pickers. This exhibits how a material is seen in multiple ways (Keane, 2003), and holding out ways of forcing people to come out of their pre-determined categories. However, the distinctions stand out when state or other organizations like recycling centers indirectly procure labor based upon social divisions of religion or caste. In Guwahati, the dumpsite waste pickers being Muslims, has become a medium for facilitating economic exchanges but their waste-labor has largely been devalued. There is little documentation on the situation of the work conditions as they self-employ themselves in the work. Thus, believed to have made their lives and livelihood sufficient.

But with no workers' representation and zero organizational skills, they stay deprived of legal means to demand their rights. In this context, Samson (2015) and Chikarmane (2016) argued that collective mobilization of waste pickers can expand where both public sector and private sphere has the capability of transforming relations between the state, the formal economy and residents, and contributing to the foraging of a more inclusive, participatory and democratic state. But in its absence, waste and waste pickers will continue to face a gradual erosion from topics that require active state involvement. The main contribution of ordering waste that these waste pickers provide, I wish to emphasize, persist inferior and low quality in the larger domain. Hence, it has led to the sphere where waste and waste pickers fall in an economy of ignorance and inattention that ultimately creates the space for bad effects.

7.3 Promises of Policies

I discovered some when searching the internet for current welfare measures. However, a small number of the welfare measures covered in Chapter 6 are unknown to the waste pickers. Indeed, the most common reaction to the mention and meaning of the policies has been the reactions of waste pickers feeling strange and taken by surprise. They opined that if these policies have been laid out then why are they yet to hear or receive the benefits. Such a response has arisen because the policies fail to account for the specific engagement with the target group i.e. the waste pickers in this case. With no proper channels to educate the waste pickers or acclimatize them to the existing policies, the functions of the policies remain detached. Plus, it adds a layer of complication as to how the arrangements are to be made for fulfilling the agendas.

There had been an effort by the Indian government to bring changes and benefits for the waste pickers through other policies. For example, through the National Environment Policy, 2006, it states to give legal recognition to and strengthen the informal sector systems of collection and recycling of various materials. It has also stated to particularly enhance waste pickers' access to institutional finance and relevant technologies. Also, not forgetting about The National Action Plan for Climate Change, 2009, which had acknowledged that despite the informal sector forming the backbone of India's highly successful recycling system, their operations are impeded and remain a tiny scale without access to finance or improved recycling technologies. However, the fault lines lie in the fact that the role of waste pickers are accredited, but the work of waste pickers is yet left to be approved as legal. This, therefore, do not recognize the right of waste pickers to social protection which is an inalienable part of the work.

This is the dual nature of welfare policies: they represent with the promise that would give a future possibility of helping the target groups like the urban poor, the marginalized and those in unorganized sector while at the same time the bonuses of the policies only result in failure to reach fully for whom it was formulated. In the long run, this tends to remain invisible with no scope for improvements. It happens as the image of the urban poor like the waste pickers does not function as a primary source of identity. Because in many countries of the Global South, precarious work as waste picking has arguably always been a part of the experience of the laboring poor (Millar, 2018).

Within the broader framework of policies, waste pickers' material waste is not acknowledged as life-giving. Because of this, the association of waste pickers in surpassing the deplorable aspects of waste is not viewed as work or as belonging in the category of occupation. Even though the policies have attempted to improve conditions for waste pickers, they are unable to completely empower them. Without establishing a connection with these waste pickers, the policies' stated goal of the common good remains unfulfilled.

The lack of success of the welfare policies, therefore, remains a hard reality. But waste pickers continue to advocate sincerity and hard work in the occupation. The city we observe conceals a multitude of unknown qualities and activities (Scanlan, 2005).

Informal waste handling undertaken by the waste pickers is one such activity. They are essentially the saviors of a city who minimize waste on dumping ground through waste reclamation for recycling. In fact, it would not be wrong to call them the drivers of positive change in a negative environment of waste.

Shekdar (2009) rightly suggests an integrated approach, especially for Asian countries, which includes national frameworks and legal policies, institutional arrangements, appropriate technologies, management, as well as public awareness and participation. Unfortunately, he pays little attention to the latter. He vaguely suggests education and community participation in decision-making processes but remains ambivalent as to how people can be reached and invited to participate. From this point also, the question arises as to who are seen as members of the 'community' that is held responsible and allegedly needs education. It thus becomes pertinent to deep dive into the challenges, miseries, and opportunities that these waste pickers embrace in the informal sector.

7.4 The need for waste pickers' integration

Ethnographic observations seek to extract inputs from waste pickers' interactions with wastes and propose to infuse nonlinear dynamical systems (NDS) analysis (Guastello & Gregson, 2011) which enables small data to make profound impact at right time. This study by engaging in the insanity propelled by wastes of the city gives a picture as to how the waste pickers powerfully debut as 'frontliners'. Their way of conceptualizing wastes and waste picking as acceptable, which are usually forgotten amidst widespread urban development shows their way of determining acceptable path of work. Through this establishment, I have attempted to investigate their lives of countless subjectivities to analyze changes, effects and constructed/deconstructed realities from their perspectives.

I would like to address the waste pickers as *reclaimer specialist*. The reasons are for their realization of wastes as worth the value, being able to capture waste in its physically filthy status, divert it from the dumping ground, and appearing every day with mental readiness to advance in the work despite the devaluation that the work confers. It is a positive obsession which they harbor that has helped to sustain in these inevitable struggles of accomplishing the dirty work. This draws attention to the interaction between

waste and the pickers who transcend boundaries for sustainability and justice. It also holds the possibility of privileging the knowledge and collective voice of these informal waste pickers in the livelihood strategies.

‘Reclaimer’ emphasizes that these workers are rescuing items with potential value from being wasted and engaging in multiple, complex forms of labor to revalue them (Samson, 2020). It is this population of the waste pickers, being a small group of the reclaimers facing biasness in terms of religious identity and migrant status but tackles waste informally. This makes the starting point to think of them as providers of solutions i.e. calling to look at waste with attention as a public problem, and the collective need of efforts to facilitate the change. Operating through the social constructions of non-recognition and spatial form of othering, waste pickers actively exercise labor to keep themselves secure.

Until waste and the waste pickers are recognized relevant, waste will be the most abundant and enduring trace of the human epoch to come (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). The need thereby, arises to see how individuals perceive, make sense of, and communicate their understandings of reality which is called as framing. Reclining upon Hird’s (2022) framing of waste as socio-ethical issue as opposed to a techno-scientific or consumer-behavioral issue, I argue that waste issues require a public engagement. Comprising of stakeholders like waste pickers, people of the specific geographical location, state authorities and policy makers, waste issues can be resolved through public dialogue focused on waste’s impact on the ‘distant, marginalized and strange other’ (Brewer, 2013) waste pickers. This would help to better understand the complexities of waste as a public problem and the roles and actors required in resolving it.

If seen as isolated events, the pressing issue of waste would remain concealed that would not interest and empower the public to examine it. Today, waste management is largely structured in neoliberal capitalist terms, as a matter of responding to individual citizens’ waste ‘needs’ through industry produced technology, rather than a social justice issue (Hird, 2022). It is therefore necessary to resist these framings of waste. Rather, the focus on waste as a social issue would help unearth causes of inequalities, be it global inequality, health care affordability, inaccessibility to education, gender disparities and so

on (ibid.). These issues in fact are a medium to look towards the low-resourced citizens like the waste pickers who remain distanced. The social issues would bring to limelight who and what are held and not held responsible for the situation of waste problem and waste pickers. Unless the social issues are identified, and solved, they are bound to be reproduced and remain excluded.

It is important therefore that waste pickers' contribution is recognized by the municipalities. Provisions like integrating them into the system can make them beneficiaries of scholarship provided by central government. Consequently, the occupation of waste picking shall have a refinement, and waste pickers be formally employed. Their incorporation has the potential to be reliable signifier of waste and waste pickers in a useful context. They will have the scope to get acceptance as dignified laborers.

For this reason, it is crucial to investigate the essential role of waste that would materialize in making Guwahati a sanitary and developed city. Diverting our thinking from 'waste as impractical' to 'waste with the potential to add to economy', can bring an improved cleanliness status to the city. Valuing waste as a resource, Gutberlet (2008) argues that it can limit the marginalisation of people who make their livelihoods through informally collecting it, while reforming waste management in terms of efficiency and environmental responsibility.

The incorporation of waste pickers, ranging from local governments to the World Bank, is therefore predicated on a larger trend of formalizing the unorganized sector of the economy. Thus, a broad range of programs and policies are covered by the term "integration" (Kashyap & Visvanathan, 2014). This has to do with acknowledging them and prioritizing the waste as a component of their waste management efforts. According to Chen et al. (2020), integration can be viewed as a transformative process that will reveal more about the workers' viewpoints, knowledge, and comprehension of the larger environment as well as how they operate within it.

Samson (2020) in her work conceptualizes waste pickers' integration in four ways in accordance with the literature. First, waste picker integration is framed as a charitable activity conducted by local government or industry for waste pickers to assist them in

purportedly marginal, survivalist work. This reflects the notion of helping the waste pickers without recognizing them as partners or even without consulting them (Velis et al., 2012). Second, the frame of waste pickers' integration is seen as participation that suggests their daily labor to improve their livelihoods. Here, support is often provided to the waste pickers to form and sustain organizations to represent themselves that would facilitate meaningful participation (Gunsilius, 2012). The third framing of waste pickers participation is viewed as a multifaceted process that requires social, cultural, legal and economic interventions, as each of these spheres shape waste pickers' work (Dias, 2011). The fourth way of waste pickers integration is conceptualized as part of larger political projects and struggles for social justice and transformation (Gutberlet, 2008). Therefore, in the larger frame, integration becomes one way of changing the current oppressive and exclusionary realities (Samson, 2020).

In my study, I discussed that waste pickers' aspiration to be integrated into Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC) is for the status of being 'employed', 'respected', and 'recognized as workers'. This pertains to their hope of lowering the common stigma that prevails over waste picking as an informal and physically dirty occupation. On the contrary, where the GMC has no immediate plans to include them, waste pickers feel that someday the inclusion could assist their transformation in their identity. From being considered dirty workers, if potential value of waste is differentiated from waste, they will not be seen as 'human waste' (Bauman, 2004). Rather, knowledge shall be generated for acknowledging the labor in waste handling. Dias (2011) argues that the process of developing waste picker integration policies and programmes is as important as the policies and programmes themselves, as it forges new forms of citizenship. This shares affinities with waste pickers' attempt at carving space in the city for valuing their work and 'reconstructing themselves as subjects of value' (Skeggs, 2004).

Thus this thesis has explored the lives and work of the waste pickers at Guwahati, focusing on their role within the city's waste management system, and how they navigate their existence and the everyday experiences. It examined the historical and current practices of both formal and informal waste management. It delved into the socio-

economic dynamics highlighting the challenges, and stigmatization faced by the waste pickers.

The ethnographic insights and their daily practices have underlined how the waste pickers form strong relationships within their community and with civil society members through daily interactions and shared experiences. Their daily lives involve waste collection and various domestic tasks, with significant gender-based division of labor. In some instances, men are found to show some aversion to domestic spaces, reflecting ingrained gender norms.

In regard to cleanliness, food, and health, waste pickers constantly battle the pervasive stench of the dumpsite, which impacts their ability to cook and eat in a clean environment. But they have adapted to these harsh conditions, though the smell often causes physical discomfort and health issues. Exposure to filth and odor have also led to health concerns, including nausea and stomach issues. During the Covid-19 pandemic, their mental health has also been strained by the temporary closure of waste picking activities.

However, the waste pickers are guided by social relations and support networks. They extend help in times of need and foster a sense of belonging among them. This camaraderie helps them cope with their marginalized status and the trials of their work. The relationships within the waste picker community are based on social capital and mutual aid, often extending beyond blood ties. The waste picker community has adapted to the precarious nature of the work and surpasses any hurdle together. The waste pickers see waste picking as a religious act, hence, abide by their own reasoning of working hard. They blend their religious beliefs with their work. They remain devoted to their faith, as they cannot always perform traditional rituals of Islam due to the demands of their job. Their spirituality provides a source of hope and motivation, helping them endure the difficulties of their work.

To these waste pickers, waste picking is essential for their economic survival, and providing themselves with income to meet basic needs like food. The work is seen as utilitarian, turning discarded materials into valuable resources, thus, demonstrating the economic potential of waste, and thereby improving waste pickers' standard of living.

Their work in fact provides them a sense of purpose. They engage in sensory practices, perceiving and interacting with waste in ways that differ from the general population.

However, the occupation of waste picking is stigmatized, both by urban residents and within the waste pickers' own social circles. This stigma is rooted in social prejudices related to cleanliness, religion, ethnic identity (Miya Muslims) and socio-economic status. Despite their significant contribution to waste handling, the waste pickers face social exclusion and are marginalized due to their work being perceived as dirty. The work therefore, get excluded from the realm of clean occupations.

As coping mechanisms, the waste pickers develop strategies of religious practice and humor to cope and enable themselves to navigate the difficulties. They remain resilient through community support, patience, and hard work. They navigate their marginalized status by forming strong community bonds and finding ways to assert their dignity. Despite working in a dirty and hazardous environment, waste pickers display their ability to manage and stabilize their lives and forge meaningful connections.

But they also do not remain free from the impact of neoliberal policies. The informal nature of waste picking leaves waste pickers vulnerable to exploitation and marginalization under neoliberal policies. They lack formal recognition and support from the state, exacerbating their precarious situation. Neoliberal agendas prioritize formal waste management systems, often overlooking the contributions of these informal waste workers. There is a power imbalance between waste pickers and the Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC). The GMC maintains a distance from the waste pickers, neglecting their needs and contributions to waste management. This, coupled with their religious and ethnic identities, further marginalizes them within the city.

Thus, there is a need for greater recognition and formalization of waste pickers' work to ensure better working conditions and social protections. It is therefore important that policies need to address the socio-economic and health challenges faced by the waste pickers. It should work to reduce the stigma associated with waste work, integrating them more fully into the urban fabric of Guwahati. Thus, by exploring the complex interplay between waste, work, and the social dynamics, the thesis has provided sociological insights into the informal waste economy and the lives of waste pickers who support this

sector. It offers a thorough comprehensive understanding of their challenges and the contributions they make to the society.