

## Abstract

This study investigates the informal handling of municipal solid waste by dumpsite waste pickers at the city of Guwahati, in the state of Assam, India. It begins by tracing the everyday routine of the waste pickers in and around the *Boragaon* dumping ground at Guwahati, and their role in the work as appropriators of dirty waste materials. Despite waste's outwardly filthy appearance, waste pickers' deliberate interactions with it suggest about the value of waste in their lives. My thesis argues that the waste pickers from the lower minority community of Miya Muslims, toil hard willingly in this physically dirty occupation for the purpose of livelihood. The study also looks at the dynamics of occupation, community, and religion both inside and beyond the dumpsite.

Drawing on fifteen months of ethnographic research at the *Boragaon* dumping ground, and one month at the new dumping ground at *Belor Tol*, Guwahati, I explore waste as a valuable resource that shapes the collective attachment of the waste pickers. Settling within the informal habitats near the dumpsite with minimum amenities, sheds light on their adjustment and contentment that is shaped by the ideals of their religion. It shows that the impact of material liveliness of waste on the waste pickers is strong that goes on to make arrangement for practices, relationships, and transformations.

Deploying Gidden's (1984) theory of agency, the study shows how waste pickers situate themselves in everyday life, sustain through the risks and difficulties in the patterns of picking and classifying waste of the dumpsite, and negotiate forms of othering, visual and spatial distinctions through resilience. Today, at Guwahati, the waste pickers work in a segregated urban space, with discarded waste which establish limits between the city and the dumping ground. But in this ignored area, work and settlement place is produced through waste pickers' struggles to create a space for themselves. It is the agency that denotes the exercise or manifestation of the capacity to act in a range of these unfavorable conditions. My arguments draw from waste pickers' active involvement in waste picking where waste becomes a tool for the formation of their collective identity.

During these situations of work and life, social inequities and stigma also emerge in the areas of religion, dirty work of waste, and kinship. In light of informal waste handling, the acquisition of discarded waste by marginalized groups such as these waste pickers demonstrates that waste manifests stratification, inequality, and stigmatization. This reinforces the concept that in emphasizing the unpleasant nature of waste, we simultaneously miss the insecure labor that defines a waste picker's existence. However, such unusual experiences get efficiently stalled by the guaranteeing security of the waste work. Thus, waste pickers surpass social classifications by focusing on the logic of waste as *mulloban* (valuable) and waste work as *dorkari* (essential) in their parlance. They construct their ideas about waste as a medium of living where waste-gathering is translated into a preparation for a potential future by contesting the abjection of waste.

Revealing that waste is embedded with a variety of actors constituted of municipal officials, waste dealers, waste pickers, and urbanites of Guwahati, this study shows reproduction of social life tangled in the transaction of waste and money. Moreover, the infrastructural environments of the city are such that involvement of the waste pickers become too small to see. The acts of meaning-making of waste, evolving and striving from the insanitary space of the dumping ground, become a locus of useful work in disguise. Even though waste pickers are the first to physically enable the movement of waste towards informal recycling, they are read as deliberate participants. Thus, waste as a dirty material object, becomes a symbol of otherness, separating the waste pickers from people of the city. This leads to a tendency to reject the use of waste among waste pickers while also ignoring the inequality and differentiation that they face on a daily basis.

As such the apparent gap between the creative agency of waste pickers as the urban poor, and the powerful agency of the state seep in. The performative force of power goes on to magnify the division, hindering the waste pickers to claim rights of formal workers. Hence, they become the unheard voices on the urban margin of the dumping ground. Though waste pickers covertly aim for a recognition of their work, they refrain from a clamor in generating their concerns publicly. This also resulted in a rigorous urban boundary making driven by the Guwahati municipality's formal management impulses, and persistent social notions of expelling dirt. However, waste pickers facilitate their

development by trying to escape the mess of obstacles in the informal economy of waste. The study explores how waste pickers sustain outside the ambit of secured work, have converted the dumpsite into a resource pool, and is regenerating livelihood in the city through wastes.