Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Waste denotes a peculiarity because they remain unseen until humans become aware of it. The consciousness then brings many meanings, and ideologies while disclosing how our lives are entangled with things or materials called 'waste'[1]. Most commonly we attach the concept of dirt to waste, and distinguish it to be a disorder. Douglas (1966) argues that the concept of dirt and the dirty are intimately linked to how we think and act in situations. It is a matter of how one responds to the environment when confronting the unused, polluted or the contagion. Our decision is in fact rooted on our act of judging the thing(s) of waste in decay, and how it is laid for social categorization. For some, waste is set aside in a state of ignorance, for some others, waste gets used to consolidate one's position with it, and for many waste is marked as a social problem.

The tendency to frame waste in different perspective signify that waste is relative. By exploring the relation between waste and people, we will know much more about the temporalities of waste. It is to imply that waste is capable of indicating its re-use through their state of non-use at a different time. Advancing through a philosophical approach to the subject of waste, it allows us to explore how waste both makes and marks time by being collected (William, 2014). To collect waste, define the significance of its availability which later provides an identity to the waste collectors. It shows that these waste collectors seek to chart an association with waste, and enacting a material continuity with it.

I refer to the waste collection practice of dumpsite waste pickers in Guwahati[2] city. They collect the wastes dumped by people of the city, thereby, manufacturing an informal economy in the vicinity of the *Boragaon* dumping ground, Guwahati. This is a crucial aspect of waste, which is cast aside at one time, but is recuperated later. Thus, to

[1] Waste, wastes, garbage, and trash has been used interchangeably throughout the study.

[2] It is the city in the state of Assam in the North-eastern part of India. More details about the state of Assam and Guwahati has been discussed in Chapter 3.

collect waste is a conception of the contemporary, as well as the shifting focus on objects and what those objects stand for (ibid.). In

this sense, waste emerge as the objects that actually help to indicate the flow of human and non-human symbiosis.

Early analysis of waste in anthropology emerged through interactions between sacred and profane, which are structurally bound to one another (O'Hare, 2019). Such distinction between the sacred and profane or purity and pollution is a consequence of the human mind and the classification system of the society. In fact, ideas of prohibitions, taboos, and attachments have very little to do with the concrete thing that is prohibited, and much more to do with an interplay of symbols that reflect deeper organizing principles of society (Douglas, 1966). The rituals of pollution and purity tend to cluster around the anomalies that confuse the cultural system of classification.

In the anthropological discourse, pollution has had a specific meaning: a stigma linked to people or substances- generally as a result of mixing or conflation of things that should be kept pure (O'Hare, 2019). However, today we can see anthropology's movement from denoting waste in pollution terms to the broader exploration of waste and humans constituting one another. For example- menstruating is a pollution because menstruating women are viewed as polluted and are therefore, quarantined (Kristeva, 1982). This tended to centre on polluted people rather than the things that pollute them. They are treated with indifference by different culture or indeed classes, and the victims have to embrace these exclusionary ideals.

Contemporary times has seen a shift in the cultural meanings of waste. Moving away from the dichotomies of sacred/profane and purity/pollution, the binary of waste and value in economic anthropology show how objects can undergo a radical transformation in its importance. In this sense, no object is fated to remain relegated to a particular category of value. In the analysis of objects, Thompson (2017) points to the category of transient, durable, and rubbish. While transient objects signify the decrease of value in due course of time, durability depicts the increase in value of an object at a later time, and rubbish are of no-value at all. However, rubbish later moves to the category of durables. In other words, even a transient object falling into disuse has the possibility of assuming

value as a classic or retro. This direct our attention towards the materiality of waste which have brought changes in the previous ideas concerning its features.

It has been only during the late nineteenth century that waste or refuse came into the public consciousness and raised several uncomfortable questions about health, aesthetics, and the quality of urban life (Melosi, 2000). This implies that the materiality of waste depicts a source of visual inconvenience, and inhabit spaces that is largely politicized. More than a symptom of culture, waste is a material that has effects in the world, including global and local political disputes, liberal and illiberal forms of governance, competing assessments of economic and moral value (Reno, 2015).

Formal management of waste show how the powerful actors contest and govern its presence. And the informal part show wastes pulling the urban poor in the entanglement of labor and possibility. The acquisition of disposed waste by marginal groups like the waste pickers even result in their stratification, inequality, and stigmatization in the society. This reiterates the idea that in pointing the objectionable character of waste, the precarious labor and their lower social position is often overlooked. However, the centrality of discarded things like waste have the capacity to embed even marginal and polluting labor within it. Larkin (2013) points out that everyday dependence of waste pickers on waste show how non-human forces make up dimensions of a social life. And the knowledge of waste work that is acquired by the waste pickers is one part that the sociological study of waste draw attention here.

The social construction of waste-which constitutes the foundation of all social sciences studies of waste-argues that there are social and cultural reasons for the variety in definitions of waste (Gille, 2012). If we look into the capitalist countries, waste was historically defined as useless leading to a mentality that prefers discarding waste to saving, reusing or recycling. On the other hand, in the developing countries, waste has been seen as valuable and fertile, which results in greater efforts to recover value from discarded materials (ibid.). However, the meaning of waste could also extend to variability within the same society due to social, cultural or physical factors.

Studies have also shown how social class become a decisive factor in determining one’s opinion about waste. For example, wealthier citizens consume profligately and

would simply discard surplus belonging. But the people with fewer resources acquire goods consciously to sustain them for a considerable time. Poignantly, the poorest, the marginalized class and lower- caste people engage themselves in the dirty task of waste gathering and selecting for reuse or transport them for recycling. This thrives in as a realm of possibility because waste is a freely available resource and restrictions on entering the occupation of waste pickers is miniscule. What presents itself as a space of opportunity however, brings the social inequalities within the waste transactions.

In the context of Guwahati city, the Miya Muslims[3] are key pickers in the dumpsite waste collection. The provisionality of the city is such that it does have ample work for these urban poor. With their willingness to situate themselves within the margins in the city, they suffice their stay with the waste work. However, their proximity to waste not only exposes them to the physical dirt but also to social taints of devaluation, marginalisation, and stereotypes. Waste, a dirty material object, therefore, become a signifier of otherness marking the boundary between them and the city dwellers. This leads to a tendency to refuse the materiality of waste as well as ignore the inequality and differentiation that the waste pickers endure in their everyday labor.

Through the Marxist view of waste, the bodies of laborers are seen as used up or wasted at accelerated rates in order to secure the most profit and emphasizes an expandable, unorganized labor force whose lives are locked into dealing with waste materials (Yates, 2011). In other words, the labor which is a daily project of survival become an unpleasant task being abandoned in the public discourse. Because it is extremely rare that upper caste, upper class, and the rich will be involved in polluting occupations like that of the waste pickers at a dumpsite. There is an assertion of ritual purity and social supremacy for not engaging in this stigmatized activity (Doron &

[3] There is no proper terminology to define them living in the riverine islands in Assam where the population predominantly comprises of Bengal origin Muslims (Kazi Sharowar Hussain in Singh 2019). They are one of the immigrant communities in Assam (Kumar, 2022). They are referred as Miya Muslims/Miya and believed to have their ancestral roots in East Bengal (now Bangladesh). I will use the terms Bengal-origin Muslims, migrants, and Miya Muslims interchangeably in this thesis. Other elaboration about Miya Muslims are also present in different footnotes in other chapters.

Jeffrey, 2018). Thus, people of lower classes, lower castes or poor Muslims are likely to be found in this role in the context of Indian cities.

India has a history of facing challenges in addressing the delicate issue of the cultural relationship between caste and waste. While ideas of 'pure' and 'impure' do not sync with scientific principles of hygiene and sanitation, yet it attributes depth of negativity to certain people. Many lives among large sections of Hindu society are lived by the everyday practices of caste prejudices. It compounds widespread discrimination against a "wasted" underclass of Dalits, landless migrants, and poor Muslims (Doron & Jeffrey, 2018). Such connections inescapably become part of the politic of public sanitation in India where caste prejudice and ethno-religious tension pop up. It further complicates efforts to deal with waste work as the interplay of caste and religion undermines the work and the workers. The cultural marginalization materializes in this context as waste pickers get attached to a sense of filth and wretchedness.

In the background of the growing city of Guwahati, the deserted waste at the dumpsite, and the internal migrants settling at Guwahati near it from the villages of Assam, end up together. The place gets added to the list of many infamous "garbage slums" at the urban edge like huge Dhapa dump and the slum on the fringe of Kolkata, Santa Cruz Meyehualco in Mexico City, Quarantina outside Beirut, or the former Smoky Mountain in Manila (Davis, 2006). These migrants become the new urban poor who facilitate waste collection as an informal income generating activity. Their act of recovering waste out of compulsion, choice, necessity, and as a means of survival become symbiotic of living with waste.

The waste pickers being contributors to informal waste handling remain unattended by the state and the municipality. As a consequence, these migrants lapse back into the dumpsite as waste laborers, and continue working under degrading and dangerous condition. But the pickers continue to display resilience by actively engaging in the work. This calls for examining the local agency to focus on the diversity of experiences and the negotiated nature of the effects of these process by drawing upon actor-centred perspectives (Shatkin, 2007). It shows how the pickers conceive of the city life, and become willing to forego the aspects of the earlier life.

Recent scholarship shows the collective practices of the urban poor defying institutional and legal frameworks in the cities of global south (Simone, 2006). Similarly, through his concept of 'occupancy urbanism' Benjamin (2008) argues local and territorial practices of the poor that subvert planning regimes, elite attitudes, and processes of global capital accumulation. Likewise, Roy (2011) argues the case for a kind of "subaltern urbanism" which can produce insights on accounts of the slum as a terrain of habitation, livelihood, and politics. On a similar angle, Moore (2008) points out that marginalized populations are able to leverage the distinction between the expectations of urban order and actually existing material conditions in cities to demand their rights to the city.

These studies explain that the poor has a tendency to interpret actions through profound sensibility of inhabiting city space. They aim to reject the inherent or constructed social classifications, and contest the dichotomy between formal/informal and legality/illegality. In this regard, it compels us to disrupt the stereotypes of subaltern urban conditions, and understand urban practices in global south generally, and Guwahati in particular. I draw on these insights to attend to the modes of waste pickers' involvement in making waste or garbage an effective tool to making their future in the city.

Taking a cue from Millar's (2018) conceptualization of the work of catadores (waste pickers) on Rio's garbage dump as a 'form of living', this study approaches waste work beyond the economic aspect. She shows this multivalent concept referring first to living in the means of income, sustenance, or livelihood. Here, the work is constituted through the habits, routines, and orientations to the meanings that waste pickers ascribe to the work. In drawing attention to the form, Millar explains that work of waste pickers does not occur in relation to wage labor and is away from state regulation, official recognition, and institutionally recognized form of work in capitalist societies. The representation means that the work is informal which characterizes the absence of bureaucratic and institutionalized order or rules. However, this do not imply that work of the waste pickers lack form but create form out of spaces and materials that are otherwise amorphous

(ibid.). It breaks open the way to reflect on the ontological experience of social belonging, and a sense of well-being among the waste pickers in the city.

In this framework of waste, and its proximity to waste pickers' strategy of living, the thesis examines how waste relates not only to the dirty, stinking, or things without use but to the domain of the relation formed between non-human (waste) and humans. It sheds light on the possibilities of arranging a livelihood out of waste, and how waste pickers root their aspirations in wastes. By exploring the collection of waste as a practice governed by notions of value, use, and informal handling, the study unpacks how waste is absorbed in the local contexts of the dumpsite waste-pickers, a community marginalized on the basis of their religion, geographical location, stigmatized identity, and isolation from political influence.

1.2 Statement of the problem

The study tracks through the space of Guwahati's dumping ground, where a section of the internal migrants engages as waste pickers in waste material recovery. Waste picking as an occupation has been historically stigmatized, demeaned, and marginalized. It has also been neglected by the state establishment, and municipality. This suggests that waste labor is considered to be a subsistence activity undertaken by the waste pickers. In addition, the place of habitat of the waste pickers near the dumpsite remain geographically segregated which compound the lived experience of inequality. This show how exclusionary treatment become implicit in the design of spaces and places.

One part of the problem that emerges is to identify the everyday negotiations of waste pickers' socio-spatial marginality, and how they articulate their position within the waste work. There is acute feeling of separation among the waste pickers who are judged on the basis of waste handling pursued as a work. In the presence of this symbolic boundary making by the city, the study tries to show how waste of the dumping ground become a force for waste pickers that drive them to construct livelihood, and stack off social judgements. It brings into the front their act of tolerance to the received difference. Furthermore, it demonstrates the perseverance of the waste pickers by situating themselves within a challenging sensorial experience of waste in the work. The study therefore, attempts to understand how waste become an aspect of waste pickers' effort to

create value, how they employ agency to counter the urban margins forged in the city, and how the form of labor facilitates their livability.

1.3 Objectives

In light of the above, the research undertakes the following objectives-

- To study everyday life of the waste pickers along with their interaction within and outside the community.
- To explore social meaning of waste, and the relationship between waste and waste pickers.
- To examine lives of the waste pickers facing marginalization and stigma for their association with waste materials.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

1.4.1 Agency

The study reclines on Gidden's theory of agency to show how waste pickers negotiate a taken for granted reality of the dirty work of waste picking. It is argued that waste pickers perform their identities of migrants and waste pickers within the constraints in the distinctive general context of the city, and particular context of the dumpsite. Employing agency, the waste pickers deconstruct notions of stigma, dirt, and marginality in waste work which is not natural but a process of social conditioning.

Giddens had been inspired by Max Weber's emphasis on the agency of the human experiences. Giddens (1984) points out that actors not only monitor continuously the flow of their activities and expect others to do the same for their own but also routinely monitor aspects, social and physical, of the contexts in which they move. This explains the presence of reflexive monitoring of the situations and activities that are governed by the dark currents outside. Such insights guide to understand waste pickers as agent being in the capacity to act against the negative representation of waste work. 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 socially structured conditions (Delormier, et al., 2009).

It has frequently been supposed that human agency can be defined only in terms of intentions. That is to say, for an item to count as action, whoever perpetrates it must intend to do so, or else the behavior in question is just a reactive response (Giddens, 1984). Agency thus, reflects intentional activities whereby individuals seek to satisfy their needs and goals (Johnson, 2008). In the view of Giddens (1984), agency refers not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing those things in the first place (which is why agency implies power). Agency concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently (ibid.). To be precise, whatever happened would not have happened if that individual had not intervened. The consequences of what actors do, whether purposefully or inadvertently, are occurrences that would not have occurred if that actor had behaved differently.

Agency reflects the capacity for actors to intervene in the world, and to influence a specific process or a state of affairs (Giddens, 1984). It is the conception of power that come embedded in agency. This assumes that being an agent entails being able to deploy a variety of causal capacities (chronically, in the course of daily life), including the ability to influence those deployed by others (ibid.). In this regard, the individual's agent ceases to exist if he or she loses the ability to influence events. For Giddens, action logically involves power in the sense of transformative capacity. In this sense, power is logically prior to subjectivity, to the constitution of reflexive monitoring of conduct (ibid.). As a result, power is frequently defined in terms of intent or will, as the ability to create desired and planned results. This power further enables to shape and influence a situation or circumstance according to one’s understanding.

All human beings have the capacity for agency- for forming intentions, capacity for desiring and acting creatively (Sewell, 1992). It implies that agents are empowered to act with and against others by structures because they have knowledge of the schemas that inform social life and have access to some measures of human and non-human resources. For instance, just as linguistic capacity takes the form of becoming a competent speaker

of some particular Language-French or Arabic or Urdu- agency is formed by a specific range of cultural schemas and resources available in a person's social milieu (ibid.). Here, the specific forms that an individual will take through agency varies deeply, and remain culturally and historically determined. But it is to be noted that all individuals exercise agency in the conduct of their daily lives. It is akin to how all members of the society employ complex repertoires of interaction skills to control and sustain ongoing social relations (Goffman, 1967).

As Giddens (1984) pointed out that people's behavior give shape to the action itself and the properties of structures, this study show how waste pickers' exercise some form of control over the nature and purpose of the waste work. They attempt to establish a positive context, and secure discretion over the denounced notion of the work. The study focuses on the complex combination of waste, value, place, work, stigma, and practices through the action of the waste pickers. Despite the shortage of consideration from the state and the Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC)[4], waste picking is the materialization of the will of the waste pickers to take root in the dirty work, and make a claim in the city. This resonates with Emirbayer & Mische's (1998) model of agency recognizing that people do not only act out of habit and routine, rather agency is oriented towards future possibilities and an individual's capacity to reflect upon and evaluate their present situation.

It is the agency or rather the act of redefining the reality which helps them to challenge the social invisibility and opens up the possibility of turning marginal space to a crucial place of urban living (Das & Walton, 2015). Overlooking the many lacks in the marginalized area of the dumping ground, waste pickers construct a new social space of potentialities for human-thing relation. Living within the limitations of work, they adapt to the niches of informality and waste labor. This development in return help the waste pickers to constitute meaning of embodiment of waste, performativity in the dirty work, and dwelling in city's margins. Through it they cease to feel diminished, and transform themselves to urban actors in their own right. It is in fact a matter of potentiality among

[4] It is the formal body for managing Guwahati city's waste which operates under the aegis of the state government. GMC and its functioning has been also discussed in Chapter 3 and Chapter 6.

them, that is the possibility where forms of life emerge in places neglected by society, outlawed by the state, and which do not get an essentialist representation (Aedo, 2019).

Even though these people are not recognized of their lived identity, they are not hindered by the social context. Hitlin & Long (2009) has pointed about the individual characteristics having both 'subjective' and 'objective' dimensions of agency. The subjective dimension has been measured as aspirations, optimism, expectations (Vaisey, 2010; Frye, 2012; Hitlin & Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2015). This type of agency is capable of sustaining human's capacity to project themselves into the future (Bazzani, 2022). The objective dimension of individual agency considers individual skills and resources (Claussen, 1991). Individuals have different endowments of social and economic resources that can be mobilized for the achievement of personal goals or for facing life's vicissitudes.

In the context of this study, waste pickers seem to find aspirations and a future with the possibility of dealing with waste. The present dispensation is not just about how waste pickers have been able to work with waste. But it is also about the kind of knowledge they have gained mastery upon, and unearthing the science underneath (Ghosh, 2017).

1.5 Conceptual Framework

1.5.1 Vital materiality

A number of studies has recently demonstrated the affinities between human and non-human agencies (Appadurai, 1986; Gallagher & Greenblat, 2000; Brown, 2001; Latour, 2004; Seyfert, 2012; Kwek, 2018;). Far from the category of mind vs matter, these studies focused on the potentiality and power of non-humans, from animals to non-sentient, inorganic, inanimate things- last candidates to which agency would normally have been ascribed (Kwek, 2018). The logic here is to begin with the positive and productive power of things and with the senses by which we recognise them. For even the discarded and avoided municipal wastes, perpetually pose as things unveiling its use, subject-object relation, and power to claim thoughtfulness. Moreover, the political effects

of the non-human things demand greater scrutiny as humans have difficulty in acknowledging or discerning the non-human agencies.

We typically consider waste to be passive objects, and human beings as the active subject capable of an active role in manipulating presence of waste. Bennett (2010) has shown how the binary between subject and object is laid open to get dissolved. It is because objects are in fact alive to be able to act, produce effects, and there is the web of human being and thinghood. Objects appear as things, that is, as vivid entities which is not entirely reducible to the contexts in which human subjects set them, and are never entirely exhausted by their semiotics (Bennett, 2010).

As W.J.T. Mitchell (2005) notes,

> " objects are the way things appear to a subject- that is with a name, an identity, a gestalt or stereotypical template… Things on the other hand, … [signal] the moment when objects become the Other, when the sardine can look back, when the mute idol speaks, when the subject experiences the object as uncanny and feels the need for what Foucault calls a 'metaphysics of the object, or, more exactly, a metaphysics of that never objectifiable depth from which objects rise up toward our superficial knowledge ".

It is only due to the quarantine of matter and life, we get encouraged to ignore the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations. Referring to the garbage hill outside Manhattan, Sullivan (1998) describes the vitality that persists even in trash where the garbage hills are alive with billions of microscopic organisms thriving underground in dark, and oxygen-free communities. The items on the ground are in fact vibratory which depicts themselves as dead stuff at one time, and as live presence, on the other.

In her explanation of debris, Bennett (2010) points it as stuff that is ignored on the one hand, but commands attention in its own right, by displaying its thing power. It is the energetic vitality inside each thing found in debris or landfill which are generally conceived as inert (ibid.). By vitality, Bennett means the capacity of things that can not only impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi-agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own. It in fact, represents a durability that have the ability to convey lives in abandonment.

Drawn from the work of Bennett (2010), the present study locates waste in waste picking as the power of waste material that encourages waste pickers to reconfigure the relationship between waste and the humans. Waste has in fact empowered waste pickers to occupy new role as financial breadwinners in the city. The presence of waste in the dumping ground is a process of value accumulation both for the waste pickers and the Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC). As concerned with the waste pickers, gathering and removing waste from the dumping ground and its transformation into price and profit is a way for their survival in the city.

On the other hand, the dumping ground is already a source of revenue for the municipality because waste is converted to manure. This reminds us that a vital materiality can never be really thrown away for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity (Bennett, 2010). It is a signal that disposability or dumping sustains mass consumption by enabling the socio-material conditions for certain types of capitalist exchange (Reno, 2016). This elevates the force of waste to disburse human capacities as well as using them up.

Gregson and Crang (2010) cite the example of industrial waste which is a vital inorganic actant in a thoroughly networked world. According to them, waste is viewed as hybrid which operates its influence through networking with human and non-human others. In this sense, waste itself, its production, its consumption, its circulation, and metamorphosis, is constitutive of society (Gille, 2010). In the context of waste picking, the power of waste consists in mediating its flow
through places, and shaping life. It produces a ‘urban symbiosis’ through re-configuration of urban
material and energy flows (Stein, et al., 2014). Waste, thus, facilitates people’s entry into waste work, reconfigure everyday lives and its embodiment of the materialities of labor.

Waste, as part of an immanent plane of becomings, actively develops the network of agencement, changing the material world and socio-natural interactions (Moore 2012). Through its ubiquitous nature in the dumping ground, waste pickers make the physical contact with waste, for the certainty that it provides. Thus, through its force as a useful object, it has become valuable for the waste pickers.

In light of the above, the study explores how waste pronounced the need for waste labor among the waste pickers. It has led them to abandon the social projection of waste picking as objectionable. Waste, in fact, has infused the idea that existence of communities and families share values, and are dependent on the materiality of waste. This is the intrinsic vibrant matter that help produce a context, and affect waste pickers to the extent of physically moving through waste for stabilizing an urban life.

1.5.2 Dirty work

The material and symbolic dimension of a work influence people in their construction and attribution of meaning. This allows us to identity that some work is socially approved while other occupations is marginalized. In this context, the low prestige-occupations are often considered 'dirty work' that negatively influences worker's well-being than simply the stigma and stains printed on 'dirty-workers' (Pereira, et al., 2021). It is because the social labeling occupies a greater position than individual explanations. In addition, there is a greater tendency to prioritize those occupational positions which has a high economic notion about it. Because people legitimize a limited idea about work, many occupations and professions has to occupy a backstage. Those employed in the lower positions eventually are subjected to social shaming, prejudice, stigma, and are degraded as well as silenced. The presence of the social division of labor further categorizes work on the basis of its physical nature which is disturbing to the senses. This is how the notion of dirty work is reinforced facilitating a sensorial distress and public distaste.

The term dirty work was coined by Hughes (1958) to refer to tasks that are physically disgusting that may be a symbol of degradation, and that something which wound's one's dignity due to stigmatized occupations and professional activities, and having little (or no) prestige or social visibility. The irony lies in the fact that even though these workers perform for the city, for example, to manage waste informally, they still remain deprived of the dignity. No matter how the work may be central to the functioning of the workers but their association make them 'dirty workers' (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). As the material conditions of any dirty work are linked to externality, the work becomes an indicator of public abandonment. Through its materiality, entangled with the embodied and affective impact it has on the workers and the stigmatizing discursive uses

it serves, it advances a symbolic distancing of them from others (Bauman & Massalha, 2021).

In India, there has been a historical account of harboring negativity towards dirty work, and the people who accomplish it. This is because it is extremely rare to find upper caste or upper class getting engaged in a polluting occupation, such as that of a sweeper or a waste picker in a dumpsite. Ideas about ritual purity and pollution anchored in the religious practice of large numbers of Hindus pose special problems for an urbanizing, consuming India (Doron & Jeffrey, 2018). Abhorrent works have also been performed by people who are born into subcastes- *jatis*- deemed to be at the bottom of a Hindu hierarchy. Such hierarchies are sometimes replicated also among Muslims, Christians and Sikhs. It is mostly the lower caste and poorest Muslims that has overwhelmingly embarked on a journey to clean waste in India. More specifically, the Dalits, officially belonging to the Scheduled caste, once referred to as untouchables, performed the dirty work of dealing with human wastes (Joseph, 2016). These Dalits belonging to the lowest rung of the Indian society, also has been engaged in the work of drain and cesspit cleaning.

Even though caste relations have changed across time and place, yet enduring ideologies of caste still loom large when it comes to occupations associated with handling waste of any kind (Doron & Jeffrey, 2018). In fact, the caste system aids the belief that all work associated with filth is the lot of the Dalits. On a similar tangent, when studied about waste pickers in Delhi, who collected plastics, a valuable commodity, Kaveri Gill (2010) found that 86 per cent were Dalits. She points that in caste lays the key to the social relations underlying the plastic scrap trade in Delhi. Such encounters suggest that caste has a strong connection with images of dirty work and in practice there exist a glaring prejudice on these works.

In light of the above, individuals continue their part in dirty work, and reflexively considers the consequence of their actions. It is to be taken into attention that stereotype and undermining of physical and mental labor become part and parcel of their everyday. Experiencing discrimination and facing embarrassment stemming from the role in dirty work is also common and inevitable. Dealing with dirt in fact constitutes a

conscious decision of the workers involved while making judgements based on any un-productive past work.

As dirt is overpowering, thus, individual adaptation to any dirty work takes time. In fact, emancipatory movement from such experiences is rather difficult. It ultimately becomes a moral obligation of the dirty workers to resist stigma and the social judgement. Under such circumstances, the language of dignity and self- respect survives and remains relevant (Guru, 2012). This recognizes how dirt is to be countered where 'dirtiness' and 'cleanliness' are real social objects and do not exist only within discourse (Wolkowitz, 2007).

Drawn from this background, the study explores the question of physical filth being linked to waste picking, stigma, and every day of the waste pickers. The materiality of waste, and the symmetrical relation of physical contact between waste and waste pickers form the crux of the dirty work. It investigates the daily work practices and their identity which is constrained by material and social context in which they work. To undertake waste picking within anticipated and unanticipated contingencies, the study explores how waste pickers still emphasize on the articulation of the dirty work. It further sees how waste pickers, their bodies, waste materials, work ideals, and group cohesion work together to keep social boundaries at bay. To understand the corporeal dynamics of how waste pickers, mediate between material and social, thus, become a setting to study the dirty work.

1.5.3 Urban Informality

Since the late 1960's, the study of informality, originating from urban development discourse (Turner, 1968), has undergone considerable changes, refinements, complexity, and meaning. Informality determined that the dwelling and economic activity of the marginalized is a threat to progress and modernization (Muller, 2019). In fact, informal dwellings trigger an entire chain that ends up creating a parallel world- an existence within a city that operates below the radar and beyond the purview of any formal existence (Bisen, 2019). Often considered a constitutive other to the state (Castells, 1972), informality is signified as a way of urbanization that is to be tolerated rather than

regulated. This aids informality to sustain and nurture the exclusory, marginalizing effects of capital interest, and elitist urban planning.

Banks et al., (2019) point that through urban informality, the processes underpinning economic, social, and political inequalities that merge and consolidate, is understandable. Specifically, by 'site of critical analysis', they refer to the ways in which urban informality can bring into focus the winners and losers in urban development, and the processes by which advantage and disadvantage are conferred. This includes the more 'typically' informal ways in which excluded groups or areas are connected to means of making a living, housing, and basic commodities, or to governance processes; but also how other groups create and exploit informal domains to meet their own ends, such as gaining or retaining social and political power, maximising profit or avoiding costly regulations and taxation (ibid.). For such reasons, urban planning is not able to meet needs of the poor as elitist mode of planning has to be trespassed by the poor.

Urban informality thus, indicates an organizing logic, a system of norms that governs the process of urban transformation itself (Roy & AlSayyad, 2004). In Indian cities, informal living being like a branch of urban informality, has long become a part of the formal spaces. Its proliferation is an unavoidable reality. Socially, informal living is the pit stop for urbanization in the modern world and no country can claim to have been free from it in its post-industrialization history (Bisen, 2019). It may be said to be an eyesore where its existence embodies the inability of the state actors to perform their duties, thus presenting a captive political opportunity which can be seized with minimum toil (ibid.). It becomes a temporary reaction to urban poor's discomfort and misery, where the state is expected to work towards permanence and restore normalcy in the affected people's life. But as the urban poor is rarely included in formal enterprises and undergo affects due to subordinate economic units, a kind of precarity get enforced.

It is significant to note that informality partake in a deepening precariousness, and in a normalization of uncertainty (Muller, 2019). This precariousness of human life then become a condition of vulnerable existence and social dependency (Lorey, 2015). Individuals tend to increasingly embody the existential fact of living precariously and therefore, assimilate to precarisation as a form of self-governing that is in accordance

with given normative frameworks (ibid.). This orientation makes it clear that inhabitants of informal settlements like the urban poor acknowledges the presence of precarity in livelihood. Informality is therefore, conceived as a form of governance that urban poor locate in particular places ("informal settlements") (Amin and Cirola, 2017). But they are unable to propose an end to the hierarchies, inequalities, and segregation that intrude in their spaces.

This pattern of self-organisation of the urban poor is again represented in ways that it is opposed to the formal, and structured master planning. In recognizing informality that constitutes a significant proportion of urban economies, De Soto (2000) presents informality as 'heroic entrepreneurship'. This corresponds to the idea that informal economy is the people's spontaneous and creative response to the state's incapacity to satisfy the basic needs of the impoverished masses (De Soto, 1989). Such approaches stand in contrast to the informal practices of the urban elite like real estate developers, politicians, etc. who routinely connect members of different socio-economic classes such as household workers, or vigilantes that live in informal settlements and work in gated condos (Muller, 2019).

In additions, there is also the presence of occupancy of places through land invasion or self-help housing. Within it informal housing become a distinctive type of market where affordability accrues through the absence of formal planning and regulation. Such a trend helps the urban poor or migrated rural residents to establish themselves in the urban peripheries of the city. With lack of policy response to public or informal housing, the social change in city's urbanism do not get addressed. As a consequence, diverse groups of urban poor continue to negotiate their roles and position in the city.

Roy & AlSayad (2004) understands informality not as a separate sector but rather a series of transactions that connect different economies and spaces to one another. This suggest that informal practices of the urban poor are instrumental to their living. For instances, hawkers that line up the streets, barber's makeshift salon or its equivalent juice corners, food stall, garment shop among others are responses to the need of informal living because retail is irrelevant to informal

living for its outpriced offer or access to both (Bisen, 2019). Out of this, notably, the waste management is a high yielding informal commerce.

From solid and wet waste, human hair from barber, medicine beyond its expiry, packaging materials, tires, glass, tin, and numerous unwanted stuffs are transported to garbage dumps from the city. From this starts the informal waste economy and urban poor like the waste pickers can be seen rummaging through it for an economic output. Though this action does not guarantee a security, and displacement from such spaces loom large, they continue using its practicability. This displays a salience of the agency of the urban poor who utilize urban informality as a strategy and practice to uplift everyday lived realities (Banks et al., 2019).

Building on the above, the study examines the process of informality getting embedded in the peripheral location of the city, and enactments of livelihood by the urban poor. It seeks to study how waste pickers, as a category of the urban poor, perform everyday life within urban informality across economic, spatial and communal domains, and are able to reverse normative inferences that often de-legitimizes informal activities they engage into. Specifically, it attends to the material encounters of waste, processes of disadvantage, and their access to limited services in the segregated urban spaces. It also pursues to explore how waste pickers live in continuous uncertainty of their position that mostly remain repressed. The study attends to the everyday practices that seek to establish order, and formulating to defend against the informality labels of threats, insecurities, and divisions.

1.6 Outline of the thesis

In this chapter, I have introduced waste through the lens of anthropology, philosophy and sociology. This forms the basis for understanding the dynamics in the study of waste. The chapter also discusses the problem statement, theoretical framework along with the concepts presented in the thesis.

In chapter 2, ‘Methodological framework: Field settings and methods’, I explored characterization of the field of study, strategies, and the research processes. Various literatures relevant to the argument of the thesis have also been discussed in this chapter.

In chapter 3, 'Locating the field- Waste, migrants, and waste picking in Guwahati, Assam', I take a closer look into the scenario of waste from pre-industrial to post-colonial times from global level to that of local i.e. the state of Assam, the status of the state as a flood prone region, and the ramification from the influx of people from villages to the city of Guwahati. The chapter also attends to the issue of migration and migrant identity which has remained an ordeal to the state since a long time. Tracing how the internal migrants seize opportunity to reside at Guwahati, the chapter illuminates how they settle in the city in the periphery amidst housing crisis, and begin reconfiguring lives unusually through participation in dumpsite waste picking. Waste governance being not under a strict regime of scientific handling of waste in the dumpsite serves an advantage to the migrants. This helps them to advance as a community of informal waste pickers who are illegally allowed to work, and knowingly permitted to stay in the city.

In chapter 4, 'Everyday representation: Waste, home, and the provisions, I mediate to interrogate the daily lives of the waste pickers who confront everydayness in the edge of the dumpsite. The chapter details the individual engagement with waste and in space of their home. It traces how the waste pickers are able to organize domestic life, confront health insecurities, devour food, manage privacy, and practice religion in the setting of a dirty physical environment. It highlights the complexities and intricacies being faced by them, and their capability in coping with the same. The turn to their stress management formulas in the form of gossips and jokes bind them to each other. It is the reproduction of life's moments that waste pickers can materialize through full participation in the surroundings. Thus, the evaluation and plurality of meanings is held differently by the waste pickers than the general notion prevalent regarding garbage and filth.

In chapter 5 of the thesis, 'Meaning of waste: Value, informal economy, and the politics of picking', I explore the symbiosis formed between waste and the network of people. The relation implies the presence of sociability and agential power of waste to command and shape the collective attachment towards it. The chapter also examines how waste picking as a stained occupation is flourishing under the label of informal waste economy along with the cooperation of waste dealers/owners. It shows how waste pickers perform the dirty task of waste handling which is a social embarrassment, by employing agency of

determination and grit. Their continuous sensorial experience in waste-gathering extends meaning of satisfaction and contentment in the waste work. It resonates with the effort of waste pickers to articulate energies in overcoming the deep sensorial abjection towards waste. The chapter details how waste pickers are able to entail self-worth and infuse value in their waste labor.

In chapter 6, Confrontation and negotiation: The dynamics of stigma and marginality in the work', I examine how waste pickers move through the boundaries of devaluation, stigma, and marginalizing effects on them. It details them being pushed within structural limits and how they make efforts to subvert the public negativity attached to the occupation and their identity as dirty workers. Differential treatment from the Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC) in refusing them a visibility, highlights waste pickers' social categorization as inferior. The chapter engages with the greater effort of waste pickers to battle their exclusion, territorialisation, and social differentiation on the context of being misrecognized. It shows how stigma is also generated owing to the nature of physical dirt in the work, their sartorial choice, and the religious identity. This affects their process of integration in the city, and manifests a symbol of crisis and disappointment among the waste pickers. The efforts of the waste pickers to endure such insidious forms of suffering suggests their exceptional spirit which is vital to continue their sustenance.

In Chapter 7, 'Conclusion', I summarize the findings and analysis of the research. It interrogates how waste pickers are placed within an informal system of governance bereft of social protection. The chapter also highlights how the occupation of waste picking attributes waste pickers a low self-esteem and social depreciation. Despite the social crafting of the work that arouse disgust, waste pickers have been able to surpass the public demeaning, and adopt the work as a way of life. The chapter put forwards the need to approve a benevolent attitude towards these army of informal workers who embrace precarity without protest. Thus, the study calls for evaluating the position of waste and the integration of waste pickers for their better future.

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