Chapter 2

Methodological framework: Field settings and methods

2.1 Introduction

Every process of inquiry privileges a particular way of knowing the world (Baviskar, 1995). Similarly, waste presents an opportunity to explore the construction of meaning in Guwahati's space of the dumping ground. Especially because waste is continuously rooted in the consciousness of the dumpsite waste pickers conveying about wastes' value and waste pickers' livelihood. It is closely related to the context/environment in which waste picking is experienced by the waste pickers. Not only does waste attributes positive connotations but also become tributaries of complexity for the waste pickers. However, the generalized perception of waste being dirty, devoid of value, and generating visual disgust, is surpassed by the waste pickers.

Such instances convey that we cannot understand the concept of waste through a single reality. There are multiple realities, constructed by people in different ontological positions; inquiry into these multiple realities does not seek to discover a unified truth but is aimed at enriching our understanding of divergent, socially- constructed truths (Lincoln & Guha, 1985). In this context, I wish to accept how my research participants reflect on the process of meaning-making of their experience, and ignore the ways by which realities and meanings previously became a product of objective truth.

Drawing on the context of waste pickers' choice of occupation, and their possibility of sustaining, reflects their way of reconstructing a previously built knowledge of waste. Taking a cue from Jean Piaget's constructivist theory, it is seen how one cannot draw conclusions about the character of the real world from an organism's adaptedness or the viability of schemes of action. He refers to the process by which the cognitive structures that shape our knowledge of the world evolve through the interaction of environment and subject. In his view, what we see, hear, and feel, i.e. our sensory world, is the result of our own perceptual activities and therefore, specific to our ways of perceiving and conceiving (Glaserfeld, 1995). Knowledge, for him, arises from actions and the agent's reflection upon them. The actions take place in an environment and are grounded on and

directed at objects that constitute the organism's experiential world, not "things in themselves" that have an independent existence (ibid.). As a result, when Piaget speaks of interaction, he does not mean an organism interacting with objects as they "really" are, but rather a cognitive subject interacting with previously built perceptual and conceptual frameworks.

Everything that is known is determined by the intersection of ideologies, beliefs, values and so on. This conveys that reality is a social construct which does not reflect an objective social world (Constantino, 2008). Each individual constructs his/her knowledge and experience through social interaction. The meaning-making depends on the situation and the context in which a particular act is embedded. Moving through these stances, I have relied on the social constructivist perspective in the research. This choice shows that it is necessary to navigate how respondents shift through contingencies and variables to perceive the essential character of an experience (ibid.).

In other words, it is the way of knowing the phenomena under study from the perspective of the participants. This would provide an unfiltered subjectivity through the intimate and lived experience of the research participants. In the study, waste as a set of dirty materials at the dumpsite exists in a pre-determined symbolic categorization, but consequently, waste is constructed not only as a mirror of human culture but as a sign of and for other-than-human beings (Reno, 2014). Thus, waste as things that have been deemed worthless and rejected cannot be completely social and cultural, but, on some level, possess a significant material character as well (Hawkins, 2006; Gille, 2007).

This chapter covers the methods that has been used in the study. It focusses on the research questions, study site, study sample and population, how data has been collected, researcher's experience in the field, research tool, research ethics, and literature review.

2.2 Research questions

The research has proceeded on the foundation of the following questions-

1. How waste pickers shape their everyday life within the edge of the dumping ground?
2. Why do waste pickers reconstruct the meaning of waste through their association with it?

3. What strategies are applied by the waste pickers to combat the sensorial experience of waste

in the contaminated atmosphere of the dumping ground?

4. What factors have sustained an amiable relation between municipality, waste dealers, and the waste pickers?

5. What circumstances lead waste pickers to feelings of marginalization, barring them to privilege from the rights and entitlements of a city life?

2.3 Study site

My curiosity on waste has been designed through waste pickers' involvement in being able to physically shift through it and overcome the challenges of waste picking at the *Boragaon* dumping ground. As regards my study, the bulk of the field work has been conducted in different phases between October 2020 to February, 2022 in the setting of the dumpsite and adjacent housing location of the waste pickers, i.e. *Vigyan Path, Paschim (west) Boragaon*, Guwahati. Towards the end, a month's field work has been accomplished at the new dumpsite *Belor Tol* in *Pub (east) Boragaon,* one kilometer away from the old dumpsite, to move deeper into the nuances and effects of workspace shift. These spaces helped me to get detailed evidence of how waste pickers live in the intersections of economic, social, and urban life. It also took me to focus on the everyday forms of practice to counter the intense devaluation of their work.

My intention to choose this place as the field site is due to its status as the only dumping ground of Guwahati, and due to the easy availability of waste pickers in its periphery. Unlike the metro cities of Delhi and Pune, door to door collection of waste is not a complete success at Guwahati, therefore, itinerant waste collectors could not be a part of the study. Solid waste of the city actually ends up at the dumpsite from where the dumpsite waste pickers extract value. From the interviews, I could draw how waste poses as fundamentally unique material resource for the waste pickers. This led me to challenge my earlier convention of waste as the wasted, and the defunct. It led me to appreciate the ability in the waste pickers to traverse the social boundary of dirt and filth and adopt waste picking as a practice of order and security.

The *Boragaon* dumpsite is located at about 15 km from the city of Guwahati, the capital city in the state of Assam, and the largest city in the Northeastern region of India. The dumpsite was selected in 2008 as the disposal site for a period of 20 years by the Government of Assam, and it would remain under the jurisdiction of the Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC). Since then, innumerable waste materials have been discarded after different journeys of previous ownership, and celebration as utilities. This waste plot has an area of about 108 bigha (a traditional unit of land and usually less than one standard acre). According to the locals, the grotesque, grey, dark, and scary view of the dumping ground today has been different before. The area was previously barren, and with its proximity to the wetland Deepor Beel[1], it stood without disturbing the ecology of the surrounding swampy lands. However, once waste dumping commenced, the wetland had to suffer its deterioration affecting its aquatic life through contamination of the water bodies, and overall ecosystem.

2.3.1 Study sample and population

The focus of the study has been on Guwahati's dumpsite waste pickers. The majority of the people residing on the border of the *Boragaon* dumping ground are self-employed as waste pickers on this disposal site.

My interviews took place with 72 waste pickers, 6 waste dealers/contractors, 7 GMC officials, and 16 individuals who were a heterogeneous population of shopkeepers, chemist, electronic rickshaw drivers, homemakers, and relatives of the waste pickers who were occasionally found at the home of the latter. The sample size has been considered adequate for the study as it has reached the point of saturation. The data collected have captured the diversity, depth, and nuances of the issues studied, and thereby seem to have demonstrated content validity (Francis et al., 2010).

[1] It is the perennial freshwater lake (beel) with variety of fish species, medicinal plants, located to the south-west of Guwahati city, and Assam's only Ramsar site. Apart from it, Deepor beel has been declared as an Important Bird Area (IBA) site and herd of Asiatic wild animals could be spotted. The *Boragaon* dumping ground sat next to the deepor beel, and even the new GMC dumping ground Belor Tal, is said to be posing threats to the existence of the beel.

The waste pickers are involved in the dual task of waste picking and classifying the waste according to its types and category. Waste pickers interviewed were both male and female and aged between 19 and 83. These waste pickers are the first generation to be involved in the occupation of waste picking. Some of them are married, staying with their spouses and children, while some were single women living with her relative, and some separated women living with her children. There were some waste pickers who never went to school while some completed primary schooling. Before entering the occupation of waste picking, women were mostly busy with household chores in the villages of the rural districts of Assam.

On the other hand, some men were involved in agricultural activities, and some owned petty shops and worked as drivers of pick-up vans during their time at village. Some of the participants pondered over occupational shift if provided with an alternative, while other participants seem to be satisfied in waste picking, not considering about change of the occupation. Children has been intentionally left out of the study owing to ethical issues in particular, and their shy nature to interact as well as minimal willingness to stick to the interview time in general.

My everyday attempt to talk and take waste pickers' approval to initiate a conversation largely depended on the emotional state of the waste pickers. The emotions served as vital to the researcher's attempt to gain approval and entry, and also maintain rapport and accessibility (Copp, 2008). I also tried to infuse the tool of 'active listening' to accurately hear and interpret the research participants' narratives (Ayres, 2008). In many instances, I have maintained 'silence' as an active non-verbal listening strategy to communicate respect and empathy to the respondents while at the same time demonstrating composed patience (ibid.). Following Karnieli-Miller et al. (2009), a reciprocal and non-hierarchical research encounter has been developed where I also have shared experiences and observations in order to give participants 'voice' and 'dignity'.

Narratives of the respondents were written down as field notes because most of them did not consent to be audio-recorded. I, however, was permitted to capture the surroundings through videography and photographs. The interviews were conducted in the languages of Assamese, Bengali, and Hindi, and each interview lasted approximately

an hour. I later translated the interview into English language. The transcripts were consulted several times in order to determine the specific themes that emerged (Silverman, 2011). The themes were derived after a detailed analysis of the participants' narration of their everyday experiences.

The waste pickers have found the work of waste picking and the dumpsite by word of mouth. It is the reliance on the network of family members and fellow villagers which has facilitated their entry into the city of Guwahati. There are also instances where some of the husbands of female waste pickers have discovered the work on visit to Guwahati, and suggested their spouses to shift to Guwahati.

These waste pickers originally hail from the districts of *Barpeta, Morigaon, Nagaon, Darrang, and Dhubri* in the state of Assam. They have been working as waste pickers under private waste owners[2] at the *Boragaon* Dumping Ground at Guwahati, for the past 13 to 15 years. They are represented by the religion of Islam, the language spoken among them is Bengali, and are referred as Miya Muslims by themselves, waste dealers, and by the GMC officials. Due to the dominant presence of the Muslim waste pickers, their spatial location is accounted as a Muslim neighbourhood in this study. There are also a few Hindu households in the same neighbourhood that are engaged in other occupations such as casual labour, owning shops, and rearing livestock.

2.4 Methods of data collection

My primary mode of data collection has been ethnography accompanied by non-participant observation, semi-structured face-to-face interviews, unstructured observation, informal discussions, and field notes. This was also backed up by consulting literature, journals, newspapers, and archives. The tools aided in facilitating communication in the field that can emerge from the ordinary area of the dumpsite, the houses, and amidst the work of classifying waste materials. In addition, I have relied upon open-ended questions as a process of empowerment in order to enable the research participants to express themselves freely.

[2] Waste dealers, waste owners and waste contractors have been used interchangeably in the study.

Convenience sampling has been used to reach out to the research participants at and near the field sites based on their 'ease of availability' (Saumure & Given, 2008). This sampling technique helped me to approach those participants that were interested on my arrival in the dumping area. They have been usually accessible at the dumpsite, in the courtyard of their homes, in the road connecting the residential areas to the dumpsite (a walking distance of 5-7 minutes), and even in the nearby shops.

My entry to the field has been through one of my acquaintances who resides near to the informal settlements of the waste pickers. She is a homemaker who lives with her family in a rented concrete Assam-type house. I was introduced to the waste pickers by her and by directly approaching them at their informal settlements. On earlier conversation with her, she informed me that few female waste pickers help her in laundry or cleaning her compound. I was also assured that the waste pickers are sociable.

To ease any kind of suspicion, I greeted them by exchanging pleasantries and would familiarize myself as a student of a university. Later many would know me as student of some college as the concept of university was alien to some. At most beginning of my introduction to the waste pickers, I clarified that I wanted to interact with them for the purpose of knowing their work and livelihood. They also had been assured that the information to be provided by them would not cause any harm later either physically or emotionally. Many had been reluctant initially to talk citing reasons as loss of time in the work or assuming that narratives from them is of not much importance. In due course of time, I could feel and see welcoming gestures from the participants that led me to converse better. Many would share experiences and ask me how I would interpret had I been in their position. It resembled how they gradually incorporated me in their lives and were willing to know about my adjustment in their space.

2.4.1 Ethnography

My selection of ethnographic methods has been to know the community of the waste pickers through their 'local interpretations' (Fetterman, 2010), and how they situate themselves pragmatically regarding the ascriptions of waste. It was important for me to gain knowledge and touch upon something central about their social, religious, economic,

and cultural life. For this reason, they cannot be perceived as an entity that could be taken for granted but as a lived and contested reality (Baviskar, 1995).

My concern lay in understanding from the voices of the waste pickers about the greater comparison of their work with other tasks deemed clean rather than appreciation of labor in a seemingly difficult and dirty work. Henceforth, to learn how they reflect on such notions, multiple role-taking, behavior, identities, events and circumstances, ethnographic interviews served as a route to grasp the details. As Maanen (1988) remarks, 'ethnographies are portraits of diversity in an increasingly homogenous world. They display the intricate ways individuals and groups understand, accommodate, and resist a presumably shared order'. This is taken as evidence to look into the intimate and deep everyday life practices of the group of the waste pickers under study.

Adopting the ethnographic approach has been my intention to also record the layers of meanings, inferences, and implications (Geertz, 1973) of urban poor people's accounts of their experiences in the social and work milieus (Routray, 2014). In the process of documenting their proficiencies and relations shaped by the city, I attempted to take into account the experiential and contextual realities with 'empathy and mutuality' (Stacey, 1988). I try to examine how the urban poor, the migrants in this study, 'embody, mediate, and enact the operations and results of unequal power' (Willis & Trondman, 2000). Most importantly, I have seen how an unorganized subaltern group of urban poor is able to profess a readiness to claim habitation and livelihood (Chatterjee, 2004). In attempting to illuminate an understanding of waste, dirty work, stigma, and marginality, I explored the ability of the human agency to withstand challenges and mediate sustenance in a new place. In studying work performances, I observed how workers constitute their identities and subvert the labels and stigma imposed on them by outsiders. It signifies how ethnographies can represent interests and lives of the people which otherwise also remain constrained, silenced and discredited.

Through ethnography, I have tried to represent the participants and their way of infusing between other's rejection and their resilience. The stories and accounts of the participant's narratives has aided me to increase the range of knowledge than to be in the previous assumptions about the hassles and intimacies of them and their work. It is by

way of my direct participation in observing waste pickers' work and life that led me to discover and witness lives being encouraged through the vital materiality of something as abject as waste. I endeavored to explore how waste pickers regard waste for its conversion to value. The ethnography in fact revealed that there is a constant communicative act (both symbolic and dialogue) between the researcher and the researched. It is through the concern for the 'digging of the data' in order that the 'real story' to be grasped and told (Maanen, 1988).

2.4.2 Challenges and delights of an ethnography of waste

Researching a segregated urban space where waste lays in abundance after it is casted out from the city, has been physically and mentally challenging for me. The space where they reside and work is a marginal environment, featured by constrained access which is attributed to the presence of dirt and filth. Having to step in the periphery of the dumpsite, my toes (inside my socks and shoes) would automatically twitch. It felt as if dirt would ooze through the shoe. The rotten smell was enveloped in the whole area. I realized that the stench is unmanageable, and I am to see the excess of waste on all of my visits to the dumping area.

Making myself understand that people make a life here, while accepting and adopting to the environment was the strategy for me as a non-resident researcher. However, as in-depth field work commenced in the semi-opening of the Covid-19 lockdown phases, I had the privilege of putting a mask on. I tried my best to withstand the nauseous feeling. My research participants would react by bursting into peals of laughter on seeing me with mask during the period from October, 2020 till almost a year. They would mock me that my fear for Covid-19 was real and heightened. The waste pickers tried to convince me that the Covid-19 pandemic was a hoax. The reason they ascribed is due to the zero case of infection among them. They cited that they have become immune by working so close with waste, and thus, the Covid-19 virus infecting them is a trivial issue.

In the first phases of the fieldwork, i.e. in the first two months, I remained a 'marginal native' (Frielich, 1970). I could not explore and get into the nook and corner of the lives of the waste pickers. The rapport building being in its nascent stage, the role relation that emerged was not so convenient. It has been problematic to be similar among

them owing to my outsider status, and they see me as a harmless intruder. There have been innumerable instances when the research participants would simply decide not to talk to me. They seemed curious at first on the pretext of taking me to a government representative, and thought I approached them to either help or provide some alternatives. But on knowing that I have nothing in particular to contribute or rescue them from their *letera kam* (which loosely translates to dirty work), there emerged a bridge between them and myself.

Some instances also turned into episodes of embarrassment. They would remind me of my autonomies to be able to live well, and how their socio-economic position sharply stood juxtaposed with me. This was the fundamental inequality; that the social arrangements of class determined that I had mobility and freedom and they did not. I felt awkward through the comparisons they drew between us. Some even pointed out that my collaboration with them for my academic pursuit would not change their status quo. It is where I realized how power inequalities made them irritated, poignant, and interrogators.

Convincing them to talk about life with waste would be as tough as making oneself ready to touch waste the first day. In my mind, I did not want our coordination to fail. As Thompson (1979) has written, 'the social scientist who wishes to study rubbish must at the very least paddle in it'. I was determined to know waste at the dumpsite closely and the complicated every day of the waste pickers' ground-level experience with waste. In the time that came, I, however, experienced their warmth of speech, and banters and talks over *cha* (tea), or chewing *tamul* (betel-nut) and *paan* (betel leaves) with them.

Baviskar (1995) importantly, points out that we need to adapt a more self-conscious attitude towards the object of inquiry, recognizing the dialectics of our relationship with them. Given the nature and the object of the work, I was always concerned and particularly cautious of my symbolic presentation. To experience waste was physically risky for a novice like me. But I tried my best not to display any signs of repugnance towards waste. I wholeheartedly internalized that the waste pickers were harnessing the power of waste to earn and live. Any of my opinion that would portray waste as a manifestation of negative ideas was consciously avoided during the tenure of my field study.

Many research participants launched into a series of questions regarding my interests in visiting the area. Few women waste pickers were predominantly concerned if I could endure the physicality of the area over a longer time. Together with their male counterparts, some were grateful to me for coming alike a guest. Otherwise, outsiders approaching them has remained an alien notion because there is more distaste than curiosity.

Noticing their strenuous labor, it made me recognize the dump not as a place of work but as an ontological experience of labor (Millar, 2018). Even the courtyard of their living spaces served as grounds for reproducing labor between other household tasks. It has been their insistence on being hardworking rather than unutilized manpower in the city. The labor showed that notion of waste would unfold in a covert region where fixed assumptions and systems of value are suspended (Thompson, 1979). To supplement them, I had to cultivate the habit of being a waste sorter irregularly. The experience did prove my uneasiness at outset but overall culminated as satisfying.

For me, touching waste was at first shadowed by my inhibition, and later being having to physically touch it. I did not labor (picking waste or sorting waste) alongside the waste pickers on every encounter with them in their work. However, occasionally touched and classified a few bottles and containers when enthusiastically called upon to do so by the waste pickers. My minimal participation in their work has been undertaken as a gesture of respect for the dirty work they religiously performed. This approach has been pursued in sync with Merleau-Ponty (1968) according to whom, it is through our senses that we not only perceive others but also share and create a world with them. The adopted link between me and the waste pickers touching the same wastes in certain time convinced their work as noteworthy. This translated into moments of joy, affection, and happiness for both the waste pickers and me.

Despite the ups and downs in the field, I have been introduced to these people who treat waste with openness. The daily coming of waste from the city suffuses their everyday lives. I am proud of them for their ability to utilize waste in different aspects and be self-sufficient in the nature of the work. It led me feel uncomfortable to think how some of the waste from my home also might have touched their hands. But the

transformation and empowerment that waste could make in the lives of the research participants explains how dirt is capable of constructing something good. This has altered my notion to view waste through the lens of utility. Towards the end, when I have started representing the waste pickers through my writing, the idea of how dirty waste makes it convenient to make waste pickers survive, is inspiring. It is this social life of waste (Millar, 2018) that has led to my collaboration with the waste pickers. A community until the start of many research like this one, keeps working in the distant dumpsite, undisturbed and unattended by academic or other concerns.

2.5 Research tools

Analysis followed the tool of axial coding advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1990). It follows the process of open-coding where the raw data (e.g., field-notes, interviews) are broken down so that as many ideas and concepts as possible are identified and labeled. This sets the stage for axial coding which is the phase where concepts and categories that begin to stand out are refined and relationships among them are pursued systematically (Benaquisto, 2008). Through this analysis, I have been aided to elucidate the interrelationship between themes, identify core and recurring themes, and then to explore the extent to which such themes might be indicative of more generalized phenomena (Simpson et al., 2014).

By considering waste and waste pickers' connection to the city of Guwahati, my analysis works in favor of waste's materiality to enable waste pickers' strategic role in incorporating themselves in the city. Given the series of lacks and absences in work environment, and experiences of symbolic stigma and marginalization, waste pickers find ways to designate themselves as responsible informal workers. They become potent symbols of settling a large portion of disorder through their labor.

2.6 Research Ethics

Before starting the interviews, I made the goal of my research clear to the participants and thus, gained their consent. During the interviews, some research participants conveyed that disclosing their identity or narratives will be accepted by them. In their opinion, when they have shared 'truth', they have nothing to fear. On the other hand, few

participants were apprehensive of the consequence of their identity being revealed. This section of the participants was little worried if any 'powerful' individual would coerce their force upon them. In their opinion, they would not be able resist the devaluation of their honesty and hard labor. Thus, any identifiable information of the research participants has therefore been anonymized so that confidentiality is not jeopardized. This is being pursued in a bid to protect the waste pickers from potential vulnerabilities.

2.7 Review of literature

The people in the orbit of a dumpsite are active agents though they appear to be passive recipients of modernity's ruins (Reno, 2016). It is harder to see these people involved in waste collection, and how they dwell in places becoming entangled with waste. The fact that garbage keeps coming in the landfill or the dumpsite offers a critical clue about the material conditions that make waste pickers' particular way of life possible (ibid.). In her reference to Rio's garbage dump, Millar (2018) acknowledges the work of the waste pickers not merely as a survival strategy, but which express distinct conception of human well-being and ideas of what life is for. That is, it takes into account the issue of how collecting materials of waste on the dump forms an experience of existence through the discards. This leads to emphasize how process, practice, and material relations take shape through everyday actions. She points that the fact of return of the waste pickers to dumpsite after a hiatus illuminates how labor and existential conditions intersect in ways that defy standard interpretations of wage less work as either as a survival or (more rarely) an act of resistance.

For many, waste picking provides steady employment, a source of identity, citizenship, but also a stereotyped image. The occupation flows across physical and social spaces, intersecting various roles and burdens (Wittmer, 2021). To counter negativity associated with the labor, Gutberlet (2008) pointed that it is important to reconceptualise waste as a resource which would help to understand waste pickers' need to redeem its value. Because the dependence on or recovery of waste is waste pickers' attempt at integrating and making claims on the city. This signifies willingness of the waste pickers to belong to the city through which they are able to express forms of agency. Even though they occupy the margins of the city, they keep a motivation to move beyond the

edges by situating themselves within such positions. They scour the dumpsite for whatever can be resold or recycled where their livelihood is shaped by the influx of partly used things from the world outside (Roy, 2021).

Taking a look back, waste pickers or ragpicker/chiffonniers as called in Paris in 1900's were excluded and restricted in their activities of waste picking by city ordinances. However, they created their own spaces in the shanty towns and asserted their independence from the rest of the urban population through appropriation of space although they were totally dependent on the larger society for their livelihood (Sibley, 1995). This representation conveys the fascination with the disorder of waste that led waste pickers to adapt to waste's rejection. Even though their working conditions is hardly dignified, waste pickers continue to provide an invaluable service to local authorities (Yu et al., 2020). Thus, the socio-economic reality of the lives of the waste pickers as well the essentiality of their work for effective waste management necessitates legal, social, and economic safeguards through policy action (Chadha, 2021).

Doing waste work that many people find contemptible, Boo (2012) points to the slums of Mumbai where garbage sorters lift family above subsistence. It draws attention to the fact that with access to mass waste, they have the skill to find and make use of something that others did not. It is waste pickers' conscious choice of waste picking for its "incentives" (Bagchi, 2016). Capturing and remaking estranged commodities becomes a source of pride, and act of self-creation amidst the wider public refusal to value waste.

In this context, it would be interesting to look upon Ghosh (2017) documenting the lives of the trash pickers of Dhapa, a dumpsite that lies on the fringes of eastern Kolkata. He brings to light the utility of the waste pickers in the context of proliferation of city waste, who serve the society silently and sincerely. A community that has been serving a metropolitan city with its painstaking practice of waste recycling without recognition, remuneration, or social security, is a group that only merits the suspicion of being thieves and vandals.

In spite of such labelling, these waste pickers do not bear any rancour towards a world that does not recognize their lived identity. It is common in India that garbage or refuse or waste are commonly identified with the people who handle them, usually in

haphazard and unsystematic ways (Doron & Jeffrey, 2018). With cultural beliefs and practices related to waste, waste pickers who mostly belong to low-castes, thereby, remain invisible as an army of informal waste managers. However, they are willing to handle garbage in pursuit of valuable recyclables because the waste brings potential for money, capital, and perhaps even improved status (Kornberg, 2019).

Waste pickers actually form a crucial part of the city's solid waste system, the economy, environment, and the quality of the cities (Dias, 2016). The practice of waste picking is not easy and usually no steps are seriously taken to improve the working conditions of the waste pickers. They occupy the bottom of the informal waste work pyramid but typically receive little social protection. The lack of social security and employment protections also mean that these waste workers inhibit the thin line between survival and failure. Exposing themselves to toxic contaminants, they develop an informal circuit of transactions or infra-economy (Gidwani & Maringanti, 2016). They use a strategic approach to promote waste as post-use valuables. The waste with disparate and temporal properties are converted into reusable forms in secondary circuits of value (Reddy, 2013). It thus provides the waste pickers a record of the life of being able to live with the aid of waste recovery.

Even in the face of cultural sanctions, ideological assertions**,** and the stereotypic against it, waste still signifies use in its messy visibility. The materiality of waste in fact holds the power to break open the possibility for transformation (Millar, 2018). It has helped to form a strategic alliance with people (Fredericks, 2018) where the relationship is both dynamic and corporeal (Ingold & Palsson, 2013). This shows how waste matters in its encounter with and animation by/of human bodies thus, revealing that the materiality of waste when viewed from the perspective of the association, captures waste in its sociality.

Hawkins (2006) shows that the sociality foregrounds how waste becomes present to us, how it is encountered and experienced. It is a cultural indicator of how one specific category of people (here waste pickers) relates to waste which someone else produces. Thus, no matter how waste stands expelled and abject, but as an expelled material it both reels and fascinates (Laporte, 2002) which makes waste have its impact.

Exploring this significance of waste, it is seen how informal waste pickers aim to establish personal relationships with phenomena to successfully screen out relevant material, whether for knowledge generation or economic sustenance. This shows the retrieval of waste's workings and flows (Reno, 2015) highlighting the true value of waste that connect human-object relations. Far from being fixed in advance, waste is seen as historically mutable, geographically contingent and both expressive of social values and sustaining to people (Gregson & Crang, 2010). It depicts that waste do not merely exist as a symbolic category. But gives the impression of carrying meanings of acceptability to the ones to whom waste matters.

Millar (2018) shows that she approaches garbage as the material basis through which waste pickers rearticulate notions of value and the good life but not as the 'degree zero of value' (Frow, 2003). In this sense, waste may be considered to have the afterlife that transcends its tag of waste and assumes the characteristics of value. This notion of the possibility of value in waste has dug out the urge to undo waste from the discourse of borders, refuse, and rejection. Moving beyond such social constructs, waste is today prioritized between/by different categories of consumers like the waste pickers, the waste dealers, the municipality, and even private enterprises.

Hawkins (2006) highlights that contemporary waste habits have become connected to the practice of virtue or a sense of obligation to rules and moral codes. In making this point, it shows how the meaning of waste has changed from rubbish to recyclables and the moral economy of waste. From the point of seeing waste as a source of risk from rubbish, it is now judged capable of generating a trend of informal certainty. As the waste markets provide employment to sizable numbers of urban poor like the waste pickers, they draw upon the assemblages of essentialisms and justifications of waste.

Within the informal recovery of recyclable waste, the exchange relation between waste dealers and waste pickers usually becomes long-term (Gill, 2010). The waste dealer, as the sole source of credit for the waste pickers, assumes far greater importance in the life of the pickers (ibid.). Such embeddedness is also shared among the municipality and waste pickers where the former do not intervene in latter's frequenting over wastes. Possibly, it is the unspoken privilege bestowed upon the 'illegal' but silent

waste pickers. Closer to these relations, it is witnessed the way one exhibits benevolence, closer ties, and levels of trust in the social relationships curved out of waste engagements.

It is actually the lively potential of waste which has aided the symbiosis between people and non-human waste. While closely interrogating the materiality of waste, it opens up the potentialities to view waste work as meaningful. This notion signifies how waste work is becoming a mode of power to bring multiple agencies of people together. It makes them the reflexive agents[3] who have to diagnose their situations, have to identify their own interests, and design the project of work they deem appropriate to attaining their ends (Archer, 2003). Through this sense, the dynamics of waste work is understood to possess opportunities available to different social groups. Dirty work like waste picking is made satisfying by the waste pickers 'not simply as a function of the objective properties of the job' (Kallerberg, 1977). But co-constructed along with the co-pickers. In many cases, the precarious nature of the work is also used as an attribute to boost the occupational prestige of the job (Deery et al., 2019).

Galazka & O'Mahoney (2021) indicates the dirty materiality of waste being accepted by the workers who conditions their body to desensitize to the dirt. Their engagement with the materialities and discourses of their work operate diachronically (ibid.). The material interactions of the work in fact serve the function of making waste workers immune to physical signs of disgust. Work become so intrinsic to their mental processes that the workers are hardly aware of the existence of the dirt and filth. They seek to exercise some form of control over the nature and purpose of the work and establish a positive context within which they work (Deery et al., 2019).

The workers construct their own perspective over the work that led to the intersection of habits, bodies, and the waste materials of the dumpsite. Waste is provocative here where the once redundant and rejected can catch us in networks of obligation that reverberate across our bodies and invite us to live with it differently (Hawkins, 2006). This aspect reveals the changed ways that make people involved in the waste work in spite of the recurring stigma or negativity.

[3] I have referred the waste pickers and those associated within informal waste work as the reflexive agents.

In India, forms of waste work have been toxic, burdened on lower sections of people, and is officially categorized as unskilled work (Rajendra, 2024). Waste pickers experience vulnerabilities but continue to exist in this informal activity of waste recovery. Symbolic staining also emerges in this dirty work involving moral taint and/or social taint that rubs into (Bergman & Chalkley, 2009) those performing it, staining character, and the sense of the self.

Waste picking is represented as a profane exchange of material, with economic and physical- but no moral-significance (Reno, 2016). While the daily work of waste picking provides the waste pickers with distinct learnings on waste and its recovery, the work fails miserably to get highlighted as a public service. There seems to be a lack of acknowledgement of the fact that in most Global South cities waste pickers also contribute to mitigate climate change, by diverting recyclables from the dumpsites (Gutberlet & Carenzo, 2020). The social standing of the waste pickers and the occupation is often compromised with the corporeal and spiritual burden of pollution, enlisting them into labors of dirt. Waste pickers' exclusion from the city or their silencing reflects and exacerbates their distancing rhetoric (Bell, 2019).

The waste pickers, however, take on the stigma and exclusion inflicted upon them with an aim to sustain in the informal waste market. As waste is positively identified as filthy, their link with reclamation of waste from the dumpsite is demeaned. Eventually, waste becomes the unvalued and indefinable other that is expelled by the society in order to shore up individual and societal borders (Moore, 2012). As such the work dispenses negative meaning and stigma with their labour. Despite extracting value from waste (Shankar & Sahni, 2018), waste pickers remain marginalized within urban informal sector. And the waste continues to be experienced by the waste pickers through their senses, emotions, and affective relations (Hawkins, 2005).

Further, the marginalizing tendencies from the state or the city play out openly with practices that pushes waste pickers towards the periphery. They are subjected to conditions in the urban margins where they struggle with their social positions (Aceska et al., 2019). They have to withstand the dehumanizing disposition of their work by

embodying a liminal hybrid identity to disassociate from their corporeal or sensorial selves (Dasgupta, 2023).

In fact, waste pickers exercise conditional agency to circumvent oppressive conditions by creating an insulated universe, a third space amid the overwhelming filth where they treat the waste solely as a means of subsistence. It is a sort of art of conservation of the self in a landscape of despair (Fredericks, 2018). Their everyday negotiations are thus aimed at reconstituting themselves in the work where not everyone readily get involves. It is due to the dirty physicality of the workspace, and the nature of work which are joined in filth, that operate as a deviance from the normal for the non-waste pickers.

The physical space appropriated by the waste pickers for living and work, however, converts into a place of inequality. It naturally erects the boundary exhibiting a classification by place. Identified by lack of services, the place falls into the category of desertion. This lead to the absence of access to the city's infrastructure which limits their participation in the city (Aceska et al., 2019). Drawing on Erving Goffman's (1963) analysis of stigma and on Pierre Bourdieu's (1982) theory of group making, Wacquant (2006) stresses the distinctive weights and effects of territorial stigmatization as well as the insuperable political dilemmas posed by the material dispersion and symbolic splintering of the new urban poor. The stigmatization feeds the apprehensions of the urban poor which only aggravates their process of assimilation. In this sense, differentiation and marginalization advance in unison and mutually reinforce each other. These poor city dwellers in fact fail to overturn the rituals of marginality that bind them to the governing elite (ibid.).

Being urban poor, the waste pickers also have to undergo spatial hardships, and are conveniently placed as a self-sufficient group by the state. There is negligible expense by the state in the context of repurposing waste that comes to the dumpsite regularly which is appropriated by the waste pickers. The local authorities draw immense benefits from them and informal sector activity without paying them wages or any form of a stipend (Blaauw, Pretorius & Schenck, 2019). The waste pickers cannot avoid but are obliged to confront.

Moreover, as formal security is alien to them, they have to go through a phase of social adjustment within it (Davis, 2006). Though the absence of protection is upsetting, and dignity of the work is often lowered, they are rare in pestering the authorities of state or municipalities with any demand. Scholars and activists have documented this contributions of informal recyclers as being highly coordinated and efficient in providing services, often at zero cost to municipalities (Chikarmane, 2016; Gill, 2010; Luthra, 2020). This becomes a reflection of the power relation unravelling that one group gets undermined by another.

Bauman (2004) have emphasized that waste collectors or the pickers are the unsung heroes of modernity who continuously has to refresh and make salient again the borderline between normality and pathology, health and illness, the desirable and the repulsive, and the inside and the outside of the human universe. That borderline is said to need their constant vigilance and diligence because it is anything but a natural frontier. He mentions that the boundary is drawn afresh with every round of garbage collection and removal. And that its sole existential mode is the incessant activity of separation.

As informal waste pickers' activities do not fit the technical, conceptual frame of modern urban solid waste management systems (Dias, 2016), it makes exclusionary tendencies towards them unescapable. But in spite of it, waste pickers do confront an overarching sense of helplessness rooted in the intractability of their situation, yet build a set of positive meanings- survival, destiny, and hope- rooted in specific facets of their lives and enacted through distinct temporal frames (Shephered, 2022).

And, in the context of cultural values attached to waste profoundly (Blincow, 1986), negative attitudes continue to appear extending to these people working with waste. With their position at the lower end of the social hierarchy (Gill, 2010), suffering a greater sense of differentiation, and discrimination get common as the work is considered nauseating and unclean. In the context of India, social ranking of the waste pickers is also entrenched through low-caste status, religious affiliations, and low economic position (ibid.). Inconveniently, transforming the stigma gets difficult because transitioning from the status of this dirty work of waste picking to some other work is not that waste pickers embrace frequently. But waste picking as a form of informal activity become a way to

establish a relationship between these groups within the city (Jaffe & Koster, 2019), and being supportive of one another in this work.

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