Chapter 3

Locating the field- Waste, migrants, and waste picking in Guwahati, Assam

3.1 Introduction

Waste as a post-consumer leftover, has been used as a resource by one of the migrant communities in Guwahati city. They have found their livelihood in waste, thus, digressing from their ancestral agrarian occupation (Misra, 2018). It has also helped them to escape the problem of flood, and financial insufficiency faced in their villages of various districts of Assam. However, in the urban space of the city, these waste pickers are compelled to occupy the lowest rank in the hierarchy of occupational identity, economic structures, and power.

Due to the long standing debate on citizenship of the Bengali Muslims (of East Bengal origin) in Assam, these migrants employed as waste pickers of the dumping ground cannot hide but face an identity crisis. Their interactions with the public reveal a struggle for self-identity, and a reflection of fear psychosis in their body language (Misra, 2018). Nevertheless, the in-migration from the rural districts of Assam to Guwahati city by surviving on waste is visible in the city. In spite of the public perception in Assam to name them as Bangladeshis, and irrespective of the lower status of the waste work, these waste pickers have continued to engage in this work of informal waste recovery.

At Guwahati, waste management is carried out by municipality services under the aegis of the state. Official incorporation of the dumpsite waste pickers into the Guwahati municipality however, lay on the periphery. This is attributed to the fact of municipality being implemented as a sign of modernity. This stands opposite to where revaluation of waste that is carried out through informal circuits like the waste pickers (Calafate-Faria, 2013). They are not considered the force to give the city a sense of hope in waste management, and thus, begin to witness miserable set of circumstances (Zeilig, 2007). The work regimes and routines operate in isolation and is far away from the state. The management of garbage has therefore, become a tenacious problem due to gaps and lack of serious efforts by the town/city authorities (Pradhan et al., 2012).

While the risk and profitability of waste is recognized, the conceptualization of it as a localized phenomenon has not happened (Fagan, 2003). The municipalities prefer to work at their convenience and system, thereby, rendering the waste pickers as an invisible group. Thus, the crack between formal and informal waste management cannot be cemented for there is no talk for mutual consensus between the two. Literatures about informal waste workers also shows that conventional approaches in solid waste management (SWM) usually lead to capital intensive solutions that ignore the potential contributions of the informal recycling centres and workers (Dias, 2012).

Around the globe, informal waste management did not emerge out of the blue. From a historical perspective, informal waste economies – at least as they are recognized today began to develop around the 19th century. This was mainly in Europe and largely a by-product of urbanization and industrialization. As urban centres began to form and expand, the quantity of waste generated by them shot up as well (Balarman, 2015). Waste became much more concentrated in cities. While the miasma theory of disease linked filth and garbage with the epidemics raging through the cities, concepts of urban ecosystems or the political structures that could tackle citywide material problems had not yet developed (Liboiron, 2012).

The increase of garbage in the course of industrialization, in fact, created a new problem: how to find the best management strategies, which was resolved in the early 20th century through the system of landfills (Nikolova, 2012). Simultaneously, the spread of the industrial revolution led to an increased demand for raw material, which proved to be infinitely cheaper when sourced from waste. As countries develop more, it is certain that their urban centres tend to produce a higher proportion of dry waste (paper, plastic, metal and the like), which have huge markets as raw material for the manufacturing sector. The informal sector that began to identify items of value within waste streams, and then source, aggregate, process and eventually recycle them, began to form (Balarman, 2015).

Informal waste trades have organically formed in developing countries. While the first scavenging sectors sprung up in Europe, waste management systems in these countries were soon formalized and steered by local governing bodies, removing any

room for unorganized private entities to continue making a living off waste (ibid.). However, the reverse has been true for countries such as India, Brazil, Serbia, and Cambodia. These countries have witnessed rapid urbanization which directly translates to a huge increase in waste generation. They also experience large-scale migration of unskilled, untrained labour towards cities, most of which have no option but to turn to informal occupations such as waste-picking. It is well documented how urban waste has been contributing to the economy by creating livelihoods (Kumar et al., 2019).

However, the local governance mechanisms of the above countries have not yet developed to the point of completely taking over the workspace of informal players. In India, for example, municipal corporations have the infrastructure and capacity to collect an average of only 70 percent of municipal solid waste to actually process it. This creates the ideal working conditions for a parallel shadow economy to operate (Balarman,2015). Although municipal officials tend to ignore this informal economy, the state has encouraged it indirectly through the non-enforcement of regulative law (Harris-White & Rodrigo, 2016). Thereby, municipal waste governance takes a smooth diversion mode that leads to the development and functioning of the informal waste economy.

Drawing on the nature of waste and its management, the chapter locates historical insights alongside waste shaping the city of Guwahati, and its capability that has afforded potentialities for a migrant community to participate in the informal handling of waste. The first section delves into the history of waste and its management from the earlier to present times. The second part analyses migration pattern of the migrants, and their identity in the state of Assam and Guwahati. The last section of the chapter focuses on the migrants taking up the occupation of waste picking that forms a complex spatial relationship between the city, waste, and waste pickers.

3.2 Understanding waste and its management in Global and National context

3.2.1 Pre-Industrial period

Attempt to understand contemporary patterns of waste disposal, formal management as well as work of informal scavengers[1] or ragpicking, requires a look into the historical dimension. This is not only to cognize the phenomena in its entirety but also to draw cultural similarities and structural continuities (Blincow, 1986). Many examples demonstrate the importance of waste to the scavenging communities that heavily relied upon them. Both historically and today, we find a 'cultural division of labor', where specific ethnic groups constitute the sole or major elements of the scavenger population. It is found that these populations have remained victims of a stigmatized, and denigrated status owing to the defiling nature of the scavenging work (ibid.). But it offers us a way to think about their patterns of reclamation and reuse of waste from disposal which constitutes an important part of their work.

Building on Sjoberg (1960), a brief example of scavenging activities in the pre-industrial city is used here to get an overview of how certain social groups were entrusted with waste work. Scavenging or the rag picking has been part of the first-time activity in which the Japanese called the 'resource generation industry' (Taira, 1964). Referencing the pre-Meiji Japan, the *eta a*nd *hinin* outcast populations have constituted a stigmatized element of society probably since the ninth to tenth centuries (Vos et al., 1982). Initially located both in rural areas and ancient capital cities, they increasingly concentrated in and around the periphery of castle towns, where they were protected by feudal lords. In other urban centers like Kyoto and Edo (Tokyo), these outcasts' population were associated particularly with polluting and/or menial tasks, cobbling, sweeping, and scavenging (Blincow, 1986).

However, with the Meiji era (1868), the legal classification and restrictions surrounding outcastes were removed, but extensive discrimination against the outcasts

[1] The term "waste picker" was adopted at the First World Conference of Waste Pickers in Bogota, Columbia, in 2008 to facilitate global networking and to supplant derogatory terms like "scavenger". Preferred terms, however, vary by place. For example, in South Africa, "reclaimers" and "bagrezi" are used.

at large has continued till a long time (ibid.). Recycling and scavenging activities also continued to remain major forms of labor amongst them. This is because rags became a prized object after Japan was opened to international trade and began to manufacture Western paper in the Meiji Period (1868-1912).

This historical account exposes how scavenging as a polluting work intersect with the social issue of ethnicity. This seems due to the ways in which power and inequality function on these ethnic groups. Sadly, as historical categories, gaps and divisions are made between these groups and others who are higher up in the social hierarchy (Butt, 2020). This has been significantly limiting their access to alternative careers. The group of scavengers' adaptation within the gripping scenario is what makes them seem like the embodiment of people who live through a stigmatized occupation. Because of this, it's possible that lower socio-economic classes have long since performed the majority of the labor involved in disposing of waste.

3.2.2 Colonial times

The legal origins of modern public solid waste management are traced back in the period of 19th century English legislation which introduced the concept of waste collection as a public service (Velis & Vrancken, 2015). According to records, early European visitors to the American colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries frequently complained about the absence of reliable supplies of soap and water, the prevalence of mud and manure, flies and insects, and disgusting tobacco stains (from both spitting and chewing) (Roy, 2012). More than 80 percent of the colonists lived in hygienically primitive situations on small farms or in country villages. Even in larger cities like Philadelphia and Boston, epidemics such as cholera and typhoid necessitated efficient water and sewer systems and stimulated massive public works construction. The legislation was thus, prompted by the growth of the urban reform movement, which associated waste with the spread of disease.

During the colonial period, disease was mainly attributable to garbage because it contaminated water supplies and served as a breeding place for flies, rats, and other disease carrying-vermin (Roy, 2012). In this context, the modernization of the waste management systems was driven by the objective to improve public health and promote

social order (Dias, 2016). In this period, realization dawned on the public authorities to recuperate residual value from waste and perform responsibility for waste collection as well as disposal. As the new systems began operationalizing, informal waste collectors who had previously collected waste in collection services as a source of livelihood, were subjected to stigmatization.

In addition, the urban reforms stood as an obstacle for the urban poor as it left no scope to earn the living from waste. The urban poor were those people moving to cities for better economic chances which gave rise to slums. But the First-World cities understood the urgency to tackle human migration to the cities (Bisen, 2019). Despite many shortcomings, they succeeded in its urban planning through implementing the mass housing agenda that sucked out all forms of informal living. Secondly, it positioned itself as a holistic science with dogmatic procedures, guidelines and codes that governed all forms of human movement within the city. The planning exercise was fruitful as it left no form of human movement to chance and individual whims.

India, on the other hand, saw a less developed urban planning. Indian cities were developed in the post-industrial world by colonial rulers. Before this, cities had primarily remained an extension of the monarch's seat of power or were trading or religious hubs, as was the case in the rest of the world. Till the 18^{th} century, almost all the population resided in rural villages where subsistence agriculture was the mainstay of the economy, alongside networks of commerce and manufacturing (Davey, 2012). But the colonial period coincided with major changes like urbanization and establishments of industries, markets, and towns. These changes accompanied new ways of living.

In addition to the aforementioned, a diverse population entered cities to create living spaces. However, not everyone could live comfortably. Before long, the reality of subsisting on informal work became apparent. Slums were thought to be a good option that is believed to develop into a self-sufficient community inside of a city. With the existence of the economic chasm, some could reap benefits of profit and unaccounted consumption, while many had to sadly thrive on waste/recycling as an assisted economy.

The informal jobs provided livelihoods for many without the state having to bother about such intervention. Bringing informal jobs into the formal fold meant governance

response in the form of legislation and enforcement (Bisen, 2019). But informality gave livelihood without these added complications and the Indian state happily accepted its presence because the alternative meant a hard toil to manage the consequences of disturbing the status quo and any slip-up in it posed grave political risk.

Ironically, the matter of caste and informal work have a history of having an unpleasant symbiotic relationship. It is to be noted that the dynamics of caste manifests or is manifested differently in villages and towns. It is a reality of the invisibility of caste in towns today, and its visibility in the villages since yesteryears. But caste has influenced residential segregation patterns in the villages of India, and castes are split between elite enclaves and slums in towns and cities. In India, within a thousand years from the sixth to the sixteenth century AD, the caste system that started as a simple 'Hindu' practice to organize the society for efficient and peaceful existence transformed into a rigid beast (Bisen, 2019). So strong became its independent identity that it unshackled itself from the reigns of Hinduism and could not even be tamed by any other religious narrative.

This caste system also carried forward India's solution to waste management. By the nineteenth century, the cleaning community was the weakest, and most dejected and exploited section of the Indian society (Bisen,2019). These communities were not allowed to be within physical proximity of the consuming class, nor meet their gaze. The relationship between the two classes became that of master and servant, where the former felt entitled. For instance, a Bhangi[2] was at the beck and call to pick up night soil, sweep streets, and remove other household and commercial waste while a Chamar[3] was a call away to dispose of livestock carcasss (ibid.). The informal job of waste collection in this fold was unfortunate as it was assigned to the lowest place in the striking order of caste.

[2] Chuhra, also known as Bhangi and Balmiki (Sarah Beth, 2014), is a lower caste in India and Pakistan (Rana, 1995). Their traditional occupation is sweeping, a 'polluting' occupation that caused them to be considered untouchables in the caste system (Bodley, 2011)

[3] A Dalit community classified as a Scheduled caste under modern India's system of affirmative action. They are said to be traditionally associated with leather work. Ramnarayan posits that the association of the Chamar community is constructed, and that the Chamars were historically agriculturalist. See, Yadav, B. (2012). Aspirations of Chamars in North India. *The Hindu.* Retrieved on March 20, 2022.

The Indian society in fact relied on these cleaning communities for its waste management.

3.2.3 Post-Colonial era

Even after 76 years of India's Independence, waste work continues to converge with low-caste and even religious minorities. While the act of enduring social isolation and marginalization is common, their placement at the lowest rung of the social strata renders them a fragile position. This sort of social separation and urban segregation is not a frozen existing situation but rather become an ongoing scene redrawing social boundaries. As a consequence, such groups end up being cornered in a city.

This also gives rise to elite anxieties regarding the practices of these urban poor in informal labor and manual work, who inhabit a fluid and shifting urban terrain (Gooptu, 2005). However, they invest themselves in informal economic activities in the marginalized spaces like slums and dumpsite which are wastelands of modern capitalism. The reason for such investment elaborates their own initiatives for the development of their communities. It is the recognition of the urgency to create solutions to address issues between living and work in urban areas.

In this regard, Sanyal (2007) traced out the wasteland as a space for surplus populations, who are external to the domain of contractual labor and rely upon other forms of work and exchange to subsists. In his explanation of capitalism in post-colonial context, he points out that migrants' have not been absorbed by capitalist development. In fact, the migrants have been said by him to occupy 'wasteland' on the outskirts of the capitalist centres. Their encroachment is frequently synchronized to a favorable opportunity for expanding sustaining rights. The crowding of these peripheral areas in fact marks their ability to overshadow social forces and restructure spaces for them.

In reality, the capital and its wastelands have become like a few of the hallmarks of cities today. It shows how the excluded population gradually but securely encroaches on these new exclusive areas (Bhattacharya & Sanyal, 2011). Among the excluded populations, informal urban workforce constitutes a higher proportion. This large informal urban workforce negotiates with a governmentalized state to secure conditions

of their social reproduction, often outside the bounds of legality (Chatterjee, 2004). They rely on the wastelands and engage in labour that is often physically and symbolically detrimental and stigmatizing to the informal army of labourers. They continue to organize themselves to work reflecting the approach towards being economic actors.

The contribution of these population reflects their desire to belong to the city despite located in defiled or secluded spaces. It has actually placed themselves as a means of exploring change, and the thrill of embracing waste through the quest of labor. Even though the work takes a toll on their religious and social identity, they get ready to accommodate it. At the ground level, waste workers are part of a social order anchored in the long-standing prejudices and inequalities (Doron & Jeffrey, 2018).

In her study of Delhi's Muslim communities, Jamil (2014) showed how Muslim waste workers could not avoid the social and economic marginalization of the increasingly capitalist setup of recent years. For them, such marginality was different from the Hindu strictures of caste, but the stigma and the prejudice were similar. The lack of political networks and reliable infrastructures combined with their religious identity constrained the opportunities to move beyond their limited part. Along with the above, waste histories also reveal India's fragmented post-colonial modernity as technologically driven and religiously embedded, viewing waste and waste labour as ritually polluting (Doron & Jeffrey, 2018).

3.3 Discourse of demographic invasion in Assam

3.3.1 A Brief History of Assam

Assam is situated in the North-East of India. It is the largest northeastern state in terms of population while second in terms of area. The state's antiquity can be established from the fact that it has been mentioned in the two great epics- The Mahabharata and the Ramayana and also in the Puranas. In ancient Sanskrit literature both the names 'Pragjyotisha' and 'Kamrupa' were used as designation for ancient Assam.

The state of Assam was ruled by various groups from which the Ahom rule (1228-1826) is a notable one. The Ahoms entered Assam fully assimilated. Describing the

kingdom of Assam during the height of Ahom rule in the seventeenth century, the historian S.K Bhuyan (1949) stated,

> "The kingdom of Assam as it was constituted during the last 140 years of Ahom rule, was bounded on the North by a range of mountains inhabited by the Bhutanese, Akas, Daflas and Abors; on the east, by another line of people by the Mishmis and the Singphos; on the South, by the Garo, Khais, Naga and Patkai hills; on the west, by the Manas or Manaha river on the north bank, and the Habraghat Pargannah on the south in the Bengal district of Rungpore. The kingdom from where it entered from Bengal commenced with the Assam Choky (gate) on the north bank of the Brahmaputra, opposite Goalpara; while on the south bank it commenced from the Nagarberra hill at a distance of 21 miles to the east of Goalpara".

It is during the Ahom dynasty that several tribal communities also came into the historical forefront of Assam. Kacharis, Chutias, and Koch were the prominent tribal groups that were found in the medieval times of Assam. In this precolonial period, peasant families had access to rent-free homestead and garden land and were also free to reclaim uncultivated lands. However, the rule of the Ahom's ended with the Burmese invasion of Assam and the subsequent takeover by the British East India Company following the Treaty of Yandaboo in 1826. Thus, began the colonial era of Assam where the colonial land policy ushered in.

The portrait of early nineteenth-century Assam-a land with vast expanses of uninhabited land-provides a useful vantage point against which to consider Assam's economic and demographic transformation in the subsequent decades (Baruah, 1999). It is only the British conquest of Assam that had turned it into what came to be seen as a natural land frontier- a sparsely populated region located next to a densely populated region of the Indian subcontinent (ibid.). For example, the fact that colonial state could designate large areas of Assam as "wastelands", available either for tea plantations or for peasant settlers, was the reward of the conquest and, in effect, involved the dispossession of the local gentry, the peasantry, and the many hunting-gathering and shifting cultivating people of the region (ibid.). The legal illusion that the previous kings had held all the land, and the British were their successors underpinned the colonial State's ability to grant away wastelands.

The colonial categorization of land as ‘wasteland’ was identified on the basis of productivity (Hilaly, 2016). Land was termed ‘waste’ to connote its ‘untapped’ or ‘idle’ nature i.e. to which value had not been accrued because they had not been utilized for commercial purposes (ibid.). Colonial officials projected that some lands were cultivated while the rest remained wastelands. It is to be noted that the British Colonial government tried to change the land titles of Assamese peasants from annual to decennial leases (Baruah, 2005). However, the Assamese peasants were not interested in long-term titles and mostly abandoned their claim to their land after a single harvest. A colonial official attributed the reason to the land losing its yielding capacity, thereby, inspiring the peasants to go in search for fresh soil (Government of Assam, 1885). Hence, the idea of colonizing the wastelands since the early period of colonial administration in Assam centered on the project of commercialization of agriculture (Hilaly, 2016).

With the above intention the colonial officials actively encouraged immigration into Assam. The demand for labor in the tea plantations was the first reason to turn to immigrants. The reason was that the Assamese peasants showed little interest in wage labor and had to reconcile the demand of their new commitments as wage laborers with the labor demands in their paddy fields. In the nascent stage of tea industry, Chinese labourers (known for production process), Nagas (accustomed to clearing jungles and practicising slash and burn for agriculture), and Kacharis (facilitated by the Assamese elite as potential labourers) were engaged in tea cultivation (Hilaly, 2016). However, at a later stage, owing to Chinese labourers’ unwillingness to adhere to the colonial officials, and demand for hike in wages from the Nagas and the Kacharis, led the colonial regime to look for other labourers outside the state.

By the 1860’s, the tea plantations thus, became segregated with vast settlements of population from outside the province, and settling the wastelands with people from outside, represented an alienation from the productive resource from the native population. The native Assamese were stigmatized as ‘indolent’ and ‘lazy’ by the planters for their unwillingness to accept employment as coolies in the plantations (Griffiths, 1967). In its historical manifestation, colonial ideology has utilized the idea of

the lazy native to create subjectivities, where existing societal practices were denigrated (Hilaly, 2016).

The immigrant labor was not only depended upon for tea plantations. Other enterprises that developed during Assam's economic transformation in the nineteenth century such as coal and oil fields and the construction of roads, buildings and railways, also attracted immigrant labor (Baruah 1999). In 1890's, the development of trunk railways connecting to the nearest port started in Assam. This reopened the discourse of settlement on wastelands. This was mediated by the perception that peripheral classes, tribes, and peasants were to fit into the corpus of labor. Of these, the Santhals was deemed fit to work on forests and plantations and the Mohammedans of East Bengal were considered the most eligible for immigration as they were "hard working" and "prolific cultivators"[4] (ibid.). Therefore, as Assam had a surplus of "cultivable land" and Bengal was featured as "overpopulated tracts", the process of migration began to materialize from East Bengal to Assam (Hilaly, 2016).

3.3.2 Migration to Assam

Ever since the beginnings of the tea, coal, and oil industries in the nineteenth century, the area has been a magnet for migrants from other parts of the sub-continent (Baruah, 2021). In fact, tea was produced on a large industrial scale and by 1921, tea workers and their descendants were a sixth of the population of the province (ibid.). In Assam, immigrants have come from all parts of South Asia. The partition of Bengal and the merger of Assam with Eastern Bengal in 1905 inaugurated the movement and mobility of farm settlers from Eastern Bengal (Hilaly, 2016) who have been the Muslims of Bengali descent. Other major immigrant[5] communities of Assam were the Hindu Bengalis, Marwaris or Nepalis, and the tea labour community.

As a huge potential source of income, the colonial administrators observed that the low-lying portions of the Brahmaputra floodplains were employed for seasonal crops

[4] This was a remark made by Porteous as early as 1890, "Naga Hills Diary", dated 22 April, 1890.

[5] Baruah (1999) has referred the term 'immigrant' as problematical-even unfortunate since only the first generation can be accurately described as immigrants.

rather than year-round cultivation and settlement (Hilaly, 2016). But they had to wait until the jute industry in Bengal saw a rise in demand for jute at the beginning of the 20th century. Muslim migrants from the heavily populated deltaic eastern Bengal were then invited to settle on those lands during that time. Once the social networks connected the two locations, the migrants started arriving on their own. The 1930s and 1940s saw a major uptick in this migration wave (Guha, 1977). But in the state of Assam, the demographic trend has had important side effects.

The most prominent change or outcome of the migration was the occurrence of population imbalance in the region. Precisely, the population seemed to be in favour of the Bengalis. Hence, the relatively insular Assamese society was exposed to a population which was distinctly different. Sections of the indigenous Assamese population were Muslims who formed an integral part of the Assamese society, yet did not maintain a distinct identity (Guha, 1977).

It merits mention here that the Assamese had already felt insecure when the British introduced Bengali as the language of official correspondence, in court and for education (Deka, 2018). The Assamese gained rightful place only in 1873 on the intervention of the Baptist missionaries who had come to Assam to proselytize but took up the case of the Assamese tirelessly (ibid.). The distinctiveness in aspects of the culture, religion, and language of the Eastern Bengal immigrants often inflamed social and ethnic conflicts in the areas where they settled.

It became clear that the ethnic resistance was beginning to be discernable. As the demographic profile altered, the threat of being swamped away by people who are not native, yet beneficiaries of the colonial projects, affected the everyday lives of the Assamese peasantry (Hilaly, 2016). Immigration thereby, threatened to reduce the Assamese population into a minority community. This issue hence played a role in consolidating the Assamese nationalism to safeguard themselves in their land.

3.4 Contextualizing internal migrants and waste picking at Guwahati city

3.4.1 City profile of Guwahati

Guwahati, meaning 'areca nut marketplace' in Assamese, was known by the name 'Gauhati' during the British period. It is situated along the Brahmaputra River and is bound on the southern side by the foothills of the Shillong Plateau. According to the Census 2011, Guwahati municipal area and Guwahati Metropolitan Area (GMA) had a population of 963, 429 and 968, 549, respectively. The city is also the major hub of economic activity in the entire North-East region. The establishment of Guwahati refinery in 1962 marked the beginning of industrialization in the city. In a similar fashion, the construction of the Saraighat Bridge over the Brahmaputra River in 1962 as well and shifting of the capital from Shillong to Guwahati in 1972 made it into one of the most important cities in the North-East.

The city experienced a massive population increase in the 1971-81 and 1981-91 decades. People from different geographical locations started pouring into the city. There has been migration from Bihar and as far away as Andhra Pradesh and Punjab since the colonial period. In fact, Guwahati Municipal Corporation's (GMC) colonies for its sanitation, employees consist of many second-generation migrants from Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, and Punjab (Desai et al., 2012). Such migration has remained both social and economic in nature. This city got chosen primarily for the opportunities it seemed to provide in terms of earning a livelihood, and to combat previous rural destitution.

3.4.2 Establishing a migrant life at Guwahati

Guwahati has long served as a catalyst for transforming the lives of the internal migrants settling in the city. With a fragile rural economy that had been disturbed in the background of the recurring flood, it reflects the severity of livelihood crisis. As the state of Assam is crisscrossed by over 20 major rivers and 50 tributaries, its geographical location makes it vulnerable to regular flooding. In addition, floods in Assam have recently become more catastrophic, casting a spell of devastation both in the urban and rural areas of the state. Saikia (2019) discusses how ancient texts considered Assam to be a 'waterscape' due to the region being inundated by annual floods.

The Brahmaputra River is said to be one of the major contributors to flooding. Because of the heavy sedimentation caused by monsoon in Assam, the level of the mighty river appears to rise. Only 16 rivers on earth carry more than 100 million tons of sediment to the sea and the Brahmaputra ranks as one of the highest among them (Goswami, 1982). This causes its water carrying capacity to decrease, hence, results in water spilling in various parts of Assam.

As a consequence, watershed events like floods and river bank erosion has become almost annual. Some of the most visible effects of the monsoons in the state's rural districts are submerged houses, destroyed croplands, paralysed livelihood, loss of domestic animals, incalculable waste of granaries from farmers' hard labour, improper housing infrastructures, limited access to health care services and humanitarian aids. The villages vanish as land and *saporis* (low-lying areas) are ripped apart by the Brahmaputra, displacing a large number of people.

As getting back to normal everyday life usually arrives after months, many villagers eventually opt for alternative solution. Furthermore, while a few villagers have benefited from the Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana- Gramin (PMAY-G)[6] housing scheme, the majority of them are yet to receive a house in the rural area. As a result, water-driven migration occurs from Assam's villages to the cities, particularly Guwahati, the state's capital in Northeast India.

Decisions about housing choice, however, become a complication for the socially underprivileged internal migrants residing in Guwahati city. It reinforces a spatial disadvantage for them. Through the informal occupation (*dakhal*) of public and private lands, there take settlements on Railway lands, State governments' Revenue lands (which are located in the plains, on swampy lands and in the hills), the State Government's

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

Reserve Forest (RF) lands (which are mostly in the hills), private lands earmarked for acquisition and other private lands (Desai & Mahadevia, 2013).

Many migrants have to settle in the city by using public land for informal dwellings. Hence, the migrants are particularly identified as key minority population who do not have equal choices in housing compared to their majority counterparts (James, et al., 2022). This renders them vulnerable due to a lack of 'economic capital' (Bourdieu, 1997 [1986]) in the form of financial privileges that may have made finding residential spaces and maintaining a comfortable standard of life easier.

The environment of informal living nowadays is frequently unstable both legally and physically. However, it has provided the migrants with a livable environment in the city where social networks, homes, and places of employment are all close to one another (Williams et al., 2022). The combination of these elements helps to create a sense of belonging while enhancing their sense of corporation, fraternity, and self-worth. Slums and informal settlements serve as a means of arranging social life according to the preferences of the individual residents. Such a model of residential preference further emphasizes that individual agency is the primary determinant of their functioning in a marginal area. It is an urbanism created by them being outside the elite domains of the formal modernity of the state (Mehrotra, 2020). It is what Sundaram (2001) also refers to as 'pirate' modernity of the poor who slip under the laws of the city to simply survive, without any conscious attempt at constructing a counter-culture. The reason is that they get to experience a measure of empowerment and the capacity to believe in the newness at a place different from their former rural life.

Evidently, most of the internal migrants are labour migrants and migrate on a temporary basis (International Organization for Migration, 2005). The migration has opened many residential areas in the peripheral zones of Guwahati. The concentration of the migrants in such areas is a way of gaining substantial profit through engaging in informal commercial hubs. It demonstrates their effort to maximize off-agricultural income in the city. The migrants recruit themselves or get recruited as unskilled labour in the informal sectors of the city. Thus, the long honed relational skills and the use of heterogeneous relationships for economic opportunity are disentangled in favour of

intensely individuated adaptations to precarious livelihoods (Simone, 2016). It becomes a way of accruing profits of informality. By and large, the city has turned into the most efficient consumption space and posing as an accelerator of development in the urban area (Florian & Salama, 2019).

In the wider context, it is to be taken into account that human migration to Indian cities was prompted by the disproportionate rise in the fortunes of urban India which motivated people to come here in search for a 'better life' (Bisen, 2019). But the country's urbanism lacked policy response specifically on public housing to address this social change. This chasm served up informal living as a mouth-watering political dish on a platter (ibid.). Informal living in fact turned out to be a dish that yielded rich calories for the political machinery but ended up disfiguring the arteries of India's urbanism (ibid.). However, informal dwelling continues as the aspirations for an ordered life in the city still exists among the informal occupants. Ghertner (2011) refers to it as a form of agency i.e. motivation to move ahead for their betterment in the city.

3.4.3 Migrants' access to Municipal wastes of the dumping ground

When internal migrants go to Guwahati, they don't find many formal livelihood prospects. They also don't have the advantage of claiming residences. To avoid discrimination (on account of one's religion i.e. Islam and social identity of Miya Muslims) in the act of accessing rental housing, the migrants prefer to live in populated informal settlements. However, through social networks and with assurance by former migrants of getting one work or the other and a place to settle, the flow of migration continues. The census report of 2011 apprises about 21.6 per cent of migrants coming to Kamrup metropolitan district of Guwahati. Out of this, Desai, et al (2012) in their study found that 11.5 per cent of migrants are engaged in waste collection in Guwahati. Conversely, it is part of the marginality of these Miya migrants that their contribution to waste service merely remains as outlier.

There is a situation where waste collection services are rarely supplied in an equal, consistent manner due to increased urbanization, limited administrative institutions, and a lack of financial and technical resources. As a result, Guwahati's mass waste collection is visible everywhere, and the dumpsite is where improper waste disposal occurs. Every

day, Guwahati generates over 600 MT (Metric Tons) of trash. It got diverted to the *Boragaon* Dumping ground since 2006 until recently shifted to a new dumping site in 2021 at Guwahati.

This is actually the unregulated dump which violate the Solid Waste Management Rules of 2016 that needs to be dismantled and replaced by constructing a scientific landfill. Even though clear instructions have been laid with the rules for installation of technology to treat waste at the scientific landfill, implementation has nonetheless remained absent. This propels the continuity of dumping waste at the dumpsite which eventually reinforces suspicion among the nearby dwellers. It is then accompanied by the public demand to control the threat of waste on the public and instigate pressures on waste governance. But the state government and the Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC) struggle to meet the expectations of people in its waste management.

The dumpsite in turn serves as the pragmatic solution to the problem of foraging a livelihood, and resettlement for the rural migrants from various districts and regions of Assam. The dumpsite in fact become the workplace and its adjoining areas assume the status of home to the many migrants. In this way, the human relationship of the migrants evolves with wastes of the city. In a similar but another context, the *catadores* (the Brazilian informal waste pickers) is a group of highly marginalized people, are migrants that arrived from rural areas to long- term inner-city slum dwellers, mostly with no formal relationship with the bureaucratic or welfare state (Calafate-Faria, 2016).

The migrants at Guwahati remain free from the interventions of Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC) and Government. They are granted access to waste as a shared resource of the GMC even though legally waste pickers have no permit to rummage through wastes. It is needful to state that blinded by the utopic visions to clear and control garbage through dependence on machine, GMC appears unbothered by the contribution of the migrant waste pickers. This may be attributed to waste pickers' reproducing particular discourses of fine-tuning with waste and urban adaptation to such livelihood.

GMC provides a platform for the waste pickers to reclaim waste, and these waste pickers assists indirectly in the process of formal recycling by providing inputs of raw materials (wastes). It is both domestic wastes and leftovers of shops that lead to the origin

of the dumping ground. The wastes gathered by them undergoes the process of sorting different categories which are then packaged for transfer to local recycling centers in Guwahati and eventually to Delhi. In an earlier study conducted by Baishya & Mahanta, (2013) in the dumpsite at Boragaon, found that different solid waste was collected and segregated as biodegradable, plastic, glass, and metal waste and accordingly compiled the total generation.

The waste pickers classify the waste based on the needs of the unregulated waste market. The process creates innumerable groups of wastes and distinct materials that were till recently only designated as useless. While some of these, such mala (junk jewelry), putul/putla (toys), and snacks like dried ginger, are repurposed by waste pickers, others are given to recycling efforts in an effort to demonstrate the use of waste.

Even though treating such massive amounts of waste requires the right equipment, its absence has not disadvantaged the waste pickers. The rotting heap of waste that has been disposed of at the dumping ground made it possible to continue making money. The migrants in Guwahati, who self-recruit as waste pickers, and live and work in squalor, have taken to inhabiting spaces in an unusual way. Their survival is their priority, not meticulous city cleaning, well-organized collections, or waste recycling (Doron & Jeffrey, 2018).

3.5 Evolution of the waste picker community at Guwahati

The possibility of being able to occupy a place, and get access to Guwahati's waste, indelibly marks a sense of belonging to the city by the migrants. The settlement of these in-migrant Bengali Muslim waste pickers captures both their experience of awayness from the native place, and a sense of attachment to the city. It points to the current of movement and migrancy (Moreton-Robinson, 2003) and eventual settlement that confers them the privilege to claim value from waste. Reclining upon waste picking, waste becomes an area of exploration as well as a source of social identification for these dumpsite waste pickers. The fact that waste pickers have built an environment of living, and their work with waste, is a symbolic relic shaped by them.

Numerous waste pickers have shared similar accounts of their experiences of migrating voluntarily to the city, and putting in long hours at informal waste handling. They believe that other villagers can find this path of belonging to the waste work since they have been able to make money and enjoy life in the city. Incorporating others into the task is facilitated by the function of family and migration-source-based social networks (Desai & Sanghvi, 2017). The social constructions of home, location, and belonging are contingent not just on shared ethnicity but also on the political and economic ties of the new community (Morton-Robinson, 2003

Even though they are not positioned similarly to Guwahati's urbanites, these migrant waste pickers nonetheless have a distinct situatedness. They describe the location as home, bringing with them a feeling of security, belonging, and acclimating to life and social interactions in the new community (Aman & Dahlstedt, 2021). It illustrates how their viewpoint can both promote their social life in the city and work in informal waste work. In this context, home, is said to be more about the process than the final result; it is about pursuing oneself (Ryan, 2008).

People use waste materials outside developed economies, in capital-scarce, labor-rich contexts through their creativity, originality, and talent. The contribution these activities make contribute to the effectiveness of so-called backward economies (Strasser, 1999). It is to be noted that backyard of the city is used up for generating an economic return from backward economies. This demonstrates the importance of physical margins or using borders of the city by marginal categories of people. Indeed, these locations are used by the waste pickers who have adopted the unknown ideals of order through waste sorting. Waste pickers represent a way of gaining visibility and representation of informal work which is tied to the accumulation of capital. That waste has unique value, and seen as a resource (Chandran, 2023) the waste pickers become part of the waste landscape, and potentially thrive in it.

In the context of waste picking, there are numerous categories that has been highlighted by WEIGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing, 2016). Following the classification, there are dumpsite or landfill waste pickers who pick wastes solely from the dumpsite and reside nearby; street waste pickers who collect waste

from dustbins or rubbish bags and are at times even allowed to retrieve waste from commercial or residential buildings; door-step waste pickers that collect wastes on a door-to-door collective system under the aegis of municipalities and in partnership with membership-based organizations like NGO's (Non-governmental organisation); On route/truck waste pickers that are informal pickers recognized as a collection team who have prior approval to pick materials along with the collection crews, and itinerant buyers as a category of waste pickers collecting recyclables from households or business and even from waste dealers of dumpsites in exchange for payment.

For the purpose of this study, only the dumpsite waste pickers have been concentrated upon those who geographically situate themselves closely to the dumping ground. Here, the neighborhood adjacent to the dumpsite is a mix of dilapidated living occupied by the waste pickers in makeshift one-bedroom houses. These residential areas are within different walled plots of land. However, adjustment in this pattern of living is a way of overcoming adversity, and particular capacities of reclaiming waste without much trouble. The waste pickers work under the waste dealers. These waste dealers are independent and work as intermediaries in the commercial supply of sorted waste to recycling centres in different areas of Guwahati city. There are also shops, a medical clinic, makeshift tea houses, and some areas undergoing transformation by upcoming infrastructures nearby. The location known as *Vigyan Path*, of *Paschim Boragaon*, Guwahati, however is not recognized/notified as a slum settlement under Guwahati's slum areas.

The informal residential area of the waste pickers is sub-named as GMC area of Vigyan path. There are about 80-90 households here. The Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC) survey of 2012 identified 217 slum pockets in Guwahati to facilitate access to government schemes. The Census of 2011 revealed that the slum population in the city was over 25000, but other sources estimate the population to be over 50000. However, the squatter colony inhabited by the waste pickers with poor housing quality and lack of basic services is a separate category of low-income

Image 1. The road leading to the residential sites of the waste pickers and the *Boragaon* dumping ground at Guwahati. *Photographs used in this thesis were taken by the researcher.*

settlement. The reason may be attributed to the fact that the land squatted upon by the waste pickers is actually rented to the waste dealers. It is not *dakhal* (informal occupation) by the waste pickers.

The location of the informal settlement of these waste pickers is near the wetland *Deepor Beel* which is under the purview of the state government. While there has always remained a public clamor in Guwahati about protecting the wetland, the untreated dumping of garbage near this *beel* (wetland) continued until August 2021. The shifting of the garbage dump to the new site has impacted the waste pickers owing to the distance. Because walking to the new site takes about half an hour while 10 -15 minutes is required to reach the new dumping ground by vehicle. Thus, this has resulted in a loss of work productivity as well as less profit from waste. As some waste pickers get tired by covering the distance on foot, so many of them also miss going to waste collection to the new site.

3.5.1 The case of the Miya Muslims and waste picking

The involvement of the Miya Muslims[7] in waste picking at Guwahati's dumping ground manifests their physical and mental commitment to the strenuous labor. Their tactics of being able to withstand dirty and unsafe working conditions illuminate their power that forge waste as *mulloban* (valuable). Through examining their identities as Miya Muslims and employed as waste pickers, I highlight how in spite of their low position in the Muslim hierarchy and in the occupation, ladder have recognized them as a strong-willed labour force. These waste pickers in fact unpack the ways by which waste picking is felt as a necessity, and waste understood as the medium to live in the city.

Referencing the Hindu community at Guwahati, *Safikul* (who desires that his real name should be taken and as he is true to his words), a waste dealer who is first in the vicinity of the *Boragaon Dumping Ground* to initiate the informal system of sorting waste through engaging the waste pickers, put forwards a strong opinion. According to him, the people belonging to the Hindu fold may not be interested in doing this dirty work while the Miya Muslim waste pickers do the work as being their own entrepreneurs.

He further adds about the polygyny pattern of marriage prevalent among some of the Miya waste pickers. Under such circumstances, a man who has more than one wife will also have a larger family. He further adds that in order to support them financially, a Miya waste picker or his wife or wives may have to adopt the stigmatized work of waste picking. Commitment to the work, thereby, become a crucial ingredient to support themselves in spite of the work gesturing physical and mental vulnerabilities.

Safikul in his narration has always lauded the extreme ability of the Miya waste pickers to tussle hard in the work irrespective of scorching sun or gust. Perseverance in fact operates as a personal resource (Fredericks, 2018) for grappling with difficult situation in work. The conception of physicality is intertwined with their mental

[7] Miya Muslims are distinguished from ethnic Assamese Muslims or *Muslim-Axomia* (also called *Tholua or Khilonjia*) (Baruah, 2021). But the ethnic Assamese Muslims are not a single ethnic community: distinctions are usually made among groups such as *Goriya, Moriya, Syed, and Deshi* (ibid.).

conviction of laboring hard and overlooking obstacles. The material and symbolic resonance of waste actually sculpts the meaning

of cleaning labor (Fredericks, 2018). It has shown the waste pickers in an embodied but unknown practice of keeping the city organized to a large extent.

There has long been a misconception that many Dalits are involved in all dirty activities. (Singh, 2014). There is, however, this exception with a small percentage of Muslims, who appear to share and labour under the same caste and castelike norms and low status (Gill, 2010). At Guwahati, we move away from caste distinction in the work of waste picking. The glaring division of caste is not seen here as available in the Pan-Indian context. In case of these dumpsite waste pickers engaged in waste handling, their Miya identity in the Muslim hierarchy, validates their position to upheld dirty work as meaningful.

Rooted in the value of duty in Islam, the waste pickers are inspired to represent the Miya identity as a replica of savior of Guwahati from garbage. The notion of hard work, and their responsibility to perform it honestly has incited waste pickers to stand up for themselves. Honesty is useful, because it assures credit, so are punctuality, industry, frugality, and that is the reason they are virtues (Weber, 2005, p.17).

The association between dirt and waste in fact has shaped the value of the work. As *Hakim*, a male waste picker has pointed out that if people from their Miya community had been unseen in Guwahati's dumping area, today the city would have drowned under garbage. Such declaration emerges alongside their ability to experiment with the discarded that without its emphasis people have to grapple with unabated wastes.

The overall experience of being Miya and being waste pickers highlights their identity upon which a city relies without acknowledging. But they are not the authors of their experience in the sense that they do not create that experience within them (Sarukkai, 2012). It is part of their nature to have such experiences and there is no extra agency needed to initiate such a feeling within them (ibid.). It is their refusal to give up waste work that has been the ultimate indicator of they are being the laboring bodies in waste picking. Some even opine that being Miya Muslims and poor, though they are able

to work hard, ‘struggle’ has yet remained a part and parcel of their lives. In Guwahati, the waste pickers are the non-state actors who have established their workforce through the unusual alliance with dirt and waste work.

3.5.2 Other participants in waste management at Guwahati

The two other members are waste dealers, and the Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC). Waste dealers operate independently and is outside the management of the GMC. The kind of waste dealing undertaken by both waste dealers and GMC varies, and there is nominal informal exchange of pleasantries. Turning to such minimal domain of exchange, speaks of the individual roles that each play in waste handling. While these waste dealers are unrecognized and informal actors benefiting without state intervention, they yet provide scope to migrants or the urban poor to work in waste market. On the other hand, the GMC is a formal body under the state government where both have accepted the existence of the waste pickers without declaring it.

The waste dealers interviewed in this study are both Assamese Muslims as well as Bengali Muslims. They are literate, having knowledge of education. One of them has studied till the second year of the three-year Bachelor’s degree in Assam, while the others have completed their tenth or twelfth standards. The relationship is friendly in terms of the commodities and services that are traded between the waste pickers and the waste dealers.

When waste pickers first arrive at the dumpsite, waste dealers give them cash in advance when asked by the former. This is later adjusted in simultaneous account settlements. The goal of the waste dealers' strategy is to instill a sense of fraternity and trust in the waste pickers in their new location. According to Simone (2004, p. 407), the inner city's marginality is frequently offset by the variety of its population and the "intersection of sociabilities" that fosters possibility and collaboration (Lancione, 2016).

For waste dealer *Amrinul*, 48 years, ‘help’ to the waste pickers in any form is an essential quality. According to him, it’s a reciprocal relation between them. Another waste dealer confided that he went to the extent of selling his own cows during the lockdown of Covid-19 pandemic in order to support the waste pickers. There are

instances when waste dealers also borrow money from the owners of recycling centres to cater to the needs of the waste pickers in case of latter's sickness or needs at native village.

Such acts, according to the waste dealers, assumes importance about each other in their city lives. With instances of occasional altercations and discord among the waste pickers, they are first to report it to their respective waste dealers. This is pursued to prevent deterioration and intensification of the situations further. Waste-dealers thus, also play the role of a guardian and savior. To maintain the sanctity of the work and the place, waste pickers are always advised by the waste dealers to live amicably in their little settlements.

The Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC) officials too come across such arguments when occurred between the waste pickers. It is followed by examining the situation and advising waste pickers to focus on work. While power firmly rests with the GMC and they could anytime use it to deprive waste pickers of waste, they have not done so since 2008, the year of the start of the 108 acres *Boragaon* dumping ground. One of the GMC officials told me on my field visit that they have used their power to give the waste pickers, and the dealers a livelihood instead of debarring them from waste.

Both the waste dealers and the GMC exhibit differences in the context of providing scope and opportunity for their respective roles in waste work. Based on the transactions that occur on the market, waste dealers and waste pickers have a patron-client relationship that some have kindly dubbed "clientalization" (Olsen, 1993). Conversely, it appears that GMC does not have a tight contact with waste dealers or the waste pickers. The latter's efforts fail to garner GMC's attention in a comparable manner, making the power dynamics apparent.

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