

Chapter 4

Everyday representation: Waste, home, and the provisions

4.1 Introduction

Why does the everyday life of the waste pickers form an important sphere of involvements in and outside the dumping ground? The chapter addresses this question showing how the everyday experiences of the waste pickers represent their version of life, interaction, and day-to-day lived practices. It draws attention to times and moments that accommodate different functions in the life of waste pickers.

The personal experiences of the waste pickers are in fact a description of the ‘innumerable practices’ (De Certeau, 1988) they prepare for and deliver. This not only illustrates the significance of everyday events and circumstances, but it also observes the commonplace in noteworthy behaviors. From working with wastes to intermingling with fellow pickers¹ and non-waste pickers, the activities offer a perspective on the ways that constitute living and embodied experiences. These minutiae of social life (Ghisleni, 2017) express how the waste pickers connect with others and ascribe meaning to different situations.

The normative social order that the pickers experienced in their villages differs in the city. While some practices grasp connotations similar to the village life, many others seem to demand change. To the waste pickers, the negotiation of meanings is considered a way of reorienting and sustaining life in the city. Guma et al, (2023) argues that navigating everyday life increasingly becomes synonymous with survival, constituting a proactive process of inhabiting the city, where the self and the urban are always in the making. This is further reflected in the fact of adjusting with the manifold rhythms and ensembles of survival. The interpretation of survival is a manner of being, a method of living, and a means of existing in the city; it is a continuous process that persists beyond

¹ Waste pickers and pickers have been used interchangeably in this thesis.

actual or perceived chronological and spatial dispositions and does not end or fully complete once as one comes or thrives (ibid.).

The pattern of living is in fact intersected with precarious work of dumpsite waste handling in the city. It illuminates how stability in daily life has to be achieved in the midst of wastes. Because exposure to waste has not been a commonplace for waste pickers in the former times, therefore, it is necessary to self-organise oneself with waste in the city landscape. The set of subjectivities among the waste pickers talk of waste as part of the everyday. They transcend notions of dirt, and stigma while considering accessibility to waste as an everyday opportunity.

By doing the waste work that many find disgraceful, participation in the work has to lose its prejudicial strength. The kind of self-determination and conviction of the waste pickers give ‘continuity’ to their everyday performances (Giddens, 1979). It is this kind of assertiveness that helps the pickers to cultivate a pro-active dwelling in the city through participation and sticking to waste work. This implies that the human and the non-human are relational and interconnected, and entail multiple trajectories, configurations, and explications for urban life (Guma et al., 2023).

Analyzing these attempts of the waste pickers to represent the essence of everyday, the chapter considers how they fashion, contest, and contend in the daily preoccupations. I intend to show how routines are followed and habits get formed in way of accommodating in the everydayness of dumpsite living. Both the ways of embracing and facing challenges amid waste become the form of rhythms that tend to represent the process of transformation. This ethnography of waste composes the discourse of how pickers use situated agency to live day-to-day in the unaesthetic of settlement and informality of work. It also implies how the waste pickers, a category of urban poor in the city, eventually ‘expand the survival space and rights’ (Bayat, 1997) in their own terms. They devise tactics to look beyond the insecurities existing at home and work.

Situational factors can play a prominent role in enabling or hindering the agential capacity of an individual (Bazzani, 2022). In this context, by regularly engaging in the act of confronting and overcoming the social binaries, the waste pickers display an indirect resistance to the external complexities. Hobson (2018) suggests that situated agency

captures the relational aspects of agency, the diversity in individual situations that shape agency freedoms, and the potential to convert resources into achievements. Thus, rather than seeing everyday life entangled with dirt and waste, the waste pickers learn to thrive in the space and with people they encounter. Situated agency helps to consider its relational dimension (Abbott, 2020; Burkitt, 2018), i.e. agency cannot be limited to stable or inner characteristics because it is “always agency *toward* something, by means of which actors enter into a relationship with surrounding persons, places, meanings, and events” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998:973).

Everyday life around waste and its daily adjustment is seen as a place for opportunity and future in the city. Living in such a space spontaneously speaks of the capacity of the waste pickers to evade the negative aspects, and supersede the physically polluted environment of the dumpsite. The anthropologist Tim Ingold (2000) notes that what makes the skilled professional skilled is not simply the amount of knowledge and their disposal, but their sensitivity to the specific details of the present situation, i.e. their capacity to respond to and coordinate with the constraints and possibilities in the particular situation, the particular materials, with which they are engaged (McGann, 2014). In a similar fashion, pickers make themselves capable of the adaptivity to shaping themselves and living in the situated environment.

To understand waste pickers’ interpretation of everydayness² in the dumpsite, I seek to take notice of their multiple endeavor at the dumpsite, at home, and in the vicinity of the area. Everyday is a reminder to the waste pickers of the need to integrate in the dichotomies of clean/dirty, acceptance/ignorance, and labor/idleness. The chapter shows how waste pickers realize, negotiate and mobilize themselves to perform the range of daily practices in their everyday.

4.2 The significance of everyday life

In framing everyday life, in sync with this thesis, I locate its meaning that centers around the daily undertakings of the waste pickers. This illustrates everyday life with reference to the patterns, practices, behavior, means, and ends that are being adopted by

² Everydayness- I have used everyday life, everydayness, and daily life interchangeably in the chapter.

them. It is a way of performing activities in the everyday relations of domestic sphere, workspace, or in other mundane interests. It gives an account of the everyday involvement in tasks that is indicative of how daily life is enabled. There is overt sign that everyday life of the waste pickers is a paradigm of the production of communication, interaction, and recreation.

Everydayness is important for the waste pickers for it mediates a series of subjective capacity to hold together the activities that are performed repeatedly. This allows us to analyse finer and repetitive details of dailyness which underlines the ordinary dimension of social life (Ghisleni, 2017). It is related to how these repetitions of the daily actions are inseparable and surrounds the waste pickers. Even though repetitive work is embodied, it is not confined to the sameness of everyday practices. In fact, “all inventiveness is born from the everyday, and is confirmed within it” (Lefebvre, 1961, pg. 239-240). It has been pointed out by Simmel (1971) that within the everyday mechanism to cope with rules, performances and positions, groups act as units as individuals act to establish uniqueness.

Everyday existence is also shaped by non-material labor. This is examined and evaluated in light of the interactions that naturally occur, such as subjectivities, feelings, perceptions, and meanings (Adler et al., 1987). People reveal that the social bonds they have forged with one another in their natural environment is part of their daily social world (Cicourel, 1964; Douglas, 1976; Garfinkel, 1967). It illustrates the major component that forms socialness (Latour, 2000). Acts that support individuals in developing cooperative relationships, understanding interpersonal interactions, forging stronger bonds with known individuals, and other aspects are all included in socialness. Maffesoli (1987) identified the epistemic elements of daily life that comprise sociability as organic solidarity, the symbolic dimension (communication), the "non-logical" (Pareto), and a concern for the present (Kalekin-Fishman, 2013).

Additionally, people's cognitive and emotional impulses influence how they behave in daily life, which might be friendly or antagonistic (Kalekin-Fishman, 2013). This is so because subjectivities are fluid and can alter depending on the situation. The key takeaway from this is that various behaviors (both public and private) demonstrate the

existence of varied social connection processes. Additionally, it lays the groundwork for the emergence of human agency and the redefining of roles and duties.

Referencing the city, Lefebvre argues that it is the locus in which the concept of everyday life is realized to the fullest (ibid.). The city can both function to provide opportunity as well as disadvantage and is filled with challenges. In this light, let us point to the minority groups who get to experience entitlements as well as deprivation frequently in the city. With various categories and groups of people, different occupations, and place of living, segmentation and adversity is inevitable. Differences and crises permeate through the everyday lives of these minority group of city dwellers. However, application of the obligations and controlling emotions has served instrumental in highlighting their social significance (even though negligibly). They make themselves capable of adjusting to everyday life and the factors that ease or aggravate difficulties (Keene, 2008).

Sztompka (2008) emphasizes that everyday life is not confined to any particular class of people or public/private life but includes numerous episodes of everyday alongside down-to-earth routines. One such instance is that of the body becoming one of the important aspects in everyday life as it permits for an embodied engagement in interaction or activity. It engages our body-biological endowment, physical prowess, and emotions- with all its strength and frailties, potential and limitations (Sztompka, 2008, pg.10). It does so that the body makes its own adaptation. Through the work encounters, I also see how the body of the waste pickers immerse in the imperfect, and dirty waste material encounter. This focus on the body is in use for appropriating inconspicuous wastes. While it evokes the notions of dirt and disgust, it allows the waste pickers to approach the body as part of everyday role.

Not only routine or systemic ways of living constituting part of the everyday but also the non-every day. Heller (1984[1970]) observes that if everyday life represents a 'relatively- stagnant' dimension of social life, the non-everyday has to do with what happens in the flow of ordinary affairs. I have observed how my frequent visits to the dumping ground and the homes affected the work routines of the pickers. Even though I was a hindrance in their day-to-day existence, they endured it as a normal occurrence.

This is better understood as an attempt to design one's life and occupation while battling feelings of insecurity and worry from others. These endeavors aim to release the difficulties and recognize the significance of their everyday tasks.

Tensions of the sort which sustains the myth that everyday life is natural, it also gives hope of ultimate change for the good. As De Certeau (1984) remarked that everyday life is a site of opportunities for spontaneity, and the potential for diverse outcomes. The aims of the waste pickers are not limited to rummaging waste but there is imagination for better times for upcoming days. Wastes or debris of people's possession of the city of Guwahati signifies fortune for the waste pickers. They would not let it slip out of their hands causing waste detachment. This emphasizes the way people construct their worlds through subjective meanings and motivations (Blumer, 1969). For the waste pickers, waste is 'extraordinarily important in sustaining and transforming the details and the design of everyday life'. (Shove, et al, 2007, pg. 2).

Before delving into the nuances of the everyday of the waste pickers, I theorize everyday life in this study. Here, the meaning of everyday life is materialized by pointing to the ongoing and emerging dynamics of living and blending, and that which is normalized as a routine affair. In defining waste pickers' everyday life, it is the site of one's (waste pickers) presence of being (in the informal settlements) which is intersected in making adjustments or steering actions (in regard to the situations), while adopting to changes that appear without indication. Thus, seemingly trivial settings (Adler & Adler, 1987) such as obtaining value and livelihood from wastes lay the ground for extracting insights on their everyday.

While waste of the dumpsite largely exists invisible for the city, it is pertinent for the accomplishment of waste work as one of the daily routine of the pickers. In this sense, such micro aspects in day-to-day life portray how negotiations take place in order to serve as the agent for consequences. It in fact helps to build a base for building an "aggregation" (Knorr-Cetina, & Cicourel, 1981) revealing the potential of wastes and waste pickers to be macro-aspects.

4.3 Existence of waste at the dumpsite and its relevance

‘Farming has long lost its attraction in my village at *Barpeta*³. To ensure that I and my family get a means to live, I decided to shift to waste picking’. Narratives like this have been common to me from most of the waste pickers I interviewed. They had to leave the village temporarily and distribute themselves in the city of Guwahati. In order to receive basic income, these waste pickers chose the dumpsite as the ideal place. It led them to discover the centrality of work prevalent through which wastes had already been established as valuable.

In some instances, few waste pickers previously had the experience of being cleaners in shopping malls in Ghaziabad, unmentioned work at Arunachal Pradesh, wage-laborers, and rickshaw pullers back in their villages. However, if compared between waste picking and the other works, they reveal to be more comfortable by working at the dumping ground. It was a common claim from some of the waste pickers that the possibility of working in other wage labor stood less. They attribute it to the absence of assurance of other informal sector to confer them the flexibility⁴ at work. It suggests that labor is not only an economic relation but also an ontological experience (Millar, 2018). This explains work as an everyday struggle, and if not registered with satisfaction, would be unsuccessful.

The instance of little mobility among the waste pickers from one section of the informal economy to another (Gill, 2010) reflects the lack of adaptability. As waste collection and sorting became a convenient (in absence of rigid regimes) livelihood, flourishing in other sector seemed difficult for the waste pickers. In their perception, they would not thrive by the standards of other formal/informal work and the agendas. The work of waste picking and arrangement has in fact stood as a solution to the reality of work crisis faced by them in the villages.

³ Barpeta- A administrative district in the state of Assam, India.

⁴ Flexibility- Here, it refers to the scope of getting to come and go to the dumpsite at waste pickers’ will, classify waste at their convenience, and not being bound by strict rules of structured timing of work and leisure.

The ambition for waste recovery has helped to sustain, and ‘it embodies and reproduces an essentialist view of demand and value (Shove, et al, 2007). Even though the social treatment of wastes is negative, its reference to the capitalist market is significant. In the words of Hakim, a male waste picker, ‘As there is a demand of waste, we are being able to fit in the occupation since the last 7 years. Else making a living out of it would have certainly stood grim’. This quotation illustrates the feeling of being able to insure livelihood due to waste proliferation and its market. Waste is a commodity, and it is the waste services of how it is also commodified, brought or sold (Reno, 2016).

To the waste pickers, waste carries meaning as a resource while it moves through the system of collection and classification to recycling, thus, accelerating its value. After picking up waste from the dumpsite, pickers bundled it up for 2-3 months. This is a routine procedure, and eventually is sold off to the recycling centers by the waste dealers. But the process of waste gathering is not free from the physical challenges of handling. The body is constantly exposed to toxic elements mixed in the garbage. But the precarious work is an unavoidable experience for these waste pickers.

I consider how unexpected events at work have become commonplace at the dumpsite, and waste pickers accept it as an avoidable part of their job. They are predicted to feel distressed because of the possibility of a drop-in economic activity as a result of labor market disruptions (Kasim et al., 2023). However, employment that poses a danger or hazard does not become an end in itself. Disregarding the precariousness of the work instead highlights the steadiness of the waste pickers. Their choices to continue in their line of work amount to an acknowledged reception of their transient bodily pain.

The *Boragaon* dumping ground with dirty, filthy, and unregulated waste disposal is difficult to endure. Both dry and wet wastes of the city become assimilated to produce a nauseous smell as well as a disgusting vision. Even though the waste pickers had traces of the dirt on them while returning from work, it symbolized their ability to withstand it. They struggled with the filthiness of the profession, yet also tried to rise above the dirty occupation (Reno, 2016). It has provided a space for self-organizing themselves to work in discomfort and fight the notion of vulnerability.



Image 2. Human and animals picking wastes at the *Boragaon* dumping ground.

The *jabrar pahar* (hill formed out of wastes) in the city slowly became tall. Few of the waste pickers said that they have never seen scope of employment accelerate so fast due to waste. Because the dumping ground never ran out of work, it became a magnet to pull people towards it. Bennett (2010) cites the encounter with landfill and trash as prototypical examples of thing-power which has the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, and to produce effects both dramatic and subtle.

From this, the notion of waste at dumpsite gets employed for invigorating nature of benefits. It opens up the question of how waste and the dumpsite pop up to be valued. The meaning exhibits that labor and waste get connected which otherwise remain untouched, unexposed, and unexplored. And once the place and essentiality of waste begins to get unconcealed and emphasized, the positive position in contrasts to societal held notions of dirt, emerge. The value of such spaces is thus conceptualized according to the requirement, belongingness, and even use of labor for dirty work performances.

The waste pickers have highlighted the purpose of their work and its associated value by continuously embracing dirt and disgust of city's waste. They take the adequacy of waste importantly, and extract value out of it. In the sociological sense, value is about the moral or what is seen as good in human life (Graeber, 2001). Work provided not only an income but also social belonging, a public identity, a sense of well-being, and future

aspirations (Muehlebach, 2011). In such a context, and in the presence of decay and disposal of the dumpsite, waste pickers have learned to interlace dedication and trials at the work. For them, waste handling is a good occupation, and it serves as a profit-sector through which their approach to life diverged from the mess of waste and emphasized on value in life.

4.4 Organizing domesticity along with waste work

Waste picking is not the only activity that keeps the waste pickers busy. Time is required to divide other household chores and domestic practices. It emphasizes both the connection and the disparities between men and women's traditionally separate roles, experiences, and subjectivities. In a study of migrant communities, Wali & Renzaho (2018) found an increase in women's feelings of empowerment and financial independence with the opportunity to be employed.

Similarly, in this study, Sakina, a female picker, said that initially she was apprehensive if she could manage waste work with other household undertakings. For her, waste work seemed to assume the priority because she was employed for the first time after her marriage 5 years ago. But today she knows how to locate the different domestic responsibilities along with waste picking or classification. This participation, in her opinion, has afforded her a degree of confidence to secure home and work engagement (Interview, 14/12/2020).

Evoking the domestic space, both men and women share the work. However, the house (typically one room with a built-in kitchen area) is imbued with discipline. In almost all the houses, I have seen utensils being washed and kept spotlessly clean when not used. Upon my inquiry, both male and female waste pickers said to be mostly cleaned by the females. Women are thus, assumed to have a better standard of cleanliness and discipline. Female waste pickers are of the opinion that they hold stronger preferences for cleanliness because it has been reinforced in them since childhood. They have since then internalized such ideas and believe it to be crucial. Their exposure to waste at the dumpsite is an existing dirty affair, therefore, they try their best to keep their home clean.

In accordance with different family values, and rules of the waste pickers, I observed how they themselves adhere to cleanliness at their homes. While some families are integrally involved in keeping things in their one-bedroom in a disciplined manner, others' area is also a mess. Their nominal garbage outcome from their homes is also carelessly thrown on their courtyard. Again, few other families prefer disposing at a distance. Waste pickers who did not cater to the discipline were often heard saying that these informal settlements were already in bad shape and color (referring to the dirt). Thus, trying to organize it would only push it to their complexity.

Practices at the domestic scales stabilize the value of cleanliness as a key disposition of civic modernity within the body/home/urban environment (Jack, et al., 2020). But lack of proper infrastructures and access to a clean environment obscure the aspirations for cleanliness among the marginalized. This makes groups like the waste pickers not willing to invest in the aesthetic of the surrounding. Such a notion points to the meaning of dirt and disorder as subjective even among the waste pickers. Douglas (1996) argued that pollution ideas can distract from the social and moral aspects of a situation by focusing on a simple material matter. Few waste pickers believed that notions of dirt are conveyed by the materiality of waste. It, therefore, does not command many distinctions to be maintained between clean and dirt always.

In the case of childcare duties, both waste picker parents pay attention to protect their children from dirt. In the infant stage, they do have control over their child's access/inaccessibility to contact the dirty. Similarly, the obligation to familiarize a child with notion of bad/good, safe/unsafe and hygiene/filth at a later age has also been observed. Many couple waste pickers also share other childcare obligations. Both are evident in helping to soothe the younger children during tantrums. In other cases, waste pickers, both male and female, drop off and pick up children from government schools in the *Boragaon* region and bring them home. It is seen that a growing number of women are visiting the landfill, while males are likewise spending more time doing household chores (Pink, 2004). Men were also observed performing household chores like sweeping and dusting off the surroundings, much like women. This implies that gender-neutral roles are common among them.

However, the gendered division in housework is also not absent among some of the households of the waste pickers. There have been situations when it was seen women playing a greater role in the household labor. Male waste pickers basically got involved at packaging and transferring wastes after it gets sorted. When interviewed they opined that household chores can be taken care by their spouses. As Haider, a 39-year-old male waste picker, puts it,

‘My *maiki* (wife) can rest at home and do cooking and cleaning. But I do not have the liberty to sit at home and rest. When I was young, my father worked more than my mother’ (Interview, 21/03/21).

Many male waste pickers happened to distance themselves from domestic sense of duty. Such an idea about keeping housework at bay can be understood as one manifestation of the internalization of macro-level gender norms through the process of socialization (Cunningham, 2001) at a young age. Both men and women pertain to make different sense of the work and the preferences they hold. These analyses tend to illustrate that domesticity is gendered in nominal instances. Daily practices are the spaces where these unequal ideas of cleanliness, gender, and labor play out, and then embodied nature of differences, becomes tangible (Nightingale, 2006).

Female waste pickers, also tend to participate in different household labor simultaneously. They mention how they breast-fed their child, and concurrently sort waste into different categories. In between they also stir food that gets cooked in the mud stove. This skill of multi-tasking is believed not easy to be inculcated by their male counterparts. But they suggest that occasionally such management becomes problematic, and sort of a heightened burden.

Some female waste pickers opined how at times they felt trapped with this different work which they have to shoulder but which is also unavoidable at the same time. While these activities of making home is work for one, for the other (the male members) it become consumption (Cox, 2013). For instance, the food being cooked in the process of child rearing and sorting is consumed by the males prepared by the females. In this sense, domesticity get linked to feminine identity, and assert the status of women in particular roles.

Other household practices also serve as a window to understanding how one's finances reinforce the idea of balance. Waste pickers fulfil the demand of housework like shopping essentials or grocery for few days or a week. The concept of buying a month's needful like rice, dal, flour, biscuits, soaps, etc. is not followed by them. Because they opine of not being able to afford investing a bigger sum of money, therefore, prefer less amount to invest to buy the household stuffs. This reveals a lot about how waste pickers make a budget. Such practices widely highlight the choices compelled to be made owing to financial limits.

I remember Nazima, the 16-17 years-old girl of a waste-picker couple casually telling me, 'Often my parents would go fishing in the *Deepor Beel*. If they are lucky, they catch fishes, and we joyfully get to relish unplanned non-vegetarian meals' (Interview, 2020). This image maps the minute privileges they get to experience while confronting the everyday domesticities. They get content with this unexpected food arrangement. It further leads to visualizing fortunate days that is yet to approach them.

4.5 Food and the experience of eating in the area

Given the stench of waste from the dumping ground, waste pickers opine that it definitely provokes aversion towards the notion of consuming food. And the act of preparing and cooking food is equally affected. A mode of tolerating and controlling the unusual experience of smell has to be constituted in the context of food intake. There has been discussion about the perception of odors on site, where it was smelled, what they smelled like, and how strong they were (Reno, 2016, pg. 31).

Some of these worries were initially raised by the waste pickers' own experiences. They claimed that when they first arrived at the dumpsite, they were concerned that the stinking waste might make them less hungry. Some even wondered if they would be able to eat in such a setting at this time. Organizing themselves in the space stood as a big deal for the purpose of daily mealtimes. Against the backdrop of the waste hill, pickers had to arrange themselves for the important aspect of not going hungry. The assimilation of the waste pickers in the ambience of smell and dirt is shown to be crucial in building a form of integration.

Prothom keidinman bohut digdar hoisil. Aku xantit khabo para nasilu. Xali bomi bhab bure aguri dhorisil. Khub kom xomoi asil jot moi bhalke gaot xuar dore khabo poristhi paisilu (The initial days were pathetic. Whatever we ate could not be digested in peace. The constant feeling of nausea loomed large. During those days there were rare times when food was consumed in an ethereal way like I used to have in village) (Haider, Interview, 2021).

Because the dumpsite odors were so persistent that subtracting it from the daily routines was impossible. The filthy stench could not be mitigated and much of the cooking time was an expression of disgust by the pickers towards the odor. They had to encounter, modify and adopt the dietary practice of consumption in such an unfavorable environment. It has remained difficult for the waste pickers to accept filthy stench getting mixed with the aroma of cooked food. It eventually became a rational choice that drove the waste pickers to explain themselves to have the food intake for utilitarian value.

However, the act of eating is rarely an isolated event among the waste pickers. They more commonly have the family members or fellow waste pickers around. Cachelin et al (2019) argued that maintaining food ways is a powerful tool for building community. The collective setting in fact helps to control the dietary behavior. For example, the meanings of eating food in a dirty environment is adequately integrated as a practice. This is reflective of the sense of accepting the conditions under which food is devoured. Central to this process is the act of embracing food as a set of relationships. Theoretical orientations for explaining collective eating patterns have emphasized cultural and symbolic expressions of food use where eating patterns reflect systems of meaning constructed by them (Delormier, et al. 2009).

However, even though the physical distance between the dumpsite and their homes has been considerable, the symbolic distance is shorter. Children too initially struggled with eating (for the presence of overpowering stench) whether it was packaged food like biscuits and chips or any cooked meal of rice, and curry. One of the residents who lives near the dumping ground at times regret the overriding stench. She claims that often her house is filled with the smell of burning frankincense or intense sticks to divert the smell. She tells,



Image 3. Female waste picker and her child sun-drying vegetables before cooking.

‘I feel shy to invite guests to my house. The smell is strong, and the dumpsite is standing grey and tall. How would they eat even if my culinary dishes are mouthwatering?’ (Interview, 16/11/2021).

This implies how a sense of shame confronts and comes to violate previous order of food experience. The presence of such constraints makes them apprehensive about preparing food for social events or social gatherings. This then serves as a social distance from the social ties. Waste pickers acknowledge that they are rather close to a small number of village-dwelling family members. The relatives do ask about eating customs, cooking methods, and eating in the presence of filth. The guest-food sequences then take on a more explanatory role. One female waste picker told, ‘At times I have to persuade my family members from village that the food cooked is clean even though the aroma is adulterated by the filthy stench’. She further conveyed how waste pickers have to craft a set of inculcated habits to create a form of assurance on the purity of food being cooked that is to be consumed.

Yet there is not much to alter for a smell-free eating experience or acquire a range of food items. Beyond the simple act of eating for sustenance, there is a complex process of internalizing the external factors (odor, space, occupation, ambience) in everyday life. In matter of the conditions of food choices, they are structured by resources limiting the range of options (Delormier, et al. 2009). The waste pickers thus would consume tea, rice, dal, mixed vegetable curry and occasionally fish, meat, and egg whenever they desired. There seems to be a conscious attitude towards their financial situation, reflected in the strategies to cope with a limited budget (van der Velde, et al., 2019).

To show how food is more than the physiological needs, I reach back to the concept of food sovereignty which is generally described as ‘a community, state or nations’ right to shape its food system’ (Wittman, 2011, pg.87). From the perspective of the waste pickers’ experience of food culture and eating practice, food is not only limited to calorie intake and getting nutrition. Their identities are shaped by their eating habits, even if food frequently does not provide them with psychological consolation. It rather awakens a sense of injustice and inequality for waste pickers having to consume food in an uncommon ambience. The reference to taste being felt as unpleasant even though food is cooked is worthy to be noted. When I asked the waste pickers about the ordeal



Image 4. Dampened chips laid to dry for consumption at a later time.

of eating in the area, they said that taste is occupied by feelings of contempt. More than flavours in the food, it was the odoring agent of the dumpsite disrupting the food eating experience.

Gross (2012) points to how some people derive their nutrition from dumpsters. Such foraging of dumpsters for food signifies that they are capable of consuming food knowing that it may or may not make them sick. There are even instances when waste pickers recovered food remains from the dumping ground. But on inquiry if they would use, it was a feeble yes as well as an unheard no. The excesses of food waste seemed a taboo to be talked with outsider like me. While cleanliness is adhered to in their kitchens, recovering food from dumping ground, and consuming it become a matter of acquiring which seemed essential at that time.

4.6 Managing vulnerability of health and illness

The waste pickers have not openly confided about being affected by food consumption gathered from the dumpsite. But the domain of waste picking is a key area that harbors tendency to propagate health risks. Scholars have documented how the work model and poor practice of personal hygiene at work entails health hazards and illness patterns thereby increasing problems (Salvaraji et al., 2020., Chandramohan, 2010., Issever, 2002). While it is not possible for the waste pickers to avoid vulnerability at work, the health condition gets compromised. What is problematic is that as they are poor, and livelihoods depend on re-use and repair (Isenhour & Reno, 2019), absence from waste contact is impossible. In the event of collecting goods that have re-sale value, waste pickers are unable to protect themselves from microbial pollution produced through solid waste, soil, and air.

Lack of equipment like masks, gloves, and protective suits, instantly convey the deplorable condition under which the waste pickers work. I have seen women picking waste from the dumpsite wearing tattered shirt over their salwar kameez, saree or

nighties. The men wear shirt, pant or *lungi*⁵ at the workspace. While they change their work attire to cleaner clothes after work and bath, this is inadequate to protect them. When inquired about the absence of personal protective equipment (PPE) at work, one of the pickers told it being a *dami aaxa* (costly and unachievable dream/hope). Not only the elders, even their children are exposed to infection at the dumpsite. Absence of siblings or one parent at home to look after the child, some children are taken to the dumping ground to be under the vision of parents. Contact with filth, dirt and inhaling toxic stench then proves obnoxious for a child with stomach upset and nausea.

The nature of the work is such that it compromises the physical integrity of the waste pickers. The subjective experience of the waste pickers revealed body ache, joint pain in the knees, and back pain (for constant stooping low) to be a pervading issue. The waste pickers are aware of the filth in their work, and risk being an indispensable part of it. In the words of Tauquar, male waste picker, said,

‘I am working over 6 years now. The pain and the discomforts are always there but only on extreme cases, we attend to it’ (Interview, 2/4/21).

Many of them expressed that such physical distresses have become part and parcel of their everyday. There are cases where waste pickers are frequently hurt by glass shard pricks, rusty iron scratches, and other leftovers. They visit the doctor to receive immunizations and ointments in reaction to similar incidents.

In a different area, according to a study conducted by WEIGO in 2019 (Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising) at Accra, Ghana, found that 41% of all waste pickers of landfills related their last illness or injury to work. Likewise, the seasonal fever, cough, and cold is significantly present but moderate degree is not considered a hurdle in the work. While Guwahati witness rainy days during monsoon, the waste pickers do not refrain from working at the dumpsite. There are occurrences when they are drenched yet continue looking for valuable waste. In particular, this bring them sickness from fever.

⁵ Lungi- A men’s apparel resembling a skirt and worn by tying around waist.

Work loss is caused by the season. Although they hold no dislike for their work and its characteristics, physical exhaustion caused them to limit their work hours. Additionally, women typically do not stay behind during their menstruation. They use cloth as affording sanitary pads is tough. Females pointed out how a day's off from the work would incur loss. Even during their monthly periods, they either collect waste or sort the gathered wastes at home. While such engagements make them feel dizzy occasionally, it is overlooked.

The ubiquity of waste, regular and protracted exposure to it, leaves adverse effects on physical and mental health (Malik et al., 2020). In wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, where nationwide lockdown, moral appeals, and punitive measures (Guru, 2020) were visualized to well-suit the affected globe, the consequences had only worsened the livelihoods of the lower-income groups like the waste pickers. Naziya, articulated how they had been low-spirited, sad, disheartened, and angry at the same time. It was too much hardship which had to be faced without work in those days. In addition to decreased earnings, the mental health of these groups was adversely affected with the management measures not being able to investigate incidents of depression, lethargy, and anxiety (Lebni et al., 2020) among the waste pickers.

The intersection of the mental health disparities led to experience amplified discontentment without proper allocation of support for the waste pickers. Like before, even during the pandemic, they had no adequate access to rights to claim social protection. As the pandemic rendered them workless, feelings like burgeoning thoughts of being marginalized, and being disadvantaged became more pronounced. In fact, the burning issue of the work crisis made the presence of stress among the waste pickers inevitable. They had to cope with the mental health issues without being exposed to the Covid-19 pandemic but experiencing its risks in the environment and feeling segregated from social embeddedness (Deka & Das, 2022). Interaction with many of my research participants provided information about the contingencies of mental health disruption, and how the struggle to sustain the unproductive days became a matter of grave concern.

Atifa, one of the female respondents said, ‘With nothing to look forward to, our minds were subjected to unwelcoming intrusive thoughts. We did not feel nice, just useless and tired. It felt as if we were trapped in a *jailkhana*’ (prison) (Interview, 2/4/21).

The above narration is indicative of the fact about how mental energy took a dip where waste pickers were subdued under dire living conditions. Work that seemed stable and dependable, stood absent during the pandemic. Fatigue was another mental strain that overwhelmed the waste pickers. As most of the time was spent in slumbers, their bodies felt severely tired. They shared how resorting to sleep after their minimal household work was an escape mechanism from excessive free time posing as the biggest ordeal. In spite of their unwillingness, they had to adapt to this new routine of monotony.

Jehrul, a male waste picker, 41 years old, said, ‘It is unexplainable. We are the last ones to be on government’s agenda of uplifting us from this dirty place. The lockdown had given us even more chances to neglect us. We cannot ask for help from others unless they do so from their heart’ (Interview, 26/10/2021).

The Covid-19 pandemic affected waste pickers' means of subsistence and economic structure because they are still primarily unemployed (Rob, 2020) and have fewer coping mechanisms for the current escalation of inequality. In actuality, they were forced to accept the city’s pre-existing structures as the helpless victims of circumstances beyond their control. During this time, the differences in how different social classes accessed resources seemed particularly pronounced. Waste pickers believed that because of their affiliation with the waste industry, they experienced othering⁶ that this contributed to government ignorance. However, the group residing in their communities has been the only source of security that appears to be long-lasting during this crisis.

4.7 Living with thins walls and breach of privacy

The plot of lands housing the dwelling units or the informal shelters of the waste pickers are actually the rent plantations owned by upper middle classes who are from cities like Guwahati, and Delhi. These are rented to the waste dealers. Informal settlements are built

⁶ Othering- a Husserlian concept, depicting the reductive action of labelling and defining a person as a subordinate in terms of category (Canales, 2020).

and rented (close to the *Boragaon* dumpsite) out by the waste dealers/owners to the waste pickers. A waste picker family get one room with a power connection, shared bathrooms, a washing space, and a tube-well. One door and one or two small windows are present in the semi-concrete or mud-floored interior of the house. The tiny space for the kitchen is made out in the room itself. A few bricks act as roof pressures under the combination of corrugated tin, tarpaulin, and reclaimed clothes from the dumpsite that makes up the roof of the house. The walls are either constructed of tin or bamboo and tarpaulin. The courtyards are mostly surrounded by houseflies and litter. It is used for household tasks, to sit idle, exchange humor as a respite from work, and as a children's play area.

Even though the absence of proper infrastructure is an urban injustice to us, we have normalized the space to our need. As these adjustments have benefitted us, so why do we not plug ourselves into the city's periphery with the minimum facilities? (Hiba, Interview, 2022)

The one-room dwelling of the waste pickers is miserable. The inner-room area depicts how life at the edge can look like. The bed-space usually for two people to sleep comfortably is crammed by more than two. The bed is made out of wooden planks and concept of mattress is not present in all of the households. There is rarely a cupboard for clothing but stuffed in bags, steel trunk box, or simply piled on one corner of the bed. It is yet adopted in a creative way to meet the needs of the living (Nedoroscik, 1997).

Strings are hung in the room itself to dry laundry during rainy days or even casually. Bricks or bamboos are placed on the floor and used as shelves. The municipal is not responsible for extending basic amenities like water and electricity but is provided by the waste dealers. Both tube-well's installation and electricity connection are managed by the dealers as well. This description is typical of their houses and the area where they take root and settle.

Davis (2006) summarizes how the urban poor have to solve a complex equation as they try to optimize housing cost, tenure security, quality of shelter, journey to work, and sometimes, personal safety. These categories of urban poor are not offered the same possibilities as other urban dwellers to lead a decent life. For instance, a sense of shame has to be stripped off in the one-room dwelling. Biological activities of parents are

witnessed by children and known by the next room neighbor. Due to the absence of any form of privacy, it become a deliberate way of not opposing private moments.

Issues of privacy as such are the scene in most families, and hence, ceases to be of concern. According to Chatterjee (2004), whatever resources are available to the poor are being honed from the ground in order to secure goods necessary to preserve biological life (Das, 2010). These are subtle ways for the waste pickers to accept living under breach of privacy. In their words, the motion of life cannot be stopped owing to the architecture of the informal settlement. They insist these are natural events and it cannot and need not be suspended.

Often, private times are inferred by eavesdropping, intentional or unintentional (Srinivasan et al., 2008). Activities, arguments, and friendly conversations are often sensed by others. While these spaces are meant to be private sheltering one's intimate practices of talk, work, and leisure, it becomes a charged area. The partition between the two houses is walled by a tin or bamboo, a symbol of powerlessness of waste pickers to inhabit better model of dwelling. At times there occurs interruption or addition of opinions from the other family. The opinion of Sakina, a 43-year-old, female waste picker, is illustrative of the above, 'This has been regularized. We stay busy in our room and they are in their room'. In drawing attention to this account, one can see how comfort or confidentiality has to be compromised. Rather the move implied a presence of self-control, and adjustment.

Personal accounts eventually find their way into a semi-public conversation. Many of the waste pickers were uncomfortable and unwilling to talk when I asked about their private space being symbolically invaded. However, they were unaware of the understanding that private life has a realm of its own which can be guarded. This reveals interesting detail about home not being space-segregated rather informs of a shared belonging. Home is not strictly imagined for private moments and communications of expressions of solidarity or resistance.

Private space becomes emblematic room for people to be alone, to dream, and gain possession of oneself. Such aspects may be unconsciously dealt within, but the waste pickers are not sensitive to it. The waste pickers individually conduct their time in the

intimate space. This physical-spatial-place is complex, contested, and an ongoing production rather than pre-given (Bryant & Williams, 2020). The social interrelationship is maintained by the waste pickers in reference to the private space though is symbolically intruded. The lack of private space couldn't be blamed on their neighbor's proximity. The point of distress and being upset was evident but (to my surprise) they claim to have been well-suited into it.

The sense of belonging is conceived as the intimate feeling of being in place in a particular geographical, social, and temporal space which is realized through interactive and relational experiences in everyday life (Yuval-Davis, et al., 2005). The waste pickers resist the interest in maintaining isolation from the neighbors. Waste pickers thrive within the bare necessities of infrastructure. Such living is seen as a necessity and thus, embarrassment on any breach of privacy is not touched upon.

Waste pickers navigate hurdles on a personal level while sense of shame is approached as covert. Lister (2007) points that people's way of negotiating rights, responsibilities, identities, and belonging in everyday social interactions can be captured as a form of second-class citizenship. The waste pickers therefore, conduct their living practices both individually as well as collectively. This experience of belonging and living is influenced and brought into practice by emulating their previous fellow waste pickers. It is seen as a way of affirming to the social norm of the space.



Image 5. A typical room of a waste picker family.

4.8 Relation among the waste pickers and other neighbors

Relations with known and unknown people are necessary for the pursuit of instating one's identity. The peculiarities of non-economic relations signify that people sustain through human associations. It is not necessary for people to have blood ties but those that are formed through acquaintances. The dumpsite thus allows for forging social relationships and it delineates the fabric of everyday life entwined with fellow waste pickers and others. This group of people navigate uncertainty and variegated forms of insecurity associated with urban life (Kinder, 2016) by being together. They organize and align themselves uncovering the principles of solidarity, cohesion, and similarities of their situations and chances in the area.

Arsana, a female waste picker who relocated to Guwahati in 2016 from Dhubri (a district in Assam), says that the combination of the above has helped to create a sense of community while also enhancing their sense of brotherhood, self-worth, and corporation. Although these internal migrants' worries are frequently unseen and only sometimes expressed, they find ways to build strong social bonds and find satisfaction in being close to one another (Skeldon, 2006).

Everyone plays a pivotal role in extending support in times of need or emergency. It is commonly observed how they generate social capital to build values of care and well-being for one another. The advantage of physical proximity helps them to work in tandem and be available. The waste pickers shared how on initial days at the dumping ground was tough but the fellow-waste pickers encouraged and motivated them to stick to it. Such support has improved relationships and increased subjective well-being.

During the times of crisis, and while facing impediments to fulfil basic needs, there are instances when one shares their available food or clothing with other families. Gestures like this promote deep friendship and cohesion between them. It helps in the formation of aspirations and a desire to give back to the community they are living in (Davidson, 2011). Much not if all, the share of goods like slippers, hair clips, and occasionally some clothes marks reciprocity enmeshed among the waste pickers.

Khalida, a 23-year-old female waste picker, say, ‘In our sphere of social life, this act of exchanging the needful is positivity. We feel like a big happy family living together’ (Interview, 12/01/2022).

Presence of such characteristics among the waste pickers signify that not only commodification of waste keep occurring but they also live by the purpose of relation and emotions. I would refer to this attachment as *morom* (meaning love and affection) that resonates with everyday articulations and declarations of gratitude, sympathy, and compassion (Kikon, 2017). It captures the desire to live in unity and peacefully which is identified as sites of love (ibid.). Through the acts of sharing, the waste pickers establish the significance of generosity and forming a bond of non-economic alliance.

The construction of such relations is also prevalent among the waste pickers and other people residing near the dumpsite. It reinforces the idea that such non-economic relations have helped waste pickers to sustain the area without conflict or war of words. Nishita, a homemaker who lives in her rented concrete Assam-type house⁷ near the informal settlements tell, ‘I have been living here since 2019 and I can confidently say about the waste pickers being helpful. I have asked few women waste pickers to wash clothes and sweep my courtyard. They displayed an amazing sense of the work’. She further added that whatever payment was offered, the waste pickers accepted with happiness. Unusual ties as such explain how social relations are defined through small acts.

Nishita told me about her early misgivings about the dumping site, the waste pickers, and the neighborhood as a whole. She, too, wasn't sure if living next to the Miya Muslims⁸ in Assam would be feasible because of widespread doubts about them.

⁷ Assam-type house- Architectural design of house which is lightweight being built in Assam after the great earthquake of 1897 of Assam.

⁸ Miya Muslims- Etymologically, Miya is an address of respect, and in Assam, was originally used to refer to the Muslim community of East Bengali origin as a whole. It was after the Axam Andolan or the Assam Movement of 1979-85 that the term took on a derogatory connotation, suggesting illegal entry and usurpation of legitimate rights of the sons of the soil (Goswami, 2011). Although legally citizens of India now, these early migrants have however become collectively unwelcome in Assam owing to the fact that illegal immigration from Bangladesh continues even today raising fears over land grabbing, demographic swamping, loss of indigenous identity, religious minoritization and loss of political representation (ibid.).

Furthermore, the waste pickers who were able to survive by working with waste did not make her feel good. The strong smell emanating from the waste dumpsite failed to inspire positive sentiments about the area either. But having a cordial conversation with the waste pickers and learning about their need to work here was invaluable.

Many question-answer sessions later based on true facts and events has moved Nishita to trust these waste pickers. It led her to give entry to waste pickers in the compound of her home. In this way, social relations between Nishita and the waste pickers kept on reproducing. The act of kindness and respect was shown to the waste pickers once Nishita was fully aware of the role and service offered by the waste pickers.

In other contexts, when I spoke with the shopkeepers of *Boragaon* (the specific road leading to the dumping ground) and to the drivers of the electric rickshaws that ply to and from Boragaon to the dumpsite, they acknowledged the waste pickers, and their guts to physically touch the ‘extremely dirty’ wastes. It was common among them to tell that these waste pickers ‘silently’ led their life amid the dumpsite. Clash with the locals has been a never-heard instance according to them. It seemed as if the area near the dumping ground was a silent zone. Such was the calm that prevailed as perceived by the onlookers.

4.9 Sense-making of gossips, and humor

Living in cohesion and indulging in entertaining moments has been a subject of importance to the waste pickers. They reflect the need to take in witty happenstances where this part of everyday life opens up the sociality (Simone & Fauzan, 2013). Otherwise lack of such communicative activities would definitely render the work monotonous. These undertakings of gossip and humor accomplish the function of stress-management in dirty work and is consumed as a source of fostering productivity. Gossip as informal word-of-mouth communication (Mills, 2010) and humor as tense reducing in socialization process (Morreall, 1991) makes waste pickers supportive of participation in the work. In many instances, waste pickers have opined to use the moderator of their own ethnicity (expressions for being Miya Muslims) and gender to create a lively environment.

In the most general and value-neutral sense, gossip can be defined as ‘a general interest in the doings, the virtues and vices of others’ (Gluckman, 1963, p. 308). It can be seen as evaluative social talk about people where the latter is not present (Eder & Enke, 1991). It serves as indulging in varied emotions of joy, defamation, bonding, and network with one another. As Herskovits (1947) notes that gossips are about events which are retold both with relish and sympathy. Thus, the space of the waste pickers at work or home turns into a spectacle of both positive and negative gossip.

During one of the conversations, a female waste picker, told me how one of their female waste picker friends was being enticed by a married male member outside of the waste picker community. While my research participant did not vilify them, she explained that the incident has triggered the ground for fresh discussion among themselves. This suggests how gossip becomes a prominent element of many social interaction and social exchange (Rajacic, et al., 2020). Gossip in fact accounts for accelerating unity and integration among new and old members in waste picking. Communication transgresses the boundaries between them for it initiates friendship, information, and entertainment.

Although the timing, subject matter, and form of gossip vary, waste pickers engage in it on a regular basis. There is a small distinction in the gossiping styles of male and female waste pickers. Gender disparities also have been examined here in relation to discussion themes. It has been observed that women assess the qualities of the person who is the subject of gossip; men discuss about groupism at work. My findings show that gossiping hasn't been harmful to those it is about, despite its indulgence. Thus, gossip is portrayed in this study as being innocuous and as a way to maintain boredom or idleness in the workplace of classifying the waste items. It offers a helpful vantage point for eliminating the silent but persistent tension associated with handling trash.

Because waste pickers spend more of their time working on waste, they have less time for other recreational pursuits. Jokes and humor are frequently used at work and when completing non-economic duties. Reno (2016) observes that humor and enjoyment can arise from the inherent susceptibility of gaps and the perilous nature of coming into contact with dirt. A female waste picker named Naussadi told me about her family

previously taking Rs. 20,000/from their waste owner in installments, spending it, and never giving it back. When she told me, she let out a big laugh. She believed that the conduct was legitimate because both she and her husband put in labor to accomplish waste picking. The presumption here that the money has been siphoned stands trivial. It is rather placed as a verbal banter reflecting the amusement among the waste pickers.

Some waste pickers found the profane jokes made with sexual content totally unsettling, while others dismissed it as non-toxic. It is considered as an extension of the life being led in the periphery. In another context, Hodson & MacInnis (2016) argues that while humor may convey a negative message, it is hidden by its humor-infused character, which frees it from any bias and reduces it to a trifling concern. Few female waste pickers opined that they feared their children might somehow learn the derogatory jokes. Hence, they refrained from making comments when such jokes are exchanged. This reflects the embodiment of femininity to care, and diverting the membership in such fun.

At other times, waste pickers themselves perpetuated stereotypes about their lower-class or lower status position. This distinction usually gets made in jest to highlight the power dynamics at work that prevent them from severing their ties to waste work. Making jocular content on the government and its politics is common among the male waste pickers. They evoke humour while navigating biased ideologies of government and their performance towards the urban poor.

This is one way of adopting the precarity of the work and contesting the hierarchy where they are not attended to. They mock and laugh at the optional nature of the government of not restoring the occupational identity of the waste pickers. Bowers (2005) notes how humour offers opportunities to empower and liberate oneself of problems and oppression. My research has found how these waste pickers established their zones of comfort in making fun of the power of the government. They would be heard saying that government's reluctance is evident in not attending to care what the waste pickers do.

This everyday technique of using humour is taken as an opportunity to reveal the unknown or what is being experienced by the waste pickers. For example, Delgado and Stefanic (2001) describe the storytelling of Black and minoritised ethnic groups as a way

to open into ignored or alternative realities. In the opinion of the waste pickers, while people other than them can enjoy a sense of superiority in terms of work identity, their work resonated inferiority. However, recognizing and acknowledging the arduous nature of the work, along with the self-deprecating humor that accompanies it, serves as a means of affirming the value and significance of their efforts.

According to Wilkins and Eisenbraun (2009), humor makes it simpler to deal with everyday struggles and disappointments. The waste picker releases their tension through the use of jokes and humour. The subtleties of the joke-telling in fact play a significant role among the waste pickers to handle fights and trivial conflicts. Humour seeks to contest the individual or any sudden display of collective authoritarianism. For some waste pickers, undermining such negative power is their act of holding to the constitution of peace and coexistence, a tenet of their religion. Hence, during difficult times, they support one another to achieve peace.

4.10 Religious practices of the waste pickers

In Islam, if faith, prayer, alms-giving, fasting, and pilgrimage can be practiced thoroughly, we believe to have a satisfied life. I do pray in the mosque occasionally but performing all practices is bit difficult for me. Does it mean I am less a Muslim? (smiles and wait for my validation)

- (Ansar, a male waste picker, Field work, 2022).

The religion of the waste pickers is not shaped by the regular practices of Islam. For them being true practitioners of the religion is not common in their locality though there may be one or two exceptions. They further add that waste picking as a physically hard labor had led most of them to relinquish being religious. The experience of daily practices of waste work is overpowering. In such instances, to be able to perform the religious practices has failed to form their pattern of life. In the context of rituals, Asad (1988) demonstrates how human bodies and emotions are engaged in religion. Through the emphasis on the interpretations on religion, the waste pickers opine that there is more religion in the work they do. The practices in the work and commitment is integrated as

religious that is used to connect to the realm of the sacred Work has supposedly prompted the experience of sacred within them.

Religion plays differently in a variety of contexts, including those that are formal and informal, public and private, terrified, secular, and religiously "neutral" (Ammerman, 2013). Its construction varies depending on the context and time. For instance, processes by which religion is explained with specific interests, and people relating to in their own respect, is advanced as a lived religion approach. McGuire (2008) argues that lived religion lies in distinguishing the actual experience of religious persons from the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices. As I discuss the topic of religious practices with the waste pickers, they admitted to having the self-consciousness to pray, and keeping faith in the Almighty. They made clear of harboring no intention to abandon the religious practices but at the present time the waste work practices have taken a central core.

Bringing together the religious practices of the waste pickers and waste work allows to see religion through their view. Women female waste pickers, during the interviews, communicated that while the male counterparts occasionally visit the mosque and give Friday prayers, they remain religious by heart and soul. Kashmira, a 35-year-old female waste picker, say,

‘When I hear the *azan* (Islamic call to prayer) every day, I feel happy. I ask for help and well-being simply by thinking about Allah while I kneel down. It seems like getting connected to Him even though physically I do not offer Namaz (prayers)’ (Interview, 2021).

This way of looking at religion is applied to claim devotion and spirituality. It sheds light on how people take religion in significance and are situated differently in their social life. It brings to the differences existing between religious interests, concerns, and agency of individuals holding different positions in social space (Rinaldo, 2014).

Courtney Bender (2012) applied Pierre Bourdieu’s practice theory to highlight the importance of capturing lived religion as it manifests in mundane interactions between people across various social settings. There are instances when waste pickers talk about hope, future, and contending that it rests on Almighty to consider them for showing better

days. Not only do such evocations arise occasionally, waste pickers also depend on the Almighty for work productivity. They have expressed how they wish for good health to enable them to continue working. Belief becomes important here as it channelizes their thoughts to pray and keep faith. In other words, the analysis of religion practiced by these groups of urban poor have transferred the focus of religion from set rules to individual perceptions.

Religion among the waste pickers is carried out in particular time and held both loosely and firmly. Waste pickers do assemble for religious discussions in the area of their rented house. An elderly waste picker, Hafiz Ali, about 82 years old, who has been involved in the waste work since last 20 years, speak,

‘In times of feeling miserable for our plight, we talk about our religious teachings. While we have not been able to practice the universally accepted definitive characteristics of a good Muslim, religious discussion helps us. It shows us to find a new path that constitutes motivation to uphold our ideas on work’ (Interview, 19/08/2021).

He tells how such discussion evokes profound peace within them. They in fact shape their own understandings of being conveniently connected to religion and meanings of devotion. There seems to arise a healing effect on their busy minds when engaging with such talk. Because they do not set time for *Namaz* at home, this practice of talking about religion is held meaningful. It is the activism for non-disruption in work and ability to produce improved living.

Such notion syncs with Max Weber’s idea of religion as to how far religion is capable of influencing economic behavior. Its one’s duty in a calling, it is an obligation which the individual is supposed to feel and does feel towards the content of his professional activity, no matter in what it consists, no matter whether it appears on the surface as a utilization of his personal powers or only of his material possessions (as capital) (Weber, 1930, p.19).

When considering religion, ‘different practice unfolds in time and is constitutive of meaning’ (Bourdieu, pg. 81). Personal religious experiences have concrete religious practices. In the case of the waste pickers, they are liberal in not being strict followers of

their religious observances. During the interviews, I came across many waste pickers who repeatedly missed the Friday prayers in the mosque. For them, it initially aroused a sense of shame and sadness for not undertaking the religious ritual. But it is individual commitment where they construct their own religious practices and later become shared experiences (McGuire, 2008). It is an intentional detachment from regular prayers at home and occasional visit to the mosque.



Image 6. The Mosque in the vicinity of the residential place of the waste pickers.

Asad (1988) argues that not only religion changes over time but also people's understanding of religious, changes. He further tells that religion should not be viewed as some trans historical essence, existing as a timeless and unitary phenomenon. The human factor of privilege plays a significant role. Analyzing the changed place of religion in the lives of the waste pickers, it highlights how social location of the work alters individual patterns of religiosity. The waste pickers thereby adopt their own practices, and if situation and time is favorable, they shall adhere to the old practices. It is believed among them that their spirituality and faith in Allah will help them to take care of the material

concerns. For instance, health, security, and prosperity in life would be supported if they are true to themselves.

Luckman (1967) defines invisible religion as individual religious behaviors that do not align with a typical bundle of religious beliefs and practices. This is consistent with feminist scholars who have advocated for sensitivity to the disparities in religious interests, concerns, and agency among individuals in various social positions (Rinaldo, 2014). For waste pickers, religion is defined by the convenience of their work and time periods.

4.11 Anxiety of separation from wastes- The *Chandrapur* protest, and the context of fear

Religion becomes an ongoing and dynamic process of interaction with the everyday reality of work, living and uncertainties. Attributing vast importance to labor in waste work as a religious lesson symbolizes how waste and work is interwoven into everyday lives of the waste pickers. It foregrounds waste's materiality as a resource that constitutes a majority experience of the waste pickers in and outside the dumping ground. In fact, value of livelihood is derived from the value placed on waste.

An instance of the decision to transfer the disposal of waste from the *Boragaon* dumpsite to a new place took the waste pickers by surprise. On June 24, 2021, the Assam state government had directed the Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC) authorities to relocate the dumping ground from *Boragaon* to *Chandrapur*, an eastern suburb of the city Guwahati. This decision was taken on the orders of the National Green Tribunal (NGT), New Delhi, that had previously directed the government to shift its dumpsite from *Boragaon*. The decision showed strong condemnation from the local residents of *Chandrapur* area who vehemently opposed the move.

Members of All Assam Students' Union (AASU) also extended solidarity to the people by supporting their rejection. In a bid to safeguard the biodiversity of the *Chandrapur* area, the locals were extremely disheartened with the decision. They emphasized how the *Deepor Beel* has been gravely affected by the dumping of city's

waste within its proximity at the previous site. Hence, the locals opposed the dumping to protect *Chandrapur* from having a similar fate on its adjoining areas.

The dumping however, materialized from June 28, 2021 for some days in the site of the defunct Chandrapur Thermal Power Station at *Chandrapur*, Guwahati. However, the mess of dumping waste was ultimately pushed to suspension. As a result of the Pollution Control Board Assam (PCBA) intervention's and public outcry, city's waste dumping at *Chandrapur* got prohibited since August 5, 2021. The dumping then shifted to a new site at *Belor Tol*, approximately 1km away from the previous *Boragaon* dumpsite.

Thus, the protest and the subsequent action came as a huge relief to the waste pickers. While they had no outlet to voice their concern that the fate of waste could impact them, they were silently witnessing the development of the protests. The waste dealers provided them the needful information during the entire tenure. News seen through phones of some of the waste pickers also kept them updated.

Finally, the return of the waste to the new site i.e. *Belor Tol*, which stand closely to the earlier site at *Boragaon*, helped them to seize the opportunity again. Even though the distance to the new site took about fifteen minutes to reach through vehicle and half an hour by walking from the settlements, they displayed being complacent. The waste dealers also confided that waste picking at *Belor tol* has proved tough as the distance is more, and thus, propensity to collect more waste at time minimizes. But they admit of the relief about getting back waste at a place close to them. This tells us about the precarity and risks which hangs above the waste pickers and dealers. The hue and cry about waste dumping or the dimension of official management has essentially hidden why waste matters for these waste pickers. Working with waste is similar to 'surviving in the midst of unspeakable tragedy' (Alexander & Reno, 2012).

But instances of having to live away from waste speaks of another great incoming uncertainty. Moreover, for this community who had faced riverbank erosion and landlessness, the dumping site has been an abode (Pathak, 2023). This is the reason why the waste pickers longed for the city's waste not to be dumped at a distance far away from them. Hasina, a female waste picker reiterated how they had provisioned themselves with waste without any external help. The decision to shift to *Chandrapur* was a bolt

from the blue. However, they had nothing on their part to place their worries before the *sorkar* (government). She further emphasized that shifting their base (informal settlements) to *Chandrapur* could have been a major hurdle. They anticipated the backlash that they would have to encounter from the locals at *Chandrapur*.

The instance around the shift of disposal site actually brought them a sense of terror within. The pickers were unable to acknowledge the inherent fear. There was no formal body or organization that could highlight the cause of their concern. Waste pickers could not resist the shifting of the disposal site. During one of the interviews, a male waste picker said their fear got difficult to be eased during that period. The arrangement of mobility then stood as a challenge. The hiatus felt in those days of protest at *Chandrapur* and dumping, raised issues of security of work, and rights over wastes of the waste pickers.

Even though the protests erupted as a response to the new dumping, the waste pickers also feared if the protests had got ignored. In such an instance, the possibility of their marginal holding over wastes would have remained jeopardized. By demonstrating patience and subservience, they waited for the result because it was the only way out. This echoes the realm of their interests to secure wastes but without protests.

The waste pickers shared with me about feeling immensely joyful and relieved on learning of the resistance against dumping from the locals at *Chandrapur*. This paved the way for the waste pickers to receive waste in their original space and get to work back. Because the economic capital (in the sense taken by Bourdieu) is not abundantly available with the waste pickers to abruptly switch to an alternate means of livelihood.

So how do we make sense of such longing for waste materials at the dumping ground? This preference rose because they were habituated with waste and the work. Their everyday participation in the work is a compulsion revealing the dependency on waste linked to deeper reasons of survival. At the *Boragaon* dumping ground, the waste pickers start their morning through waste picking which continues after breakfast till sunset. The analysis shows how people forge strategic alliances with things (Fredericks, 2018) such as wastes, and it matters to laboring bodies of the waste pickers. This

intersection between waste and waste pickers allows us to see the dense fabric of relation shared between them.

What receives less attention is the fact of waste pickers responsibly collecting and contributing to recycling in an effective manner. They became vulnerable to structural changes in the selection of dumpsite. However, the stability and resilience displayed by the waste pickers both during the shift of the dumpsite and afterwards is deficit in the public eye. Since the waste pickers are weighed down, the relevance of waste in their lives is of fading relevance to society. A lack of collective agency in the waste pickers also make it incapable to check how waste is more than the abject. The asymmetry of power has its performance, and it impacts the waste pickers. Waste pickers became apprehensive of being the primary causalities in dispossession of waste (Shankar & Sahni, 2018).

4.12 Conclusion

This chapter has shown how the waste pickers accommodate themselves in their everyday life. The hazardous work of handling waste from dumpsites in the city intersects with their pattern of living. But they demonstrate the stability attained in day-to-day life in the face of wastes. By continuing to embrace the filth and disgust of the city's waste, the waste pickers have emphasized the purpose of their employment, and its accompanying worth. They thus take waste adequacy seriously and derive value from it.

Waste pickers allocate time for other household chores and domestic practices in addition to their waste work. They come across, adapt, and take up the eating habit of consuming food in the adverse environment of waste and its smell. Their bodily integrity is jeopardized because of the dirty work; they get physical aches due to the nature of their job, which requires them to bend over in order to pick waste. Nevertheless, they carry on with their work and make accommodation in their modest one-room home. It portrays what life might be like on a city corner. Despite the hardships of existence in such an ambience, waste pickers develop social bonds with other waste pickers and other people. Together, they negotiate ambiguities and many types of insecurities. One can see their attempts at humor and gossip that are meant to make them happy, cheer them up, and help them cope with tension when doing the unusual dirty work. They labor arduously

and make their living from the value of waste. It is believed among them that there is more religion involved in what they do. Their work and commitment habits are therefore intertwined with religion, which links them to the world of the sacred.

These waste pickers feel a sense of ownership over the waste they gather, even though they have no legal right to it. Because they continue to take part in the process of recovering waste from the dump, they have gained legitimacy over waste. They therefore perceive waste as important whenever they get separated from it in any situation, be the transfer of waste to *Chandrapur* or during the Covid-19 pandemic. As the dumping ground has become a venue for commodifying waste, the need for waste appropriation is deemed important for the pickers. It represents waste making up for the lacks in the villages of the waste pickers. Both between precarity and the possibility, the waste pickers become part of the larger network of informal waste economy. It thus, provides them the platform to form new collective action with others.

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