

Chapter 5

Meaning of waste: Value, informal economy, and the politics of picking

5. 1 Introduction

Waste does not have an individual existence. If we look for the connections, it will be discovered how waste is intrinsically linked to the lives of the people. A closer examination would show the existence of sociability, usefulness, value, and materiality of waste. These attributes turn our attention towards the experience of those whose existences are marked principally by the experiences, livelihoods and lives in/with/of waste (Bell, 2019).

In the previous chapter, we saw waste being demonstrated by the necessity of the waste pickers. The fact of its temporary transfer to a different location had triggered anxiousness among the waste pickers. Symbolizing that material waste is a necessity, it draws attention to the generative capacity of non-human actants to move us and shape our collective attachments (Braun & Whatmore, 2010). While we may unwittingly glimpse garbage, its full implications may not be realized (Scanlan, 2005), unless the occurrence of some major happenings. Till then, waste remains people's disinterest, or aversion towards those things or products that were once useful.

Dumping of waste at Guwahati city, not just at the dumpsite but careless disposing of waste here and there, is figured as common. Out of this, waste goes through a process of recovery by the waste pickers and waste dealers. Waste creates the foundation for the expanding but under-appreciated informal sector, supports networks of loyalty and trust, and, in the end, provides these vulnerable waste pickers with a sense of identity at work. Production of informal garbage economy that is not deemed a priority under the power of neoliberal agendas, is generated by these people. Allocated with risk and danger, the work is embraced for the attractiveness and having potential to bring economic change. The portrayal of informality is based not only on its traits, but also on the possibilities that exist outside of the state's regularity scope.

However, this does not recognize the waste pickers for their contributions to the city who reclaims recyclables that would otherwise end up in landfills or incinerators (Chen

& Carre, 2020). Because historically informality is seen as less productive, it is viewed as an array of labour and institutional resources to be harnessed rather than transformed (Meagher, 2020). Therefore, this aspect relates to ignoring the work that waste pickers do, and the infrastructure they build. Waste is referred to as rejectamenta, or the material reject in the filthy task of waste picking.

But amid the intensification of risks in working with waste and the hazards, the waste pickers sustain through the complexities. It is a grim manifestation of collective effort of the community to hide the pervading undercurrent of insecurity (Ghosh, 2017). The agency of sustainability of the waste pickers pivots around their understanding to embrace the uncertainties and survive. Even though they remain spectral figures and condemned to non-existence, they merge themselves with the polluted environment of the dumpsite.

Waste pickers appear to be happy as they enter the field of informal waste handling. The stigma, humiliation, and inhibitions get swallowed by the nasty task. The sensorial disgust (seeing the unsightly and touching the smelly waste materials) is transformed to a construction of unavailability's in their profession. This emphasizes the reflexivity to mediate their physical body and material waste for action. It depicts the city's waste being collected and repurposed by waste pickers, illustrating their practical yet largely invisible contribution to waste management.

By focusing on waste in this chapter, I show that waste get intersected with the labor of waste pickers, become a matter of bridge between waste and waste pickers, and how burden of dirt is emplaced on specific bodies. I trace out the significance and meaning of waste and how it is confronted while existing outside of one's physicality. Even though by definition waste is innately dirty and possess filth, Fredericks (2018) notes that waste work can simultaneously be seen as a process of cleaning.

Nonetheless, owing to the notion of purity and labor discharged in the waste work, cleaning through waste picking is overlooked. Even though there is an ongoing effort put forth to uncover the opportunities present in waste, the waste pickers have an impoverished solitary experience, where development intervention is still little. It is thus important and relevant to pay attention to the human labor working in the non-networked,

informal, and fragmented infrastructural systems across Global South (Graham and Marvin, 2001).

5.2 Waste: Meanings from the disconnection

Over the years, the city of Guwahati has been struggling to get rid of its littered waste in different parts of the city. There has always been widespread public dissatisfaction over the inability of Guwahati Municipal Corporation (GMC) and state to contain the festering waste in a systematic manner. As a result, waste has remained a symbol of disgust, confusion, and a tendency to disconnect from the same. It informs that the idea of waste management has become a problematic issue for formal organization like the state and GMC. Hence, the propensity to dispose waste without segregation at source continues.

Despite GMC's efforts in sensitizing people about source segregation and directing NGO's¹ to categorically collect waste, it has not materialized in full force. Indeed, a GMC official opines, "The public is not ready to listen on the benefits of waste segregation". This is an indication of blaming the urban dwellers who in the opinion of the GMC are poor in the implementation of self-rules and self-control in garbage handling.

Commonly, waste embodies rejection and go unnoticed in the effectiveness of recycling. It is regarded as the antonym of utility that denotes objects without possible use whose sole accomplishment has been soiling and cluttering of the space (Bauman, 2014). But if usefully employed waste occupies a place within a framework of usefulness and global waste economy. The unconnected bits and fragments that on their own might seem useless, are brought together to create something new (Scanlan, 2005), wanted and meaningful. This represents the putting of waste into use and that the centrality of waste starts after its disposal. Waste that is the leftover, discarded, and consigned to decay, has functions to transform into use/value once appropriated.

¹ NGO's- In Guwahati city, the GMC entrusts different NGO's to collect waste from the residential areas.

The meaning-making of waste is relative and at the same time there is ‘different senses of waste’² like ecological, utilitarian and moral-political. In contemporary times, waste is not only restricted to its single meaning as rejecting dirt or filth to be out of place (Douglas, 1966). It is being understood in relation to places and people too. Things appearing to be obsolete and defunct may lead to its disposition at the dumpsite or landfill or simply left distanced. In this way, waste is moved and accumulated out of sight, a particular way of getting rid of its presence and curbing the connection to the discarded. Brown (2001) points out that for even the most mere things, they pose a problem due to the specific un-specificity that ‘things’ denote.

The meaning of waste, on the other hand, is not constant because the impact of waste varies on different bodies and culture. Scholars working on waste have always been interested in the material- whether matter and materialism were constructed as thingness in garbage, shit or toxic waste (given or constructed), or the social-relations and political-economic processes concealed or revealed in the waste itself (Moore, 2012). Both people’s lives and cities oscillate between tidy and dirty and waste become a language which reflects connection of people and places. In this sense, Ammons (1993) notes that garbage³ can indeed be the poem of our times.

Drawing on the work of Scanlan (2005), we can see waste as imperfection, disorder and contamination, and the stateless condition of being one thing then another. However, the genius of the waste pickers is seen in the way where the feature of being a discard is concealed while promoting newness for the waste picked up. This leads us to notice how time changes or plays a role in transforming the nature of things and circumstances. Williams (2015) argues that prioritizing the philosophical approach to the subject of

² Different sense of waste- Reno (2016) discuss about three distinct sense of waste across various contexts: ecological waste (that comes from living things and processes, and is therefore, not exclusive to human beings), utilitarian waste (coming from the manufacture and use of utilities, is therefore, mostly exclusive to humans and rises in prominence as a problem in bigger, industrial societies), and moral-political waste (that comes from the systems of symbolic classification, such as rituals, religions, or racism, which are entirely exclusive to and arguably universal among humans, no matter how big or small the society).

³ Garbage- Waste, wastes, trash and garbage has been used interchangeably in this study.

waste allows us to explore how waste both makes and marks time by being collected. With the aspect of waste being available, it signifies the temporal openness that helps structure its recovery, collection, and analysis. In this context, I came across instances where waste pickers conveyed temporal rhythms in between work of picking waste. Their recuperative act of collecting waste is to describe how waste takes time for its use and recognition of having value.

5.2.1 Waste as a valuable resource

Waste is increasingly being recognized as a resource (Ghosh, 2017). People are entering into the fold of informal waste management because these people do not think of waste as polluted. This offers insight into how lives and bodies get caught up in and sustained by managing waste. The waste pickers in my study who are subjected to relentless action of picking wastes (municipal solid wastes of the city which are under the control of Guwahati municipal authority) reach a point from where there is no return. According to them, to stress its use, waste is highly different. To them, waste is a combination of resource, value, and desirability. This symbolizes the arrival of the act of reinvigorating life in wastes and infusing a sense of visibility in the value of wastes.

The practice of the waste pickers shows how they consolidate the position of waste as valuable in the present time. During my initial visits to the fields site, I observed how waste as residual traces of production and capitalism was consuming the waste pickers. The twisted doll, the new and unpacked Volini ointment, and fragment of Maa Durga's⁴ clay head lay scattered. These wastes that once served a child's playful time, eased someone's backache, and Hindus prayed to the deity for prosperity, are now evidence of a culture's departed desires. Many instances also showed that waste pickers used usable waste from the dumpsite, for example, junk jewelry, leftover food in good condition, chips, clothes, and bags. Fixing and finding uses for worn and broken articles entails a consciousness about materials and objects that is key to the process of making things to begin with (Strasser, 1999).

⁴ Maa Durga- In Hinduism, worshipped as a principal form of Goddess, she is also known as Devi and Shakti.

Fredericks (2018) have illustrated how the force of waste is animated through its intersection with human labor as it emplaces burdens of dirt onto specific bodies through differentiated experiences of precarity and discipline. The pursuit of waste by the waste pickers may be seen as a way to open up spaces to bring its restructuring. Because value has a representational tendency (Pederson, 2013). The value in waste represents how waste pickers have used value to different potentials.

The different values attached to the waste collected symbolize the demand. For example, the cost of plastic (per kg) stands at Rs.15, while the cost of aluminum foil (per kg) is Rs. 35. No one particularly asks the waste pickers to pick selected waste. But once acquainted with the price of waste, they hope to find the high priced wastes. It is thus, commanded by the market value. Akhtarul, a male waste picker, tells,

‘Waste is not simply suspended. We reflect *maal* (waste) as potential things. It is the transition from being nothing to worthwhile. A variety of waste is yielded, and all has measurable value’ (Interview, 12/07/2021).

With all the different types of waste that are retrieved by the waste pickers from the *Boragaon* dumping ground, it establishes that the degraded and the worthless is a sign of something important. Waste, for the waste pickers, does not appear to be out of context, but is indicative of how waste is remarkable for their variety. It is to be noted that the medical waste from hospitals, construction and demolition waste, and other hazardous waste is not dumped in this dumpsite. The solid waste that is both dry and wet from households, vegetable markets, grocery shops, and few medicine packets and needles from some clinics find their place here.



Image 7. Fragment (face) of Maa Durga’s statue.

In the dumping ground, the waste pickers accumulate numerable waste and classify them into fourteen (14) types. The heterogeneity of municipal waste means that it crosses other classificatory boundaries (Davies, 2008). The waste materials and their market price (during the time of field work) is presented below.

Sl. No.	Waste Material	Amount
1	Glass bottles	Rs. 4/kg
2	Iron	Rs. 12/kg
3	Aluminum foil paper	Rs. 40/kg
4	Polythene packets	Rs. 15/kg
5	Plastic bottles	Rs. 20/kg
6	Copper wires	Rs. 3-5/kg
7	Hotel takeaway plates and bowls	Rs. 15/kg
8	Silver jewelry/utensils	Rs. 250-300/kg
9	Steel utensils	Rs. 10-13/kg
10	Tin	Rs. 8/kg
11	Brass utensils	Rs. 250-300/kg
12	Leather	Rs. 6/kg
13	Carton	Rs. 4/kg
14	Human hair	Rs. 1000-2000/kg

Put in a more systematic way, a certain waste material has to be classified again into different categories. For example, wine and beer bottles are sorted according to shape, size, and color. In a similar fashion, polythene packets are classified and bundled according to colors as well as size. In between this waste, if some are torn, broken or crumbled, it undergoes a separate classification and stacked separately. It often not only comprises of benign materials but also contains remnants of toxic materials. Such meticulous engagement is considered to retain the relevance of the materials in the waste market.



Image. 8. Sorted miscellaneous plastic objects ready to be stacked.

The waste collected by the waste pickers becomes a commodity following different transactions at different phases. It is the private waste management organisations like the recycling centres at *Boragaon*, *Gorchuk*, and *Athgaon* (localities in Guwahati city) that processes them for further transfer to Delhi. Waste that be thought of as parallax object: that which objects, that which disturbs the smooth running of things' (Zizek, 2006), is aided in facilitation of an economy. It is interesting to note how such public wastes has been privatized by the waste pickers. Asma, a female waste picker, say,

'Ami maal bur khutu jeneke kua hoi. Dangor, xoru aru rong sai lou jetia beleg ke thou. Bhabile amaru asorit lage je ai jaboror bostu buror ata daam ase. Aru ai pelonia bostui kintu amak ghor soluat xohai kore' (We arrange waste according to size, color, and types. It is somewhat surprising for us that these odd wastes are collected for its unique qualities and value in the market. And these abandoned wastes are today drawn together to give us a livelihood)' (Interview, 19/2/2022)

Williams (2015) notes that waste becomes a recurrent figure despite its exhaustion, decay, and breakage. He further cites James Clifford where the later once argued that collecting in the West implies a rescue of phenomena from inevitable decay or loss. Dumped waste in fact does not narrate the end of the materials but images of need and

purpose. In particular, these provide the perspective on waste that directs our attention to an ethnographic understanding of the lifeworlds of people in various culture and setting (Chatterjee, 2004).

Waste or garbage as corpse of the commodity (Minan, 2011) is the main unit of transaction from the *Boragaon* dumping ground. Even waste is reclaimed in its rotting condition or filthy visuals; it stands as a source of revenue. In fact, the dumpsite is proof that even the negation of materials, their removal and burial, can be transformed into price, profit, and possibility (Reno, 2016). Hence, waste stands as a reservoir of value for generating a mode of living for the waste pickers. Waste picking and buying of waste by recycling centres suggests that waste is not limited to its spatiality but is expanded in its functionality. It is the attitude of the waste pickers that brings waste into the practicality of use, produce value where such value chains are embedded in the dumpsite.

5.3 Waste pickers' discourse of the work

Waste pickers tend to reject the sense of order and cleanliness that is imposed on one's thoughts and body. For them, adopting the disorder of waste has become the preferred mode to extract the best from waste. Bateson (1972) argued that disorder is the real condition of the universe that provides new growth, and disorder that state of open-ended rather than limited possibilities (Deacon, 2012). The practice of waste gathering constitutes the dumpsite as a potential space for contesting against the discourse on constraints, and victimization (Neubert and Scherer, 2014). According to Douglas (1966), waste pickers set free the pollution that is an aesthetic, hygienic, or etiquette issue, or that could cause social disgrace.

The setting in which the labor of the waste pickers is focused upon *maal uthua* (trash/waste collection) and *bhanga-sora khuta* (sorting of broken waste objects/materials) give account of their way of regulating waste. They engage as active agents in developing their work in the marginalized space of the dumpsite. While in Guwahati efforts have been made to take care of the waste problem, the municipal service has been facing hurdles. Adding up to the official report, Guwahati city generates approximately 550 TPD (Tons per day) of waste. The waste of the city with an exception of some waste getting segregated at source, rests get dumped in the *Boragaon* dumpsite

(now at *Belor tol*). The study of SPCB's (State Pollution Control Board) websites reveal that there are no annual reports on waste management available for Assam. As a result, the dumpsite became a useful vantage for the waste pickers to collect the unclaimed wastes.

At the *Boragaon* dumping ground, there are two categories of dumpsite waste workers. The first category consists of those migrants who live in rented houses, and work under the contractors or waste dealers, hence are regular waste pickers. The other category is occasional or seasonal waste pickers. They are very nominal in number, around 10-15 who reside in their houses built by purchasing a small plot of land in proximity to the dumpsite. These workers are more involved in waste classification and on rare occasions visit the dumpsite, hence I have termed them waste sorters. The common aspect among both the categories is their willingness to handle waste in spite of the social devaluation.

The arrival of dumpsite waste pickers at Guwahati dates back to early 2000. Initially wastes of the city were dumped in empty spaces of the city in places like *Barsapara*, *Adabari*, and *Hengrabari*. Only a few waste pickers enrolled themselves in gathering wastes from these areas until the *Boragaon* dumping ground was selected by the Government. Since 2008, the waste pickers made *Boragaon* their base for the waste work.

According to Taibunisa, the 75 years old female waste picker, her age progression can be seen through her association with the occupation since the last 20 years. In her opinion, she could not hold the struggle of finding work in her place near *Kharupetia* (a town in *Darrang* district of Assam). Thus, this work seems sufficient to lead her every day in the new city. She jovially recounts, "When I first arrived here in 2001, I started collecting bottles from *Barsapara*. I arrived young (laughs) and by following the wastes in different areas, I am now growing old at *Boragaon*". She elaborated that her mobility had been dependent on the mobility of garbage in the city.

5.3.1 Nusrat's tale of her days

Nusrat⁵, a young lady in her early thirties, narrates the episodes in a day of her life as a waste picker. She and other fellow waste pickers have set the base for recurring interpretation of community relations within marginalized territory near the dumping ground. They romanticize that village-like ghettos become integrated through tight communal ties (Aceska, et al. 2019). Her day to prepare for being a dumpsite laborer starts at 4 am in the morning.

Moving through the courtyard of her dwelling unit, she first brooms the place. Then proceeds to rinse her body as a purification ritual before half immersing in the dumpsite later. Meanwhile food is made ready for cooking. The morning breakfast in her home consists of biscuit, tea, and sometimes little rice, and a dal or mixed vegetables curry. On many occasions, she misses the rice platter and packs it to be consumed as lunch at the dumpsite. Her husband works in a garage that deals in mending broken vehicles. He leaves by 8 am in the morning which is one hour later than Nusrat. The children of Nusrat, three girls (aged 6, 12, 14 years) self-organize themselves for the day. While the second daughter accompanies her mother to the dumpsite, the other two visit the dumpsite irregularly.

On my query, Nusrat expressed how they work with waste and has been affected in unseen ways in the initial days. Inhabiting the place that always emits strong stench of rotten waste, and working under the scorching heat is unexplainable. She described her child becoming dark and skin tanned. Exposure to the sun always affected her skin and there is constantly a burning sensation. Unavoidable as it was, they shaped themselves to the schedule. She further told whether it is in the inferno of summer or the deluge of monsoon, waste work (picking and sorting) never stops.

Millar (2018) refers to the *catadores* (waste pickers) of Rio de Janeiro who embrace the materiality of garbage by reaching a hand into a ripped bag- that is confront waste as both toxic and life-giving. While addressing waste as *jaboror bostu* (things of the

⁵ Nusrat's interview taken on 1/03/2021.

dumpsite), Nusrat opens that these things can disrupt pain, dirt, toxicity, and shame. Because of such a shift in understanding notions, the waste pickers have been able to accept the vitality of wastes. The changing subjectivity and everyday experience, according to Nusrat, has aided in recognizing waste with presence of qualities and values of waste. It is this significance that has facilitated the supplement of income in the city.

I asked Nusrat how her life is different now from earlier times. She recalled life was not easy in the villages before joining this occupation. Living in a joint family in the village, responsibility was shared and so was the expense. Many a times her husband and family members would fall into discord. However, those were trivial and would be solved soon. But a sense of uneasiness would have enveloped her. At present when she is tied to the activities of the dump, she recounts a state of self-sufficiency. This is particularly because she earns along with her husband. While the work is dirty, the income is clean, meaning only labor and determination is entangled in her work. I argue that waste pickers willingness to handle the physically dirty, and fouling waste materials is because it allows them to work in their own rights. Even though the work is stigmatizing, it captures their labor as tough where they exceed innumerable risks.

Finding the life in objects that would otherwise be buried is the first step in the process of reclaiming on the landfill (Millar, 2018). The city's waste has created a thriving potential for the informal absorption of waste pickers' labor. Biehl (2005) makes the case that it is possible to contest widely held beliefs about the world. The waste which lay in the dumpsite totally devoid of value to the common people, actually become the unplanned project for poor people's upgradation. But as waste work is chosen for personal reasons, it is an invisible labor. Waste pickers' disappearance from public view thus, become a carrier of the meaning that they exist unfamiliar, informal, and tabooed.

5.4 Informal waste economy at *Boragaon*

Over 90 percent of the workforce in India is informal, including those self-employed in unregulated, small-scale enterprises and wage workers in large, formal enterprises, small informal enterprises, and households (Agarwala. 2020). The units, activities, and workers face numerous risks and costs in the informal economy. The reality of most informal self-employed in developing countries are different from the neo-classical

economics notion of the informal self-employed who choose to operate informally to avoid regulation and taxations (Maloney, 2004).

The waste work that comprises gathering, and classifying wastes to the point of transferring without formal systems symbolizes the work belonging to the informal sector. According to the International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS, 1993), informal sector refers to the production and employment that takes place in unincorporated or unregistered enterprises. Through the economic activities, these workers contribute to household, societies; serving as main source of income and helping to reduce hunger and poverty and contributing to the production of goods and services for domestic and international markets (Chen & Carre, 2020). In the context of my research participants, they do not get to work under well- established laws and policies but become integrated into the global system of production and exchange. However, their informal economic specialization of waste transactions passes off unnoticed.

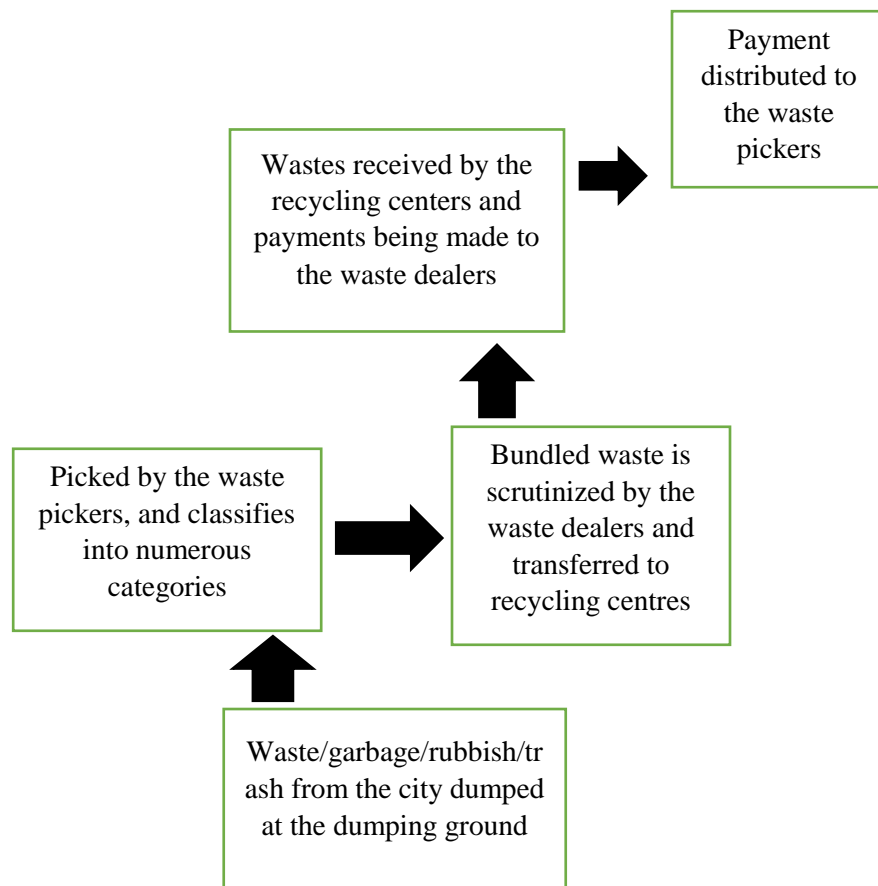


Figure 9. Graphical description of waste handling from bottom to top.

Unlike the itinerant waste pickers or buyers who circuits on bicycles, and deal in *kabada*, that is dry, segregated, inorganic waste, some of which is reusable and all of which is recyclable, the waste pickers deal in *kooda-kachhra*, that is, a wet, unsegregated mix of organic and inorganic waste, possibly contaminated by the rotting remains of food, excreta, and other heavily ‘polluting’ (in a ritual sense) material, only some of which is recyclable (Gill, 2010). At *Boragaon* dumping ground, the same form of work is visible. As there are no safety nets, waste pickers become vulnerable to hindrances in the work.

The waste pickers engage actively in pulling out wastes from the dumpsite and make it ready for the waste dealers to take them to recycling centres located at *Boragon*, *Gorchuk*, *Athgaon* and *Kotabari*. After sorting the collected wastes, it is categorized into different plastic gunny bags and stacked for a period of 2-3 months. These are then transported to the centres. The logic behind stacking up for the particular time period in the words of Safikul, the first waste dealer at the *Boragaon* dumpsite area is, “to save time from not going to the recycling centres every day, and also due to the wishes of recycling centres to receive the classified waste in bulk”. He tells that the time saved could be utilized to supervise the waste pickers, their labor, problems, solutions, or simply to sit among them and talk. Many waste pickers shared that it is more like a family relationship with the waste dealers than *beboxai* (business).

In my view, the informal nature of labor rather than friendly banter facilitates the relationship between waste pickers and waste dealers. The response I received to my query about whether the waste pickers had been coerced into working against their will was negative. They view waste dealers as rarely irritated and believe that they manage disorder in sobriety, if any. Hence, there exists closer ties among them where waste dealers help them even in monetary terms in extreme needs. The amount given in an emergency is, however, deducted from the salary of the waste pickers. Advances, in fact, became the most easily accessible source of credit for the waste pickers who otherwise earn just above subsistence (Gill, 2007). The fact of *bhoroxa* (trust) and loyalty is also demanded by the waste dealers from the pickers. As Safikul explains, it is



Image 10. A premise where packed wastes are weighed before taking to the recycling centre.

essence of the bond that holds them together and sow the seeds of a long-term commitment to the relationship among them. In addition, on grounds of language and religion commonality, it is easier to maintain the relationship of work, he further added.



Image 11. Bundled sacks of wastes, ready for transfer to recycling centres.

However, in certain instances, fraudulent behavior is reported by waste dealers against waste pickers and vice versa. This occasional bitterness does give rise to displeasure and the behavior turn unpleasant towards one another. Verbal fights then become common. In some instances, waste pickers and waste sorters have to use ‘threat mechanism’ to instill fear on the minds of the waste dealers. This usually comes about when occasionally some waste dealers make delayed payments to the waste pickers. Under such situations, waste pickers openly declare that ‘if no timely payment, then no work’ (Interview, 26/12/21). Upon this, waste dealers are forced to pay but usually make half payments that at least encourage the waste pickers to resume work. The other half of the payment is made later. Rahim, a 35 year old male waste picker and co-supervisor of the process of waste sorting of one of the areas reported to me,

‘It was the first time in my four years of the occupation that I received the payment very late. The dealer kept postponing weekly, and that got delayed by almost a month. I lost my cool, had my outburst, and stopped going to work. Later, I apologized for my behavior, and explained the difficulty I faced in getting the daily essentials for my family. The dealer understood my state as well as explained his situation. I was forgiven, and it made me happy’.

Most waste pickers realize that the waste dealers are their protectors in the city. They say how waste dealers always assure of safeguarding them in case of any untoward circumstances. They even acknowledge that the dealers allowed pickers to conjure up an occupation with absolutely zero assets or money (Gill, 2010). Even the houses they live in today have been arranged initially by the dealers without charging any money from the pickers. Such moral and emotional support from the dealers, in the words of the pickers, is rare to be found outside of this dirty work. More than just a workspace, it is a domain of forming meaning in circumventing the work together. It is the ethic of care, well-being for others, and team spirit that has sustained the connection among pickers and dealers for a long time.

The waste pickers convey that conceptualization of work in the informal economy at the dumpsite is about belonging to the place. Absence of rigidity on part of the dealers prompts the pickers to work with passion. It is the liberation that comes from autonomy

which is about the ability to create new communities and ties of mutual dependence (Graeber, 2009). It reflects giving the pickers the autonomy to work for any hour, come and go as one wishes, and carve out space for one's leisure. Therefore, the idea of withdrawal from or resistance to the work is not an active concept among the pickers.

But as the informal economy is not confined to the economy, it pervades the state and policy process (Harris-White, 2020). There is a lack of support from the state and local government. The state in fact plays a different role in overlooking the workers and their contribution, and hence, informality exists in this unorganized sector. Roy (2005) in her study points out how the city governments hold the power to determine what is informal and what is not. This approach gives rise to social differences and distinctions. This is what exploitation and injustice refers to where there is lack of recognition to the urban space and work occupied by the informal workers. In a different context, Roy further adds that there is a difference in appropriation of public land for private housing (elite informality) and appropriation of public land by urban poor for their settlements (subaltern informality). Thus, who is empowered to contest these differences again depends on the social position of the people.

5.5 Waste picking: advantages and disadvantages

Waste pickers' place in the informal sector of the waste economy pushes them to the margins. Yet regardless of their position and complexities, they keep themselves locked in the work. As a result, their mandate becomes clear to keep working amidst the negligence to their representation.

Performing this denigrated work has turned to a regular practice. It is true that we pick up waste, but the disappointment has now become occasional (Arifa, 43 years old, female waste picker).

When the waste pickers first started collecting waste, it seemed irrational for them. First, due to the belief that picking unclean materials represented their inability to scout other work, and second, it reflected their low position as internal migrants in the city. There are arguments in favor of carrying this consciousness with them for a considerable time. The job in fact seemed socially useless (Graeber, 2013), and they showed low job

satisfaction (Dur & van Lent, 2019). In view of the fact, it remained tough to accept the stigma, lower status, and pollution coming from an external source as waste. Because once pollution as a matter of aesthetic, hygiene or etiquette becomes grave, it creates social embarrassment (Douglas, 1966). They could decipher that embarrassment is attached to their occupational identity.

Drawing from the merit of the occupation, the waste pickers, however, realized possessing the physical prowess to work harder that could supplement a decent life. By embracing the potency of waste and making a conscious effort in reclaiming the thrown away, they made a gesture of everyday practice. Reckwitz (2002: 249) notes that practice is a routinized type of behavior which consists of several elements: interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. This transformation from self-doubting their work to unleashing the desire to work, reflects how their labor got interwoven with livelihood.

Waste pickers' view of labor as the cornerstone of their cultural capital is demonstrated by the shift in how they view their profession. The ways in which they depict informal work encountering circumstances, frameworks, and tactics align with Marx's notion of the labor process, which refers to the historically transcending process by which people engage with the nature to generate and apply values that satisfy their wants⁶. One of the waste pickers said, ‘transacting with waste today is to satisfy hunger which otherwise is a permanent pressure in life’ (Interview, 22/7/2022). The upheavals when one is hungry may be extreme and people might be involved in indescribable tasks. For this reason, adopting informal survivalism (Davis, 2006) by way of constructing one’s means of subsistence is a way that is valued by the waste pickers. Picking waste constitutes a moral or rather a utilitarian argument that expresses work as the access to essentials like food.

⁶ Karl Marx, “Results of the Immediate Process of Production” [the unpublished “Chapter Six” of the first volume of *Capital*], in Marx, *Capital* (New York: Vintage, 1977), I, p. 980. On Marx’s exposition of the concept of “labor process”, see also *Capital* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), I, pp. 177–85

The decision of the waste pickers to continue at the dumpsite is a form of respect towards the work. While the occupation is enacted as symbolic of a degrading and defamed work, the waste pickers affirm their links. They point to the layered operations of the occupation that has rescued them from the clutches of rural exigencies. The omnipresence of waste in this area (Graff, 2014) are signs of the security of work. The waste landscape has in fact helped the waste pickers to experience work and prove their work in coordination and effectiveness (Wittmer, 2023).

5.5.1 Finding a meaning in the waste work

Waste pickers' blending in the work describe the stability they receive in the livelihoods. The meanings of the work thus remain fundamentally different for the waste pickers. It forms an evolving and experimental pattern of seeing the dynamic processes between waste and waste pickers, strengthening the continuum. For them it is an experience of living, not merely surviving but persisting through the social predicament and trying to transcend it (Das, 2007). It is the personal, and individual feelings towards the work that show waste being assembled in different contexts for the waste pickers. Meaningfulness typically describes a certain positive significance that work holds for an individual (Rosso, et.al, 2010). According to the workers' subjective experiences, work is a significant source of productivity, motivation, and well-being (Walo, 2023).

It is the calling of work that involves continuous engagements of the workers enabling them to make and remake life, and entangle complexities. The idea of calling goes back to Max Weber's (2001[1930]) classic on the emergence of the Protestant work ethic that infused a normative order into early capitalism, characterizing calling as 'God's commandment to the individual to work for the divine glory'. In the meaningful work literature, calling is deployed as emerging from within the person and is thereby, an individual experience that is tied to a person's identity and underpins one's meaningful engagement with work (Laaser, 2022). The work calling for the waste pickers focuses on the perception of hard work for self-fulfillment as well as achieve a relatively stable income stream for the family members.

Interviews with the waste pickers told their way of re-approaching work in dire circumstances like the Covid- 19 pandemic. It was so quick and uncertain that few waste

pickers left the place. However, even during the period when work came to a standstill, many waste pickers patiently waited with the hope to resume work. Not leaving the place and guarding the previously stacked wastes is what held them back. They associated the decision with a sense of pride. Because the work had a creative potential to absorb the waste pickers, it brought into notion the changing aspiration. One of them, Akram, a male waste picker, said,

When we started working again after the lockdown relaxation, my *malik* (waste dealer) thanked me for not leaving behind the bundled waste. He poignantly said that our abandonment of the place would have incurred him a heavy loss. I realized my worth and my value of our collective labor. You know embracing this kind of uncertainty is not everyone's cup of tea (14/10/2020).

Like Akram, many of his peers, uncertainty in the work is a shared condition for themselves and the waste dealers. They elaborately explained the consequences of having to walk out had they been engaged in construction work or as helpers in some shops. Because they knew waste was getting generated in the city and was coming to the dumpsite even during that period. It was a matter of time to wait until the lockdown relaxation would be announced, when waste pickers would grab the opportunity to pick waste again. This notion allowed the majority of the waste pickers not to leave the residential area and the waste. They rather learned to inhabit the place at the time of the crisis. It served as a tangible sign of the relevance of the work, and its impact on the waste pickers.

Drawing from Bailey and Madden's (2017) concept of work as meaningful where meaningfulness arises episodically through work experiences that are shared, autonomous, and temporarily complex, I show how waste pickers cultivated a sense of endurance at times of insecurity. These modes of living by practicing patience represent the work providing capacity to embody both the known and the unknown. This allows a deeper understanding of what workers want from work and why work is objectively becoming more pressurized and precarious but remain a source of meaning and attachment for many workers (Thompson, 2021).

In an interview with Sazida, she narrated her experience of working. Describing the work environment, she tells of having the freedom to choose her time to work and navigate other moments. This capacity of having self-command and determining one's course of action or sequence in the work renders it meaningful. The absence of tight distinction between power of the waste dealers and independent participation of the waste pickers suggests less of a contested terrain. It showcases how the informal practices and relations in the work is characteristic of the effectiveness present in the work.

Unlike other formal or capitalist work regimes that limit an employee's agential capacity to work, the same is minimal in waste work. Laaser & Karlsson (2021) explain the search for meaningfulness is driven by the aim to establish and defend spaces of autonomy at work and be recognized for their efforts and treated with respect and dignity in the context of social structures and necessity of the labour processes. Economic efficiency, productivity and profitability is not demanded as done under strict formal work organization. The interests and concerns of the waste pickers are taken into account showing that the power of the waste dealers is not pervasive.

Another important feature of the meaningful work in the opinion of the waste pickers is that while many of the villagers are still reeling under scarcity of daily essentials, they have risen from that situation. They are quick to clear that they are not targeting the fellow villagers to experience waste picking. But is referring to how money exchanges from waste have promoted their lives to a higher level than previously being lived. According to some of the waste pickers, the profit has enabled them to enroll their children in school. One particularly inspiring event is that of Sharifa, a 62-year-old, female waste picker, whose son will be a graduate in the Commerce stream in 2024. She tells,

With much trial and tribulation, I have fulfilled my and my son's dream to be well-educated. It is so empowering to see him turning the pages of books while I at his age was helping my parents in the household chores (Interview, 2022).

Meaningful work, therefore, becomes a product of worker's desire to find inner coherence, expressing their authentic desires by engaging in interesting practices from which other benefits (Laaser & Karlsson, 2021). The waste work has in fact helped with

the agency to develop virtues to serve even the purpose of others. It is the unexpected way that a work where pickers initially were not confident of continuing, is now supporting others through it.

The above corresponds to Bailey and Madden's (2017) meaning of meaningful work when an individual perceives connection between their work and a broader transcendent life purpose beyond the self. This is a valuable perspective that underlines the impact workers' multi-layered interests, desire for purpose, and meaning that have on the experience of work. I demonstrate that waste pickers triumph over the challenges of work evokes a sense of happiness among themselves and those benefitted. Work plays a key role in giving positive experiences beyond the self and to others.

The existence of the disjunction between outsider's and waste pickers' perception of the waste work, however, sustains. But the pickers find work carrying meaning in their ability to counter negativity and enjoying the work in its condition. Also, the enjoyment of dirty work has become a resource to contest and mock class divisions (Reno, 2016). These divisions are a dimension of the class structures that exist between people doing clean work and waste pickers into dirty waste work. Involvement in work is a defensive tactic to subjugate the negative occupational ideologies attached to the work and to assume derogated personhood. Agential responses like acceptance, distancing from such notions and views, and resistance have been applied as coping strategies to suggest how they respond to the experience of devaluation (Bailey & Madden, 2019).

5.6 Waste materialities and the sensory liaisons

Battling the degrading environment which is subdued in dirt, filth, sludge, and decay while being able to manage, forms an important aspect of the meaningful work. While avoiding the sight, touch, and odor of waste become impossible, it become sites of deep personal experiences of the waste pickers. They register as well as surrender the physical body to waste contact and embrace the inherent precarity. The need of the human bodies in the work is naturalized as an essential condition. Fredericks (2018) notes that worker's bodies are enrolled into infrastructural formulas, and practices of embodiment, corporeality, and performativity get embedded in the space of dirty work. In spite of

waste inherently carrying a repugnant nature, detaching from its contexts, is not conceivable for the pickers.

"Waste can touch the most visceral registers of the self—it can trigger responses and affects that remind us of the intensities and multiplicities of the body," assert Hawkins & Muecke (2003). It forces the pickers to engage in more in-depth visual, tactile, and olfactory techniques, regardless of the level of distaste it may arouse. The waste pickers cannot escape the material reality of waste, even though the sensory qualities of it serve as the foundation for the discourse surrounding socially manufactured divisions around ideas of dirt or as an aberration of some moral-symbolic system (Reno, 2014).

Waste pickers adapt to this setting even though it takes time for the body to desensitize to dirt (Hughes, et al. 2017). Both corporeal and psychological processes of working with waste are inter-related in a complex process. The entrenchment into waste work is in fact subjected to considerations from the mind. Until then waste remains an exclusionary entity. In fact, accounts of waste possess a significant material character, and waste as rejected cannot be completely social and cultural (Gille, 2007). This reflects on the broader politics of waste that become objects of utilization. And it all starts from the waste picker-waste physical encounter.

Both the agency of waste pickers and the agency of the abandoned wastes is portrayed in the discourse around waste's materiality, and eventual act of affirmation. For example, pickers admit the effort and time required to be able to decompose the past inhibitions and perform bodily functions in the waste market. In the informal market of waste at *Boragaon*, the waste pickers' labor is first in the list to be depended upon. Jahanara, in her explanation of what feel like to embody waste materiality through her body, tells,

The wastes at the dumpsite are a manifestation of access stain that is smeared with blackness. Everything is found here- xukan (dry), bhija (wet), kumol (soft), datha (hard), atha (sticky), xupka (spongy), pisoliya (sludge), and what not. It hit me real hard for the first time. My hands and legs literally stiffened to take the next step and pick waste (Interview, 2021).

Not only this vivid scene. Jahanara further shared how she tried suppressing such feelings. The task had to be performed in her language as waste retrieval is the most compelling thing. After all, the subsistence income is promising in this market. Because the protocol of the waste work called for seeing and touching the smelling wastes, it anyhow required her consideration of wastes. The bodily impulse to withdraw touching waste had to be surrendered because her bodily limits would be a constraint in her effort to work. It meant that she needed to test her own reflexivity in order to accomplish the waste collection.

Jahanara also spoke of the amount of mental pain she harbored during the initial days. Seeing her body in same level as wastes due to its placement at the dumpsite, informed of her embarrassment. She responded that as a matter of fact of waste possessing the value dimensions, and her earnings depending on ‘touching’ wastes, she conflated touch with meaning. In her personal experience of sensing waste in its adverse dirty form, she had been able to filter out the features of dirt through her proximity to it (Galazka & O’ Mahoney, 2021). Catering to her practical necessity of handling waste, she refrained from limiting herself to the repetitive physical exposure to waste. In a similar tangent, Appadurai (1986) points out that humans encode things with significance, and the things-in-motion illuminate their human-social context.

To emphasis an obvious point, it is the power of the senses of the waste pickers that have been believed to treat waste differently. When it comes to the usability of the senses of sight, touch, and smell, they stand symbolically in opposition to one another. However, the three senses are evidently accorded the representation of its agency as willing collaborators in the practice of waste handling. The interplay has in fact facilitated the intimate approach to waste. In the processes that waste metamorphoses from being ‘waste’ to the form of value, signify its duality and temporality.

The senses are the most fundamental domain of cultural expression, the medium through which all of the values and practices are enacted (Howes, 2003). This sense-making practices entail both creative and ritualized habits of the senses that draw from social, cultural, and situational experiences by which meaning is interpreted and assigned. Waste pickers socially and psychologically adjust with man-induced existence of wastes.



Image 12. Adjutant storks, waste pickers, and cattle at work in the dumpsite.

5.6.1 Sense of sight, and competition for waste materials

The way you see waste can never be equated with us. We have been bombarded with the sight of waste from the day we arrived here, and now we don't feel the need to distance it. Rather, encountering waste every time is a temptation to acquire more waste for sorting. Be it the event of leaving or entering our house or going to and coming from our village, we are enveloped with a lingering consciousness to see and retrieve waste. When we see the GMC trucks entering our lane, we attain a sense of relief. For us, waste being brought to the dumping ground are signs of work availability, and moving near a hassle-free profit from waste. (Imran, male waste picker, Interview, 2021).

The waste pickers transform the identity of *maal* (waste) through sensory symbiosis with sight. According to them, it is the vision through which pickers first attempt to mine waste materials from the dumpsite. Their work of seeing and organizing their body helps to recover waste from the process of wastefulness at the dumpsite. They enclose reevaluation of waste materials by saving from the potential and unwanted tampering by

other species. On some occasions, waste pickers get anxious on the pretext that they would be attacked in human-animal encounters at the dumping ground.

With the mix of animals like cows, dogs, and birds like crows and adjutant storks equally hunting wastes, waste pickers have to move in between to see wastes. This characteristic of man-animals working alongside one another create trans-species relationships-known as guilds-is work in progress (O'Connor, 2000). The forms and functions of guild developing over urban feed and foraging resources affect cultural constructions of animal co-habitants among citizens as well as fine-grained behavioral adaptations by animals to the heterogeneous social environments of cities (Kumar et al., 2018). While waste pickers gather around to pick waste, birds/animals circle around and feed on the organic wastes. It is possible that there might be a subtle form of man-animal conflict over waste, but pickers are also sympathetic towards them. Within this interface, pickers do not miss the aim at getting the maximum wastes from the dumpsite environ.

Synnott (1992) points out that sight is supreme in the act of already seeing the seen. The way waste pickers see waste has implication in accumulating for demand in the waste market. Merleau-Ponty (1974) praises the sense of sight and displays his fascination with it. He says, 'The eye is an instrument which moves itself'. In their opinion, waste pickers find it strange how their eyes have shifted to seeing dark and dirty waste in contrast to the vast green or dried patches in agricultural fields. The pickers reflect on the process of accumulating waste connected to the eyes and through which the body perceives the waste. With no sunglasses either to block the sunlight or protective eye gear to save from hazardous particles contacting the eyes, the naked eye achieves useful waste-sighting without barrier.

According to waste picker Imran, seeing through waste is first in the act of picking. The act of seeing makes waste visible. It consists in the ability to distinguish its validity beyond the external dirty appearance. It is this equation of sight with assurance, knowledge, and importance of material that render sight its significance. This act of looking at waste is a kind of inter-connectedness revealing how one has to permeate in the vision of waste. The avoidance would equate with the loss of price in their profit chain. Edwards & Bhaumik (2008) point out that vision is more than looking or seeing; it

is integral to action. The visual experience navigates beyond the seen (sacred or profane) and which is fundamental in ordering knowledge about the surrounding. Alima, who is unmarried and Imran's sister, illustrates how the function of sight is at the core of the waste work. She points out,

The vision gives us a concentration to see those waste that is not easily seen or remain immersed. When a truck unload wastes on the dump, we run towards it. In many instances, the plastics are filled with half eaten food, vegetable peels, diapers, flour, and nauseating stale mixtures. In such situations, the plastic packets have to be emptied first. This consumes some time. In the meantime, other pickers may just have got to collect empty packets. Then she/he is ahead of me in collecting. I will not deny the presence of covert competition among us but we do not fight over waste. Because waste is abundant, and we have full trust in the people of the city that they would bring us more wastes. However, if we fail to take, naturally, my waste picker in the side will collect more than me (Interview,2021).

The everyday struggle of collecting waste is always present and it cannot be dismissed. For this matter, the sensory possibility of sight is a resource that also needs to be communicated with the other senses of touch and smell. It conveys how senses are a means of leveraging interest in how people notice and make relevant the people, objects and contexts of interaction (Gibson & Lehn, 2021).

The waste pickers say that sight becomes integral to interpret waste before picking up. It requires a scrutiny in selecting the waste that has the prospect for value. For example, in necessitating to select specific waste object, the pickers would prefer plastic over cloth. The reason is that the discarded clothes do not fetch a price and hence, remain obsolete. The pickers do spend some time staring at those few clothes that end up at the dumpsite. But they apply more effort in analyzing the usability of the plastic in the market. Hence, it is the code of cautiousness that surfaces in the daily practice of selecting wastes from the dumpsite. It demands pickers' attention to look for materials that is allowed access around ideas of being desirables.

By stooping low both physically and symbolically, the waste pickers seek to see for waste as it promises a dignity of living. The relationship to materials thus affords status positions and ethical stances, and especially so with waste, which for too long had been

glossed as a passive object without socially meaningful properties (Gregson & Crang, 2010). The pickers are, however, aware of the other meaning in the sight of waste that gives a different interpretation to waste. More than



Image 13. Woman waste picker arranging waste after her collection from the dumping ground.

seeing waste as the harbinger of livelihood, it casts a shadow of uncertainty and constraints. It profoundly affects the social experience of the pickers and undermines their place in society. In the words of Imran,

When we see waste, we are constantly reminded of the limited options available to earn a living in the city. It is the lowest occupation where one has to gather guts and mental readiness to perform. The sight of dirty waste reflects our pathetic condition of being passive receptors of this life. And our attraction to waste is an insight to the actual life of inferiority that we physically consume (Interview, 2021).

The comparison between sight of waste and the sight into pickers life in practical terms is true and inseparable. In Satre's view, seeing is not the noblest sense, nor seeing is believing; seeing is fear, and danger, it reveals the other but also the self (Synnott, 1992). The sight of waste leads to think how unclean materials with their inherent notion of dirt

and damage harms the identity of the pickers. It is a reality for them to face boundaries that symbolize the dumpsite as a bounded system leading the waste pickers to experience separation from the city.

In actuality, the sight provides a multifaceted understanding of the identity of waste. The sight of enormous amounts of waste at the disposal site also illustrates how a state fails to organize the underprivileged for other "clean" occupations. It signals how the city generates waste and adds to socio-political and environmental pressures. Unknowingly, the waste pickers are the ones who come into contact with waste both literally and figuratively, connect with it, and coax productivity out of it. But remain away from the gaze of the state.



Image 14. Unclassified waste in sacks in queue at the dumping ground to be taken to sorting area.

5.6.2 Corporeal body: touching the untouched

The account of touch and touching waste is registered with enormous attention by the waste pickers. It highlights the ways through which they experience touching waste consciously. The practice stands in contrast to the habits by which pickers have been socialized to touch before entering the waste picking occupation. There are important consequences for the above as pickers now has to fulfil the act of touching without denial.

Touch has remained an effective means for inter-corporeal communication. While some see touch as warmth and care, others see it as pain and humiliation (Kinnunen & Kolehmainen, 2019). Nonetheless, waste pickers in this study report experiencing both symbolic shame and actual dirt. Seeing how waste pickers' direct contact with waste reflects their social standing at the lowest rung of their family tree is an interesting observation. Touch is now the main component that distinguishes the interpersonal and group ties between waste pickers and other people. However, among the community of waste pickers, the same physical act of touching waste is only regarded as brave and bold.

Sarukkai (2012) points out that to touch is to move towards an object, to bring surfaces into contact. In the sensation of touch, the distance that characterizes the objects of touch is forgotten and so also the ever-present minute distance between surfaces of contact. Through minimizing the gap, waste pickers are in fact creating and implying the material afterlife inherent in waste materials. In fact, touching waste has helped erase waste's untouchability. The notion of untouchability is all the more interesting because we are always in the process of touching even when we do not act to touch (Sarukkai, 2012). The ambiguous response to touch or not to touch anything dirty that others have an option to choose from, waste pickers have to choose touch as essential. The body of the pickers has to embody the impurities.

Waste work comprise the sequence of touch from rummaging and picking to that of classifying the soiled wastes. The constant touch by hands causes pain, injuries, and rashes but touching becomes unavoidable in the exercise of waste handling. This is deemed necessary because the physical act belongs to a corporeal language (Classen,

2012) of benefit. Waste pickers use and value touch as a matter of reproducing productivity through the discarded. It links waste with the generation of a status based on waste labor. This is an important insight regarding human labor that is entwined with not so common touchable things as wastes. Though they are potentially open to touch but yet remain objects of non-touch (Sarukkai, 2012). As waste is understood to be more valuable than being the carrier of a demeaning attribution, it encourages the pickers to forge an intimate approach towards it.

Crucially, labor needs to be carefully organized at work. It is necessary to properly sort and handle waste with care. Therefore, waste pickers treat the waste materials such that they are not disassembled during the classification process. As in the case of glass bottles, pickers cannot afford to break or make it susceptible to cracking through their way of handling. If broken, they would be vulnerable to cuts and bruises, and second, it would minimize the amount of arranged waste. In such an instance, there is the probability of pickers being rebuked by the waste dealers.



Image 15. A female waste picker separating caps from glass bottles.

The practice of alertness in waste sorting upholds the logic of utmost attention. Because in its absence the process of waste segregation may be rendered harder. Knowledge of categorized sorting, care, and attention are considered the necessary skills that pickers have to cultivate. Be it glass or plastic, it has to be classified by touching its thickness or the thinness. The sense of touch plays a vital role in assessing the physical characteristics of waste materials.

The tactile history of the waste pickers has never produced events with something as filthy as waste from the dumpsite. The interviews gave a clear account of how they acquired the knowledge prior to being aversive towards touching something unclean. Contrary to it, today they toss and turn waste of others, contesting notions about clean/dirty, and pure/impure. Their action (waste touching in this context) would have been paralyzed if they attended the above dichotomies; thus, anxiety has to be selective (Douglas, 1966). Their experience reflects regulating their mind and body to touch those waste materials that has remained unknown to them.

Touch thus, causes the body to become affective, which makes it possible to express surrounding energies, sentiments, and sensations (Kinnunen & Kolehmainen, 2019). Sakina recalls her initial encounter with waste and how she came to see it as a crucial source of benefit. However, it led to various inhibitions and anticipation.

I could not comprehend if touching waste posed a risk to my children. It was the same hands without any cover that I use as caring touch for my little girl. I remember her telling me how my hands would smell similar to excreta even after I washed multiple times. A guilt overpowered me because the same hands, even after cleansing have to be used to prepare food. It was the most disgusting feeling of having to eat with those two hands and feed my child (Interview, 30/10/2020).

Sakina additionally elaborated that the economic gain from touch is underpinned by the implication of touch intersecting with identity, and ethnicity. Because the waste pickers at the dumpsite are Muslims and Bengali, she poignantly points the work assigned for them. It exposes that a particular ethnicity being indirectly shaped and identified by dirty tactile encounters. Absence of Hindu and Assamese/Hindi speaking dumpsite waste pickers buttress the fact further. These implicitly show how dirty and

dangerous touch tasks are consigned to workforces, attributed lower status or are strategically avoided by others (Barker & Jewitt, 2022). She argues that while the work has transformed her financial position, the extreme touch of waste has affected her sense of being. The manual labor of touch sought to show her that freeing from the unpleasant and degrading touch has a long way to go.

In the dumpsite, bodies move through and get mixed with different wastes of the city. The bodies as self-organising systems (Reno, 2016) in fact has to change at the dumpsite. Bodily cleanliness and order get constrained due to waste handling techniques. In the event of waste acquiring its significance, touching waste has to be embedded in the bodily postures of work and activity, and giving up bodily comfort. In the words of another female waste picker,

‘Waste is slippery, and sometimes sticky. So many varieties in waste quality that categorizing all would be a nauseous feeling. Once I touched some semi-wet accumulation of mud and rotten vegetables while scouting to pick a bottle. My hands felt an indescribable irritation and disgust’.

In the outdoor space of the dumpsite, the dirt cannot be kept out of the work while indoors, the feeling lingers on. In an interview, a male waste picker said that even the after-work purification rituals and formalities like incessant rubbing of skin while bathing, and changing to different clothes, the psychic sensation of being held to dirt remains. The mind in fact becomes the location for the waste affects and the body having to tolerate uncontrollable contamination. The sensory remembrances of the day that involves desensitizing to waste touch result in immobilising the body. For instance, waste pickers convey that at times they simply do not wish to leave the room after returning from work.

Affects move through bodies in ways that are often difficult to see (Blackman, 2012). It is both physical fatigue from waste picking motions as well as the perception and registering of their social positioning due to the work. As the waste pickers occasionally provision themselves with a *hakka* (an iron rod with a curved point to extract waste), the fact of using bare hands mostly weighs them down. In a Muslim society, where

cleanliness of the body is of utmost importance in terms of spiritual and community standing, this is no small issue (Fredericks, 2018). While the waste pickers have to compromise with the religious notions of purity, they cannot escape the sarcasm from people known to them. Many a time, they ponder how the action of touching waste introduces notions of feeling powerless, humiliated, and distanced.



Image 16. The *Hakka* used by the waste pickers.

5.6.3 Smell: waste as olfactory marker and waste pickers' othering

In the city, bad odors become the basis of their personal and social identity (Classen, 1993). The organic smell of waste fixes the boundary of impurity in the process of abjection- a rejection of that which is other within the self, and the ensuing demarcation of a border between self and other (Baumann & Massalha, 2021). Many scholars working on moral disgust argue that because it is grounded in corporeal revulsion, it is the basis for other forms of contempt or resentment of a more moral and interpersonal nature (Reno, 2016).

The smell of waste goes on to shape the public imagination of waste pickers' lives and work. Though waste pickers capture the odor unintentionally, it combines to produce a sense of their othering. For example, smells in the body and hair constitute matters of

distinction. The sensory experience of those other than the waste pickers become an arena for structuring social relationships. In the words of Rathin, the salesman of the chemist shop that lay in proximity to the dumping ground, narrates his experience,

‘The odor intensity is at another level here. I felt bad but could not help telling the waste picker to stand at a distance when he came to the shop. His body and clothes emanated smell (*gundho*) that had cling to him from the dumpsite. I had no tolerance capacity for such smell. Giving him the medicines that he wanted for suffering from cold, I immediately asked him to leave quickly. The character of the smell is so suffocating and decayed that tolerating got difficult. If he would have stayed a little longer, I was sure to puke in front of him’ (Interview, 2022).

For the waste pickers, the general forbearance for the pungent odor of the waste remains in control. But to newcomers like Rathin, whose sense of smell has been influenced by cultural factors, the level of disgust was at a higher level and subscribing to it seemed tough. Disgust is also grounded in the sensorial response to the threats from anything waste could bring. The noses are individual entities and tussling the odor is also an individual struggle. Because even smelling different objects or things is socially and culturally guided, bad smell is taught to be avoided. Bad odors correspond to different degrees of danger, animality, and sociality (Low, 2012). While with time, waste pickers have not felt threatened by the negative response to their smell, the concerns and heightened awareness about smell do perpetuate olfactory stigmatization (Drobnick, 2006).

While Rathin complained about the smell of the site and from waste picker’s body, he knew the environment has been poisoned by peoples’ waste of the city. Unwillingly, he had to discriminate against the pickers based on the odor they brought along. In other conversations, he would always refer the waste pickers as *asorit manuh* (strange people of the city). He told me how these pickers had the ability to surrender their bodies to the dumpsite. He appreciated the personal value of wealth being generated from waste by the pickers, and how odor in the work could be inhaled by them. But time again he confessed that waste work is weird in the sense of reorienting and accelerating pickers’ life through their association.

The role of smell has an impact in the moral construction of self and the other, in terms of one's class, ethnic and gender relations (Synnott, 1991). According to the symbology, one's ability to distinguish oneself from societal cohesion might be shown by how something smells, either pleasant or bad. According to Kornberg's (2020) analysis of Delhi's waste economy, residents of the city would cover their noses when putting in their waste since the body of Bengali Muslim waste workers were subjected to the idea of being dangerous. These workers have had to adjust to



Image 17. The road (after the rains) leading to the *Boragaon* dumping ground

their status and treatment in order to continue working; they have had to integrate and rationalize their new status and negotiate its implications for their life (ibid.).

Waste pickers are aware of the social construction around the identity and meaning of their lives due to their waste association. All of them are aware of their smelly body taken as a unit of analysis. They equate foul smells with social and moral defilement but tend to adopt the attitude and behaviors of social inclusion and exclusion (Low, 2006). They but have to remain unbothered by the social judgements and pathologies of odor that could affect them. They preferred to emphasize on the work that upheld their integrity.

Jaborot bhal gundho pabo ase janu. Tenekua aku bostu nai. Sariu fale xali karha gundh. Apuni gome napabo keneke aru ketia ai gundho amar naakot xumai jai. Upai nai kintu ami ai gundhote uxah lobo lage (Look, the dumping ground does not have smellable stuff. It presents unimaginably *karha* (strong/sharp) smells. You will not realize when the bad odor hit our nose and sail in immediately. The stinking smell is so intrusive that other than breathing, it has no solution. We can do nothing to stop the odor reaching us) (Female waste picker, Interview, 6/1/22).

She underlines that as the pickers grow used to it, these scents help them bond with one another. Their mutual aversion to odors becomes the common knowledge that directs their labor and behavior. During an interview, a male waste picker shared a moving story about being told, 'You smell brother!' by a reporter. 'I apologize, but how are you able to carry that smell with you?' Even though the waste picker had nothing against the comment, it suddenly made him unhappy. He felt powerless since he couldn't claim to have adapted to it. Although their physical presence is made up of several fragrances, they play no part in categorizing those scents. I was reminded that waste pickers are able to reside here on a regular basis because of the feeling of sensory similarity.

The dumpsite is a storehouse of numberless wastes. Waste pickers conveyed about trying to make sense of the specific smell they encounter while picking waste at the dumping ground. They admit at times of the difficulty to convey about some mysterious smells (not smelt before) through the visual medium of wastes. As the task of consciously deciphering the source of smell is not part of their work, they do not pay much attention. Moreover, due to the lack of extensive vocabulary, odors remain unmatched (Drobnick, 2006). However, they have identified some sources of smell at the dumpsite from new as well rotten fruits and vegetables, dissected fish and meat, recently rotten dead animals and birds, dampened clothes, expired or used food items, napkins and hygiene pads, urine, excreta, wet/muddy rusted iron, and soil individually as well as together releasing a putrefying stench around them.

They told how weather conditions are a vital force in determining the characteristic of odor of waste. A rainy season while is a respite from the sweltering heat, bearing the foul and damp smell gets tough. While a sunny day has the power to suck up the stench

and drastically minimize the dumpsite odor. Only lighter smells of drying mud waves through the area. Cerulo (2018) points out that smells and their sensation are uniquely social and context dependent; scents are simultaneously concrete and ephemeral; both meaning and matter. These are reminders how one has to be prepared to embody smell in changing contexts and facilitate the dynamic interaction between smell and the smeller.

McLean (2023) argued how we experience smells not just as simple objects but as having differing characteristics of duration, intensity, color and shape. Once while I was discussing about smell with a group of pickers who had just come for lunch, narrated in turns,

‘Some smell is particular like the tangy, spicy or freshly baked which we get occasionally and is ephemeral. Such smells emanate from half eaten food thrown away at the dumpsite. But most of the time we get a fetid smell as when fishes are dead which is ubiquitous. There are very rare times when we get sweet smells like the aromas of ‘fresh’ flowers when dumped here. During summers, our own sweaty smell and odor of decayed things make a very unpleasant experience’ (Interview, 21/11/21).

The variations hint to how objects of bad smell define spaces and social uses, and good aromatic things like flowers that once adorned a well-landscape and carrying ritualistic meanings, become obsolete. There is much more to the stench of waste than just the physical act of perception. Public olfactory codes may be known to people everywhere, but social status affects how participants consider, interpret, and use those codes when creating meaning (Cerulo, 2018). One way to think of the relationship between waste pickers and odor is as a frame of contact.

Deciphering smells involves a fully entwined system including neural operations, corporeal experience, and cultured environments in which bodies are embedded (Spackman & Yanchar, 2013). Covering their nose is not the option here that usually materializes in other situations and location. They totally cannot reject olfaction from waste. It is the differential adaptation to these olfactory challenges that is mediated and negotiated through the cultural context in the area.

Smells signal how it is individually witnessed as well as collectively encountered and shared by a number of people (McLean, 2023). In one of the interviews, waste pickers shared how he sometimes recalled the fresh, grassy, and muddy smell of the village courtyard and the agricultural fields. In contrast to the decomposed smell at the dumpsite to which there is no respite. This sense of smell is thus, strongly linked to the creation of emotional memories (Florian, 2022). In many moments, such smell evocating past events have facilitated discussions among the waste pickers drawing comparisons between urban and rural odors. It leads to an understanding of how smell induces particular type of reaction in varying situations. But pickers have to process through such events as fashioned beyond comfort in the work and living space, and which is publicly held dirty.

5.7 Label of waste picking as ‘dirty work’

The features of waste like filth and odor stand as evidence that it remains out of the aesthetic orders. This negative connotation attached to waste dominates on various levels and one of them deprives the practitioners of the work (Bauman, 2004). The ever-pervading sensorial abjection creates a symbolic expulsion that effectively draws the urban boundaries (Baumann & Massalha, 2021). As it turns out, the pickers as workers remain in the background and barely visible.

It becomes the pattern of insinuating a troubling gap between us (who is not involved in waste work) and them (the dumpsite waste pickers). Heer and Asfaque, a waste picker couple once said, ‘There have been multiple times when we confront people expressing shock and disgust on hearing our identity as waste pickers and work at the dumpsite. The first thing they question is how it is even possible on our part to do execute this dirty work’ (Interview, 2021). From the moment they start working in this lowly occupation, they are believed to enter the domain of dirty work.

The term dirty work was invoked by Everett Hughes (1951) to refer to tasks and occupations that are likely to be perceived as disgusting and degrading. It’s been observed that society delegates dirty works to groups who act as agents on society’s behalf, and that society then stigmatizes these groups, effectively disowning and disavowing the work it has mandated (Hughes, 1962). Waste pickers believed that

communication with others had made it possible for others to spread the opinion that the work is inferior.

When I encountered one shopkeeper at the *Boragaon* bus stop, I was able to discern the aforementioned. His views about waste picking turned out to be ingrained in the work's haphazard synopsis. He was candid in his remarks, acknowledging waste exchanges as a dirty self-representation and a cycle of pollutants. I took advantage of the opportunity to inform him that waste has changed and is now considered a commodity. Due to his ignorance of the market of waste, he stuck to his beliefs. Thus, obtaining social approbation becomes extremely difficult when it comes to dirty work and the beliefs people hold (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999).

Most people hold an implicit schema of occupations and any occupation falling out of the schema, gets considered to lack the prestige. The embedded perception of the work with physical taints is responsible for striking out against the necessity. As prestige scores capture societal perceptions of the differential evaluations or rankings of occupations (Dunkerley, 1975), waste work appear to lack status. In the words of the waste pickers, under such circumstances of devaluation, it become pertinent on their part to self-define the value of their work.

Self-definitions are important because they help situate individuals in the context and, thereby, what to do, think, and even feel (Ashforth & Mael, 1996). For the pickers, defining their work in optimistic light is important to secure themselves in the dirty work. In a way, it operates as a means to enhance their esteem being grounded in others' perception as demeaning. Heer and Asfaque confided that they gathered courage to dismiss the language of mock and insult they receive for their profession and work. They are aware of the low prestige work they are involved in and have become accustomed in internalizing the rejection.

5.8 Conclusion

This chapter has revealed how waste pickers have been able to recover waste as a valuable resource even if it is discarded at the dumpsite. Waste in fact has enabled the waste pickers to survive and profit from the unofficial waste market through their

combined efforts and by working under the auspices of the waste dealers. This explains how the waste pickers have been able to stay on the occupation despite the physical and symbolic hazards posed by waste. They have said that waiting for social affirmation for their work would not provide them the meaning which dirtiness of the work has given, i.e. means of livelihood. Even though it's indicative of impurity, the task makes room for a full-time employment or engagement. The waste pickers believe that they have been able to embrace both the force of waste labor and all of its ambiguities what others have not. Two-dimensional benefits have resulted from it: waste has been brought into an economy of value, and pickers are using it as a means of subsistence.

Heer, wife of Asfaque, provided an example of how the combination of waste and themselves has given them the knowledge to gain from uncertain materials. The foul smell of waste, and their act of touching waste in the process of waste handling, is often equated with social damage. No matter how much they contribute to the work, their conditions are not addressed in the city's boundary. But waste pickers have helped themselves to distance themselves from the disgust (Perin, 1988) that initially translated the work to a symbol of degradation.

Viveiros de Castro et al.'s (2014) points out that material can be drawn from anytime, anywhere, and anyone, and there is no limit to what practices, discourses, and artifacts are amenable to ontological analysis. Waste took a new form in the lives of the waste pickers. Their choice of waste picking is explanatory of the rise of responsibility among them to move beyond the social construct of waste.

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