

Sharma, Sneha

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## GEOGRAPHIES OF EXCLUSION: Reproducing Dispossession and Erasure within a Waste Picker Organization in Mumbai

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# – GEOGRAPHIES OF EXCLUSION: Reproducing Dispossession and Erasure within a Waste Picker Organization in Mumbai

SNEHA SHARMA

## Abstract

*A rich seam of waste scholarship already addresses the exclusion faced by informal waste workers as cities in the global South undergo spatial transformations to become 'world class'. However, less attention has been paid to how state practices have reproduced inequalities within and across waste picker communities. Drawing upon eleven months of ethnographic research at Mumbai's Deonar dump site, this article maps the practices through which waste workers have responded to their exclusion following a massive fire in 2016. It demonstrates that social exclusion is experienced differently by different members of the community and calls for a greater focus on heterogeneity amongst waste workers. Multi-dimensional vulnerabilities manifest through these workers' deal-making strategies, while simultaneously mirroring the conditions of marginality produced by the state. The article contributes to debates on marginality by employing the lens of erasure to show how exclusion relies on the optics of visibility and invisibility. By unpicking the hierarchical structure within one waste worker organization, the article argues that the state-led mandate for garbage-free cities in India disproportionately affects those located at the margins of marginalized groups.*

## Introduction

Deonar—Mumbai's almost hundred-year-old dumping site—is surrounded by a flourishing and well-organized informal waste economy that has emerged over many years. Deonar's waste economy is not entirely informal or unregulated but comprises arrangements that work in conjunction with the formal waste management system of the city. Informal waste work has been tacitly approved by the city governing authorities because recycling activities prevent the burying of vast quantities of mixed waste and slow down the exhaustion of the dump. In 2001 the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) of Mumbai permitted waste collectors to work at the dump, albeit in perfunctory ways, by issuing them with an identity card known as the 'photo-pass'. The card's annual renewal routine reassured the waste workers of continued access to their livelihood and helped them legitimize their presence at the dump.

However, the state revoked the community's access to the dump after a massive fire in January 2016, citing the presence of miscreants. Even though dump fires were common due to the inflammable gases released from mixed waste, the intensity and scale of the 2016 fire foregrounded the forgotten dump in the public consciousness. The incident soon gained political importance when Mumbaikars blamed the government and the municipal authorities for allowing the largest open dump in Asia to be situated within a megacity's built-up area. In response to the public accusation of poor governance, the BMC framed new rules for the dump and escalated surveillance at the

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site. The waste workers' photo-passes were declared invalid and private security was deployed to prevent the entry of any trespassers. The 134 ha site was put under surveillance by installing security cameras, watchtowers and a wired boundary wall. The waste workers lost their access to materials and were blamed for starting the fire to recover metals by burning the discarded materials. Following orders of the Bombay High Court<sup>1</sup> and a later mandate by the national waste programme Swachh Bharat (SB) to make cities free of garbage,<sup>2</sup> the BMC announced its plans to build Mumbai's first ever waste-to-Energy (WTE) plant on a section of the dump, which would directly incinerate the incoming waste. The dump site was scheduled for permanent closure, but since then the BMC has applied to the High Court for several extensions, citing the high quantities of waste generated by the city.

The surveillance and securitization of the dump disrupted the previous informal arrangements and transformed it into an enclosure, cutting off access for waste workers. Their dispossession from the dump opened up new contestations around access to waste (Manzi *et al.*, 2022). Within the context of ongoing neoliberal urban transformations in Mumbai (Harvey, 2005; Banerjee-Guha, 2010; Schindler and Kanai, 2018), the waste workers' displacement can be attributed to the logic of aesthetics and order (Taguchi, 2013; Luthra, 2015; Pathak, 2023) that are a marker of the state and its world-class visions (Baviskar, 2006; Dupont, 2011; Ghertner, 2011; Roy and Ong, 2011). The informal waste economy at Deonar resonates with the concept of Gidwani and Maringanti's (2016) infra-economy that is denied recognition by the state but is used for blaming and condemnation during a crisis. The state's reassertion of control and denial of permissions exacerbated the marginalization of the waste workers.

Various scholars have explained marginalization as a set of social relations between the centre and its margins shaped by class, race or the political economy (Birkbeck, 1978; Wacquant, 1999; 2008; Moore, 2000; Harvey, 2005; Davis, 2006; Sanyal, 2014). Nevertheless, this view of marginality does not reveal how those at the margins respond, negotiate and engage with the technologies of the state. In response, a more recent series of debates has emerged around urban marginality from a relational analytic (Thieme *et al.*, 2017; Lancione, 2018), which contends that those located at the margins are not surplus populations or passive victims, but that they actively contest their exclusion (Blokland, 2012; Aceska *et al.*, 2019). Situating this article within this scholarship allows me to avoid framing the waste workers as marginalized *a priori* and instead delve into a situated observation of their everyday life. I critically address the heterogeneity of waste workers in order to unpack the differentiated lived experiences of exclusion (Nas and Jaffe, 2004; Truelove and O'Reilly, 2021). By employing a framework of erasure, I show how practices of erasure—and hence (in)visibility—operate together to direct disproportionate forms of violence towards differently positioned workers.

The article has two objectives, the first being to show how state action deepens existing social differences within the waste worker community and fragments collective solidarity. Second, the article disrupts the category of 'waste workers' by highlighting the community's heterogeneous composition and revealing which groups face disproportionate forms of exclusion. Focusing on the broad category of waste workers, the article investigates who is actually able to make claims to waste and through which kind of configurations. It also seeks to determine the extent to which a critical analysis of heterogeneity can challenge and contribute to existing perspectives on marginality. To provide answers to these questions, I trace the events at Deonar through the eyes of one waste workers' collective—a registered association called Kaamgaar Samiti (KS),<sup>3</sup>

1 *Rajkumar Sharma vs Shri. Pandurang Patil*, Bombay High Court (Bench A.S. Oka, 29 February 2016).

2 See 'Toolkit 2022 Azadi@75 Star Rating Protocol of Garbage-Free Cities' by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, available at [http://saharapurnagarnigam.com/pdf/GFC-Toolkit-2022\\_Final.pdf](http://saharapurnagarnigam.com/pdf/GFC-Toolkit-2022_Final.pdf)

3 The Kaamgaar Samiti (name changed to preserve anonymity) is a collective that is registered under the Bombay Trust Act as an association, distinguishing it from a cooperative or a workers' union.

established in 2001 by a local non-governmental organization (NGO) called Nirmala.<sup>4</sup> I bring nuance to the way marginality is understood by unpacking the plural positionalities within the KS along intersectional dimensions.

My findings reveal that focusing on heterogeneity can explain how the imagination of a world-class ‘garbage-free’ city amplifies violence and exaggerates inequalities at the margins. The municipal corporation’s banning of waste workers and the parallel development of Swachh Bharat’s garbage-free directive not only pushed the community towards dispossession, but also generated a range of unequal and sometimes violent practices in which those situated lowest in the hierarchy were the most adversely affected. This took shape in response to a ban on the entry of waste workers to the dump that collapsed their spaces of survival, coupled with the exploitative practices of state actors (security guards, municipal corporation officers and elected representatives) at the site.

I argue that the state’s practices stressed the existing social differences and fragmented the community’s solidarity because the disruption of arrangements for accessing waste at the dump resulted in several contestations and the crystallization of power inequalities within the community. The emerging alliances to overcome the exclusion of waste workers favoured and made visible the community’s more privileged members (such as core committee members) while dispossessing and invisibilizing those who were marginalized, even eradicating them from waste work and forcing them to migrate away from the neighbourhood. The alliances formed by KS members reasserted those in power, particularly those who were able to make themselves visible through their political capital. Thus, the city’s attempts to make Mumbai garbage-free failed to remove the dump from the public eye while simultaneously shaping a politics of erasure through which certain groups were made visible or invisible.

### Methods of data collection

I conducted eleven months of ethnographic research around the Deonar dump site, primarily collecting data between 2016 and 2017 and subsequently during short visits in 2018 around the neighbourhood of Shivaji Nagar. I visited the site six months after the fire and spent most of my time with members of the Kaamgaar Samiti waste workers’ association—attending their monthly meetings, running around for paperwork and helping organize public events. I took notes and recorded conversations whenever possible. The interviews and informal chats usually took place in Hindi, as most waste workers were North-Indian Muslims, but I also spoke with some Marathi-speaking workers, in which case the conversations were translated with the help of an assistant.

I draw from 60 semi-structured interviews and 22 in-depth interviews with various actors: waste workers (including small collectors), scrap merchants (*katawalas*), itinerant buyers (*kabadiwalas*), and neighbourhood residents who lived in the vicinity of the dump. Women formed the majority of the waste workers at Deonar. I spent my days closely observing the respondents and participated in everyday activities that involved labouring, finding work, protesting, attending a funeral, and accompanying them in segregating plastics at scrap shops. Due to the municipal ban, I did not get an opportunity to enter the dump site. Additionally, I recorded interactions with city councillors, social workers and government officials<sup>5</sup> to capture the different narratives around waste disposal in the city.

The first set of participants was identified by attending the monthly meetings at Nirmala’s office and then approaching workers willing to meet again. The atmosphere was tense, and they would often vent against the BMC or Nirmala during our

4 The name of this NGO has also been changed to protect the identity of its members.

5 Original names have been changed for all respondents to safeguard their privacy.

discussions. At these times they would ask me not to record or write anything, with which I respectfully obliged. As a female researcher, I realized the limitations with my positionality and adapted my visits early on to spend time mostly with women who also allowed me to hang around while they cooked or categorized recyclables. Right from the outset, I clarified my intentions and objectives by presenting myself as a university scholar curious about their daily life and requested that they allow me to take back what I learnt to better understand social relations outside the classroom walls. Throughout the fieldwork, I would reflect critically on my positionality as a privileged scholar and an outsider engaging in people's private space for the production of knowledge. I made sure that I returned to the field to share the insights that emerged and acknowledge the active participation of the respondents in co-producing this research.

I now move on to present my research findings and the insights they generated. I begin by setting out the theoretical groundwork for the article, the main contours of which are provided by the rich and growing body of scholarly literature on waste and marginality (Samson, 2015; Thieme, 2017b; 2020; Truelove and O'Reilly, 2021; Manzi *et al.*, 2022; Rosaldo, 2022). I address the tendency of some studies to treat the composition of waste worker organizations as amorphous units—with little reflection on the nuances of their structural hierarchy or the maintenance and/or disruption of solidarities—before introducing the concept of 'erasure' as a framework for analysis. After this, I outline the background to everyday practices at Deonar and present the role, composition and heterogeneity of the waste workers' association Kaamgaar Samiti. I then summarize the top-down practices adopted by the state after the fire incident that initiated the process of dispossessing the waste workers. The section which follows is divided into three empirical parts that describe how the waste workers' deal-making strategies correspond to the exercise of identity, political alliances and economic position. Paying *hafta* (protection money) to the security guards, forging alliances with state functionaries, and forming self-help groups are just some of the emerging arrangements adopted by the waste workers to access the dump. My analysis illustrates that only those with resources and power were able to negotiate access to the dump, while those positioned lower in the hierarchy (in terms of intersecting inequalities) were pushed out of waste work completely. As the conclusion makes clear, the concept of erasure cascades across all the empirical sections to show how invisibility (or visibility) is politically produced.

### **Theoretical framework**

There is an abundance of work which highlights the creative and self-appropriating ways through which informal workers respond to and subvert their exclusion. Most of this literature emerges from critical urban research on informality, which draws attention to the claims, roles and interactions of marginal groups—explained variously as weapons of the weak (Scott, 1985), as the slow encroachment of the ordinary (Bayat, 2010), as occupancy urbanism (Benjamin, 2008), as vitalist pragmatism (Gago, 2017), or as agonistic transgression (Lawhon *et al.*, 2018). Waste scholarship has also drawn from a relational framework (Reddy, 2018; Rosa and Cirelli, 2018; Parra, 2020; Tucker and Anantharaman, 2020) to show how exclusion around waste is actively reproduced through policies (Schenck *et al.*, 2019), discourses (Gutberlet and de Oliveira Jayme, 2010; Corwin, 2020) and semantics (Do Carmo and de Oliveira, 2010).

However, while working with waste is seen as a survival strategy (Medina, 2007), these studies also tend to romanticize the marginal groups as emancipatory communities and overlook the variegated ways in which power hierarchies operate within them. In contrast, recent observations on conflicts emerging from state-induced formalization efforts (Samson, 2015; 2020; Makina and Lawhon, 2022; Rosaldo, 2022; Sseviiri *et al.*, 2022) have attempted to advance a critical takeaway by paying attention to situated

practices. Waste scholars have also reflected on navigations across porous boundaries of the formal and informal in waste work (Harriss-White, 2020; Rosaldo, 2021): recyclers working in formalized segregation centres, for example, who operate in informal ways in the 'black market' (O'Hare, 2020), or the tendency of informal collectives to mirror formal institutions while operating within a grey zone (Samson, 2015).

Much of this literature remains focused on the agency of the marginalized, and waste scholarship continues to fall into the trap of positioning informal waste workers as either insurgents or victims. This is particularly evident in studies that use a rights-based vocabulary (O'Brien, 1999; Hayami *et al.*, 2006; Chikarmane, 2012; Schindler *et al.*, 2012; Dias, 2016; Joshi, 2018; Dias and Fernández, 2020; Parra, 2020; Marnce and Reddy, 2021), in that they position heterogeneous waste worker groups as claiming a single identity with a unified political voice and distributed agency. Yet doing so masks the presence of plural and conflicting rationalities driving political struggles at the urban margins. Informal waste workers do not necessarily unite for collective struggle but in order to make particular claims that may reassert their socio-political positions. Most of the literature (Hayami *et al.*, 2006; Viljoen *et al.*, 2012; Gutberlet *et al.*, 2021; Schenck *et al.*, 2021) shies away from acknowledging the different positionalities, voices and lived experiences that offer a critical perspective on the community's heterogeneity. For instance, Makina and Lawhon (2022) reveal how permissions were granted to bin workers in Tshwane (South Africa), but they fail to address which workers were most at risk or how their exchanges were shaped in the first place.

Strategies of the urban poor, as Burte and Kamath (2010) argue, need to be understood in the context of the 'unwillingness of the state to listen to non-violent dissent' (*ibid.*: 73) and the shrinking opportunities for survival in cities. This calls for a focus on the contradictions that emerge from encounters between the state and the urban poor. Rosaldo (2022), for instance, writing on the political struggles of recycler associations in Colombia, shows how state-led formalization initiatives led to tensions between two recycler factions. Even integration efforts from the state have worked towards excluding informal workers by introducing intermediaries (O'Hare, 2020) or framing them as scavengers (Samson, 2015). Luthra and Monteith (2021) show how an NGO's intervention of assigning ID cards to formalize workers delegitimized others who did not have one. While the latter study analyses an 'othering' elicited by membership of a collective vis-à-vis non-members, the current article interrogates splintering tendencies *within and across* a collective. State actions can deepen existing structural differences and also generate conditions where hierarchically placed individuals may exercise positionalities and negotiate identities that reproduce social differences.

English terms like 'waste pickers', 'recyclers' and 'reclaimers' are generic and fail to express the particular nature of the work—what kind of materials are collected, for instance, or at which stage of the recycling chain the workers operate. Therefore, scholars have taken to retaining local terms like *clasificadores* or *catadores*. In India, waste pickers predominantly belong to the lower caste and minority groups (Gill, 2006; Harriss-White, 2020; Rathore, 2020). Scholars have called them entrepreneurs and environmental champions at the lowest level in the hierarchy of waste regimes who reincarnate garbage into a valuable economic resource (Gill, 2009; Firdaus and Ahmad, 2010). There is also a tendency in waste scholarship to treat waste workers as a homogenous category (saving the occasional mention of gender) (Schenck *et al.*, 2019; Makina and Lawhon, 2022; Manzi *et al.*, 2022), which is problematic because it erases the differential lived experiences that emerge from a combination of intersectional identities like caste, class, ethnicity and race. Therefore, Ranganathan (2022b) calls for a focus on intersectionality, and shows in her study (2022a) how caste relations are perpetuated through infrastructure and property regimes of the modern city, where the low-caste Dalits still live with insecure tenure and perform metabolic labour. Kornberg (2019) uses the concept of 'casteification' to show how caste discrimination conflates with



intersectional vulnerabilities and continues to dispense harm to vulnerable migrant Muslims entering waste work.

The preoccupation with waste workers' agency may blind us to the graduated forms of power that crystallize within their group organization. In other words, the alliances that waste workers forge or the strategies and transgressions they use to negotiate their structural and political exclusion need to be critically unpacked. Paying attention to heterogeneity also has epistemological implications for researching marginalization. It challenges the assumption of a single centre and a margin by opening up space for disrupting multiple axes of oppression. Grounding observations in multiple forms of meaning-making and lived experiences can shed light on everyday practices without essentializing agency (Bar On, 1992: 92). In addition, being sensitive to a heterogeneous world supports a researcher's decision-making during fieldwork by preventing a generalization of the voices of dissent and helping to map the extant power relations. Therefore, I build from Truelove and O'Reilly's (2021) proposition that many such political configurations are possible along intersectional axes and I anchor my study on tracing these shifting coordinates through the concept of erasure that I now elaborate.

– The optics of erasure

I propose to use the concept of erasure as an analytic lens that investigates how the state's navigation of informality and governance of urban spaces operates through a politics of visibility and erasure to (re)produce inequality and dispossession. Towards this, I look at informal spaces of waste work which lack formal recognition as an economy (Scheinberg and Anschtz, 2006) but which suffer from visibility in times of crisis to bear accountability or act as a subject of reform. It has been established that informality persists not outside the state but through it (Roy, 2005; 2009). The term erasure traverses these porous configurations of the formal-informal to trace how exclusion is contracted and cascaded—at times mirrored and reproduced through political actions that seek to subvert dispossession.

Truelove and O'Reilly (2021) in their study on the impacts of a sanitation programme in Indore (India) show that the official aspiration of achieving the 'cleanest' city title rested on the optics of constructing cleanliness by erasing 'from visibility those houses and neighbourhoods of the poor that had not yet been provided toilets' (*ibid.*: 728). The management of visibility and erasure reproduces situated and differentiated forms of violence by deepening structural inequalities. Similarly, Luthra and Monteith (2021) argue that the aestheticization of waste work by an NGO by assigning designated uniforms became a mechanism to 'make visible' and legitimize its workers while obliterating those who were outside its membership. Such aestheticization processes, along with the official vision of garbage-free cities, are backed by the optics of erasure; that is, a process of reorganizing socio-spatial relations to make spaces in the city desirable. It is often achieved by determining order; specifically, by deciding *who* or *what* must be removed to restore order. I refer to this as optics because it comprises a kaleidoscope of configurations assembled to give an impression of visibility or invisibility to particular populations or spaces.

There are two paradoxical yet interconnected dimensions to this conceptualization. The first is that the politics of erasure relies on the production of binaries—clean/dirty, acceptable/unwanted, legal/illegal—which drive city planning, sanitation and waste management policies (Datta, 2012; McFarlane and Silver, 2017; Thieme, 2017a; Banks *et al.*, 2020). Different ways of seeing are manoeuvred in such a way that the undesirable spaces and people are eliminated to produce a world-class city (Roy and Ong, 2011). The second dimension of erasure is that it is relational and co-constituted. The emerging configurations of social relations that contribute to displacing certain groups operate across a spectrum of formal-informal exchanges. This means

that mechanisms of erasure and visibility operate hand-in-hand and through informal negotiations. In other words, the erasure (of some) is accompanied by securing visibility (for others) within the community. Along with the reproduction of binaries by dominant actors, the article shows that erasure is also reproduced through insurgent practices that seek to subvert exclusion through informal coping strategies. Lastly, the politics of erasure can also refer to tactics of ‘avoiding’ the gaze of specific institutions or actors while drawing the spotlight onto others to make them (more) visible.

In this article, I refrain from beginning my analysis from the standpoint of waste workers being either insurgents or victims. Instead, I show how uneven processes of dispossession both produce opportunities for subversion and also exacerbate existing inequalities within the waste working community. State-led practices at Deonar eroded the survival opportunities of the marginalized and fragmented their solidarities by generating precarities in everyday life. Dispossession in waste work can be initiated in a top-down fashion—i.e. by formal actors—but it can also be reproduced by other actors consolidating hierarchies across heterogeneous positions within and across the group.

### **Practices of the state: out of sight, out of mind**

‘the goal of Swachh Bharat Mission: Urban 2.0 is to make a “Garbage-Free City”, a city completely free of garbage.’

Speech by Narendra Modi, Prime Minister of India, on the launch of the second phase of the Swachh Bharat programme, 1 October 2021

India’s nationwide sanitation initiative—the Swachh Bharat (SB) programme, now in its second phase (2020–2025)—announced its plan to make cities completely garbage-free. In 2022 city governments were granted a budgetary allocation of US \$215.3 million under the Lakshya Zero Dumpsite initiative to recover land from the existing open dump sites and establish WTE plants.<sup>6</sup> Prior to the SB programme, waste management policies in India were tolerant to the creation of new landfills as long as they were located away from habitation (Municipal Solid Wastes Management and Handling Rules, 2000). However, based on the vision of garbage-free cities, the SB programme (Toolkit on Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016) radically shifted waste policies towards eliminating landfills altogether, either through bio-remediation or by closing down dump sites.<sup>7</sup> The garbage-free vision rests on the cultural logic of maintaining order by placing waste out of sight and consequently out of mind.

Under SB, existing dumps have been quite literally invisibilized by camouflaging them with greenery (such as a golf course in Indore) so that the aesthetics of the city could be maintained. Even SB’s waste worker integration programmes focused on aestheticization through uniforms and ID cards. India’s waste management mandates are not limited to erasing the polluted (and polluting) dump sites from city landscapes, because informal workers are likewise invisibilized within the state’s policies and plans. In Mumbai, for example, the BMC lacked a concrete plan for an exhausted Deonar (Mirza, 2019). The pressures of complying with the SB’s ‘garbage-free city’ directives and the recurrent incidences of fire led to the announcement of plans for a new waste-to-energy plant,<sup>8</sup> but the state failed to acknowledge that removing the dump and building the WTE would also erase all those who laboured there as unrecognized (or quasi-recognized) workers.

6 Mumbai’s municipal body, the BMC, committed to reclaiming 144 ha of dumping land.

7 Bio-remediation involves segregating previously dumped waste by sieving it, sending recyclables for recycling and composting bio-degradable matter.

8 Before the launch of Swachh Bharat, discussions on WTE were still in their nascent stages in India, with the first plant set up in Okhla, New Delhi.



The lowest-placed in the waste-value hierarchy in India are the waste pickers, who earn by foraging, collecting, segregating and selling materials of value to the scrap dealers (Chaturvedi and Gidwani, 2011; Millington *et al.*, 2022). Within the category of waste workers, individuals are differently positioned along class, caste and gender lines (Truelove and O'Reilly, 2021) that converge in complex ways to elicit different political positions. A study by the Tata Institute of Social Science on Mumbai's M-Ward (TISS, 2015) confirms that the slums of Shivaji Nagar and Baiganwadi around Deonar are predominantly home to Dalits and low-caste Muslims. The report also characterized that a majority of the ward's poorest residents are informal workers who work as daily labourers or depend on the dump in some way. A historical study of the neighbourhood by Thatra (2020) confirms that the concentration of Dalits in the slums around the dump is not a coincidence and is rooted in Colonial urban planning. A local NGO called Apnalaya claimed that of the 1,500 estimated informal waste workers, the majority were women from Dalit or lower caste Muslims groups. The Dalits and minority communities have traditionally borne the stigma of untouchability and continue to do so in the modern urban society through new forms of discrimination reproduced through casted labour (Sreenath, 2019). Scholars have also illustrated the manifestation of moral and cultural burdens tied up with pollution and notions of purity amongst Indian Muslims who display similar caste-like divisions (Trivedi *et al.*, 2016).

In Deonar, the low-caste Muslims are called Qureshis, who traditionally worked as butchers and resorted to waste work after being displaced from other parts of the city (Contractor, 2021). Most of Deonar's Muslim population trace their roots as North Indian migrants who migrated to Shivaji Nagar in response to several instances of ethnic and political turmoil throughout the city's history (Hansen, 1999; Contractor, 2012; Shaban, 2012). Caste power is not only perpetuated in Mumbai but it has also become spatialized across the modern cityscape (Wittmer, 2022) by intersecting with religion, ethnicity and gender. Consequently, social groups bearing the burden of pollution are subjected to multiple forms of vulnerability. As evidenced in my observations, the majority of the waste workers live in close proximity to the dump with precarious housing tenure facing frequent evictions. They were also the ones to be criminalized after the Deonar fire on the grounds of their physical and social proximity to the waste dump (Sharma, 2022).

### **The informal collective: Kaamgaar Samiti**

In 2001 the NGO Nirmala managed to organize around 600 waste workers and formed the Kaamgaar Samiti (KS). Initially created to facilitate renewal of the photo-pass, the KS soon became a forum for discussing issues, building solidarity and receiving skills training. Its members elected their representatives (a core committee) and met every month. While membership of the KS was for waste pickers who collected recyclables at the dump, many scrap dealers (some of whom had previously been waste workers) also joined. The KS had a floating membership that varied every year as people left or joined the association based on life events, migration, loss of employment and the seasonal monsoons. Although in principle any waste picker could join the KS, all membership applications were scrutinized and required verbal identification by one of the committee members. Almost everyone in the KS resided in one of the slum clusters of Shivaji Nagar.

I refer to the KS broadly as a community because its members demonstrated relationships beyond collegiality as waste workers, reciprocated friendships, and provided social and material support during adverse situations. However, the associational character of the KS divided along social differences of caste, class and religion, which to a large extent reflected the complex social history of Shivaji Nagar. The ethnic politics of Shiv Sena<sup>9</sup> (Hansen, 2001; Shaban, 2012) have bred animosity

9 The Shiv Sena is a stridently Hindu right-wing political party founded in Maharashtra which has proliferated ethnic, anti-Muslim and xenophobic discourse in the state since the 1980s.

between the North Indian migrants and the Marathi populations that are mirrored within the KS. Except for some cleavages along religious and ethnic grounds, the waste workers had established their own networks and arrangements with BMC officials to access waste at the dump. Cutting across this spectrum of structural intersectionalities, the members of the 'core committee' enjoyed a certain degree of power, economic and political privileges. They were well-networked, took financial decisions, worked closely with the NGO officers, and represented the community in official meetings with the BMC.

In sum, different waste workers exercised different identities and power positions because some KS members were economically more privileged than others. O'Hare (2020) warns us that 'waste work' and 'poor' are not synonymous, and Rosaldo (2022: 256) rightly states that 'informal workers are a large and heterogeneous group, and dispossession is not a primary threat to all of them at all times'. These scholars assert caution in assuming who can or cannot work with waste, given that it is shaped by situated and structural power geometries. I shall now elaborate three different instances of the informal coping strategies adopted by members of the KS to access the dump while the municipal ban was in force.

– Performance of protection: *hafta*

One might assume that as an unregulated dump site, Deonar's waste would be publicly accessible to anyone, but this was not the case. There were multiple arrangements for accessing waste that can be traced to a hierarchy amongst workers which determines *who* is permitted to collect *what* and from *where*. Interview participants mentioned that two scrap dealers had become particularly powerful over the years and had territorialized sections of the dump to claim all the incoming waste. The KS had officially distanced itself from this system and refused membership to anyone who worked for these dealers.

On a regular day, the waste pickers would gather around the freshly dumped waste with their burlap sacks to separate out the recyclables (such as different kinds of plastics, metals, paper and wood) using iron sickles. Once satisfied with their collection, the *maal* (materials) were transferred into the sacks and transported to the scrap shops located in Shivaji Nagar and Mandala. At times, the drivers of BMC waste vehicles, many of whom resided in the same slum cluster, helped the workers to transport the burlap sacks in their compactors and drop them at the scrap shops. This was done in exchange for a small fee, part of which was paid to the municipal employees who weighed the passing trucks so that they would ignore the discrepancies in their records. At Deonar, waste picking was performed not only in the presence of the BMC's staff but also by collaborating and synchronizing disposal activities. After the fire, access to the dump changed dramatically, with increased surveillance and security imposed by the authorities. The private security company prevented anyone from entering the dump, hitting trespassers with sticks and detaining them. The previous informal arrangements with the drivers were no longer feasible.

There were two kinds of security guards deployed at the site: the watchmen, who were lower in the hierarchy and patrolled the area in shifts, and the higher officials, who monitored the dump through cameras and took their rounds in a security van at fixed hours. Waste workers had been violently chased away by the watchmen on multiple occasions. However, some KS members decided to negotiate with the watchmen— who also happened to be neighbours of one of the waste workers and shared the same ethnic identity (being Marathis from Kolhapur, a city in Maharashtra). My interviews revealed that this group was comprised of members with close links to the local NGO Nirmala who had been explicitly voicing dissent in the monthly meetings. They came from low-income households but were predominantly of Marathi origin—in other words, their ethnic roots were in the state of Maharashtra in contrast to the North-Indian Muslim

migrants, who were perceived as outsiders (see Hansen, 2001). Using the evident privileges of a common ethnic identity they had established political connections over time. Negotiations at the dump relied on a variety of factors such as ethnic identity, political contacts, economic position, caste and religion.

In one of the interviews conducted after the fire, a female waste picker called Niru shared her thoughts about the new arrangement:

One of the watchmen lives in my neighbourhood. So I offer him a Fanta with 3,000 rupees [US \$37] for one month and he allows me to work for a few hours every day. No, I negotiated permissions for eight other women and we shared the expenses ... Not only does he allow us, but also warns us by whistling when he spots a security jeep of a higher official. The higher officials do not talk to us (interview, August 2016).

While the previous arrangement of paying a fee to the vehicle drivers also involved an informal exchange of money, now the watchmen were demanding large sums of money (also called *hafta*, which is a fee collected at regular intervals by police officers in exchange for permitting certain activities or for offering protection). With the exception of a group of privileged workers, most waste pickers struggled to organize the high sums required for *hafta* and were therefore unable to access materials inside the dump, resulting in a rift between the two groups.

The dump's boundary wall was kept under strict surveillance by the security personnel who frequently patrolled the area, but workers identified gaps during the change of duty and lunch hours when they could jump over. The increased security during the day also forced workers to operate at night to avoid being seen; this led to another zone of contention between KS workers who began visiting the dump at night or in the early morning and those who went there during the day. The group which worked at night (primarily comprised of younger men) refused to join the collective struggles initiated by the day-workers of the KS (who were mainly women), thereby diminishing their strength during public protests. Women shared that they did not feel safe visiting the dump at night due to its uneven terrain, the threat of being attacked by dogs, and instances of sexual abuse. They were disproportionately affected because they faced additional hardships at night and were criminalized and detained during the day. State action had not only heightened violence through the security measures adopted, but it also reinforced the social divisions amongst the waste workers by making visible certain identities and exposing them to violence.

– Leveraging visibility: political alliances and deal-making

After the fire, new political alliances were sought and old relations were revived to seek durable ways of accessing the Deonar site. KS members resorted to Shivaji Nagar's local political network to access the dump without the threat of violence. Sheela, who was the treasurer of the KS and one of my primary contacts, lived in Rafique Nagar adjacent to the dump. Her husband had set up a scrap shop in the nearby street. Because she was on the KS committee she travelled for various events, but she also had multiple odd jobs including as a caregiver with a private agency and as a waste picker to supplement her income.

In December 2016 (shortly before the 2017 municipal elections) when the local corporator (an elected political representative) had refused to help, Sheela approached a local leader called Rakesh from the opposition Shiv Sena party. The following day, Rakesh took Sheela to meet Irfan, the chief security officer, and a BMC employee who monitored the entrance to the dump site. Rakesh presented himself as a potential corporator of the constituency and pleaded before them to allow Sheela to work. After an hour-long discussion Sheela was able to negotiate access, and in exchange for a fee

(bribe) Irfan agreed to allow her to work in a small area inside for a few hours every day. A few days later, realizing the economic value of recyclables, he asked Sheela to bring a few more workers to collect waste for him. Sheela organized a small group of her close contacts who thus also gained entry into the dump. Under this arrangement, Irfan allowed them to work for a lower fee while retaining some of the collected materials for himself. Over the following months, the privileged members of the KS<sup>10</sup> and those with political affiliations to Shiv Sena successfully negotiated similar informal arrangements. This lasted for almost two months until other waste workers complained to Nirmala about Sheela and expressed a loss of trust in their leader.

Waste pickers who were not part of Sheela's closed group blamed her for abusing her position as a KS leader and for promoting her political agenda. Meanwhile, others also resorted to similar strategies of bribes, favours and patronage, using references from influential intermediaries, party leaders, social workers and religious leaders. The success of an arrangement was determined by the hierarchy of the contacts one could leverage. The in-depth interviews revealed that the remaining waste workers who failed to mobilize relevant contacts faced higher intensities of physical violence and surveillance than Sheela's group. Not only had access been negotiated, but violence was now commodified through bribes and influential contacts, exploiting the marginalized at the margins.

Sheela's practices of gaining visibility through political advantage can be explained using Simone's concept of plasticity (Simone, 2015), which refers to the fluidity of social roles. Simone explains this as connected behaviour that encompasses resistance as well as daily survival practices and ultimately develops into rights-based struggles (Savirani and Saedi, 2022). Although intended to accommodate the extant heterogeneity, such an explanation ignores the power geometries at play, which create inequalities for workers situated at the intersections of class, caste, gender and ethnicity. Sheela's case highlights the graduated forms of exclusion faced by waste workers confronted with the exploitative formal-informal practices of the state functionaries. As the interviews illustrate, workers gain access by rendering themselves visible through political leverage materialized through their class or ethnicity. These relationally exploitative arrangements gradually result in erasure for workers who are unable to assemble powerful contacts due to a combination of profound structural and constructed inequalities.

– Compounding erasure through self-help groups

Over the following months, KS members shared their innovative attempts to gain access. Incidences of violence at the site had reportedly reduced—until September 2016, when a bulldozer ran over a teenage girl after she entered with the help of a watchman. The incident caused great alarm and drew the attention of the municipal authorities to the transgressionary practices at the site. The authorities immediately revisited the security measures in place at Deonar.

With increasing uncertainty around official permissions to collect waste, the annual renewal of the photo-passes did not take place as planned. Nonetheless, the KS decided to apply for the renewal as usual, believing that this collective action could put pressure on the BMC and help the workers resume their access. Meanwhile, altercations between the different factions within the KS had increased, turning into fights and squabbles. Nirmala therefore suggested holding elections to re-elect the leaders. Two candidates—Naziya and Shabana—stood for the post of president, promising to find alternative livelihoods to help women workers.

10 The core members (comprising the president, vice-president and secretaries) represent the organization in public forums and mediate initiatives advocated by the Municipal Corporation; they may also work closely with local party leaders.

Taking advantage of the tense situation (and to demonstrate her leadership skills before the elections), Shabana proposed to form a self-help group. The group would support its members by collecting a financial contribution which it would use to secure short-term work contracts for waste segregation so that KS members could continue using their segregation skills. Shabana started collecting signatures from women who were interested in setting up the group, and all along, she also campaigned as a KS presidential candidate. The official registration of a self-help group required it to have financial savings so as to be eligible to compete for tenders. This was a challenging task for Shabana, because most women had taken on debts to cover their daily expenses after the ban was imposed at the site. Hence, only those who could pay the full contribution could join the group, thus leaving out the most severely affected workers. In other words, a community-led intervention that was intended to create a support system led to the exclusion of those who needed it the most but who lacked sufficient financial capacity.

One day, while helping Shabana with some paperwork at a copy-shop, I met Rohana, a migrant Qureshi Muslim, who complained of being left out of the self-help group. Rohana resided in Chikalwadi (a partially submerged and marshy part of the dump) in a makeshift structure that she had reclaimed herself. She had even voted for Shabana as president, but she did not have the financial resources to pay the group membership fee. She shared her disappointment regarding the matter with me:

I want to work but do not have 3,000 rupees to give Shabana. Neither can I pay a bribe to the security guard nor can I pay to the self-help group. Initially, they said they would include everyone in this group but now it's not the same ... those who do not have extra jobs are already impoverished, from where will I arrange so much money? I will not be renewing my KS membership, it costs money and doesn't protect me. If I cannot work at the dump, I will relocate to some other *jhoadpatti* [informal settlement] (interview, January 2017).

Rohana's precarious identity as a Muslim migrant in contrast to Shabana's political purchase as a leader juxtaposes the visibility of the coping strategies each one is able to employ. During the period of my fieldwork three women respondents whom I had interviewed decided to permanently move out of Shivaji Nagar. Others who did not have the resources to negotiate left waste work completely, in some cases taking up more exploitative forms of work. Shabana and her group eventually gained visibility within the community and made contacts with engineers at the BMC's waste department during their application for work tenders. The closing of the dump left workers competing for access to waste—not by turning them against each other, but by forcing them to contest for political visibility in times of crisis. The state's security and surveillance at the dump did not just dispossess the waste workers of their livelihood; it fragmented their solidarity by exacerbating and deepening social differences.

## Conclusion

This article contributes to debates on the marginality and organization of waste worker collectives. I complicate a simplistic understanding of marginalized groups by critically analysing their heterogeneity and intersectional configurations. Employing a critical lens helps to shift away from overly structural explanations of marginality and instead investigate situated everyday interactions. Political transgressions by the urban poor are generally taken as insurgent expressions (Holston, 2008; Bayat, 2010; Lawhon *et al.*, 2018) but I delve deeper into the layers of configurations to situate different power geometries and thereby avoid generalizations of the marginalized groups. Building on Truelove and O'Reilly's (2021) emphasis on intersectional dimensions, the article restates the need to focus on the shifting power configurations that emerge during encounters and amplify the exclusion of some but not others. This could be due to



a combination of relationally held positions such as Sheela's economic and political position as a committee member or Rohana's minority Muslim-migrant status.

I have presented three situated configurations of power geometries that play out along lines of identity, forging political alliances, and economic capacity. Individuals in positions of power within the community are able to acquire (and access) information, while at the same time (dis)enabling others from accessing waste. The politics of erasure does not aim to erase either spaces or people, but it does determine who is made visible or becomes dispossessed. The compounding of existing social differences within the waste community at Deonar was not a result of identity-based tension or internal disagreements; instead, exclusion materialized through the ways in which encounters with the state required waste workers to forge alliances to fight their dispossession. In their response to the splintered spaces of survival, waste workers organized and negotiated deals by employing shifting identities and power relations.

Illustrating who can mobilize and leverage which kind of network helps us understand how social groups are embedded within hierarchies and how social relations are (re)reproduced socio-spatially even within groups. In this article I have described how transgressions take place, both on the part of formal state representatives such as security guards and by waste workers attempting to subvert their exclusion. It is evident that along with market actors, the state is reworking its claims to waste, both formally and informally. It is doing so in order to conform with the world-class city narrative while at the same time experimenting with value recovery from landfills through WTE plants. The Indian government's chosen method of erasing dumps from city spaces by using bio-remediation merely shifts materials from one place to another despite the scientific procedures involved (S.V., 2021).

The claims made by contesting groups might be based on shifting logics and negotiations that alter over time and may not necessarily result in establishing access to rights or resources (Lawhon *et al.*, 2018). Informal or quasi-formal collectives such as the KS persist despite the lack of official recognition, mainly due to their practical legitimation (Kornberg, 2020) gained through organizing the photo-pass, regular meetings, elections and the collection of signatures to resist exclusion. The privileged members of the KS engage in negotiations and alliances that make them visible (either as leaders or brokers) while intensifying the power hierarchies between those who can access waste and those excluded from doing so. On the other hand, the state refuses to recognize informal waste workers but makes them visible as perpetrators in response to crisis events or the failures of formal governance. The optics play out in ways that attempt to erase the presence of the vulnerable from public consciousness. Here I have shown how the optics of erasure unfold through state actions and are reproduced across the community, thereby splintering the collective solidarity of the waste workers.

**Sneha Sharma**, Geographisches Institut der Universität Bonn/Department of Geography, University of Bonn, Meckenheimer Allee 166, Bonn, 53115, Germany, ssharma@uni-bonn.de

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