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# Challenging inequality: rights of the waste workers of Delhi

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic did not create any new problems for the working class in India but amplified those that have been prevalent for ages due to an economic system that prioritises profit. Particularly, the collecting and disposing of garbage in the Indian subcontinent has always been associated with a particular caste group, ranked low in the caste hierarchy of the Hindu social order. Though this system can be traced back to Hindu religious texts, it has long percolated into practice in other faiths, with people who converted from these communities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the waste collectors living in informal settlements on the peripheries of New Delhi faced a peculiar exclusion from basic infrastructural amenities and the right to work. The parlance of social distancing provided an environment adverse to the manual door-to-door waste collection in which the workers were engaged. As a substitute, the state machinery employed private companies whose modus operandi is not very different from independent waste workers. However, when things were restored to normalcy, the workers continued to find themselves out of work. The Solid Waste Management Act 2016 recognises the rights of waste workers, but they are yet to be enforced. In this paper, we look at the exclusion of the waste workers from accessing the city who, by their profession, are seen as polluting the very city which they keep clean.

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Exclusion; informalisation; reduced mobility; social justice; urbanisation

## 1. Introduction

Throughout history, there have been multiple events that have altered the way the social life of humans is oriented. The COVID-19 pandemic that gripped the world in the early months of 2020 led to specific developments and steps undertaken worldwide by Governments and Civil society groups alike. India was not indifferent to this either; steps like total civilian lockdown, nationwide vaccination, and food grain aid programmes were rolled out to curb the pandemic in the country. However, the debate regarding a. the efficiency and b. Whether these policies of both the Union and State Governments widened the ever-present cleavages of Indian society, loom before us as we try to turn a page on the pandemic and get back to normalcy.

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The handling of the COVID-19 pandemic by the Government was not considerate of how 'socially marginalised groups would be more vulnerable' (Deshpande & Ramachandran, 2023, p. 1983), which was reflected in their *unbiased* decisions, leading to the marginalised suffering more so than they already do. The sudden decision to call for a nationwide lockdown without consideration for how the working class would earn their livelihood pushed many into economic distress. The waste generated in urban India is disproportionately by the rich, while the working class is expected to clean it up. The former generates waste unbothered while the duty of ensuring cleanliness is divided on the grounds of caste since the common-sensical culture 'stigmatises sanitation work as unclean and sanitation workers as untouchables. A caste ethos is pervasively reflected in the behaviour of Indians. This ethos effectively "casteises" and genders various tasks, persists despite the spread of education, urbanisation and globalisation' (Teltumbde, 2018, p. 321). There is a tendency to associate open defecation and lack of cleanliness with poverty, where the poor, by their lack of access to education, are assumed to be generating filth even when research has proven it is not economic factors due to which poor sanitation persists in India but due to 'unique social forces – in particular, caste' (Coffey & Spears, 2017, p. 5). Hence, even the so-called educated and urban population 'who are sticklers for personal hygiene would not mind making their surroundings unclean. In India ... the privileged castes evince a sense of superiority and entitlement in littering the place, knowing that there's always some untouchable scavenger ... who would clean up after them' (Teltumbde, 2018, p. 321).

Since liberalising the Indian Economy and ensuing reforms, neo-liberal ideas of aesthetics and city planning have put tremendous pressure on the Urban local bodies (ULBs). This has also prompted them to 'enact an array of reforms that aim to make the country's notoriously underperforming and inefficient municipalities effective and financially sustainable service providers' (Reddy, 2013, p. 62). Tasks and Functions, such as municipal solid waste (MSW) management services, have been either fully or partially privatised. Under this wave of privatisation, private actors such as for-profit corporations, civil society groups, and even citizens have been enlisted to discharge duties that state institutions and actors earlier carried out. Many municipalities have entered private-public partnerships with corporations that, often, aim to extract and keep a profit margin for the discharge of these duties. However, this privatisation has also enabled the disenfranchisement and infringement of a disparate set of private actors, including ragpickers and petty recyclers who have, for the longest time, harnessed their entrepreneurial skills to offer private waste management services in cities across India long before privatisation became the de ruger best practice of ULBs (Chaturvedi & Gidwani, 2010). This newly mandated 'corporate privatisation' now seems to be the de facto voice and stakeholder when MSW management is concerned in Indian cities. It is noteworthy to mention here that the revised Solid Waste Management Act, 2016, has stated that the integration of the informal waste sector into the formal waste management system, along with seeking to provide them with proper working conditions, social security, and access to healthcare facilities as one of its primary objectives. Through this paper, we try to conceptualise the politics of waste that prevails in the waste economy and how it inherently makes the primary stakeholders of the enterprise, the informal waste workers, the absolute marginals.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Urban spaces were one of the first themes to be studied as the field of Sociology began to develop. The primary founders of Sociology, Durkheim, Marx, and Weber were fundamentally concerned with studying the social changes that resulted from industrial capitalism and, therefore – intended or otherwise – urbanisation. The first urban sociologists, who came to hail from what is now considered the Chicago school, focused their gaze on the changes technological advancements brought to everyday life; they overlooked inequality. Their approach towards studying the ghetto was rather essentialised instead of considering the underlying economic, political, and social processes. Castells (1976) and Mills (2000) criticised this approach and school of thought. While the former posited that the theorists from the Chicago School of Thought were seemingly oblivious that the changes they were studying were not individual choices but rather capitalist processes, the latter criticised them for overlooking ‘structure’ in their study. Though Ernest Bradley and Burgess (2008) provided the concentric zone theory, wherein he suggested that the city was divided into multiple zones, it was rejected by Castells on the grounds of not being replicable and its relevance being restricted only to one city. Another well-known scholar from the Chicago School, Louis Wirth, had his arguments on individualism discredited in the sense that they were not specific only to urban societies. The Chicago School of Thought ‘appeared deficient in theory, but it did go on to be influential in later interactionist works in the realm of social psychology and urban “micro” studies’ (Jamil, 2017, p. 17).

Borrowing from Henri Lefebvre (1991), we assert that the *production* of space is essentially a site of capital and power, but as he has suggested, ‘Only when politics focuses on the production and reproduction of urban life as the central labour process out of which revolutionary impulses arise will it be possible to mobilise anti-capitalist struggles capable of radically transforming daily life’ (Harvey, 2012, p. xvi). Though Lefebvre accepts that a city is essentially a marketplace, a site for trade and ‘though space is neither a “subject” nor an “object” but rather a social reality – that is to say, a set of relations and forms’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 116). Although Lefebvre overlooked factors such as caste, ethnicity, and religion as influential factors that determine access and ‘right to the city,’ we have integrated components from his work to include these to comprehend the situation of the waste workers in New Delhi.

## 3. Research methodology

The study was conducted by the co-authors, who are residents of New Delhi and employed a qualitative approach. The researchers undertook transect walks through the two neighbourhoods, during which primary data was collected by analysing and gauging how urban space is structured in the residential and *commons* where the waste workers live and work. Further, the researchers employed semi-structured interviews and focused-group discussions (FCG) with twenty waste workers spread across two different localities and seven scrap dealers in the localities. The observational method helped develop a picture of the collection, transportation, and marketing strategies of recyclables and other diverse aspects related to waste and the work with waste. The semi-structured interviews and FCGs relayed primary information and helped us prepare an understanding of how the waste workers and other stakeholders located themselves in the prevalent conditions. It also comprised questions regarding whether their

conditions have undergone any changes after the COVID pandemic and the general lockdowns.

The fieldwork undertaken for this research was primarily carried out in the mostly dry winter months of November – March, when waste collection and segregation is relatively easier compared to the monsoon months when the communities experience water logging in their localities, which is an added hurdle to tasks. Lastly, the research overlooks the State and Corporate actors, limiting it to an exclusively bottom-up approach.

#### 4. The spatiality of waste and waste pickers

The waste pickers we interviewed inhabited neighbourhoods on the fringes of the city, indicative of not just their physical proximity to the *centre* but even their economic and social positions. During the colonial era, when the city of New Delhi was planned, there was an emphasis to segregate the old city of Shahjahanabad to ensure that there existed a clear demarcation between the *Old* and the *New* cities, and in our view, it has percolated till this day. The racialised nature of planning and segregation in the colonial era, coupled with the *Brahmanical* notions of purity and pollution, which are sustained through the practice of caste, sustained the same patterns of exclusion in contemporary India. The workers, primarily the sanitation workers and the waste pickers, considered to be at the bottom of the hierarchy owing to their occupation of dealing with human waste, usually reside on the peripheries of the city or in neighbourhoods where they are rendered invisible from public avenues.

In this effort, we witnessed that the binary ideas of planned and unplanned or formal and informal may not necessarily be nuanced enough to address the ground realities, as what is *acceptable* may not necessarily be planned, and what is *unacceptable* may not necessarily be unplanned either. After the liberalisation of the country in the 1990s, the markets have 'opened up,' where people's behaviour and consumption patterns have radically been transformed, leading them to have a preference for what is palatable to their sense of *aesthetic*, and more often than not, the mere presence of the waste pickers whose labour ensures that their aesthetic spaces are clean, are strangely enough considered as *ruining* or rather *polluting* the space. A significant number of our respondents informed us how they are expected to be invisible while they carry on with their daily tasks, and often, expected to collect waste from households during the day, preferably when there are a smaller number of people around. They are also considered suspicious elements as they often cannot keep up with the changing idea of what is deemed as 'normative' since their precarious situations keep them preoccupied with trying to earn a living, leaving barely any time to indulge in the ever-changing idea of *normative*.

The idea of caste and its omnipresence in South Asia cannot be written off, even as several scholars tend to do. All our respondents were from castes listed under the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and, in some exceptional cases, Other Backward Classes (OBCs), while respondents who were not *Hindu* were primarily Muslims who were classified under the OBC group as well, proving a case of double marginalisation, one by their religious identity and the other owing to their caste identity. In Seemapuri, the respondents claimed to have been the third generation of people who have lived in the city, while those in Bhuapur were first-generation migrants to the city of New Delhi. In both cases, they had inherited from their ancestors their caste identity and social marginalisation, for which they resorted to the only means of occupation they had available to them. Their younger family members, such as children and grandchildren, were

often forced to engage in waste picking to earn for the family and in cases when they were attending school, they reported cases of being discriminated against under the occupation their family were in, their caste, and in most cases, a combination of both. Though the Indian Republic has abolished caste discrimination, the effort has often not percolated into an overhaul of the prevalent social norms. However, there have been minuscule beneficiaries of the affirmative action policies meant for the caste and the religious minorities, but even in those cases, the discrimination they face at educational institutions and workplaces deters them from making significant progress, as their upper-caste counterparts do.

By birth, most young individuals born in families of waste pickers are unable to acquire upward mobility, and the cycle continues. One respondent in their late seventies informed us that they had had hopes for their son to land a government job, but they were unable to educate them owing to their financial condition. While they had hope for their grandchild, they informed us that their hope was gradually dissipating, more so since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic when there was a sudden shift to the online mode of education, during which their grandchild had initially missed out on their class due to lack of a smartphone. When they did acquire a pre-owned smartphone so that classes could be attended, they had to worry about accessing the internet, for which they would often borrow money.

Economic factors drive migration to Indian towns and cities, but it is crucial not to overlook the cultural aspects of this phenomenon. For Dalit households, urban migration offers the prospect of anonymity and freedom from working for upper-caste landowners, mitigating the harsh experiences of untouchability. The younger generation of migrants is influenced by aspirational politics, aspiring to enter respectable or glamorous occupations such as operating a personal rickshaw, working as a private security guard, becoming a beautician, or, in this context, pursuing independent work as a waste worker. Even though it is by far an extension of their caste occupations it still tends to offer them the consolation of not being under the wing of a landowner. The problem in all this is that this *corporate – privatisation* is taking even that agency away from the waste workers all over the country, including the NCT.

Now, waste and, by association, the waste workers have become symbols of urban mobility that, according to the rest of the civil society, should be *invisibilised*. This, however, implies that these actors should not be able to share a space with the rest of society in the highly contested and commodified urban space. Therefore, by extension of this argument, waste workers and their rights do not seemingly matter significantly when it hinders the neo-liberal ideas of how space is utilised and how certain aesthetics are attached to it. This makes conceptualising the politics of waste in modern urban cities and spaces a daunting and dicey affair.

## 5. The dilemma of Delhi's development: for whom and at what cost?

There have been tremendous efforts in the Global South to develop cities so that they are transformed into *global cities*, such as London, New York or Tokyo, but unfortunately, these efforts have not seen much fruit, and New Delhi happens to be one of them. Delhi is often positioned as a global city in popular parlance, with examples of infrastructures such as flyovers and the Delhi Metro, which are merely symbolic representations given that a significant majority of the residents of the city are unable to afford cars and the Delhi Metro. If the city is still indeed considered a global city, which is well-developed, then it pushes us towards asking: for whom and at what cost? The ambition to develop the city into a *global city* came largely with the liberalisation policies of the 1990s since there has been a gradual

informalisation of the occupations, leading to the State shrinking away from its responsibilities of ensuring welfare, even when the Constitution of India's Article 38 enshrines how the State shall ensure the welfare of its people. The waste sector is being reorganised with the introduction of private corporate players, threatening the situation of the waste workers who already live under so much precarity. During our study, we observed how the established legal framework meant to protect waste workers' rights by assuring them of no interference when they collect waste is being overlooked in favour of private corporations looking to profit from waste. At this juncture, a conflict arises as the waste workers depend on collecting waste, segregating it, and then selling it to the wholesale market, after which they are sold at a much higher rate. Advocacy groups have raised the issue of the informal nature of the work for quite some time. Before the Municipal Corporation elections, the opposition and the current governing party, the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), had promised to regularise workers if they came into power.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the workers were left in disarray as most were migrants. In the case of Seemapuri, all our respondents were Bengali-speaking Muslim individuals, most of whom were from Midnapore. On the other hand, in Bhuapur Village, the respondents were migrants from the state of Bihar who were lower-caste Hindus, most of whom were Scheduled Castes (SC), with a few respondents from the Other Backward Classes (OBC) group. While various governments and the bureaucracy laud themselves for being committed towards development, the fruit of this development seems to evade the marginalised groups consistently, and in this case, the waste pickers.

## 6. Securing rights for the waste workers through the Solid Waste Management Rules (SWM), 2016

Through our study of the waste workers, the researchers aimed to investigate the various factors due to which the waste workers are alienated throughout India. However, without hurting the now much-appreciated *sense of neo-liberal aesthetics and hygiene*, we have tried to problematise the entire idea of securing rights for these informal workers. The waste workers, along with Sanitation workers, have been relegated to the lowest rung in the hierarchy of urban informal occupations and otherwise. We have further tried to present arguments and processes through which the inclusion of informal waste workers can be facilitated in *modern-day* waste management.

Solid waste generated through residential, industrial and commercial activities involves many active and passive stakeholders, such as waste generators, municipalities and waste pickers. The newer models of urban planning, which is in corollary with New Delhi being presented as a global city, have made stakeholders such as civil society organisations and Residents' Welfare Associations (RWAs) more vocal about how they want *their waste* to be collected, with little to no space for the waste pickers to have their voices heard. These voices are often heard vying for a landscape of the city, which 'takes shape through a compelling vision of the future ... a world-class aesthetic and the cultivation of a popular desire for such a future – the making of world-class subjects' (Ghertner, 2011, p. 281). Our research revealed that most workers did not enter specific neighbourhoods due to fear of being misconstrued as thieves and harassed. The general attitude of the upscaled community is that rag-pickers and kabadiwalas, which is the term

loosely used for scrap dealers, are not to be trusted, to be labelled as unhygienic and therefore to be restricted from entry into their *clean* and *safe* neighbourhoods.

The Solid Waste Management (SWM) Rules, 2016, which superseded the Municipal Solid Wastes (Management and Handling) Rules, 2000, provided guidelines meant to make solid waste management more inclusive, participatory and decentralised. One of the pioneering features of the 2016 Rules was the direction to integrate the informal waste pickers community into the waste collection system and grant them legal recognition and identification to prevent them from getting harassed and marginalised. However, when we come to solid waste management in Delhi, it has been a particularly mammoth task as the entire NCR region has multiple landfills piled up over the years, coupled with the lack of systems and infrastructure to deal with the increasing waste production. The SWM Rules are a crucial aspect of securing rights for Delhi's informal waste workers as they depend on the waste industry for their livelihood, and the Rules mandate their inclusion.

However, our fieldwork at the sites reveals a severe lag in the ground reality and the degree to which these rules mandate the inclusion of informal waste workers. We noticed that the state has made the privatisation of waste management a priority over the integration of the informal sector. The shift has been such that instead of empowering the informal workers to handle waste better, municipalities throughout the city have allotted this task to private waste collection concessionaires, pushing the former to further margins. The door-to-door waste collection that was one of the primary sources for these workers has now been mostly taken over by private contractors who have employed mini-trucks and workers on the payroll. Often, these workers double down as henchmen and muscle for these contractors as they have a turf war going on with the informal workers who have resorted to collecting waste at night to go under the radar. An increasing trend that we observed on our field visits is that throughout the city of Delhi, municipality dustbins are undergoing closure, which, on the one hand, disenfranchises these waste workers from collecting waste and, on the other hand, makes waste disposal of everyday citizens dependent on these new sub-contractors.

Therefore, the first and most tangible step that needs to be taken to secure workers' rights is advocacy for the legal recognition of informal waste workers as a legitimate part of the waste management system. The easiest way to accomplish that might be by identifying waste workers and then allotting them some kind of identification documents or tags. However, as already stated above, there are already hurdles in place when there is any mobilisation regarding the formalisation of waste workers through whatever means. As stated earlier, the principal argument presented here is that they do not have adequate documentation of where they migrated from. In the case of one of our sites, Seemapuri, we encountered waste workers who said that they had been harassed by the police lately and accused of being Bangladeshi migrants just because they have Bengali ethnicity. Therefore, by the extension of the same argument, there was no tangible need for the authorities to work on the prospect of formalising these waste workers as they are *illegal migrants* doing *illegal* work in their country. This attitude is also reflected in the fact that during our fieldwork, we encountered workers who complained of police officials and private concessionaires asking them for money to *allow* them to carry out their work. They also complained that they asked for money when they tried to dispose of the non-



recyclable waste in the landfills and dumps after completing the cleaning and segregation processes.

Another development we encountered during our fieldwork picked up steam, particularly after restrictions due to the COVID lockdowns put the waste workers out of commission for some months. On the 2nd of October 2014, the Government of India rolled out its ambitious project under the banner of 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan' (Clean India Mission). This was an instrumental step because it had symbolic significance regarding how the general perception of cleanliness was oriented and, by extension, the same way policy considerations were to be considered in the larger public domain. Borrowing from the Gandhian idea of *personal hygiene shaping general hygiene*, the mission's primary objective was to make India an open defecation-free country. The Government directed the construction of washrooms at every nook and corner of the country to implement their vision, and although this move's efficiency has been debated, it had definite implications on the way waste collection and management is carried out in the urban centres, including the National Capital Territory of Delhi. Now, almost ten years after the rolling out of the Mission, private commissaries are using the pilot song of the Mission and blaring it on loudspeakers attached to their mini trucks. This serves a two-faceted purpose, as we have been able to infer. First, it serves as a medium through which these private commissaries convince the public that they are somehow associated with the MCD. Two, it enables them to assert their domination over the petty and informal rag-pickers as they now claim the *official* status of waste workers.

The interesting fact that we have been able to draw from our fieldwork is that these sub-contractors are selling their *produce* to the Big Corporations that process waste and recycle it further. Therefore, the informal waste workers are in dire straits; on the one hand, they are not being formalised, and further, their source of earning has been taken over by subcontractors and contractors directly selling waste to big corporations who pay *big money*.

Under the Local Government promoting and preferring to work with private concessionaires, the average informal worker continues to be harassed in this new waste economy. Although there is a direct mandate in the SWM Rules calling for the inclusion of waste pickers, it conflicts with the imaginations of the corporations, the governments, and the RWAs – all of whom are collectively vying to sustain a world-class aesthetic of the city. The solid waste management situation in Delhi continues to be one where the administration has decided to work with inadequate waste infrastructure despite having a huge informal sector that largely contributes to the waste-value chain. Adopting a centralised approach for the longest time and then changing the approach to that of decentralisation has been a difficult transition for the bureaucracy and civil society.

## 7. Conclusion

Through our study, while examining waste management policies and practices in urban India, specifically focusing on New Delhi, reveals the intricate interplay between socio-economic stratification, governmental policies, and the marginalised status of waste workers. The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst, exposing and exacerbating the vulnerabilities faced by these workers, particularly those from socially marginalised groups. This study helped us to identify the multifaceted challenges encountered by

waste workers, often rooted in historical, cultural, and socio-political factors. The analysis unveiled the systemic neglect of waste workers' rights, furthered and compounded by the privatisation initiatives and the formalisation of waste management systems. Despite the Solid Waste Management (SWM) Rules 2016 mandating the inclusion of informal waste workers, the ground-level reality reflects a stark divergence from policy intent, with the informal sector facing increasing marginalisation.

Drawing from sociological and scholarly perspectives, the theoretical framework offered a lens to understand the complex dynamics of urban spaces, neoliberal ideologies, and their impact on waste management practices. The incorporation of Henri Lefebvre's concept of the production of space provided critical insights into the power dynamics shaping urban environments and the marginalised status of waste workers within these spaces.

Empirical observations obtained through mixed-methods research underscored the challenges faced by waste workers, their precarious living conditions, and the resistance they encounter in gaining recognition within formal waste management systems all while in their attempts to gain social and economic mobility. The study also shed light on the socio-political and caste-based dimensions influencing waste management, emphasising the need for policy reforms that prioritise the inclusion and rights of waste workers. This research tries to highlight the urgent need for a paradigm shift in waste management policies, emphasising waste workers' recognition, empowerment, and formal integration into the system. Additionally, it calls for reevaluating urban planning strategies, considering the socio-economic and cultural dime-affecting effect of waste workers' lives. A concerted effort by policymakers, civil society, and stakeholders is crucial to bridge the gap between policy intent and ground-level implementation, ensuring equitable treatment and improved livelihoods for waste workers in urban India. As urban spaces continue to evolve, it is imperative to recognise the agency and contributions of waste workers, acknowledging their pivotal role in sustainable waste management practices. Future research endeavours should delve deeper into the socio-political intricacies and policy dynamics governing waste management systems, fostering a more inclusive and equitable approach towards waste workers and their rights within urban landscapes. Waste is to be swept aside and cleaned after, not the Waste Workers.

The city in its current form of being the capital of India, a major South Asian nation, was envisioned by the British Colonial government with a deliberate attempt to segregate the New City from the Old by constructing *good roads* to create a clear demarcation to prevent 'the old town encroaching on and spoiling the symmetry of the new, and the "Indian town" polluting the imperial one led to the first serious attempt at long-term town planning for Delhi's urban area' (Gupta, 1997, p. 181). This pattern has percolated through time and is practised today, where waste workers – who, along with sanitation workers, are considered at the bottom of the hierarchy even among the working class – are relegated to residential localities on the city's peripheries. Delhi has maintained and preserved its tendency to place individuals at the peripheries of the city, as in the case of the nineteenth-century Mughal City of Shahjahanabad where the outskirts of the walled city were ... separate territories ... assigned to poverty (Gupta, 1997, p. 54), such as Ajmeri Gate, Delhi Gate, and other regions which served as entry-points to the city. Delhi as we know it, therefore, is an amalgamation of all the changes that have been carried on from the Mughal times to the now neo-imperialist powers of The *Corporate*. In both cases, notions of body and racial purity have been central, leading to the *otherisation* of marginalised communities, who are pushed to the fringes of the

city, where they can reside away from public sight and not be a *public nuisance*. As Desai (1985) argues, the fabricated concept of over-urbanisation as deployed by the rulers of the Third World nations to guide the process of urbanisation is done in such a way that it contrasts with Lefebvre's idea of accommodating the needs of the larger community but instead in the polar direction. The endeavour of planned and unplanned is often decided not due to 'formal standing in planning law' (Ghertner, 2011, p. 280) but based on what seems more acceptable, where 'if a development project looks "world-class," then it is most often declared planned; if a settlement looks polluting, it is sanctioned as unplanned and illegal' (Ghertner, 2011, p. 280). Hence, this endeavour of aestheticising the city 'has targeted those who inhabit its margins' (Baviskar, 2011, p. 391), which causes further insecurity among the marginalised communities residing within the city. Thus, the 'citizens in urban areas are forced to fend for their livelihood and economy by resorting to a proliferating insecure, lowly paid, relatively non-growing, more exploitative and humiliating informal sector' (Desai, 1985, p. 7).

There is a strand of belief that believes that caste is no longer relevant to South Asian, and particularly Indian, society as they think that it is a *traditional* system. We should instead consider 'the needs of the individual irrespective of his caste, for his caste tells us less and less about the total range of his deprivation' (Béteille, 1992, p. 37). However, such sweeping remarks are proven as near-sightedness when empirical studies prove how it still plays a significant role in the case of housing (Thorat et al., 2015) and employment in the private sector (Thorat & Attewell, 2007). The relationship between caste and waste work has had strong ties for ages, persisting through colonisation, as was the case in colonial Bombay, where 'there was a close relationship between caste and stigmatised labour seen in sanitising the city, removing refuse and collecting urban waste' (Sharma, 2022, p. 9). Even though the Indian state has a liberal democratic setup and a welfarist state that promises to protect the rights of the marginalised groups, there exists a portion 'of the Dalit community that has become invisible to the state and liberal democracy: construction workers, rag pickers, and scavengers' (Guru, 2011, p. 114). The State overlooks this portion of the marginalised caste groups, and the 'invisibility imposed on rag pickers results in their double death – moral and corporeal' (Guru, 2011, p. 114–15). This raises several concerns concerning one's rights, but rather, more particularly, how citizenship functions. The precarity faced by the waste workers, most of whom are Dalits or low-caste individuals who have converted to non-Hindu religions, have 'practically ceased to be citizens' (Guru, 2011, p. 115). A similar phenomenon is observed in the neighbouring nations of Bangladesh and Pakistan, both of which have an overwhelming majority of the Muslim population. However, even the absence of caste or any form of stratification within Islamic theology has not stopped the adherents of the faith from engaging in discrimination on the grounds of caste. In Pakistan, the tendency to maintain proximity from waste is not merely a physical phenomenon but 'fundamentally social, being entangled with caste-based identities' (Butt, 2020, p. 2).

The development pattern evident in Delhi, particularly in how waste is managed, goes in line with Harvey's (1973) analysis of the shift from managerialism to entrepreneurialism, which was earlier witnessed in advanced capitalist countries and is now being witnessed in India. According to estimates, the total value ascertained from waste could be around ₹ 3,587 million per year (Hayami et al., 2006). This proves to be a lucrative income source, attracting private players to waste collection. However, advocacy groups working with waste collectors call for the informal sector workers to be recognised by formalisation.

Even though municipal corporations often do not recognise waste workers, they are still comparatively efficient when dealing with waste (Gidwani & Chaturvedi, 2016). The Municipal Corporation of Delhi passed a proposal to regularise 5,000 sanitation workers (The Quint, 2023).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of India ordered a nationwide lockdown that lasted twenty-one days but was extended by the government as the cases went up. This period also witnessed one of the largest mass movements of people across the country, ‘an exodus of millions of migrant workers and families last week unlike anything seen in India since partition’ (Ellis & Chaurasia, 2020). Research using space-time modelling has confirmed suspicions that travel restrictions do not significantly impact the spread of pandemics (Carter, 2016). During a pandemic, the ‘quarantine measures taken by the government are appropriate, but these may lead to inefficient outcomes because many migrants would prefer to escape the centres of disease, consequently inflicting negative externalities on other uninfected people’ (Khanna, 2020, p. 182). The Government of India launched the Arogya Setu App (ASA) to monitor disease spread and store data about vaccination. ‘The conflation of disease surveillance/monitoring with personal, societal and national security signals the central place of security in government welfare discourse’ (Sengupta & Jha, 2020, p. 164). Migrant workers in rural regions are less likely to own smartphones. Even if they do, there are problems with accessing electricity to charge the phone, having enough money to access the internet, and having decent network connectivity. The relief measures for those worst hit by the COVID-19 pandemic would ideally be direct cash transfer and distribution of food items rather than the complicated and enforced digitisation. Amongst all this noise, in New Delhi, the capital of *New India*, informal waste worker Fatima Khanum and the rest, however, continue to suffer in silence.

## Disclosure statement

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