

frontier

An independent weekly since 1968

mir Basu

Since 1968



Samir
Founder

[Home](#)

[About Frontier](#)

[Recent Past Issues](#)

[Archive](#)

Shit-Work

India's Fastest-Growing Sector

Barbara-Harris White

Throughout the world, the production of waste is one of the fastest growing economic sectors, though rarely labelled as such, particularly when the waste takes the form of gases.

India is no exception. A paper in *Nature* even predicts that 'peak waste'—beyond which material efficiencies will counterbalance the physical growth of waste—lies a century into the future in India. Before peak waste, it will do nothing but grow.

As a knowledge field, waste is hard to navigate, unusually disordered with chaotic classifications, not a system but rather a litter of categories which match the sensory assault of decaying waste-scapes. The image of litter directs people to consumption waste but waste is generated less visibly throughout the spheres of production, distribution, consumption and social reproduction—throughout all economic and social life.

As a technical field, waste is captured by engineers and technologists whose cost-benefit analyses, biased towards metropolitan waste, tend to be blind to workers. As a social problem, NGOs and SHGs dominate the literature, ignoring the potentials of frontier technology. *But in India, waste is the most visible expression of caste relations in which upper castes are still entitled to throw waste into public space and in which a workforce still overwhelmingly made up of scheduled castes and tribes is expected to clean it up.*

More urban Indians live outside than inside Metros, so this writer chose to study the waste economy of a one-lakh town. As a public sector responsibility and a major public

expenditure category for local government, waste is not unique in being managed bureaucratically in several territorial or networked silos which are not well co-ordinated. With exceptions, upper caste officials are ignorant about how the sector actually works, their estimates of waste generation differing by a factor of three, their contact with the workforce in the town studied minimal.

Waste disposal is structured through an extraordinary set of 'public private partnerships'—with business models one doesn't find in textbooks but which may not be special to waste. Over and above the public service workforce paid directly by the municipality, which is unionised, has work and social security rights and which cleans most of the town, there is a differentiated private sector at work. The largest private assets are in companies subcontracted to the municipality—but they can also be found subcontracted to other state organisations such as colleges, hospitals and the railways. Like the directly paid municipal salariat, the private/corporate workforce gathers and segregates waste and transports unrecyclable waste to the dump-yard. But the company can only do this at lower cost than the municipality and still make a profit by reducing wages and ignoring work-related benefits. Both these goals are achieved through the casualisation of contracts. Adjacent to this scale of capital are urban industrial and service companies (eg. factories making liquor, rice and clothing accessories, private clinics, private colleges, transport companies, offices, etc). These firms have a specialist waste—or 'house-keeping'—work-force which is disproportionately Dalit, casual and low paid. 'We are permanently temporary' said one. Then there is a barely-regulated hierarchy of 'scrap-capital' through which paper, card, metal, glass and plastic is segregated and bulked for recycling. At its apex is a joint-family portfolio including several scrap yards, a lorry fleet, urban real estate and a labour force in four figures. Serving this hierarchy is a monopoly controlling the purchase, repair and sale of gunny-bags and the big white plastic bags essential to waste-work. Separate from this are private fleets of septic tankers, owned by scheduled caste and scheduled tribal entrepreneurs, which dispose of some of the town's completely untreated faecal waste in complicitous relations of extortion with the local police.

For every one registered worker there must be 10-15 unregistered, right-less workers; local or migrant, some are employed more or less bonded as wage-labourers while others are self-employed. Does one also include the large number of small, unregistered backstreet dairies and piggeries for which food waste that would otherwise rot rapidly is collected from the vegetable markets and meals hotels? Some of this invisible army of self-employed gatherers are tribal people. They live liminal lives, constantly harassed by the state, evicted by society and referred to offhand by other waste-workers as non-human animals.

This informal economy of waste is essential to the survival of the town. It is bolted into both public and private sectors. Over-determined by tax evasion which starves local government of revenue and by theories of new public management and neoliberalism, waste-workers have been laid off throughout the last decade by public sector organisations and rehired on informal, casual or 'semi-written' contracts by private companies and contractors. At a

stroke, their wages drop from say Rs 15,000 a month with work-related benefits to Rs 5,000 without benefits. In an effort to compensate however partially for this catastrophic decline in incomes, waste-workers have to add extra shifts to their already long working day in which they sift, grade and segregate, carry, drag and sell the recyclable elements in the detritus they collect. This was work previously done in the evening or before dawn by self-employed informal collectors. The inexorable increase in waste means that there is still work for displaced self-employed labour—if one considers earnings of Rs 3-4,000 per month to count as work. Workers on poverty wages and incomes are heavily dependent on the public distribution system for their staple food—even if they also criticise it. They themselves can figure out that the state underwrites the reproduction of their household and its workers while it simultaneously enables employers to deprive them of income and security at work. But they insist on its importance.

Throughout the waste economy, waste work is shit-work. The phrase has two meanings: literal and figurative. Literally, the waste from the social production of human labour is no longer the realm of female manual scavenging. After this was abolished in 1993, households began to invest in septic tanks. Now, nearly 30 years later, about half the town's houses have them. Septic tanker owners explained how these tanks were usually too small and not voided regularly ('only when they break down, overflow or when there is a wedding' said one). The police require their series of septic tanks to be voided for free. The municipality has a poster encouraging waste ducts from such tanks to lead directly through compound walls into open drains—which is exactly what the other half of the houses do anyway from their latrines. The result in the open drains of the town is that general consumption waste is mixed with human waste. Open-drain waste is 'wet waste' and wet waste is men's rather than women's work. (It is also men who are sent underground to risk asphyxiation in metropolitan sewers.) So prior to recycling, small-town consumption waste jumbled in surface drains, has to be cleaned. Inevitably more gets rejected for recycling and heads for the dump-yard than would be the case if it were not mixed with shit. And, just like the irrigation tank and the river bed where septic tankers dump their untreated loads, the dump-yard is also a resting place for decomposing shit.

Figuratively, shit-work denotes low status, menial work with poor control over work-conditions—work that is undervalued by society. The highest status shit-workers directly paid by local government, and technically part of the civil service, have no access to lavatories or bathing facilities. Apart from the irony of public sector workers having to relieve themselves on the very verges that they clean, the absence of 'facilities' requires a tight control over bodily metabolism. Over decades of such self-discipline, occupation-related diseases such as kidney failure and liver disorders are reported—over and above those diseases directly attributable to dangerous work environments, such as skin infections, allergies, joint pain and upper respiratory tract disease. The municipal sanitation workers (MSWs) know of the Human Rights Watch finding that 90% of India's sanitation workers die before retirement age. 'In future, urban shit-workers will be Dalit drop-outs from far-off villages', commented a MSW. The entire informal waste sector is stigmatised but more

oppressively so for women. Women work harder for longer hours, lower pay and fewer social entitlements. Yet, both literally and figuratively, while shit-work is low-paid, dirty and low status—as a sector it is not a barrier to accumulation. The state has few difficulties subcontracting this work to private and corporate capital.

Over the 5 years prior to Covid-19, the conditions of this shit-work were deteriorating. Taking shit-work figuratively, the municipal labour force has been being casualised. Cheaper ad hoc contracts replace permanent ones and limited, arbitrary (and delayed) benefits replace theoretically decent work-rights. New electric trucks succeeding old tractor-trailers inappropriately designed for the labour-teams; their lower capacity requires more dump-yard journeys. So, the new vehicles shift the balance of the working day between gathering, segregation and time-consuming transport and necessitate the informal lengthening of work shifts. Taking shit-work literally, a MSW explained, 'apart from the explosion in plastic waste, more and more waste is complicated, horrible and jumbled up in drains'. It's new—the diapers, sanitary napkins, tampons and incontinence pads muddled with used plastic, glass, metals, paper and cardboard and food-waste. That's not to mention syringes and other infectious medical waste which is not always segregated.

While India's biomedical waste amounts to about 600 tonnes per day, even before the tragic 2021 Covid wave, daily Covid waste added anywhere between 101 and 230 tonnes to this total. Note that this range does not vary with the pandemic surge. It is the range of official daily estimates for a given month in 2020. A hospital patient with Covid generates between 2 to 15 times the medical waste of a general patient.

'Covid waste' has emerged as a sub-field in public health and engineering directed at themes like the logistics of yellow-bag segregation, the hazards and cleaning of infected surfaces and the management of infectious sludge, disinfection and autoclave sterilisation as alternatives to compromised incineration infrastructure, the need for education and training, in sites such as clinical institutions, quarantine centres, labs and Pollution Control Boards. If labour is mentioned at all, it is in media op eds deploring the lack of safety gear and social security and warning of transmission risks in housing where isolation is impossible. The discovery of roadside 'disposals' of PPE, masks, Covid-related human tissues and body fluids is blamed on 'lack of awareness'. Covid waste is seen as a burden on the environment rather on waste labour —on the life-worlds from which the research literature is far removed.

Indeed lockdowns have made field-work impossible. In the rush for vaccination, the waste workforce was not classified as essential, and waste workers had to weigh up the inordinate time spent waiting for free vaccines at public hospitals against the deterrent cost of private vaccines relative to their earnings. Phone interviews with MSWs reveal that they are handling ever more waste and more non-biodegradable waste. Covid-related used masks, gloves and swabs add both to the consumption waste they collect and to their risk of exposure to the virus. Increasingly, the 'dry waste' that it falls to women to collect combines general waste with infectious 'medical' waste. Meanwhile the revenue-starved municipality vires

expenditure towards its public health response to Covid at the expense of support to the invisible waste labour-force that is essential to public health. The municipality has provided the subset of its 'elite' labour force still on permanent contracts with two surgical masks per day but fails to supply soap, sanitizer or gloves - let alone hazard benefits, check-ups or tests. For waste-collectors, covid is not a crisis in the sense of an unexpected extreme event, nor a crisis in the sense of a turning point, but simply marks a serious exacerbation of the hazards of their daily shit-work.

In 2019, in exasperation before Covid existed, a union leader suggested that the only reform worthy of the conditions in which they work needed to be radical—waste needs a workforce organised and equipped like the Indian army. 'Waste disposal should be organised by the Government of India like the police and army and not through arbitrary schemes like Swachh Bharat, or cash-starved municipalities, let alone self-help groups' she said.

But the state, embodying upper-caste, waste-throwing interests, is part of the problem. India's waste economy is a cultural artefact as well as a physical hazard. Only when the practices and economy of waste are disengaged from patriarchy and caste, and waste management is adequately publicly funded and organised, is the waste economy likely to be technologically transformed, are work conditions likely to approach decency and towns to be cleaned with less damage to the environment. Since all this is unlikely to happen, in the meanwhile waste will become one of India's most obtrusive development problems, with low-caste and tribal men and women toiling everywhere at their indispensable shit-work.

[<barbara.harriss-white@qeh.ox.ac.uk>](mailto:barbara.harriss-white@qeh.ox.ac.uk)

[Back to Home Page](#)

Frontier
Vol. 54, No. 14-17, Oct 3 - 30, 2021