

# **Migrants and Waste: A Gendered Analysis of Work, Identity and Precarity in Urban Slums of Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India**

## **Extended Abstract**

### **Introduction:**

Waren shire in her poem “Home” writes, “No one leaves homes, unless home is a mouth of shark”. The historical-structuralist paradigm sees migration as a “flight from misery”. The dependency theorist as well have the Marxist school of thought have been fairly pessimistic about migration. The neo classical thinking attempted to hoist migration as an individual choice towards increased wage and mitigation of risk. Migration in the global south continues to be a special case. At that juncture, here is the case on how “The misery continues”. This paper talks about the plight of a particular section of population who belongs to Barpeta district in Assam and have taken a migratory route to a distant land Lucknow in Uttar Pradesh. All of these migrants engage in the trade of waste picking. The waste economy in the country is hierarchical and waste pickers are at the lowest level. This simply means high risk and low income. Along with the risks and meagre income, waste pickers often are subjected to stigmatisation. They are considered as untouchable and associated with “dirt and disease” (Dias 2016). These prejudices run so strong; heredity and identity lead to waste being identified with people who handle it” (Doron and Jeffrey 2018). In this perspective, this paper is an attempt to present a gendered perspective on the trials and tribulation of waste pickers and their place in the expeditious, neoliberal state planning. In this paper, we bring together a qualitative analysis of female waste pickers now residing in Lucknow. These Bengali speaking Muslim women are migrants from Barpeta, lower Assam. The migrant discrimination, wounded identities and the occupation of waste picking that they engage in, call for an intersectional day to day lived navigation of their ordeal.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Development studies scholars have theorised discourses of inequalities, space and structures of power relations at length (Peet and Harwick 2015). The relationships between social, economic and political phenomena and spatial differences have been conceptualised. Emerging Literature in the field of developmental geography defined underdevelopment as a congregation of discourses that allows re-imagination of spaces for different actors in varied contexts. In explaining and studying power relations and inequalities, neo liberalism has often been used to

underline the transformation resulting from state “roll back”; how cities and urban spaces have been petri dished to breed the endless and biased development. A recent development in this rhetoric has been the concept of inclusion. Scholars have highlighted how this leads to the burden on the marginalised is acknowledge, but at the end, they are the ones to be blamed for it. Peck (2010) calls it “soft neoliberalism”. There is evidence to support the ironical claim that ‘inclusive planning’ has resulted in even more exclusion. Furthermore, there is a question on with the lens of neo liberalism be extended and applied to the global south, how far can one see? Secondly, Neo liberalism tends to reduce the layered narratives and multifaceted realities of urban poverty into a “monolith representation” (Bell 2019). Therefore, scholars have recognised a need to reposition urban theory in the way that is apropos to capture the diversity of people, practices and institutions that produce the city (Roy 2013). Scholars have also criticised the dichotomous classification of ‘formal and informal’, ‘exclusion and inclusion’ being simply ascended from the global north to global south. It is reductionist to put Urban spaces, urban citizenship is such watertight categories. Desai and Sanyal have challenged this notion of citizenry. They focus on the process of urbanisation by emphasising on the inequitable distribution of resources and rights. “Citizenship is not exclusive or inclusive, it is performed and enacted and reformulated and lived” (Sultana 2020).

Feminist scholars have focused on the social relationship and social justice in the cities. They have looked at the issue of space and access as “critical aspects of construction of gendered and sexualised identities and inequalities” (Whitson 2017). Cities influences the way in which gender is articulated in relation to spatial practices and power relation. There has been substantial theorisation of urban spaces and inequities studies in context of intersectional identities (Sultana 2020). There has been a paradigm shift in understanding women of global south by emphasizing on women’s rights, access to space and organising against encroachment of entitlements (Joshi 2018). An operationalisation of this approach is through the method of ‘scale of everyday’ to study the concepts of well-being and precarity (Wittmer 2020). It is in place to mention what Crenshaw (1991) said “the need to account for multiple identities when considering how the social world is constructed” . Intersectional approach provides an apropos framework to understand the “overlapping structural oppressions” while navigating everyday life experiences. In India feminism, positionality of women has been a function of caste and class. “The politics of engaging with multiple identities, their contradictions and interrelations, goes back to the early 20th century and the legacy of anti-imperialist struggles in the global South” (Menon 2015). Wittmer (2020) argues for conceptualisation of waste pickers not just

as labourers discarded by neoliberal development, but also in context of their relational autonomy, perceptions and aspirations and every day of precarious work.

### **Methodology and Data Collection:**

The broad theoretical framing of the study is based on waste studies and intersectionality. The research is a day-to-day navigation through the lived experiences of waste pickers from a social constructivist ontological foundation. The research has an epistemological underpinning of critical realism. The paper is based on qualitative data collected through series of field surveys which have been conducted between December 2018 to December 2020 in villages in Barpeta as well as in slums in Lucknow inhabited by these Bengali speaking Muslim migrants from Barpeta in Lower Assam. Those slums in Lucknow were chosen which had more than 100 households and these were located in trans Gomti area. The villages in Barpeta were the native villages of our respondents. Data for this study was collected through survey (n=200) including semi-structured interviews (n=100), follow-up visits (n=70), and focus group discussions and case studies (n=30). As per the information given by local NGO, Vigyan foundation, it is learnt that approximately 90,000 migrants are residing in different parts of the city. Since these migrants are a part of the informal economy therefore, no government record is found to quantify their numbers. These migrants have settled near railway tracks, vacant plots at the outskirts of the city. For the purpose of analysis interviews were conducted and recorded in field diaries. Systematic sampling could not be done in this case as the migrants were hesitant to interact with us. They were sceptical as to why we were showing so much interest in their problems and life when no one has ever bothered to visit their slums. They were very apprehensive if we are from any government or Police department or are journalist and hence, many of them refrained to communicate with us. However, after are frequent and multiple visits to these slums, they started to warm up to us and respond. We were helped by language experts in Assam. In the slums of Lucknow, the contactors helped us by introducing us to the slum dwellers, especially to the women waste pickers who were initially highly sceptical talk. In Lucknow data collection was done at three different occasions: At their homes, on their daily trips of waste collection and in the evenings, when they sat collectively with their friends. The authors visited their native villages to understand the discriminatory and migratory factors. Interview excerpts have been supplemented with contemporary evidences from the available literature.

## **Discussion:**

During our field visits we understood the interplay between migration and identity crisis of the migrants in discussion. The discrimination and harassment which they have been facing in their native state Assam since years being Bengali speaking Muslims has put them in state of poverty. Floods in the lower parts of Assam make agriculture unsustainable. In Assam they are denied of any employment opportunities because of the longstanding lingual and ethnic conflict in the state. They do not have land entitlements nor they have descent work to earn their livelihood. This compelled them to move out to a distant place through network in Lucknow. Most of these migrants have moved with their families. It was also found that all the Assamese migrants had their names in the National Register for Citizens (NRC). Despite of being a part of this list, most of them narrated the pinnacles of discrimination they face on an everyday basis due to their identity. Despite having a formal recognition of citizenship they were often called “Bangladeshis”; had faced harassment by people as well as the police. “The tag of “Bangladeshi’s” is like curse”, one of our respondents said. Waste pickers are individuals who fall in the lowest hierarchy of power and economic structures in the urban spaces. They have been working for years, contributing significantly to the waste management of cities by segregation, cleaning and recycling waste. However, they receive no recognition for their contributions to the urban spaces. Furthermore, they are considered as eye sore, and often reduced to the work they do, rather than as citizens who, by virtue of their citizenry have equal rights and equal claims over the city spaces. One of our respondents from Chandan slum, told us, “they call us Bangladeshi’s and thieves and *Bidesi’s (foreigners)*. My lord knows, our blood is no different than theirs”. Supriya Routh’s study in West Bengal highlights this aspect of migrant waste pickers and how their standard of living is alarmingly low. Mental health of this vulnerable section has not been given enough attention. 80% Bengali Muslims and are often called “Bangladeshi’s”.

### ***Gendered Analysis of Work and Identity:***

Women commonly engage in the waste picking work as it does not require any educational qualification, no financial or capital pre requisites. There are no barriers to entry. One of our respondents told us, “This work suits us, wherever we ask for work, people asked us for papers, money and education. We didn’t have any of those, so we started this work”. Another of our respondents told us, “In Assam, I could never go to work, I had to stay at home with my in-laws. Since we have moved here, I can also go out and work. I share my husband’s burden”. But the placement of women in the lowest position shows that women in the informal sector are, low paid and exploited and prone to higher risks and uncertainties (Kabeer 2015). Majority

of the women from our study, engaged in waste picking while their husbands were a level above them; they worked as door-to-door collectors and had access to *thelas* while women picked and moved on foot. The first and the most visible problem of women in waste picking is the physical health hazards and women still continue to engage in large numbers in the waste picking work. One of our respondent, who was 50 years told us, “Not a single day passes when I don’t feel heavy ache in my body, but we have to work, we have no choice.” Narayan (2000) emphasized on how struggles of livelihood leads to women compromising their health, prioritising income over their own bodies, comfort and well-being. For most of them, work and income simply means filled bellies and fulfilled needs of the daily life for their families and themselves. In our study we also found women waste- pickers toiling for eight hours for door to door collection of waste. They start their day at 5.00 a.m in the morning and return at around 2.00 p.m. After that they segregate waste to sell it to next value chain, the contractors. Living in unhygienic conditions impacts their health status badly like their other counterparts. In this study, it was found that in addition to Physical health, there is also the focal aspect of mental and social well-being. Women take care of the households and bear the burden of gender responsibilities. Women waste pickers narrated how they prefer waste picking as it does not require them to interact with any member of the household and in this manner they do not have to reveal their name/ identity. They also do not mingle with people belonging to other caste and communities. This gives them a sense of flexibility and ease. Other than that, respondents in the study also told us how work is a coping mechanism and helps them distract themselves from the daily struggles of life.

Social wellbeing amongst women waste pickers can get constrained by gendered limitations. The biggest perceivable threat is of unsafe spaces harassment and abuse. Women waste pickers often face sexual harassment. One of our respondents told us, “We lower our gaze and dress in a way that is not flashy. If we were something nice or flashy people might trouble us.” It is important to understand that women waste pickers challenge the norms of female bodies in urban spaces. Their visibility makes them open to harassment, physical and sexual abuse. It is a paradoxical affair between visibility and invisibility. To be visible makes them stand a chance of getting recognition but also makes them vulnerable to abuse. Invisible shields them, but makes them likely to get lost in the “curse of oblivion”. Women, in such conditions often try to manipulate their identities by trying to blend it by dressing timidly and making manipulation so as to not attract any attention (Wittmer 2020). Our respondents told us how she had to hide her Muslim identity from employer to get a job outside waste trade. Being a Bengali speaking Muslim, she was not finding work in Hindu households with her real identity being revealed.

So she adopted a Hindu name, in order to get work as a house help. She worked as a waste picker along with her husband, but she desired a “a work that is less dirty”. Another finding that emerged out from our study and had been supported by works of other scholars is the women’s work perspective of “relational autonomy” (Miller 2018). Women waste pickers have been known to appreciate the flexibility aspect of their work because flexibility is necessary when women for women to be able to balance between reproductive responsibilities, child bearing and rearing, and paid work outside home (Agarwala 2019).

### **Conclusion:**

“To include only those who can professionalize their labours and appearance within the current privatized system in most Indian cities is to exclude a majority of workers who cannot or choose not to subscribe to the requirements of this system.” (Whittmer 2020). Women waste pickers and their work needs to be looked at with a relational interpretation. Their well-being and what is precarity to them, can be understood by navigating lived experiences with them. Intersectionality and gendered analysis enable us to look beyond the narrow “Biomedical hazard” explanation of waste work, women and well-being. As much as research scholars must use this form of approach to study marginalised workers. From a policy point of view it is imperative that women’s work and their organisations are recognised as self-sufficient entities capable of providing paid services. It is also important that the identity crisis of these migrants gets resolved in their native state so that they may get a descent work and can go back to their villages, settling there maintaining their own linguistic and cultural identities.

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