COVID-19 as method

Managing the ubiquity of waste and waste-collectors in India

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Events like the COVID-19 pandemic can become what Assa Doron and Robin Jeffrey have called 'binding crises': 'events with the clarity and immediacy of a terrifying threat' (2018: 12), impacting the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless – though unevenly. Binding crises of the past (like the 1842 Great Fire of Hamburg, the 1858 Great Stink in London and the 1896 Bombay plague) have led to ubiquitous reforms in sanitation and waste management practices, most notably landmark innovations in modern sewerage systems. In what follows, I draw on ethnographic research, conducted discontinuously over five years (2015–2019), around municipal solid waste management (MSWM), and the political ecology of informal plastic recycling in the city of Ahmedabad, India.[1] I argue that the current pandemic may constitute such a binding event as freelance waste-collection networks are paralysed by the lockdown and 'authorised' modes of waste collection are prioritised, leading to a novel 'infrastructuring' of emerging relations between human bodies and wasted things.

Studying an emerging waste regime: Narendra Modi's 'Clean India'

If my field were defined by one past binding event, it would be the 1994 'plague' in Surat, 265 kilometres south of Ahmedabad. The thorough reforms in waste collection and increased levels of public compliance that followed the event were spearheaded by the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the Gujarat state. Narendra Modi, then BJP's state secretary and India's future prime minister, visited the city during the crisis to conduct public education 'not only about personal hygiene but also about social hygiene' and termed the incident a 'game changer as far as Surat is concerned' (Doron and Jeffrey 2018: 10, 268). During my

research, I have closely studied how Modi's government has taken this work nationwide with his signature Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, or Clean India Mission, and its efforts to standardise and privatise MSWM. I have also studied the multifarious forms of interpretative practice, resistance, subversion and organisational readjustments in light of the changed MSWM policies among a wide range of actors: municipal agents, private contractors and labour agencies, pay-rolled and non-pay-rolled waste-workers, private recycling businesses, NGOs and the residents of the city. Now working under quarantine conditions in the United Kingdom, my ethnography has been extended and (re)informed by online research and a series of recent telephonic conversations as I have been checking in with former co-workers at a plastic waste re-cycling facility, waste collectors and other friendly acquaintances in the recycling business.

Despite its celebrated culmination in October 2019 with Gandhi's 150th birth anniversary, Modi's Clean India Mission was resumed in March 2020 as Phase 2, with emphasis on rural sanitation, and the con-tinuation of urban schemes and standards, especially in MSWM. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the mission rebranded its Twitter display name with the hashtag #IndiaFightsCorona. At one point, the account's cover photo made the links between Clean India (Swachh Bharat) and Healthy India (Swasth Bharat) even more prominent (see Figure 1).

In what follows, I argue that the massive bid to secure a healthy – rather, coronavirus-free – India appears alongside and pushes for-ward aspects of the operational agenda for Clean India. I map how the pandemic response has helped push forwards a new 'waste regime', transforming the circulation of bodies and the waste that they generate, or handle, in fundamental ways. Central to a waste regime, as Zsuzsa Gille (2010: 1056) explains, is the role of a set of institutions (social, economic, political) that multifariously enact the value(s) of waste and 'regulate their production and distribution in tangible ways' (see also Gille 2007). I consider in particular some of the local configurations of the 'essential worker', especially how these re-enact the waste collec-tor – body and visibility, socio-professional relations, rights. I theorise these emerging relations around waste and waste work as better con-stitutive of a project of infrastructuring (Bowker and Star 2000; Bowker et al. 1996; Harvey 2012), with emphasis on a standardised regime of visibility and exception. I illustrate the collapse of one regime of waste-collection practices (notably that around freelance waste picking) and the valorisation of the new regime (an 'authorised' mode of municipal

Figure 1. Screenshot of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan official Twitter account (@swachhbharat), 29 May 2020.

solid waste collection, now re-enacted as 'essential service') through this multi-scalar conceptual framing of 'waste regimes' that holds the ubiquity of human bodies and discarded things in a productive tension.

Human bodies

Images and stories (e.g. BBC News 2020) have proliferated within India and globally of newly unemployed workers from the informal sector walking for weeks to reach their villages in the wake of hastily arranged lockdowns that failed to provide for the country's millions of precariously employed migrant workers. These scenes have dramatised how restrictive measures on movement have wreaked havoc across India. An all-pervasive lockdown order seems to have been guided by a particularly neat dovetailing vision of coronaviral and human ubiquities, and of the ubiquity of those primarily socio-economic affordances that would enable everyone to stay quarantined. Yet, as decades of Indian sociological research has shown, the practical ability to

adequately adhere to the new 'social distancing' measures has rarely been ubiquitous in India (Khan and Abraham 2020). Not merely a humanitarian crisis, such migratory flows of desperate workers seeking food and shelter also potentially represent the coronavirus migrating, unchecked, from the affected urban industrial settings into previously unaffected rural territory. Here the heavy-handed attempt to suppress the virus merely makes it more ubiquitous, not just creating new vectors for infection but also distressingly bringing already-marginalised bodies to the attention of publics that increasingly read all human bodies as contagion threats.

Interpreted as the reduction of corporal contact among the public, secured by restrictions on movement in the public domain, including orders to 'stay at home' or quarantine in other places, 'social distancing' makes the human body visible in particular ways. Inconclusive evidence around the modes and media of transmission of SARS-CoV-2, or infrastructural insufficiencies, like the lack of mass-testing facilities, have made effective contact-tracing difficult, especially for asymptomatic bodies. This is not to discount the agencies of the (novel) virus, and its ability to emerge unpredictably across physico-chemical environments, and in instances, to be particularly intractable, and resistant to modelling. As such, in light of the virus's 'invisibility', the lockdown solution proposed by the newly centralised administration in India under the all-binding Disaster Management Act, 2005 (MHA 2020b; PIB 2020) may be argued to project the virus's potential vector – the human body – as a 'hyper-visible' subject in certain cases. The visibility of the human subject is enacted in different ways, through multifarious technologies and across different scales and types of media, in order to effectively manage (and critique, reprimand) its ubiquity. The varied modes of visibilisation of human bodies are thus seen as key to effective public regimes of corporal distancing.

The visibility of migrant workers, walking down the streets during lockdown, or congregating at interstate borders and at bus/rail stations with no interpersonal physical distance has, expectedly, generated a wide range of public reactions. The Twitter hashtag #COVIDIOTS, a caricatural embodiment of irresponsible citizen behaviour, worldwide, also found currency in India, especially regarding celebratory street processions, possibly exaggerating the prime minister's call to visibilise 'essential' practitioners (HW News English 2020). Human bodies seemingly undermining restriction orders, transgressing the boundaries of quarantine sites, not maintaining physical distancing rules, are thus, variously seen and marked as different, heavily mediated and

subject to various forms of legal and social injunctions. My interlocutors from Ahmedabad report that waste collectors who ventured out in the early phases of lockdown were forced out of gated communities with accusations of carrying coronavirus, or harassed by the police for violating lockdown orders. Such abuse was not uncommon before the pandemic, but their idioms and intensity seem to have mutated now. As 'essential workers' exempt from the general lockdown rules by central order (MHA 2020a), waste collectors would therefore seem to have the experience of being abused one day and feted another by street processions and the claps and the bangs of empty balcony-class utensils. For the time being, it may be argued that it is not any kind of 'essence' around practice but rather how the waste workers' bodies are identified – made visible differently, or perhaps invisible – that would mark them as 'essential workers' in the public space.

This regime of exception and prioritisation of practice does not necessarily translate into prioritised public protection of the physical and social health of waste workers. Several news reports (Chakravorty 2020) testify to the lack of proper PPE (personal protective equipment) among these critical workers, including those handling hazardous medical waste. A news reporter asked an unprotected medical waste handler in New Delhi if he was afraid of the coronavirus. They were told that he was, but to stop work would surely mean starving to death. Likewise, my former co-workers informed me that the sheer daytime heat (40–42°C in April and May) makes it impossible to wear the porous, single-layered cotton masks, or the pair of thick gloves, provided by employers. Yet, from their testimonies, it would seem that the masks and the gloves are still somewhat useful: keeping these on offers confidence to those who they serve, rather than any real personal protection for their own bodies.

Therefore, the mandatory wearing of masks and gloves, together with a uniform, marks the body of the waste collector, identifiably, as an 'essential worker' and visibilises their work as 'essential service'. The uniform is often composed of a safety coat in designated catchy colours (one form for all body types and genders), a basic ID card worn around the neck, supplemented by the co-presence of marked technologised equipment. Even a colour-coded wheelbarrow and broom will help.

As the rest of the population stays fixed in space under the regimes of lockdown, the ubiquity of the waste worker may be managed through distinct forms of identification, visible from a distance, and notionally spared further policing. The performativity of the 'essential' waste collector (with assistance from the celebrations of the balconied

classes) would seem to lend legitimacy to the profession, while differently identified waste-collection practices would be denied access to public space. I will discuss what these ubiquitous uniformalised forms of mediated visibility conceal, but for now it is well worth noting what they reveal, or help bring to focus, especially around the critical value and importance of waste work in the maintenance of different kinds of public order. The ubiquity of the coronavirus pandemic – through its concurrence across worlds where the work of waste is differentially valorised and technologised – makes visible some of the similar operational risks, and physical health hazards of handling waste (Nagle 2013).

The present enactment of the 'essential' waste collector extends beyond a complex project of visibilisation. Critically, it also relates to the processual dismantling of working relations, infrastructures and practical standards involved in other alternative forms of waste picking, or involves their progressive invisibilisation. To be able to appreciate a topical discussion, we must delve into a brief history of wasted things, and some of their entanglements with spaces, and bodies in space. The context is, broadly, Indian, with localised focus on municipal solid waste management in Ahmedabad, and the associated domain of waste collection. I illustrate in particular how the sociolegal and practical ecology around the Clean India Mission multifariously enacts 'authorised' waste collection across different scales. Finally, the concept of waste regimes helps us appreciate how the present (re)valorisation of 'authorised' practice may produce further marginalisation in the domain of waste-collection work.

Wasted things

As Figure 2 (and many more such images, circulating across news and social media at the moment) would suggest, the hypervisibility of suspect human carriers extends to inanimate objects of daily use and refuse by the human body: fomites, the term made popular by Steven Soderberg's *Contagion* (2011). Indeed, the specificity of the material is key to how the object is made visible (note the eye-catching blue of the PPE glove), or handled, and surely, even pertinent to what material and moral claims, threats or opportunities the object poses for different members of the public (Reno 2015). Scientific studies demonstrating differential coronaviral persistence on material surfaces (plastic, metals, cardboard, glass, etc.) have sometimes been used to raise public alarm, worldwide. As Mike Michael and I recently discussed, the circulation

Figure 2. Discarded PPE on a public pathway in South West England (© Tridibesh Dey).

of plastic objects – especially reusable shopping bags – between the home and the outside is made controversial within the current regimes of citizen responsibilisation towards 'saving lives' (Dey and Michael 2020). The suspicion of coronavirus transmitting through cross-contact, and through material objects changing hands, has brought material discards into the public domain of scrutiny, perhaps with renewed fervour. The microscopic – if even, personal and intimate – details of what gets thrown away, how, where, who picks it up, how, where the waste goes, what gets done to it and so on become publicly hypervisible.

These are, not least, charged with the questions of responsibility, in particular, around the management of waste's ubiquity – where it can, or cannot, be, and how it is made (in)visible. As various authors have reminded us, time and again, the matter of waste and its (in)efficient management is never apolitical, or devoid of socio-economic contention (Doron and Jeffrey 2018; Liboiron 2019; Millar 2018; Newell 2011). For instance, waste management is critically linked with the policies and practices of making and maintaining a public order (Guitard and

Milliot 2015). This is not just a spatial order, as evident, but also a temporal one, given the material durability of some of the discards to persist and perturb. Regular and effective waste clearance is, after all, key to clean citizenship, and consumerism with minimal material and moral repercussion (Hawkins 2006). As such, the occurrence of discarded objects in the public sphere is problematic, not least, in its allocation of blame and responsibility. What is termed 'litter', within a particular parlance, has had a long and contested history that differently enacts the public space, and individual, civic and corporate responsibilities (Dunaway 2015).

In South Asia, at least in the modern era, the subject of public sanitation is manifest in the region's colonial history, visibilised, not least, through the 'immaculate "order" of the European quarters' (Chakrabarty 1991: 17; see also Kaviraj 1997). Key to the maintenance work of this order were projects of spatial segregation and the management of ubiquities of compromised material, like shit. These pertained, not least, to the native population, who were alleged to 'eat and drink and perform his evacuations actually on the very same foot of water' (UK Parliament 1863: 330). Dominant nationalist discourses often idealised and mirrored similar aesthetic visions for the country's public spaces. Gandhi himself regretted how fellow Indians would 'throw out refuse or spit, without pausing to consider whether (they) are not inconveniencing the passer-by' (Parekh 1989: 49–50), linking the individual moral responsibility of maintaining clean sanitised public spaces with political activism towards *Swaraj*, or responsible self-rule.

So, it is not coincidental that Gandhi's image would be made iconic to the recent Clean India Mission (2014–2019), shepherded by current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. However, the India we are discussing is the India of the twenty-first century, decidedly postcolonial and post-1991 (the watershed year of economic liberalisation), surging along a path of ever-increasing growth, consumption and waste. Waste management – a devolved responsibility under the local civic authorities of independent India (MoEF 2000) – may, then, be understood to constitute key practices that, in Dipesh Chakraborty's (1991) words, make 'open space public place'. Clean India is partly about responsibilising and weaponising individual citizens and the state agents. A part of the ubiquitous citizen pledge on the mission's website reads: 'I will neither litter not [*sic*] let others litter . . . I believe that the countries of the world that appear clean are so because their citizens don't indulge in littering nor do they allow it to happen' (SBA 2020).[2] Calls to devote '100 hours per year, that is two hours per week, to voluntarily work for

cleanliness' initiating 'the quest for cleanliness with myself, my family, my locality, my village and my work place' led to thousands of anti-litter campaigns and weekend street-sweeping drives among India's urban elite classes and celebrities, with Modi himself joining in at many of these occasions (see Figure 3).

Selfies and testimonies abound on news and social media. The direct-tax-paying and internationally connected citizens were happy to publicly document their hands-on contribution towards the making of open spaces they may (finally) be proud of, their citizenship and belonging in place now tied together by a virtuous practical commitment. The second part of the Clean India pledge, around the segregation of waste at source, also enacts a vision of waste ubiquity – based on which material discard goes into which bin – tying discipline in practice together with the ethico-political performances of responsible citizenship (Hawkins 2001). Yet, the mission also revealed socio-economic fault lines among the population of the country. It led to citizen vigilantism (Doron 2016; Luthra 2018) and stringent policing of the public space. This included (literal) whistleblowing, water cannoning, naming and social media shaming of fellow citizens seemingly undermining the rules of responsible citizenship by littering, or relieving themselves in public.

Since 2016, the ethos of the Clean India Mission has been further enacted, nationally, through a series of codified waste management rules. They integrate new priorities associated with the urban growth (like plastic, e-waste, construction debris) and institutionalize ubiquitous operative 'duties and responsibilities' for different set of actors – from the different ministries to local (municipal) authorities and their contracted agents, individual businesses and citizens (the latter two actors included as 'waste generators'). Under the encompassing *Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016* (MoEF 2016) waste generators are directed to not litter, to segregate waste at source in colour-coded bins provided by the municipality, to properly bag sanitary waste and to hand over waste to collectors, 'authorised' by the local authorities, and pay due collection fees for the service. Meanwhile, the duty of local civic authorities is to put systems in place, facilitate infrastructure building and ensure compliance through initiatives, facilitation, education and penalties.

It is the complex regulatory infrastructure of the Clean India Mission – through a set of material-specific rules for a wide range of actors – that turns municipal waste-management practices into what Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star may call a project of 'standardisation' (2000: 15). Indeed, for these authors, standards are a set of binding rules

Figure 3. Prime Minister Narendra Modi launching the cleanliness drive for Clean India Mission from Valmiki Basti, New Delhi, 2 October 2014 (© Press Information Bureau, Prime Minister's Office, Government of India, CNR 60275, ID: 57538, Government Open Data License – India). Reprinted with permission under the Government of India's National Data Sharing and Accessibility Policy.

for producing objects (in this case, actors themselves, different modes of practice, regimes of identification, infrastructures, technologies of compliance) that span more than one community of practice (multi-actor) and are deployed to work across distance and multiple heterogeneous scales (multi-scale). Yet, analysing the organisation of these practices, especially for our discussion around MSWM, it is important to notice how the controls of standardisation are distributed. There are multiple centres that may produce practical standards (ministries, pollution control boards, municipalities, private contractors). Each of these generates and affects communities of practices. Albeit for individual citizens and businesses (waste generators), or for individual waste workers,

practices and standards are defined by authorities higher up, offering limited scope for subjective enactment. Responsibility is, thus, turned into centrally drafted legal obligation to defined forms of practice, and classified practical standards, that would govern the ubiquity of wasted things across India. Notably, recommended individual practices of waste segregation and timely disposal is tied to an infrastructuring of waste-collection practices.

The 2016 rules recommend municipal authorities to recognise and register – thereby 'authorising' – freelancing waste pickers, and to integrate them into standardised MSWM. Civic authorities in Ahmedabad tied up with local NGOs and private companies, under contract, to supply labour (and sometimes equipment) for door-to-door waste collection, street sweeping, transport and sorting of recyclables. Waste collectors, registered with these agencies, could sign up or be deployed to perform these functions. They would, henceforth, be identified by a uniform and an ID card, provided equipment and (sometimes) PPE and granted exclusive and timed access to the guarded community bins. As 'authorised' waste collectors, their ubiquity of movement and access to waste is mediated by the new relations of professional obligation, and particular modes of performative visibility. My interlocutors – freelancing-turned-'authorised' waste collectors – in Ahmedabad told me their salaries are usually fixed, paid monthly and often shared by the contractor and residence associations. Job security and benefits, like sick pay and access to loans, may be at the discretion of the particular employer. Thus, the link between labour and income is variously mediated, emplacing the waste collector within multiple relations of obligation and dependence within existing socio-economic hierarchies. As such, the noted critiques of the Clean India Mission towards the invisibilisation, obscuration and caste entrenchment of waste workers (Sharma 2020; Teltumbde 2018) are observed here too.

Understandably, many thousands of waste collectors in Ahmedabad, most of them women, continue to freelance, carefully weighing out the benefits of freedom of choice (time and duration of work, which 'waste' to (not) pick) and control over income, with the promised securities of 'authorised' wage work. Vital to the sustenance of freelance waste picking is the sprawling and intricate network of material recycling. These are largely constituted of informal businesses, predominantly micro to small-scale (defined under the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Act, 2006 as those with investment in plant and machinery rarely exceeding 50 million Indian rupees, and often with no more than 20 current employees), specialising in the multi-

farious practices and products of material processing. For the waste seller, this vast network of social and economic relations is manifest primarily through the selling point, the *peetha* (Gujarati). At the *peethas*, recyclables are purchased, sorted and finally sent off to other facilities for further processing along the recycling value chain. Similar to Kaveri Gill's (2009) description of waste-trade networks in Delhi, *peethas* in Ahmedabad have their loyal clientele, and employees, often linked by various (distant kinship) relations of mutual obligation and contractual arrangement, including loans and sponsorship of children's education.

Conclusion: COVID-19 as method

The centrally binding rules of the coronavirus lockdown, dated 24 March 2020, excluded material recycling from its list of 'essential services', meaning immediate suspension of work at and indefinite closure of the *peethas*, and all the intermediate procuration, storage, processing centres that together constitute the vast informal networks and infrastructures of recycling. Freelance waste collection – already marked by a regime of visibility and exception made even more stringent by COVID-19 – saw its critical infrastructure and supports taken away, to perish, while dependent individuals and communities were left without means of income for months at a stretch. On the other hand, as previously noted, the emergent 'waste regime' enacted and standardised by the agents of the state, not least through the regular work of door-to-door waste collection, continues, appreciably, as a matter of state priority (with or without adequate PPE for the waste collectors). The regime of 'authorisation' is, thus, turned into a regime of indispensability and exception, actively prioritised as 'essential' and, potentially, valorised.

In the urban ghetto of Ramapir no Tekro, where many of my former co-workers live, municipally commissioned colour-coded garbage trucks still make an appearance a few times a week. The present moment of a binding crisis allows the civic authority to reiterate and drive home its instructions on colour-coded segregation of waste at source and to effectuate disciplined disposal practices as a matter of urgent civic (and national) responsibility. If unsegregated and unmarked, or not put out in time, waste collectors could refuse the bins, my interlocutors tell me. The absence of freelance waste pickers, or large community bins, as alternative actors in garbage circulation, positions the municipality and its contractors as principal waste management agents, with unprecedented power over individual households and

private waste generators. The present health crisis is, thus, mobilised to enact and enlist a responsible citizenry towards standardised garbage-disposal practices.

The conceptual lens of 'waste regime' offers a recognition of the critical institutions that support, valorise or resist different modes of waste collection. Each set of practices and practical standards configures a wide range of spatio-temporal and intersubjective relations, and as such, re-standardisation leads to multiple forms of socio-material change across different levels. These include, not least, the waste collector's relations to waste, work, health, safety and rights to socio-economic justice. Individual citizens, households and communities are mobilised and enacted too, about waste disposal, handling and processing and, in their relations to spaces, places, service providers and the state. All these things are now being 'infrastructured' differently in the wake of the pandemic.

This nationally localised story of the re-standardisation of practices around waste collection can also perform certain 'exceptional' conceptual work in the times of the global pandemic. COVID-19 – as a contagious, global viral condition – makes prominent some of the pre-existing *local* socio-material linkages between different ubiquities. I brought out some of the links it reveals between the ubiquities of human bodies – suspect carriers of a virus, 'waste generators', but also providers of 'essential services' like waste collection – and the ubiquities of wasted things – material objects that may carry the virus. As such, COVID-19 reveals the different practices and standards of managing these ubiquities, while also exposing their often-problematic links, points of cross-contact and vulnerabilities. The pandemic mediates and complicates these ubiquities, and their management. It creates new or reinforced orders of exclusion, and ironies. In this manner, my very ability to pull together and study these different domains of practice – across multiple sites and scales – has been facilitated by the very sociolegal infrastructures brought into being by the pandemic itself.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. The *Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016* define the eponymous term to include physically solid and semi-solid domestic waste; sanitary waste; waste from shops and commercial establishments, institutes and markets; and other non-residential wastes including from catered outdoor events, street sweepings, etc. In terms of material, this would range from compostable organic food waste to recyclables and non-recyclables in plastic, metal, glass and paper (MoEF 2016: 54).

2. The reader may appreciate here the induction and appropriation of the political vocabulary of 'litter' within an Indian nationalistic state discourse.

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