REDEFINING CASTE: A STUDY OF DALIT WOMEN'S SANITATION LABOR AND GENERATIONAL ASPIRATIONS.

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: Redefining Caste: A Study of Dalit Women's Sanitation Labor and Generational Aspirations.

This dissertation analyzes the persistence of caste-based sanitation labor and the ways in which Dalit women are redefining the associations between caste and sanitation labor. This project is based on ethnographic research I conducted among Dalit women who are part of the informal waste management sector in Mumbai, India. I use the Gramscian concept of hegemony to highlight that dominant caste groups used caste ideology to construct caste-based occupational divisions and subordinated other caste groups by assigning them degrading forms of labor. Caste hegemony has served to limit options available to subordinated castes, to the extent that economically impoverished Dalit women, like those who are part of this study, continue to perform sanitation labor. Specifically, my research documents how state and corporate regulation of waste management has threatened Dalit women's livelihoods, while simultaneously creating a limited set of opportunities for them to seek formal employment in the management of waste. I investigate Dalit women's association with the NGO Parisar Vikas, to argue that through their many activities, Parisar Vikas has cultivated a Gramscian good sense and fostered the capacity to aspire; enabling Dalit women to challenge the common sense of caste hegemony. Finally, I construct Dalit women's claims for legitimacy in access to

waste, demands for inclusion in the waste management system, and resolve to educate their daughters, as a redefinition of caste, through which Dalit women aspire to break the link between caste and hereditary sanitation labor.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Visible/Invisible: Waste Management Activities in Suburban Mumbai

On a crisp morning in March, at about 6:30am, I leave my home to go for a walk. During fieldwork I lived in a residential society in an affluent suburb of Mumbai. This society is a set of two buildings enclosed by a low brick wall and a metal gate. Similar residential societies dot either side and facing the one I lived in. The security guard appointed by the society greets me as I make my way out of the gate. As I walk down the lane, around me are the morning activities, typical to a middle-class[1] residential area in Mumbai; children wait with their parents at the society gates for their school bus, people are out for a walk, others are at the local dairy shop, some are on their way to work or college or to worship at the temple on the street corner. This morning I am walking towards a large playground, centrally located in this suburb. Encircling the dirt playground is a walking track, a vehicular road, and a string of residential societies. Today there are a few dozen suburban residents walking along the track, groups occupy the dirt playground; playing cricket or badminton or doing exercises. Amid the typical morning activity in an affluent suburb, informal sanitation workers collect discarded waste, formal sanitation workers sweep the streets, and those employed by residential

[1] In this dissertation, I do not use the term 'middle-class' to denote those in the middle of the class or income spectrum. Instead I refer to an affluent class that exerts ideological and cultural hegemony over society, through their control of public sphere institutions like the media, politics, and the education system. People belonging to this class are market subjects formed as a result of economic liberalization in India, they comprise the top ten-fifteen percent of the income spectrum (see Ray and Qayum 2009, 14-15), and largely belong to dominant caste communities.

societies maneuver large, wheeled waste bins, setting them outside the society gates for municipal collection.

The playground is a popular hangout for residents in this area; for meeting friends, playing sports, people-gazing, etc. Unsurprisingly, a vast array of juice bars, tea and coffee shops, restaurants, grocers, and apparel shops have cropped up around the playground as a result of the residents' leisure activities. Because of which, a lot of waste is generated and discarded daily, on the streets and wastebins surrounding the playground. As I walk in circles along the walking track, I see a young woman picking through a pile of waste near a closed restaurant. She has a large, heavy looking sack on her shoulder, which comes down to her ankles. She is bent over the pile of waste, rummaging with bare hands, presumably searching for lucrative recyclable waste. A few meters down another woman opens the lid of a wastebin set out for municipal collection, she sifts through it, her hand coming up with a piece of plastic which she deposits in the bag on her shoulder. As I continue my leisurely walk I see more solitary women rummaging through waste piles on the street or in wastebins.

Around 7:30am, an older woman carrying a broom and dragging along a plastic tub, comes onto the road surrounding the playground and starts to sweep the street, collecting and pilling swept waste into the plastic tub. By 8:00am, the green and orange municipal wet waste compactor truck makes its way onto the road encircling the playground. In addition to the driver, the truck is accompanied by four sanitation workers, all of whom are men. The wet waste truck stops in front of each residential society where the workers pick up trash bins set outside the society gates and empty its contents into the truck's compactor bed, putting the empty bins back at the gates before

moving on to the next building. As the truck makes it way around the ground, residents who walk on the road tend to give the wet waste compactor and accompanying sanitation workers, a wide berth due to the rotting stench emanating from the waste they handle.

Around 9:00am when I return home, the sanitation worker employed by the residential society has already set out wet waste and dry waste bins, filled with yesterday's waste, by the gates for municipal collection. We greet each other as he walks towards the building with two large, soiled plastic buckets to begin his daily work of waste collection. He, sometimes accompanied by his wife, drags the buckets door-to-door across six storeys of each building, knocking on each door and dumping the waste residents give him in their respective buckets. Once done with the collection, he goes to the back of the buildings where the community waste bins are located. From the collected waste, he takes out any recyclables he can sell, and dumps the rest of the waste in their respective wet or dry waste bins.

I offer this brief glimpse into some of the usual waste management activities occurring every morning in an affluent area, to demonstrate the persistence of caste based sanitation labor and the status differences of the people present and the activities they perform in the public sphere. All sanitation workers noted above are poor and belong to Dalit communities. Local residents are all affluent, a majority of whom belong to dominant castes. Through this research I show that these differences of labor in the public sphere are part of a historic trajectory which has the Hindu caste hierarchy at its core. Moreover, while sanitation workers perform their labor in plain view, they are largely invisible from elite activities in the public sphere to legislative discourses in the halls power. As Berthier shows through research among waste workers in Mexico City, the

"visible functionality of solid waste management conceals complicated relationships of power groups for which garbage has been and still is an enormous political and economic booty" (2003, 195). This research contends that power continues to be consolidated through dominant caste groups who reap the social, political, and economic benefits of waste management, rooted in the exploitation of subordinated caste groups.

In this chapter, I first lay out the key arguments that guide my research and the scholarly context in which it is situated. I then elaborate on the Gramscian concept of hegemony, linking it to the occupational divisions that organized caste Hindu society. Following which, I discuss the state's involvement in waste management. I go on to show the ways in which it exploits the stigmatized labor of Dalit women who pick waste. I then link the contemporary invisibility of Dalit women's labor in the public sphere, to the constructions of 'Indian woman' that happened during British colonization of India. I finally elaborate on the claims to legitimacy made by Dalit women and how it informs their redefinitions of caste. I end the chapter by providing a map of this dissertation.

Key Arguments and Research Context

In this research, I investigate the persistence of caste-based sanitation labor and the ways in which women, who are informal sanitation workers, seek to redefine associations between caste and sanitation labor. I argue that women's claims for legitimacy over access to waste, demands for fair inclusion in the waste management system, and determination to educate their children all constitute a redefinition of caste, as they serve to break the link between hereditary sanitation labor and their caste status. I contend that these articulations challenge the hegemony of caste, which Dalit

communities continue to endure. I show that redefinitions occur due to changes in the formal waste management system, but most importantly are a result of a Gramscian good sense cultivated within the women through the activities of the organization they are associated with. Through this research I further demonstrate that Dalit women's redefinition of caste is historically situated and informed through the tensions women experience while performing sanitation labor and envisioning a different future.

Sanitation labor includes a broad range of activities including manually scavenging human excrement, cleaning toilets and sewers, sweeping the streets, picking and selling discarded waste, segregating household and commercial waste, composting wet waste, processing and recycling dry waste, transporting and disposing all other waste in dumps or landfills. A vast majority of the people engaged in this labor are poor Dalits belonging to castes historically assigned sanitation labor (Gatade 2015). My research focuses on Dalit women in Mumbai who pick and sell discarded waste and those who are engaged in composting and waste segregating activities that are necessary for recycling. These workers are part of the informal waste management or waste recycling system. All women part of this research are associated with Parisar Bhagini Vikas Sangh (Organization of Women for the Improvement of the Environment), Parisar Vikas for short. I elaborate on the history and activities of Parisar Vikas in chapters two and four. The women who are part of this research belong to the Baudh and Matang castes, which were ritually ordained as sweepers and waste collectors. Today, these women are known as 'wastepickers', a label based on the fact of their labor, that, as I demonstrate in chapter four, is deeply stigmatizing. And so, in this work I use the term wastepicker sparingly, and only to refer to groups of people who pick waste, not attaching it to individual

women part of this research. Instead I use a translation of the Marathi term *Safai Kamgar*, which means sanitation worker.

Douglas asserts that what constitutes dirt in a given society is "matter out of place" (1966, 44). One way to deal with the disorder and uncleanliness resulting from dirt is to remove that object and label it unclean. Significantly, uncleanliness is a result of contravening the boundaries of order which are specific to a given culture. Douglas's symbolic structuralist approach does not look at physical objects which are considered waste but investigates the ways in which the category of pollution emerges within social relations in a particular society (Douglas 1966). This approach is particularly useful to my research. I show in chapter three that anti-caste leaders proposed a radical interpretation of history arguing that people seen as transgressing boundaries were outcaste as untouchables, assigned polluting occupations, and then excluded from public institutions by being labeled as polluted (Ambedkar 1946; 1948). But while Douglas is frequently cited in waste related research, "her focus on the symbolism of ritual pollution fits awkwardly with discussion of the billions of tons of municipal solid waste that arrive daily at the world's landfills" (Alexander and O'Hare 2020, 4). Recently anthropologists have begun to construct a body of knowledge that expands our understanding of human cultures through what we discard as waste. This field of inquiry is loosely termed the anthropology of waste. Scholars explore a wide range of ideas about waste from cultural notions that define the category of waste, workers who handle waste, to the power exerted in the local to global flows of waste.

Scholarship on waste includes cultural ideas of relating to the natural environment by looking at the ways in which people conceptualize waste reduction and disposal

(Schlehe and Yulianto 2020), the contribution of non-human animals in the management and reduction of waste (Doherty 2019), the unequal flows of waste and derived wealth, where waste is transported from the Global North to pollute the Global South while derived profits flow in reverse (Alexander and Reno 2012), the culturally specific ways in which the category of waste is constructed through religious ideas of cleanliness (Furniss 2017), and the need to look at the value of objects considered waste to understand the broader value of material things (Thompson 2017). Waste management literature has disproportionately focused on household and individual waste generation. Here waste is unfailingly seen as a resource which emphasizes that its creation and disposal, while polluting, is necessary for the global flow of capital (Alexander 2020; Alexander and O'Hare 2020). The focus on individual waste generation diverts it away from the role of industrial and military sectors who create the most polluting toxic waste (Alexander 2020). The impact of this diversion is deeply felt by low income communities of color who live in "sacrifice zones", near polluting industry or toxic waste dumps (Lerner 2010). Scholarship within the anthropology of waste also investigates the lives and work of people engaged in sanitation labor. Millar explores sociability and care among workers on a landfill in Brazil. Kinships ties are crucial in finding about and learning to work on dumpsites. Additionally family and neighborhood groups work together on the landfill, looking out for each other amid the dangerous work environment. Significant to my research, Millar finds that people who pick waste have tremendous flexibility and freedom to choose their work hours. And so they prefer to work in waste, even when other opportunities become available, rather than be tied to an employer's schedule (Millar 2008). Nguyen studies the value waste traders in Vietnam generate as they handle

waste. Through their labor of collecting and selling waste, traders generate economic value for the global market, which is tied to the moral value of familial care, which is the primary reason for their labor (Nguyen 2019).

Since the 1990s, waste management research on India has focused on the problem of waste generation, its unchecked disposal, and its impact on the environment. This body of work also investigates current waste management infrastructure and technologies and the municipal inability to manage the growing problem of urban waste (Jain 1994; Joshi and Ahmed 2016; Kumar et al. 2017; Mani & Singh 2016; Mehta, Shastri, and Joseph 2018; Rathi 2006; Reddy and Ram 2019; Sharma and Chandel 2021; Singh 2020). In light of governmental inability to deal with waste, researchers explore the success of privatization of waste management systems (Banerjee 2017; Chavan and Zambare 2013; Kumar et al. 2017; Mani and Singh 2016; Rathi 2006). Today, waste management research increasingly focuses on the crippling impact of state policy and privatization on informal sanitation workers. This research highlights the exploitation informal sanitation workers endure, the significance of their labor for human and environmental health, and their critical role in the profits extracted through the global trade of waste (Ahmed and Ali 2004; Berthier 2003; Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Chintan 2007; Dias 2016; Doron and Jeffrey 2018; Frow 2003; Gidwani 2015; Gill 2012; Gunsilius, Chaturvedi, and Scheinberg 2011; Kaseva and Gupta 1996; Medina 2000; Shankar and Sahni 2018; Wilson, Velis, and Cheeseman 2006). In this body of work, few address the relationship between caste and sanitation, primarily marking the continuation of caste-based sanitation labor (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Doron and Jeffrey 2018; Gill 2012; McFarlane 2008; Mirza 2018; Prasad 2000; Shankar and Sahni 2018). Particularly

important to this research is the argument that urbanization has maintained feudal caste relations that existed in rural areas, translating them into the urban informal economy, which has created a systemic barrier against labor mobility (Doron and Jeffrey 2018; Gill 2012; Prasad 2000). My research sits within these scholarly trajectories. Dalit women part of this research belong to castes historically deemed polluting through relations of power in Hindu caste society. I show that, these women are their household's primary earners and perform sanitation labor as part of their familial responsibilities, while adding tremendous economic value to the waste they pick. I take an Gramscian approach to demonstrate the ways in which ideological power is mobilized through caste, in maintaining caste-based sanitation labor. And I complicate this continuation through the Gramscian concept of good sense, by arguing that changes in the waste management system, urban migration, and organizational affiliation have created a set of circumstances whereby Dalit women are able to redefine the meanings of caste-based sanitation labor.

Here it is important to note that the landscape of Dalit studies in India is incredibly diverse and complex. This complexity reflects the regional diversity of India. My research is selectively embedded within the history of Dalits in Mumbai, who are deeply influenced by Ambedkar's ideas on emancipation and his conversation to Buddhism. I use Ambedkar's writings as the primary source to elaborate on the history and ideology of caste, because of this influence. Western scholars like Trautmann (2008) have looked at the impact of the Aryan invasion theory, put forth by British colonists, on the construction of caste. Viswanath (2014) demonstrates the ways in which land owners, colonial officials, and Christian missionaries constructed Dalit oppression in 1890s

colonial India, and the continuing impact of measures that were undertaken to provide welfare to Dalit communities. Prakash (2003) investigates the idea of freedom, through discourses surrounding the history of Dalit bonded labor in colonial and post-colonial India. Dalit scholars like Yengde (2019) and Gidla (2017), through their personal stories of growing up Dalit in India, map contemporary Dalit experiences onto Dalit histories of oppression and emancipation. Pertinent to my research with sanitation workers in Mumbai, Jaoul (2011) explores the complexity of Ambedkar's influence on caste politics is northern India. Here multiple Dalit subcastes, including the Valmikis who work as sweepers, and who I briefly mention in chapter three, stake a claim to Ambedkar's political liberation ideology, arguing that in fact, Ambedkar belonged to the Maharashtrian equivalent of their north Indian sub-castes (Jaoul 2011).

Caste Hegemony and Hereditary Labor

Gramsci argued that ideology is the primary mechanism through which power is organized in a given society (Gramsci 1988). Ideology creates a system of knowledge and values within a particular culture, and any social group who is able to organize such a system assumes ideological control of that society. Gramsci used the term hegemony to describe this scheme of power which operates in capitalist societies (Brooker 2002; Fontana 1993; Gramsci 1971). Hegemony, which is the exercise of power through ideology, legitimizes constructed power relations by linking the subaltern masses to the ruling classes through ties of dependance (Gramsci 1988). Significantly, the ruling class maintains its hegemony by winning consent within the society to the extent that inequalities and exploitation seem inevitable or the natural order of things, to both

dominant and subordinated groups (Brooker 2002). Gramsci called this consent, the prevailing ‘common sense’, which is mobilized through the state or the ruling institution in a society. The state comprises of all practical and abstract activities that the ruling class mobilizes, to maintain their dominance. Ideological institutions of the state include school, church, media, family, etc. who work to construct a system of knowledge and values that become the common sense, enabling the ruling class to legitimize their supremacy. Citizens are expected to conform to the common sense to maintain civil life either through consent, which is built by ideological institutions of the state or through coercion demanded by repressive institutions of the state like the military and police. For Gramsci, consent garnered through ideology held primacy in maintaining the dominance of the ruling class (Daldal 2014; Gramsci 1971).

I argue that Hindu caste hierarchy is a scheme of hegemony which cultivated consent through the dual concepts of *dharma* or duty and *karma* or fate. The Hindu caste system is defined by occupational divisions that are hereditarily determined and unequally valued. Caste hierarchy arranges groups of people into five castes, with the Brahmin or scholar caste at the top, followed by the Kshatriya or warrior caste, followed by the Vaishya or merchant caste. The three dominant castes are followed by the Shudra or the menial laborer caste and the Ati-Shudra who were historically known as the ‘untouchables’. Dominant caste groups mobilized religious ideology to assign each caste, hereditary occupations and codes of conduct, based on notions of purity and pollution (Dirks 2001; Rao 2009; Roy 2014). Hereditary occupations of the Shudra and Ati-Shudra

castes were in servitude[2] to the three dominant castes. Subordinated castes were completely dependent on the patronage of dominant castes for their survival (Dirks 2001; Guru 2013; Mahalingam, Jagannathan, and Selvaraj 2019; Rao 2009; Roy 2014). The intertwined ideas of dharma and karma suggest that members of the Shudra and Ati-Shudra castes were born into subordinated castes because they failed to do their *dharma* in their previous life. Moreover, by doing their *dharma* in this life, they can change their *karma* and be born in a higher caste in their next life. Caste ideology was thus able to create Gramscian consent whereby subordinated castes engage in acts of servitude, believing it to be their *karma* (Appadurai 2013; Dirks 1988; Roy 2014). It is important to note here that historically and presently, consent has also been demanded through brutal acts of violence including assault, rape, and murder meted out to subordinated castes. Dalit women in particular have been constructed as sexual property of dominant caste men. And sexual harassment and rape of Dalit women is used to punish Dalit communities for crimes committed, as perceived and defined by dominant caste communities (Rao 2005).

Occupational divisions inherent in the Hindu caste system were operationalized through locally specific administrative structures (Gokhale 1986; Jaffrelot 2005). Historically in Maharashtra, part of the hereditary occupations forced upon Ati-Shudra castes included manually scavenging human feces and removing other waste from the village. In a pernicious cycle, the fact of their imposed labor was used to label subordinated castes as 'untouchable' and exclude them from all public institutions within

[2] In this dissertation, I use the term servitude to highlight the interaction between ideology and culture in normalizing inequality through ties of dependance between the dominant and subordinated groups. Ray and Qayum argue that servitude is tied to the concept of hegemony "because it treats the social process of experience and consciousness in terms of power" (2009, 3-4).

the village (Ambedkar 1946; Guru 2013; Jaffrelot 2005; Mahalingam, Jagannathan, and Selvaraj 2019; Rao 2009; Roy 2014). Caste hegemony was thus utilized to keep subordinated castes in demeaning forms of sanitation labor, stripping them off their choice and dignity (Gatade 2015; Gupta, Coffey, and Spears 2016) and constructing this exploitation as the prevailing common sense. Through this research I show that caste hegemony persists through caste-based sanitation labor. Castes historically assigned sanitation labor continue in similar forms of work. Additionally, public perception sees handling waste as someone else's work, and the ensuing indignities then become a consequence of the worker's *karma* (Bathran 2018; Doron and Jeffrey 2018; Gill 2012).

Sanitation reform in colonial India which began in the late nineteenth century, subsumed existing practices of caste-based sanitation labor, encoding them within the structure of government (Chaplin 2011; Cohn 1996; Dias 2016; Dirks 2001; McFarlane 2008; Prasad 2000; Ramaswamy 2011). After Indian independence in 1947, the post-colonial government too absorbed the caste-based recruitment of sanitation workers. Caste groups historically assigned sanitation labor continued the same work in municipal sanitation departments (Chaplin 2011; McFarlane 2008; Mirza 2018). Dalit labor was constructed as disposable within the waste management framework of the state. The availability of poor Dalit labor combined with ritual notions of purity and pollution that are attached to waste, provided the Indian state with a pretext to disinvest from creating just systems for the management of waste (Bathran 2018; Gatade 2015; Ramaswamy 2011).

The Informal Waste Recycling Sector

Urbanization and commercial activity grew in independent India, between 1947 and late 1980s, amid dwindling economic prospects in rural areas. As a result, poor Dalit communities migrated to urban areas. Some of whom, particularly castes historically assigned sanitation labor began to pick and sell waste. Over time, an informal network of waste recycling emerged, which includes wastepickers, itinerant waste traders, junkshops owners and workers, scrap warehouse owners and workers, and small-scale recycling industry owners and workers. Workers in this network pick, sort, sell, and process recyclable waste, moving it up the recycling chain, to meet their own economic needs, keeping cities clean and ensuring waste recycling in India (Ahmed and Ali 2004; Chaturvedi 2013; Gidwani 2015; Gill 2012; Gunsilius, Chaturvedi, and Scheinberg 2011). In the 1970s and 80s, due to the absence of state regulation, trading castes assumed control of the informal waste recycling network and a 'garbage mafia' grew to control the waste trade, in large urban centers like Mumbai (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Nighoskar 2019; Sinha 2018). The informal waste recycling sector incorporated caste hierarchy and its ritual notions of purity and pollution. People who pick waste belong to historically 'untouchable' castes are deemed lowest in the waste recycling hierarchy. They handle waste at its dirtiest, do the hardest labor and receive the least payment. As waste moves up the recycling hierarchy from wastepicker to junkshop to scrap dealer to recycler, it becomes cleaner and accrues monetary value (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Chintan 2007; Mehta, Shastri, and Joseph 2018; Wilson, Velis, and Cheeseman 2006).

Economic Liberalization and State Intervention in Waste Management

Colonial era sanitation policies were continued by the Indian state, well into the 1980s. Waste management became a policy concern of the Indian state after economic liberalization, which increased waste generation and made evident the profits that could be extracted from the trade in recyclable waste. Economic liberalization was introduced in post-colonial nations through the intertwined processes of globalization and development (Appadurai 1990; Inda and Rosaldo 2008). The imperial project of development began after the Second World War, when Western or 'developed' nations sought to improve social-economic and political conditions in formerly colonized or 'developing' nations. Over time, Western nations employed measures of development which required 'developing' nations to liberalize their economies by relaxing tariffs on trade, allowing foreign investment, and rapid industrial reform (Edelman and Haugerud 2005; Upadhyay 2000). Across the Global South, in numerous nations constructed as 'developing' these measures were accompanied by structural adjustment programs, which forced local economies to reorient themselves with the global market (Arora 1999; Kabeer 1994; Lind 1997; Upadhyay 2000). Importantly, structural adjustment programs transferred power from state institutions to private corporations and international agencies like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Sharma and Gupta 2006).

Independent India's economic plan focused on local production and industrialization through public sector industries. Over time, these policies led to shortage in foreign exchange and put the country in debt (Arora 1999; Upadhyay 2000). In 1991, in part due to accrued debt, the Indian government instituted the New Economic Policy,

which liberalized India's economy, leading to privatization of public sector industries, formation of private sector industries, and state withdrawal from economic and welfare activities (Arora 1999; Gosai 2013; Gupta 2012; Omvedt 2011; Upadhyay 2000). Post liberalization increased urbanization and economic activity, leading to a rise in the standard of living and consumption, particularly among the dominant castes and affluent classes. As a result of these activities, waste generation in urban India grew, leading to an elaborate policy framework for the management of waste (Ahmed and Ali 2004; Doron and Jeffrey 2018; Jain 1994; Joshi and Ahmed 2016; Kumar et al. 2017; Mani and Singh 2016; Rathi 2006; Reddy and Ram 2019).

Contemporary Waste Management Policy and Practices

This elaborate policy framework was written out in numerous policy documents, but marginally implemented. Gupta argues that implementation is not the intention of beaurocratic writing. In fact, writing is not a by-product of state activity, it "is constitutive of the state; it is not a substitute for action but is itself a form of action" (Gupta 2012, 36). Significantly, beaurocratic writing in India is a result of a balancing act of democracy; between the demands of the affluent who fund elections and those of the poor who elect governments (Gupta 2012). But the lack of policy implementation combined with unrestricted waste generation and disposal frustrated the urban affluent population, who demanded sustainable waste management reform and implementation (Baviskar 2002; Chaplin 1999; 2011). In 2014, the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) created an additional policy framework, in part to meet the demands of affluent citizens. And while SBM has had limited success in its implementation (Singh 2020), it has

primarily served to conceal the caste-based sanitation labor of impoverished Dalit communities. Once annually, the SBM posits a day of voluntary service where elite citizens perform sanitation tasks like sweeping and waste collection. But SBM does not address the Dalit labor who performs these tasks daily. In doing so, the legislative process negates the reality that a clean city only exists because an 'unclean' caste has absorbed the existing filth through their labor. In a continuation of caste hegemony, Dalit sanitation labor is thus deemed inconsequential to waste management within public perception (Bathran 2018; Chintan 2007; Doron and Jeffrey 2018; Gatade 2015; Mosse 2018).

Today, waste management is governed by the parallel process of extracting profits from waste and meeting the sustainability concerns of affluent citizens. On the one hand, municipal governments and private corporations are competing to extract maximum profits from recyclable waste (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Joshi and Ahmed 2016; Reddy and Ram 2019; Shankar and Sahni 2018). On the other hand both state and private corporations are forced to show sustainability in their waste management to appease the environmentalist sentiments of the Indian elite (Baviskar 2002; Chaplin 1999). Through this research I show the significant impact both processes have on Dalit women who pick waste in Mumbai and on their redefinitions of hereditary sanitation labor.

Under the current waste management policy guidelines in Mumbai, there are two primary categories of waste; wet waste and dry waste. Wet waste includes compostable materials like tea leaves, coffee grounds, eggshells, fruit and vegetable peels and pits, meat and bones, gardening waste, coconut shells, etc. Dry waste includes recyclable materials like paper, newspaper, glass, metal, plastic, textiles, leather, rubber, wood, e-waste, etc. A third category of waste, not included in municipal guidelines is hazardous

waste which includes soiled sanitary napkins and diapers, medical waste, batteries, etc. As per current waste management policy directives all waste is collected by municipally authorized vehicles at the 'source' where waste is generated or discarded. Collection sites include residential societies, businesses and offices, hospitals, malls, public transit stations, dumpsters on the streets, etc. On paper, once collected, wet waste trucks transport wet waste to compost centers and dry waste trucks transport dry waste to recycling centers. But in practice, only dry waste is collected and taken to recycling centers for processing, due to its financial value for the authorized workers who collect, transport, sort and sell it into the informal waste recycling chain. All other waste is collected and dumped on one of the city's numerous dumping grounds.

Dalit Sanitation Workers and the Informal Labor Sector

Across the Global South, people who pick waste belong to the most marginalized and economically impoverished communities. They are often migrants from rural areas who begin to pick waste to as a way to survive extreme poverty and chronic unemployment. The availability of discarded recyclable waste combined with the market demand for it, makes wastepicking a viable employment opportunity for the poor (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Chintan 2007; Kaseva and Gupta 1996; Medina 2000; Wilson, Velis, and Cheeseman 2006). Historically in India, Ati-Shudra castes were deemed polluting and forced to undertake demeaning forms of labor like manual scavenging and waste collection (Cháirez-Garza 2014; Gatade 2015). And these practices continue despite the ban on caste-based recruitment and employment in independent India. In Mumbai, all sanitation workers employed by the municipal government belong

to the Baudh or Matang castes, who were historically assigned sanitation labor (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Gatade 2015). In the municipal or formal waste management system, men are employed in waste collection, processing and disposal. Women when formally employed work as street sweepers, which is seen as women's work (Gatade 2015; Gunsilius, Chaturvedi, and Scheinberg 2011; Shankar and Sahni 2018). In this research I highlight the indignities and exploitation informal sanitation workers endure. But it is important to point out that municipally employed Dalit sanitation workers fare only a little better; they are paid a dismal salary and have limited access to social security (see Gatade 2015).

Ninety-three percent of the Indian workforce is part of the informal labor sector (Murthy 2019). The informal labor sector exists and thrives as a result of a market need for a product and the availability of an inexpensive labor force. Workers part of this sector are compelled to perform labor intensive jobs that are characteristic of the informal sector and necessary for the functioning of the formal sector (Ahmed and Ali 2004; Gill 2012). In Mumbai, a majority of informal sanitation workers who pick and sell discarded waste are poor Dalit women. As part of the informal labor sector, these women have no access to social security benefits like wages, pension, leave, and health insurance (Ahmed and Ali 2004; Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Chintan 2007; Gatade 2015; Stree Mukti Sanghatana n.d.). When migrant communities first began picking waste in Mumbai in the 1970s, both men and women did this work. But, as is typical of the informal labor sector, women lack access to training, education and equipment in comparison to men doing similar work (Chen 2007; Gunsilius, Chaturvedi, and Scheinberg 2011). And so, men who picked waste in the 1970s were able to transition to formal employment. And

wastepicking remained accessible to poor Dalit women as it requires no education, license, or capital. Instead women depend on their social networks in learning to identify recyclable waste and pick it as safely and efficiently as possible (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Chintan 2007; Joshi and Ahmed 2016; Wilson, Velis, and Cheeseman 2006).

The Stigmatized and Exploited Labor of Dalit Women who Pick Waste

Dalit women who are part of this research pick waste from the streets, dumpsters on street corners, waste bins set outside residential societies for municipal collection, and dumping grounds. Women who pick waste on streets do so in affluent areas, where residents with a higher standard of living, normatively engage in more consumption, generate and discard a greater amount of recyclable waste. Women who work on dumping grounds usually do so near slum settlements where garbage dumps are located. Women who pick waste carry a large plastic sack on their shoulder to hold the waste they pick throughout their workday. A small subset of the women I spoke with exchange garlic for recyclable waste. The women are known as 'garlic sellers' and they describe their labor as 'selling garlic'[3]. These women roam in poor residential areas, with a straw basket of garlic perched on their head, calling out their wares and going door to door

[3] The practice of 'selling garlic' for dry waste has been ongoing in Mumbai since the 1970s. It is unclear exactly how this practice began and why people started to 'sell' garlic instead of other produce. It seems likely that it was chosen because it is cheap, light to carry, and widely used in local cuisine. Importantly women who sell garlic do so in low income areas, where it is economically appealing for residents to keep aside recyclable waste generated within the household and exchange it for garlic.

selling garlic for recyclable waste. After each of these women are finished working for the day, they segregate collected waste, and sell it to the *katewala*[4] for their daily wages.

Each recyclable material women pick has a different monetary value, which changes based on policy intervention, market demand, monsoons, festival season, etc. Women's earnings also depend on their ability to pick, sort, and sell waste on a given day. Women who pick and sell waste are inadequately compensated for their labor. They are also subject to exploitation within their trading relationship with the *katewala*, being paid significantly below the market value for recyclable waste (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Gidwani 2015; Gill 2012; Gunsilius, Chaturvedi, and Scheinberg 2011; Joshi and Ahmed 2016; Kaseva and Gupta 2016; Medina 2000).

The Dalit women part of this research pick various grades of plastic, paper, cardboard, and metal objects like nuts, bolts, pipes, umbrella spokes, etc. They also pick e-waste, but it is harder to come by. Here I use plastic as an example to demonstrate wage inequality. For one kilo of thin plastic, also known as single use plastic, the *katewala* gives the women nine rupees (12 cents) and twenty-five rupees (33 cents) for good quality plastic, which is thicker and used for sturdy bags, bottles, etc. When the *katewala* sells this plastic up the recycling waste chain, to the large scrap dealer, he gets approximately fifteen rupees (20 cents) per kilo for thin plastic and forty rupees (53 cents) for good quality plastic. With each sale up the informal waste recycling hierarchy, that kilo of waste accrues approximately sixty percent of the value it was acquired at. So, by the time good quality plastic reaches the recycler, which is a couple steps above the

[4] Small junkshop owners in Mumbai are known as k*atewalas*, their name derives from the scales or *kata* used to weigh the waste they deal in. Their shops are usually located in or near slum areas and dumping grounds.

scrap dealer, it is worth approximately four hundred and fifty rupees ($6) per kilo. Lower grades of plastic are used to make inexpensive footwear, fuel pellets used in industrial production to replace fossil fuels, plastic sheeting used in industrial or construction settings, or in the process of making roads. Higher qualities of plastic are recycled to make anything from high end athletic wear and outerwear sold in foreign markets, retailing between $75-200 to water bottles retailing between $8-20. Significantly, the items women collect and sell in Mumbai are often sold to scrap dealers and recyclers located anywhere across India. The recycled product having further reach in domestic and foreign markets. The mobility that is accorded to waste is not given to people who handle it, "The paradox is that waste is mobile but people who collect it seldom are. Waste-pickers assemble items that can be hauled up a pyramid of value. But the men, women, and children at the bottom of the pyramid rarely have the chance to move to less hazardous and more rewarding work". Significantly, the mobility of waste is dependent on the "… immobility of people and is compatible with a parallel pyramid like structure - the caste system" (Doron and Jeffrey 2018, 213). As a result, waste and the people who handle it continue to carry the stigma of caste pollution (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Doron and Jeffrey 2018; Gill 2012; Prasad 2000). To the extent that even the most economically impoverished dominant castes do not enter waste work (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000). Poverty combined with subordinated caste status creates the perfect conditions under which historically oppressed castes continue to do sanitation labor. Waste management policy in India operates in this milieu without taking it into account. Caste has been systematically delinked from labor, including from sanitation labor within

legislative discourse; ignoring its reality (Cháirez-Garza 2014; Coffey and Spears 2017; Gatade 2015; Gupta, Coffey, and Spears 2016; Lamba and Spears 2013).

Today, majority of the waste recycling in cities across the Global South is carried out by the informal sector. People who pick waste are crucial to these recycling activities as they add primary value to discarded waste by picking and selling it; a job that is necessary but that no one else is willing to do. Through their labor, these workers enable municipal governments to reach they recycling targets, save municipal budgets the cost of transporting and dumping waste, and provide a steady flow of recyclable materials to small scale recycling industries who would otherwise cease to operate (Dias 2016; Gunsilius, Chaturvedi, and Scheinberg 2011; Kaseva and Gupta 1996; Medina 2000; Wilson, Velis, and Cheeseman). But, just as sanitation policies disregard caste, they do not account for the informal sanitation labor of Dalit people indicating that their concerns are not important within legislative discourse (Cháirez-Garza 2014; Gatade 2015; Gupta, Coffey, and Spears 2016; Jaoul 2011; Javaid 2015; Lamba and Spears 2013; Coffey and Spears 2017). Consequently, women who handle waste are more vulnerable to policy changes that limit their access to waste (Gidwani 2015; Gill 2012; Gunsilius, Chaturvedi, and Scheinberg 2011; Shankar and Sahni 2018).

Education as a Prerequisite for Women's Legitimacy in the Public Sphere

Present day invisibility of Dalit women, their labor, and subsequent exploitation that I have described above was sharpened through the Indian nationalist construction of 'Indian woman' and the new patriarchy that emerged as a result of British colonial rule in India. Colonial officials constructed Indian tradition as barbaric, particularly in its

treatment of Indian women (Chatterjee 1993; Mani 1998; Mayo 1927). In response, English educated dominant caste men in the Indian nationalist movement[5] sought to construct a different version of Indian tradition and modernity, which was rooted in the Indian woman's body (Chatterjee 1993; Mani 1998; Sarkar 2008). The Indian nationalist narrative divided the social sphere into the public which is occupied by men and colonized by the British, and the domestic, which is represented by women and sovereign from colonial rule (Chatterjee 1993). The sovereignty of the domestic sphere and of women who occupied it was to be protected from colonial encroachment, while simultaneously modernizing women (Chatterjee 1993; Kumar 1993; Sangari and Vaid 1990). Through this narrative, nationalists constructed the 'woman's question' as integral to Indian culture (Chatterjee 1993). Education was seen to be a respectable pursuit for modernizing the Indian woman (Chatterjee 1993; Kumar 1993). Education was also deemed important for women to participate in the nationalist struggle for independence. Nationalists deemed women's education and political participation as a challenge to the British construction of Indian tradition, signaling to the British that Indians were in fact progressive (Chatterjee 1993; Sarkar 2008).

But the nationalist construction of 'Indian woman' limited the agency of women, to aspects that suited men's nationalist enterprise (Sarkar 2008). Here, the Indian woman who had access to education and political participation was the dominant caste woman. Moreover, women's foray into the public sphere was contingent on their ability to maintain their Indian identity through modesty of dress, mannerisms, self-sacrifice, and

[5] The Indian nationalist movement refers to the Indian independence struggle against British colonization. It specifically describes English educated dominant caste men belonging to the Indian National Congress, a political party formed in 1885, to seek freedom from British rule.

benevolence. Indian nationalism thus created a patriarchy that constructed and restricted the status of women, particularly of dominant caste women, to being custodians of Indian identity, modern through education but traditional through behavior (Chatterjee 1993; Sangari and Vaid 1990). The new patriarchy reinforced divisions between the dominant caste or 'respectable' woman and the poor, Dalit and Muslim or 'common' woman (Chatterjee 1993; Sarkar 2008). Indian nationalists thus gave dominant caste Hindu women unprecedented access to the public sphere and the ability to participate in the political process (Basu 1995; Forbes 2007; Jayawardena 1986; Kumar 1993). Because education was a prerequisite for women's entry into the public sphere, it was seen as crucial for women to change their lives. Dalit women were denied access to education and from legitimate entry into the public sphere (Chatterjee 1993; Forbes 2007; Kumar 1993; Sarkar 2008; Rao 2005).

Dalit Social Reform and the Caste-Based Analysis of Women's Oppression

Dalit social reform in India traces to the latter half of the nineteenth century and the anti-caste activism of Jyotiba Phule and his wife Savitribai, members of the Shudra *Mali* or gardener caste. Long before Indian nationalists constructed education as the primary mechanism through which women achieve public status and modernity, Savitribai and Jyotiba started schools for Dalit girls; in defiance of the prohibition on women acquiring knowledge. Both Savitribai and Jyotiba worked for women's emancipation from patriarchy and caste hegemony by advocating education for all women, freedom from the veil, and widow remarriage. In doing so, they constructed a powerful critique of Brahminism and caste hegemony (Kumar 1993; O'Hanlon 1985;

Rao 2005; Rege 2005). In the early twentieth century, alongside the development of Indian nationalism, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar emerged as the leader of the Dalit movement. Under the slogan 'educate, organize, and agitate' Ambedkar mobilized Dalit communities to unite against caste atrocities, and demand freedom from discrimination. Dalit identity and political consciousness today, owes its origins to the mobilization that began at this time, under Ambedkar's leadership (Omvedt 2004; Rao 2009).

Ambedkar, a member of the Mahar[6] caste, was born on 14th April 1891. Ambedkar and his siblings were able to attend government school because his father worked in the British army. Ambedkar achieved tremendous academic success through a BA in Economics and Political Science from Bombay University in 1912, an MA from Columbia University in 1915, a DSc. at the London School of Economics, a barrister's degree from the Honourable Society of Gray's Inn, London, and a PhD from Columbia University in 1927. Living as an 'untouchable' in colonial India, the indignities he suffered and observed have been well documented in his own writings and in those of historians, biographers, and academics . His social experience as an 'untouchable' and his intellectual pursuits combined to make him India's foremost anti-caste activist, seeking the abolition of untouchability and fighting for equality, dignity and justice for the Dalit community (Omvedt 2004; Rao 2009; Roy 2014). I narrate this brief history of Ambedkar's life and work because, as I demonstrate in chapter four, he has been the central figure of transformation in the lives of Dalit people today.

[6] An outdated name of a caste category, today people belonging to this caste are called Baudh, a name derived from Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956. I use this term only in its historic context. And I elaborate on this caste group's history in chapter three.

In the early twentieth century the Dalit movement signaled a departure from the nationalist movement by linking women's oppression to caste oppression. Ambedkar argued that in the Brahminical social order, the construction of women as subject legitimizes not only patriarchy but also the structure of caste, through the observance of endogamy and the regulation of women's sexuality (Rege 2005). Significantly, the construction of respectability as the ideal for the dominant caste women served primarily to maintain caste (Rao 2005; Rege 2005). Following this trajectory of critique, Dalit feminists in the 1970s argued that gender relations are a fundamental aspect of caste relations, and that women's oppression is rooted in caste oppression (Rao 2005). Importantly they argued that Dalit women are thrice oppressed; as women, as dalit women, and as women forced to perform stigmatized labor. Their oppression further compounded by lack of access to services like water, sanitation facilities, educational institutions, and legitimacy in public space. Moreover, the broader subjugation of Dalit communities works to reinforce the social, political, economic, and sexual exploitation of Dalit women (Guru 1995; Rao 2005; Rege 2005).

Women's Legitimacy and Labor in the Public Sphere

I have argued that Indian nationalists constructed the dominant caste Hindu woman as the symbol of Indian womanhood (Chatterjee 1993; Kumar 1993; Mani 1998; Sarkar 2008; Sinha 1995). In doing so, nationalists intensified existing boundaries between dominant caste and Dalit women, giving the former rights and representation in the public sphere, and rendering the latter invisible (Chakrabarty 1991; Chatterjee 1993; Sarkar 2008). Typically, public culture is constructed through the activities,

entertainment forms and consumption practices of dominant groups and affluent classes, in exclusion of the poor and non-dominant groups (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1995; Bondi and Domosh 1998). Acceptable public discourse too is set by the elite who have the self-imposed moral authority to govern. In this scheme of hegemony, the non-dominant are simultaneously naturalized and delegitimized in public space and public culture (Chakrabarty 1991; Wilson 2000).

Historically in Hindu society, dominant caste women remained in the domestic sphere. Dalit women occupied the public sphere primarily through stigmatized labor. The limited economic opportunities available to them included menial labor, sanitation labor, or prostitution (Kumar 1993; Rao 2005; Rege 2005). Nationalists constructed education as the only acceptable way for women to enter the public sphere. Dalit women were denied access to education and so their occupation of the public realm was seen as illegitimate and therefore inconsequential to the construction of 'Indian woman' (Chatterjee 1993; Sangari and Vaid 1990). Through education and their participation in the independence movement, dominant caste women gained legitimate entry into public sphere (Chatterjee 1993; Forbes 2007; Kumar 1993; Sarkar 2008). As a result, after Indian independence, educated women who were primarily dominant caste occupied the public arena through work as doctors, nurses, activists, lawyers, and teachers. Still, for many dominant caste women, work was discouraged by their families well into the 1980s (Budhwar, Saini, and Bhatnagar 2005). These patterns changed in the 1990s, with the liberalization of the Indian economy, when educated women who were predominantly dominant caste entered the public economy in unprecedented numbers. At this time, job opportunities for educated women were available in government and private service,

hospitality, and Information Technology industries (Budhwar, Saini, and Bhatnagar 2005; Ng and Mitter 2005).

In independent India, affirmative action and the ban on caste-based discrimination, enshrined into the constitution by Ambedkar, enabled Dalit people to receive an education and seek employment in varied fields like government service, education, law, journalism, industry, etc. (Joshi 1986; Omvedt 2011). As a result those with access to education were able to improve their economic status. But communities without such access, particularly poor Dalit women have been forced to continue working in the informal economy in highly insecure jobs, without benefits, regular wages, or the protection of labor laws (Fernandes 1997; Kapoor 2007; Rajan 2003; Truelove 2011). And after economic liberalization in the 1990s, there has been a steady increase of poor women, who belong to subordinated castes and religious minority communities, in the informal labor sector (Fernandes 1997; Kapoor 2007; Rajan 2003). The presence of educated women workers, who are predominantly middle-class and dominant caste, is pervasive in Indian cities today. Their presence in the public sphere has inadvertently challenged its gendered construction (Phadke, Khan, and Ranade 2011) but has done little to change the caste-based construction of the public sphere. Stigmatized labor, particularly sanitation labor continues to be performed by castes ritually ordained to do so (Doron and Jeffrey 2018; Gill 2012; Prasad 2000). In chapter four, I argue that through education the employment profile of poor Dalit women is shifting. Significantly, caste-based socio-spatial relations are disrupted in urban areas, enabling some Dalit women to work in dominant caste people's homes as cooks. But a majority of poor Dalit women continue to perform menial or sanitation labor. Additionally it is important to note that

both menial and sanitation labor continues to be stigmatized; dominant caste people would not want their children engaged in either forms of work.

Feminist Activism, NGOs and the State

In addition to aligning local economies with global markets, globalization and development discourse also professed to improve women's social position in the Global South, by giving them access to the public sphere through modern forms of thinking and fulfilling forms of work (Grewal and Bernal 2014; Kabeer 1994; O'Bannon 1994). In reality, women were systematically excluded from any benefits of development. Privatization and industrialization made many jobs unavailable to poor women, forcing them to work in informal sector industries, exacerbating their marginalization and poverty (Arora 1999; Basu 1995; Heyzer, Kapoor, and Sandler 1995; Kabeer 1994; Mitter 1999, Rajan 2003; Upadhyay 2000). In India, these forces also worked to stifle activism in the 1980s and 1990s, simultaneously opening a space for Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to provide services increasingly denied by the shrinking welfare state (Basu 2013; Grewal and Bernal 2014; Rajan 2003). The mainstream feminist movement[7] in India began in 1970 with three separate campaigns focused on land rights for tribal people, unionizing informal women workers and organizing against the rise in prices of essential commodities. At the same time, Dalit feminists organized to highlight the plight of *Devdasis*[8]. These platforms were then used to articulate gender disparity.

[7] I use the term 'mainstream feminist movement' to mark a difference from Dalit feminists, because the Indian feminist movement has been shaped through the discourses and actions of dominant caste women.

[8] *Devdasis* were poor Dalit girls forced to be 'married' to local deities and prostituted by temple priests to dominant caste men.

Between 1977 and the mid-1980s, the mainstream feminist movement led two successful campaigns enabling the legislation of anti-dowry laws and stricter inquiry into rape allegations (Kumar 1993). In both instances disillusioned by insufficient policy, poor implementation, and staggeringly low convictions on dowry and rape cases, many mainstream feminists pointed to the failure of rights-based activism in improving the conditions of women's lives (Basu 2013; Kumar 1993; Phadke 2003; Rajan 2003). As a result, from the late 1980s women's organizing shifted from a rights-based platform to providing literacy, legal aid, healthcare, employment, and counselling services to women, through NGOs (Kumar 1993; Rajan 2003). Here I do not argue that the feminist movement was recast as a conglomeration of women oriented NGOs. I only aim to point out that as a result of their disillusionment, many feminists sought to change the conditions of women's lives through NGO work. Additionally, NGOs have provided a human face to the debilitating impact of development policies, which have depoliticized public protest and weakened democratic states (Grewal and Bernal 2014; Rajan 2003). I also provide this brief context to situate the processes through which organizations like Parisar Vikas emerged. Liberalization policies were followed by state withdrawal from welfare sectors, a move that disproportionately affects women. The NGO has become an important entity taking up many of these welfare activities. In many instances, the NGO politicizes women's lives, through their women centered activities in the public sphere, and has become a legitimate way for women to make claims on the state (Grewal and Bernal 2014).

Redefining the Meanings of Caste-Based Sanitation Labor

Through this research I show that Dalit women enter wastepicking due to extreme poverty and the absence of opportunity. In chapter three, I show that women exert territorial rights over waste in specific areas as a result of decades of picking in those areas (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Shankar and Sahni 2018). The parallel processes of extracting profits from waste while ensuring sustainability in its management have led to the simultaneous centralization and privatization of the waste management system (Chaturvedi 2013). Both processes are contingent on the exploited labor of Dalit women, who add primary value to waste by picking and selling it. Significantly, without the labor of these women, the trade in recyclable waste and subsequent profits are not possible (Berthier 2003; Dias 2016; Frow 2003; Gunsilius, Chaturvedi, and Scheinberg 2011; Kaseva and Gupta 1996; Medina 2000; Wilson, Velis, and Cheeseman 2006). As a result of these processes Dalit women's perceived territorial rights over waste are threatened; delegitimizing their labor and jeopardizing their livelihoods (Ahmed and Ali 2004; Chaturvedi 2013; Chintan 2007; Shankar and Sahni 2018). While government regulation in waste management has threatened women's livelihoods, my research shows that it has also, albeit inadvertently, created limited opportunities for informal sanitation workers to seek formal employment in the management of waste (see Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Shankar and Sahni 2018). And Parisar Vikas has capitalized on these opportunities to seek employment for their constituents; opening a path for women to make demands on the state.

As I detail in chapter three, historically, sanitation labor was ritually ordained and hereditary for castes at the bottom of the Hindu caste order. Exploitation that resulted

from their labor was constructed as the prevailing common sense through caste ideology. Today, women who pick waste belong to the same castes that were ritually assigned sanitation labor. Additionally, Dalit women and their sanitation labor continues to be marginalized within government policy and practices of waste management. In this research, I argue that these exclusions and exploitations combined with Parisar Vikas's interventions have constructed a critical dialogue against caste hegemony and changed the way Dalit women see themselves, their sanitation labor, and their place in society. Gramsci termed this critical dialogue as 'good sense', arguing that its cultivation was necessary in enabling non-dominant groups to challenge their oppression. Good sense is formed through rational thought and a cultivated critique of the prevailing common sense (Daldal 2014; Gramsci 1988; Nun 1986). In this research, I argue that Parisar Vikas's interventions affirmed Dalit women's dignity and accorded importance to their labor; fostering within them a Gramscian good sense. I elaborate on the organization's interventions in chapter four and contend that Dalit women's experiences with Parisar Vikas and through formal employment provided them with the opportunities and experiences required to develop the capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2013).

Aspirations are simultaneously universal and particular, expressed through our choices, desires and preferences. Even though they are expressed through individuals they are "always formed in the interaction and in the thick of social life". Aspirations are also deeply embedded within culturally specific notions of what constitutes a "good life" (Appadurai 2013, 187). But the capacity to aspire is not equally allocated within a particular society. The rich have more access to resources, enabling them to have "a more complex experience of the relation between a wide range of ends and means … they are

in a better position to explore and harvest diverse experiences of exploration and trial, because of their many opportunities to link material goods and immediate opportunities to more general and generic possibilities and options". Poor people lack this access to material resources and the experiences it allows, and so they tend to "have a more brittle horizon of aspirations" (Appadurai 2013, 188-189). Appadurai contends that this unequal distribution of the capacity to aspire is a fundamental aspect of contemporary globalization (2013). I add to this analysis that the disproportionate allocation of the capacity to aspire is also a fundamental facet of the Hindu caste order. In chapter four, I demonstrate that Parisar Vikas has enabled many Dalit sanitation workers to have experiences and opportunities which have fostered within them the capacity to aspire. In particular, through formal employment, Dalit women part of this research obtain a glimpse into the lives of affluent dominant caste communities, which shapes their most fervent aspiration; to educate their children so they won't have to continue sanitation labor. While this aspiration is formed through Dalit women's present day experiences, it is also rooted in their community's historical exclusion from education and subsequent denial of economic opportunity and legitimacy in the public sphere.

A good sense together with the capacity to aspire has enabled women part of this research to redefine the associations between caste and sanitation labor. Dalit women articulate these redefinitions by contesting their exclusion from and demanding fair inclusion within the formal waste management system. Redefinitions of caste are further expressed through women's aspiration to educate their children so they can have access to opportunities and leave behind hereditary sanitation labor. Additionally, even though women continue to perform sanitation labor, it is different from the hereditary labor

forced upon their communities. Today, the women I spoke with sell collected waste for market value or are paid a salary for their labor, marking a shift from the servitude of hereditary caste labor to a semblance of control over their work. I argue that these changes are crucial as they enable Dalit women to break the link between caste and hereditary sanitation labor.

Map of the Dissertation

In chapter two, I detail the research setting and my research process, including where I conducted fieldwork, an overview of the NGO it was conducted with, and of the organization's interventions with Dalit women who pick waste. I provide an account of how I collected my research data. I go on to discuss the profile of the women who are part of this research and of Mumbai, the city in which fieldwork for this research was conducted. I conclude with a statement of my positionality and of my interactions with the women who are part of this research.

In chapter three I discuss the history of caste-based hereditary labor tracing its link to contemporary caste-based sanitation labor. I elaborate how caste-based recruitment for sanitation work was encoded within the structure of colonial and post-colonial government. I document the indignities and exploitation Dalit communities endured as a result of being forced to perform stigmatized labor. Through their accounts, I show the hardships that Dalit women continue to face as they perform sanitation labor. I highlight the ways in which changes at the legislative level impact the labor of Dalit women working on the streets, on dumping grounds, or selling garlic. I go on to explore the ways in which waste management policy unintentionally created a path for Dalit

women to obtain formal employment. And I argue that these processes have enabled Dalit women sanitation workers to claim legitimacy over the right to access waste and demand inclusion in the formal waste management system.

In chapter four, I examine the debilitating impact caste hegemony has had on the lives of Dalit communities. I further demonstrate that caste hegemony has worked to perpetuate caste-based sanitation labor, as poor Dalit communities still lack access to education and employment opportunities. I explore the ways in which Parisar Vikas's interventions with informal sanitation workers has affirmed their worth and dignity, disrupting the common sense of caste hegemony. I assert that these changes have cultivated within Dalit women, the capacity to aspire; enabling them to redefine caste by breaking the link between caste and sanitation labor.

CHAPTER II

METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I provide a detailed account of my research process and the research landscape. I first discuss where I conducted my research and how I came to my research subject. I then present an overview of the NGO I conducted research with and their interventions with Dalit women who pick waste. I then account for the ways in which I gathered my research data. I go on to provide a profile of the women who are part of this research and of Mumbai, the city where I conducted fieldwork for this research. Finally, I address my positionality within the research and my relationship with the women part of this research.

I conducted fieldwork from March to November 2018 among women sanitation workers and NGO workers associated with Parisar Bhagini Vikas Sangh (Organization of Women for the Improvement of the Environment) in Mumbai. I went into the field with the aim of exploring gender, class, and caste based disparity in access to sanitation facilities and resultant activism in the form of an NGO coalition called the 'Right to Pee' campaign. To do so, I decided to conduct fieldwork among two NGOs; namely, Committee of Resource Organizations (CORO) the founder of the 'Right to Pee' campaign, and Stree Mukti Sanghatana (Women Liberation Organization) or SMS, a contributing organization to the campaign. While I interviewed founders of the 'Right to Pee' campaign, the majority of my initial fieldwork was conducted with SMS and its subsidiary organization Parisar Bhagini Vikas Sangh (Parisar Vikas). Initial fieldwork with Parisar Vikas highlighted the persistence of caste-based sanitation labor while

revealing to me the ways in which Dalit women sanitation workers were attempting to redefine its meaning. I spent the first couple months of fieldwork in conversation with Parisar Vikas staff and its constituent women sanitation workers, and conducted observations at a dumping ground, compost center, and at Parisar Vikas meetings and workshops. In many conversations, Dalit women sanitation workers, pointed out that only Dalit women are engaged in wastepicking, composting, and in the initial stage of the recycling process. And yet, many maintained that caste has little to do with their labor. This intriguing dichotomy led me to abandon my initial research ideas and focus solely on women sanitation workers; their labor and perceptions about their work. Initial observations at women's worksites and Parisar Vikas meetings and workshops further enlightened me on the role the sanghatana[9] plays in shaping women's ideas about themselves and their labor.

SMS was founded in 1975 by a group of dominant caste feminists with the aim of raising awareness regarding issues of gender equality. They began by forming a cultural troupe, writing and performing street plays on issues of female infanticide, sex selection for a male child, dowry, and violence against women. Over time their work expanded to a focus on childcare, children's education, gender rights counseling, and advocacy for women's rights. By 1989, SMS had numerous childcare centers in low-income neighborhoods, for working mothers. Jyoti Tai is one of the founding members of SMS and Parisar Vikas and is SMS's president. She is seventy years old, married, and incidentally lived down the street from where I resided during fieldwork. One morning in

[9] Literally translated to mean 'collective movement', women part of this research use Parisar Vikas and sanghatana interchangeably. In this dissertation I too use sanghatana to denote Parisar Vikas.

early March, before I began fieldwork, Jyoti Tai invited me to her house to talk about the research I wanted to do with Parisar Vikas. Jyoti Tai led me through the narrow entryway of her apartment into a bright and airy living room and invited me to sit on the sofa. Before we start to chat, she brings me a glass water, as is customary in most homes in India, and asks if I would like a cup of tea. I then tell her a little about myself, and in describing my project tell her I want to understand the role caste plays in their constituents lives and labor. I ask her how SMS began working with Dalit women who pick waste. She tells me that SMS leaders were cognizant of issues faced by Dalit women. In the early 1990s, a Dalit activist part of SMS suggested starting childcare centers in slums with a high concentration of poor Dalit communities. And it was through this work, Jyoti Tai explains, that dominant caste, middle class feminists, like her, who were part of SMS, first came in contact with Dalit women who picked waste. Jyoti Tai goes on to tell me that seeing the poor conditions of the women's and children's lives, SMS decided to conduct a survey in order to better understand the community, following which Parisar Vikas was formed as a separate organization to SMS. Jyoti Tai is always incredibly busy; overseeing the workings of SMS and Parisar Vikas and travelling across the country for Parisar Vikas's state-wide and national advocacy efforts. Because we lived close-by, after our initial meeting, Jyoti Tai often invited me to her home in the mornings, evenings, or weekends to chat about my research progress and any questions I might have. She also often invited me to travel with her to the Parisar Vikas office, to an organizational meeting, or an event. And many of my conversations with her occurred in transit or sitting on her sofa.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I learnt that today, Parisar Vikas is the only organization working with women sanitation workers in Mumbai. Parisar Vikas's membership includes approximately three thousand Dalit women all of whom are engaged in waste management labor. Parisar Vikas's work is divided into two broad programs; employment and community. The organization runs three employment projects; housekeeping, compost work, and work at municipal dry waste centers. Initially dominant caste women part of SMS were able to get work contracts for Dalit women through their networks. As the organization grew, Parisar Vikas staff began to canvas residential societies, hospitals, and corporate offices, seeking contracts for housekeeping, dry waste sorting or composting work to employ their constituents. Today, while Parisar Vikas staff continues to canvas for work contracts, a growing number or their contracts result from people calling them seeking waste management workers. A decade ago, Parisar Vikas successfully lobbied the municipal government and won contracts to manage collection and segregation at eight dry waste recycling centers in Mumbai. About a third of Parisar Vikas's constituents are engaged in these new forms of labor. A vast majority of their members continue to pick waste on dumping grounds, or the streets, or sell garlic for dry waste.

Community projects conducted by Parisar Vikas include savings groups, educational and health support, and public education campaigns. Deriving from the initial survey, Parisar Vikas conceived of savings groups to bring women together and teach them to save and manage their own money. Parisar Vikas runs about a hundred and sixty-eight savings groups, each comprising of ten women. Over the years, Parisar Vikas has sought school and college scholarships through governmental schemes and private

donations for daughters of their constituents to give young girls options, because girls in this community are more likely to continue waste management labor. To this end, they began dedicated study groups in vastis[10] where community teachers help the girls with their schoolwork. Parisar Vikas also conducts a weekly outpatient clinic in one of their office locations and monthly health camps at various vastis, free of charge for their constituents and their children. Parisar Vikas employs three organizational leaders, three office staff, four project coordinators, and six community helpers who oversee the employment and community programs. Parisar Vikas also employs sixty supervisors who manage the ongoing work at housekeeping, compost, and dry waste recycling sites. Only a handful of these employees belong to dominant caste groups, the rest are Dalit women, many of whom formerly picked waste.

Parisar Vikas has multiple offices located across Mumbai, in slum settlements and middle-class residential areas. During fieldwork I visited primarily two offices, both of which are set up in residential units; one near a middle-class residential area and the other in a slum resettlement colony. For the purposes of this dissertation I distinguish the offices by calling the one in the middle-class residential area the 'Parisar Vikas main office' and the one in the slum resettlement colony the 'Parisar Vikas vasti office'. The 'main office' is located on a narrow lane, off a busy highway in central Mumbai. It is spread out over two small apartments on the ground floor. Both apartments have a front room and an inner room which are filled to bursting with metal cupboards piled high with paperwork, desks some holding desktop computers, and an eclectic collection of plastic,

[10] Here 'vasti' is translated to mean 'place of residence'. The women part of this research all use 'vasti' to describe where they live. In this dissertation I use 'vasti' instead of 'slum' to accurately represent their discourse. I also use 'vasti' in describing their places of residence because not all Dalit women I spoke with live in slums.

wheeled, cushioned, and wooden chairs. Many of my conversations with Parisar Vikas staff, some of the meetings, events, and workshops I participated in happened in this office. The 'vasti office' is located on the ground floor of a slum resettlement colony, which describe later in this chapter. It is a small room with a single window. A blackboard mounted on one wall, plastic chairs sit stacked on top of one another in one corner, a metal cupboard stands in another corner, against which rest rolls of colorful mats. This office is used for savings group meetings, study group sessions, teachers training workshops and vasti-based events like mobile health camps.

Through my fieldwork, I sought to understand Dalit women's waste management labor; in terms of what the work actually entails and how women conceptualize and articulate the different forms of waste management activities they undertake. I aimed at exploring the impact urban migration and increasing state control of waste management has had on Dalit women's labor. I wanted to comprehend the role Parisar Vikas has played in changing Dalit women's lives, labor and shaping their perceptions of self. To do this, I interviewed a total of fifty-seven women including; twelve compost workers, ten housekeeping workers, nineteen women who pick waste on the streets and dumps, eight dry waste center workers, six garlic sellers, and two study group teachers. I also interviewed nine Parisar Vikas staff members, organizational leaders, and the organization's founder to learn about the organization's history, their analysis of problems facing their constituents, details on the programs they conduct, and the organizations' impact. Of the nine staff members I interviewed, two belong to dominant caste communities and the remaining seven belong to Dalit communities; three of whom formerly picked waste.

To understand the conditions of women's labor, I conducted three field observations at one city owned privately managed dumping ground where some of the women pick waste. As I elaborate on in chapter three, larger municipal dumping grounds have closed to the public with a set of stringent rules of entry put in place. Therefore, it proved difficult for me to access them. I was able to conduct multiple observations at a smaller dumping ground but was not allowed to photograph its premises. The Dalit women I spoke with, who pick waste on the streets were hesitant at my requests to accompany them while they work. As I show in chapter four, these women are fiercely independent in their work schedule and conceivably did not desire my interference. They possibly feared I would slow them down during their work, which could result in a loss of earnings. Respecting their wishes I relied on conversations and interviews with them to understand the conditions of their labor. I visited ten housekeeping sites, where I similarly relied on conversations and interviews to understand women's waste management work. Going on housekeeping rounds with these women could have created unnecessary complications and jeopardized their work contracts. I also conducted multiple field observations at eight compost centers and three dry waste centers, where I was able to go on-site and observe, as women worked.

I also attended a dozen savings group meetings, six study group sessions, a couple of community teachers training meetings, a couple of educational outreach sessions, and a couple of health camps. These observations enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of Parisar Vikas community programs and provided a glimpse into how women sanitation workers engage with these programs. I also paid multiple visits to five vastis to see where and how the women part of this research live, and in some cases to interview them. I

followed Marcus's notion of a multi-sited ethnography, positioning my research across multiple sites and drawing connections between them, to better understand the sanitation labor undertaken by Dalit women, shifts in their labor, and consequent changes to their perceptions of self and work. This multi-sited ethnography draws from both "follow the people" and "follow the thing" approaches (Marcus 1995). I followed Dalit women in their waste management activities, often finding people to talk to through their relationships with one another. In this sense, I followed their sanitation labor, changes to that labor, and their organizational affiliation, to understand the shifting nature of women's conceptions of their work. I also traced the circulation of waste, within women's waste management activities, state control and privatization of waste management, to understand how the movement of waste acts upon women's labor, informing their identities and aspirations.

The women included in this research are Dalit; a majority belonging to the Baudh[11] community and a few to the Matang caste. They are all part of the informal waste management sector and work as wastepickers, garlic sellers, housekeeping workers, compost workers, and dry waste recycling workers. Women part of this research range between the ages of twenty and sixty. Most of them are married, a handful are widowed, and only two have separated from their husbands. All except one of them has children. The vast majority of these interlocutors are the primary earners and providers in their households. Their husbands do not work, either due to illness or accident which has left them handicapped, or because of alcoholism that is rampant in this community. Half of the women have alcoholic husbands and sons, so they need to first work to feed their

[11] A designation used to refer to Dalit people who have converted to Buddhism.

children and then continue working to feed their grandchildren. Women tell me this with frustration and often helplessness but continue with a degree of pride in their voice, asserting they single handedly raised their children on their labor.

A key aspect of ethnographic research is to situate the individual within a broader community in order to demonstrate how individual identities are formed through historically determined relations of power (Visweswaran 1994). The brief description of migration and subsequent sanitation work narrated below, adds to the detailed discussion on caste and hereditary labor, which I provide in chapter three. Together this analysis roots Dalit women who are part of this research, within a broader historic trajectory of caste, forced labor and resultant Dalit identity. Significantly, this historic lens provides a key context to understanding the women's contemporary sanitation labor and generational aspirations. Dalit women part of Parisar Vikas are all from Marathwada, a perpetually drought-ridden district in eastern Maharashtra. About half the women I spoke with migrated to Mumbai with their families as a result of the 1972 famine, which proved a defining event in this community's future. The famine ravaged limited economic opportunities available to Dalits forcing them to migrate to Mumbai for their survival. Finding little viable employment once they came to the city, these Dalit families turned to picking waste in order to earn a living. One afternoon in May I am sitting in the Parisar Vikas vasti office chatting with Yogita Tai and Suman Bai. Yogita Tai is a Parisar Vikas project coordinator and has been working with the organization for about a decade. She is Baudh, in her late forties, and is associated with women who pick waste only through her work in Parisar Vikas. Suman Bai formerly picked waste and is currently the president of Parisar Vikas. I write more about her life, work, and journey within Parisar Vikas in

chapter four. Suman Bai is in her fifties, she is Baudh, and has been separated from her husband for over two decades. During our conversation I ask Suman Bai how and when she came to Mumbai. With tears in her eyes, Suman Bai recounts the history of her family's migration, which echoes the story of many in this community. "My mother came to Mumbai during the famine. She stayed for a couple of months [in Mumbai], earned some money doing construction work and came back to the village. My youngest sister was just a baby, so my mother took her when she went back to Mumbai. At that time my mother would take my baby sister with her, set her down in one corner of the street within her line of sight and pick waste. Then she built a little hut in a newly settled slum, and she would keep my baby sister in the hut, alone, while she went to work. Like that she earned more money and sent for me and my brother. Then we would take care of my sister while my mother worked … Many years later, my mother told me she could hear my baby sister crying as she walked away, she said I wanted to turn back, but if I turned back, who would earn money to feed all of you".

Migrant Dalit families turned to picking waste because, as many interlocutors told me, it does not require any collateral; all you need is a large sack and the ability to walk. Many of the women I spoke with were children when they migrated with their parents and all of them started picking waste alongside their parents to supplement the family income. During the same conversation, as Yogita Tai and I listen, Suman Bai continues telling us, when she was about ten years old and her sister was six, Suman Bai started going with her mother to pick waste. "We would pick from the bin or the road. As a child I would pick those small paper packets [that held] peanuts, run and give them to my mother, they were light and that was all I understood to pick up". Others in the

community came during subsequent waves of migration, through marriage and significantly due to the continuing lack of employment in the villages. The initial migrants also sent for their relatives and helped them set up a life in Mumbai. In addition to Jyoti Tai, Yogita Tai and Suman Bai were key interlocutors in my research. As part of her organizational duties, Suman Bai oversees compost and housekeeping worksites across the city. Among other organizational duties, Yogita Tai oversees the workings of a dozen or so savings groups and study groups. I often accompanied them to worksites or meetings to gain introductions with women sanitation workers. Through numerous conversations with both women, as we travelled to and from worksites or vastis, I also learnt a lot about Parisar Vikas and the lives and labor of Dalit women who are its constituents.

Located in the western state of Maharashtra, Mumbai is the state's capital as well as the nation's financial center. It is a sprawling city, situated on the shores of the Arabian Sea. Mumbai covers a total area of two hundred and thirty three square miles which includes the central city, which are parts settled during British colonial rule, the suburban city, which are parts subsequently settled, defense lands, port authority land, and a national park. The central and suburban parts of Mumbai are governed through the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai or the MCGM, previously called the Bombay Municipal Corporation or the BMC[12]. Mumbai is divided into twenty-four administrative sections known as wards (Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai n.d.). Parisar Vikas's work is carried out in eight wards. Mumbai's estimated population is about

[12] Although Mumbai's governing body is now called MCGM, it is still colloquially referred to as the BMC. In multiple accounts and explanations in this dissertation I use the term BMC to denote MCGM.

twenty million (World Population Review 2021), majority of whom, including all the Dalit women part of this research reside in its suburban areas.

Mumbai is a city of contradictions with extreme wealth and equally extreme poverty residing side by side. Slum settlements that house poor citizens often arise near high rise buildings that house middle-class and affluent citizens. This is because slum dwellers provide key services to affluent residents; like domestic help, waste collection, gardening, etc. Middle class and affluent housing in Mumbai comprises of residential societies and gated communities. Residential societies usually comprise of a few high rise buildings, fenced in by a wall with a gate, and patrolled by a security guard. Residential societies usually have open spaces on its premises for children to play, paved walkways for residents to stroll, and either a small garden or trees and potted plants dotted around its premises. Gated communities often hold multiple high rise buildings, its premises usually have one or more large gardens, swimming pool, community center, etc. There is often heavy security at the entrance to gated communities, making it an elaborate security theatre to gain entry. Women who pick waste on the streets, among residential societies in middle-class and affluent neighborhoods. A majority of housekeeping and composting work is carried out in residential societies and gated communities, while some of it is done on the premises of private businesses. Housekeeping work includes sweeping the premises of the society, sweeping and washing all the common areas in each of the buildings in the society, and door to door waste collection from all the residences. Composting work involves manually sorting through and processing food waste, transferring processed waste into compost drums or pits, adding in ‘cultures’ to aid composting, and manually mixing the decomposing waste to ensure even composting.

Mumbai is well connected by a public railway system and a public bus system on which a majority of the city's population relies for transportation. Private transport includes taxis which are operational in the central part of Mumbai and rickshaws that operate in the suburban parts. Dalit women part of this research walk or primarily use the railway and bus systems to travel to and from work as they are more economical than private transport. While travelling for fieldwork I primarily used trains and rickshaws, occasionally travelling by bus when I was with my field contacts.

Nine million of Mumbai's residents live in slum settlements (Jain 2010). This includes all Dalit sanitation workers included in this research, two-thirds of whom live in slum settlements and a third in a slum resettlement colony. Most of these interlocutors' vastis are located close to public transit stations or highways. The resettlement colony comprises of six buildings, each six storeys high, situated in close proximity to each other, surrounded by a boundary wall and a gated entrance. The road outside the colony is bustling night and day and is packed with confectionary shops, restaurants, juice shops, and alcohol shops. The colony holds grocery shops, internet cafes, doctor's office, and medical labs on the ground floors of all the buildings. Women part of Parisar Vikas, who live here, were resettled after their slum was demolished by the BMC, over a decade ago. Their apartments are approximately two hundred square feet, on average housing a family of six. Most homes have two rooms; a kitchen and a living/sleeping area, indoor toilets and plumbing. But residents need to fill and store water in large containers as they do not have access to running water all day. The resettlement colony was a key location for my research, because it holds the Parisar Vikas vasti office on the ground floor of one of the buildings. Both Yogita Tai and Suman Bai's work is also based out of this office. I

spent a lot of time there which enabled me to meet many women part of this research. Often when I was in the office, Yogita Tai or Suman Bai would call out to women as they passed to office door, on their way home or out, and would introduce me to them. Many of my conversations with Yogita Tai, Suman Bai, and interviews with other interlocutors who reside in the resettlement colony, took place at this office.

Slum settlements where Dalit women part of this research live, have a variety of grocery shops, tea shops, food stalls, and miscellaneous repair shops lining their entrances and central streets. Large slums also house restaurants, businesses, and small-scale industries. The central roads in all the slums I visited were clogged with people, congregating at various shops, walking about, stopping for a chat, children playing, hand cart pullers, bicyclists, and people ferrying wares. Narrow lanes extended perpendicular to the central road and were packed with brightly painted houses on either side. Walking on uneven ground, into the narrow lanes to reach research participants' homes, I could see a few houses had metal stairs leading up to a second storey where another family resides. Clotheslines ran across the lanes between the house. Many houses had large blue plastic drums filled with water outside their doors (Figure 1). These homes do not have indoor plumbing or running water, so water for daily use needs to be filled and stored. Most houses also had a small space cordoned off on one side of their front door, which served as a washing area for clothes and utensils. Outside several interlocutors homes I could see piles of collected dry waste stored under a plastic tarp for future sale. Their homes are approximately hundred and fifty square feet, on average housing a family of six. Homes I visited were one room, sub-divided into a kitchen and a sitting/sleeping area. Most slum settlements have public toilets for its residents, but in many vastis, Dalit

women I spoke with described significant hurdles in gaining access to them. Each vasti, the resettlement colony and slum settlements, I visited have a community center called a Baudh Vihar[13] (Figure 2).

Figure 1: A narrow lane leading into the vasti houses (photo by author)

Figure 2: A group of young girls studying inside the community Baudh Vihar (photo by author)

[13] Baudh Vihar can be translated to mean 'sanctuary of Baudh people'. In the vastis I visited, Baudh Vihars were decorated with photographs of Ambedkar, Buddha, people, and sites significant to Dalit Buddhists. These Vihars are important community spaces where Dalit people in a vasti gather for community meetings, celebrations, and to commemorate important events.

I met with and interviewed women part of this research in many places; at Parisar Vikas offices, women's worksites, or their homes. The venue for each conversation was entirely dependent on the woman's convenience. As I note in chapter three, the women I spoke with are responsible for working and earning money outside the home, as well as domestic duties inside the home. Majority of the women part of this research work between six and twelve hours a day, before going home to cook and care for their families. And so, it was more convenient for them if I met them at their worksites where we could talk during their lunch or tea breaks. I also chose to go to many worksites because I wanted to see the work women do. Additionally, women part of this research live in multi-generational households, and many probably felt more comfortable talking with me among other women at the Parisar Vikas offices or their worksites, rather than in front of their in-laws, husbands, children, or other relatives. And in some instances, as I mention earlier in this chapter, I was invited into women's homes where I could interview them; at times with just the two of us present and at times in the presence of their family members.

In this dissertation I use the honorifics 'Tai' and 'Bai' after the names of some women, as a sign of respect and for clarity. Tai literally translates to mean 'older sister'. The word 'Bai' literally translates to mean 'woman'. Among its constituents, Parisar Vikas staff are referred to by just their names, or with the honorifics 'madam' or 'aunt' or 'Bai' added after their names. In the context of my research, the women part of this research use 'Bai' as a suffix to an older woman's name, as a signifier of age and respect. These honorifics also serve as a way to identify positionality. I use 'Tai' as a suffix for

Parisar Vikas staff members and 'Bai' as a suffix for women approximately over the age of fifty. Names without honorifics refer to younger interlocutors.

I belong to a dominant caste group and am considered upper middle class in India. My family has never subscribed to Hinduism, caste ideology, and caste-based discrimination. Being atheists, my parents raised me as such. But growing up, they strove to show me that many of the educational, economic, and social privileges we enjoy are a result of our caste and class background. I believe they did this to drive home the point that people who have little, do so due to systemic injustices that create unequal and oppressive institutions, marginalizing the majority while privileging a few. My parents' ideological leanings were formed within my family's social service background. My grandfather was a prominent union leader in the sugar belt of rural Maharashtra and my grandmother was part of a women's social service organization. Both my parents worked in social service organizations in Dalit and tribal areas in the 1970s and 80s. From a young age, I was told about issues faced by Dalit and tribal people and of labor, activism, feminism, and social service. Given this background, I went on to graduate with a degree in social work. Between 2004 and 2011 I worked with NGOs in and around Mumbai on issues ranging from rights-based work with Dalit and tribal people, media and legislative advocacy for social movements, and work with victims of domestic violence. These experiences deepened my commitment to work with marginalized communities and amplify their voices, where I can.

The insider/outsider distinction is an important lens in understanding power dynamics between the ethnographer and those they research (Naples 1996). I was born and grew up in Mumbai, which lends me some insider perspective into the political

processes at play in my research. But my education, middle class, and dominant caste status makes me an outsider among the community of women part of this research. But the insider/outsider distinction can also be a false dichotomy because neither position is static. Both insider and outsider status is constantly renegotiated, between the researcher and the community studied, through everyday interactions occurring within socially constructed differences of race, gender, class (Naples 1996), and caste. I knew of SMS as being one of the first feminist organizations in India, but I did not have a rapport with its leaders or constituents prior to my fieldwork. My previous social service work perhaps helped me develop a rapport with Jyoti Tai, which in turn helped cultivate one with Parisar Vikas staff and its constituents. In India, I am identifiable dominant caste and was often referred to as such, by the women who are part of this research. But over time, my presence at the Parisar Vikas office, savings group meetings, and worksites made me a familiar sight to the women. In these spaces, I sat with the women, ate lunch with them, and freely answered their questions about my life, creating not 'insider' status, but some form of affinity between us. And as I show in chapter four, despite issues the women might have with Parisar Vikas, they hold the sanghatana in high regard. And so, seeing my involvement with the sanghatana possibly made it easier for the women to see me as trustworthy.

Finally, I do not believe my research posed much risk or discomfort to the participants, any more than what they experience in their daily lives. I do not have reason to believe my presence significantly influenced research participants responses. During my interviews and conversations with the women, I often repeated back to them what I understood of their account. In most instances, women did not hesitate to point out

discrepancies or mistakes I made in understanding of what they were telling me. Additionally, many of my conversations with the women occurred in groups which I believe made it more comfortable for them to speak with me. On multiple occasions, key interlocutors like Suman Bai specifically told me something or pointed out something I might have missed because they want an accurate record of their experiences.

Ethnographic research can be an important tool for marginalized groups to seek representation by voicing their own stories, histories, and present lives (Smith 2005). This research shows that Dalit women who perform sanitation labor are underrepresented in public perception, legislative discourse, and academic scholarship. My social location is significantly different to that of the Dalit women part of this research. I do not belong to the Dalit community of sanitation workers, my affiliation with them began as a result of this research. And so, this is not a truly decolonizing project in Smith's (2005) sense. But, through this research I attempt to provide one framework of visibility, to acknowledge the lives, labor and aspirations of Dalit women who are engaged in sanitation labor.

CHAPTER III

CONTESTATIONS OVER THE RIGHTS TO ACCESS WASTE

In this chapter, I highlight the persistence of caste-based sanitation labor, through a history of caste and hereditary labor in India. I then discuss the status of sanitation reform under British colonial rule elaborating on the ways in which hereditary, caste-based sanitation labor was encoded into the fabric of colonial government. I analyze how the post-colonial Indian state continued caste-based sanitation practices within the waste management policy framework. I then describe the sanitation labor that Dalit women who are part of this research perform. Through their stories I emphasize the hardships that the women endure, as they seek to eke out a living in a system that actively marginalizes them. I finally show how recent changes to the waste management system have enabled the women who are part of this research, to claim legitimacy over the right to access waste and redefine the meanings of caste-based sanitation labor.

Caste, Untouchability, and Hereditary Labor in India

Hindu caste ideology derives from a three-thousand-year-old orthodoxy, hierarchically arranging groups of people into five castes. At the top of the hierarchy is the Brahmin or scholar caste, followed by the Kshatriya or warrior caste, followed by the Vaishya or merchant caste. These three dominant castes are followed by the Shudra or

the menial laborer caste. At the bottom of this hierarchy are the Ati-Shudra[14] who were historically known as the 'untouchables'. Each caste is further divided into numerous hierarchically arranged sub-castes. Based on notions of purity and pollution, caste ideology delineated castes and sub-castes, each with their particular code of conduct, customs, and rules (Dirks 2001; Rao 2009; Roy 2014). All social, political and economic relations between the castes was rooted in the hegemonic construction of power (Dirks 1988), benefitting the dominant castes.

A defining characteristic of the Hindu caste system is its occupational divisions that are hereditarily determined, hierarchically arranged, and differentially valued. Education was ritually permitted only to the Brahmin caste and one of their hereditary occupations was to educate and advise the kings. Hereditary occupations of the Shudra and Ati-Shudra castes as dictated through caste ideology were in servitude to the Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya castes. Members of the Shudra and Ati-Shudra castes were wholly dependent on the patronage of dominant castes for food, water, and employment (Bandyopadhyaya 2002; Guru 2013; Mahalingam, Jagannathan, and Selvaraj 2019; Roy 2014; Zene 2013). Hereditary duties said to be ordained within scripture were interpreted and assigned by Brahmins and policed by the dominant castes. In his scathing critique of the Hindu caste system, *The Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar (1936) notes, caste is "not merely a division of labor, but a division of laborers … into watertight compartments", ranked against each other to form a hierarchy based on

[14] Shudra and Ati-Shudra are both historical names for the menial laborer and 'untouchable' caste and are no longer in common use. Today 'Dalit', literally meaning 'broken people', is used to refer to members of both subordinated castes. In this dissertation, I refer to Shudra and Ati-Shudra only in their historical context. Everywhere else, I use the term Dalit.

insidious notions of purity and pollution. Significantly the division of labor "is not a division based on choice … It is based on the dogma of predestination", mobilized to exploit castes assigned the most 'polluting' labor (29-30). Caste ideology ensured that Shudra and Ati-Shudra castes believed themselves polluted, underserving of human dignity (Rao 2009; Roy 2014).

Untouchability was a key factor in the pernicious stigma and exploitation suffered by the Ati-Shudras. The idea of impurity and its associated stigma was prevalent within ancient Hinduism, but the idea of untouchability was not. The practice of ritual untouchability arose in the 4th century CE when the ruling dynasty banned the slaughter of cows. Over time, eating beef became a sin and those who did, became untouchable (see Ambedkar 1948). Untouchability was further reinforced through 'polluting' occupations like leather working, broom making, and scavenging or sweeping. Closely reading ancient religious and mythological texts, Ambedkar argued that scavenging was performed by slaves, be they Brahmin, Kshatriya or Vaishya slaves. To galvanize the Ati-Shudra community, Ambedkar argued that initially there were only the first three castes, present day Shudras were Kshatriya kings. Due to feuds with Brahmins they were denied the scared thread and fell below the Vaishya forming the fourth caste of Shudra. Among the Shudras, those who continued to eat beef after it was banned in the 4th century CE, fell to form the Ati-Shudra castes and were forced to take up 'polluting' work previously done by slaves (see Ambedkar 1946; 1948). Significantly, the fact of their labor was used as a mechanism to deem the Ati-Shudra community ritually polluted and exclude them from public institutions, compounding their exploitation (Ambedkar 1946).

Historically, caste-based division of labor was operationalized within administrative systems to organize social, economic and political relations between the castes and ensure the functioning of daily life in the village, province, and region. The *balutedari* system was the prevalent administrative structure in precolonial Maharashtra, also known as the *bara balutedar*, indicative of the twelve castes and sub-castes who served as hereditary village servants in village administration. The twelve castes were hierarchically arranged based on their caste duty and ensuing notions of purity and pollution. The village chief was at the top of the *balutedari* and was a Kshatriya Maratha, followed by village accountants, astrologers and temple priests who were Brahmin. The next seven *balutedars* belonged to the Shudra castes and included silversmiths, ironsmiths, carpenters, potters, barbers, washermen, and temple guards. The last three *balutedars* belonged to the Ati-Shudra castes and were Matang, Mahar, and shoemakers. In exchange for their service to the village, each *balutedar* was entitled wages and a share of the village produce (Gokhale 1986; Jaffrelot 2005), predetermined according to their place in the caste hierarchy.

Members of the Matang caste were rope and broom makers, occasionally providing village security alongside members of the Mahar caste (Jaffrelot 2005). The Mahar caste did not have a proprietary occupation but had several roles critical in village administration. They were responsible for providing village security, collecting taxes, protecting the village treasury, carrying death notices and other messages, mending walls, and agricultural labor. Additionally, lending support to their claim of being the original settlers of Maharashtra, they were adjudicators in boundary disputes. In exchange for

these important services, the Mahar were the only *balutedar* awarded tax exempt land, outside the village (Gokhale 1986; Guru 2016; Jaffrelot 2005).

Members of the Mahar caste were responsible for tasks considered extremely polluting within Hinduism, including sweeping, digging graves, providing fuel to Hindu burning grounds, attending funeral pyres, and carrying away animal carcasses (Gokhale 1986; Government of the Bombay Presidency 1926; Guru 2016; Jaffrelot 2005). Members of the Mahar caste ate beef, as they had easy access to dead cows (Jaffrelot 2005). Manual scavenging labor was not outlined within the *bara balutedari*. In many parts of Maharashtra members of the Bhangi[15] caste, migrants from neighboring state Gujrat and falling lower in the caste hierarchy than the Mahar caste, were assigned this labor (Enthoven 1922; Gundimeda 2016; Joshi and Ferron 2007; Mirza 2018). But it is probable that in some parts of Maharashtra, sweeping duties of the Mahar caste included manual scavenging. And it was these imposed 'polluting' occupations that defined them. The Mahar caste was considered most impure, their touch or even their shadow was though to defile (Government of the Bombay Presidency 1926).

The Mahar, Matang and shoemaker castes were all ostracized by Hindu caste society. The three Ati-Shudra *balutedars* were forced to live outside the village, when venturing in the dominant caste village, they were forced to tie earthenware around their necks so their spit would not defile the ground, tie a broom to their waist to sweep away their 'polluting' footprints, and call out to announce their arrival in warning, so their

[15] Today, the names Mahar and Bhangi are considered to be insults. I use them only in their historical context. As part of their reinvention and liberation from caste exploitation, the Mahar caste came to be referred to as Baudh, through their mass conversion to Buddhism, alongside Ambedkar in 1956 (see Ambedkar 1957). Similarly the Bhangi caste reinvented themselves as descendants of Valmiki, a great Hindu sage, naming themselves 'Valmiki' in their bid to gain status within Hinduism (see Prasad 2000).

shadow would not fall on a dominant caste person (Guru 2013; Jaffrelot 2005; Mahalingam, Jagannathan, and Selvaraj 2019; Rao 2009; Roy 2014; Zene 2013). They were not allowed access to water and had to wait at the village well for hours until a member of the dominant castes threw some water into their pots (Government of the Bombay Presidency 1926). For the Mahar caste in particular, lack of a proprietary occupation rendered them fully dependent on the administrative structure for their sustenance (Gokhale 1986). Regardless of their tax-exempt land and share in the village produce, they had to beg daily at each house they served, for their wages or *bhakri* as it was colloquially known, which often consisted of stale and at times rancid food (Jaffrelot 2005).

Sanitation Reform and Status of Hereditary Sanitation Workers in Colonial India

The *bara balutedari* system was disrupted under British colonization, but subordinated castes, particularly those assigned sweeping and manual scavenging labor continued their hereditary occupations, outside of colonial administration, until sanitation reform was introduced by the British colonial government in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Sanitation reform in colonial India was deeply influenced by the public health movement in Britain. Sanitary reformers argued that state provision of sanitary services was imperative to improve public health and stop the spread of disease (Chaplin 2011; Dias 2016; McFarlane 2008; Mushtaq 2009). In 1863, the Royal Commission report on the sanitary conditions in the British Army, lead to the formation of a sanitary police force to improve hygiene within the armed services. The colonial government also established a Commission on Public Health in each presidency,

consolidated under the Central Sanitary Department by 1870. Over the following decade, sanitary departments were set up and sanitary commissioners appointed in every province of colonial India (Mushtaq 2009; Ramanna 2002). Sanitary departments focused some of their resources on the control of epidemics, but a majority of their focus was on sanitary improvements for military and government personnel, and the colonial elite (Chaplin 2011; McFarlane 2008; Mushtaq 2009). Despite the establishment of an institutional framework, sanitary departments had little impact on sanitation and public health, particularly for the poor Indian population (Chaplin 2011; McFarlane 2008). Colonial India was an important trading route, whose prosperity was threatened by widespread epidemics (Chaplin 2011; Dias 2016; Mushtaq 2009). And perhaps, the activity around creating a sanitation infrastructure was in part, a production to maintain those trading routes.

Regardless of central and provincial sanitary departments, local governments often determined their own system of sanitation and waste management (Cohn 1996; McFarlane 2008; Mirza 2018). In the Bombay Presidency, the 1850 report titled *Sanitary State and Sanitary Requirement of Bombay* by Henry Conybeare[16] established a discourse of sanitation as a problem of public health, to be resolved through governmental intervention. The 1864 report titled *Sanitary State of the Island of Bombay* by Andrew Leith[17] was instrumental in establishing governmental management of sanitary services (McFarlane 2008; Ramanna 2002). In 1865, Arthur Crawford[18] formed Bombay city's

[16] Superintendent of Repairs to the Board of Conservancy in the Bombay Presidency between 1850-56.

[17] Deputy Inspector General of Hospitals in the Bombay Presidency in the early 1860s.

[18] The first municipal commissioner of Bombay city, 1865-71.

first sanitary department and recruited workers to sweep the streets, collect garbage and scavenge; based on the existing system of hereditary occupations (Mirza 2018). In 1888, the Bombay Municipal Corporation (BMC) Act set up Bombay city's municipal government, laying out administrative departments and wards, its officers, their duties, and electoral procedures (Mirza 2018). The BMC Act restructured the sanitation department, but caste-based recruitment continued; men belonging to the Mahar castes were employed as sweepers and garbage collectors, men of the Bhangi caste were hired to clean public toilets and transport waste to open dumps. Women of the Bhangi caste were hired to clean private toilets and were paid less than the men (Enthoven 1922; Mirza 2018). In absorbing hereditary labor practices, the colonial administration formalized caste labor within the institutional framework of government (Chaplin 1999; Cohn 1996; Dirks 2001; Prasad 2000; Ramaswamy 2011).

During this time, members of the Mahar caste also served as guides, messengers, escorts to government treasury, and domestic help for the colonists (Enthoven 1922); continuing many of their hereditary duties. Colonial practices reinscribed caste-based occupations, but through their proximity to the colonial government, members of the Mahar caste also gained access to schools and mobility to travel outside the village. Migrating to Bombay, many educated members of the Mahar caste were able to get low ranking jobs in the colonial administrative services. In addition to being employed as sanitation workers, others worked in cloth mills, at shipping docks, construction sites, and railways, becoming part of the urban labor force (Enthoven 1922; Jaffrelot 2005).

In addition to municipally employed sanitation workers in Bombay, residents, particularly in elite areas also employed hereditary sanitation workers to clean their

residential spaces (see Ramanna 2002). All waste collected by private and municipal sanitation workers was transported and dumped on open grounds outside the city limits. In 1927, the BMC established the dumping ground in Deonar[19], at the very edges of the city, where all collected waste was dumped. Technology used for the transportation of waste was determined per the sensibilities of the elite rather than convenience of the workers. Open bullock carts used until the 1920s were replaced with enclosed motor wagons by the 1930s (Mirza 2018). Here I do not argue that enclosed wagons had an adverse impact on the labor or health of Dalit sanitation workers. I aim to highlight that the primary purpose of changes to waste transportation were to provide elite residents relief from the sight and smell of waste as it was transported across the city (Mirza 2018).

In Bombay, like in most large colonial cities, poor residents were disproportionately affected by inadequate sanitary services in their areas of residence. Residential spaces of European and Indian elite were the only places with ventilation, water, drainage, and other sanitary services (McFarlane 2008). The threat of disease caused by unsanitary living conditions was ubiquitous in the imaginations of the colonial elite, particularly due to the migratory work and social patterns between poor and elite areas in Bombay. In order to protect the health and wellbeing of the elite, sanitary services became another avenue in controlling the poor (McFarlane 2008). In fact, the 1896 plague epidemic in the Bombay presidency was a culmination of this threat of disease experienced by the elite, resulting in increased taxation and spending on sanitation related schemes (Chaplin 2011; Doron and Jeffrey 2018). The establishment of

[19] Colloquially called the 'Deonar dumping ground', today it is centrally located amid sprawling slum settlements.

Improvement Trusts was one such scheme. Improvement Trusts were committees comprising of elite residents and business owners, in charge of developing and implementing sanitation related services (Chaplin 2011). In the colonial imagination, the poor and particularly their places of residence were seen as the problem. Predictably, improvement trusts undertook large scale demolition of slum settlements as a way to control the proliferation of disease, clean, and develop the city. In their places, improvement trusts built chawls, housing estates[20], and roads; reflecting the business interests of its members, creating a powerful relationship between local government and business, and shaping colonial and post-colonial urbanization. Members of subordinated castes like the Mahar, Matang, Bhangi, who were employed as sanitation workers, lived in slums that were now being demolished through the improvement trusts; deepening caste-based inequality in urban spaces (Chaplin 2011; McFarlane 2008).

Sanitation and Waste Management in Post-Colonial India

Sanitation discourse in post-colonial India continued to remain centered on the removal of unsanitary living conditions and the improvement of public health (Chaplin 2011; Lamba and Spears 2013; McFarlane 2008). M. K. Gandhi, one of the most influential people in the shaping of post-colonial India, believed in maintaining the caste system but removing its associated stigma (Ambedkar 1946; Gandhi 1936; Rawat and Satyanarayana 2016). For Gandhi, the issue of 'polluting' occupations performed by 'untouchables' was central in reforming post-colonial Hindu society (Rawat and

[20] The idea underlining slum demolitions and building housing estates was to remove unsanitary conditions and rehabilitate slum dwellers in the new residences. Instead demolished slums were rebuilt elsewhere. And it wasn't until the mid-1990s that the Indian government created policies mandating the rehabilitation of slum dwellers impacted by slum demolitions.

Satyanarayana 2016). In an essay titled *The Ideal Bhangi*, Gandhi contends that every society needs a range of services to function, "The Brahmin's duty is to look after the sanitation of the soul, the Bhangi's that of the body of society", and in doing so, the Bhangi performs the most foundational service required in society. Gandhi goes on to argue that it is the duty of the privileged and educated classes to "clothe the Bhangi with the dignity and privilege due to him" by providing better equipment for their manual scavenging labor and improving the conditions of their residential spaces (Gandhi 1936, 336). As is evident, for Gandhi, paramount in improving the lives of the 'untouchables', was reforming the profession of scavenging. Gandhi began cleaning toilets and urged his followers to do the same, calling manual scavenging a noble profession, only criticizing its technologies and associated stigma (Gatade 2015; Loomba 2016; Prasad 2000). Ambedkar critiqued these views and actions as a mockery of Dalits on whom this demeaning labor is forced, arguing that idealizing the scavenger and their labor does little to stem the insidious exploitation of the caste system which has devastated the lives of Dalits (Ambedkar 1946; Gatade 2015; Loomba 2016).

The hegemony of Gandhi's ideas prevailed in post-colonial sanitation discourse and subsequent reform. In the nationalist discourse, the scavenger figure became the lens through which issues facing Dalits were examined (Rawat and Satyanarayana 2016). In addition to mitigating the spread of disease and improving public health, sanitation reform in the 1950s, 60s and 70s attempted, unsuccessfully, to transform manual scavenging labor. The Scavengers Living Conditions Enquiry Committee set up in 1957, submitted its report in 1961. This report outlined in detail the status of manual scavengers in India and provided recommendations on improving their livelihoods and lives through

the provision of technology and social security[21] (Chaplin 2011; Ministry of Home Affairs 1960). Significantly this report highlighted the continuation of colonial era sanitation practices like slum clearance and employment of people from 'untouchable' castes as manual scavengers, sweepers, and garbage collectors (see Ministry of Home Affairs 1960). Echoing the perceptions of colonial elite, the threat of disease felt by the Indian elite propelled governmental intervention in affluent, largely dominant caste residential areas, at the expense of poor, subordinated castes and religious minorities. These interventions steadily improved sanitary conditions in affluent areas, while those in slum settlements deteriorated (see Chaplin 2011).

In the seven decades since Indian independence, central, state, and municipal governments have invested heavily in urban infrastructure projects for housing, water, transport, etc. but investment in sanitation and waste management has been dismal (Chaplin 2011; McFarlane 2008). The post-colonial Indian government banned practices of caste-based employment and untouchability, enshrining in the constitution a commitment to equality (Dirks 2001; Jaffrelot 2005). Instead of achieving parity, these actions constructed caste and caste-based labor as an archaic pre-colonial system; negating its reality (Dirks 2001; Jaffrelot 2005; Mosse 2018). By absorbing caste-based sanitation labor, the colonial government created a path for its continuation in post-colonial administration; reproducing the colonial state (Chaplin 2011; McFarlane 2008; Prasad 2000). The availability of Dalit labor for sanitation and waste management

[21] This report had little impact on issues faced by people engaged in manual scavenging. Despite prohibition of manual scavenging laws in 1993 and 2013, the practice continues. Today, 95% of people engaged in manual scavenging are women (see Babu 2016; Bathran 2018; Dhanraj 2014; Gatade 2015; Joshi and Ferron 2007; Lee 2017; Loomba 2016; Mosse 2018; Ramaswamy 2011; Coffey and Spears 2017).

provided the Indian state a pretext to neglect creating non-exploitative systems of sanitation and waste management; perpetuating caste-based employment along with the associated stigma and exploitation (Bathran 2018; Gatade 2015; Ramaswamy 2011).

Indian state involvement in sanitation and waste management was largely absent well into the late 1980s. Colonial era and hereditary sanitation labor practices continued in villages, towns and cities across post-colonial India. There is little information available regarding day-to-day waste management activities in a large urban centers like Mumbai[22], prior to the 1990s. In my conversations with residents who lived in Mumbai since the 1960s, I learnt that the municipality would provide large dumpsters on street corners in most middle class and affluent residential areas. Citizens in these areas, through their residential associations hired people from the Baudh, Matang or Valmiki castes, to collect household waste, sweep their premises, and throw all collected waste in municipally provided dumpsters, in a continuation of hereditary and colonial sanitation practices.

Between 1947 and the late 1980s, urbanization and subsequent waste generation in urban areas grew steadily, as did the informal trade in waste that was picked and cleaned by Dalit informal sanitation workers. Economic opportunities in villages dwindled, particularly for the poor, religious minorities, and subordinated castes, who migrated to cities. Some of these migrants, particularly caste groups who were historically engaged in sanitation or menial labor, became part of informal waste management as wastepickers and waste traders. In Mumbai, junkshops proliferated as did

[22] Bombay was renamed Mumbai in 1995 by the regionalist political party Shiv Sena. It derives from *Mumba Devi* the goddesses of the *Koli* people who are the city's original inhabitants.

small-scale recycling industries. In the absence of a regulatory authority, this informal waste trade was controlled by trading castes, who formed gangs and pressure groups to control their monopoly over the waste trade and its profits. A 'garbage mafia' grew amid the continued absence of governmental intervention, steadily becoming a highly profitable trade[23] (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Nighoskar 2019; Sinha 2018). Seeking their own sustenance, workers in the informal waste trade industry kept the city, particularly its affluent areas, clean. Availability of Dalit labor and notions of pollution attached to waste work, deepened state disinvestment in waste management (Gatade 2015), until the management of waste became financially lucrative.

The Contemporary Waste Management Policy Framework of the Indian State

Urbanization grew soon after Indian independence and had almost doubled by 1991 (Datta 2006). Economic liberalization which began in the late 1980s culminated in the New Economic Policy in 1991 and aimed at opening up previously state-controlled industry to private and foreign investment, by deregulating the market, reducing import tariffs, and reducing taxes on foreign and private investment (Arora 1999; Gosai 2013; Gupta 2012; Omvedt 2011; Upadhyay 2000). Post liberalization saw an increase in urbanization, financial and commercial activity, proliferation of plastic, an increase in the standard of living and a rise in consumption, particularly among the dominant castes and affluent classes. Liberalization and urbanization together accelerated waste generation in urban India, making waste management a policy concern (Ahmed and Ali 2004; Doron

[23] After governmental intervention in waste management began, the garbage mafia developed strong ties to local politicians, civil servants, and businesses, ensuring their continuation. The garbage mafia still maintains some control over the waste trade in Mumbai, particularly of the garbage that goes in and out of the Deonar dumping ground. (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Nighoskar 2019; Sinha 2018).

and Jeffrey 2018; Jain 1994; Joshi and Ahmed 2016; Kumar et al. 2017; Mani and Singh 2016; Rathi 2006; Reddy and Ram 2019).

Across the 1990s, the Government of India (GoI), formulated five committees under the aegis of the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change (MoEFCC) and National Environmental Engineering Research Institute (NEERI), to research and develop strategies for the management of increasing urban waste. Based on their recommendations, the MoEFCC formulated a spate of waste management policy guidelines for the management of biomedical waste in 1998, plastic waste in 1999, hazardous waste in 2001 and more recently e-waste in 2012. Importantly the MoEFCC in collaboration with the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA) developed the Municipal Solid Waste[24] Management Rules (SWM Rules) in 2000 (Chintan 2007; Joshi and Ahmed 2016; Kumar et al. 2017; Mani and Singh 2016; MoEFCC n.d.), further solidifying the link between waste management and urban development (Doron and Jeffrey 2018; Joshi and Ahmed 2016; Mani and Singh 2016; Reddy and Ram 2019), a link that was established by the colonial government. The SWM Rules 2000 were the first comprehensive policy guidelines for the management of urban solid waste and are the definitive rules under which waste management has been operationalized in urban India for the last two decades (Chintan 2007; Shankar and Sahni 2018).

Overall, colonial era policies remained largely unchanged until the 74th Amendment to the Indian Constitution in 1993-94, which created a system of decentralized governance. City municipalities were incorporated into a three-tier system

[24] Municipal solid waste includes all commercial and residential waste generated in a municipality; including paper, plastic, textile, wood, metal, appliances, furniture, food, gardening waste, etc.

of governance, with the GoI or central government at the top, followed by state governments, followed by city municipalities. Despite the language of decentralization, much of municipal functioning came under GoI control, who retained the power to formulate broad policy guidelines, which state governments were to use in determining state-specific policy directives. City municipalities were essentially tasked to operationalize decisions made at the central and state levels, without financial support, leaving them dependent on state and central governments (Chaplin 2011; Doron and Jeffrey 2018; Mani and Singh 2016; National Portal of India n.d.; Singh 2020). Under the three-tiered system of governance, the MoEFCC became responsible for preparing the national waste management policy guidelines. Based on which, the MoHUA was put in charge of preparing a solid waste management manual for municipalities. The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) was charged with devising a system for the prevention and control of air and water pollution. NEERI was mandated to conduct research on and develop technological solutions to waste management and environmental pollution, which in part informs policy guidelines set by the MoEFCC, MoHUA, and CPCB (Joshi and Ahmed 2016; Kumar et al. 2017; Reddy and Ram 2019) The various State Pollution Control Boards (SPCB) under the oversight of the CPCB were tasked with setting state specific policy directives, to be used as a template for city municipalities in developing concrete waste management strategies. So, for the city of Mumbai, the Maharashtra State Pollution Control Board sets policy directives based on MoEFCC, MoHUA, and CPCB policy guidelines, which the BMC then strategizes and implements (Kumar et al. 2017; Maharashtra Pollution Control Board n.d.; Reddy and Ram 2019).

As part of bureaucratic action, this elaborate framework for waste management was written out in numerous policy documents and directives, but implementation is not the intention of its writing. In post-colonial India, writing of public policy and social programs by central, state, and regional governments "is an end in itself", it is not meant to produce action or ensure implementation (Gupta 2012, 188). Instead, the act of writing is intended to balance the competing electoral demands inherent to Indian democracy; between the poor who elect governments and the affluent who fund governments (see Chatterjee 2011; Gupta 2012). While the various policies constituting the waste management framework were written and codified, waste generation and open disposal of waste in urban India continued unchanged. Frustrated with the growing pollution in cities and armed with an increasing awareness of environmental problems caused by unrestricted waste disposal, affluent residents began to push for urban waste management reform and implementation (Baviskar 2002; Chaplin 1999; 2011). And in 2014, the Swachh Bharat Mission proved an impetus for reexamining urban waste management policy and updating the SWM Rules in 2016 (Shankar and Sahni 2018). The SBM-Urban and the updated SWM Rules have further added to the elaborate written framework of waste management policy. Per the updated SWM Rules, municipalities are required to compost wet waste and recycle dry waste. The Ministry of Agriculture is tasked with setting regulatory standards for the compost produced at compost facilities. The Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilizers is responsible for collecting and marketing produced compost. The National Highway Authority of India along with the Ministry of Road Transportation and Highways is to use the recyclable plastic collected by municipalities in the construction of national highways. And finally, the Ministry of New and

Renewable Energy is to assist municipal authorities in the development of new waste-to-energy infrastructure (Kumar et al. 2017; Reddy and Ram 2019; Singh 2020). The writing of these directives, I argue, created an additional record aimed at meeting the demands of affluent Indians and creating an image of sustainability in Indian waste management policy.

SBM-Urban then introduced 'Cleanliness Helpline and 'Cleanliness App' for citizens to register complaints about inadequate waste management in their area. In 2016 a 'Cleanliness Survey' was launched, ranking cities against each other on a set of waste management parameters for a 'Cleanliness Prize' (Mani and Singh 2016; Reddy and Ram 2019; Singh 2020). In 2017, SBM introduced a yearly *shramadan* or 'donation of labor' campaign, to produce citizen consent in achieving a 'Clean India' (Singh 2020). In yearly public spectacle, as part of *shramadan*, affluent citizens, celebrities, and ministers, wearing protective gear, take to sweeping iconic public spaces in cities across India. Images of the elite engaged in sweeping are then broadcast to engender public participation in keeping public spaces clean. Images of municipal and informal sanitation workers and conspicuously absent from SBM advertising. The fleeting labor of dominant caste elite is thus mobilized to delink the permanent and persistent sanitation labor conducted by subordinated castes; actively displacing Dalit workers from waste management discourse, making them invisible and inconsequential to waste management in the public imagination (Bathran 2018; Chintan 2007; Gatade 2015).

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is advertised as the chief architect of SBM. His ideas on sanitation, waste management, and its workers is indicative of their erasure from policy. In his book *Karmayog* (2007), in reference to the Valmiki community of

sanitation workers, Modi writes "I do not believe that they have been doing this job just to sustain their livelihood. Had this been so, they would not have continued with this type of job, generation after generation … At some point of time, somebody must have got the enlightenment that it is their duty to work for the happiness of the entire society and the Gods; that they have to do this job bestowed upon them by Gods and that this job of cleaning should continue as an internal spiritual activity for centuries … It is impossible to believe that their ancestors did not have the choice of adopting any other work or business" [25] (Gatade 2015, 33). These deep-rooted attitudes are sustained within state sanitation policy; rendering invisible the existence of caste-based sanitation labor and meaningless its workers exploitation (Bathran 2018; Gatade 2015; Mosse 2018).

Waste Management Practices in Municipal Jurisdictions

Waste generation in urban India continually exceeds municipal capacity to manage it. Municipalities have failed to devise and implement waste management practices based on the SWM Rules since their adoption in 2000. This failure is primarily due to an absence of political will, but also a lack of funds, infrastructure, institutional capacity, and expertise (Ahmed and Ali 2004; Dias 2016; Doron and Jeffrey 2018; Jain 1994; Joshi and Ahmed 2016; Kumar et al. 2017; Mani and Singh 2016; Mehta, Shastri, and Joseph 2018; Rathi 2006; Reddy and Ram 2019; Singh 2020).

The SWM Rules ban the open dumping and burning of waste. They hold the individual responsible for segregating waste they create. They mandate municipalities to

[25] This excerpt was published in a prominent national newspaper and translated into several regional newspapers, following the publication of the book. Massive protests from the Dalit community ensued, causing Modi to withdraw his book. But this withdrawal is not indicative of a shift in his attitudes (see Gatade 2015).

devise systems for door-to-door collection, transportation, storage and processing of all waste; composting wet waste, recycling dry waste, and safely disposing hazardous waste (Joshi and Ahmed 2016; Kumar et al. 2017; Reddy and Ram 2019; Shankar and Sahni 2018; Singh 2020; Vikaspedia n.d.). In practice, only 50-70% of the waste generated is collected by municipal authorities. Once collected, dumping and burning continue to be the primary waste management practices. Approximately 10% of collected waste is burned and 80% is dumped. In Mumbai, 81% of collected waste is dumped on one of three dumping grounds - Deonar, Mulund, or Kanjurmarg - all of which have exceeded or fast approaching their capacity (Kumar et al. 2017; Mani and Singh 2016; Mehta, Shastri, and Joseph 2018; Singh 2020).

As a result of the SWM Rules, the BMC mandates all residential and commercial properties to manage the segregation and collection of internally generated waste, keeping it ready for daily municipal collection in separate wet and dry waste bins. Residential societies and commercial establishments continue the practice of employing members of the Baudh, Matang, and Valmiki castes to collect waste from within their premises, ensure it is segregated and correctly binned, and leave it at the property gates for collection. These workers today are called ‘housekeepers’, but the same castes continue to perform similar labor, with minimal changes. Dry waste makes a small portion of total waste collected and some of it is taken to dry waste centers for further sorting for recycling. Majority of the wet waste collected is dumped. In reality, wet waste taken to dumping grounds is usually mixed waste containing bio-degradable, recyclable, and hazardous waste. The recovery and processing of recyclable materials from dumped waste is conducted primarily by the informal waste recycling sector; a vast highly

organized yet decentralized network of sanitation workers collecting, sorting, selling, and processing materials, moving them up the recycling chain (Gunsilius, Chaturvedi, and Scheinberg 2011; Jain 1994). The informal waste recycling sector comprises of wastepickers, who at the lowest level of the hierarchy, do the hardest labor and receive the least remuneration. Above them are itinerant waste buyers who go door-to-door collecting recyclables in exchange of money or other goods. Small and large junk shop owners or scrap dealers who buy waste from wastepickers and itinerant waste buyers are a step up in the hierarchy, followed by waste wholesalers who trade in a single recyclable material, at the top of the hierarchy are recycling industries (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Mehta, Shastri, and Joseph 2018; Wilson, Velis, and Cheeseman 2006). Workers in each part of the sector, be it wastepickers, itinerant waste buyers, junkshop owners and workers, or scrap warehouse workers, work to meet their individual economic needs, in turn enabling efficient and cost-effective waste recycling in Indian cities (Ahmed and Ali 2004; Chaturvedi 2013; Gidwani 2015; Gill 2012; Gunsilius, Chaturvedi, and Scheinberg 2011).

Different castes and sub-castes operate within the informal waste recycling hierarchy. In Mumbai, people who pick waste are almost exclusively poor Dalit and Muslim women are at the bottom of this hierarchy. Itinerant buyers who collect metal, glass, newspaper, and other scrap are a step above, they are primarily poor Dalit and Muslim men. Small and large scrap dealers are a step above and are usually Muslim families. Above them are retailers and wholesalers, who are men, belonging to the Gujrati and Marwadi trading castes particular to western India. At the top of this hierarchy are the recycling factory owners who often belong to dominant castes. In the chain from dirty

to clean recyclable materials, the informal waste recycling hierarchy reflects the caste hierarchy. Wastepickers belong to the most subordinated castes, pick waste at its dirtiest, as it moves up the recycling chain it is converted into cleaner material, handled first by Muslim dealers, then Gujrati and Marwadi traders and other dominant caste groups (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000). Monetary value of recyclable materials and profit received by its workers also corresponds to the same hierarchy. Wastepickers collect recyclable items at the lowest end of their monetary value while recycling industries deal with goods at their highest value (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Chintan 2007; Mehta, Shastri, and Joseph 2018; Wilson, Velis, and Cheeseman 2006). A markup from primary sale between wastepicker and small scrap dealer to secondary sale between small and large scrap dealers can be anywhere between twenty and forty percent, with recycling industries making billions of rupees annually (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000).

There are no comprehensive statistics enumerating wastepickers in urban India. Researchers estimate about 1% of an urban city's population is engaged in wastepicking (Chintan 2007; Gill 2012; Wilson, Velis, and Cheeseman 2006). This includes approximately four million wastepickers, majority of whom are women, most working in the nation's capital, New Delhi, followed by Mumbai (Shankar and Sahni 2018). Dalit castes and tribes not traditionally engaged in sanitation work have also entered waste work due to acute poverty, resulting from displacement due to natural disasters or loss of traditional occupation because of state policy or market intervention (Doron and Jeffrey 2018; Prasad 2000). Still, a vast majority of people engaged in wastepicking continue to belong to castes who were historically assigned sanitation labor. Women part of this

research belong to the Baudh and Matang castes; historically designated as sweepers and waste collectors.

"We are Insects of Hell": The Hardships of Picking Waste on Dumping Grounds

The three major dumping grounds in Mumbai are officially closed for dumping or picking waste. There are numerous smaller dumping grounds scattered across the city, in low-income areas, often surrounding slum settlements. On a hot summer day, I go with Yogita Tai, who I introduced in chapter two, to one such dumping ground. The ground is accessed by a dirt lane off the main road, between a mosque, a toilet block and an eclectic array of shops and restaurants. Wet waste trucks pass as we walk into the lane, raising plumes of dust around us. A few meters in, I am confronted by the overpowering stench of decaying waste and a distinctive buzz of flies. The stink grows stronger as we get closer to the dumping ground, where mounds of waste are spread over approximately twelve hundred square feet of land. The ground is enclosed on three sides by corrugated iron sheets mounted vertically on a seven-feet stone wall, beyond which lie sprawling slums. I see dozens of people walking on the hills of waste amid waste trucks depositing more waste. All the while, swarms of flies envelop the waste, the people and the trucks. Activity on the dump is loud and constant. Along one boundary wall is a room with an awning built on a raised platform, at a distance from the waste. Serving as an office, it is a small room with a door to the side and open windows facing the dump, surveilling the ongoing activity. The heat of the day and the stench of rotting waste gets worse as we make our way to the office.

Yogita Tai goes to the office and greets the men working inside. From my vantage point in front of the office I see women walking on the waste mounds with an L-shaped metal rod called an *akdi* in their hands, which they use to prod and hook pieces of waste and deposit in a large sack on their shoulders. Simultaneously, waste trucks back onto the waste mounds, too close to the women picking. In few minutes a couple of the women notice us and start to descend from the waste heaps calling to each other. Ten women walk towards us, they all wear oversized men's shirts, cloth wrapped tightly around their waists, baseball caps, straw hats or scarves covering their heads, and running shoes on their feet. They are accompanied by flies who encircle their bodies. Their shoes and legs are covered in a sludgy greenish brown muck deposited from walking in decomposing waste. Their clothes too are layered by the muck making it difficult to identify patterns or colors in the textiles they wear. One of the women goes into the office and brings out chairs for Yogita Tai and me to sit on while the others settle on the floor, some leaning against the beams that support the awning. The flies are now swarming around us all.

The women are in their late thirties and forties and have picked on dumping grounds since they were children, accompanying their mothers or in-laws. When I ask about their work, one of the women declares, "*narkache kide aahot amhi*", we are insects of hell, digging through the filth, while the others nod bitterly. Swati, a Baudh woman in her late thirties, tells me "We spend most of our lives on the dumping ground". The women leave their homes at 7am travelling to begin work at 9am and finishing at 7pm daily. With their *akdi* in one hand and a large sack on their shoulder they walk up and down the waste mounds, using the *akdi* to dig through and hook sellable waste and put it

in their sacks. Swati says, “We don’t put our hands in the waste, we could get stuck, lose our hands, and the trucks could drive over us”. Once a woman’s sack is full she descends the waste mounds to empty it out in a designated space before climbing back on the mounds to refill up her sack. The women have carved out separate spaces for each of them, along one boundary wall, to unload their sacks. The women have no services on the dumping ground. They eat their lunch in one corner of the ground and need to pay for access to water or toilets, located outside the dump.

The women can’t always work through the day. The mid-day sun makes their hands peel and bleed, the toxic fumes emanating from the rotting waste leaves them dizzy and nauseous, and the heat from the sun above and the waste below makes it impossible to work. At such times, Swati says they come to sit in the shade of the awning outside the office and resting before going back to work. As the day wanes, each woman sorts her pile of waste which she sells to *katewalas* who come to buy waste, at the dump. If they work all day, a woman can make upto eight hundred rupees ($11) daily. Swati explains “It depends on our labor. A lot of effort goes into walking on this [pointing to the waste heaps] and digging through it, if we are able to do it without a break we can make a lot of money, if some day we can’t bear the heat and muster the strength we earn a little”.

Currently twenty-two women work at this dump, down from about forty women a few years ago. Those who no longer work at the dump were hit by waste trucks backing onto them or were pulled under waste heaps; losing their limbs and in some instances their lives. The women currently at the dump work in fear of the same happening to them. Because they are not formally employed, they and their families have no access to benefits in case of accidents or death. To work safely, they make their own guidelines by

using an *akdi*, wearing caps or scarves and shoes. Laughing, Swati says "Thankfully we started wearing shoes, otherwise every day at least four of us would have our feet cut open by glass or metal. One day someone started wearing shoes. We saw she was fine after that, so we all started wearing shoes".

The women bring from home old shirts, cloth to wrap around their waist, caps, scarves, and shoes. Once at work, they gather in a corner, hike up their *saris* and put these work clothes over their street clothes, before starting work. At the end of their workday, the women take off their soiled clothes carrying them home in their bags. Pointing to her soiled shirt and cloth tied around her waist, Swati says "[At the end of the day] When I take this off, put down my sari and walk out [of the dumping ground], who will know I pick waste". Their work clothes not only protect the women clothes from getting dirty, but also secure them in the knowledge they won't be recognized as 'wastepickers' in their vasti, and while travelling to and from work.

Like Dogs, Running from This Bin to the Other, Trying to Access Waste First

I meet Kusum at the primary school where she works as a housekeeper. She is on her afternoon break and leads me to a small courtyard inside the school's premises, where we can talk. She sits on a child-sized chair, pointing me towards another chair facing the one she sits on. During our conversation Kusum tells me that she started picking waste on the streets along with her mother, when she was eight years old. Smiling while thinking of at her younger self she says "My parents put me in school, but I would run away and join them in picking waste, despite many beatings. So, my mother let me pick waste. I would look at what others around me are doing and pick and earn an additional one rupee

(1 cent) for my family, [money] that was needed". Kusum stopped picking waste over a decade ago and started working on Parisar Vikas contracts. Today at forty-three she works as a housekeeper at a primary school in an affluent suburb of Mumbai. Thinking back to her days picking waste, she says "There was no difference between a dog and us. We would get up at 5am, leave our young children at home, take our sack and run out of the house, and keep running here and there to be the first to get to that waste [bin]" … "If you see any wastepicker, she has so much anger, even if someone looks at her, she will shout at them, run after him like a dog, swear at people if they brush past, because in our head we think the other person is a threat". Seema too picked waste on the streets before coming to work as a housekeeper in a residential society, a decade ago. She too describes wastepicking in similar terms saying, "Before we had the sack on our shoulder, rummaging through bins, men harassing us; there is no respect there, it is living like a dog".

I first meet Padma Bai during a Parisar Vikas meeting at a dry waste recycling center in early October. Suman Bai, who I introduced in chapter two, and I are congregated at the entrance of the center, near rows of baled plastic waste piled high, when Padma Bai comes to join us. Suman Bai introduces us, and I tell Padma Bai that I recently met her son, who is currently employed by Parisar Vikas. A proud smile crosses her face as she asks me about myself. I meet her again, a couple weeks later at the Parisar Vikas vasti office. At which time, sitting cross-legged on mats on the office floor, Padma Bai tells me about her life and her work. Padma Bai came to Mumbai after she was married, at the age of ten, and started picking waste alongside her mother-in-law. At forty-five, she continues to pick waste, proudly telling me she has educated her three

children “on her own strength, on a wastepicker’s earnings”. One of her daughters is currently in nursing school and her son, having completed his undergraduate degree, works in Parisar Vikas. Her husband is handicapped and has never been able to work, so she had to work to provide for her family from a young age. Padma Bai leaves home around 5am, going to work with a group of women from the vasti. They need to travel by local train and bus to reach work. Once there, the women branch out into ‘their’ areas; a designated set of lanes where a particular woman has picked waste for decades. These areas are decided through mutual agreement among the women who travel together. ‘Ownership’ of these areas and lanes is often generational; passed down to the women by mothers, in-laws, or other relatives. Once in her area, Padma Bai weaves in and out of ‘her’ lanes collecting sellable waste from the streets, roadside dumpsters, and from bins left at residential society gates for municipal collection. She has never faced harassment from municipal workers but, once the wet waste truck starts to make its rounds, municipal workers don’t let her access any of the wastebins. She has to wait until municipal workers are gone before continuing her work. Around 1pm, she empties her sack on the side of a road, sorts the waste, stacks the sorted bundles in her sack, hoists the heavy sack on her head and walks to the *katewala*, selling the waste and going home by 3pm. Padma Bai picks plastic bags, wastepaper, cardboard, plastic bottles, sometimes finding corrugated iron, pieces of metal, umbrellas or broken gadgets, picking approximately forty kilos and earning four hundred rupees ($5) daily.

One evening I am sitting on a mat on the floor of the Parisar Vikas vasti office, while sitting next to me, Yogita Tai fills out an organizational report. Looking up from her report, she calls out to an old bent woman walking past the office door and asks her if

she has the time to talk with me about her wastepicking labor. As the woman comes into the office, Yogita Tai introduces me to Manda Bai, who indicates she has some time to talk with me. Sitting on the floor with some difficulty, Manda Tai tells me she has been picking waste since she migrated to Mumbai with her husband and in-laws after the 1972 famine. Today, she goes to work alone, leaving home at 5am. She travels to work by local train, getting off a few stations away. She starts to pick waste from the station weaving through the lanes, picking sellable waste from the streets and dumpsters. She picks approximately twenty to thirty kilos of cardboard and mixed plastic; until 10am when she goes to her *katewala's* shop, dumps her sack, sorts it contents, sells them, earning approximately three hundred rupees ($4) daily. She goes to work at the crack of dawn because once the municipal waste trucks come for waste collection, the municipal workers don't let her touch any of the waste bins. Manda Bai's sight is failing, she is in her sixties and significantly bent over. Today her three daughters and two sons are all are married, one of her daughters works as a domestic cook. Her husband and sons are alcoholics; she says her husband hasn't worked for almost two decades and her sons can barely hold on to work. Manda Bai raised her children through her labor and now is compelled to continue working to provide for her grandchildren.

We Don't Pick Waste, We Sell Garlic

A small group of women associated with Parisar Vikas are waste traders. They all live in the same vasti and belong to the Matang caste. These women go to slums settlements much like their own to exchange garlic for recyclable waste. They refer to this as "selling garlic". Vidya Bai, a Parisar Vikas staff member, lives in this vasti and

also oversees Parisar Vikas's programmatic activity here. Vidya Bai is Baudh, she is approximately fifty years old, and formerly picked waste. I write more about her life, work, and journey within Parisar Vikas in chapter four. In the twilight of a November evening, as we sit on the steps of a garlic sellers' home in the vasti, I ask Vidya Bai how women in this vasti came to sell garlic. She tells me when this vasti was first settled in the 1970s, "The old people say there was nothing around. They built mud houses. The men needed work to feed their families, someone got garlic from somewhere and started selling it for waste and selling that for money. Everyone here is related to one another, so they told their relatives, who also entered this business". Women also started selling garlic and over time the door-to-door trade in garlic has become women's work. Men in this community now work as wage labor or in the wholesale trade of garlic. To meet the women garlic sellers part of Parisar Vikas, Vidya Bai asked me to visit her vasti over multiple evenings in November. The garlic sellers I meet have been trading in garlic since the early 1980s. Jaya Bai has returned from selling garlic and is resting as we approach her door one evening. She invites Vidya Bai and me inside, offering us water and tea. We settle on the floor with our drinks, in the narrow space between a bed and the wall of her one room home, and I ask Jaya Bai to tell me about the work of selling garlic. Jaya Bai came to Mumbai during the famine in 1972 when she was about six years old. She was widowed more than a decade ago and now lives with her daughter, two sons, daughters-in-law and grandchildren, providing for her large family.

Jaya Bai tells me the garlic sellers in this vasti travel to work in groups, either with relatives or friends leaving at 10am and coming back home by 4pm. They carry with them approximately six kilos of garlic in straw baskets on their heads. Once at work they

separate out into ‘their lanes’, each woman selling garlic on her own, in a set of lanes that are ‘hers’ by pre-decided agreement amongst the women. Jaya Bai explains “We call out [as we walk the lanes], and if anyone has waste to sell they call us to their door. We give them quarter kilo of garlic for one kilo of recyclable waste”. There is little sorting involved in their work, the garlic sellers get mostly cleaned and segregated recyclable waste. On average, they women have sold about six kilos of garlic for twenty kilos of dry waste by the end of a workday, earning approximately five hundred rupees ($7) per day. The women buy garlic from a wholesale vegetable market every fortnight. They go in groups so as to better negotiate prices and buy anywhere between two-five hundred pounds depending on their earnings during the previous fortnight. The garlic is then cleaned and sorted before it is ready to be sold.

The garlic sellers I speak with all make it a point to convey they are not wastepickers. In describing her work, Jaya Bai tells me “There is a big difference, this [selling garlic] is good work, that [picking waste] is dirty work. Picking waste you go to the bin and have to touch all the dirty waste. Selling garlic we don’t put our hands [in the mixed waste], we get clean waste sorted and stored for us”. As traders they also have the right to refuse service as Jaya Bai points out “If a customer’s starts to argue we tell them this is the rate [of garlic] if they don’t agree, we walk away”. Moreover, because the women have been selling garlic in the same area for decades, each of them have long established trading relationships with their customers who Jaya Bai tells me “Keep waste for us, even if we don’t go for a day or two. When we go [after an absence] they will ask why we didn’t come yesterday, if we are well. All our customers, even their children call us ‘aunty’, ask if we want water or tea”.

This Work is Borne of Our Helplessness

Majority of the Dalit women I spoke with started picking waste young, at an average age of eight years old, and have been picking waste for over three decades. None of women pick waste or sell garlic in areas where they live, instead they travel considerable distances, to dumping grounds or affluent residential areas. Women travel to work as they don't want to be known as 'wastepickers' in their vasti. But women, particularly those who pick on the streets travel to middle class and affluent areas to gain access to better quality of recyclable waste. Garlic sellers and women who pick waste usually travel to work in groups, once they reach their workplace, the women separate into 'their' areas to individually pick waste and sort waste. They pick paper, cardboard, various grades and types of plastic, milk packets, tins and bottles, metal, phones, chargers; anything that has recyclable value. Women pick and carry twenty to fifty kilos of recyclable waste on their heads and shoulders daily, depending on their financial needs for that day or upcoming days.

Women do not wear gloves or masks while picking waste, instead many of them use an *akdi* as a safety tool. In my conversations with the women, I often asked if they wore masks or gloves while they worked. Every time, my question was met with laughter, followed by them telling me that waste keeps slipping out of their hands when they wear gloves and masks make it difficult for them to breathe. Garlic sellers and women who pick on the streets don't walk a straight line when they pick, but weave in and out of the lanes in 'their' areas, for four to six hours until they have traded for or collected all the sellable waste they can find. Women who pick waste on the streets then empty their sack at the side of the road or near their *katewala*, segregate and sell their

waste individually. Some women store metal and best grade plastic, selling it every fortnight; because these items are more difficult to find and have better value in bulk. Padma Bai tells me they have options when it comes to selling; if a particular *katewala* does not give them a good rate or he is not treating them well, they go to another.

The daily earnings of informal sanitation workers depends on their ability to pick and sort waste on a given day. For women who pick on the streets, their earnings further depend on the area they pick in. On average, women who pick waste on the streets can make three to five hundred rupees ($7) per day, depending on the income bracket of the residential area. In commercial areas like leather markets, women can make up to one thousand rupees ($14) per day by picking waste. Their earnings are further determined by market fluctuations in the price of dry waste, which can be a result of the weather, the season, the demand, and policy decisions that do not account for Dalit women's labor. For example, during the monsoon, much of what women pick gets soaked and they barely earn fifty rupees (67 cents) a day. In contrast during festival seasons, with an increase in commercial activity, women can often earn upto six hundred rupees ($8).

Women who pick waste face numerous difficulties and indignities while working. Many have been chased and bitten by dogs on the streets and rodents on the dumps, cut by shards of metal, glass, and needles. While rummaging for sellable waste women come to touch rotting food, soiled sanitary napkins and diapers. During a visit to her housekeeping worksite, Seema tells me, when she picked waste and had to rummage through such waste, "Its feels dirty, no matter who it is, we all feel it is dirty, but we have to provide for our families, so we learn to ignore the feeling". During my interview with Manda Bai in the Parisar Vikas vasti office, she points to the fact that women who pick

waste are the first to be accused of theft, if something goes missing in the areas they pick. She too has been accused of theft, which she says is absurd “Why would I steal from where I go to work every day”. Seema’s comments to me, when I talk with her at her worksite, reflects a similar feeling, “It feels so insulting to be accused of stealing. They never stopped to think if we are good or not, they directly assume we are thieves”. Garlic sellers and women who pick on the streets only drink tea before leaving for work and do not carry any food of water with them. They work for approximately six hours and prefer to cook and eat after they are back home from work. Women who pick on dumping grounds take lunch and a bottle of water with them as they are away from home for twelve hours. They do not have a dedicated space for lunch and eat amid the buzzing flies and mounds of waste. None of the women have facilities at work, if they get thirsty, they look for public taps or ask nearby shopkeepers. They often need to pay for water and to use public toilets. Dalit women sanitation workers often lack the education or skills required to do other work and confronted with the need to provide for their children, they turn to sanitation work. Every woman I spoke with used the work *majboori* or helplessness to describe her labor. As Padma Bai explained to me, “We couldn’t find any other work, we started picking waste. What to do, it is our *majboori*, if we pick waste then [only] we eat … I don’t know if there is an escape, we might have to pick waste till we die, I think”.

My research does not explore the health consequences of waste work. But it is important to note that most of the Dalit women I spoke with suffer chronic pain in their feet, hands, back, neck, head, and shoulders, including immense pressure on their eyes, chest, and head, from decades of daily walking and carrying heavy loads. They are

frequently cut by glass, rusted nails or metal fragments. Women who pick on dumps are exposed to toxic waste and gasses released by decomposing waste leaving them susceptible to respiratory illnesses, nausea, dizziness and infections. Because women work on empty stomachs, they feel weak and faint, also experiencing crippling acidity and urinary tract infections. What women don't talk about are their own addictions to tobacco which is said to kill hunger, and the sexual harassment they face daily; being catcalled and propositioned by *katewalas*, tea sellers, and security guards. There are few studies that look at the health impact of wastepicking, those who do, describe similar occupational hazards, which are compounded by the poor living conditions of people who are engaged in picking waste (see Chintan 2007; Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Gunsilius, Chaturvedi, and Scheinberg 2011; Joshi and Ahmed 2016; Kaseva and Gupta 1996; Kumar et al. 2017; Wilson, Velis, and Cheeseman 2006).

The Changing Relationship between Caste and Sanitation Labor

Waste management in India is rooted in the intertwined interests of extracting profits from waste while ensuring sustainability by managing waste. Both processes guide national, state, and municipal policy and have led to the large-scale privatization of the waste management system. Extracting profits from waste and sustainability are both contingent on the labor of women who pick and sell waste. And yet, as I demonstrate in subsequent sections, women performing the primary labor necessary in extracting profits and sustainability are rendered inconsequential to both, through government and corporate activity. I argue that changes in waste management and wastepickers' subsequent marginalization from access to waste has created circumstances by which

women assert their legitimacy over the rights to access waste, thereby redefining the meanings of caste-based sanitation labor.

I have argued that Baudh and Matang castes were deemed polluting through caste ideology, assigned sanitation labor, and excluded from access to public institutions. These ritually designated hereditary occupations and resultant exploitation were constructed as the prevailing 'common sense' through caste ideology. Occupational designations and their ideological foundations were first absorbed by the colonial state and then by the post-colonial Indian state. These forces have served to keep poor Dalit communities in sanitation labor. As I have shown, Dalit women part of this research, consistently perform the most difficult and demeaning forms of sanitation labor and receive the least benefit and remuneration. Picking and processing waste continues to be perceived as 'dirty'. And so, the poorest women belonging to castes historically forced into sanitation labor continue to do it, out of *majboori*. By performing the labor intensive tasks of picking, sorting, cleaning, and selling waste, wastepickers save municipal budgets from investing in these endeavors (Chintan 2007; Doron and Jeffrey 2018; Jain 1994; Wilson, Velis, and Cheeseman 2006).

Dalit women preform the most crucial labor required within waste management. Discarded waste, lying on the streets, in dumpsters, and on dumping grounds has no monetary value. The act of picking, collecting, and selling waste turns it into a valuable commodity. In performing these activities, women who pick waste add primary value to waste, making it commercially viable. As waste moves up the recycling chain it accrues increasing monetary value through the labor of people involved at each step; including scrap dealers, godown or warehouse owners and workers, wholesalers, and recyclers

(Berthier 2003; Frow 2003; Wilson, Velis, and Cheeseman 2006). Dalit women I spoke with, who pick waste on the streets, on dumps, and trade in waste in exchange for garlic, all add value to a discarded commodity. It is important to recognize that without this primary labor, the trade in recyclable waste and profits extracted from it are not possible (Berthier 2003; Wilson, Velis, and Cheeseman 2006).

Extracting Profits from Recyclable Waste

In the Global South, privatization of waste management systems is accepted as necessary to improve waste management in urban areas (Ahmed and Ali 2004; Banerjee 2017; Chavan and Zambare 2013; Singh 2020). In India, dissatisfaction of urban elites with municipal waste management services has consistently promoted privatization of waste management services (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Shankar and Sahni 2018). Privatization that began in the late 1990s was initially characterized by public private partnerships. Here municipalities contracted out the work of segregating, processing, and recycling dry waste to private corporations. Public private partnerships also included community participation in collecting, segregating, and composting waste at the local level (Ahmed and Ali 2004; Chaplin 2011; Rathi 2006). These partnerships saved municipal budgets the cost of labor, land and capital needed for the treatment of waste, enabled private businesses to earn profits through recycling, and provided civic minded citizens a sense of ownership in keeping their locality clean (Rathi 2006).

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly how and when the trade in recyclable waste became profitable (Nighoskar 2019). The trade in recyclable waste grew as a result of economic liberalization and urbanization in the 1990s and 2000s, making it reasonable to estimate a similar timeline for its increasing financial value. Today, the trade in

recyclable waste in Mumbai, generates approximately two and half to four and half billion rupees annually (Sinha 2018). Given the scale of profits that can be extracted from the trade in waste, multi-national corporations have entered waste management seeking contracts to control all waste management activities. Today, municipal governments, multi-national corporations, smaller private enterprises, and the garbage mafia are all competing to extract maximum profits from recyclable waste (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Joshi and Ahmed 2016; Reddy and Ram 2019; Shankar and Sahni 2018).

On a Monday morning in mid-April, I go to the Parisar Vikas main office to meet Vandana Tai a Parisar Vikas program coordinator. Vandana Tai is in her fifties and has been working with the sanghatana for a couple decades. Her association with women who pick waste is based on her work with Parisar Vikas. I had arranged to meet with her to learn about waste management in Mumbai, the sanghatana's work, and their interventions in the Dalit community of women who pick waste. Once I reach the office, I make my way to the inner room, where Vandana Tai is sitting, while greeting other staff members along the way. Vandana Tai is busy working but asks me to pull up a chair and sit in front of her desk while she finishes what she is doing. During this conversation, I learn that there is little clarity in the BMC's waste management strategies making it impossible to pinpoint the actual policy, its decision makers, and whom to address for information. This Vandana Tai tells me is deliberate because waste is now financially lucrative and the BMC do not want others, including wastepickers, staking their claim. Over two and half decades of formal waste management, the BMC has developed a stranglehold over the movement of waste in Mumbai. During one of my visits to Jyoti Tai's home, who I introduced in chapter two, she explains to me, the control BMC workers exert over dry

waste in Mumbai, “Many years ago [Parisar Vikas] had a contract to pick non-medical dry waste from a prominent hospital. A supervisor and four women went to collect the waste. When the BMC sanitation workers found only wet waste they asked the hospital workers where it [dry waste] had gone. Hospital workers would not dare take dry waste away from the BMC, so and they told them [municipal workers] that Parisar Vikas were asked to take the dry waste. [the next day] BMC workers started threatening the women saying do you understand anything, you will get TB and AIDS because you do not know how to handle these materials and so on. The BMC workers then told the women they have been called to the ward office where a police complaint was filed against the women accusing them of improper waste collection. BMC workers put some medical waste in the women’s collected dry waste to show that women were collecting things they are not allowed to. There was about a thousand rupees ($14) worth of waste coming out of the hospital daily and BMC sanitation workers wanted sole claim on that money”.

By 1998, dumping grounds in Mumbai were heavily patrolled by Mumbai police. At this time, there was no boundary wall around the Deonar dumping ground and women from surrounding slum settlements routinely entered the grounds to collect recyclable waste. The police, on the BMC’s order, would conduct daily raids to arrest women picking waste on the dump. Many interlocutors recall constantly being on the lookout to evade police. If arrested they would have to pay a fine before being released at the end of day. I learn from Jyoti Tai, between 1998-1999, the Mumbai High Court appealed to the BMC to allow wastepickers entry on dumping grounds. Soon after the High Court order, fires began on the Deonar dumping ground. The BMC blamed wastepickers for starting fires, following which the High Court banned wastepickers entry on the grounds. At a

savings group meeting in a sanitation worker's home in the vasti, I am introduced to a group of women who picked waste at the Deonar dumping ground. These women picked waste on dumping grounds since they were children, first with their mothers and then with their in-laws. Godavari is a Baudh woman in her forties, her daughter goes to school and has dreams of working in a bank and her son is in college. During this meeting, she tells me, "We never set fires, they [gang members] did and we were only picking whatever leftover metal we could find. Once wood or doors caught fire, we would stand nearby waiting for metal hinges and nuts-bolts to fall away, we were getting a good price for copper, brass, and iron". Gang members routinely set fires to vehicles, doors, etc. to extract metal. Rival gangs would also burn each other's stock in retribution (Johari 2015; Sinha 2018). Gang activity increased police presence on dumping grounds which further threatened women's livelihoods. Gang members were largely unscathed as they would intimidate or bribe police, security guards, and municipal waste truck drivers, to retain their access to the dumping ground. Godavari recalls seeing local young men diverting municipal waste trucks carrying lucrative waste to specific gang controlled spaces within the Deonar dump. She remembers seeing young men with swords and daggers roaming the ground to protect their territory. Godavari adds, "We worked in fear of either being caught by the police or in the crossfire between the gangs". Five hundred waste trucks carrying approximately seven and a half million rupees of recyclable waste enter dumping grounds across Mumbai per day (Sinha 2018). Women who pick waste earn a miniscule amount compared to the profits gangs and government officials extract from waste deposited on dumping grounds. And so, the focus on keeping them out of dumping grounds might seem pointless. Women who pick waste have no unions or pressure groups

to fight on their behalf, making them an easy target (Nighoskar 2019). But significantly, if these women were given authorization in 1999 as per the Mumbai High Court directive, the BMC would have to contend with a legitimate stakeholder to the profits extracted from recyclable waste.

During my first meeting with Vandana Tai, in the Parisar Vikas main office, she tells me that initially, Parisar Vikas was hesitant about getting into the management of dry waste because it was solely controlled by the mafia. And while the dumping ground continues to be controlled by the garbage mafia[26], governmental regulation in waste management from the late 1990s onwards, slowly opened the way for Parisar Vikas's constituents to stake a claim in the management of recyclable waste. In the late 2000s, Parisar Vikas won contracts to manage eight of the approximately twenty-four municipal dry waste centers in Mumbai. The dry waste center I visit is a municipal facility, contracted to Parisar Vikas through Johnson and Johnson. It is a dark, dank and cavernous warehouse situated under a vehicular flyover. Facing the warehouse is a dilapidated room with a road stretching between both structures. The women working at this center do not venture into the warehouse, they work on the road and amid the rubble of the small room. To one side of the road, within the premises of the dry waste center is an overflowing dumpster. Waste at various stages of decomposing is also strewn around the dry waste center premises. Six trucks and drivers are assigned to the dry waste center, for twelve women workers. All women working here previously picked waste on the streets. Indu came to work at the dry waste center in 2010. She is thirty-two years old and

[26] Gangs continue to set prices of the recyclable waste sold in and around the dumping ground. They bribe officials for access to the most lucrative waste, employ children to segregate that waste, control what is picked, who to sell to, and the cut the children receive (Nighoskar 2019; Sinha 2018).

has been doing sanitation work for half her life. She is the primary earner of her household as her husband cannot work due to illness. The money she earns supports her family; her three young children's schooling and her husband's many medical expenses.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I visited this dry waste center half a dozen times. Every time I went there, seeing me Indu and the other women present, would come to greet me, and take a few minutes break to talk with me. At times we would go to the roadside tea stall set up under a tree, across the road from the center, where the women could stretch out, rest and chat for a little while, before going back to work. Through numerous visits and conversations I learn of the women's work routine and their notions about their work. Six of the twelve women go on the trucks to pick up dry waste from their allotted areas, which include residential societies and one shopping mall. The trucks and drivers are contracted by the BMC through a private company, who pay the drivers a monthly salary. Once a truck reaches its pickup location, the woman on that truck gets out, picks up and dumps the contents of the dry waste bin in the back of the truck, continuing the process at other locations, until the truck is full. The truck is then driven back to the dry waste center, where the women unload its contents before going back for collection. The other six women stay back at the center to segregate the waste (Figure 3). Dry waste trucks make their rounds till 4pm, with a lunch break at 1pm. After the last collection round, the women finish the daily segregation together. They sort through almost six thousand kilos of mixed waste daily, getting approximately three to six hundred kilos of sellable waste at the end of the day. In the late evening they load up a truck with segregated waste, go to the *katewala*, sell the waste, and divide the money

amongst themselves for their daily wages, earning approximately two hundred to three hundred and fifty rupees ($3-5) per person.

Figure 3: Workers sorting through dry waste at a municipal dry waste center (photo by author)

The women leave their homes at approximately 7am and return home by 7pm, without a weekly day off. In part this is due to their own needs, the women do not earn a salary, their daily needs are met through their daily earnings. Indu says, “I have to come to work every day, if I don’t then my family won’t eat that day. We use gloves and masks because if I fall sick, what will my family eat!”. Waste is generated every day, and the BMC needs workers to collect it daily or face complaints from residents in affluent areas. In consequence, Dalit sanitation workers’ relentless economic insecurities are exploited, to serve elite dominant caste sensibilities.

On one of my visits to the dry waste center, Indu brings me around to the back of a truck that has just come in. Pointing inside she says “See these wooden planks, we have to carry them and bring them here on the truck. This is a dumper’s work, but all these

jobs are given to us. Why should we do this work, we don't get paid". The women have to collect whatever dry waste is left at residential society gates for municipal collection, for fear of complaints being lodged against them, and their work contracts terminated. During another visit, Indu calls me over to see a large sofa and sheet of cracked glass propped behind it, along one side of the truck bed (Figure 4), "We told them don't give us this kind of waste, how are we to pick it up and put it in the trucks, and if we are injured while doing this work, then what … but they don't listen". Wooden planks, sofas, cracked glass sheets, etc. are all unsellable and loading-unloading them are a waste of the women's time and labor; work that is forced upon them and not compensated. Indu adds, "We have fought with the BMC too, not to make us collect hazardous materials, because there is no compensation if anything happens to us". The women are incredibly frustrated with the work and do not want to work at the dry waste center under the current labor conditions. Despite their frustrations, Indu says work at dry waste centers and the IDs they received have given them unprecedented access to waste from residential societies, shopping malls, and other private enterprises. Significantly this never before had access has given them conditional work security.

Figure 4: Workers unloading a truck at a municipal dry waste center (photo by author)

When waste management is contracted out to corporations, the company does the more profitable work of recycling while the government takes responsibility for less profitable work like collection and transportation (Shankar and Sahni 2018). When waste management is contracted to an NGO, as seen from women's work at the dry waste center, the organization ends up saving municipal budgets the cost of waste collection, employee salaries, and compensation (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Dias 2016). And yet, local and multi-national corporations lead the privatization of waste management. In mid-July, as part of their waste management directives the Maharashtra government divided Mumbai's wards between two multinational corporations; namely Bisleri and Coca Cola. After I learn about this division, I go to the Parisar Vikas main office one afternoon, to ask Vandana Tai details about the division, its impact on the women's

livelihoods, and on the sanghatana's work. Vandana Tai tells me, the state government tasked both corporations to collect and recycle all dry waste generated within their allotted wards. Both corporations have contracted out the primary labor of collection and segregation to Parisar Vikas. And Parisar Vikas has been tasked with collecting and segregating all sellable and unsellable plastic collected at municipal dry waste centers, identifying residential societies, small businesses, restaurants, and convincing them to dispose their dry waste through Parisar Vikas, and most importantly convincing their constituents to store their collected waste selling it directly to the corporations instead of selling it daily to the *katewala*. Significantly, Parisar Vikas staff fear if they are unable to meet this mandate, future opportunities for their constituents could be at risk.

State and private interest in extracting profits from recyclable waste has restricted livelihoods of women who pick waste on dumping grounds while expanding work opportunities for the women at dry waste centers. Bisleri and Coca Cola have both promised to buy all dry waste collected by Parisar Vikas's constituents at market value. But the market value paid to a wastepicker is twenty to forty percent lower than the market value paid to a *katewala*. Through these schemes, governments and corporations will accrue many-fold any profits Dalit sanitation workers might receive. Significantly all profits extracted from the trade in dry waste are entirely dependent on the exploited and uncompensated labor of poor Dalit women, who have little choice but to stick their hands in discarded waste.

Sustainability Concerns of the Affluent Disadvantaging the Poor

From the early 2000s there was a growing awareness among the Indian elite of environmental problems caused by the unchecked disposal of waste. Aimed at protecting

the environment, this awareness led to a concerted effort by affluent citizens to push for better waste management to create sustainable and clean cities (Baviskar 2002; Chaplin 1999). In echoes of the colonial city, this form of bourgeois environmentalism (Baviskar 2002) focused on slum demolition, large scale infrastructure projects, and an increase in private ownership of waste management services in order to beautify elite spaces (Chaplin 2011; McFarlane 2008). To meet the demands of its elite citizens, policies formulated in this time period, like the SWM Rules highlighted sustainability in waste management, stressing that management of waste must minimize adverse impacts on the environment (Joshi and Ahmed 2016; Mani and Singh 2016).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the environmental movement was focused on air pollution as it affected many affluent urbanites (Baviskar 2002; Chaplin 1999). In Mumbai alone, waste burning releases 22,000 tons of pollutants into the air annually leading to rise in respiratory illnesses (Kumar et al. 2017; Mani and Singh 2016). From the early 2000s, residents in the area around the Deonar dumping ground were protesting against pollution caused by the fires set on the ground. As a result of these protests, in 2008 the city pledged to close down parts of the Deonar dumping ground (Johari 2015; Kulkarni 2012; Sinha 2018). Instead of being shut down, by 2010, the dumping ground was being managed by a private corporation. Women no longer had free entry into the dumping ground but gained entry by bribing security guards. Fires too continued to burn, stoking three substantial blazes at the Deonar: in 2015, 2016, and 2018. The 2016 fire raged for over two weeks, choked large parts of the city in a dense smog, and was followed by massive citizen's protest (Nighoskar 2019; Sinha 2018). Godavari, who I met at a savings group meeting in her vasti, recalls being stuck inside the Deonar

dumping ground during this blaze, alongside other women from her vasti, fearing for their lives until they were rescued. After this fire a wall was built around the dump and entry into the ground was barred; damaging women's livelihoods. Godavari astutely points out failure of bourgeois environmentalism for her community, "Wastepickers are being erased. Who is doing anything about it? For so much time we have been sitting at home [without work]".

As part of its focus on sustainability, the SWM Rules 2016 mandated the door-to-door collection and segregation of waste at the household level. This has made it more difficult for Dalit women to access good recyclable waste. Before the implementation of SWM Rules 2016, mixed waste was dumped in the large roadside dumpsters provided by the municipality. Vandana Tai explained to me as we sit in the Parisar Vikas main office "Before, wastepickers were the only ones who would put their hands [in the bins] to remove sellable materials. Who else is going to put their hands into filthy rotting waste. But now dry waste and wet waste are kept separate, dry waste stays clean, housekeeping staff, BMC sanitation workers take the premium waste to supplement their income, disadvantaging wastepickers". Residential societies hire housekeepers to collect segregated waste from each residence, who get the first pick of dry waste before it is left is set out for municipal collection. In my conversation with her, as we sit in the Parisar Vikas vasti office, Padma Bai points out that residential societies pay housekeepers a monthly salary, adding "They [residential societies] should give us all the good waste. Now if they [housekeepers] get a salary and if they also take out all the good waste, what is left for us? How will we eat?". Women who work at municipal dry waste centers collect dry waste after the wet waste trucks have finished their rounds; after the

housekeepers and BMC sanitation workers have taken their pick of the dry waste. On one of my visits to the dry waste center, Indu tells me “The housekeeper gets the first pick of good waste, the person who composts takes out some more good waste, and then the BMC”. Pointing to the broken furniture and glass she had to haul today, Indu adds “We get all the unsellable waste”. By ‘good waste’ the women mean high quality recyclable plastic which has a value between twelve to twenty-five rupees (16-46 cents) per kilo. The value of remaining sellable waste like paper or cardboard is valued between three to ten rupees (4-13 cents). Unsellable waste has no monetary value.

Women I spoke with all voice the same concern, while segregation might be sustainable, it has negatively affected their ability to earn a livelihood. One evening in late October, Suman Bai, Manda Bai, and I are sitting in the Parisar Vikas vasti office, as I ask them about their thoughts on the impact sustainability policies have had on women who work with dry waste. To this, Suman Bai first says “I understand the importance of reducing waste and segregation at the source, but it has caused damage to our community, our homes run on the money we make by picking waste. Because people know there is money in waste, they store [recyclables] and give it to their maid or society housekeeper and whatever comes on the streets or dumps is unsellable. Before price was plastic was low and wastepickers were getting a lot, but now when the price of plastic is high the women are getting very little”.

Another step towards fulfilling elite citizens sustainability concerns was the removal of large dumpsters, which were an eyesore, on street corners in affluent areas. The BMC argued since waste was being collected at each residence, there was no longer a need for roadside dumpsters. But their removal severely limited access to waste for

women who pick waste on the streets. During the same conversation, Manda Bai tells me there are now only three bins remaining on her picking route when earlier there were dozens, “There is hardly any waste on the streets anymore. Before there were large waste bins on every road, and they would be overflowing with waste in the early mornings. Now there are no bins, and we can’t go inside the residential societies [where segregated waste is kept for municipal collection], the watchmen don’t let us”.

As we continue to talk about sustainability practices in waste management and its impact of Dalit women’s lives, Manda Bai adds “I tell you [after SBM began] there were workers coming in and cleaning the streets, for the first few days. All streets I pick were clean, there wasn’t a piece of waste anywhere. That was so damaging to us! They [hired sweepers] were doing the rounds cleaning [the streets], we were not getting any waste to sell, we were forced to stay at home on an empty stomach”. Agreeing Suman Bai says “Everyone wants their country and neighborhood to be clean so SBM is a good thing but there is no facility for people like us. So if the country is clean, the city is clean, and the home is clean, but we are left on empty stomachs, how is that a good thing. If our children stay hungry what is the use of SBM to us, if our children are uneducated then what is its use to us”. Cloaked within the language of sustainability, Swacch Bharat Mission (SBM) too jeopardizes the livelihoods of women who pick waste.

In addition to broader policy directives for the sustainable management of waste, state governments often declare one-off initiatives that fail to consider the livelihoods of poor Dalit women. In summer 2018, the Maharashtra government announced a ban on the use and trade of certain kinds of plastic, colloquially called the ‘plastic ban’. Only plastic with a manufacturers stamp, which includes its microns and a buy back price, was

allowed in circulation, the use and trade of any other plastic became illegal. Overnight the price of plastic dropped as did the earnings of Dalit women who pick waste, because *katewalas* refused to buy plastic collected by wastepickers for fear of reprisals from the BMC. Detrimentally, these sustainability measures; including the plastic ban, removal of roadside dumpsters, household waste segregation, and door to door collection, have reduced sanitation workers daily earnings to half of what they were previously making.

Contestations Over the Rights to Access Waste

The idea of legitimacy is fundamental to wastepickers contestations over their right to access waste. Wastepickers across the Global South have attempted to achieve legitimacy within waste management systems, by forming cooperatives and competing for municipal waste management contracts (Chikarmane and Narayan 2005; Medina 2000; Shankar and Sahni 2018; Wilson, Velis, and Cheeseman 2006). Wastepickers have also sought legitimacy by lobbying governments to provide them with ID cards authorizing they labor (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Shankar and Sahni 2018). For Parisar Vikas constituents, contractual and authorized legitimacy are important in the assertion of their pre-existing rights over access to waste. In one of our many conversations, travelling to and from women's worksites, Suman Bai points out that women have been cleaning the city, long before waste management policies were introduced. By picking waste in the same area for decades, women have established territorial rights to access waste in 'their' areas (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000; Shankar and Sahni 2018).

Dalit women do not enter wastepicking out of environmental concerns. They pick waste as a result of crippling poverty and an absence of opportunity. But women are fully aware of the impact their labor has on improving the environmental and human health of a city. Suman Bai's explanation here is enlightening, "The sanghatana told us we do such important work for the environment, we save the municipality cost of transporting [waste], we keep it away from the dump, all of this helps the environment. From then on, we realized that the work we are doing is really good. It is hard work, especially in the rains, we would be out staying wet while picking waste, but at least it is important for the society, the environment, for people's health, and I feel proud of the work we do". Women are also keenly aware of the far-reaching impact of their labor. I visit the dumping ground again in late summer. At this time, Swati comes down from the waste mounds, to meet me outside the office and we sit under the awning amid the buzz of flies. During this conversation I ask her thoughts on the impact her daily work has on broader society. Swati tells me "These big people, they think less of us. Whatever scrap metal we collect goes to the recyclers who give it companies who make all these buildings, so I don't think you should think less of us, because we help you, it we don't do our work then how can you make your products". These interlocutors' knowledge of their contributions to society bolsters their claims of legitimacy in access to waste. As I have demonstrated, women's long held territorial rights over access to waste are displaced through governmental intervention, privatization, and policies that promote sustainability. These policies delegitimize and exploit women's labor; intensifying their contestations over the rights to access waste (Ahmed and Ali 2004; Chaturvedi 2013; Chintan 2007; Shankar and Sahni 2018).

Women's frustrations at being denied access to waste are compounded when they realize that written policy promotes the authorization of their labor. SWM Rules 2016 were the first to define 'wastepicker' as important stakeholders in urban waste management, advising their integration within municipal waste management systems. But they do not specify how wastepickers are to be integrated; leaving those decisions up to municipal discretion (Joshi and Ahmed 2016; Mani and Singh 2016; Singh 2020). I learn from many conversations with Parisar Vikas staff, integration of women who pick waste has been severely limited and inconsistent across India. While numerous states have passed laws integrating wastepickers in formal waste management systems, much of this integration remains on paper. SBM too supports the integration of women who pick waste in policy, but its practices are contradictory to its rhetoric. While bureaucratic writing is constitutive of governmental action, the absence policy implementation has debilitating consequences in the lives of the poor (Gupta 2012). For example, in 2018, the Indore municipality rounded up wastepickers and their families, moving them to encampments outside the city. Forced to live outside the city, without access to transportation, these families lost their only source of income. The Indore municipality then hired private contractors to provide workers to sweep the streets, collect, segregate and process waste. For the resulting cleanliness, the city of Indore has been awarded the SBM's 'cleanliness award' for four consecutive years. In Maharashtra, the Pune municipality set up successful projects to include women who pick waste in the formal waste collection system, providing them with health insurance and mandating residents pay them a service fee (Shankar and Sahni 2018). Despite being one of India's richest municipalities, Mumbai has done little to include women who pick waste, beyond giving

Parisar Vikas contracts to manage eight dry waste centers. In one of my conversations with her, in the Parisar Vikas main office, Vandana Tai asserts, “We have asked, but the BMC refuses to pay these women a salary or give them any benefits. They fear that integrating wastepickers will give them legitimate claims to demand jobs and salaries”. And so, governmental recommendations on integration have remained meaningless as Dalit women who pick waste continue to be deemed incompatible with the formal waste management system. This exclusion perpetuates inhumane work conditions, the crushing cycle of poverty and wastepickers’ embodied social stigma (Chintan 2007; Doron and Jeffrey 2018; Gidwani 2015; Gill 2012; Wilson, Velis, and Cheeseman 2006).

Since the early 2000s, Parisar Vikas has been lobbying the BMC to authorize women who pick waste as legitimate dry waste collectors by providing them with IDs. Parisar Vikas argues that their work contributes to a reduction of waste at the street level thereby reducing the city cost of transporting waste to garbage dumps and dry waste centers. The sanghatana further argues by picking and selling waste, women who pick waste move it into the recycling chain helping the city meet its recycling targets. In fact, based on the SWM Rules 2016, the Maharashtra government requires all its municipalities to provide informal sanitation workers with IDs, authorizing them to pick waste. While municipalities neighboring Mumbai have taken steps to do so, the BMC’s efforts have been inconsistent and lacking. Dry waste center workers who have authorization through IDs are able to access to waste without being insulted or turned away. Knowing this prompts many of the women to see IDs as important in getting priority access to waste. During a conversation with Padma Bai and Manda Bai at the Parisar Vikas vasti office, Padma Bai argues “We pick all the waste, we clean the roads,

the government should see this and give us IDs, but they don't want to give us [IDs], they are afraid we will ask for jobs next. But we don't want jobs, only rightful access to good waste". IDs are also seen as important for working with dignity. Manda Bai explains, "If we go in the lane or in a society they tell us to go away, they think we will steal from them, it doesn't feel good, we feel slighted … but if we have ID cards then it will be better … then people won't look at us like we are thieves".

Contestations over the right to access waste have arisen as a consequence of that access being threatened. Women's contestations are reinforced through their knowledge of the impact of their labor and by the fact that written policy indicates they have a legitimate claim to access waste. Women sanitation workers contestations and claims of legitimacy in access to waste are best summed up by Suman Bai. During a meeting at the Parisar Vikas vasti office, about strategizing to mitigate the impact of sustainability policies on women's livelihoods, she says, "It is my position that all waste should be disposed of at the local level by employing wastepickers. We should be given contracts for housekeeping, to compost wet waste, and to sort and sell dry waste. This will ensure women's livelihoods, save the municipality costs of transporting waste, of land used for dumping, and protect the environment. We have been doing this work from before, and we should get something for it, that is rightfully ours". While Dalit women continue to perform sanitation labor out of *majboori,* women included in this research, articulate the importance of their labor for the dominant castes, claim legitimacy in access to waste, and demand fair inclusion in the waste management system. This I argue marks a shift from servitude inherent in caste-based sanitation labor, towards a degree of control over their labor.

CHAPTER IV

ASPIRING TO BREAK THE LINK BETWEEN CASTE AND HEREDITARY SANITATION LABOR

In this chapter, I analyze the ways in which caste hegemony has worked to perpetuate caste-based labor, sharpening the exploitation of and the indignities suffered by Dalit communities. I then elaborate on the ways in which Dalit women's informal sanitation labor is being formalized through their association with Parisar Vikas. And I argue that through the formalization of their labor, women are able to claim dignity that is lost within the servitude of hereditary sanitation labor. I show how the interventions initiated by Parisar Vikas for this community have enabled women sanitation workers to disrupt the common sense of caste hegemony and construct a Gramscian good sense. I finally assert that these changes have fostered within the women, a capacity to aspire; creating a path for them to sever the link between caste and hereditary sanitation labor.

The Hegemony of Caste

Hegemony is the exercise of power though ideology. It is contingent on a "permanent consent" manufactured by the dominant social groups, in order to maintain their dominance (Fontana 1993, 141). For the ruling class to maintain their hegemony, all practices that serve their economic interests must be viewed as the natural order of things. Gramsci described this as manufacturing a 'common sense' which is an integral part of hegemonic knowledge and values (Brooker 2002). For Gramsci, 'common sense' is

dogmatic, conservative, conformist, and inherently suspicious of change (Nun 1986, 202).

Dalit communities are at the bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy. They were historically colonized, forced to live on the margins of villages and excluded from participation in mainstream society. Historically, power was controlled and exercised through caste ideology by the dominant castes, particularly the Brahman and Kshatriya castes. Based on notions of purity and pollution, caste ideology was mobilized to construct the prevailing common sense, that dominant castes are pure and deserve an abundance of privileges and Dalits are polluted, deserving no entitlements, bound in servitude to the dominant castes (Rao 2009; Roy 2014). Moreover, caste ideology fixed the individuals caste status, and hence, their social, political, and occupational positions at birth (Béteille 1965).

The *dharma* or caste duty of the subordinated castes was to serve the dominant castes. Their *dharma* also included severe rules of conduct like not walking on public roads, drinking water or getting food from the same places as the dominant castes, covering their bodies, wearing jewelry, or attending school. And without access to formalized learning, all information Dalits received about themselves, and the external world was mediated through caste ideology controlled by the dominant castes. In this manner, dominant castes used caste ideology to maintain their dominance, leaving subordinated castes dependent on their patronage for food, water, and work (Dirks 2001; Rao 2009; Roy 2014).

In Hindu caste ideology, the concept of *dharma* is attached to the concept of *karma* or fate. Dalit subordination was solidified through invocation of *karma*, which

states that the Shudra and Ati-Shudra are born into subordinate castes as punishment for not carrying out their *dharma* in their past life. Moreover, by doing their *dharma* in this life, the Shudras and Ati-Shudras can change their *karma* and be born into a higher caste in their next life (Roy 2014). This shows that the very nature of social relations and practices among the castes, especially the subordinate castes, was rooted in the hegemonic construction of power through caste ideology (Dirks 1988). I argue that caste ideology is one scheme of hegemony. I do not argue that caste hegemony was absolute but aim to show that caste ideology was able to construct a lasting consent among members of the subordinate castes so that they engaged in acts of subservience with the belief that doing their caste duty in this life they would enable them to be born into a higher caste in the next life, thereby maintaining the power of the dominant castes (Appadurai 2013; Roy 2014).

As I have shown in chapter three, sanitation labor was part of the *dharma* of Baudh and Matang castes. Significantly, Ambedkar argued that the ritualistic nature of caste ideology only made it more pernicious and permanent. He argued it is forced labor, performed by people who are seen as cheap and dispensable, by those in power (Gatade 2015; Loomba 2016). Jyoti Tai's comment on the persistence of caste based sanitation labor, made during one of our chats as we travel to the Parisar Vikas office, is pertinent. She explains to me, "[Historically] caste is an explanation, wastepicking is seen as the consequences of *karma,* and so [today] there is a whole group of Dalit people who will do this work because they have no other options". Today, the prevalence of caste hegemony is evident through caste based sanitation labor, not just in who performs what aspects of waste management work but also in the public attitudes that dealing with waste

is somebody else's job, and the indignities that person suffers are justified as being a consequence of their birth (Bathran 2018; Doron and Jeffrey 2018).

Leaving Behind Caste Associations on the Path to Emancipation

Over numerous conversations with Suman Bai and Laxmi Bai, who I write about later in this chapter, they mention Ambedkar's call for Dalits to leave the village and move to the city for their emancipation. Geographically, the Indian village was structured along caste lines. Historically the three dominant castes, Brahmin, Kshatriya, and Vaishya, lived in the main part of the village. All of the village resources like water, fertile land, etc. were located in the dominant caste village, and were controlled by the dominant castes. Dalits lived on the outskirts of the village, in smaller hamlets, further subdivided by caste. Caste-based village boundaries were legitimized through caste ideology as Dalits were considered to be polluted and therefore could not live in the main village. These boundaries were tightly policed by rules and customs that were enforced by dominant caste communities. Members of dominant caste communities could go into Dalit hamlets, and often did, in order to punish them for some real or fictitious offence. Conversely, Dalits were only allowed to go into the upper caste village, if they were employed by someone who lived there. Dalits would go into the upper caste village to sweep the streets, clean the refuse, and dispose of the dead (Cháirez-Garza 2014; Rao 2009; Roy 2014). Ambedkar argued that the village is the cause of the persistence of untouchability. It is a settlement divided into two sections, creating and reinforcing spatial and social hierarchies that are fundamentally unequal and unjust and providing an easy method for identifying the touchable and untouchable (Cháirez-Garza 2014).

Dalits belonging to castes tasked with sanitation labor were thus stripped off their choices, their worth as human beings, and were deemed undeserving of honor, respect, or dignity (Gatade 2015; Gupta, Coffey, and Spears 2016). To remedy this, in a pivotal demonstration at the Chavdar Lake in Mahad, in 1927, Ambedkar urged Dalits to renounce the occupations that strip them off their dignity and move to cities where they would not be bound by the social-spatial identifications and could pursue other opportunities moving them towards their emancipation (Cháirez-Garza 2014; Gatade 2015; Gupta, Coffey, and Spears 2016). A large majority of the Dalit women part of this research, migrated to Mumbai as a result of the 1972 famine in western Maharashtra. This migration has significantly changed socio-spatial caste associations. When I speak with Padma Bai at the Parisar Vikas vasti office one evening in October, she tells me, "We don't follow caste [discrimination], and no one [living around] discriminates against us. In the village we lived in the Dalit section, so everyone knew who we were. But in the city it is better, we can live anywhere, and people don't know [our caste]". Daya is in her forties, and currently works as a housekeeper[27], I write more about her life and work in subsequent sections of this chapter. Her parents came to Mumbai during the famine, today she rarely visits her relatives in the village; due to physical inconveniences like lack of access to water, but more importantly due to ideological differences. As we sit in her home, she explains, "Those who were able to come here during the famine were able to better themselves little by little. If we go to the village now we have to take the veil on our head, have to bow down to everyone. In the city it is not like that, my daughter will

[27] A housekeeper does the work of sweeping, mopping, and collecting garbage. It is janitorial work. In Mumbai this work is known as 'housekeeping' and the worker doing it is a 'housekeeper'.

not bow down and we don't expect her to". Daya's daughter is in her early twenties and is educated.

Migration to the city enabled Dalits to leave behind hereditary occupations, to an extent. One evening during the monsoons, after an organizational meeting, Jyoti Tai and I are travelling back home by car. During our journey, I ask Jyoti Tai about occupational mobility for Dalit women who pick waste. Acknowledging it is incredibly difficult for women who pick waste do any other work and indicating the influence of broader societal change, Jyoti Tai tells me, "Now some of the women, particularly younger women, cook in others houses, before no one would let a Dalit woman cook for them". But this community's migration has also kept them in similar forms of sanitation labor. The women I met acknowledge that women who pick waste are all Dalit. During one of my visits to the dry waste center, gesturing towards women sorting through the waste, Indu says angrily, "We are from lesser castes that is why we have to do this work". As we wait for a bus in the sweltering summer heat, Suman Bai tells me "You won't find any upper caste woman in wastepicking; only dark women like us put our hands in the filth". During that same conversation, Suman Bai puts Dalit women's continuing sanitation work in perspective, "Before people of our caste would sweep, take out the cow dung, do other people's work. When we came to Mumbai, we thought what to do, so someone started picking waste. We didn't know about [dry waste], where to take it, what to do with it, none of this was there is the village. In the village we would put our hand in the cow dung, so we didn't think much of putting our hand in the filth here either. Once that work began it continued. Now no one forces us to do this, but because we don't have any education, we have accepted this work to fill our stomachs". Picking waste on streets or

dumps and selling garlic continues to be more accessible to many of the women I met. One evening during the monsoons, I go to a vasti for a savings group meeting. I am directed to a house near the vasti entrance where a group of women along with a Parisar Vikas staff member are sitting on a brightly patterned mat spread across the floor. Before the meeting begins, I introduce myself to the women and request them to stay after the meeting if they have some time to talk with me. Ganga is among the few women who stays to talk with me. She is a Dalit woman in her forties, who picks waste on the streets. She highlights the flexibility inherent in wastepicking labor, "A woman needs to earn money because her husband doesn't work, take care of her young children, and do all the [domestic] work. So she will go to pick waste in the morning for a few hours, earn some money, come back home and see to her children and all the housework. If she goes for work all day, who will look after her children and the house".

A deeper exploration into women's continuing sanitation labor reveals it to be different from the work they did in the village. In one of my conversations with her, in the Parisar Vikas vasti office, Suman Bai points out that picking and particularly selling dry waste was not work her community did in the village, prior to their migration. On a Sunday morning in November, Jyoti Tai invites me to accompany her to a workshop for college students, where she has been asked to speak about Parisar Vikas's work. She is travelling by car and picks me up from my place of residence. As we make our way to the venue, I take this opportunity to ask Jyoti Tai about a contradiction that has been puzzling to me. I tell her that majority of the women I have spoken with tell me only Dalit women pick waste, and yet they claim no relationship between their caste and labor. Jyoti Tai's explanation is similar to Suman Bai's. She says, "The women don't see caste in their

work because this is a new profession for them. In the sense that they are not doing sanitation work the way their parents and grandparents did. Plastic came into the country only after the 1990s, these women predominantly pick plastic, nothing like their families did". Women sanitation workers I spoke with now sell collected waste and can choose to whom they sell. As I show in subsequent sections, women who work on waste management contracts are paid a salary for their work. This is significant because in the village, sanitation labor was not remunerated per market value. For the women today, being paid market value for their labor legitimizes them within the workforce, which is different from the servitude inherent to hereditary sanitation labor.

Formalizing Women's Sanitation Labor through Contractual Work

Soon after its inception in 1998, Parisar Vikas conducted a survey of women who pick waste in half a dozen vastis. They found that women who pick waste were stuck in a cycle of debt resulting from low earnings, consequent need to borrow money, and the inability to repay those loans. And so, Parisar Vikas staff decided to form savings groups to help women save money and borrow amongst themselves. My older interlocuters tell me, when Parisar Vikas staff first conducted the survey, women were suspicious of the dominant caste women asking them questions. But Parisar Vikas staff's consistent presence in their vasti convinced many interlocutors to hear them out. Suman Bai recounts "They came to us, would ask us detailed questions about where we are from, what we do, how much we earn, if we save, if we would be part of savings groups. But the first six months at least we didn't pay them much attention. The madam would come [to their vasti], she would sit in the dark with a torch she had brought and speak with us.

And she kept coming back even if we didn't pay her any attention. At that time we had no savings, we would earn every day and spend it all on what we needed that day. When we needed money, we would take loans from local moneylenders at ten or twenty percent interest and be repaying it for years. They were looting us really. So we thought, they [Parisar Vikas] are coming to us, saying they will teach us to control our money, help with our children's education, give us work, so why not give them a chance, maybe they will help us". Many women, like Vidya Bai, who I introduced in chapter three, are their family's sole earners and did not have the time to speak with Parisar Vikas staff or attend their meetings. Vidya Bai recalls "My only focus was to work, earn money and feed my children. But they [Parisar Vikas staff] kept coming. I went to the meeting thinking what harm can it do. At the meeting I got information about starting savings groups and getting help for our children's education. I felt very supported. After that meeting, I didn't go to work that day instead I went to their office and told them I am interested in starting a savings group. They told me to collect ten women from the vasti and they will help us form the savings group". In this manner, Parisar Vikas helped women in half a dozen vastis form savings groups between 1998 and 2000.

Through the savings groups, Parisar Vikas staff learnt about the physical, economic and social hardships women face while picking waste. During my initial conversation with Jyoti Tai, sitting in her bright and airy living room, she tells me, "It soon became clear to us that we need to engage with the women's labor if we are to have an impact on this community". With this realization, Parisar Vikas began alternative skills trainings to widen work opportunities available to the women. Enlisting the help of various research and training institutes in Mumbai, five hundred women were trained in

composting, operating biogas machines, and gardening between 1998 and early 2000s. Many of the women sanitation workers I spoke with attended these trainings aspiring towards better employment. During our conversation at the school where she works as a housekeeper, Kusum, who I introduced in chapter three, tells me, “They [Parisar Vikas] said they can help us, try to get us other work, we won’t have to roam the streets and pick waste. So I thought it is good if they are doing this for us. We sat and listened to them with this hope, who else is going to put an illiterate person to work, and where are we going to go asking people for a job”. Women who pick waste, work according to their own schedule, they earn daily, and are always on the move. They have no experience of being answerable to an employer, being paid a monthly salary, or working in one place. To prepare the women for new forms of employment, alternative skills trainings also included modules on working according to an employer’s schedule, having a fixed weekly holiday, budgeting for monthly income, basic reading and maths, and how to identify the correct buses/trains needed to travel across the city.

In 2000, Parisar Vikas formed cooperatives and undertook work contracts to employ women part of the alternative skills trainings. Today there are twelve registered cooperatives. Each cooperative comprises of a four-member committee, all of whom are Dalit women, who formerly or currently pick waste. Incoming work contracts are directed towards the cooperative closest to the proposed workplace. Each cooperative committee makes decisions about which contracts to undertake and how to distribute them among women who want employment. As of 2018, Parisar Vikas work contracts are ongoing at a hundred and forty locations; a hundred and twenty-three of them are compost work contracts and the remainder are housekeeping work contracts. Most of the

work sites are residential societies, with a few colleges, shopping malls, and private business establishments like hospitals and restaurants.

As I demonstrated in chapter three, waste management policies jeopardized the livelihoods of Dalit women who pick, collect, and sell waste. But the same policies also created employment opportunities for people engaged in informal sanitation work. The SWM Rules 2016 forced municipalities to implement waste segregation, door-to-door collection, recycling, and composting policies. Following the SWM Rules 2016, the BMC mandated residential societies and private businesses in Mumbai to segregate and collect all waste generated on their premises. Once segregated waste is collected, the BMC required residential societies and some private businesses to compost wet waste on their premises. As a result, residential societies and private businesses needed workers to collect, segregate, and compost waste. Dry waste was to be left for municipal collection, which would be taken to dry waste centers for further processing. To do this, the BMC needed workers to segregate recyclable waste at dry waste centers. As I have shown in chapter three, Parisar Vikas successfully lobbied the BMC to employ their constituents at some of the city's dry waste centers. Parisar Vikas was further able to capitalize on the opportunities presented by the SWM Rules 2016 and sought employment for their constituents at residential societies and private businesses as housekeepers and compost workers. In 2017 alone, Parisar Vikas cooperatives employed sixty women across approximately fifty work sites. The state did not intend to create these opportunities for Dalit women. But changes in waste management that sought to extract profit from dry waste and ensure sustainability, inadvertently opened up spaces where women compelled to perform informal sanitation labor could seek formal employment.

Women Engaged in Housekeeping Work

I go to the Parisar Vikas vasti office one afternoon in November to meet Kamal Bai. The office is bustling this day, with women gathering for a savings group meeting. Yogita Tai directs us to sit towards the back of the small office room where Kamal Bai and I can sit and talk undisturbed. Kamal Bai works as a housekeeper at a residential society from 7 to 11am. The society has four four-storey buildings, and Kamal Bai is responsible for sweeping the society's premises, stairs and passages, and collecting segregated waste from each residence daily, and washing the stairs and corridors of each building monthly. At work, she first wheels out the large waste bins, filled with the previous day's collected waste to the society's gate for municipal collection. She then sweeps the society's premises. At 9am she takes two large plastic drums - one for wet waste and one for dry waste - and starts the door-to-door collection of waste. Once all the waste is collected she gives the wet waste to the compost worker, sorts through the dry waste drum to take out recyclable waste and dumps the remaining waste in the wheeled waste bins. She then sweeps the stairs and corridors of all four buildings. After she has finished, she says "I wash up, neaten my sari and hair and only then leave for home". Kamal Bai started picking waste at the age of twelve after she was married. She tells me "When I first started going to pick up waste I would cry and I wasn't able to do the work, I didn't understand what to pick up and how. Any educated people I would come across [on the streets] would tell me I should go to school and study and not do this work, but what to do this is my fate". Kamal Bai is now in her fifties and has two sons and a daughter, all of whom she educated and are also married. She elaborates, "I didn't want the same for my children. I put them in school and never took them to pick waste. I didn't

like it, why should I subject them to it". Today both her sons work as drivers and her daughter-in-law is a nurse.

Kusum, who I have previously written about, works as a housekeeper at a primary school. She starts work at 8:30am, first sweeping and mopping the classrooms, corridors, and stairs, moving on to cleaning the toilets. After lunch she sweeps the school premises, passages, and courtyard. At 3pm, after school has let out she goes back into the building to sweep the corridors and classrooms and is done for the day by 4:30pm. Kusum says "Everyone treats me well here, the principal, the teachers, the peons. They ask after my health, give me advice for good health". Kusum has two sons and a daughter, her husband sold garlic wholesale but is currently unemployed. She tells me Parisar Vikas helped with her daughter's primary education and nursing degree. Her daughter now works as a nurse and one of her sons works as a housekeeper in a residential society.

Anandi Bai and Seema are two of the four housekeepers employed at a large residential society in central Mumbai. On a cool rainy afternoon in July, a Parisar Vikas supervisor takes me to meet the women working at this residential society. We meet the women at the society's administrative office where they usually eat lunch. Anandi Bai is in her late forties and lives with her husband, three sons, daughters in law and grandchildren. Anandi Bai started picking waste when she was sixteen after she has two children. Seema has three sons and a daughter, all of whom work as peons in private companies, her daughter has a housekeeping contract through Parisar Vikas. Seema did construction work and sold garlic before she started housekeeping work, six years ago. As I share my lunch with the women, I ask them about their lives and their work. They tell me they begin work at 8:30am and finish by 4:30pm, breaking for lunch at 1pm. Each

woman is responsible for five buildings. After they arrive at work, each woman first sweeps stairs, corridors, premises, and then goes door-to-door collecting segregated waste in her assigned buildings. Once the waste is collected, the women sort through the dry waste together, remove any sellable waste, and store it in one corner of the society's premises. The rest of the waste is left at the society's gate for municipal collection. The women sell the stored waste weekly, dividing the money amongst the four of them. Once a month the women clear cobwebs and mop stairs and corridors in their assigned buildings. The administrative office for the residential society is assigned to each woman to clean, on a monthly rotation. The women also clean the back of the property on a four-month rotation. Anandi Bai says they have good facilities at this society; a tap for water, access to a bathroom, and a place to rest and have lunch "Once we are in the society it is like we are working in a company, there is no tension".

I meet Daya, who I mention earlier in this chapter, one evening in April. I am in the Parisar Vikas vasti office with Yogita Tai, who calls out to Daya as she passes the open office door on her way home. Yogita Tai introduces me and asks Daya if she has the time to talk with me. Daya invites me to her home where we can sit and talk. Her apartment is in the same building as the office. Once in her home, I sit on the floor in the front room, near a bed piled high with bedding. Her son is sitting on the bed, and I chat with him while Daya goes into the small kitchen to get some water and make tea. After a little while Daya brings out water, tea, and some biscuits before settling down in front of me. I ask about her work, and she tells me she works as a housekeeper in a gated community. She starts work at 7:30am finishing work at noon. She first sweeping the community's premises, then going door-to-door to collect waste. She also collects waste

from a hospital, a gym, and a community center on the premises. Once all waste has been collected she gives the wet waste to the compost workers, sorts through the dry waste for sellable materials and stores these, selling them weekly. Daya has good facilities at work; a small room to keep her belongings with a bathroom for her use. Born in Mumbai, Daya studied only till the third standard, all her siblings finished school and she says none of them do sanitation work. Her father worked as a driver in the city public transit system and her mother worked as a seamstress. Even though she did not go to school, Daya did not work until she was twenty-two. After being married at seventeen, she stayed home and occasionally worked as a seamstress while her children were young. At that time her husband worked as a driver for a private company. Today he owns and drives a taxi. When her children started school, Daya says "I wanted them to have a good education. I wanted to put them in private school, so I started working. I made chapatis for a lunch service, picked waste, and did any other work I could find". When Daya joined Parisar Vikas, she says "Unlike other men in the vasti, my husband was very supportive. He said you are independent and you like doing it so you should do it".

Women Engaged in Compost Work

On a hot afternoon in May, I walk with Suman Bai to a compost center in a gated community in central Mumbai. The gate has two automobile entrances for incoming and outgoing cars with a pedestrian entrance to one side. Three security guards look up as we get to the pedestrian entrance, Suman Bai tells them we are from Parisar Vikas and need to speak with the women at the compost center. The guards tell us to write our names and other details in the entry book and let us through after we do. As we make our way to the

compost center, I see tree-lined streets, well-manicured lawns, trimmed hedges and beautifully planted flowers. I am told that this community has six twenty-storey buildings with many gardens, a community center, and a pool. The compost center is surrounded by trees, trimmed bushes, and potted plants. Inside it has a concrete floor, corrugated iron roof, and green textile strung between poles in place of walls. It is a large rectangular space, half of which hold a dozen blue compost drums suspended on tripod legs and fitted with a hand crank. The other half holds an open space where the compost workers process waste and a small washing area surrounded by large buckets of water. Near the entrance are large gunny sacks filled with ready compost and smaller plastic crates filled with compost that needs to be dried out. The entire center has the sickly sweet smell of composting waste.

Suman Bai introduces me to Vasudha and Kala who work at this center. Both women are in their mid-thirties. Vasudha has two sons, both of whom are in school, and her husband works as a driver. Kala has one son who is also in school. She tells me she is separated from her husband, who has since died, because “He was an alcoholic and just sat at home, not working!”. A large drum of food waste is ready for processing by the time Vasudha, and Kala come to work at 9am. They first dump the waste onto the floor in the open space. Sitting on low stools they sort and chop the waste, filling large plastic tubs they have set next to them. Once full, they empty the tubs in a compost drum ready to take on waste. Once the compost drum is filled to its maximum capacity, it is sealed and left to compost for forty-five days. The women spend their morning, sorting, chopping, and filling the compost drums with food waste. They then clean the area with soap and water, wash their hands and break for lunch. In the afternoon, the women rotate

the drums that have been sealed for composting, seal drums that are full of waste, empty drums that have been sealed for forty-five days (Figure 5) and carry that compost to the back of the property to dry out.

Figure 5: Workers emptying ready compost from a compost drum (photo by author)

One rainy morning in July, I go to meet Shanti at a leading scientific research institution in Mumbai. Six women, three men, and Shanti who is the site supervisor work at a compost center on the institution's premises. In addition to the research offices, the institution's campus is a small city; with a hospital, a few dozen residential buildings, canteens and restaurants, grocery shops, gardens and children's play parks. The main entrance is heavily surveilled with four traffic lanes with pedestrian entrance and exit on either side. There is a metal detector, a sign-in log, and a couple dozen security personnel overseeing the pedestrians entering the premises. Shanti comes to get me at the

institution's entrance. Once I am issued a visitors pass, Shanti leads me to the compost center. Residential buildings along our walk, are spaced evenly from one another with an abundance of greenery surrounding them; including manicured lawns, trees, bushes and potted plants. Park benches dot the lawns, there is a steady stream of traffic, of people out for a walk, tradespeople and workers. It is the monsoons, and as we walk off the pavement into the woods, the ground is sludgy below our feet. A couple minutes into the woods we come to the compost site set up in a large clearing, against the institution's boundary wall. I see a single room with a long rectangular verandah shaded with a roof of corrugated iron sheets. To the side of the verandah is a large, paved space with twelve compost pits arranged in two rows. A weighing scale is set up by the compost pits. Six women are squatting around mounds of food waste, spread across the verandah floor (Figure 6). Around the verandah, piled high, are bags of waste and bricks of a mulch like substance that Shanti tells me is mixed in with the waste to aid the composting process.

Figure 6: Workers processing food waste for the compost pit (photo by author)

Several members of Shanti's family are informal sanitation workers. Having completed her schooling Shanti was put to work as a supervisor by Parisar Vikas. The

compost workers picked waste or sold garlic for over two decades before coming to work at the compost center. The women begin work at 10am and work until 5pm with a lunch break at 1pm. Wet waste starts to come into the center from 10:30am to early afternoon, brought by the housekeeping and gardening staff. The women dump small amounts of waste onto the verandah, squat around the waste heaps, sort and chop compostable waste into smaller pieces. Then they mix in composting agents and fill the waste in plastic buckets which the men carry in assembly line to weigh and then put in the compost pits. The women then dump another pile of waste on the verandah repeating the work in amicable silence throughout the day, occasionally getting up to stretch or get a drink of water. As supervisor, Shanti is in charge of documenting the amount of waste processed, time management, problem solving, and liaising with the institutional supervisors. Notebook in hand, she moves from the verandah to the weighing scale to compost pits overseeing the work and recording the amounts and weights, a tally of which is to be called in to their institutional supervisor every day. In between her work, Shanti talks with visitors and supervisors who come to see the compost site, all of whom listen to her attentively, note issues she brings up, and respond respectfully.

At lunch time the women walk out of the woods to a nearby residential building where they can access an outdoor tap and sit to eat and rest under the shade of a tree. The women all sit in a circle and share their lunch with each other As they eat, they comment on each other's lunch, discuss recipes, talk about goings-on in their vasti, a celebration they recently had, etc. Some of the women have brought fruit and homemade sweets to share. After lunch and a few minutes rest, the women go back to the compost site and

resume their work. At the end of their workday, the women wash and sweep the verandah, wash themselves and leave for home.

Laxmi Bai is a compost worker on an industrial site located next to a couple of luxury high rise apartments. Suman Bai and I accompany her to her workplace, one morning in November. After Suman Bai and I are issued visitors passes, Laxmi Bai takes us to the back of the property where four compost drums are suspended on metal stands. This compost site is surrounded by heavy machinery and faces the open factory floor. To one side of the factory floor is a small building with a door which leads into the canteen. Laxmi Bai has access to the staff canteen, water and bathroom facilities inside the building. There is no shade at the compost site, so Laxmi Bai works directly under the elements. Once at the compost site, Laxmi Bai takes out a pair of gloves, a mask, and an old sari from her bag, before hanging it on a nearby piece of machinery. A green plastic crate filled with food waste lies next to the compost drums. Putting on the mask, gloves and tying the sari around her waist, Laxmi Bai retrieves a tarpaulin, a plastic tub, a scythe, and a wooden board which she keeps under the nearby machinery. She spreads the tarpaulin in front of the drums, upends the waste on the tarpaulin, squats and uses the scythe and board to chop the waste into smaller pieces, which she transfers to the plastic tub. Once the plastic tub is full, she transfers the chopped food waste into a compost drum, continuing this until all the waste is processed. Laxmi Bai works from 10am to 2pm. As she works, employees of the factory continue to bring crates of food waste until noon. Once she has processed all the day's food waste, she rotates the drums daily to ensure even composting.

Laxmi Bai is in her fifties. She is widowed and lives with her two sons, daughters-in-law and three grandchildren. One of her sons has a housekeeping job, the other drives a rickshaw, and one of her daughters-in-law is a community worker with Parisar Vikas. Laxmi Bai came to Mumbai with her parents when she was about ten years old, during the 1972 famine. As a child, she started picking waste alongside her parents and continued to pick waste after she was married. Laxmi Bai joined Parisar Vikas at its inception in 1998 and continued to pick waste until 2012, after which she took a month long compost training, because she says, "I thought that someone is giving me a good opportunity to work, and I should make good use of it".

Good Sense: Upholding Dignity and Redefining Hereditary Sanitation Labor

Prior to compost contracts, all the women I spoke with worked with dry recyclable waste. They encountered wet waste on dumping grounds and in roadside dumpsters, but none of them were used to sorting and composting waste and many found compost work difficult. While doing compost work, the women need to process decomposing wet waste and at times have to handle any soiled diapers or sanitary napkins mixed in with the wet waste. When I talk with Kala at the compost site where she works, I ask about the transition from working primarily with dry waste to doing compost work. Kala tells me "It was very difficult, it felt really dirty, sometimes I couldn't even eat my lunch [at work]". Yet, women who work housekeeping or compost contracts prefer it to their previous work of picking waste. They now have a regular job, a weekly day off, monthly income, access to a bathroom, drinking water, a place to rest, and regular mealtimes at work. They no longer have to walk all day, or carry heavy loads on

their backs, they are not accused of stealing, and do not work in fear of municipal sanitation workers or security guards. In most places of employment other workers and security guards lend the women a hand if they need help. And in case of workplace issues, the women are secure in the knowledge that Parisar Vikas will advocate on their behalf.

The main difference most lament is following an employer's schedule as opposed to their self-directed wastepicking. But the women are now used to it; they tell me they had to, as there is no other option. Most of the women are their family's sole earners and they are convinced that not adapting to this new way of work will be to their detriment. During my visit to her workplace, Laxmi Bai tells me to meet her at the Parisar Vikas vasti office where we can sit and talk at length. As we sit on mats on the floor of the office, Laxmi Bai tells me "We have to do this work because it is our *majboori,* even if it smells bad or bugs from the compost come crawling on my hand, even if it feels dirty. I have to do it, because if I don't how will I feed my family". A common complaint women working on contracts have is that their salary is not enough to make ends meet. On average, women working contract jobs make nine thousand rupees ($121) for an eight-hour workday, and six thousand rupees ($81) for a four-hour workday. Housing society residents often give housekeeping workers sellable dry waste, and these workers are also able to sort through the collected dry waste earning approximately two to four hundred rupees ($3-5) monthly in addition to their salary. Compost workers do not usually get sellable dry waste to supplement their income.

Before housekeeping and compost work, all the women I spoke with picked waste on streets or dumps or sold garlic since the late 1970s. Women are still engaged in

sanitation labor through these new forms of work, but, as I demonstrate in subsequent sections, their association with Parisar Vikas affirmed women's dignity and facilitated the creation of a 'good sense', enabling women to redefine hereditary sanitation labor. Gramsci contended that 'good sense' is a crucial counterpoint to hegemonic 'common sense', enabling subaltern masses could challenge their oppression. 'Good sense' is essentially criticism of the dominant common sense, put into practice to subvert hegemony. 'Good sense' is not a pre-established body of knowledge and values but is achieved through rational thought and a cultivated critique of dominant ideologies (Daldal 2014; Gramsci 1988; Nun 1986). As I have discussed, caste hegemony forced Baudh and Matang castes into sanitation labor, depriving them of their choice, worth, and dignity. Here, dignity is taken away from the marginalized, by those who control knowledge and have the power to categorize and rank people. While the removal of dignity is power exercised by the dominant, its restoration is an exercise of power by the marginalized (Mignolo 2011). Caste hegemony not only took the dignity of Dalit people but convinced them of their inferiority. Through the following sections I demonstrate that Parisar Vikas's interventions with women who pick waste, enabled the creation of a 'good sense', affirming Dalit women's dignity.

Bharatiya Baudh Mahasabha and Dalit Identity

Some Parisar Vikas constituents are also part of the Bharatiya Baudh Mahasabha (The Buddhist Society of India or BSI), a socio-religious Buddhist organization founded by Ambedkar in 1955. The older women have been part of the BSI since 1982, long before their association with Parisar Vikas. As we sit in the Parisar Vikas vasti office,

Suman Bai explains to me the work they do "It is religious work. We take workshops for young girls and boys telling them about Baudh teachings. If there is a function like a naming ceremony or a wedding we officiate those. I joined the Mahasabha in 1982, I went for a workshop, and they gave us information about *Babasaheb*[28], about Gautama Buddha, how we should be as Baudh, how we should carry forward our religion. We are Mahar by caste, but we are Baudh, and it is our organization, trying to make good people out of us". The women members of BSI meet nightly, after dinner, at the Baudh Vihar in their vasti. They talk about Dalit Buddhist philosophy, Ambedkar and other Dalit leaders, they sing and compose songs, and discuss events impacting their community. They organize a monthly lecture series on topics pertinent to the Dalit community, go on excursions across the country to important Dalit Buddhist sites, go to workshops through the BSI, and perform service at the *Chaitya Bhoomi*[29]. Their association with the BSI has been instructive in developing their knowledge and perspectives on their community and their identity as Dalit women.

As a result of their association with the BSI, these interlocutors are deeply aware of the impact Ambedkar had on shaping the future for the Dalit community in an independent India. Ambedkar believed that democracy in the Indian state could not be achieved through a mere change in government. As chair of the committee drafting the Indian constitution, Ambedkar suggested provisions aimed at eliminating caste-based social and economic inequality (Drèze 2005). He argued for the right against economic exploitation to be instated as a fundamental right of every Indian citizen. Arguing that for

[28] An endearment conferred upon Ambedkar by the Dalit community. It roughly translates to mean 'father'.

[29] Ambedkar's cremation site, it is a Dalit Buddhist shrine dedicate to him, and is located in central Mumbai.

Dalits in stratified Indian society, freedom from economic exploitation was as crucial as the right to life and speech, as "the unemployed are thus compelled to relinquish their Fundamental Rights for the sake of securing the privilege to work and to subsist" (Joshi 1986, 36). Ambedkar also advocated for a time bound system of reservations so that marginalized groups are not perpetually misused as a political resource by dominant castes. The highlight of the time bound system was that provision of education, economic opportunities, and the protection against economic and social exploitation would eventually make reservations unnecessary for the historically discriminated groups (Joshi 1986; Omvedt 2004). Neither provisions were enshrined in the constitution as Ambedkar intended, but his radical propositions have provided Dalit communities some relief. As a result of his ceaseless work to ensure social and economic justice for Dalits in India, Ambedkar is seen as a central force for change among the Dalit women I spoke with. One evening, as we sit in the Parisar Vikas vasti office, I ask Laxmi Bai her thoughts on Ambedkar and the BSI, she tells me, "*Babasaheb* is our father, and he has a lot of power, no one can discriminate against us, our father has written this law and if anyone says anything we can directly take them to court". During my conversation with Padma Bai in the Parisar Vikas vasti office, she tells me, "We don't celebrate Diwali, these days people will make sweets for their children and buy firecrackers, but that is so the children can enjoy themselves, not because we have faith in the celebrations. How your people celebrate Diwali, we celebrate 14th April[30], it is our big festival. We cook a feast, invite people to our homes, we go to people's houses, and give food and small gifts to each other. *Babasaheb* has done a lot for us, made sure we have rights, that no one

[30] The anniversary of Ambedkar's birth, 14th April 1891.

discriminates against us, that is why 14th April is important for us". Historically, education and more specifically knowledge was denied to Dalit communities. Understanding their community and history through the BSI has been a critical point in the development of a Gramscian good sense.

Parisar Vikas and Dalit Identity

The women have never been treated differently by Parisar Vikas staff or leadership. Suman Bai tells me she began to trust Parisar Vikas because, "I saw equality in sanghatana. When I went for the first workshop, I saw photographs of *Babasaheb*, Mahatma Phule, Savitri Bai Phule[31] and I thought these people must be doing good work if they have put up photos of our leaders. From the beginning they never kept us apart or discriminated against us because we work in waste. They only encouraged us to stay clean and healthy for our own sakes". Similarly many other women's faith in Parisar Vikas solidified when they saw the sanghatana's leaders respect their community. During our conversation at the school where Kusum works as a housekeeper, she tells me "Whenever I meet [the organization's dominant caste leaders] they say '*Jai Bheem*'[32]. They say the same at the start of all meetings, I feel so happy hearing that. They also tell us about *Babasaheb*, it feels so good when they do, even they have so much information about us and about *Babasaheb*". While we talk one evening, in the Parisar Vikas vasti office, Laxmi Bai articulates a similar sentiment, "When they [Parisar Vikas staff] first

[31] Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and his wife Savitri Bai Phule were anti-caste activists in Maharashtra during mid to late 1800s. They advocated for the eradication of caste and untouchability and promoted education for women. Their work inspired many Dalit leaders including Ambedkar.

[32] A salutation among the Dalit Buddhist community. It translates to mean 'Victory to Ambedkar'.

came into our homes and saw our photos of *Babasaheb*, they showed that they respected him, and we appreciate them for it. Seeing this I respect them [dominant caste leaders of Parisar Vikas]". Women's association with Parisar Vikas also brought younger women to BSI. Kusum explains "In savings group meetings we came together, they [Parisar Vikas karyakartas] would start the meeting by singing [Dalit liberation or feminist] songs, and then slowly we started meeting [in the Baudh Vihar]. The older women used to meet from before, but later we [younger women] also started joining them. Before we didn't do any of this [she laughs], we wouldn't even look at each other, we were so busy, waking up early, running to pick waste, coming home, making food, sending our children to school, and then doing all the rest of the housework".

Many of my interlocuters caste identity is shaped through their association with BSI. This identity is further reinforced, when women dominant caste leaders of Parisar Vikas value their practices and histories. Caste hegemony denied Dalit people of their societal worth and the act of dominant castes restoring that worth is a powerful critique of caste hegemony. One evening in June, I am sitting in the Parisar Vikas vasti office, talking with Yogita Tai, Suman Bai, and Indira about their association with BSI and changes in their community as a result of Parisar Vikas's interventions. Indira is a teacher in the Parisar Vikas study group for this vasti. Indira is in her thirties, she has two young sons, both of whom are in school, and her husband works on a project with Parisar Vikas. During this conversation, Indira speaks to the deleterious impact caste hegemony has had on the psyche of Dalit peoples, "It is said in society and in the constitution that there is no discrimination, but it continues. Today we have reservations and laws [protecting us], but our community is behind. Now say you are upper caste, and you keep telling us, you are

lower caste, you are like this and like that, then we will think what is the use of this reservations and laws, we are like that only, see everyone is saying it. And then any person collapses and finally does what everyone says he is … for generations we have been doing [waste] work, our parents and in laws have done this [and we think] we should also be doing this". She goes on to add the affirming influence Parisar Vikas has had on her community, "Our community is kept from education, just now our community is walking a little ahead because we have understood the importance of education. Before everyone thought that we would end up doing what our parents and in laws did. That is why the sanghatana has given more importance to our castes, because we are constantly taunted and put down, till we start believing we are deserving of nothing else, and they [dominant castes] stay where they are. But not anymore, we are becoming aware slowly and we have the sanghatana on our side'.

Women I spoke with also see Dalit women from their community in prominent roles; as Parisar Vikas leadership and staff. This bolsters their sense of worth for themselves and for their community creating the good sense that they deserve to be in charge of their futures. During my conversation with Kala, at the compost site where she works, she highlights this sense of worth, "The sanghatana is ours, who else is going to give us support but our own people. I mean there are plenty of our women in the sanghatana, because of them, we are where we are". One evening in June, as I get ready to go, after an interview at the Parisar Vikas vasti office, Suman Bai invites me to her home. Her apartment is on the top floor in the same building as the office. We take the elevator up and walk down a long corridor to her door. Inside her home Suman Bai invites me to sit on a bench set below the window opposite the entrance. It is early in the

monsoons and there is a cool breeze coming into the home from the window. Suman Bai brings me a glass of water and sets a plate of biscuits between us as she sits beside me. She asks me about my life, and after some conversation I ask her who she lives with in this home. Suman Bai tells me, she separated from her husband when she was pregnant with her son because, "Our values didn't match … he just wasn't working. He was an incredibly lazy man". After her separation, Suman Bai picked waste and educated her son on her earnings. Today her son, daughter-in-law and two grandchildren live with her. Suman Bai was part of the first skills training, leadership workshop, and work contract undertaken by Parisar Vikas. Once part of the sanghatana, Suman Bai stopped picking waste and began working on compost and housekeeping contracts until 2001, after which she began working in the Parisar Vikas office. In 2004 she was named president of Parisar Vikas. She continues telling me that when she first started working in the office, she says she didn't know how to read or write, "I am illiterate, but I got the opportunity to learn after coming to the sanghatana. My courage increased in standing up and speaking anywhere. I also started understanding how to behave in society, the importance of education. Now when I stand up to speak, people listen to me, it feels so good … It feels like a rebirth".

Vidya Bai came to Mumbai after she was married and started picking waste to provide for her family. I go to Vidya Bai's home one afternoon in June accompanied by a Parisar Vikas staff member. Vidya Bai invites us in and offers us a glass of water, as we take a seat on the floor of the small room. I am introduced to Vidya Bai who tells us to wait while she finishes some chores. After she has completed her work, she comes and sits by us, and I ask Vidya Bai to tell me of her association with Parisar Vikas. She says,

she approached Parisar Vikas staff following a leadership workshop in 2000. “I really wanted to be a teacher, but I had only studied till the seventh standard in the village”. With Parisar Vikas’s support, she successfully completed her tenth standard, trained as a preschool educator, and undertook training to form and register savings groups. By 2004 Vidya Bai says, “My circumstances changed dramatically. I stopped picking waste and I would teach at the school in the mornings and do savings group work in the afternoons and evenings”. Today Vidya Bai is a Parisar Vikas staff member, overseeing all the savings groups and educational programs in her vasti, and recruiting women from her vasti to work on composting or housekeeping contracts. As a result of her association with Parisar Vikas, she says “I learnt how to speak, to present my point, I got courageous. When I first joined, I would sit in one corner at the meetings and not think I can speak in front of all these big people, but slowly I overcame this and learnt to speak up. Now I go to many meetings to tell people about our issues, I have even gone to Delhi to speak with ministers about the issues that we face”. These Dalit women are among numerous Parisar Vikas leaders, staff, supervisors, and community workers. Significantly, for many interlocutors, Suman Bai and Vidya Bai’s position in Parisar Vikas is not only reflective of their personal growth but is also a representation of their community’s progress.

Disrupting the Common Sense of Caste Hegemony

Parisar Vikas projects like savings, groups, alternative skills trainings, leadership workshops, and work contracts have also worked to disrupt the common sense of caste hegemony. Women I spoke with have all been cheated by moneylenders stealing their money and charging exorbitant interest rates. So they were skeptical when Parisar Vikas

staff first came to them with the idea of forming savings groups. But the women soon saw that Parisar Vikas staff only helped with writing out the accounts, teaching them to accurately count money and deposit it in the bank; so they can exercise control over their money. During our conversation in the vasti, after her savings group meeting, Ganga tells me “It is our money, and now we make decisions for it. Before we would pawn jewelry or other household items to get loans and repay that money with more than ten percent interest. Whenever we took loans we would have to suffer humiliations. But now, money in the groups is ours, we can rightfully take loans from it and at good interest rates”. Currently Parisar Vikas operates a hundred and sixty-eight savings groups in Mumbai. Each group consists of ten women who meet once a month. Each group is collectively managed by its members. Together the women collect and deposit monthly savings in the bank, oversee their group’s bank account, decide the amount of the monthly savings, the number of loans to give, the loan amount, the loan repayment schedule, and the division of accumulated interest. Only interest is set by Parisar Vikas at two percent, three quarters of which goes back to the savings group.

In each of the two dozen savings group meetings I attend, Parisar Vikas staff manage the collection and notation of the money in the group’s account book, while its members watch the proceedings closely, helping with the calculations and recording accounts. Once the savings, interest and loan repayments are collected the staff member counts it to ensure the sum is accurate, she gives the money to a group member to recount, and finally hands the money to the women in charge of depositing it in the bank. During a savings group meeting in the Parisar Vikas vasti office, after the counting is completed, Yogita Tai looks towards me and says, “We don’t touch the money except to

collect and count it and keep the accounts; that too in front of the women". During savings group meetings the staff member leading them asks the women about their health, encouraging them to attend health camps and the outpatient clinic run out of one Parisar Vikas office. They ask about the women's daughters education, if they themselves or others in their vasti want employment and make a note of educated women who could work in the Parisar Vikas office or as a supervisors at one of the work sites.

From their inception, the aim of savings groups was not just to collect savings but also to start a dialogue between women in the vasti. During a meeting of a newly formed savings group, I sit among Suman Bai, a couple of Parisar Vikas staff members, and a dozen women, in the community center of a vasti. Suman Bai begins the meeting by explaining, "Us women, we have no time for ourselves we are working from the time we get up to the time we go to sleep, if we at least meet for an hour once a month, it gives us time for us to talk to each other. And then we also collect savings and give loans so all of us can learn to save and not have to depend on moneylenders". Bringing women together, teaching them to go to the bank, open accounts, sign their names, and manage savings groups boosted women's confidence in their abilities. And as the groups became stronger there are visible differences between the women and in the dynamics of the vasti. I first meet Madhura Tai, a Parisar Vikas program coordinator, in March, during my first month in the field. She is a dominant caste woman, is in her fifties, and has been working with Parisar Vikas for over two decades. A couple months later, she invites me to one of Parisar Vikas's offices for a workshop. I take a seat next to her, as we wait for the workshop to begin. She is always busy, so I take this opportunity to ask her perspective about the impact savings groups have had on their constituents lives. She points out "The

savings groups created a kind of unity amongst the women, and as the groups have become stronger, incidents of domestic violence have decreased". The savings groups provided a platform for women to come together and communicate with each other; engendering a sense of community that was previously missing. During our conversation in the vasti, after her savings group meeting, I ask Ganga what being part of a savings group means to her. She points to a developing sense of understanding and unity amongst the women part of the savings groups, "We learnt to talk and negotiate with one another in the group. We fight a lot with each other, but in the group we try and understand each other and discuss things keeping each other in mind, when it comes to taking or repaying loans".

Not all of women part of Parisar Vikas have financially benefitted from the savings groups. Some were not able to get the loan amount they want; some groups dissolved as a result of displacement caused by slum demolitions and others due to loan defaulters. During the same conversation with Madhura Tai, as we wait for the workshop to start, she tells me, when a member refuses to repay loans or pay monthly savings, there is little they can do "We are not moneylenders, we are only teaching women to manage their money. We try to understand their reasons for defaulting instead of forcing them to repay. And sometimes if they don't pay then we leave it at that, we dissolve the group and re-form a new one without the defaulter". As we sit amid the buzz of flies, outside the office in the dumping ground where she works, Swati, who I introduced in chapter three, explains to me, "Parisar Vikas didn't take our money, our women only sunk our money and broke up the group". Nevertheless women still see value in being part of the

savings groups. Jaya Bai says, “At least we are coming together, sitting and talking with each other, staying connected”.

In 2000 in addition to the savings groups and alternative skills trainings, Parisar Vikas developed a ‘leadership workshop’. They created fifteen sessions on issues impacting Dalit women including food security, women’s health and reproductive issues, family life and marital issues, addiction, budgeting, leadership development, etc. These workshops included two sessions every Saturday conducted over a fortnight and were intended to provide a space for women to think about and discuss issues they face. Parisar Vikas staff choose two women from each savings group to attend these workshops. One thousand five hundred women were part of these workshops in the decade between 2000-2010. In addition to the savings group meetings, leadership workshops were important in transforming their sense of self, by changing the way they interact with their families, employers, and each other. During our conversation in the vasti, after her savings group meeting, Ganga tells me “We learnt if someone is very angry to not make it worse and to calm them down, to stand by each other if someone is shouting at one of us in the street. We were told we should stand with her and ask the person why they are shouting at her, to come together united”. During my first conversation with Daya, as we sit in her home, she recounts “They taught us a lot, how to discipline our children, how to behave so as not to fight with our husband or in-laws or neighbors. They would call a lot of good people who are on high posts in various places to talk with us and take these trainings”.

Others note they learnt about gender parity. For example, in the women’s homes, the best portions of food were routinely kept for men in the family. When I first speak with Vidya Bai in her home, she tells me, “Even I thought like this, but it changed for me

and others, slowly, through the leadership workshops and repeated conversations … Those of us who learnt then started convincing others. In one meeting, we had a chart about the work a man does and what a woman does, and when women saw how much they do they started thinking about it and slowly it is changing. Any incidence of abuse or domestic violence, we started going to their house and talking with them, if they didn't listen we would threaten them with police action. Men also saw money coming into their homes through the savings groups. So slowly they also changed their attitude towards the sanghatana". When I talk with her in the vasti, Ganga tells me her daughter is currently in law school. She adds, "We used to marry our daughters at a very young age, we wouldn't educate them. It isn't like that anymore. We educate them, help them study ahead if they want to, and marry them only after they are eighteen years".

The women were also taught basic maths, reading, and writing in alternative skills trainings, leadership workshops, and savings group meetings. During our lunchtime conversation at the housekeeping site where she works, Anandi Bai tells me "We don't have any schooling, we would roam so far to get waste and then walk with that weight to the *katewala* and take whatever money he gave us, we didn't even know enough to ask if we are getting the right price. It is not like that now, we work, and we get the proper remuneration for our work … At savings group meetings as well we do the calculations, follow along, how much is in the account, the loans taken, the repayments". Suman Bai's comments in this regard, made to me during a conversation in the Parisar Vikas vasti office, are particularly enlightening, "We would take whatever we picked and take it to sell to the *katewala*. At that time the [*katewalas*], earned a lot of money, because we didn't understand much about the price of the waste, only he did". During my

conversation with her at the compost site where she is supervisor, Shanti tells me women did not know how to navigate Mumbai's public transportation system as they were unable to read bus numbers or destinations. By learning to read and write, women gained the ability to travel across the city, expanding economic opportunity available to them.

New forms of employment have been an important catalyst for change for the women; from the way they dress to their ideas about themselves and their work. Vidya Bai explains, "Before the sanghatana all the women were doing waste work, but now many are working in societies, they have an eight hour duty, they go to work properly dressed in a good sari, carry a bag with their lunch and a bottle of water, will anyone say of this woman that she is a waste picker, there is change in the way people see us. Now this woman gets a monthly salary, she has learned to budget for monthly expenses, save money. She can say with pride I work in this society or that society, read bus numbers, travel on her own, sign her name, operate a bank account … these have been very big changes in our lives". During my first conversation with Daya, as we sit in her home, her comments affirm this "If I were still picking waste my children would be embarrassed, but now they see I go to a job, even though my job is collecting waste and sweeping, I am going to work dressed properly. Coming back home from wastepicking, our sari is dirty, hair is all in disarray, it looks different right, our children do not like to see us like that. But now there is a change in us, even our children feel good when they see us".

Women part of this research repeatedly tell me they have become brave, clever and have courage because of their association with Parisar Vikas. During our lunchtime conversation at the housekeeping site where she works, Anandi Bai tells me "When we picked waste we were afraid, will anyone shout at us, so we would run from this lane to

the other. If we pick up something they [residents] would shout at us to put it back, we would have to ask people for permission to pick up anything. But now we know we have the sanghatana's support, so we have courage. We work here [on contracts] and we know that it [waste] is rightfully ours, and we can take it as we want". Seema adds, "We have become cleverer after coming to the sanghatana, we have got good work. We don't have to live like dogs anymore".

The women now are treated well by people in the places where they work. When she was picking waste on the streets, Kusum tells me, "People would walk as far away from us as they could, they would wrinkle their nose and harass us. Because of this we would constantly be fighting, our personality was so hostile. But now if anyone says anything we tell them we are part of the sanghatana, then no one says anything to us, they are afraid of us because of the sanghatana, they respect us because of the sanghatana". During my conversation with her in the Parisar Vikas vasti office, Laxmi Bai tells me, of the residential societies she has worked at "The people treat me with respect, some of them call me madam others call me aunt. The gardeners politely ask me about the compost they help me lift and carry the compost tubs if they are too heavy for me, they help me rotate the drums. When I was picking waste on the road nobody would even help lift the sack to place it on my head, people would pretend they haven't heard, and I would be waiting for anyone to help in the sun without food or water, it was life in distress".

The women also have facilities at work; including access to bathrooms, water to drink and wash up, a dedicated lunch time, and place to sit and rest during the day. During the same conversation, Laxmi Bai adds, "When we were picking waste, it was always a rush; leave early in the morning to pick waste, sort and sell it, then come home

and do all the housework, cook food and then only we would eat. Now I go to work and come back at a fixed time. I eat at proper timings, that is a huge difference. We didn't even drink water for most of the day, [if we were thirsty] we would take one of the cleaner plastic bags we collected and fill that with water and drink it, if anyone would give us water. Now I have access to drinking water, a bathroom where I can wash my hands and feet, and soap". Because women who work on contracts have these facilities, they carry their lunch, an extra sari or clothing to cover and protect their clothes as they work.

A quarter of the women I interviewed told me that their association with Parisar Vikas has not been beneficial to them, in terms of educational support for their daughters, and in the kind of employment they want. Yet these women too feel supported by the sanghatana. During my initial conversation with her, at the Parisar Vikas vasti office, Manda Bai tells me, "Our names are with the sanghatana, they never kicked us out just because our savings group is broken, they keep us close … Even though we have not had much benefit, there are many other women we see have been helped; they have jobs, they can take loans from their own money, so we have hope".

In Mumbai today, Parisar Vikas is the only organization that works with Dalit women who pick waste. For several interlocutors, their affiliation with Parisar Vikas is the first and most long lasting association they have had with an organization which seeks to better their lives. Women continue to perform sanitation labor, reinforcing their *dharma* and the hegemony of caste. The prevailing common sense still sees Dalit people engaged in sanitation work as dispensable within the larger goal of clean cities; stripping them of choice and dignity (Gatade 2015; Gupta, Coffey, and Spears 2016). I argue that

through their work, Parisar Vikas and its constituents have constructed a critical dialogue against the dominant common sense. As I have shown, savings groups, alternative skills trainings, leaderships workshops, and work contracts have opened up Dalit women's opportunities and changed the way women see themselves, their work, and their place in society. Through work contracts, women experience respectful treatment from members of dominant caste communities. These opportunities and experiences have affirmed their dignity and opened up their capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2013).

Women's Experiences of Dignity

For the Dalit women I spoke with, respect is an important aspect of claiming dignity. While we sit and chat in her home, Suman Bai explains "After coming into the sanghatana we have started to get respect; people have started knowing us in societies. Before we would be working in the filth, and we would think that this [wastepicking] is our fate, we deserve to be in this work. Now we heard they make new things from the waste [we pick]. If we give one thousand pieces of paper to the recycler I have heard it means seventeen trees are saved, this is a very good thing for the environment. Before we would bemoan our fate. Now we understand that we do this good work for the society and the environment, and we feel better about our work". Here, the realization of one's significance to broader society, being Dalit, is a crucial aspect of overturning hegemonic common sense and affirming dignity. Women I spoke with, who work on housekeeping and compost contracts say they earn less than they did when they were picking waste, but still prefer to work on these contracts. On another visit to their housekeeping worksite, I arrive just as the women are finishing their lunch. I sit down to talk with them as they

stretch out to rest before going back to work. During this conversation I ask the women how they would compare their previous work of picking waste to their current work as housekeepers. Anandi Bai says, “We don’t want to do that [wastepicking], this work is proper, we get respect here, our children are educated now, it doesn’t feel good to pick waste. Now we are on a good track, we work with dignity”. Nodding Seema adds “Here the work is harder, but we get respect, and that is more important that getting more money. We come here, work properly, eat on time. While picking waste, when we got hungry we would buy stale bread and eat dry bread with water, eating [a meal] directly at night after we have earned money, gone back home and cooked”.

Over and over women tell me they are now ‘*vyavastit*’ roughly translated to mean proper. Many interlocutors use that word to signify they now leave for work with their hair combed, *sari* pinned, carrying a purse containing water and lunch, and wearing nice shoes, which women point out to me, renders them unrecognizable as ‘wastepickers’. As we sit and talk in her home, I ask Daya how her association with Parisar Vikas has altered her identity, she tells me, “This work [through Parisar Vikas] is proper it feels good to go to work dressed well. When we go to pick waste our hair is all in disarray as is our sari, it doesn’t feel right, it is embarrassing [she adds laughing] this feels so much better going to work dressed well. And people don’t see us as wastepickers, they see us good women who are coming and working well. They trust us, they treat us with respect. When we go to the society they talk with us properly and politely. They ask after us. They call us sister or aunt. They give us water, in the winter they give us tea, they even invite us to come into their homes, let us take water on our own”. Women who continue to pick waste also see similar changes in their lives. During our conversation at the Parisar Vikas vasti

office, I ask Padma Bai, about Parisar Vikas's impact on her life, considering that she continues to pick waste. She replies, "The way we live has changed, before we would wake up and like that only go to work, now we are proper, we pick waste, but you can't know by looking at us that we are wastepickers". Importantly, being 'proper', renders the women unrecognizable as 'wastepickers'; a title associated with the filth of their labor and degradation of their lives. After a few months in the field I go to the Parisar Vikas main office one May afternoon, to meet with Vandana Tai, who I introduced in chapter three. I meet her to get additional information about the leadership workshops and trainings Parisar Vikas constituents participated in. At this time, Vandana Tai stresses the impact of these trainings, "Getting trainings at these big research institutions, being able to travel without being labeled as 'wastepicker' has had a tremendous impact on the women's confidence and sense of achievement. I can't say this is all our doing, the women too have developed themselves. They showed that they are ready to change and made that effort that is why all this change was possible".

As a result of their work contracts, women meet members of dominant caste communities, many of whom treat the women with respect and affinity, constructing a good sense and reaffirming their value. During our conversation in the Parisar Vikas vasti office, Kamal Bai recounts, "I was once asked to give a waste management training for students at an undergraduate college and there all the students paid attention to me, addressed me as aunt. [She says laughing] Even now when I pass the college the big sirs address me as madam. I feel embarrassed that such educated people treat me so well. I left wastepicking after I joined the sanghatana, but at the end of the day it is still waste work. The difference is people treat me well and I feel pride [in my work], when I was

picking waste I didn't have any pride in my work, people would talk badly to us, we couldn't go near anyone". When I talk with Vasudha at the compost site where she works, she narrates a similar incident "During the 15th of August celebrations they called us on the stage felicitated us. They gave each of us five hundred rupees ($7) and a shawl. I told them that I feel embarrassed, with all you big people and we are like this [working with waste]. And the madam said, don't talk like that, you are big, if we are big you are the same".

Everyday acts of sociability, relatedness, and affinity like sharing a meal (Bell and Coleman 1999; Carsten 2000), have also been significant in disrupting the common sense of caste hegemony. Suman Bai's comments here are significant, "When we would work in the societies, initially we didn't have supervisors from our community, they were *savarna*[33] and they would sit with us for lunch, eat our food, and share their food with us". Similarly, women indicated my interactions with them as being reaffirming. In some instances, when I ate lunch with the women at their worksites, sharing my food with them and partaking in theirs, they would whisper to each other in surprise or tell me they appreciate that I have eaten lunch with them. On one such occasion, after I eat lunch with Kala and Vasudha at the compost site, in the gated community where they work, while packing up her lunch boxes, Kala says to me "You came and sat and ate with us, I felt very good about that. Even the madam's [in the gated community], they are just like that, they don't differentiate. They say we are all the same".

[33] In Hindu religious texts, v*arna* refers to caste. *Savarna* translates to 'having caste' and refers to the three dominant caste communities. Dalits, historically called 'Shudra' and 'Ati-Shudra', are referred to as *Avarna* or outside caste.

As I have shown, many aspects of women sanitation workers lives have been transformed through their association with Parisar Vikas. But of course, these shifts do not always translate into broader change. Not all women have consistently positive experiences in their interactions with dominant caste people at their work sites. I meet Vibha at an event at the Parisar Vikas main office, she is sitting near me, and I get to chatting with her. She is in her thirties, has two young children and a husband who doesn't work. Vibha works as a compost worker in a gated community in a very affluent suburb of Mumbai. She tells me because she is her family's sole earner she needs additional work so she can earn enough to sustain her family, "I have asked [residents] if I can do some work in their homes as well as my composting work. But when they find I am doing waste work, they say it is dirty work, how can we let you work in our kitchens. It feels terrible when someone says this, they shouldn't say this, if we clean their premises, then only they become clean … They think we are desperate, in one of the houses this lady had kept a packet of *chapatis* outside her house on the dustbin. I threw them in the dustbin thinking it is waste. Then she tells me she had kept them for me to eat and it is not waste. Who eats chapatis kept on a dustbin! Like that some of these women are … [but] they are big they have money, there is no comparison between them and us, we pick waste, how can we compare … And we can't complain. If we do, and if they [society residents] have any money or something to give us, they won't give it to us, that is why we have to put our head down". Similarly, women working on the contract jobs are acutely aware they need to meet their employers expectations and are wary of losing their employment in the case of complaints. Often this awareness is rooted in insecurities formed during their wastepicking labor. As a supervisor, Shanti tells me "I don't let the

women procrastinate in the morning because a lot of *sahibs* visit the site before lunch and if they come and the women are not working they will think we don't need the work". During my initial conversation with Daya, in her home, she tells me "If any of the madams need, we wash their utensils or sweep and mop their floors, not every day but sometimes they will ask us, when we go to take they waste, if they are ill or they have guests. We can't say no this is not our work, because we are afraid if we say no, they might make some false complaints against us. And if they remove us from the work, we are dependent on our earnings, what will we do". During our conversation in the Parisar Vikas vasti office, Kamal Bai tells me she was always afraid while picking waste that someone will accuse her of stealing, even though no one ever did. And so, at her present place of employment, when she takes the stored dry waste to sell, she calls over the society's security guard to check it "We don't want any complaints against us, we are there to do honest work".

Aspiring to Break the Link between Caste and Hereditary Sanitation Labor

Aspirations are expressed through our desires and choices. In this sense, they are universal. But aspirations are also particular, tied to culturally specific ideas of what constitutes a good life, and are inseparable from language, history, cultural values, and norms. Significantly, the capacity to aspire is not equally allocated within any society. The rich are able to explore a plentitude of aspirations without risk to their power, dignity, or material resources. Conversely poverty entails material deprivation, lack of security, and the loss of dignity, because of which the poor do not have the ability to infinitely explore their desires or in fact make choices; making their capacity to aspire

fragile (Appadurai 2013). This is particularly true of poor Dalit communities, who have had to endure innumerable material, social, and psychological degradations (Rao 2009; Roy 2014), as a result of caste hegemony. Dalit communities tasked with sanitation labor are hereditarily bound to that work. As a result they have been stripped off their choices, dignity, and material possessions for generations (Béteille 1965; Gatade 2015; Gupta, Coffey, and Spears 2016). Caste hegemony has also deprived Dalit communities, like the Baudh and Matang women I spoke with, of their capacity to aspire. Appadurai argues that the capacity to aspire is "unequally distributed and that its skewed distribution is a fundamental feature, and not just a secondary attribute, of extreme of poverty" (2013, 289). I add to this argument, that the unequal distribution of the capacity to aspire is also a fundamental feature of caste hegemony.

At its inception, all of Parisar Vikas's leadership included dominant caste women. Through my early conversations with Jyoti Tai I learn that being dominant caste and therefore outsiders, Parisar Vikas leaders choose to build capacity and provide opportunities for women through savings groups, alternative skills trainings, leaderships workshops, and contractual employment. And while Parisar Vikas does not explicitly mobilize around caste, I argue, caste is at the very center of their work. As I have shown, their work breached the common sense of caste hegemony, fostering a Gramscian good sense and affirming women's dignity; thereby producing a deep and lasting impact on the caste identities of Dalit women. Importantly, the affirmation of dignity through the cultivation of a good sense has fostered in these women the capacity to aspire. For many interlocutors, this capacity is articulated through their desire to educate their children in order to break the hereditary link between caste and sanitation labor.

Today, the Dalit women I spoke with pick waste, sell garlic, work at dry waste centers, and at housekeeping or compost jobs. They either sell their goods for market value or are paid a salary for their labor. And it is these differences that enable many women sanitation workers to claim no relationship between their caste and wastepicking labor. Instead of caste, many attribute their labor to a lack of education and employment opportunities. They women explain they perform sanitation labor due to a lack of education as a result of having accompanied their mothers to pick waste instead of going to school. During our conversation in the vasti, after her savings group meeting, Ganga tells me "There is no caste here. Now I am not educated, people like me we pick waste, but we educate our children, and they get better jobs, and they earn money and better themselves". Women who argue caste plays a significant role in their labor also note their lack of education as a compounding factor in their work. And they believe education is the only way out of sanitation labor for future generations in their community. As we sit and talk in the dumping ground, Swati asserts the importance of education, "Like *Babasaheb* said, and they say the same in the sanghatana, educate, organize, and agitate. And that is true. If we were educated, we wouldn't do this work".

Rooted in this belief, women's most fervent aspiration is that their next generation should not be compelled into sanitation work. In one of my conversations with Suman Bai, as we sit and chat in the Parisar Vikas vasti office, she tells me with conviction "It is our mission that our children will not do waste work, they will not roam with a sack like we have". During our conversation in the vasti, after her savings group meeting, Ganga echoes a similar sentiment "Our lives have gone in picking waste but that shouldn't happen to our children, that is our hope. Our generation has picked waste, but the next

generation shouldn't have to, that is our desire". To keep their children from repeating their fate, many of the women I spoke with have not taken their children wastepicking with them. I attend a savings group meeting in the Parisar Vikas vasti office one afternoon in October. The women gathered for the meeting all pick waste on the streets. After the meeting winds down I ask the women what they hope for their children and if they every took their children with them to pick waste. Manda Bai, who is at the meeting, speaks up, "I never took my girls to pick waste with me. My situation was so bad, but I never took my daughters to pick waste with me. No matter how bad my situation is my daughters should not do this. If my daughters has come to pick waste with me even once and got that greed, they would have done only that. I didn't want that for them". I ask her why she uses the word greed, she along with the women sitting around start laughing. And Manda Bai explains "You get money in hand, there is little trouble in this work, so they would have done this work only … You know how people get into the habit of having money in their hands every day, they [her daughters] would have gotten into the same habit. That is what I mean by greed. The greed is bad in their case, these days girls are getting educated it is not good for them to do this work. For us, the greed is good, because we have been doing this work from before and so it is good in our old age as well, we can move slowly, collect waste as we need. Now the girls are so educated why should they do this work. Both my girls have learnt the [sewing] machine, they sew clothes, one of them cooks, why should they do this work". Through work contracts women gain entry into affluent residential societies and gated communities, where they are able to observe the lives of dominant caste communities, and this shapes their capacity to aspire. During our lunchtime conversation at the housekeeping site where she

works, Seema tells me, “We got work at a good place, we meet people, people like you come to meet us and we think our children should be like them”. As we sit and chat in her home, Daya echoes a similar sentiment “First we would pick waste, now we started going to work in good societies, we see young girls and boys there and think it would be nice if our children are like that. Now we tell our children to focus on their studies instead of housework”.

The capacity to aspire is a collective asset, implemented through collective action (Appadurai 2013). To further foster this collective asset, Parisar Vikas aims to educate the next generation, providing them with opportunities so they aren’t forced into waste work. In one of our many conversations in the Parisar Vikas vasti office, Yogita Tai tells me “The only solution to this is that our children get educated and progress”. Madhura Tai reflects a similar position, she tells me, as a sanghatana, “Our aim is to make sure, this is the last generation who will be in this work”. Young girls in this community are married young and are not favored by their families for education or vocational training. These girls then get caught in the same generational cycle of turning to wastepicking due to lack of other opportunities. And so, over the last two decades, Parisar Vikas has striven to secure educational scholarships from NGO, governmental, and private sources to help these girls complete school and go on to university or vocational training. Parisar Vikas has also conducted study groups for over a decade, aimed at providing young girls a place to study. There are currently eight active study groups in central Mumbai. They meet for an hour every evening and are open for school going daughters of women who pick waste. On weekdays the study group teachers help the girls with their homework and explaining concepts that are unclear. On weekends the girls are taken on field trips to

parks or educational programs, or art workshops or educational seminars. The teachers, like Indira, who I write about earlier in this chapter, are all women from the vasti; daughters or daughters-in-law of women sanitation workers. They have a relationship with the girls and their families and understand their circumstances. A couple of the teachers have formal teachers training and all have been further trained through another NGO that specializes in educational support for low-income children.

Within two decades of providing educational support, there have been significant changes in the employment profile for young women in this community. When I first speak with Vidya Bai in her home, she tells me, “In the early 2000s I can’t recall one girl in the vasti who had studied beyond the eighth standard, but now many girls have completed their graduation and marry only after they have jobs”. More than half of the Dalit women part of this research have daughters who are high school graduates, many of whom have gone on to college or undertaken vocational training. Today they work as nurses, teachers, in corporate offices and banks, as supervisors at Parisar Vikas work sites, or as domestic help. Realizing the importance of education, one of Vidya Bai’s sons is currently pursuing a law degree and her college educated daughter works in a bank. One of Padma Bai daughters is a nurse, during our conversation at the Parisar Vikas vasti office, she tells me “I educated my girls, because I thought this is my situation, I wanted better for them, if they are educated their life will be better. They will go out of the house and see things. They read books, and they will have good ideas in their head”. Kusum, whose daughter is studying nursing, attests to this “If I hadn’t come to know of the sanghatana, my children would also be in waste work, like I am and like my parents were, it is generational labor”. I argue that women’s focus on educating their daughters’

and resultant outcomes, are a redefinition of caste-based hereditary sanitation labor, and a realization of the women's capacity to aspire. The teachers also note differences in the girls who come to the study group daily. They are more interested in learning, are less confrontational and more helpful towards each other, they do better at school, they are seen as important in their homes, and they have tremendous self-confidence. Significantly, they aspire for more from their lives; other than marriage and wastepicking. And today, these girls are rarely married young. I argue that here, the capacity to aspire is not only collective but is also generational.

Despite many strides in their capacity to aspire, Dalit women I spoke with recognize that their efforts to sever the hereditary relationship between caste and sanitation labor will not always succeed. One evening Suman Bai, Indira and I are sitting in the Parisar Vikas vasti office, chatting, while the girls gather for their daily study group. They tell me, getting an education is still not easy for Dalit girls. Suman Bai explains, "There is a different system of education for a rich persons child and for our child". Indira adds "For our children, in municipal schools they are pushed forward till the eighth standard even if they learn nothing, and if she fails in the eighth her parents will not let her go back to school, they will say you are not able to pass so what is they point, you will pick waste only, why waste your time going to school. And our community stays deprived, continues doing waste work, in *gulamgiri*[34]". Dalit women I spoke with are also aware of the significant employment hurdles their children will face, inspite of having an education. Swati who has a young daughter in school, asserts angrily,

[34] Literally translated to mean 'slavery', *gulamgiri* is also the title of Phule's seminal work on caste which was published in 1873. In it, Phule critiques the caste system, calling for its abolishment.

"Our situation is really poor; I pick waste even my parents picked waste. *Babasaheb* told us to get educated, so we can go ahead. I think at least our children are educated, they should be able to make progress, but if they try, there are all *Manuvadi*[35] people ahead, everyone is sitting to take their own benefit, so even if our children are educated, we don't have the money to get them jobs and you can't get anywhere without money, so our children are exactly where they started and those who have money have gone ahead". But even with this awareness, women sanitation workers I spoke with continue to educate their children and seek to fulfil their aspiration that hereditary caste-based sanitation labor stops with them.

[35] In Hindu mythology, *Manu* is referred to as the 'first man'. *Manu* is also the name of the first warrior king, son of the Hindu god of creation *Brahma*. This name is used as a prefix in the Hindu text, *Manusmruti*, which is believed to be a significant document enumerating on the ways of being a Hindu. Anti-caste leaders like Ambedkar held the *Manusmruti* responsible for enumerating the Hindu caste system and encoding the means for Dalit exploitation and degradation (Dirks 2001). And so, *Manuvadi* entails a person or people who perpetuate exploitative caste ideology.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Waste management research on India shows that people who do the primary labor of handling waste are Dalit. I went into the field with this knowledge, expecting Dalit interlocutors to elaborate on the various associations between their caste and sanitation labor. Surprisingly, as this ethnography shows, more than half of the Dalit women I spoke with disavowed any relationship between their caste status and waste picking labor. Additionally, Dalit women who indicated a relationship stressed the impact of poverty, lack of education and opportunity on their continuing sanitation labor. This I argue points to a weakening of the relationship between their caste and occupational identities.

One of the formative debates in the making of independent India have been the contentions between dominant and subordinated caste aspirations for the new republic. These contentions are best exemplified through the difference between Gandhi's and Ambedkar's vision for India. In the context of sanitation labor, Gandhi believed following one's caste duty was important for the smooth functioning of Indian society, but abhorred the stigma attached to so called 'polluting' occupations (Gandhi 1936). In an attempt to remove associated stigma, Gandhi called sanitation labor a noble profession, and began performing sanitation labor, encouraging his followers to do the same (Gatade 2015; Loomba 2016; Prasad 2000). In opposition, Ambedkar argued that Dalits were forced into sanitation labor because they were considered dispensable by those in power. Ambedkar further reasoned that caste-based labor and ensuing

exploitation were not a part of an outdated social order but were key to an exploitative economic and political system; that Gandhi wanted the Indian state to maintain. Significantly, by engaging in sanitation work, a person belonging to a dominant caste cannot understand the degradation the Hindu caste order has imposed on Dalits. Ambedkar contended that "a man is not a scavenger because of his work. He is a scavenger because of his birth irrespective of the question whether he is scavenging or not" (Ambedkar 1946, 304).

Using Ambedkar's analysis, I have argued that hereditary occupational divisions are a defining characteristic of Hindu caste hierarchy. Dominant caste communities mobilized ritual notions of purity and pollution to assign Dalit communities degrading forms of labor; keeping them fully dependent on the patronage of dominant caste communities (Bandyopadhyaya 2002; Dirks 1988; Guru 2013; Mahalingam, Jagannathan, and Selvaraj 2019; Rao 2009; Roy 2014; Zene 2013). Dominant caste groups used religious ideology to construct labor divisions and resultant exploitation as the prevailing common sense, in order to maintain their supremacy. Dalit communities in India have thus been historically colonized and stripped off their choices, material possessions, and dignity for generations (Béteille 1965; Rao 2009; Roy 2014).

In chapter three, I demonstrate that caste-based occupational divisions were first operationalized through local administrative systems, later subsumed by the British colonial government, and further absorbed within the framework of the post-colonial India state. At its outset, the Indian state banned caste-based discrimination and labor recruitment but neglected to create systems whereby historically marginalized people could seek other forms of work. As a result, Dalit communities ritually assigned

sanitation labor continue to perform the same work. Availability of inexpensive Dalit labor, who has kept public spaces clean, ensured the continuation of caste-based recruitment for sanitation work.

The focus of state led sanitation reform in colonial and post-colonial India was on the elimination of disease and keeping elite spaces clean (Chaplin 2011; Lamba and Spears 2013; McFarlane 2008; Mirza 2018). Derived from Gandhian ideology, the primary difference between colonial and post-colonial sanitation policy, was the Indian state's attempts to reform the lives of Dalit people engaged in 'polluting' labor (Rawat and Satyanarayana 2016). The management of waste remained outside the purview of the Indian state between 1947 and the late 1980s. In the absence of state control, alternative nodes of power like the garbage mafia and private businesses emerged and grew to control the informal waste management sector. The activities of the informal waste management sector commodified recyclable waste, making the trade in recyclable waste profitable, while denying those profits to Dalits who perform primary labor within this sector (Chikarmane and Narayan 2000).

State intervention in waste management began in the 1990s, coinciding with liberalization of the Indian economy. Liberalization led to a rise in consumption, subsequent waste generation, and in the profits derived from the waste trade. Government involvement in waste management enabled state actors to stake a claim in the profits derived from the waste trade. Specifically, government action resulted in an elaborate waste management policy framework, with little implementation (Gupta 2012). During this time, affluent citizens became frustrated with growing urban pollution and the lack of policy implementation and pushed for the creation and implementation of sustainable

waste management (Baviskar 2002; Chaplin 1999; 2011). Today, waste management in India is governed by the parallel processes of extracting profits from the trade in waste and ensuring sustainability in its waste management.

Regardless of state intervention, the vast majority of waste processing and recycling continues to be done by the informal waste management sector. Dalit women who pick and sell waste are at the bottom of this sector's labor hierarchy. Through their narratives, I have shown that Dalit women who are part of this research enter wastepicking and endure its hardships, due to crippling poverty and a lack of opportunity. Their work adds tremendous economic value to the waste they pick and sell (Chintan 2007; Doron and Jeffrey 2018; Jain 1994; Wilson, Velis, and Cheeseman 2006). Most importantly, profits from the waste trade, that municipal governments, private businesses, and multi-national corporations compete for, are not possible without the exploited labor of Dalit women (Berthier 2003; Wilson, Velis, and Cheeseman 2006).

In chapter four, I contend that caste hegemony persists. Dalit communities that were ritually assigned sanitation work continue to perform similar labor. And waste management systems continue to discount the exploitative processes underlying the persistence of caste-based sanitation labor. As a result, Dalit women's sanitation labor is rendered invisible and inconsequential to waste management within state policy, corporate activity, and public perception (Bathran 2018; Doron and Jeffrey 2018; Gatade 2015; Mosse 2018; Ramaswamy 2011). In chapter one, I have tied this invisibility of Dalit women's labor to Indian nationalist constructions of 'Indian woman', which accorded women legitimacy in the public sphere, only through education (Chatterjee 1993; Kumar 1993; Sarkar 2008). Today, poor Dalit women continue to have limited

access to education, and as a result are often constructed as illegitimate through public discourse (Chatterjee 1993; Forbes 2007; Kumar 1993; Sarkar 2008; Rao 2005).

While Dalit women who pick waste are marginalized within waste management systems, my research shows that waste management policy, inadvertently opened up limited employment opportunities for these women. And the NGO, Parisar Vikas capitalized on these opportunities to get employment contracts for Dalit women to work at residential societies, municipal facilities, and private businesses. Employment has given Dalit women conditional work security and unprecedented access to waste; providing them a glimpse into the stake they could have in the waste trade. At the same time, sustainability measures encoded within waste management policy have threatened the access to waste women have had for decades. Women's contestations over legitimacy in access to waste have arisen as a result of their access being threatened. Today, Dalit women pick and sell dry waste or are paid a salary for the sanitation work they are employed to do. Women I spoke with perceive their current work as different from hereditary caste labor because, even though unfairly priced, it is remunerated per market value; making them legitimate workers within the waste management labor force.

Highlighted in my conversations with Dalit women who are part of this research, are the ways in which Parisar Vikas has changed their lives. Equally important as Parisar Vikas programs, are Dalit women's interactions with dominant caste people they meet as a result of their affiliation with Parisar Vikas. These interactions combined with employment have reinforced Dalit women's sense of worth, affirmed their dignity, and constructed a Gramscian 'good sense', creating a powerful critique to the common sense of caste hegemony. Moreover, as a result of their employment and Parisar Vikas

affiliation, women I spoke with have greater access to opportunities and experiences which are necessary to develop one's capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2013). Here, Dalit women's capacity to aspire is articulated through a desire to educate their daughters, with the hope that it will accord them legitimacy in public discourse and expand employment opportunities available to them; in essence breaking the generational link between caste and sanitation labor. To expand this collective aspiration, Parisar Vikas has been providing their constituent's daughters with scholarships and study classes to support their learning. Today, many young women in this community are educated and employed in banks, corporate offices, as nurses, teachers and worksite supervisors. Change to the educational and employment profile of the younger generation, further serves to reinforce this community's capacity to aspire.

I make these claims with the knowledge that changes within Dalit women's perspectives about themselves, their community, and labor, do not always translate into broader social change. Sanitation labor continues to be stigmatized, and Dalit women who are part of the waste management system continue to be exploited within it. In order to fully change the conditions of sanitation workers lives and labor, there needs to be a reckoning of caste, which accounts for the historic, religiously ordained, and persistent association between caste and labor (Doron and Jeffery 2018; Gatade 2015). And although young women in the Dalit community I spoke with have access to different forms of employment, other people from their community or Dalit migrants from other parts of the country, take their place in picking, selling, and processing waste; as a consequence of extreme poverty, lack of opportunity, and the need to earn a living (Wilson, Velis, and Cheeseman 2006).

Associations between caste and occupational identities are shifting not only for Dalit communities, but for all caste groups. But caste identity continues to influence a community's labor within the Indian economy (Oh 2021). Hereditary occupational identities fixed through caste ideology persist in the contemporary labor market (Cassan, Keniston and Kleineberg 2021). For example, today; members of the scholar castes are overrepresented as educators, particularly in higher education, and similarly, members of the merchant castes are overrepresented in business. Here I do not argue that there is no occupational mobility. Members of the dominant castes, and affluent members of Dalit castes are able to move beyond the confining caste and labor associations. For economically impoverished Dalits, Deshpande and Palshikar (2008) find that lateral occupational mobility is easier than upward occupational mobility.

Similarly, this research shows that caste continues to influence the occupational choices of poor Dalit people in India. But, caste is not discussed in national or global policy discourse, in the same way as gender, age, religion, and race. Caste is seen as an archaic system. And the historical disadvantages Dalits have suffered as a result, are assumed to have been rectified in independent India (Mosse 2018). In the 1990s, caste and occupational identities were strengthened through forces of globalization and liberalization (Mosse 2018; Tambs-Lyche 2006). Today, caste disparities and caste-based occupational identities are integrated with local and global markets; making caste discrimination synonymous with economic discrimination (Mosse 2018; 2020). I have argued that one explanation for women's denial of a relationship between their caste status and sanitation labor, is this integration of caste with the market economy.

Dalit women who are part of this research are Ambedkarite Buddhists. My research did not delve into women's religious identities, and additional investigation is required to fully understand their religious practice as it relates to their lives and labor. While I did not engage with women's identities as Ambedkarite Buddhists, a few interlocutors did not hesitate to point out differences between Hindu religious practices and Ambedkarite Buddhist ones. The end of my fieldwork coincided with the Hindu festival, Diwali. During this time, on a November evening, I sit with Padma Bai, Laxmi Bai, and Suman Bai in the Parisar Vikas vasti office. As we chat, Padma Bai feels compelled to tell me that they don't celebrate Diwali, that it is not "their festival", instead they celebrate significant events in Ambedkar's and the Buddha's life. I have elaborated on this encounter in chapter four. I mention it here to emphasize women's rejection of Hindu religious practices. At another time, in late April, during a visit to the dumping ground, Swati, who I first introduced in chapter three, tells me Ambedkarite Buddhists are financially better off to poor Hindu women, "At least we are Baudh, we follow only Ambedkar and Buddha. Not any other gods. So many [Hindu] women have lost all their money by worshiping [Hindu] gods". These repudiations are significant to Dalit women's religious identities. And perhaps provide another explanation for their dismissal of any relationship between caste and sanitation labor. Here, their disavowal reflects a rejection of Hinduism; positioning themselves closer to Ambedkarite Buddhism.

The analysis I present in this dissertation attests to the idea that "People are the products of their history in that they inherit traditions that constrain their vision and restrict their choices" (Moberg 2013, 85). I have argued that caste hegemony has worked to severely limit the options available to poor Dalit women who have 'inherited' caste-

based sanitation labor. At the same time, caste hegemony is also inherited by public and private institutions that work to delink caste from sanitation labor, concealing the labor of Dalit people compelled into this work. While hegemony can impair a person's ability to understand and change the conditions of their oppression, people are only victim to it as long as they are unable to deconstruct their circumstances. People can change their position only when they are able to see that dominant ideologies contradict their particular experiences (Moberg 2013). Caste hegemony has devastating material consequences for poor Dalit communities. It also robs poor Dalit people of intangible assets like choice, dignity, hope, imagination, and aspirations. For poor Dalit women who are part of this research, strengthening these assets is an important strategy "to change the "terms of recognition" within which they are generally trapped, terms which severely limit their capacity to exercise voice and to debate the economic conditions in which they are confined" (Appadurai 2013, 289-90). Through this dissertation I have argued that Parisar Vikas has provided Dalit women a discursive space to mobilize a good sense, through practices that critique caste hegemony and provide opportunity. Parisar Vikas has additionally strengthened Dalit women's intangible assets, expanding their capacity to aspire, and enabling them to redefine the associations between caste and hereditary sanitation labor. A significant aspect of Gramsci's work was an attempt to understand political and cultural conditions that either enable or disallow the creation of an 'actor', who although subordinate, embodies the potential to move beyond contemporary reality (Gramsci 1988; Nun 1986). I assert that Dalit women's claims for legitimacy over access to waste, demands for fair inclusion in the waste management system, and determination to educate their daughters, all constitutes a redefinition of caste. These actions together

work to sever the link between caste and hereditary sanitation labor; providing hope for Dalit women in their attempts to move beyond the economic, political, and social conditions that confine them.

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