

An encounter with the 'other':

The uniform as erasure

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A group of people work as waste pickers. They live on garbage dumps, on landfills, in shanty slums, and on the street. Each morning they move around, collecting materials which are of no 'value' to anyone else, and which have been discarded – waste. This they selectively collect, well aware of the value this would fetch them in the kabari market, from the filth. The more they can collect, the more money they can sell it for.

The ragpickers, as they are commonly called, have come into the city, to find work. At 'home, they are often landless, or with very small land holdings, insufficient to earn a living from, and come to the city to find survival and maybe a future. Many of them are also of a lower caste, or belong to a minority religion. Some have illegally migrated from across national borders. In all cases they are very vulnerable.

Those of them who manage to enter and live in the city with its hostile economic and social environment, are the lucky ones. Many are not able to do this, for living in the city is expensive, and housing is hard or impossible to find. Very often those who have kith or kin in the city already, find it easier to gain access. Sometimes the kabari becomes the new patron, using this power to make them 'serve' as collectors of waste, which is his wealth and their livelihood. Hence those who are able to collect waste in the heart of the city are the 'privileged' ones. Others are those who may end up living on landfills on the edge of the city, washing dirty plastics bags, which no one else wants to even collect. Hierarchies do not disappear in the milieu of the city, they are only harder to see.

The city celebrates them. These are the workers who serve the city by cleaning it up. There are many organizations in a city which have been created on the basis of making their life better, by absorbing them into the city's waste system. Here they are provided identity cards, more fixed jobs, a regular income (even if very low), and even a uniform. All this gives them a new identity. From being social subjects they have become 'citizens,' ready to join the new economy, provided of course they keep their place in it. Of course this gives them dignity, and some sense security (which is not always necessarily real) but does not help change their status beyond that. So long as they are waste pickers, they are offered the possibility of some sort of economic and social security.

The city terms them as 'city cleaners,' 'green brigade,' or another word, to erase the word scavenger or waste picker, even if they are still doing the same work. There are also now private waste management companies doing this. It is 'easier' if those who labour for society are provided more palatable labels. Their existence is celebrated with words like 'dignity,' 'pride,' or 'happy.' It is as if being poor and the s of society had otherwise taken these away from them. However it helps those who 'provide' them a better job opportunity to think that by doing so they have helped recover some 'humanity,' for the waste pickers even though

human dignity and pride is present in the the 'poor' alike. Similarly many other reformist claims are made to justify the interventions, even though not much changes on the ground. Escape through an upward mobility remains a dream. They are still wastepickers, and even branded thus!

However, not all are this lucky. Many more come into the city looking for work than the city can accommodate. Hence those who cannot be supported become illegitimate subjects of the city, the no-organization, itinerant waste workers, who has no institutional support, and are often termed a thieves, an illegal entrants, and undesirables. Those who cannot be included, since the new systems of waste only allows a few based on economic logic, are asked to leave. The inclusion of some leads to the exclusion of everyone else.

Those who manage to stay on and survive, are no fools. They are well aware of their economic possibilities in the city and have the desire to maximize this. While the city tries to absorb them into a 'legitimate' space, they too are willing to enter this and play along. From no livelihood to a livelihood, this is their question, and the only way to be alive. They are however still political subjects, even though much of the city starts to believe that they are only economic subject. Recognizing this, some of them have started to form their own grouping, cooperatives and unions. They know that they have to start negotiating their existence as a collective, and not be dependant on the city as their benefactors.

The uniform they are provided with, attempts to erase them as political and social subjects, and turn them into economic subjects. It provides a veneer of safety – surprisingly not much to the waste picker, but maybe to everyone else, since the waste pickers now appear 'cleaner' and more acceptable! However, in the quest for democratic freedom, they still have a long long way to navigate..