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Recycling Class

The Contradictions of Inclusion in Urban Sustainability

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Conclusion: Beyond Inclusion, toward Reparation

In a 2020 advocacy video produced by Parisara Tanda, Deepak, a former child waste picker who now operates a dry waste collection center (DWCC) in Bengaluru, articulates how market forces affect waste-picker livelihoods. The video was released to offer waste-picker perspectives on the extended producer responsibility (EPR) guidelines issued by the Indian government earlier in the year.

They [waste pickers] work from morning to evening until their body aches. The amount of money they make compared to the effort they put in is very little. This happens because the market behaves like that. . . . When there was demonetization,¹ there was no money, so no trade could happen. When there is price fluctuation of crude oil, it will affect the price of the recycling market. We have gone through a lot of ups and downs, a lot of struggles, there are no predictable rates we get for the material. . . . When there is a demand for recycling plastic, they give one rupee more. And when there is a surplus recyclable ore, give us two rupees less. However, the hard work we put in is the same, there is no difference. EPR legislation requires companies to take back their waste, . . . but I ask those companies, please think before you implement these strategies. If you appoint another company, they might not understand the grassroots. Please work with us directly. Do not exclude waste pickers. The important thing in EPR is the collection of data. That data, we can ourselves give it to you. We have data on what materials we have collected, the rates at which we have sold it. We have learned to use a smartphone, we have developed an app. We are using many technologies. We are ready to learn and use any technology required.

Looking for Transformative Potential in the Cracks

Can sustainability and environmental action be emancipated from neoliberal capitalism's eviscerating impulses? Deepak still thinks so. In his comments, he outlines some tangible policy actions to improve the lives of

waste pickers. He calls for fixed rates and fair prices that protect waste pickers from the vagaries of global markets. He asks corporate brands to work with them directly and avoid the seduction of the latest tech-speaking start-up to come into town. Deepak's comments go beyond policy prescriptions. Fundamentally, he is asking the state, consumers, and corporations to overcome their prejudices. Implicit in Deepak's demand is the recognition that the system as it currently stands is unfair. That it devalues waste pickers' labor while taking it for granted.

For waste pickers like Deepak who were already doing the infra-labor of maintaining urban environments, inclusion into decentralized sustainability infrastructure is both a burden and an opportunity. Deepak is now required to collect inorganic dry waste from several neighborhoods in Bengaluru as part of his contract with the Bengaluru Municipality (BBMP). Much of this waste does not have a preexisting market, and the resale price is always fluctuating. Nevertheless, he is now inside the system, and from his vantage point and by leveraging his knowledge, he can attempt to participate in policy discussions. There is an ongoing conflict here, simmering just under the pile of discards in the background of Deepak's video. On the one hand, there is a top-down governmentalizing goal to make waste pickers perform recycling work for as little compensation as possible. On the other hand, waste pickers try to both resist and modify these schemes to advance their goals of higher, stable incomes and social mobility. And surrounding this conflict is the broader question of how to deal with Bengaluru's discards in an ecologically sensible manner.

The top-down program that repackages the exploitation of waste pickers is what I call a neoliberal sustainability agenda. As best exemplified by the corporate-led circular economy, it is market friendly, emphasizing efficiency, encouraging privatization, and looks to achieve win-win solutions that combine economic and environmental goals, at the expense of social justice. It individualizes responsibility, scapegoats consumers, excludes or exploits the poor, and enables corporations to elide responsibility and the state to escape accountability. It makes us feel good for doing our bit, comforting us with clean and sanitized spaces, all the while distracting us from the more fundamental contradictions of consumer capitalism. Bengaluru's communal sustainability proponents started shackled by this neoliberal thinking, only to be challenged by the inclusion of waste pickers in the zero-waste movement, who through their work and knowledge claims are

expanding the conversation to include questions of sustainable livelihoods and justice.

In this concluding chapter, I take inspiration from the ways in which waste pickers and their representatives have engaged in a concerted program of popular education to explore transformative potential in the cracks of neoliberal sustainability. The presence of informal workers engaged in the metabolic flows of the city changes how sustainability manifests in Bengaluru. The waste picker, as the laboring body who engages in intimate contact with materials termed waste, garbage, scrap, or *maal*, knows the materialities and temporalities of waste in a way that average middle-class Bengalureans or bureaucratic functionaries do not. Waste pickers deploy their embodied knowledge through their work, documenting the reality of waste streams, as opposed to illusions of them as composed mostly of recyclable materials.

Waste-picker organizations, through their savvy use of social media, culture jamming, and coalition-building with the middle-class-led zero-waste movement (ZWM), have incrementally moved the city closer to some actions that target the political economy of waste, beyond disposal. These actions include a statewide ban on single-use plastics and a redesign of the waste collection system to restrict the power of garbage contractors. Waste picker-entrepreneurs like Deepak have become highly visible voices for change in the city. Yet, these gains are provisional and contingent. The commodifying and co-opting forces of global capitalism threaten to subsume place-based experiments into a corporate green-growth agenda. National campaigns prioritizing “smart cities,” visual cleanliness, and privatization continue to undercut the power of labor. The progressive potential of place-based collective action is compromised by the denial of casteism, which locks most waste pickers into subordinate roles in recycling infrastructures.

Households and informal workers are the two groups most frequently scapegoated in the blame game of who is producing plastic pollution. When these two constituencies come together in organizing and advocacy, the state and corporations face more pressure and accountability. In Bengaluru, a move away from privatization, spectacular infrastructures, and corporate volunteerism toward public investment in coproduced and inclusive infrastructures shows us that unlikely coalitions can re-politicize the waste crisis. But if the urban sustainability agenda is to go beyond cleaning up or recycling, it must be led by diverse coalitions that both confront the throwaway

cultures normalized by consumer capitalism and hold the state accountable to its most vulnerable constituencies. Most importantly, it must resist the seductions of growth, efficiency, and aesthetics to recover the urban commons from the detritus of a casteist society.

Engaged Universals for Thinking Sustainability

A key contribution of this book is to situate an analysis of neoliberalizing processes in relation to urban sustainability. How do neoliberal logics forwarded by the state and capital contour what it means to be a good environmental actor in the city? How do these logics constrain or open opportunities for participation by different groups? What are the sites, forms, and expressions of environmental action? And what sorts of social and material sustainability infrastructures emerge from the interactions of ideas, peoples, and flows? In answering these questions, this narrative resists seeing neoliberalism as a monolithic juggernaut refashioning hapless objects and subjects. Rather, I highlight how neoliberal logics are skillfully appropriated by diverse constituencies to make claims for themselves and for urban environments.

I offer up several concepts that I hope will function as engaged universals, ideas emerging from and grounded in a particular locality, but that aspire to travel and help make sense of other places and dramas (Tsing 2011, 8). It was by looking side by side at a middle-class spandex-clad cyclist and a *dhobi* on his bicycle that I began to think about the aesthetic and discursive biases of so-called sustainable consumption. I reworked the term *performative environmentalism* to name these biases. Now I see performative environmentalism everywhere I look, and especially in my home in a global hub of the “creative classes,” the San Francisco Bay Area. Engaged universals are by definition provisional—they change and are changed by contact with other spaces. In Oakland, California, where I live, other axes of history, identity, and difference (race and indigeneity, for instance) matter to making sense of how performative environmentalism functions as a tool silencing communities who do not fit into the aesthetic and discursive registers of elite environmentalism.

Performative environmentalism is routine, habitual, and mundane. It is now woven into the very fabric of the everyday lives of the global consuming classes. Its everydayness makes it harder to question, problematize, and

dismantle, as does the fact that most environmental scholars, including myself, are personally implicated in reproducing it. But an honest conversation about its limits is urgent because meeting climate targets requires absolute reductions in consumption (Creutzig et al. 2018; Dubois et al. 2019). In a world of mass poverty, this is possible only through degrowth and economic redistribution (Hickel 2020). While it might be tempting to declare that the dilution of environmentalism is purely a product of top-down efforts, I speculate that the everyday legitimating structures of performative environmentalism that reify the existing social order *also* perpetuate Band-Aid solutions. My argument suggests that an honest examination of “feel-good” environmental agendas practiced and promoted by the elites and middle classes—across the world—is a necessary step toward exploring alternative environmental possibilities.

Similarly, Bengaluru is not unique in its turn to community as a site for enacting sustainability. However, in Bengaluru you can clearly see that community is hierarchical. Caste, class, and gender divisions are in your face. You would have to be skillful at delusion to ignore them.² Looking from Bengaluru helped me name *communal sustainability* as a contradictory object, both empowering women and workers while responsabilizing them for social reproduction in a manner that intensified gendered, classed, and caste hierarchies. Employing *intersectional theories of social reproduction* to characterize sustainability initiatives can reveal community hierarchies and structures in finer detail than other approaches, I contend, and this lens can be applied across diverse cases and geographies. I also saw how the turn to individual responsibility and community participation in environmental action created openings for social groups who had been comprehensively excluded from participation in urban reform.

Groups representing waste pickers created a new mode of *entrepreneurial environmentalism* that put a spin on the environmentalism of the poor—a term usually used to describe the struggles of working-class, rural peasants and forest-dependent communities in the Global South against development and infrastructural projects that threaten their livelihoods and survival in the moment—to instead focus on how their livelihoods sustain urban environments. The metabolic dependencies on manual environmental labor embedded within communal sustainability created a new avenue for claims-making. In cities like Bengaluru that prioritize livability, aesthetics, and economic competitiveness as markers of success and sustainability,

speaking about utility and usefulness is a more compelling entryway than rights-based environmental claims. Fashioning themselves as ecological actors also enabled waste-picker organizations to find common cause and form coalitions with middle-class environmentalists.

These coalitions in turn forwarded decentralized, coproduced infrastructural forms. The neoliberal state here again saw a convenient opportunity to further devolve infrastructural labor onto people through *DIY infrastructures*. DWCCs lock middle-class women and waste pickers into functioning as social infrastructure, keeping the city clean and green in a manner that is consistent with the state's goals of municipal de-risking and divestment. Geographer Rosalind Fredericks (2018) astutely points out that this technique of devolving infrastructural labor onto community is a key way the state seeks to divert and mute the activist capacities of urban residents. Making ordinary urban residents responsible for functions that would have been in the ambit of public control and responsibility gives them less time to make trouble. But it also makes the city more vulnerable to these people and social groups. Contradictions galore.

Neoliberal spaces, techniques, and subjects have multiple and contradictory aspects (Larner 2003). For instance, neoliberal reforms privatizing municipal waste collection resulted in a private contractor system that is universally loathed in Bengaluru. Middle-class zero-waste activists came to oppose garbage contractors because they found they made no effort to segregate waste or promote recycling. Labor movements opposed them because contractors subject *pourakarmikas* to inhumane working conditions, disrespect, and wage theft.³ For Bengalureans unmoved by environmental or labor issues, contractors are still worthy of censure because they are not effective at keeping waste off the streets. The infrastructural breakdown provoked by privatization opened the way for experimentation with decentralized waste management systems.

Similarly, neoliberal discourses valorize the “consumer-citizen” to marginalize other social groups. The neoliberal state utilizes community participation as a softer, kinder mode of disciplining its subjects (Peck 2010). However, in the process, these discourses and apparatuses of participation also create openings for ordinary people to do politics. In many cases, bottom-up environmental mobilization dovetails with governmentalizing agendas (Roy 2009a). Surprisingly in Bengaluru, global connections and aspirations, as well as the waste-picker movement, meant that the ZWM was not in total

accordance with governmental visions. Indeed, outcomes are not predetermined. Infrastructures of social reproduction can become spaces of contest and struggle.

In Bengaluru, infrastructural breakdown combined with a discursive emphasis on behavior change, consumer-citizenship, decentralization, and low-cost solutions opened room for some waste pickers to make themselves essential to middle-class schemes. It gave them a platform to make claims to recognition. These political claims challenge how unwaged, informal work and workers are rendered essential but disposable in capitalist economies. Formal enterprises, the state, and capital appropriate value from informal workers, but deny this metabolic dependence. Communal sustainability cracked open a door by forcing acknowledgment of the environmental and economic value of waste pickers through occupational identity cards and inclusion arrangements. It became the terrain where people who previously thought they had nothing in common—middle-class women and (mostly female) waste pickers—formed a cross-class coalition to push back against a male-dominated, technocratic, and centralized urban agenda. I contend that such cross-class coalitions are fundamental to recovering sustainability from its techno-managerial shackles, a point I elaborate on in the next section.

But the commodifying and co-opting forces of capitalism are a specter on the horizon. The effectiveness of community-education programs in changing household behavior, and waste pickers' success in recovering value from waste, has attracted a new breed of dispossessing actor. Start-ups and big business now see opportunities to turn municipal solid waste into a profit frontier. Segregated waste streams make it easier for companies to capture value from waste materials. Private players seek to retain waste pickers as a source of cheap manual labor and in ways that reduce their autonomy. Market-based circular economy initiatives concentrate power in the hands of polluters and investors and privilege new start-ups over informal organizations. The result is what I term *accumulation by inclusion*, where waste-picker inclusion becomes primarily about securing the conditions of growth and profit-making, leading to uneven outcomes for informal workers.

Looking at inclusion arrangements in Bengaluru shows us that cultural ideas about racialized others (as expendable, unworthy, devalued), explanations about the root causes of poverty (as a product of individual failure), and assumptions about how best to solve problems (through markets,

efficiency, technological, and managerial innovation) influence how well-meaning sustainable development interventions are conceptualized and enacted. Unspoken but omnipresent ideologies frame who is worthy or unworthy and contour how waste pickers are engaged. The implicit preference for English-speaking, dominant-caste men talking tech privileges these voices over waste pickers who have toiled for years to recover resources. It reveals how environmental legitimacy and legibility are ontological, still predicated on caste/class position and transnational cachet, rather than on what one actually does. While waste pickers might have used performative environmentalism's aesthetic biases to make their claims, they are still not recognized as having ecological legitimacy in the same way the dominant-caste middle classes are. This is because of the unspoken ways in which casteism and, more broadly, racialization still hold sway in how informal workers are engaged in sustainable development.

As Assa Doron and Robin Jeffrey point out (2018), India's cheap labor is a magnet for trash from all over the world. It could now become a magnet for plastic producers and brands seeking to discharge their environmental commitments, at cheapest cost. But waste labor is not inherently cheap. It is cheapened through economic and cultural processes—such as colonial appropriation that produces huge wealth inequalities between nations and the social relations of racial/caste capitalism that devalue nonwhite/Dalit bodies to cut costs. Those forces shape the outcomes of well-meaning sustainability initiatives as well. The logics of racial capitalism can infiltrate environmental mobilizations and sustainable development practice in subtle and insidious ways, resulting in inclusion becoming a tool for capital accumulation in place of social justice. This is a warning to “inclusive circular economy” proponents and practitioners in particular—your preoccupations with inclusion as an antidote to injustice might lead to the very outcomes you seek to avoid.

Radical Incrementalism from Everyday Inclusion

Can the democratizing impulses of communal sustainability be recovered from casteism, “win-win” fallacies, and corporate capture? In asking this hopeful question at the end of this book, I am taking inspiration from feminist economic geographers who have called on scholars of poverty and difference to explore the ontology of a politics of possibility (Gibson-Graham

2006, 2008; MacGregor 2021b). The stories we tell as researchers can present the current situation as one that is unchangeable, a simple story of oppression repackaged. Or we can share humble narratives that leave room open for diverse futures. In chapter 5, I showed how the drive to include waste pickers as entrepreneurs articulates with a global circular economy agenda to perpetuate the conditions of growth and profit-making in the face of compounding ecological crises. I explain that inclusion becomes a tool for accumulation because inclusion efforts are individualizing, prioritizing profit over social outcomes, and because casteism goes unacknowledged as a disciplining force.

But inclusion is everyday and lived. It is a practice, not an outcome. The material practices of negotiation that take place within zero-waste movements and infrastructures can become the stage for citizenship struggles (Fredericks 2018). To make sense of material and discursive practices of negotiations as connected to and potentially generative of a broader transformation of social relations in the city, I turn to Edgar Pieterse's frame of radical incrementalism. Writing from situated understandings of African urbanism, Pieterse and other scholars of situated urban political ecology (SUPE) argue for an analytical framework that, instead of seeing power as residing in and enacted solely through social structures (i.e., through neoliberalism, capitalism, and so on), understands power as distributed and situated. SUPE examines city-making through everyday practices of power-laden negotiation among diverse groups. While negotiations are contoured by structural constraints, their outcomes are not determined by them. Situated analyses explore whether power can be reclaimed in incremental steps through recursive empowerment. Scholars of situated urban political ecology Mary Lawhon, Henrik Ernstson, and Jonathan Silver explain (2014, 511),

The examination of diverse forms of power opens up spaces for reclaiming power in incremental steps. To be effective, such steps must be part of a larger project of recursive empowerment, for these actions "only begin to matter if one can effectively institutionalize such efforts" (Pieterse 2008, 131). This reframing allows for a reinterpretation of individualist practices, including the "quiet encroachment" of the urban poor (Bayat 2000), and the "performance of citizenship" (Scott 1985). At the same time, it calls for a critical consideration of when, how and under what circumstances such actions can be drawn into wider processes of resistance and empowerment. The process of turning these everyday moments into a radical incrementalism that supports recursive empowerment, as theorized by Pieterse (2008), is critical for understanding spaces of possibility and hope that

can multiply instead of evaporate or be placed within a centralized “state.” Radical incrementalism is thus a situated, unfolding process which differs over time and across space.

Radical incrementalism and SUPE offer an important corrective to sustainability studies that remains dominated by epistemologies of the Global North. Sustainability studies encompass a tendency to imagine that it is possible to enact social transformation without engaging in transformational politics (Sovacool and Dunlap 2022). For instance, scholars have pointed out the need to make planning processes more inclusive of diverse perspectives (McLaren and Agyeman 2015). Others have called for environmental collective action that unites government, local citizens, researchers, NGOs, and business to make effective progress toward sustainable ecological and environmental planning (Nagendra 2016). The imagined processes of participation are citizens’ assemblies or participatory forums, convened and supported by the state.

However, these ideas of polite, state-sanctioned deliberation ignore how culture and identity mediate participation in collective action (Mudliar and Koontz 2018). Official invited spaces of participation can deliberately exclude and silence dissenting voices (Ellis 2011; Miraftab and Wills 2005). Talk-centric deliberative fora wherein actors debate the merits of different possibilities ignore or undermine questions of identity and representation (White 2019). Caste, religion, and class operate as regimes of silencing and humiliation in Indian cities. Thus, the idealized version of a stakeholder forum in which all voices are heard and decisions that balance social, environmental, and quality of life concerns are reached through consensus has limited precedent in the Indian city. Indeed, when forums are convened, they are exclusive, either for elite and propertied classes or for laboring classes and the poor. The agendas of these groups rarely mix. When they do, the concerns of the poor and working classes are rendered less important and less valid, both implicitly and explicitly.

Recognizing these modes of silencing in urban environmental politics and lacking the numbers necessary to hold the state’s attention through mass movements, waste pickers pursued a mode of engagement and negotiation that is embodied, accomplished through work with waste and representing that work back to the city. As we saw in chapter 4, waste-picker organizations, through savvy use of traditional and social media, reflect back to the city the metabolic flows of materials that zero-waste infrastructures

are supposed to hide. Through this knowledge production and infrastructural negotiation, they sought to improve their conditions of life and work. I contend that this popular pedagogy also defamiliarized elite and middle-class understanding about the core drivers of unsustainability—debunking the simplistic, commonsensical mythologies forwarded by the anti-politics machine of sustainable development (Ferguson 1994).

Zero-waste activists thought they could fix Bengaluru's garbage woes by educating their neighbors, convening communities of practice, designing communal infrastructures, and unleashing market forces. It was waste pickers who mobilized their knowledge of waste materials and recyclability to show zero-waste activists that the problem was not just behavioral or infrastructural, but more fundamental. Careful documentation of dry waste flows busted the myth that the materials flowing through Bengaluru's households and commercial establishments were largely recyclable. Parisara Tanda organized DWCC visits for middle-class citizens on World Environment Day to demonstrate that, even with proper collection and sorting, the sheer volume of materials discarded in the city every day, much of which is toxic and hazardous, overwhelmed systems. It conducted plastic brand audits, recruiting middle-class environmentalists to join them in the activity. These national and international audits were conceived to highlight the culpability of plastic producers and brands for plastic pollution. Leaders in the waste-picking community like Deepak, Imran, and Shrimati conduct training sessions for college students, middle-class citizens, and other stakeholders, discussing the ongoing casteism and communalism that waste workers face. These educational tactics have been also employed by waste-picker organizations in Brazil and Argentina to build awareness among the general public about the socio-environmental aspects of waste management (Gutberlet et al. 2021).

The conditions of waste-picker work, material realities, and their representations have shifted the sustainability agenda in Bengaluru. What started as a movement to keep waste off the street evolved, first, to include a more ecological understanding of the issue, and eventually included topics that the middle-class zero-waste movement would have never thought about alone: occupational health, housing, and social security for waste pickers, reversing privatization of waste management, and a serious discussion about holding the producers of plastic and nonrecyclable materials accountable. In 2018, the Karnataka state government imposed a ban on manufacturing,

storing, distributing, and using single-use plastics, partially because of this activism. María José Zapata Campos and coauthors document how waste-picker networks in Africa and Latin America produce discourses and rationalities of social inclusion and environmental sustainability, and engage in coalition-building, as political strategies. Through this they challenge and expand environmental governance possibilities (Zapata Campos et al. 2021). In similar ways, grassroots environmental stewardship by some waste pickers is demythologizing and defamiliarizing the common explanations for urban dysfunction and unsustainability. Not only do waste pickers play an important role in knowledge production promoting recycling and recovering more resources, but their knowledge also helped demonstrate that current systems of tackling pollution were fundamentally flawed and that the core problem lay further upstream. In unequal, elite-dominated cities, re-politicizing waste, pollution, and unsustainability is an incremental process of embodied communication.

Waste Activism as a “Contact Zone”

As environmental movements recognize their ecological legitimacy and expertise, some waste pickers have become public figures and thought leaders in the city. Waste picker-entrepreneurs like Imran and Shrimati are featured on national and international webinars about waste management and climate action. They are quoted in the media. They participate in global climate summits. They make videos that are distributed on Twitter and Facebook. Leadership and advocacy activities also put waste pickers and middle-class zero-waste activists in increasing contact. I contend, hopefully, that cross-class coalitions in Bengaluru potentially provide opportunities for the kinds of spatial encounters in contact zones that can lead to transformative moments in how the middle classes politicize both unsustainability and poverty.

Feminist geographers Victoria Lawson and Sarah Elwood challenge researchers of poverty and class to search for the “ontologies of a politics of possibility.” They describe this outlook as “an ontology of openness and curiosity about what is empirically present, but what often remains theoretically unseen: middle-class actors who engage with ‘poor others’ in ways that lead to shifts in normative understandings of poverty and enacted poverty politics” (Lawson and Elwood 2014, 210). Failing to look for instances where

the dominant ways of explaining poverty and the poor are challenged might mean researchers discount moments that create new possibilities.

Uneven, distributed, and erratic contact zones are emblematic of the urban present in Indian cities. The proliferation of survival jobs such as waste picking, domestic servitude, and food delivery led by rapidly rising middle-class affluence put the middle classes in contact with socioeconomically and caste-marginalized groups on a regular basis. This contact has always involved contradictory aspects. Moreover, as Indian cities become more unequal and the state steps back further from any commitment to supporting its poorest constituencies, the underclass becomes more dependent on the patronage of the affluent to survive. New forms of patron-client relations fill in, imperfectly, for the postdevelopment state (Gidwani and Reddy 2011; Kornberg 2020). As previous chapters have shown, expunging waste from middle-class homes frequently involves domestic help who serve as the conduits of refuse from the home to the street or the dump.

The zero-waste movement also implicated the urban underclass, seeking to discipline maids, drivers, and sweepers into changed behaviors. The contact that happens around waste and even zero waste represents this form of patron-client relationship. However, the contact zones convened via joint activism are different. What makes them different is the storytelling that waste pickers and their advocates do in these spaces, a storytelling that has performative capacity and persuasive power. Although contact zones emerge from pragmatic motivations, waste-picker knowledge production can turn these into zones of transformative encounters, where middle-class actors are forced to reexamine their understandings of waste, waste pickers, and social systems more broadly.

In 2013, when I was supporting advocacy efforts led by TCGF and other groups, I participated in the creation of one such contact zone, where members of the middle classes encountered and engaged with waste pickers in counter-hegemonic ways. I helped organize a waste management awareness event. This event, a collaboration between the local elected representative's office and a collection of neighborhood associations, was envisioned as a launch point for a zero-waste management plan and was attended by around two hundred residents. As part of the event, the organizing committee decided to convene a series of panel discussions on zero-waste implementation. When choosing panelists, we proposed inviting a waste picker to participate in the discussions. With Parisara Tanda's help, the event was

attended by Santosh, a waste picker who had just begun to operate one of Bengaluru's newly commissioned DWCCs. Santosh, who had working knowledge of three languages, including some English, participated in the panel discussion as an expert on recycling. The other members of the panel included a Brahmin woman who had launched a waste management scheme in her luxury apartment complex, an elected representative, a doctor who had expertise in public health, and a composting expert. During the session, Santosh explained, "We, waste pickers are dependent on you, because if you stop us from working, we will starve. But, you are also dependent on us, because if we don't do our work there will be even more waste on the street. So we have to find a way to work together to make everything better for all of us."

The story of Savitha, a fifty-year-old housewife living in northcentral Bengaluru who co-organized this event, illustrates the transformative impact of interaction in contact zones. In a 2017 interview, Savitha confessed to me that she never thought she would be so involved with waste pickers in the city. Her engagement in the ZWM started in the usual way; she was a member of her local residents' association for several years and an influential voice in neighborhood politics pushing for clean streets. During her engagement with local civic campaigns, she became interested in zero-waste management as a potential solution to ongoing garbage issues in her neighborhood. She joined TCGF, met activists who organize informal workers, and began to engage with some waste pickers. These personal engagements changed her views on waste pickers. She began to see that they shared similar goals—to live in a safe, clean city. Savitha is not alone. Several middle-class waste activists have become supportive of waste pickers because of their in-person encounters. Sheetal hosts waste-picker training sessions in her home. Her husband is not a fan, but she has decided to go ahead without his approval. Waste pickers have also at times been able to rely on middle class support to resist intimidation from garbage contractors. As one labor activist put it, "Green conscious middle classes helped us fight the garbage mafia." Now, a sizable contingent of environmentally engaged middle classes ally themselves with waste-picker goals and rights and vouch for waste pickers in public fora.

Yet it is essential to emphasize that these moments of transformative possibility are just that, ephemeral moments. Assorted transformative moments in contact zones have not eliminated the hierarchies and exclusions of communal sustainability. Many middle-class "environmentalists" continue

to malign the work of waste pickers. Alongside labor-friendly moves to regularize sanitation work are a series of antipoor measures implemented by the municipality in the past three years—often with the encouragement of some middle-class actors. The BBMP has paused the process of issuing occupational identity cards to Bengaluru's waste pickers. Hefty fines for littering enforced by ex-military marshals, and a single-use plastic ban that does not include any provisions to help informal vendors transition to using other materials, could harm the city's poor and working classes in unexpected ways. Entrepreneur inclusion models have also segmented informal waste workers, with many migrant waste pickers remaining in precarious positions (AICCTU 2021). And while there are attempts to draw individualist practices of waste picker advocacy and leadership into wider processes of resistance and empowerment, the lack of a strong mass movement leaves waste pickers vulnerable to changing policy priorities.

Recognizing these vulnerabilities and the need for a collective approach, on March 1, 2022, which commemorates Global Waste Pickers' Day, waste pickers and small scrap dealers launched a new statewide member-based organization, Thyajya Shramika Sangatane (TSSK), that would unite around fifteen thousand informal waste workers across thirteen cities and villages in Karnataka. Leveraging its numbers and statewide scope, TSSK is now pushing the Karnataka state government to restart issuing identity cards and provide waste pickers with health insurance, disability insurance, and pension fund accounts. This story is still unfolding. While it remains to be seen if waste pickers can build the collective might needed to reverse privatization, break caste, and improve their lives, sustainability and environmentalism have served as necessary and unavoidable terrain for their struggle in Bengaluru thus far. And this struggle is not theirs alone.

Solidarity and a sense of mutual vulnerability between progressive, environmentally engaged middle classes, and informal workers is even more important today. The postdevelopment Indian state is increasingly an authoritarian one, empowered by a large section of society that ascribes to its Brahminical Hindu Nationalist sentiments (Ranganathan 2021, Reddy 2021). Waste pickers, as poor and largely Dalit and Muslim groups, are especially vulnerable at this time. Conversely, when middle-class climate change activist Disha Ravi was arrested and charged with anti-national activity, environmental and social progressives received a terrible wake-up call (Kashwan 2023). Their class and caste privilege no longer offered protection from the state's repressive

tendencies. Authentic collaboration with working class labor movements and anti-caste movements will be necessary to sustain environmental activism and advance sustainability in the country.

From Performative to Reparative Environmentalisms

We are at the end of this story. Where do we go from here? Even though waste pickers are now recognized as environmental heroes, as we see from this story, “recognition and intent are grossly insufficient for changing systems of discard, or even to study them ethically” (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022, 120). As theorists of decoloniality contend, gestures of inclusion can function to maintain an unequal social order (Glenn 2015; Maldonado-Torres 2011; Mignolo 2007). Bengaluru’s local waste and pollution crises are connected to and inseparable from a global crisis of plastic overaccumulation and climate change. They are also locally complex, challenged by the sheer magnitude, density, and frequency of waste generation, as well as the casteism that has stymied the development of modern sanitation infrastructures. To overcome false solutions that reproduce the exploitation of oppressed communities and fail to tackle the core drivers of ecological destruction, we need a fundamental shift in thinking and action beyond inclusion.

The onus to create systems that “discard well” is not just on waste pickers, but also on scholars and activists concerned about sustainability and ecological health.⁴ What are the steps we can take? In closing this book, I want to offer some ideas, big picture and specific policy proposals, to ally with and strengthen the radical incrementalism that waste pickers are attempting to enact in Bengaluru and beyond. These ideas are for those of us who see ourselves as committed to the broader project of ecological health, environmental justice, and equitable, sustainable well-being. I am speaking to you, my fellow well-meaning researcher, activist, engineer, or policymaker.

Reclaiming environmental questions from technocratic, managerial, and economistic capture is a necessary first step. Thinking relationally, historically, and spatially reveals how environmental pollution is produced and enacted through colonial land relations and (racial) capitalism’s cheapening strategies that turn people and places into sinks (Liboiron 2021; Patel and Moore 2018). Dismantling these structures of oppression will be a long, hard road ahead, one that cannot be traversed by middle-class

environmentalists or labor groups alone. Rather, confronting the interlinked global-local environmental crises of climate change and environmental pollution will require transformative coalitions led by frontline communities.

Waste pickers and other waste workers know the most about the material natures of waste. Leveraging this knowledge and building coalitions, waste pickers recursively empowered themselves. Through their advocacy and embodied activism, they illuminated the fallacies of neoliberal sustainability. Waste pickers showed the ZWM that efficiency and entrepreneurship was not going to get Bengaluru out of its garbage mess. They demythicized “clean as green,” teaching middle-class environmentalists that if the sustainability agenda is to succeed in achieving a healthy city, it must confront more centrally the throwaway cultures normalized by consumer capitalism. Waste pickers are doing environmental activism while trying to survive in a world that treats them as disposable. They are constantly negotiating eviscerating forces that repackage their exploitation with a green sheen.

Communal sustainability, as emerging from and practiced by middle-class zero-waste warriors, politicizes the waste crisis by connecting it to urban development and consumerism, but it does not question caste, and thus struggles to emerge as a transformative coalition centering justice and equity. Communal hierarchies and differences (along lines of race, caste, religion, ethnicity) undermine collective and communitarian routes to social transformation, as do individualizing narratives that reduce people to consumers and entrepreneurs. The reliance on caste-determined environmental labor to produce sustainable cities ultimately serves the ends of capital accumulation, undermining environmental and social goals. Indeed, what waste-picker coalitions are trying to do world over is resist the colonial, casteist, and racist ways in which the powerful hide and deny the oppression that enables capital accumulation. Instead, they demand that *they*, and not just their exploitable labor, be seen as indispensable to our collective futures.

Looking at this case study in Bengaluru and zooming out from it reminds us that our systems of production and consumption do not work for most people in the world. Whether it is waste pickers materially deprived of basic dignity and forced to sort through refuse to make life, or the middle-class mother in Bengaluru worried about her child's fourth bout of malaria,⁵ waste reveals a broken economic system. Recognizing the interlinked nature

of ecological violence and human suffering across diverse positionalities can help us see our mutual vulnerability. Waste flows form the material bonds of our mutual vulnerability. Our mutual vulnerability is what we have in common.

Recognizing mutual vulnerability and racial and socioecological indispensability means rejecting the ideas of dominion that legitimize the dehumanization and oppression of others (Pellow 2016). In India, this means the annihilation of caste. Quite simply, there can be no *just sustainability* as long as environmental initiatives ignore, condone, or reproduce casteism. Scholarship on Indian cities and environmentalism is finally beginning to include caste within its analytic, thanks largely to the efforts of Dalit scholars and activists (Aiyadurai and Ingole 2021; M. Sharma 2017b). Rejecting casteism involves recognizing the reality that salubrious environments and economic gains for dominant-caste, middle-class, and elite groups in India has always come at the cost of oppressed castes. Thinking about casteism as an expression and form of racialized oppression connects the struggles of Bengaluru's waste pickers to the struggles of racialized and othered communities all over the world (Ranganathan 2021).

Anti-casteism, like antiracism, is not simply an orientation but a practice. Enacting an anti-casteist, justice-oriented sustainability will require not just new ways of thinking but also new ways of doing and being in the world. And we cannot wait to abolish caste to reform dehumanizing waste management systems either (Swaroop and Lee 2021). These actions go together. Achieving salubrious environments without caste oppression will require changes from everyone—households, municipal governments, businesses, and the state. And while no systemic solution to Bengaluru's waste problem is likely to be perfect, and there is no single and universal good that can be achieved, one that combines an ecological ethic with an anti-casteist practice is more likely to be a system that “discards well”—especially if we consistently prioritize the well-being of communities who have thus far borne the brunt of a wasteful city.

Converging social and ecological conditions present an opportunity for changing this broken system. The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on waste workers across the world. It cut waste pickers off from the source of their livelihoods and exposed them to health risks while also making it harder to access aid and community resources (Chandran 2021; Hartmann, Hegel, and Boampong 2022). Women waste pickers were particularly

vulnerable to hunger and increased precarity (Wittmer, Srinivasan, and Qureshi 2020). Sanitation workers too toiled amid great hazards—three *pourakarmikas* in Bengaluru lost their lives as they worked on the front lines without any protective equipment. Yet, COVID-19 also reminded elites and the middle classes of their fundamental dependence on sanitation workers and waste pickers, and of their own vulnerability. As Kanthi Swaroop and Joel Lee reflect (2021, 39), the “emergence and growth of a discourse in which sanitation workers are guardians of societal well-being rather than objects of caste contempt” has in some cases improved the material conditions of their work. Meanwhile, pandemic “risk society” increased the use of disposable plastics, bringing new urgency to the task of tackling plastic pollution (Silva et al. 2021). The conjoining of labor and environmental crisis offers the opportunity to see these oft-separated issues as inexorably linked.

In closing this book, I want to argue for an alternative agenda of *reparation by inclusion*, which rejects the dehumanization of informal workers and the seductions of performative environmentalism. An ethic and practice of reparation seeks to reimagine and recreate socio-ecological relations from a full acknowledgment of the injustices of the past as they live into the present. I advocate reparation over justice because dominant, liberal notions of justice center the individual, foreclosing consideration of histories of harm and denying the need for collective redress. Reparation is less open for capture by neoliberal capitalism’s individualizing, commodifying, and depoliticizing forces.

My thought-partner Jennifer Tucker and I argue in a 2020 perspective piece that the frame of reparation offers a corrective to the dominant logics of legalistic and deficit-based interventions in informal economies (Tucker and Anantharaman 2020, 295).

Decentering formalization, we advocate for reparation as an ethic to orient the actions of development practitioners and policymakers. Our debt here is to the Black radical tradition (hooks 1996), scholars and activists proposing collective redress for the unspeakable violence and thefts of slavery, legacies that live into the present (Martinez-Alier 2016; Wiedmann et al. 2020; Liboiron 2021; Hickel 2017). Following W. E. B. Du Bois, the ethic of reparation activates memory against the forces of willful forgetting that deny history and deep relationality (Du Bois 1935). We are inspired by the Black radical tradition’s expansive, future-oriented political imagination and its call to remake economic and social relations from the roots up (West and hooks 2016). “Reparation ecologies” add an imperative to heal the false Nature/Society divide, locating socio-economic relationships within

living ecologies. Both lines of thinking emphasize redistribution: of resources, land, work and the labors of care. While formalization targets workers or the economies that sustain them for reform, the field of action promoted by reparation is much broader, including the forces producing inequality and environmental harm. Reparation acts horizontally, centering communities most harmed by fomenting worker power, repairing historic injustices, and redistributing social power and resources to the grassroots. Reparation can also help us acknowledge the long history of assent to exploitation that structures scholarship and practice (Roy 2017).

A *reparation by inclusion* agenda leverages sustainability and circular economy to demand more material and intellectual investment into informal economies, as well as access to more social entitlements for informal waste pickers. It starts with a claim that informal economies have long subsidized the conditions of capital accumulation, often through (self) exploitation, and that any sustainability initiative will have to redress existing injustice through grassroots leadership. When this investment is made from an acknowledgment of past injustices, it avoids a deficit-based agenda of disciplining waste pickers. At UNEA assemblies and global climate summits, grassroots waste-picker organizations are already insisting that sustainability practitioners go beyond economic and ecological rationality: they are demanding full and meaningful participation in national and international policymaking, fair wages and social security, and systematic plans to phase out toxic substances in plastics. By delinking labor, income, and development, and connecting social reform with ecological healing, these reparative policies foster more just ways of organizing work, time, and life.

Reparation by inclusion is impossible within a sustainability regime that justifies every action based on narrow cost-benefit analysis, efficiency metrics, and aesthetic preoccupations. Such a sustainability regime is fated to reproduce injustice. Instead, sustainability can become a terrain through which ecological and social harm can be repaired *if* there is a recognition of mutual vulnerability, a refusal to participate in dehumanization, and a reparation of power and resources. The circular economy's emphasis on sharing, reuse, and regeneration holds promise for ameliorating both ecological harm and social inequity, but only if its interventions are designed with attention to power, scale, and difference (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022, 132). This means redistributing power so informal workers are the ones developing EPR policies and determining the terms of integration. It means the redistribution of revenue toward waste pickers. It means using

technology not to increase profit, but instead to stop exposing waste workers to social and material toxicity. It means investing in public infrastructure and in social schemes like care incomes and universal basic services to ensure a *just transition* for informal waste workers exiting this occupation.

Sustainability initiatives that are driven by an ethic and practice of reparation would redistribute resources and power toward oppressed communities and disentangle socio-ecological sustenance from corporate growth or accumulation goals. Building intersectional coalitions led by those most harmed by the status quo, which remake everyday life alongside doing politics, is the key to a more transformative sustainability. To move forward, privileged environmentalists, scholars, and activists must accept leadership from waste pickers, sanitation workers, and other frontline communities, and prioritize social reform and reparation over aesthetics or efficiency.

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