CHAPTER 19

Shitological Marxism: political subjectivities among the sanitation workers of Mumbai

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Abstract: Metabolic rift theory seems to be based on a forgetting of shit. In considering waste without waste work, ecological Marxists tend to overlook how metabolic rifts are overcoded by racial, sexual, or caste differences. A shitological appreciation of metabolic rift theory might remedy this issue. In the inaugural metabolic rift in Britain, race was already present given that the cholera spread by shit was symbolised as a racial other. Moreover, a caste-formation always coalesces around the management of shit. Contemporary sanitation workers' struggle in Mumbai is considered then in light of the political history of self-fashioning and subject constitution of Dalits in Maharashtra. Neoliberal privatisation of municipal waste management since the 1990s has casualised sanitation work, rendering workers as volunteers, temporary, and obsolete – and thus subjects doubly metonymic of waste. Kachra Vahatuk Shramik Sangh (KVSS, translates as Waste Transport Workers' Union) uses traditional labour tactics but also technologies of the self to create a resistant political subject. The ambivalence of this subject to waste suggests an eco-political subjectivity not accounted for by the metabolic rift.

The forgetting of shitology in metabolic rift theory

Under a section titled "Utilisation of the Refuse of Production" in *Capital Vol. 3*, Marx writes:

> ... the excrement [*Exkremente*] produced by man's natural metabolism ... the natural human waste products [*Ausscheidungsstoffe*] ... are of the greatest importance for agriculture. But there is a colossal wastage [*Verschwendung*] in the capitalist economy in proportion to their actual use. In London, for example, they can do nothing better with the excrement [*Dünger*] produced by 4½ million people than to pollute the Thames with it, at monstrous expense [*ungeheuren Kosten*].[1]

This passage is one of the key philological bases of the metabolic rift school of ecological Marxism.[2] They argue that the historical separation between direct producers and the means of production (the "so-called primitive accumulation" in Marx's ironic phrase) is the systematic cause of disturbances in primordial ecological cycles that add up to environmental crisis and even climate catastrophe.[3] Indeed, the metabolic rift has travelled from this initial case of shit in the Thames to a general question of waste and excess on the planet, where the Anthropocene itself can be conceived as a series of rifts.[4] Just as the above translation elides the distance between *Exkremente* and *Dünger* into "excrement", shit is flushed out of the metabolic rift theory – or rather traded for a general concept of waste.

But such theoretical sanitation is more insidious than a total effacement. The ecological Marxists are rather adept at recalling the metabolic rift as a contradiction between too much shit in the city, and not enough shit in the countryside.[5] The enclosure movements freed up land for the first agricultural revolution and drove urbanisation by sending paupers into cities; this process exhausted the soil, and nitrogen-rich human faeces were now concentrated in the urban centres and unable to return to the soil to replenish it.[6] The ensuing crisis of land productivity inspired imperial adventures to appropriate even more shit – the rush to acquire guano islands – until the mass production of synthetic fertilisers became tenable.[7] Moreover, like the sewage farms of the nineteenth century, scholars continue to look to shit as a site of repairing the rift, for instance through the use of

biosolids in contemporary agricultural practices.[8] Such remedial hopes rely on the image of a primordial and un-rifted metabolism.[9] But who performed the work of maintaining the ecological cycle and how? Who hauled shit between town and farm?

The trace of a forgetting of shit is felt in ecological Marxists' omission of waste work, and a political subjectivity proper to it. While the metabolic rift theorists have offered critiques of ecological economics' obliviousness to mechanisation and the profit-motive in the management of waste,[10] they do not attend directly to the labour process of the waste pickers, sanitation workers, and other such forms of ecological, or infrastructural labour.[11] Such an approach would necessarily bring into the fray political subjectivities in excess of the labour/capital dyad, insofar as waste work is tied up with purity rituals and pollution stigma that constitute racial, gendered, and caste subjects. Metabolic rift theorists do not attend to this question of subject constitution as a whole.[12] A revolutionary subjectivity is a rather conspicuous absence in metabolic rift theory as a labour-centric social theory that avows "a revolutionary ecological view... that links social transformation with the transformation of the human relation with nature".[13]

In this essay, I want to offer a recuperation of the metabolic rift theory from a shitological standpoint. That is, a position where the management of faecal matters is simultaneously an ecological question and a technology of the self, that is the production of subjects.[14] In this sense, Dominique Laporte's *History of Shit* is the maverick shitological work – especially in its account of the "privatisation of waste" in which the absolutist state mandated an olfactory privacy of the household, stipulating that subjects accumulate their waste, paving the way for the economic individual of capitalism.[15] In the same vein, caste power – as a regulation of sensuality, institution of purity rituals, and marking (stigmatising) of bodies – appears as the horizon within which shitology has to be understood. In the peripheral vision of metabolic rift theory, shit is thus a double intersection: of nature and capitalism on the one hand, and the body stigmatised by caste and the body that produces value on the other.[16]

I recount a spurious version of the inaugural metabolic rift while underscoring the constitutive role of caste/racial markers between Britain and India. Moreover, based on ethnographic work with Kachra Vahatuk Shramik Sangh (KVSS, Waste Transport Workers' Union) in Mumbai, I illustrate how waste workers negotiate class and caste hierarchy through self-fashioning and spectacular politics. In the onslaught of neoliberal privatisation, the municipality refuses to recognise thousands of sanitation workers in Mumbai as employees – instead of permanent workers, the city sees them as temporary and redundant volunteers. The KVSS workers are thus rendered disposable in ways that exceed the scope of metabolic rift theory – through caste stigma of waste work and losing the very status of labour. I note how these workers constitute themselves as working subjects from the streets to the courts.

The metabolism of the Empire

By "monstrous expense", Marx designated (not exclusively) London's waves of cholera outbreaks – of which human faeces were a notorious vector, abounding in the city's waters and producing in 1858 what was called the Great Stink.[17] The 19th century debates on sanitation and what to do with municipal waste, and the resulting mode of public heath and urban governance, are well known.[18] However, the provenance of the cholera itself is underappreciated, and indexes in turn the shitological character of capitalism's metabolic rift. Turning from the sanitary crisis of the metropole to epidemiological ones in the colony renders shit not merely as a fertiliser and contaminant but also as a racial marker conditioned by the imperial scope of the metabolic rift.

The first recorded cholera epidemic (1817-1820) is tied to the British East India Company's 1817 requisition of the Sundarban mangrove swamps of the Bengal region. After having declared them to be Company property, colonial troops went into the forests for surveying and setting up plantations, and their imperial networks accelerated the spread of the contagion.[19] At the time, however, medical officials of the Bengal

Presidency construed the disease as a meteorological one, as if it was proper to the clime itself.[20] The "monstrous expense" was thus chickens coming home to roost – to use an anachronistic phrase for the contradiction of imperialism – in the form of an Asiatic malady that would visit the streets of London.

Marx's economic rendering of the epidemic as an *ungeheuren Kosten* might seem like a metaphor that portends a twentieth century discourse of "negative externalities" of economic production, but it is rather in step with the then contemporaneous discussions of cholera in the economic register. By the time of the second cholera epidemic (1830-1832), which reached the metropole, the disease is figured as contagious and communicative (as opposed to miasmatic and meteorological), that is, an oriental but also an itinerant gripe – personified later in American papers as a deathly immigrant donning a fez and perched on the bowsprit of a British merchant ship.

But, despite maintaining that the disease spread through social intercourse (and advising quarantine), health reformers and investigators added the caveat that international free trade shall not be disturbed in order to curb cholera. [22] Public health was thus limited to the economic interest of empire, and this limit appeared as an oriental scapegoat alongside the unassailable ideal of free trade.[23] In the inaugural metabolic rift, then, shit clung to disease, which in turn clung to social difference (in this case, a racial stigma).

Fig. 1: Friedrich Graetz, "The kind of 'assisted emigrant' we can not afford to admit" (1832). *Puck Magazine*. Photograph: Yale University Library Online Exhibition, *Moral Judgment in Evaluating Disease: Some Pictures for Discussion*.[21]

The imperial machinery for producing metabolic rifts continues after the Revolt of 1857, after the dominion of the subcontinent was transferred from the Company to the Crown. Natural accident and governmental neglect together led to mass deaths in the form of famines in 1876 and 1896.[24] Making some remedial efforts, the agronomist J.A. Voelcker – who was versed in the natural scientific basis of the metabolic rift theory as taught by the chemist Justus von Liebig – toured the colony on behalf of the Crown and compiled a four-hundred page report on the causes and ways of preventing famines; a subtle indictment of imperial society unfolds in this document.[25] He found the Indians to be caste-prejudiced against the use of nightsoil as a fertiliser (a practice that he recommended), praising the few sewage farms he encountered. He also attributed the famines in part to the loss of nutrients as crops like linseed were being traded "freely" with Britain, and the chemicals in their refuse could not return as manure to Indian soil.[26]

The empire's right to trade freely was thus a pretext for transforming social and ecological relations.[27]

Nevertheless, like the forgetting of shit in metabolic rift theory – especially the work of waste and its entanglement in racial difference – the nationalist historians of the subcontinent's ecology have been rather oblivious at best, and sanguine at worst, about the caste difference in their indictment of the colonial management of environment.[28] They focus on colonialism as the primary driver of the metabolic rift in India, which conjures an ecologically idyllic image of pre-colonial forms of life. More recent scholarship has noted the valorisation of brahmanical rituals in Indian environmentalisms as indigenous praxes of social metabolism with nature.[29] These trends existed both in the resistance to the Green Revolution and the big dam projects carried out by the Indian state. Unsurprisingly, scholars have also noted the exclusion of Dalits from such movements.[30]

Shitology and Dalit Marxism

As most of the sanitation workers, waste pickers, manual scavengers of India are Dalits,[31] a discussion of waste work inevitably brings us to the caste question, and opens up the politico-subjective dimension of waste work occluded in the metabolic rift theory. But this inevitability also recapitulates the brahmanical stigma that marks some bodies as impure. The activist Bezwada Wilson, who founded and convenes the Sanitation Workers' Movement has criticised ongoing schemes to turn Dalit sanitation workers into entrepreneurs – by giving them loans to buy sewer cleaning machines – for such policies end up reifying the link between Dalits and sanitation.[32] The scholar of anti-caste Ambedkarite politics Anupama Rao writes: "efforts to define waste management as Dalit labour, and offer government protection for [sanitation workers] are a violence committed in the name of labour abstraction: their effect is to universalise Dalits' association with waste, rather than defining all labourers as Dalit."[33] Turning to Dalit radicalism for a shitological treatment of metabolic rift theory harbours the risk of committing this same violence.

However, the centrality of "spirituality" – understood as techniques of constituting a body as a subject – in the history of Dalit politics creates a direct connection between the caste question and shitology.[34] They both work on the terrain of control, conduct, and expression of individuals in and against a given social formation. Rao notes how Ambedkar had beseeched Dalit women of the Mahar region to wear gold jewellery and clothes like upper-caste women – this was a political claim to a *habitus* that disrupted caste society. Moreover, contemporary scholars formulate caste as a specific *body history*, entangled with – but in excess of – histories of value.[35] Such a formulation is comparable to Laporte's shitology as a conjunction of "history of senses" and "history of modes of production". He distilled a Royal Edict of Villers-Cotterets from 1539 as "*à chacun sa merde*" [to each his shit].[36] A proto-capitalist subject is groomed, an olfactory enclosure is carved out when the Crown demands that each house ought to have a cesspool of its own, and that faeces and refuse ought to be collected before given away to the *vidangeur*.[37]

This classical French subject must differ from, say, the one conjured by the 2014 campaign of the Modi government to eliminate open-defecation, called the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission).[38] In the face of the spectacular image of India as the land of manual scavenging and open defecation, it might appear that the privatisation of shit is something the continent inherits from Europe in the colonial encounter – but that is far from truth.

First, the Royal Edict and others like it were a Romanesque aspiration, as Laporte is keen to note, which was efficacious more as an aspiration than as a reality. Moreover, a version of stigma coalesces in waste management *everywhere*, even where faeces were precious enough as fertiliser to be stolen, and those who made money off it (like the *vidangeurs* of France) hired the labour of outcaste and stigmatised individuals (as in the

case of the *hinins* of Japan).[39] Even if shit is collected in one private household – and the metabolism has not been rifted – it is still transported by someone as a social labour (a dimension overlooked by Laporte and ecological Marxists alike). Likewise, the faecal modernity coveted by the Modi government cannot be dreamt without repressing ongoing caste-based discrimination – manual scavenging and untouchability, in both bare and newer, subtler forms. In the West today, for instance, municipal sanitation does not carry the stigma it does in India, but that is in part because of a neoimperial relation through which the waste of the North is conveniently transferred to the South.[40]

Second, the architectural enclosures of privies, cesspools and water closets is homologous to the inscription of caste from the body to the urban space as a whole – segregations between dense slums and sanitised "civil lines".[41] Oral histories and state archives attest to Dalits' tactical use of the spectacles of caste atrocity and of the metonymic association to waste to perform a critique of the Indian state and caste society.[42]

A spectacular example: On 13 May 1949, about fifteen thousand Bombay municipal workers, under the leadership of BR Ambedkar, predominantly sweepers and scavengers, went on strike for better wages, a six-hour workday, and free housing. This was the same year that this municipality received powers to acquire any land for "improvement" in the name of the urban poor and their health. Such policies often displaced the urban poor, and in this strike we had ostensibly the urban poor, only a third of whom had tenement housing from the city's health department. This housing was itself squalid and mismanaged, with reports of overflowing privies and broken flush mechanisms. Such was the city's faecal regime, its shitological formation if you will. However, when the police retaliated with mass arrests, the workers reversed this dynamic.

The workers responded by launching a sewage attack: they clogged sewage pipes near the residence of the chief minister and home minister of the Bombay state, thus encircling their official residences with overflowing human waste. Now the homes of the chief minister and home minister too were surrounded with faecal matter, and not just the homes of Dalits described by sociologists and reformers. In this moment, then, the sanitation workers overturned the symbolic order of clean versus unclean, sanitary versus unsanitary.[43]

The workers used the sensorial and figurative capacity of shit – it is spectacular, and unavoidable, it draws attention – but also make a symbolic point by reversing the urban production of squalor. The city elites that benefit from cordoned enclaves of unlivable slums for the working urban poor – but who may also make arbitrary claim upon it – are now mired in shit. Dalit politics appears thus not as a question of proximity to or distance from the stigma of waste, but as a strategic and ethical movement between the two poles.[44]

The shitological question is how social differences, as stigma and subjectivity, coalesce around shit, and it is therefore a universal question. Caste society is one shitological formation that Dalit radicalism seeks to abolish. The revolutionary ecological view of the metabolic rift theory is not revolutionary enough as long as it does not account for the articulation of stigma and social metabolism. Like the activist-scholar Anand Teltumbde, who said there can be no "Swachh Bharat" without the annihilation of caste, we might in the shitological inspiration say that there is no communist metabolism with caste-based waste management. The purchase of shitology is to mediate Dalit Marxism with metabolic rift theory of environmental contradictions – an urgent task, not least due to the impoverishment of sanitation workers legitimated by bourgeois environmentalism.

KVSS and the Hyderabad Model

The KVSS (Waste Transport Workers' Union) operates in the legacy of Dalit Marxists against the municipal governance that maintains segregated urban space of Mumbai. The union has been active since 1996. At the time, there were few garbage compactor

vehicles, and the waste was transported in open trucks. As Milind Ranade, now the general secretary of KVSS, recounts, most of the workers were migrants from other regions of India, and the language barriers made the organising process slow and arduous. Through months of organising, Ranade led the workers to their first major victory: securing drinking water access for sanitation workers at the Deonar dumping ground – one of Asia's largest.

Fig. 2: Map of Mumbai, from Google Maps. Deonar is the dumping ground, and surrounding areas south of it – Shivaji Nagar, Baiganwasi, Mankhurd, Govandi – are working class neighborhoods where most of the sanitation workers I met live. Their dwellings range from slums to underserviced public housing. This area is zoned as M East Ward.

KVSS is often in the news both for its legal victories and for its spectacular protests. In 2018, when Sumanti, a 38-year-old sweeper, committed suicide for not finding any work, KVSS marched with her body to the municipal corporation.[45] This spectacular confrontation with the urban government is reminiscent of the 1949 strike, but the work of KVSS departs from that legacy due to the specificities of the neoliberal articulation of waste management and environment. After an environmentally-minded citizen moved courts against the open dumping of municipal waste in the 1990s, state sanctioned committees developed a waste management framework for Indian municipalities – for the first time laying out rules for segregation, collection, transport, and disposal of waste.[46] In this framework, the involvement of NGOs and civil society actors in municipal sanitation was explicitly encouraged. By the 2000s, a model of municipal waste management arose – called the Hyderabad model – in which the sanitation worker was made invisible, and was rebranded as a volunteer.[47]

Wages were replaced by honorariums given out by private NGOs contracted by the municipality. As the same people continued to do the same stigmatised work, on paper the municipality feigned that the city's waste was being collected by good samaritans. By making sure to systematically and periodically interrupt work, these NGOs found a way to skirt the definitions of employment laid out in the Factory Act. The centre and local governments thus created alongside the permanent workers a precarious underclass of temporary sanitation workers, who were already beset by terrible working conditions and stigmatisation.

Unlike the Dalit Marxism of yore, it is not housing then, but rather *permanence* that has been the main demand of the KVSS. At stake is the crisis of work, and the working subject without work, of which Sumanti's suicide is a tragic expression. Over a series of successive cases, the union has argued in state and central courts, and in industrial

tribunals, that the workers are engaged in a core – not supplemental – function of the municipality, and that they do the same work as the other permanent sanitation workers. Thousands of workers have received a permanent status – that is, to be hired with full wages and benefits by the municipal corporation – but many more remain unincorporated. One of the workers I met, Dadarao Patekar, a charismatic local leader, began this work in 1996, and he is still not a permanent worker.

In 2022, I attended a Zoom hearing of one of the cases in the Maharashtra High Court in which the lawyer of the union argued that these are permanent workers, and thus that their wages and rights were being violated. The lawyer for the municipal corporation said that these workers were not hired for the usual duties. The lawyer for the union said that cleaning of waste is a permanent duty of the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM) according to the municipal corporation act from the late 1800s. The MCGM lawyer maintained that, legally, the municipality couldn't make new positions for hiring these workers. That hearing ended at an impasse.

Earlier in 2024, however, the workers' struggle reached a major milestone – the MCGM announced that it will roll back the Hyderabad model, and will hire 7,388 sanitation workers across Mumbai under a single contract and pay them the legal minimum wage.[48] This raises the Rs. 180 per day honorarium to a Rs. 768 per day wage – which amounts to less than $10 at the time of writing. But the struggle continues, as another group of workers protested the job insecurity that comes from this move – as the new contract does not guarantee that it will employ the same "volunteers".[49] The turnover from the old scheme to a new one is then also an opportunity for the state to discipline and control the workers – to disturb the organic connections, knowledge, and militancy that they have formed over a period of years.

At stake here is the political subjectivity of labour – what is a worker without work, how is caste-based labour rendered voluntary, and how to constitute oneself as a worker in the eye of the state. These considerations flare up in the spectacle in the streets and in court, but it also plays out in minute ways during the production process itself.

(Waste) Working Day[50]

The day began near a special economic zone, at the GTB Nagar Metro Station in Andheri West, an affluent neighborhood with young professionals, students, and tech parks – campuses containing corporate offices. It was about 5.30am. Ashok, a member of KVSS, met me there and beckoned all the other workers for an introduction with me. They were collected at a *chauraha*, a traffic roundabout. Theirs was an assembly without an architecture – a demand for a basic workplace that included restrooms and a place to take breaks and eat had been a part of their long-term fight.

Ashok – my contact from the union – introduced me as someone who would write about "their plight", and I went along with it.[51] He instructed the group to tell me what they needed and what their problems were. Chauhan spoke of how the trash compactor, in its motions, can amputate their fingers during a casual workday – he showed me his mutilated hand. Ajay told me that a tree fell upon him while he was working during a storm, and also about how the glass in the trash makes their exposed toes bleed out. They pointed out these injuries because the MCGM does not give them adequate gear. Nor, given the workers' contractual status, does the municipal authority provide them with medical insurance for these workplace injuries.

After some of the workers had dispersed, Sagar – who used to be a water purifier technician before sanitation work – continued to tell me things, and I was taking notes, and he was waiting for me to write things down. I listened with a notepad and pen in my hand. I was admittedly less interested in recording because I had a sense that his account in this first meeting would be a union-sanctioned rehearsal of collective grievances – not that that was unimportant, but it was something that I knew was well documented. But

when I would stop writing, he would stop speaking in tandem. He told me to write, and I pretended to do so, and he continued talking.

Before the beginning of the workday proper, with its established rhythms, a political collaboration had already commenced. Ashok, Chauhan, Ajay, and Sagar were prepared, that much is trivial. What is notable was that this preparation was for writing their bodies (specifically, the injuries incurred therein while at work) into being in the eyes of the state through their conversation with me. The social worker, activist, journalist, or ethnographer (non-workers who come in contact with these sanitation workers often) with whom KVSS tends to collaborate thus appeared to the workers as an inscriptive surface, as a part of their project in constituting a worker-subjectivity – an organisational form of self-fashioning.

After the supervisor took attendance, I followed a team on one of their trucks. The truck would stop near piles of trash on the street, and the workers – some clung to the vehicle's rear, and some rode in the cockpit – would chip at it with their tools until it disappeared. They would use primarily four types of tools – all provided by the municipality. *Kaanta* – a poker made of a wooden stick with a metal end ("kaanta", as in a fork, hook, thorn, or needle (but masculine declension) in Hindi – almost a pitchfork). *Patti* – a thin and flat sheet of plastic or metal, about the site of an A4 paper ("patti", as in bandage). *Jhaadu* – a broom made of straws. And a tarp of plastic onto which, using the other tools, they would load the trash from the road, and then lift the tarp together to throw the trash into the compactor. Rarely would they have recourse to plastic or metal garbage chutes that they could attach to the compactor and mechanically unload them – although, when they did, it was this operation that had mutilated workers' digits. They knew which buildings were hospitals or factories – that would be industrial or biohazardous waste, which was out of their purview, because they worked for the Municipal Solid Waste department.

Laksh, whom I was sitting next to, told me that they wore reflective orange vests less so for safety, and more because the supervisors wanted them to be seen as they went along the collection routes – it was a way to mark and monitor them. I saw Laksh's toe bleeding because of the glass dumped into one of the municipal solid waste chutes, right next to a recycling plant run by an NGO – whose waste they did not and could not collect. That was the green recyclable waste – with its own profitable economy – and this was the solid waste that went straight to the dumping ground.

While some days the political character of the working day would appear through details such as the reflective vest or the tools, moments of upheaval were not infrequent. In January of 2022, the Municipal Solid Waste Department issued a circular informing that they were going to halve the number of workers per truck. They cited a Time Motion Study conducted by a local institute as the justification for this measure.[52] In protest, the sanitation workers refused to keep at their usual pace and took a longer time to collect, thereby also slowing down the compactor trucks, and thus performing inefficiency. They entered confrontations not with managers but rather with the truck drivers who – given their proximity to the means of disposal – were accustomed to controlling the rhythm of waste work.

The route ended slightly before the 8-hour shift that these workers would clock; the compactor dropped off the 6 workers that were collaboratively loading waste into it, and then drove off towards the dumping ground. The waste from this truck was heading to the Deonar dumping ground, where many of the workers lived. Sometimes, the workers stayed on the truck because it also gave them a ride home. I switched then into a different compactor, one that was headed to the Kanjurmarg dumping ground, managed by a private contractor. This one was indistinguishable from the other one – the same color and MCGM insignia – except that near the front wheel on the passenger side was a small inscription in white paint that indicated its true ownership. This compactor belonged to a "Roshan Enviro-solutions", different from the clone I had been on earlier.

The driver Faizal and another sanitation worker, Sundar, accompanied me. Sundar had asked Faizal, on my behalf, to break the rules a little bit to help me sneak into the dumping ground. Faizal told me to put on the orange vest before we entered, so that I would blend in. We were both curious about each other, as he was not part of the union and not my direct contact. He told me that his family has some land in rural Uttar Pradesh – a far away state in the North – but it is not viable for agriculture. Before driving waste compactor trucks, Faizal had worked on the docks and driven an auto rickshaw and some other gigs.

Faizal wanted to know what I was doing here, and I fumbled a bit, so Sundar stepped in. He knew me from the union. He said that I was here to write about the grievances of "us, the poor". Faizal looked away from the road and at Sundar and me. He said that he was not poor, not as long as God had given him health and hands and feet. He was not poor because he could labour. Sundar argued with him, and pointed out how they are living in an unjust system even though they work – they are poor precisely because they work. Faizal retorted that Sundar should use his free time – after the work shift – to look for more work, and then he would find that he has fewer problems in his life.

Epilogue

As the cholera epidemics subsided in London, by 1896 Bombay was seeing a bubonic plague. Informed by the metropolitan experience, urban planners and improvers looked to the immigrating urban poor and their dwellings as the site and cause of the problem. The historian Juned Shaikh writes of Mumbai:

> The urban poor, because of their presumed propensity to overcrowd the city and exaggerate its sanitation woes, were the objects of change and provided the rationale for the spatial transformation of Bombay. A disproportionately large portion of the urban poor were categorized as lower castes by the census reports, many of them as Dalits. All these categories – urban poor, lower castes, and Dalits – were highly unstable and stratified.[53]

I have thematised the flux of these categories from the truck to the court under the question of political subjectivity.[54]

Faizal seems to refuse the category of the poor, and identifies strongly with his capacity to labour – which in turn becomes an almost ableist fetishism of his un-maimed body. On the other hand, KVSS workers – who are themselves, as sanitation workers, engaged in the production of health – take pains to point out the injuries their work has dealt them, using them to even argue to be recognised as permanent workers – with full health benefits. Lastly, Sumanti's suicide suggests a dire contradiction of labour capacity: workers without work. Faizal's contrarian position, it seemed, valorised less so labour, and more so the labour of finding work.[55]

NOTES

1. Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. 3*, trans. David Fernbach, Penguin, 1991, p. 195. German text from "Karl Marx – Friedrich Engels – Werke, Band 25, "Das Kapital", Bd. III, Erster Abschnitt, S. 87 – 114 Dietz Verlag, Berlin/DDR 1983", http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me25/me25_087.htm.

2. John Bellamy Foster, "Marx's theory of metabolic rift: classical foundations for environmental sociology", *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 105, no. 2, September 1999, pp. 386-90. Andreas Malm, "Ecology and Marxism" on *Historical Materialism*.

https://www.historicalmaterialism.org/ecology-marxism-andreas-malm/.

3. Malm, "Ecology and Marxism".

4. Mckenzie Wark, *Molecular Red: Theory for the Anthropocene*, Verso, 2015.

5. John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, Monthly Review Press, 2000, pp. 149-54. Also, John Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift*, Monthly Review Press, 2010, p. 124.

6. Karl Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes, Penguin, 1982, pp. 636-9. Robert Nichols connects the phenomenon of displacement and urbanisation to proletarianisation as such in "Disaggregating primitive accumulation", *Radical Philosophy* 194, Nov/Dec 2015.

7. Foster, Clark, and York, *Ecological Rift*, pp. 78-29.

8. For nineteenth century (failed) attempts at sewage recycling, see Vijay Prashad, "Technology of sanitation in colonial Delhi", *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 35, issue 1, 1 Feb 2001, pp. 136-47; and see Erland Marald, "Everything circulates: agricultural chemistry and recycling theories in the second half of the nineteenth century", *Environment and History*, 8(1), 1 Feb 2002, pp. 65-84. For contemporary turn to sewage recycling, see Nicholas C. Kawa, "A mend to the metabolic rift? The promises (and potential pitfalls) of biosolids application on American soils" in *Thinking with Soils: Material Politics and Social Theory*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020, pp. 141-56; and see the work of SOIL in Haiti for a humanitarian version. https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/2011-3-may-june/treehugger/haiti-s-toilet-sweetheart.

9. For stereotypes about faecal recycling, see Donald Worster, "The good muck: toward an excremental history of China", *RCC Perspectives*, no. 5, pp. 1-54.

10. Paul Burkett, "Two stages of ecosocialism? Implications of some neglected analyses of ecological conflict and crisis", *International Journal of Political Economy*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Fall 2006, pp. 23-45

11. Vinay Gidwani. "The work of waste: inside India's infra-economy". *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 40(4), pp. 575-95.

12. Kai Heron, "Dialectical materialisms, metabolic rifts and the climate crisis: a Lacanian/Hegelian perspective", *Science & Society*, Vol. 85, No. 4, October 2021.

13. Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, p. 1

14. This term refers to the logistics of ethics, the process of becoming who one is: "the interaction between oneself and others and in the technologies of individual domination, the history of how an individual acts upon himself," Michel Foucault. "Technologies of the Self". Lectures at University of Vermont Oct. 1982, in *Technologies of the Self*, Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1988, 16-49.

15. Dominique Laporte, *History of Shit*, trans. Rodolphe el-Khoury, MIT Press, 2000.

16. On caste as the articulation of body history and value history, see Anupama Rao, "Stigma and labour: remembering Dalit Marxism", https://www.india-seminar.com/2012/633/633_anupama_rao.htm

17. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Stink.

18. Erland Marald. "Everything circulates: agricultural chemistry and recycling theories in the second half of the nineteenth century." *Environment and history* vol. 8,1 (2002): 65-84. doi:10.3197/096734002129342602

19. Anjuli Fatima Raza Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, University of Chicago Press, 2021, p. 56.

20. Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, p. 61.

21. https://onlineexhibits.library.yale.edu/s/moral-judgment-in-evaluating-disease/page/assisted-emigrant. Also reproduced in Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, p. 77.

22. Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, p. 64.

23. Kolb, *Epidemic Empire*, p. 72.

24. Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts*, Verso, 2000.

25. For Liebig as the scientific foundation of Marx's metabolic rift theory, see Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, pp. 149-51. For Voelcker's reformist indictment of the Raj, see Irfan Habib, *Man and Environment – The Ecological History of India*, Tulika, 2011. J.A. Voelcker's full *Report on the Improvement of Indian Agriculture* is available on the

Internet Archive: https://ia601303.us.archive.org/4/items/cu31924001039324/cu31924001039324.pdf.

26. Voelcker, *Report*, p. 106.

27. For the debunking of the myth of free trade in the wealth accumulation and development of western empires, see Ha-Joon Chang, "Kicking away the ladder: infant industry promotion in historical perspective," in *Oxford Development Studies*, vol. 31, issue 1, 2003. For the directly environmental connection to the fixation on free trade in British imperialism, see Andreas Malm, "The destruction of Palestine is the destruction of the Earth," *Verso blog*, 8 April 2024: https://www.versobooks.com/en-gb/blogs/news/the-destruction-of-palestine-is-the-destruction-of-the-earth. Malm notes Britain's use of fossil-powered steamships in the battles against the stronghold of Muhammed Ali who was a pasha in the Ottoman Empire, and had refused to trade raw cotton, using it instead to set up domestic industry in Egypt.

28. Ramchandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil's 1992 ecological history *This Fissured Land* is an example of noting solely colonialism as the inaugural contradiction in the subcontinental metabolism between humans and nature.

29. Subir Sinha, Shubhra Gururani & Brian Greenberg, "The 'new traditionalist' discourse of Indian environmentalism", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 24, 1997, pp. 65-99.

30. Mukul Sharma, "Dalits and Indian environmental politics", *Economic and Political Weekly* 47(23), June 2012, pp. 46-52.

31. "Dalit", literally meaning crushed, is a modern political identity assumed by the historically dominated communities of India who were stigmatised as untouchable by caste society that also traditionally restricted them to ritually impure forms of work – such as manual scavenging, and eventually sanitation work.

32. https://scroll.in/article/915103/delhi-sewer-cleaning-machine-project-reinforces-link-between-dalits-and-sanitation-work-say-critics. "Sanitation Workers' Movement" translates *Safai Karamchari Andolan.* For a more recent implementation of such entrepreneurial policy, see https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/tn-cm-distributes-orders-sanctioning-loans-to-help-sanitary-workers-buy-machines/article67931591.ece. Such schemes are driven partly by a distinctively neoliberal Dalit middle class, consecrated in associations like the Dalit Indian Chamber of Commerce. The scholar and activist Anand Teltumbde, who was imprisoned on fabricated charges in 2020 due to his criticism of the Modi government, sketches the contours of the Dalit middle class in "Dalits under neoliberalism", in his book *Dalits*, Routledge, 2017.

33. Rao, "Stigma and labour", n.3.

34. For this sense of spirituality, see Michel Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, trans. Graham Burchell, Picador, 1982. Here, as opposed to the production or acquisition of truth, spirituality is the subject's preparation for truth. This discussion of spirituality takes places in a classical epistemological context – and transposing it to modern capitalism, we may substitute "truth" with any plenitude (wealth, right, enjoyment).

35. Rao, "Stigma and labour"; I understand Vinay Gidwani's characterisation of a (non-dialectical) dialectic between waste and value in this sense, see "Waste/Value" in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Economic Geography*.

36. Laporte, *History of Shit*, p. 47.

37. Scholars of the environment and society have noted how the government of nature produces and interacts with political subjects through legal, scientific, and ethnographic means. David Bond, *Negative Ecologies*, University of California Press, 2022. Arun Agarwal, *Environmentality*, Duke University Press, 2005. Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200-1991*, Cambridge UP, 1999.

38. https://www.epw.in/journal/2014/45/margin-speak/no-swachh-bharat-without-annihilation-caste.html

39. Dean Fergusson, "Nightsoil and 'The Great Divergence'", *Journal of Global History*, vol. 9, issue 3, 2014.

40. https://grist.org/equity/rich-countries-export-twice-as-much-plastic-waste-to-the-developing-world-as-previously-thought/

41. Laporte, *History of Shit*, pp. 38-40. On urban Dalit politics of housing, see Juned Shaikh, *Outcaste Bombay*, University of Washington Press, 2021. On civil lines as an exceptional, sanitary space, see Prashad, "Technology of Sanitation," pp. 124-5. For the mutual constitution of Mumbai's urbanity and Dalit identity see Anupama Rao, "The word and the world: Dalit aesthetics as a critique of everyday life" in *The Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 53, issue 1-2, 2017, pp. 147-61. Dalit migration largely contributed to the culture and labour force of the emerging metropolitan Bombay, and at the same time, the urban experience shifted the caste-hierarchy from a question of servility to that of spatial segregation.

42. On the right to habitus in Dalit politics, see Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question*, University of California Press, 2009, pp. 66-8. Rao, however, distances her analysis of "corporeal politics" from the Foucauldian question of spirituality and techniques of the self, despite her emphasis on Dalit political self-fashioning (p. 367, n.9). The following story is taken from Shaikh, *Outcaste Bombay*, pp. 103-6.

43. Shaikh, *Outcaste Bombay*, p. 104.

44. That is, a class whose struggle is to abolish class society as such.

45. https://www.dnaindia.com/mumbai/report-workers-body-take-sweeper-s-corpse-to-bmc-hq-in-protest-2572953

46. Arefa Johari, "Jailed for keeping Mumbai clean", *Scroll.in*, 24 Nov 2021. https://scroll.in/article/1011160/jailed-for-keeping-mumbai-clean

47. Johari, "Jailed," *Scroll.in*

48. https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/mumbai-news/bmc-revamps-slum-sanitation-scheme-one-contractor-to-employ-7-388-workers-101708454982474.html

49. https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/mumbai-news/slum-sanitation-workers-of-scrapped-bmc-scheme-protest-at-m-east-ward-office-101709150064390.html

50. The following account is based on 2 months of fieldwork in Mumbai. I have narrated the details as if they all took place in a single day.

51. All the names are changed in the following.

52. Part of my work at this union was to acquire this report, but despite months of following up, the public information office did not provide me with the report – a violation, or deferral of the mandates of the Right to Information law.

53. Shaikh, *Outcaste Bombay*, p. 18.

54. My account is not by any measure exhaustive of the political subjectivity around waste work. Waste pickers (whose political economic status differs from that of the sanitation workers) negotiate subjectivity in a different way. For instance, a group of waste pickers that I encountered discussed how they have been given ID cards by NGOs that buys scraps from them, but they find the process of becoming legible to state and civil society a nuisance. They perform the metabolic labour of not only transporting, but also discerning and sorting the non-municipal wastes of the city (but the city might antagonise them by accusing them of stealing its waste). They are migrants from a rural district in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, where they have some family land. They said that problems like the absence of built toilets, and sexual harassment during open defecation motivated their migration. Working in the city has allowed them to fund some building projects back home, including toilets. On waste picking, see Gidwani, "Work of waste". Moreover, political subjectivity is obviously gendered, as all the sanitation workers I met were men, and these waste pickers were women. On waste picking near the Deonar dumping ground, and the negotiation of police surveillance and islamophobia, see Syantani Chatterjee, "The labors of failure: labor, toxicity, and belonging in Mumbai". *International Labor and Working-Class History* 95 (2019): 49–75.

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