

Waste Matters: Informal Economies and Commodity Detritus in Delhi, India

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In the 2013 Asia Lecture, Vinay Gidwani examined through stories, images and both conceptual and empirical analysis the spatial histories and evolving political economy of waste in Delhi, India. Dr. Gidwani focused particularly on the marginalized people whose livelihoods depend on gathering, sorting, transporting and selling garbage in India's huge informal economy, livelihoods now challenged as the municipal government contracts the recycling of waste to corporations. For Dr. Gidwani, the evolving, bumpy geography of the waste economy creates permanent border areas of primitive accumulation and both devalorized and valorized people and places, linking the impoverished garbage pickers of Delhi's largest landfills with the city's glitzy real-estate developments. The lecture was drawn from Dr. Gidwani's project called *Afterlives of Waste* and his chapter in *Ecologies of Urbanism in India*, edited by Anne Rademacher and K. Sivaramakrishnan.

I want to begin with a quote from a wonderful book of stories by Italo Calvino called *Invisible Cities*, where I refer to the 1974 edition. Those of you who have read my chapter in *Ecologies of Urbanism in India*, edited by Anne Rademacher and K. Sivaramakrishnan have seen this quote before. The concept of the book is quite simple. Marco Polo is in a conversation with the aging emperor Kublai Khan and regaling him with stories of all the wonderful, magical cities that he has experienced in various outposts of Kublai Khan's far-flung empire, in a sense giving the aging emperor a glimpse into the way his empire operates. This particular story is of a city called Leonia, and I've simply put it up because it echoes so wonderfully well the situation that you might want to recount for a city like Delhi or a city like Islamabad, or Dhaka or Manila, or Bangkok or Cairo or Rio de Janeiro, or Buenos Aires. It doesn't matter. But in some ways this is a faithful rendition of what we might confront in a city today. He says:

[O]n the sidewalks encased in spotless plastic bags, the remains of Leonia await the garbage truck not only squeezed tubes of toothpaste, blown out light bulbs, newspapers, containers, wrappings, but also boilers, encyclopedia's, pianos, porcelain dinner services. Nobody wonders where each day they—which is to say the street cleaners—carry their load of refuse. Outside the city, surely, but each year the city expands and the street cleaners have to fall farther back. The bulk of the outflow increases, and the piles rise higher, become stratified, extend over a wider perimeter. Besides, the more Leonia's talent for making new materials excels, the more the rubbish improves in quality, resists time, the elements, fermentations, combustions, a fortress of indestructible leftovers surrounds Leonia dominating it on every side like a chain of mountains.

Figure 1: Municipal worker who works on one of Delhi's largest landfills. (Vinay Gidwani 2013)



This gentleman here (see Figure 1) is a municipal worker who works on one of Delhi's largest landfills. He is atop a landfill that I visited in Delhi in August of 2013. It's the highest point on the landscape, and in so many ways echoes what Calvino was talking about.

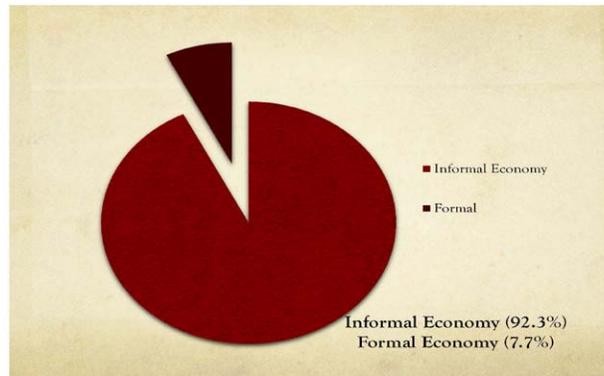
I want to give the lecture in seven parts. I'm going to begin by talking briefly about the work of a late Indian Marxist economist, Kalyan Sanyal, and his concept of the "need economy" and the way in which it helps us understand some of the ongoing transformations in contemporary India. I'm also going to talk about a report put out in 2007 by the National Commission for Enterprise in the Unorganized Sector, NCEUS, better known as the Arjun Sengupta Commission. This was a landmark report on the state and contributions of India's informal economy. I'm going to say a little bit about the missing geographies of the informal economy, about spatial economics and the rhythms that organize particularly the economies of waste in cities like Delhi. I'm going to talk very briefly about some of the legal rulings that have begun to transform urban space and urban rhythms, and the effects those have had on the organization of informal economies. I'm going to speculate about something that I will call a dialectic of waste and value, and finally, I will have a little bit to say about what the implications of all this verbosity might be. So let's begin with Sanyal's concept of the need economy.

Sanyal, as I mentioned, was an Indian Marxist economist who wrote a book back in 2007 called *Rethinking Capitalist Development*, which I recommend reading. It's quite an insightful book. You may disagree with it, but nevertheless find it insightful. What Sanyal wants to do in that book, very

simply, is to move away from developmentalist understandings of capitalist processes. What he wants to do is think in terms of what he calls a “capital-non-capital complex” and the manner in which this capital-non-capital complex operates in contemporary India. The empirical grist for his work derives from some rather startling statistics that have begun to emerge in the last 15 years on the makeup of India’s economy.

Figure 2: Employment in India’s Economy (2004-2005)

Source: Pie chart based on data from the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector, Government of India, 2009. *The Challenge of Employment in India: An Informal Economy Perspective, Volume I – Main Report*. New Delhi: Academic Foundation.



And what’s startling? The pie chart (see Figure 2) suggests that the informal economy accounts for almost 93 per cent of employment in India. What Sanyal calls the need economy is a large subset of this informal economy. The formal economy, or what Sanyal calls the accumulation economy (I’ll get to these distinctions momentarily), accounts for about 7 per cent of employment in India. That’s pretty startling, although let’s be fair, for what’s included here, what’s folded into the informal economy is the agricultural sector, which is informal to begin with. Even so, even if you subtract the agricultural sector, the size of the informal economy is absolutely massive. This has profound implications, I think, for the narrative that is sometimes told, the kind of celebratory narrative about India’s growth miracle, which lately has been punctured, somewhat.

Let’s return to Sanyal and his concept of the need economy. As he construes the need economy, he thinks of it as something that is part and parcel of a capitalist social formation. He doesn’t see it as something that is divorced from capitalist processes. Rather he sees it as a sub-economy that is folded into the effect of capitalist transformations that are happening, and he uses vivid language to describe

the need economy. He calls it the space of the dispossessed, comprising those who are excluded from the space of capital, a wasteland created by capitalist development. He says the inhabitants of this need economy are victims of primitive accumulation, of capitalist processes, occurring in heterogeneous locations. The space of the dispossessed is not an empty space. The inhabitants engage in a number of activities for their survival; and these activities, heterogeneous in makeup, comprise a sub-economy. But the point to be stressed is that the sub-economy is the result of exclusion.

Now some of these claims may be familiar to those of you who study various parts of the world. They have long antecedents. One of the works of scholarship that Sanyal draws on is an article that some of you have likely read, by José Nun called, “The End of Work and the ‘Marginal Mass’ Thesis,” published in 2000 in *Latin American Perspectives*. There, Nun claims that in many places a surplus population is growing, that in the best of cases is simply irrelevant to the hegemonic capitalist sector of the economy and in the worst cases endangers its stability.

So, it’s an economic problem, but it’s also a political problem because the growth of this apparently non-functional, and I underscore “apparently” non-functional, surplus population appears to indicate the impossibility of transition narratives that we are now so familiar with, specifically the transition from traditional to a modern mode of production that was the bread and butter of dual economy models in development economics all the way into the 1970s. Variations of it continue to linger. Sanyal takes the work of folks like José Nun, but also earlier scholars like the economic anthropologist Keith Hart from the 1970s and Harold Wolpe from South Africa, to build a conceptual model of this capital-non-capital complex. The model can be schematically depicted as follows, as I have distilled from his book. There are heterogeneous processes of primitive accumulation, of uneven development, in rural areas as well as in urban fringes. These lead to mass migration to cities. In cities, migrants are unable to find formal sector jobs. They have to survive, and they survive by finding livelihoods in all sorts of urban niches. These urban niches are lumped together under the rubric “informal sector,” or more

recently “informal economy”.

Now the term informal economy itself is an old one. It goes back to the work of Keith Hart and others from the 1970s. But Sanyal’s point is that the informal economy has become newly visible, which is to say, no longer as part of a transition narrative. Rather, there is an uneasy, ongoing recognition that the informal economy is in fact here to stay. It’s a permanent fixture of the economical landscape: it’s not going away. Sanyal wants to argue, as do other scholars, that the informal economy in fact should give us pause because maybe what’s at stake here is a completely different story that has to be told about capitalist development in countries like India over the last 50 to 60 years, an account that re-imagines the status, the contributions, and the work of the informal economy. This informal economy, it won’t surprise you, is then recognized as a governmental problem that has to be dealt with. Here we come to a happy union between people you likely know, which is Sanyal whom I’ve just introduced, but also the work of Partha Chatterjee, particularly his 2004 book *The Politics of the Governed*. I’ll say a bit more about the convergence between Chatterjee and Sanyal, but first let me just summarize how Sanyal pronounces the death of dual economy models.

He says, look, when we look back at the last five decades of post-independence India, we see three phases of hegemony. The first phase is what he calls a moment of simple hegemony, where the truth of dual-economy models, many of them derived from the Indian experience, rules. The Delhi School of Economics, which was founded in 1949-1950, was a thriving site for economists from all over the world. It was India’s empirical experience, but also the kind of normative trajectory that was envisioned for India that became the grist for many of the insights that development economics emerged with in the 1950s and the 1960s, where it was able to consolidate itself as this subfield within the discipline. But at that moment the dominant narrative was one of a transition, from the traditional to the modern sector, where the primacy of the modern sector, which was conflated with the industrialized urban sector, was simply taken for granted. Not surprisingly, we’ve seen this become a kind of staple of

modernization narratives, not just in economics through dual economy models, but also in modernization narratives in sociology, in political science, and many other social science disciplines. So this was a moment of simple hegemony where the primacy of the model was simply taken for granted, commonsensical. However, in the 1970s something changed, and this change, according to Sanyal—but also many others have observed this—was that poverty suddenly, or perhaps not so suddenly, emerges as an object of management, a political problem that has to be dealt with in order to sustain a certain desired growth trajectory.

Sanyal dates the moment of transition, which seems a bit disingenuous, but he identifies the speech that Robert McNamara gave in 1973 in Lagos, where he talked about how the World Bank had to begin addressing questions of poverty. So poverty now becomes a political problem that has to be confronted, and the state is now entrusted with the role of managing poverty and reversing the effects of the primitive accumulation that is producing this poverty. So in a sense, the state becomes a more actively Keynesian state, if you will. This is the second moment of hegemony, a complex hegemony as Sanyal puts it. Then, finally he says that at the turn of the millennium, we go through yet another transition where the informal now is understood as something that is permanent, something that needs to be governed, an arena with latent entrepreneurial capacities that need to be unleashed. You've probably read all the accounts that have been produced by business gurus who talk about the entrepreneurial capacities and consumption power of the bottom billion that are just waiting to be unleashed. That's the third moment of hegemony. Sanyal here is in happy congruence with Partha Chatterjee, and it's not a surprise, because Sanyal and Partha Chatterjee have been having an underground conversation, from what I gather, for about two decades. So, Chatterjee's work has been influenced by Sanyal and vice versa. But Sanyal, as I mentioned, is conceptualizing the contemporary social formation in countries like India as a capital-non-capital-complex that consists of a need economy, a space of non-capitalist production that is outside capitalist production but within the social formation of capitalism. It is an outside that

is actually inside, which is to say something that is folded into, and is the effect of, the workings of the accumulation economy. Moreover, this inside, that is, the outside that is inside (for those of you that are familiar with the agrarian studies literature) has some resemblance to A.V. Chayanov's work in *The Theory of Peasant Economy* (1966). Specifically, the conceptual distinction that Sanyal enacts between the need economy and the accumulation economy is as follows: the accumulation economy is the profit-oriented economy, the need economy is the need-oriented economy, but is undergirded by a subsistence, safety-first logic, a livelihood logic of survival. It's not that there isn't any surplus generation in the need economy, but the overriding emphasis is on the generation of livelihoods. This has some profound political implications for Sanyal because in many of these forms of livelihood that inhabit the need economy, the traditional relations of antagonism between workers and employers becomes attenuated. This, for Sanyal, opens up a problem for political imagination and organizing. I'll get to that later. Now, what Sanyal identifies as the inhabitants of the need economy, Partha Chatterjee identifies as the inhabitants of political society. So, very briefly then, Chatterjee, as many of you know, enacts a distinction between what he calls civil society and political society. In countries like India, he says, civil society is the space of formal citizenship which is substantively available only to a subset of the population, the middle class, the bourgeoisie. The need economy consists of the urban poor, a vast and heterogeneous population who are nominally citizens, but who don't really have the same capacity to exert the substantive rights of citizenship unless they find ways of coalescing into communities with some moral charge, some moral standing, that makes them visible to the state, where the state cannot afford to ignore them anymore. It's this moral standing, in the form of community, that allows these populations to lay claim to the resources of the state. In his 2011 book *Lineages of Political Society*, Chatterjee explicitly acknowledges his debt to Sanyal and says that political society is the space of management of non-corporate capital, as contrasted to the accumulation economy which is the space of corporate capital. Now we can

quarrel about this distinction that Chatterjee draws, but what I want to point out here is simply that there is a convergence between Sanyal and Chatterjee, and it's not a coincidental one. Let me then say something about the Arjun Sengupta Commission and why it's significant because in many ways it provides what we might call the empirical warrant for the conceptual renovations that someone like Sanyal engages in. The Commission doesn't use the term need economy by the way, it uses the term informal or unorganized economy.

Page one of that report points out that by the end of 2004-2005 about 836 million people, or about 77% of India's population, were living below 20 rupees a day (US \$0.40) and constituted the bulk of India's informal economy. 79% of this group, of these 836 million, belonged to the informal, or unorganized sector, which is to say that they were working without any legal protection for their jobs, without any social security, living in abject poverty. The report remarks with savage brio, "excluded from all the glory of shining India." I say with savage brio because this was a commission that was appointed by the Prime Minister of India, Manmohan Singh, who you can imagine was none too happy when he finally was given the recommendation of the report. I met one of the people appointed to the Sengupta Commission, an economist at the Center for Development Studies in Trivandrum. He pointed out that when they presented the findings of the report, Manmohan Singh was distinctly irritated and told them that this was not what he had charged them to do.

The report basically came out and said that the government of India should enact a social security bill, which would provide a strong social safety net to workers in the unorganized economy. Manmohan Singh came back and said, look, I asked you to tell me what sort of policies we can enact to unleash the entrepreneurial energies of the informal sector. There was a social security bill that was enacted by the government of India in December 2008. One of the main pillars of that bill was something called the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojana (RSBY), a national health insurance scheme, which was roundly debated and criticized by Indian activists and scholars. Nevertheless, the RSBY was a momentous policy decision. Equally significant, the Sengupta Commission, and

the NCEUS, a government appointed body, were disbanded. They no longer exist. So if you want to look for reports on what is fresh about the informal economy in India, you're out of luck. Or you actually have to go to the National Sample Survey Organization, the NSS, which has been conducting economic surveys of various aspects of India's economy for the longest time. In the 55th round of the NSS, that is 1999-2000, they explicitly started to ask questions in the survey about the informal economy. In Figure 3, which is based on data from that 55th round and the 61st round in 2004-2005, the totals in red are significant.

Figure 3: Relationship between Sector and Type of Employment, All Workers 1999-2000 & 2004-2005

Source : Computed from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (India). India National Sample Survey, 55th Round, 1999-2000 and 61st Round, 2004-2005. New Delhi, India: Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (India); National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector, Government of India. 2009. The Challenge of Employment in India: An Informal Economy Perspective, Volume I – Main Report . New Delhi: Academic Foundation, 13, Table 2.3.

Sector/Worker	Total Employment (Millions)		TOTAL
	Informal/ Unorganised worker	Formal/ Organised worker	
	1999 – 2000		
Informal/Unorganised sector	339.7 (99.5)	1.8 (0.5)	341.5 (100.0)
Formal/Organised sector	23.1 (42.1)	31.8 (57.9)	54.9 (100.0)
TOTAL	362.8 (91.2)	33.6 (8.5)	396.4 (100.0)
	2004 – 2005		
Informal/Unorganised sector	391.8 (99.6)	1.4 (0.4)	393.2 (100.0)
Formal/Organised sector	28.9 (46.2)	33.7 (53.8)	62.6 (100.0)
TOTAL	420.7 (92.3)	35.0 (7.7)	455.7 (100.0)

Note : Figures in brackets are percentages; of the 393.2 million unorganised sector workers in 2004-05, agriculture accounted for 251.7 million and the rest, 141.5 million, were non-agricultural workers.

They compiled data that not only identified the number of workers in unregulated enterprises, which we would conventionally recognize as part of the informal economy, but also workers in formal sectors of the economy that had been informalized, something that we see happening in North America when salary work becomes contract work. What they discovered is this: in this six year period (1999 to 2000 to 2004 to 2005) there was almost no net employment creation in the formal sector. Remember, these were the heydays of India's growth miracle. Yet, the informal sector is where all the jobs are being created. So now you can see that there is a certain kind of empirical warrant for the conceptual renovations that Sanyal wants to propose. What's interesting, although I don't know if it's coincidental, is that Sanyal's book was published in 2007 and the Sengupta Commission report was also released in 2007. It comes to a damning conclusion that I'm not going to rehearse here, although the sad reality is evident in Figure 3. The formal economy at the height of India's growth miracle

wasn't really creating much employment. So what is the nature of this growth miracle? It really does beg the question. Now, Sanyal's book really didn't get much traction in the West, but certainly in Indian scholarship it received a lot of notice and was hotly debated. One of the criticisms of his conceptual framework was that what he called the need economy and the accumulation economy are not as hermetically sealed from each other as he made out. Not surprising, similar criticism is issued against Chatterjee for suggesting that civil society and political society are somehow these two separate domains that are neatly separable. Not so. Anybody who has studied informal economies knows that in fact the informal and the formal are thickly interwoven with each other, there's a lot of interdigitation. You can think of just about any sector within the formal economy and you could probably come up with a cognate in the informal economy that sustains, supports, and underwrites that formal sector. The trite example that I always give is that if you go and buy a cake in a high-end bakery in Mumbai, the cake was probably produced in a slum, in an informal enterprise. High fashion is similar. Where do you think the fabric was stitched together or assembled? In the homes of the poor, or in sweatshops. Who do you think sifted the cement, and where? Our waste, plastic bags, the ubiquitous plastic bags, how do you think the plastic was recycled that led to the plastic bag?

So all I'm saying is a somewhat commonsensical point, which is that the informal economy is diverse, it's heterogeneous. To use a singular term like informal economy sometimes obscures that, and that's consequential. But I'm also saying that the formal and the informal are so entangled, so deeply entangled, that really what we need is an entirely different account of what has happened in a place like India in the last 50 years. I'm just going to show you some slides of the particular case that I'm utilizing to anchor this talk, which is of these urban informal economies that are organized around different streams of waste. This is the second of Delhi's three large landfills (see Figure 4). Earlier I showed you a photograph of the first. This is the Ghazipur landfill, the largest of the three, which rises about 500 feet. It's the highest point in the area. We went and spoke to some landfill workers and

Figure 4: Ghazipur landfill, Delhi's largest municipal dumpsite, an urban commons that supports a diverse community of waste pickers (Mayank Bhatnagar, 2008, with permission)



should point out that a lot of this work that I've been doing on informal waste economies is in conjunction with an advocacy group in Delhi that has been working on this for much longer than I have, an organization called Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group. Our interviews with landfill workers at Ghazipur told us that this was actually a hollow depression about 50 feet below the surrounding area when it was first started in 1984, which has grown to 500 feet above in the intervening years. This landfill, like many other segments of the city, supports a livelihood ecology. You can think of it as a kind of small urban ecosystem.

It's common to observe children who are pickers on these landfills. I could share stories with you about how they also find half-eaten food and use that to supplement their diet, but that would be just pornographic. This is the basic structure of waste economies. I want to emphasize that these waste economies are quite heterogeneous. They have a basic pyramidal structure that you are likely to find in many segments of the informal economy. At the base you have a large army of waste pickers; in a city like Delhi there are 150,000 to 200,000, but nobody really has an accurate census. You have a number of petty scrap dealers, many of them risen from the ranks of the waste pickers through toil, through luck, through scrounging, through loans, through help from social networks and so on, often through violence. Then you have the bigger players, who are the warehouse owners, who have storage space, which gives them the capacity to enter into patron-client relations with petty dealers. The warehouse owners in turn sell the waste that they gather to factories

and re-processors, who then hurl it back into what we would call the accumulation economy, the circuits of capitalist value. Again, this is not surprising. This is also a typical spatial value chain of waste and because waste economies are heterogeneous the architecture of e-waste is likely to be spatially quite different from the architecture of municipal waste, or of plastics, of glass, of scrap metal, of fabric, of hair. In fact, some waste pickers say that there are almost 150 different streams of waste, each with their own spatial organization, each with their own value chain differentially stretched in space.

With most informal economies, the architecture is closely anchored to the place of habitation. Imagine you're a waste picker. You have a gunny sack, a jute or plastic bag, which you carry on your back, or if you're lucky maybe a cycle with a cart on the back. This imposes certain physical limitations on the catchment area that you can traverse. If you're walking around maybe you can walk about 10 km a day and that becomes in your radius, or maybe 5km. If you have a bicycle maybe your radius increases, and the catchment area also multiplies. There's a designated territory or route. This has been painstakingly established through informal conventions and negotiations and often brawling. It is policed, both individually and also through peer pressure. Then once you've gathered the waste you need a place to segregate it; you need to sort it. That's not as easy as it sounds, especially in cities like Delhi where property values have been absolutely skyrocketing; parts of Delhi are more expensive than Manhattan. It's not that easy to find areas where you can dump the garbage that you've collected so that you can sort through it, because residents get wild. Then you need a place to store it. Most people don't have that, because most of them are living in shanties which are very thickly scrunched together. These are very high-density slums. Basically, and this again is something that should be familiar to people who are invested in the agrarian studies literature, you pretty much have to sell right away, which means that it lowers your bargaining leverage. You have to sell so that you can get cash in hand so that you can meet your daily livelihood needs. The petty scrap dealer has the advantage of having a place to

store. Then you have the warehouse owner who is higher up on the food chain and finally the re-processor. So the spatial economics, what we might call the tricks of the trade, are pretty straightforward. In this strange magical world of waste, purity matters. So how finely you're able to sort different categories of waste determines what you're able to command from the scrap dealer if you're a waste picker, or from the warehouse owner if you're a scrap dealer.

Figure 5: An empty cycle cart (Mayank Bhatnagar, 2008, with permission)



Volume also matters, because there are scale economies in transportation. If you're able to gather up sufficient quantities of waste, which can all then be transported in one go in an overloaded truck, then the warehouse owner is likely to give you a better price. Timing also matters, and here's where the capacity to store becomes so critical, because if you can't store you have to sell at the reigning price. If you can store, you can play the market, because the market also fluctuates, the price fluctuates. Until recently the country that has been exerting this giant sucking sound is China: China is the biggest consumer of scrap, of cardboard, of metals, of plastics, of glass, of e-waste and so on. So, what happens in China has ripple effects in Delhi. This is an example of how, if you have a simple technology like a cart that you can join to your cycle, then it suddenly increases both the catchment area and the volume that you are able to gather. This is what an empty cart looks like (see Figure 5). These are waste pickers who are sorting their wares on a waterlogged tract near the banks of the Yamuna River that flows through Delhi, because it's so hard to find a place to sort (see Figure 6). This is the humble shop of a scrap dealer,

Figure 6: Pickers sorting and amassing their wares (*maal*) (Mayank Bhatnagar, 2008, with permission)



Figure 7: A typical scrap dealer's (*kabari's*) shop, a humble one room affair with wares spilling onto the street (Mayank Bhatnagar, 2008, with permission)



basically a sort of dimly lit one room affair in most instances so it's not much to speak of (see Figure 7). Most of what he stores is spilling out onto the pavement, and he's obviously engaged in some negotiations with the local beat cops, paying them off on the side to let him do that. This is a warehouse owner in Old Delhi who is using an adjacent alley as a public space for assorted items (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Alley warehouse, Old Delhi (Mayank Bhatnagar, 2008, with permission)



This is a squatter settlement that also doubles up as a storage space (see Figure 9). Scrap metal, plastics, auto trash, scrap paper, even old doors are just a few of the streams of waste that make up this waste economy.

Figure 9: Squatter settlement that doubles up as storage (Mayank Bhatnagar, 2008, with permission)



I'm not going to spend much time talking about judicial activism in Delhi that has been quite consequential particularly in the past 15 years in transforming the spatial economics of these informal economies around waste. However, it is notable that the various judicial decisions that have been handed down in the past 15 years have had an enormous impact on the viability of many of these informal economies. They include decisions that have essentially opened up the recycling of waste to corporate entities so the municipal governments of cities like Delhi have now started contracting waste management to corporations, with profound effects on these waste economies. It's an era of judicial activism that the legal scholar Usha Ramanathan has described as a scenario where what was once informal has now become illegal.

This really is quite consequential. In fact, if you think about this conceptually, what has been happening could be described as a chronopolitics, which is to say a politics of time where the time of some is devalued and the time of others is valued. It has completely altered the temporal rhythms of these heterogeneous informal economies. In the case of waste, it has led to the corporate privatization of waste collection, the closure of scrap dealerships in many parts of the cities, through various kinds of municipal drives, the demolition of slums which has expelled slum dwellers to areas which are sometimes 20 to 30, even 40 kilometers

For information on the book and video, see <http://www.yamunagentlyweeps.com/>

away from the city, making it unviable to engage in the same form of livelihood that they have so painstakingly assembled. There have also been new municipal ordinances, which don't necessarily have the force of law but are enacted on an ad-hoc basis by municipal corporations and, nevertheless, intervene in and interrupt the workings of these informal economies. The infamous Yamun Pushta eviction of 2004, poignantly documented by Ruzbeh Bharucha in his film (and book by the same name) *Yamuna Gently Weeps*, led to the displacement of about 350,000 residents in the city of Delhi. It involved a slum on the banks of the river Yamuna. The eviction was issued on two legal grounds: the first was that the slum dwellers were polluting the river, the second that they were in a flood-prone zone. They were relocated to several places, including a place called Bawana, which is roughly 30 kilometers from Delhi with poor transportation, making it very difficult if you're a waste picker to come into Delhi and do your business, do your job. But, in a brazen display of chronopolitics, on that same zone that was labeled flood-prone a temple was allowed to go ahead, financed by the Indian diaspora of the Swaminarayans (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Akshardham Temple (inaugurated in 2005)

Source: Airpano Project, 360° Aerial Panorama, 3D Virtual Tours Around the World. <http://www.airpano.ru/files/Akshardham-India/2-2>. Photo reproduced from http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Akshardham_Airpano_wide_view.png Accessed August 15, 2014.



So let me get to the speculative part of my lecture. I want to pick on the comment and observation that Walter Benjamin makes in his notebooks for *The Arcades Project*, where he puts forward what he calls a modest methodological proposal for a cultural historical dialectic as a method of study. This cultural-historical dialectic, he says, is anchored around re-imagining, re-signifying the work of the negative. Briefly, Benjamin says it is very easy to establish oppositions according to determinant points of view within the various fields of any epoch.

Drawing from Benjamin, on one side lies the productive, the forward looking, the lively, the positive part of the epoch, the modern economy, the formal sector, profit-oriented enterprise and hosts of other phenomena besides. On the other side lies the abortive, the retrograde and the obsolete. You can already see at work in Benjamin's imagination a notion of chronopolitics. The very contours of the positive element will appear distinctly only insofar as this negative element is set up—this positive set up against the negative. On the other hand, every negation has its value solely as background for the delineation of what is lively, the positive. It is therefore of decisive importance that a new partition be applied to this initially excluded negative component so that a positive element emerges anew in it, something different from that previously signified.

Here I enter the realm of fantastical speculation. Maybe one way to imagine Benjamin's call for a cultural-historical dialectic is to think about the travels, the afterlives if you will, of waste and how waste has the potential to provide what we might call a shadow theory of value. It's something that constantly shadows or haunts projects of value, which are continuously reinvented in various epochs. We could start from the Great Charter of the Forest in 1225, which is part and parcel of the Magna Carta, where, as Peter Linebaugh points out in his book *The Magna Carta Manifesto*, the rights of commoners and commoning are most vividly asserted. We could go to John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, where the figure of waste comes to mark the horizon of political society. We could think about how the Lockean renovation of philosophy and politics becomes the basis for bourgeois classical political economy, but also how it finds its way into various land settlements that were enacted in the 19th century in countries like India, but not just India. We could think about how this figure of waste enters the Fabian socialism of statesmen like Nehru as part and parcel of Nehruvian socialist planning. We could think about how this figure of waste is then reinvented as part of India's new economic policy, what kind of background work it does in giving warrant to projects of value. As I point out here in this very early state of thinking, really quite incipient, is that one

could think about waste as something that is simultaneously concept and matter, something that is figurative and literal, that is enrolled at various points. It's enrolled at the moment of appropriation when certain people, places and things are recruited into capital circuits of value, in the moment of production when that production process generates leakage, chaff, entropy and wasted bodies, but also in the moment of consumption, when exchange value returns as used value and produces in its wake matter that is unusable and, in some cases, reusable.

This could become, perhaps, an entry point into the cultural-historical dialectic that someone like Benjamin is calling for. As J. M. Neeson, the historian (and student of E. P. Thompson) points out, waste in English history was always seen as an enemy to be engaged and beaten. So waste provides, as I said, perhaps a shadow theory of value. This is to say it reveals how capitalist value is always enmeshed in struggles that involve a border politics and, I would also say, value struggles because I want to maintain, claim, assert that capitalist value is only one normative way in which the social comes to be organized. There are also other normative value forms that can provide the basis for mobilizing, and social organization. So I wanted to put it in its place without diminishing its profound and pivotal influence. We need to ask if value struggles involve a border politics, what gets set on the side of waste and what gets valorized as value? How does this happen, with what implications, for whom? This shifting, uneven geography then produces continuously frontier areas for primitive accumulation conjoined more recently with this idiom of informality that produces in cities like Delhi a patchwork of devalorized and valorized people and places, which in turn then gives sanction to various projects of value all the way from real-estate development to gentrification, to urban reform and so on.

This brings me to the last segment of my talk, which concerns what is to be done. I want to bring it back to Calvino, who points out in the story of Leonia with which I began that, in fact, the street cleaners of Leonia are treated like angels by the inhabitants of Leonia. They pay respect to the work of these street cleaners in silence, like a ritual

that inspires devotion, which is very unlike how the valued inhabitants of Delhi treat their street cleaners. This leads me to ask, what could be done concretely in terms of these urban informal economies of waste? A lot of groups that have been advocating for informal economy workers have pointed out that there is a process of sequestration and mobility that is crucial in these informal economies. In waste picking, people need a place to store and segregate their waste. They need security of housing because waste picking is so closely anchored to place of habitation. They need provisions for mobility, they need right of first access to the city's municipal waste rather than being shunted aside as the waste is given away to corporate privatizers who now happily trumpet the paradigm that waste is wealth. They need guarantees of non-harassment from beat cops, from the low level municipal staff. They need systems of extended producer responsibility that ensure that packaging materials are recyclable and non-toxic. They need access to subsidized health care and social safety nets as well as incentives for children's education because almost no waste picker wants their children to become waste pickers. Conceptually, riffing on the work of Sanyal, Benjamin and others, we need the things that radical scholars have been doing for some time—counter-narratives of capitalist social formations and of development that recast the work of the negative, in the case of India the contributions of the informal economy. How does that change how we think about India's growth miracle? It exposes the violence and the effacements of dominant projects of value-making, particularly capitalist value, at different moments. It underscores the post-colonial nostrum, the imperative to politicize relations of difference, to denaturalize them and in the process show how representations of people, places, things and conducts are invariably entangled in bio-cultural, racially inflected logics that set up an ideal figure of the human, of the citizen. We need a form of historical materialism—this is Benjamin's call—that annihilates, that evacuates all traces of progress, that is not tempered by developmentalist narratives that then become authorizing in all sorts of pernicious ways. Finally, we need new idioms of organizing and new forms of solidarity that harness among other things the unsettling potential of competitive populism that is enabled by electoral politics.

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