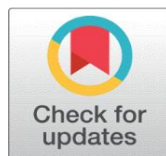
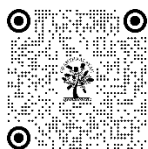


PROBLEMATIZING ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN ANKUR BISEN'S WASTED: THE MESSY STORY OF SANITATION IN INDIA, A MANIFESTO FOR CHANGE WITH INSIGHTS FROM THE INDIGENOUS PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

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ABSTRACT

A conversation about environmental justice uncovers the intricate relationship between the environment and the concept of 'justice'. In Ankur Bisen's work titled "Wasted: The Messy Story of Sanitation in India, A Manifesto for Change," he delves into the complexities of waste management within India's socio-political landscape. Bisen highlights how societal biases based on caste have significantly influenced sanitation practices, hindering the acceptance of ecological awareness as a communal obligation. The text further examines the power dynamics that contribute to the system's apathy towards individuals living in unsanitary conditions. It critiques both societal indifference and the audacity of the system, exploring the subtle workings of power politics that shape social perspectives, and drawing insights from Foucault's theories on power structures. The paper also delves into the ways indigenous cultures actively safeguard the environment, showcasing a profound sensitivity often absent in today's consumer-driven, modern society. Tribal traditions brim with a deeply ingrained eco-consciousness, offering invaluable lessons on integrating ecological practices into everyday life. This comparison between an eco-sensitive culture and our current world, steeped in excess and waste, holds immense significance as a guiding philosophy—one that suggests a shift towards a more adaptive global ethos.

Keywords: Environmental Justice, the Politics of Power, Ecology, Caste Prejudices on Cleanliness, Sanitation. Environmental Pollution, Indian Mindset Towards Pollution, Social Responsibility, Indigenous Culture, Eco-Sensitivity

1. INTRODUCTION

An exploration of environmental justice uncovers the diverse facets of the environment entwined with the concept of 'justice'. Justice, a term open to debate, especially within the realm of 'environmental justice', embodies notions of equality, democracy, and freedom. In this context, environmental justice manifests as the pursuit of these ideals within the realm of our surroundings.

Today, the concept of 'home' holds a significant meaning. It represents both the sheltered space we inhabit and the surrounding environment. Taking a broader view, 'home' extends beyond individual dwellings to encompass the entirety of the Earth, shared by humanity and the natural world. This prompts a crucial question: 'Who is responsible for

safeguarding our home?' Interestingly, this query implicates each of us, including those who raise it. Does it imply a shared responsibility, paradoxically absolving any specific group of singular obligations?

Contemplating environmental justice naturally leads to discussions on waste management. The focal point revolves around how the existing waste management systems pose a challenge to environmental and earthly justice, particularly in the Indian context. Ankur Bisen's observations on India's socio-cultural landscape and its influence on waste management offer profound insights. His exploration of caste-based biases in sanitation sheds light on the intricate socio-psychological aspects that underpin waste management practices.

The author also highlights corruption and population as factors contributing to India's sanitation challenges, juxtaposing this with examples of similarly densely populated and corruption-affected places like Tokyo and Hong Kong, which have effectively addressed cleanliness concerns.

The author stresses how waste management consistently remains at the bottom of the priority list, highlighting the immense burden placed on a workforce largely comprised of underprivileged individuals. These workers, equipped with nothing more than worn-out wheelbarrows, buckets, and brooms, endure meager wages while shouldering this colossal responsibility, painting a stark picture of the Indian scenario. "This army is virtually set up to lift 100,000 metric tons of garbage that India generates daily. The third largest in the world" (Bisen 55). He further adds "Consequently, the subject of waste management and sanitation is an under-researched area severely lacking critical thinking and starved of scientific temperament." (Bisen 55)

The obsession with caste identity prevented many in India from recognizing their obligation to contribute to better sanitation practices. Just as Foucault highlights the perils of power-based discourses, there is a necessity to remain cognizant of the stigma associated with caste, even within the realm of cleanliness and sanitation,

My point is that not everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, we always have something to do. So, my position leads not to apathy but to hyper- and pessimistic activism. I think that the ethical-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger. (Dryfus and Rainbow, 231-232)

Foucault astutely points out the ambiguity regarding the greater danger: whether it is the pervasive caste stigma within society or the wilful ignorance of governance that passively perpetuates this stigma. The belief that specific groups should handle cleaning duties, conveniently allowed the majority to distance themselves from these responsibilities. The social stigma attached to sanitation workers persisted, marked by the filth and stink they dealt with. Ironically, those who historically engaged in cleaning were considered 'unclean and untouchable' in societal perceptions, while those who created waste and filth maintained a 'clean aura.' Both the historical narrative and contemporary accounts unveil an unsettling aspect of civilization that we have attempted to navigate. "The British hired on its roll Bhangis and Chamars to take care of the waste disposal in India, reinforcing a formal sponsorship of the state to the caste arrangement for waste disposal delivered through British municipalities. This was also part of the larger work of British rule that codified the caste system." (Bisen 37). The caste system, which saw its heyday during the Gupta period, was tactfully leveraged and fortified by the British colonial rulers.

The sanitation challenge exposes all our tall claims of equality, which refuses to uplift waste-management jobs and bring them up to the stature of perceived superior jobs. It exposes our democratic credentials that supposedly champion cooperative federalism, but assign the job of disposing of the aftermath of the consumption binge of our aspiring nation to the weakest member of the Indian state. (Bisen 477).

When discussing waste management, exploring a zero-waste culture like that of indigenous societies offers a fascinating perspective. It prompts the question: How might a consumer-focused society draw inspiration from and integrate elements of indigenous cultures into its practices? The argument accepts the impossibility of entirely returning to a prior, less technologically advanced, non-consumerist era. However, it highlights the potential for contemporary society to adopt certain aspects of tribal cultures—particularly their profound respect and care for the environment.

What distinguishes the Adivasi perspective is their fundamentally different approach to the environment, one absent of exploitation. Instead, indigenous cultures emphasize a mutual reliance on nature. They utilize its resources with sustainability in mind, nurturing and preserving it with great care. This interconnected coexistence promotes a philosophy centred on sustainability, offering valuable insights into modern society's relationship with the environment. In *Adivasi and Their Forest*, Gladson Dungdung, an activist from Jharkhand who works for the tribal society beautifully portrays a vibrant tribal culture, depicting the intertwined histories of the Adivasis and the Forest as inseparable. In *Mission Saranda*, Dungdung quotes the tribal attitude towards the forest thus: "We need the mountain and the Mountain needs us" (xviii). As the author says "a society that takes from nature for need rather than greed. Greed is prevented

through restraints and taboos" (xviii). This underscores a mutually reliant coexistence. Additionally, the constraints and taboos hold significance in safeguarding the surrounding ecology. Indigenous practices abound in environmental sustainability. The Adivasi bond with the ecosystem, with forest, has been marked thus: "Their land and forest are not only essential livelihood resources "but their sole identity, culture, tradition, ethos, spirituality, autonomy and social security" (Dungdung 13)

The enriched and sustainable lifestyle of tribal society stands in stark contrast to contemporary Indian society, burdened by waste management due to entrenched consumerism and a disregard for the environment.

Ankur Bisen in *Wasted*, highlights how India's deeply rooted caste system played a role in fostering collective neglect concerning sanitation. The pervasive influence of casteism prevented a significant segment of society from recognizing their responsibility toward environmental care. A contrast is drawn on how contemporary Indian society is stigmatized with the notion of caste in managing waste whereas the lessons from indigenous practices show how to maintain an air of equality in terms of labour. It is often noticed that patriarchal notions never had much influence on indigenous practice. Labour was performed on a notion of equality in terms of collecting fuel from the forest or taking care of the family. The absence of caste prejudices within indigenous cultures likely contributed to a more considerate attitude towards nature. Simultaneously, observing nature imparts profound lessons in equality, the celebration of differences, and embracing diversity. This mutual influence fosters a deeper connection between human perspectives and the environment. Proximity with nature can enlighten one with a philosophy of life that flies above all forms of discrimination. Indigenous cultures embody this profound life philosophy. As observed by Ramdayal Munda in *Asdivasi Astitavaar Jharkandi Asmitake*, the true character of the Adivasi community is " casteless, classless, based on quality, community-based economic system, co-existence with the nature, consent-based self-rule, dignity and autonomy" (quoted in *Adivasi and Their Forest* 21)

In *Mother Forest*, C. K. Janu, the tribal activist from Kerala, paints a vibrant picture of the profound bond between the Adivasi community and the forest, often revered as their 'mother forest.' She recounts their youthful escapades of discovery—tasting honey, gathering fruits and roots, fishing, and coaxing crabs from the marshlands. Amid her narrative, there's an overwhelming sense of abundance and opulence encapsulating their deep-seated connection with the forest. She recounts:

When young all of us children would go to the ridges of the fields to pick chappa or to the little stream to catch fish or else to lure out the crabs hiding in the slush of the fields or to graze the Jenmi's cattle or to roam aimlessly in the woods or to pluck wild fruits like karappayam mothangappayam or kanjippayam. Kanjippayam was plentiful, when eaten it turned our tongues blood red or we would look for honey in the tall trees. (2, Janu)

Reading Indigenous narratives and experiences provides a glimpse of a realm where meaningful interaction happens between human-ecological spaces. The essence of ecology is inculcated as an element of life denoting the idea of co-existence. Environment is never a wall apart but an integral part of the flow. The flora and fauna, the entire ecosystem thrive with human existence, mutually benefitting and enriching one another.

The core issue seems to stem from a collective lack of foresight and environmental awareness. There is a pervasive complacency, a belief that someone else will eventually resolve the problem, coupled with the misconception that life will continue unaffected. Unfortunately, the government often falls short of being that "somebody" to bring about effective, long-term solutions. Political systems tend to focus on short-term fixes that do not address the root causes.

What is truly necessary is a comprehensive system driven by a visionary approach. Governments should take the lead in implementing sustainable waste management systems that align with a larger environmental vision. This would require not just immediate actions but a strategic, forward-thinking plan to tackle waste management and environmental sustainability on a broader scale.

India indeed requires a forward-looking, research-oriented strategy to address its waste management challenges. The current system's inertia is contributing to an alarming accumulation of waste, essentially creating a burden for future generations. The urgency to act is crucial as the pace of waste generation far surpasses the rate at which it's being managed. If this inertia persists, the consequences may be dire and could even affect the current generation, making the future we fear a reality sooner than anticipated

While these examples highlight successful waste management strategies, there is a need for further evolution towards systems that require less direct human intervention. The ideal approach would involve the development and implementation of more advanced, technology-driven methods for waste collection, segregation, and disposal.

Efforts should focus on technological advancements such as automated sorting systems, robotics, artificial intelligence, and IoT (Internet of Things) applications to streamline waste management processes. These technologies can significantly reduce human involvement while enhancing efficiency and accuracy in waste segregation and disposal.

Creating systems that rely less on manual labor not only improves efficiency but also ensures safer and healthier conditions for workers while addressing the mounting challenges of waste management. Finding ways to integrate technology seamlessly into waste management processes will be crucial for creating sustainable and less labor-intensive solutions.

In this context it is interesting to note how certain indigenous practices and performances offer an alternative to a society, heaped with non-degradable wastes. Theyyam (Theyyattam) is a popular ritual form of worship of North Malabar, in Kerala. The performers of Theyyam belong to the lower-caste community and have an important position in Theyyam. Theyyam often is performed in an open area in a forest clearing. In "Dancer of Kannur," William Dalrymple vividly portrays the preparation of the Theyyam artist, allowing us to witness the eco-sensitive nature of the materials used for the performance.

...one of the most celebrated and articulate Theyyam dancers in the area is naked but for a white mundu, and he is lying on his back as a young boy applies makeup to his face and body. His torso and upper arms are covered with yellow paint, and his cheeks are smeared with orange turmeric, which gives off a strong pungent smell. Two black paisleys are painted around his eyes and a pair of mango-shaped patches on his cheeks are daubed with bright, white rice paste. On these using a slim strip of coconut leaf, the makeup boy is skilfully drawing loops and whirls and scorpion-tail trumpet spirals, then finishing the effect with a thin red stripe across his cheekbones. (Harmony of Prose 121)

Though Theyyam is an art form not particularly performed by the tribes, but by the lower caste community, it is an instance of performance by people in the margins, exhorting the idea of sustainability. The performance never requires a concrete building but happens in a forest clearing and the decorations, make-up, and some of the accessories are made entirely from organic and eco-friendly products like rice, turmeric, and palm leaves. Most of the tribal art forms and performances use properties, accessories, and makeup from raw materials that are part of nature.

An introspection on indigenous practices compels one to ponder on contemporary society and how the 'use and throw' consumer culture has resulted in the generation of unmanageable heap of waste. The inability to address waste management challenges despite a long-standing civilization underscores the urgent need for proactive measures and a collective shift in mindset. It calls for a re-evaluation of our societal norms, practices, and approaches toward consumption and waste generation to ensure a more sustainable and responsible coexistence with our environment. As we see "Every commercial activity generates waste, as does every seemingly innocuous human imprint in modern society." (Bisen 469)

Foucault's work prompts a critical examination of how structures of power influence and shape our perceptions, behaviors, and interactions within society. "Power is co-extensive with the social body ... the relations of power are interwoven with other kinds of relations for which they play at once a conditioning and a conditioned role." (Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* 142). Foucault's ideas about power structures in society resonate deeply with the way ecological conditioning, crucial in today's context, has been overlooked. The power structures intertwined with social relations have perpetuated biases, particularly evident in caste prejudices toward sanitation, which have been deeply ingrained through habitual practices. Similarly, societal apathy towards environmental concerns seems rooted in historical conditioning, stemming from perspectives like the Christian theological view of the Earth as a resource for human exploitation.

This conditioning has been perpetuated by a self-centered political focus that often prioritizes immediate gains over long-term environmental welfare. Moreover, the unwavering allegiance of the system to corporate interests often results in a superficial commitment to environmental causes, masking true intentions, and sidelining the well-being of the environment and society at large. These power dynamics and conditioned ideologies pose significant challenges in fostering genuine ecological consciousness and sustainable practices within society.

Foucault's insights into the dynamics of power shed light on how individuals' choices are influenced and constrained by societal structures. It was significant to recognize that expecting individuals living in unsanitary conditions to maintain their sanity is a monumental request, considering the repulsive circumstances they are forced to endure. In this scenario, the blame rests on both society and the system for their failure to envision or implement changes that would alleviate such conditions.

When we ponder on people's inaction or apparent lack of activism, it is crucial to recognize the constraints they face. The struggle to make ends meet often leaves little time or resources for individuals to actively advocate for a clean environment. This plight is unfortunately taken for granted, assuming that people have the luxury of choice and time to fight for a healthier living environment amidst their daily struggles for survival.

When heaps of waste is a reality of contemporary society, it is interesting to look at the kind of understanding the indigenous culture maintained with ecology. C K Janu's reminiscences on Ammini, her childhood friend, in *Mother Forest*, highlight the profound connection the Adivasis have with the land and its biodiversity. This underscores their inherent rights and intimate understanding of the forest's terrain." She knew about the plants needed for snakebites. When we walk through the forest she could make out the birds from the sounds they made and easily locate the directions in the forest. Ammini could catch the spoor of an elephant quite quickly, she knew everything about the forest. (22)

Janu's reflection on her friend is just a hint at the deep understanding the tribal community shared with the environment which modern society lacks. The narrative also highlights the responsibility of the system to safeguard the traditional knowledge, the indigenous cultures learn and own from observing and *living* with nature; a knowledge, a textbook can never impart.

Janu, also beautifully articulates how their spiritual beliefs intricately intertwine with the fabric of the natural world. Their religious customs revolved around and were closely connected to various aspects of nature.

In our community there are no gods or goddesses like among Hindus...when we were young there used to be a big tree near our hut in Thrissileri and a stone placed underneath it. we used to worship that our forefathers rested there. Once in a year we appeased them.... the area around the tree would be cleared of the bushes and swept clean. (*Mother Forest*19)

Contrasting contemporary culture with indigenous practices reveals potential pathways to maintain eco-sensitivity, embracing insights for a way of life that harmonizes with the surrounding ecology.

Both Japan and the USA have implemented advanced technology in e-waste segregation plants. These facilities employ cutting-edge sorting technologies such as automated systems, robotics, and advanced machinery.

The adoption of such advanced technology ensures that e-waste is handled in a more sustainable and ecologically responsible manner. These plants set an example for other regions, emphasizing the importance of integrating technological advancements into waste management systems to effectively tackle the challenges posed by electronic waste.

"Japan still burn seventy percent of its generated waste, albeit in controlled environment whereas Sweden recycles most of the waste it produces" (Bisen 372) . "The Panasonic Eco Technology Centre (PETEC) an e-waste processing plant based in Japan owned and operated by Panasonic came into existence as a result of legislation. Its e-waste processing is designed to capture every solid, liquid or gaseous particle that has gone into the making of the electronic item in a controlled and environmentally safe manner" (Bisen, 429)

Indeed, many nations across the globe serve as excellent examples of effective waste management practices. Their approach often involves viewing waste management as a field that requires scientific research, innovation, and meticulous execution.

By adopting these research-driven and technologically advanced approaches, these nations set a precedent for how waste management should be approached—a forward-thinking, innovative, and scientifically grounded field that continuously evolves to meet the challenges of waste generation in an ever-changing world. These examples serve as guiding lights for envisioning and implementing similar strategies on a global scale.

The informal resource extraction centres in India often engage in disassembling electronic wastes (e-wastes) to extract valuable resources. However, the informal nature of these operations poses significant risks and challenges, especially for the workers involved in this process. Additionally, the lack of regulations and safety measures in these informal centers exacerbates the risks for workers, exposing them to harmful working conditions without adequate protection or support. Addressing the informal nature of these resource extraction practices becomes imperative to safeguard the health and livelihoods of the individuals engaged in these activities and to mitigate the environmental impact caused by unsafe handling and disposal of e-wastes.

Shedding light on the state of slums, the author offers a glimpse into the informal living conditions in Delhi." The committee's findings concluded that 40 percent of Delhi's population lived in slums, shanties, and ghettos implying that by the start of the 21st century in India had successfully upgraded the stature of informal living from an sudden addendum to an integral piece of its urbanism."(Bisen 255)

Living informally is a right, but without providing people with proper waste disposal means and integrating waste management into their way of life, India will continue to be dirty. There's a danger of accepting that slums are inherently dirty, while governance shirks its responsible role in addressing this issue. As Foucault observes:

"There are forms of oppression and domination which become invisible - the new normal" (*Hewett, Martin A., 2004*). The emerging norm conveniently accepts slums as places destined for filth and the people within, allowing the system to absolve itself from the collective responsibility of maintaining clean and hygienic living spaces for everyone. Foucault's notion of the invisibility of power structures resonates strongly in this context.

Disciplinary power, on the other hand, is exercised through its invisibility the same time it imposes on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility. In discipline, it is the subjects who have to be seen. Their visibility assures the hold of power that is exercised over them. (Rainbow 199).

The tactic of invisibility in disciplinary power is a deliberate strategy for wielding control. In the realm of environmental concerns, this invisibility forms an unholy alliance with negligence and convenient silence, directly impacting lives.

Environmental issues profoundly affect the public, particularly those without the luxury of escaping filth. The types of jobs forced upon them—resource extraction or garbage picking—highlight the system's failure to prevent such dehumanizing practices. There is an awareness of this issue, yet a pervasive silence prevails as long as it does not directly impact individuals. A cleaner India, a cleaner environment, is as crucial as the air we breathe; it is about life and dignity. Indeed, there's a wealth of lessons to learn from indigenous cultures regarding eco-sensitivity, the art of co-existence, the adherence to taboos and restraints for preserving nature, and the profound harmony they derive from observing nature. These teachings provide a rich tapestry of wisdom for our relationship with the environment.

And a governance system sensitive to the environment and valuing the dignity of individuals and labor is crucial for New India. The ground is shifting beneath our feet, yet we cling to the hope of what remains, akin to the proverbial "living in daydreams of a great future." Who will take action then? Is it the government, the people, the local bodies, or each individual? The question lingers unanswered, as if there is a reluctance to find a solution!

GLOSSARY

Karappayam, mothangappayam or kanjippayam are all wild fruits

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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