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TRASH TO TRANSFORMATION: ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN WASTED BY ANKUR BISEN

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ABSTRACT

Environmental justice asserts that all individuals have the right to be shielded from environmental harm and to live in a healthy, pollution-free environment. Exploring environmental justice uncovers the many facets of "environment" and "justice." Ankur Bisen's Wasted: The Messy Story of Sanitation in India, A Manifesto for Change delves into waste management challenges within India's socio-political landscape. Bisen highlights how caste-based biases have influenced sanitation practices, delaying the recognition of ecological responsibility as a collective social duty. This paper examines how power structures contribute to systemic indifference toward communities compelled to live in unsanitary conditions. It critiques society's apathy and the system's audacity, analyzing the politics of power that shapes public attitudes through a Foucauldian lens on power structures.

Keywords: Environmental Justice, The politics of power, Ecology, Caste prejudices on cleanliness, sanitation. Environmental pollution, Indian mindset towards pollution, social responsibility

1. INTRODUCTION

Environmental justice (EJ) is founded on the belief that everyone deserves protection from pollution and the right to live in a clean, healthy environment. It means equal protection and active participation for all communities in shaping, applying, and enforcing environmental laws, policies, and regulations, as well as fair access to environmental benefits. Exploring EJ brings forward complex ideas around both "environment" and "justice." While justice itself is open to interpretation, in EJ it embodies equality, democracy, and freedom, framing the environment as a space where these values should be actively realized. Today, the concept of "home" has expanded: it represents not just our personal dwellings but the broader natural world we all share. This raises a fundamental question: who should protect this shared home? The question of responsibility implicates everyone, yet collective responsibility often dilutes individual accountability.

Waste management, a crucial aspect of EJ, highlights how these issues play out in India. Author Ankur Bisen provides valuable insights, examining how caste and class dynamics deeply affect waste management. His observations on caste-related biases in sanitation are particularly revealing, shedding light on how socio-cultural prejudices continue to influence who bears the burden of managing waste. Bisen's perspective invites a broader reflection on the social and psychological roots of waste management practices in India and their implications for environmental justice.

The author highlights that corruption and population density are commonly blamed for India's sanitation issues. However, similarly populous and corrupt cities like Tokyo and Hong Kong have managed to maintain cleanliness, suggesting that India's struggle with waste management may be rooted in deeper issues. According to the author, society must move past its inertia on waste management, adopting practices that make waste management a collective and habitual part of life. There are potential solutions, as seen in other countries' handling of e-waste, where brands bear responsibility for reverse logistics, funded by fees collected at the point of sale. In this way, consumers and brands alike share accountability for discarded products.

While waste management is critical, it ranks low on India's priority list, and the burden of handling 100,000 metric tons of daily waste largely falls on a marginalized workforce who receive minimal compensation and lack adequate resources. This scenario underscores the social hierarchy embedded in India's waste management, where caste-based roles perpetuate both stigma and neglect. The caste system has long facilitated an evasion of collective responsibility for sanitation, as many view these tasks as duties assigned to specific groups, rather than a shared obligation.

Drawing on Foucault's insights into power, the author suggests that caste stigma and governmental passivity are interwoven dangers, reinforcing each other to sustain these entrenched divisions. Society has often viewed sanitation workers—those managing waste and enduring its associated stigmas—as "unclean" while those generating waste retain a sense of purity. This contrast reflects the historical bias that has persisted into modern times.

The British colonial administration institutionalized caste-based roles in waste management, appointing specific groups to these duties, which further entrenched caste structures. This system of assigning sanitation work based on caste has endured, undermining India's democratic ideals of equality and collective responsibility. The sanitation system exposes the limitations of a supposed federal democracy that places the burden of waste on society's most vulnerable.

Historically, every society has relied on dedicated waste management workers, such as the *gongferomons* in Europe, who were compensated well for the challenging work. Unlike in India, these individuals could choose to enter or leave this occupation freely. The caste system offers no such flexibility, making it inherently undemocratic. As Indian society slowly awakens to the reality that waste is a shared responsibility, the lack of a systematic, scientific approach to collection and disposal only exacerbates the problem.

India's current waste management practices expose the gap between professed values of equality and actual practices. While we often speak of shared responsibility, we lack a functional system to support it. Without such a structure, waste continues to be discarded in public spaces and streets, where it impacts others' living spaces. The author stresses the urgency of activism within the waste management system, suggesting that India cannot wait for society alone to embrace responsibility. Instead, this challenge requires political commitment and policy innovation, supported by the coordinated efforts of all stakeholders. Only through a fundamental shift in governance and collective action can India establish a truly inclusive, effective approach to waste management

If we claim to have moved beyond race- and caste-based assumptions about sanitation, the current waste management system reveals a significant gap in our commitment to equality. Instead of a cohesive system, waste management remains fragmented and inconsistent. Often, waste is discarded in public spaces, essentially shifting the burden from one community to another. Although collective responsibility is touted, the reality is that a systematic approach to waste collection and segregation remains absent, and bureaucracy has yet to establish a viable solution. Consequently, waste management continues to be a low priority, dismissed by a "not in my backyard" mentality that simply pushes waste into someone else's living space.

This case is yet another example of a waste disposal strategy that heavily depends on manual labor, but there is a need for a scientific evolution in waste management—one that reduces human involvement. The inability of a civilization with a history of over a thousand years to devise effective waste management for commercial, industrial, and domestic sources is alarming. Observing the impact of human activity on waste production in modern society challenges our collective complacency. As noted, *"Every commercial activity generates waste, as does every seemingly innocuous human imprint in modern society"* (469).

Foucault's analysis of power as deeply woven within social systems is relevant here: *"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). The power dynamics shaping society also shape environmental attitudes, yet ecological awareness—a pressing need—is missing. This absence is seen in the continued impact of caste bias within sanitation, a practice conditioned over centuries. Society's historical passivity toward environmental issues reflects not only power but also theological perspectives that once positioned nature as a resource for human exploitation, reinforced by a modern political focus on corporate gains over collective ecological welfare.

India's current reality underscores the lack of social and political sensitivity toward its people. A system indifferent to the environment inherently disregards its citizens' well-being, as the environment forms the essential space of home. The sight of communities living in polluted conditions is a testament to the administration's failure. Foucault notes, *"There is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives. But this does not mean that it results from the choice or decision of an individual subject … The rationality of power is characterized by tactics that are often quite explicit at the restricted level"* (Foucault, 1981, 94-95). When individuals live in filth, their psychological and physical states are compromised, driven by a society and system lacking the vision to initiate change. Criticizing people's inactivity can be unfair, as many are preoccupied with survival, not advocacy for clean living conditions. Their situation, sadly, has been exploited.

Reflecting on possible solutions reveals valuable global models. The author references technological advancements in Japan and the U.S. to illustrate the potential of effective, tech-driven waste management. Japan, for instance, incinerates 70% of its waste within a controlled environment, while Sweden leads in recycling practices (372). The Panasonic Eco Technology Centre (PETEC) in Japan, created through legislative action, processes e-waste with rigorous safety measures, capturing each particle released during electronic item recycling (429).

Countries that recognize waste management as a field for scientific innovation have already invested in research-focused, technology-driven plants. These examples highlight the importance of treating waste management as a discipline requiring foresight and technical rigor—a commitment India must strive toward.

In India, informal e-waste processing centers operate by breaking down materials for resource extraction, but this unregulated process often harms the workers involved. Foucault argues that the "nexus of political economy is the process of exploitation, while the nexus of the process of power is 'how human beings are made into social subjects'" (*Subject and Power*, 208). Here, individuals are shaped into social subjects through the exploitation of their socio-economic vulnerabilities. Involvement in informal e-waste resource extraction reflects a passive system that perpetuates these exploitative conditions, seemingly indifferent to the toll it takes on workers.

In many developing countries, scenes of people handling e-waste without protective gear starkly reveal this negligence by both authorities and the public. This indifference persists even as these activities pose significant health risks. In India, the issue is culturally entrenched, as observed by the author*: "Dirty homes are not acceptable, but dirty public places are fine. The inner sanctum of temples should be clean, but the filth and garbage outside do not bother priests or followers alike" (477).* The increase in waste accumulation during festivals is predictable, yet authorities often remain passive, even though proactive measures like surveillance technology could help control illegal dumping in cities like Varanasi and Prayagraj (465).

This tendency to disregard cleanliness in communal spaces calls for introspection. Indian streets and public spaces are commonly treated as waste dumping zones. A genuine campaign is needed to reshape public sanitation habits, particularly in shared spaces. Before all else, adequate waste disposal facilities should be provided in the form of bins designated for different types of waste, with a sincere effort to encourage their use. True environmental responsibility goes beyond token gestures like observing Environmental Day with speeches and sapling distributions. What's needed is a well-thought-out action plan, executed with genuine intent This excerpt offers a comprehensive critique of India's waste management system, exposing the entrenched systemic failures, social neglect, and political complacency that have allowed environmental issues to worsen, especially for the marginalized. The text highlights the country's deep-seated inequalities, where the privileged can escape the consequences of pollution, while others, often involuntarily, are

confined to environments teeming with waste and neglect. This system results in a vicious cycle of exploitation that makes waste a burden borne by the vulnerable. As Foucault's concepts illustrate, these conditions are a product of complex power dynamics, where both exploitation and discipline render certain people and places "invisible" under structures of systemic neglect.

The author underlines the irony of religious reverence for rivers like the Ganga, while simultaneously allowing them to be polluted without adequate intervention. Public representatives, protected by a society that rarely holds them accountable, demonstrate limited urgency for implementing waste management solutions. This lack of responsibility extends to unchecked pollution in cities like Delhi, where slums have become stigmatized as zones of permanent filth, their residents deprived of a fundamental right to a clean environment.

Furthermore, the text argues for concrete policy changes to address these inequities. It questions why regulations for waste management can't be implemented with the same rigor as traffic laws, underscoring the urgent need for stringent environmental regulations to protect public health. The call is for proactive environmental stewardship—laws, public awareness, and infrastructural improvements such as accessible waste bins—to make clean living environments a fundamental right for all, regardless of economic status.

In conclusion, the text is a call to action for an overhaul in how India addresses waste management and environmental issues, advocating for structural change, accountability, and education. Only by recognizing and addressing these interconnected issues can the country hope to break free from the entrenched patterns that have normalized pollution and inequity.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

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