Neo-liberalising Inclusion?
Waste Picking, Data Activism, and the State

HARSHA ANANTHARAMAN

Non-governmental organisations and civil society actors have mobilised in several Indian cities around issues facing informal waste pickers. Data (surveys, narratives, visualisations) is a key basis on which NGOs premise such negotiations with the state. How a data-based NGO—state collaboration can provide the state new modalities of intervention and control over informal labour and its unaccounted value chains is discussed. However, the state’s response, as observed in Chennai, had been fractured and idiosyncratic. Given this, it is also shown how this selective “hearing” by the state is articulated with certain dynamics of data and NGO activism to facilitate the roll-out and rollback processes of neo-liberalisation in Chennai.

Meet KS. He is 30 years old. Starting from six in the morning to noon, KS picks waste in Kodungaiyur, the open dumpsite in which Chennai’s unsegregated waste has accumulated for the last 30 years. He calls the dumpsite “kuppamma” (“kupp” + “amma,” a portmanteau of the Tamil words for trash and mother), a term that gestures to its divinity and motherhood, perhaps because these 300-odd acres not only watch over him, but also give him food and livelihood. KS takes the recyclables he gleans to a nearby scrap shop to sell, earning about ₹150 a day. The scrap dealer also loans him money from time to time, perhaps in tacit acknowledgment of the below-market rates that KS is invariably offered for his daily collection.

KS has one leg. The other is a stump—on which he sports a plastic “false leg”—the result of a compactor vehicle severing his leg. KS remembers lying bleeding on a mound of waste, watching his severed leg going into the caverns of the compactor with a craneful of rotting mixed waste. No ambulance was called in to the dump yard, nor could he apply for any worker’s compensation. He does not have official access to the dump yard or its contents, which are regarded as state property. Yet, he is an important cog in the wheel of Chennai’s solid waste management (SWM) systems.

Across India, middle-class activists and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have mobilised around waste pickers’ livelihoods, attempting to increase the visibility and recognition of their “infrastructural labour” (Gidwani and Maringanti 2015). Negotiations between middle-class actors, technical experts and the state largely exclude waste pickers, while producing policies and categorical knowledge that unevenly impact political economies of waste, and questions of who is, or is not, a waste picker. These negotiations occur within the context of the neo-liberalising processes in SWM such as contractualisation and casualisation of work, and/or commodification of waste, that are transforming waste systems and economies in the global South (Gidwani and Reddy 2011; Samson 2015).

In this paper, I try to contribute to the insights of scholars such as Bayat (2000), Benjamin and Raman (2011) and Datta (2012) on the politics and pitfalls of formalising and visualising various informal practices to do with land and labour. How KS, and hundreds like him, have failed to become beneficiaries of new political configurations in which NGOs attempted to collaborate with the city of Chennai based on the premise and promise of data-driven political action? From 2013 to 2018, I was part of two NGOs engaged in research, advocacy and grounded...
activism in Chennai, which were interested in using data-driven and participatory approaches as the basis for developing collaborative modes of engagement for tackling issues of social justice, and addressing issues facing the urban poor. We took up waste picker issues hoping to follow the lead of organisations such as Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKP) in Pune and Hasiru Dala in Bengaluru. In 2014, they began a collaborative effort with other NGOs and the Corporation of Chennai (now the Greater Chennai Corporation or the GCC) to decriminalise waste picking through GCC-issued identity (ID) cards.

The Context: Negotiating Access

Waste-picking livelihoods involve navigating city streets to pick waste as well as operating in spaces such as dump yards and transfer stations where waste is handled. These two geographies, which the author refers to as roadside and dump yard waste picking respectively, are distinguished by how the state relates to them in terms of claims over land, labour and waste. These relationships translate into distinctive forms of negotiation as well as modes of control exerted by the state over the informal waste picker, eventually leading to different levels of recognition and regulation.

Roadside waste pickers are a familiar sight on city streets, moving from dumpster to dumpster collecting recyclables, typically in a large sack. Although exact figures do not exist for the city of Chennai, it is estimated that more than 10,000 individuals secure a living in this fashion. These waste pickers enter into complex negotiations with one another and with other actors such as street-level bureaucrats and city residents over questions of territory, access to waste, and times of work.

In 2013, a male waste picker said that he prefers to work in the early morning hours, when the city had not yet cleared bins of garbage, and when he was less likely to be confronted by middle-class residents in whose neighbourhoods higher value materials could be retrieved. However, it is not always possible for waste pickers to avoid obstructions, including violent ones.

D, who runs an NGO that works to rescue homeless children and adolescents, related stories of younger male waste pickers being assaulted and humiliated by policemen while working on the dark, empty streets. “They get beaten. Sometimes, a drunk policeman will overturn their sacks and tell you to scrounge it all up again like a dog” (November 2013).

By contrast, dump yard waste picking occurs in bounded, usually state-owned spaces, with very different rhythms, relationships, forms of negotiation and modes of control. More closely aligned with municipal rhythms, dump yard waste pickers more often work regular hours, and often in groups. In larger dump yards, a shift system might sometimes emerge for the hundreds of workers drawing their livelihoods from its waste. In Chennai’s major dump yards at Kodungaiyur and Perungudi, around 1,000 workers pick waste daily.

Dump yard waste picking must contend with an ever-present state hierarchy. Here, waste pickers come in daily contact with municipal solid waste workers, dump-truck drivers and security guards. While a GCC engineer sits at the top of the official hierarchy at the dump yard, the most central figure as far as waste pickers are concerned is the conservancy inspector who manages the day-to-day operations of the dump yard, including who is and is not allowed to enter it. Unlike in the case of roadside waste picking, where the state’s property claim over waste is loose and not easily enforceable, its claim can be activated to exclusionary effect at any point in the dump yard. In addition to owning the dump yard’s contents, the state also owns the land. In effect, waste pickers can be declared thieves and trespassers at any time.

However, the state actively tolerates dump yard waste picking while imposing constraints on who can do it, when, where and how. Why does the state, or at least one stratum of it, allow this practice? Part of the explanation lies in the rent-seeking opportunities arising for the GCC officials and workers managing the dump by allowing hundreds of people informal access to the dump site. In 2015, local NGOs received complaints that certain officials at Kodungaiyur dump site were extorting money from waste pickers. When asked about this, the majority of pickers evaded the question or denied it, while a few conceded that it might occur but they had not been personally approached. It was not clear whether waste pickers denied the claims simply because they were untrue, or because they were afraid of reprisals from the officials who were known to be well-connected, or because they viewed their relationship with these officials as key to ensuring their continued access to the dump.

Waste pickers are also allowed to access dumps because it enables state officials, both at the dump yard and at the headquarters level, to conveniently scapegoat waste pickers for the dysfunctional operation of the dump. Kodungaiyur dump is particularly notorious for frequent fires that spew toxic smoke into the densely-populated neighbourhoods surrounding it, pushing health and environmental activists to repeatedly call for its closure. While the GCC maintains that the fires are set off by waste pickers trying to get at valuable scrap metal buried beneath heaps of trash, both waste pickers and local residents claim that GCC workers set fires themselves to free up space in the overflowing dump yards.

Yet, another factor in the persistence of dump yard waste picking are the affective economies that sometimes develop between waste pickers and GCC officials and workers. For instance, when a small dumping ground in Central Chennai was converted into an equipped garbage transfer station by the GCC in 2014, the 30 or so waste pickers working at the dump site were expelled. While officers at the GCC headquarters sometimes express paternalistic sympathy for waste pickers, acknowledging that “these people have nothing else,” the street-level bureaucrats and workers who encounter waste pickers face-to-face have to contend more personally with waste pickers’ morally charged appeals to be allowed to work and survive. In this case, the waste pickers installed themselves outside the facility demanding the attention of the conservancy inspector of the transfer station, whom they had become acquainted with. Eventually, the conservancy inspector responded to waste pickers’ angry protests by deciding to permit the workers to return on the condition that they start recording their entry in a daily register.

As the foregoing discussion suggests, waste picking in Chennai has been integral to the state’s Swm machinery, while simultaneously being maintained in a liminal, partially recognised...
form that is vulnerable to (extra) legal scrutiny and reprisal. Operating in the in-between spaces where legal regimes are strategically and partially suspended gives waste pickers and street-level officials room to manoeuvre, but renders waste pickers’ labour unrecognised and unrewarded, and leaves them vulnerable to arbitrary state violence and forms of abandonment.

Data-driven Collaborations

In 2013, when I began to research and advocate on waste picker related issues as part of NGOs, there was considerable interest from citizens, civil society organisations (CSOs), and the GCC in surveying alternative approaches to SWM in Chennai. The GCC’s mixed experiences with privatised waste management, increasing middle-class scrutiny over garbage collection, the new SWM rules that mandated segregation of waste at the source and waste picker inclusion, and the well-publicised transformations of SWM in Bengaluru, placed pressure on the officials to engage with the activists who were pushing for measures such as zero waste management and waste picker inclusion. This was a period of increasing civil society influence within the GCC. Prominent CSO groups such as Chennai City Connect began to wield considerable influence over transport policy, pedestrian infrastructure and SWM, and even some of my colleagues became embedded within the GCC as part of a data-driven governance agenda.

The NGOs I worked for participated in two connected spheres of activism around waste in the city. One of them, dominated by corporate NGOs and upper-class, upper-caste city residents, grappled with SWM in the city from environmental, technical and governance perspectives. Here, the question of waste picking livelihoods was perceived as secondary at best and as an unwelcome distraction from the “real challenges” at worst. The other sphere in which we were active featured a range of grassroots organisations (including other NGOs, labour unions, and Dalit and women’s rights organisations) that worked with waste pickers in varying capacities. Both NGOs that I worked for actively cultivated relationships with such organisations in the city. These relationships were not only sources of political mentorship but also intended to facilitate the “transfer” of research support and funding to these organisations. Following these discussions, largely confined to the latter sphere, we partnered with a subset of grass roots activist organisations to mediate waste pickers’ engagement with the GCC and the state government over two key issues articulated by waste pickers: livelihood insecurity and police harassment. Following the example of efforts in Pune, Delhi and Bengaluru, NGO allies decided to demand that the GCC issue ID cards to legitimise waste pickers’ access to waste. Both my employers served as nodal organisations for these efforts vis-à-vis the other, more grassroots-level organisations in the coalition. This was, in part, attributable to their prior record in researching and advocating on slum policy and public sanitation issues, but most importantly, due to their access to grant funding from a major international donor, and a perception that the GCC would be more responsive to institutionally-backed actors armed with “credible” research.

The premise was simple, perhaps too simple. Local governments were increasingly partial to data in the form of Geographic Information System (GIS) maps and surveys. As elite NGO partners, we would collaborate with communities, and subsequently the government, to conduct data exercises aimed at making a case for the decriminalisation of waste picking and the extension of a host of welfare measures to those engaged in waste picking as a livelihood. Our engagement with the state would work at the level of senior and middle management and street-level city government officials. With this multi-level strategy, we would develop a data-driven approach to engage with state machinery to effect change.

Starting in 2013, we began collecting data to establish the importance of waste pickers’ work, and the desirability of their “inclusion” in any SWM vision that the city might enact. To establish the range of waste picking activities in the city and the daily struggles of delegitimised waste pickers, we conducted surveys and collected narratives focusing on waste pickers’ experiences and work processes. At the same time, we generated GIS maps and numerical projections designed to communicate the economic and environmental significance of waste pickers’ labour, and its utility to the city. We used this research (and existing contacts in the GCC) to solicit meetings with officials and begin the process of negotiation for ID cards to decriminalise waste picking. This was conceived as the first, essential step in a longer process of extending social security benefits and employment opportunities to waste pickers working in Chennai.

As events unfolded, advocacy interventions largely amounted to a handful of middle-class researchers regularly meeting with the GCC to present and substantiate our proposals in support of waste picker inclusion. This approach was a departure from efforts in cities such as Pune, where, although university professors and activists participated, waste pickers themselves played a leading role in efforts to address their own concerns and demands. In sharp contrast to their commitment to organising and collective bargaining, we decided that we could not take on the task of organising waste pickers as we had teams of a small-size (no more than 6 at any time). That we sincerely hoped to effect positive change despite this, points to a failure to fully appreciate structural and political forces at play.

Presenting data such as interviews with waste pickers talking about their difficulty in making a living wage, in accessing medical care and in convincing the police and city authorities that they were not criminal or untrustworthy, elicited a range of responses from the GCC officials. Some expressed unwillingness to entertain a case for ID cards, saying “They will want employment [if given ID cards] … GCC cannot employ them.” Others supported the scheme, arguing that waste pickers were unfairly treated and should be rewarded for their good work in diverting waste from the GCC dump yards. One official confessed in a private conversation that he thought the GCC should issue the cards, as destruction of waste picking livelihoods would result in a spurt in crime in the city. One perceptive health officer asked a question that we did not adequately understand or engage at that time, hinting at our failure to mobilise caste in our understanding of waste pickers’ struggles or how they might be supported: “Why are you calling them a community? Don’t you think many of them do this work under compulsion, and
will be trapped if you officialise all this through 10 cards?” (July 2014).

The internal dynamics of the gcc became visible through the distinct ways in which different strata of administration perceived csos’ increasingly active role in designing policy for the gcc. The gcc commissioner, who had a good reputation with csos as an erudite, reform-minded bureaucrat, was supportive of our efforts, frequently issuing orders to his subordinates to consult with us, and other csos. The lower and middle-level hierarchies at the gcc headquarters were often less convinced, and in some cases, openly resented the fact that some csos had been given offices within the gcc headquarters and empowered to hold the gcc officials accountable. Over time, I observed a dynamic whereby both the gcc’s top brass and influential csos actors embedded within gcc, periodically turned to each other to discipline or stir to action the lower or middle levels of the gcc administrative hierarchy, whom they respectively perceived as recalcitrant or reactionary.

Nevertheless, the superintending engineer for swm, the person directly in charge of the day-to-day swm operations in the city, encouraged us to persist, despite frequent administrative delays and the indifference of some of his subordinates, most notably, the executive engineer (swm) who would be directly responsible for implementing the waste pickers’ 10 cards programme. Ultimately, the gcc commissioner and the mayor approved the scheme at a meeting on 24 November 2014. The deputy commissioner (Health) who convened the meeting concluded it by thanking the assembled ngo coalition for the various proposals, confirmed that the gcc wanted to help waste pickers by issuing 10 cards, and invited us to submit proposals on how to proceed with this.

Registration Process
Months of back-and-forth negotiations ensued over the scope, nature and design of the cards. The gcc wanted us to completely handle the process, including drafting official circulars and memos regarding the initiative, which they would then approve or reject. At their behest, we also designed the process and instruments by which waste pickers would be registered. Through most of the first half of 2015, we worked with the swm department to prepare for and organise the registration camps. The gcc reluctantly agreed to extend resources such as venues, staff, and digital equipment for the camps.

A major sticking point was the gcc’s insistence of “respectable” citizens, such as middle-class Resident Welfare Association (rwa) members or government officials, who authenticate each claim of being a waste picker. All the senior officials agreed that a measure such as 10 cards for waste pickers was bound to be abused by “unscrupulous people,” and that the gcc could not expose itself to such a possibility without some insurance. We eventually accommodated this requirement by proposing that the ngos or csos in the coalition would vet and clear individual applications. This was our workaround to a bureaucratic requirement that was practically unviable, as waste picking is a need-based activity featuring a high degree of flexible membership.

On the first day of the camps (2 July 2015), our understanding was that we would assist the gcc to run three-day camps, first at the Perungudi dump site, and then at Kodungaiyur, to register waste pickers working at the dump site as well as roadside waste pickers working in nearby areas such as Thiruvanmiyur and Besant Nagar (near Perungudi) and Korukkupet and Vyasarpadi (near Kodungaiyur). This would be followed by camps in each of Chennai’s three regions (North, South and Central) targeted at roadside waste pickers in those areas, and any dump yard waste pickers who were missed out at the initial camps.

That evening, I was summoned unexpectedly to a meeting at the gcc headquarters. As the only present representative of the ngos (and consequently of waste pickers), I was informed that the gcc would be merely issuing “dump yard entry permits,” rather than 10 cards meant to legitimise waste picking as a livelihood practice. “We do not care about waste pickers … This [increasing dump yard security] is the only basis on which we have justified this [programme] to our superiors” (July 2015), said the executive engineer. While such a statement in isolation is neither exceptional nor unusual, it is important to keep in mind the context of extended collaboration leading up to this point, and the contradictions in both public statements and official circulars. The superintending engineer apologetically stated that I should understand how difficult their jobs were, and that they had taken up the issue of 10 cards for waste pickers despite heavy pressure and scepticism, and that dump yard entry permits should be viewed as a positive outcome.

This represented a distressing outcome, for only a few hundred surveillance and policed waste pickers would be certified as legitimate, while thousands (mainly roadside waste pickers but also dump yard waste pickers who had missed the camps) would be pushed further into the mire of liminality and criminality. Opposing this subversion, we threatened to pull out of the camps, but were convinced otherwise by the commissioner, who reassured us that 10 cards for all waste pickers were still on the table. The camps went on, and since the data was being collected on tablets that directly transmitted it to the gcc servers, there was no possibility of withholding the data from the gcc. When the gcc reverted to dump yard entry permits after the camps, all the ngos were compelled to withdraw from the initiative. After this, the gcc dropped the idea of issuing 10s altogether. As far as I am aware, the registration data still sits in a compact disc somewhere in the gcc swm offices.

Approximately 930 waste pickers were registered and surveyed at the two sites. The only 10s issued were 25 hastily printed ones that were presented by the mayor to randomly selected waste pickers at a media event conducted during the camps. The gcc had agreed that 10 cards should be issued no later than 90 days from initial registration, and waste pickers were given a receipt to this effect. As of 2019, employees of various csos/ngos involved in the process still encounter waste pickers, occasionally, who wish to know what became of their 10 cards, and one or two even carry their tattered receipts.

In July 2018, I learned from former colleagues that there had been developments at the Kodungaiyur dump site. On further investigation, I learned that waste pickers, who for years had accessed the dump site informally through a “side gate” (simply a broken section of the compound wall) were now compelled to
enter through the main gate under the scrutiny of gcc officials. These officials are now under strict instructions from their superiors to keep a close eye on waste pickers, and crack down on any indiscretions, especially the setting of fires. On some days, a register is brought out, in which names and thumbprints are recorded. For waste pickers, the threat of expulsion, or being punished for entering the dump yard is even more keenly felt than before. Simultaneously, the gcc effectively no longer needs to consider waste picking livelihoods in its plans for closing or converting its dump yards into incineration facilities as it possesses a list of only 930 waste pickers to be considered for rehabilitation.

In 2019, the gcc contacted one of the NGOs involved in the ID cards initiative to discuss the prospect of extending door-to-door garbage collection services in the city by leveraging waste pickers’ labour on the basis of data collected during the ID cards programme. The gcc basic assumption was that waste pickers could be asked to collect, sort and sell household garbage, thereby massively easing the municipality’s burden,13 without any mention of compensating the workers beyond the permission to collect garbage officially.

**Roll-out, Rollback**
Reflecting on the approach to change-making that undergirded the ID cards project throws up some critical questions about the expression of neo-liberal dynamics in “pro-poor” NGO interventions in Indian cities. Although, in its initial positioning neo-liberalism was conceived as necessarily implicating the withdrawal of the state; regional specificities revealed that neo-liberalisation entails a reconfiguration of the state, and the integration of state, corporate and elite interests (Harvey 2008).

J Peck and A Tickell’s (2002) influential paper makes the case for a process-based analysis of neo-liberalisation. Emphasising its contingent nature while allowing for its metalectic, and focusing on moments of change, they identify a paradigmatic shift in the 1980s—from a pattern of deregulation and dismantlement that they characterise as a “rollback” phase, to an emergent phase of active state building and regulatory reform, which they term as “roll-out.” Drawing a creative distinction between what they term as its destructive and creative moments, the two inter-related phases of rollback and roll-out neo-liberalisation represent very different relationships between the market, regulatory forms and the state:

-the agenda gradually moved from one preoccupied with the active destruction and discredition of Keynesian-welfarist and social-collectivist institutions (broadly defined) to one focused on the purposeful construction and consolidation of neo-liberalised state forms, modes of governance and regulatory relations. (Peck and Tickell 2002: 384)

Although the bulk of literature on neo-liberalisation focuses on global market forces, large corporations, and governments, other studies have emphasised the role of NGOs and CSOs enabled by transnational flows of capital and knowledge as an important ingredient of the contemporary political economy. As a case in point, the policy mobility around inclusive SWM and formalisation of informal workers, and concomitant flows of money and values, has resulted in an increasing number of NGOs and CSOs taking interventionist roles in the functioning of core urban infrastructure services, in what was previously a predominantly state-managed problem (Anjaria 2009; Baviskar 2011; Gertner 2015). While it is true that the welfare protections promised by the postcolonial developmentalist Indian state were never actually extended to many populations, including informal workers, scholars have lately argued that the state and elite civil society are now engaged in a process of rolling back even the promises, let alone practices of welfare or developmentalist ethics. They are replaced instead with a “moral economy of patronage,” which renders the welfare of the marginalised sections of society dependent on the moral concern of social elites (Gidwani and Reddy 2011).

The case study discussed in this paper shows how in contemporary urban contexts like Chennai’s, roll-out and rollback processes outlined by Peck and Tickell (2002) are interdependent and not merely linear or sequential. The waste picker ID cards initiative had not only failed to deliver the official recognition it promised, but instead led to increased surveillance and regulation of waste pickers, and also destabilised negotiated and local forms of recognition and access that waste pickers had carved out for themselves.

These forms might be premised on the temporary absences of the state, as in the case of roadside waste picking, or negotiated relationships between waste pickers and lower-level state workers and officials. These relationships are based on the rent-seeking tendencies of the latter, and on affective ties that sometimes emerge between them as waste pickers make it difficult for the fractured state to unilaterally roll back. In this regard, NGOs and civil society actors become implicated in rolling out neo-liberal orders, in destabilising existing forms of recognition, and in the same movement, rolling back on even the promise of welfare measures.

To explain these developments, I suggest the following reasons. First, certain strata of the state heard the appeals of the NGOs and waste pickers selectively, and, in so doing, sought to exert control over—or resist the control of—other strata of the state. Second, the data activism approach adopted in Chennai fell prey to an illusion of transparency, premising itself on an apolitical understanding of both waste picking and how the state relates to it. Third, this apolitical understanding was, in particular, conditioned by a caste-blind approach adopted by the leading NGOs. And fourth, the interventionist NGOs can knowingly or unknowingly collaborate in roll-out and rollback processes of neo-liberalisation in which the state is a participant or “regulator,” potentially underwriting state withdrawal and destabilising local and negotiated forms of recognition.

To elaborate, first, I propose the term “hearing like a state,” as an extension of James C Scott’s (1998) “seeing-like-a-state” thesis. Revisiting the development and breakdown of the ID cards initiative, it appears that despite seeming congruences around the ID card programme, NGOs and state officials were ultimately imagining very different processes and outcomes. Reflecting on the many hours of conversation and dialogue amongst activist, researchers and city officials, it becomes apparent that different strata of the state hear and act in distinctive and idiosyncratic ways. Reflecting on the ways neo-liberalisation sets power plays in motion within differentiated strata of the state, it becomes plausible that the state
machinery as a whole was not only trying to exert a modicum of control over waste pickers (and their cso/ngo allies), but also that certain factions within the state were trying to discipline or exert control over the discretionary, free-wheeling operations of other factions as a way of fortifying their own power and authority.

At one level, the top and middle strata of the gcc administration wished to curb the discretionary actions of street and dump yard-level officials. At another, higher-ups in the gcc sought to exert control over middle and lower-level administrators and engineers through embedded cso actors—a tactic that was resisted by these officials who viewed the top brass’s relationships with elite cso representatives as both, discretionary and “unofficial.” Representatives of ngos negotiating with the gcc, such as myself, failed to anticipate that certain strata of the state would selectively hear and view the id card scheme as a mechanism to grasp and control an otherwise flexible and semi-covert set of arrangements.

Second, the data activism approach adopted by the nodal ngos in this case was premised on an “illusion of transparency” (Lefebvre 1991: 27–28). The notion that creating data on waste picking would prompt the gcc to address waste pickers’ precarity betrayed a technicist and the apolitical understanding of both waste picking and the city’s infrastructural operations. This perspective failed to account for the complex relationships and forms of recognition (albeit imperfect, exploitative and occasionally violent) that waste pickers have negotiated for themselves on the ground through informal transactions. Equally, it misses both: the fact that the state benefits directly and indirectly from waste picking in its precarious, liminal condition, and that enumeration and registration of waste pickers might lead to more stringent forms of control and exploitation of waste pickers in the future.16

Third, despite partnering with Dalit and tribal welfare organisations in the campaign for 10 cards, the nodal ngos failed to adequately mobilise a critical understanding of caste, preferring to privilege the lenses of informality, labour and environmental ethics. The resignation of Dalit political organisations towards the caste-blind attitude of the leading ngos likely contributed to the less active role taken by these organisations as the process developed. It would be inaccurate to say that both ngos were entirely upper-caste dominated, but it is undeniable that upper-caste, middle- and upper-class activists, such as myself (a 23-year-old with no prior experience in labour organising or waste picking advocacy when we started), wielded considerable influence in defining the philosophy and parameters of our intervention. An additional implication of the central role played by elite ngos was that our efforts hinged decisively on positive relationships with senior bureaucrats of the Indian Administrative Service, and largely ignored elected representatives.17

Considering the class and caste commonalities between (some) ngo representatives and senior bureaucrats, and the fact that swm is one of the few municipal operations in which corporators still wield some influence, the reluctance to consistently engage elected representatives may indicate that in the absence of a structural analysis of class and caste, certain illiberal tendencies of middle-class political activism (Fernandes and Heller 2006) may find expression even when their politics are ostensibly pro-poor.

Finally, this case extends the insights of feminist scholars such as Wendy Brown (1995) who demonstrate that resorting to the legal framework of rights to address feminist causes ultimately limits one to the parameters of redressal offered by the state. However, in the case of the id cards initiative, the state not only failed to deliver on the promise of official recognition, it also gained new modalities of control over waste pickers. ngo intervention and collaboration with the state effectively circumvented and undermined the ties of “political society” (Chatterjee 2004) that bound waste pickers and certain strata of the gcc together. In some ways, the id cards initiative in Chennai was an effort to translate claims usually made by waste pickers themselves, through the porosity that exists between the state and the urban poor, into a “policy sphere” that is characterised by porosity between the state and urban elites (Benjamin 2008). The failure and potential inversion of the rationale underpinning the effort casts aspersion on the translatability of the issues of the urban poor in such settings. It raises the uncomfortable question of whether pro-poor policy instruments are effective in achieving even the same imperfect results that the poor manage to secure for themselves.

Conclusions
The gcc officials have attempted to expel waste pickers from its facilities in the past, but due to the reasons discussed above, never without incident or for very long. Similarly, roadside waste pickers have often faced the brunt of state excesses, but have maintained the plasticity and flexibility that characterise their occupation (not only in terms of when, where, and how to pick waste, but also in terms of whether to be a waste picker at all).

However, as the opening sections demonstrate, waste picking, in its unrecognised and liminal form, exposes workers to a range of injustices and hazards, including economic precarity, health risks and sociocultural stigma. Many waste pickers have undoubtedly benefited from id cards in cities like Delhi and Bengaluru, where organisations have spearheaded more substantive and long-lasting commitments to waste picker livelihoods as compared to Chennai.

In Chennai as well, the city’s swm by-laws issued in 2016 include a definition of waste pickers and calls for their integration into swm systems. However, the Chennai case points to certain dynamics that require closer attention in other contexts as well. First, ngos/csos need to be reflexive on the extent to which they adopt the rationales of the state when advocating for waste picker livelihoods and welfare measures. While highlighting the economic and environmental benefits of waste pickers’ labour has been successful in generating visibility and degrees of recognition for waste pickers, campaigning for waste pickers' welfare on the basis of their utility to the city as “expert” waste-workers might lead to new levels of exploitation of these workers. ngos and csos must guard against implicitly endorsing the view that garbage is the only claim waste pickers can legitimately make from the state, as this fails to incorporate a
much-needed caste critique and unfairly overlooks the fact that waste pickers are invariably socio-economically and socioculturally marginalised.

Second, we need to think carefully about the implications of processes of enumeration, registration, and ultimately, categorisation. These measures typically address subpopulations of waste pickers, creating exclusions and constraints for those left out. Conversely, officialising the category of waste picker might facilitate the conscription of these workers into semi-formalised forms of waste work that are not necessarily less precarious or stigmatising, while frustrating the desires of some waste pickers to leave waste work behind altogether.

Third, there appears to be an emerging contradiction between the drive to enumerate and register waste pickers (ostensibly so that they can get better access to various forms of state surplus), and the fast-spreading notion that the future of waste pickers is as self-sufficient garage entrepreneurs who must simultaneously provide crucial infrastructural services to cities. These intricate dilemmas make the challenges for NGOs and CSOs seeking to ally with waste pickers all the more complex as they must evolve strategies to redress waste pickers’ current difficulties without inadvertently enabling the state to enclose and exploit waste pickers’ labour for its own purposes.

NOTES
1 The names of the respondents are anonymised in this article.
2 Waste pickers—informal workers who subsist off the discards of consumption—painstakingly carve out livelihood niches retrieving, sorting and selling waste in Indian cities. Located at the nexus of social and political structures, waste pickers are crucial to the reproduction of city life (Gidwani and Maringanti 2015; Harriss-White 2017).
3 It is important to keep in mind that these groupings might not be categorical; rather, they accommodate a degree of plasticity in that people move in and out of waste picking, and back and forth between the two forms during a working life.
5 Over the past decade, the GCC had had acrimonious relations with all three major private contractors who serviced the city.
6 While I refer to the group of organisations campaigning for ID cards as NGOs, I occasionally refer to the two nodal organisations (my employers) as CSOs also due to their participation in various civil society networks and largely elite-dominated character.
7 These relationships were intended to be mutually beneficial, helping to ground the agenda of elite NGOs, while channeling research and financial support to overburdened grassroots activists and organisations. Over time, the political economy of donor-funding and “capacity-building” has led elite NGOs to act as conduits for the imposition of neo-liberal discipline.
8 For a discussion around waste picker identity cards in Bengaluru, see Chennappa (2013).
9 The notion of waste picker ID cards had already been circulating among some waste-pickers and NGOs in Chennai, especially after a few waste pickers and activists travelled to Pune in the early 2000s to learn from the KKPWP experience.
10 This was not necessarily our claim, but rather the consensus opinion of the group at large.
11 See the detailed discussion in Chikarmane and Narayan (2005).
12 “...to safeguard against misuse of the cards or obtaining under false pretenses, the urban local body (ULB) shall invite relevant eminent NGOs ... to aid in properly identifying the waste pickers.” Excerpt from internal GCC memo WS M W C No 45/2766 A/2014.
13 Quote from city official on Day 1 of registration camp, 15 July 2015.
14 This would also mean that waste pickers would have to handle and dispose of all types of mixed garbage rather than mainly recyclables.
15 Speaking about regular calls from middle-class residents asking him to discipline waste pickers accused of dirtying their street, one overworked

CI complained from the seat of his running motorcycle—“They don’t understand that we are never in one place. I don’t have time to run after ragpickers” (November 2014). He was of the opinion that regularising the practice through ID cards would assure these residents’ concerns but, equally, residents feeling empowered to ask a waste picker for identification might also feel empowered to act against one lacking it.

16 The Swachh Survekshan 2019 survey report (Gol 2019) found that Chennai has integrated 100% of informal waste pickers within the ULB. Chennai is not the only municipality to make this claim, but the truncated enumeration process outlined here may have been the basis for making such claims.

17 Although, this was not true of other activists in the same NGO working on slum-dwellers’ rights.

REFERENCES

Economic & Political Weekly 1207 NOVEMBER 30, 2019 VOL LIV NO 47 67