

Krishna Raj Summer Fellowship (2017)

Report

**CASTE AND THE FORMAL SECTOR**

**A Case Study of the Formalised Garbage Collection Workers in Shimla**

**Paper by**

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**M.A. Final Sociology**

During the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the city of Shimla was facing a crisis. The narrow gullies of the middle-class neighbourhoods, the bustling tourist spots and markets, and the slopes on which the city sits: each saw a continuous piling up of garbage as spots of waste on the cityscape. The system of waste management was not so much related to the process of garbage collection as it was related to the process of garbage deposition. It was required of residents and tourists to make short trips to the nearby ‘dumpers’ on a daily basis to get rid of the waste produced by their ‘units’. A rapid growth in the city’s population<sup>1</sup>, and thus an increased production of waste (biological and household) implied that the dumpers which dotted Shimla were soon overflowing.

Given that about 70% of the households and shops were not connected by road to the dumpers, the short trips of depositing waste were often avoided in favour of the physical convenience that the neighbouring streets, drains, and the hillsides could afford. These piles of plastic, vegetable peels, paper, glass bottles, ceramics, etc., were further scattered by stray animals, particularly monkeys, dogs and abandoned cattle. It was not as if the Shimla Municipal Corporation (SMC) was unaware of this crisis. They were, however, incapacitated

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<sup>1</sup> Census of India, 1991; Census of India, 2001; Census of India 2011

by the limits placed on public expenditure (something we discovered after a detailed interview with a high official of the SMC).

In 2009, the Shimla Environment, Heritage Conservation and Beautification (S.E.H.B) Society was formed. The eponymous tasks called for had to be carried out by a new and more effective system of waste-management in the city. Thus, the ‘door-to-door’ (D2D) garbage collection system was put in place – a more extensive and organised system based on bureaucratic and scientific rationality. This involved hiring workers (D2D, drivers, sweepers, sewer-men etc.) who were then distributed across the various municipal wards loosely according to the population levels and the amount of garbage expected to be produced. Among these various strata of workers, our fieldwork focused on the D2D garbage collectors whose task was to personally collect garbage from each unit (household/shop/restaurants & hotels) every day or two. The reason as to why the D2D workers were chosen for the study was not only because they formed a major part of the workforce hired by the SEHB society, but also because they were the ones who directly handled all the waste.

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Historically, castes have been associated with occupations. Various mythical and religious imaginations of the caste-system structure themselves around a division of labour and social responsibilities, and following from these, a social system of rights and duties. Here, we must understand that the relationship between the caste and the associated occupation is a ‘symbolic’ relationship. Drawing from Ferdinand de Saussure’s definition of a ‘symbol’<sup>2</sup>, the caste-structure provides a recursive rationality to classify members of its society as per their occupations. These occupations are in turn socially circulated and inherited by the processes of kinning, thus vertically and horizontally maintaining a monopoly on the prestige, rights, and duties that become associated with the caste. Within this framework, those designated to and tasked with handling waste (biological or otherwise) have belonged to particular castes and sub-castes. In most parts of India various sub-caste of Dalits, have been associated with the same: manual scavenging, entering man-holes to rid sewer pipelines of obstructions, and

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<sup>2</sup> A symbol, according to Saussure, has as motivated signification with respect to its signified, i.e. there exists a reason, cultural or scientific, as to why the link between the symbol and what it symbolises.  
De Saussure, Ferdinand. *Course in general linguistics*. Columbia University Press, 2011.

garbage picking<sup>3</sup>. These classifications are not merely horizontal, but hierarchical as well, and are kept as such by networks of kinship and economic dominance.

Antithetical to this imagination of a rigid structure of occupation is that of the modern capitalist system. The duality of capitalist production and liberal democratic polities attempts to explain to us that the economics of our everyday lives has a secular character. Here, we are told that people, freed from their traditional bondages, enter into a world where the merit of their labour and intellect would be justly rewarded by the market. While this regime of meritocracy was often introduced in pre-capitalist societies in the non-western world with the use of great degrees of violence and destruction of the local societies, the system could not fully eliminate the social basis of work and organisation in these societies and communities. As Prof. Patnaik argues<sup>4</sup>, capitalism was able to help break the bondages of the “old” communities due to large scale migrations of the dispossessed peasantry during the colonial era, thereby reducing the reserve army of unemployed people in the home country, who could then bargain for rights against their respective national bourgeoisie, and thus win democratic freedoms for themselves in the workplace and elsewhere. Since this possibility of emigration was largely impossible for the colonised peoples of the world, mainly due to the lack of economic resources or the racism faced by these people in the European colonial countries, the reserve army of the labour, the unemployed masses, had to take to the revival and revitalisation of the ties of the “old” community in order to sustain themselves in the new economic environment.

The economic policies of independent, which based themselves on huge amounts of public expenditure and governmental programmes, as exemplified by the Mahalanobis Plan, the government aimed at creating a formal sector of employment where the rights of the workers would be protected, in order to keep the market demand floating (using a largely Keynesian logic). The government could not however practically protect the rights of those who lay outside this sector. We argue that the logic of the formal sector is that the state can guarantee workers their rights, and hence equality, only if the state, to begin with, identifies them as such, and hence protect them from overexploitation, i.e. the State grants rights not in return for services, labour and taxes, but in return for visibility. And it is only within this that the State can be negotiated with: with respect to workers’ rights, or for that matter, any rights. If

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<sup>3</sup> Gatade, Subhash. "Silencing Caste, Sanitising Oppression." *Economic & Political Weekly* 50, no. 44 (2015): 29.

<sup>4</sup> Patnaik, Prabhat. "Capitalism and the Oppressed Castes." *The Second Foundation Day Lecture*, May 2, 2016.

the proof of citizenship is quintessential to the right to exercise rights, as is seen in the case of the requirement of the Aadhar Card in order to avail mid-day meals<sup>5</sup>, then the proof of workmanship is necessary for a democratic state to prevent active discrimination and exploitation in the workplace and otherwise. It then follows that the informal sector is that which relies not on the powers of the state for its regulation, but on pre-existing orders and rules of social organisation which help lay down the rules of trade and the moralities surrounding the circulation of goods and services, i.e. it revitalises the “old” communities. In India, therefore, the informal sector calls upon the traditional, or rather, the non-capitalist social relations (of kinship, caste, religion, regionalism) to organise a network of trust and circulation in order to maintain a continuous flow of the economy.

Given these characterisations of caste and the informal sectors, the city of Shimla, which has witnessed the formalisation of the garbage collection sector, a department traditionally associated with certain castes, gives us an opportunity to observe and understand the interplays of the so-called traditional social order and the secular, bureaucratic organisation and division of labour in capitalist society. The fieldwork for this paper was conducted over 16 days in Shimla, H.P. It consisted of interviews with D2D workers, drivers, supervisors, sweeping staff of the SMC, and officials of the SEHB Society and the SMC. Observation of the work-processes, sites of work and sites of residence were also extremely important in order to provide a geographic and social context of this paper. Our **methodology** included, apart from mere observations, semi-structured interviews with our respondents. For the purpose of maintaining anonymity, the respondents’ names of been changed.

## THE WORLD OF WORK

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<sup>5</sup> “Aadhaar must for availing mid-Day meal from June 30.” *The Economic Times*, 2 June 2017, [economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/aadhaar-must-for-availing-mid-day-meal-from-june-30/articleshow/58954831.cms](http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/aadhaar-must-for-availing-mid-day-meal-from-june-30/articleshow/58954831.cms).

[The SEHB society, as per its own documents, for the month May (2017), employed 523 door-to-door garbage collectors<sup>6</sup>. The monthly wages for each worker was Rs. 5,800 in hand as well as Rs. 1,900 as EPF + ESI. These income figures were not provide to us by the officials, but by our respondents in the SMC, SEHB Society office and the various D2D workers. They all confirmed the same figures. For the purposes of availing social security, the Society opened bank accounts for all employees. Their salaries were also credited directly to these accounts.]

The process of garbage collection, as managed by SEHB Society, follows a particular trajectory. It begins with the D2D collector reporting to the area within a ward to which he/she is assigned. They then proceed from one unit to the next collecting garbage. Each collector is assigned the responsibility of collecting this garbage from anywhere between 100-130 units. They may visit each of the units daily or categorise these in batches so that some of the units are visited on one day and the remaining on the other. They visit as many units as they can carry the garbage of, and then temporarily deposit this at a location before proceeding to the other units. This temporary deposit is made at a spot in the vicinity of the area designated to them. This spot may or may not have the provisions of shelter or coverings. Once the houses assigned to the collector have been covered, they wait for the garbage truck to arrive at these spots. The garbage is put into the truck by the garbage collectors themselves, which then transports it to the treatment plant situated at Totu By-Pass (Bhariyal) in west Shimla. Here, the singularities<sup>7</sup> in the spatial structure of the trajectory of garbage (from the household to the main dump) are mediated by a performative structure<sup>8</sup>, where each category of workers is placed in a horizontal relationship with the other.



SEHB Statistics.pdf

<sup>6</sup> Document Attached

<sup>7</sup> In the Deleuzian sense, singularities are taken as elements which make the structure and are mediated by differential relations.

Deleuze, Gilles. "Desert Islands: And Other Texts, 1953--1974." (2004).

<sup>8</sup> Format of the diagram borrowed from:

Feldman, Allen. *Formations of Violence: The narrative of the body and political terror in Northern Ireland*. University of Chicago Press, 1991.

- Performative Structure
- Spatial Structure

By horizontal, we mean that there are no institutionalised relations of power within the organisation of their work. For convenience's sake, let us call these relations organisational relations. Not all relations of this kind are horizontal though. There are defined hierarchical relations of power within the organisation as well. We will talk about this later.

The process of garbage collection and its spatial structuring, however, manifests itself very differently for different workers. Since our fieldwork focuses on the D2D workers, the paper will discuss the extra-organisational relationships these workers specifically enter into at their workplace. With regards to the garbage spots, some collectors, like Amit, who was in charge of collecting garbage from the May Villa area (Summer Hill ward) had been granted access to a shanty-like structure made of tin sheets where he deposited his collections. This depot also provided him with the facility of storing jackets, gloves and other equipment. On the other hand, Ravi and Ravi, who worked in a different area of the same ward, had no such structure and had to resort to depositing the sacks of garbage on the roadside, particularly at the bends, and placing heavy rocks on them to prevent them from being overturned. Amit claimed that the access granted to him had resulted from honing cordial relationships with the residents and shopkeepers of May Villa. He was not only a garbage collector for the residents but also acted as a handyman, for whom the possibility and quantity of payment depended upon the kind of work. The tin shelter afforded him greater safety from the menace of stray cattle and monkeys, and thus prevented the garbage from being scattered while he was away collecting more garbage. It also gave him a bit of privacy where he could change in and out of his "work" clothes. On the other hand, Ravi and Ravi worked in an area with sparsely situated residences and shops, as a result of which they had to resort to using the natural environment, such as tree branches and shrubs to hang their clothes and gloves. Even in their case, however, the spot they did choose as their depot was situated right next to a small general store, with whom they had established a friendly relationship and where they went to wash themselves at the end of the workday. This performance, whereby amicable relationships are established with the residents of the workplace, becomes an extremely

important technical aspect of the negotiation with the problems they face at work in the absence of any similar provisions afforded to them by the SEHB society.

D2D workers, however, do not necessarily enter into new relationships which find their structural basis in the nature of the work itself. The other form of social relationships which was apparent at the place of work was kin-relations amongst the workers. In Ram Bazaar, we met Kunal, who had called upon his cousins, Bunty and Rajdeep, to join SEHB Society as D2D workers. He claimed to have put in a word with the supervisor of Ram Bazaar to make sure that his brothers were employed, not only in the same ward, but in the same area – managing the same units with him. Later on, we will expound on this and other accounts of kin-relations flowing into the world of work, but for now, an interesting observation we made was the presence of two other distant relatives at the work-site. They had come to Shimla, from Punjab, for their summer vacations, but turned up with their cousins in order to get the work done as quickly as possible, so that they may all get free sooner than usual. Since they were not employees, they were naturally not paid for their work, and the fact that they were on a vacation to meet their cousins meant that they could not demand remuneration, since their living expenses were being taken care of by these cousins themselves. In this way, the transaction between labour and kinship operated so as to reduce the burden of work.

The world of work is not an equal one, marked only by qualitatively distinct horizontal relationships. It is characterised by, and, more importantly, composed of hierarchies, both organisational and otherwise. On the one hand, the organisational structure itself confers certain positions, such as that of the supervisor and the office staff, with bureaucratic power. The supervisor recruits workers, grants leave, and assigns workers to areas within the ward under his control. But the exercise of power does not restrict itself to the realm of bureaucratic roles. While interviewing Anil and Basanti, D2D workers in Sangti, their supervisor during the course of the interview repeatedly interrupted the conversation, claiming that he was better suited to answer questions about their work, despite the queries being more specific and personal: beyond the realm of the actual control of the supervisor, since he was not present during the actual work process. A similar hierarchy was visible during our conversations with a heterogeneous group of workers. This group comprised of SEHB's D2D workers and the sweepers who worked under the SMC.

## **The Restroom**

In Shimla, the Mall Road is an important and historic road that runs through the heart of the tourist area. It is the site of numerous colonial-era buildings and tourist attractions. This particular stretch is kept meticulously clean, with dustbins every 50 metres. The task of keeping it clean, however, does not fall to SEHB Society, but to the sweeper employees of the SMC, who, being government employees receive government-specified wages (much higher than those of SEHB employees) and guaranteed housing. We met Hiradas on the Mall Road and spoke to him for a while. He suggested that we come sit with him and drink tea. Near the middle of the Mall Road, there is a public restroom located around 10 feet below the road level, accessed by a small staircase. Under the staircase, is a room approximately 7 feet by 5 feet by 5 feet, with two small makeshift benches covered by cloth facing each other. Posters of Dr. Ambedkar and the goddess Durga are hung on the wall. Hiradas, along with one of his colleagues in SMC, Akshay, and Shorya, a SEHB D2D worker, asked us to make ourselves comfortable in the room. They explained to us that this was where they, SMC and SEHB workers both came to occasionally take breaks for tea and *beedis*. Our conversation was marked throughout by expressions of disappointments of the workers both in the SMC and SEHB. Low wages for SEHB workers, lack of equipments, no future of being regularised as SMC workers, etc., Shorya (still in his 20s) claimed, had forced him to consider leaving the Society many-a-times in the past, but kept going on due to the lack of other opportunities. During the conversation, however, we were interrupted by two men who asked us who we were and what we were doing. They then asked us to immediately join them at the Union office, located near the same spot on the Mall Road, but around 40-50 feet higher. When we said we would be glad to after we had finished our conversation, both Hiradas and Akshay immediately suggested we go with them to the office. Once more, the claim that our questions would be better answered by those in the office was made. We agreed and went to the union office.

At the Union office, we were greeted by an air of polite irritation. The Union leader, Balwant, asked us to take our seats opposite his desk. This desk was already covered with documents and papers, about which he immediately proceeded to elaborate, offering us a history of the origins and accomplishments of the union, despite us not asking questions in this direction. The general idea seemed to be that the importance of the Union was so much as to preclude any possible alternate lines of conversation. When we directly asked questions to another of the SMC employees seated in the office, we were again interrupted by the leader, who reasserted his superior ability to answer any questions we had. He was more often than not



partaking in a rhetorical exercise of confirming his claims with the other workers – “...*hai ki nahi?*”

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This creates the possibility of a problem of representation since the narratives and information provided to us by the workers go through a filter of self-censorship before the utterance, or varying degrees of modification by their superiors. Another case in point was the interview conducted with Anil and Basanti. When asked in front of the supervisor about their attitude towards their work and hardships, they just nodded along the interruptions made by the supervisor.

This claim to knowledge stems from the structure of power placed within the organisation of work, and as is seen in the case of the Union, the formal mode of politics within the workplace. Power here originates in the very nature of the role of the supervisor or the Union leader: that of coordinator of work, recruiter, negotiator (with respect to leaves and wages, redressal), and thus a reservoir of knowledge beyond the realm of the immediate and the lived work-experiences of the D2D workers. This was also reproduced in the responses of each, where both the supervisor and the Union leader merely re-iterated the official and formal lines regarding the facilities and equipment provided to the worker – existing at a distance from the experiences of the workers themselves. For example the supervisor, the SEHB office staff, and the Union leader, each claimed that safety gloves were provided to the workers once every year – a claim flatly denied by every worker, SEHB or SMC. They did concede that gloves were once handed out to them “three-four years ago” (the approximation in the memory of these workers itself indicating that this was a one-off instance). Even then, as several workers claimed, the gloves handed over to them were not the thick rubber ones suited to their work, but instead thin plastic ones which wore out within a couple of weeks. In a particular instance, Amit had had to purchase his own pairs of gloves. Despite having lost one piece of each pair, a more colourful pair thus synthesised, he had to make do with the torn and tattered equipment in order to make his work less hazardous than it would otherwise have been. Other workers, such as Ravi and Ravi, did not even have that provision for themselves. In our interview with a former worker of SEHB, Bhavna, we found out that she had lost a finger. She narrated to us how her finger caught an infection due to a minor injury that she suffered while separating metal and glass pieces from a pile of garbage. When asked

whether she had been provided with a pair of gloves to handle the garbage, she too answered in the negative.

This is not to say that all supervisors, and organisational superiors, whether elected or not, behave in a manner whereby the workers and their lived experiences are deemed useless or incomplete. In fact, one of the supervisors, Rajesh of the Ram Bazaar ward, was very evidently not intruding into or disrupting the narrations of the SEHB workers. This does not disprove our previous proposition that there is extra-organisational power accumulated in the superior officials. What this does prove is that the agency exercised by the superiors is done so once they are located hierarchically above the workers. And although the supervisors and the Union leader were sympathetic to the hardships faced by the workers in their wards, their sympathies were more often than not (except in the case of Rajesh) followed by claims of the facilities provided by SEHB and the SMC respectively.

This problem of representation (as *darstellen*, i.e. as re-presentation of a previous occurrence)<sup>9</sup> is situated in the very manner in which Foucault talks about the ability of power to produce the very structure of a discourse. Representations themselves exist as parts of discourses which are necessarily shaped and engendered by the structures of power. But unlike a discourse which even sets the rules for further engagements in its particular paradigm, that is when power becomes constructivist, there existed an element of destruction of the very realities and experiences that embody the lives of the SEHB workers when they are silenced by the presence of power. Here, assumed representation, as speaking as a proxy for someone else (*vertreten*)<sup>9</sup> of the workers by their union leaders and supervisors, stifles representation (*darstellen*) of the lived-experiences of the workers.

This could be seen in the above cases, and also in the case of the strike conducted by SEHB workers in October, 2015. The strike was against the failure of the SMC to regularise the SEHB workers under the municipality, and thus receive incomes higher than what they were currently earning, get a government housing accommodation, and attain a certain sense of economic security (as was told to us by the driver, Devender). Representations of the strike in

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<sup>9</sup> Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the subaltern speak?." *Can the subaltern speak? Reflections on the history of an idea* (1988): 21-78.

mainstream media<sup>10 11</sup> were more concerned with the cleanliness of the city and the uncollected garbage lying about. The SMC was reprimanded, not for failing to address the issues raised by the workers and their (informal) leaders, but because the cityscape was rendered ugly. Thus, once the strike was broken, through the expulsion of the leaders (we were made aware of this by , as was told to us by one of the drivers at SEHB, the media did not follow the stories so as to provide a means of redressal for the workers. It may, in fact, be said that the strike assumed a negative instrumentality, with its solution, whether in favour of the workers or not, being absolutely essential to maintaining cleanliness in the city. The narrative of cleanliness and the public pressure thus applied did not care much for the reasons as to why the strikes were called in the first place.

### **Problems faced at work**

Apart from the general lack of safety equipment, there were several other challenges that the workers faced. The physical geography of Shimla: the steep slopes, newly built multi-storied buildings (sans-elevators), and the moss-covered routes to the various neighbourhoods, rendered their work extremely tiring, and, thus, time consuming. The congestion on the Old Bus-Stand Road, due to increased traffic during the peak tourist season, meant that workers often had to wait for more than 2 hours, after their work had been completed, for the dump-truck to show up at their garbage depots, increasing their work hours, for which they were never compensated.

Another major problem they faced was the lack of equipment during the winter season. Workers claimed that no provisions were made available to them in order to combat the snowy and extremely chilly winter season. They had to rely on their own incomes to provide for the winter warmth. What was also conveyed to us by Aman, a D2D worker in

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<sup>10</sup> Thakur, Rakhee. "Shimla stinks as SEHB workers continue strike - Times of India." The Times of India. September 1, 2015. Accessed October 17, 2017. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chandigarh/Shimla-stinks-as-SEHB-workers-continue-strike/articleshow/48753189.cms>.

<sup>11</sup> "Shimla `beautification workers` raise stink." NYOOOZ. September 09, 2015. Accessed October 17, 2017. <https://www.nyoooz.com/news/shimla/195892/shimla-beautification-workers-raise-stink/>.

Krishnanagar ward, was that during winters, the garbage would very quickly become wet, and, thus, while carrying the tarpaulin sacks, their clothes too would get wet. They had to use their bare hands in order to not only collect the garbage, but also stuff the sacks in the dump-truck which was already overflowing with sacks collected from other areas in the ward. There was a clear expression of disgust towards their bodies and clothes being marked by the stench of the garbage, something most claimed to have gotten over while others (such as Ravi and Ravi) mentioned the utility of alcohol in order to forget the same. All the workers we interviewed claimed to have felt disgust towards their work (“*bhaiya, kisko kude mein kaam karna achchha lag sakta hai*” – Aman) during the initial phases of their employment. Some of them even knew of people who, on account of the disgust associated with this work, left the job within a month as they could not accustom to the physical and mental requirements of this job.

Workers in SMC and SEHB were often also required to do work outside their ‘job-descriptions’, not as handymen but rather in the same department of cleanliness. Hiradas, Akshay, and Shorya claimed that they were often commissioned to clear up dead bodies – of people and animals, and that this work was also done without any provisions from the officiating bodies. Often, Hiradas claimed, the work would be delegated to a couple of sweepers working for the SMC by the body itself. They would then call upon their friends and colleagues who may be employees of SEHB as well and not the SMC (like Shorya). When asked as to why they agreed to doing this kind of work for which they were not compensated monetarily, Shorya answered, “*aapko lagta hai ki koi pandit ya thakur yeh kaam karega?*”

## **THE WORLD OUTSIDE WORK**

What constitutes the lives of these workers outside of their immediate employment? In order to understand this, it is necessary to understand what their demographic composition is.

While our sample was not large enough to determine this, it was clear through conversations with the workers themselves, with employees of the SMC, and with the officials of SEHB and the SMC, that “more than 80% of the workers involved in D2D work are Valmiki” (based on

an interview with SEHB office staff). The point being made is that the collective opinion of the people involved in some way with the garbage collection system was that it is primarily Valmikis/Dalits who are involved in the direct handling of waste. Frequently, it was seen that parents, children, spouses, and other relatives of SEHB workers were also involved in sanitation work - in some cases, in SEHB itself. In others, it was seen that relatives or ancestors work or have worked for the SMC, or for cleaning jobs in other institutions. In fact, for Sunil, the other job he worked after he completed his daily work for SEHB was in the sanitation department of a hospital.

Among the workers we did interview, there were some belonging to upper and non-dalit castes, and these tended to explain their involvement in this occupation either by a crisis event (the respective fathers of both Alok and Sanjeev contracted cancer and passed away; the economic crisis being both the treatment of the cancer and the loss of a wage-earning household member), or through a general lack of access to resources and employment. Apart from this, the representation of caste is also visible in the fact that the office staffs are predominantly higher caste. Even within drivers and D2D workers, a relationship that is not organised as being hierarchical, drivers of trucks tend to be Thakurs and Vermas (based on an interview with the truck driver Devender).

However, when we inquired about discrimination on the basis of caste, the responses we received were largely dismissive. Nearly all the people we spoke to asserted that caste discrimination no longer happens in cities. A high official at SMC, office staff at SEHB, drivers, numerous D2D workers, SMC employees, relatives of workers, all asserted that caste discrimination was a thing of the past, and a thing of the village. Here, in the city, they said, they are allowed into all temples, they eat and drink with people of all castes, their children study together with children of all castes, and they celebrate festivals with people of all castes (the union leader even presented the example of his who was pursuing higher education to point out that discrimination as such didn't exist). When explaining what it was that brought them to this job, they cited the lack of education and chronic unemployment as factors that forced them into the only available jobs there were to be had. Most importantly, many of them (including Ravi and Ravi) pointed at casual assurances made to them at the time of recruitment that the SEHB workers would soon be regularised and obtain the same government-assured benefits as the SMC employees. This is also one of the factors that was said to have led to the strike - the sense that the path to regularisation was hopeless.

There were, however, some exceptions to the claim that discrimination was gone. Rajdeep, for one, recounted how the first time he came to Shimla and was looking for a house to rent; he was denied 3-4 times. The landlords he was looking to rent from did not offer a reason as to why they were not willing to rent him the house, but Rajdeep himself said he was quite sure it was because of his caste. Akshay, who plays for a wedding band, said that they do not eat at the weddings at which they play. Sujata recounted how, when she was new to the job, residents who she would ask for water from would either pour it from a glass into her hands, or keep a separate glass for her. (This is something that was confirmed by Chamanlal). However, she said that once she had been on the job for a while, these practices had ceased, and now there were no more instances of active untouchability that she faced. She also mentioned how she now receives gifts on Diwali and other festive occasions - something also told to us by Amit. This ties in to a point we mentioned earlier, that of the ways in which workers integrate themselves into the lives of the residents where they work. It also suggests that she sees these acts of gift-giving as a proof that caste-based discrimination is no longer playing an active role.

Many of the workers work second jobs. These can range from manual labour to sanitation work, and odd jobs such as painting. The insufficiency of the SEHB wages means that most of them tend to manage their expenses through the taking of loans. These loans are not taken from banks but from friends and colleagues, and may or may not incur interest. Sometimes, large expenses such as a medical emergency, a visit from relatives, or a wedding can stretch the finances so thin that larger loans must be taken. Their dietary patterns reflected their low income levels. Most could only afford to eat meat once or twice in a month, or perhaps once a week. Dairy products were particularly absent from the daily diet, and only purchased for children.

Education emerged as an important theme for social mobility. All the workers we spoke to said that their desire to send their children to school stemmed from the hope that the education they achieved would allow them to not have to resort to livelihoods like the one they were doing. The workers had completed various levels of education. Many of the older workers had not studied beyond the 4th or 5th standard, but the younger workers had generally gone somewhat further. Some had passed 10th grade examinations as well. Two interesting observations included Shorya, who, having dropped out of school, said that the fault was entirely his, and that his parents were extremely supportive of his education; and Kunal's cousins Rajdeep, who

used to work as a graphic designer in Amritsar, and Bunty, who used to work with travel operators in selling bus tickets.

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Crucial to the lives of these workers is the place they live.

**Krishnanagar** is a ward in Shimla, located below one of the main roads (Bus Stand Road) that acts as a connection both between the various wards in Shimla and between Shimla and neighbouring areas. It is also located on the slope directly above the “nalah” (sewer) into which all the waste from the Mall and Bazaar areas flow. This open nalah was created during the colonial era and has seen no subsequent development or modification<sup>12</sup>. When the SMC was still hiring workers directly for sweeping and sanitation tasks, houses were built for these workers in Krishna Nagar itself. Since the SMC has frozen the recruitment process, no new houses have been built by the Municipal Corporation. Krishna Nagar consists primarily of small houses, most of which are “kuchha” or “semi-pukka”<sup>13</sup>. There are a few large, pukka houses, and the respondents attribute the relative wealth implied by these houses to their being earlier settlers in the neighbourhood, and through education and the attainment of better livelihoods (one of the children of the households is a doctor).

The ward itself is one of the more populous in Shimla with a population of 7190<sup>14</sup>, and based on both the narratives of the residents, of other people we spoke to, and through observation, comprises mainly working class population. Most importantly for this study, the vast majority of SEHB and SMC workers we spoke to live in Krishnanagar. One of the two acting “Pradhans” of the local community that formed the residents of that ward (more on this later) offered us a history of the ward that began with the colonial administration bringing with them lower class workers to Shimla for the labour that was required in the city. The pradhan also referred to it as being called a “*ladakhi mohalla*” at some point in its history. He also said that post-

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<sup>12</sup> Rajiv Awas Yojana - Detailed Project Report (Krishna Nagar Pilot Slum) Volume-I. Report, p 42

<sup>13</sup> Rajiv Awas Yojana - Detailed Project Report (Krishna Nagar Pilot Slum) Volume-I. Report, p 46



Population



Population

<sup>14</sup> Census\_Shimla\_Pg 1. Census\_Shimla\_Pg 2.

independence, the condition of the ward actually worsened, and it became a kind of dumping ground for the city. He pointed at the open nallah as an indicator of this. A slaughterhouse used to be located quite close to the “slum”, but was moved further away at some point in the 70s. The new slaughterhouse is also situated within the ward, but a little farther away. Subsequently, in search of economic opportunities, more and more people began to come to the city and settled in the ward, often because they came either on the behest or recommendation of someone already living there. People brought their families and relatives as well, and over time Krishna Nagar acquired the population and character it has today.

The residents of Krishna Nagar comprise majorly of two communities - Valmikis (or Balmikis) and Ravidasis (or “Mandi-wale” - from Mandi, a district in Himachal Pradesh. We learned that they also refer to themselves as Chamars). The two communities are located spatially apart. When entering Krishna Nagar from the Bus Stand Road, one descends via flights of stairs about 100 odd metres and enters the Valmiki area. Since Krishna Nagar is located on a slope, proceeding down the road takes one to the Ravidasi area. This spatial relation may be important, because at times of heavy rainfall or snow, the level of the nallah located below the slum rises considerably, often flooding into peoples’ homes<sup>15</sup>, and since it acts as a sewer, it brings a host of garbage and other disposed matter with it.

Each community has their own Pradhan. The Pradhan mentioned earlier was in fact only filling in for the ‘real’ Pradhan, who had been ill for some time, and belonged to the Valmiki community. His counterpart, the Ravidasi Pradhan, is also a SEHB worker, and so was his wife, Bhavna, before she suffered from the injury. In attempting to examine the relationship between the two communities, we gathered a sense both of camaraderie and of difference. The members of the communities claimed that while there used to be a degree of distance between the two, intermarriage was now rare, but not unheard of. Festivals are often celebrated together as well. While they do both have their own temples, they are not restricted from visiting and praying in each other’s. However, there were certain representations of the other community. For instance, when asked about alcohol habits of the women, Akshay casually mentioned that no, the women in Krishnanagar don’t drink alcohol, but - as an afterthought - Mandi women do.

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<sup>15</sup> “During the rainy season, the water level is so high that the Nalaha flowing in this ward get choked and the dirty water enters into the houses of the people”



In a long conversation with the Ravidasi Pradhan, Chamanlal we learnt of the ways in which the two communities imagine themselves and each other. The first time we met him was in passing, when he told us that caste discrimination is still very much alive. The next time, though, he was less sure about this claim. He too repeated the line that it is a rural phenomenon, and that cities are more secular places. He then offered us accounts from his own life. In recounting the history of the Valmiki community, he suggested that they used to be involved in manual scavenging: responsible for cleaning the remains of faeces from toilets. This, he believed, was degrading and disgusting work and he told us of how he used to feel a sense both of disgust and of pity when he would notice the Valmiki collect the fecal matter and carry it on their heads, and especially when this would drop onto their bodies as well. It is important here that Chamanlal's sentiment towards the actual substance was one of disgust, but while he never explicitly said it, his feeling of pity for the people who handled this substance was certainly tinted with a hint of that disgust as well: "*woh log apne sirr par tatti rakhte the...chhi chhi chhi*". He did, then, consider Valmikis to be, in a sense, inferior to his own community. This, however, he claims, has changed.

In one of Chamanlal's first few years in Shimla, he was working as a casual construction worker or bricoleur at the house of a richer Valmiki. On the first day of work, around lunch time, the Valmiki offered him roti and meat. This meat, however, was pork, a meat that was forbidden to him on account of one of the deities he followed. He refused. This left him hungry for the rest of the day. This event repeated itself the next day, at which point Chamanlal realised that if he refused again, he would not have the energy to walk back home on an empty stomach. He accepted. He then told us of the guilt he felt for having transgressed this rule; but also told us that after the first couple of times it did not bother him too much. In fact, he said that this was a crucial event in the way he began to regard Valmikis as not so different after all. This has come to the point today where he does not see much of a difference between them at all anymore, but it is important to remember that this is also related to the fact that while "*pehle sirf ganda kaam karte the, abhi achha kaam bhi karte hain*". That is, he was referring to other odd jobs that the valmikis undertook - musicians in wedding bands, barbers, shopkeepers, etc.

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The figure of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar plays an interesting role in the ward of Krishnanagar. His picture hangs in the makeshift office of the Valmiki Pradhan, adorns the front of T-shirts, and

lends its name to a “Babasaheb Ambedkar Welfare Society (regd.)” - an organisation whose main aim seemed to be the printing and distribution of calendars, posters, and other such material. Often his face was given a fairer complexion than one that would be accurate. Yet little seemed to be known about Babasaheb other than his contribution to the policy of reservations. The knowledge and acknowledgement of reservations was certainly more present in spaces like the pradhans office, or rather, the office of the “Valmiki Sabha”. Many said that the first time they heard of the policy of reservations was when some bureaucratic work had to be done, such as at times of admissions or the making of certificates. Others, such as Sujata, were not even aware of the policy of reservation in government institutions.

There was, though, at least in the office of the Valmiki Sabha, a certain sense of caste consciousness in the ideas and people situated there. Arun spoke to us at length about how his caste played a large role in his personal pursuit of educational and other qualifications. But he also spoke to us about the general difficulty of Harijans. He pointed out the difficulties of children for whom filling admission forms is not an easy task, of negotiating with bureaucratic state organisations for bonafide and caste certificates, of people being denied jobs without explicit reasons and the resultant unsure about what it was that they could improve upon. Others told us of the difficulties of fitting large families into 10x10 rooms, of the prejudices against those from Krishnanagar as being violent and dangerous (this is something we experienced - we were told numerous times to avoid going to Krishna Nagar around the time of the Municipal election as it might be a dangerous place to be), of the pains of missing out on education and other things that seemed to be easily accessible for other parts of the population. There was also the claim that the state/government/municipal corporation cared little about the wellbeing of the residents of Krishna Nagar and used it merely as a vote bank. They exemplified this through the incident of the landslide

The acting-pradhan of the Valmiki Sabha told us to go down to the *mandiwallah*/Ravidasi area to see for ourselves the damage that the landslide had caused and the apathy of state bodies to address it. The ruinous remains of several houses in this part of Krishnanagar were plainly evident. It was claimed that about a dozen houses were swept away by a landslide following heavy rainfalls in the July of 2013. The houses which still stood bore the marks, deep crevices and cracks in their structures, and uneven foundations resulting from the landslide - cracks along the floor, in the walls, roofs fallen in, entire rooms that simply slipped down the hillside. We were told of the years it had taken to build these houses wall by wall and room by room,

of the way in which daily life was overturned in a matter of days, of the pains of rebuilding. Numerous appeals to the municipal corporation had gone unheeded, it was said, and even immediate aid in terms of housing those displaced by the landslide was not provided. While a major mass of the Mandi population of Krishnanagar was left homeless and resourceless in the aftermath of the landslide, various civil society institutions, such as the nearby Gurdwara and the Arya Samaji Mandir, refused to house them amidst heavy rainfall in their dormitories despite vacancy (as claimed by the officiating Pradhan of the Valmikis). The reasons given ranged from there being no vacancy to their untrustworthiness of people from Krishnanagar (“*Unhone kaha ki hum daaru peeke maar peet karne waale log hain*”).

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Before we move onto our theoretical considerations, we must present the stories of a portion, albeit not quantitatively significant, of the workforce of SEHB. These are the immigrant workers from Nepal.

### **Immigrants from Nepal**

While most of the workers, working for either the SEHB Society or the SMC, were either Valmikis or Chamars, whose ancestors had come to Shimla 3-4 generations ago, and had settled into neighbourhood communities such as Krishnanagar (as shown above), a demographic analysis of the immigrants from Nepal shows a slightly different picture. Most of them were either first or second generation settlers in Himachal. Of all the Nepalese we interviewed (Amit, Ravi, Ravi, Anil, Basanti...), they positively claimed their caste identities as either Thapas or Pandits. For them, unlike even in the few instances of caste consciousness amongst the “natives”, the main motivator for work was the lack of job opportunities elsewhere in the state. Anil for instance told us why he shifted to the D2D job: he used to work for *thekedaars* who used to pay him on a daily basis. The wages fluctuated between Rs. 100 to Rs. 500 per day, depending upon the nature of the work and also the mannerisms of the *thekedaar*. He cited the regularity of the work at SEHB being far more secure than the daily wages received under contractors, average daily wages being lower in the former. He also cited the fact that provisions of social security such as EPF and ESI ensured that a part of his money was saved on a monthly basis, unlike the cash payments received as a daily-wage worker, where savings were minimal. When asked whether he knew how to check his EPF and ESI deposits, he claimed he didn't.

What most of the Nepalese workers also told us was that since their work at SEHB wasn't nearly enough to feed their families, and educate their children, they often had to work at multiple places within a day for a daily or an hourly wage. This is something we observed while observing Ravi and Ravi while they were at work. While making trips from one garbage depot to the next, they were seen chatting and asking for any available work with acquaintances who were working as daily wage labourers on a petty road-side construction. Several others talked about their need to work at multiple sites to make ends meet. For Anil, the primary motivation was that through the money that he earned during the day was to be used for his children's education so as to enable them to look for more dignified sources of livelihood, with higher pay.

One of the important off-work relationships that these people developed was the ones they built with people working at the ration-shops. Amit told us that, as Nepalese, they were not entitled to ration cards, as a result of which they did not have access to subsidised food items, in particular, rice, wheat, refined oil, and sugar. They thus had to hone a cordial relationship with the people working at these stores as they depended on them to reduce their monthly financial burdens – their pockets otherwise being emptied by the higher priced goods in the market. While Amit claimed that he had had no luck in honing such relations, as did Ravi and Ravi, Anil had been successful. *“Aap logon ke saath achchha karoge toh log aapke saath achchha karenge”*

This process of developing and maintaining social relationships follows from a process of self-disciplining and constantly affirming one's good character. That is, negotiating with the financial constraints and economic necessities, along with their social aspirations (such as a better future for their children), depends a lot on the performative aspect of their goodness. Performativity, here, is seen as Judith Butler<sup>16</sup> sees it with respect to gender: the 'certificate' of good character is reaffirmed on a periodical basis by their polite ways of speaking, not haggling for lower prices or greater quantities of goods with the workers at the store and so on, i.e. by their enactment as good, trustworthy individuals. When their foreign-origin is brought in to deny them the rights available to natives of similar economic and financial background, the Nepalese workers seek to establish themselves as equivalents of the natives through a constant affirmation of trust towards them, and thus performatively socialise and merge themselves with the “native” population.

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<sup>16</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. routledge, 2011.

## THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

So far, this paper has concerned itself with a strict binary of the ‘world of work’ and the ‘non-work world’, and has explored the organisational and extra-organisational relationships, wherever they exist. This binary has at times been undermined when, for instance, we spoke of the cleaning up of human and animal carcasses, and calling upon one’s guests to the work site. But, more broadly speaking, our analysis has proceeded in a manner which keeps the two categories separately. What this section attempts to show is that these two ‘worlds’, in a way, collapse into each other. What is synthesised as a result is a ‘structure of discrimination’, i.e. SEHB and SMC workers face ‘structural discrimination’.

Before proceeding into how our fieldwork develops into this theoretical consideration, we must firstly establish what we mean by ‘structural discrimination’. There are three forms of discriminations that we identify: personalised, institutionalised or legal, and structural<sup>17</sup>. These may or may not be exclusive, but more on that later.

**Personalised discrimination** occurs when individuals, communities, and social groups are able to identify personal sources of the denial of their rights, freedoms and dignity. Here, the experience of the individual, and the same being a part of their memory, iterates this denial in terms of discriminatory practices of the specific person/s or institutions. This is not to say that if memory fails an individual, for example, the traumatised victims of communal riots in India or those of the Yugoslavian Civil War, we should strike-off the possibility of personalised discrimination. In fact, this form of discrimination is very much present in such instances. What we must then make of personalised discrimination is that it does not as much rely on the ability of the victim to situate the source of discrimination in another person or social group, through the sheer trauma of the experience or the lack of consciousness as such regarding the event or process of discrimination, as it does on the fact that this source of discrimination itself originates in the body/ies and actions of the perpetrator/s.

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<sup>17</sup> Pincus, Fred L. "Discrimination comes in many forms: Individual, institutional, and structural." *American Behavioral Scientist* 40, no. 2 (1996): 186-194.

This slight emendation to our previous definition enables us to understand that why, even though some of our respondents such as Sujata or Rajdeep were aware of or could to a certain degree speculate on the causes of discrimination, and, evidently, situate these in individual landlords and households, there were many who were not able to locate the hardships they faced despite the fact that these were meted out on to them through actions. Another example was that of the refusal to provide refuge to the residents of Krishnanagar in the aftermath of the landslide. What we observed was that individuals like the acting-Pradhan and Arun were much more conscious of instances of personal discrimination. But they too conferred that these were far and few between. Entry into temples and gurdwaras was otherwise allowed. They claimed that they were never denied food or access to public amenities on a personal basis, except in the few instances such as the ones mentioned.

**Institutionalised discrimination**, on the other hand, is embodied in the norms, conventions and laws of a particular society. Examples of this can be the Jim Crow segregation laws in the first half of 20<sup>th</sup> century USA, apartheid Africa, the occupation of West Bank and Gaza by the IDF, etc. The point here is that institutions (the state, family, or private property) establish laws, norms and conventions so as to constantly deny a certain segment of their own population, or other populations, essential universal rights and freedoms. If, however, we understand institutions in a more sociological sense, as social collectives where behaviour amongst the members is regulated by rules and regulations, written or unwritten, we can understand that individuals are then set up in specific relations against each other, and are, thus, themselves defined. These rules and norms are, however, not necessarily agreed upon mutually. In fact, as exemplified above, these are often established through relations of power. Institutions, thus, play an important role in the genesis of the next category of discrimination.

**Structural discrimination** is to be understood as that which is not rooted either in the actions of individuals (groups or persons), or in the norms, rules and customs of institutions, but rather in the social structure itself. By this we imply that individuals are placed in a relation with each other whereby exploitation and deprivation, and thus discrimination itself, needn't be expressed personally or institutionally, but may exist nonetheless. This is not to say that the forms of discrimination formerly discussed are independent of the social structure. In fact, they may be seen as specific instances and expressions of that structure itself.

The structural discrimination faced by the workers collapses the boundaries between work and non-work. A crucial link between the two supposed realms is that recruitment into SEHB is, as mentioned above, done on the basis of the word of mouth. The work of a garbage collector isn't exactly skilled enough to warrant an interview (respondent at the SEHB office), but we were informed that apart from the first time, the SEHB Society didn't take any initiatives to formally advertise the job openings for the position of the garbage collector (Sunil). A "high attrition rate" (as claimed by a high-up officer of the SMC) meant that workers were constantly leaving their jobs, and not in a cyclical fashion, so that either the SMC or SEHB society could organise recruitment programmes on a large scale. Many workers argued that hopelessness with regards to regularisation of employment under the SMC, the general disgust of handling garbage, and the physical exhaustion that the work entailed, particularly in the more geographically challenging wards such as Malyana and Chamyana discouraged many other workers from continuing with their jobs as D2Ds. Whatever be the reason, the process of recruitment was carried out by the supervisor who in turn mostly depended on the information provided by the D2D workers under him regarding the availability of a new applicant. This meant that the workers called upon their relationships of kinship, and thus, caste, in order to avail a more regularised job opportunity. For the Nepalese workers, however, such relations did not exist, and thus, their relations had a greater degree of performativity than those of the "native" workers who could, despite their poor economic conditions, call upon a reservoir of social capital<sup>18</sup>, due to their entrenched social existence in Himachal Pradesh and other neighbouring states such as Punjab and Haryana.

What this therefore resulted in was that the logistical, spiritual (with regards to the notion of disgust), economic, and political deprivation faced by the D2D workers circulated within a particular stratum of society<sup>3</sup>: since most of the workers were SCs, the recruitment process ensured that the very nature of the work provided a logic of its own for the further inclusion of other members of the SC community into this occupation. Thus, the traditional unity of caste and occupation is maintained in this manner. This is not to say that people from other castes (such as Sanjeev and the Nepalese workers) were not a part of the D2D workforce. In fact, one may even argue that it is not their caste itself places them there, since people from other castes are also beginning to dot the workforce. Caste, or any other reservoir of social networks, must

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<sup>18</sup> "The aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition."  
Bourdieu, Pierre. "ökonomisches Kapital, kulturelles Kapital, soziales Kapital." In *Handbuch Bildungs- und Erziehungssoziologie*, pp. 229-242. VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2012.

combine with three essential aspects in order to become an axis of discrimination. Economic deprivation has already been talked about. The second aspect follows from the first: enclaves of residence. As has been seen in the description of Krishnanagar, the economic disadvantages faced by these workers, logically translates into their inability to rent houses which are located at better locations. For the “native” workers, an enclave such as Krishnanagar is a means of subsidising their existence in the city, and to be able to in the least avail certain rights. Caste networks and kinship relations must combine with the economics of their lives to generate a space in Shimla’s cityscape where the major proportion of the population belongs to the SCs. And their economically weak and precarious conditions were represented in a similar degree of precariousness with regards to their housing. Residents of Krishnanagar claimed that they had had to rebuild the houses using help from the neighbouring community as help from government was largely absent. The lack of a proper drainage system and the location of this colony in the close proximity of the main drain of Shimla expose them to enormous health related risks.

The closely knitted lives and livelihoods enable the overlaps across organisation when certain cleanliness tasks have to be carried out (as was seen in the case of the disposal of carcasses). While such extra-work tasks are not compensated for, it can be argued that cooperation in such tasks enables them to live a more coherent and collective life in the city, thus giving a performative dimension to their kinship and caste networks as well. Thus, our fieldwork couldn’t restrict itself to the D2D workers, since an examination of their non-work social relationships brought forth to us that their relationships with the SMC sweeper employees was also an important component of their extra-work lives.

Caste must not be seen here as a rigid category which cannot be impressed upon or moulded by non-caste structures, such as the economic. The economic, in fact, to a large degree broke down the apprehensions held by the Ravidasis (chamars) against the Valmikis, and their work. For instance, Chamanlal claimed that marriages between the two castes were now common place, and that Ravidasis also gave up on their relatively prestigious position with respect to the Valmikis by entering into the same type of occupation: cleanliness and garbage collection. The impact of the economic is not only secularised within the SCs, but has a similar impact on people of higher castes who face similar economic (as in the case of Sanjeev) or social (as in the case of the Nepalese workers) hardships.



Either as conscious members of a caste or as employees of the SEHB Society, any attempt to redress the grievances of these collectives is immediately restricted by the problem of representation. Through the deletion of their stories, and the focus of the “general public” being taken away from the conditions of their fellow city dwellers to the primacy of Shimla’s beautification, their political representation is discursively stifled. The imagery of Ambedkar amongst the Valmikis also doesn’t help them with effective collective representation regarding the actual hardships they face. Ambedkar is an influential figure for them, as someone who worked for the Dalits. But when asked whether or not they knew his ideological positions, what he had written, whether his works were ever circulated amongst the residents of Krishnanagar, they replied in the negative. Thus, even though they knew of him as a historically significant figure, most of them were unable to draw relations between him and the hardships they faced in their own lives.

Structural discrimination thus combines the problems of economic deprivation, caste and kinship relations as the most relevant form of social capital, and destruction of their narratives in popular discourse. Caste discrimination, in this case, results from this very structure of discrimination which itself is not restricted to just the SCs. Economic hardships and compulsions have driven people from other castes as well into this profession. Despite the fact that both the SEHB and the SMC operate as formal sector corporations, the social settings within which the workers find themselves, are born into, and constantly enact and perform in their everyday lives results in the inevitable overflow of these relationships into their working lives. The formal sector, despite claims of being regulated by the secular principles of liberalism and the rights thus obtained, in reality depends heavily on the pre-existing/non-liberal social contexts, and does very little to end the discrimination faced by these workers.

Bhavna’s fingers, in an instrumental sense (*causa efficiens*), might have resulted from the infection she suffered from while doing her work, that is, nobody actually chopped her finger off because of her economic and social positioning. But her economic and social positioning was such that she found herself working in a dump, thus exposed to dangers greater than what she would have had she not hailed from a poor Dalit background.

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