

BOOK REVIEW

Nandini Sen. *Urban Marginalisation in South Asia, Waste Pickers in Calcutta* (First published), Routledge, London, New York (2018), Taylor & Francis Group, ISBN 978-0-8153-5766-7(hbk), Pages vi + 131.

Urban Marginalization in South Asia by Nandini Sen elaborately frames her research on the waste-pickers' community in Kolkata. While going through the pages, each and every aspect of the waste-picker's daily life-style, work-pattern, hazardous aspects and myths of the profession were sketched. She wrote in detail about the rigorous and hectic work structure vis-à-vis their familial characteristics. She observed in-depth that they were economically, social-culturally and ideologically a marginalized and neglected urban community in the city of Kolkata, India.

The researcher conducted this ethnographic fieldwork from the year 2011-2013 in two phases. She used Interviews, Participant Observation, Focus Group Discussions, Case Study as the main methods in her primary data collection. As a scholar from Bengal, the author enjoyed the privilege of a lingual interface to build a strong rapport with the interviewees.

In the six chapters, different dimensions of the socio-economic life of the waste-pickers were categorically mentioned. She skillfully showed how they prepared their own space (that was marginalized at any cost) in this city in order to invest their economic, socio-cultural as well as entrepreneurial activities (that revolved around their work-pattern and style) despite tremendous and painstaking harassment (both physically and mentally) from the mainstream society of Calcutta.

Most of the waste-pickers migrated to Kolkata from rural West Bengal, North and East India and also from Bangladesh. They came to this city in search of jobs since the 1930s. The emergence of such professions came from the weakness of the solid-waste management services of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC). For an 'A' grade city, urban solid waste management was worse than usual. From that time, they preferred to take shelter in two areas –the Park Circus Railway Tracks and the highly polluted canals of Narkeldanga. Though, these two settlements were made up of unhygienic plastic materials, but they were habituated to it. They had no permanent address, and no ration cards. Our social caste system debarred them

from attending any religious festivals as well as socio-cultural gatherings. The researcher explained the actual problems of waste-pickers like poor settlement, large family size, security problems of female members, their language, behaviour, their day-to-day struggle for their rubbish collection and then selling it to some recycling units. She also wrote about the waste-pickers' health and hygiene, their treatment, food habits, recreational patterns of different sexes, and the different types of rituals during the time of cremation. Here, she expresses a clear scenario of their unhygienic food environment as well as the poor quality of food-making technique, but most of them did not bother with the quality of food. They tried to save some money, buying cheap items for their daily needs.

The Author also shows a picture of their harassment from the mainstream society during the time of medical assistance and delivery. Most of the waste-pickers' families faced severe difficulties in order to procure a death certificate from the respective doctors without the help of social workers. NGO workers alerted the parents to buy proper foods as well as necessary ingredients for their children and also take their proper responsibilities as well as proper care for their health and hygiene, but most of them were not interested in their children's health and also not much worried about their proper up-bringing in this unhygienic environment and problematic circumstances. Always, they were more concerned about their work as well as the struggle to earn more and more money. The present researcher also presented a clear scenario of the relationship between waste-pickers and waste-retailers. Moreover, readers get the whereabouts of three Non-Government Organizations namely Tiljala Shed, Christian Missionary Charity and Calcutta Samaritan who continuously helped the waste-pickers in harassment that they faced, especially from the mainstream society. She wrote about the occupational health hazards of these waste-pickers elaborately through the examples of discussed cases.

Besides some conferences and awareness camps, NGOs also tried to make them aware about the importance and utility of redeveloping the waste-picker's association and savings schemes. Through these discussions, it may be supposed that, waste-pickers were regularly harassed by the police at the time of their submission of any written/vocal complaints. Without any crime, they were victimized as a criminal along with punishment by the mainstream society/elite/police. For this reason, they had always refused to visit the police station to talk of their basic necessities. She also discussed the major parameters of social capital both in mainstream society as well as in waste-pickers' communities. From this book, readers may get a clear picture of these waste-picking communities who generally continued their simple life-style with a minimal social capital. Neither did they belong to any club or formal group, nor were they

involved in any social network. Women and children were addicted to T.V. during their free time which was the main reason for the decline of any other expensive social capital.

The present researcher (author) here displayed the picture of a typical patrilineal society seen all over West Bengal, where, in most of the families, males were the dominating character. Though, the males were engaged in waste-picking occupation from the early morning along with the wife but most of the leisure time after returning home, was engaged in playing cards, gambling, and drug addiction. Moreover, male members were mainly engaged in alcohol consumption, visiting brothels and in criminal activities. Both of them engaged in the same occupation at the same time, but, males spent their earning for recreation only, whereas, women took all the responsibilities of doing all the household jobs along with rearing and looking after the children and the aged family members. Male members did not take any responsibility for their children, both for education or for health issues. Women sacrificed themselves for their family as well as for their children unlike the males who were generally self-seeking.

The author also discusses a few life-histories of different female-headed waste-picker families who spent their lives without male figures. Women played a dominant role in those families where the husband left his wife and children several years ago and remarried. Most of the married males had several relationships with women. Moreover, they maintained some social relationships with some prostitutes, but, they could not tolerate their wives' friendship with another male. They always tortured their wives and harass them sexually. Here, it was seen how a mother saved and nurtured the child alone without any help from her husband and others.

In the waste-picker families, early marriage of the girl was common. Illiteracy and socio-economic conditions were mainly liable for early marriages. Most of the life of a younger girl became miserable. She became pregnant at 16-17 years and in most of the cases, accordingly, children were having severe malnutrition. In almost all cases, husbands exploited their wives and after giving birth of the new-born babies, they always tortured them and sent her to her mother's house along with the baby. At this critical juncture, when the female member did not have any earnings, nor have any past savings, she was fully dependent upon her mother.

The author here puts forth a picture of the economic marginalization of the waste-pickers. Owing to their occupational pursuit, they are always untouchables, untrustworthy, unreliable, immoral, shameless as well as antisocial to all of the so-called mainstream society. However, their important healthy contribution to urban society is never properly recognized by the mainstream civil society as well as the state, rather they were always abused and harassed by the police and the civil society. Without them, the city of Kolkata would be full of garbage and

pollution everywhere. Here, the author mainly examines the social and economic problems of the waste-pickers of Kolkata as marginalized people in an urban context framed on some anthropological theories given by Appadurai, Bourdieu, Arnold, Holston, Wacquant, etc. as well as some existing literature which was mainly the different models of marginalization of waste-pickers in a developing country. Ideological marginalization versus economic marginalization could be seen clearly in this book. How the mainstream society misbehaved towards these marginalized people and how they revolted against them with regard to their urban citizenship or to avoid them in order to justify their powerful voices regarding the protest of their acute marginalization – all of these were clearly explained in this book. It is very unethical and illegal that mainstream society always exploited the waste-pickers for their unhealthy, unauthorized occupation and also for their unhygienic squatter settlements. The main crisis between them was no longer economic in nature, it became a moral standpoint.

Moreover, according to the author, waste-picking, and scrap re-selling were quite profitable businesses as well as a specialized occupation than any other on the basis of their qualifications. She explained that adult male or females daily earned Rs250/-to 300/-per head. In each family 3-4 members were engaged in this occupation. So, their monthly income was on paper sufficient for their lifestyle. On the basis of the opinion of the author, they had the jeweler's eyes. They always saw the valuable scraps from the rejected and unutilized tiny waste products.

Here, the author shows that the waste-pickers were not worried and did not take any initiatives regarding their shelter, shifting to a new occupation, their daily lifestyle, children's education, etc. They were very much accustomed to this unhygienic environment. They always rejected the Government and NGO offers for a better settlement along with a favourable environment. Moreover, NGOs took initiatives for the admission of the waste-picker's children in formal schools, but nobody cared for their children's education. If they wished, they could change their marginalized position, as well as the future of their children and their selves also.

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Manuscript received on: July 7, 2022
Manuscript accepted on: August 12, 2022