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## Unruly order: the role of sweepers in municipal solid waste management in 1990s Faisalabad, Pakistan

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### **Abstract**

This paper reviews largely unpublished research conducted in the mid-1990s on Faisalabad's municipal solid waste management (SWM).<sup>1</sup> During the 1990s, Faisalabad's municipal waste collection was dominated by Punjabi Christian sweepers. They laid claim to this work based on their social identity and status, based on caste-like hereditary status-group occupations. This was institutionalised under the British and sustained thereafter, affording them exclusive access to municipal waste work. Though, dirty and menial, the work yielded a decent income, job security and a pension.

During the 1990s, donors and international development organisations advocated the privatisation of urban services, including municipal waste collection. They came up against this firmly entrenched system of labour relations and were resisted by the unions and municipal leaders alike. Moreover, an informal private waste collection system was already in operation, operating within and without the official system, which was appreciated and supported by the users of waste collection and disposal services. International interventions in SWM failed in Faisalabad at the time and even today, steps towards privatisation in the form of a government-owned company replacing local government responsibility and reporting to Punjab Province have been cautious

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<sup>1</sup> This research was revisited under the Rubbish Resources and Residues project to inform and provide a baseline for the next paper in this Working Paper Series, which looks at contemporary roles and conditions of traditional municipal sweepers in Faisalabad and Karachi (Gazdar and Mallah 2022).

and incremental. This stands in contrast to Karachi where bolder efforts towards privatisation include interventions such as the contracting of Chinese SWM companies. This paper stands as a situation report for Faisalabad in the mid-1990s and provides a baseline for the 2021 research and investigation into the work, lives, and social standing of the city's waste workers, especially Punjabi Christian Sweepers.

## Introduction

The research conducted in the mid-1990s looked at Faisalabad's municipal SWM, being the collection, transportation, and disposal of a city's domestic waste.<sup>2</sup> In addition to being the material by-product of human activity, in many contexts, waste is also socially or culturally defined and can be seen as a source of impurity and even danger. It draws on largely unpublished doctoral research conducted by the author (Beall 1997),<sup>3</sup> the starting assumption of which was that waste is both socially and metabolically transmuted. As the contemporary research by Gazdar and Mallah (2022) shows, much has changed. A quarter of a century later a not-for-profit company, wholly owned by Punjab Provincial Government was formed to run SWM in Faisalabad. There have been incremental changes to the conditions of service of municipal sweepers as a result, as well as to the overall composition of the workforce. Nevertheless, the stickiness of social relations in the city means traditional practices around SWM remain strong in Faisalabad. Drawing on ethnographic field research conducted among Punjabi Christian Sweepers in Faisalabad in the mid-1990s, a detailed exploration of the explanatory factors is provided here.

All over the world waste workers are stigmatised and are likely to be from marginalized groups such as ethnic or religious minorities, or rural-to-urban and international migrants. For centuries waste collection and disposal in South Asia, has been inextricably linked to caste, being hereditary occupational status groups, whose work and scripted existence underpin the reproduction of the social order. Although Pakistan as a predominantly Muslim country does not officially recognise social hierarchies and therefore caste, waste work nevertheless remains the preserve of social groups widely associated with

unclean work. Key among waste workers in Pakistan were village-based Hindu groups known as *Churas*, who converted to Christianity under the British during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Punjabi Christian Sweepers, as they became known, have for many years used their stigmatised status to claim and retain privileged access to municipal sanitation and waste work first ascribed to them under the British, on the basis that the work is ritually impure and therefore not available to Muslims.

Sanctioned by their supervisors, municipal officials and the trade unions, Punjabi Christian sweepers dominated the delivery of official SWM in the city and participated too in an effective informal private system of door-to-door waste collection, which operated both alongside and within the formal system. When international agencies such as the World Bank urged municipalities of large and fast-growing cities in South Asia to privatise their SWM, they assumed official delivery systems could be 'unbundled', with households paying for private goods elements such as door-to-door collection, so that greater municipal investment could be channelled towards public goods elements such as secondary collection from transit points and transportation of waste to landfill sites. In fact, the informal collection system proved difficult to dislodge, bound up as it was by firmly entrenched social relationships.

Methodologically, the author together with a translator cum research assistant adopted an ethnographic approach dubbed 'follow the waste' and 'follow the sweeper'. The first involved tracing waste from the time it was discarded by households until the time it was collected from the transit dumps and transported to the final dumpsite. The second involved accompanying sweepers on their rounds in two neighbourhoods of the city, one middle income and one high income, observing interactions in the streets and on the transit dumps, with householders,

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<sup>2</sup> SWM also includes commercial and hospital waste, but this was not covered in the research.

<sup>3</sup> All data and information are derived from Beall (1997) and is not cited repeatedly in what follows.

supervisors, officials, other waste workers, waste pickers, door-to-door waste collectors, and waste dealer shops (*kabarias*). In addition, interviews were conducted, both semi-formal and conversational, and visits were paid to sweepers and their families were in their residential areas.<sup>4</sup> What follows is an analysis of that research.

## The social dimensions of waste

The low social status of people dealing with rubbish is compounded in South Asia by the association of this work with caste. There is a school of thought deriving from comparative method, which argues that virtually all norms, values and practices associated with caste can be found in other societies (Berreman 1979). In the same vein, in *Purity and Danger* Mary Douglas (1991: 2-35) argued that dirt that may be tolerated in one setting can be abhorred in another, while both dirt and hygiene are socially constructed. Beginning with a study of comparative religions and their associated rituals of purity and impurity, her analysis sought to make sense of how ritual pollution, or 'danger-beliefs' served to maintain social categories and distinctions. These she saw as being reinforced through the strict observance of boundaries between the inside world of what is known and safe, and the outside world of danger and chaos.

Writing on India, Dipesh Chakrabarty (1991: 17) has argued that household dirt creates a symbolic enclosure for the purpose of protecting 'the inside' from disorder, while 'the outside', where one meets strangers, can be 'rubbished'. Forming a bridge between the inside and outside worlds, are categories of people who are deemed to be ritually polluted and born to work with dirt. As between high and low castes in India, considerable interdependence

accompanies the social distance between them, with the execution of impure tasks by the latter being necessary for the maintenance of purity by the former.

In Pakistan, classic caste-like characteristics can be found among hereditary occupational status groups, where they are overlain with very specific notions of ritual pollution associated with Islamic religious injunction (Barth, 1960). The principal hereditary occupational status groups associated with waste and sanitation work in Pakistan are either of Hindu or animist origin, known generically as *Pakhiwas*, or derive from a village-based Hindu *quom* (a tribal or hereditary status group) from Punjab, known as *Chuhras*.<sup>5</sup> Traditionally agricultural labourers, through successive waves of rural-urban migration they came to dominate the lower echelons of municipal sanitary work in all the major cities of the Punjab (Streefland 1979) and in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century under the British, converted *en masse* to Christianity (Pickett 1933).

In Pakistan a hierarchical interdependence in relation to dirty work still pertains. It was reinforced by the historical encounter between India (which included Pakistan during colonial rule) and the British, who systematised the region's 'diverse forms of social identity, community and organisation' (Dirks, 2001: 5). Vijay Prashad (1994, 1995) concurs in relation to sanitation and waste management in colonial Delhi, as does Jim Masselos regarding sweepers in Bombay under the Raj:

*Their nineteenth century entrapment did not derive from the structured world of overarching Hinduism although social division into castes aided that entrapment. It derived rather from an*

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<sup>4</sup> The intention was for the contemporary project to undertake longitudinal research, seeking out original research participants or their family members and repeating the ethnographic methods used in the mid-1990s. The COVID-19 global pandemic prevented the author from travelling and the feasibility of replicating the 'follow the sweeper' method. The companion research paper by Haris Gazdar and Hussain Mallah (2022) describes how they compensated for this in their comparison of the

situation of contemporary sweepers in Karachi and Faisalabad.

<sup>5</sup> *Pakhiwas* is a nomenclature embracing all the indigenous nomadic tribes of the Punjab, groups that in India may be classified as 'scheduled tribes'. Although they may well be settled in one place for generations now, they are regarded by village communities as semi-nomadic and include, for example, *Changars*. *Chuhras* would be the equivalent in India of a 'scheduled caste'.

*urban context and needs of urban government*  
(Masselos 1990: 103).

This is not to deny the existence of caste before colonialism or the persistence of caste-like attitudes in contemporary South Asia. Nor is it to deny that Indians and Pakistanis have since shaped very particular ‘constructions’ of caste (Bayly 1999: 97). Rather, it is to note that despite the egalitarian values espoused by Islam, notions of ritual pollution have persisted, closely associated with dirty work.<sup>6</sup> Part of the extraordinary strength and resilience of Punjabi Christian sweepers (hereafter sweepers) is that they have shown a remarkable capacity to adapt themselves to change (Streefland 1979), including. Indeed, they have tended to collude rather than collide with any new initiatives in relation to waste management systems.

## Waste management in Faisalabad

Faisalabad is located close to Lahore in Punjab Province and is the centre of Pakistan’s textile industry, and services surrounding agricultural areas. In the mid-1990s it was the third largest city in Pakistan and had outgrown its 19<sup>th</sup> century sanitation infrastructure and as the city spread, its waste collection and disposal services were inadequate, not reaching low-income areas at all and with patchy reach in peripheral parts of the city.

The formal organisation of SWM in 1990s Faisalabad was a function of the Faisalabad Municipal Corporation’s (FMC) Department of Health and with ultimate responsibility resting with two Chief Medical Officers of Health (CMOHs) who jointly head the Department. Below them were 12 chief sanitary inspectors and 29 sanitary inspectors. Secondary collection, which involved the transport of waste by large trucks and tractor-trailers from transfer points dotted around the city to a final disposal site on the outskirts, was centrally organised and fell directly under the CMOHs and the chief sanitary inspectors.

By contrast, primary collection, which involved the removal of street-level waste to local transfer points, was highly decentralised. Primary collection was the responsibility of the 29 sanitary inspectors, each of whom controlled an area embracing several wards. They were responsible for supervising the 2,500 sanitary workers or sweepers employed by the FMC. The latter were at the lowest pay grade for FMC employees but enjoyed job security and benefits, such as a lump sum at retirement and a pension after 25 years’ service. Thus, this was highly prized employment, even though it was dirty and stigmatising work.

In theory, municipal sweepers were assigned to wards in rough proportion to the number of people living there. However, there were deviations. Workers could be taken from their usual beats and sent to parts of the city where councillors or other luminaries lived, where a visiting dignitary was attending, or to fill potholes on main roads and clear silt from blocked drains during the monsoon season. In high-income areas or those where there was a strong councillor, services were less likely to be disrupted by the redeployment of workers. Low-income residents rarely enjoyed waste collection services, so it was middle-income residents who were most likely to experience interruptions in service. This constitutes a first layer of informal practices impinging on formal service delivery.

Second, local councillors were apt to commandeer municipal sweepers to undertake private cleaning work in their homes, pointing to an example of quite widespread interference by political actors in public service delivery. To avoid both main road and drain work and working in councillors’ houses, sweepers ingratiated themselves with sanitary inspectors and supervisors, including through acceding to a regular cut being taken from their wage packets.

Christian sweepers acted as effective gatekeepers to municipal waste work, ensuring that, based on their ascribed social status, jobs in the FMC remained their preserve. Over decades, families of sweepers existed and persisted, with one generation inheriting the jobs of the last. This system operated not only regarding municipal employment, but also regarding private

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<sup>6</sup> In the follow up research, Gazdar and Mallah (2022) take this argument further.

jobs for individual householders. In theory, municipal sweepers were supposed to sweep the streets and remove waste from street bins and transport it to local transfer points. In reality, they also collected waste from inside homes, sometimes performing some domestic chores for householders as well. This informal system of private waste collection operated both within and alongside the official SWM system and constitutes a third layer of informal practice within the official SWM. Private work was remunerated at a given rate that pertained across the city. Sometimes municipal sweepers undertook the work themselves or passed it on to a family member. One of the householders interviewed explained it as follows:

*You see we have a tradition that once we have a sweeper at our house privately, we will never terminate their job until his death. If that sweeper wants to leave, he nominates his alternative to the household. Like [sweeper X], he has taken over his mother's post. She was working here at the time of her retirement, and she is still working in those houses privately, in which she worked during her government job because you still have to fill your belly even after retirement.*

A fourth layer of informality was when municipal sweepers who had accumulated assets and a degree of economic security, 'sold' their jobs. Some sweepers inherited the right to a municipal job but were disinclined to perform all or part of the work, and 'rented' out the work to others who were less well-off. These informal workers were paid on a month-by-month basis by the 'owner' of the job, while the official job holder retained the right to claim the lump sum and pension on retirement. Here too, inspectors and supervisors turned a blind eye and took their cut. Hence, the formal arrangements for solid waste collection concealed a multiplicity of practices that were quite invisible to international donors seeking to intervene in what they perceived as inefficient and ineffective delivery in need of root to branch privatisation. In the following section the reason for the stickiness of these practices is explored in more depth.

## Gender relations and the inside world of waste

To understand how and why householders as users of SWM services colluded in what to outside professionals appeared to be an inefficient and unruly system, it is necessary to recognise the undergirding social relations. In particular, it is necessary to locate waste work within the broader spectrum of household labour. Within the home, social relations were governed by women's status within the household, and gender relations within the home were mediated by class, that is the placement of that household in the social hierarchy (Papanek, 1971, 1973, 1989; Papanek & Minault, 1982). In Faisalabad this was observed to be the case with women in low-income and high-income households having relative mobility and freedom to participate in society as compared to women in middle-income households. The latter were more likely to be segregated from society and purdah (both veiling and seclusion in the home) were more strictly observed.

Within the home, dealing with rubbish was seen as women's domain, usually the duty of the most junior woman of the household. As soon as a family could afford to employ others to work for them, dirty work related to sanitation and solid waste was the first tasks to be delegated. Fieldwork conducted in a middle-income area Nazimabad, and a high-income area, Gulberg, showed that in Gulberg, 84 per cent of households employed a private sweeper and most households employed domestic workers as well. In Nazimabad, very few households could afford domestic workers but 68 per cent employed a private sweeper to clean bathrooms and toilets and remove waste.

Private sweepers were either municipal sweepers themselves or relatives of officially employed municipal sweepers. They were invariably Christian and were considered by the Muslim householders interviewed, to be ritually impure. They were mostly but not exclusively women. Domestic workers were also invariably women but were mostly Muslim, for reasons explained by a Gulberg housewife:

*People prefer to have Muslims if they can get them because if you employ Christians in domestic work, you run the risk of touching things they have touched. I know in England you people don't*

*hesitate about this, but here we hesitate. So, if you employ a Christian worker then he or she can only wash the bathrooms and floors. And of course, we prefer females. If there are two females, a Christian and a Muslim then we would prefer a Muslim woman because she can do washing and utensil cleaning and even cooking. At the same time, she can perform the duty of a sweeper as well.*

In the more traditional lower–middle-income area of Nazimabad, a woman explained the relationship with her private sweeper thus:

*I don't have a domestic worker. I don't trust them and prefer to do the work myself, even though I get no help from my mother-in-law. I have a sweeper who sweeps and swabs when she comes to take the garbage . . . Also, people will not accept it if she does more because she is Christian. Religious-minded people object to them doing other tasks. For example, when I recruited a Christian woman to do washing, my neighbour told me I could not say my prayers in clothes washed by a Christian.*

In the middle-income neighbourhood of Nazimabad, privately employed women sweepers were often seen doing some of the tasks that were the preserve of Muslim domestic workers in high-income Gulberg, such as washing bed sheets and cleaning utensils. However, this was never done conspicuously. In both cases, separate utensils were always maintained for use by the sweepers. In both cases too, all food preparation was undertaken by women of the household.

For male sweepers, if possible, when they entered women retreated to another section of the house. When this was not possible, as in smaller homes, the physical barriers of both *purdah* and ritual impurity were re of necessity transgressed. They were replaced by symbolic boundaries. A modest gesture of the veil or an averted gaze substituted for strict physical divisions between public and private space, in the mutual interests of co-dependency. Describing her interaction with the male municipal sweeper who did private cleaning work for her household, a woman from Nazimabad said:

*Sardar comes daily but is honest and doesn't need supervising. He just shouts "Kora!" [rubbish] and we know to hide ourselves [behind a veil] until he has gone. Neighbours recommended him when we*

*came to this house, and he will come with us when we move.*

This ritual involved both parties participating in carefully choreographed patterns of behaviour, as explained by a male sweeper:

*The only thing you need for this job is that you should have lahaz [hair in your eyes, meaning not looking] and sweetness on your tongue.*

For the most part, however, householders in both neighbourhoods preferred women:

*They [FMC sweepers] keep changing because people complain about them, or they get transferred .... So, we have a permanent arrangement with a female sweeper to carry our household waste. We pay her 20 rupees a month. But the man who presently sweeps our lane, I don't know his name, gives abuses to her, and pesters her to give him our private work .... How can we give him permission? He is a man and cannot enter our house. So, we have kept this old woman for works for five or six houses in this lane.*

Acknowledging the significance of *purdah* and the way it is negotiated, is crucial to understanding the intersection of gender relations and waste work. It is *purdah* that determines where far sweepers can venture across the threshold into the home and their behaviour within it. However, it is the notion of pollution that explains why it is women (who are considered ritually impure during menstruation) do dirty work in the house rather than men. It also explains why certain hereditary status groups are delegated dirty work. In virtually all households in both neighbourhoods, separate utensils were kept for municipal and private sweepers. In the heat sweepers brought their own utensils or alternatively cupped their hands so water could be poured into them.

Nevertheless, there was widespread interaction between householders and sweepers, particularly in Nazimabad where the turnover of private sweepers was lower. Many women gave the sweepers water or food and sometimes used clothing. In Nazimabad, just under half the households interviewed there reported employing the same sweeper for 'twenty years', 'decades', 'since my childhood', or 'as long as I can remember'. The rest reported an employment period of between five and ten years. Several

households in Nazimabad employed private sweepers from the same family, one generation after the next and knew something of their life circumstances and members of their families. In Gulberg, by contrast, few householders knew the name of their sweepers, and relations with sweepers were more transactional.

Outside of the house or between the home and the outside world, men were more likely to engage with sweepers. In both Nazimabad and Gulberg, it was men who supervised street-level work, paid private sweepers, distributed gifts at Eid and handed over discretionary payments, known in Punjabi as *chai e pani* (tea and water). In Gulberg men reported municipal sweepers to the FMC supervisor or area councillor if things went wrong, and relations between sweepers and male householders could become tense or fraught. In Nazimabad, by contrast, most male householders were on greeting terms with sweepers, and prominent community members mediated between them and householders whenever the need arose. In return, such community figures could rely on sweepers doing little private jobs for them such as cutting back overgrown trees, removing hornets' nests, clearing gutters, and unblocking drains. Although extra was paid for these tasks, strong bonds of obligation and reciprocity existed between many of the middle-income householders and sweepers, described by one man interviewed as follows:

*It is not his duty to take waste from the houses. His duty is to clean the streets. If he takes waste from our houses, then it is a favour which should be compensated. That is why we pay him Rs15 with our own will. It is not his pay or even a compulsory payment. We give him this because we think he is a poor man, and we can also get Allah's blessing.*

Sweepers had ways of ensuring householders kept their side of the bargain. They charged buffalo owners more to remove the weighty and unpleasant dung. They would 'forget' to remove waste when payments were not made on time, or when a lot of time had elapsed since the last *chai e pani*.

However familiar or genial, the relations between householders and sweepers were inherently unequal and predicated on the assumption that certain services could be expected from them in the context of patronage-based relationships set by custom.

These relationships were embedded in dynamics of differential status and power. Within households, women sought to improve their position within existing constraints. The following section looks at how sweepers accommodated and challenged intersecting axes of inequality to ensure their livelihoods.

## Hereditary occupation groups and the outside world of waste

When waste is thrown away it is deemed to have no further value in the eye of the first owner. However, one person's waste can be another's treasure. The world of waste picking by people variously described as scavengers, ragpickers, waste retrievers and informal recyclers, is more visible and better researched than the more ambiguous world of municipal sweepers and sanitary workers. Nevertheless, in Faisalabad there was an overlap between them, both in terms of their shared social identity as *Pakhiwas* and their places of work.

The research for this area of investigation was conducted on two transfer stations serving Gulberg and Nazimabad. Two separate transfer points or dumps were monitored, serving respectively the middle-income area of Nazimabad, and the high-income area of Gulberg. The Nazimabad dump was comparatively small and lay 'off the beaten track'. It was in the supervisory hands of an unofficial sweeper supervisor coded as MP. It was run day-to-day by an ex-sweeper who had been given certain 'rights' to manage the dump after being permanently suspended from the FMC because he challenged cuts from his pay. This man had earned the nickname *Bila* (the he-cat) because of his stealthy vigilance on the waste stand, pouncing on any waste of recyclable material of value and on any picker who was there without his say so. On asking how he came to work on the dumpsite the first man explained:

*I was wandering around like a Changar,<sup>7</sup> just picking paper to survive when I came to this neighbourhood. I picked paper from MP's handcart for a month and by that we became acquainted. He himself asked me to help him in his work. He said, 'I have no elder son, and this is your traditional work so if you do this work for me, you can earn your dehari' (livelihood).*

When sweepers arrived with household waste *Bila* gave certain groups of pickers the right to first pickings. Other pickers not under his patron, would come either very early in the morning or later in the day when everyone else was through.

The Gulberg dump was much larger, and on a main road. At the time of the research, it was firmly controlled by two groups of pickers. Each had their established sitting places under makeshift hessian shelters, and each arranged with particular sweepers, access to their waste. In return for first pickings, they would run to meet them on the road as they approached the dump carrying their handcarts the last leg of the journey. There were clearly defined and guarded relationships with the drivers and loaders of the FMC crews responsible for secondary collection. In return for favours, such as providing water or some food, the crews would be sensitive to where the pickers were searching for and separating recyclable materials, before tackling the dump with the front-end loader.

Pickers came mainly from among the indigenous tribal people of the Punjab, referred to collectively as *Pakhiwas*. For example, the Nazimabad dump was mainly worked by *Changars*, an indigenous nomadic group that moved between seasonal agricultural labour and waste picking, while the richer Gulberg dump was shared between *Changars* and a group of *Dindars*. *Dindars*, also *Changars* heralding from the *Pakhiwas*, constitute groups that converted to Islam

before or around the time of Partition or indeed more recently. They became known as well as *Naumusalman* meaning 'New Muslims' or more pejoratively, *Mussalis*. Despite their Hindu origins *Dindars* acquired a certain respectability through converting to Islam, although this should not be overstated for the poorest among them, who continued to be deemed of low social status. As far as their own self-perceptions were concerned, neither *Dindars* nor *Changars* saw themselves as ritually impure.<sup>8</sup>

There was generally good cooperation between these two groups on the Gulberg Dump. At one point they came up against each other, but peaceful coexistence ensued. and as one of the *Dindar* pickers said, 'we learnt a good lesson from confronting each other. The lesson is this. If you want access to waste don't have conflict. Now we stop other *Dindars* from coming and they stop other *Changars*. This way we both have a better chance to pick.'<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the dump was clearly demarcated with the *Dindars* occupying a semi-permanent shed in the lefthand front corner and the *Changars* sitting under a hessian canopy in the righthand corner. They picked only from 'their side' and competition was about getting there first to help sweepers with their donkey-carts and handcarts to get first pickings.

One of the *Dindars* said they could never hope to pick as quickly and cleverly as *Changars* who picked as family groups, with boys and men covering the commercial areas and women and girls scouring the less rich but socially safer residential areas and picking with hawk-eyed aptitude for on the dumps. Despite their perceived low social status, *Changars* were less stigmatised than Christians and were the focus of Muslim proselytizers and political campaigners.

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<sup>7</sup>*Pakhiwas* is a generic term for indigenous nomadic tribes or quoms from the Punjab, including many that retain their separate identity to this day such as *Changar*, *Odh*, and *Gagray*.

<sup>8</sup> Like other *Naumusalmen*, *Dindars* benefited from the efforts of competing political parties and religious leaders to attain their support.

<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the dump is clearly demarcated with the *Dindars* occupying a semi-permanent shed in the lefthand front corner and the *Changars* sitting under a hessian canopy in the righthand corner. They picked from 'their side' mainly and competed to help sweepers to get first pickings and to service the loaders and drivers in the interest of long-term relationships of support.



*Dindars* also herald from *Pakhiwas* but converted to Islam before or around the time of Partition. Known also as *Naumusalman* meaning 'New Muslims', or more pejoratively *Mussalis*, they had acquired a certain respectability through converting to Islam, despite their Hindu origins. While this should not be overstated as they continue to be of low social status, they too benefited from the efforts of competing political parties and religious leaders to attain their support. The *Dindar* group encountered on the dump had support of a Muslim *pir* called Sarkar Baba Jee Hazoor<sup>10</sup> who had converted their father's generation from several *Pakhiwa qoums*, notably *Fakirs* and their *qoum*, *Gagarays*, who were traditionally animal skimmers and pickers and traders in bones.

This group was given access to serviced land on the periphery of the city on which they were encouraged to settle rather than pursue their peripatetic ways.<sup>11</sup> Sakar Baba Jee also arranged jobs for *Dindars* within the FMC, information derived not only from *Dindar* informants but also from interviews with union officials who confirmed that Sakar Baba Jee was a key figure who in the early 1980s had secured FMC jobs for many newly converted *Mussalis*. Neither *Changars* nor *Dindars* saw themselves as ritually impure and regarded waste picking an activity that extracted 'dry' waste from 'wet' without them being contaminated by the process. *Dindars* also used their hereditary occupation as animal skimmers and bone pickers to enter FMC work, first through picking.

Another group associated with the dumps were the *katcha* or temporary sweepers who were employed on an occasional basis by the FMC or other sweepers and who supplemented their income by picking. Speaking to one of them who worked for the Faisalabad Development Authority (FDA), he said, 'I am not one of them [i.e., from the FMC], I am a sewer man'. He was paid Rs500 a month by a female FMC sweeper who was a widow and whose children were not yet old enough to help her, to carry her waste to the transfer station from the neatly swept piles she made in the streets on her beat. He was not the only

FDA sweeper or sanitary worker who came to the dump to pick waste. FMC sweepers would also come before or after work. As one man explained, while his wages were given over to household expenses, money from picking was for his own '*kurcha wurcha*' or personal expenses.

Unlike *Dindars* who did pose a potential challenge and real competition for FMC jobs, *Changars* appeared to be of less immediate threat to Christian sweepers. *Dindars* tended to engage in picking as a route to obtaining work with the FMC, whereas for *Changars* it was part of a range of seasonal livelihood pursuits. These included providing agricultural labour to regular landowners at harvest time and picking and selling wild fruit berries. *Changars* also engaged in customary occupations such as basket making and had begun to take up some newer urban-based activities such as donkey cart driving. Whereas in the past, whole families would be peripatetic, moving between town and country and from one area to the next, while some family members continued to move around, retaining customary relationships of rural labour obligation, now other family members remained in the city full time to protect assets, including guarding their access to waste.

The real upward mobility through working with waste came through the informal waste economy, which began with picking, involved middle-dealers or *kabarias* who bought a full range of waste and sold it on to specialist dealers in particular materials such as metals, glass, paper, and plastics. We came across several middle dealers who had started out waste pickers but did not pursue their role in the informal waste economy beyond their purchase of dry waste items from pickers, sweepers, and itinerant waste collectors.

## Sweepers in the FMC: spanning the public private divide

Over the last quarter of the twentieth century, competition for FMC jobs grew. It was reported by

<sup>10</sup> His full name is Abu Aness Muhammad Barkat Ali Lodhyanive Mudzalha (*mudzalha* means the *pir* is alive).

<sup>11</sup> Informants said they were worried whether they would be able to stay on that land after Sarkar Baba Jee's death as his *molvees* or henchmen had designs on it, and they feared they would be evicted.

sweepers that even the children of current sweepers were finding it difficult to get into the FMC and corruption had crept into the system. It was difficult to pinpoint exactly when things changed. However, older sweepers all claimed they never had to pay anything for their jobs. Those who had joined the FMC about ten years prior to the research in the mid-1990s said they paid the sum of Rs1000-2000 to secure their job. Those who joined around five years earlier, paid between Rs4000-5000. At the time the research was conducted, to acquire an FMC job as a sanitary worker required an outlay of between Rs7000-15,000 with the usual rate being between Rs10,000-Rs12,000.

Variations in the amount depended on whether the entire amount was paid up front or whether a down-payment was made, and the remainder paid off over time. The area to which a sweeper was assigned also made a difference. For example, a job in the middle-to-high income area of Gulberg, with better tips and charity at *Eid*, cost more than entry through a middle-income area such as Nazimabad. Another factor was the sex of the sweeper. This was not a factor in the past but at the time of the research, women had to pay more than men for an FMC position.

Another system identified was what was called *addie/addie* or 'half/half'. Here the sanitary inspector took half the sweeper's wage and the sweeper paid half of his half to an unemployed person who did the job on a casual basis. This left the permanently employed sweeper free to pursue other private work and to still claim the lump sum gratuity and pension at retirement. For a number of Punjabi Christian sweepers participating in the *addie* system, buying an FMC sweeper's position constituted a tidy investment for the future, without having to do the actual dirty work. All the rates cited above refer to a *pukka* FMC job, that is a full-time permanent job with a lump sum gratuity payment and pension after 25 years. However, in addition to *pukka*, permanent, and pensionable jobs, there were *katcha* jobs, that came without the full conditions of service. These too could be 'purchased' with the going rate being around Rs300 in Nazimabad and Rs500 in Gulberg. The value of these jobs was not only the wages received but access to information and the ability to identify and apply for positions as soon as they came up.

According to most of the sweepers interviewed, the sum charged for a job did not all go to the official or politician who arranged it. One sweeper reported the following conversation he had with a sanitary supervisor who he approached on behalf of a friend who wanted to apply for an FMC job that was coming up but had no money to pay for it immediately:

*See, you are my friend but if we don't take from you then how can we give to them? Suppose doctor sahib is sitting in his office and you take some application to him. He will say to you, 'Get out of my office and take this application away. Don't you know that guests have arrived in my house? Then he pauses and looks, and you think in your mind, why is doctor sahib behaving like that? You will ask in your heart, has he become mad, must I give these guests a massage or what? You will think and then you will say, 'doctor sahib, order me anything'. Then he says, 'I have guests in my house so bring me a five kg tin of ghee, five kg of sugar, five kg of rice'. These are the three main items. Then he will say, 'take these things to my home'. So, will those sanitary inspectors take from their mother's cupboard I ask you? No, they will come to us and slaughter us.*

To maintain sufficient autonomy to take on private work alongside official municipal employment meant securing the support of householders and benign neglect on the part of supervisors and sanitary inspectors. Sweepers devised many ways of handling impediments to the flow of their private work. For example, to undertake private work alongside their municipal duties, sweepers got help from their families, including children who assisted before school hours. Some used their own donkey carts to speed up waste collection and disposal or paid others on an ad hoc basis to assist them. All these efforts were preferable to losing the goodwill of the householders with whom they had private arrangements or the support of their supervisors.

Embedded in official SWM, unruly practices operated through an informal but orderly system that facilitated private work. If sweepers agreed without complaint to having cuts taken from their pay, they were monitored only during the first part of the morning shift. Once the register was taken, they were free to organise and balance their FMC and private work as they wished. Sweepers who did not comply

with the system of pay cuts could expect surprise visits throughout the day and then to be allocated extensive sessions on main road and drain duty, meaning opportunities for private work were lost.

In addition to pay cuts and other offerings, sweepers also paid in kind. Following one of the sweepers on his rounds one day, we saw a man give him instructions on making a fence. On being asked whether he would be compensated for this work beyond his duties, he said 'I'm just helping him as a friend, it is not a problem'. However, later he revealed that this resident was a friend of the councillor and had influential friends. 'Whenever he asks a personal favour and we refuse, he complains to those friends, and they make trouble for us. So, we must make sure he is happy. In my heart I don't like him but what can I do?'

There was extreme reluctance on the part of sweepers to work for politicians and bureaucrats and it was often women who were pushed forward for this work. The officials generally welcomed this because women could be prevailed upon to do a range of additional domestic chores. However, if they had *carte blanche*, councillors preferred to have *Dindar* men working in their houses as they could do heavy work and, being Muslim, presented no problems in terms of conventional taboos. *Dindars* were the newly converted Muslims, generally from among Punjabi *pukhiwas*.

Although at the bottom of the pecking order, it was this group that constituted the greatest threat to the exclusive preserve Christian Punjabi sweepers held over FMC jobs. One *Dindar* sweeper interviewed on the waste stand serving Gulberg provided another window on the problems associated with working for councillors. 'We are the people who always salute the rising sun. An officer is always an officer, and you must respect him'. He reported a conversation over his refusal to work in the councillor's house:

*That supervisor said to me, 'You are Muslim so you must go to the councillor's house to work'. I said to him, 'Look brother, try to understand my position sympathetically. I will be highly obliged if you give me another job anywhere like other sweepers. I want to work on the beat'. So, I politely requested 'Put any Christian sweeper there but please excuse me from such a dangerous job'. But he said, 'no, you have to work there because the councillor has*

*a buffalo, and he requires a Muslim man to feed and milk it'.*

He was suspended from FMC duties for refusing to work for the councillor and when interviewed, he was waste picking on the Gulberg transfer station. For him, being *Dindar* was a disadvantage as it pushed him towards distasteful labour obligations born of patronage that Christian men managed to escape. However, *Dindars* were also able to use their religion to escape other areas of work. Sweepers could at any time be taken off their normal beats and sent by supervisors to clean main roads and drains. *Dindars* refused to do drain work on the grounds they were Muslim and could not touch 'wet' waste, so this duty fell exclusively to Christian men.

At the time of the research, Muslims had not broken the stranglehold of Christian sweepers. The number of *Dindars* in the FMC was estimated to be no more than 500 strong, but it had already influenced the division of labour among sweepers within the official SWM system. There was something of a divide between FMC sweepers who were considered responsible for *halal khor* (ritually 'pure' or 'dry' waste) and those who cleaned sewers and drains and who came into contact with *haram khor* (ritually 'impure' or 'wet' waste), with no Muslims among the latter. Usually these terms refer to those who consume forbidden food such as pork and carrion, versus those who do not. Hence this hierarchy is connected in some sense to the notion of untouchability.

## Managing upwards: the official view

The day-to-day management of primary waste collection was the responsibility of sanitary inspectors who were assigned to a ward and who reported into chief sanitary inspectors managing several wards and the vehicles, waste stands and transfer stations within them. The sanitary inspectors were responsible for the performance of sanitary workers in their area, who were directly overseen by supervisors. Supervisors sometimes delegated supervisory tasks to unofficial *dunda* (literally stick) supervisors, drawn from among the sweepers. They did not get extra pay but were guaranteed light work and benefited from perks such as relief from onerous

work. Some FMC sweepers had become what the others called *saffaid poush*, literally a 'white collar worker' or someone who did not do manual work. The term was used by sweepers to refer to those among them who were upwardly mobile or who became *dunda* supervisors and sub-contracted all or part of their FMC and private work to others.

How strictly sweepers were monitored depended on how strictly supervisors and *dunda* supervisors were themselves monitored. Attendance was recorded in an ad hoc fashion and registers were manipulated as a way of controlling sweepers, as explained by a woman sweeper in Gulberg:

*A part of our pay is cut every month but on our own sweet will, in return for that monthly, we get some facilities. If we insist on getting full pay, they will create problems for us. They will mark our absence for example but if we give them something by mutual understanding, they will let us work at our ease. If not, they will cut our pay by hook or by crook.*

Cuts tended to be resented only when they exceeded the 'fixed' rate or when, as was the case at times, women were expected to offer in addition or in lieu, sexual favours.

Although a corrupt and exploitative system, in those areas of the city that received a full SWM service, it was relatively efficient and benefited from flexibility within the official system and between public and private work. From the perspective of supervisors, inspectors, and officials, therefore, there was little incentive to change things. Efforts at reform came to naught. A mayor, several years previously, tried to introduce a new schedule, one shift five a.m. until one p.m. instead of a morning and afternoon shift. This prevented officials from being able to control access to and take cuts relating to private work as the sweepers had the afternoons free. They succeeded in changing the routine back.

A second attempt at reform occurred under the Administrator system, which replaced elected mayors when local government was suspended by the Pakistan People's Party after the November 1993 election. The Administrator of Faisalabad, to prevent officials being able to cut workers' pay, directed that sweepers should be paid directly through the government-run Habib Bank. For the first time, they

came to know the exact amount of their monthly pay and could calculate what had been deducted over the years. Sweepers tried among themselves to fix a figure they thought was reasonable to pay. As one sweeper explained:

*When we came to know about our pay, we became more outspoken and bolder. We said to them, 'we will keep paying you' but they had to wait for us. We were giving them the money and, as you know, when you give money to someone, then he is obliged to you.*

However, the FMC officers had their way of increasing the rate by requiring sweepers to go directly from the bank to their muster points for attendance, where they would require them to hand over a larger amount. The unpopularity of the system with FMC officials led to its demise. The bank queues got longer and slower and some sweepers waited days to be served. The officials reported that the system increased absences and was disruptive to work routines and the old system was reinstated. Once again sanitary inspectors collected wages from the Corporation and individually paid the sweepers under his jurisdiction.

In Faisalabad sweepers are members of the Sanitary Workers and Staff Union (SWSU), one of eight registered trade unions representing employees of the FMC. One of the eight, the *Mazdoor Ithed* Union was the elected collective bargaining agent in 1983 and acted on behalf of all the unions. The SWSU represented both sweepers and their supervisors and inspectors and it came as little surprise that the interests of sweepers were not the first to feature among collective bargaining priorities. One of the unionists interviewed, when asked what they had achieved on behalf of sweepers, said a two rupee increase to the monthly allowance for maintenance of brooms and getting some temporary sweeper posts made permanent, arguing that 'we don't put forward demands which are not achievable'. One of the sweepers said:

*We have a union, but it is useless. They say 'yes' with the officers and 'no' with the officers. They are appointed as our leaders by the officials themselves. They do nothing for us but make sure they have a role in recruitment. They process the applications and make the bribes walk smoothly.*

In Pakistan, trade unions constitute a significant political voice but contrary to the view of the World Bank (1996: 5)<sup>12</sup> at the time, it was not the unions standing in the way of public sector reform of SWM:

*Solid waste managers ... are burdened with unproductive and undisciplined operational staff. They are not free to terminate employment, except in extreme cases and through burdensome procedures. Since the labour supply comes largely from a small Christian minority, labour unions representing solid waste workers are strong and able to resist efforts to increase workloads .... Hiring, however, has been frozen in many cities and reduction through natural attrition is slowly occurring.*

The SWSU was a sweetheart union representing the interests and strategies of more senior employees rather than workers. The latter largely comprised a politically and socially vulnerable Christian minority who were far from being able to hold the FMC to ransom.

### The view from the Mohalla: social mobility without economic opportunity

With 97 per cent of the population adhering to Islam, demographically, Pakistan is overwhelmingly Muslim. According to the 1981 Census, the Hindu and Christian populations were about equal in size, each numbering around 1.3 million and each accounting for about 1.6 per cent of the country's total population (Addleton, 1985: 32).<sup>13</sup> The vast majority of Hindus live in Sindh Province, but Christians are the largest single religious minority in the Punjab, NWFP and Baluchistan. The Punjab has the largest Christian population, being about four-fifths of the total and virtually all Christians are native to the province.

According to the 1981 Census, there are large Christian communities in five key districts of Punjab

Province, Lahore (190,000), Faisalabad (165,000), Sialkot (119,000), Gujranwala (100,000) and Sheikhupura (109,000), with smaller but still significant communities in the districts of Kasur, Sahiwal, Sargodha, Multan, and Rawalpindi. The rural population is important both proportionally at 62 per cent and in terms of absolute numbers (650,000). According to informants, Christian sweepers in Faisalabad maintained close social ties with Christian groups in Sargodha, Sialkot and Sheikhupura as well as the rural areas within Faisalabad district itself. Marriages often took place between women and men within these four districts and visits were periodically made to celebrate Christian festivals and family ceremonies such as marriages and deaths.

Faisalabad's Punjabi Christian sweepers lived in Christian colonies or separate *mohallas* or neighbourhoods within larger settlements. Research was done in both, covering the older settlements which now form part of the central area of the city, as well as newer settlements on the periphery. In the older colonies, houses were mainly double storey and comprised several rooms. Houses in the peripheral Christian settlement usually comprised a single room with a courtyard at the front. The names of the five Christian colonies visited during the research were withheld to protect the identity of our informants. In the older settlements sweepers were usually part of extended and/or joint households where they were not the only income earners and where family members were engaged in a range of different economic activities. In the peripheral areas the families visited were all younger and in nuclear households, a number being younger brothers who, with their families, had been forced to move on from joint households due to space constraints.

It is widely believed that in Pakistan sweepers are becoming upwardly mobile and for a number this is true. Where families have worked as FMC sweepers for generations, asset accumulation over years have enabled them to build homes and to educate their children. This stands as the strongest argument in

<sup>12</sup> World Bank (1996) Strategies for Increasing Private Sector Participation in Solid Waste Services in Pakistan: A Sector Study, Washington DC: World Bank.

<sup>13</sup> Christian political leaders at the time estimated the Christian population to be double the official figures (Amjad-Ali, 1987).

favour of retaining secure conditions of employment in the delivery of solid waste and sanitation services. Yet opportunities outside of this kind of work are few and far between for those who don't want to work for the FMC and the growing number who cannot get FMC jobs. Men who do not have jobs as sweepers do technical work, usually engaging in small enterprises that are not associated with ancestral or caste-ascribed occupations. For example, life histories of male sweepers showed them to have worked at various times as auto-rickshaw drivers, car mechanics and repairers of bicycles or electrical equipment.

Among low-to-middle income Christians as with Muslims, it was considered a sign of upward mobility for women of the household not to engage in paid work outside the home. However, the habit of female employment runs deep among Punjabi Christian Sweepers and many women were involved in some form of income earning activity. For instance, of the sweeper families visited at home where women were not working for the FMC or as private sweepers, they did embroidery, sewing or tailoring to earn money. Educating Christian girls reaped a greater reward in that they had better employment opportunities by virtue of access to another occupational niche, nursing. In addition to being a gendered occupation in Pakistan, few Muslim women go into this field because dealing with blood and bodily discharges is potentially polluting.

As jobs as FMC sweepers faced greater competition or became too expensive to purchase, some Christian sweepers were experiencing increased insecurity. Other stable employment, such as in the large textile mills and factories, invariably went to Muslims. Christians were more likely to get jobs in the smaller workshops employing few workers, which paid less. They were not employed in outlets where they would have to deal with food or with a public that might object to their presence. Vast numbers of men drove

donkey carts either working for the owners as daily paid drivers or by hiring them and transporting goods on a contract basis. As such, Christians worked as casual labourers or entered the swelling ranks of the informal economy.

When all other income earning, activities were closed to them Christians entered other domains of waste work, notably waste picking. Another direction was to join the burgeoning ranks of gamblers and heroin addicts that could be found in every Christian area. These people were labelled *jahaz* which literally means aeroplane. It referred to the way they held their arms out to keep their balance when they walked. Of the few women-headed households encountered in Faisalabad, all were in the Christian community, and all arose because of women leaving husbands due to physical or substance abuse. A constant theme in the interviews with both women and men was how difficult it was these days to find a 'clean boy', that is one who was not addicted. Alcoholism seemed less of a problem among Christians because selling their quota of alcohol to Muslims was a key part of household livelihood strategies.<sup>14</sup>

## The politics of minority status

Minorities in Pakistan are defined in relation to the Muslim majority. According to Article 260 (2) of the 1973 Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan (Mahmood, 1990: 979-80):<sup>15</sup>

- a) "Muslims' means a person who believes in the unity and oneness of the Almighty Allah, in the absolute and unqualified finality of the Prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him), the last of the prophets, and does not believe in, or recognize as a prophet or religious reformer, any person who claimed or claims to be a prophet, in any sense of the

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<sup>14</sup> In a country which is 'dry' on religious grounds, Christians are issued with a licence to purchase a monthly quota of liquor. They sell this on at a profit to Muslims who are prohibited from purchasing alcohol.

<sup>15</sup> The constitution was amended in 1974 to include the *Ahmadis*. It was amended again in 1985 when

significantly the word 'freely' was omitted from the statement in the Preamble which read that 'adequate provision shall be made for the minorities freely to profess and practice their religion and develop their cultures' (Amjad-Ali, 1987: 76).

word or of any description whatsoever, after Muhammad (peace be upon him); and

- b) 'non-Muslim' means a person who is not a Muslim and includes a person belonging to the Christian, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist or Parsi community, a person of the Quadiani Group or the Lahori Group (who call themselves 'Ahmadis' or by any other name) or a Bahai, and a person belonging to any of the Scheduled Castes'.<sup>16</sup>

Constitutionally, therefore, minorities are identified primarily in terms of religion. Divisions within the different religious groupings based on ethnicity, hereditary status groups or other identities of origin, are not recognised constitutionally. In Pakistan the indigenous groups which do not embrace the formal religions are treated as a single category. Sociologically they are referred to as *Pakhiwas*. Officially until the first census after independence in 1951, they were classified as 'Hindu-Muslim' by the British who could not work out the ethnic or *qoum* identities among them.

There were a range of welfare benefits to which minorities were entitled such as access to benefits from the *Bait-ul-Mal* fund,<sup>17</sup> discretionary amounts for the celebration of festivals such as Christmas and the Hindu festival of lights, *Divali*. There were special allocations to indigent persons of minority status, and six per cent of seats were reserved for minorities in professional institutions such as those training engineers, medics, and other professionals. However, it appeared that welfare schemes were rarely accessed.

According to the Ministry of Religious and Minority Affairs in Islamabad the six per cent quota also applied to public sector employment:

*As regards government services, all the minorities are being treated on a par with other citizens of Pakistan. However, the Government of Pakistan, out of kindness and affection towards the most vulnerable minorities, reserves a six per cent quota in government jobs for the scheduled castes.*

However, competition for government jobs was fierce and minorities rarely got a look in, particularly in the higher ranks of the armed forces and civil service. The six per cent quota was filled almost exclusively through the employment of sweepers in military departments, the railways, the post office, and the municipal corporations of cities throughout Pakistan. Although during the time of Quaid-i-Azam's founding government there was a relative openness towards minorities this changed after his death and according to Christian leaders interviewed, the situation had deteriorated ever since.

The single most resented legislation was the fact of separate electoral role for minorities. Ten Members of the National Assembly (MNAs) represented the minorities of Pakistan, of which four, all from the Punjab, represented Christians. One of these was from Faisalabad. Christian communities in a minority MNA's immediate constituency could benefit in terms of access to services, while others remained overlooked and neglected. A key theme pursued by Christian leaders interviewed in Faisalabad, unsurprisingly was 'national integration'.

At the local level, the system allowed minority councillors to contest local elections but not on a party-political basis. In Faisalabad out of a total of 91 elected FMC councillors 87 were Muslim and only four represented Christians. One of Faisalabad's Christian councillors explained the objection of Christians to the present system:

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<sup>16</sup> 'Scheduled castes' in the Punjab at least, refers to 'the castes, races or tribes or parts of groups, within castes, races, or tribes declared to be scheduled castes under any law in force in the Punjab or so declared by Government for the purposes of various Services/Recruitment Rules' (Abid and Rehman, 1995: 89).

<sup>17</sup> This was set up by the Nawaz Shariff administration, first in the Punjab and then

nationally during the early 1990s. It was designed to reach those individuals who could not receive funds from *Zakat* (prescribed charity which is one of the five *Arkans* or pillars of Islam), eligibility for which is determined by the *Shariah*, and which therefore could not be changed by secular law.

*This separate electoral system created a gap between communities. When we had joint elections, candidates used to come here, listen to our problems, sit with us, even eat with us. This system brought us very close to each other. But after the separate system was introduced, they had no interest in visiting our towns and our streets. The gap has increased, we have parted from each other. Political difference has increased social difference. When political equality disappeared, social equality also disappeared.*

In fact, it is likely 'the gap' existed before, dating back to their conversion to Christianity. Christian missionaries expected converts to stay separately on mission stations where they lived a self-contained life under the close observation by the missionaries: 'These groups of Christians had no roots. Increasingly, they became aliens in their own country, all the natural ramifications of family and community and caste having been lost' (Neil, 1970: 80).

Christian political leaders interviewed pointed out that today, the position of Christians in villages is far worse than that of urban Christians, due to the 'persistence of traditional attitudes' and rural dwellers being 'less educated'. Even within the city, many Christian informants in Faisalabad complained that 'less educated' people were harsher in their attitudes towards Christians. An important mobilising issue was untouchability.<sup>18</sup> At the time the field work was conducted a restaurant owner in Faisalabad refused to serve five young Christian men with food because 'our shop does not have separate utensils for you people'. In response a campaign was launched and 'saving our nation from violence and ethnicity' was another key issue. One of the Christian councillors in the city, in his capacity as Chairman of the Pakistan Minority Welfare Council, issued a pamphlet from which the following extract is drawn:

*Who can deny the natural fact that we are all sanitary workers for our own bodies? We have to clean the dirt from our bodies with our own hands*

*and no one feels shame over this. Is it not a cruel act that the people who clean our society are considered of very low status; even though they are the social doctors of our lives? They provide us with a clean and pollution free environment. Is it not a cruel act that these lowly people are forced to find separate utensils even at ordinary shops and restaurants? Is this a reward for their social services to the society?*

Of significance here is the fact that sweepers are referred to as sanitary workers and that they are seen as having both dignity and value in that occupational role.

This was not always the case regarding the attitudes of Church leaders in Faisalabad. Interviews were conducted with representatives of a range of Christian organisations from both Catholic and Protestant denominations, including those with an evangelical and those with a developmental perspective. Among them all, two broad attitudes were evident. Some considered sweeping a degrading occupation and efforts were focused on educating sanitary workers and providing them with a route out of their employment trap. These church leaders bemoaned the reluctance of Punjabi Christian Sweepers to educate their children although they acknowledged that until there were job options available to those with education, the incentive was absent. Alternatively, church leaders saw the Christian community as divided into two groups, sweepers and sanitary workers, and the rest. These leaders offered support to other Christians wishing to socially distance themselves at all costs. As one of them reluctantly put it, 'we have to have relations with these people because they are Christians'.

What Christian political leaders understood that religious leaders did not, was that most sweepers were committed to maintaining their occupational niche for the sake of their livelihoods. Few felt it was worth struggling through long years of schooling to be denied employment or only to get jobs that did not pay as well as sweeping. Moreover, if a man was to be

<sup>18</sup> Muslim taboos in relation to Punjabi Christian Sweepers include not drinking or eating out of the same utensils, not sharing a *huqqa* (water filtered smoking pipe also known as a hubble bubble), not

using the same water source and avoiding any physical contact. All these avoidances are closely associated with but not exclusive to Hindu notions of untouchability.



successful in securing an office-based occupation such as clerical work, to maintain his position and status he had to conform to Muslim norms and prevent his wife from working, accepting the resultant lower standard of living without the guarantee of social acceptability.

## Conclusions: unruly order in a changing world of waste

Since this research was conducted in the mid-1990s, working with waste is still seen globally as lowly and degrading, and everywhere, waste work is inherently infused with relations of inequality based on social differences such as class, gender, ethnicity, or age, further overlaid by asymmetries deriving from the nature of the work itself.

In India the division of labour which separates out those who undertake society's dirty work from those who do not get their hands dirty, is also underpinned by caste or caste-like characteristics. Resistance to this is often closely tied to Dalit organisation and politics. An example is the *Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat* trade union of waste-pickers in Pune city, India which emerged in the 1990s and which has a membership of over five thousand across the city and that has conducted a campaign aimed at igniting similar movements in other cities across India (Chikarmane and Narayan 2005 and 2015).

Hence despite sanitation and waste workers being at the bottom of the social heap, they can and do exercise agency and collective action, whether this is in the interest of retaining their freedom and independence as micro-entrepreneurs or to improve their working conditions and bargain position.

Much work globally in the decades since the original work conducted in Faisalabad during the 1990s, has focused on the collective action and organisational activities of waste workers. This has probably been most marked in Latin American countries (Dias and Cidrin 2008, Gutberlet 2008, Rosaldo 2014) but is also evident in South Africa (Budlender 2005, Samson 2004) and indeed South Asia (Chikarmane and Narayan 2005).

The majority of these cases refer to organisations of waste pickers, collectors, and recyclers entering or working with public waste collection systems, rather

than to public sector employees. Their involvement in municipal SWM service delivery is generally seen as a good thing, particularly if they are fairly compensated for their labour. They are also seen as contributing to and influencing perceptions on the importance of recycling, their contribution to environmental management and the potential of the circular economy.

This goes positive standpoint goes against much of the literature on municipal service delivery and the informal economy more generally, which sees the involvement of ad hoc, part-time or informally employed workers as a key element in neo-liberal privatisation agendas (Meagher 2013, Peck and Tickell 2002), in a process that is seen as eroding the rights of public sector workers in particular and workers on secure contracts more generally. Indeed, it was this perspective that informed the original Faisalabad research.

Many of the examples where there has been successful organisation on the part of waste workers, formal and informal, are predicated on the space for and nature civil society organisation, and the political orientation of the parties in power and of the state. A key factor in Pakistan when compared to elsewhere has been the minority status of public sector employees involved in SWM. They existed and still exist as a small minority in a universe where, the amendment to Section 295 of the Pakistan Penal Code, popularly known as the 'blasphemy laws', carries a mandatory death sentence. Further, the 1984 Qanun-e-Shahadat law of evidence deems the evidence of women and non-Muslims as less reliable than that of Muslim men; and where in everyday speech to this day, the terms Christian, *Churha* and sweeper are used interchangeably and invariably pejoratively. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the same degree of collective action and organisation has not been evident and resistance is more likely to resemble the weapons of the weak (Scott 1986).

Punjabi Christian Sweepers exercise agency themselves, and the everyday practices and rituals of waste disposal and collection have mutated and adapted to any changes in the overall SWM system over time. Preliminary research for the current project suggests that in Faisalabad, efforts to improve efficiency through privatisation have proceeded cautiously and incrementally, with minimal

disruption to existing, largely Christian employees, although there are fewer prospects and less security for those coming in behind them.

As we move forward three decades, there is also evidence of some visible collective action that addresses the minority and vulnerable status of sanitary workers, both those who sweep the streets but more particularly, those who clean the sewers. Notable has been the advocacy of Mary James Gill, Executive Director of the Centre for Law and Justice, a policy research and advocacy organisation based in Lahore. She is a Christian and between May 2013 and May 2018 was a Member of the Provincial Assembly in the Punjab, occupying a reserved seat for women. In both roles she works and has worked for the rights of religious minorities, including in 2017, launching an advocacy campaign called Sweepers are Superheroes. The aim was to render more visible the working conditions of sanitary workers and social attitudes towards them. However, in the context of Pakistan it is still necessary that people with stature and status speak on behalf of those whose resistance is otherwise confined to 'the quiet encroachment of the ordinary' (Bayat 2013).

As we investigate broader changes to SWM in urban Pakistan in Karachi and Faisalabad thirty years on, it is therefore important that among the higher profile given to the informal waste economy and pickers and recyclers within it, we also pay attention to the changing conditions and experience of Punjabi Christian sweepers and how their social status and opportunities or otherwise, intersect with the technical and institutional shifts taking place. It has not proved possible given the COVID-19 pandemic, to replicate our original methodologies such as 'follow the waste' and 'follow the sweeper'. Instead, we have interviewed sweepers in their colonies and paid attention to their perceptions of their lives and livelihoods and the impact of the continuities and discontinuities associated with them.

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