DIRTY SIGNS IN CLEAN CITIES: ON TRASH AS SOCIO-AESTHETIC CATEGORY IN INDIA

SANCHITA KHURANA

Khurana.sanchita@gmail.com

Sanchita Khurana is an Assistant Professor of English at Mata Sundri College for Women, University of Delhi. Her research interests include popular culture, aesthetic theory, literary criticism, theories of the public sphere, urban cultural studies, Dalit aesthetics, and visual and literary modernisms. She holds a PhD in Art History and Visual Studies from Jawaharlal Nehru University, where her dissertation examined the moral and political economy of commissioned street art in Delhi. Khurana's work has appeared in academic journals in the fields of urban studies, art history, English studies, and popular culture, as well as in mainstream publications such as *The Frontline*, *Huffington Post*, and *The Telegraph* (forthcoming Nov 2024). Her co-edited volume, *Form and Context: Modern Aesthetics and Literary Criticism*, was published by Worldview Books in 2023. Recognized for her comparative research on street art, she was awarded a Fulbright Doctoral Fellowship, which she completed at Columbia University in 2019, and a Charles Wallace Research Grant in 2020, which she pursued in London. With over a decade of research and teaching experience, Khurana also currently serves as the Secretary of the Research Advisory Council at Mata Sundri College for Women.

KEYWORDS

aesthetics, governmentality, caste, beautification, urban space

Dirty Signs in Clean Cities: On Trash as Socio-aesthetic Category in India

_Abstract

This _Article explores the intersection of urban beautification and caste in contemporary Indian cities, with specific focus on commissioned works of street art which are part of urban cleanliness campaigns. Over the past three decades, state-sponsored urban improvement schemes have aimed at eradicating perceived 'dirt' from cities, often employing street artists to promote urban beautification and cleanliness. Within the apparently inherent connection between beauty, sanitation and citizenship in Indian cities, an attempt at establishing an urban aesthetics of clean(s)ing is discernible, specifically in New Delhi. This _Article argues that the utilization of urban aesthetic practices like street art, particularly as a means to combat 'dirt,' emerges from caste-based and revanchist visions of the Indian public sphere. Through case studies, it shows how murals are employed to promote ideals of cleanliness that reflect upper-caste values that serve to transform urban spaces while policing oppressed-caste and working-class residents. Building on analyses of spatial transgression, such as Mary Douglas' idea of dirt as "matter out of place," Tim Cresswell's notion of graffiti as "words out of place," and D. Asher Ghertner's concept of "aesthetic governmentality," it explores the discursive procedures through which certain types of bodies and symbols are declared as illegal/illegible or dirty/disgusting in the Indian city. The _Article will show how street and other forms of art may embody and/or critique these prevalent notions of socio-spatial order.

"Whose idea of beauty and order will dominate
public space in the future?"—Judith Baca[1]

Fig. 1: *Ek kadam swachta ki or*, mural by painter Kafeel and St+Art India Foundation, Lodhi
Colony, Delhi, 2016, © Sanchita Khurana

1_Background: Beauty and Dirt

In India, various processes have congealed in the last three decades to rid cities of
perceived 'dirt.' This is seen in state-commissioned urban improvement schemes that
claim to instill regional and civic pride, as part of which street artists are
instrumentalized within urban beautification and cleanliness drives. Notably, it is the
Government of India's Swachh Bharat Mission[2] that inspires and/or commissions
most of these street art projects, hinting at an ideological relationship between ideas
of beautification and cleanliness in contemporary art and policy in India. Such
beautification through street art must also be read within the larger history of
beautification drives in Indian cities as well as the environmental activism that the
urban middle class took to in the 1990s, engaging in campaigns that were often led by
municipal authorities and supported by resident communities, aiming to enhance the
aesthetic appeal and environmental quality of the city. The Clean Delhi, Green Delhi
movement offers a notable case study in understanding the connection between urban
cleanliness initiatives and the dominance of the middle class in Indian cities. Scholars

of the Indian city, particularly Leela Fernandes, Amita Baviskar and Sanjay Srivastava, have shed light on how such initiatives can perpetuate middle-class dominance in urban space.[3] Sunalini Kumar has explored the complex relationship of environmental governance to urban citizenship in Indian cities, critically examining various anti-pollution initiatives aimed at improving air quality in Delhi and critiquing their middle-class bias.[4]

It is observed that such revanchist urban policies often target marginalized communities, framing their presence as disorderly and their environments as sources of 'dirt,' a sense perception that not only legitimizes their displacement, but also reinforces existing socio-economic hierarchies. The selective labeling of certain areas as dirty or unsightly serves to justify this, leading to the displacement of informal workers and slum residents, who often rely on the informal economy for their livelihood. Furthermore, the public discourse surrounding cleanliness in India has historically been intertwined with notions of purity and hygiene, which have been used to justify caste-based hierarchies and spatial segregation. Within this context, the socio-aesthetic category of trash becomes an important site of struggle for social visibility and urban inclusion, foregrounding the centrality of sensory experience and aesthetic judgments in Indian city-making. Street art and urban aesthetics, thus, may be viewed as instrumental to understanding urban hierarchies. However, Arijeet Mandal cautions against the aestheticization of space and politics, emphasizing its potential to perpetuate discrimination and vilification of marginalized groups,[5] just as Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his essay "Of Garbage, Modernity and the Citizen's Gaze," insists on the cultural specificity of public space in India, arguing that colonial and nationalist discourses often shape perceptions of cleanliness and filth here.[6] In the Indian context, the aesthetic categories of 'beauty' and 'dirt' are thus closely linked to the notion of an ordered public sphere rooted in upper-caste hygiene and middle-class civility, which is solidified by contemporary urban beautification practices, including street art.

Theoretically, trash has been interpreted both in terms of its materiality as well as for its potential significations in the realm of the immaterial. While all systems of order generation rely on practices of disposal and discarding, the visual appearance and reappearance of items considered as 'waste' may often challenge established categories of order, potentially leading to the threat of contamination and contagion,

evoking the intense emotion of disgust. This could happen both at the literal level and the philosophical level, unveiling the moral implications and political threat seemingly inherent in the concept of waste, which carries implications of disorder, contamination, and social marginalization, going beyond just the idea of trashed items. Within the context of urban development initiatives and sanitation campaigns, trash is often equated with, and equivocated as, 'dirt,' becoming a focal point in the pursuit of urban beautification. Semiotically thinking, signs and symbols associated with marginalized groups are often branded as 'dirty' or 'disgusting' based on subjective perceptions of beauty and cleanliness. Consequently, for instance, art that challenges prevailing urban aesthetics may face marginalization or legal scrutiny, as seen in cases of political graffiti in India. The prevalence of caste-based exclusions exacerbates this dynamic, as certain communities, most notably Dalits, continue to bear a disproportionate burden in the handling and disposing of trash. Dirt thus becomes intertwined with urban sanitation and caste identity in this context, where certain forms of corporeal presences find themselves "abjected"[7] into the realm of trash. While some urban texts and bodies are abjected or eliminated, symbols which reinforce aesthetic standards of upper-caste civility are encouraged and perpetuated.

2_The Art of Civility

In 2016, street art organization Delhi Street Art collaborated with the volunteer group "We Mean to Clean," which is committed to working towards *Swachch Bharat* (clean India) and climate justice. The partnership resulted in a cleaning and mural painting drive in Uttam Nagar, Delhi, aimed not only at aesthetic enhancement, but also at inspiring viewers to uphold cleanliness in their neighborhood. The conceptual assumption underlying this partnership seems to be that citizens or residents would be encouraged to refrain from littering near a beautifully adorned wall. But, the question that arises from the presumption of such an inherent connection between beautification and cleanliness is: If beauty is the function of orderliness and well-being, then, as D. Asher Ghertner asks, "how are coherent ways of seeing put in place for identifying order and disorder?"[8]

Recent statements by street art organizations as well as commissioning state bodies reveal a logic of moral and civilizational duty behind bringing art to cities. Murals painted by different organizations may have varying aesthetics, but they all hint at

largely the same theme—that of keeping cities, and, by extension, the nation clean. Many of them are, in fact, painted on public garbage bins, meta-referentially commenting on the presumed relationship between art and dirt. Founder of St+Art India Foundation, Hanif Kureshi, is quoted saying in an *Economic Times* article that with their art they "would not only spruce up the area but also get the message of Swachh Bharat Mission across,"[9] while Yogesh Saini of Delhi Street Art says in a personal interview that, "one thing which [I] always strive for while creating artwork is to change the notion of a space from being a filthy, dirty place into a clean space."[10] Art here seems to have been naturalized as the bearer of moral and civic sense, with the street artist, often upper-caste and middle-class, viewed as the embodiment of civility, and expected to indulge in a behavioral pedagogy for the resident community of a particular neighborhood. Ghertner analyses such "aesthetic governmentality,"[11] entailing the strategic use of visual aesthetics by both state and non-state actors, as a means of policing and controlling urban populations and behaviors.

In his short story "La Poubelle Agréée," Italo Calvino, through the example of "la poubelle agréée" (or "the agreeable trashcan"), has lyrically drawn out the interesting linkages between aesthetic choices and categories of what is acceptable in the city's eyes and what is not:

> It must be said, however, that the big *poubelle*, despite being undeniably our own private property, having been purchased in regular fashion on the open market, already looks, in terms of its shape and color (a dark green, military-uniform grey), like a piece of official city equipment, and proclaims the role that the public sphere, civic duty and the constitution of the polis play in all our lives. Our choosing it was not in fact the result of the arbitrariness of aesthetic taste […] but was dictated by respect for the city's laws.[12]

In a simple description of everyday life, he shows the reader how public categories of nuisance and dirt invade private choices, how the 'outside' of urban order coalesces with the 'inside' of domestic life to produce urban citizens. It may be said, therefore, that aesthetic preferences and dominant urban policy may not have as clear a boundary separating each other as one may think. Calvino's insightful intertwining of not just the public and the private, but also of the aesthetic with the realm of (municipal) law, speaks to the role of urban aesthetics in social reproduction.

Redolent of Ghertner and Calvino's ideas, contemporary state-commissioned street art in India seems to attempt to codify civic behavior, not only by directly linking beauty to sanitation, but also by propagating the view that beauty and art are edifying.

Whereas St+Art India Foundation's festivals are "built on the foundation of the Swachh Bharat Mission (and to) focus on creatively spreading the message of maintaining a cleaner physical environment,"[13] Delhi Street Art's idea of successful art is tied to its ability to clean up a dirty space.[14] Aesthetic practices deployed to combat 'dirt' link cleanliness with citizen behavior and reassert the transcendental power of art, while concealing the material and ideological conditions behind it. It becomes clear that such city practices make good use of the abstract notion of beauty by positing it as inherently linked to cleanliness and, thus, to urban order. Eveline Dürr and Gordon M. Winder have already explored the complex relationship between cleanliness, dirt, and urban pollution in the context of Mexico, showing how differences are constructed socially and politically, and stressing the importance of considering both the material and symbolic dimensions of dirt.[15]

As suggested above, the definitions of beauty in the Indian public sphere are often derived from caste-based understandings of purity and pollution. Street art's role in combating dirt perpetuates this association, linking urban beautification with hygiene and reinforcing class and caste-based hierarchies in city-making. The interplay between beautification, cleanliness, and semiotics reflects a broader hegemonic agenda which has manifested itself through, what Ghertner calls, a "rule by aesthetics."[16] This may be contextualized within the rise of a self-aware citizen politics in India since the 1990s, which articulated itself through a politics of spatial purification as well as an assertion of middle-class and upper-caste dominance in public spaces. As part of this, Indian cities have witnessed a surge in participatory governance and urban improvement schemes, where concerns have gradually shifted towards superficial urban orderliness, extending beyond physical reconstruction towards regulating public aesthetics in alignment with moral and civic sensibilities. This shift towards a regime of urban policy-making based solely on aesthetic judgments has prompted some scholarly scrutiny from perspectives of class and caste.[17] Ghertner points out:

> This discourse tied deficiencies in environmental well-being and appearance to the presence of slums, largely through the legal category of 'nuisance.' Before 2000, nuisance-causing activities like open defecation or unhygienic living conditions did not provide sufficient justification for demolishing a slum […] Today […] the look of the slum alone confirms its illegality, and the calculative practices of producing expert knowledge of a population group now consists of a

judge's aesthetic judgment of that group's contribution to the overall security and vitality of the city.[18]

Beautification initiatives, like the state-citizen led Clean Delhi, Green Delhi campaign, for instance, and urban renewal projects tied to events like the Asian and Commonwealth Games, have frequently justified the eviction of the poor or the demolition of slum settlements as they are perceived as sources of dirt.[19] Similar in methods and intent to these projects, contemporary street art may also be seen as instrumental in spatial clean(s)ing and policing of social conduct through the shaping of aesthetic perceptions. The recent and vigorous introduction of street art in such spaces as Sona Gachi of Kolkata, Dharavi in Mumbai, and the Tihar and Mandoli Jails, as well as slum areas in Nizammudin and Raghubir Basti in Delhi, as seen in the projects of both St+Art India Foundation and Delhi Street Art, while activating a narrative of populist access, undergirds the governmental expediency of street art for neoliberal governments.[20] Referencing to their work at the slum of Vasant Vihar Coolie Camp, Delhi's "first street art village," Yogesh Saini of Delhi Street Art says that the mission was "to get the locals involved in keeping their bastis clean and also making it more colorful […] when I visited two three months after the initiative, I saw that some people had started painting their own walls."[21]

While it may not entirely be the case that by participating in these projects, the locals uncritically reproduce and/or embody the citizen subjectivity that is intended for them by the artists or the state, art does seem to act here as the sanctimonious site through which to discipline the masses into civility. The responsibility of the populace seems to be easily governable subjects, and that of the street artist to carry forward the cultural mission of art. In another interview entitled "Our Cities, Our Responsibilities: It's Time to Act," Saini highlights an instance where they were urged by residents to resolve the issue of public urination by beautifying an area. However, he acknowledges the challenge of altering ingrained behaviors, pointing out the limitations of signage effectiveness.[22] One is reminded here of Mary Schmidt Campbell and Randy Martin's notion of public art as "civically ennobling," where artists fulfill a responsibility to society by bringing culture to communities.[23] Street artists, often privileged in caste and class as may be seen from a study of their professional status and surnames (Saini, Kureshi, etc.), embody these civically ennobling efforts to impart 'culture' to the 'community.'[24] While endeavors like

implementing street art in poorer localities might conceptually revolve around being inclusive, they predominantly serve neoliberal agendas geared towards the management of populations and pollution, both bodily and linguistic.

Additionally, this "aesthetic governmentality," to re-employ Ghertner's term, must also be contextualized within the state's tolerance of other illegal practices in various contexts. Ironically, the Indian state often pardons infrastructural signs or projects, like malls and temples, if they are deemed aesthetically pleasing or populist in their politics, despite their riven legal histories, while urban symbols like slums or mosques are swiftly labeled illegal. In November 2019, amidst student protests against fee hikes at Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi, the university administration filed a legal complaint over graffiti defacing a statue of Swami Vivekananda on campus. This sparked media debates on the ethics of protest, with public anger directed at students for vandalizing public property. However, this outrage contrasted sharply with the state and public celebration following the Supreme Court's verdict on the Babri Masjid demolition, just days earlier. This revealed contradictions in the very definition of what constitute populist acts of reclamation, exposing the moral and legal ambiguity around the erection/erasure of icons and acts of effacement/defacement in the Indian public sphere in general. Understanding protests like the ones against the 2019 Supreme Court order to demolish the Dalit-revered Guru Ravidass Temple in Tughlaqabad, Delhi, requires recognizing these urban contradictions. Despite reasons of illegality/deviation from the Delhi Master Plan, the temple's allowance to remain highlights a less-than-rational conception of legality in the public domain today.

Many state-commissioned street art and urban beautification projects often enroll artists who formerly practiced illegal graffiti in Indian cities, an act further legitimizing illegality into legibility. Moreover, the use of illegality to demolish/efface certain aesthetic symbols in Indian cities is both challenged and reinforced by the proliferation of newer, 'illegally' but legitimately created icons, like street art districts or the Swaminarayan Akshardham Temple in New Delhi, or those that are 'revealed' (if not produced), such as the discovery of a Hindu *shivalingam* in the Gyanvapi Mosque in Varanasi. This new influx of iconography, particularly through popular artistic forms like murals, temples, statues, or tile paintings, may be read as an attempt to reverse the history of iconoclasm associated with India's Islamic

past, despite the most recent instances of icon vandalism emerging from right-wing groups. These paradoxes highlight a rule of visual perception wherein political or marginalized aesthetic expressions are branded as illegal or vulgar, defacement or vandalism, while populist aesthetics are glorified as beauty or cultural revival. They also underscore the complex semantics of 'dirt' in contemporary urban discourse, revealing shifting meanings assigned to urban Others based on political, social, and cultural contexts.

3_Signs out of Place

Mary Douglas defines dirt as "matter out of place," positing that it "is essentially disorder […] it exists in the eye of the beholder."[25] If dirt signifies disorder, then cleanliness is order, both notions contingent upon historical and political context. Associated with dirt is also the powerful emotion of disgust, which often defines social boundaries, but also plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of trash. Terms like 'white trash' in the Western context reveal how societal attitudes towards certain classes can manifest in the labeling and treatment not just of discarded items, but also of individuals. The fear of contamination is often associated with certain socio-economic groups and contributes to the stigmatization of waste while reinforcing spatial segregation and highlighting how class- and caste-based attitudes may extend beyond the realm of the material to include immaterial discourses around individuals, texts and spaces.

Scholars across the globe have discussed this phenomenon through studies of urban hygienization. For instance, in Brazil, poverty is so closely linked with notions of dirt that *favelas* (informal settlements) are pathologized as sources of disease and crime, perceived as contagious areas to be isolated from the rest of the city. Numerous *favelas* have been repeatedly demolished or relocated from city centers under the guise of beautification, mirroring the removal of slum settlements in Delhi. Garmany and Richmond propose that in a broader post-colonial urban context, the term 'hygienization' could encompass situations where marginalized communities are forcefully displaced, often by state authorities or with their collaboration, in the name of urban beautification and restoring order.[26] In India, the term 'urban beautification' has long served as a euphemism for the demolition of slums, a practice that predates the Emergency era, but has been particularly pronounced since 1975.[27] Discussions on

the 'cleaning up' of Indian cities emphasize that cleanliness encompasses more than just the absence of dirt; it involves a "politics of visibilizing and forgetting" the poor, as noted by Leela Fernandes.[28] Arjun Appadurai further highlights the heightened concerns of Mumbai's middle class, regarding practices like open defecation, urination, and spitting, which reflect a broader discourse on urban cleanliness and perpetuate entrenched associations between dirt and oppressed-caste individuals.[29] As discussed above, Ghertner demonstrates how the discourse of 'nuisance'—an aesthetic category linked to sensory aversion—shapes casteist and classist discourses about slums, influencing official policies by circulating between Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs), the media, and the government.[30] From the linkages between beautification drives, cleanliness, and semiotics in Delhi, it may be derived that there is an attempt at establishing an aesthetics that orders, and facilitates not just the cleaning of, but also a cleansing in, the city. The re-ordering of the environment is visible in the multiple movements to curb not only literal garbage, but also to sanitize the city of certain types of bodies and symbols.

In a press release in February 2016 about the Lodhi Art District in Delhi, Arjun Bahl, co-founder and Festivals Director of St+Art India Foundation, emphasized art's potential to positively impact cities and promote environmental awareness, seeking to continue collaboration with the Swachh Bharat Mission. However, three years later, in a different context in the same city, circulars issued by the Director of *Swachh* JNU in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), under central government control, took a contrasting approach. The circulars cited the Delhi Prevention of Defacement of Property Act, 2007, warning of penalties for defacement, and announced the university's intention to remove posters, graffiti art, and bills from campus walls to clean public spaces. These contradictory actions suggest a tension within the Indian state's relationship to urban aesthetics and cleanliness.

While initiatives like the Swachh Bharat Mission may prioritize the visual enhancement of public spaces through art, other government bodies enforce laws against defacement and political graffiti. This tension reflects broader debates around the role of art in public spaces and raises questions about whose voices and expressions are prioritized in urban environments as well as how government policies navigate competing interests and ideologies. It would also make sense to understand this shifting symbolic economy in Delhi within and against traditional debates about

art-led gentrification, and juxtapose urban renewal against communal, class and caste othering in cities, all of which street art seems to be uncritically partaking in. Delhi's unique case of gentrification and revanchism, of course, needs also to be rethought in terms of its post-colonial history of hygiene, and the 'right to the city' discourse specific to Delhi. In previous research on graffiti and street art in Delhi's urban villages, I studied the instrumentality of street art in leading to cultural gentrification, notwithstanding its specific geo-social connotations in the Indian context.[31]

Graffiti, in particular, has historically been met with a discourse of disorder in the West.[32] Intruding on the controlled nature of 'beauty' as well as the order of urban environments, it compels those that benefit from this order to respond to it as if it was an ugly and illegible threat to their (logocentric/aesthetic) domination. By defying norms of urban beauty and order, graffiti artists signify a break from urban language itself. Understanding the history of graffiti helps one gauge what the menace of graffiti truly represents to city authorities and why there is so much investment in curbing it. Drawing on Mary Douglas' conception of "matter out of place," Tim Cresswell applies thinking to the symbolic boundaries of the city itself, and the ways in which graffiti writers in New York questioned them; he refers to graffiti as "words out of place."[33] A pathological association of it with crime, dirt, and protest, has been very common in government attitudes, but city governments the world over have been working with individual street artists and street art organizations to beautify neighborhoods and to prevent and clean graffiti. In my research on the emergence of the hip-hop style of graffiti in Delhi, I had drawn parallels between the pathologization of this particular art form (for its association with the black community) and the ways in which certain (particularly caste-based) representations in India are automatically associated with dirt and disease. One program comparable to the Swachh Bharat Mission is the Jersey City Mural Arts Program, started in 2013 to beautify Jersey City neighborhoods. Spearheaded by Brooke Hansson, aide to the Mayor of Jersey City and funded by a state grant called the Clean Communities Grant, the Program links established and emerging local, national and international mural artists with property owners city-wide as part of an innovative beautification program that reduces graffiti, engages local residents and is transforming Jersey City into an outdoor art gallery.

In 2019, the Swachh Bharat Mission marked India's milestone achievement of being declared Open Defecation Free (ODF). Interestingly, the Mission extends beyond cleanliness and sanitation, shaping a semiotic language through urban beautification. One strategy involves employing former graffiti writers as street artists, with the resulting street art often featuring Mahatma Gandhi as a symbol of cleanliness. In 2016, signboard painter Kafeel collaborated with St+Art India Foundation to create a mural in Lodhi Colony, Delhi, titled *Swachh Bharat*. This mural depicts Gandhi's smiling profile alongside the slogan "Clean Lodhi, Clean Delhi, Clean India" in English and "*ek kadam swachhta ki or*" (one more step towards cleanliness) in the Devanagari script, the Swachh Bharat Mission's tagline. Additionally, the mural incorporates the national flag, silhouettes of men cleaning, and the program's symbol, Gandhi's spectacles with "Swachh Bharat" written inside the lenses. Similarly, during the St+Art Bengaluru festival in 2018, street artist Daku, formerly a graffiti writer, created an installation featuring cut-outs of Gandhi holding a broom amidst piles of garbage across the city. Gandhi was depicted wearing orange sanitation-worker attire adorned with the Swachh Bharat Mission logo, draped in an off-white shawl and *dhoti*. Titled "If you don't, I will," the artwork aimed at commemorating Gandhi's 147th birth anniversary while raising awareness about cleanliness.

What stands out in these artworks is not only the presence of Gandhi, a figure laden with complexities regarding caste and sanitation, but also the moralistic tone associated with his invocation. The intended audience here is the upper-caste citizen, and the shock value of the artwork stems from the perceived improbability of Gandhi engaging in manual labor, specifically sweeping the city streets. It is important to note that the viewer addressed by Daku's portrayal of Gandhi is the same individual who routinely encounters images of actual sanitation workers risking their lives by entering manholes to clean sewage without proper safety equipment, often resulting in fatalities, images which circulate routinely in the news and fail to evoke much indignation or shock. Therefore, it is not difficult to perceive the shock value of this artwork as being rooted in a Brahminical notion of urban sanitation. By uncritically referencing sanitation work without acknowledging its caste connection, these street art works bypass the caste of labor.

For context, the Indian caste system deeply influences the allocation of manual sanitation tasks despite legal bans. The Dalit community and Indigenous Adivasi, designated as "Scheduled Tribes" in India's Constitution, often find themselves in the role of street sweepers, tasked with the removal of garbage, dirt, and waste left behind by upper-caste citizens. This labor, though socially devalued, holds economic significance as it serves to maintain cleanliness for the dominant castes. The artistic celebration of a sanitation scheme by street art organizations in India, while overlooking the labor of sanitation workers, risks reinforcing the caste-based division that assigns Dalit workers to handle the city's waste. Joel Lee's exploration of "odor and order" suggests that caste, among other factors, underpins the spatial-sensory order in Indian cities.[34] One may interpret this within the history of Indian urban planning, which is influenced by caste-based and colonial hygiene norms, shaping an urban sensorium that assigns certain spaces to specific classes and castes. Street art funded by the Swachh Bharat scheme claims to be an initiative to make art accessible, while access to public spaces remains restricted and precarious for the masses, reinforcing what Lee refers to as the "infrastructure of sanitation" in Indian cities.[35]

Former Delhi-based graffiti artist Samita Chatterjee observes that the contemporary street art movement, as opposed to hip-hop or political graffiti, emphasizes a "civilized" appearance, reflecting a broader shift in India towards a sensory urban language aligned with the dominant order and "cleaning" anything that challenges it.[36] Beneath absolute concepts of beauty, art, dirt, and defacement, lie unstable binaries dictated by moral, ideological, and economic imperatives. Some forms of cultural expression, such as state-commissioned murals featuring populist imagery in designated street art spaces, are officially recognized as art and beautification; conversely, political graffiti or slums are condemned as offensive or vandalism. Trash here is a manifestation of visual disorder and aesthetic transgression, which highlights the complex interplay between morality, ideology, and economics in shaping perceptions of beauty and illegality in India today. Within this framework of perception, political graffiti and slums, just as the Dalit body, are 'signs out of place,' disrupting and revealing the contradictions and continuities within the neoliberal symbolic economy.

4_Outcast(e) Corporealities

Despite the invisibility of older forms of untouchability and the illegality of manual scavenging today, Dalit workers are still forced to clean sewers manually without safety provisions.[37] In fact, these jobs have increased after neoliberal urbanization policies, further entrenching specific castes in sanitation roles.[38] Indian anthropologist Shreyas Sreenath's recent research illuminates the resurgence of urban manual scavenging through an examination of three Dalit fatalities within Bengaluru's sewage treatment plants and underground drainage networks. By tracing these grim incidents, he foregrounds how Dalit bodies, often relegated to the realm of untouchability, are themselves systematically exploited to sustain urban infrastructures, underscoring the intricate relationship between urban modernity and caste labor.[39]

The Swachh Bharat Mission has been criticized for its facetious approach to the issue of sanitation with its focus on making cities look cleaner and presentable, as part of which one often sees photographs of ministers with brooms in hand, which chimes well with the 'spectacularity' of cleanliness that Indian cities have witnessed in other instances of cleansing. An EPW Engage analysis notes that the scheme overlooks the caste implications of cleanliness, further marginalizing Dalit sanitation workers and invisibilizing their work.[40] The campaign, with its slogan "Toilets first, temples after," initially appears to prioritize basic sanitation needs over religious structures. However, the juxtaposition of purity and hygiene within this context carries implications beyond mere sanitation, considering that in India, the concept of cleanliness has always had a spiritual and moral dimension too. Ravichandran Bathran, now Raees Mohammad, highlights that dirt remains intertwined with religious notions of purity and pollution in India, thereby reinforcing caste-based associations.[41] These associations are so deeply ingrained that Dalit individuals, including children, may face violence for defecating in open spaces, particularly near upper-caste properties or in public areas.

It must be noted that the Indian caste system, alongside other social hierarchies, molds and relies on the senses and emotions to regenerate dominant sensoria and affects through time and space. The concept of *ghṛṇā* (disgust), thus, embodies behaviors commonly associated with practices of untouchability. In fact, the disgust toward bodily functions in the Indian context, Mandal points out, reveals a glimpse of

the collapse of the caste order, evoking fear of pollution from the Other as it violates not just the individual, but the entire social structure for eternity.[42] Within the framework of the caste hierarchy, Dalits face a paradoxical devaluation of their physical selves, with their bodies deemed inherently polluting or contaminating, and leading to their segregation from mainstream society. The designation Dalit, signifying a condition of degradation or subjugation, connotes the physical debilitation and suffering experienced by oppressed-caste individuals. These associations originate from Brahmanical concepts of purity and pollution, wherein specific activities and substances are deemed impure or contaminating. Informed by this ideology, Brahmanical prohibitions have historically categorized the Dalit community as 'mobile dirt,' which emphasizes how this impurity was not static but traveled with Dalit individuals, shaping their interactions and relationships within society. In fact, the Dalit body was often characterized by distinctive visual attributes, such as dark skin and sometimes the presence of symbolic objects. For instance, the broom becomes an integral part of the Dalit body, symbolizing pollution and impurity while also invoking feelings of 'disgust' within the caste-based sensorium. This characterization suggests that the Dalit identity was constructed as inherently impure and contaminating, much like dirt itself.

Viscera and the body thus hold profound significance in comprehending Dalit epistemology. This is primarily because Dalit identity has historically been diminished to their physical selves. Dalits were mandated to be separated spatially from caste Hindus to prevent any contamination of purity, enforcing Brahmanical prohibitions on touch. This segregation extended to various aspects of daily life, from living spaces to social interactions of the Dalit community, who "count amongst those most at risk of being identified as waste, and put to use (recycled?) in the work camp."[43] The dynamics of urban regeneration and revanchism in Indian cities, deeply entwined with their colonial and post-colonial history of urban hygiene, are still represented by the reliance of upper-caste urban dwellers on lower-caste migrant laborers for tasks like urban waste disposal, domestic work, and city security: "[I]t is precisely because these spaces are impure that they can be left to fester until someone of the right caste comes by to clean up."[44] Consequently, thus, while waste is merely a metaphor in the context of hygienization programs in, say, Brazil or Mexico, it becomes a metonym in the context of India, with human waste itself being signified

by a category of humans. Given that within the Indic—and particularly the Hindu—context, purity is tightly linked to hygiene and cleanliness, religious notions about touch pertinently come together with twenty-first-century ideas about the 'right to the city,' to shape a selectively sanitizing public sphere that is sustained by social segregation and untouchability, producing for Indian Dalits what Orlando Patterson has referred to as "social death" in the context of slavery.[45]

Western philosophers such as Zygmunt Bauman and Giorgio Agamben have delved into the concept of humans as discarded or wasted entities within socio-political hygiene discourses in general, while Arjun Dangle specifically highlights the exclusionary challenges Dalits encounter due to their perceived polluting presence, underscoring the association of the Dalit body with waste, microbes, animals, and the cycles of life and death.[46] The continued relegation of Dalit bodies to peripheral areas, whether in rural or urban contexts, reflects a larger disregard for corporeal inclusion and dignity of life. Despite their critical role in urban productivity, Dalits face increased precarization through systemic discrimination and stigmatization associated with waste and pollution management, including the disposal of fecal matter and deceased organisms. This juxtaposition underscores a paradox wherein the very underclass working for these initiatives sustains urban modernity, while simultaneously being perceived as the very cause of urban disorder. This ambivalent relationship may be understood in the violence directed at Dalits and the relegation of Dalit bodies to "spaces of abjection" within both urban and national spaces (and citizenship).[47] One could argue that in a manner akin to certain aesthetic symbols being feared for their illegibility and subsequently legitimized through legality, specific bodies that pose a threat to the Brahminical social hierarchy are delegitimized [and outcast(e)] by rendering them illegible within the urban structure.[48]

Barbara Creed elucidates the concept of the abject by asserting that it poses a threat to life, necessitating its complete exclusion from the realm of the living subject. This exclusion involves forcibly removing the abject from the body and relegating it to a distant, imaginary border that separates the self from that which is perceived as a threat.[49] This notion, as first articulated by French feminist Julia Kristeva, forms the basis of exclusionary societies, a sentiment echoed by Mary Douglas, who contends that pollution poses a danger in societies where social boundaries are rigidly defined. Assa Doron and Ira Raja argue in their essay "The Cultural Politics of Shit: Class,

Gender and Public Space in India" that Douglas "was especially incisive when discussing the polluting nature of bodily fluids, such as feces, urine and spit, all of which are seen to press against the porous boundaries of the body. But what Douglas found particularly instructive was the Hindu caste system, and its concepts of purity and pollution, which not only governed individual conduct, but were also mirrored in the body politic."[50] The delineation between castes serves to exclude untouchables out of fear of contamination, as if their physical proximity to excrement could taint the subjectivity of others, rendering it impure; hence, "so long as the removal of human excreta is assigned to the impure castes, the practice of defecating in public does nothing to undermine upper-caste purity. If anything, upper-caste 'purity' is seen to be reinforced by having the 'untouchables' perform the unclean task for them."[51]

In Indian society, these imaginary borders expand from the corporeal into the social body, with caste, in the public sphere, understood as a sensory entity. From this perspective, it may be argued that Dalits internalize a sense of abjection, existing in a compromised state of subjectivity in their association with filth and impurity. However, while abject objects, populations, and practices are commonly thought of as absolutely excluded from normative and sanitized orderings of the body, the household, the city, and the nation, theorists of abjection point to the impossibility of permanently excluding the abject.[52] The defining quality of the abject, then, is not an essential trait that elicits feelings of disgust or horror, but rather anything that muddles normative borders and divisions, and thus threatens a breakdown in conventional ways of making meaning in the world. In their article, "The Afterlives of 'Waste': Notes from India for a Minor History of Capitalist Surplus," Vinay Gidwani and Rajyashree R. Reddy, who view 'waste' as the political counterpart to capitalist 'value,' trace the trajectory of waste in India through various historical junctures, highlighting how it embodies superfluity, excess, or detritus outside the realm of 'value,' only to resurface unexpectedly.[53] This continual insistence of the abject is not just about negation but comes to be a productive process through which prohibitions, taboos, and boundaries are established or contested. As something that is repressed for its very threat of return, the abject is policed through practices of civility as seen in the beautification of 'filthy' spaces and the sanitization of 'beauty' itself.

If street art is rooted in the transgression of the institution of the gallery, and works in conscious opposition to its elite nature, then it may be understood to be continuing the legacy of pop art. But if its main purpose is to shock the viewer into acting and making them responsible, as it seems to be in the works of art that attempt to deal with the issue of urban cleanliness, then it may also be understood in the genealogy of the modern avant-garde, whose main aim was supposedly to generate a rupture in the viewer's consciousness. But these provocations, such as making Gandhi hold a broom (as discussed in the sections above) or making actual sanitation workers pose with brooms next to painted street art works (as was seen in the Lodhi Art District in Delhi), may be reiterating certain moral values and may even, as Grant Kester writes, "perform an affirmative function, reinforcing a particular sense of identity among art world viewers."[54] This literal and metaphorical iconization of the broom occludes its relation to caste-based assignation of professional occupation in public space. Ravichandran, critiquing the use of this symbol, points out that the Dalit population involved in manual scavenging could never use the broom as a political weapon—it is the weapon of oppression for them.[55] The generation of a visual sensorium through such street art that fails to challenge the basis of structural exploitation, then, might be another way of reproducing the caste order, "in the viscera, as it were."[56]

5_Conclusion: An Abject Aesthetics

Contemporary urban governance in India promotes the idea that urban beauty and art are morally uplifting, often embedding this perspective within urban improvement schemes. These schemes have frequently been used as pretexts for demolishing slum settlements or punishing political graffiti, primarily guided by subjective perceptions of beauty and disgust. The discourse on cleanliness in India is deeply ingrained in notions of purity and hygiene, historically reinforcing social hierarchies based on caste and class. The instrumentalization of street art as a tool for beautification and sanitation projects, particularly exemplified in initiatives like the Swachh Bharat Mission, embodies an aesthetic governmentality. Not just this, the glorification of sanitation schemes and the aestheticization of cleanliness often overlook the materiality of caste labor, reinforcing caste hierarchies. Furthermore, the selective labeling of certain aesthetic expressions as dirt within dominant perception reflects underlying caste ideologies, highlighting the contested nature of urban representation

and the politics of beautification. It thus becomes possible to consider beautifying practices such as contemporary street art as a tool to generate and/or strengthen a sanitized urban sensorium suited to the dominant order.

Trash, within the socio-aesthetic context outlined in the _Article, emerges as more than just physical waste; it embodies symbolic representations of power and marginalization. The treatment of trash, whether in the form of slum settlements labeled as 'illegal,' or political graffiti deemed 'vandalism,' reflects deeply ingrained caste ideologies behind notions of cleanliness and order. In the context of waste and pollution management in India, abjection illuminates how certain populations, particularly Dalits, who disproportionately engage in hazardous tasks such as manual scavenging, are tagged as dirty and are subsequently further marginalized. This association reinforces societal hierarchies and power dynamics that perpetuate caste-based discrimination, relegating Dalits to the status of 'wasted' bodies in society; "people who defecate in the open, it would seem, themselves become waste matter," as Doron and Raja put it.[57] Abjection, therefore, also extends to symbolic associations with dirt or filth, marking populations like scavengers, trash collectors, and minorities as abject, invoking categories of art/beauty and dirt/vulgarity to define socio-spatial inequalities. In contemporary street art projects, Brahminical ideas of urban order intersect with upper-class urban revanchism to reshape urban spaces and marginalize working-class and oppressed-caste residents.

Owing to its philosophical and transcendental associations with well-being and public welfare, resistance to the notion of beauty is often limited. By divorcing politics from beauty, its implications become obscured, as commitments to beauty are perceived to transcend socio-material conditions. Scholar Umar Nizar critiques how the autonomy of beauty perpetuates a caste monopoly in the contemporary Indian art world, hindering critical reflection and allowing politics to be aestheticized.[58] It is thus observed that even when art by upper-caste artists endeavors to depict Dalit lives, it often fails to escape predetermined categories of beauty and vulgarity. For example, the Bollywood film *Chamkila* (directed by Indian filmmaker Imtiaz Ali) provokes a socially reformative rethinking of moralizing ideas on aesthetic categories of beauty and vulgarity, classical and popular, academic and commercial. It goes even so far as to 'popularize' Dalit pop singer Amar Singh Chamkila's vulgar Punjabi lyrics by making translations/transliterations available on screen in Hindi and

English. However, in failing to reference the radical stance of Chamkila's 'vulgar' aesthetics as a Dalit singer, it falls back into the trap of Brahminical civility, offering a generalized portrayal of class and gender dynamics without delving into the critical issue of caste.[59] This raises questions about whether upper-caste Indian cinema, often associated with artistry in opposition to commercial cinema, merely appropriates the 'vulgar' to maintain alternative notions of aesthetic civility and disruption, ultimately failing to engage with the sociological implications of dirt.

Dalit art and literature, on the other hand, challenge the depoliticization of beauty by redefining it through language, theme, and tonal experimentation. This involves utilizing elicitors of disgust as a literary device to evoke contemplative aesthetic pleasure rather than relying solely on explicit language. The poet that comes to mind immediately is Dalit Marathi poet Namdeo Dhasal, whose provocative and explicit verses delved into the fringes of society, including pimps, prostitutes, and criminals, sparking both controversy and introspection. His poetry shook the Marathi literary world with its stark language, evoking *bibhatsa rasa* or disgust. Sudhir Arora asserts that Dhasal initiated a guerrilla-style resistance against the passive and sanitized realm of his literary audience right from the outset, single-handedly challenging effete upper-caste and middle-class sensibilities.[60] The use of moral disgust and discomfort in art and literature serves to provoke a sense of repulsion towards dominant social codes and highlights the gendered and caste-based aspects of disgust. In Dalit art and literature, these abject aesthetics play a significant role in expressing the lived experiences of marginalization, oppression, and resistance, serving to disrupt normative boundaries and challenge the sanitization of caste-based oppression. In another research paper, I argue that a "redistribution of the caste sensible" is attained within Dalit literature not solely by resisting assimilation into universal aesthetic norms like beauty and harmony, but also through the deliberate incorporation and allusion to cultural symbols and ritual practices significant to the Dalit community.[61]

Similarly, Dalit photographer Sudharak Olwe offers non-spectacular, caste-specific photographs of Dalit sanitation workers, providing a more nuanced perspective on their everyday reality, in contrast to the treatment of sanitation in art works by St+Art India Foundation and Delhi Street Art, which notably overlook caste labor, even when collaborating with lower-caste communities. Olwe's photographs compel viewers to confront the material conditions of sanitation work, going beyond

facial expressions and directing attention to the worker's body immersed in human waste.[62] Aesthetic resistance may also be seen in the rise of anti-caste mural art on JNU campus in response to the increasing hygienization of Indian university campuses and, concomitantly, the public sphere in general. As the social makeup of students has changed since the institution of the Mandal Commission Report in India, so has the dominant symbolic discourse with slogans and graffiti beginning to feature Birsa Munda, Jyotirao Phule, and B. R. Ambedkar instead of traditional political or philosophical figures.[63]

In this sense, to quote Ghertner again, "new forms of aesthetic counter-conduct aimed at challenging the image of the world-class city are beginning to emerge,"[64] since critical engagement with the nexus of aesthetics, sanitation, and caste is essential to challenging dominant narratives and advocating for a more inclusive urban sphere. These emerging discourses challenge Brahminical notions of aesthetics and beauty by elevating the uncomfortable, the vulgar, the political, the abject, and the ugly as forms of art. This produces an aesthetics of abjection that challenges traditional concepts of dirt, humiliation, and disgust, revealing the deep-seated upper-caste efforts to beautify, sanitize, and control urban spaces in India. Examining waste and trash through the lens of Dalit abjection involves recognizing the ongoing influence of non-discursive and sensory elements in sense-making processes. This complex interplay often disrupts established meanings, exposing the fragility of socio-aesthetic norms and making the legal ambiguous, while the state renders the illegal legible. Only through such disruptions can one hope to dismantle caste hierarchy and confront the concurrent aestheticization of politics and depoliticization of the public sphere in India.

_Endnotes

1   Qtd. in Suzanne Lacy, *Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 38.

2   The Swachh Bharat Mission or Abhiyan (SBA) is a nation-wide campaign launched by the central government in 2014, that aims at cleaning up cities and increasing sanitation facilities.

3   For more discussion, see Amita Baviskar, "Between Violence and Desire: Space, Power, and Identity in the Making of Metropolitan Delhi," *International Social Science Journal* 55, no. 175 (2003): 89–98; Arjun Appadurai, "Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai," *Public Culture* 12, no. 3 (2000): 627–651; Karen Coelho and T Venkat, "The Politics of Civil Society: Neighbourhood Associationism in Chennai," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44,

no. 26/27 (2009): 358–367; Partha Chatterjee, "Are Indian Cities Becoming Bourgeois At Last?," in *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*, ed. Partha Chatterjee (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 131–147; Sanjay Srivastava, "Urban Spaces, Disney-Divinity and Moral Middle Classes in Delhi," *Economic and Political Weekly* 9, no. 26/27 (2009): 338–345, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40279794>.

4   Sunalini Kumar, "Environmental Activism, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere in Delhi," in *Urbanising Citizenship: Contested Spaces in Indian Cities*, eds. Renu Desai and Romola Sanyal (Delhi and London: Sage, 2012), 135–160.

5   Arijeet Mandal, "*Ghiñn*: A Reading of Disgust as a Literary Device in Subimal Mishra's Short Fiction," *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry* 9, no. 2 (2023): 55–66, here: 55.

6   Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Of Garbage, Modernity and the Citizen's Gaze," *Economic and Political Weekly* 27, no. 10/11 (1992): 541–547.

7   Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

8   D. Asher Ghertner, *Rule by Aesthetics: World-class City Making in Delhi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4.

9   Nidhi Sharma, "Government Finalises Lodhi Road for Common Secretariat to Bring Together Scattered Ministries," *The Economic Times*, June 2, 2016, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/government-finalises-lodhi-road-for-common-secretariat-to-bring-together-scattered-ministries/articleshow/52544951.cms?from=mdr>.

10   Yogesh Saini in telephone interview with author, November 24, 2018.

11   D. Asher Ghertner, "Calculating Without Numbers: Aesthetic Governmentality in Delhi's Slums," *Economy and Society* 39, no. 2 (2010): 185–217.

12   Italo Calvino, *The Road to San Giovanni*, trans. Tim Parks (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 93.

13   Qtd. in Geetha Jayaraman, "Arty Street-spiration," *The Asian Age*, January 28, 2016.

14   Interview with Yogesh Saini, 2018.

15   See Eveline Dürr and Gordon M. Winder, "Garbage at Work: Ethics, Subjectivation and Resistance in Mexico," in *Purity and Danger Now: New Perspectives*, eds. Robbie Duschinsky, Simone Schnall and Daniel Weiss (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2016), 52–68.

16   Ghertner, *Rule by Aesthetics*.

17   See Arvind Rajagopal, "The Emergency as Pre-history of the New Indian Middle Class," *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no. 5 (2011): 1003–1049. Doi: 10.1017/S0026749X10000314; Ghertner, *Rule by Aesthetics*; Loretta Lees, "The Geography of Gentrification: Thinking Through Comparative Urbanism," *Progress in Human Geography* 36, no. 2 (2021): 155–171.

18   Ghertner, "Calculating Without Numbers," 22–23.

19   See Veronique Dupont, "Slum Demolitions in Delhi Since the 1990s: An Appraisal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 28 (2008): 79–87, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40277717>; Amita Baviskar, "Delhi's Date with the Commonwealth Games 2010," in *Games Monitor*, August 11, 2007, <http://www.gamesmonitor.org.uk/archive/node/488.html>.

20   See Paola Merli, "Evaluating the Social Impact of Participation in Arts Activities: A Critical Review of François Matarasso's *Use or Ornament?*," *Variant* 19 (2002): 107–118; Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari, eds., *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (New York: Zed Books, 2001); Andrea

Cornwall, "Introduction: New Democratic Spaces? The Politics and Dynamics of Institutionalized Participation," *Institute for Development Studies Bulletin* 35, no. 2 (2004): 1–10. Doi: 10.1111/j.1759-5436.2004.tb00115.x.

[21] Interview with Yogesh Saini, 2018.

[22] "Our Cities, Our Responsibilities: It's Time to Act," *Realty Myths*, September 18, 2018, <https://realtymyth.com/our-cities-our-responsibilities-its-time-to-act-realtymyths/>.

[23] Mary Schmidt Campbell and Randy Martin, *Artistic Citizenship: A Public Voice for the Arts* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 3.

[24] In previous research, I put such creative allowances by authorities within the larger framework of neoliberal governance of cities whereby middle-class citizens are invited to participate in crafting their own aesthetic city, represented in several project initiatives in the last two decades. For more discussion, see Sanchita Khurana, "Art Participolis: Neoliberal Governance and Urban Art Policy in Delhi," *SubVersions* 5 (2015): 1–20, <http://subversions.tiss.edu/vol-5/sanchita/>.

[25] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 2.

[26] Jeff Garmany and Matthew A. Richmond, "Hygienization, Gentrification, and Urban Displacement in Brazil," *Antipode* 52, no. 1 (2020): 124–144, here: 129.

[27] The Emergency era in India spans a tumultuous period from 1975 to 1977, marked by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's declaration of a state of emergency, characterized by a suspension of civil liberties, widespread censorship, and the consolidation of authoritarian power. Gandhi initiated various urban beautification schemes, including the Clean Delhi Campaign and the demolition of slums, aiming to improve the aesthetics and cleanliness of cities. Concurrently, the term 'urban beautification' since this time often meant slum demolition, underscoring the intersection of political authoritarianism, urban development policy and governance in India. For more, see Rajagopal, "The Emergency," 1017.

[28] Leela Fernandes, "The Politics of Forgetting: Class Politics, State Power and the Restructuring of Urban Space in India," *Urban Studies* 41, no. 12 (2004): 2415–2430.

[29] See Arjun Appadurai, "Dirt and Democracy: The Politics of Cleaning Mumbai," Lecture, Mumbai, February 28, 2001.

[30] Ghertner, "Calculating Without Numbers," 20.

[31] I also came to see during this research that urban changes such as art-led 'gentrification' exist over a grid of meanings, activities, and possibilities in each context. Local contexts for producing public art remain highly significant and specific, and should be studied separately as they reveal particularized manifestations of global capital. It was during this time that I had come across the key differentiation between gentrification and regeneration highlighted by Josephine Berry Slater and Anthony Iles thus: "Regeneration does not boil down to gentrification. Gentrification is about real estate. Regeneration is also about getting people to behave differently." For more discussion, see Josephine Berry Slater and Anthony Iles, "No Room to Move: Radical Art and the Regenerate City," *Metamute*, November 24, 2009, <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/no-room-to-move-radical-art-and-regenerate-city>. Instead I attempt to art-led gentrification as more than just rising rents and physical displacement (although these phenomena are also prevalent in some Delhi neighborhoods where street art is present). To understand gentrification as a kind of aesthetic homogenization in the Indian context, I also look to Ghertner's interesting take on how participatory practices in urban governance in Indian cities, but particularly in Delhi, tend to "gentrify the state." It is his application of the idea of aesthetics to neoliberal governance that has been a major influence on my understanding of urban aesthetics. See D. Asher Ghertner,

"Gentrifying the State, Gentrifying Participation: Elite Governance Programs in Delhi," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35, no. 3 (2011): 504–532.

32 For discussion, see Jeff Ferrell, *Crimes of Style: Urban Graffiti and the Politics of Criminality* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993); Tim Cresswell, "The Crucial 'Where' of Graffiti: A Geographical Analysis of Reactions to Graffiti in New York," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 10, no. 3 (1992): 329–344.

33 Tim Cresswell, *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

34 Joel Lee, "Odor and Order: How Caste is Inscribed in Space and Sensoria," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 37, no. 3 (2017): 470–490.

35 Lee, "Odor and Order," 481.

36 Samita Chatterjee in telephone interview with author, January 30, 2019.

37 In 2013, the Indian government enacted the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, recognizing the historical injustice faced by Dalits who have been assigned the demeaning task of manual scavenging. It underscores the necessity of rehabilitating manual scavengers through cooperation with local authorities and the adoption of modern sanitation technology. Nevertheless, the law's failure underscores an essential point: addressing untouchability solely as a matter of hygiene, rather than as a deeply entrenched social issue rooted in caste dynamics, proves ineffective.

38 A report for *The Print* shows that the Union Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MSJE) revealed that 282 sanitation workers died while cleaning sewers and septic tanks in the country between 2016 and 2019. See Dhaval Desai, "282 Deaths in Last 4 Years: How Swachh Bharat Mission Failed India's Manual Scavengers," *The Print*, January 27, 2020, <https://theprint.in/india/282-deaths-in-last-4-years-how-swachh-bharat-mission-failed-indias-manual-scavengers/354116/>.

39 For discussion, see Shreyas Sreenath, "(Un)making the Manual Scavenger: Caste, Contract, and Ecological Uncertainty in Bengaluru, India," *American Ethnologist* 50, no. 3 (2023): 491–505; Shreyas Sreenath, "Numbing Machines: Manual Scavenging's Reconstitution in 21st Century Bengaluru," *Economic and Political Weekly* 54, no. 47 (2019): 55–60.

40 See *EPW Engage*, "Swachh Bharat: Hiding Caste Discrimination in Cleanliness," *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 11, 2019, <https://www.epw.in/index.php/engage/article/how-swachh-bharat-sanitising-caste>.

41 Ravichandran Bathran, "The Unclean Politics Behind Swachh Bharat," in *Round Table India*, November 19, 2014, <https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/swachh-bharat-places-onus-on-sweepers-than-the-litterers-2/>.; Ravichandran Bathran, "By Linking Cleanliness to Spirituality, Gandhi, Symbol of Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Valorised Inhuman Practice of Manual Scavenging," in *Firstpost*, June 14, 2019, <https://www.firstpost.com/india/by-linking-cleanliness-to-spirituality-gandhi-symbol-of-swachh-bharat-abhiyan-valorised-inhuman-practice-of-manual-scavenging-6813891.html>.

42 Mandal, "Ghiñn," 58.

43 Assa Doron and Ira Raja, "The Cultural Politics of Shit: Class, Gender and Public Space in India," *Postcolonial Studies* 18, no. 2 (2015): 189–207, here: 199.

44 Doron and Raja, "The Cultural Politics of Shit," 195.

45 Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1982).

[46] Zygmunt Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and Its Outcasts* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004); Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Arjun Dangle, *Poisoned Bread: Translations from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (Mumbai: Orient Blackswan, 2005).

[47] Gabriela Salvador D'Ambrosio, "Tracing the Politics of Urbanism and Abjection: Space and Identity in Trainspotting," *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies* 3, no. 2 (2016): 255–274.

[48] The term 'outcaste' in India historically refers to individuals who are considered outside the traditional caste system, often marginalized and discriminated against by society. They are often excluded from mainstream social, economic, and political activities due to their status.

[49] Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993).

[50] Doron and Raja, "The Cultural Politics of Shit," 193.

[51] Doron and Raja, "The Cultural Politics of Shit," 193.

[52] For discussion, see David Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 1995); Sarah Moore, "Garbage Matters: Concepts in New Geographies of Waste," *Progress in Human Geography* 36, no. 6 (2012): 780–799.

[53] Vinay Gidwani and Rajyashree N. Reddy, "The Afterlives of 'Waste': Notes from India for a Minor History of Capitalist Surplus," *Antipode* 43 (2011): 1625–1658. Doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8330.2011.00902.x.

[54] Grant Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 35.

[55] Bathran, "The Unclean Politics."

[56] Lee, "Odor and Order," 487.

[57] Doron and Raja, "The Cultural Politics of Shit," 198.

[58] Umar Nizar, "'Raqs Media Collective': The Caste Pursuit of Hyper Cool," *Round Table India*, May 12, 2020, <https://www.roundtableindia.co.in/raqs-media-collective-the-caste-pursuit-of-hyper-cool/>.

[59] Amar Singh Chamkila, a prominent Dalit pop singer from Punjab, rose to fame in the 1980s for his revolutionary and controversial lyrics that openly addressed social issues and caste discrimination. His music, characterized by its raw and unapologetic portrayal of everyday life, resonated deeply with marginalized communities, challenging the status quo and sparking debates about freedom of expression and cultural representation in Indian society. Chamkila's career tragically came to an abrupt end in 1988 when he and his wife were fatally shot by unidentified assailants.

[60] Sudhir Arora, "Voicing Dalits: The Poetry of Namdeo Dhasal," *Indian Literature* 53, no. 5 (2009): 220–230, here: 253, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23340244>.

[61] Sanchita Khurana, "Cast(e)ing a Subversive 'Sensible': The Symbology of Cultural Resistance in Dalit Writing," in *Dalit and Dalit Lives in 21st Century India: Towards a New Politics*, eds. Amrit Mishra and Tamanna Priya (Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2024), 1–16.

[62] See Sudharak Olwe's photo series "In Search of Dignity and Justice," <https://www.sudharakolwe.com/insearch.html>.

63 Birsa Munda was a prominent tribal freedom fighter who spearheaded the Munda Rebellion against British colonial rule in India, advocating for the rights of indigenous people. Jyotirao Phule was a pioneering social reformer and educator from the Dalit community, known for his efforts to challenge caste-based discrimination and promote education and social equality. B. R. Ambedkar, a towering figure in Indian politics and history, was a Dalit leader, jurist, and architect of the Indian Constitution. He tirelessly fought against caste oppression and advocated for the rights and dignity of Dalits. For more, see Pramod Ranjan, "Bahujan Discourse Puts JNU in the Crosshairs," Forward Press, February 27, 2016, <https://www.forwardpress.in/2016/02/bahujan-discourse-puts-jnu-in-the-crosshairs/>.

64 Ghertner, "Calculating Without Numbers," 31.