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# Decasticization, Dignity, and 'Dirty Work' at the Intersections of Caste, Memory, and Disaster

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## **Abstract**

In this qualitative study we examine the role of caste, class, and Dalit janitorial labor in the aftermath of floods in Chennai, India, in 2015. Drawing from a variety of sources including interviews, social media, and news coverage, we studied how Dalit (formerly known as ‘untouchable’) janitors were treated during the performance of janitorial labor for cleaning the city. Our study focuses on two theoretical premises: (a) caste-based social relations reproduce inequalities by devaluing Dalit labor as ‘dirty work’; and (b) Dalit subjectivities, labor, and sufferings including occupational hazards become invisible and ungrievable forcing Dalits to provide a counter narrative to preserve the memory of their trauma and dignity injuries. We find that the discursive construction of janitorial labor as dirty work forced Dalit janitors to work in appalling and unsafe working conditions. Janitors suffered several dignity injuries in terms of social exclusion and a lack of recognition for their efforts and accomplishments. Specifically, we examine various ways through which caste, dirty work, and dignity intersected in the narrative accounts of Dalit janitors. We also explore memory and how processes of remembering and forgetting affected the dignity claims of Dalit janitors.

## **Keywords**

caste, dignity, dirty work, memory, narratives, janitors, floods

## **Disciplines**

Business | Labor Relations | Management Sciences and Quantitative Methods

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## ABSTRACT

In this qualitative study, we examine the role of caste, class and Dalit janitorial labor in the aftermath of floods in Chennai, India in 2015. Drawing from a variety of sources including interviews, social media and news coverage, we studied how Dalit (formerly known as “untouchables”) janitors were treated during the performance of janitorial labor for cleaning the city. Our study focuses on two theoretical premises: (a) caste based social relations reproduce inequalities by devaluing Dalit labor as “dirty work”; (b) Dalit subjectivities, labor and sufferings including occupational hazards become invisible and ungrievable forcing Dalits to provide a counter narrative to preserve the memory of their trauma and dignity injuries. We find that the discursive construction of janitorial labor as dirty work forced Dalit janitors to work in appalling and unsafe working conditions. Janitors suffered several dignity injuries in terms of social exclusion and a lack of recognition for their efforts and accomplishments. Specifically, we examined various ways through which caste, dirty work and dignity intersected in the narrative accounts of Dalit janitors. We also explored memory and how processes of remembering and forgetting affected the dignity claims of Dalit janitors.

Key words: caste, Dalits, dignity, dirty work, floods, forgetting, janitors, memory, narratives

## **Decasticization, Dignity and “Dirty Work” at the Intersections of Caste, Memory and Disaster**

Floods in December 2015 in Tamilnadu’s (a southern state in India) capital city of Chennai eroded the livelihoods and everyday dignities of people from all castes and social classes. The floods killed over 250 people in the city of Chennai and displaced over 1.8 million Tamilians (Narasimhan et al., 2016). The burden of cleaning fell on a historically stigmatized community of Dalits, also known as *Arunthathiyars*, whose members have been ‘scavengers’ by occupation for multiple generations in the state (Singh, 2014). The term ‘scavengers,’ implying a dark Dickensian undertone, has often been used to refer to workers who clean the streets and toilets (Singh, 2014). Cleaning the city in the aftermath of the disaster was casticized and constructed as dirty work involving moral and physical taint (Hughes, 1958), and relegated to Dalits.

When the floods were receding, there were few who volunteered to clean the city. To deal with the situation, the government commandeered nearly 25000 janitors from the western districts of Tamilnadu to clean the city. Not surprisingly, almost all the sanitation workers were from the Arunthathiyar community. The process of cleaning Chennai took nearly a month, as the low lying areas continued to be flooded with sewage and waste even after the main roads had been cleaned. While 650 tons of waste are produced daily in Chennai, Dalit janitors had to clean almost 8000 to 10000 tons of garbage every day during the floods (Narasimhan et al., 2016). The conditions of work were fairly dangerous as plastic, electric waste and medical waste had mixed with various materials.

The mobilization of Dalit workers for cleaning Chennai also needs to be seen in the context of the priorities of a neoliberal city administration. While Chennai has a population of nearly 8.5 million people, it only employs 7000 sanitation workers, which means one sanitation worker is responsible for cleaning waste generated by 1200 people (Mondal, 2015, December 11). While each sanitation worker handles about 870 kg of garbage every day, only about a tenth of the 7000 sanitation workers in Chennai hold a permanent job. Thus, a vast majority of janitors not only face the stigma of caste and dirty work but are also adversely affected by acute job and economic insecurity with hardly any access to social security provisions such as health insurance, medical facilities, sick-leave or retirement benefits.

We believe that the aftermath of the Chennai floods offers a useful opportunity to understand Dalit janitors' experiences of dignity. A disaster offers a context where resources are scarce and, consequently, hegemonies of privilege may be materially enacted to reveal the social and cultural limits of our democratic lives (Gorringe, 2008). The reconstruction of society in the aftermath of a disaster involves the exertion of labor power. The aftermath of the Chennai floods offer us an opportunity to explore whether Dalit workers could access justice and break free from the oppression of caste based injustice or whether they continued to be trapped in the webs of inequality, lack of dignity and exclusion.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMING: DIRTY WORK, DIGNITY INJURIES AND FORGETTING DALIT LABOR

In the next two sections, we outline two theoretical themes we wish to explore. *First*, we outline how caste based social relations may be contingent on the reproduction of inequalities and may discursively construct Dalits' performance of labor as dirty work. The social exclusion of Dalits and the normalization of the extraction of dirty work might constitute important dignity

injuries for them. *Second*, we explore how Dalits' performance of labor during disasters and contingencies might be forgotten thus rendering their lives and work ungrievable. Dalits may try to counteract caste based memories of servitude by preserving memories of trauma and dignity injuries.

By engaging with the narratives of Dalit janitors, we hope to achieve two goals. Our first aim is to understand how caste and the labeling of janitorial labor as dirty work may erode the dignity of Dalit janitors. Our second aim is to understand how memory processes of remembering and forgetting may help in understanding the dignity claims of Dalit janitors.

The Chennai floods may have reinforced the *casticization* of janitorial labor, founded upon an historical assignment of essentialist caste identities. For Ambedkar, a twentieth century Dalit intellectual and activist, the very category of the political was contingent on the recovery of dignity for Dalits (Narke et al., 2003). Ambedkar (1968) argued that Dalits were drawn into a culture of obedience in terms of a caste based social relations that restricted them to a few occupational categories such as janitorial labor. Dalits' dignity was adversely affected due to caste based social relations of inequality and the social construction of their labor as dirty work. In this context of understanding dignity, we draw upon Esposito (2015) who argues that indignity results from structuring sharp binaries in terms of some entities being labeled as persons and others being labeled as things. In order to understand how experiences of indignity may be normalized, we draw upon Butler's (2009) arguments about how political discourses construct some lives as less grievable. In order to conceptualize caste based cultures of obedience, dignity and grief in the context of Dalit janitors' experiences and memories of their work, we also mobilize Ricoeur (2004) to engage with complex processes of remembering and forgetting.

In the following sections, we briefly review the literature on caste, dirty work, dignity and processes of remembering and forgetting. We also describe our study in terms of our modes of data collection and analyses. Further, we discuss the experiences of Dalit janitors in terms of their narratives of work in the aftermath of the Chennai floods.

### *Caste, 'Dirty Work' and Dignity Injuries*

Dalits constitute about 16 percent of India's total population and exist on the margins of the Indian economy. In comparison to non-Dalits, 61% more Dalits do not have access to any land ownership (Thorat, 2009). The discourse of caste has inflicted multiple kinds of violence on Dalits such as untouchability, occupational segregation, lack of access to common resources such as water, and exclusion in the context of education and employment (Zene, 2013). To resist such discrimination, B. R. Ambedkar led an important movement for Dalit rights in India. He argued that caste created two significant difficulties for Dalits to access dignity in the spirit of citizenship and equality (Guru, 2013). First, Dalits were required to exhibit a sense of reverence towards 'upper' castes and Brahmins and second, Dalits' demonstration of reverence diminished their self-esteem.

The reproduction of caste based social relations is contingent on constructing essentialist notions of identity-based inequality for Dalits (Mahalingam, 2007). Discrimination is perpetuated against Dalits through the reiteration of material conditions of inequality (Ambedkar, 1968). Caste based social relations operate due to an intersection of cultural and economic inequalities imposed on Dalits (Sarkar & Sarkar, 2016; Thorat, 2009). Caste structures the humiliation of Dalits in terms of episodes through which cultural and economic inequalities are reiterated (Zene, 2013). Caste operates through the gaze of distancing which situates Dalits as outsiders in the civic life of 'upper' castes (Guru, 2013).



One of the ways in which Dalits are distanced from the civic life of ‘upper’ castes is by restricting them to a few occupational categories and stigmatizing these occupational categories as being polluting and constituting ‘dirty work’ (Mahalingam & Rodriguez, 2006).

Organizational literature on ‘dirty work’ refers to occupations that are stigmatized as ‘dirty,’ ‘polluted’ or ‘degrading’ (Ackroyd, 2007; Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Hughes, 1951, 1958) due to their association with ‘taint.’ Workers who do ‘dirty work’ have mixed emotions (e.g., pride and disgust) about their work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Bolton, 2007; Simpson, Slutskaya & Hughes, 2011), and are also denied social acceptance (Dutton, Debebe & Wrzesniewski, 2016; Goffman, 1968; Hughes, 1962). In several instances, when Dalits have refused to perform their traditional occupational roles such as crematorium work, leather work or landless agricultural labor, they have been coerced into continuing their traditional roles (Coffey et al., 2017; Gatade, 2015). Social structures of exclusion which restrict Dalits’ ability to access education and urban mobility play an important role in restricting them to ‘dirty work’ occupations (Carswell & De Neve, 2014).

‘Upper’ caste members label Dalit performance of janitorial labor as ‘dirty work’ by associating such work with physical taint (Thorat, 2009). The state and the market intersect in structuring conditions for Dalits which makes it difficult for them to escape the performance of ‘dirty work’ (Ambedkar, 1968). The state does not intervene actively to prevent atrocities from being inflicted on Dalits and reduces their confidence in moving away from traditional forms of labor (Zene, 2013). In many cases, the state may actively incentivize conditions for Dalits to remain embedded in ‘dirty work’ labor under unfair and unequal conditions (Jagannathan, Selvaraj & Joseph, 2016). Markets are often defined by unequal conditions of ownership and

may be prone to curbing the mobility of Dalits by restricting them to subordinated forms of labor (Carswell & De Neve, 2014).

The use of language and terms such as sweepers or scavengers itself diminishes the dignity of Dalit workers (Thorat, 2009). Hence in this study, we consistently use the term 'janitors' to respect the dignity of Dalit workers. Ambedkar, a pioneering intellectual who fought for the rights of Dalits, argues that erosion of dignity is associated with webs of control and regulation through which caste based segregation is reproduced in Indian society (Rodrigues, 2002). Exclusion and indignity embody social relations of insensitivity where dominant sections of society are unable to imagine a sense of community and friendship with the marginalized (Esposito, 2015). According to Esposito, members of marginalized sections may often be categorized as objects and things rather than as persons. Members of marginalized communities may find that while labor is extracted from them, they are not treated with dignity.

The erosion of dignity is aimed at preventing Dalits from asserting a sense of citizenship and equality (Guru, 2013). This lack of equality aids in the structuring of indignity for janitors when they are constantly reminded that janitorial labor is dirty work which they should not shirk from performing, as this is a caste based duty which is important for both society and the nation (Jaoul, 2011). Bolton (2007) contends that dignity in work refers to respectable and meaningful work with social esteem, responsibility and autonomy. Similarly, dignity at work refers to equitable, safe, respectful and healthy working conditions. Dalit janitors may be denied both dignity in work and dignity at work as the extraction of 'dirty work' from them is naturalized due to the prevalence of caste based inequities (Thorat, 2009). Control is also exercised on Dalits through a progressive contractualization of work where wages, working conditions and social security measures are withdrawn (Jagannathan, Selvaraj and Joseph, 2016).

Dignity injuries are associated with overwork, lack of autonomy, inequalities of pay and working conditions (Hodson, 2001; Lucas 2015). According to Sayer (2011), identity-sensitive inequalities embody unequal treatment based on beliefs about social groups (e.g., casteism, sexism and homophobia). In India, identity-sensitive inequalities include the infliction of violence on Dalits and normalizing abysmal working conditions and pay for Dalit janitors (Dalwai, 2016). When Dalit janitors' claims of safe and fair conditions of work are ignored, they experience dignity injuries in the form of their work being precarious, unsafe and devalued by society (Singh, 2014; Thorat, 2009).

*'Forgetting': Crisis And Collective Memories*

While exploring dignity injuries emerging from caste based social relations, we also pay attention to ways in which caste based inequalities may be remembered (Thorat, 2009). In order to remember caste based inequalities, it may be necessary to remember specific accounts of injustice and trauma (Prashad, 2000). These accounts of injustice can prevent the naturalization of caste based inequalities as they critique the coercive means through which injustice is produced (Guru, 2013). According to Mena et al. (2016), traumatic and unjust acts are often resisted by stakeholders by remembering the violence which resides in these unjust acts. Stakeholder mnemonic communities including regulatory agencies and NGOs try to preserve the memory of injustice in the form of narrative accounts that provide the details of violence and indignity at play (Fine, 2012).

Mena et al. (2016) argue that mnemonic communities are empathetic constituencies that nurture important memories for cultural communities and help in building identities of solidarity. Ricoeur (2004) contends that corporeality and place are intertwined with each other in the construction of memory. Thus, the memory of a disaster occurring in a place can be remembered

by accessing what happened to people in that place during the time of the disaster. In order to access justice, the memory of a disaster must also reflect the memory of embodied janitorial labor that helped in cleaning the debris and reconstructing the city. However, if the city has already been etched in memory as a place where Dalits exist only as servile, commodified bodies, then discourses of caste reproduce the disaster as a moment to reify Dalit servitude while making their suffering 'invisible' (Hatton, 2017).

Such a politics of memory is compatible with Ambedkar's assertion that injustices persist against Dalits because existing frameworks of multicultural rights and liberal regimes of law do not adequately counteract inequality (Rodrigues, 2002). According to Ambedkar, there exists no space for shared beliefs within the social relations of caste and the marginalization of Dalits results in their unification only by a common experience of oppression. For Ambedkar, the undoing of injustice rests on a militant objection to all exclusionary practices and shared beliefs that facilitate oppression. The inability of Dalits to counteract discrimination leads to inequalities and marginalization (Prashad, 2000).

In the context of inequality, Butler (2009) argues that injustices persist against marginal subjects because these subjects are regarded as ungrievable, and the sense of loss associated with them is deemed to be a rationalized component of social functionality. For Butler, the undoing of injustices involves the discursive capacity to grieve and establish the poetics of grief as a shared belief. The ungrievability of some subjects is contingent on historically produced social relations of subordination. Repeated waves of subordination make the grief of marginalized subjects invisible (Hatton, 2017). Hegemonic cultural narratives construct marginalized subjects as being responsible for their own experiences of invisibility. Marginalized subjects are blamed for being unable to integrate themselves with the contours of operating ideologies (Hatton, 2017).

In the context of resistance, Kleinman & Kleinman (1994) contend that criticism of social relations and events is often mobilized by narrating embodied experiences of pain, injury, trauma and illness. According to Kleinman and Kleinman, memory work embodies the activation of experiences to uncover the material and cultural significance of some memories. Following Kleinman and Kleinman, who argue that embodied experiences reflect larger social events, we inquire whether Dalit narratives of injury and trauma experienced in the performance of janitorial labor could highlight a larger critique of the casticization of social relations. Casticization of social relations may be contingent on processes which marginalize dignity injuries occurring due to caste based subordination.

Memory work helps in remembering experiences that can help in crafting alternative frames for interpreting discourses (Ricoeur, 1999a). When important experiences are remembered through memory work, it may be possible to recraft social relations around anchors of justice and equality (Kleinman & Kleiman, 1994). Ricoeur argues that historical accounts are largely descriptions of actors who are successful and have triumphed against another set of actors. Therefore, Ricoeur contends that there is an ethical duty to remember the victims of history so that their sufferings are not submerged within triumphalist narrative accounts. Ignoring the victims of history while romanticizing the contributions of other actors may be a form of de-narrativization where victims' are marginalized and erased from collective memories (Butler, 2009).

In the process of such de-narrativization, Dalit janitors' narratives of difficulties faced during cleaning and reconstructing the city may be marginalized and made invisible. De-narrativization is linked to normalization of ideological frames which prevent some experiences from being recognized as grievable (Butler, 2009). According to Butler, the grief of the

marginalized subject can often be enacted only within narrative circuits enabled by dominant ideological frames. Such ideological framing also leads to de-narrativization as the capacity of the marginalized to deploy their grief as a form of political dialogue is eroded. De-narrativization can then become complicit in the reproduction and naturalization of inequalities, as these inequalities are not considered as ethical wrongs that need to be reversed.

The political project of accomplishing greater dignity may lie in mobilizing alternative memories of the disaster. Ricoeur (1999b) argues that consensus driven memories must be viewed with suspicion as the operation of dominant ideologies are likely to have repressed alternative accounts. While conflicting memories and interpretations of events are necessary for negotiating justice, Ricoeur cautions against the dangers of violence. Huyssen (2003) contends that memory intersects with important questions of justice and collective responsibility. The stigmatization of discriminated subjects does injustice to their social contributions leading to de-narrativization indicating the marginality of the accomplishments of discriminated subjects.

The act of marginalizing claims of dignity is associated with concealing systematic processes of identity based violence and discrimination (Bold, Knowles & Leach, 2002). Collective memories not only comprise desires and fantasies but also include displacements of experiences and stories (Sturken, 1999). The struggle for Dalit janitors to achieve dignity may be marginalized by societal forgetting of their contributions. The societal forgetting of Dalit contributions is linked to their larger loss of voice as citizens and the ability to access justice from structures of the state (Ambedkar, 1968). In this article, we explore how Dalit struggles for dignity are linked to remembering their contributions and sufferings while performing janitorial labor in the aftermath of the Chennai floods.

## METHODS

Between December 2015 and June 2016, one of the authors visited Chennai several times to access narratives of Dalit janitors who cleaned Chennai in the aftermath of the floods. He was helped by a research associate who was a member of the Dalit community in Chennai and involved in a variety of occupations such as the scrap trade, and selling and repair of electronic goods such as computers. With his help, we were able to record informal conversational interviews with Dalit janitors. Once we met Dalit janitors, we informed them about the purpose of our study and assured them complete confidentiality. We also assured them that they could withdraw from our study at any juncture and could ask us not to make use of the data provided by them at any point of time.

We were interested in examining the situatedness of Dalit labor in the Chennai floods for two reasons. *First*, the Chennai floods embodied a largescale crisis where life and livelihood were significantly disrupted. We were interested in knowing what happens to caste based inequalities and how Dalit labor is extracted during moments of crisis. *Second*, all three authors of this study are migrants from Tamilnadu and have an intimate cultural connectedness with Tamil society and the city of Chennai. We have been interested in concerns of equality and have been following Dalit movements in Tamilnadu for a long period of time. We wanted to access Dalit janitors' experiences in Chennai to understand the enactment of caste based social relations in Tamilnadu.

Our informants who cleaned the city were from Chennai and other districts. We held multiple conversations with nine informants who were based in the city of Chennai over a period of six months. We also held conversations with six sanitation workers who were from outside Chennai. We recorded about fifty hours of conversations with the fifteen sanitation workers. In all, apart from fifteen sanitation workers, we held conversations with three activists, three

journalists and two academics. Two authors of this study conducted the conversations with activists, journalists and academics. We recorded about fifteen hours of conversations with other stakeholders. We also collected data from secondary sources such as newspaper articles, blogs, YouTube videos and social media posts to understand details about the Chennai floods and how these narratives reflected the role of Dalit janitors. We accessed slightly more than five hundred pages of data from secondary sources about the floods in general, from which about eighty pages of data had some information about janitors.

The initial conversations were cryptic as Dalit janitors feared losing their jobs and other adverse consequences of speaking openly with us. We established a higher degree of trust and rapport after several informal conversations. We held at least one conversation with Dalit janitors while they were still exerting their labor for the cleaning efforts. In our initial conversations, we focused on janitors' experiences of dignity injuries in the midst of the cleaning efforts. In our later conversations, when we began to integrate narratives from the media and secondary sources, we began to reflect more deeply on processes of social forgetting through which Dalit labor was marginalized.

The research associate independently recorded many of these conversational interviews and each of these conversations lasted for at least more than an hour. Once trust had been established, we held the conversations either in Dalit janitors' homes or the research associate's home. The conversations revolved around how Dalit janitors were drafted into the work of cleaning the city after the floods, the routines which they followed, the number of hours they put in, the challenges of janitorial work after the disaster, the treatment meted out to them by various stakeholders such as officials, media and citizens, issues of safety, working conditions, wages and an overall sense of how the work affected their dignity and agency. Dalit janitors' memories



of their labor embodied complex tropes of resentment and dignity injuries. As time progressed, some Dalit janitors wanted to forget what had happened during the floods as they experienced their labor in deeply traumatic ways.

Other janitors nourished greater resentment as time progressed, as they felt angry about the inequalities they continued to experience. Those who felt resentful about their trauma during the floods were concerned by the fact that the city had forgotten the difficult and unsafe conditions in which they had worked. Our conversations involved prompts and cues on our part to evoke narratives and stories indicating how Dalits experienced being subordinated in the construction of a grander narrative of resurrection after the disaster. Through these narratives, we attempted to understand stories as cultural atmospheres (Jensen, 2007) informing the work and lives of Dalits. Whenever feasible, we held multiple conversations with the same informant to clarify issues emerging from previous conversations.

We paid attention to a variety of media narratives emerging in the wake of the floods to understand how Dalit experiences were being interwoven into narratives of the flood. We gathered data from a variety of sources: interviews with janitors, newspaper articles, readers' responses, YouTube videos, interviews of social activists and government documents. We also collected Facebook accounts of the floods and flood relief efforts. We constructed a comprehensive repository of media accounts of the Chennai floods. While some of the media accounts provide insights about janitors' experiences of dignity injuries, most of the media accounts provided details about the everyday lives of people and remembering of the floods. They provided insights about the different ways in which the Chennai floods were being written into public memory.

Based on our media repository, we identified journalists, activists and commentators who had commented about the Dalit experience of the Chennai floods. We held extensive conversations with these activists, encompassing a range of issues such as how Dalit workers were brought to Chennai to clean waste in the aftermath of the floods, the conditions in which Dalit workers lived, reactions of the state and society to Dalit janitors, issues of safety and the general conditions of work, dignity and the lives of Dalits in Indian society. By asking questions such as ‘do you think the Dalit workers were treated as citizens or were they treated as servants?’ we hoped to evoke metaphors which advanced Dalit demands for dignity. We wanted to explore whether Dalits were able to gain any respect or higher wages during the disaster and to understand how journalists and activists performed memory work in integrating Dalit experiences into the collective memory of the Chennai floods.

In terms of reflexivity, it is necessary for us to state that we are not Dalits. When we spoke with Dalit activists, we acknowledged that we could never fully understand Dalits’ experiences of violence because we had not experienced it ourselves. Our engagements with reflexivity were similar to Stronach et al.’s (2007) position who suggested that image, symbols and different narrations of the self, play an important role in research inquiries. We endeavor to produce our inquiry as a political project in which encounters between different life worlds are filled with a yearning to collaborate in the hope of justice.

We analyzed our data by writing detailed memos about our interview transcripts and media accounts. We also compared our analysis with each other. We organized our data around discursive frames such as dignity injuries, resistance and forgetting emerging from our memos. We found many janitors’ experiences troubling and painful. We felt that janitors’ experiences embodied dignity injuries because state, social and media actors hardly intervened to structure

conditions of safety and equality for Dalits. Many Dalit janitors were overworked and had little control over the labor process or conditions of work.

At the same time, as we looked through various media accounts of the floods, we found very little mention of the difficult conditions in which Dalit janitors were working. We articulated this scant attention as part of the invisibility of Dalit labor that structured processes of social forgetting. When we reflected on the accounts of janitors and activists, we analyzed their responses in terms of how they felt that the state and society deliberately ignored their concerns. We analyzed these accounts as discerning the state's and society's attempts at forgetting the dignity injuries inflicted on Dalits and normalizing social relations of inequality. We felt that caste based social relations were threatened by the documentation of dignity injuries and social processes of forgetting were activated as a response to reproduce the inequalities of caste.

## FINDINGS

### *Disaster and Reproduction of Inequalities and Indignities: Situating Dalit Lives*

Through the narratives, we explore how in the aftermath of the disaster, Dalit janitors stigmatizing aspects of dirty work in more intense ways. We analyze the narratives by deploying two broad themes. In the first theme, we explore how the Dalit janitorial labor was socially constructed as dirty work to naturalize several dignity injuries. We understand the relationship between dirty work and dignity injuries in terms of caste based social relations embodying the reproduction of inequality. In the second theme, we engage with issues of memory and forgetting which prevent Dalit janitors from recovering their dignity. Social processes of forgetting are related to the ungrievability of Dalit life and the marginalization of Dalit narratives is important for preventing subversive conversations about the dignity injuries that Dalit janitors experience.

Under the broad theme of identifying intersections of inequality, ‘dirty work’ and dignity injuries, we explore several subthemes: (a) we examine how caste based processes discursively construct janitorial labor as dirty work in terms of experiences of disgust and trauma; (b) we explore the dignity injury of social exclusion in terms of Dalit experiences of humiliation; (c) we engage with the dignity injury of normalizing the extraction of dirty work in terms of long and exhausting hours of work for Dalit janitors during the Chennai floods; (d) we discuss the dignity injury of overlooking safe and fair conditions of work in terms of cultures of insensitivity towards janitors’ experiences of bodily harm; and (e) we explore how the violation of labor rights in the context of caste based social relations is aimed at producing cultures of Dalit servitude. These subthemes delineate the discursive mechanisms for constructing janitorial identity in ungrievable and marginal ways.

#### Dirty Work, Disgust and Trauma

In this section, we discuss how janitorial labor is labelled as dirty work. Dalit janitors experience caste based social relations with a sense of disgust in terms of the everyday trauma that their work evokes. We attempt to understand how Dalits experience difficulties in eating and sleeping after being disgusted by their cleaning work during the floods. We explore how the insensitivity of the state in not providing basic provisions such as a clean place to eat can aid in the construction of janitorial labor as dirty work. We discuss how the state’s lack of support to Dalit janitors consolidates the discourse of dirty work.

A janitor narrated his traumatic experience of cleaning,  
*“It is all Kalige (a dirty mess). Sewer, dead bodies were all there. I have to clean them. I was smoking beedies. I was hungry. But I could not eat for weeks.”*

Janitors found it very difficult to deal with the mixing of sewer water with drinking water. They found it difficult to clear the debris which obstructed the drainage system. They were unable to recover from the trauma of cleaning for several weeks and could not even eat properly. Several janitors told us that others felt that it was natural for Dalits to engage in dirty work, and made no effort to appreciate the difficulties they were experiencing.

A janitor described the difficulties he faced while doing his work,  
*“The biggest problem was dead rats, chickens and other animals which were in water for a number of days. It was horrible and nothing equips you to clean this. I did not eat for few weeks. Some workers fainted. I had to sleep outside my house fearing the smell. Painful to think about it.”*

Dalit janitors felt that they were not prepared in dealing with very difficult conditions of cleaning. Several janitors fainted while performing their work being unable to overcome the nature of death and destruction they were witnessing. When janitors remembered the work they had done, they experienced pain in describing the smells, sounds and breakdown of spaces they dealt with.

Another participant summarized the difficulties, *“Everyday in the morning at 9 am, they gave us breakfast. They gave us dosa (fermented rice fried in oil) or pongal (mixture of rice and lentils). During lunch, they gave us sambhar (lentils cooked with tamarind) rice or some other rice. They gave us food in the same place where we were cleaning the streets or the houses. The gutter was overflowing. They gave us gloves. But still our hands were dirty and sticky. The wires and electric items were sticking in our hands. We had to eat food there itself in the same condition.”*

While the municipal corporation provided food to workers, it expected them to eat it quickly in the midst of waste and return to work. In failing to provide clean places to eat and decent living conditions for workers who were brought from different parts of Tamilnadu, the municipal corporation became complicit in constructing janitorial labor as dirty work. The municipal corporation gave no time to janitors to clean themselves before eating food. Many janitors told us that there were few Dalit officers in the municipal corporation and officers from other castes failed to appreciate the difficulties of Dalits.

During our fieldwork, when we discussed with citizens the difficult conditions in which janitors were working, a few of them expressed the sentiment that janitors were unlikely to experience any trauma as Dalits were used to such work and were inherently dirty. Since janitors were in everyday contact with dead animals and overflowing gutters, they were tainted by their contact with death and debris. Sometimes, janitors themselves internalized this sense of taint. A janitor described that he felt that his body carried the smell of the death and debris he was cleaning and he did not feel like going inside his house and slept outside his home for a number of days.

We find that the aftermath of a disaster is used to reproduce inequalities by extracting traumatic labor from Dalit janitors without providing them spaces of recuperation and recovery. When the municipal corporation fails to provide spaces where Dalit janitors can rest and recover, it becomes complicit in imagining Dalits as being inseparable from the dirt, debris and death that a disaster leaves behind. Dalit janitors experience a sense of disgust at the labor they perform as the municipal corporation makes no effort in making the work they do less dirty.

Caste, Exclusion, Dirty Work and Humiliation

In this section, we engage with the social exclusion of Dalit janitors in terms of the humiliation experienced by them due to their performance of ‘dirty work.’ We explore how citizens engaged in implicit practices of untouchability while interacting with Dalit janitors. We discuss how citizens’ use of caste based references to address janitors led to their humiliation.

A participant described the difficulties of engaging in janitorial work in the aftermath of the floods,

*“When we were cleaning the city, we were still regarded as untouchables. Nobody welcomed us in their homes. Even when some of them gave us food, it was not in their plates, but they wrapped it in newspapers and plastic bags and gave us. As if we were dogs who could not eat in the plates of human beings.”*

Social exclusion and implicit practices of untouchability structure dignity injuries for Dalit janitors who feel humiliated by the way ‘upper’ caste citizens treat them. Dalit janitors resentfully feel that they are treated like dogs. The practice of social exclusion persisted during the floods in spite of the cleaning efforts undertaken by Dalits.

A participant observed how he felt dehumanized in the context of caste references,

*“People will give things without touching, will not notice us and will not see as humans. They do not call me by my name. They call me “thotti” (a derogatory term for sanitation worker). They forget that I am human too with a name. People treat me like this because we are born as Dalits.”*

Janitors experience dignity injuries as they feel that they are robbed of their humanity. Dalit janitors feel that caste references erode their sense of personhood and they are denied

equality as citizens and workers. The use of derogatory labels is seen as a cynical defacement of labor in order to prevent janitors from accessing dignity and satisfaction from their work.

A participant spoke about how workers' basic responsibilities towards their families were overlooked,

*“Entire buildings were under water up to three floors. There was no electricity or food for a week. We were not even supposed to think about the safety of our families but continuously work so that the city could be clean again. The lives of our families did not matter.”*

Janitors felt that the state was not concerned about the safety of their families, as it was unconcerned about what happened to Dalits. Janitors experienced dignity injuries due to the insensitivity of the state as well as the public they were serving. They felt that the intersection of caste and dirty work devalued considerations of their life and safety.

We find that janitors continue to experience social exclusion even while they are exerting themselves to clean the city. They experience social exclusion as a dignity injury as they find implicit practices of untouchability humiliating. Janitors feel hurt at their dehumanization when others refer to them using derogatory caste labels. The state's lack of concern about their families' safety makes them feel that Dalit life and existence is devalued. Dalits feel that the floods have reproduced caste based processes of humiliation.

Citizens' infliction of humiliation on Dalit janitors reveals how the reproduction of caste is contingent on structuring repeated episodes of untouchability. When citizens humiliate Dalit janitors, they want to prevent the disaster from becoming a site where dialogue and intimacy can become possible. The atmosphere of crisis shrinks the space for solidarity as citizens' practices of exclusion prevent Dalit janitors from sharing common spaces and a collective sense of belonging.



## Mistreatment: Long Hours of Work and Exhaustion

Our conversations revealed dignity injuries in terms of an exploitative extraction of labor from janitors. We explore what janitors felt when they were made to work for long hours without any respite. We discuss how the long hours of work created dignity injuries in the form of exhaustion and the inability to cope with the relentless demands of work.

According to one participant,

*“We were asked to work non-stop without any leave for two weeks and without time to take a bath and rest. I could not eat because it was so disgusting. I could only drink tea.”*

Non-stop work without even the time to bath or take rest implies that Dalit janitors remain in close proximity of the sites of damage after the floods. No leave was given to Dalit janitors and they were expected to work continuously. Several janitors experienced dignity injuries on account of being overworked and having no sense of autonomy.

In a journalistic account written for a Tamil magazine, Jeyarani (2015) provides the narrative of a Dalit worker engaged in waste disposal after the Chennai floods,

*Ramu described how he was woken up at 4 am in the morning and brought to Chennai, ‘All of a sudden they knocked on our doors and brought us here. Garbage which is like a mountain, they make us collect with our bare hands, put it on our head and dispose it. Two times, I became unconscious and fainted.’*

Ramu feels exhausted and faints while performing janitorial labor. The municipal administration extracts dirty work from Ramu without providing him with any support and makes him clean the garbage with his bare hands. The administration mobilizes Ramu at four in the morning, and makes him clean enormous amounts of garbage without allowing him any opportunity to take rest and recover.

A blogger ('Collateral damage'), writing on how Dalit labor was being extracted in the aftermath of the floods, described the inhuman living conditions for migrant workers, *The number of workers brought from outside Chennai put up in the school far outweighed the school's infrastructure facilities and hence for a lot of them there was no water to take shower or even wash their hands. They said that other basic facilities like toilets were in such bad conditions that they were finding it very difficult to cope.*

The working and living conditions of janitors who had been mobilized to clean Chennai were abysmal. While janitors were cleaning the city, ironically they did not have access to clean toilets and were made to use toilets which were in a bad condition. Janitors experienced dignity injuries in the form of working for long hours without any sense of gratitude or respect.

Janitors feel exploited when they are made to work for long hours without any rest. They experience dignity injuries in the form of overwork being normalized during the floods. They experience abysmal conditions of work as janitors who have been mobilized from outside Chennai do not have access to decent living conditions. The state extracts dirty work from janitors without providing decent conditions of employment in return.

Long hours of work and abysmal living conditions erode the dignity of janitorial labor as janitors are unable to obtain a negotiated settlement of their working conditions. The long hours of work commodify janitorial labor as citizens do not come forward in the spirit of civic responsibility to share the task of cleaning exceptional amounts of waste that exist. The entire task of cleaning the waste falls on Dalit janitors and leaves them exhausted as they have to work relentlessly without any respite.

*Bodily Harm and Dangerous Work*

In this section, we explore how janitors interpreted work related injuries as affecting their dignity. We discuss how some janitors experienced serious injuries and felt that basic conditions of safety and fairness were violated. We engage with dignity injuries arising from the backdrop of poor safety provisions indicating a lack of concern for the well-being of janitors.

A janitor described the bodily harm he suffered while doing his work,  
*“I had to remove the carcasses of dead cows, dogs, cats and rats. It was horrifying . . . broken mica and debris needed to be cleaned. The skins in my feet were peeling off and my feet were full of mud boils as a result of working nonstop.”*

The janitor experiences bodily harm in the form of his skin peeling off. Despite his feet being full of boils, he is not expected to take any rest and is expected to work continuously. The janitor experiences this condition as a dignity injury as he feels that the state does not relate to his bodily harm with empathy.

In a conversation with us, a Dalit academic, who has been engaged with the community summarized janitors’ experiences,

*The janitors are being rotated in different phases. Recently, one contract sanitary worker died during the cleaning up of Chennai after the floods. However, the government refused to give any compensation claiming that he was a contract worker and not entitled for any benefits.*

A Dalit digital media site reported how the state did not compensate the worker and claimed that it was not liable as the worker had died of heart attack while working (Shanmugavelan & Kadhiraavan, 2015, December 28). The precarious conditions of work created dignity injuries for Dalits as they felt that the state was insensitive towards their well-being. Janitors felt that the state had become immune to the bodily harm they suffered while performing their work.

A Dalit sanitary worker, who worked in the cleaning efforts said,  
*“Nobody cares even if we die. I have seen my relatives getting injured and sick. A drain was clogged. My uncle entered the drain. He inhaled some poisonous gases inside the drain. He became unconscious. A cousin went inside the drain to bring him out. If he had delayed even slightly further, my uncle may have died. After the floods, we cleaned waste with our bare hands throughout the day.”*

The Dalit janitor describes the hazardous conditions in which he works and how the state does not feel responsible for improving the conditions of work. Dalits are left to themselves to exhibit social relations of care towards each other. They are not given safety equipment to clean the waste and have to use their bare hands to participate in the cleaning efforts.

When Dalit janitors work even after being injured, they feel that the state does not care for their well-being. They feel that basic safety conditions and issues of fairness are being ignored in the employment relationship. Janitors experience dignity injuries when the state does not exhibit sensitivity towards incidents of bodily harm. Janitors feel that they work in hazardous conditions and the state has not made adequate investments to improve the conditions of work. The state’s lack of sensitivity structures dignity injuries in the form of Dalits’ experiences of precariousness and alienation. The institutional apathy and the lack of empathy to the appalling and hazardous working conditions illustrate the state’s lack of institutional commitment in improving the working conditions of janitors. The state’s apathy makes janitors’ sufferings invisible and not worthy of empathy and compassion.

#### *Violation of Labor Rights and Exploitation*

In this section, we explore the implications of the erosion of labor rights for janitors in the form of absence of overtime wages, violation of minimum hours of work, lack of

compensation for employment injuries and increasing insecurities in the workplace. We discuss how contractors did not pay minimum wages to janitors whom they had employed on a temporary basis. We find that caste based social relations are contingent on the reproduction of inequality for janitors. We explore how Dalit servitude is reproduced during the floods by ensuring that janitors have no recourse to justice after their labor rights being violated.

A participant indicated that there was an acute shortage of personnel in janitorial work, *“The municipality has stopped hiring us for permanent jobs. My father had a permanent job. He was an alcoholic and died early. My elder brother got his job. But I never got a permanent job and work in a contract position. During the floods, the contractor made me work for almost the entire day. Yes, I got more wages but it was still unfair. Sometimes I worked for more than 16 hours but got only two hours overtime wages.”*

The janitor describes the inequality and exploitation that informs his employment relationship. Janitors experience neoliberal employment relationships devoid of job or social security as being unjust. The floods exacerbate inequality for Dalit janitors as they are not paid overtime wages for the actual number of hours they have put in.

A Dalit academic spoke to us about the ways in which Dalit janitors had been mobilized for the task of cleaning up Chennai,

*“They were given no facilities, no safety and I believe that even minimum wage conditions are violated. In several cases, contractors got these contracts on account of their political and criminal connections. Just because they are Dalits, the workers were voiceless.”*

Caste based social relations of inequality were reproduced when Dalit janitors were rendered voiceless in the cleaning efforts in the aftermath of the floods. During our fieldwork, we felt that the persistence of caste based social relations required the structuring of inequality,

as Dalit workers who asserted equality were likely to question the legitimacy of caste based ideologies. Contractors violating minimum wage provisions indicated that the law could be violated with impunity in the context of Dalit workers.

In a journalistic account written for a newspaper, Mondal (2015, December 11) describes the narrative of a Dalit worker who worked under extremely difficult conditions,

*“I was given gloves and chappals (not gumboots) but they don’t fit properly. It is not easy to work with ill-fitting equipment,” says Kannamma, 50, a sanitary worker with the Chennai corporation. She confirms that she has cleaned human excrement with her bare hands and says, “Toilets everywhere are flooded. Half of the city is defecating in the open. And there are the dead animals.”*

When Dalit workers had to clean flooded toilets and human excrement with their bare hands, they felt that they were being treated unfairly. When we listened to the narratives of Dalit workers, we felt that they faced many difficulties in asserting their labor rights. We felt that caste persisted in influencing the orientation of the state towards Dalits. Indifference to the mistreatment of Dalit janitors curtailed Dalits’ ability to take recourse to legal mechanisms to counteract the violation of their rights.

Contractors violating the labor rights of janitors signaled the powerlessness of Dalits in taking recourse to justice. Many violations structured inhuman conditions of work where Dalits had to work with their bare hands in cleaning excrement and other debris. We felt that contractors were able to get away with these violations because these inequalities reinforced social relations of caste. The social relations of caste naturalized Dalit performance of janitorial labor and eroded the ability of Dalits to assert their employment rights. We felt that the violation of labor rights reinforced social relations of caste and produced Dalit janitors as servile subjects.

## Memory, Forgetting and Dignity

In this section, we shift our focus to explore how janitors respond to the reproduction of inequality and the discursive production of Dalit subjectivities as ungrievable. We described Dalit janitors' experiences of dirty work and dignity injuries in the previous section. The dignity injuries by themselves may not constitute memory work as several injuries were recounted in the specific context of a research conversation. Many times, janitors' accounts may be silenced due to a conducive space not being available to share experiences of injustice. When janitors articulate these accounts to other members of the community, these accounts become a part of their memory work. When janitors infuse emotions such as pride or resentment into accounts they share with members of their community and other social actors, they engage in memory work as they articulate how the dignity injuries affect them.

There are two important mechanisms through which memory work affects Dalit janitors' quest for dignity. *First*, Dalit janitors want to reclaim dignity by remembering their contributions with pride and resilience. Through their memory work, Dalit janitors articulate claims of justice by remembering their embodied janitorial labor. *Second*, media discourses and caste ideologies counteract Dalit claims by focusing on the need to exercise labor process control on janitors. Media discourses and caste ideologies enact de-narrativization of Dalit claims by advancing tropes of the ungrievability of Dalit life.

### *Memories of Pride and Resilience*

In this section, we explore how janitors want to assert a sense of justice by describing the pride and resilience with which they embodied janitorial labor in the aftermath of the Chennai floods. Memories of pride and resilience are an attempt to counteract the devaluing of janitorial

labor. We discuss how janitors resent their experiences of dignity injuries by remembering caste based social relations as embodying structures of irresponsibility.

A janitor narrated about how he felt that he was working to resurrect the city,

*“I have to do this as a service to people to bring back Chennai to life.”*

A couple of participants talked about their resilience and were proud of their hard work:

*“We worked hard to have the city back. I washed a house 15-20 times to remove the smell.”*

*“We were efficient. We learned from mistakes, and we supported each other.”*

Helping and service to the community are the most common themes in the janitorial memory of floods. We feel that janitors articulated these claims to access justice for the labor they rendered. Janitors present positive accounts of their work to counteract the discursive labelling of their labor as dirty work.

Another participant told us about the satisfaction he derived from his work,

*“I was cleaning a six floor building. In each room, there was waste. Waste had piled up to six feet high piles in each room in the building. Laptop, TV, fridge, chair, sewer and gutter water, everything had got mixed up. Earlier, the building looked like a dilapidated 100 year old structure. After I cleaned it, it was restored as a new, clean, modern building.”*

By providing an account of how he contributed to refurbishing a building which had become dilapidated into a clean, modern space, the participant is articulating the rehabilitative potential of janitorial labor. Janitorial labor as rehabilitation reshapes the discourse about the contribution of Dalits in the aftermath of the Chennai floods. We feel that this is a process through which Dalits reject their subordination in the caste order and want to lay claims as equal citizens.

Another janitor empathized about the suffering of people,



*“I was born and grew up in this mess. I feel sorry and pity for those people who faced this problem. Nature taught us a lesson. We are all one in this. I helped as much as I can.”*

Dalit janitors remember the floods as an opportunity for providing solidarity to citizens, and in some rare cases, they found that citizens also reciprocated a sense of ephemeral respect. During the interviews, at least one janitor mentioned that for the first time, people addressed him as “sir.” Yet, this sense of respect was either forgotten or never seriously translated into action within the context of how labor was extracted from Dalit janitors.

Memory work embodying pride and resilience indicates Dalit janitors’ desires to resist dignity injuries and recraft their location as equal citizens. We feel that Dalit janitors’ memory work militates against caste based subordination while at the same time communicating a positive image of their contributions to society. We believe that Dalit janitors’ memory work becomes an important cultural resource in presenting Dalits as creative and hard-working beings who have made significant contributions in reconstructing Chennai. We contend that Dalit janitors’ memory work outlines how the persistence of structures of caste based irresponsibility in the aftermath of their resilient labor indicates the basic antagonism of caste with dignity and civic consciousness. We feel that memory work outlining the positive accounts of Dalit janitorial labor resist the labels of dirty work imposed on Dalits and show that caste based prejudices are at the heart of the discursive construction of dirty work.

### *Forgetfulness and Hostile Social Relations*

In this section, we describe how the process of socially forgetting the contributions of janitors is linked to the ungrievability of Dalit life. In several instances, the media presented Dalit janitors as shirking their work and being responsible for the slowness of the city’s recovery

efforts. We explore how Dalit experiences were de-narrativized and silenced in constructing collective memories of the Chennai floods.

A participant described how the media constructed hostile stereotypes of janitors, *“TV journalists stood in the streets of the well-off and pulled together a crowd. Soon the crowd started screaming. Then, typically they called the municipal commissioner or the MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly or the local representative) saying that nobody has come to clean up. The TV camera zoomed on the gutter or waste lying in the street. Soon the municipal officer started shouting at us. We had just come back from a 14 hour shift. Not even half an hour had passed. As soon as our garbage truck arrived, the crowd started cheering. The journalist also started shouting and claiming credit. Sometimes they poked the mike in front of us as well making us look like criminals who were shirking work. Someone in the crowd muttered that we were lazy people lacking discipline. Many times, I felt like shouting back abuses at the TV camera. But I kept quiet as I would be immediately thrown out of my job.”*

The media nurtures memories through which Dalit janitors can be described as lazy and irresponsible. These media accounts create the basis of memory work through which Dalit contributions can be forgotten as everyday media narratives form an important part of public memory and discourse. We feel that the media construction of Dalits as lazy and irresponsible become the basis for the ungreivability of Dalit life and a lack of empathy for the difficult and hazardous conditions in which Dalits exerted themselves.

A participant observed how Dalits were denied credit for the work done by them, *“The stars and politicians did not get off their cars. They sat inside and came out just for the photo. The media played the story almost as if the politicians and stars had done the cleaning. Our work was forgotten.”*

The media actively nurtured images of film personalities and politicians as participating in the cleaning efforts after the Chennai floods. At the same time, the media did not highlight the work done by Dalit janitors or listen to their experiences of non-stop work in the midst of difficult circumstances. We feel that the media did not provide adequate space for Dalit memories of the floods, thus de-narrativizing the grief of Dalits and reproducing social relations of inequality.

In terms of the limelight being stolen for the work done by him, a participant commented, *“The waste was like stone. The smell and sight was difficult for me to handle. I had to smoke a beedi (local make of cigarette) every half an hour. My face and hands looked like I had fallen into a gutter after every ten minutes of work. But I had to continue as there was no place for washing myself. While we did all this work, did any TV journalist interview us? Radio jockeys who were sitting in their radio stations and NGOs became stars for handing out a few food packets. But no one seemed to care for us.”*

The media marginalized the accomplishments of Dalit janitors by refusing to acknowledge them while romanticizing the relief efforts carried out by NGOs and celebrities. We feel that the media’s failure to discuss the ways in which janitors cleaned Chennai is related to larger tropes of stigmatization, dirty work and invisibility of janitorial labor. We feel that the media’s failure to describe the work done by the janitors distances citizens from janitorial labor, perpetuating the label of dirty work.

Media accounts presented Dalit janitors as lazy and irresponsible, and accountable for the slow recovery of Chennai after the floods. While they nurtured romantic images of film personalities, politicians and NGOs, they did not pay attention to the difficult conditions of work or accomplishments of Dalit janitors. As media accounts did not mobilize experiences of Dalit

grief, they were complicit in nurturing the ungrievability of Dalit life and structured the possibility of forgetting Dalit efforts. The media's lack of attention to Dalit stories and memories de-narrativized Dalit accounts and aided the reproduction of inequalities. By failing to provide intimate accounts of how Dalit janitors were cleaning the city, the media reproduced tropes of distancing, stigmatization and marginalizing Dalit accomplishments. We believe that the media erased Dalit conversations from the public discourse around Chennai floods in order to create a culture of forgetfulness about Dalit labor. Cultures of forgetfulness become the basis for sustaining caste based hostilities as they marginalize Dalit contributions in sustaining the material fabric of the city.

## DISCUSSION

From our analysis of Dalit narratives in the aftermath of the Chennai floods, we arrive at three conceptual positions. By drawing from Butler's (2009) unequal grievability of life, we arrive at an understanding of Dalit janitorial experience as a process of de-narrativization through which the grief of Dalit workers is silenced. Through an exploration of Ambedkar's frame of annihilation of caste (Rodrigues, 2002), we understand how dignity injuries de-frame social relations of equality, reproducing social relations of caste as cultures of obedience. By engaging with Ambedkar's thought, we acquire an understanding of how the discursive construction of janitorial labor as dirty work erodes the dignity of Dalits. Finally, by engaging with Esposito's (2015) arguments surrounding the binary between persons and things, we access Dalit experiences as implying a process of sanitization and de-pluralization where concrete Dalit accounts are de-emphasized in the enactment of a universalized public memory of the floods.

Privileging such universalized memories counteracts the Dalit janitors' attempts to advance dignity claims, as public discourse excludes their grief from the memory of the disaster.

We refer to de-narrativization as the process of erasing the stories of marginal subjects from public discourse on account of inequality in expressing grief about them (Butler, 2009). The de-narrativization of Dalit experiences is outlined by the marginalization and stigmatization of janitorial labor while the relief and discursive work done by other actors such as NGOs and radio jockeys is romanticized. Several Dalit janitors remember their cleaning efforts with pride and resilience. When these memories of pride and resilience are not given space in public discourse and de-narrativized, the possibility of accessing justice as a process of remembering embodied janitorial labor is marginalized.

Caste based obligations intersect with neoliberal vulnerabilities imposed by the state on Dalit janitors (Jagannathan, Selvaraj & Joseph, 2016). In our study, Dalit janitors experience job insecurity, lack of payment of minimum wages, lack of compensation for employment injuries and a violation of labor rights. Dalits are unable to mobilize their grief to make the state accountable for the dignity injuries they suffer in the form of unsafe conditions of work and lack of fairness. The ungrievability of Dalit life is linked to the reproduction of inequality for Dalits.

According to Butler (2009), utilitarian thought often constructs materially and politically disenfranchised lives as less grievable, leading to the de-narrativization of the griefs of marginalized subjects. In our study, Dalit janitors lead materially and politically disenfranchised lives as they receive abysmal wages and have little say in processes of governance. De-narrativization is compounded by the individualization of employment relations (Lundberg & Karlsson, 2011), marginalization of Dalits in the trade union movement (Soni-Sinha & Yates, 2013), and stereotyping and stigmatization of janitorial labor (Cruz & Abrantes, 2014). While

Mena et al. (2016) argue that structural dignity injuries need to be counteracted through memory work, Dalit janitors and mnemonic communities find difficulties in articulating their grief (Dalwai, 2016). Inequalities which structure Dalits as ungrievable subjects aid the reproduction of social relations of caste and consolidated the embodied injustices of caste in extracting janitorial labor from Dalits under hazardous conditions. While Butler articulates the unequal grievability of life in political discourses, we add to her theorization by suggesting that de-narrativization is linked to the reproduction of embodied injustices.

According to Ambedkar, dignity injuries constitute traumatic memories that are inflicted on Dalit communities and reproduce social relations of caste as cultures of obedience (Rodrigues, 2002). Our findings add to the literature on how janitors in India face multiple axes of discrimination and are incorporated into a culture of servitude (Ray & Qayum, 2009). The reproduction of caste based social relations structures janitors' experiences of dignity injuries (Bolton, 2007; Carswell & De Neve, 2014; Hodson, 2001; Sayer, 2011) and advances the stigmatization of dirty work (Ackroyd, 2007; Gatade, 2015; Jaoul, 2011). Janitors' experiences of dignity injuries undermine their sense of self-worth and well-being (Aguar & Herod, 2006; Coffey et al., 2017; Hughes, 1962; Yadav, 2014). Ambedkar (1968) argued that the construction of occupational categories such as janitorial labor as dirty work and the social exclusion of Dalits structured several dignity injuries for them.

In the context of dignity injuries, it is useful to understand the tension between the memories of body as habit and body as event (Ricoeur, 2004). While the body as habit is associated with rhythms of familiarity or strangeness, the body as event is associated with various affects, emotions, joys and traumas. According to Ricoeur, events are remembered in terms of their embodied affects and memory plays an important role in recognizing the politics

of events. In our study, the politics of subordinating Dalit janitorial labor is enacted through embodied memories such as practicing implicit forms of untouchability and addressing janitors using derogatory caste names. Ambedkar argues that Dalit experiences of humiliation are at the heart of the political production of obedience, and he describes caste as unsustainable as it structures dignity injuries for Dalits (Guru, 2013; Thorat, 2009).

Embodied memories are often signs of a larger social commentary about places, narratives of alienation and critiques of social relations (Kleinman & Kleinman, 1994; Ricoeur, 2004). In our study, several janitors recollected being exhausted and described how they were even unable to eat food while doing their work. Following Ricoeur and Kleinman & Kleinman, we contend that these embodied experiences of exhaustion reflect a larger social commentary on how casticization of social relations has tired Dalit subjects. Ricoeur (1999a) outlines that it is important to both remember and forget in order to negotiate social relations of justice. Ambedkarite politics has the potential to inaugurate a negotiation of remembering and forgetting (Rodrigues, 2002). Ambedkar argues that the extraction of intense forms of Dalit labor is linked to the memory of caste based social relations of obedience. Dalits can assert their dignity by forgetting the normality of obedience and resentfully remembering the need to counteract their experiences of humiliation. While Ambedkar focuses on the ritual and hierarchical basis of the social relations of equality, we add to his thought by arguing that experiences of humiliation (Guru, 2013) are central to cultures of obedience.

Esposito (2015) argues that it is necessary to challenge the binary between things and persons as depersonalization leads to the erosion of dignity. When Dalit workers are engaging in cleaning carcasses, sewage, debris and electronic waste for long hours without adequate rest, safety equipment or overtime wages, they are being treated as mechanical things without any

bodily limits or dignity (Lucas, 2011). The exploitative extraction of Dalit labor in the aftermath of a disaster suggests a process of sanitization and de-pluralization of memories. By sanitization and de-pluralization, we refer to the failure to separately account for Dalit experiences of the Chennai floods. The universalization of narrative about the Chennai floods provides a sanitized account and fails to outline Dalit janitors' specific dignity injuries.

Ricoeur (1999b) argues that the past and the future are tied to each other. Utopian imaginations of the future are built on unkept promises in the past. Conflictual memories of the past help in uncovering these unkept promises. The selective repression of conflictual memories leads to acts of repetitive labeling which are unjust and violent. In our study, we observed that television journalists actively engaged in such acts of repression and repetition, thus sanitizing accounts of the Chennai floods. Dalit janitors experienced dignity injuries due to being transformed into objects and de-personalized entities (Esposito, 2015) as a result of the journalistic accounts describing them as lazy and irresponsible.

Television journalists never focused on the embodied dignity injuries of Dalit janitors thus repressing inequalities which were operating in the aftermath of the floods. Instead, they created sanitized spectacles which mobilized repetitive stereotypes of Dalit janitors shirking their work, thus reiterating the casticization of social relations. Through our engagement with Dalit janitors, we contest these stereotypes to sustain the memory of alternative accounts of the Chennai floods. Such a sustenance of alternative accounts becomes necessary to prevent the linear production of history on the basis of ideological operations of power against marginal subjects (Huysen, 2003). The future can be changed by politically discovering ways of remembering the past through which marginalized perspectives can be mobilized (Bold, Knowles & Leach, 2002; Sturken, 1999). Dignity injuries can be resisted by counteracting the



sanitization of accounts which advance the binary segregation of some entities as persons and other entities as things (Esposito, 2015).

Ambedkar (1968) indicated that Dalits needed to actively develop a collective will to counteract the inequality of caste and the requirements of dirty work that caste orders of society placed on them. In this article, we outline that the collective will of Dalits is entangled with the counteraction of processes of forgetting that are imposed on them. Through these processes of forgetting, hazardous labor is extracted from Dalits, but their roles in reconstructing cities through their janitorial labor is not adequately acknowledged. Butler (2009) outlines that processes of forgetting might be related to the pleasure that dominant subjects draw from the degradation of vulnerable subjects. Extending Butler's arguments to janitorial labor implies that labor extracted from Dalit janitors not only fulfils instrumental outcomes of reconstructing the city, but also structures pleasures of degradation.

In the Ambedkarite sense, we understand Butler's (2009) reference to the pleasure of degradation as the narcissistic pleasure that the so called 'upper' castes and Brahminical figures derive in the reproduction of caste (Rodrigues, 2002). The caste based politics of forgetting is related to denying any virtuosity that Dalits can claim, and naturalizing dirty work as a caste based obligation that Dalit janitors need to perform. Extending Butler's thoughts on the unequal grievability of life, the injuries that Dalit janitors suffer during the performance of their labor become ungrievable as caste based inequality constructs them as subjects who cannot have any claims to grief. Within the caste order, Dalits are robbed of personhood and become bound to ties of servitude, outlining Esposito's (2015) conceptualization of the banishment of life into abstract existence, devoid of concrete embodiment. Extending Esposito's arguments of the reduction of

life into the abstract, we argue that rituals of naming involved in invoking hierarchically unequal categories of caste, rob Dalits of a concrete sense of embodied agency and personal dignity.

### **Implications**

Our core aim is to explore how the reproduction of inequalities by associating ‘dirty work’ with Dalit subjectivities diminishing social capacities of compassion for Dalit suffering and grief. The construction of janitorial labor as dirty works constructs several dignity injuries for Dalits, and when they do not have adequate opportunities to incorporate their injuries into public memory, they are unable to resist the erosion of their dignity. By naturalizing caste hierarchy, Dalit janitors’ embodiment of suffering, grief and occupational hazards become invisible and erased from the public memory. We contribute to the growing body of work on invisibility in the workplace (Hatton, 2017). We argue that there is a paradoxical relationship between embodiment and invisibility. Those who embody multiple marginalized identities in an organizational context often experience a veneer of hypervisibility. We characterize such hypervisibility as *objectified invisibility*. We argue that there may be two kinds of objectified invisibility: *erased* and *exotic*. Often one or more marginalized identities (e.g., caste or race or sexuality) could overshadow objectified invisibility - thereby erasing the suffering and indignities of those who embody those identities. The suffering of Dalit sanitation workers who work in appalling hazardous conditions is erased in the public memory because of the association between their ‘polluted’ caste status and ‘dirty work.’ In contrast, women, specifically ethnic minority women, often experience exotic objectified invisibility where being marked as an object of desire makes their everyday humanity/suffering as a human being/fellow worker invisible. Our findings suggest that an intersectional approach to study invisibility in a cross cultural contexts is critical to further our understanding of the contours of invisibility in the workplace.

Our study also makes three theoretical contributions by drawing on the experiences of Dalit janitors in the aftermath of the Chennai floods. *First*, we add to Butler's (2009) understanding of the unequal grievability of life by arguing that de-narrativization is not merely a political-discursive enactment but a process of repressing concrete embodied experiences of injustice. *Second*, we add to Ambedkar's (Rodrigues, 2002) description of caste as embodying cultures of obedience by arguing that obedience is not merely enacted through hierarchy but also through embodied memories of humiliation. *Third*, we add to Esposito's (2015) proposition that the binary segregation of persons and things is at the heart of indignity by advancing the argument that the sanitization of accounts which represses conflictual memories could aid the reproduction of binaries between persons and things. We contend that decasticizing the Indian mind is a critical step to recognition of the occupational hazards of Dalits and to restore their dignity at and in work.

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