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The Political Economy of Environmental Justice: A Comparative Study of New Delhi and Los Angeles

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Claremont McKenna College

**The Political Economy of Environmental Justice: A Comparative Study of New
Delhi and Los Angeles**

submitted to

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and

Dean Nicholas Warner

by

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for

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Abstract

Though mainstream environmentalism, both in the U.S. and India, was initially rooted in social justice, it has, over time, moved away from this focus. The Environmental Justice Movement consequently arose to reunite social and environmental activism. In this thesis, I trace the historical relationship between the mainstream environmentalism, the Environmental Justice Movement, and marginalized communities. After providing this general overview, I examine two case studies – in Los Angeles and New Delhi respectively – where marginalized communities have been involved in Environmental Justice activities. My analysis reveals that marginalized communities often act in an ‘environmentalist’ or ‘environmentally friendly’ manner, without defining their actions as such. That is, their socio-political activism often is or *becomes* environmental because of the contexts it operates within.

Chapter One: The Political Economy of Environmental Justice

In this chapter, I will trace the history and relationship between the Environmental Justice Movement (EJM) and mainstream environmentalism in American and Indian contexts. In both these countries, mainstream environmentalism was initially rooted, to differing extents, in social justice. Over time, however, it has moved away from these roots and instead focused on litigation and corporate engagement, activities that tend to prevent the participation of disenfranchised or marginalized citizens, and people who lack higher education. Because one type of experience has disappeared from mainstream environmentalism (experience, that is, of the hazards caused by industry and poverty) the movement has, in general, moved away from fighting for the rights of people *and* (and *in*) the environment, and instead defending the environment against people. By and large, it is disenfranchised or otherwise marginalized populations that are forgotten, or worse, harmed by this type of activism.

In response to the changing concerns of mainstream environmentalism, several Environmental Justice (EJ) groups have emerged, both in the U.S. and India, to fight for the rights of the aforementioned populations. Traditionally, however, these groups do not see themselves as supporting an ‘environmental’ cause. Rather, they are simply fighting for social and economic rights, for the health of their community, indeed, for their survival. But because of the contexts shaping their protest (a government’s pollution or waste policy, for example) these groups should be considered as environmentalist. It is important to reclaim the definition or meaning of ‘environmentalism’. Indeed, it is only

through reflecting on our definition of concepts like ‘environment’ (and by extension, our relation to this ‘environment’) can we understand the factors that shaped today’s political economy of environmental justice. Brief descriptions of my two case studies will better illustrate my claim.

Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles (CCSCLA), who I focus on in my second chapter, is an organization that successfully opposed the Los Angeles waste board’s plans to construct a dangerous Waste-to-Energy incinerator in South Central, an economically marginalized and predominantly African-American neighborhood of LA. They opposed the landfill because of the health and economic hazards it would bring to the community. However, their protest was *innately* environmental because the incinerator would have released dangerous pollutants into the air.

Similarly, informal waste workers in Okhla, on whom I focus my third chapter, protested the construction of a Waste-to-Energy incinerator in their neighborhood because it would burn and thus separate them from their primary source of income. (The waste workers collect and sell recyclable items from landfills.) They protested the incinerator for socio-economic reasons, but given the air pollution the incinerator would create, and the carbon friendly nature of their recycling, their protest was innately environmental as well.

In both these cases, marginalized communities – African Americans in Los Angeles (LA), migrant, informal workers in Delhi – were overlooked by policymakers and mainstream environmental groups (MEGs). Indeed, their socio-economic oppression arose *because* of a biased or poorly informed environmental policy. This context is what makes their socio-economic protests also environmental protests. By tracing the tracing

the history of EJM and mainstream environmentalism, I aim to show how socio-economic protest also comes to become environmental protest. This exploration will necessarily make us question the definitions ‘environment’ or ‘environmental work’ that are currently employed.

*

Most historians situate the origins of the American Environmental Justice Movement (EJM)¹ in protests orchestrated by the African American of community Warren County, North Carolina against a proposed landfill in 1982.² By designating the Warren County protests as the start of something *new*, historians implicitly define the EJM as separate from, or in opposition to America’s second wave of environmentalism (SWE) which rose in the 1960’s and remains the model for most modern mainstream environmental groups (MEG) today. There are many reasons for marking this separation.

It was during the Warren protests that veterans of the Civil Rights Movement were majorly involved in environmental work for the first time. Up until then, environmental activism had overwhelmingly been orchestrated by well-educated, white citizens, and concerned with “wilderness” areas rather than spaces inhabited by humans.³ Furthermore, despite their eventual failure to block the landfill, Warren’s protestors inspired minority populations across America to take up the environmental cause. It is

1 The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) defines Environmental Justice as the “fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.”

2 McGurty, Eileen M. "From NIMBY to Civil Rights: The Origins of the Environmental Justice Movement." *Environmental History* 2.3 (1997): 302. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Oct. 2012.

3 Rome, Adam. "'Give Earth a Chance': The Environmental Movement and the Sixties." *The Journal of American History* 90.2 (2003): 538. *JSTOR*. Web. 08 Nov. 2013.

also clear that, for the most part, MEGs at the time did not concern themselves with conservation problems of ethnic minorities, and that “racism and other prejudices have historically excluded activist of color and grassroots activists from the traditional environmental movement.”⁴ However, this separation between EJM and mainstream environmentalism blurs one historical reality.

By defining EJM in opposition to mainstream environmentalism, we risk bracketing the later as environmentalism as a *purely* white, upper-middle class moment, whose actions were based on an altruistic non-anthropocentric concern for ‘nature,’ or, in more cynical cases, from a concern about property values. While the actions and agendas of many MEGs may reflect this sort of belief, the SWE, in its early years at least, was deeply informed by social-political and economic developments (of the 1950s and 60s.) Indeed, the SWE has its roots as much in the shift of the liberal agenda from questions of individual material prosperity to the “imbalance between private wealth and public poverty”, in the feminist, anti-war and labor movements, as it does in scientific developments such as the publication of *Silent Spring*. In other words, the modern environmental movement has always been, to an extent, an environmental *justice* movement. Yet, the fact remains that most MEGs have failed to acknowledge or combat ‘environmental racism’ in a meaningful manner, making second wave environmentalism an EJM that has lost its way.

*

4 Cole, Luke W., and Sheila R. Foster. "A History of the Environmental Justice Movement." *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*. New York: New York UP, 2001. 30. Print.

Sheila Foster considers “it more useful to think metaphorically of the movement [EJM] as a river, fed over time by many tributaries” rather than through an incident focused lens.⁵ The main tributaries she identifies are anti-toxics movement, the Civil Rights movement, the labor movement, and the involvement of academics. To this, she adds that a “very small, and late, tributary to the EJM [was] the traditional environmental movement. Perhaps it is the history of the environmental movement that has made it such a small contributor to the EJM.”⁶ Her point regarding the history of traditional (or mainstream) environmentalism requires clarification. Foster does not claim that mainstream environmentalism has always been the bastion of well off preservationists. In fact, she even admits that the SWE “grew out of the ferment of the 1960s” and like the “Civil Rights Movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement [was] explicitly oriented towards social justice.”⁷ In time, however, second-wave environmentalists have moved away from their social justice orientation.

This transition is clearly reflected in the movement’s change in modus operandi, and the shifting demographic of its participants. Second-wave environmentalists “moved from a participatory strategy based on broad mobilization of the interested public, such as that used in the civil rights and anti-war movements, to an insider strategy based on litigation, lobbying, and technical evaluation.”⁸ Forster notes, not unsympathetically, that this shift from street protest to litigation “coincided with the traditional groups’ desire to

⁵ Cole, Luke W., and Sheila R. Foster. "A History of the Environmental Justice Movement." *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*. New York: New York UP, 2001. 20. Print.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸ *Ibid.*

control the environmental establishment or at least to have power within it.”⁹ While such groups’ intentions might have been admirable – admirable but harmful intentions will be a recurrent theme in my thesis – it ended up excluding “those without expertise from much of environmental decision making.”¹⁰ People ‘without expertise’ are usually people who have not received specialized higher education. It is not difficult to see that this group would largely consist of members of ethnic minorities and economically suppressed classes.

Viewed from a policy perspective, SWE’s shift in focus towards litigation makes sense. After all, it expedited much vital litigation such as the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)¹¹ and Clean Air Act (CAA).¹² But this ‘streets-to-courts’ transition (one that is socio-economic as well as spatial) is very disconcerting when considered from a social perspective. For by changing their arena of operation, second-wave environmentalists assumed a false discontinuity between human habitation and the ‘environment.’ When protesting against the Vietnam War or against melting ice-caps, it is possible for an group to switch its focus from street protests’ to ligation, because the issue being protested is far from home (that is, not on the streets). When second-wave environmentalists made this same shift, they lost sight of the various environmental problems such as garbage disposal, air pollution, toxic water, soil and food, which local

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 30.

¹¹ NEPA, in fact, was the act that made Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) necessary for all projects that could have significant environmental consequences. EIS has proven to be an effective tool for reform.

¹² Cole, Luke W., and Sheila R. Foster. "A History of the Environmental Justice Movement." *From the Ground Up: Environmental Racism and the Rise of the Environmental Justice Movement*. New York: New York UP, 2001. 30. Print.

people faced. As with most of these problems, economically oppressed and minority communities were the worst affected. Thus, by switching their focus to litigation, second-wave environmentalists excluded those that had most direct experience or contact with environmental dangers and hazards. As this schism widened and ossified over time, the environmental problems of minority groups and urban populations came to be regarded as ‘specialized’ concern. Indeed, the schism seems to have effaced the social justice roots of SWE. This is why, in 1971, 58% of the Sierra Club members noted that the club “should [not] concerns itself with the conservation problems of such *special groups* as the urban poor and ethnic minorities (my italics).”¹³ And this is why a critic like Charles W Mills can claim that “traditional environmentalism has not been political...[its] primary concerns have been framed as technical – how best and most efficiently to handle ecological problems – and moral – what are our responsibilities to other animals and to the natural wilderness are.”¹⁴

*

Before analyzing the ramifications of SWE’s break from its social justice roots, it is worth exploring how it was socially oriented to begin with. Historians, Adam Rome believes that the growth of liberal environmental agenda (as a result of the party’s switch in focus from ‘quantitative liberalism’ to ‘qualitative liberalism’), the grass-roots activism of middle-class women (as part of the feminist movement), and the countercultural movement driven by the writings of Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder,

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Westra, Laura, and Peter S. Wenz. "Black Trash." *Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995. 72. Print.

were vital to shaping the SWE. Each of these influences were rooted in or related to social justice.

In the 1950s, Democratic intellectuals like historian Arthur Schlesinger and economist John Galbraith began re-evaluating the modern liberal agenda.¹⁵ In particular, they questioned what liberalism could offer in a “time of unprecedented affluence,” a time when people were able to purchase and consume increasing amounts of products.¹⁶ Their solution was to turn from a ‘quantities liberalism’ to a ‘qualitative liberalism,’ and thus to shift the government’s focus from satisfying individual comforts to the “problem of social balance” and the lack of community services.¹⁷ Environmental conservation became an important part of the new agenda. Schlesinger and Galbraith argued that pollution and waste creation were economic harms. They harmed America’s national resources, which were a public good. Urbanists like Catherine Wurster worried about the effects “vanishing opens space and spreading pollution” would have to the health of a community.¹⁸ Environmental problems, then, were considered a subset of the larger individualist and consumerist culture that threatened to harm America’s socio-economic fabric. In this way, it was very closely related to problems of race or education. Presidents Kennedy and Johnson played major roles in promoting the liberal agenda. Johnson in particular, considered environmental reforms to be central to his vision of a Great Society. Indeed, Rome goes so far as to argue that conservation and civil rights were of comparable concerns for Johnson. Johnson stressed in a May 1964 speech:

¹⁵ Rome, Adam. ""Give Earth a Chance": The Environmental Movement and the Sixties." *The Journal of American History* 90.2 (2003): 527. *JSTOR*. Web. 08 Nov. 2013.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 528.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 530.

The abolition of poverty and racial justice [would be] just the beginning... The Great Society [would be] a place where man can renew contact with nature ... We have always prided ourselves on being not only America the strong... and free but America the beautiful... Today that beauty is in danger. The water we drink, the food we eat, the very air that we breathe, are threatened with pollution.¹⁹

His rhetoric would deeply resonate with any member of the EJM. EJM Groups such as CCSCLA fought for a community's right to live in a healthy environment, and to have access to unpolluted resources. Furthermore, their goals were not narrowly 'environmental'. They were also concerned, like Johnson, with quality of education, health, and life overall. For them, the environment was not an idyllic nature that had to be protected *from* humans. Rather, they challenged socio-economic systems that consigned *both* the humans and natural environment of a particular area to oppression.

In the 1960s, a growing awareness of the dangers and pervasiveness of pollution seemed to galvanize women differently than it did men. Women, primarily middle-class housewives, got involved, en masse, with the anti-toxics movement at the time. Their response seemed particularly driven by domestic concerns:

Many women became active response to an environmental threat that hit home. This was especially true in suburbia – the most rapidly changing environment in the nation... Because the suburbs were domestic places – and women were traditionally caretakers of the domestic – threats to environmental quality in suburbia were threats to the women's sphere... For many middle-class women, therefore, the environmental cause seemed a natural extension of their concerns as housewives and mothers.²⁰

Paradoxically, their involvement in environmental work was what allowed them to transcend or escape domestic limitations. Rome argues that simply by organizing and protesting, women, "without using the language of feminism, effectively called into

¹⁹ Ibid., 533.

²⁰ Ibid., 538.

question the boundaries of the women's sphere.”²¹ These two traits – women's control of the domestic sphere, and their eventual liberation from it – will reappear, with remarkable similarity, when we consider CCSCLA. Because CCSCLA's founders, and a majority of its members, were women. Given the existing gender norms in south central, their political organizing was thus intrinsically a radical and feminist act.

Rome's final factor – radicalism – played a less explicit, but never the less important role in CCSCLA's struggle too. As its founder Robin Cannon admits, CCSCLA, in many ways, emerged to fill the void left by the Black Panther party. Just as peace protestors, and students affected by writings of radical and 'eastern' influenced writers like Snyder found an amiable cause in the environmental movement (“Give Earth A Chance,” as Rome highlights, quickly came to replace “Give Peace A Chance” during Earth Day), minority embers of various EJMs recognized that the environmental hazards they were being subjected to were very much part of an overall system that was racially biased.

And yet, despite all these similarities, SWE broke away from its social justice roots. But this break was not complete.. SWE might have lost a part of its radical nature, but it never the less attracts radicals today. Likewise, a large number of women are involved in and leading various environmental groups. Why, then, did a separate movement emerge to represent ethnic minorities? Why, given the overwhelming congruence between minority EJ group like CCSCLA's concerns and those of SWE's founding members, did SWE never properly represent minority communities?

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²¹ Ibid., 540.

The simple answer seems to be that minority members *never* compromised a significant percentage of SWE groups. Historian Eileen McGurty notes that when African-Americans protesting the landfill in Warren, NC “spoke about the involvement of environmental organizations in the controversy, they only referred to the governmental agencies that made environmentally related decisions, especially the EPA.”²² These protestors never considered reaching out to MEAs such as the EDF or Sierra Club, probably because MEAs had never made their presence felt in the area before. Indeed, the partnership between white protestors and African-American protestors against the landfill was initially an awkward one. White protestors had treated the landfill simply “as a technical issue of NIMBY”, and it was only once Civil Rights veterans got involved that the protests took on a racial tone.²³ In hindsight, it seems quite arbitrary to designate the Warren protests as the birth of EJM given how suddenly protestors reframed a technical issue as a racial concern. This does not mean that placement of a landfill that threatened to contaminate groundwater and soil in the *only* majority African-American county in North Carolina was not, at least in part, racially motivated.²⁴ It most certainly was. What is striking, rather, is the protestors’ gradual discovery of the racial bias that had gone into selecting a location for the landfill.

Most minority communities across the U.S. shared this predicament at the time. Inspired or rather provoked by the events at Warren, several American academics, led by Robert Bullard, began to study the disparity in the application of environment (and in

²² McGurty, Eileen M. "From NIMBY to Civil Rights: The Origins of the Environmental Justice Movement." *Environmental History* 2.3 (1997): 316. *JSTOR*. Web. 11 Oct. 2012.

²³ *Ibid.*, 310.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 317.

particular, waste) related laws between white and African-American communities. In the following decades, various studies were conducted – none, however, by the EPA – to analyze the correlation between race and environmental burdens in the US. Here are some of the especially shocking results they found:

1. In 1992, the *National Law Journal* noted that “Penalties under hazardous waste laws at sites having a greatest white population were 500% higher than penalties with the greatest minority population, averaging \$335,566 for white areas, compared to \$55,318 for minority areas.”²⁵

2. A 1990 Greenpeace report found that “communities with existing incinerators have 89% more people of color than the national average; communities where incinerators are proposed for construction have minority populations that are 60% higher than the national average.”²⁶

Up until the Greenpeace report, most MEA did not display much interest in environmental racism, partly because they hardly suspected that such a thing might exist. It was thus up to minority organizations – usually those related with Civil Rights or religion – to broaden their mandate and conduct studies. Perhaps the most important of these studies was The United Church of Christ Commission for Racial Justice’s landmark

²⁵ Westra, Laura, and Peter S. Wenz. "Decision Making." *Faces of Environmental Racism: Confronting Issues of Global Justice*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995. 5. Print.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

Toxic Wastes and Race in the U.S., published in 1983, which “found race to be the single most important factor in the location of abandoned toxic waste sites.”²⁷

Another salient feature of the government’s landfill policy was that it targeted economically impoverished communities so as to capitalize on the local’s willingness to part with their land, or to welcome industrial development, regardless of its dangers. In this way, residents were forced to choose between poverty and environmental danger. And the more polluted an area was, the less likely it was to attract conventional or safe businesses. Thus, government actions often perpetuated a vicious cycle. Given the preexisting correlation between race and economic class in the US, this policy was tantamount to institutional racism. Indeed, this was the case with Warren.

Given these realities, in hindsight, we must conclude that SWE, despite its roots in social justice, has failed – and always failed – to meaningfully represent ethnic minorities in America. This failure was exacerbated by most MEGs transition from street protest to litigation, but it has been a salient feature of the movement from its conception. Despite its many ills, SWE’s legacy of ignoring racial concerns has had one unintended and positive consequence. Because they were left to fight on their own, many minority EJ organizations such as the United Church of Christ and CCSCLA have had to pass through a thorough *self*-education in environmental research, organizing and so forth. Thus, instead of inheriting the lessons of the past, these organizations have had to learn them through first-hand experience.

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²⁷ Bullard, Robert D. "Environmental Justice for All." *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1994. 17. Print.

It would not be an overstatement to claim that two main factors – India’s broad social contexts (issues of race and class in the U.S. are substantially equivalent to issues of caste, ethnicity, class in India); and the complex nature and functioning of the postcolonial state – combine to create most of India’s EJ issues. In India, the colonial British government usually set up legislative and bureaucratic systems to extract the nation’s resources rather than to benefit locals. Whether it be the acquisition of large swathes of forest land, or the establishment of a centralized water system, these government systems inevitably separated communities (tribal communities that lived in the forest, or villages that were flooded by large dams) from vital resources, or from their land all together. Given the far-reaching and still powerful legacy of British colonial rule – a legacy carried on by the post-independence state – most of India’s modern EJ issues involve a similar confrontation between disenfranchised groups such as peasants, tribals, migrants – who are having their resources taken away from them – and the forces of big-business and a centralized government.

Post-independence India is in many ways a ‘weak-strong’ state. A large number of its environmental programs are overly ambitious yet incompletely realized. Like most centralized programs, they primarily benefit urban middle class and elite communities (by bringing them resources from various parts of the country) and harm poor, rural communities (who make up a majority of the country’s population). In this way, the state, as economist Glyn Williams remarks, has “itself has historically been an important site of

misdistribution.”²⁸

This history of misdistribution has shaped the political economy of India’s EJ in two important ways. On one hand, it has created a very powerful suspicion of state power and intervention in almost all EJ groups. Unlike the US, where such suspicion is usually limited to the state’s operations, in India, EJ groups often aim their protests against the jurisdiction or very presence of the state itself. This suspicion has also been reinforced by the Indian government’s historical policy of “tilting the economy in favor of industry, modern intensive agriculture and commercial exploitation of resources,” which, in different ways, have further separated traditionally decentralized communities – both ‘formal’ and ‘informal – from their land.²⁹ On the other hand, it has united EJ groups in their faith that “a rescaling of development projects and environmental governance to the local level, rather than the search for global reform or restructuring” is required to create meaningful change.”³⁰

Because of the intensely social nature of most of its troubles, India, unlike the US, has not had an EJ movement that arose in opposition too, or exists separately from mainstream environmentalism. Given that 68% of India still lives in rural areas, and that a majority of India’s farmers (49% of the population) are involved in subsistence farming, the environment’s direct impact on human lives (as evidenced by droughts, farmer suicides, floodings, pesticide related epidemics) is far more – for want of a less

²⁸ Williams, Glyn, and Emma Mawdsley. "Postcolonial Environmental Justice: Government and Governance in India." *Geoforum* 37 (2006): 668. *Elsevier*. Web. 15 Apr. 2015.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 663.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

graceful word – *visible*.³¹ This gives an anthropocentric urgency to almost all environmental protests, and turns almost all environmental groups into environmental justice groups. Nevertheless, there remain social inequities within the movement.

These inequities are most pronounced in work done by civil society organizations or urban civil society individuals, especially those that file public interest litigations. Public Interest Litigation (PIL) – is a legal device that enables citizens to challenge government legislations in the name of public interest.³² Given the preexisting (and stupendous) inequalities with regard to education and monetary resources, it is obvious that PILs will primarily be filed by members of the middle and elite classes. What has been really harmful however, is that these citizens, though usually driven by positive intentions, often use PILs “to pursue their own interests...at the expense of the poor.”³³ That is, civil society members often promote legislation that ‘improves’ the ‘overall’ cleanliness or environmental standards in a city or region, at the expense of the homeless, workers in the informal economies and so forth, whose homes and places of business are demolished or who are forced to relocate in the name of better order.

The Okhla wastepickers’ reflects three major traits I have listed. Okhla’s wastepickers, who are informal economy workers, have historically operated outside urban government regulation, but very much within – both spatially and socio-

³¹ "Rural Population (% of Total Population)." The World Bank. Accessed March 26, 2015.

³² Gidwani, Vinay K. "The Right to Waste : Informal Sector Recyclers and Struggles for Social Justice in Post-reform Urban India." *India's New Economic Policy: A Critical Analysis*. New York: Routledge, 2011. 134. Print.

³³ Williams, Glyn, and Emma Mawdsley. "Postcolonial Environmental Justice: Government and Governance in India." *Geoforum* 37 (2006): 666. Elsevier. Web. 15 Apr. 2015.

economically – urban society. As we shall later see, the government has recently decided to formalize (that is, centralize and corporatize) their work, and in the process rendered their occupation illegal. In other words, through imposing a centralized power structure, the Indian government is separating a disenfranchised community from its main source of livelihood, which we have previously established as a standard cause for EJ troubles in India. Furthermore, because of their ‘informal’ status, these wastepickers have been overlooked by most civil society organizations and national policy bodies.

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The informal economy is “characterized by small-scale, labor-intensive, largely unregulated and unregistered, low-technology manufacturing or provision of services.”³⁴ It exists in various parts of the developing world, and finds niches to operate within in several different industries. India’s informal economy produces over “60%³⁵ of GDP beyond the regulative and protective reach of the state.”³⁶ Yet the prevalent public discourse promoted by the government and civil society is overwhelmingly focused on the development of the formal economy.

Because the formal economy can be taxed, and because it can receive Foreign Direct Investment, it “commands privilege in urban policy and planning circles as the engine that drives production and consumption and ensures the government its cash

³⁴ Wilson, David C., Costas Velis, and Chris Cheeseman. "Role of Informal Sector Recycling in Waste Management in Developing Countries." *Habitat International* 30 (2006): 797. *Elsevier*. Web. 22 Mar. 2015.

³⁵ This number includes earnings made by subsistence agricultures and un-unionized farm and factory workers.

³⁶ Harriss-White, Barbara, and Nandini Gooptu. "Mapping India's World of Unorganized Labour." *Socialist Register* 37 (2001): 90. Print.

flow.” In reality, however, the separation between India’s formal and informal economies is not black and white. For example, a majority of production inputs and consumption goods utilized by the formal sector “are manufactured from the informal sector: everything from electric cables...portable fans, paints, industrial solvents.” These products are the preview of the informal economy because they are available in great abundance at landfills, and can thus be sold cheap second-hand. Many small business owners or individuals would not be able to afford them at commercial rates.

The informal economy also plays an essential role in providing many vital middle class comforts such as domestic aid, vegetables on delivery, and – I will focus on this in my third chapter – door-to-door waste collection. Bharati Chaturvedi, a Marxist economist, goes so far as to assert that the “well-being of the formal sector company and its employees is critically dependent on goods and services provided by the informal sector.”³⁷

The informal economy has historically played a vital role in India’s waste management. There are several different and inter-dependent roles within the informal waste sector:

Residents and shopkeepers sell recyclable items, such as newspaper, glass, containers, tin cans etc. to kabariwallas or itinerant waste collectors. The waste pickers retrieve recyclable materials from what is discarded by households commercial establishments and industries from municipal wastes. Large commercial establishments and industries sell the recyclable waste to waste dealers in bulk, who then sell it recyclers.³⁸

³⁷ Gidwani, Vinay K. "The Right to Waste : Informal Sector Recyclers and Struggles for Social Justice in Post-reform Urban India." *India's New Economic Policy: A Critical Analysis*. New York: Routledge, 2011. 131. Print.

³⁸ Sarkar, Papiya “Solid Waste Management In Delhi –A Social Vulnerability Study” in Martin J. Bunch, V. Madha Suresh and T. Vasantha Kumaran, eds., *Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Environment and Health, Chennai, India, 15-17*

India's and especially Delhi's, informal waste workers form a discrete social group. Most are migrants from rural India who have been driven to the city by unemployment and rural poverty. Given their migratory status and economic situation, most of these workers don't have permanent or formal housing or a 'legal right' to live within the city. They are thus members of an impoverished social class. Never the less, their presence was ubiquitous in many well-off neighborhoods, and their occupation was very much vital to middle class and elite life.

In the 1990s, for example, many of Delhi's citizens filed PILs accusing the government of not paying attention to the nation's waste management problems. PILs such as *B.L. Wadhera v. The Union of India and Others (1996)* and *Almitra Patel v. the Union of India and Others (1996)* had a considerable impact on the Indian government's waste policy. Along with provoking several dramatic moments in court that involved the public humiliation of municipal officials, they led to the framing and enactment of India's first Bio-Medical Waste Management and Handling Rules, and Solid Waste Management and Handling Rules. Before these PILs, the government had not considered it necessary to regulate the disposal of bio-medical and solid waste to any extent. The new rules, for the first time, brought regulation to an aspect of civic functioning that up until then had just been happening, formally or informally.

Concerned citizens like Wadhera and Patel certainly filed their PILs with positive intentions. However, they severely underplayed, and indeed effaced the relevance of informal economy recyclers to the task of urban waste management." They failed to

acknowledge the recycler's importance, their "right to livelihood of informal sector recycling workers," and, in the process, even threatened waste picker's rights to access living spaces in urban India. This attitude is symptomatic of the India's government and middle-class's general neglect of the country's lower class, and its informal economy workers. It has been the cause of the limitation of failures of several EJ movements as well as government policies. Given the combination of their impoverishments – informal workers are migrants, usually poorly educated, driven to waste work by dire economic circumstances, often 'illegals' in the city – it has been especially hard for them to organize to defend their rights.

Luckily, however, MEGs such as Shrishti in Bangalore and Chintan in New Delhi, have published papers, conducted protests, and worked with waste workers so as to defend their rights. As is the case with many American Environmental Justice movements, India's wastepickers are fighting for their own survival, and simply by virtue of this, are supporting an environmental cause. This is because their work has historically been 'environmentally friendly.' Wastepickers were the first and only group to actively engage in recycling, and, as we shall later see, their occupation saved more carbon credits than most major government interventions. Yet, simply because of its 'informality,' however, it was targeted for exploitation by the government.

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Thus, my thesis will consider the impact of Waste-to-Energy incinerators in two communities – South Central Los Angeles, and Okhla, a suburb of Delhi. Both these incinerators were constructed (or proposed) by centralized governing bodies that did not recognize the rights of the community in which it would build its incinerator. In the case

of South Central, the incinerator would have caused great health and environmental harm to the community through its release of toxins and other associated polluting activities. In Okhla, the incinerator has both robbed an impoverished community of its main source of livelihood, and also undone the community's remarkable environmental work. What unites Okhla's wastepickers and CCSCLA is the how their concerns were excluded from traditional environmental policymaking, and consequently, how their socio-economic protests *became* environmental because of the contexts that surrounded them.

Chapter Two: Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles – A Case Study

In 1984, Cerrell Associates, a Los Angeles consulting firm, submitted a report titled *Political Difficulties Facing Waste-to-Energy Conversion Plant Siting* to the California Waste Management Board (the state's apex recycling and waste management agency). The Cerrell Report, as it later came to be known, was commissioned with ostensibly good intentions. At the time, California was facing an immense solid waste disposal problem. Over "35 million tons of garbage [was being] landfilled in municipal disposal facilities" in-state per annum.³⁹ If things continued at that rate, the state would have lost an estimated 50 percent of its landfill capacity within a year, and would have had no empty landfills by the end of the decade.⁴⁰ The California Waste Management Board⁴¹ believed that Waste-to-Energy facilities were an ideal solution to their mounting problems. Waste-to-Energy facilities contained a new type of garbage incinerator that both burnt solid waste and created steam energy. They were thus more environmentally friendly and economically sustainable than landfills. Because of these merits, California's waste board wanted to construct Waste-to-Energy facilities in as many optimal locations as possible.

³⁹ Cerrell Associates. *California Waste Management Board. Political Difficulties Facing Waste-to-energy Conversion Plant Siting*. By J. Stephen. Powell. California: Cerrell Associates, 1984. Web.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Henceforth referred to as 'waste board'.

However, as the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) has shown, most of the environmental benefits associated with Waste-to-Energy incinerators are really myths. Over 90% of materials that are disposed in “incinerators can be reused, recycled and composted.”⁴² Thus, by building incinerators, the waste board was almost promoting waste. Furthermore, studies have shown that “among U.S. industries, the waste incineration industry has the highest ratio of negative economic impacts from air pollution compared to the financial value added by the industry.”⁴³

Though these facts were not well known to the public at the time, no communities wanted Waste-to-Energy facilities in their neighborhood because of the generally negative aura, both with regard to aesthetics and pollution, they had. As the Cerrell Report notes, “the most formidable obstacle to Waste-to-Energy is public opposition. People tend to view Waste-to-Energy projects in the same light as any waste disposal facility, and they simply do not want a dump nearby.”⁴⁴ Never the less, California’s waste board was convinced of the safety and merits of Waste-to-Energy facilities, and in the face of public opposition, contracted Cerrell Associates with drawing up a report that isolated the best places and best ways in which to develop them.

Cerrell coldly analyzed the likeliness of a community protesting an incinerator, but never stopped to question *why* this was so. Their approach was absolutely pragmatic.

⁴² *Incinerators: Myths vs . Facts about “Waste to Energy”*. Tech. Global Alliance For Incinerator Alternatives, Feb. 2012. Web.

⁴³ " Muller, Nicholas Z., Robert Mendelsohn, and William Nordhaus. 2011. "Environmental Accounting for Pollution in the United States Economy." *American Economic Review*, 101(5): 1649-75.

⁴⁴ Cerrell Associates. *California Waste Management Board. Political Difficulties Facing Waste-to-energy Conversion Plant Siting*. By J. Stephen. Powell. California: Cerrell Associates, 1984. Web.

Waste-to-Energy facilities had to be built, and Cerrell aimed to find the easiest places to build them. If Cerrell Associates' complacency regarding the health and environmental dangers of Waste-to-Energy facilities was not questionable enough, the recommendations of their report revealed a disturbing disregard for the socioeconomic forces that shape a community's civic involvement and leverage:

Certain types of people are likely to participate in politics, either by virtue of their issue awareness or their financial resources, or both. Members of middle or higher-socioeconomic strata...are more likely to organize into effective groups to express their political interests and views. All socioeconomic groupings tend to resent the nearby siting of major facilities, but the middle and upper-socioeconomic strata possess better resources to effectuate their opposition. *Middle and higher-socioeconomic strata neighborhoods should not fall at least within the one-mile and five-mile radii of the proposed site* [my italics]...all subgroups, people with a college education, young or middle-aged, and liberal in philosophy are most likely to organize opposition to the siting of a major facility. Older people, people with a high school education or less, and those who adhere to a free market orientation are least likely to oppose a facility.⁴⁵

In this way, the Cerrell Report selected communities with the lowest average incomes and lowest education rates as prime locations for Waste-to-Energy facilities. Given the preexisting racial inequities in America, their suggestion was tantamount to declaring minority neighborhoods as resistance 'soft-spots.'

Cerrell's disregard for the socio-economic context of civic involvement also points towards another salient feature of the waste board's Waste-to-Energy plans. Though the waste board stressed the economic benefits – cheap energy production – of Waste-to-Energy incinerators; it was not concerned with channeling these benefits to the *same* neighborhoods where incinerators would be built. Indeed, neighborhoods that had incinerators often received none of the energy they produced. In other words, the waste board took a context and geography-blind approach to energy production. Instead of addressing the needs of specific neighborhoods, they were concerned with improving

⁴⁵ Ibid.

‘overall’ energy numbers, a top-down approach that was biased against economically disadvantaged and minority populations.

In 1984, based on the Cerrell report’s recommendations, the L.A. waste board selected South Central Los Angeles as the site of its new LANCER Waste-to-energy facility. At the time, South Central was a predominantly minority populated neighborhood – 52% of its population is African American and 44% Latino – with a 78% unemployment rate, average yearly income less than half of LA, and low number of college graduates.⁴⁶ In other words, it was the opposite of a “middle and higher-socioeconomic strata neighborhood” and was thus a perfect site for a Waste-to-Energy facility. South Central also had a long history of government neglect and high pollution levels; this made it an even easier target for a polluting facility. Indeed, in a study conducted in the early 80s, South Central was found to be “the dirtiest zip code in California” as per the federal EPA toxic release inventory data.⁴⁷ Incinerators would have fit right into its landscape.

By locating an incinerator in South Central, the waste board promoted the type of institutional racial bias (with regard to environmental policy) that I detailed in my first chapter. Given its demographic, South Central had historically received minimum attention from MEGs. This combined with waste board’s racist policy, meant that the neighborhood was being subjected to an environmental injustice. In the rest of my

⁴⁶ Hamilton, Cynthia. "Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles." *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1994. 208. Print.

⁴⁷ Bullard, Robert D. "Residential Segregation and Urban Quality of Life." *Environmental Justice: Issues, Policies, and Solutions*. Washington, D.C.: Island, 1995. 77. Print.

chapter, I will detail how South Central's citizens organized to form an Environmental Justice group, Concerned Citizens for South Central Los Angeles, which successfully opposed LANCER.

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The L.A. waste board did not expect much protest from South Central's citizens – this was why the neighborhood had been selected – but they nevertheless attempted to speed the construction of the first incinerator, LANCER 1, because activists and officials would have been “hard-pressed to justify killing LANCER 2 on health and environmental grounds if LANCER 1 was up and running.”⁴⁸ Their plan did not work out.

Because led by Charlotte Bullock and Robin Cannon, a group of South Central's citizens got together, and in a historical move, successfully overcame the L.A. waste board to have LANCER, a project which by then the government had already invested \$12 million dollars on, cancelled. It is worth noting that CCSCLA was manly comprised of a high school educated, middle-aged, nonprofessional, low-income individuals with little previous political experience. That is, of people that were the very antithesis of the Cerrell Report's prototypical ‘protestors’.

Most accounts of CCSCLA's conception begin in dramatic fashion. And rightly so. It is a narrative that involves a disadvantaged group discovering the callous, almost malevolent plans that a powerful organization, the State, had for them. The State had not attempted to conceal its plans. It merely assumed that South Central's citizens would not care or perhaps not understand them. Indeed, the State's plans were publicly available.

⁴⁸ Bullard, Robert D. "The Threat of Environmental Racism." *Natural Resources & Environment Facility Siting 7.3* (1993): 23. *JSTOR*. Web.

As part of the standard Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) process, the waste board had to conduct a public hearing in which they discussed the LANCER project – its costs, benefits, dangers and so forth – with local residents of the area. Robin Cannon, an African-American resident of South Central L.A., was then a senior data processor technician for the City of Los Angeles, and as a part of her job had to review the notification of the city’s public hearing. As someone familiar with the neighborhood, Cannon was aware that many of South Central L.A.’s residents suffered from respiratory ailments. The prospect of an incinerator being built in the neighborhood thus worried her. She had even “suspected for some time that air pollutants associated with established industries in her neighborhood contributed” to her family’s and her community’s ailments, and was thus further alarmed at the prospect of a toxin releasing incinerator.⁴⁹

Academic Robert Bullard notes that industrial flight from inner city urban neighborhoods creates an economic vacuum that is often filled by polluting industries. Citing South Central in L.A., and other economically advantaged neighborhoods in San Francisco, San Diego and Riverside, he highlights the striking correlation between crumbling infrastructure and high poverty, and high levels of pollution.⁵⁰ The economic situation in such neighborhoods is often so acute that workers are “forced to choose between unemployment and a job that may risk their health, their family’s health, and the

⁴⁹ Winton, Sonya. "Concerned Citizens: Environmental (In)Justice in Black Los Angeles." *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*. New York: New York UP, 2010. 347. Print.

⁵⁰ Bullard, Robert D. "Residential Segregation and Urban Quality of Life." *Environmental Justice: Issues, Policies, and Solutions*. Washington, D.C.: Island, 1995. 81. Print.

health of their community.”⁵¹ This, in a sense, is what happened to Cannon and Bullock. Being employees of the City of Los Angeles, it was in their best interest to turn a blind eye to LANCER’s dangers. However, their personal investment in the issues at hand outweighed any potential fears of unemployment. In an interview, Bullock noted that:

People’s jobs were threatened, ministers were threatened...but I said, “I’m not going to be intimidated...” My child’s health comes first...that’s more important than any job.⁵²

Bullock also recognized the dubious and inequality-perpetuating economic rationale behind LANCER’s development:

They’re not bringin real development to our community...They’re [bringing] this incinerator [that promises fifty jobs]. Meanwhile, they’re going to shut down another factory (in Riverside) and eliminate 200 jobs to buy more pollution rights.⁵³

Her observation both ties in with Bullard’s correlation between industrial flight and pollution, and also points towards a larger systemic problem – the outsourcing or transport of pollution to disadvantaged neighborhoods through cap and trade. Again, it was the social problem – job losses – that led Bullock to discover an environmental problem – cap and trade.

There is also a distinctly racial component to these matters. For industrial flight and the government’s free market approach to pollution rights compound to create a situation where an disproportionate amount of polluting or waste-management plants are situated in minority neighborhoods. Boer’s multivariate analysis of several L.A. neighborhoods proves that communities “most likely to host a TDSF [treatment, storage and disposal facility] are industrial areas with a large concentration of working-class

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Hamilton, Cynthia. "Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles." *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1994. 210. Print.

⁵³ Ibid., 215.

people of color.⁵⁴ Furthermore, all the neighborhoods Bullard cites in his industrial flight-pollution analysis are minority populated.

Given her concerns, Cannon decided to attend the project's public hearing, which was to happen the following week, with her co-worker and neighbor Charlotte Bullock, who had herself just heard about LANCER. This simple display of civic awareness was the first step in the process that led to the formation of CCSCLA.

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Bullock and Cannon found themselves among forty other skeptical community residents at the public hearing, an event that was less a sustained dialogue with the public and more an advertising campaign for LANCER. City officials screened a film in which African-American actor Brock Peters "endorsed LANCER as an economic revitalization project vis-à-vis job creation."⁵⁵

Most of these claims were not completely true. For example, Cannon would soon realize that the council's claims about job creation were bogus. Though LANCER would need personnel, a "majority of the 50 or so employment opportunities offered by such a high-tech operation would be specialized" which meant that most of its employees would be brought in from elsewhere because of the lower education levels in South Central

⁵⁴ Boer, J. Tom, Manuel Pastor, Jr., James L. Sadd, and Lori Snyder. "Is There Environmental Racism." *Social Science Quarterly* 78.4 (1997). University of Texas Press. Web.

⁵⁵ Winton, Sonya. "Concerned Citizens: Environmental (In)Justice in Black Los Angeles." *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*. New York: New York UP, 2010. 348. Print.

L.A.”⁵⁶ It was the council’s calm denial of LANCER’s environmental and health threats that was more troubling. Cannon was alarmed by how city officials discussed the emission of dioxins and furans “as if they were nothing to worry about,” and casually mentioned that the plant “would operate twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and dispose 100,000 gallons of water” daily, as if the coming and going dump trucks would not make noise or release fumes.⁵⁷

After the council’s presentation, Cannon walked on stage and listed her many concerns for the project. This turned her into a face for a LANCER ‘protest’ or opposition campaign. On one hand, city officials gave her LANCER’s EIR assuming it would placate her concerns (or that she would not understand it); on the other, many community residents took her phone number assuming that she was a figure of authority. Cannon left the hearing with these growing responsibilities, and so spent her entire day pouring through LANCER’s EIR. She was shocked by what she read that she called her sister to declare, “Sheila, I think they’re trying to kill us!”⁵⁸ Over the next few weeks, awareness of the EIR spread through the neighborhood. The Cannon sisters, Bullock, and several others eventually held a meeting together and formed Concerned Citizens for

⁵⁶ Winton, Sonya. "Concerned Citizens: Environmental (In)Justice in Black Los Angeles." *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*. New York: New York UP, 2010. 349. Print.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 348.

⁵⁸ Chiro, Giovanna Di. "Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice." *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1995. 298. Print.

South-Central Los Angeles, an entirely local group that “met every Saturday for two consecutive years” and eventually helped overcome LANCER.⁵⁹

CCSCLA did not initially consider LANCER to be an ‘environmental problem.’ Indeed, although their work had environmental dimensions – air pollution, water disposal, and so forth – CCSCLA’s role-models were not the Sierra Club or Greenpeace, but rather the Black Panther Party (BPP). Their initial reluctance or disinterest in labels of environmentalism is reflective of the overall EJM trends identified in Chapter One.

Cannon noted that her “education in community development and resource knowledge... came from listening to the Black Panthers talk about the need for political, economic, and social empowerment in my community in the 1960’s.”⁶⁰ CCSCLA’s members were primarily concerned about the lives of South Central’s citizens, and thus thought of themselves as a social justice organization. It was not that CCSCLA was unaware of the effects polluted air would have on people. Rather, they understood this well enough to see that *humans* were the primary victims of LANCER’s *environmental* hazards. This convergence of humanitarian and environmental concern would both complicate CCSCLA’s movement and be the key to its success,

In Chapter One, we observed how, SWE came to distance itself from the environmental concerns of minority and urban populations. And indeed, CCSCLA’s situation was no different. When they approached the Sierra Club and Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) for help, CCSCLA’s members were informed that “the poisoning of

⁵⁹ Winton, Sonya. "Concerned Citizens: Environmental (In)Justice in Black Los Angeles." *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*. New York: New York UP, 2010. 349. Print.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

an urban community by an incarceration facility was a ‘community health issue,’ not an environmental one” and thus denied support.⁶¹ This (perhaps false) distinction between ‘community’ and ‘environment’ brings us to one of the central issues CCSCLA raised.

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Though CCSCLA’s initial concerns were community-oriented, their research led them to see the LANCER’s environmental dangers. In this way their experience is similar to several original American EJM protestors including the Warren protestors. CCSCLA did not stop their organizing once they overcame the waste board’s mandate and had LANCER cancelled. Rather, they forced the waste board to set up a *recycling* program so as to ensure that dangerous incinerators like LANCER would not have to be constructed again. In other words, they found an environmental solution for their community problem. This was an important development, because, as historian Sonya Winton notes:

By combining the issues of race, concentrated poverty, social isolation, and environmental health, leaders of CCSCLA not only made certain that South Central LA emerged as a significant focal point of the burgeoning modern environmental justice movement that was sweeping the nation, but they also effectively challenged an overtly narrow definition of ‘the environment’.⁶²

Winton is highlighting how CCSCLA’s were both socio-economic and environmental in nature. However, her use of the word ‘combining’ is perhaps misleading. Because South Central’s environmental and socioeconomic troubles were *combined* to begin with. That is, they arose from institutional inequalities.

⁶¹ Chiro, Giovanna Di. "Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice." *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1995. 299. Print.

⁶² Winton, Sonya. "Concerned Citizens: Environmental (In)Justice in Black Los Angeles." *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*. New York: New York UP, 2010. 349. Print.

CCSCLA faced racial biases even in the media coverage of their protest. Newspapers – both local and national – failed to cover their activities for over a year. When Omawale Fowles, a local resident, discovered in the course of her research, that LANCER’s Environmental Impact Report (EIR) “lacked the required Health Risk Assessment (HRA) – an analysis that identifies and assess environmental risks to public health” no media outlet stepped forward to cover this shortcoming.⁶³ No lab or environmental organization offered its expertise either. Finally, “Lewis Amand – a community resident and graduate student at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) – petitioned his department” to conduct an independent health analysis, one whose results were so shocking that the waste board had to cave in and conduct the previously neglected HRA.⁶⁴ The new HRA, conducted by peer reviewers, led to LANCER’s demise.

The media was present at the city council’s chambers when CCSCLA brandished these results at LANCER’s Conditional Permit hearing in March 1986. But instead of interviewing Cannon or Bullock, they asked around for “CCSCLA’s white leader” and left on hearing that such a person did not exist.⁶⁵ Indeed, it was not until CCSCLA contacted Not Yet New York, a political organization based in affluent west L.A., did they receive any media attention. However, racial biases continued to affect CCSCLA even once it became a well-known organization. In fact, when L.A. mayor Tom Bradley finally cancelled LANCER in 1987, he invited leaders of mainstream environmental

⁶³ Ibid., 350.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Winton, Sonya. "Concerned Citizens: Environmental (In)Justice in Black Los Angeles." *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*. New York: New York UP, 2010. 351. Print.

groups (many that had not supported CCSCLA), and no one from CCSCLA, to a photo-op celebrating its demise.

Given its constant struggle with government institutions, with the media, and even with mainstream environmental groups (MEGs), CCSCLA's activities were as much an assertion of a minority community's importance, that is, of racial protest, as it was of environmental protest. Indeed, CCSCLA revealed how dubious EIR's and polluting industries are often approved (and thus exist) just because of the government, and, to an extent, the media's disregard of minority issues. As Cannon notes:

The fight had really turned me around; things are intertwined in ways I hadn't realized...All these social issues as well as political and economic issues are really intertwined. Before, I was only concerned about health, and then I began to get into politics, decision making, and so many things.⁶⁶

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Just as there were distinctly social and racial elements to the 'environmental' issues that CCSCLA was protesting, there were distinctly 'social-justice' or feminist elements to their internal organization. CCSCLA's two de-facto leaders (the organization never established a definite hierarchy) were both women, as were a majority of its constituent members. This was not happenstance. Cynthia Hamilton argues that women are more likely than men to act against community health hazards, because community or home issues are 'domestic' and thus traditionally considered a part of the women's domain.⁶⁷ Children are also a part of this domestic domain, and many of CCSCLA's women members, Cannon included, despite having "no political experience [or] history

⁶⁶ Hamilton, Cynthia. "Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles." *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1994. 217. Print.

⁶⁷ Hamilton, Cynthia. "Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles." *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1994. 210. Print.

of organizing, responded first as protectors of their children.”⁶⁸ Hamilton even goes so far as to argue that women’s liberation was a significant result of CCSCLA’s struggles.⁶⁹

This liberation unfolded on two fronts: at the council chambers, and at home.

The primarily male city council members initially dismissed CCSCLA’s concerns regarding LANCER’s dangerous health impacts as “irrational, uninformed, and disruptive” because CCSCLA members were referring to their children’s health histories rather than citing scientific evidence.⁷⁰ Referring to their own scientific evidence – which later turned out to be faulty – experts at the council claimed that dioxin exposure was as dangerous as eating peanut butter, and mockingly asked CCSCLA members if this would make them stop feeding their children peanut butter sandwiches.⁷¹ Gil Lindsay – L.A. city council’s first black councilman – was particularly vehement in denying CCSCLA’s legitimacy. Using what Winton calls ‘coded misogynist language,’ Lindsay publicly pointed to CCSCLA members and declared that, “these people will never be able to impact my fellow councilmen.”⁷² Furthermore, he often conspired to prevent CCSCLA members from attending town council meetings, and almost succeeded in sabotaging their efforts by attempting to win over the HRA peer review members in the closed door meeting. Cannon believed that Lindsay “felt that black women should not have been challenging black female leadership.”⁷³ In this way, CCSCLA’s environmental protest

⁶⁸ Ibid., 211.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 215.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Winton, Sonya. "Concerned Citizens: Environmental (In)Justice in Black Los Angeles." *Black Los Angeles: American Dreams and Racial Realities*. New York: New York UP, 2010. 351. Print.

⁷³ Ibid.

also became a critique of patriarchy – one that was developed through practice, rather than through theory. By bringing traditionally ‘domestic concerns’ to the professional sphere, CCSCLA had managed to see environmental hazards that were overlooked by policy makers who were more interested in economic gains and professional advancement.

CCSCLA activities were empowering *within* the domestic sphere as well. In an ironic twist, political activity which was spurred by a concern for the family, was actually straining these women’s familial relations. Since CCSCLA largely progressed without external help, its members had to devote a large amount of time to research, door-to-door campaigning, and to attending council meetings. This meant that they had less time to attend to domestic matters, a development which did not sit well with many of their husbands who did not take CCSCLA’s activities seriously. As Cannon notes:

My husband didn’t take me seriously at first...He just saw a whole lot of women meeting and assumed we wouldn’t get anything done...I had to split my time...I’m the one usually comes home from work, cooks, helps the kids with their homework...Now the kids were on their own...I had my own homework...my husband still wasn’t taking me seriously [but he had to] learn to allocate more time to baby-sitting.⁷⁴

Here again we see how CCSCLA managed to protest against inequality in the public and domestic spheres through activism. More than anything, CCSCLA’s members strived to assert that their lives, and their way of life – one based on familial care and concern, rather than economic gain – deserved protection. Their actions force us to reconsider the boundaries that define an ‘environmental protest,’ and to recognize that environmental problems are often manifestations of larger systemic issues, and can thus

⁷⁴ Hamilton, Cynthia. "Concerned Citizens of South Central Los Angeles." *Unequal Protection: Environmental Justice and Communities of Color*. San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1994. 216. Print.

be addressed through several techniques, not only through preservationist discourse that frames the environment as an idyllic expanse that must be protected from humans.

Like CCSCLA, Okhla's wastepickers conducted protests aimed at protecting their occupations and way of life. But given the socio-political context of these protests, they turned out to be environmentalist as well. I will detail their struggle and highlight the parallels between it and CCSLCA in my next chapter.

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Chapter Three: Timarpur-Okhla Waste-to-Energy Project – A Case Study

Like Los Angeles in 1990, New Delhi in 2010 was a city that faced serious and growing solid waste management [SWM] problems. Its population has almost doubled (from 12.8 million to 24 million) in the past decade, previously rural areas such as Ghaziabad and Noida had become suburbs closely connected with the city, and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi's [MCD] three major designated landfills were close to reaching their full capacity.⁷⁵ In addition to their shrinking reserves of land, the MCD also faced pressure from the middle class activists (as evidenced by the Wadhera and Patel PILs that were mentioned in Chapter One) to modernize their organization. The MCD responded to these pressures in two important ways: through the privatization of SWM, and through the creation of capital-intensive, large-scale SWM infrastructure such as Waste-to-Energy generators. Both these actions were harmful to informal waste workers.

In theory, the MCD has always been legally bound to manage all of the city's solid waste. In reality, laborers from the informal sector have played an integral role in this process for decades. Prior to large-scale privatization that happened in 2004, a majority of Delhi's waste was brought to neighborhood depots called 'dhalaos' by individual wastepickers (informal economy waste workers) who went from door-to-door

⁷⁵ Gidwani, Vinay K. "The Right to Waste : Informal Sector Recyclers and Struggles for Social Justice in Post-reform Urban India." *India's New Economic Policy: A Critical Analysis*. New York: Routledge, 2011. 135. Print.

collecting waste, and who then separated and sold parts of the waste – through informal traders – for recycling.⁷⁶ Their numbers were more than considerable: over 100,000 waste collectors operated in Delhi, collecting close to 75000 tonnes of waste daily.⁷⁷ By privatizing SWM, the MCD deprived waste workers the ability to go door-to-door collecting waste, as private companies would now collect an entire building or housing society's waste and take it directly to dhalao or central landfill.

What's striking about the MCD's decision was that it didn't happen in *response* to the ineffectiveness of wastepickers (indeed, as we shall later see, wastepickers have been more efficient with recycling than any private organization). Rather, the MCD acted as if wastepickers didn't even exist. Just as L.A.'s Waste Board located a Waste-to-Energy plant in South Central on the assumption that South Central's community members would not protest it or be aware of its dangers, the MCD privatized SWM on the assumption that wastepickers, given their unclear legal status, did not deserve any governmental protection despite the utility they provided. In Chapter One, I described the post-independence Indian government's historical unwillingness to acknowledge the rights of various disenfranchised communities. The MCD's behavior is a typical example of this. As Marxist economist Chaturvedi notes, "the shift to capital-intensive waste management is...incompatible with labor-intensive methods historically employed in the informal sector and has resulted in a socio-technical regime that endangers the

⁷⁶ A more detailed description of their work is present in Chapter One.

⁷⁷ "Waste-to-Energy or Waste-of-Energy: Social and Economic Impact Assessment of Waste-to-Energy Projects on Wastepickers near Ghazipur and Okhla Landfills in Delhi." Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group, Web.

livelihoods of the urban poor.⁷⁸

Privatization was only one part of the MCD's agenda. The other part involved technological advancement. In 2009, the MCD issued tenders for two Waste-to-Energy plants to be located in Ghazipur, a suburb of New Delhi where the international airport is located.⁷⁹ Jindal Urban Infrastructure Ltd. – a subsidiary of the Jindal Steel Empire – was awarded a tender for a plant to be built in the Okhla landfill.⁸⁰ The other project was cancelled. Construction began on the Timarpur-Okhla plant (as it came to be called) the following year, despite vehement protest from 450 residents who live nearby, and depended on the landfill, directly or indirectly, for their livelihood. In this aspect, the Okhla wastepickers' story differs from that of CCSCLA.

Tughlakabad Extension, Tekhanad Village and Tughlakabad Village – the three main residential subdivisions in the Okhla – are neighborhoods whose economies are largely (and in two cases, entirely) dependent on waste collected from the Okhla landfill, and income generated through this activity. The establishment of a Waste-To-Energy generator in Okhla, and the consequent privatization of all waste directed towards that landfill, thus signaled an enormous threat to their lives. Sensing this, they, along with the Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group, conducted large protests against the MCD. Okhla's residents suffered from greater systematic socio-economic oppression than South Central's citizens. As I mentioned in chapter 1, most waste workers were migrants who came to Delhi because of unemployment. Furthermore, many of them did not have permanent or formal housing or a 'legal right' to live within the city. Despite

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

these trying circumstances, however, the wastepickers organized and began protests soon as news of the plant's spread in the community. They persist with their protests today, three years into the plant's operation.

The central parallel between the Okhla wastepickers' struggle and that of CCSCLA is that both communities are fighting a social battle – CCSCLA for minority rights; the Okhla wastepickers for their very form of living – but one whose ultimate aims turned out to be environmental. Indeed the socio-political and environmental aspects of their protests were inextricable. Both questioned the prevalent ideologies upon which the government operates.

India's Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) passed legislation in 2006 requiring all Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) to involve both an EIA report and a public hearing. Jindal Urban Infrastructure fulfilled both requirements. But they responded to the letter of the law, not its spirit. Jindal's public hearing announcement was only published in two newspapers, was one sentence long in its *entirety*, and mentioned an "integrated municipal solid waste processing complex" but made no direct reference to an incinerator.⁸¹ No community member attended the public hearing.

This event provides two crucial insights: it reveals Jindal's moral ambivalence, and also speaks to the demographics of Okhla's wastepickers. A Waste-to-Energy incinerator's public hearing, no matter how poorly publicized, would certainly be attended in large numbers were the project located in a primarily middle-class or well

⁸¹ Shah, Dharmesh. *The Timarpur-Okhla Waste to Energy Venture*. Rep. Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives, Web.

educated neighborhood. Almost all of Okhla's residents would be considered members of the lower class. Indeed, a majority of them were migrants from West Bengal who had come to Delhi with very little qualification or capital, and in search of employment. Given that many wastepickers have had incomplete educations, and spend almost the entire day working,⁸² it is unsurprising that a tiny notification in a newspaper went unnoticed. It is possible, but highly unlikely that one or two of them read EIA announcement. After all, it would take only one person reading it for news to disseminate through the community.

The announcement, made in newsprint, rather than in person, again underlines the unequal distinctions between formal and informal parts of the economy. For years, wastepickers had conducted their business free from the legal restraints or attentions of the government. When the time for change came, however, their actions were entirely overlooked. Indeed, the government's reasons for setting up a Waste-to-Energy plant at Okhla are darkly ironic, because the project's two central goals – monetization (and thus incentivization) of waste management, and environmental protection – were better achieved by the informal sector than they currently are through Jindal's activities.

By privatizing SWM, the MCD attempted to “augment the value of waste”, to change it from being “viewed as an inconvenient by-product to being subsumed within circuits of capital and subject to capitalist laws of value.”⁸³ But this is only half the story. Because wastepickers, in many ways, were the first community to view waste as a commodity of value. Wastepickers, scrap collectors, junk dealers and so forth, created an

⁸² Wastepickers often reach landfills at 4:00 AM.

⁸³ Schindler, Seth, Federico Demaria, and Shashi Pandit. "Delhi's Waste Conflict." *Economic & Political Weekly* XLviI.42 (2012): 18. Web.

economy where solid waste – historically unmanaged and unmonitored – was collected, painstakingly sifted through, and then returned to the commercial economy in the form of recyclable parts and raw materials. They were not acting on an altruistic mandate that involved environmentalism or civic duty. Like entrepreneurs, wastepickers in Okhla responded to the socio-economic situation they were in – one of social marginalization, economic despondency, and inability to achieve formal employment – by harvesting the one resource they had access to: solid waste. In this way, they *created* a carbon-friendly economy where there was none before. Thus, the MCD did not really ‘monetize’ solid waste by privatizing SWM. Rather, they merely monopolized an existing democratic economy. The MCD’s end-of-pipe solution gave an individual organization monopolistic control over waste in all stages of its existence (that is, at individual households, at dhalaos, and at landfills).

Solid waste has historically not been a “municipal property until it reaches a formal disposal point.”⁸⁴ Wastepickers operated in a legal gray zone where they were allowed to collect waste from individual households, but not from dhalaos or landfills (though, in reality these activities were allowed to). In order to privatize waste *all along* the disposal chain, the MCD had to pass legislation that overruled or replaced wastepickers rights to door-to-door collection. Scholars have described this sort of strong-arming as “accumulation by dispossession” a process by which owners of capital “separate, by force if necessary, laborers [wastepickers] from the means of production

⁸⁴ Gidwani, Vinay K. "The Right to Waste : Informal Sector Recyclers and Struggles for Social Justice in Post-reform Urban India." *India's New Economic Policy: A Critical Analysis*. New York: Routledge, 2011. 134. Print.

[waste, transfer stations, etc.].”⁸⁵ The similarity between the wastepickers separation from their resources, and that of laborers in other industries, forces us to probe the *real* economic rationale behind the privatization of Delhi’s SWM, and their installation of a Waste-to-Energy incinerator.

Proponents of Waste-to-Energy will argue that the economic benefits of such plants – regardless of their environmental merits or demerits – are indisputable. In one sense this is true. Okhla’s wastepickers were earning enough for their own livelihoods, and introducing some raw materials and products back into the economy, but they were not *generating* electricity. By burning waste, a public resource, Jindal Urban would be generating electricity, a public good. But in reality, the equation was not so simple. MCD’s tender agreement stated that Jindal would have to sell all its electricity to the Delhi Transmission Utility (Transco) at a fixed tariff. The final Power Purchase Agreement (PPA), however, contained an unpublicized clause that allowed Jindal to channel all energy generated at Okhla towards captive use.⁸⁶ Thus, in essence, Jindal had purchased a public good (that wastepickers previously shared in a decentralized and democratic manner) and used it for their own profit.

The consequences of this move, as we shall soon see, harmed the environment. But it is important to note that the Okhla Waste-to-Energy incinerator was first and foremost facilitated by a socio-economic wrong. Had wastepickers not treated Delhi’s dhalaos and landfills as a public ‘common,’ were waste picking part of the *formal* sector, Jindal would

⁸⁵ Schindler, Seth, Federico Demaria, and Shashi Pandit. "Delhi’s Waste Conflict." *Economic & Political Weekly* XLvI.42 (2012): 20. Web.

⁸⁶ Shah, Dharmesh. *The Timarpur-Okhla Waste to Energy Venture*. Rep. Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives, Web.

not have been able to take control over the Okhla landfill. But Okhla's wastepickers were un-unionized workers and their occupation unrecognized by the MCD. Today, a common rallying cry during Okhla wastepicker protests is "Koorā Humara Aapka, Nahin kisee ke baapka [Waste belongs to all of us; it is not the private entitlement of any one individual]" – a sentiment which addresses the flawed ideology upon which the MCD awarded Jindal the Okhla landfill."⁸⁷

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Most major American environmental groups failed to recognize CCSCLA's activities as 'environment-related,' at the outset of their operations at least. The situation has been different with Okhla's wastepickers. NGOs Chintan and All India Kabadi Mazdoor Mahasangh (AIKMM) have recognized the environmental benefits of the wastepickers work. Indeed, Chintan has rigorously quantified the GHG emissions saved through the Okhla wastepickers' activities, and also calculated the percentage of waste they recycle per annum. A shocking image arises when these figures are compared against those of the Jindal Waste-to-Energy plant.

Chintan estimates that Delhi's wastepickers, combined, reduce estimated 962,133 tons of Carbon Dioxide per annum" which is equivalent to reducing removing 176,215 passenger vehicles from the road, and is more than *three times* the emission reduction the MCD estimates the Timarpur-Okhla plant creates.⁸⁸ Okhla's wastepickers comprise only

⁸⁷ "Failing the Grade: How Cities Across India are Breaking the Rules, Ignoring the Informal Recycling Sector and Unable to Make the Grade." Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group, Web.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

a small subgroup of all wastepickers in Delhi. However, if we consider recycling figures this single subgroup does better than the entire Timarpur-Okhla plant. On a year-to-year average, Okhla's wastepickers recycled 55% of the all waste that made it to the Okhla landfill.⁸⁹ Jindal's plant, by contrast recycles only 20% of this waste. This is not simply because they burn the rest for energy. Jindal recycles 20% of incoming waste because they are legally *required* to as per the tender contract from the MCD. If the requirement were lower, Jindal would incinerate more waste and thus create electricity for themselves. This type of trade-off reflects the dangers of entrusting large businesses with public goods.

Solid waste that remains stagnant invariably begins emitting methane, a greenhouse gas (GHG) that is 25-72 times as potent as carbon dioxide. An argument often provided in defense of Waste-to-Energy is that such incinerators prevent waste from stagnating and thus reduce methane emissions. However, methane is generated by wet organic waste – much of which is present in the Okhla landfill – but which does not easily burn. Even if this biomass is burned, it produces carbon dioxide, which though less harmful than methane, is still harmful – a fact ignored by Jindal, as they don't report 84% of their carbon dioxide emissions because of its biogenic origin.⁹⁰ Jindal's website goes so far as to claim that the Timarpur-Okhla incinerator will produce zero emissions

⁸⁹ "Waste-to-Energy or Waste-of-Energy: Social and Economic Impact Assessment of Waste-to-Energy Projects on Wastepickers near Ghazipur and Okhla Landfills in Delhi." Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group, Web

⁹⁰ Shah, Dharmesh. *The Timarpur-Okhla Waste to Energy Venture*. Rep. Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives, Web.

because of state-of-the-art pollution control technology.⁹¹ This seems unlikely given that the technology cost Jindal only \$45 million. By contrast, an incinerator in Rostock, Germany that processes less than a third of Timarpur-Okhla's waste per day, was fitted with a \$120 million pollution control system so as to achieve zero emissions. In a depressing parallel with LANCER, Jindal too declared that the dioxins emitted from Timarpur-Okhla would not be dangerous to the nearby communities. A crowning irony in this case is that Timarpur-Okhla is registered under the Indian government's Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) program, and is having its operations subsidized.

Given the obvious environmental dangers and costs, one wonders why the MCD imagined a Waste-to-Energy project was needed in Okhla. History seems to provide us with a clue. Jindal's Timarpur-Okhla plant was *not* the first Waste-to-Energy incinerator to be built in the region. In 1987, the Ministry of Non-Conventional Energy Sources (MNES)⁹² had commissioned a Danish company, Volund Milojoteknik, to build a Refuse Incinerator-cum-Power Generation Station (a technological precursor of Waste-to-Energy) at the very same landfill.⁹³ This plant, built to incinerate 300 tons of waste a day⁹⁴ operated for only 21 days before it had to be closed down due to the poor quality of incoming waste. Several government enquiries were made in the wake of this debacle, and yet, two decades later, an incinerator was being planned on the same location. Could it be that the *nature* (not quantity) of Delhi's waste had changed so much in this time?

⁹¹ "Salient Features." Integrated Waste Management. Timarpur-Okhla Waste Management Company, Web.

⁹² Later renamed the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy

⁹³ Shah, Dharmesh. *The Timarpur-Okhla Waste to Energy Venture*. Rep. Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives, Web.

⁹⁴ The Jindal's, by compassion, incinerates over 2000 tons per day

Likely not. Rather, a pro-technology ideology seems to have ossified in Indian governmental discourse.

‘Technologically advanced,’ and capital driven projects like Jindal’s are being promoted as environment-friendly regardless of the applicability to a given situation, or their larger social costs. This agenda owes as much to the Indian government’s general inability to understand the informal sector as it does to any power nexus that exists between businesses and government officials. Given India’s pro-business focus after the country’s economic liberalization in 1991, it is unsurprising that civic bodies like the MCD find it easier to recommend corporate based solutions to garbage problems that tackle the more delicate informal sector. As Chaturvedi notes, “Rather than viewing kabaris and waste pickers as political subjects with claims on the city’s amenities and spaces, or even as economic service providers, judges and planners have instead come to see them as disruptions to public order – a view that is often anchored in the crudest of bourgeois aesthetics.”⁹⁵ Such an institutional ideology also allows the MCD to remain blind to the socio-economic effects their environmental decision had on the Okhla wastepicking community.

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A year after the Jindal Waste-to-Energy plant commenced its operations, Chintan conducted a survey of almost all (429 of 450) residents that were left in Okhla’s three

⁹⁵ Gidwani, Vinay K. "The Right to Waste : Informal Sector Recyclers and Struggles for Social Justice in Post-reform Urban India." *India's New Economic Policy: A Critical Analysis*. New York: Routledge, 2011. 133. Print.

residential subdivisions.⁹⁶ The qualifier ‘were left’ is specifically used because within this one year there was a 40% decrease in Okhla’s population.⁹⁷ As mentioned before, approximately 88% of Okhla’s residents depended on the landfill for their livelihood, and its corporate takeover effectively made it impossible to continue their lives there. Jindal’s arrival affected members of the community – landfill workers, scrap collectors; men, women, children – in different ways. Before parsing these differences, it is worth tabulating some facts. Within a year of the Jindal Waste-to-Energy plant’s operation:

1. Okhla’s population decreased from 740 to 430.
2. Okhla’s wastepicker population decreased 683 to 377
3. Okhla’s landfill worker (a sub category of wastepicker) population decreased from 400 to 105
4. There has been a 5% decrease in the number of children attending school; 67% of these children are now working with waste.⁹⁸

These facts make it unequivocally clear that Jindal has had a terrible impact on Okhla’s residents. In addition to surveying these residents, Chintan also interviewed many of them. These interviews dispel all doubts, if any existed, that the mass-migration from Okhla was due to the Jindal plant. No project, regardless of its environmental would be tolerated in a middle-class neighborhood were it to displace 40% of its population. MCD’s disregard for the Okhla mass-migration must thus be attributed to a deep-seated classism of the Indian government. Just as the LANCER plant was a result of

⁹⁶ Chaturvedi, Bharati, Imran Khan, and Pujarini Sen. "Give Back Our Waste What the Okhla Waste-to-Energy Plant Has Done to Local Wastepickers." Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group, Web.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

environmental racism, the Timarpur-Okhla plant is an sure case of environmental classism. Jindal and MCD could coldly respond to these claims by arguing that Okhla workers unemployment and displacement were merely a result of the free market's operations. But such an answer fails to realize that Okhla's wastepickers fundamentally exist *outside* the free market. Indeed, waste collection seems to be their only form of economic mobility. This is underscored by the fact that the proportion of wastepickers (despite the overall fall in population) in Okhla has remained the same even after Jindal's arrival. If anything, there has been a shift from landfill work to segregation work. Wastepickers have responded to Jindal's arrival in three major ways: by bribing officials to gain temporary access to landfills, by travelling greater distances to collect waste, and by employing their children that previously attended school.

It seems almost criminal that 'environment-friendly' workers should suffer such arbitrary traumas so that a large corporation can produce electricity at subsidized rates. These shocking statistics also underscores a central aspect of the Okhla wastepickers' protests. Like CCSCLA, these wastepickers were fighting to retain their way of life, to retain control over their "painfully improvised survival niches in the city."⁹⁹ Their lifestyles were innately environment-friendly. But simply because it was informal, the MCD was willing to impose a system that both destroyed their community, and harmed the environment, merely so that they could proceed with their privation and formalization focused agenda. Cases like this make it clear that environmental work, if it is to be successful in socio-politically complex places like Delhi, must have a wide, holistic

⁹⁹ Gidwani, Vinay K. "The Right to Waste : Informal Sector Recyclers and Struggles for Social Justice in Post-reform Urban India." *India's New Economic Policy: A Critical Analysis*. New York: Routledge, 2011. 142. Print.

understanding of the term 'environment.' Otherwise, traditional 'environmental solutions' such as Waste-to-Energy will be proposed, much to everyone's detriment.

Conclusion

Deep Ecologists advocate the inherent worth of every living creature, and consequently do not take an anthropocentric approach to environmentalism. On the surface, their aims would seem completely at odds with those of EJM activists. While this may be the case on an individual to individual (or group to group) basis, I do not think it holds as a principle in itself. Indeed, I believe that the same group could espouse both EJM and Deep Ecologist beliefs. For many of the issues defined as ‘environmental’ by MEGs, are have really systemic issues that just happen to have environmental ramifications. By focusing on the effect, rather than the underlying cause of environmental issues, MEGs narrow their understanding of what is really at stake.

A group may hold biocentric principles and still participate in EJM, because EJM activities, often enough, are focused on tackling discriminatory governmental or economic practices, not in addressing more abstract ideas such as humanity’s relationship with nature. To say that deep ecology and EJM are incompatible would be like arguing that a true belief in democracy is incompatible with living in a nation that practices discriminatory policies. This might be true in some extreme cases. By and large, however, people live in a manner that contradicts their most deeply felt principles. The problem with mainstream environmentalism, then, is that it no longer balances pragmatic action with principled action. In their haste to defend wilderness areas from the onslaught of civilization – an honorable intention – MEGs have failed to see that several questions they face are not about humanity’s relation with nature, but rather, about its relation with

its own economic and social systems. That is, they have provided shortsighted, 'principled' responses to pragmatic questions of policy.

This is why it is imperative to question and re-evaluate our definitions of 'environment' and 'environmentalism'. Only by creating rigorous, socio-politically (as well as philosophically and scientifically) informed definitions for these terms, will EJM groups and MEGs be able to locate what they are fighting for, and who they are fighting against. Without intending to, CCSCLA and the Okhla wastepickers have made important strides towards creating such a definition. By tackling questions of policy from the first principles of life – the need for community, the need for healthy surroundings, the right to embrace an independent lifestyle – they have been able to clearly see the inter-connectedness of economic, political and environmental policy. Future individuals and groups will do well to embrace this lesson.

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