



Reimagining Kamathipura: Creating value from waste

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Abstract

Located in the heart of the glossy, concrete and steel Island city of Mumbai is a compact, densely built, overcrowded, dilapidated, old neighbourhood that appears to have been purposefully bypassed by the flurry of real estate development that has gripped the city since the late eighties. Kamathipura, Mumbai's infamous red-light district, is associated with danger, violence, disease, and grime. A place that simultaneously evokes desire and disgust because of its historically produced ill-reputation as a place of commercial sex work. For the city's deeply moralistic middle class, however, Kamathipura is an unfortunate scab in an aspiring world-class city.

The unsavoury spectacle that Kamathipura is portrayed to be is distinctly at odds with its socially diverse character and the rich history of labouring classes who have made the neighbourhood their home. Several groups of poor, marginalised, but hardworking people are engaged in different kinds of informal work. Many of them work with urban waste that is denied any recognition by the state or civil society. It is thus an important spatio-social node within the city's complex infra-economy. These precarious, poorly paid, insecure forms of livelihood revolve around extracting resources from the waste that the rest of the city spews out. It involves resourcefulness, labour, skills and knowledge from those who undertake the recycling, repurposing or renewing of everyday urban waste materials. For Gidwani and Maringanti (2016), these are forms of invisible 'infrastructural labour' that 'repairs and renews the city, continuously recreating the conditions of possibility for urban life and capitalist enterprise'.

In this essay, we highlight one such dense micro-cluster of waste-work that is located in Stable Street, Kamathipura. We attempt to show how the socially ostracised neighbourhood is connected to the wider city and beyond through complex material flows of waste. While we try to develop a deeper understanding of the space economy of waste work and the intricate lifeworld that the people associated with it create through their daily rhythms of work and living, we argue that neglected and under-valued neighbourhoods like Kamathipura are important urban arenas for the creation of value rather than simply being repositories of unwanted waste. This article demonstrates the fraught politics of place-making through invisibilised labouring bodies and spatial practices tied to waste-work.

One man's waste is another person's livelihood

Waste is the material by-product of human activity for which an economical use has not been found (Harris-White 2019). And as cities continue to grow and our consumption of goods and services expand, we see an increase in waste as well. But, waste is perceived (negatively) as matter, out of place, as material excess - especially by the propertied class who have particular stakes in the city and capital accumulation processes (Gidwani, 2013). The act of wasting too has a negative value in our moral register. Waste is therefore subject to strict modes of regulation, control and removal to safeguard property and value in our cities.

Some waste gains economic value through sale for reuse or recycling (Harris-white, 2019). Gidwani and Maringanti (2016) have argued, '*Capitalist value making is underwritten by the production and disposal of waste through a complex, often invisible economy of informal waste recycling*'. An invisible workforce of informal waste workers and small entrepreneurs have evolved

over time in our cities who collect, sort and process recyclable waste matter, thus making a living out of waste while also reducing the strain on landfills. Invariably these workers and small entrepreneurs belong to historically marginalised and discriminated upon socioeconomic groups. Given the nature of their work, informal waste workers are often treated with suspicion and indignity, reinforcing existing social and casteist inequalities. Though their work has immense environmental and economic value for the city at large, their working conditions are disproportionately dismal and dangerous.

In the process of capitalist production of urban space, nodes of informal waste-work such as Kamathipura are often devalorised and identified as spaces of abjection and poverty. However, the unevenly produced geographies of valorised and devalorised urban spaces make it possible for further rounds of capital accumulation through processes of land value capture. However, large-scale redevelopment processes necessitate the removal of waste management activities and the waste along with those whose lives and livelihoods depend on it. The waste itself is then pushed to peripheries, thereby reproducing highly differentiated geography of spatial value.

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Kamathipura’s transformation from a red light area to Mumbai’s waste-receptacle

About two hundred years ago, private landowners developed Kamathipura as a residential neighbourhood for migrant workers. In 1860, colonial rulers designated Kamathipura as a de facto red light area. Brothels began to mushroom, catering largely to European clientele. A parallel night economy emerged around sex work. The other working-class residents meanwhile joined the mills and began to claim Kamathipura as a space for the ‘respectable poor’ by contributing to the development

of community infrastructures and institutions in the neighbourhood, distancing themselves from the sex workers.

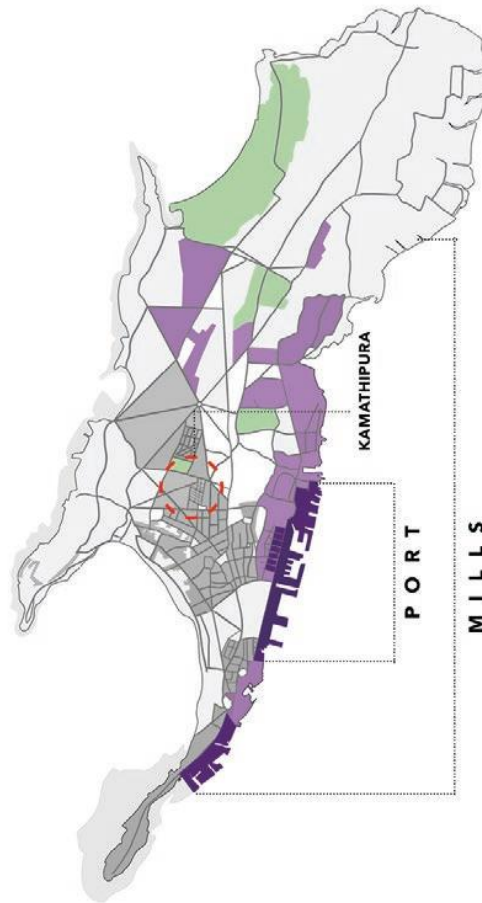


IMAGE 1: EMERGENCE OF KAMATHIPURA IN PROXIMITY TO THE PORT AND MILLS IN COLONIAL BOMBAY

IMAGE CREDIT:
ARADHANA PARALIKAR

Post-independence, Bombay emerged as a primate industrial city attracting more migrants to Kamathipura. Each lane in the congested neighbourhood represented particular ethnic and caste groups of mostly poor working-class migrants. However, the built environment of Kamathipura became severely degraded, and the area gained notoriety. With the onslaught of HIV/AIDS in the late 80s, landlords forced sex workers to vacate the brothels. A few buildings went into private redevelopment. Brothels were replaced with small scale manufacturing units. Buildings began

to be transformed into shop floors, storages and work units, some working exclusively with waste materials. New waves of male migrants began to work and reside in Kamathipura, transforming the historically gendered and sexualised geography of the neighbourhood.

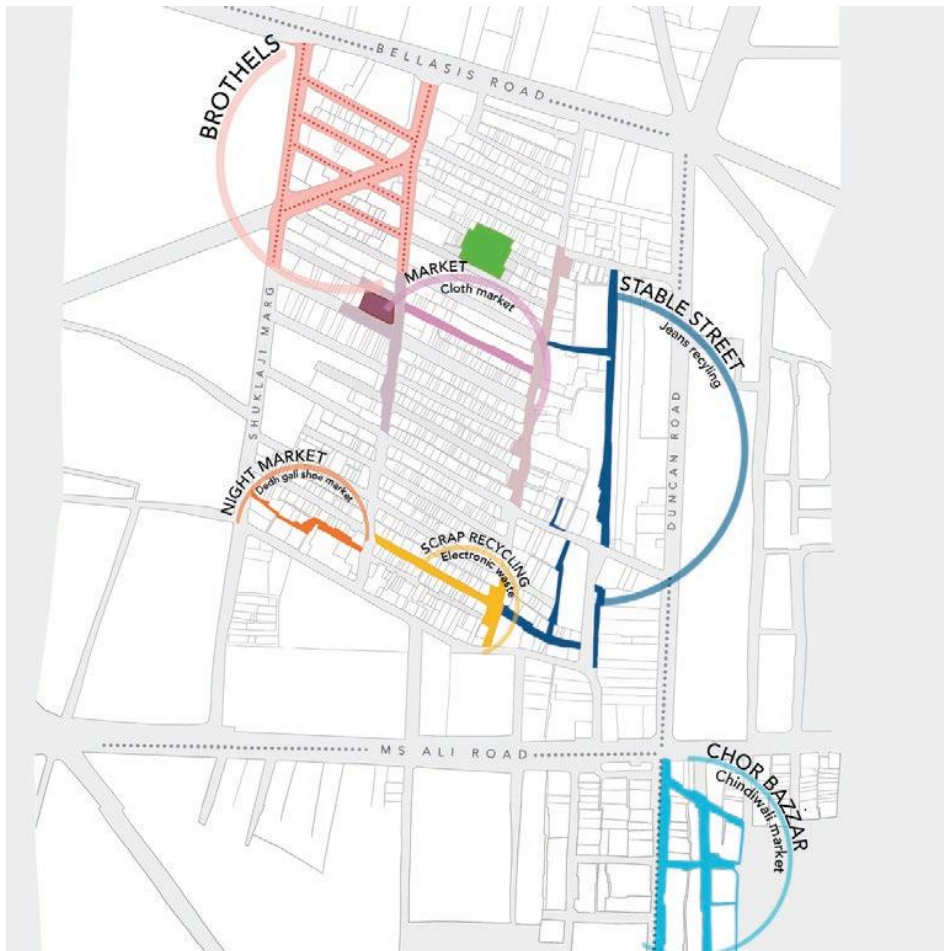


IMAGE 2 MAP SHOWING THE DIFFERENT WASTE ECONOMY MICRO-CLUSTERS IN KAMATHIPURA, PREPARED THROUGH FIELDWORK AND OBSERVATIONS

IMAGE CREDIT:
ARADHANA PARALIKAR

Post the 90s, the fringes of Kamathipura changed drastically, with multi-storied apartment complexes and malls replacing the old, dilapidated buildings. Land values appreciated. Developers, tenants, and landlords began to reimagine a redeveloped Kamathipura that would erase its notorious status as a red light area. In early 2020, plans for cluster redevelopment of Kamathipura were approved by the state government, citing an

urgent need to address the blighted condition. However, grand redevelopment plans which emphasise the ‘decent’ and ‘clean’ residential character of the neighbourhood are unlikely to include the informal waste recycling clusters.

IMAGE 3: THE CHANGING FACE OF KAMATHIPURA WITH APARTMENT TOWERS LOOMING IN THE BACKGROUND (LEFT), PHOTO COLLAGE (RIGHT)

IMAGE CREDIT:
ARADHANA PARALIKAR



The micro-geography of the denim recycling industry in Kamathipura and beyond

Stable Street in Kamathipura accommodates small scale sheds that comprise an entire supply chain of garment recycling. This street was used as a stable for horses by the municipality's transport department in the colonial era. It underwent a gradual transformation to a long-form, residential chawl in the 1960s when it was inhabited by the lower caste sweepers of Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC). The street was renamed Chandramani Buddha Vihar. Behind the rows of units is a private compound that has been under redevelopment since 2011.

There are around 60 units that carry out different labour intensive tasks of repair, dyeing, drying and repackaging of old jeans into refurbished jeans mimicking the factory-based assembly line of production. This spatial proximity helps to reduce transport, housing and labour costs and ensures the

survival of such unregistered units based on unwritten codes of trust, familiarity and interdependency.



IMAGE 4: THE JEANS RECYCLING CLUSTER IN STABLE STREET

IMAGE CREDIT:
ARADHANA PARALIKAR

Each unit engages about 6 to 8 young Muslim male migrant workers drawn from villages in Uttar Pradesh. Family and kin networks between workers and unit owners play a big role in structuring the labour market. The work is hard and monotonous, and they make barely Rs 8000 to 10000 per month, a large chunk of which goes into paying rent and buying food. Salim, one of the workers, says, '*Yaha paisa kam hai aur kaam bhaut zyada. Kabhi Kabhi humlog raat ko bhi washing ka kam karte hai agar koi bada contract aya toh. Uske hisab se paise nahi milte.*' The supervisors are skilled and knowledgeable older men experienced in tailoring.

“ Men mingle on the street as they go about their daily tasks of washing, drying, stitching and packaging - a constant hum of conversations and industrious labour. The street is marked by the absence of women. ”

The marginal entrepreneurs who own and operate these units for extremely thin profits also identify themselves as migrants from Uttar Pradesh.

There are a few small shops on one end of Stable Street selling jeans at wholesale prices. The manufacturing units supply the jeans to these shops. Traders buy the jeans from these shops and sell them in other parts of the city such as Dharavi, Fashion street, Chembur market and even beyond the city limits. These local retail shops are typically owned by Muslim families who are residents of Kamathipura. The erstwhile chawl residents of Stable Street were mostly Hindu families who fled the area during the bloody Hindu-Muslim riots in 1992. The emptied chawls were quietly occupied by resourceful entrepreneurs who set up the small manufacturing units with the tacit help of the locally dominant business families.

Beyond Stable Street, several buildings in the neighbourhood also act as storage facilities for refurbished jeans. Stable Street itself is distinguished by the presence of large blue drums in which jeans are dyed. Pockets of empty lots, terraces, unfinished or partially demolished buildings or interstitial spaces between buildings have been occupied by strings of denim in various stages of dyeing and drying. Men mingle on the street as they go about their daily tasks of washing, drying, stitching and packaging - a constant hum of conversations and industrious labour. The street is marked by the absence of women. The recycling units are heavily dependent on unskilled manual labour.



IMAGE 5: INTERSTITIAL SPACES
OCCUPIED BY JEANS RECYCLING
UNITS

IMAGE CREDIT:
ARADHANA PARALIKAR

Given that the small units also double up as living spaces for the men, there are small signs of habitation and personalisation. However, overcrowding within these spaces pushes the men onto the abutting street for the creation of tenuous associational lifeworlds. The mosque on the street, the tea stall on the corner are reminders of the pursuit of a social life beyond the regular drudgery of work. The charpoys are sites of daily gossip as well as hardcore business negotiations.

The workers are heavily dependent on the rest of the neighbourhood for their daily needs. They use the public toilets, eat meals in the small eateries, and for entertainment, they head to the shacks showing B grade regional movies or selling cheap country liquor. Some even frequent the brothels. However, they remain outsiders to Kamathipura, their presence undesirable to the middle-class residents. Salim, a young migrant worker, confirms these tensions - *'yahan ke chawl wale log hum se baat nahin karte hain. Woh hum ko ganda samajhta hain, aur duur rehte hain kyunki hum log kachra ke saath kaam karte hain. Woh padhe likhe hain isliye acche naukri karte hain. Lekin hum ko majboori hain isiliye yeh kaam karna padta hain'*

“Overcrowding within these spaces pushes the men onto the abutting street for the creation of tenuous associational lifeworlds.”



IMAGE 6: INSIDE THE UNITS THAT
DOUBLE UP AS LIVING SPACES
FOR MIGRANT WORKERS

IMAGE CREDIT:
ARADHANA PARALIKAR

Given that most informal waste recycling units located in these nodes operate in a clandestine manner, without recognition or permits, there is a tacit understanding between the local administration and unit operators that such neighbourhoods are also prone to public health hazards - fires from chemicals or other inflammable stored waste materials, or accidents involving workers working in temporary tin sheds with poor ventilation and safety gears. An informal system of rent extraction has emerged to ensure that these units continue to operate under the radar. Therefore, these nodes are characterised simultaneously by hyper surveillance and studied neglect by the state.

The workers, operators, small traders, therefore, develop the skills to negotiate this with the state actors, dis-assembling the makeshift bamboo structures on the street when the BMC arrives to conduct a raid and confiscate their materials. Although there are no formal trade associations, there are informal collectives. These associations negotiate with state intermediaries during raids. They also adjudicate matters on wages that do not follow any written contracts. In times of increased demand, they distribute work orders across units while maintaining a competitive edge. In recent times, associations in Kamathipura have been playing an important but unsuccessful role in

negotiating with private developers who wish to redevelop buildings on Stable Street.

Hussain Chacha, who owns one of the biggest units on Stable Street, having started with a small enterprise nearly 30 years back, is aware of the lack of his bargaining power and the imminent redevelopment that threatens to wipe away his business from Stable Street.

‘Kathawala Saab ek side ka sab rooms leke baithe hai. Dusre side me Bhawani Leke baitha hai. Humlogo ke bareme koi sochta nahi hai. Humein last meeting mein bulaya tha 2011 mein lekin uske baad kuch nahi hua. Andar kam chalu hai. Pata nahi kab ake sab tod de.’

Where does the waste material come from?

One of the most important actors in this particular waste economy is the *chindiwalli* - women who traverse the city, exchanging cooking vessels or plastic household goods for old clothes. *Chindiwallis* take away the discarded clothes and offer good quality household items at the doorstep. The *chindiwalis* converge at Chor Bazar in the early morning, where they display their wares to the customers in an unspoken organised fashion. Chor Bazar is a large, chaotic but temporary market that comes alive everyday between 6:00 am and 9:00 am and is a vital element of the waste economy of Kamathipura.



IMAGE 7: CHINDIWALLI SELLING JUNA JEANS IN CHOR BAZAR

IMAGE CREDIT:
ARADHANA PARALIKAR

“When it comes to redevelopment of these ‘blighted’ areas, waste economies are deliberately invisibilised.”

Apart from the *chindiwalis*, there are some aggregators who collect garment waste from small factories, shops as well as *chindiwallis*. The recycling unit owners of Stable Street are the daily customers at Chor Bazar as they browse through the heaps of old jeans, searching and sorting the ones that will fetch the most money. Then there is a period of intense bargaining between the *chindiwalli* and the unit owner. There are coolies and *hathgadi walas*, also daily wage workers who transport the materials from Chor Bazar to the units within Stable Street.

Waste-work and urban placemaking

The circuits through which waste material flows within the city reveal the invisible but organised and gendered regimes of labour and labourers in the city who work with waste in the informal sector. By studying the micro-geography of the jeans recycling cluster in Kamathipura, we are able to understand the ways in which value is regenerated from waste and the deep and complex interlinkages between formal and informal economies. More importantly, we understand the infrastructural labour through which Kamathipura is given a new meaning and a positive valence as a neighbourhood within which the city’s waste circulates and is transformed into reusable material goods. Another significant insight is that waste and waste recycling work is not only relegated to informal settlements but takes place in the heart of the city, in the interstitial neighbourhoods that are already socially marginalised and morally relegated to ‘zones of exception’ such as Kamathipura. But when it comes to redevelopment of these ‘blighted’ areas, waste economies are deliberately invisibilised, thus further devaluing the work and entrepreneurship that takes place in these small off-the-book units of manufacturing.

According to Shanti bai, a middle-aged waghri woman who sells juna jeans at Chor Bazar, the area will undergo

redevelopment and erase the recycling shops and the networks pehchaan and livelihood she has cultivated painstakingly.

‘Saukat Ali Kathawala ke hathon beekh gaya. Kharid liya usne. Yeh sare dukane jane wale hai. Hum sab pata nahi kaha jayenge. Dekhte hai Kathawala kya karta hai. Humare liye kuch nahi karenge kyun ki humlog to raaste wale hai.’

Post Script

In March 2020, as the city of Mumbai and the country went into a hastily announced indefinite lockdown caused by the COVID 19 pandemic, the shutters came down on Stable Street. A containment zone was declared on Stable Street in early April. The units ceased functioning with mounting financial pressure to pay wages, rents and other overheads. Many workers left the city. Given that most of the migrant workers lived a hand to mouth existence on meagre piece-rate daily wages, the pandemic has exposed the precarious nature of their work. Many were forced to rely on charitable organisations for food. The pandemic has laid bare the extractive and extreme work conditions around informal waste work and the brittleness of the enterprises that lie hidden in the interstitial folds of the city. Unfortunately, it has also amplified social stigmatisation of such labouring bodies in waste-work as disorderly, as detritus, as carriers of disease and pestilence, as out of place in the body of the city.

In this essay, waste and the economies it generates has served as a point of critiquing the existing city and its (capitalist) production processes. It explores the contested materiality of the ways in which the city is collectively produced, consumed, trashed, reproduced, and renewed.

“The pandemic has laid bare the extractive and extreme work conditions around informal waste work and the brittleness of the enterprises that lie hidden in the interstitial folds of the city.”

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