Survival Strategies of the Urban Poor — Scavenging and Recuperation in Calcutta

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Abstract: Recuperation and recycling take place at all levels of society in economies of scarcity. For the urban poor, they may be vital to "survival strategies" or may provide important supplements to uncertain and low wages. Currently scholars and planners are reassessing scavenging and waste recovery in developing countries in order to understand the role of these activities in the urban economy. Scavengers in different areas of Calcutta are described: pavement dwellers, municipal dump workers, and squatters in an elite suburb. It is argued that these groups contribute to effective use of waste, but there are severe health and environmental problems associated with their activities. There is need for comparative studies of scavengers to understand similarities and differences across poor but growing cities.

How do the poor survive in poor cities? One answer is that they seek to become a part of the webs of recuperation, reuse, and recycling that link different levels of society, from rich households to small enterprises to squatters' shacks. In Africa, Asia, and Latin America we can identify many ways in which the poor attempt to share in what the cities have to offer, even if it is only the waste products of those who are better off 1).

Scavenging and recuperation by poor individuals and groups are so widespread in Third World countries that, apart from being condemned or suppressed by local authorities, these activities have, for the most part, been accepted without systematic study. The ubiquitous scavenger, "an object of admiration to a few, of pity or repulsion to most" (Keyes 1974), has been seen as the ultimate symbol of urban poverty 2). Larissa Lomnitz dramatically dubbed the marginal people of Latin America "the hunters and gatherers of the urban jungle" (Lomnitz 1977), while the local names for scavengers — the "vultures" of Cali (Birkbeck 1979), the "ants" of Tokyo (Taira 1969), the "marias" of Juarez (Price 1978) — may evoke associated images.

In the last decade, a number of perspectives on urban scavengers have begun to converge. Scholars are reexamining the survival strategies of the poor (Eames and Goode 1980) and calling for a more detached, if not positive, approach to scavenging and recuperation at the lowest levels of the urban system (Keyes 1975, Mukherjee and Singh 1981). Scholars and planners investigating the informal economy see networks of reciprocity in the ways in which scavengers work and supply materials to small-scale manufacturing enterprises (Mukherjee n.d.). The desire to cope with increasing urban waste matter has led to discussion of the contribution scavengers make to reducing the bulk of urban garbage and to recovering items that cannot be mechanically retrieved (Cointreau 1982). This thrust is part of a wider concern for more effective waste recovery and recycling in the developing countries (Long et al. 1983).

While at first sight all scavengers may look alike, appearing dirty, ragged, diseased, or malnourished, the few studies available suggest a great variety in modes of scavenging and recuperation both within cities and across countries. This discussion is offered as a contribution to building a series of case studies that will enable us to develop a typology of scavengers and thence to understand the ways in which these occupations are linked to the wider economic system of poor but growing cities.

Defining Scavenging

In most developing countries, recuperation and recycling take place at all levels of society. Street and dump pickers
are only the most visible among many who benefit from such activities. Little of value is discarded from residences. In rich households, the servants pick over wastes; itinerant small dealers buy bottles and paper from shops and homes; offices and industrial establishments sell quantities of waste materials directly to dealers.

We do not usually class household and commercial recuperation as scavenging. The original meaning of the term to scavenge was “to scrape dirt from the streets”, and a scavenger was one whose privilege or job it was to remove dirt from public places. In the nineteenth century, before the development of regular municipal waste removal services, cities licensed scavengers, who enjoyed the right to use the waste materials as they wished. Today the legitimacy of scavenging has largely been lost with the disappearance of the recognized scavenger role. In many cities, scavenging from municipal garbage dumps is illegal, so those who engage in it are regarded as pilferers.

It would seem that we should retain at least part of the original meaning by confining scavenging to recovery of waste materials from public places. Recuperation would then refer to recovery from private spaces. Recycling refers to the transformation of recuperated waste products in some manner, rather than simple reuse of the materials. Even these simple distinctions will be difficult to maintain in the discussion of many scavenging groups, for their activities cross and recross abstract lines of definition.

Scavenging in Calcutta: The Pavement Dwellers’ Survey

All but the most protected of residents are aware of some of the many forms of scavenging and recuperation in a city like Calcutta, but it is virtually impossible to arrive at estimates of the number of people whose livelihood depends to some extent on gains (monetary or other) from recuperation. Although “rag picker”, the usual term for all scavengers in India, may be included as an occupation in some surveys, one can surmise that only persons whose primary and long-term occupation is scavenging would give this as their occupation. Persons turning to scavenging temporarily, or women and children who regard themselves as unemployed, even though they engage in scavenging, would not usually be included in such statistics.

We have not systematic account of scavenging and recuperation for Calcutta, but there are some passing references to these activities in the survey of pavement dwellers conducted for the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA) by Dr. Sudhendu Mukherjee in the early 1970s (Mukherjee 1975). Among 10,841 pavement dwellers surveyed, 4.8% gave their occupation as rag picker; however, the selected biographical sketches included in the report reveal that scavenging may contribute to pavement “households”, even when the primary occupation is some other work. Particularly important is the scavenging by children that supplements their families’ income and goods.

Mukherjee thus argues that scavenging plays a larger role in the life of pavement dwellers than would appear from the statistics of the survey: almost any pavement family might resort to scavenging in the absence of other work and given the opportunity (Mukherjee 1975, Singh 1978). The organizational unit may not be a family group: one sketch describes a group of five boys, aged five to eight years, who collect paper, metal scraps, and cinders in the Kalighat area under the protection of a pavement-dwelling prostitute. Others who classed themselves as rag pickers were lone individuals; for instance, an old man who had been gathering rags and waste papers for 36 years and who had no desire to change his occupation or to seek some form of shelter, even if he could have afforded it. The loners among the pavement scavengers may fiercely value their independence of formal institutions (Mukherjee 1975, Keyes 1974).

Besides the paper pickers who frequent the business and commercial areas of the city, there are those who work in the vicinity of markets, collecting fruit and vegetables thrown away by stall holders. Food scavengers may set up their “stalls” on the pavement outside the market area. Hotels, restaurants, and food shops are other sources of food scraps. Other “specialists” may concentrate on metal picking in the areas of small workshops adjoining Burra Bazar and in Howrah across the river. Metal brings a higher return than paper, rags, or plastic, but, as little metal is discarded, the competition for pickings is keen.

An unusual form of scavenging mentioned in the report is the case of a man who, having established a foothold on the bank of the Hooghly River where bathers cast coins in the water in bathing rituals, dives to recover the coins in competition with other divers, each defending a territory or strip of the riverbed. He earned Rs 3 to 4 a day, twice as much as a paper picker in the central city, with the prospect of much better earnings during festivals, when thousands of pilgrims converge upon the river (Mukherjee 1975).

Scavengers, then, will position themselves as close as possible to the wastes they covet. If the CMDA report is taken as a guide, scavenging in Calcutta is undertaken by lone individuals (usually male migrants from rural areas), by groups of boys and young men, by men who are heads of families, by women and children of families, and by groups of families cooperating in an informal or small-scale enterprise. An instance of this last form is women and children collecting plastic wastes for recycling in small-scale plastics factories (Mukherjee n.d.).

Scavenged and recuperated items may be sold directly to the public, as in the case of market scavengers, or sold by weight to brokers or agents, who sell them to factories. The scavengers may take their pickups directly to receiving enterprises, or the materials may be used in production.