Orange is for oppression

A day in the life of a Colombo street cleaner.

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As dawn breaks over the horizon, Colombo rises from its slumber to the rude sound of traffic. Devika wakes up from another night spent in front of a shop in Sri Jayawardenepura Kotte, a busy suburban area in the capital Colombo. Her day's work starts at 6 am at the outer boundary of a public school in the area, from where she starts sweeping down the deserted streets in this early hour, passing shops that are lazily opening up for business. Dressed in a pair of three-quarter shorts and an oversized bright orange T-shirt, she cleans the gutters and collects garbage from the roads and sidewalks. Soon, the traffic starts to gather in the streets with Colombo's well-heeled citizens and expatriates driving their cars to work. Buses honk above the blaring music coming from cars.
Delving into the cracks and crevices between the garden walls and the paving stones where seeds sprout, damp leaves congeal,

and crumpled paper clings, Devika sweeps the streets and pavements, pausing occasionally to shovel up the deposits of a society becoming addicted to fast food and binge drinking.

In a world driven by consumerism, Devika is a foot soldier among the small army deployed by a big conglomerate to clean up after more than 600,000 Sri Lankan citizens. She is part of a group of individuals who work night and day, in the merciless heat and the unforgiving monsoon, keeping the streets and neighbourhoods clean. In Sri Lanka, the total Municipal Solid Waste generation is estimated to be around 6400 tonnes per day, out of which about 60 percent is collected from the Western Province. However, less than half of this is collected by the municipal authorities. Illegal dumping of waste is common practice in Sri Lanka, and the streets serve as a dumping ground. Improper management of waste is a major cause of environmental degradation in the country and it impacts the health of citizens. It also causes odour, pestilence and leads to declining property values.

Colombo's street cleaners are everywhere for everyone to see: you encounter them on your morning walk to work, and they greet you again on the pavements on your way back from work. Yet, they remain invisible. They remain on the margins of society, largely excluded and unaccepted, entangled in a complex web of social, economic and political structures that is suffocating. The bright orange T-shirts they wear on the job symbolise in many ways the vulnerability of those who inhabit the underbelly of our city.

This narrative is about a day in the life of Devika.

Work

"I went and spoke to the company. I asked for a job and told them we [Devika and her husband] were hardworking people. They employed both of us and we work very well. I'm good at this job," says Devika. She's almost permanently cheerful. Her weather-beaten 45-year-old features are regularly animated by an expression that complements her feisty nature. Her official

designation is 'Sanitary Labourer': they collect waste from the curbside or litter from the streets, gutters and waterways, and sweep the streets. Like the vast majority of street cleaners in the city, Devika belongs to the increasingly-expanding unorganised sector. She has a contract with a well-established corporate entity, the not-so-fine print of which she cannot read. However, she tells us that as a contract worker, she is not entitled to paid leave, medical leave, a pension, employees' provident fund/employees' trust fund and retirement benefits. She is paid on a daily basis and gets additional overtime allowance, but does not receive social security benefit of any kind. "If I don't work, I don't eat," she says, flashing another one of her smiles. She does not have a letter of appointment, terms of reference (TOR) of any sort and was not provided training prior to starting the job.

Devika's working hours are from 6 am to 2 pm. Her employer has a system in which all street cleaners are picked up by a truck and dispatched to designated locations. She becomes uncharacteristically curmudgeonly when she spots a young adult throwing a food wrapper on the streets. But to everyone she knows down the streets – from mothers dropping their children off at school to shop keepers and policemen – she waves with recognition.

By now it's time for a break. She steps into a bakery in Pittakotte junction, where she has tea and buns. She doesn't have a house to go to or a kitchen to cook in, and eats all three meals at small shops just as this one. "My husband likes fried rice," she says. Sometimes people buy them food or bring it from home for them. Her diet is not balanced: it has excess carbohydrates and sugar,

and lacks protein and vegetables. This is the case with most of the poor of Sri Lanka, who cannot afford the luxury of meat, fish, poultry, eggs, cereal and quality vegetables and fruit. It is clear that Devika eats enough to just fill her stomach, nothing else.

Over a cup of tea, she talks of her past.

Street life

Devika comes from a poor settlement in Mattakkuliya, a suburb in Colombo. Her father was a labourer from India, a fact that handcuffs her current reality to the oppressive history of indentured labour of Sri Lanka. He died when Devika was three, after which her mother worked as a domestic worker to feed Devika and her two siblings. Devika started working at the age of ten, and did all kinds of jobs – packing tea, making natural fertiliser, converting animal bones to manure. As a child she was unruly and feisty. "I don't like it when people try to control me. I grew up in a rough environment. My mother put me in a home [an orphanage] because I was impossible to control. I worked there too." She ran away at 17 with a man and was married to him for a few years. However, Devika's situation quickly deteriorated as the man wasted her hard-earned money on gambling. "He used to beat me every day." She gave birth to a child. Following a domestic dispute, the father decided to take sole custody, arguing that the child should be raised by his family. The incident marked the end of their marriage.

Devika met her current husband when she was 22. They lived in the Nugegoda suburb for a while. He was a garbage collector and a caretaker of a house in the area. They stayed in the house, but after a few years the owner asked them to leave. Since they had nowhere else to go, they were forced to take to the streets. They eventually relocated to the pavement in front of a well-known church. There were lots of stray dogs and cats around and they would feed them scraps of food. Soon enough, they were accused of raising stray animals and were asked to leave by the church authorities. "I was not at all happy with this and I had several altercations with

them. It was clear that the church people did not want us crashing there. They called the police on us. The police beat my husband and broke his arm. We had nowhere to go and my husband was injured. It was very tough for me." Homelessness is common amongst waste pickers, who are regularly treated as nuisances by authorities and with displeasure by the public, and are often absent from public policies. They are very susceptible to police violence and exploitation, and intimidation by intermediaries is well documented.

In this sprawling city of the 'miracle of Asia', it is a shop front where Devika and her husband sleep every night. The overwhelming ubiquity of people like her with no roof for shelter is an indication of the city's betrayal. When you look at the city from a high vantage point, you see the old buildings almost hidden under layers of paint that took generations to accumulate, and sometimes, it seems all beaten, banged and mutilated. These are elements of the city which its beautification process tries to conceal and get rid of. But they are there. And they have triumphed over time, heat, humidity, wind, rain, rust, pigeon droppings, smoke, and nail-loosening stone-cracking vibrations from traffic.

"Sometimes life on the street is not safe." Devika was once held at gunpoint and her husband was almost abducted. Fortunately, the man who attempted the abduction drove off when people started coming out of their houses upon hearing the commotion. Although they went to a police station, the police did not take them very seriously.

"They started asking me ridiculous questions. They asked 'You really love your man, don't you?' They wrote FIR and handed it to me and told me to return if problems persist. Sometimes, drunkards or other vulgar men around here come to strike me. Now I'm seasoned to all this. I don't take their shit. I'm a fighter. My husband is scared to intervene when I am harassed; he doesn't come to intervene. But, people hardly mess with me. They know what I'm like." Devika seems to have come to terms with her homelessness, and has developed a level of resilience that can

withstand the multiple violations of human rights that she experiences. Most episodes of violence and harassment that people like Devika suffer from go unreported. When asked why, she says that the police sometimes laugh them off, saying, "All our FIR books will run out of space if we were to record everything that happens to everyone."

Health

Devika seems to have triumphed over this tiresome work. "Most people find it difficult to do this for more than eight hours, especially pushing a cart when it's full and heavy. I'm strong, I work whether there is rain or sun, it doesn't bother me," she says. On a good day, she pushes about 70-100 kilos in her cart; sometimes, the load is heavier. Devika is stocky, relatively young and looks healthy, which leads us to wonder how street cleaners in Colombo, predominantly an older group of labourers, grapple with the physical demands of the job. "There are lots of old people cleaning the streets and some of them can't do the job. They are useless," proclaims Devika.

For a person dealing with all kinds of waste as a profession, Devika appears far from equipped. No gloves, no boots and certainly no mask to protect her lungs from the toxic fumes she is forced to inhale day and night. When we asked her about safety gear, she laughed it off saying that even though the company offers them gear, she is more comfortable in her usual outfit. She mentions that the boots they offer have more germs than what is in the gutters. For the most part, she handles organic waste from kitchens of houses and businesses in the area, vegetables and fruits thrown away by vendors in the nearby market to flowers, as well as leaves and animal excreta. However, some days she comes into contact with bottles and containers with chemical residue, used batteries and medical wastes, particularly when she cleans near a busy private clinic. We ask her whether she is aware of her work-related health risks and the danger of not wearing protective gear. She replies, "This is our work, what else can we do? So far, the gods have been kind to us."

Studies conducted in Bangalore and New Delhi have found that tuberculosis, bronchitis, asthma, pneumonia, dysentery, parasites and malnutrition were among the most common ailments and challenges experienced by waste pickers. When asked about what she does when she is ill, Devika responds, "We typically don't go to a doctor, but if it is unbearable, we go to the National Hospital. But I don't like to go there." She puts her palms together and looks up at the sky, "I pray to the gods to keep us healthy." One day, Devika had to rush her husband to the National Hospital and she "accidently" wore her orange T-shirt. "They treat us differently when they know that we clean the streets. Even the way the attendants and the nurses speak to us changes. They think we're dirty. They don't speak to others like that."

Contract labour

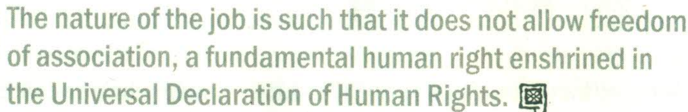
There is severe competition between the municipality and company workers, and Devika reports that they often face problems related to work politics. "My husband works with me. We both work for the company and both of us manage the same area. They tried to separate me from him and gave him a different area. I picked a fight with them about it. How could they? I am all he has. We have always worked together. So the company suspended me for a week and later gave my job back." We met Devika during the time of her suspension and she was a different person then. She was desperate for work and money and was trying to get her job back. It was the first time we witnessed hopelessness on her face; she seemed broken. It was a telling indication of how precarious her job is and the non-existent bargaining power she has with the employer. "I can find hundreds like you. Cleaning streets is not a big deal," the employer told Devika when they had an argument about the quality of her work. Beyond the lack of job stability, it is the lack of dignity which rankles Devika the most.

"Once, I was asked to strike by the municipality workers if salaries weren't paid in two days. I refused. I told them that my job is different to yours. I won't halt work just because I'm not paid in two days. I will continue to work because I know my salary will

come someday." The nature of the job is such that it does not allow freedom of association, a fundamental human right enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Devika is excluded from participating in any form of social dialogue with her employers regarding the terms and conditions of employment.

Poor classification

Devika survives on a daily wage of LKR 500 (USD 4). In a good month, she earns around LKR 12,500 (USD 94). "It is hard to live on day wages. In sun or rain I do my job. We try to save from my husband's salary and survive on mine. It is very difficult. But we must think of the future." The largest chunk of her salary goes towards purchasing food. When Devika gets sick, she earns less and skimps on food. According to the widely accepted poverty line of USD 1.25 a day, Devika is not poor, as she lives on roughly three dollars a day. She is also not counted among the poor according to Sri Lanka's National Poverty Line which identifies 'the poor' as individuals living under LKR 130 (USD 1) a day for food *and* non-food expenditure.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This absolute poverty line that most of us have conveniently internalised as the correct criteria to gauge livelihoods, is derived by calculating the cost of a basket of basic needs. According to the Department of Census and Statistics, this imaginary basket consists of food items needed to meet the minimum nutritional requirement of 2030 kilocalories per day per person, as well as other basic needs such as clothes, shelter, education and health services. We need to interrogate whether this basket, based on the caloric requirement, takes account of the energy needs of the kind of hard and extended labour that is performed by Devika and others like her. Partha Dasgupta in *An Enquiry into Well-being*

and Destitution contends that the "Daily energy requirements for a male engaged in such work [heavy manual labour] in the tropics are in the order of 3,550 kcals." Devika spends a minimum of LKR 300 (USD 2) a day on food that is far from nutritious and satiating. In 2002, the official food poverty line was set at 68 percent (LKR 973 or USD 7 per month per individual) of the national poverty line. (The current official food poverty line has not yet been determined by the state authorities, but if the 2002 rate is anything to go by, it would be set around LKR 2668 or USD 20 per month per individual.) This means the meagre amount that Devika spends on food is already more than three times the food poverty line. In this regard, both international and national poverty measurements not only hide the depth of poverty of Devika and others, but misclassify and place them above the poverty lines.

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The non-food component of Sri Lanka's poverty line is calculated by taking the average of lower and upper poverty lines for non-food expenditure. According to the Department of Census and Statistics, the upper boundary is defined as per-person non-food expenditure of households whose per capita food expenditure is close to the food poverty line (give or take 10 percent). This means, while the food component of the poverty line is based on a 'scientific' calculation according to physical needs, the non-food component is not a straightforward calculation based on physical requirements. According to Ashwani Saith, the procedure of calculating the upper boundary of the poverty line:

> essentially identifies households whose expenditure on food exactly matches the cost of the food component in the poverty line basket, and then checks how much such

> households actually spend on non-food items. Thus, the food component is needs-based whereas the non-food component reflects the poverty of the poor with no guarantee that all basic non-food needs are in fact, or in principle could be satisfactorily met.

The critical assumption of this benchmark – that the basic non-food needs of poor households are substantively met – is extremely problematic as it may suppress the visibility of vital basic needs such as housing, health, education, transport, information, communications and political participation. Anecdotal yet lived experiences of many households (and individuals like Devika) tell us that after spending on food, there is nothing left to meet the real needs of health.

The calculation of the lower boundary of the non-food poverty line is even more problematic. The lower bound of the non-food component of Sri Lanka's poverty line is taken to be the non-food expenditure of households whose *total* expenditure is equal to that required to be on or close to the *food* poverty line. This means such households cannot, under any circumstances, meet both food and non-food basic needs simultaneously. Explaining this, a World Bank sourcebook notes, "the nonfood expenditures of the households in this... case must be necessities, since the households are giving up food expenditures considered necessary to buy nonfood items". In other words, there is no room for *non-necessity* in this basket of goods. How can a poverty line that is postulated by such a methodology be classified as a basic-needs line?

We must question whether the notion of poverty conceptualised in the international and national poverty lines meaningfully assess the extent, nature and forms of deprivation experienced in society. Do either of these poverty lines take into account Devika's hazardous work conditions, overwork and low-pay, vulnerability to violence on the streets and during work, insecurity of employment, limited access to public utilities (as a result of homelessness), heightened perception of exclusion, and the lack of dignity attributed to her work and to herself as a human being?

Bootstraps

"Our social lives are centred on our Kovils [temples]. I am Tamil and my partner is Sinhala. There is no difference between Tamils and Sinhalese, the same blood in our veins," she beams, flashing a rotten incisor. Devika talks of how much she looks forward to Kovil days. The Kovil appears to offer an escape from her harsh existence.

"Life is good when you feel free. Of course, you need money to survive, but money is not everything. Having a good partner is very important... We are jolly, we work hard and laugh a lot. We also quarrel with others a bit. But we have fewer problems than people who live in houses... We won't be able to work this hard every day because we are not getting any younger. My wish is to have a small haven for us to live in peace in our old age, that's all I want."

When darkness spreads, the ridiculously sleek and expensive-looking cars line up. With smoke and pollution thickening the air and because of the brightness of electric lights, the stars are concealed as are the lives of the people who keep the city clean. They are very much part of this city, but this beautiful, wondrous city, its perfect water fountains and lawns manicured with military precision, seems to have forgotten them. As Devika finishes her day's work and goes to rejoin her husband at the shop front, we bid her farewell.

Devika's story is an example that helps debunks the 'bootstrap myth', one that has infected our thinking for decades. The bootstrap myth – the idea of the self-made individual who lifts himself out of poverty to conspicuous wealth through nothing more than hard work, or work without the help of anyone else, and without the benefit of community – asserts a misplaced sense of autonomy. The assertion of autonomy is entrenched in the neoliberal faith that champions human sovereignty and self-sufficiency. It preaches radical self-reliance and denies the responsibility of others. It sees self-interest as the moral North

Star and self-sacrifice as foolish weakness. Devika, in many ways, is a poster child for those who will join the labour force in Sri Lanka in the future. She is hard-working, efficient and dedicated to her job. However, she is entangled in a complex web of social, economic and political relations that work against her social mobility, which has the potential of eventually diminishing her life force and many others like her. Δ