

India

Assa Doron and Robin Jeffrey, *Waste of a Nation: Garbage and Growth in India*

Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2018. 416 pages. 20 halftones, 4 maps, 4 charts, 9 tables, notes, bibliography, index. Hardcover, \$29.95. ISBN 9780674980600.

As India aspires to become a global economic and technological power, it has to face a mounting crisis of dealing with its trash, sewage, and hygiene issues. *Waste of a Nation: Garbage and Growth in India* is an erudite tour de force educating us about such issues from a variety of perspectives and methods. It provides insights using fieldwork from various places in India, past and contemporary news reports, and other archival research across India. While most other South Asian academic books have cast light on India's political, social, economic, or religious issues, *Waste of a Nation*, completes the picture of contemporary India by looking at this underbelly of trash and garbage that is rarely discussed.

In writing this book, anthropologist Assa Doron and historian Robin Jeffrey have come together transcending their disciplines but also transcending space and time. Throughout the book, they take us to various places in India and elsewhere to give us glimpses of their trash issues. They also take us to various periods before Indian Independence to show us the root causes of some of the problems of urban development that continue to “plague” various Indian cities. Throughout the book, the references to the plague is most prominently made to Surat, the famous industrial city in Gujarat, that has improved tremendously since 1994 when the panic of plague shocked politicians, policy makers, and public. The authors present several other similar successful

and not so successful examples of urban cleansing efforts and think aloud with us about what solutions are realistically possible as these places deal with gigantic volumes of sewerage.

The book starts with an introductory chapter that discusses India's gigantic problems related to trash and recycling. The authors mention Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who made Clean India one of his signature campaigns immediately after coming to power in 2014. The authors begin with an anecdote of a young boy named Mallu and draw the connection between his name and the Sanskrit word *mal*, i.e., feces. However, *mal* is a common suffix to many Hindu male names that is derived from another Sanskrit word *malla*, i.e., a strong man. Although a character is indeed named *Kachra* (meaning trash) in the 2001 Oscar nominated film *Lagaan*, it is almost certain that no parent would name their children to identify them with feces. Essentially, the authors make references to India's traditional recycling practices but also present their concerns about the amount of trash India is generating and how helpless it still is in dealing with it.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide us with comparative situations in England and other countries with respect to sewage and garbage issues in India. They showed us how European countries successfully cleaned their rivers and cities as an indirect suggestion that perhaps India should learn some of their best practices. It examines the question: How long will the colonial figures continue to appeal to scholars and policy makers of India?

Chapter 3 makes references to the Indian phenomenon of caste and untouchability. Do casteism and religious discrimination cause obstacles in the efforts to keep India clean? The authors assert at many places in the affirmative but do not actually show concrete evidence to support this claim. In some ways, such discriminations come handy as whip lashes to many scholarly observations.

In Chapter 4, the authors make several favorable references to Indian practices of "austerity and self-denial," but these seem also to be based on the heavy Gandhian influence. Just as Gandhi practiced fasting and other austere practices in his life, the authors hope that Indians at large can also take inspiration from his lifestyle and keep their consumption and carbon footprint low in order to keep the overall trash also very low compared to other industrialized countries, which are also forced to deal with their trash because of their staggering consumption patterns. However, the historical fact that the authors of the book seem to have ignored is that Indians did not historically just practice austere lifestyles, as is often presumed when India is seen from the lens of Gandhi and his lifestyle. Just before the British started plundering the wealth of India, India was the second biggest economy in the world, a fact that is often forgotten or ignored under the Gandhian influence of renunciation as the only major hallmark of Indians, even in this book.

In Chapter 5, the authors share some interesting comparative information related to waste treatment efforts in Western countries and India. Some of the interesting statistics from this chapter demonstrate that the sheer amount of trash that India has to deal with is many times larger than the trash of its Western counterparts. Chapters 6 and 7 give us further details about the various local and state governments in India that are trying to deal with their monumental waste situations. Some efforts are lauded by the authors for their remarkable success, such as Surat in Gujarat.

With one of the authors being a historian, we would have immensely benefitted if we could also learn how these dozens of older Indian cities dealt with their sewerage.

Are there any indigenous or non-Western ways of dealing with sewage of urban areas? The book does mention a couple of passing references to Dholavira in Gujarat but does not mention dozens of other Indian cities that have continued to thrive even as some of the major cities from the Indus Valley Civilization era have disappeared. By not incorporating this important historical perspective, the book seems to adhere to the Gandhian bias, or even oriental bias, that India was a country of villages and that its cities are just an afterthought, a product of the British Raj and modernity. For instance, the book does not refer to the works such as *The City in South Asia* by James Heitzman (2009). The book sings some praises for Chandigarh in Chapter 2, the iconic city built by Nehru and his team, but has no mention of Jaipur, the city built with meticulous planning well before the British Raj. Sanskrit texts such as *Arthashastra* also elaborate on urban planning but they continue to be ignored by scholars and planners of Indian urban life. The authors mention a number of times throughout the book that the Indian leaders suffered with the Gandhian bias in their planning and allocating of funds. Under the influence of the Gandhian idyllic and ideal village, Indian cities did not get adequate attention and funding until the twenty first century. However, the book never mentions a large number of ancient and medieval cities that Indian subcontinent had such as Varanasi, Ujjain, Jaipur, Hampi, Patna, Thanjavur, Mathura, Pushkar, Mamallapuram, Kochi, Agra, and many more. Thus, the authors seem to have the same bias that they try to see elsewhere.

Overall, the book could have been even more enriching if it provided us some more details of the latest success stories, such as the Himalayan state Sikkim, mentioned only on the last page, or other older stories such as how cities functioned in ancient or medieval times as I alluded to above. The book will still be a great resource to all interested in urban anthropology of India and should surely be added to all academic libraries of South Asian studies.

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