

Legitimacy as Fetish: Documenting Work in Lahore's Waste Infrastructures

In 2011 the Lahore Waste Management Company (the "Company") replaced the Solid Waste Management department as the primary institution of governance invested with the power and authority to monitor and improve waste infrastructures for the City District Government of Lahore. A publicly-funded entity, the Company was formed out "good governance" efforts and is one of the many public-private partnerships that have emerged in Pakistan over the past few decades. While overseeing these infrastructures, it has contracted out its entire labor-force to two private companies that carry out waste disposal services. All the while the previous municipal department continues to exist but now only performs "residual" functions. The expansion of governance institutions and corporate entities has undoubtedly impacted the provisioning of waste disposal services across Lahore's different administrative units, with capital and affective investments made into acquiring new machinery, building a "modern" sanitary landfill site, and employing a class of professionals. Alongside this infrastructure for improved waste disposal services has emerged a parallel one for documenting these same services, infrastructures, and institutions. While institutional and technological changes are undeniable, the labor of Christian sanitation workers remains the backbone of waste infrastructures in Lahore. This paper asks, how does the labor of this workforce come to be documented in different media forms such that, not only is their labor rendered invisible despite being visibly central to provisioning waste disposal services but also, the good produced by these services appear to arise out of the Company as the primary institution of governance within the municipal government. What are the technologies of mediation, both print and digital, by which the work of waste disposal comes to be known, abstracted, and objectified? How does the good produced by this service, such as the environmental, aesthetic, and health value that accompanies the disposal of potentially polluting and harmful material in a sanitary landfill site, become attached to the Company itself as well as the dominant political party in the Punjab, the capital of which is Lahore? This paper argues that documentation participates in a kind of commodity fetishism, whereby the provisioning of the good of waste disposal services is seen to

emerge from the powers of the Company, technologies of documentation, and the ruling political party in the Punjab (Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz), and not the concrete social relations that physically carry out the work of waste disposal. Thus the power of documentation is not a matter of technology or mediation but rather, is entangled with the legitimacy of the state itself and the political party that has been able to mobilize its institutions in contemporary Pakistan.