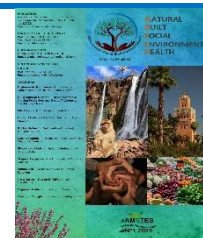




Natural Built Social Environment Health

ISSN 3085-461X

www.nbseh.org

BOOK REVIEW

Garbocracy: Towards a Great Human Collapse, by Sayan Dey, Chennai, India: Peter Lang Group AG, Lausanne, 2025, XX + 128 pp., US\$72.95 (eBook), ISBN 978-1-80374-727-9 (PDF), DOI: 10.3726/b22308

At a time when right-wing populism is on the rise in India, when vast swathes of the Indian population experience hazardous air quality, and when dehumanizing and illegal waste-removal practices like manual scavenging continue despite legal prohibitions, this new book justifies big changes. Sayan Dey introduces the concept of "*garbocracy*" — a system in which the accumulation, disposal, distribution, and regulation of waste become central features of the social, political, and cultural fabric of contemporary India. Dey argues that with the advent of neoliberal policies, waste has become a pervasive material and immaterial presence, with implications that extend far beyond environmental issues.

In essence, *Garbocracy* interrogates how and why India's "*garbageous*" ways of living have contributed to—and become entangled with—larger socio-political and environmental crises that have, in turn, contributed to the rise of a "*garbocratic*" society characterized by the normalization of waste, the exploitation of certain communities, the erosion of critical thinking, and the systematic dismantling of democratic values and environmental protections.

As the third part of Dey's *Decoloniality, Eco-sustainability, and Cultural Studies* series, *Garbocracy* seeks to explore the "different patterns of garbageous existence that human civilization is entangled in" (p. xv), in contemporary India. Divided into eight chapters across four sections, the book begins with a rather uncharacteristic "(un)acknowledgment" statement that highlights the violent role played by the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government in exacerbating caste, communal, and environmental tensions. These developments spurred the creation of this book; and to the extent that the BJP's divisive policies prompted Dey into research action, they are "warmly" (un)acknowledged from the start.

This incisive note sets the tone for the rest of the work. The first section, titled "*Accumulating*", contains two chapters. The first chapter, "*Introduction: The Politics and Optics of Garbaging*," introduces the monograph's theoretical and methodological intentions. It engages with the author's positionality and the contexts from which Dey's arguments emerge, discussing how material, spiritual, political, and governmental garbage evolves, accumulates, operates, and suffocates human beings and animals in India. The chapter also introduces the concept of "*garbo-beings*" as a way of explaining how Indians are collectively impacted by the physical and ideological presences of waste. The second chapter, "*Garbo-Imperialism: The Empire of Wastes*," develops the theories and methodologies introduced in the first chapter by discussing how garbage manifests imperialistic tendencies in India. This chapter examines how waste dictates people's existential patterns, both physically and cognitively. It delves into the ethics and politics of garbage disposal in Kolkata and Varanasi—locations that hold personal

and academic significance for the author, as he was born in Kolkata and has conducted extensive research in Varanasi. It examines how "*garbagescapes*"—spatially defined garbage kingdoms—are generated across residential and commuting areas through "*social, cultural, communal, and religious algorithms*" (p. 21).

The second section, "*Disposing*," shows how garbo-imperialism operates through paradigms of knowledge, power, and being; with the third chapter, "*Garbo-knowledge: Towards Garbo-intellectualism*," engaging with the idea of how the visible and invisible presence of garbage impacts knowledge production and relationships with diverse communities in India. This chapter examines how history, science, philosophy and other strands of intellectual thinking have today become negatively impacted by the "*decomposed intellectuality*," propagated by the policies of the right wing BJP government (pp. 31-33). The fourth chapter, "*Garbo-power and Garbo-being: The Onset of Garbo-ideologies*," explores how garbo-knowledge and garbo-power lead to the formation of "*garbo-beings*"—individuals whose functions are influenced by the physical and ideological garbage produced by political actors like the BJP. Dey highlights how the BJP's garbo-ideologies are manufactured and reinforced through a range of tools including radio, printings, posters, t-shirts, books, and flags.

The third section, "*Distributing*," comprises one chapter, —the fifth chapter, "*Garbo-pedagogies and Garbo-curricula: Schools as Knowledge-garbage Laboratories*," which examines how "*garbo-knowledge*," "*garbo-power*," and "*garbo-being*" are systematically produced in India through school curricula and pedagogies. Dey alleges that schools function as "*concentration camps, gas chambers, and mumbo-jumbo rooms*," (p. 59) systematically promoting unpractical, uncaring, and unsustainable modes of teaching and learning that lead to the production of physical and emotional wastes. It is difficult to see such savage language as justifiable.

The final section, "*Regulating*," consists of three chapters. Chapter six, "*Garbo-Citizenship: The Great Human Collapse*," explores the evolution of "*garbo-citizenship*" in India through three specific incidents: first, the destruction of the natural environment by the British; second, Dey's personal experience of teaching in a school with a discriminatory grading system; and third, the BJP's enactment of the constitutionally dubious Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019. Chapter seven, "*Digital Discardscapes, Digital Infrastructures, and Garbocratic Futures*," shifts the focus to the digital realm, exploring how the disposal of digital waste reflects social, cultural, and economic hierarchies in India, and how discarded electronic items, referred to as "*smart discards*" (p. 96), are used to display socioeconomic status. Chapter eight concludes with visions of alternative future.

What Dey does exceptionally well is weave together seemingly disparate events— across spatial and temporal boundaries— and link them to broader themes of marginality, disposability, and devaluation in the context of waste. By drawing readers' attention to the different kinds of garbage prevalent in India today—not just the physical, but also the ideological, political, and social—Dey reveals just how these seemingly unrelated forms of "garbage" are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing in creating a "*tentacular garbocratic empire, suffocating not only the present but also the future*." (p. 107).

Dey draws on several intellectual perspectives—from Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "*wasted humans*" (introduced in Chapter three) to Foucault's concept of the panopticon and

Deleuze's concept of the rhizome (p. 69), from Latour's work on actor-network theory (introduced in Chapter seven) to Siegfried Kracauer's concept of "sollen" knowledge systems (p. 40)—and in tying these ideas together, Dey enriches his explanation of what it means to produce, consume, and dispose waste in contemporary India.

That said, Dey seems to place disproportionate blame for the rise of garbocracy on the BJP, without adequately addressing the political processes, systems, and ideologies that both preceded its ascendancy and continue. Perhaps it is necessary to examine a broader range of actors intertwined with the BJP's agenda of producing "garbo-citizens," such as, for example, India's deteriorating legal system, the poor state of environmental governance policies in India, and the role of non-BJP political actors in making these problems *alongside* the BJP. It is notable that many of the BJP government's beneficiaries are Muslims and Dalits.

Although *Garbocracy* is very full of neologisms and sociology, it also offers a view of waste problems mediated by environmental justice.

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How to cite this article

Garbocracy: Towards a Great Human Collapse, by Sayan Dey, Chennai, India: Peter Lang Group AG, Lausanne, 2025, XX + 128 pp., US\$72.95 (eBook), ISBN 978-1-80374-727-9 (PDF), DOI: 10.3726/b22308. *Natural Built Social Environment Health* 1(1), 184-186. DOI: [10.63095/NBSEH.25.250273](https://doi.org/10.63095/NBSEH.25.250273)
