

WASTE-PICKERS OF DELHI DEMAND INTEGRATION AND BETTERMENT OF LIVELIHOOD



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Around two to three lakh people earn their basic income from waste in the city of Delhi. Their work has huge environmental and public health benefits while also reducing costs for the municipality. However, they receive little recognition for this and continue to work and live in terrible conditions.

Waste-pickers of the city demand due recognition, legal and social protection, effective integration into city solid waste management system, and adequate spaces to pursue their livelihood in a dignified manner.

KEY FACTS

Estimated nos: 2-3 lakh people

Avg monthly income: Rs.3000-5000

"Waste-picker is a person informally engaged in the collection and recovery of reusable and recyclable solid waste from the source of waste generation...for sale to re-cyclers directly or through intermediaries to earn their livelihood."

- Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016

"We help keep the city clean but we have to live in filth. We work but are not recognized. We ask for the right to our identity."

- Jagruti Devi, Waste-picker

It is estimated that Delhi produces around 14000 tonnes of waste per day, of which informal waste workers recycle between 10-20%, which is above 2500 tonnes of waste per day (CSE, 2017; Chintan, 2018). They collect waste from households and shops, retrieve discarded waste from community bins and streets, and process it in different ways like washing and dismantling, before selling it as recyclables. A single waste-picker is estimated to collect, sort, and transport 10-15 kilograms of waste a day in Delhi, while those with tricycle carts can collect 50 kilograms a day



ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTIONS

- Livelihood source for urban poor
- Saves labour and transport cost for municipality - Minimum wage for unskilled labour * No. of households serviced in Delhi = 3-6 crores annually (Chintan, 2018)

ENVIRONMENTAL CONTRIBUTIONS

- Efficient recycling - UN study showed that 80% of recycling in Delhi is done by the informal sector (UN, 2010) which:
 - Lowers pressure on landfills and natural resources
 - Reduces quantity of waste for incineration
 - Reduces emissions equal to removing 176,215 passenger vehicles from the roads annually-3 times more than a Waste to Energy plant (Chintan, 2011)
- Prevents waste from collecting near houses and roads which can cause public health problems



A waste picker doesn't have normal working hours. We often meet waste pickers who start their day at 5 or 6 am, going door-to-door and collecting waste, before taking it to a dhalao to segregate. Others work in the night, sometimes starting at 1 or 2 am upto 10 am, finding it easier to collect waste at night, when the heat is lesser and roads clearer.

In Delhi, most of the collection is done by men, though some women too do this. Most women waste-pickers however sort and segregate the waste collected by men, in and around their homes and communities. Much of this gets subsumed as unpaid family labour. Some women are also waged workers in godowns or with small contractors who sell the recyclables to factories.

Various studies have showed that waste workers are over-exposed to many health risks and report increased symptoms of respiratory and lung function disorders, worm infestation and other gastro-intestinal problems than the general population.

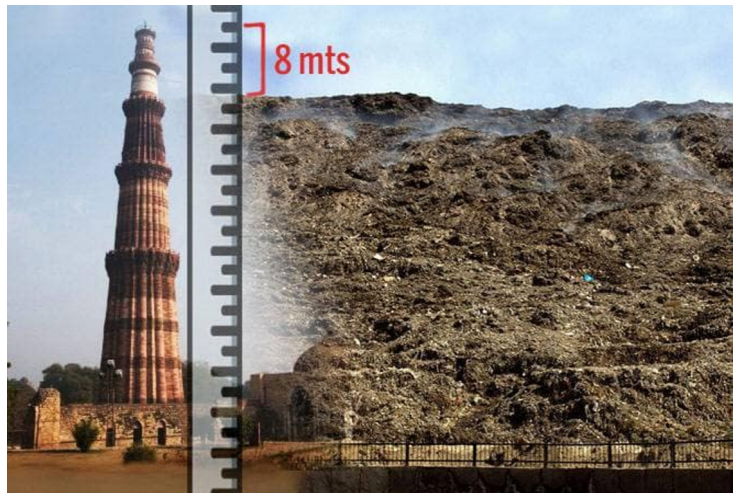
They also report being wounded by cuts and bruises while sifting through waste on a daily basis. Most of the waste is unsegregated and contains toxic contaminants which create long-term health issues besides which waste-picking is also a physically strenuous occupation that requires carrying of heavy loads. The fact that much of the waste collected is sorted and segregated in the worker's homes increases the health risks faced by the worker's family as a whole. (Chintan, 2018)



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THE LANDFILL PROBLEM

The landfills in Delhi have far exceeded their capacities, and become towering mounds symbolic of the city's waste management problem. In the public discussions surrounding this however, there is no mention of the waste-pickers who are the only people segregating out recyclables and doing a big part in reducing what ends up in landfills as mixed waste. The work of these lakhs of people who live and work around dumpsites in Delhi is often forgotten.



Business Today, 2018

Borrowing from flawed global policy, Waste to Energy plants are seen as the way to deal with this problem. Such plants can only function with high quantity of waste and so has to contain even what can be otherwise recycled, and all this material is then burnt which actually releases toxic pollutants. Private companies like Ramky in Delhi earn huge profits per tonnage of waste and so are eager to deny waste-pickers from accessing waste, and encourage mixing of waste.

KEY ISSUES



Best Practices from India and the world

Many municipalities around the world have begun to understand the value of waste-pickers contributions to their cities and started the process of integrating them as equal and valuable partners in solid waste management.

In Belo Horizonte, Brazil and Bogota, Columbia, waste-pickers are paid a fixed rate for each kilogram of waste that they divert away from the waste stream and recycle. In both places, this led to rise in worker's income and reduced municipal waste budget, and saved tax payer money (WIEGO).

Within India, the municipalities of Pune and Bengaluru have entered into waste management contracts with waste-pickers' cooperatives. The workers are employed to provide doorstep waste collection service, segregation and transport to designated pick-up point or processing centres. They are allowed to retain and sell the recyclables, and are given training and safety equipment, which has made the work more dignified and profitable.

In Delhi, Safai Sena and Chintan have a partnership with New Delhi Railway Station where the waste-pickers provide collection and segregation services. They collect waste from trains and the station which is then taken to a Material Recovery Facility. Here the wet waste is then composted and dry waste segregated to over 12 categories and recycled. Only un-treatable items have to be taken to the landfill. This arrangement has ensured that of the approximate 4 tonnes of waste collected per day at the station, over 3.25 tonnes is recycled by waste-pickers who are able to earn decent livelihood.

WHY SAY NO TO BIG CORPORATES IN WASTE MANAGEMENT

The general understanding is that waste management is a big problem which can only be handled by large centralized mechanisms which require high investment and energy input. This leads resource-poor municipalities to entrust private companies to do waste management. But what effect does this have?

- Companies own the waste and can deny access to waste workers. They earn lakhs per tonne of waste, and these profits are not shared by society.
- When companies enter collection, waste-pickers lose their jobs. Even those who may be hired see reduction in income. The same process is true when companies enter into landfill development as they make this an enclosed space and deprive informal waste-pickers of access to waste.
- The private sector sets up Waste to Energy plants which not only deprives waste-pickers of their livelihood, but also encourages unsustainable environmental practices like non-segregation and diversion of recyclables. It also does not reduce emissions to any significant extent.
- Private contracts often puts high strain on municipal resources while the operational costs keep increasing due to energy costs.

What do Waste-pickers want?

VOICE & RECOGNITION

Enumeration and data collection

Worker identity cards by municipality

Representation of waste-pickers and their organizations in waste management related policy making processes and institutions

INTEGRATION

First right of access in door step collection and at dhalaos

Training and capacity building for becoming professional service-providers

Safety equipment and clothing to be provided by municipality

Waste-pickers collectives given preference in bidding for municipal waste contracts - fixed % for this

SPACE ALLOCATION

Neighbourhood-level access to public spaces for sorting and storage

Space for dry waste collection centres/ material recovery facility at neighbourhood level

Space for kabari shops in commercial areas and preservation of natural recyclables markets

Land for decentralised SWM and priority for recycling over other technologies

RIGHTS & SOCIAL PROTECTION

As workers - full benefits under all schemes and available labour laws

Should be brought under social protection schemes and laws

Access to low-cost quality housing and public infrastructure

Access to social welfare, health, education and pension

Waste-pickers and the 2041 Delhi Master Plan

- The next plan should have a clear focus on decentralised solid waste management and recognise informal waste-pickers as key partners to implement this.
- Space needed by waste-pickers can only be calculated properly if numbers of waste-pickers is available, and hence there should be survey and enumeration of waste-pickers by the government.
- Dhalaos are sometimes far from collection points. There should be allocation of space closer to pick-up points for the waste-picker to segregate and consolidate waste. This will be also useful if there is neighbourhood-level space allocation for wet waste composting and waste-pickers are paid a service fee for this work.
- The size and design of dhalaos should be made keeping in mind the needs of waste-pickers and they should be ensured access to it. The plan can mandate for the construction of Material Recovery Facilities which could be managed by waste-pickers in the model of Bengaluru's Dry Waste Collection Centres.
- There should be allocation of space in commercial areas for junk shops.
- When allocating land for solid waste management, the plan should move away from allocating large parcels for landfills or Waste to Energy plants, but move towards smaller allocations which can support decentralised waste management- Eg- Mini-Material Recovery Facility/ 50sqm in neighbourhood parks for wet waste composting.

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