

Formalising Livelihood

Case of Wastepickers in Pune

This article attempts a sector-specific analysis of wastepicking, which is an informal though integral part of urban solid waste management. It looks at the role played by wastepickers in environment protection and conservation apart from their contribution to economic productivity. It explores the possibilities for legitimising the occupation with a view to improving the conditions of work. It also proposes a framework through which social security benefits can be assured to this section of workers. The article draws upon the authors' own research and experience of working with the Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (Scrap Collectors Association) and the Department of Adult Education, SNDT Women's University, in Pune city.

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Reuse and recycling of waste have always been practised in India, as in most developing countries of the world. The flourishing trade in used goods and scrap bears testimony to this fact. Among the first items to be collected by wastepickers were rags, bones and paper. These constituted raw material for the reprocessing industry. Industrialisation and urbanisation led to greater generation of waste. The advent of plastics and the use of sophisticated packaging material provided a further boost to recycling. The items collected have diversified during the century and a half, that wastepickers have been working.

Scrap collection is undertaken by two groups, wastepickers and itinerant buyers. The total population of such workers in Pune city is estimated to be 7,000, of which wastepickers constitute 85 per cent and itinerant buyers 15 per cent. Wastepickers retrieve paper, plastic, metal, glass, bones, bottles and rags from garbage bins and dumps. Over 90 per cent of wastepickers are women. They move mostly on foot covering up to 10-12 kms a day with headloads of up to 40 kgs. Some of them travel by train or truck to the villages and industrial belts around the city, in order to collect scrap. They leave their homes at sunrise and return at sunset after a 10-12 hour working day. The average daily earning is about Rs 50. Contrary to popular belief, these forays do not take place at random. Wastepickers

have specific beats which they traverse daily, much like policemen. They establish 'territorial rights' over bins, dumping sites and beats. Squabbles over infringement of these 'rights' are not uncommon.

Itinerant buyers purchase small quantities of scrap from residential areas and commercial establishments. Over 90 per cent of them are men ('bhangar feriwallas') and 10 per cent are women ('dabba batliwallis'). They access small amounts of capital daily, from the scrap traders which is deducted from their earnings at the end of the day. The push carts which the men use are provided by the scrap traders who charge a fee of Rs 5 per day. The items purchased by itinerant buyers are of relatively better quality and market value than those collected by wastepickers. These include unbroken bottles, metal scrap, newspaper, plastic cans and tins. Their earnings average at Rs 70-80 per day. Women itinerant buyers also barter peanuts and garlic in exchange for scrap, particularly in the villages.

The scrap thus collected, is sold to scrap traders by weight, after rudimentary sorting into about 13 broad categories of plastic, glass, white paper, mixed paper, milk bags, tin and iron. It is further sorted and graded as it moves progressively through various trade channels till it reaches the reprocessor or the end-user. Value addition takes place with each successive transaction.

The scrap trade is completely unregulated. Scrap stores operate from encroached spaces in slums. Only the larger establishments are licensed under the Shops and

Establishments Act. No receipts are issued for cash transactions with scrap collectors and it is doubtful whether any taxes are paid.

The scrap trade is closely held and controlled by the trading castes and communities. New entrants are treated with hostility. Cartel formation and vandalism to ease out new entrants, are not uncommon. The scrap market is subject to seasonal price fluctuations, the prices being the lowest during the monsoons. It is also influenced by the dumping of scrap and imports of scrap from developed countries. Apart from retail purchase of scrap from wastepickers and itinerant buyers, the more established traders also purchase large quantities from industries, institutions and commercial establishments.

Wastepicking, like other informal sector occupations, is characterised by relative ease of entry and low entry costs. There exists no form of licensing and no education, skill or capital requirement. Wastepickers enter the occupation between the ages of 6-8 years and continue till physically incapacitated. About 10 per cent of wastepickers are child labourers.

Those involved in waste collection belong almost exclusively to the matang and neo-Buddhist castes (scheduled castes/dalits). This is true in the case of conservancy staff (sweepers, sewage cleaners, garbage workers) employed by the municipalities, as well as wastepickers and itinerant buyers. Most wastepickers are migrants from the backward districts of Marathwada (Beed, Usmanabad, Latur and Solapur). The severe drought in 1972 marks a watershed in their migration.

Wastepicking ranks lowest in the urban occupational hierarchy, even within the informal sector. There is a predominance of marathas ('upper' caste) and the other backward castes among domestic workers, hawkers and hamals. These occupations enjoy a better status, by virtue of relatively better conditions of work, even though there may not be a significant difference in earnings. Even the very poor among the 'upper' castes desist from waste collection because of the indignity associated with the handling of garbage.

Women constitute the bulk of the wastepickers, since they have no access to capital. The few men that do this work are usually too old or incapable of other forms of work. Others feel it is beneath their dignity. Conversely, men dominate in itinerant buying, which also has the connotation of a 'trade', as opposed to 'scavenging'.

The dominance of certain groups in scrap collection is not incidental. It is evidence of labour market segmentation along gender and caste lines. Wastepicking is more a survival strategy than an occupational choice. It may be argued by some that this kind of work allows for flexible work timings, ease of entry and exit to suit domestic responsibilities and has no age bar. The authors submit that certain groups are pushed into this occupation because of the inaccessibility of other means of gainful employment.

While itinerant buyers are marginally better placed in the scrap collection sector, the problems faced are common to wastepickers and itinerant buyers. Henceforth, in this paper, the term scrap collectors refers to the collective of wastepickers and itinerant buyers, unless otherwise specified.

Urban Solid Waste Management Practice

The generation of garbage has increased in direct proportion to the growth of urban centres and their populations. About 75 per cent of the total garbage generated (1,000 tonnes) in Pune and Pimpri Chinchwad is organic waste that decomposes. The cost incurred by the municipalities for collection and transport per tonne of garbage is Rs 300 (PMC 1998). The other 25 per cent (250 tonnes) is paper, plastic, metal and glass scrap, which constitute the raw material for the reprocessing industry. Itinerant buyers purchase about 10 per cent of the scrap. Of the balance, 80 per cent of the scrap is collected by wastepickers from street bins and 10 per cent from dumping grounds. This amounts to almost 225 tonnes per day in Pune and Pimpri Chinchwad.

The civic bodies in these cities are mandated by the Bombay Provincial Municipal Corporations Act, 1949, to provide for public receptacles for garbage, its transport and final disposal. Citizens are required to deposit garbage in containers provided by the municipalities (BPMC Act, 1949). The most common form of final disposal is the sanitary landfill method (composting through dumping at sites reserved for the purpose).

Unlike in most western countries, segregation of garbage at source into organic (biodegradable) and recyclable (non-biodegradable) is not mandatory in India. The municipalities themselves do not undertake segregation. It is the wastepickers who perform this task, thereby earning

their livelihood. The quantification of their contribution in economic, environmental and social terms, indicates its magnitude even at conservative estimates. (The estimates are computed on the basis of data generated by the co-operative scrap store run by the Scrap Collectors Association.) – Collectively, wastepickers salvage about 200 tonnes of recyclable scrap prior to its transportation, thereby saving the Pune and Pimpri Chinchwad municipal corporations, the sum of Rs 60,000 per day. By implication each wastepicker contributes Rs 2,400 worth of unpaid labour per annum to the municipality.

– Each wastepicker and itinerant buyer, average earnings of Rs 50 and Rs 75 per day, respectively. At conservative estimates, collectively this amounts to Rs 3,75,000 per day, in the primary transaction between the scrap collector and the local scrap store. The margin on the secondary sale, i.e. scrap trader to wholesaler is between 20-40 per cent depending upon the number of intermediate transactions and the season. Further value addition takes place as scrap is finely sorted and undergoes intermediate processing. The annual turnover in the scrap trade and reprocessing industry runs into several hundred crore rupees.

– The environmental benefits that are derived from the work done by wastepickers are self-evident and would be difficult to quantify in economic terms.

The above data substantiate the premise that wastepickers and itinerant buyers conserve resources and are engaged in socially useful, economically productive and environmentally beneficial work.

Wastepickers are subject to a number of health hazards because they rummage through putrefying garbage including toxic medical waste using bare hands. Tuberculosis, scabies, asthma, respiratory infections, cuts and injuries are common. As are animal bites from pigs, dogs, cows and rodents that they have to contend with. Nutritionally, they subsist on tea and tobacco through the day since it is not possible to eat in the environs of the garbage bin. Only the night meal is substantial.

Wastepickers and itinerant buyers are considered to be self-employed (Shramshakti 1988). There exists no legally established tenable employer-worker relationship between the scrap trader and the scrap collector, even though they frequent the same scrap store for decades. Consequently, they do not come within the purview of any labour legislation that could entitle them to contributory provident fund, insurance,

paid leave, bonus, gratuity, old age pension, minimum returns for labour and security of livelihood. This also impacts negatively on their creditworthiness to access formal institutional channels of credit.

Scrap collection is not recognised as gainful work. Wastepickers are variously subjected to abuse, unwarranted suspicion and harassment from the police, municipal workers and citizens.

The relationship between the scrap traders and scrap collectors is exploitative and paternalistic in nature. The local trader often belongs to the same caste as the scrap collector and lives in the same locality albeit, in better circumstances. While the fact of exploitation is recognised, it is outweighed by the feeling of identification and familiarity. Underweighing of scrap, random cutting of weights, issue of credit slips in lieu of cash, price fixation and verbal abuse are some of the common exploitative practices.

The increasing dissatisfaction with garbage clearance by the civic bodies has created a lobby for privatisation of garbage collection. In Pune, a few citizens' groups started private schemes for garbage transport and disposal. Contracts were handed out to contractors who hired labour to collect unsegregated garbage from homes and dump it in the dumping grounds. A service charge amounting to Rs 10-25 per month per family was paid by the residents of the area. In one area, 20 wastepickers were displaced by the contractors and two labourers were employed for garbage collection. This had a direct negative impact on the livelihoods of wastepickers by denying them access to scrap.

Similar citizens' initiatives have been undertaken in Chennai, Coimbatore and Hyderabad, by Exnora, an NGO. Exnora provides cycle trolleys to unemployed youth (men) for doorstep collection of garbage, on payment of a service charge by citizens. Displacement of wastepickers is the logical fallout of this endeavour which was started with good intentions.

Environment engineering companies, both Indian and international, have been trying to market their technologies for garbage processing. Those technologies that incorporate mechanical segregation of garbage are bound to displace wastepickers.

Hitherto, the value of garbage and scrap have largely been invisible. The recognition of its worth will generate questions about 'rights' to garbage.

Most wastepickers being women, have no respite from domestic chores, social

obligations and childbearing and rearing. A significant proportion belong to women headed households or are de facto heads of households. Their spouses are mostly engaged in some form of casual manual wage labour. Over 97 per cent of wastepickers are illiterate. Child marriage is the norm. Marital discord, alcoholism and domestic violence are common. Caste linked practices such as 'wada zhadne' (sweeping courtyards in exchange for leftover food in the 'old' city) and 'jogva magne' (a 'divinely' ordained ritual seeking of alms) are still prevalent.

Experience of Pune

As in other informal sector occupations, scrap collectors are dispersed, invisible and unorganised. Five thousand adult wastepickers and itinerant buyers were organised into the Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat in 1993, in order to establish a collective identity and provide leverage for bargaining. To establish their status as 'workers', the association was registered as a trade union and photo-identity membership cards were issued.

Endorsement of the identity cards by the municipalities was sought on the basis of the informal, unpaid yet productive role of wastepickers in the management of urban solid waste. The Pune and Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporations officially endorsed the identity cards in 1996 and 1997, respectively. The endorsement authorises adult scrap collectors to collect recyclable scrap.

Disposal of garbage in segregated form (organic and recyclable) at source, is environmentally correct. For wastepickers, it enhances the value of scrap, reduces the time required for collection and the health hazards involved in handling garbage. Experience proves that if segregated garbage is disposed in public bins, it becomes an immensely attractive means for domestic workers, security guards and municipal workers to supplement their earnings. It infringes on the 'right' of wastepickers to scrap.

A campaign for segregation of garbage at source and its doorstep collection by authorised wastepickers (cards endorsed by municipality) was initiated. In effect, wastepickers collect both organic and recyclable waste in segregated form. The scrap is retained while the organic waste is deposited in the public bin or vermiculture pit (where it is operational), using trolleys provided by the municipality. Residents are required to pay the wastepicker a service

charge of Rs 10 per month per household for the collection service. Each wastepicker is allotted about 100 households. The scheme now covers 25,000 households and commercial establishments, benefiting about 300 wastepickers.

The Pune and Pimpri Chinchwad municipalities have lent their support to the endeavour, by endorsing the identity cards and promoting public awareness on waste segregation. However, segregation of garbage at source is yet to be made mandatory. The Pune Municipal Corporation has also made provision for a subsidy of Rs 1,000 (per 10 families) to housing societies for undertaking vermiculture on organic waste within the society premises.

The Hamal Mathadi and Other Manual Workers (Regulation of Employment and Welfare) Act, was enacted by the Maharashtra government in 1969. It was enacted with the specific intention of protecting manual workers in insecure employments. The act defines the category of 'unprotected worker' as a 'manual worker who is engaged or to be engaged in any scheduled employment'. The 'nature of work' as defined by the act includes 'catching, collecting, sorting, loading, unloading, weighing, measuring, stacking, carrying, stitching, cleaning, filling or any such other work including work preparatory or incidental to such operations'.

The act provides for compulsory registration of employers and workers, with a statutory board. The constituents of the tripartite board include representatives of the employers/traders associations, the trade unions of employees and the state. The costs of administering the board are defrayed through a levy payable by the employers. Wages are deposited with the board by the employers along with the levy which includes the contribution towards provident fund and other statutory benefits. The board deducts the workers' contribution and makes the wage payment to the worker. Since traders do not require a constant number of workers, the act allows for multiple employers and payment on the basis of work done (piece rate). Engagement of unregistered workers by unregistered employers is prohibited under the act.

The act applies to a list of scheduled employments specified in the act, in industries, factories, markets, shops and other establishments notified by the government. Those covered include grocery, iron and steel, railway yards and goods sheds, agricultural produce, timber, chemicals and

fertilisers, goods transport, fishing, salt pans, metals (excluding iron and steel) and paper.

The implementation of the act in the three decades since its enactment has greatly benefited the workers covered in Maharashtra. Till March 1995, 29 boards had been established in the state with 1,62,838 registered workers and 53,086 registered employers (*Hamal Mapadi Varta*, 1995). Other states have tried to emulate the act with lesser degree of success. Even within Maharashtra, the experience has been that the efficacy of the act is directly proportional to the organised bargaining strength of the workers. Implementation has been difficult in districts where the trade unions have been weak.

The act provides for inclusion of other employments in the schedule with suitable modifications as may be specified in the notification, if there is a demand from either the employers or the workers.

The act, if applied to the reprocessing industry (including scrap collection and trade), with suitable modifications, can become a powerful instrument through which scrap collectors can be guaranteed legitimacy, protection, security of livelihood and worker benefits.

As mentioned earlier, scrap collectors at present, do not have a legally established tenable employer-worker relationship with the scrap traders. The relationship can be established by the act, even though it is not 'employment' as understood in the conventional sense.

Scrap collectors have no social security. Since they are daily income earners, savings practices are mostly informal. The Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat has attempted to address this need through several strategic initiatives, detailed below.

The Scrap Collectors Association along with the Life Insurance Corporation of India have recently introduced a group insurance scheme for its members. At a payment of Rs 25 per annum, members receive insurance coverage of Rs 5,000 (death due to natural causes) and Rs 25,000 (accidental death), or proportion thereof in case of disability.

The Kagad Kach Patra Nagri Sahakari Pat Sanstha, a savings linked credit co-operative was formally registered in 1997. Members deposit a fixed amount as savings every month. It entitles them to credit of up to three times the amount saved, at an interest rate of 18 per cent per annum. A surcharge of 6 per cent per annum is

levied towards a social security fund. The total rate of 24 per cent per annum is considerably less than the existing informal credit which they access at anything between 10 per cent a day and 25 per cent per month.

The association assists members to avail of government schemes like the Sanjay Gandhi Niradhar Yojana and Compensation for Death of Earning Member Yojana.

The Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat started a scrap cooperative in 1998 in space provided gratis by the Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation. It functions on a no-profit no-loss basis. Members selling at the store received a bonus of 5 per cent on the total sales in the first year of operation itself.

Mass mobilisation and struggle for legislative protection and statutory benefits are also on the agenda.

Concluding Remarks

There is scope for arguing that in civilised society there should be no room for human beings to engage in demeaning occupations such as wastepicking. That any move to legitimise the occupation, will perpetuate the caste and occupation link, rather than sever it. On the other hand, the fact remains that, in a labour surplus market it is the lack of other means of livelihood that pushes people to engage in this kind of work. The status accorded to it could change with improvement in the conditions of work, with better economic returns and acknowledgement of its economic and social worth. These changes would offer the next generation (children of wastepickers) educational and vocational opportunities for entry into other occupations. The significance of caste in determining occupation is likely to diminish.

The Shramshakti Report of the National Commission on Women Workers in the Informal Sector (Shramshakti 1988) is the most exhaustive and comprehensive report on the informal sector to date. The report lists ragpicking/wastepicking as one form of self-employment in a wide range of informal sector occupations. The authors through this article argue and attempt to establish that wastepicking is different from other self-employment such as hawking, vending and auto-rickshaw driving. While not clearly fitting the conventional definition of employment, it has more in common with employment than self-employment.

There seems to be no clear legal position on the right to livelihood and 'rights' to garbage/scrap. It can be logically argued

that garbage belongs to the householder till it is deposited in the municipal bin. Thereafter, it is the property of the municipality according to Section 291 of the BMC Act, 1949. To the extent that the right to livelihood is a civil right, it would apply equally to contractors, in the event that garbage collection is privatised. The question of whose right prevails will be critical. It is possible to argue that wastepickers have established their customary right to collect recyclable scrap that should be protected.

These are issues that will have to be addressed sooner than later in the light of the pressure upon civic bodies to privatise garbage collection.

Ensuring legislative protection for scrap collectors, by implication, means regulation of the scrap trade. It is bound to generate hostility, given the strong nexus between trade and other vested interests. Since the scrap trade is unregulated, scrap traders operate under the protection of local goons and elected representatives. Mobilisation of political will emerges as a key variable.

More importantly, in a liberalising economy, the state has demonstrated its reluctance to undertake any market intervention or regulation. Nevertheless, there is credence to the argument that the state is duty-bound to protect the interests of those affected, displaced and marginalised by market processes.

There is evidence to show that the organised workforce has shrunk in the last decade. There is sharp escalation in the numbers of workers engaged in casual forms of labour. In this context, there is need for the state to play an interventionist and affirmative role in the protection and regulation of economic activities such as scrap collection; in the provision of services like creches and child care centres and sorting/resting areas; and in the provision of social security and welfare. Institutional vehicles in the form of the statutory, self-supporting, regulatory Mathadi Board, in which the state is a party seem to hold the most promise in the emerging economic scenario.

Some sections of the labour force will continue to collect scrap as long as there is demand from the recycling industry. The extent to which the experience of Pune can be generalised to the rest of Maharashtra or the country is difficult to predict. The situation in Mumbai is far more complex, because the population of wastepickers is less homogeneous. However, cities in the hinterland of Maharashtra share much in common with Pune. They would be able to draw upon the experience. Much would depend upon the extent to which the labour movement is able to bring within its fold this section of the unorganised labour force. The effective organisation of this hitherto neglected constituency is a challenge that trade unions need to address. **EPW**

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