

JUST TRANSITION: ENSURING EQUITABLE WASTE PICKER INTEGRATION IN WASTE MANAGEMENT



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कामाच्या ति
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मिलाली

कष्टकऱ्यांची आमची जात
कष्टाने करु दुःखावर मात
आमला हवी
तुमची साथ

को
हवा

I. INTRODUCTION

60-year-old Suman More recollects having turned over her collection of scrap material in front of a police officer who was investigating an incident of theft. “We collect scrap, we sift through garbage to eke out a living. But we are always the first to be suspected of theft,” Suman said. When the police insisted that Suman reveal her scrap collection, Suman told them that she was willing to turn the entire bag of waste over on the condition that if the police did not find what they were looking for, they would have to fill it back in the bag. “And of course they did not find anything. We know what we have collected, and they should have just believed me when I said I did not have what they were looking for. So, I turned the bag and walked away and then they began calling after me to clear the foot path. Afterall, it was garbage for them. But I refused staunchly,” recollected Suman. It was only after a tough negotiation that she describes reinforced her dignity as a worker, did she finally refill her scrap collection into the gunny bag. But life had not always been like this for Suman. Suman had walked to Pune from the famine struck district of Beed more than forty years ago. Infant in one hand and a second child tugging the end of her saree, Suman and her husband walked 12 days and nights to Pune to find work. Through a network of women in her neighbourhood she learnt to sieve through garbage looking for items of value, that she later sold to a scrap dealer and brought home just about enough money for the daily meals. Suman describes her confidence in tackling the police as new freedom she experienced after joining Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP), a waste picker’s trade union formed in 1993 in Pune¹.

At KKPKP, Suman More’s story is not unique. KKPKP was the first ever trade union of waste pickers and itinerant trade buyers formed in India, enabling waste pickers to command the identity of ‘workers’ initially through ownership of ID cards and later through access to state social security benefits².

Waste pickers have faced constant discrimination at the hands of the state and civil society that views them with suspicion, disgust and pity (Mander and Manikandan 2008). India is estimated to have between 15 lakh to 40 lakh informal waste pickers (Meghani 2023). Of this, close to 49% of waste pickers are women (Sonal 2023). Waste pickers comprise a significant section of India’s large informal economy. Despite this, the majority of them do not perceive their activities of earning a livelihood by sorting and selling materials of value from waste, as a service. In the contemporary world, however, within the contexts of growing concerns about solid waste management, this work of waste pickers is crucial and while their contribution receives recognition under newer rules and policies, this will remain only symbolic, unless the value of their work and its consequent streamlining is approached with equal gravity.

¹Names of waste pickers, except for in Pune and PCMC, have been anonymised. Waste pickers in Pune and PCMC provided consent for publication of their actual name.

²In 2007, waste pickers from KKPKP formed a cooperative called SWaCH to organise and streamline their waste collection activities in collaboration with the Pune Municipal Corporation. This further facilitated access to benefits such as health insurance and equipment.

India produces around 62 million tonnes of waste annually. Most of this ends up in landfills³. Not only does this result in crucial concerns about the safe disposal of waste, but it also places severe limitations on the possibilities of reuse and recycling of several non-biodegradable waste materials. These systemic failures have brought to light several issues, such as the rights of waste pickers, the leaching of groundwater and soil⁴, untethered and mindless consumption of single-use products, and the threat to animals, insects, and plants because of non-degradable products, such as low-value and multi-layered plastics. Waste management remains at the intersection of these issues and thus holds immense possibilities not only in terms of technological innovations, and creative regeneration of biodiversity, but also in terms of livelihood generation. Each of these issues deserves serious attention to capture the idea of solid waste management holistically and efficiently.

One of the key issues underscoring waste management in India today is efficiency. Be it the large mountains of waste in Delhi's outskirts or the growing number of dump yards along river bodies and street corners, each of these is decidedly unsightly and unhygienic and seemingly a marker of the country's failure to modernise fully, despite significant economic growth (Hodges 2013). A popular understanding of efficiency, therefore, is first and foremost concerned with the complete removal of these unsightly garbage heaps in the fastest manner and at lowest cost. What this has led to is an increased pressure on mechanisation and incineration. Research from across the world has shown that incineration, however, may not be a viable solution for waste management. For instance, a recent report highlights the impacts of waste-to-energy (WtE) incineration to the urban heat in Delhi (Kulasekaran 2025). Moreover, empirical studies suggest that the physical, chemical and biological characteristics of waste in India make it technically unsuitable for incineration (Luthra 2017). This analysis is only strengthened by evidence that of the 14 WtE plants installed in the last 38 years, seven have already been closed due to input of low quality of waste resulting from improper segregation practices, leading to questioning such purely mechanised approaches to efficiency in solid waste management. The only real alternative to incineration (or failed incineration), is source segregation of biodegradable and non-biodegradable (or wet and dry) waste⁵, and the structured and maximised sorting of non-biodegradable waste, which can be processed appropriately.

Segregation of what is today known as “high-value non-biodegradable waste” has been traditional to South Asian societies. Segregation was possible and continued because it was incentivised as a trade. Several actors, such as kabadiwallas, boharins, dabba-batliwalis, and waste pickers, bought different types of waste from the generator (primarily householders)

³According to the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, municipal areas in the country generate 1,33,760 metric tonnes per day of municipal solid waste (MSW), of which only 91,152 TPD waste is collected and 25,884 TPD treated. Accessed from <https://moef.gov.in/waste-management>.

⁴Cases from Punjab, Haryana, and Bihar provide alarming instances of leaching in groundwater, leading to serious contamination of drinking water. The Bihar Economic Survey (2024_25) identified 26% of its rural districts suffering from arsenic poisoning, which is estimated to be over 30,000 rural wards being exposed to unsafe drinking water on an everyday basis. Similarly, states such as Punjab and Haryana have been suffering from the high concentration of uranium and fluoride in their groundwater because of unsafe disposal and mismanagement of agricultural waste and runoffs. The Annual Groundwater Quality Report (2024) pointed out that about 20 districts of Punjab and 16 districts of Haryana are suffering from health diseases, leading to severe chances of kidney failure due to high-level contamination in their groundwater (Business Standard, 2025)

⁵Although the rules and policies refer to segregation of biodegradable and non-biodegradable waste, fieldwork revealed the popular use of terms ‘wet and dry’ for categorising segregation. Activists of KKPKP pointed out that this was because several dry biodegradable materials such as paper – for instance – could be recycled and therefore were sold by waste pickers. Segregation on the lines of wet and dry was more useful to waste pickers as against the categories of biodegradable and non-biodegradable.

and sold it further for their livelihood. These are traditional economies that indicate that waste management holds potential for livelihood creation, both in terms of employment and entrepreneurship. In the context of South Asia, Sanyal and Bhattacharyya (2009) observe that although the capitalist economy did expand by breaking up traditional economies,

“
...it did so by transferring resources, not labourers. As a result, a ‘surplus’ labour force emerged ... (whose) livelihoods were destroyed but who were not absorbed in the modern sector ...

”

The informal sector, as they explain, is thus, a consequence of capitalist processes that captures the resources of what were once traditional economies but excludes their labour. With the increased emphasis on WtE plants and privatisation of waste management, a similar pattern threatens the waste economy in India that currently thrives at the hands of an informal sector made up of waste pickers, scrap dealers and small recyclers. While this creates employment opportunities for a large section of the population, it also reinforces, as Barbara Harriss-White (2019) highlights, asymmetric livelihoods that are economically and socially segregated. As the work of Harris-White, Bisen (2019) and Gill (2010), amongst others, shows, issues of caste and gender remain endemic to the business of waste in India and cannot be unseen from the larger project of waste management in India.

II. THE POTENTIAL FOR WOMEN'S LIVELIHOODS IN WASTE MANAGEMENT



50% of waste pickers in India are women. A paper by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) indicates that female labour force participation in South Asia was less than half that of men (Verick and Chaudhary 2014). A more recent study by Deshpande and Kabeer (2024) highlights that India has the lowest female labour force participation in the world. Women's participation in the labour force is restricted by a number of social and economic factors, including their lifelong responsibility of care giving which remains invisibilised as labour as well as in potential employment for women.

Interestingly, the ratio of financial returns in waste picking to the flexibility in working schedules, autonomy over work and required investment in learning the skills has been found advantageous by women waste pickers. Women often turned to waste picking or engaged in it as their preferred form of livelihood because it enabled income generation without compromising on their caregiving and domestic responsibilities. Preeti Sodhe, who works as a safaai saathi with an NGO managing waste in Raigad, quit her full-time job as a domestic help to work as a waste collector. Although she works for eight hours a day, she says that this job profile leaves her with more time for her family. "I can spend time with my daughter and also have energy left to cook and clean," said Preeti, who recollected that her job as a househelp was very demanding sometimes keeping her busy till past midnight. For Rohini Kaspate who also works as a safai saathi with an NGO in Raigad, a widow and mother of a young daughter the location of the job was important. "There aren't many jobs for women in rural areas, we have to go to Mumbai or other big cities. I also did that, but I used to be very worried about my daughter. As a single mother, having a job and one that is close to my home is very advantageous," she said. While these women were waste pickers employed by an NGO, erstwhile waste pickers who were initially itinerant also spoke about how they became involved in waste picking because of their infants or sick family members. Vijaya Chavan could not return to her job in a company that made cardboard boxes because her three-month-old son did not stay for long without her. "He also could not digest outside milk. So, I had to find something that I could do more flexibly and tailored to my free time. This is when I learnt to pick and sell scrap metal and glass," said Vijaya who is now employed as a waste picker with a private contractor in Pimpri-Chinchwad Municipal Corporation (PCMC).

Additionally, the wide variety of activities involved in solid waste management including sorting and recycling provided opportunities for older women's employment too. Since these jobs did not require activities like hauling, pushing or climbing on trucks, older women engaged in them more willingly. "When we agitated for better working conditions, we argued that the older women from our union be employed on the machines (conveyor belts) for sorting," explained Vijaya Chavan. In other places older and younger women waste pickers have partnered in a way that the younger woman focusses on collection of dry waste, which she then brings to the older woman for sorting. "We divide the profits earned from selling the dry waste," explained Surekha, a young waste picker collecting waste in an elite neighbourhood in Pune.

Increasing women's involvement in the labour force and access to decent work are not only necessary elements of an inclusive and sustainable development process, but lead to improvement in women's financial security and increased empowerment through higher confidence and rebalancing unequal gender power structures, family and social spaces. This particular potential of solid waste management in providing large scale, but also diverse types of employment must be capitalised to further India's commitment to the fulfilment of sustainable development goals such as decent work for all and gender equality.

III. WASTE WORKERS THROUGH THE LENS OF RULES AND SCHEMES



The Solid Waste Management Rules 2016 (SWM Rules 2016) formed under the Environment Protection Act, 1986 emphasise waste segregation. Consequently, these rules also identify the role of actors such as “waste pickers” and “informal waste collectors” in waste management and recommend their integration into the state’s waste management system through registration, training and appropriate policies (Section 15, 16, SWM Rules 2016).

A related promulgation, the **National Action for Mechanised Sanitation Ecosystem (NAMASTE)** Scheme under the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, has been operational in India since 2023 and provides specific guidelines for such integration, primarily with the objective of ensuring the safety and wellbeing of waste pickers. While these rules and schemes seemingly promote formalisation of waste picking as a service, there are certain factors that are critical to ensure that such formalisation adopts an inclusive approach and remains cautious of the rigidity lent by bureaucratic procedures, hierarchy and demanding paperwork.

This policy paper proceeds to make certain policy recommendations towards formal integration of waste pickers into state based solid waste management systems **through participatory processes and institutional relationships**. These policy recommendations follow research through qualitative interviews and informal interactions with various waste pickers, most of whom were women, and activists and organisations who have been involved in solid waste management.

A Defining waste pickers and its impact on integration.

The SWM Rules 2016 provide two categories of individuals dealing with waste informally. They define the ‘informal waste collector’ to include

“individuals, associations or waste traders who are involved in sorting, sale and purchase of recyclable materials”.

They also define “waste picker” as a

“person or groups of persons informally engaged in collection and recovery of reusable and recyclable solid waste from the source of waste generation the streets, bins, material recovery facilities, processing and waste disposal facilities for sale to recyclers directly or through intermediaries to earn their livelihood.”

While the rules do not accrue different rights to these different categories of persons, it would be good to note that often these categories of persons overlap. At the same time, as Gill’s (2019) research finds, the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector’s Report of 2007 indicates that there is a high overlap between the urban poor and those working in the informal sector of waste retrieval and recycling.

Integration of waste pickers into the state systems of solid waste management should therefore align with this reality and expand the scope based on prioritising locally available individuals who are a) experienced in waste picking and b) are economically vulnerable. Since women comprise close to 50% of the workforce in waste picking, inclusive integration should prioritise the employment of women waste pickers who remain most vulnerable due to structural inequalities.

It cannot be denied that waste management holds tremendous potential for employment of labour and therefore has scope to provide economic security for a large section of the urban poor.



B Registration of Waste pickers

The SWM Rules 2016 provide for registration of waste pickers. The NAMASTE Scheme highlights profiling of waste pickers, encouraging the formation of waste picker collectives and issuing of ID cards to facilitate registration. As the experience of KKPKP indicates, registration not only provides waste pickers with a recognition but also the identification of their waste related activities as 'work'. Itinerant waste pickers confront a lot of challenges as a result of their choice of work which lends precarity to their livelihood generation (Sengupta 2025). The purpose of registration should therefore be manifold.

Given the crucial work related to sanitation, cleanliness and waste management that waste pickers perform, registration should ensure that waste pickers have access to

- I. Government social security schemes for themselves and their families
- II. Subsidised healthcare and insurance
- III. Opportunities to educate their children
- IV. Safe and clean housing facilities
- V. Pension schemes

While some of these factors are covered under the NAMASTE scheme, the scheme does not envisage how such registration will be ensured in contexts where ULBs outsource waste management operations to contractors who are then in charge of recruiting the waste pickers. It is therefore important that this section be read together with Section C on wages.

C Wages

The SWM Rules in their present form encourage states to ensure that waste pickers and informal waste collectors are recognised and integrated into whatever state waste management policy is developed in consequence of these rules. However, an observation of current patterns shows that urban and rural local bodies outsource waste management to contractors who organise the process from collection to segregation and sometimes even recycling. Waste pickers therefore do not become employees of the state, but rather employees of a private contractor, who within a broader interpretation of the SWM Rules could also be categorised as a waste collector. Such a reading would however be absolutely incorrect, as the difficult and often hazardous work of actual waste collection, segregation and sorting will continue to be done by the most vulnerable population of these workers – the waste pickers.

It is therefore imminent that urban and rural local governance bodies ensure through employment regulations that waste pickers engaged in the actual collection, sorting and segregation of waste:

- i. **Are registered in line with Section B above with the concerned ULB and receive**
- ii. **Minimum wage.**
- iii. **Employee state insurance benefits.**
- iv. **Provident fund.**
- v. **Safety gear such as gloves, masks and uniforms.**
- vi. **Equipment such as push-carts, shovels and brooms.**
- vii. **A choice to have the right over dry waste to supplement their incomes.**

Mere minimum wage without the added benefits of provident funds and health insurance secure waste pickers only partially against the precarity the nature of their work exposes them to. “I used to spend close to Rs. 4000 per month on health expenses previously,” said Asma who works in a recycling unit in Pune. Similarly, Manisha Borade, a waste picker who transitioned from itinerant waste picking to working under a private waste management contractor in PCMC. said that she realised the value of ESI when she had to be admitted to the hospital for fifteen days which drew up a bill of Rs. 80000. “I needed to be on Oxygen. I would have never been able to afford this without the ESI,” she described animatedly. Waste pickers work under poor sanitation conditions and are therefore extremely vulnerable not just during the lifetime of their work, but even after. Social security and health benefit support, which is rarely provided by private contractors in waste management, is however imminent to ensure holistic employment security.

AN SWM MODEL BASED ON MINIMUM WAGE: SOME REFLECTIONS

Current trends in India show that the operation of solid waste management in cities is largely outsourced to private contractors who conduct waste collection and processing activities through employees hired on a wage-based model (Bandopadhyay 2025). However, since the wage-based model does not ensure the highest level of segregation, some contractors also engage in a part wage and part incentive-based model to promote better segregation of waste. The Pune labour court’s decision in 2023 in a case filed by the waste picker’s trade union, KKPKP, against the PCMC Municipal Corporation and the private contractors hired by it, however, indicates that this part wage-part incentivisation (to offset minimum wage) model actually violates the Minimum Wages Act, 2012 (Menon 2024)⁶.

While proper implementation of minimum wages ostensibly improves the livelihood of waste pickers, it is not without certain formidable challenges.

- Empirical research in Kanpur, Raigad and PCMC reveals that since waste pickers do not have the right to sell dry waste under a minimum wage model, the levels of segregation are significantly lower as compared to the segregation by itinerant waste pickers or by waste pickers’ cooperatives⁷. “We used to segregate almost

⁶The PCMC jurisdiction has undergone a transition from a cooperative based SWM model to a private contractor based SWM model over the last 15 years. What started out as replica of the Pune counterpart with SWaCH organizing local waste pickers for door-to-door collection in PCMC eventually broke down because the municipality implemented multiple SWM models (one of which was SWaCH) in the city at the same time, leading to SWaCH terminating their contract with PCMC and filing a court case for various human rights violations, including those under the Minimum Wages Act, 2012. SWaCH promotes a SWM model that does not compromise on waste-picker’s rights. While KKPKP’s litigation in the Supreme Court and Labour Courts caught the limelight, several degrees of protests and negotiations that occurred in the shadows of these law suits finally resulted in ensuring that erstwhile waste pickers (who worked for SWaCH in PCMC) were absorbed by the private contractors in their SWM activities, paid a minimum wage, offered compensation for the years lost in litigation and guaranteed social security benefits like PF and ESI. More details about this case study can be found at https://www.wiego.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/SWaCH_Success_Story_Provide_a_better_service.pdf. See also <https://theprint.in/ground-reports/pimpri-chinchwad-vs-310-women-waste-pickers-a-12-year-battle-a-trade-union-rs-7-5-cr/2147825/>.

⁷Drawn on the basis of an ongoing research study titled The Business of Waste Technology and the Social Landscape of Waste Management in India at the Kotak School of Sustainability in IIT Kanpur

100% of the dry waste - there is even a market for chindhis (cloth scraps),” said 62-year-old Chaaya Tribhuvan from PCMC as she described her potential to segregate. And efficient segregation is undeniably the most crucial component of efficient waste management, which however is likely to become compromised in a wage-based model.

- Wage based SWM models are not inclusive in terms of age and gender. Since most wage based SWM models are managed by private profit-oriented contractors, they target maximised labour at the lowest cost. This in turn impacts who is employed. In PCMC waste pickers related how the contractor preferred employing men over women. Likewise weaker and older women and men were not considered eligible for waste related work by private contractors. “Many times, I put aside a large chunk of dry waste and hand it over the older ladies waiting outside the ramp areas. This is not allowed, the supervisor has even taken my pictures while doing this saying she will complain. But what will these old ladies earn? They know nothing other than sorting and selling dry waste,” said Vijaya Chavan from PCMC.
- Retirement has been unknown to waste pickers unless compelled by reason of health deterioration. The idea of having to retire at a particular age (which some private contractors mandate) and possibly return to itinerant waste picking is frightening, admit many waste pickers and it was PF benefits that alleviated this fear. “It is not until we are close to retirement that we realise the benefit of the PF that is being cut from our salaries. Although initially the cut did seem like a burden. But now I know I can live off my PF in my old age,” said Vijaya Chavan from PCMC when we discussed the experience of waste pickers in Raigad resisting salary deductions for PF.
- A comparison of Pune and its neighbouring city of PCMC reveals that wage-based models managed by private contractors are likely to be more costly for municipalities, not only in terms of labour but also with respect to the capital investments such as motorised vehicles, fuel, etc. that they often command.

D Collaboration with Civil Society Organisations

While prioritising solid waste management is essential to protect public health, ensuring livelihood opportunities is equally important as has been highlighted under the Sustainable Development Goals #1 (End Poverty) and #8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). These two objectives can be easily tied together, as the case study of SWaCH (described below) shows, to ensure that efficient solid waste management occurs through maximising livelihood generating opportunities and that too without large capital investment by local bodies but at reasonable costs.

While urban and rural local bodies must put into place policies and rules related to the safety, dignity, social and financial security of waste workers, it is equally important that such rules do not remain mere paper tigers and are properly implemented. Urban and rural local bodies must partner with civil society organisations, NGOs and self-help groups embedded within clear mandates towards social justice to ensure that the rights of waste workers vis-à-vis state rules and policies are effectively secured.



The NAMASTE scheme highlights the role of CSOs as ‘Resource Organisations’ but only to the limited extent of facilitating profiling and registration of waste pickers. Undeniably, waste pickers are the most vulnerable group of workers within the hierarchy of labour in solid waste management. It is thus doubly important to ensure that the rights assured to them under the rules and schemes are not compromised either on account of unawareness or asymmetrical power structures.

This paper therefore urges for policies that mandate urban or rural local bodies to partner with CSOs:

- i. To help waste pickers form self-help groups or collectives that provide them with a platform for collective bargaining⁸.
- ii. To create awareness about methods of registration with the urban or rural local bodies, right to minimum wage and other benefits and the various schemes such as NAMASTE.

⁸Collectives such as KKPKP in Pune and Hasiru Dala in Bangalore have already been engaged in such work to ensure that erstwhile waste pickers are included in newer waste management systems (Meghani 2023).



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IV. THE SWACH MODEL: A CASE STUDY

Identifying a gap in the rules and policies around solid waste management, KKPKP, in collaboration with the PMC formed SWaCH in 2007. SWaCH is a waste picker owned cooperative that collects segregated waste from households and deposits it at designated feeder points from where municipal vehicles collect it for further disposal. This process also enables waste pickers to sort the non-biodegradable waste for sale as scrap, thus reinforcing their first right over the economy from waste. Born within a dynamic process of social movements, political advocacy, protests and collaboration, SWaCH cemented a relationship between citizens and their waste through the daily collection of segregated waste by waste pickers against the payment of an (often negotiable) user fee. This process transformed waste pickers into service providers, thus enabling the reimagination of their work into a value-added service that not only assured them a monthly income but also reinvented their relationship with middle-class society along lines of trust, respect and empathy.

SWaCH adopts the model of a waste picker owned cooperative that partners with the Pune Municipal Corporation for activities of solid waste management. This model, by its very nature, incentivises the primary activities of waste collection, segregation and sorting without compromising on rights or rules. More importantly, the model encourages autonomy and entrepreneurial skills that result in the incurring of low investment costs by the state in the following manner. Set out below are certain practices that would underscore the formalisation of a primarily unorganised sector to ensure inclusivity and equity. At the same time, certain recommendations for actions from urban and rural local bodies have been made to further strengthen the effectiveness of such practices:

A Sale of Scrap

The waste pickers are expected to sort the non-biodegradable waste they collect from households by enabling them the right to sell recyclable items to supplement their income. Waste pickers hone a sense of ownership over the non-biodegradable waste they collect because of its income generating potential. “We need some money every day to buy oil, vegetables, soap etc. This comes from the daily sale of this scrap,” explains Keshar Londhe, a waste picker who has been in the cooperative for over a decade. While the user fees she earns on a monthly basis are substantial, the security lent by receipt of a daily income is more reassuring, she explains. The dependency on earning daily incomes, however small, has been integral to the waste pickers’ daily consumption patterns. Participating in SWaCH’s user fee-based model was initially a challenging transition for several traditional waste pickers because although user fees promised a possibly large income, it was received only on a monthly basis. Today of course, waste pickers who are part of SWaCH rely largely on the user fees for their economic security, more often selling scrap on a weekly or fortnightly basis.



Sorting involves the detailed task of separating the different types of recyclables from hair and plastic to cardboards and thermocol. Waste pickers however share that their motivation and methods of sorting depend on the changing market of recyclable items, with items fetching better prices being sorted more carefully. Simultaneously the municipality's acceptance of mixed waste – which gets transferred to landfills or WtE plants – only complements these patterns of sorting.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION:

Given that segregation and sorting are so essential to proper waste management, it is important for urban local bodies to:

1. Not accept mixed waste
2. Ensure waste pickers have first right to sort and recover for sale items from collected waste at all locations, including from households, in public areas, from landfills and WtE plant locations . This will incentivise sorting at the primary level.
3. Innovate and establish proper markets for recyclables and trade of scrap. This would encourage scrap dealers to expand the types of items they purchase from waste pickers and in turn encourage waste pickers to sort more.
4. Develop policies that mandate WtE plants to accept only such waste that cannot be recycled. This is likely to compel WtE set-ups to partner with waste pickers to maximise sorting activities even at the last mile.

B Fixed User Fees

Payment of a user fee for waste collection is mandated by the municipal corporation. The user fee compensates as a monthly income for the waste picker paid directly by the householder to the waste picker. The user fee is decided by the municipality, ideally in consultation with the citizens and waste pickers. While this fee is in theory fixed, waste pickers admit to it being negotiable. The SWaCH model encourages waste pickers to be innovative and entrepreneurial. While an organisational staff member allocates waste pickers to a specific area and households within an area or ward, securing and maintaining the householders to utilize their service is often dependent on the waste picker. Having started with a user fee of Rs 5 per month in 2006, today Pune's waste pickers earn a monthly user fee of Rs 90 per household. "However not everyone pays exactly this, there are some households that bargain to reduce this amount and some who are more generous and pay a bigger fee," said Pushpa Lad, who has been collecting waste from an upper middle class area in east Pune. Likewise, in urban slums, a smaller user fee of Rs 65 is levied, and the difference is made up through a 'slum-subsidy' payment from the municipality.

User fees have enabled some crucial benefits to waste pickers as well as the urban local body. User fee payment establishes a direct connection between the householder and the waste picker, thus facilitating a contract between customer and service provider. This not only enables waste pickers to set the terms of their contractual obligations but also provides the municipality with an alternative to the minimum wage model for primary levels of waste management. In Pune, the



municipality has incurred an expense of approximately Rs 40 crores over the last 17 years, which is substantially less than the expenses incurred through outsourcing solid waste management to private contractors or employing waste pickers directly (Press Trust of India 2024; Times New Network 2020). At the same time, services of the waste pickers are organised by a staff member paid by the cooperative, who ensure that services are provided efficiently and regularly. A contract between the municipality and the cooperative ensures that the municipality continues to have a hold on the operations of such a service delivery. A model facilitating user fee as an income generating opportunity model further incentivises proper waste collection.

The challenge of the user fee model however is that waste pickers accumulating substantial amounts of user fee are less motivated towards income generation through the sale of non-biodegradable waste, which could potentially mean low levels of sorting and could lead to inefficient waste management.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION:

1. Waste pickers must be given the first opportunity for household collection of non-biodegradable waste. This can be facilitated through partnering with local self-help groups, NGOs or waste picker associations.
2. Urban local bodies should fix a user fee in consultation with waste pickers or waste picker collectives. This user fee should be revised every year.
3. The waste picker to household ratio should be fixed so that a proportionate balance between user fees and collection from sale of scrap can be maintained, and employment opportunities will thus be maximised. Capping the maximum number of households also helps in ensuring regularity and punctuality of service provided.

C Flexibility, Work Autonomy and Inclusivity

In his prominent contribution towards understanding what constitutes work, anthropologist John Parry (2020) finds that informal and daily wage workers explained 'their choice of more precarious forms of livelihood over those more likely to yield a reliable income' in terms of *azadi* – the possibilities of having autonomy and control of their own terms of work (Pattnaik 2024). Female waste pickers, in particular, expressed a similar sentiment in articulating their resistance to contract-based models of employment in waste management. In fact, data shows that in such contract-based models approximately 80% of the workforce comprises men.

Contrastingly, the SWaCH model is described to align with women's multiple care giving and domestic responsibilities and is made-up primarily of women waste workers. Since their incomes are not bound to hours of work, interactions with waste pickers reveal that their primary obligation is to maintain fixed hours for waste collection every day and to ensure that the non-saleable non-recyclable waste gets deposited into the municipal secondary collection vans. "These timings are fixed. And we must adhere to them. But most of us finish our work by afternoon and then can plan the remainder of the day as per our needs," explained a young waste picker attending SWaCH's grievance redressal group (Aadhar gat) meeting.

In the early years of organising waste collection, previously itinerant waste pickers found it very hard to adhere to a specific timing. Longer or odd working hours such as the wee hours of the morning were often inevitable to ensure the recovery of best and most scrap. But over the years waste pickers have recognised that the service-oriented nature of their work granted them an assured income, better relationship with society at large and lent dignity and sophistication to their work.

In addition to being able to sort non-biodegradable waste at their convenience without the worry of stray animals and thefts, due to the streamlined free hours, waste pickers also found opportunities for other types of employment such as part time domestic work, composting of wet waste in apartment complexes and cleaning or sweeping jobs in residential complexes. "I can also send a replacement for waste collection on days that I cannot go myself. One would not have had such a flexibility in a contractor's model, where your wages depend on the number of hours you put into the job," said Rajabai an older waste picker who has enlisted the support of her sons as well, in her waste collection activities in a ward in West Pune.

In addition to flexibility, such a model also brings with it inclusivity, not only in terms of gender but also in terms of age and physical abilities. Private contractors invariably prioritise profit at maximum labour potential and minimum costs, which means the implementation of rules such as upper age limits for working and selected emphasis of certain physical abilities. "Our supervisor is very cruel to weak women. He constantly threatens to throw them out of the job saying they are not fit enough. Similarly, they don't employ shorter or heavier women either. They only want men, because they say men work better," described Manisha Borade from PCMC as she compares her experiences of itinerant waste picking and employment-based waste picking.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION:

1. The state must ensure that formalisation is infused with flexibility that does not compromise on service efficiency and pro rata wages per hour of work. Flexibility is likely to expand the diversity in labour willing to engage in waste picking, both in terms of gender and age.

D Empowerment through Collectives

When individuals find an opportunity to be organised through an apparatus that encourages cooperation, while simultaneously ensuring security of livelihood; several ancillary advantages are likely to evolve in the process.

Waste pickers are often placed at the intersection of multiple vulnerable identities. A collective provides a platform for learning from shared lived experiences. It also provides a sense of support through a collective voice. “I began the activity of waste picking with SWaCH during the COVID lockdown. My husband used to drink a lot and even physically abuse me. I had started living with my parents and needed to find a way to support myself. SWaCH changed my life. It gave a source of income, but more importantly, the other women helped me sort out my domestic situation. They gave me strength to confront the violence and helped me put an end to it,” narrated 30-year-old Pushpa Lad, who emphasised how her relationship with SWaCH exceeded the income generating potential it opened for her. “I received support from the other women in a form that I had not received from any mahila mandal or even the police. I felt safe to discuss my matrimonial issue with my senior colleagues because it had begun to impact my work. They not only backed me up, but also spoke to my husband and my in-laws, warning them that they would help me take action if my husband did not improve his ways. And it worked. Today my husband doesn’t drink, he even has a job, and we are in a slightly better financial situation,” she explained.

Given that waste collection generates a secure and stable livelihood, and inefficient services could impact this opportunity, cooperative models promote interventions that are motivated to prevent the breakdown of services, but simultaneously evolve as strong support mechanisms.

E Support from Urban Local Bodies

In a model that extends maximum autonomy to the waste picker, incentivising waste collection through user fees and waste segregation through ownership of waste, urban local bodies are likely to be faced with minimum costs and maximum efficiency, provided:

- a. **Waste pickers are provided with sufficient infrastructure in terms of push carts, gloves, coats and any other equipment required for safe and efficient waste collection, so that their health and safety is not compromised.**
- b. **Waste pickers are provided with physical space to store and sort the collected non-biodegradable waste, which is necessary for proper sorting and safety of the surrounding environment.**
- c. **Registration of waste pickers is carried out in line with policy recommendation B in Section II above.**



V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Legal and mechanised interventions that treat waste as a homogenous category of objects with no value (see also (Hodges 2013)) necessary to be removed at any cost, displace livelihood opportunities besides being unsustainable and expensive. It is important that we recognize waste as a collective of objects of varying worths. Of course, it would be partial sighted if we do not highlight that the sorting of waste is meaningful only when its disposal - whether in terms of reuse, recycling or upcycling - can be made in a structured manner using appropriate skill and technologies. It is only through an approach that emphasises reuse and recycling that the large proportion of labour, that currently comprises the informal sector in waste management, will not be dispossessed of their right to livelihood which, remains a pressing constitutional obligation for states in India.

Mechanisms for formalising waste pickers through streamlined opportunities of employment within the broader systems of waste management must be underscored by approaches that are inclusive, particularly towards those confronting multiple intersections of vulnerability.

A COMPARATIVE SNAPSHOT OF DIFFERENT PRIMARY WASTE COLLECTION MODELS

*Data reflected in the table is sourced from Pune and PCMC areas in Pune District, Maharashtra, India over a timeline of ten years.

Heads of Comparison	Itinerant Waste Pickers	Waste picker owned Cooperative Model	Minimum Wage Model
Work hours	Flexible - 4-12 hours/day, 7 days a week	Flexible- 3-6 hours/day, 6 days a week	9 hours /day, 6 days a week
Average monthly earnings of waste pickers	₹7,000 - 20,000 [^]	₹17,000 - 40,000	Rs. 22,000 gross
Right over recyclables	Yes, informal	Yes, formal	No
Gender ratio of employees (M:F)	8:92*	30:70	80:20
Age of retirement	Till health permits	Till health permits	58 - 60 years
Social Security for waste pickers	NAMASTE scheme benefits**	Equipment and PPE, Health (UHS), Life and Accident insurance. Scholarships for children. NAMASTE scheme benefits**	Equipment and PPE, PF, Medical insurance***
Annual Cost to Municipality	None	Administration: 6.23 Crore per annum Social Welfare, Equipment, PPE, Slum subsidy: 9 Cr	Waste collection****: 75 Cr per annum IEC for primary collection: 20 Cr per annum
Carbon Foot-Print	Very Low- Non-motorised transport with minimal waste going to landfill	Very Low- Non-motorised transport with minimal waste going to landfill	Very High- Fully motorised transport with high levels of waste going to landfill

*Data sourced from Chikarmane, P., Deshpande, M., & Narayan, L. (2001). Waste pickers in Pune: Informal recycling for sustainable resource management. International Labour Organisation

**Social welfare component of NAMASTE scheme not yet rolled out

***Not eligible for ESI since total earnings are above Rs. 21,000

****Includes secondary transportation

[^] Data sourced from itinerant waste picker mapping exercise conducted by KKPKP over 2024_25.

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