

Picking a Brighter Future

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As I watched

Ribeka Kedari dump a load of stinking garbage into her cart, outside a mansion in Pune's posh National Society, I wondered: do we ever spare a thought for people who handle the waste we throw out ... the chips package, the chocolate wrapper, the potato peels, the toilet paper ... and worse? Under what conditions do they toil, what are their lives like, what do they feel when dealing with the dirty byproducts of our consumption? Most of us don't give a second's reflection to wastepickers like Ribeka, whom we see in our neighbourhoods, or digging into streetside wastebins. Or if we do, it is probably to dismiss them as filthy persons not worth our consideration. Or maybe even to curse them if they miss out on picking up our garbage one day. Fortunately, not all of us ensconced in our relatively comfortable middle class existence are blind to the conditions of the less privileged. In 1990, some participants of the National Adult Education Programme at the SNDT College in Pune encountered child wastepickers. Observing their activities, they wondered if the earnings and working conditions of the wastepickers could improve if the waste was segregated before putting into bins. This was tried out in one colony in Pune, with initial results that got the childrens' mothers also enthused. 30 of the women were issued ID cards by SNDT, and with cooperation of the colony's households, collection became less hazardous, and more remunerative as segregated waste fetched better prices. It was then that the SNDT team realized the potential of similar processes for wastepickers across the city. Almost immediately, however, they faced a challenge. Very soon after initiating the above activity, a private entrepreneur offered to collect waste from each household and rid the colony of wastebins. The colony residents bought into this, with immediate impacts on the livelihoods of the wastepicker women. The latter protested, and staged a *bin chipko andolan* (modeled after the famous Himalayan Chipko movement to protect trees), which forced the entrepreneur to withdraw. Union and Cooperative formation From those early struggles came the realization that the women need to organize themselves into a larger, stronger collective. With help from Baba Adhav (well-known as the head of the trade union of *coolies* or headloaders), and the Dalit Swayamsevak Sangh, a convention of wastepickers was organised in 1993; significantly, over 800 women and men participated. The adverse conditions of the wastepickers --- the hazards of the occupation, the mistreatment by police and municipality officials, the impossibility of sending their children to school or of getting proper medical care, and the social exclusion faced from the rest of society both as dalits and as 'unclean' waste-handlers --- were powerfully expressed at the Convention, and a decision was taken to set up a trade union with a formal membership. Thus was born the Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP, <http://www.kkpkp-pune.org>). From those initial years, KKPKP has gained steadily in strength, both in membership and in the ability to mobilize for the rights of members. It has about 10,000 registered members (up from about 800 in 1993), 80% of whom are women from marginalized and disprivileged castes. Its primary activity has been to negotiate and arrange better working conditions and remuneration for waste collection and sale, but it has also taken up a number of associated actions related to education, health, living conditions, social relations, and other aspects of the lives of members. Going beyond the immediate issues of wastepickers, it has also increasingly become involved in larger issues of urban planning and sustainability. **Economic and social gains** KKPKP can boast of a number of impressive achievements. Through mass mobilization it was able to establish, and demand recognition for, waste collection as legitimate *work*, and collectors as *workers*. This was crucial to enable them to claim various rights and benefits that the state provides. This was done by showing that collectively, wastepickers were saving the municipal corporation several million rupees per annum, and generating a substantial part of the city's income. The environmental benefits of dealing with garbage at source were highlighted. The central government had in 2000 passed the Municipal Solid Wastes (Management and Handling) Rules, requiring segregation and door to door collection. KKPKP was already campaigning for the implementation of these Rules; in 2006, Maharashtra promulgated the Non-Biodegradable Garbage Control Ordinance, also requiring segregation. In 2008 a cooperative, the Solid Waste Collection and Handling or SWaCH Seva Sahakari Sansha Maryadit was registered, to negotiate formal contracts for waste collection with the municipal corporation (<http://www.swachcoop.com/>). Now over 2300 SWaCH members go door to door collecting segregated wastes, servicing about 400,000 households across Pune. With justification, SWaCH prides itself in being "India's first wholly owned cooperative of self-employed ragpickers/waste collectors and other urban poor." SWaCH covers 76 of Pune's wards. The Pune Municipal Corporation pays its administrative cost, and additional overhead costs are met from contributions that the Cooperative's members make from their own earnings. Members are able to charge a user fee from either each household, or from residents' associations collectively. The waste is divided into at least 16 categories (of paper, cloth, metals, plastics, glass etc), and sold directly to scrap dealers or taken to the 3 shops that SWaCH runs, where it is further

sorted for sale. Economic benefits are only a part of the story. Equally important are the social and political ones. With an increasing sense of identity, the self-image of wastepickers has changed from feeling inferior, useless and powerless to being confident and strong, feeling equal and productive. School enrolment of kids from the wastepickers' families has dramatically increased (it is now 100%), and child labour in the waste trade consequently reduced (already by about 76% by 2001, according to a KKP KP study). KKP KP provides notebooks, loans, and other inputs to enable childrens' education. Access to medical care is much easier, and a sustained campaign has resulted in Pune's municipal corporation being the only one in India with a budget to pay the premium of a medical insurance scheme for self-employed wastepickers. Health status has anyway improved because women are able to use gloves, masks, and other protective gear if they want, while collecting and handling waste. Now recognized across the city, and with uniforms, there is considerably less harassment by police and government officials, and more respect from residents. Finding it hard to get loans from banks, several dozen credit self-help groups were started, and then a credit cooperative, the KKP KP Pat Sanstha, was created for loans and social security schemes. From about 200 members in 1997-98, the Sanstha now has over 3000 members. Since 2008 SWaCH has teamed with other organizations to collect

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(flowers, fruits, coconuts) that is thrown into rivers by Pune's citizens during the annual Ganesh festival, and convert it into manure. Being part of these collectives also enables women to deal more effectively with problems like poor servicing or malpractices by ration shops, or getting shortchanged in slum redevelopment programmes. A number of cultural programmes are organised, including street plays to create awareness about issues like child marriage and caste inequities.... and, as the women proudly state, just to have collective fun! **Challenges and the future** KKP KP and SWaCH continue to face serious challenges. Even as the attitude of Pune's residents towards wastepickers has in general improved, many of them continue to 'look down' at what they consider a distasteful occupation. Such elitist attitudes are sometimes displayed even by NGOs, such as in 2011 when the National Society for Clean Cities (NSCC), taking a narrow environmentalist view, characterized wastepickers as unreliable and unaccountable. The fact that a few wastepickers are indeed tardy, or 'rude', or careless about hygiene, adds to this unfortunate and illegitimate stereotype. Fortunately there are also several colonies that have gone out of their way to help, such as the ICS Colony and Bhosale Nagar opening up their common toilets for wastepickers to use, and Anand Park residents providing new buckets. There is also the issue of earning disparity between those working in rich colonies, and those in lower middle class or poorer wards; KKP KP and SWaCH have started activities like enhancing the latter's earnings through collection and sale of old clothes or other items that households want to dispose (in something called 'V-collect drives'), while those working rich colonies could pay a higher contributory amount back to the organization. Not all of Pune's wastepickers are part of the union (about 33% remain unorganised). Another challenge is the continuing dependence on a few middle-class activists for some managerial and accounting issues, and for advocacy with the city administration, though this is apparently decreasing as youth from within the community get educated and empowered to take over. By far the biggest challenge, however, is the increasing entry of private companies in waste collection and management, having realized its profit potential, and the schizophrenic attitude of the Pune and (neighbouring) Pimpri Chinchwad municipal corporations. On one hand they have facilitated SWaCH, on the other contracted private sector agencies for waste collection from several wards. In these areas households do not have to pay any user fees, leading to families in the SWaCH areas to wonder why they have to pay; worse, the company does little or no segregation, simply taking the garbage to the landfill site. Its payment is on a weight basis, so it in fact benefits from an increase in garbage it is handling; whereas KKP KP and SWaCH have been campaigning for more localized waste treatment including composting within colonies. SWaCH had to recently terminate its agreement with the Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation (PCMC), since the Corporation was openly siding with the private agency and unwilling to level the playing field for SWaCH. Ironically, even in some wards of Pune where SWaCH has a contract, corporators have got into waste collection for profits or political mileage; they do this without charging residents, which makes it difficult for SWaCH to collect user fees from other colonies. The Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) itself runs vehicles for free collection in some of these wards. All of this involves unsegregated waste that then ends up in landfills. The PMC has not fulfilled its responsibility of providing equipment like buckets, gloves, masks, and footwear for about 2 years now, and payments due to SWaCH have been delayed for several months. It has also been lukewarm about providing sorting spaces for the wastepickers, who then have to do the sorting on roadsides, which is not only inconvenient but also invites displeasure and criticism from residents. In a city that provides enormous amounts of space to cars for parking, it is ironical that a basic thing like waste management does not get the space it requires. SWaCH members like Ribeka Kedari meanwhile continue their work, mixing collection with campaigning and activism. They are the lifeline of the organisations' democratic structure, which ensures that actual wastepickers are the decision-makers. They have been to other countries to tell their story, and learn from other models; SWaCH and KKP KP have also hosted, in 2012, the 1st Global Strategic Workshop of Waste Pickers, on behalf of the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers (http://globalrec.org/archive/design/report-pune2012_120708_a.pdf). Interestingly, one of their observations is how those speaking on behalf of wastepickers from several other countries seemed more 'middle-class' who were no longer doing wastepicking themselves. In Pune, they say, leaders continue to get their hands dirty, and are not alienated from the rest. Women like Ribeka are getting increasing chances to interact with other similar groups in India through the Alliance of Indian Wastepickers (<http://allianceofindianwastepickers.blogspot.in/>), a network of over 30 organisations which KKP KP and SWaCH were instrumental in starting. Through such alliances, they are strong advocating more sensitive policies at state and central government levels, including extension of welfare, pension, and other benefits to wastepickers just as they would be due to any recognized sector of workers. They have campaigned to get their kids enrolled in schools using the Right to Education quota (overcoming strong elitist resistance from 'public' schools); about 50 children have been admitted in Pune so far. They have protested the Pune Corporation's move to set up more 'waste to energy' plants, arguing that these are highly polluting, and that the wastepickers' methods of disposing of garbage (much of it through recycling) is much safer. The latest movement is targeting manufacturers of sanitary napkins and diapers like Proctor and Gamble and Johnson and Johnson, demanding that they take responsibility for safe disposal rather than exposing wastepickers to health hazards. This principle of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) is now well-established in many countries but relatively new in India. SWaCH has taken up EPR campaigns also for low grade, non-recyclable waste such as the thin plastic that potato chips packets are made of (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ysg4rKqLGo>). It also does segregation awareness drives, and electronic waste collection. The entire waste of Fergusson College is managed by SWaCH, including composting and dry waste segregation. A number of other services are also provided as part of what is called SWaCH+. This includes constructing and maintaining composting plants in colonies, housekeeping, and others. Another idea is to work towards 'zero-waste' colonies, where all or most waste is either composted or locally recycled. Reality is still far from such an ideal, but some colonies such as in the Katraj ward are beginning to respond to the idea. Wet waste from all the households will go into a biogas plant, already in operation. Low grade plastics are being recycled into boards. Policies that provide resident associations with incentives, and impose penalties for violation of basic norms, would help greatly in expanding such initiatives. Perhaps the biggest questions KKP KP and SWaCH are pointing us to are regarding the kind of consumerism that produces enormous amounts of waste, and the callousness of a class of citizens that can simply throw out its garbage without worrying about the consequences or the lives of those dealing with it. Answers to these questions need the involvement of all of us who care for a better future. A 'zero-waste' society can be achieved through reduction, recycling, upcycling, and other methods. Already there are movements to forge alliances between producers and consumers (e.g. in organic food); these can be extended to 'disposers' also, eventually working towards a system in which the entire chain of a product is ecologically safe, and provides for dignified livelihoods. Workers' organizations like KKP KP and SWaCH are crucial parts of such a future. This article is under publication (Hindu Survey of Environment 2013)

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