

Wastepickers protest in Ghaziabad

On August 16, 2013, around 300 members of Safai Sena protested against bribery and atrocities on them by private contractors in City Zone, Kavi Nagar Zone and Mohan Nagar Zone of Ghaziabad. Over 700 persons from Safai Sena have been working in the City Zone, Kavi Nagar Zone and Mohan Nagar Zone of Ghaziabad for over 10 years now. Most of them collect waste from the doorstep of over 18,000 households in Mohan Nagar zone and approximately 20,000 households in City and Kavi Nagar Zone.

Unfortunately, they are being forced to pay bribe by extortionists viz private contractors. Over 500 wastepickers need to pay Rs. 400 per month just to take the waste they have collected from the doorstep. On the denial, they are beaten up severely. Several women have been victims of this extortion racket run under the guise of waste management system of Nagar Nigam, Ghaziabad.

This is unacceptable and against their Right to Life, which is also understood by the Supreme Court as the Right to dignified and sustainable livelihood.

Apart from this, in Mohan Nagar Zone, many wastepickers find disposal of wet waste difficult since there are no dustbins are provided by Ghaziabad Nagar Nigam for this purpose.

All these are in violation of the National Action Plan on Climate Change (2009) and the National Environment Policy (2006), which clearly mandate including wastepickers in solid waste through institutional support and financial measures. The Plastic Waste (Management and Handling) Rules, 2011, also clearly state that wastepickers must be deployed for plastic waste collection.

Wastepickers were demanding:

1. Immediate action against extortionists and mafia collecting money from wastepickers.
2. A no objection letter from the Nagar Nigam to Safai Sena for collecting waste from doorstep without payment and keeping the dry waste.
3. Cancellation of any contract with anyone which allows them to harass wastepickers
4. Placement of dustbins in Mohan Nagar zone in at least 10 locations.

- Jai Prakash Choudhury



Privatization of waste a trouble for wastepickers

Anwar moved to Delhi as a kid with his parents in 1976. He enrolled in a school in Wazirabad but had to quit schooling and started work as a waste picker. He worked as a kabari in a society in Laxmi Nagar. During his work in Delhi, he learnt about and worked with Chintan. After having worked a while as a kabari in Delhi, Anwar decided to move back to Haldia where in the early 2000s. He worked as a construction worker, rickshaw driver until he was able to save enough money to buy his own rickshaw. During his time in Haldia, he tried to get work at Ramky waste management plant but was unsuccessful. To try to push for employment at the waste management plant, Chintan wrote him a letter of recommendation in 2006. Anwar says that the reason why he has been unable to get a job in the plant is because Trinamool political party is in power and the plant has therefore been staffed only with party supporters. After getting frustrated with not being able to find work in Haldia despite frequent attempts, a contractor—Saidul—told Anwar about potential work opportunity in Chennai. In April 2012, Anwar had been appointed as “Compactor Help” at Chennai MSW Pvt Ltd. Anwar worked in Chennai at this company for 7 months and had to return to Haldia due to some domestic issues he had to take care of. While in Haldia, he was contacted by Murti from the Ramky facility in Jodhpur. Murti promised Anwar work for him any others interested in the Jodhpur facility. Anwar assembled a team of 27 men and headed to Jodhpur. When they arrived in Jodhpur, the locals were very surprised and agitated to see this team of workers from Bengal. Someone from the Bengal

group said that this was just the beginning and even more people from Bengal would come to work in Jodhpur. The locals in Jodhpur went on strike and asked that the Bengalis should not be allowed to work in Jodhpur. Anwar and his group spent one week in Jodhpur and received no compensation for that time. Murti, the person who had invited them to Jodhpur, asked them to go to Delhi instead. For the bus trip between Jodhpur and Delhi, Anwar and his team were bought tickets and given an allowance of Rs. 3000 total. When they reached Delhi and called the Ramky official whose number Murti had given them, at first they were told that Murti had not informed them about this issue at all. Then they were told to meet Ramky officials at the Ramky truck garage behind the Yamuna bus depot. The Ramky official they met at the garage told them that they would be given work of loading garbage into trucks and will be paid on a per ton basis of Rs. 67/ton. Seven of the 27 agreed to stay in Delhi and work under these conditions but the rest wanted to return home to Haldia. Anwar asked the Ramky official if they will pay for the tickets to return home, to which the official replied, "I didn't ask you to come here."



If they pick waste, they must be thieves: Daily struggles of a wastepicker in Delhi

Picking trash is a narrow window of economic opportunity that provides a meagre income for Manwara Begum and her family. An opportunity to make ends meet, an opportunity of giving her children a better and more secure future. Manwara, a wastepicker, has been in Delhi since her childhood. She chose this work to add to her husband's income who is also a wastepicker. Recently, Manwara's dream turned ugly when her innocent children were blamed for a theft that happened in the nearby area. She was unaware that her being wastepicker would make her so vulnerable to being accused, harassed, and suffers violence openly.

Manwara Begum has been collecting waste from households and through her work, she keeps the city clean, providing an indispensable environmental and public health service. Manwara and her husband are members of Safai Sena, a registered association of wastepickers and small waste traders.

The ordeal began on July 19, 2013 when Manwara Begum's younger son, Naseem, aged 10, went to play near a community centre in his area with a bunch of his friends. There, he was accosted by some locals attending a religious ceremony who accused him of stealing an envelope containing money. The locals badly thrashed the child and tortured with live electric wires at the community centre. His elder brother Waseem, aged 14, came looking for his younger brother and he too was dragged and assaulted by the locals. The nearest police station was immediately informed by the locals about the incident and the officers on duty were expected to intervene to stop the heinous act. Instead, they showed their inhuman and unlawful side by being mere spectators to the atrocious act. Later the same evening, Manwara's husband and children were taken to the police station where the officers took the children to a separate room. The children were abused and kicked brutally. When Manwara tried to intervene, they slapped her.



A helpless and frustrated Manwara then approached Chintan and Safai Sena who advised her to file a First Information Report (FIR) as the first step. A F.I.R is a written document prepared by police when they receive information about the commission of a cognizable offence. Her letter was accepted by the police, but yet again, they accused her of being a thief, and told her that the FIR would be filed only after the matter had been investigated the matter. A few days later, the police took Manwara and her children to a hospital for a medical examination. At the hospital, the police kept talking to the doctor quietly to tamper with the report possibly.

Meanwhile, Manwara's children were sent to the Juvenile Justice Board. At the first meeting, the children were unable to speak for themselves because the police had threatened to murder their family if they opened their mouths in front of the judge. Since then, the police started to threaten them by visiting their house and harassing them. But the children have now become much more confident and are able to tell the truth at subsequent meetings with the Board.

The incident has left Manwara in a state of anger and helplessness. She says that even though she belongs to one of the lowest rung of the Indian society, this should not mean that different principles of justice should apply to her. To seek justice that is her due, Safai Sena, wrote letters to the Dr. Kiran Walia, Honourable Minister for Health and Family Welfare, Women and Child Department, Government of the National Capital Territory of Delhi, and Ms. Barkha Singh, Chairperson of the Delhi Commission for Women. In addition to writing the letters, Safai Sena members accompanied Manwara and her husband to demand an audience with Ms. Barkha Singh on July 26, 2013. She accepted the complaint and confirmed that strict action will be taken against all the duty officers if found guilty. All police officers involved in this case will be summoned to the Commission in the following 15 days to investigate this matter. In addition, on the same day, Safai Sena members went to the Special Police Unit meeting and put the matter in front of Joint Commissioner of Police, Delhi Police Women Cell. The office also reaffirmed Manwara that strict action would be taken against the people involved in this case.

The incident has been traumatic and taxing for Manwara and her family. But she has accepted that she will need to become more vigilant in future and now has the confidence to raise her voice for injustice. Regardless of these mildly positive outcomes, the incident is unacceptable and a complete violation of the rights of the poor who serve the city through waste collection and waste recycling. We all should hope that justice is rendered to her and her family and that the voices of millions of women across the world continue to be strengthened.

Wastepickers open three schools for children

Chintan along with Safai Sena inaugurated three schools for children at Tila Mod, Panchsheel Colony and Mangal Bazaar, Bhopura on July 11, 2013. Safai Sena has significantly contributed in starting these schools. On the occasion, Safai Sena members, Jai Prakash Choudhury, Aziz Sheikh, Noor Nabi and Etarul Ansari were felicitated and certified by Chintan for their good work. "We are grateful to Chintan for supporting us in opening the schools. Our children will also get education and will have a better future."

- Aziz Sheikh



Rekha's Journey: From a Scavenger to a Manager

When you first meet her, Rekha appears simply as a coy woman from a small town. But as soon you get her talking about her work, Rekha's face beams with confidence and pride. Rekha has come a long way from being just another wastepicker to now becoming a waste management professional, managing waste and housekeeping for Kisaan Haat, a crafts bazaar in Delhi, where she supervises other staff, as well as managing waste for big clients such as Artemis hospital.

Rekha first came to Delhi about two decades ago in the hope of a better life, a journey shared by thousands across India who have moved from villages to megacities such as Delhi. She comes from a poor farmer's family in Bihar where income was dependent on rains. "We have endured the worst times where the whole family used to sleep hungry for days. Few people from our locality suggested that we move to Delhi to start wastepicking and here I am", says Rekha in a complete matter-of-fact way.

Rekha lives in a Delhi slum and tears up as she describes how her life has changed since she started working at Kisaan Haat in 2012. "Today I make a decent living from my work and I run my family comfortably. People who used to frown at me while I was picking waste at the garbage bin, now know my name and greet me", says Rekha with pride. Picking trash from the city's dumps is hazardous work. One has to avoid getting injured from falling items, or being hit by moving vehicles while scrambling to get to the recyclable materials being dumped. In addition, Rekha remembers the frequent arguments between workers, sweepers, and others about territory and claims to materials of value. The memory of being a waste picker is not very pleasant for Rekha. Without recognition and legitimacy for their work, waste pickers are often accused of theft, have to frequently bribe the police and municipal workers, are vulnerable to sexual assault, and are viewed by the public with disgust.

Rekha's life took a turn when she joined Kisaan Haat. "Earlier we used to scavenge for recyclables in trash, segregate it and sell it to make a living. After being employed as a supervisor, I feel empowered. I have employed other wastepicker women and am now able to have a respectable social stand", says Rekha. "I am also grateful because I get to meet various people and each day comes with experiences that add value to my life. I am no longer looked down upon, I get respect in my family as well as my community back home. What else can one expect from life?" chuckles Rekha. She is also happy that her working hours are also regular with some time off each week.

Nothing came easy to Rekha, she has struggled to make a life for herself and her family. "My whole family is employed in this business and we make enough to have a comfortable living. My association with Chintan and Safai Sena has made work easier for me. We have better facilities, health services and can look forward to a better future. I am now capable of employing around 12 women waste pickers who work at my godown. They all are from nearby places and since they started working at my godown, life has changed for them also. They are now better able to take care of their families and have a fixed income," Rekha proudly says.

Rekha's story is truly inspirational. She is a woman entrepreneur who is not just supporting her family but is keeping our urban environment clean and free of trash. With a little help from Chintan, an NGO that works for waste pickers and their rights to a decent livelihood, her life has transformed. With financial support from a 2012 US Secretary of State's Innovation Award for the Empowerment of Women and Girls, Chintan is working to create safe, stable, and secure livelihoods for many similar women across the city. Rekha's journey from a 'kabari' to 'Rekha Ji' has been like a dream to her. In her own words, this is the biggest achievement that she will cherish for her lifetime.



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