

Rag-pickers—Scavengers or the Green Brigade?

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An important though marginalised and deprived group of city-dwellers constitutes a part of the ‘downstream’ of urban metabolism, in the cities of the developing world, and several thousands of them ply their trade in Indian cities and towns. Commonly referred to as rag-pickers, they segregate recyclables of value—plastics, metals, paper, glass, electronic wastes, etc. and also inert wastes and biodegradables in some instances—from dumpsites and landfills, and sell them to middlemen who are nodes in the

recycling supply-chain. They have been referred to as the ‘icons of poverty in the Global South’, ‘the most provocative figures of human misery’, ‘figures of the abject, mired in dead and rotting matter’ and ‘soldiers of the Green Brigade’. The ‘Leave-No-One-Behind’ (LNOB) recommendation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals of 2015 behoves everyone to correct the historical wrongs that have been committed against these urban miners.

Health, Safety and Well-being

‘Health’ includes the physical, mental/emotional and psychological

aspects of salubriousness. The psychosomatic nature of ill health is quite well-understood nowadays by the medical fraternity and the healthcare sector in general. Constant exposure to biological, chemical and safety hazards at the dumpsites, posed by discarded medicines, bandages, blood, diapers, sanitary napkins, used needles, dead animals, razor blades, batteries, etc., owing to the disuse of facemasks, gloves and proper footwear, makes them vulnerable to a host of ailments, musculoskeletal pain being an inevitable one. The biological hazards are posed by a variety of

bacteria and fungi in the biodegradable organic content in the landfills/dumpsites, the air and the soil in their vicinity. Feeling discriminated against and compelled to work as rag-pickers to earn their livelihood, and enduring monotony and repetitiveness on-the-job in addition to pain, bruises, lacerations, abrasions, burns, sprains, headaches, breathlessness, fever, whooping cough, asthma, tinnitus, diarrhoea, constipation, anorexia, sinusitis, leucocytosis and scabies amplifies the risk of psychiatric disorders. It is very much understandable that both adults and adolescents enduring



these travails day in and day out easily fall prey to alcohol and tobacco, drugs and inhalants like toluene-containing typewriter fluid, which provide them with a temporary reprieve from their suffering, while leading them down a perilous, health-damaging path. If one includes the harassment which rag-pickers are subjected to, at the hands of local goons, corrupt policeman and also municipal workers, the plight of rag-pickers has verily reached a tipping point, and it cannot, must not, and hopefully will not be overlooked.

The health of malnourished female rag-pickers, diagnosed with oxidative stress, inflammation, blood platelet hyperactivity, genotoxicity and anaemia, is exacerbated if they avail of wood, dung or charcoal as cooking fuel.

Malnutrition among rag-pickers, has been a problem which has been swept under the carpet for long and we are still very far away from the 'Zero Hunger' goal (Sustainable Development Goal – SDG 2). It is not merely about not being able to eat two square meals a day, but also about finding it difficult to access safe drinking water or avail of sanitation facilities. Whether and how these challenges will be tackled, in the context of the Leave-No-One-Behind aspect applied to the sustainable development goals 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation) and 7 (Affordable and Renewable Energy), remains to be seen.

Health insurance has been a politically-sensitive issue in many countries of the world—both developed and developing. There



have been reports stating that the most vulnerable migrant rag-pickers in India, children and women especially, are often excluded from the health benefits offered by the 'half-baked' insurance schemes that are often pitted against each other.

Education

Education, in the context of rag-pickers and their children, comprises both formal primary education, literacy and numeracy, generating awareness about health issues and the need for safety, sustainability and environmental issues, and imparting training to enable rag-pickers to develop new skills to be able to find alternate, safer employment opportunities in the urban economy. Just the process of learning and acquiring knowledge is extremely empowering and therapeutic, and can combat depressive tendencies in youngsters, and education has been, is, and will continue to be, as Nelson Mandela remarked, 'the most powerful weapon which one can use to change the world'.

The prevalence of child labour in general, and rag-picking by children in particular—which tends to become a familial occupation, in the absence of

interventions—deprives children of their rights to get at least a good primary education.

Culture, Heritage and Religion

Leaving No One Behind (LNOB), as defined by the United Nations Sustainable Development Group, is 'the central, transformative promise of the 2030 Agenda, to reach the farthest behind first'. If this is followed by India, the rag-pickers would be among those who are the farthest behind in urban habitats, and in order to make these habitats 'inclusive', they ought to get the attention which is long overdue. Religious tolerance is indispensable for inclusivity as well as for the reduction of inequalities. Researchers have reported that Muslim migrant rag-pickers in Indian towns and cities, feel discriminated against, presumably on religious/linguistic grounds.

Religions advocate humaneness, and preach and promote the concepts of fraternity and brotherhood. Art, music and literature have long been instruments used for this purpose. The rag-picker takes on an entirely different persona in the eyes of artists, painters, poets and writers. They are instantly transmogrified

from an object of scorn to a subject of mystique. Hands which sift through garbage to unearth items of value, are honoured by hands wielding pen and brush on paper and canvas.

Economy

Whenever new demands have arisen in economies, owing to exigencies imposed by natural catastrophes, commodity shortages, rise in standards of living of the upper and middle classes, the unemployed have 'by choice or compulsion', availed of the opportunity to fulfil them as suppliers. Most of them have been (and are) poor people from rural areas who have migrated to urban centres, and taken to rag-picking as a means of livelihood.

Innovations and infrastructure development, which form a part of SDG 9 can very well be Janus-faced, with respect to rag-pickers, if efforts are not made to magnify the complementarities and minimise the trade-offs. Repair shops which have mushroomed in Indian towns and cities, are important infrastructural entities, but whether and how rag-pickers can be integrated into the 'repair culture' and benefit therefrom is not very clear. The privatisation of

waste collections and transportation is directly antagonistic to the rag-pickers' livelihoods unless some kind of public-private-NGO partnership can be conceived to arrive at the best possible, sustainable compromise. Automating waste segregation and displacing the rag-pickers altogether is inadvisable for developing world economies. If segregation is carried out to enable rag-pickers to work safely and effectively while improving their productivity (which can be measured as the value of recyclables collected and sold to middlemen per day), one may consider that a win-win for the rag-pickers, the economy and the environment.

The daily earnings of rag-pickers vary, depending not only on what and how much they collect, but also on the market price of the recyclables at the time of sale to the middlemen, and the bargaining power of the rag-pickers. They can vary from anything under one US\$ to five US\$. However, with literacy, access to technology/equipment, receptiveness to advice and support from NGOs and optimal sizing of groups formed during dumpsite/landfill-mining, rag-pickers can very well earn more.

Environment

Ragpickers, by collecting about 5-10 kilograms per-capita daily, divert huge quantities of recyclable waste—reportedly, 35% in Delhi, 32% in Bengaluru, 80% in Coimbatore, 24% in Bhopal, close to 100% in Pondicherry and 20% on average in Indian cities—from landfills and dumpsites, and this translates to significant environmental benefits, positively impacting a host of environmental impact categories. In Dehradun for instance, they divert close to 50 tonnes of plastic wastes to recycling every month.

Rag-pickers belong to the so-called ‘bottom of Maslow’s pyramid’, and are oppressed by all sections of people who occupy its upper portion. It is amidst the piles of wastes generated by these sections that the rag-pickers spend most of their waking hours in.

NGOs have been working

closely with rag-pickers in different parts of India, and they would need to sustain their efforts to form organised cooperatives of rag-pickers, educate their children, train and impart basic environmental education and other useful skills to make rag-pickers employable elsewhere, arrange for the provision of protective equipment like gloves and masks, and spread awareness about health issues like AIDS. The noble work undertaken by NGOs with financial support from philanthropists, must be backed up by both the public sector (local, provincial and national governments) and the private sector (industries desirous of improving their social footprint by supporting NGOs working with rag-pickers, as part of their CSR initiatives). Eventually, it is up to the governments at all levels to redress grievances on a continuous basis,



through effective, long-overdue policy changes. While NGOs can equip rag-pickers with skill sets to make them employable elsewhere, and even provide vocational training to their children, it is after all up to the governments (at all levels) and the private sector (social entrepreneurs, especially) to generate employment opportunities for them.

The developing world is still far away from embracing the paradigm of gender parity. Female rag-pickers—girls and women—lead an extremely challenging existence. Focusing on the well-being of women in general is verily a lynchpin for sustainable development and attaining the SDGs. Government-sponsored schools in India must take up the responsibility of educating rag-pickers' children, and teachers must understand that there is a yawning gap between them and their classmates from well-to-do middle-class households, which needs to be bridged with patience and

perseverance. Counsellors and psychologists can step in to play a part in improving the mental health of depressed adolescent rag-pickers.

The media, be it print, online or audio-visual, or even for that matter film and theatre, play a key role in disseminating information and generating awareness, and bridging the gap of ignorance, and dismantle the wall of callousness, separating the marginalised existence of rag-pickers from the comfort and luxury of the other denizens of urban society. The latter may one day be convinced to pay more for waste management services, which would include those of the rag-pickers also.

The rag-picker has been a silently-striving, stoic protagonist who does not seek any appreciation for what they are doing, and thereby deserves it all the more from us, instead of being looked down upon as 'sordid and dangerous'. ●

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World is bound to perish one
day or another. Everything in
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- Srimad Bhagavat Gita