

They also Serve

Madhu Dogra, Bharat Dogra

There are some categories of workers the utility of whose work is well established but nevertheless they get the least respect and quite often the worst contempt. Rag pickers constitute such a category of workers who toil hard to keep the cities clean but hardly ever get any thanks or appreciation for this work.

In the context of Delhi it has been estimated that rag pickers take care of about 15 to 20 percent of the city's garbage. The situation is almost identical in most metros. In most cities the arrangements for clearing the garbage are highly unsatisfactory and inadequate. These can cope with only a part of the massive amounts of garbage generated every day. In this situation rag pickers make an important contribution by cleaning a significant share of the garbage without demanding any payment from the authorities. If the part of the garbage being taken care of by them was also to be cleared by paid employees, this would result in an additional expenditure of millions of rupees per day. Thus it is clear that rag pickers play a useful role in clearing garbage and at the same time save millions of rupees per day for financially hard-pressed municipalities. According to published estimates about Rs six lakhs per day are saved in Delhi alone, thanks to the contribution made by rag pickers.

Rag pickers make a contribution to protection of environment by helping to significantly add to the number of recycled products. Many products which can be recycled are carelessly thrown away. Rag packers salvage these products from various scattered places and supply these at the proper point from where these can enter the chain of re-cycling. The kabaris who collect these re-cyclable products from households have been making a significant contribution for a long time, but the contribution of rag pickers is even more important as they walk long distances to search for recyclable products which have been thrown away but for the special effort of ragpickers these would be lost to the recycling chain.

In mega-cities like Delhi landfill sites for disposal of garbage are under great pressure to accommodate the increasing mounds of garbage. It is becoming increasingly difficult to find more landfill sites. Rag pickers help to reduce this pressure when a load of 2 to 3 lakh sacks of garbage is reduced per day in a city like Delhi by rag pickers, this certainly helps to reduce to some extent the pressure on landfill sites.

Another important aspect of the work of rag-picking is that some of the poorest and economically most hard-pressed people who don't have other opportunities of livelihood are employed in this work. Many of them share a background of poorest, landless or near landless families, in backward areas ravaged by natural disasters. Escaping the economic distress of these villages by carrying out rag-picking work in cities, these workers are also able to send some badly needed money to old parents or other family members in villages. Thus this occupation helps to meet the basic needs of some of the poorest families in cities as well as in remote rural areas.

Despite this useful and significant role of rag-pickers, by and large their work has not received any recognition from the government and the society. Generally rag pickers are looked down upon and they face frequent humiliation and insults. Government policies have frequently added to their pain and suffering. Sometimes

their huts are demolished and sometimes they are harassed by the police. This attitude of the government and the society has added to the sufferings and risks of rag-pickers.

There is a high risk of rag pickers being exposed to health problems and injuries in the conditions in which they have to work. They can suffer injuries due to the presence of glass, needles, blades and other sharp products in the garbage. The presence of several harmful chemicals as well as inflammable objects poses other hazards. The waste of hospitals and nursing homes poses the greatest threat of disease to them.

Several steps can be taken to reduce these health risks. Some of these steps will benefit the entire society and not just the rag-pickers. Steps should be taken for segregation of the most risky part of the garbage including medical wastes and hazardous chemicals. If rag pickers (including those, specially women and children, who are engaged in classifying various waste products) can be provided with gloves and shoes suitable for this work, then this can help to reduce the risk of injuries and skin diseases.

Waste classifying and storage sites can be provided in colonies inhabited by rag pickers. This will help them to do the work cleanly and keep their homes clean. These colonies should have good water and sanitation facilities so that all persons engaged in this work are able to wash and bathe regularly.

Quite often rag pickers are unable to access government health facilities on an equal basis like other citizens. One reason for this is that they may not have any residential proof or identity papers. If they have a proper identity card approved by the government, this can help in several ways including obtaining better access to government's health facilities.

Another serious problem faced by many rag pickers is that they are frequently harassed by policemen and despite being very poor they've to make payments to them. Lai Miyan Ali has come from a village in Assam and he has been working as a rag picker in Delhi. On 9 March 2005 he was rag picking near Chattarpur when a policeman obstructed him and beat him. This policeman seized the cycle-cart in which Ali used to carry his pickings. This was locked up in a nearby godown. Ali was asked to bring Rs 5000 and only then the cart will be returned to him.

It is another matter that Ali was able to secure the intervention of a voluntary organisation *Bal Vikas Dhara* which helped him to get back this payment. What this incident reveals is that not only are rag pickers beaten up arbitrarily but in addition their livelihood can be suddenly disrupted in a most cruel way.

Sometimes they are also harassed by local powerful persons. Anil Ravi-das is a landless farm worker from Patna. As he was fed up with the exploitative working conditions of his village he along with several other poor persons from his village came to Delhi and started working as a rag-picker. On May 14, 2005 when he was rag picking in Mahipalpur he was surrounded by some local powerful persons who accused him of theft and took away his bi-cycle. Without his cycle he could not continue his work. Thankfully an organisation of rag-pickers *Delhi Kabri Mazdoor Sangh* came to his rescue by arranging for the return of his cycle.

There are several such examples which reveal that apart from working in difficult and humiliating conditions rag pickers also have to face a lot of oppression and injustice. Sometimes this can result in the loss of some earnings but sometimes the very livelihood may be threatened.

Even in normal times fair earnings based on prevailing market rates may be denied to many rag pickers. This is because they may have borrowed money from a

contractor, or received an advance from him, or the contractor may have arranged huts or housing for them. The contractor may even be paying protection money to police on behalf of a number of rag pickers. In these conditions a rag picker is obliged to sell his pickings only to this particular contractor at a rate which is somewhat lower than the prevailing market rate.

On the other hand if rag pickers can be provided secure housing and if arrangements for credit from self-help groups or other suitable sources can be made, then it may become possible for them to increase their earnings by selling at the market rate. But till such time that better and more secure arrangements are in place, the precarious support provided by the existing arrangements cannot be abandoned.

In recent years in keeping with the prevailing trends privatisation has been much discussed in the content of garbage management. More environment friendly arrangements are being talked about. But unfortunately in the name of environment protection steps are being taken against the livelihood of poorest, weakest people. For example according to recent reports from Mexico (see the *Statesman*, Feb. 9, 2006), the outwardly good looking 'reform' of garbage management adversely affected rag pickers who are the poorest people here.

In Indian cities also rag-picking provides livelihood to millions of poorest people. Whatever the changes being envisaged in garbage sector, these should be linked to protecting the livelihood of rag pickers. It is not enough to preserve a small number of rag pickers in a favoured position by starting a small project. The livelihood and working and living conditions of all rag pickers should be improved.

If today rag pickers are able to earn a livelihood in the face of grim odds, one reason is that they are able to regulate their work and working hours in accordance with their needs and circumstances. For example many of them start their rounds as early as 4 to 5 am so that they are able to return early to avoid the extreme heat of summer afternoons. In this way despite many adverse circumstances they are able to make both ends meet and also send some money to their families in remote villages. This freedom to decide their work and working hours should be maintained and restrictions should not be placed on this.

Their first demand is that their livelihood should be protected. They should not be harassed and obstructed while doing work which has a clear social utility. They should not be forced to pay bribes to continue their work. Their cycles and carts should not be confiscated.

They should also get housing security. Their colonies should not be demolished. They should be allocated additional space for classifying their pickings. Essential fire fighting equipment should be installed here. They should get all basic facilities including water, electricity, education and health to which all citizens are entitled. To protect them from injury in the course of their work, they should be provided sturdy shoes and at least three pairs of gloves (for each worker).

The badly neglected community of rag pickers needs dedicated social activists who can help them to raise their demands in an effective way. Educational programmes in the community can give new hope of a better life for children. At the same time educated youth should be encouraged to maintain their commitment towards the welfare of their community.

Apart from raising the just demands of ragpickers, social activists should also tackle alcoholism and other social problems existing within the community. Organisation of

fairs and festivals involving them will bring joy in their lives and provide a forum for their creativity to be expressed in various forms. They should be honoured in the presence of the wider community of the area where they live and work, and efforts should be made to provide them a place of dignity and respect in society.

Needs of women and children should get special attention. A wider social understanding should be built to discourage and prevent all forms of domestic violence. Crches for small children and special nutrition for pregnant women and lactating mothers should be emphasised.

It is heartening to know that a few organisations like *Bal Vikas Dhara* have continued to emphasise the rights of rag pickers in the middle of many adverse conditions. Apart from working with rag pickers in Delhi this organisation has also sought to sensitise other sections of society about the many-sided problems of ragpickers as well as the useful service provided by them. 'Bal Vikas Dhara' has also taken up educational work among the badly neglected children of this community.

To mobilise ragpickers for asserting their rights, *Bal Vikas Dhara* played an important role in creating *Delhi Kabari Mazdoor Sangh*, an organisation of rag pickers with a membership of over 900. They hold regular meetings and try to sort out the problems of rag pickers which are raised in these meetings. Apart from protecting the livelihood of rag pickers, these meetings should also take up issues like protecting the health of members and precautions which need to be taken while rag picking.

If organisations like *Bal Vikas Dhara* can get mobile medical units and a few doctors, they can take badly needed medicare to various settlements of rag pickers. This will also help to secure a greater involvement of people in other welfare activities. While mobilising the most neg-lected and vulnerable groups to assert their rights, it is also important particularly at an early stage to provide some basic services. Such an integrated approach will enable many-sided welfare to progress at a brisk pace as well-provided services will also help in the broader mobilisation for rights. ☰ ☱ ☲ ☳