

SURVIVING ON SCRAP

PRIVATIZATION THREATENS INDIA'S INFORMAL RECYCLING SECTOR



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WASTEPICKERS IN DELHI, INDIA, WORRY THAT PRIVATIZATION WILL TAKE AWAY THEIR JOBS AND THEIR HOMES. IT WILL ALSO RESULT IN LESS RECYCLING, THEIR SUPPORTERS SAY.

BY MRIDU KHULLAR ■ PHOTOGRAPHS BY SIMON DE TREY-WHITE





anav Bibi sorts through the trash she has just collected from House No. 292 in the D block of Sunder Nagar, an upscale neighborhood in Delhi, India. Plastic bag, yes. It will sell for 5 rupees (about 10 cents) per kilogram. Scraps of paper, yes, 1.25 rupees per kilogram. Glass, 1 rupee. Tin, 2 rupees. A bag of chips, no. Some kinds of plastic just won't sell.

Bibi's 16-year-old son, Qurban Ali, has found a calculator. He hands it to her, then he takes it back when she's not interested. He looks it over, pressing buttons to see if it works. It does. He moves the gadget around in his hand with a hint of fascination, then he throws it in with the rest of the recyclables they will sell. He has no other use for it.

About 150,000 Banav Bibis and Qurban Alis work throughout Delhi collecting waste and scrap. They constitute 1 percent of the city's population and recycle 20 percent of the material the city discards, saving the Municipal Corp. of Delhi 600,000 rupees (\$12,300) every day, according to Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group (New Delhi, India), a nonprofit that supports these "wastepickers."

Poverty forces people into this work. They face discrimination because they're poor, because the work is dirty, and often because of their caste. Children start working early, as young as age 6. Workers pick up between 50 and 60 kg of recyclable material each day, for which they can earn 150 to 300 rupees (\$3 to \$6), depending on how many hours they work. The young ones can usually pull an 11- or 12-hour day.

Amir Khan, 10, on just his second day working on the landfill. His family can earn more as wastepickers than it did operating a sweet shop in Agra, he says.

This year, making a living has been tougher than usual, according to the wastepickers and their advocates. The global recession affects both what scrap is available and what money they can get for it. Further, Delhi is gearing up for the October 2010 Commonwealth Games by creating a cleaner city—one in which scrap and waste collection is out of sight and out of mind. This and other Indian cities are meeting that goal in large part by privatizing collection. Private companies can do a better job than the government and the informal sector, MCD officials say. But if these efforts succeed in cutting off the supply of scrap, the wastepickers will lose their source of income and, in most cases, their homes. For them, scrap is survival.

THE COST OF PROGRESS

As part of a push to make the city cleaner for the Commonwealth Games, the MCD has privatized waste and scrap collection in seven of the city's 12 administrative zones, in effect putting thousands of wastepickers out of work. They've also destroyed many of their homes, which usually are built illegally on government land.

Privatization is the only way to get past decades of entrenched government bureaucracy and clean up the city, says Ram Pal, councilor at MCD. "Look around you," he says. "The city is filthy, and the government staff reeks of inefficiency. Thirty to 40 percent of the workers never even show up to work because they're guaranteed a government job and can't be fired. Privatization will allow us to streamline certain processes and make the city's trash collection run smoothly." Private collection also helps the Indian government support a wave of new waste-to-energy projects it has established to meet the country's energy deficit—a problem that threatens the country's long-term economic growth.

These initiatives seem to be coming at the expense of the informal scrap collection sector. The government doesn't officially recognize this sector, which includes people who pick recyclables out of trash in the landfills, the door-to-door collectors, and two levels of middlemen buyers who sell to established recycling businesses. "You're getting people to do the dirty work [of] cleaning and making your city livable," says Chintan's director, Bharati Chaturvedi, "but you're not compensating them in any human manner. Privatization further marginalizes people who are already in that corner."

LIFE ON THE LANDFILL

Bibi collects waste and scrap door to door from people's homes, taking what she thinks will sell and depositing the rest in the dhalao, the commu-



It's just Amir's second day of work. The 10-year-old sits on top of a mound of trash, digging through it with a piece of metal bent into a hook so as to not touch the wet waste. He hacks away at it with enthusiasm, sure that this business is going to prove more profitable than what he left behind in Agra, the city of the Taj Mahal. That's where his father's small sweet shop was shut down after his brother gambled away all their money.

"I made 200 rupees yesterday, and father made 300," he says. "Others only made 100 or 150." His two little brothers work on the landfill as well.

Amir doesn't know it yet, but these early days are probably going to be his most profitable.

Then disease sets in.

Chintan estimates that more than 82 percent of the women and 84 percent of the children who work as wastepickers are severely anemic. Most of them are prone to respiratory illnesses caused by exposure to dust and gastrointestinal diseases caused by eating in unclean surroundings—or eating food from the landfill itself. Fourteen percent have tuberculosis; 25 percent have recurring illnesses. More than 22 percent suffer from four or more health problems. There's

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also the unknown fever and nausea that Chaturvedi says many of the workers complain about, which is likely the result of working in hazardous conditions, living in hazardous conditions, and being malnourished.

Once he's done picking in one area of the landfill, Amir takes his bag and heads toward where the trucks come in. Every few minutes, day and night, trucks from MCD, the New Delhi Municipal Corp., and private companies come to the Ghazipur landfill, one of the biggest in the city. Amir stands around with the others, picking here and there before the next truck arrives.

He doesn't have to wait long. Within minutes, three trucks drive up to the edge of the landfill. People shout to each other to get out of the way, and a swarm of wastepickers surrounds the truck. As it dumps its contents onto the ground, Amir, with his smaller stature, squeezes through the crowd and gets right up front.

The MCD workers wear masks over their noses and mouths. As they dump their loads, an odor of rotting food, wet cloth, and dirty diapers rises up into the air, along with a cloud of thick dust. Amir is undeterred by the odor or the dust. He looks through the material quickly and collects scraps of paper, a few pieces of metal, and some plastic bags. He's one of the first people out.

Eventually the truck leaves, and there is silence again for a few brief moments. Fragments of people's lives crunch below everyone's feet: a roll of film, a wedding invitation, wood shavings, a bag of chips, a broken piece of coconut, a pink purse, part of a glass bangle, half a toilet seat, and photographs of people who once meant something to someone.

SORTING ON THE STREET

Many of Delhi's wastepickers are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh, India's neighbor to the east. They are discriminated against, harassed, and often picked up by the police, who take bribes to release them.

Banav Bibi is not Bangladeshi. She shouted this fact, she says, to the policeman who arrested her son without any charges and beat him up. She said it to the rich lady who would not let her enter her home to pick up the trash. And she told the jamadarni, the neighborhood head of the waste collectors, who hired her. If they want proof, they can look at her identity card. Bibi, as she is known—it's an affectionate term for a mother figure—is a minority Muslim from the Indian state of West Bengal. Like many, she and her family migrated to Delhi right after India

gained independence from British colonial rule in 1947. "Bangladesh is an entirely different country," she says. "They have a different way of talking. We are from Calcutta, which is in India."

This fact has not protected her or her family. Last week, the jamadarni hired goons to beat up Bibi and her two sons, she says, because they were afraid she was stealing their business.



waste in search of scrap. He chooses not to attend the free, government-run school at the edge of the landfill. Instead, he hopes to earn enough from scrap to become a mechanic.

As they hit her, right here on this street, she called out to the building owners, the people who've watched her work on these same lanes for 18 years. She ran up to their doors, rang the doorbells, and cried for them to intervene. No one did. Now they keep calling her, but she refuses to take their garbage. They've pleaded with her, but she is adamant.

"Now they want me to take their garbage?" she says. "How can I? When I was being beaten, they all went inside and locked their doors. This house, and this house, and the one behind this one, here," she points out. "None of them helped."

Her defiant stance soon turns to frustration. The less scrap she collects, the fewer rupees she will make. Out of pride, she'll refuse today, and maybe even tomorrow. But eventually she'll start collecting again. She always does. Every time she's beaten, and each time her boys are accused of thievery, she eventually comes back. There's no other choice. "It's so disgusting, this work,"

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she says. "But does the stomach listen? We can't get any other work, that is why we're here."

Like other door-to-door collectors, Bibi started out working as a wastepicker in the landfills after her marriage. Her husband soon fell ill, and she became the sole breadwinner of the family. "Their father is unwell. It's been over 17 years, and not one rupee he can earn," she says. "How will I run the household? So I bring the boys here and make them do this work."



The two boys go up and down the stairs of each home and bring the trash down to the cart, where Bibi stands and picks out scrap she can sell. It's quicker to sort as you collect, she says. She and her sons will carry the finds of the day to a storage area near their home. There is no one there to guard the material, but there is no need. Everything operates on the honor system. Once in a while, a fight might break out, but for the most part everyone respects each other's space and material. Twice a month, the whole family sits down and sorts all the collected material. Then they go to the buyer—the middleman—and sell it by the kilogram. He'll sell the material in larger quantities to the scrap recyclers.

what happens" to the wastepickers, says one such worker.

No one pays Bibi for this door-to-door collection. On the contrary, she pays the jamadarni 300 rupees per month for access to the material. Whatever money she makes depends on what scrap she finds in the material she collects every week.

THE SCRAP HIERARCHY

Bibi is second from the bottom in Delhi's recycling chain. Below her are the landfill wastepickers; above her are the specialized door-to-door scrap collectors who get the "cream of the crop"—corrugated cardboard, paper, and beverage containers from homes and offices.

The local raddiwala, or household scrap col-

lector, has been part of India's recycling machinery for decades. One who works in the same neighborhood as Bibi pays people 7 rupees per kilogram for their old newspapers and magazines, which he then sells to the recyclers for a good profit. Other collectors buy bottles—both glass and plastic—and metals. Bibi collects things that have been thrown directly into the trash can: bits and pieces of scrap that were of no interest to the raddiwala.

What arrives at the landfill has already gone through two layers of sorting: The raddiwala has taken the paper; others have taken the bottles; Bibi and others like her have skimmed off anything valuable they can find. What remains is what no one else will touch—and yet thousands of workers do just that, looking for scrap the others have missed.

The government is serious about getting rid of this unorganized sector, says an MCD worker at the landfill who declines to give his name. Everything that hasn't already

been privatized, will be. It's just a matter of months. Privatization will eliminate Bibi's role in the scrap chain. In the new "green" future, consumers will recycle at the source, dumping their paper, plastic, and glass into separate bins, as they do in the West, for household collection. The rest will go straight to the landfill. Under the new model, the private collection companies will fence off the dhalaos, preventing wastepickers from accessing their contents. The wastepickers also will not be allowed to segregate on the street, and without this space in which to work they will find it difficult to run their businesses.

"It's total desperation here," the worker says, looking on as an MCD truck dumps its garbage and a swarm of wastepickers rushes forward to get what they can find. "These people are so poor, they'll take anything that might even sell for one rupee—shoes, bags, even cloth. The government doesn't really care what happens to them. As long as the city gets clean for the Games."

Bibi is unperturbed by these revelations. She's been struggling since the day she was born, she says. What will she do when the city privatizes her zone? She doesn't know. It's not like the government will give her a job.

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It's easy to miss Sirara's small shop in the C block in Jahangirpuri. He is one of dozens of brokers who buy scrap from the wastepickers. The neighborhood contains rows of these 4-by-4-meter shops where people sit outside, rain or shine, and separate paper from plastic, glass from metal, and throw it into bags for sale to another specialized buyer.

Sirara is upset. It has rained, which means no one will come by today. He's just going to sit here with nothing to do. This worries him because business has been harder of late. The global recession and the credit crunch have had their impact on this small shop. Running this shop takes capital, Sirara explains. He needs large sums of money—sometimes more than he makes in months—to buy the scrap from the wastepickers and process it for sale. He has many clients: One only buys glass; another, a certain kind of plastic; another, a certain

metal. Those buyers

will then sell to recyclers who break down the material and sell it to scrap consumers. Lately, though, his clients have been buying less, and he's already invested the money in material he's purchased. The profit is not enough to keep him going—he makes a measly 1 rupee per kilo—which means he needs to sell several metric tons each week to keep afloat.

Sirara is not alone. The whole scrap industry has been reeling under the recession. Globally, prices for most scrap commodities have fallen by more than 50 percent, and those price declines

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Wastepickers remove and recycle an estimated 60 percent of all discarded plastic from India's waste stream—a statistic that concerns those who hope to solve the country's energy shortage with waste-to-energy plants. The wastepickers transport the scrap—on their heads or with hand-drawn carts—to storage areas where they sort it for sale to middlemen.

trickle down to the wastepickers, who have been forced to work longer hours to compensate for the lower returns. Eighty percent of wastepicker families Chintan interviewed in June said they had cut down on "luxury foods," which they defined as milk, meat, and fruit. About 41 percent said they had stopped purchasing milk entirely.

DOES PRIVATIZATION MEAN LESS RECYCLING?

Ghazipur is "a landhill, not a landfill," says Vimlendu Jha, founder of the environmental and social welfare nonprofit Swechha (New Delhi). "It expired five years ago." Indeed, the Ghazipur landfill is overflowing, and workers burn the garbage frequently to make space for the tons of new garbage that arrive every day, putting the

health of residents of surrounding areas at risk.

It might seem difficult to defend the wastepicking way of life, with its health and environmental hazards and the use of child labor, but Swechha and Chintan contend that privatization creates new problems without solving the old ones. "We all have this notion that privatization means efficiency and a solution, but we don't realize that privatization has an economic impact, a social impact, and an ecological impact," Jha says.

He notes the economic benefits of the existing system: The wastepickers' work saves the state thousands of dollars each day in waste disposal costs by removing and recycling the scrap. The state would be better off trying to work within this existing system, using these existing players, than replacing it with a completely new one, he suggests. Chintan's Chaturvedi agrees. "Waste pickers are entrepreneurs," she says. "If somebody gave me a bag and said, 'Go out and fend for yourself,' I would return home very fast because I don't have what it takes. They are entrepreneurs. The point is to recognize their entrepreneurship."

Another country has come around to that way of thinking. In April 2009, Colombia's Constitutional Court ruled that the country's wastepickers are entrepreneurs. It suspended all fines the city of Cali had levied against them for sorting trash in public and voided a contract for private collection that had cut off their access to the landfill. The city's wastepickers hope to organize and bid for the collection contract themselves. Brazil also has recognized the legitimacy of informal scrap and waste collection, according to a June 11 story in the *Economist*. "We would like identical forms of inclusion in India," Chaturvedi says.

She also points out that the city's existing privatization efforts have been plagued with problems. For one, the private companies have to contend with what they call "leakage": The companies have not yet fenced in the dhalaos and the landfills, and door-to-door collection has not yet been privatized, so the informal sector is still getting access to the material. (The MCD's Pal estimates that door-to-door collection will start getting privatized within the next six months.)

More important, perhaps, from the scrap industry's perspective is that the private contractors are removing and recycling less scrap. Wastepickers tend to do intense and thorough scrap segregation because their livelihood depends on it, Chaturvedi explains. In contrast, the private contractors hire workers whom they pay in cash for a day's work.

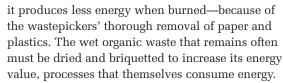
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The workers have little incentive to do extensive separation, nor do they have the experience and knowledge of scrap to do so. They often end up removing the bare minimum of recyclables to meet the contract requirements and dumping the rest in the landfill. "So now we're finding that a lot of [the contractors] are using the informal sector all over again," Chaturvedi says.

That's not necessarily good news for the wastepickers, however. These companies generally hire them on a contract basis, so the moment they get ill-which, statistics show, they willthey are not only out of work, but completely unemployable. "If you've converted a job which was somehow being shared through a very complex understanding [among] your relatives, within your families, and through very delicate balances, and formalized it and given it to one person, that's a very bad idea," Chaturvedi says.

Leaving more scrap in the waste stream also might be intentional. India has invested in more than 30 waste-to-energy plants across the country and is bullish on the potential of such technologies to reduce the country's energy deficit, according to "Waste-to-energy-to-poverty," an article in the October-December 2008 Chintan newsletter Jahan-E-Kabari (The World of the Waste Recycler). But India's waste has a relatively low calorific value—

Children as young as age 6 work up to 12-hour days collecting scrap from the landfill. Lower commodity prices mean they have to work longer hours and collect more scrapor cut back on "luxuries" such as milk, meat, and fruit.



"When [refuse-derived fuel] plants operate, they need the highest calorific value waste they can get," the article contends. "This means plastics and paper. Because [RDF plants] are sanctioned by the government and assisted by municipalities, investors in RDF have privileged and formal access to waste. ... Chillingly, a sudden new emphasis on waste segregation in many parts of India is not to ensure optimal recycling...."

Environmentalists are critical of RDF plants on many counts: They can create greenhouse gas emissions (whereas recycling reduces them) and they emit dioxins, furans, and other toxic substances that harm the surrounding communities, they say. In other words, privatization might alleviate the mess and the odor of the existing waste and scrap collection system, but its economic, social, and environmental benefits are in doubt. "We need new technology, we need private players, and we do need a cleaner city," Jha says. "But privatization cannot be at the cost of livelihood."

It's almost noon, and Bibi is finally finished for the day. She's going home, but her sons will continue to collect more waste and scrap until late in the afternoon.

She describes her home as a place where, if someone died, there's no space to take out the body. Eleven people live in her small house in the Seemapuri slum, where—with an income of

> 150 rupees (\$3) a day—she's the richest resident. Government workers burned down Bibi's thatched home many times, saying the slum-dwellers had encroached upon the state's land, so the family has now constructed a home with concrete walls. The entire family works in the scrap business, she says. Only her youngest daughter has ever gone to school.

Inside Bibi's home, on the lap of a social worker, lies Bibi's threeday-old grandson. He will not get into this trade, Bibi says. He will study and go to school and not do the dirty work of his grandmother.

Freelance journalist Mridu Khullar and photojournalist Simon de Trey-White are

