

Can Waste-Picking Be a Good Career?

With unions and health benefits, one city is turning India's dirtiest job into a respected blue-collar pursuit.

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AT THE FATEHABAD ROAD PHARMACY, A MAN IN PLAIN CLOTHES RIDING A SIMPLE CYCLE-CART SWINGS BY TO PICK UP EMPTY CARDBOARD MEDICINE BOXES, WHICH HE'LL LATER SELL TO A WHOLESALER FOR RECYCLING. The remaining trash is simply left in piles in the street for child rag-pickers to poke through. The rest ends up pushed into the creek by a woman with a handmade broom, filling what should be an urban amenity with a stunning array of filth.

Agra is a small city by Indian standards, with just over a million inhabitants, so its problems are relatively modest. Larger cities have more garbage and even more difficulties disposing of it. In Jaipur, the two-million-strong capital of Rajasthan, the trash collection “system” is a combination of child rag-pickers, who search for recyclables, and countless trash fires set by residents lacking garbage collectors. Packs of wild dogs and hairy street pigs descend on these fires, squaring off to salvage edible items before they're consumed by the flames. The capital region of Delhi, with more than 20 million residents, is home to an estimated 100,000 impoverished rag-pickers, many of them children. Indian mega-cities have mega-problems when it comes to trash.

But Pune is different. Each day, in the mid-sized city 95 miles inland from Mumbai, 2,300 official, uniformed, adult waste-collectors fan out on their allotted routes to collect the city's refuse with professional efficiency. Housing complexes pay them to pick up their garbage, which is sorted as recyclable, compostable or trash. The women who collect all of this (more than 90 percent of Pune's collectors are women) are self-employed independent contractors, united as members of the Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP), a trade union of paper, plastic and bottle recyclers organized in 1993, and SWaCH (Solid Waste Collection and Handling), their worker-owned cooperative. Formed in 2006, SWaCH was hired in 2008 by the Pune Municipal Corporation (city hall) as its official door-to-door trash-collection force. Each day, SWaCH members pick up trash from 125,000 Pune households. Though still poor by both local and global standards, the women earn what most Indian rag-pickers could hardly fathom — a base salary of two dollars a day plus a bevy of social benefits that includes a basic health care plan.

In this daily miracle that leaps and bounds ahead of waste collection in other Indian cities, many see a win-win-win: a system that is good for the collectors, good for the residents and good for the city as a whole. And there would seem little to prevent exporting Pune's unique system to the rest of India or beyond to other developing-world cities. Things are bigger in India — the nation is on pace to be the world's most populous country by 2025 — including its problems. So if a solution can work there, perhaps it could work anywhere.

I pulled into Pune on an Indian Railways train last February, eager to marvel at the city's vaunted best practices. As my train crossed a bridge just before the station, I gazed down at the rivers that flow from downtown. But what I saw looked nothing like the waterways of a city pioneering a state-of-the-art waste-collection system. There were trash islands everywhere, created by garbage thrown into the rivers upstream that got



Waste-pickers load tarp sacks of recyclables into a scrap dealer's truck. Photo credit: AP

caught on rocks and driftwood. Some of the islands were as big as river rafts. From my elevated perch, Pune's rivers looked like even larger versions of the polluted creek on Fatehabad Road in Agra. I began to wonder if Pune's garbage system was truly worthy of the hype, or just a greenwashed version of the broken systems throughout the rest of India. Had the city really accomplished as much as its boosters claimed?

"A SALARY PLUS RECYCLABLES"

If Bangalore is India's Silicon Valley, Pune is its Seattle — not quite as globally known, but still a boomtown studded with offices of the world's biggest high-tech multinationals. Microsoft, Google and Indian software giants like Infosys and Wipro have made this growing metropolis of two million into one of India's most successful national-level cities. Pune has a pleasant climate on account of its down-by-the-Equator but up-in-the-air location on the Deccan Plateau, and sees its moderate scale as an opportunity, a place where new ideas can be tested out before being deployed in megacities like Delhi and Kolkata.

As Vishnu Shrimangale, a 34-year-old SWaCH social worker explained to me, "Pune is a progressive city" due to a kind of political perfect storm: "The Pune Municipal Corporation is cooperative, citizens are aware and the informal sector is very organized." Deep links between the left-wing academics in Pune's many universities and the labor activists out on its streets have built powerful grassroots organizations for the

most humble of the city's workers. In Pune, there are unions and NGOs for maids, truck drivers, hawkers and "haulers," who pull heavy loads by handcart. Shrimangale showed me his organization's work all over Pune by motor scooter, his skillful driving minimizing the hazard of my riding helmetless on the back.

The city's progressive roots run deep. In the 19th century, Pune was the site of India's first school for girls and the children of low-caste "untouchables." In the early 20th century, Mahatma Gandhi praised Pune as "a beehive of social workers." Today's Pune transplants place a high value on environmentalism and, having done stints in places like Singapore and San Francisco, are worldly enough to have confidence that urban India's problems, while daunting, are not insurmountable.

Shrimangale took me from my hotel to the posh, tree-lined streets of nearby Aundh, where many of these transplants live in well-kept bungalows set back amid lush greenery. The cars and SUVs here are top-of-the-line — nearly the same array of makes and models as you'd find in Palo Alto, California. As I later learned, Aundh was one of the first sections of Pune to get a McDonald's and one of the first places in all of India to get a Starbucks.

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Amid this prosperity stood Hirra Tuppe, a career waste-picker and founding member of the KKP union, who was making her daily rounds. She carried a large white canvas bag and pushed a wooden hand-cart topped with three plastic buckets — one for recyclables, one for compostables and one for everything else. A weathered 45, her dark, wrinkled skin testified to a life working in the relentless tropical sun. Like many other SWaCH members I met that morning, she wore traditional garb, a red floral-patterned sari, rather than the mandatory blue uniform.

At each stop along Tuppe's route, the building's doorman or the bungalow owner's servant appeared bearing that day's trash in several bags and dropped them into her white canvas sack. She then went through the delivery, ripping open the plastic bags to ensure proper segregation. Since just after the founding of KKP, Pune residents have been required to separate their own trash. In recycling, time is money, so pushing the first stage of the process onto the waste-creators rather than waste-collectors is key to increasing waste-picker incomes. Still, compliance is spotty, so Tuppe examines the contents of each bag, separating the compostable onion-tops and half-eaten samosas from the recyclable chewing gum wrappers, newspapers and Coke bottles.

After the day's rounds, the "everything else" bucket gets dumped in a Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) dumpster and taken to a landfill, the compostables get put aside to biodegrade, and the recyclables go to a sorting station. In Aundh, this is nothing but a vacant trash lot across from an upscale grocery store called Reliance Fresh. Here, SWaCH members separate the various recyclables by type, filling huge 35-kilogram bags with bottles and newspapers that they then sell by weight.

Trash collection is hard work for low pay. Each month, Tuppe says she gets 4,000 rupees (\$65 U.S.) from SWaCH, which comes from the fees Pune residents pay for trash pickup, and another 500 to 600 rupees (\$8 to \$10 U.S.) from selling recyclables. She works from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. every day except Sunday, not counting her commute from her family hut two miles from Aundh. For transportation, she rides on her scrap dealers' trucks for 100 rupees per week (less than \$2 U.S.). For lunch, she usually brings dahl, rice and vegetable curry, and sometimes some chapattis (flatbreads). Her goal is to work 10 more years and retire at 55.



It remains to be seen whether much larger cities like New Delhi, seen here, could scale up the waste-picker system pioneered by Pune. Photo credit: AP Photo / Altaf Qadri

Nearly all rag-pickers come from the lowest caste, Dalits. Formerly known as “untouchables,” their ancestors were responsible for carrying away animal carcasses and making leather goods. (Hindu tradition designates low-status jobs as those that put workers in close proximity to death.) Tuppe’s husband is also a rag-picker, as are her grown son and her son-in-law. But her youngest son, now 16, has learned some English (the Tuppes’ mother-tongue is Marathi) and may move up the social ladder. He currently works in a jewelry store.

For all her trials, Tuppe told me, “When I joined KKPKP, my life changed.” Before joining the union, she was an informal rag-picker with no official route and no salary. Middle-class residents viewed

her as a vagrant, not a public servant. (“She is economically and socially backward,” Shrimangale told me at one point in English, which Tuppe cannot understand, meaning she’s of a low caste and has not transcended her ancestral status.) She would find whatever trash she could, sort it and sell the recyclables as her only source of income. “Before I got only 100 or 200 rupees [a week] from recyclable materials. Now I get a salary plus recyclables,” she told me with great satisfaction.

FROM “VAGRANTS” TO ORGANIZED LABOR

The effort that would birth the organizations that improved Tuppe’s lot — KKPKP and SWaCH — began when a pair of professors at Pune’s SNDT Women’s University started meeting with the city’s child waste-pickers and asked them which policy changes could help them. Time was money, the waste-pickers explained. If Pune’s garbage-producing middle-class just separated out recyclables before throwing away their trash, the rag-pickers could work fewer hours, earn the same pay and enroll in school during their reclaimed time. The professors lobbied local officials, and the city soon passed the ordinance requiring citizens to separate their trash.

Since rag-picking is generally a trade that is passed on from mother to daughter, the professors realized that raising take-home pay enough for adult rag-pickers could largely eliminate child labor in the sector. Instead of sending the next generation into the streets and dumps of Pune, mothers could send their daughters to school. But raising pay would require organizing some kind of union. Baba Adhav, the chief organizer of what became the KKPKP, had previously organized the Hamal Panchayat, a trade union of “coolies” and “headloaders” — manual laborers who specialize in carrying materials by balancing them on top of their heads. The organizing challenge

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was similar. Like the manual laborers, the rag-pickers were no one's full-time employees, leaving them unprotected by Indian labor law and without entitlement to employer-funded social security benefits. But with Adhav's guidance, the least-skilled and least-respected men in Pune had already organized a union. Disregarding the sexist stereotypes that have stubbornly endured in India despite decades of official progressive policies, Adhav was confident that the least-skilled and least-respected women in the city could do the same.

Since rag-picking is generally a trade that is passed on from mother to daughter, raising take-home pay for adult rag-pickers could largely eliminate child labor in the sector. In 1993, he announced the Convention of Waste-Pickers. Simply assembling the women was a challenge. Worker literacy in the sector ran just 8 percent, so leaflets were useless. Typical incomes were a dollar a day and missing a day of work for the convention meant forgoing a day's pay. But wooed by Adhav's track record with the Hamal Panchayat, more than 800 waste-pickers from all over the city turned out for his mass meeting. As one attendee told the press, "Until now we were counted among the animals [but] Baba Adhav has brought us to sit here as humans."

The delegates voted to form a registered trade union, use nonviolent means to advocate for themselves in the Gandhian tradition and pay annual dues to fund their organization, the KKP KP. Mohan Nanavre, the son of a waste-picker, became the union president. (While the union membership is overwhelmingly female, its professional and administrative positions have long been, and remain, disproportionately male.)

The first demand of the new union was for a city-issued identity card certifying waste-pickers as part of a municipal sanitation system. Members reasoned that with some officially recognized role in the city, they would be less likely to be harassed as they made their rounds. And in a nation with one of the highest recycling rates in the world — some estimate India's recycling rate runs as high as 90 percent — waste-pickers wanted acknowledgement of the public service that they were providing.

Soon after the founding convention, thousands of waste-pickers marched in public demonstrations pressing their ID card demand. Two years later, the Pune city government agreed, and it became the first city in India to officially register its waste-pickers. As one rag-picker later told KKP KP officials, "The residents in the area who used to frown at me while I was at the garbage bin now know my name and greet me."

Registration was also a strategy to counter child labor since only waste-pickers over the age of 18 were eligible. Traditionally, parents and children would waste-pick together, but for the union, eliminating child labor was not only a moral goal but also a matter of economic self-interest. Teenagers were generally faster trash-sorters than adults, and



younger children were marks for unscrupulous scrap dealers who ripped them off. The registration system worked. Less than a decade after unionization, a study found, the number of child rag-pickers in Pune had declined by 76 percent.

The union's goal was not simply to stop children from rag-picking but to help the children of rag-pickers attend schools, gaining skills needed for more remunerative work in the future. To aid the children squeezed out of the dumps, the state government officially recognized waste-picking as an "unclean occupation," allowing

the children of rag-pickers to benefit from affirmative action in educational institutions. The union also got its members officially certified as living below the poverty line, entitling them to Below Poverty Line ration cards. With their new access to subsidized staple foods, rag-pickers could ensure better nutrition for themselves and their children, who were now enrolled in school, where good nutrition is widely recognized as a prerequisite for achievement.

Arguably the most important union victory was obtaining city-funded health insurance. It was an audacious demand since waste-pickers are self-employed independent contractors, not municipal employees. But in 2002, the Pune Municipal Corporation agreed to pay the premiums on a basic health insurance plan for KKPKP members. The maximum hospital benefit is under \$100, and many rag-pickers prefer ayurvedic remedies to Western medicine anyway, but the benefit gives rag-pickers basic access to a doctor for the first time.

In addition to winning concessions from the municipality, the union also created its own self-help institutions, most importantly its credit cooperative. Through this credit union, members pool their resources, gaining access to loans and interest on their savings. The co-op will loan up to three times the amount a member saves in her account. Members can also purchase life insurance policies through the union.

For the rag-pickers themselves though, the simplest changes brought by the union may be the most crucial. During his shift at the Aundh sorting lot, Lakshman Sherkar, a hulking 33-year-old father of two and the only male rag-picker I met in Pune, told me, "Now I have [a] fixed work [schedule]: 9 to 2." He showed me a scabbed over cut on the back of his thumb that he'd gotten sorting glass bottles two days before. It wasn't serious enough to require stitches but if it had been, thanks to his SWaCH health plan, he could have gone to a doctor.

DOES PUNE NEED WASTE-PICKERS AT ALL?

Where KKPKP goes from here — what its end-game is for Pune and its implications beyond it — is currently under debate. According to Shrimangale, the membership is united in its push for increased benefits, but deeply divided over whether to continue as independent contractors or pursue full formalization as public employees of the city. The benefits of formalization are obvious — civil service protections, employer-funded social benefits — but the drawbacks are real. Being a formal employee would entail having a boss, a dynamic synonymous with quasi-feudal subjugation and rampant sexual harassment. Avoiding being anyone’s employee is precisely why many chose rag-picking over, say, being someone’s maid or cook. Formalization would also mean giving hiring power to the Pune Municipal Corporation, and many fear that PMC bureaucrats would give out those positions as patronage jobs to their politically connected friends, resulting in women being displaced by men and low-caste individuals being replaced by higher-caste ones.

Opponents see SWaCH members wary of formalization as enemies of progress. And it is fair to say there has always been an undercurrent of Ludditism within the union. In 1990, in the pilot program that ultimately became the KKPKP, 30 women began collecting trash door-to-door in a well-off neighborhood for a user fee. Six months later, an entrepreneur noticed the market the women had discovered and wanted it for himself. He offered to do the service more efficiently, with a motorized vehicle and just two laborers, and he began signing up the women’s customers. The waste-pickers mounted a direct-action protest, holding onto the neighborhood trash bins and refusing to allow the garbage truck to collect them. One waste-picker reportedly told the entrepreneur, “You are educated and you have capital, why don’t you start some other business?”



The entrepreneur gave in and the women claimed victory. But was this really what was best for Pune? Without mechanization, sorting must take place in residential neighborhoods, since there is only so far a waste-picker can push a wheelbarrow. This creates public health hazards, like the fly-infested trash lot across the street from Aundh’s upscale supermarket.

Most crucially, without formalization, it is unclear how trash collection in Pune can be universalized. It’s a market-based system, with independent contractors deriving an income stream from selling the recyclables they collect. Wealthy neighborhoods filled with avid consumers too rich to redeem their own empty Coke bottles will always offer more profits than poor neighborhoods teeming with frugal slum-dwellers. To counter this economic fact, the Pune Municipal Corporation pays SWaCH to collect from the shantytowns, but since those routes are still less lucrative for waste-pickers, coverage is

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spotty. As one waste-picker, Sukubai Pawar, told me in a huff at the sorting lot in Aundh, “I don’t collect from slums. They don’t pay their dues and they don’t give recyclables.”

Ironically, this means that the slum neighborhoods where the waste-pickers themselves live have no trash pickup. Hirra Tuppe told me that in her neighborhood, Sangvi, the waste-picker residents recycle what they can for the going rate and dump the rest “in a [dumpster or] in the river.”

Even in Aundh, where Tuppe methodically makes her rounds, some residents see room for improvement. At one of the buildings on Tuppe’s route, the Shri Shanti Apartments, the president of the residents’ association told me he backs full formalization. A courtly man of 69, Dhananjay Rau worked as a chemist in Germany before retiring to his native India. He was frustrated that Indian cities don’t have formal trash collection the way German cities do. “It’s not rocket science. [We] should be able to do it”

But Europe, too, was once rag-picking territory. The photographs taken by French photographer Eugène Atget of rag-pickers in Paris a century ago look remarkably similar to Pune today, the Parisian rag-pickers’ handmade slum huts like black-and-white versions of Pune’s shantytowns. These days, of course, Paris, with its army of uniformed sanitation workers, offers some of the best public services on Earth. Can Pune’s development follow the same path through formalization?

In Europe, the formalization of trash collection was part of a broader development, in which plentiful factory jobs provided work to displaced waste-pickers. India’s unusual path of development, with call centers and software companies instead of sweatshops — precisely the development model that has been such a boon to tech-centric Pune — has provided millions of jobs for educated English-speakers but offers little for the uneducated and unskilled. Pune’s rag-pickers’ fears they would be displaced by mechanization and formalization are understandable.

Maybe the best way forward is not full formalization, but more government oversight and subsidies to ensure universal trash collection, even in the slums. Datta Bhise, a SWaCH official and history teacher by trade, who oversees collection in the Pune city ward that includes Aundh and an adjacent slum, explained, “We have difficulties in slum areas because people in slums take recyclable materials and sell them themselves.” He also noted that the PMC trash collection trucks came less reliably to pick up from sorting centers near slums, likely on account of the slum-dwellers’ limited political pull.

Whether the Pune model will ever deliver on the environmental and public health impacts claimed by boosters remains an open question. And how the formalization debate will shake out and how it might tweak the model is still to be determined. But one benefit of Pune’s experiment is undeniable: It has afforded some of the lowest-status people in the city a measure of human dignity.

In the U.S., during the 1968 Memphis sanitation workers' strike, observers were puzzled that the picket signs hoisted by the African-American garbage men had no concrete demand, just the statement: "I AM A MAN." If nothing else, the KKP KP in Pune has accomplished a similar feat for its overwhelmingly low-caste, female membership. That isn't everything it claims to have accomplished or that needs to be accomplished, but it's certainly something.

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