

## **Formalising the Informal**

### **Door to Door Collection at Rampir no Tekro, Vadaj, Ahmedabad Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation – Waste pickers of SEWA**

Waste Pickers are the primary link of the recycling industry. The waste we see around is picked, gathered and sorted by these waste pickers, which further goes to the recycling units and industries through intermediate scrapdealers. Statistically, according to the research done by World Bank, 1% of the population of urban cities in the world consists of waste pickers. In India, out of estimated 1.25 million waste pickers in India (i.e. 1% of the population of India), 90% are women waste pickers. Urbanization, in boom is making the world direct into more privatization than governmental. Informal sector (unorganized) including Waste pickers are the most affected by this chain of privatizing.

**Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is a central trade union established in 1972. Since then SEWA is organizing women workers of the informal sector in 12 states of India. Currently, SEWA has organized 13,51,493 in the country, out of which 8.25 lakh in Gujarat itself.**

SEWA has organized around 49,240 waste pickers and cleaners in Ahmedabad. SEWA is constantly trying modes to inclusively link our traditional waste pickers with the solid waste management system in our country, to lessen the impact of urbanization and privatization. For this, SEWA is working hands in hands with Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC), for inclusion, for government schemes and benefits for waste pickers and their families.

With constant discussions and meetings, SEWA's waste pickers were given the door to door collection work from Ram pir no Tekro settlements, Vadaj area in Ahmedabad. With this, the work will stretch to other areas of Ahmedabad, 'slums' to start with, supported by AMC.

#### **Research and Study of the area:**

Prior the start of door to door collection work, AMC asked SEWA to do a thorough study and survey of the number of houses to work on. SEWA's grassroots research team commenced the demographic household survey and solid waste infrastructure survey of the settlements at Ram pir no Tekro. According to the survey data given by Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC), there were 4914 houses recorded, but our team found out, there are 6556 houses. Mostly all the houses are kachha (temporary) houses.



*The landscape of organic settlements*



## Settlement Brief: Ramapir no Tekro

Ramapir no Tekro is the largest slum in Ahmedabad city, located in Vadaj area, with about 1.5 lakh slum dwellers. Families residing here have migrated from the neighboring small towns in Gujarat like Patan, Mehsana, Kheda, and neighboring states of Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

The settlement basically thrives on Informal economy. Trades like waste picking, potters, puppet makers, construction workers, shoe makers (wholesale leather work), Hawkers, Old cloth vendors, Carpenters, Informal Idol artists and many more. There are residents who have dwelled in their squatter there since last 50 years. Though the land is considered an encroachment, the settlement continues to exist and expand here.



*Demarcation of Rampir no tekro, Google Maps*

There were certain common characteristics of the settlements which was observed, which are as follows:

1. Toilets: Not all the houses (slums) have toilets inside the house. 40% houses have toilets inside their house. Rest 60% defecate in the open or very few use the few common toilets, present in the area.
2. Cleanliness: The alleys created by organic landscape at Ram pir no tekro, are extremely dirty. One can find the litter everywhere, or dumps of it, every 10 houses. The main pick is that the families living there belong to the informal economy, daily wage earners, doing work on piece rate basis. There are a lot of informal works which happen in the slums. The waste created from these works is thrown outside the house generally. There are no waste collectors in the entire

settlement. As told by the slum dwellers to our team, there are two people assigned to collect waste from all the houses by the municipality, in a pedal. Gradually, it has just stopped.

3. Alcohol addicts and gambling spots: The entire area has a lot of alcoholics. Our team observed, every two lanes, there was an alcoholic and gamble spot, where all the men, in the drunken state, would waste their time out.
4. Type of workers: There are many types of works which the slum dwellers do, for a living. These works are leather work (wholesale), old cloth vendors, waste pickers / cleaners, Iron container shops, carpenters, construction workers, Informal Idol artists, potters, etc. It is a very live settlement, with number of activities happening.
5. Channel of Water: There is also a runnel (channel of water) passing in between this settlement. Due to the lack of awareness, most of the families living in this slum area, throw the waste directly into this channel, which directly opens into Sabarmati river. Thus, the entire area is highly unhygienic and dirty.



*Heaps of waste – unattended grounds*

6. The families staying here are very poor, daily wage earners, summing up to an average monthly income of a family of Rs. 3000 – 4000/-. With the nature of the informal work and impoverished state of people, many of the ills exist in this settlement, like crimes, intoxications and sometimes inter religion / caste clashes.

Currently, mostly all the slums in Ahmedabad have no waste collection or management system. AMC has provided with few cleaners, who do not clean the slums regularly, although. However, there is no waste collecting system carried out in the slums.

### **Experiences and Difficulties while surveying**

Slums have certain ways of living and socio – cultural ethos and practices, which is inevitably led by poverty and incomes of the slum dwellers. Below are some of the experiences and difficulties our team faced during the survey:

1. It would not be wrong if we say that, poverty and alcoholism goes hand in hand. Our research team basically comprising of women, faced a lot of problems from the alcoholics. Every two challis (alleys), there were drunkards found in a group, which hampered the study.
2. Many of the squatters do not have toilets to them. This led to very unhygienic environment to work in, as people used the runnel (naala) and often the deserted junctions as niche toilets.
3. There were families who were a little skeptical in telling their names or even talking to us. They cooperated only under the confidence of our SEWA local leaders from the area. Secondly, the concept of waste management in their slums, was something difficult to make the residents grasp. That was one of our challenge.

### **Waste collection in the slums, Ramapir tekro, Vadaj: SEWA's integrated approach**

**Globalisation has led to privatization, of which the most affected are informal sector workers. SEWA supports and believes the cooperatives to take the main lead, rather than private companies seeping in. Cooperatives, although, is also a form of privatization. However, the very character is different, of money going to workers itself and not concentrate, as in the private company.**

In waste picking, with the privatization supported by the government, a private company has been allotted the work of door to door collection, which supposedly does not happen in slums. Slums as its character viz. physical landscape, organic and curvy narrow lanes, with no legalized infrastructure of waste management, water and electricity connection, face a basic problem of awareness and attention. As they are the poorest settlements, there has been no eye on it.

SEWA has organised 3261 waste pickers and cleaners in the area itself i.e. Vadaj area. The main problem in physical terms, we faced in Ram pir no tekro is runnel (naala) and no basic infrastructure of toilets and water connection. Few waste pickers from the area collect waste from the houses, on a very irregular basis. Their basic objective for them of collecting waste is not income, but the leftover food (vaaru) which they get as meals in the night.

*Naala cutting the settlement*





*Untouchable, Inaccessible Dirt grounds*



*Naala, often used as defecating ground*

**We strategized on strengthening the livelihood of the waste pickers staying there, which is one of the SEWA's principles. We linked the waste pickers from that slum itself for the door to door collection work. Currently, 25 waste picker women collect the waste from total of 5684 houses. Out of which 10 did previously pick up the waste from the same lanes, the only difference is now they are being paid by the government for the same job, inclusion in the system, which was not the case before.**

**Our women waste pickers are confident, as they get SEWA, as a platform, which make them a body, not an individual.**

**It was one of the task, to convince the waste pickers from the slums to collect the waste, as they were not ready to leave their lane and collect from other bunch of the houses from the settlement. What SEWA along with their local leaders did, each waste picker women were allotted the houses around their house, for collecting the waste.**



*Proper tools for picking waste: Containers, Trolleys and other tools for collecting waste*

SEWA imparted women with introductory training to women to work in a decent and an hygienic way. Steps like using Aprons, containers and also general socio-cultural behavioural patterns. The team was helped with the aprons by SEWA. Our team of waste picker women was made understood, the importance of imparting general awareness to residents, as in not to throw waste in naala, segregate waste to an extent ....



SEWA Women at work!

Self reliance and Sustainable livelihoods are the two guiding philosophies of SEWA. Waste pickers, through this work are integrated in the solid waste management system. Firstly, they got sustainable livelihoods, due to this work. Their work is traceable and statistically registered in the economy. These 25 women waste pickers are assured with a permanent source of income, through this door to door collection work.

The slum area fetches around 2.5-3 tonnes of waste everyday, from the houses, where each house fetching 0.5 – 1.0 kilo waste everyday. Again, the amount of waste depends on the kind of work the family does, for eg. the family doing leather work and having cattle produces more waste upto 1.5 kilo a day. This is excluding the waste collection from the area around the channel (naala), which is in a very bad condition.

#### **Responses of the residents:**

*Meenaben, residing in Ramapir slums since last 10 years, experiences a relief from walking daily to the naala to throw waste. She says we pollute the naala, as there is no provision of our waste. We cannot keep the waste at our doorstep. She is expecting these women to collect waste regularly. Now our doorsteps and outside, streets are clean, which really makes a positive healthy environment.*

*Another resident family, Anitaben, says that she is the sole earner in the family. Her husband does not contribute much in the family expenses, except some odd job works, which he gets like once a week. She herself makes shoes, sticking soles to the shoes, for 8 hours a day, as her livelihood. She also have to look after her domestic chores and take care of her 10 year old daughter. The waste collected from sticking shoes and the waste of cooking and other things, is collectively thrown by her daughter in the naala. She makes two - three rounds to dump the waste. She expresses grief for her daughter doing this job of throwing waste, as she cannot herself do it. She is quite happy with this door to door collection work initiated by constant efforts of SEWA with the collaboration with the government. Her one of the major concern was her daughter's education and health, which she was not able to consider before. She is hoping now she would be able to pay some attention to her studies.*

## Impact on the Waste pickers: Their narrations

**Lalitaben**, one of the waste picker, was merrily dancing as she got her salary Rs. 4000/- at the end of one month. Her family is again just like many other families, whose monthly incomes is Rs. 4000/. She, age 30, has been a paper picker since last 15 years. She stays in the Ramapir slums, since last 15 years. She picks the waste from the slums and the surrounding areas. By paper picking, she earns upto Rs. 60-90 per day, with whole day collection and sorting of the waste. Waste picking does not fetch the permanent regular earning daily. With the door to door collection work, she collects waste from 400 houses. She is really happy with this permanency, keeping intact the waste picking she does alternatively. Her twice the earning has led considerable effects on her husband, who did not earn any money before. She has voiced and led her husband to start working. He does odd labour works now.

*She says 'she has never in her life has earned this much amount of money at one go. This work gives the feeling of certainty, which we all live for, in life. The first thing I did is, get monthly groceries, which is definitely cheaper then buying it every single day, in retail.'*

**Laduben**, has been working as a cleaner, since last 15-16 years. She stays in the Ramapir slums. By cleaning, her monthly earning before was Rs. 1800/-. Now, with the door to door collection work, she gets Rs. 3000/- as an earning per month. She expressed her poor living conditions. She is the sole earner of the family. *She says 'pehle hum aadhi roti khaate the, ab puri roti kha paate hai, apna pet toh bhar sakte hai' (I used to have half a roti, now I am able to have one roti, is able to fill her stomach).*

**Premilaben**, is an old women, widowed, has 3 sons, all live separately. She stays alone in the Ramapir slum, since last 20 years. She used to pick the waste from the houses and the roads, with the sole intention of getting free meals at the nights from the slum residents. With the door to door collection work, she is eating, working and living with a dignity, with a job to do. Also, she is able to have some security for her old age problems. She earns around Rs. 2500/- per month. This work has given the biggest security of food and medical expenses.

**Laxmiben**, again a sole earner of her house, is a paper picker since last 10 years. *She says that 'ab bachhi ko ache se padayenge, ab jo har mahine salary milti hai, toh surakshit lagta hai. Bachhi ko padaungi. Padhai toh bot zaroori hai, usko dunggi jo humko nahi mila (now that I got a sense of permanency in life, I really want to save for my daughter, invest in her education, which now I understand the importance of it). This work has made me support my beliefs and thoughts, concerns in life.'*



*Formal – Informal .... Hand in hand ....*



*Happy Smiles, SEWA sisters*

### **Impact on the settlement: Slums, the first step to betterment**

Solid Waste Management practices can never be successful without the people's participation. In slums, it is more pressing as, the people start and end their day with the fulfilling of basic necessity of food. Secondly, the illiteracy count is also high. To make the door to door collection work successful, there is a general awareness needed regarding cleanliness and importance of the same.

There was a play organized and supported by the municipal corporation, by a social group called 'Aayush Foundation' on Solid Waste Management and importance of cleanliness, in the chowk of one community in the slum. These awareness programs are planned to happen in other slums too. However, such plays need to happen more, and a constant circle of pushing people in slums to follow certain steps to keep their surroundings clean. SEWA's local leaders constantly keep the residents aware of not throwing the waste anywhere but to give it to them.

### **Impact of door to door collection was voiced out by the residents:**

- a) The residents are quite happy with the cleanliness around. They repeatedly tell our waste pickers 'have meherbaani karine kaam karvu band nai karta' (we would really like this door to door collection go on and not stop, please do not stop coming). Our waste pickers are given training on spreading awareness while working amongst the residents. The slum dwellers are very cooperative in the work of collection of waste. The most important thing is they understand the importance of cleanliness.
- b) Some of the residents also want the government to provide for street cleaners. They tell our women that it would be good if they only start cleaning, sweeping the lanes.



- c) Above all, as the photographs show it, the women working there have a professional getup of aprons, added with the tools and not bare-handed. They do not look like a typical waste picker with a rag on her back. They also have a feeling of doing a job, and the residents too, feel that the slum of Rampir no tekro a part of the city, as the city is providing them with the infrastructure, with the help of SEWA.

### **Way Forward**

Ram pir no Tekro is the pilot project of inclusion of waste pickers in solid waste management system. After which, four other slums are in the pipeline for door to door collection by our traditional Waste pickers, viz. Holi Chakla slums, Saraspur (7 women); Shahpur (8 women); Danilimda (20 women); Subhash bridge and Gandhi bridge (8 women).

**We are really thankful to have Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation's with their support and belief. We would especially like to thank Mr. Naresh Rajput, Director, Solid Waste Management (SWM); Mr. Bhavin Solanki, Deputy Health Officer, Vadaj Branch; and above all Dr. Guruprasad Mohapatra, Municipal Commissioner and Mr. I. K. Patel, Deputy Municipal Commissioner, Ahmedabad to believe in SEWA!**



### **Recommendations for Waste pickers:**

- a) **The Planning and development of the city should be inclusive of waste pickers, formalizing them in the solid waste management.**
- b) **Globalisation has led to privatization, of which the most affected are informal sector workers. The privatization happening in the cities, is not an issue, but there has to be some way, where these private agencies only work and involve the informal sector in the system.**

**SEWA supports and believes the cooperatives to take the main lead, rather than private companies seeping in. Cooperatives, although, is also a form of privatization. However, the very character is different, of money going to workers itself and not concentrate, as in the private company.**

- c) Waste Pickers should be issued Identity cards, being recognized by the government.**
- d) Government should introduce Scholarship schemes for the children of Waste pickers.**
- e) Waste pickers work in unhygienic work conditions, constantly, government should provide with some medical and insurance schemes to waste pickers.**
- f) This is our general observation, that for informal workers, generally their home or nearby areas become their workplace. Hence the amount of waste collected from each house, depends on the trade or work which the family does. It ranges from 0.25 kilo to 2 kilo. We recommend that the rates or money to be paid to waste pickers, be followed or strategized as considering this, into the pay system.**
- g) Periodic research and studies should be carried out to assess the impact of the privatization on the livelihoods of Waste Pickers.**
- h) The member based organizations like the cooperatives of such workers should be developed and encouraged.**
- i) There is a need to provide a much needed recognition and validation to the waste pickers by enacting a policy / law / legislation for them.**

**SEWA's constant struggle is to make the Informal sector's livelihood sustainable.**

**City belongs to all social and economic strata of the society. However, Informal sector counts are high in developing countries. In India, 90% of the population is informal economy, doing unskilled or hidden work / labour. A country where 9 out of 10 people are working informally, the country's policies have to be inclusive of the consideration of this huge population. Inclusion of the informal sector in the city policies loop for the poorest of the poor, such as waste pickers, is the basic and foremost step catering to this vast population.**