



# Wastepickers Might be Given Dignity by A Respectful Appellation

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## ABSTRACT

This Paper explores the importance of waste pickers respected identification and how it might affect their ability to integrate into society. To lessen the impact on the environment and the risks to public health, sustainable waste management solutions are essential. These include trash segregation, recycling initiatives, waste-to-energy projects, and effective landfill management. Although they frequently endure social shame and dangerous working circumstances, informal rubbish pickers contribute significantly to waste management and minimization. In order to respect waste pickers' rights and give them just remuneration, it is crucial to acknowledge their efforts and include them into official waste management systems. Nonetheless, waste pickers in India frequently face prejudice and social stigma, which is a critical humanitarian concern. Stereotypes and unfavourable opinions can be reinforced by the language and terminology used to describe refuse pickers. The necessity for legal recognition and protection for waste pickers has been acknowledged by a number of committees and projects, such as the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. However, the language used in official documents and recommendations may contribute to societal stigmatization. In order to change perceptions, uphold the dignity of waste pickers, and encourage an accepting and compassionate approach in society, this study highlights the significance of utilizing inclusive vocabulary and polite terminology. Within the framework of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, the terms "ragpickers" and "waste pickers" are accurate and draw attention to important problems. Prejudices and social stigmatization may become more ingrained if these terms are consistently used in government documents and policies. It also highlights issues with caste structures and the social standing of trash workers.

Government must withdraw stigmatizing terms like "rag picker" or "scavenger" from Solid waste management Rules and elsewhere, and should consider using more neutral and courteous terminology like "reclaimers," "resource recoverers," or "environmental managers," or "safai karamcharis," so that nobody in the community views the item as waste but rather as a resource. This is the first step toward restoring wastepickers' dignity and acceptance.

**Key Words:** Wastepickers, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Solid waste Management Rules, Reclaimers, Safai karamcharis

## INTRODUCTION

The huge volume of municipal solid trash created everyday in Hyderabad, at 6,000 metric tons, is a serious concern that highlights the need for adequate waste management infrastructure and policies. Managing such a large amount of garbage necessitates extensive planning, effective collection, recycling, and disposal systems, as well as public knowledge and engagement (Premsudha, M., et al., 2022).

With an ever-increasing urban population, it is critical to establish sustainable waste management solutions to reduce the environmental impact and public health hazards connected with garbage generation. Improved waste segregation at the source, recycling activities, waste-to-energy projects, and efficient landfill management are examples of these solutions.

The problem of waste management in a rapidly urbanizing city like Hyderabad is not unique; it is shared by many cities throughout the world.

Telangana's municipal solid waste composition, with a substantial organic component of 50-60% and the presence of inorganic and recyclable materials accounting for 25% of the waste stream, provides significant potential for recycling and resource recovery. These items, which include paper, plastics, glass, and metals, can be collected, sorted, and recycled, minimizing waste.

Informal waste pickers are undoubtedly helpful in managing and minimizing the issues posed by enormous volumes of waste, which necessitate effective collection, transportation, disposal, or recycling solutions (Wan, C., Shen, G.Q and Choi, S.,2019).

They are frequently self-employed individuals or members of small-scale rubbish-picking collectives who work outside of the conventional waste collection system. Their labour aids in the diversion of recyclable materials from landfills, the reduction of environmental effect, and the development of the informal recycling sector (Porras, J. and Climent, V., 2018).

It's important to recognize the contribution of waste pickers and to work towards integrating them into formal waste management systems. Recognizing their rights, providing them with appropriate protective gear and training, and offering fair compensation are important steps toward acknowledging their essential role.

However, in India the waste pickers are engaged in the challenging, social stigmatization and often hazardous work of collecting recyclables which indeed is a pressing humanitarian issue. The work they do often comes at great personal cost, including health and safety risks, as well as a lack of recognition and dignity.

The BBC Media Action research study exposes critical issues with the perception and treatment of informal waste pickers in many communities. This study puts light on some of the issues and bad attitudes surrounding waste pickers, which can have serious social and economic consequences.

According to the study, a sizable proportion of respondents viewed informal waste pickers unfavourably, with 55% judging them to be "dirty" in appearance. Such negative judgments can result in societal stigma. A troubling finding was that 56% of respondents said rubbish pickers should not be allowed in building complexes or societies. This shows that informal rubbish pickers are being excluded and discriminated against. Their research also revealed that, while people typically admire formal waste collectors (pourakarmikas), informal rubbish pickers, who are almost invisible in cities, face a significant level of stigma. Informal rubbish pickers indicated a desire for dignity and respect in their employment. They are proud of their efforts to environmental cleanup and illness prevention (Rasheed Kappan., 2021).

According to studies, waste pickers save towns in India a significant amount of money by collecting, sorting, and selling recyclable materials that would otherwise wind up in landfills. For example, a 2013 study in Bengaluru discovered that waste pickers recycled around 600 metric tons of waste every day, resulting in yearly savings of around forty-nine crores for the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), the city's municipal body (Chaya Chengappa, (2013).

Furthermore, waste pickers, who are largely from the Dalit population, have historically faced exploitation and marginalization. This community experiences prejudice and exploitation on numerous fronts, leaving them extremely susceptible (Pinky Chandran, Nalini Shekar., 2014).

The desire for dignity and respect is a basic human want, and waste pickers, like all persons, ought to be treated fairly and with respect for the important work they do.

It is profoundly worrisome to learn that waste pickers frequently endure abuse and prejudice, particularly when their caste or social status is involved. Discrimination against waste pickers or any other group on the basis of caste, race, or any other factor is wrong and unacceptable.

## **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

As a result, the current study seeks to determine whether initiatives such as Swachh Bharat Abhiyan and solid waste management rules have been successful in replacing the derogatory term "waste pickers" or "rag pickers" with more respectful and accurate descriptors that recognize their value and contributions.

## **CRITICAL REVIEW ANALYSIS**

### **Committees Prior to Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan**

In fact, the 1994 bubonic plague outbreak in Surat was a pivotal moment in Indian history because it brought attention to the pressing need for better urban sanitation and public health initiatives. The pandemic brought to light the dangers of improper garbage disposal and unhygienic living conditions (Ashok, K, D et al., 2006). In response to this crisis and realizing the value of upholding clean and sanitary urban environments, a number of committees and initiatives in India have proposed waste management regulations and guidelines, with an emphasis on incorporating waste pickers into the waste management system. These initiatives attempted to enhance general city cleanliness and sanitation while addressing the problems caused by garbage (Ashok, K. et al., 2006).

**Report of J.S. Bajaj High Power Committee, 1994:**

The enormous contributions garbage pickers made to India's solid waste management were acknowledged in large part because to the efforts of the J.S. Bajaj Committee, which was established in the wake of the 1994 Surat plague outbreak. This group addressed the issues that **Rag pickers** faced in a commendable and compassionate manner and offered several suggestions to enhance their quality of life and working environment. The proposals most likely intended to support **Rag pickers'** inclusion in official waste management programs and to recognize their essential contribution to maintaining hygienic and clean urban environments. The Bajaj Committee's actions were crucial in bringing the rights and needs of India's rag pickers to light (Planning Commission Government of India Report, 1995)

**The Asim Burman Committee Report, 1999:**

During the Almitra Patel Case hearings, the Indian Supreme Court appointed this committee. The committee's task was to conduct a thorough analysis of every facet of solid waste management in India's Class-I cities. The nation's waste management laws and policies were greatly influenced by the suggestions given by the Asim Burman Committee. In order to enhance their functions and enhance waste management procedures, it is recommended in points 3.4.7 and 3.4.8 of this study that rag pickers be converted into doorstep rubbish collectors. **Rag pickers** would have to change from their custom of rummaging through landfills and streets for trash to become official rubbish collectors who pick up debris right from homes' doorsteps (Akhileshwari Reddy & Alok Prasanna Kumar., 2018).

The committee's main suggestion was that the government use the authority granted to it by the Environment Protection Act to enact regulations. In the end, this suggestion resulted in the 2000 adoption of the Solid Waste (Management and Handling) Rules. The legal framework for solid waste management in India, which includes regulations for trash segregation, collection, transportation, and disposal, has been greatly aided by these regulations.

**The National Environmental Policy, 2006:**

The policy's emphasis on recognizing and promoting the informal sector's involvement in trash management demonstrated a growing recognition of the importance of integrating refuse pickers and other informal workers into the formal waste management system. The strategy provided specific proposals to provide legal recognition and boost the informal sector's garbage collection and recycling infrastructure.

One noteworthy idea was to improve **waste pickers'** access to institutional finance and associated technologies. This idea aimed to empower waste pickers by providing them with financial assistance as well as access to new tools and technology that may improve their efficiency in collecting and recycling waste items (Kashika Chadha., 2018)

## The Performance Audit on “Management of waste in India” 2007

The Comptroller and Auditor General of India published a Performance Audit on "Waste Management in India, 2007" in 2007. While recognizing waste pickers' substantial contribution to waste management in the country, the audit report was harsh on the Ministry of Forests and Environment for failing to provide **waste pickers** with legal protection in India.

It advised that **waste pickers** be registered. This would entail developing a systematic system for identifying and recognizing waste pickers, giving them legal standing.

## The National Action Plan on Climate Change of 2009

The National Action Plan on Climate Change of 2009 recognizes the vital role played by the informal sector, including **waste pickers**, in India's recycling industry. It highlights the informal sector as the backbone of the country's recycling efforts. The plan acknowledges the challenges faced by the informal sector, such as limited access to finance and advanced recycling technologies. It also points out that some municipal regulations hinder the operations of recyclers in India.

So, prior to Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan, many committees recognize the need for legal recognition and protection for waste pickers.

## Swachh Bharat and Solid Waste Management 2016

For the first time in 2014, the Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan played a critical role in recognizing organizations of **Rag pickers** or informal **waste pickers** and promoting and establishing a mechanism for integrating these approved waste collectors. Swachh Bharat or Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (English: Clean Indian Mission) is a national level program inaugurated by the Government of India on October 2, 2014, at Rajghat in New Delhi, where Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself held a broom and scrubbed a road.

Aside from that, the government rules, the Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016 (SWM Rules) and the Plastic Waste Rules, 2016 (PWM Rules), which are an extension of the Swachh Bharat abhiyan, have clearly defined the word 'waste picker' and incorporated provisions to facilitate their access.

In reality, Solid Waste Management 2016 Rule No. 11(1) (c) clearly calls for the explicit recognition and acknowledgement of **waste pickers'** major role in waste reduction in India. Furthermore, Rule 15 of the SWM Rules now requires local governments to provide comprehensive guidelines and a mechanism to promote the integration of **waste pickers** into the waste management system. Rule 11(1) (m) requires the establishment of a garbage picker registration scheme. "It bothers me when people refer to people as **Rag pickers** or chappars because it conjures up a negative image right away; chappar is generally understood to mean someone carrying stolen goods on their shoulder."

For the first time, Rule 11(1) (a) envisions an inclusive and participatory method in which informal sector workers such as waste pickers and recyclers are also involved in the development of a state's waste policy and solid waste management strategy. Municipalities are also required by Rule 3(1)(31) to create a 'Material

Recovery Facility' where garbage pickers can segregate, classify, and store recovered materials. The Rules also clearly recognize the role of garbage picker MBOs (Pinky Chandran and Et. Al., 2019).

## DISCUSSION

Despite the fact that all of these committees, Swachh Bharat, and regulations and rules speak about the inclusion of waste pickers in the city's formal waste management system. But it was the phrase 'Rag pickers,' also known as garbage pickers or waste pickers used to characterize the individuals in garbage collection that made me squirm. So, what comes to mind when we hear the words 'ragpicker' Waste pickers or 'scavenger' used to describe the act of collecting or gathering? And now I want you to explain the visual image that comes to mind. Would the image identify the person, or would it elicit sorrow, disgust, or sympathy, bordering on savagery, hatred, rage, or dirtiness?"

The name 'waste picker' was coined in 2008 at the First World Conference of waste Pickers in Bogota, Colombia, to allow global networking while also replacing disparaging labels such as "scavenger." I agree with it that this was necessary to develop vocabulary that clearly distinguished this group of workers from others. It would also establish a global collective identity of workers with comparable goals. However, Countries' definitions may differ. In South Africa, for example, the terms "reclaimers" and "bagerezi" are employed. The term "canners" is frequently used in the United States. Other languages use different terms: catadores in Portuguese and recicladores in Spanish. In India, the phrase "waste picker" is used in official contexts, although "rag picker" is more often used in casual conversations. And, unfortunately, these phrases reinforce caste-based stigma and discrimination." (Weigo Blog, 2008).

"It bothers me when people refer to people as rag pickers or chappars or Chamars because it conjures up a negative image right away; chappar is generally understood to mean someone carrying stolen goods on their shoulder." Similarly, the word "Madiga or chamars" is used for the people who belong to the tanning who are considered low status since they work with dead animals. (Jammanna, A and Sudhakar, P., 2016).

Strong preconceptions can be generated by language. This implies that the label we apply to a group of people also affects how we interact with them. Thus, the term "rag picker" is used to promote poverty and marginalization in the media and in social impact investments, distorting the truth and undermining the dignity that all workers deserve.

Language has the ability to establish powerful prejudices. That is, the phrase we use to define a community has ramifications for how we treat them. As a result, 'Waste Pickers or rag picker' becomes a tool to promote poverty and marginalisation in popular media and social impact investment, removing both accuracy and the dignity we must provide all labour.

The language needs to simplify to R.E.S.P.E.C.T. "Instead of imposing our own beliefs, the key here is to ask how a person chooses to identify." The experience is intimate because real individuals are involved in the task that they are performing.

It's critical to recover language. For example, the waste pickers in Pune decided to define their union as Kagad, Kach, Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (Paper, Glass, Metal Workers Association) in 1993. Similarly, the Latin American counterparts, on the other hand, adopted the terms Recicladores and Cartoneras, depending on the contexts in which they operated (Moora, H. and Harshad, B. 2018).

Affirmation and respect for their individual and communal identities, taking into account their past as Dalits from the lowest levels, their experience, and their pride, are critical to any term. As a result, the umbrella term for waste workers will include all workers who live off of, or rely directly on, garbage for a living.

This includes anyone working in a formal setting (municipality), a hybrid system (for example, dry trash collection centres), or an informal setting spanning the whole recycling value chain (recyclers, scrap dealers/traders, aggregators, and so on). But how can one ensure that every component of the varied workforce is visible? The crucial words here are self-determination and representation.

When looking at worldwide best practices, it becomes clear that waste pickers should choose their occupation. It is their right and freedom to express themselves. Academicians, researchers, organizers, the commercial sector, and environmental organizations should all keep this in mind. The freedom to identify oneself includes the liberty to choose one's profession and the title they bear.

Upon interviewing a waste picker, I discovered that he takes great satisfaction in sorting waste. Pride, as a result of his awareness of the worth of what most would consider garbage. There's a skill component to it. He is aware that waste can be classified into a wide range of categories. He is certain of at least 75 different categories based on my years of experience as a rubbish picker and home-based waste sorter. Given the complexity, he claims there is much more, and that he deserves to be acknowledged and respected.

It is evident that this was overlooked by every committee, and policymakers including the Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan. They overlooked a small detail that provides the folks who clean our cities with a sense of respect. Instead, we focused on loftier ideals like inclusion or formalizing the disregarded members of our society in order to offer them respect and a better life—all without first removing the label of "W.A.S.T.E." in the title waste pickers. They are labelled as unclean or untouchables in our society by this moniker. I believe this larger aspect was overlooked by the titles used by all of the previous committees.

The label "waste pickers" indeed carries a connotation that can stigmatize and demean the individuals who play a crucial role in managing waste and maintaining cleanliness in our cities. The choice of terminology can significantly affect how waste pickers are perceived and treated by society.

It should be known that the persistence of traditional occupations and hereditary roles among Dalits despite the constitutional abolition of "untouchability" underscores the deep-rooted social and economic challenges they face. While the legal framework has made it illegal to force Dalits into degrading occupations, the actual transformation of these deeply ingrained societal norms and practices is a complex and ongoing process. Even than many "untouchable" communities have been forced to continue their occupations as leather workers, disposers of dead animals, waste pickers or manual scavengers, and to perform other tasks deemed too ritually polluting for upper castes. Further the limited access to quality education often left the Dalits without the skills

and qualifications required for alternative, non-stigmatized employment. That is why many have taken waste picking jobs for their family survival. Refusing to perform caste-based tasks can lead to physical abuse and social boycotts, which can be a powerful disincentive for Dalits seeking to escape these roles. The hereditary nature of many of these occupations, often passed down through generations, makes breaking free from these roles even more challenging.

It is important to use language carefully so that it is polite and free of stereotypes or unfavourable implications. It is important to note that terminology should be used carefully when referring to those who collect and recycle rubbish. The labels "wastepickers" and "rag picker" or even "scavengers" may have derogatory meanings and preconceptions that stigmatize those who perform this vital labour. Selecting language that upholds their dignity and highlights their contribution to sustainable waste management is crucial. Some people may have a different image in mind when they hear the terms "ragpicker" or "scavenger" when referring to the process of collecting or gathering, but it usually involves a person picking rubbish by hand, frequently in difficult and unhygienic conditions. It's crucial to stress, though, that the prejudices and stereotypes that society has attached to these terms have molded these mental representations.

It is true that the terms "ragpicker" "waste pickers" and even "scavenger" can arouse negative emotions like revulsion, which can verge on savagery, hostility, rage, or dirtiness, as well as feelings of sympathy and sorrow. These feelings are brought on by the devaluation and stigmatization of the labour done by those who collect and recycle rubbish.

In order to transform attitudes and lessen prejudices about garbage workers, it is imperative to promote polite and inclusive language. This will increase respect and dignity for waste workers and their jobs.

In the context of the **Swachh Bharat Abhiyan**, the labels "**waste pickers**" and "**ragpickers**" are legitimate and highlight significant issues. The continuous use of these phrases in official records and guidelines has the potential to strengthen social stigmatization and prejudices. It also draws attention to problems with caste systems and the socioeconomic status of trash workers.

## CONCLUSIONS

Government initiatives like the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan must acknowledge the significance of speaking in a way that respects the identity and dignity of waste workers in order to allay these worries and advance inclusivity and dignity for waste workers. Use polite, neutral words instead than stigmatizing or disparaging remarks. Consider using more neutral and courteous terminology like "reclaimers," "resource recoverers," or "environmental managers," or "safai karamcharis," in place of stigmatizing ones like "rag picker" or "scavenger" "so that nobody in the community views the item as waste but rather as a resource.

Recognizing and addressing the stigmatization and discrimination faced by waste pickers, especially by revisiting the terminology and considering more respectful and accurate designations, is essential. This change can contribute to improving their social standing, self-esteem, and overall well-being. Moreover, it can foster a more inclusive and empathetic approach in society toward those who work tirelessly to keep our cities clean.

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