



Surviving on waste: A study of waste pickers

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Abstract

In the hierarchy of urban informal occupations, Waste picking has been ranked as lowest occupation with lower dignity where large number of the workers are men, women and children. Unskilled workers, migrants having a lower caste in hierarchy and the poorest of the poor are predominant in this occupation, as they are unable to find any other kind of employment opportunities. Waste pickers are therefore categorized as self-employed workers and the disposal of waste material has economic implications in terms of job creation, income generation, in reduction, recycling, regeneration, and reducing pollution in the environment. In this backdrop, the objectives of the present study are to investigate that how much quantity of waste is monthly collected by the waste pickers, how much income is generated by them monthly through it, what is their consumption pattern and what type of the problems are being faced by them in the study area. Waste pickers are making an important contribution in the process of growth and sustainable development but they have to bear a cost in the form of poor wellbeing which is not good for human resource development. Majority of waste pickers are suffering from different types of diseases, many of them have regular headache, back pain fever, etc. In the study area it has been found that 2.5 percent, 1.25 percent, 8.75 percent, 8.75 percent, 3.75 percent, 17.5 percent, 31.25 percent, 15 percent and 55 percent of waste pickers were facing problem of TB, Cancer, Diarrhoea, Jaundice, Malaria, Allergy, Fever, Flew, Cuts/injuries, Dog bites respectively at the present place. After migration to this place there is a shift in their occupation and at present they are working as waste pickers which is a low level of work. They have gone for generation of self-employment opportunities and turning the waste into wealth, generating resources for their sustenance and survival and making an important contribution in the economy through reducing burden on natural resources and reducing pollution. According to the study their income, expenditure and saving has shown an improvement.

Keywords: waste, rag pickers, interment buyers, inclusive growth, sustainable development

Introduction

Right from the first five year plan, reduction of poverty has (directly or indirectly) remained as one of the most important objective of all plans in India. The Twelfth Plan focuses on poverty reduction, ensuring access to basic physical infrastructure, health and education facilities to all while giving importance to bridging the regional/social/gender disparities and attending to the marginalized and the weaker social groups. Faster and inclusive growth needs special attention to informal economy in terms of output, employment and earnings because the unorganized sector workers consists workers of all small economic entities such as Self Employed, Own account workers, heads of the family businesses, unpaid family workers, Wage workers, Casual Workers without a fixed employer, Home based workers, domestic workers, temporary and part time workers, unregistered workers, etc. This sector is larger than the organized sector in terms of relative share in GDP and also provides livelihood to nearly 93 percent of the work force. (Economic Special, 2010). In the hierarchy of urban informal occupations, Waste picking has been ranked as lowest occupation with lower dignity where large number of the workers are men, women and children. Unskilled workers, migrants having a lower caste in hierarchy and the poorest of the poor are predominant in this occupation, as they are unable to find any other kind of employment

opportunities. Generally, there is no employer-employee relationship in this trade even though it is possible that some of the scrap picking activity is organized by contractors. Waste pickers are therefore categorized as self-employed workers and the transaction between the waste pickers and the scrap traders is a sale purchase transaction. In any society the economic well being of any household is determined by the diversity in their sources of income and by their consumption expenditure. It is evident that there exists wide disparity in the occupational structure, income and consumption pattern between the poor and rich households in all the societies. The present research confines itself to the study of distressed category in informal sector wherein an attempt has been made to analyse that how this distressed class of waste Pickers has been struggling for their survival on waste. The review of literature of various studies on waste pickers provides an in depth insight into their living & working conditions, their efforts to generate self –employment, income, reducing the pressure on the natural resources, conserving the environment and their contribution in the process of growth and development . The disposal of waste material has economic implications in terms of job creation, income generation in reduction, recycling, regeneration, and reducing pollution in the environment. In this backdrop the present study is of immense importance for the policy makers.

Objectives & Methodology

The main objectives of the present study are to investigate that how much quantity of waste is monthly collected by the waste pickers, how much income is generated by them monthly through it, what is their consumption pattern and what type of the problems are being faced by them in the study area. The present study is based on Primary as well as Secondary sources. Secondary data has been collected from various books, journals and reports websites etc. For conducting the present study four localities of Jammu city such as Railway Station, Gandhi Nagar, Bhagwati Nagar & Satwari have been selected through random sampling technique. The selection of Waste pickers has been made purposively. A total sample of eighty waste pickers (40 rag pickers and 40 itinerant buyers) have been selected to realize the objectives of the study. In the present study, waste is defined as refused waste (dumped within houses & shops etc.) & thrown in open spaces, whereas Waste pickers comprises Rag Pickers & Interment Buyers. Rag Pickers are defined as those who collect refused waste from garbage, dumping points around neighbourhoods, streets, drains, river beds consisting primarily of plastic, paper, cardboard, metals, etc. without making any payment. & Interment Buyers as those who collect refused waste from households & shops directly by making payment at different rates on the basis of quantity & quality of waste. The primary data has been collected through personal interview method on a well-structured questionnaire. After the collection of the data it has been tabulated and analyzed with simple statistical tools, to realize the objectives of the study.

Significance & scope of the study

This study will be having wider policy implications as it will provide an insight to the policy makers with regard to the contribution of the waste pickers in making the city clean through waste collection, how they survive on waste by generating income through self-employment, their consumption pattern & the problems faced by them in their occupation.

Findings of the study

Most of the Waste Pickers have migrated from different states of the country as well as from outside the country such as Myanmar. So far as the place of origin of the Rag pickers is concerned, 32.5 percent, 27.5 percent and 10 percent were from Myanmar, West Bengal and UP whereas others were from Assam, Bihar, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Punjab, and from the home state of J&K. Among Itinerant Buyers, 40 percent, 37.5 percent, 10 percent, 7.5 percent were from Bihar, UP, West Bengal and Punjab and 5 percent from J&K. Among total waste pickers, majority of them have migrated from UP, Bihar, Myanmar and West Bengal while the rest belonged to the other states. Among Rag pickers 35 percent of them have been females and 65 percent males and 100 percent of Itinerant buyers have been males.

Among the Rag pickers 35 percent were in the age group of less than 14 years of age, 20 percent in the age group of 14-25 years, 22.5 percent in the age group of 25-40 years, 15 percent in the age group of 40-60 years and 7.5 percent in the age group of 60 years and above. After the age of 14 relatively less number of females were found engaged in the rag picking as

their movement is restricted by their parents & they prefer to involve them in the household chorus or marry them. So far as Itinerant buyers are concerned, no itinerant buyer has been found in the age group of less than 14, but 30 percent, 35 percent and 30 percent were found in the age group of 14-25, 25-40, 40-60 respectively and only 5 percent were in the age group of above 60 years. Less number of respondent were found in the age group of above 60 years which implies that in old age this occupation is not desirable. Out of total waste pickers, it has been found that 17.5 percent of waste pickers were in the age group of less than 14 years, 25 percent in between 14 to 25 years, 28.75 percent in between 25-40 years, 22.5 percent in between 40-60 years and 6.25 percent in the age group of 60- above years. Out of total 82.5 percent were Male and 17.5 percent were Female waste pickers in the study area.

Occupation plays an important role in assessing the economic condition of the respondents as it reflects their relative dependence on the various economic activities. So far as the occupation of waste pickers at their native place is concerned, among Rag Pickers, 20 percent were working as agricultural labourer, 15 percent as casual labourer, 7.5 percent each as industrial labourer and fish sellers, 5 percent as Cobbler and 45 percent were doing nothing before waste picking. On the other side, 40 percent of Itinerant buyers were engaged as agricultural labourer, 25 percent as Casual labourer, 12.5 percent as Industrial labourer, 5 percent each as shop keeper and Barber, 2.5 percent as fruits/ vegetables vendors, and 10 percent were doing nothing. Out of total 80 waste pickers, 30 percent of them were working as agriculture labourers, 20 percent as casual labourers, 10 percent as industrial labourers, 2.5 percent as a shop keeper, 1.25 percent as fruits/vegetables vendors, 3.75 percent as fish seller, 2.5 percent each as Cobbler and barber and 27.5 percent were doing nothing before waste picking. Both of the Rag Pickers and Itinerant Buyers have left their old occupation after their migration and have joined the work of waste picking at the present place because according to them this work requires no skill, no training and moreover the returns are relatively higher in the present occupation. All the waste Pickers are self-employed & they generate their own income through collecting the waste. The types of waste collected by the waste pickers in the present study is plastic, cardboard, iron, newspaper, books, notebook, bottles etc. Most of the Rag pickers collect mostly plastic, iron, cardboard without making any payment and Itinerant buyers collect different items by making payment and prefer to purchase the material which they feel desirable to enjoy a high profit margin.

Table 1: Monthly waste collection and Income generation by waste pickers

Waste Pickers	Waste collection monthly in kg.	Income generated monthly in Rs.
Rag pickers	32,880 (43.4)	1,33,500(42.7)
Itinerant Buyers	42,900 (56.6)	1,79,400(57.3)
Total	75,780 (100)	3,12,900(100)

Source: Survey data, 2016

(Figures in brackets showing Percentage with respect to total of the sample respondents)

Table 2 reveals that the waste pickers collected 757 quintals of recyclable waste in a month, of which Rag pickers collected 328 quintals i.e. 43.4 per cent and Itinerant buyers collected 429 quintals i.e. 56.6 percent of it, by selling this they get income through self-employment. The daily waste collected by the forty rag pickers has been 1096 kg & monthly near about 328 quintals and the average waste collected by rag picker is near about 27 kg per day. Forty Itinerant buyers collected 1430 kgs of waste daily and monthly they collected near about 429 quintals of waste and the average waste collected by Itinerant buyer is near about 36 kg a day. They are not only reducing but also creating the wealth out of waste by putting such material in the recycling pyramid as well as reducing the pressure on natural resources and on earth and creates self-generate income and employment. By selling the collected recyclable waste to the retail scrap dealer they survive. Waste pickers generate monthly income of Rs. 3,12,900 through the sale of recyclable waste of 757 quintals, of which 42.7 per cent of total income i.e. RS.1,33,500 has been generated by Rag pickers and 57.3 percent of total Rs.1,79,400 by Itinerant buyers who collect waste after making payment to the households. The whole chain of reducing, regenerating & reusing is that the waste pickers, sell their collected waste to retail scrap waste to dealers against which they get some money, who in their turn sell it to the wholesale scrap waste dealers & the wholesale scrap waste dealers finally sell & supply it to the local industry in Bari Brahamana of Jammu & Kashmir & to the outside state of Punjab (iron & steel industry in Pathankote & paper industry in Ludhiana) for reducing, regenerating & reusing. Itinerant buyers are making relatively a larger contribution in the supply of industrial raw material for production than Rag Pickers. Their contribution is of immense importance in the economic development.

The total monthly income generated by the Rag pickers is Rs. 1,33,500 per month, their monthly consumption expenditure is Rs. 85,760 and savings Rs. 47,740. The average monthly income of Rag pickers has been about Rs. 3338, expenditure Rs. 2144 and saving near about Rs. 1194 in the study area. At the same note the total monthly income of all the Itinerant buyers, was Rs. 1,79,400, monthly expenditure Rs. 88550 and monthly saving of all was Rs. 90850. The average monthly income of Itinerant Buyers was Rs. 4485 expenditure about Rs. 2214 and savings about Rs. 2271. Among Rag Pickers the minimum range of income was Rs. 1200 and maximum range of income was Rs. 7500, in case of expenditure the minimum range was Rs. 1200 and maximum range is Rs. 3350, whereas the maximum range of saving among Rag Pickers was Rs.4800 per month. Among Itinerant Buyers, the minimum range of income was Rs. 2400 and maximum range was Rs. 9000. The minimum range of expenditure was Rs. 1400 and the maximum range Rs. 3250. The maximum range of saving among Itinerant Buyers was Rs. 6300 per month. This was because of earning higher income by the itinerant buyers because they collect the waste material which is in demand & carries a higher profit margin. Majority of waste pickers used to collect waste through bicycles, tricycles but some putting on their shoulders /heads for their livelihood. They collect the waste of their own choice from different areas by traveling a long distance. Moreover the waste pickers have to

bear the heat of extreme weather conditions of hot summer and cold winters to collect the waste for their survival and sustenance.

Table 2: Consumption pattern of waste pickers

Expenditure on food items (in Rs.)	Rag Pickers (%age)	Itinerant Buyers (%age)	Total (%age)
Cereals	32450 (37.84)	34750 (39.2)	67200 (38.5)
Vegetables	9100 (10.61)	9500 (10.7)	18600 (10.7)
Milk/Milk products	15050 (17.55)	13750 (15.5)	28800 (16.5)
Non-Veg	4800 (5.6)	2300 (2.6)	7100 (4.1)
Other food related items	3260 (3.8)	3150 (3.6)	6410 (3.7)
Total Exp. (On Food Items)	64660 (75.4)	63450 (71.7)	128110 (73.5)
Average Exp. (On Food Items)	1616.5	1586.25	1601.4
Expenditure on non-food items			
Rent	5750 (6.7)	6200 (7.0)	11950 (6.9)
Education	0	1200 (1.4)	1200 (0.7)
Health	1000 (1.2)	1000 (1.1)	2000 (1.1)
Cloth	950 (1.1)	2400 (2.7)	3350 (1.9)
Alcohol/Tobacco/other addicted items	7800 (9.1)	9400 (10.6)	17200 (9.9)
Any other	5600 (6.5)	4900 (5.5)	10500 (6)
Total Exp. (On Non Food Items)	21100 (24.5)	25100 (28.3)	46,200 (26.5)
Average Exp. (On Non-food items)	527.5	627.5	577.5
Total Exp. (on food & non-food items)	85760 (100)	88550 (100)	1,74,310 (100)
Average (on food & non-food items)	2144	2213.75	2178.87

Source: Survey data, 2016.

Table 2 shows the consumption pattern of the waste pickers on food items and non-food items. Food items include cereals, vegetables, milk and milk products, non-veg. and eggs and other food items like sugar, salt, red pepper, edible oil, fuel, etc. Expenditure on non-food items include rent for slums/chuggis/the room, expenditure on education of children, expenditure on health, cloth, addicted items any other items include expenditure on entertainment, mobile, help to the friends, relatives etc. It has been found that monthly expenditure of waste pickers on food items was Rs. 128110 i.e. 73.5 percent and average monthly expenditure was Rs. 1601.4 per month in which major expenditure was made on cereals, vegetables and milk and milk products. Whereas on other side, monthly expenditure of waste pickers on non-food items has been Rs. 46200 i.e. 26.5 percent and its average monthly expenditure was about Rs. 578 per month where major expenditure was made on rent and addicted items. The total monthly expenditure of waste pickers on food and non-

food items was Rs. 174310 per month and the average expenditure was Rs. 2178.87.

Thus the consumption pattern shows that there is a little difference in their monthly expenditure of Rag pickers and of Itinerant buyers. The rate of savings has been higher among Itinerant Buyers in comparison to that of Rag Pickers. The reason behind this is that most of the rag picker have migrated to the present place with their family so their expenditure is more than the Itinerant buyers and secondly there is some difference in the level of income of both and thirdly there is a difference in the rates of scrap waste they collected by them. Thus, the economic condition of Itinerant buyers is better than Rag pickers because of difference in the rates of waste material and their quality. Hence both of them are playing major role in waste management and recycling, there by saving the stock of new raw material for the production of different items and protecting the environment and improving the economy. 15 per cent of total waste pickers were found working for 1-5 hours daily, 53.75 per cent for 5-8 hours and 31.25 per cent for 8-12hours a day. All the Itinerant buyers in the study area were found using bicycle for collection and transportation of waste material whereas some of the rag pickers were using tricycle, bicycle and some used to collect the waste material on their heads and shoulders. Those with supportive mechanism were covering a long distance but others with no bicycle or tricycle were covering a shorter distance by foot. When asked about their consumption of alcohol/Tobacco and other addicted items, the answer of the rag pickers was that, it is necessary for them to continue in the same work and of Itinerant buyers that was after moving and covering a long distance during hot summer and cold winter, it is necessary for them to consume these items.

Problems and Conclusion

No doubt waste pickers are making an important contribution in the process of growth and sustainable development but they have to bear a cost in the form of poor wellbeing which is not good for human resource development. Majority of waste pickers are suffering from different types of diseases, many of them have regular headache, back pain fever, etc. In the study area it has been found that 2.5 percent, 1.25 percent, 8.75 percent, 8.75 percent, 3.75 percent, 17.5 percent, 31.25 percent, 15 percent and 55 percent of waste pickers were facing problem of TB, Cancer, Diarrhoea, Jaundice, Malaria, Allergy, Fever, Flew, Cuts/injuries, Dog bites respectively at the present place. Sofor as Harassment and Exploitation of waste pickers is concerned it has been found that 51.25 percent of waste pickers were harassed /abused by the local people, 15 percent by the police men and 23.75 percent by drunks and many of them reported that they were beaten many a times by the local people. After migration to this place there is a shift in their occupation and at present they are working as waste pickers which is a low level of work. They have gone for generation of self-employment opportunities and turning the waste into wealth, generating resources for their sustenance and survival and making an important contribution in the economy through reducing burden on natural resources and reducing pollution. According to the study their income, expenditure and saving has shown an improvement. So for as their working conditions are

concerned, it is poor and unhygienic and inhumane, particularly in case of rag pickers than in case of Itinerant buyers. Moreover, they have to cover a long distance for collecting waste and selling it to the retail and wholesale dealers. While working these people are abused, harassed and sometime beaten by the locals and police. They suffer from different types of diseases but do not prefer to visit to doctor regularly for their treatment. Thus, no doubt their economic condition has shown an improvement but the working condition are very poor. The NDA government has announced a number of welfare schemes to improve the living conditions of the workers in the unorganized sector through widening of social security coverage but this distressed class needs a special focus to improve their social & economic conditions. Apart from this their role as waste managers needs to be recognised so as to involve them in the development process.

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