

# Informal Waste Collectors in India

S.Thirunavukarasu

**Abstract:** The informal waste collector sector plays a major role in Indian economy begins to dominate in providing gainful employment opportunities for lakhs of people. It also contributing significant share of nation's output. It is estimated that two fifths of India's Gross Domestic Product generate from the informal waste collector sector and of the families are depending on this sector directly and indirectly for their survival. There are millions of people worldwide make a living in waste collecting, sorting and selling materials, that someone else has thrown away. They are vital actors of informal economy. The informal waste collectors perform an essential role in the economies and societies of developing countries in large. In the developed world, this kind of activity is relatively small. The unplanned growth of Indian cities has led to a host of problems like fuel scarcity, water, air and other pollution due to increase in growth of population, motor vehicles and industries etc., This has led to many problems to the human beings; animals etc., the waste collectors are play a pivotal role in reducing waste materials by their collection and recycling process. This paper aims at to explain the socio-economic conditions of informal waste collectors in India. This study may lead to do a qualitative research on this field in future by the researchers.

**Index Terms** - Informal sector, waste collectors, environmental pollution, job security, informal economy.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The anatomy of Indian economy is often described in terms of a vector of sectors: private sector, joint sector, tiny sector so on and so forth. To this list add one more the informal sector. The informal sector is a respectable designation used by the economists who have their own ways of covering up urban poverty by inventing rather neutral phraseology.[1]The informal sector plays a major role in Indian economy begins to dominate in providing gainful employment opportunity to millions of people. It also contributing significant share of the nation's output. It is estimated that two-fifths of Gross Domestic Product generate form the informal sector and 90 per cent the families are depending on this sector directly and indirectly for their survival. [2]The study of informal sector has become an increasingly popular not only in Economics but also in Sociology and Anthropology. Keith Hart was the first person to introduce the term "informal sector". the informal dichotomy was also first used by Keith Hart while making a presentation on "informal income opportunities and urban employment in Ghana in Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at conference (1971) coorganised by Rita Cruise O' Brien and Richard Jolly on urban employment in Africa months before International Labour Organization (ILO) employment mission to Kenya came with its report "Employment, Incomes and Equality". [3]

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## 2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF INFORMAL WASTE COLLECTORS

Waste collection in India goes back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, where bones, rags and paper were among the first commodities to be collected. The caste system in Indian society, which continues to exist, it is a determining factor in the solid waste management system. Waste picking, along with any work related to garbage or the handling of carcasses and human excreta is traditionally bound to the lowest caste. The historical evidence of the immigration of low caste workers to Delhi during the worker was shortages to handle waste in the city. Many Bangladeshi migrants and their families have also working in the field of waste. Because of their involvement and filthy work environment, the occupation of waste picking has traditionally been held in low esteem by the population and by political decision makers. There is no other social category has been prepared to start waste picking, even times of poverty and hardship, offered at least degree of guaranteed job security to waste collectors in India. The existing literature suggests that certain activities have attracted the researchers much more than others, owing to their low productivity, low capital stock, exploitative labour relations, etc., these are building constriction, rickshaw pulling, hawking and vending, textile and garment related activities and waste collection etc., [4]

## 3. MEANING OF WASTE COLLECTOR

The term waste collector is a person employed by a public or private enterprise to collect and remove from residential, commercial, industrial or other collection of site for further processing and disposal. Specialized waste collection vehicle featuring an array of automated functions are often deployed to assist waste collectors in reducing collection and transport time and protection from exposure.

#### 4. DEFINITION OF WASTE COLLECTOR

The term “waste collector” is commonly refers to the task of extracting reusable or recyclables materials from mixed wastes. Many waste collectors also sort or segregate waste and sell it further up the recycling chain. According to Samson, the term waste collectors can be broadly defined as people who reclaim “reusable materials from what others have cast aside as waste”.



#### 5. SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF INFORMAL WASTE COLLECTORS

Nowadays the large numbers of poor people are associated with waste management in India. The recent study estimates that about 1 to 2 percent of the urban population in India is active in the informal recycling sector. The informal waste sector is socially stratified in a pyramid with scrap collectors at the bottom and re-processors at the top.

The informal waste collector sector really constitutes the hard working poor whose toils are disproportionately larger to their earnings. The earnings of waste collectors vary from country to country, type of work they do and for women and men. After a whole day's hard labour, a worker earns about Rs.20 compared to above Rs.80 the wage rate per day prevailing in the formal sector. The informal waste collectors are vulnerable to exploitation by the middlemen who buy recovered waste materials from them before selling to industry. The Indian waste collectors can receive as low as 5% of the price, industry pays for recyclables, middle men get more gain this business. Generally waste collectors have low income, lack of drinking water, sanitation and other basic infrastructure. The level of monthly income level of these workers is less than Rs.1000 per month, but it is not adequate to meet their basic needs to live in urban areas because of the monthly per capita consumer expenditure (MPCE) is Rs.2401.68 in urban areas according to NSS 68<sup>th</sup> round July 20011 to June 2012 (provisional).the workers are unable to manage their families consequently they are pushed to borrow from money lenders and thereby they are reeling in the hands of poverty. As a result of their poor living conditions and nature of work, the waste collectors face many problems.

#### 6. PROBLEMS OF INFORMAL WASTE COLLECTORS

The informal waste collectors face tremendous health and safety risks like extreme temperatures, wind,rain,sun,fezal,animal carcasses, broken glass, needles, sharp material objects, above all diseases transmitted by vermin, flies and mosquitoes,back pain and limp pain, skin irritation and rashe and recycling is the only kind of recycling that occurs at all. It decreases the

specific high risk tuberculosis, bronchitis, asthma, pneumonia, dysentery and parasites. It comes as no surprise, high infant mortality rates and low expectancies are common problems in the life of waste collectors.In addition public authorities often treat them as nuisances, embarrassments, or even criminals. They tend to have low social status and face public scorn, harassment and occasionally violence. They treated as nuisances by authorities and with disdain by the public and they are ignored by public policy processes and frequently suffer mentally and physically. In recent times, privatization of municipal solid waste management services threatens the zaba len community of waste collectors in many cities in India. The global recession has hit waste collectors hard and the global approaches to change mitigation, such as funding for incinerators and waste-to- energy plants that burn materials waste collectors could otherwise recycle, threaten rather than reward of waste collectors. [5]

#### 7.0. IMPORTANCE OF INFORMAL WASTE COLLECTORS

Millions of people worldwide make a living collecting, sorting and selling materials that someone else has thrown away. They are vital actors of informal economy. The informal waste collectors perform an essential role in the economies and societies of developing countries in large. Waste collectors provide widespread benefits to their communities, municipalities and the environment.

##### 7.1. Source of employment and income

For many people in developing countries, especially those with limited education or opportunities, waste collection offers a livelihood. The waste collection work is main sources of employment and income of the urban poor in India, because they are affected by the problem of unemployment. The World Bank estimates that nearly 1-2 percent of the urban population in developing countries earns a living through waste collection or process of recycling. A more recent study in India estimated that waste collectors are in the country numbered 1.5 million people, primarily women and those from socially marginalized group.

##### 7.2. Raw material for industrial sector

The waste collections of materials are important raw material for industrial sector in developing countries. India is an industrially developing country. It importantly needs more investment and raw materials in low cost. But the main problems of the industrial sector are non availability of raw materials. The waste collectors provide inexpensive recycled materials to industries; this reduces the need for expensive imports. Bottles, waste papers, plastic damaged materials are the main things in collection of wastes by the urban poor.

##### 7.3. Municipal expenses are reduced

The informal subsidization of solid waste management systems is reduced the municipal expenses. Waste collectors reduce the amount of waste that needs to be collected, transported and disposed of with public funds and they save each city in India at least Rs.50 lakhs per year.

##### 7.4. Environmental sustainability

Waste collectors are working for their daily wages, but they are improving the environment. Most of the urban areas are affected by pollution; it affects the health and sanitation of human beings. Informal waste collectors play an important role in removing wastes and they improving the welfare of the people. The waste collection work contributes environmental sustainability. In many cities in India, informal waste collection and recycling is the only kind of recycling that occurs at all. It decreases the

amount of virgin materials used by industries, stores, households, hotels, markets etc., thereby conserving natural resources and energy while reducing air and water pollution. It also reduce the amount of land that needs to be dumps and landfills.

### 8. Characteristics of informal waste collectors

- The informal waste collectors are subject to social stigma, poor working conditions and are frequently harassed.
- Waste collection is highly responsive to market driven conditions for recyclables.
- Most of the waste collectors are migrants.
- Large numbers of waste collectors fluctuate due to economic conditions and urban processes.
- Waste collectors are often not part of public solid waste management systems; they are socially invisible and seldom reported in official statistics.
- Waste collection is easily learned and usually does not require literacy. However, when working in a collective Endeavour like administrative tasks do require literacy.
- The informal waste collectors are often recruited by middlemen.

### 9. Urgent need of the informal waste collectors

The informal waste collectors are economically, socially and politically poor. The standard of living can be improved by various plans and schemes of the government. The common demands of the waste collectors are large. They are, identification, recognition and identity cards, right to work or have access to waste, provision of sites to sell waste, provision of facilities for collection and sorting of waste, sanitary and storage facilities, healthcare and social security provisions, credit or loan facilities, granting of rights to collect scrap for recycling, provisions of drinking water, toilet, crèche facilities at dumping grounds and land fill sites, child labours should not be allowed, institutionalizing informal waste collectors into doorstep or other collection, encouragement and support for organizations of waste collectors financial and non financial. They are also demanding better enforcement social security schemes of the state and national policies for promoting solid waste management.

### 10. Organizational developments for the informal waste collectors

Waste collectors, known for their independence and individualism, are increasingly motivated to organize and fight for recognition and a within formal waste management systems. They are organizing in many different ways like cooperatives, associations, companies, unions, micro-enterprises etc., some are even forming "women only" organizations in order to better confront gender inequalities. Since 1972, many efforts have been made by NGO'S (Non Governmental Organizations) to organize the waste collectors, but the results do not yet extend across India, due to the predominant of women in waste collection. Women's organizations were the first to cast light on waste collector and their interests. These approaches encouraged waste collectors to transfer to work less demeaning to their dignity and less hazardous to their health. In 1990 the Project for the Empowerment of Waste Collectors of the Women's University

in Pune in Western India started organizing waste collectors around their work issues. In subsequent years waste collector organizations were formed in Delhi, Bangalore and other cities. All of the organizations underscored the value and the work of informal sector waste collectors. The Swalamban social security pension scheme for the informal workers has enacted by the Central government on 9<sup>th</sup> August 2010 for the welfare of the informal sector workers including waste collectors. The Indira Gandhi National old age pension scheme is also facilitates the Below Poverty Line people age between 60 to 80 years will get pension for Rs.500 per month [6]. The organizational and the government support increases the social status, self esteem, income, quality of life, working conditions, better health quality, development of networks, prevention of harassment, violence and it eliminating child labour among these workers.

### 11. Law and policies

The Municipal Solid waste Management and Handling Rules passed in January 2000. However, it came into effect in January 2004 under the Environment Protection Act, 1986 by Ministry of Environment and Forests of Government of India, after direction from the Supreme Court of India in the Almitra Patel case, mandating a comprehensive policy for collecting, handling, recycling of managing solid waste management. Although the rules do not make a specific mention of waste pickers or waste collectors, they are explicit in offering a wide range of choices to the municipalities in the system that they may want to adopt depending upon local conditions. Contracting out the system of doorstep garbage collection, partly of fully, both local and national operators is most popular because there is a strong lobby that believes that privatization of waste collection is cheaper and more efficient. Frequently these measures displace waste collectors as the contracting party now has direct control over the waste and its disposal.

### 12.0. Suggestions

The following promotional measures have been proposed for the welfare and growth of informal waste collectors in India.

12.1. The labour exploitation should be removed from the informal waste collection community.

12.2. The steering committee comprising representatives of informal waste collectors, urban local bodies, police and resident welfare associations should be formed to monitor the implementation of National Social Security schemes for these workers.

12.3. The mobile waste collectors should be permitted to collect the different types of waste in all places.

12.4. Insurance scheme is need for these workers to protect their life from unexpected risk and natural disaster.

12.5. The informal waste collector's union should be motivated to attain their basic needs and rights.

12.6. Raising awareness about social security schemes is need for the waste collectors.

12.7. The national organization should create to monitor the socio economic conditions of these workers and it should give Identity Cards who are the members of this organization.

12.8. The politicians are not interested in solving the problems of these workers. They should also focus on the rights of these workers.

12.9. The local government authorities should encourage the waste collectors to collect waste in their boundaries without any restrictions.

### 13. Conclusion

The waste collectors are making a strong positive contribution to the economic growth and up gradation of environment of India. There are millions of waste collectors worldwide, but little reliable socio-economic or statistical information exists. Most studies are qualitative and few quantitative studies exist. Since waste collectors are mobile and their population can frequently fluctuate by season, estimation of a total population is difficult and making it harder to the researchers to collect sound data. The growth of population, industries and changes in the living conditions of the people is entirely different from one country to another and it creates millions of tonnes wastes per day in all over the world. Particularly in India, it is a biggest problem to the flora and fauna. On the other side, the informal waste collection activity creates more gainful employment opportunities for the poor. Hence, the waste collectors' community should be encouraged by the local, state and central government by fulfilling the demand of these workers to protect their standard of living and the environment of India for the benefit of future generation.

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