

Survey on Socio-Status of Waste Pickers in Chandigarh, India

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Abstract: Chandigarh's recognition as India's second cleanest city in 2016 was a moment of pride, but its subsequent decline in ranking underscores the urgent challenges in urban waste management. The situation at the Dadu Majra garbage dump site exemplifies this crisis, where waste accumulation is both a visible and systemic issue. This reflects deeper flaws, including inadequate facilities for clean water, sanitation, and electricity in areas surrounding the landfill.

The health risks faced by waste pickers further highlight the human cost of poor waste management. Prolonged exposure to hazardous materials leads to respiratory issues, skin infections, and frequent injuries. The absence of protective gear, combined with limited access to healthcare, exacerbates the dangers of this occupation. These issues not only impact individual lives but also point to broader gaps in public health and urban planning. Chandigarh has the potential to reclaim its status as a model city for cleanliness and sustainability with a focused and inclusive effort.

I. Introduction:

Chandigarh, one of the planned and fastest-growing cities in India, has a workforce of 1,350 door-to-door waste pickers, 109 Material Recovery Facility (MRF) workers who earn their living by collecting and sorting the solid waste. These individuals provide a vital service to the city's (currently) 12,41,173 residents by managing a daily influx of 550 metric tons of municipal solid waste. Additionally roughly 400 families of rag pickers earn their livelihood in the city by picking, sorting and selling waste and are running the wheel of recycling and helping to conserve social wealth. Waste pickers play a crucial role in maintaining cleanliness and sanitation within the city.

Before assessing the Socio economic status of waste pickers, understanding the roles of diverse waste pickers in the solid waste management system in Chandigarh is crucial. To provide clarity in understanding the diverse roles within waste picking, individuals are named as garbage collectors, rag pickers and MRF Workers. For ease of comprehension, we have divided these individuals into two overarching sectors: the **Organized or Formal sector**, encompassing garbage picker, MRF workers and the **Unorganized or informal sector**, comprising rag pickers and workers at garbage processing units

This paper deals with the social conditions and problems faced by the waste pickers in the city of Chandigarh. Addressing the challenges faced by the waste pickers requires a multi-faceted approach like upgradation of the waste management systems, improvement in basic amenities, protecting waste pickers by providing safety gear, regular health check-ups and better working conditions. Also community engagement by educating citizens on waste segregation and recycling can reduce the load on landfills. The survey reveals that waste pickers generally fall into the lowest income brackets, earning meagre and inconsistent wages. Their income is often dictated by the amount and type of waste they collect, leading to financial instability. Additionally, most waste pickers lack access to formal banking systems, savings opportunities, and credit facilities, further perpetuating their economic vulnerability.

The living conditions of waste pickers are typically substandard, with many residing in informal settlements characterized by overcrowding and poor infrastructure. Basic amenities such as clean water, sanitation, and electricity are often inadequate or absent. This precarious housing situation exacerbates their vulnerability and limits their quality of life.

Waste pickers frequently encounter social stigma and discrimination, which marginalizes them and hinders their access to social services. They are often viewed as untouchables or social outcasts, further isolating them from mainstream society and limiting their opportunities for social integration.

The survey indicates that waste pickers have limited access to essential social services, including healthcare, education, and social security benefits. Their informal employment status excludes them from formal labour protections, leaving them without a safety net in times of need.

The survey also highlights gender disparities within the waste picker community. Female waste pickers often earn less than their male counterparts and face additional challenges, such as balancing work with domestic responsibilities. These gender-based inequalities further exacerbate the vulnerabilities of women in this sector.

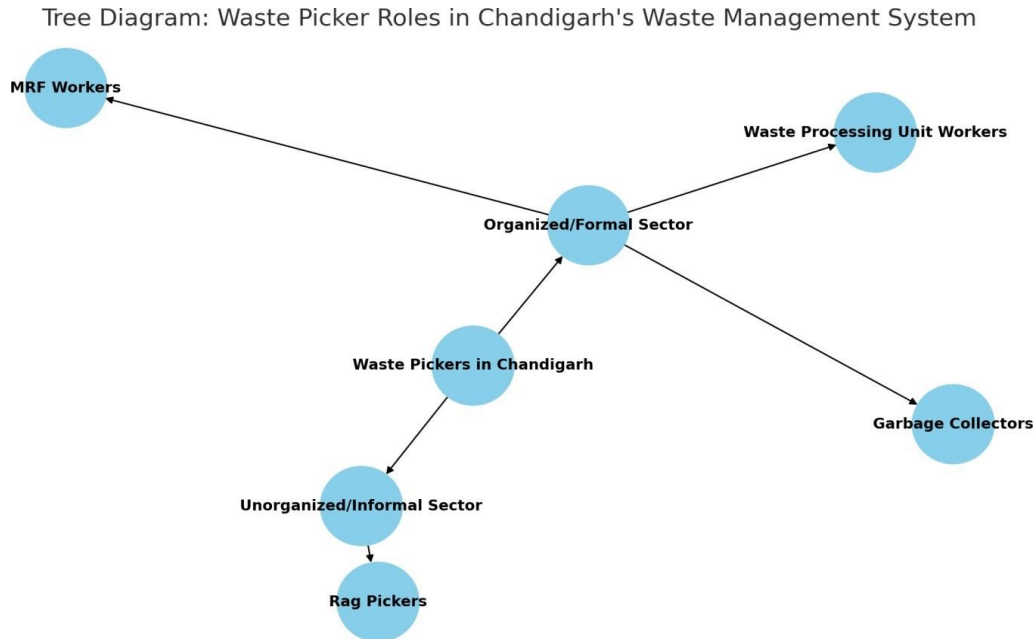
The survey paints a grim picture of the socio-economic conditions faced by waste pickers, underscoring the urgent need for targeted interventions. Addressing their economic vulnerabilities, improving living conditions, ensuring health and safety, enhancing access to education and social services and reducing social stigma are critical steps towards uplifting this marginalized community.

Acknowledging the vital role that waste pickers play in urban waste management and integrating them into formal systems with appropriate protections and benefits is essential for their empowerment and for the sustainability of waste management practice.

This survey also explores their potential as valuable partners in achieving a more sustainable and efficient waste management system for Chandigarh.

II. Material and Methodology:

Chandigarh, known as the City Beautiful, boasts meticulous urban planning, with its landscape divided into 56 rectangular sectors and surrounded by 26 villages. It serves as a vibrant cultural and educational hub, adorned with green spaces and modern infrastructure, making it an attractive destination for people from various regions.



To study the target group of our survey, we adopted a **random sampling methodology** to ensure a diverse representation of waste pickers across Chandigarh. This approach includes both **urban and rural areas**, covering sectors and localities where waste pickers are most active. By doing so, the survey aims to capture a **broad spectrum of demographics** and **socio-economic backgrounds** for a comprehensive analysis.

Surveyed Areas:

Responses were gathered from the following **sectors and localities** in Chandigarh:

- **Urban Sectors:** 12, 14, 21, 24, 25D, 32C, 36, 38 West, 39, 39 West, 41, 42, 46, 47, 49, 50, 52D, 55, and 56.
- **Rural and Peripheral Areas:** Attawa, Dadumajra, Maloya, Dhanas, Ram Darbar, Palsora, BATERLA, KAJEHRI, and Manimajra.

Timeline of the Project

The timeline for this survey was structured to accommodate both **data collection** and **analysis phases** within a constrained period:

Pre-Planning (Week 1):

- Development of the survey questionnaire and methodology.
- Identification of target areas and sample size estimation.

Data Collection (Weeks 2–4):

- Field visits to identified sectors and localities for random sampling.
- Collection of responses through structured interviews and observations.

Data Compilation and Analysis (Weeks 5–6):

- Collation of survey data and initial organization.

- Statistical and thematic analysis to identify key trends and insights.

Report Preparation and Review (Weeks 7–8):

- Drafting of findings and recommendations.
- Peer review and finalization of the survey report.

This systematic approach ensures that the study provides a **holistic understanding of the waste pickers' community**, highlighting key challenges and actionable recommendations within the constraints of the project's timeline.

Survey Design

The questionnaire for waste pickers was structured to gather information on various aspects¹.

¹http://www.dbrcindia.org/images/publications/Waste_Pickers_Study_Report_2017.pdf

This questionnaire covered demographic factors such as gender, age, marital status, family size, education and income level, daily working time and maximum hours. Additionally, it delved into safety and health considerations, including any health issues or morbidities experienced in the past year, habits related to smoking and alcohol consumption, challenges encountered in their workplace and their utilization of protective equipment.

Furthermore, the questionnaire also aimed to gauge their awareness of wellness schemes and their access to essential amenities such as water, electricity, medical services, and sanitation hygiene. Importantly, it sought to capture waste pickers own perspectives on their profession we have adopted interview approach too along questionnaire to interact our target group for better understanding.

This Survey has been conducted in three phases:

Sampling Strategy

Stratified sampling was used to ensure representation from different areas encompassing both urban and rural areas of Chandigarh. Respondents were targeted, based on a calculated sample size to ensure statistical significance. To gather questionnaire-based data, waste pickers were chosen based on the sources from which they collect waste.

Number of Survey Samples Collected

A total of 1,122 samples were collected for this study, comprising 675 door-to-door waste pickers, 22 Material Recovery Facility (MRF) workers, and 425 rag pickers. Out of these, 254 waste pickers and 92 rag pickers were registered through questionnaire forms. Additional information was gathered through comprehensive group discussions with rag picker's families, sanitary inspectors at Sehaj Safai Kendra, MRF personnel, and waste picker organizations, providing a thorough understanding of the waste picker population.

Sampling Method

We engaged participants by having them fill out questionnaire forms and conducted interviews at their convenience to gather detailed insights into their living and working conditions. Despite our efforts, it is important to acknowledge that time constraints limited our ability to register more waste pickers and to capture the full extent of the situation. Nevertheless, the data collected offers valuable insights and represents a significant portion of the waste picker community.

Data Collection

The profiling of waste pickers was conducted during their regular work hours while they were on door-to-door waste collection jobs. To address challenges encountered while engaging with rag pickers during these times, we expanded our approach. We also conducted outreach at dump yards and roadside locations, as well as at scrap dealers' sites and nearby colonies where waste pickers reside or store their collected waste. This broader strategy enabled more effective communication and data collection.

Unstructured interviews were conducted to gain a deeper understanding of the participant's experiences, perspectives, and emotions by allowing the conversation to flow naturally without the constraints of predefined questions. These interviews organized through group meetings at various locations like Maloya, Dadumajra, Kajheri, waste processing units, Material Recovery Facilities (MRF), and Sehaj Safai Kendras in Sectors 22, 24, 36, 41, and 42 by eco-scouts and investigators.

Structured interviews with officials of Chandigarh Municipal Corporation, Supervisors at the MRFs and representatives of Waste Picker Association were organized. This phase aimed to supplement questionnaire data with qualitative insights.

Earlier, Employment in waste-picking was characterized by informal service charge fixation purely through interaction between house-owners and waste-pickers, where their low bargaining power leads to a surprisingly low level of income with significant variations due to gender. In February 2021, the Municipal Corporation, Chandigarh declared its intention to take charge of the door-to-door waste collection system. To facilitate this transition, Initially 390 vehicles were purchased to collect waste throughout the

city. In December 2021, Door to Door waste Collectors Society which represents the majority of the unorganized sector, gave consent for signing agreements between waste pickers and Municipal Corporation, Chandigarh Administration.

Total 924 waste pickers who were already engaged in door to door waste collection in Chandigarh were enrolled for 2 years. Additionally, this MOU has been extended until further agreement is reached between both beneficiaries during 2024. It's noteworthy that door-to-door waste picking has been categorized within the organized sector now. This recognition marks a significant step forward, potentially resulting in enhanced working conditions, formalized employment opportunities and improved access to benefits for waste pickers. Furthermore, negotiations are underway to finalize a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) aimed at formalizing arrangements for approximately 100 waste pickers operating in commercial zones.

Need of Socio Economic Survey of Present Plight of Waste Pickers in Chandigarh

Inspired by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) India's Baseline analysis on Safai Sathis, or waste pickers, released on January 25, 2022, we aim to conduct a study on a smaller scale in Chandigarh, renowned as one of India's most well-planned cities.

This survey delves into the livelihood conditions of waste pickers and their occupational and social mobility in Chandigarh. This ground truth survey employs an evidence-based methodology to thoroughly investigate the challenges faced by the waste picker community, to gather empirical data that will shed light on the livelihood conditions of waste pickers in the city. Through this rapid assessment survey, we seek to identify specific areas where interventions can be directed to improve the lives of waste pickers

This study has been completed with utmost sincerity and hope that our analysis will help the administration to take more concrete steps for improving the living and working conditions of waste pickers in the area of Chandigarh.

Objectives:

Demographic Analysis:

- Assess waste pickers' distribution across various age groups, gender dimensions, marital status, and migration trends to understand the population dynamics.

Education and Employment Patterns:

- Evaluate their educational levels and that of their family members.
- Understand their income levels, working hours, waste collection methods, and site selection.
- Investigate the reasons for entering the occupation and their tenure in the field.

Housing and Amenities:

- Examine the type of housing and their access to basic amenities like toilets, electricity, and drinking water to assess living standards and quality of life.

Health and Documentation:

- Assess their access to medical facilities and possession of identification documents.
- Explore their involvement in subsidiary work alongside waste picking.

Addiction and Harassment:

- Investigate the prevalence of addiction and document the challenges and harassments they face in their daily lives.

Social Dynamics:

- Examine the social stigma and discrimination faced by waste pickers.
- Highlight the absence or inadequacy of social protection for them.

Economic Challenges and Wage Disparities:

- Assess the challenges in accessing fair wages and identify wage disparities.
- Emphasize the need for policy interventions to secure economic stability and improve their quality of life.

This study aims to offer a holistic understanding of the conditions and barriers waste pickers face while underscoring the urgent need for targeted policies and support systems. It aspires to improve their livelihoods, reduce inequalities, and promote their integration into the formal economy.

III. Results:

Size of Family

The survey revealed that 49% families of respondents consist of 4-5-member family with spouse and children followed by 23% having between 6-10 family members with parents, spouses, children and siblings. Remaining 16% are solely with their spouse, while the 12% live alone here as their families are at their native place. The size of a family can significantly impact its socio-economic status. Larger families often face challenges in providing for basic needs.

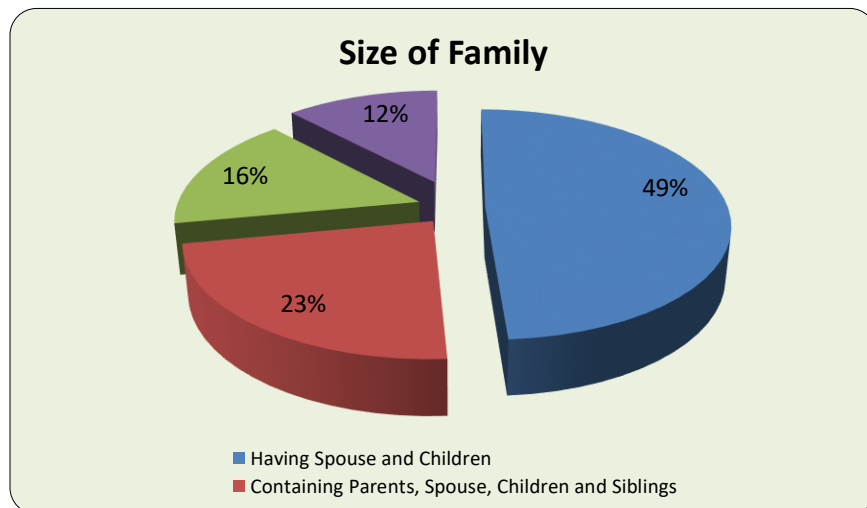


Fig. 1: Size of the

Family

Migration Pattern

Migration pattern among waste pickers: The present study reveals that out of 1122 samples collected, 674 respondents were native of Chandigarh as their families long back migrated from nearby states and settled over here. Further, we found that 219 respondents were from Uttar Pradesh, 167 from Haryana, 39 from Punjab and 23 respondents were from other states of India. It is revealed that the majority of the respondents were from Uttar Pradesh followed by Haryana state.

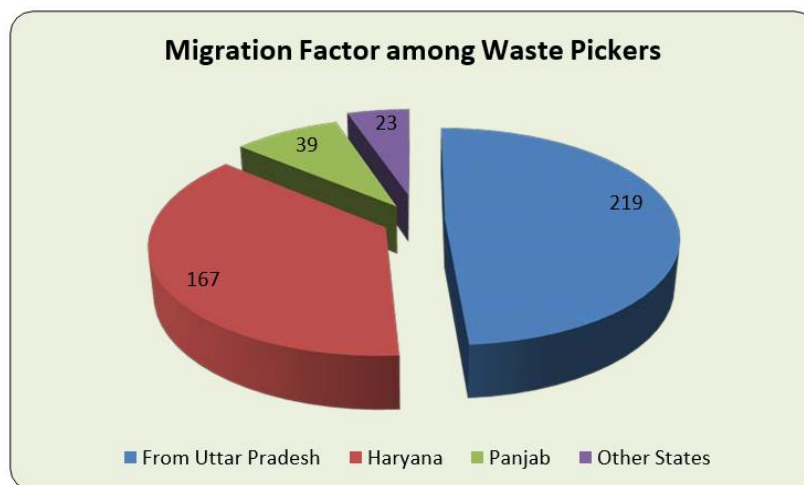


Fig. 2: Migration Pattern among Waste Pickers

Social Support and Community Engagement/Association for waste pickers

Community engagement is exemplified through a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the association representing a significant number of respondents and the Municipal Corporation (MC) of Chandigarh. Among the total 1122 surveyed individuals, 695 are part of this MoU arrangement. This partnership signifies a collaborative effort between the association and the local government, demonstrating a shared commitment to address community needs. By working directly for the MC Department of Chandigarh and conducting door-to-door surveys, these individuals actively participate in community initiatives endorsed by both their association and the municipal authorities.

On the other hand, the remaining 427 respondents, who work independently, also contribute to community engagement by directly interacting with residents during their surveys. While they may not be part of a formal MoU, their efforts are integral to understanding and addressing the needs of the community. Overall, both groups play vital roles of association in community engagement, whether through formal partnerships or independent initiatives, ultimately working towards the betterment of their shared environment.

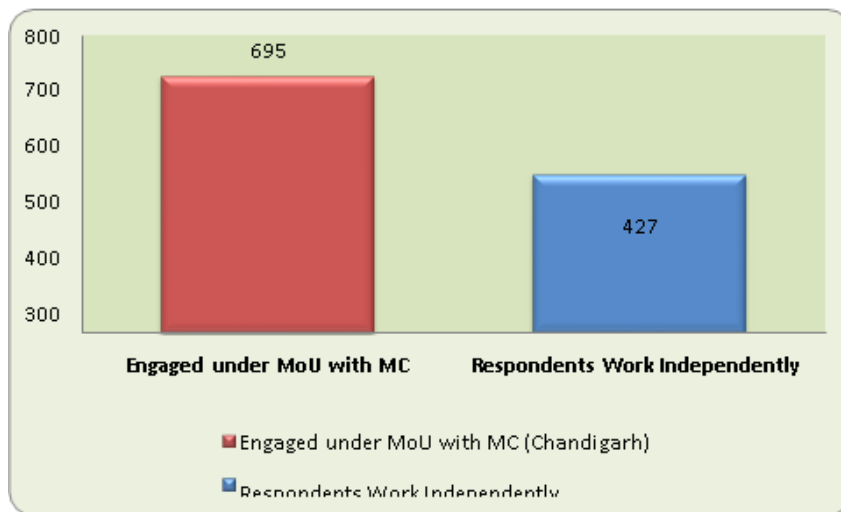


Fig. 3: Association of Waste Pickers

Awareness about the Government Welfare Schemes for marginalized

It is examined that Waste pickers generally have limited awareness about government welfare schemes available for residents of marginalized communities. Out of 1122 survey samples, only 24% were found to be receiving old age pension, and 14% were receiving widow pension. Despite the existence of schemes such as the Rashtriya Swasthya Bima Yojna (National Health Insurance Scheme) and scholarships for children of parents engaged in unclean occupations relevant to waste picking, none of the surveyed individuals had accessed these benefits.

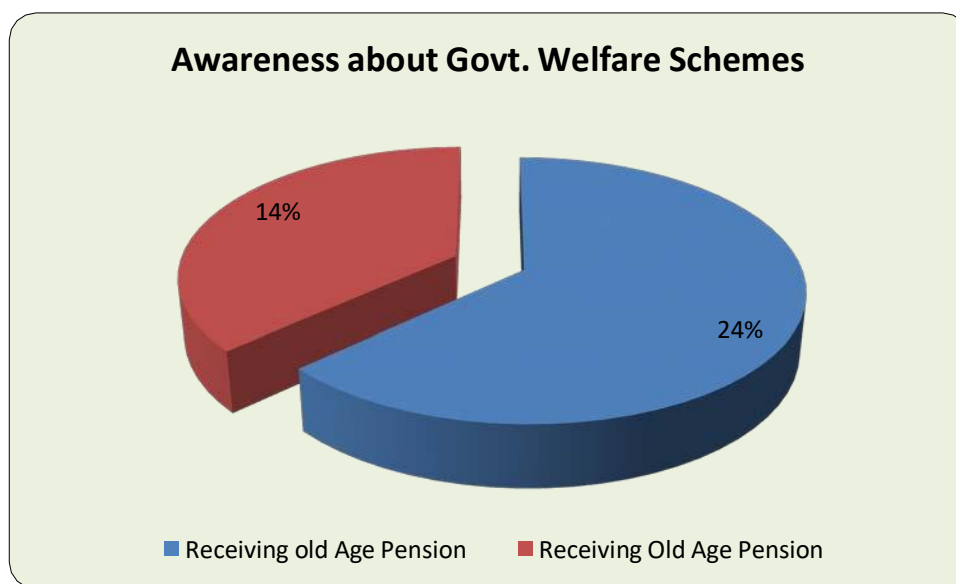


Fig. 4: Awareness about Govt. Welfare Schemes

Facilities for the Waste Pickers in Organized Sector

It is observed that Waste pickers of the organized sector who are enrolled under MoU are allotted four Sundays off and three holidays annually, which include Diwali, Holi and Balmiki Jayanti. They are provided with insurance coverage that encompasses rupees 2.5 lakhs to mitigate the risks associated with death at the workplace and rupees 40 lakhs in the unfortunate event of accidental death while on duty. There is **No retirement age** in this occupation and if a waste picker passes away the job opportunity is offered to their immediate family members as a form of support. Quarterly, waste pickers receive 2 kilograms of jaggery, 2 litres of body oil and 6 bars of soap. Additionally, they are provided with rubber gloves on a monthly basis with an unlimited supply of

disposable gloves available. Furthermore, tools required for safe collection and loading are provided to ensure their well-being. The dispensaries located in Sectors 38, 49, 50 and 51 provide medical treatments and basic tests free of charge for the waste pickers who are enrolled with the Municipal Corporation (MC). They are not covered under the government-run-employees provident fund scheme which covers all employees including daily wages who earn less than a threshold amount.

Struggle of Waste Pickers in Unorganized Sector

In the unorganized sector, individuals typically work a minimum of 8 to 12 hours, often making adjustments within their families to accommodate their work schedules. In many cases males engage in rag picking in the mornings while females attend to household duties. Subsequently, females venture out in groups for rag picking till afternoon while men pursue other alternate employment opportunities. Rag picker's living conditions are often dire with many residing in rundown homes and surrounded by piles of non-recyclable waste. Despite the challenges, they diligently separate the garbage they bring home, highlighting the stark socio economic disparities prevalent in society. Conversely rag picking is often passed down through generations and is typically undertaken by individuals who are born into the occupation. They are predominantly illiterate and lack formal skills. Education is often not a priority for them or their children leading to the involvement of the younger generation in rag picking as well.

This sector lacks coverage under any social security schemes exacerbating their financial insecurities. Waste Pickers frequently lack access to government schemes and welfare programs aimed at supporting marginalized communities leaving them unaware of the assistance available to them. Waste Pickers face considerable instability in their earnings, which fluctuate depending on factors such as the availability of scrap at source, demand for recyclable materials and prevailing market rates. This uncertainty poses a significant challenge, making it hard for them to effectively plan and budget for their families' needs.

Moreover with its ease of entry like no education, no investment and few skills picked up from other pickers in the job making it an attractive option in comparison with other wages employment. It is noted that a small fraction of individuals, particularly those struggling with addiction or extreme poverty may resort to theft in order to obtain more waste materials, thereby increasing their earnings or satisfying their addiction.

The survey highlights the vulnerability of waste pickers who face social exclusion, lack of social security, unstable earnings and heightened health and environmental risks due to their occupation.

Perception of Society about Waste Pickers

During our survey, we randomly questioned individuals from various walks of life about their opinion about waste pickers and the findings revealed that there is a prevailing perception of distrust and suspicion towards them particularly among those who do not engage in what is commonly perceived as productive work. Some view waste pickers as carriers of diseases due to their living conditions amidst filth. There's also a misconception that waste pickers contribute to making the city dirty, despite their essential role in sorting out waste materials. It's indeed unfortunate that there is a prevalent stereotype portraying waste pickers, particularly rag pickers, as thieves.

When we ask our students to share their opinions about waste pickers, they often recount childhood warnings by their elders 'Not to go near Them', as they were told that they kidnap children. Consequently, these ingrained perceptions lead to a lack of appreciation for waste pickers, perpetuating discrimination against them.

Challenges faced by investigators during Survey

It was challenging to engage with these individuals during their working hours because there was limited time available for conversations due to their focus on work tasks.

All waste pickers were highly aware of their rights and the social risks. Consequently, maximum refused to allow our eco scouts to take pictures and were unwilling to share their addresses and phone numbers.

In unauthorized colonies, we made the decision not to bring along our eco scouts due to safety concerns. However, this choice may have resulted in a smaller data sample.

Visiting places like the SSK, MRFs, and Garbage Processing Unit posed risks, but it was essential to comprehend their work environment and assess their current status. We implemented special safety measures to ensure our visits were conducted safely.

Initially, encountering reluctance to share their experiences, we sought assistance from higher-level representatives within the waste pickers' community to facilitate open dialogue and encourage candid conversation.

IV. Conclusion

Waste pickers are the unsung heroes who play a crucial role in keeping our cities clean ensuring our health. They have the power to influence and enhance our country's Swachh ranking. The rapid growth of population, coupled with increasing urbanization and rising living standards, has led to a significant surge in solid waste generation in Chandigarh. This trend is further exacerbated by technological innovations that have introduced new products and packaging materials into the market. Consequently, both the quantity and quality of solid waste have seen a marked increase

In response to this growing challenge, waste pickers play a crucial role in managing Chandigarh's solid waste. They scavenge through garbage bins, landfill sites, dump yards, lakesides, streets, roads, and commercial areas, collecting and sorting recyclable materials. Despite their informal status, waste pickers contribute significantly to the city's waste management efforts by diverting recyclable materials from landfills and reducing environmental pollution.

However, it's essential to recognize the inherent challenges faced by waste pickers, including precarious working conditions, inadequate access to social protections and limited recognition of their contributions. Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach that involves collaboration between government authorities, civil society organizations and the private sector to ensure the inclusion and well-being of waste pickers in Chandigarh's waste management ecosystem.

The Municipal Corporation of Chandigarh is implementing commendable solid waste management practices as compared to adjacent cities and towns. However, there is still room for improvement, especially in uplifting waste pickers, when compared to cities like Indore and Pune. Despite the basic amenities and medical facilities provided by the Chandigarh Municipal Corporation, there is a need for greater focus on the welfare of waste pickers.

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12. Pic: Meeting with Dr. Vinay Mohan, MOH Municipal Corporation, Chandigarh



Pic: Meeting with Mr. Dharambir and Mr. Bijender Dulgch, President and General Secretary respectively, Door to Door Garbage Collection Society, Chandigarh (Chd. Regd. No. 3477)



Pic: Mr. Harvinder Singh, Sanitary Inspector and Supervisor Mr. Gurdit Singh, the Municipal Corporation, Chandigarh, proved to be a valuable source of information.