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Social stigmas and the waste collection scheme

Mariëlle Snel, WEDC.

THE PURPOSE OF the following paper is to highlight the going debate presented in the previous WEDC conference paper on the role of NGOs/CBOs in solid waste management in Hyderabad (India) (Refer to Snel, 1998). The purpose of this paper is to create a better understanding of the 'integrated'(linked) perception of waste and how this affects those working in, for example, primary waste collection schemes.

This paper will briefly examine solid waste management in Hyderabad. It will go on to focus on a short description of the community-based waste collection scheme. After this it will describe the perceptual changes towards waste workers emerging specifically in urban areas. Finally there will be a focus on the future of the scheme specifically with the potential threat that privatisation may bring towards waste workers in the scheme.

Background on solid waste management in hyderabad

From the time since its colonial heyday, Hyderabad has developed into a major industrial city. Its population has grown from about one million at the time of Independence in 1947 to over 3 million at present¹ which makes it the sixth largest city of India. If one takes into consideration the wider area of the Hyderabad Urban Developed Authority,

this estimate is around 4 million. As a result, current quantities of solid waste generated per day in Hyderabad are estimated to be between 1,300 and 1,500 metric tons approximately, with the presumption that an average middle class household throws away 350 grams of waste daily. Consequently the Municipal Corporation of Hyderabad (MCH) is not able to clear all of its waste due to numerous administrative/organisational problems and financial deficits (Reddy, 1994). Although all accumulated waste is officially supposed to be collected every other day, a daily backlog of between 100 to 500 metric tonnes of waste remains. This backlog is disposed of in various ways, such as burning by residences or collection by scavengers, but some waste remains piled on unused pieces of land, often close to or within residential quarters and causing a permanent threat to the city's health.

Community-based waste collection scheme

Since 1993 the Municipal Corporation of Hyderabad(MCH) has been experimenting with waste disposal schemes in different areas of Hyderabad. The scheme under the jurisdiction of MCH, started in June 1993, and is managed by community-based or neighbourhood-based organizations (CBOs or NBOs) within middle and upper income areas. At

Table 1. Solid waste generated and disposed by administrative division in Hyderabad (1994) (in metric tonnes)

Circle	Total Waste Generated Per Day	No. of Vehicles	Total waste lifted Per Day	Waste left over Per Day
1	181	28	164	17
2	117	23	96	21
3	238	25	184	54
4	144	21	106	38
5	131	14	110	21
6	150	16	130	20
7	210	27	150	60
Total	1171	154	940	231

Source: Snel, 1997.

present 167 colonies with around 100,000 households, are involved in this type of scheme. The scheme is also taking place in 217 slum areas, some of which are managed by the Department of International Development² (DFID) (for simplicity's sake all these areas are called DFID *slum areas*). This type of scheme also functions with the help of CBOs or NBOs and comprises a total of 190,000 households (MCH, 1994). In addition to colonies, and slums involved in the scheme, 12 vegetable markets with biodegradable waste have been selected to take part (Refer to Snel, 1999a for more information on this aspect).

There are various economic objectives in this particular waste disposal scheme, which include:

- to make waste management more effective by establishing a house-to-house collection scheme with the help of waste pickers and other actors of the informal recycling sector; and
- to pursue the recycling of biodegradable waste by re-establishing the production of compost through vermiculture composing with the help of earthworms.

The present waste disposal scheme entails the employment of one or two unemployed youths (or adults) in each residential area, usually belonging to the area; at present they are recruited from among unemployed people and not yet from the group of people already active as waste pickers. Every day between 06:00 am and 09:00 am, the youth or 'waste collector' visits the homes involved in the scheme to collect their waste. The waste is dumped in a box (200 Kg capacity) that has been fitted on a tricycle, (the scheme therefore is often called the Tricycle scheme). Once all the waste is finally collected from each household it is dumped in one of the M.C.H. bins or in one of the "garbage houses" (at present an extra one hundred are being constructed). The waste dumped in either place is then cleared by the M.C.H. conservancy staff on a day-to-day basis (Refer to Snel, 1999b for a detailed overview of the scheme).

One of the key elements of the project is the involvement of waste pickers in the scheme. The eventual goal is the rehabilitation of between 10,000 and 20,000 of the approximately 35,000 waste pickers in Hyderabad. This 'labour-intensive' scheme would therefore provide workers with on-the-job vocation training and a steady income.

Perception of waste

In Hyderabad, and throughout India, the perception of waste, due partly to the Hindu culture and caste system, unavoidably affects peoples' behavior and attitudes towards both the formal and informal³ waste management sector, and especially with regards to the actors involved in the collection element of the voluntary waste disposal scheme (Snel, 1999b, 1999c). A survey which was conducted between 1993-94 on the voluntary waste disposal scheme in Hyderabad, however indicates a change in attitude by participating households towards the employment of waste pickers in the scheme. This implies a growing understand-

ing among citizens of the specific capabilities of street waste pickers, as a result of the educational activities of NBOs and CBOs. Yet, although there is more optimism regarding this aspect of the scheme, around half of the citizens in both Municipal Corporation of Hyderabad (MCH) and DFID slum areas remain reluctant to hire waste picker(s) for the scheme. This hesitation signifies that negative stigmas towards the possible hiring of waste pickers who often belong to the untouchable class, still remain, demonstrating that many people are not content with 'this underclass of people' working in their neighborhood. Undeniably, the prevailing system of waste collection by *kamatees* and *kamatans*, many of whom are from the untouchable class, still affects how people view the waste issue (India Today, 1994; The Hindu Magazine, 1994).

Changing perceptions

I would argue that much research in the past focused on workers found in the lowest ranks of the informal recycling sector who continue to be perceived as having 'inferior' and 'polluting' occupations, as noted earlier. However, except in the last two decades, only a few researchers, professionals in government, universities and institutions, inside India, have been focusing on the significant effect this group may have on the future of solid waste management in India (Furedy, 1994a, 1994b; Huysman and Baud, 1994; Snel, 1997 and 1999b, 1999c; Unni, C.V, Namboothiri, D, and Joseph, C., 1993).

It is specifically Furedy (1989), who notes that *changes in the perception* of waste workers among the Indian population can be reported. She writes that although the cultural values remain deep-seated with regards to those working with waste, whether they be in the formal or informal sector, there are signs that communities are starting to change their attitudes. This has been cited in more recent studies, such as by Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (1994), who focused on solid waste, urban development and waste pickers in India.

According to the researchers, although social prejudices specifically towards waste pickers continue, they have become considerably weaker in urban areas than in rural India; waste pickers are given a better chance to improve their social standing in cities than in their home village (Venkateswaran, 1994). Existing literature reveals that within urban areas traditional roles are less defined and allow for more flexibility. City life has always given rise to opportunities for people from all walks of life, and in this respect Indian cities are no exception (See Baker, 1990; Stern, 1993). In addition, there is also a new movement in cities such as in Hyderabad, toward starting to view waste pickers as entrepreneurs in their own right, although this is proceeding slowly.

This shift in attitude demonstrates a diversity of economic opportunities in the informal recycling sector, based on supplies from all segments of the community and on deliveries to dealers and enterprises which can make good profits from waste materials. It appears that income earned,

however much or little this may be, overrides social stigmas attached to this work. Therefore, although respondents still perceive this type of work as demeaning, on the whole, the employment of waste pickers in the waste disposal scheme does represent a realistic option for future decisions to improve municipal waste management. However, the role of NBOs in supporting these advances remains indispensable.

Privatisation involvement

Nevertheless, as long as social stigmas with respect to waste workers still prove to be problematic, the danger remains that in the future the Municipal Corporation of Hyderabad (MCH) may decide to contract private companies to perform more functions of municipal waste management services. As Venkateswaran (1994) indicates, ongoing privatisation of municipal waste services may actually negatively affect the more vulnerable group of waste pickers. She specifically refers to a case in which a private municipal waste management entrepreneur negotiated a waste collection contract in a specific area of Pune, where an organised group of women waste pickers used to do a house to house collection of recyclable materials. The private entrepreneur was able to convince residents that his company would do a better job of collecting the waste for a lower cost. At the same time the private entrepreneur promised to get rid of the waste pickers, if they could do the collection on a house to house basis and acquired the sole right to buy recyclable materials (Venkateswaran, 1994).

The success of this type of 'private enterprise invasion' reflects the continuing and deep-seated biases against waste-pickers and shows the subsequent damage that can easily be done to these actors in the informal sector of waste management. The preoccupation of local governments with privatisation also shows a lack of concern for the economic advancement of the urban poor.

Conclusion

Although social stigma of waste pickers in the waste collection scheme in Hyderabad is slowly changing, I would nevertheless argue that it remains a problematic issue. Therefore more pressure needs to be exerted on the MCH by NGOs and citizens to acknowledge the importance of waste pickers. In turn these groups should demand that the local governments takes on the responsibility to protect the waste disposal scheme as well as the rights of waste pickers included in such schemes.

Finally this entails that the MCH should consistently pursue the social aspects of the waste disposal schemes by supporting awareness campaigns so that citizens start to appreciate the vital role informal recycling of waste management actors play in urban waste management services.

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¹ The Hyderabad Development Authority and the Mega city development project estimated that Hyderabad had a population of more than 4 million inhabitants by the year 2000.

² DFID was called the Overseas Development Administration in the previous elected U.K. government.

³ Informal sector refers is described as 'associated with unregistered, unregulated activities, individual and family enterprises, small-scale and low capital inputs, local materials, and labour-intensive techniques' (Furedy, 1989.p.14).

Dr Marielle Snel, Urban services specialist in the Urban Infrastructure Unit at WEDC.
