



# THE TREASURE OF **TRASH**



Banav Bibi sorts through trash in an upscale South Delhi colony.



*In the race to modernise before the Commonwealth Games Delhi's trashpicker's are being left behind*

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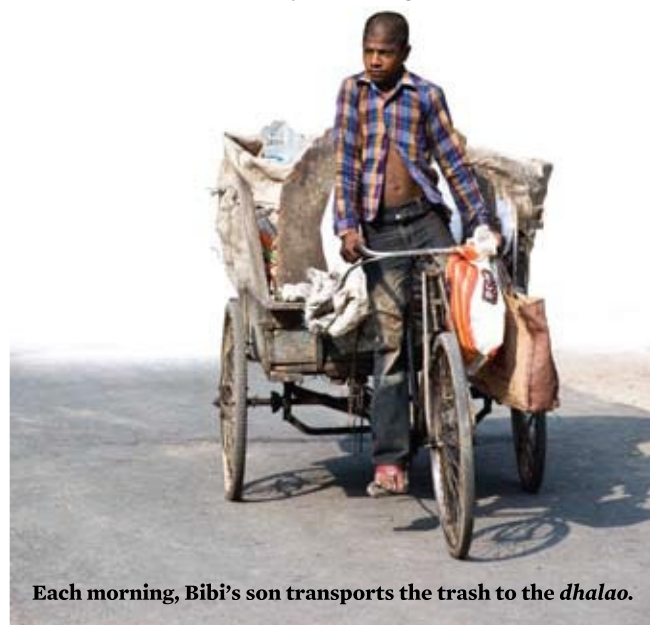
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**B**ANAV BIBI IS NOT A BANGLADESHI. She wants everyone to know this. She shouted it to the policeman who accused her son of being an illegal immigrant, arrested him, and beat him up. She said it to the rich madam-ji in one of the homes from which she picks up trash, when she was accused of stealing and not allowed to enter. And she told the *jamadarni*, the neighbourhood head of the waste collectors, who hired goons to run her out of the area. If they want proof, they can look at her identity card. “Bangladesh is an entirely different country,” she says. “They have a different way of talking. We are from Kolkata, which is in India.”

Bibi, a door-to-door garbage collector and wastepicker, sorts through trash near the Seemapuri slum in East Delhi. She’s collected it and transported it 16 kilometres from one of the homes on her route in the D-block of the posh Sunder Nagar colony, in South Delhi. Plastic bag, yes. It will sell for five rupees per kilogram. Scraps of paper, yes. 1.25 rupees per kilogram. Glass, one rupee per kilogram. Tin, two rupees. Packet of chips. No. Some kinds of plastic just won’t sell.

Bibi, as she is affectionately known, belongs to West Bengal’s Muslim minority. While her family, and many others like them, migrated to Delhi right after Independence in 1947, there are also a large number of illegal immigrants from Bangladesh in the wastepicking business here. Because they speak Bengali and resemble fellow workers from across the border, people like Bibi are discriminated against, harassed, and often picked up by the police, who take bribes to release them.

Qurban Ali, Bibi’s 16-year-old son who works with her every day, has just found a calculator. He hands it to her, takes it back when she’s not interested, looks it over and presses the buttons to see if it still works. It does. He moves around the piece of machinery in his hand with a hint of fascination, finally throwing it in with the rest of



Each morning, Bibi’s son transports the trash to the *dhalao*.

the recyclable material.

He has no other use for it.

**B**IBI'S HANDS tell her story. A scratch for each time she's been beaten and abused. A cut for every time she's had to bail her sons out of jail. A bruise for the many times she thought she couldn't take it any more.

There are, too, the wounds that no one can see. The wounds of loss that fail to heal. The son who died, the son who left, the physically abused daughter who returned from her husband's home. The children who never went to school, the children who never will.

"There are glass pieces, blades, and other sharp material that have been thrown into the dustbin," she says, observing the marks on her hands as if for the first time. "I sort very carefully, but once or twice a day, we'll miss something, and get a cut."

Bibi is part of an informal wastepicking hierarchy that has existed in the country for decades. In India's culture of recycling, nothing goes to waste, and there is always someone willing to buy it. A specialised scrap collector is a staple of every neighbourhood and community, buying from home owners old newspapers, glass and plastic bottles, and metals, to sell to even more specialised wholesale buyers. Below him are the waste collectors like Bibi, who get the other trash from the residents. At the bottom of the chain are the wastepickers at the landfill—sorting through what has already gone through two layers of peeling, and is usually material that the others have missed.

There are approximately 150,000 wastepickers in Delhi alone, who collect the garbage the city throws out, and sort through it for recyclable material. Constituting one percent of the city's population, they are forced by poverty and discrimination onto the *dhalao*s and landfills, where they start work early, making between 150 to 300 rupees a day. Some start as young as age six.

Every morning, 45-year-old Bibi leaves home at five am so she can reach the upper middle-class Sunder Nagar neighbourhood before most of the residents leave for their offices. Many will put their garbage bags outside their front door from where Bibi will take them, throwing the contents in her cart, putting in a bag what she thinks will sell, segregating the rest to the side to be later thrown into the *dhalao*, the community dumpster. While the rich residents have drivers, live-in household help, and spend a large amount of their disposable incomes on entertainment, no one pays Bibi for this service of door-to-door collection. Instead, whatever money she makes will depend on what she's found in the residents' garbage that day. Paper is good, plastic is better, metal is the best.

**L**AST WEEK, the jamadarni hired goons to beat up Bibi and her two sons, because she was afraid they were stealing her business. As they hit her, right on the street, she called out to the building owners, the people who've watched her work on these same lanes for 18 years. She ran up to their doors, rang the doorbells, and cried for them to intervene. No one did. Now they keep calling her, but she refuses to take their garbage. They've pleaded with

her, but she is adamant.

"Now they want me to take their garbage?" she says. "How can I? When I was being beaten, they all went inside and locked their doors. This house, and this house, and the one behind this one, here," she points out. "What if they had finished me right here, those goons with the knives? I'm a woman with children, all alone."

Her defiant stance soon turns to frustration. The less scrap she collects, the fewer rupees she will make. Out of pride, she will refuse today and maybe even tomorrow. But eventually, she'll start collecting again. She always does. Every time she's beaten, and each time her boys are accused of thievery, she eventually comes back. "It's so disgusting, this work," she says. "But does the stomach listen? We can't get any other work, that is why we're here."

Just a few months ago, the police caught her 14-year-old son and accused him of stealing. "Someone jumped from one of the buildings, and my boy was standing downstairs collecting garbage, so they arrested him and locked him up." Bibi called the local NGO and got them to negotiate the release of her son, but it cost her half a day's work and two days worth of cash.

"If we were thieves, why would we bother doing this dirty work?" she asks.

Like other door-to-door collectors, Bibi started out working as a wastepicker in the landfills when she was 16. Almost immediately after she got married a few years later, her new husband fell ill and she became the sole breadwinner for the family. "It's been over 17 years and not one rupee he can earn," she says. "How will I run the household? So I bring the boys here and they help me do the work."

The two boys go up the stairs of each house and bring down the trash to the cart, where Bibi stands and picks out the scrap she can sell. They will carry the finds of the day to a storage area near their home. Twice a month, the whole family sits down and sorts all the collected material, making heaps of plastic, paper, metal and other random materials. Then they go to the buyer—the middleman—and sell it by the kilogram. The middleman will sell the material in even larger quantities, by the tonne, to the scrap recyclers.

**I**N AN ATTEMPT TO MAKE the city greener and cleaner for the Commonwealth Games to be held in New Delhi in October, the government has been experimenting with several new ventures, including a plan to privatise the city's waste collection systems. Until now, this work has been handled by the informal sector, which is not recognised by the government and includes people who pick trash in the landfills, the door-to-door collectors, and two levels of middlemen, who sell plastic, paper and metal to factories to be recycled. Privatisation has already begun in seven of the 12 administrative zones.

Once the trash reaches the *dhalao*, it legally becomes the property of the municipal body. Bibi collects waste and scrap from people's homes, taking what she thinks will sell and depositing the rest in the *dhalao*. It's here, in this dumpster, that most of the door-to-door waste collectors



do their sorting and segregating. A couple of times a day, workers of the municipality empty out the contents of the dumpster into a truck and transport it to one of the city's landfills.

Traditionally, the role of the municipality in cleaning the city, apart from sweeping the streets, has been to transport the garbage from the dumpster to the landfill, something they felt they weren't doing very well and have been trying to privatise for years. All the other steps in the process have been handled by the informal wastepickers. But there's a new thing that started a few months ago in a couple of zones in Delhi, where the government started eyeing door-to-door collection for privatisation as well. This is bad news for the wastepickers, says Bharati Chaturvedi, director of Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group, a New Delhi-based NGO, "because it ensures that there is no room for the urban poor to still find a living in privatisation." There are at least 150,000 waste recyclers, but around 40,000 municipal workers. "Look at who's really keeping the city clean," she says.

According to a Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) presentation, the goal of the municipal body is to have a 'dhalao free city' before the Games, which would essentially involve taking away the space the wastepickers use for their segregation, making their businesses difficult, if not impossible, to run.

But officials disagree. "Look around you," says Ram Pal, councillor at MCD. "The city is filthy and the government staff reeks of inefficiency. Thirty to 40 percent of the workers never even show up to work because they're guaranteed a government job and can't be fired. Privatisation will allow us to streamline certain processes and make the city's trash collection run smoothly."

Over the last decade, Delhi's citizens have voiced their distrust and dissatisfaction with the way the city handles their waste. "I think Delhi in particular, but everywhere else as well in India, there's been this huge crisis of confidence in municipalities," says Chaturvedi.

In the 1990s, India's urban middle and upper-class began to speak out against this inadequacy in the form of Public Interest Litigations (PIL), a legal tool available to citizens to challenge local, state and federal legislations for public interest reasons. While the PILs offered some tangible results such as the enactment of laws, their real achievement was in embarrassing top-level municipal officers, who were required to appear in court and explain their shoddy performance. This pressured them to find answers to the city's compounding waste problem.

The officers, who had, until then, seen waste as a liability and a strain on city budgets, now envisioned it as a source of wealth. By privatising the entire system, they transferred the responsibility of cleaning the city to a private



Sheikh Azhar, 15, scours the Ghazipur landfill for items he can sell to middle-men.

party while capitalising on Delhi's increased volume of waste. The city's trash became the city's treasure.

But no one considered informal workers who were already cleaning up the city's garbage.

Despite the government's intentions, the private contractors are removing and recycling less scrap. Wastepickers tend to do intense and thorough scrap segregation because their next meal depends on it. In contrast, private contractors hire workers who they pay in cash for a day's work. These workers have little incentive to do extensive separation, nor do they have the experience and the knowledge to do so. They often end up removing the bare minimum of recyclables to meet the (verbal) contract requirements and dumping the rest in the landfill.

"I think what's going to happen is exactly what we've seen till now, is that [the wastepickers] will continue to work under even more terrible conditions," Chaturvedi says. "People who pick up the trash are people with very few options. Suddenly from being an informal person, you've become an illegal person, and I think that's the big shift that happens. So the only way to become legal is to become a worker of the municipality."

Indeed, a 2006 World Bank study, while suggesting that cost differences between private and municipal entities were in the range of 20-40 percent, pinned the cause on the fact that "private contractors tend to pay lower than minimum wages to their sanitary workers." What corporate privatisation does, then, is force the wastepickers into these below-minimum wage contracts.

Bibi has little hope of finding a government or private job. She'll continue to work here, she says, no matter what she earns. There doesn't seem to be any other choice.

**F**IFTEEN-YEAR-OLD Sheikh Azhar will never go to school. He went once, in his village near Kolkata, and studied until fifth grade. They taught math, which

he liked, and social sciences, which he didn't.

They've built one over there, over the mountains of rubbish where the landfill ends, he says. It's a free government-run school, but he doesn't want to go. It's too late. "When I first came, there was no one to teach us," he says. "Now they have someone who comes every day, but where is the time?"

It's been a particularly difficult year for recyclers and wastepickers across the spectrum, with prices of recyclable waste materials declining by as much as 50 percent worldwide because of the recession. In a survey conducted by Chintan, 80 percent of wastepicker families interviewed said they had cut down on "luxury foods," which they defined as milk, meat, and fruit. Approximately 41 percent said they had stopped purchasing milk entirely.

"It's total desperation here," says an MCD worker as he looks at the municipal truck dumping its garbage, watching a swarm of wastepickers rushing forward to get what they can find. "These people are so poor, they'll take anything that might even sell for one rupee—shoes, bags, even cloth. The government doesn't really care what happens to them. As long as the city gets clean for the Games."

Ten-year-old Amir Khan claws his way through the masked MCD workers, the older wastepickers who've practically lived on this landfill for decades, and the other children, to reach the trucks just pulling into the edge of the landfill. As they dump their contents on the ground, Amir, along with the others, picks through it to find something, anything of value.

Every few minutes, day and night, trucks from the MCD, the NDMC (New Delhi Municipal Council), and the private companies come to the Ghazipur landfill, one of the biggest in the city. "Ghazipur is a landfill, not a landfill," says Vimlendu Jha, founder of the environmental and social welfare non-profit group Swechha. Each time a truck comes in, it brings with it the smell of rotting food, discarded nappies, and medical supplies. Every time it leaves, there is silence again. Fragments of people's lives crunch below scampering feet. A roll of film, a wedding invitation, wood shavings, an empty bag of chips, a broken piece of coconut, a pink purse, part of a glass bangle, half a toilet seat, photographs of people who once meant something to someone.

It's Amir Khan's second day of work. He's come from Agra, the home of the Taj Mahal, to start a new life here after the debt on his parents became too much back home. "I made 200 rupees yesterday and father made 300," he says. "Others made only 100 or 150."

Amir doesn't know it yet, but these early days are probably also his most profitable. Then, disease sets in.

Chintan estimates that more than 82 percent of the women and 84 percent of the children who work as wastepickers are severely anaemic. Most of them are prone to respiratory illnesses caused by exposure to dust and gastrointestinal diseases caused by eating in unclean surroundings—or eating food from the landfill itself. There's also the unknown fever and nausea that Chaturvedi says many of the workers complain about, which is likely the result of working and living in hazardous conditions, and being malnourished.

**On Amir Khan's second day of work at the Ghazipur landfill, he rummages through discarded trash in the hope of making more than what he did at his father's sweetshop in Agra.**



It seems easy to understand why the government would want to, quite literally, clean up its act, and start hiring outside agencies to alleviate the headaches of child labour, environmental hazards, and health problems, but NGOs contend that privatisation would create new problems without really solving the old ones. "We all have this notion that privatisation means efficiency and a solution, but we don't realise that privatisation has an economic impact, a social impact, and an ecological impact," Jha says. He's also quick to point out the city government's 600,000 rupee daily savings in waste disposal costs.

Furthermore, the wastepickers are the single-largest factor in helping to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions, more than any other new technology in the city. A report released last month by Chintan's research team shows that Delhi's informal trash sector reduces greenhouse gas emissions by an estimated 962,133 tonnes of carbon dioxide each year, over three times more than other waste proj-





ects slated to receive carbon credits in the city. That means the savings are equivalent to removing roughly 175,000 passenger vehicles from the roads annually or providing electricity to about 130,000 homes for one year.

In addition, contracts between the MCD and private contractors state that the contractor has a target to recycle 20 percent of the waste in its eighth year of operation. The informal wastepickers are already recycling up to 60 percent of that waste today.

“Biased recycling privatisation in Delhi should give [environmental] responsibilities, very tangible ones, to the private players,” says Chaturvedi. “We found that this contract had nothing like that. It’s saying, please, have a party.”

India’s rapid urbanisation and economic growth has led to a huge surge in waste, and emissions from the waste sector have grown more than 30 percent since 1995. During this same period, emissions from waste in many countries have levelled off or even declined. This is important,

as gas emissions from waste now account for 6.7 percent of total Indian emissions, a number that is twice the average of other countries in Asia and higher than the global average, which remains at less than five percent.

This high rate of emissions from waste stems largely from a lack of systematic composting at the lower level. “[This high number] is because of organic waste ending up in landfills,” Chaturvedi says. “It’s not good enough to take all the organic waste to a composting factory because you’re still using transportation and fuel. It makes more sense to do decentralised local composting so that there’s sustainability.” In many cities in developed countries, such as San Francisco in the US, however, citizens are encouraged to compost in their backyards, often through cash incentives. Environmentalists feel there is an increasing need to employ such mechanisms in rapidly growing Indian cities.

Current private contractors, however, are paid for each tonne of waste picked up and delivered to the landfill. “[If



Each morning, smoke rises from the mounds of trash on the Ghazipur landfill, where humans and animals find their sustenance.

I'm a private contractor], why would I want you to compost your waste, I'd lose 40-50 percent of my earnings," says Chaturvedi. "If you're going to, on the one hand, say we should do more composting and, on the other, I'm paying you to take more waste, then I think privatisation clashes with really basic ideas of reducing your carbon footprint."

Further, the formal waste management systems currently being implemented by the municipalities in conjunction with the private companies are almost universally in non-compliance with national waste management laws, which state that the waste generated belongs to the municipalities only once it's reached the dhalao, and not at the stage where it's being collected door to door.

A senior official in the MCD who declined to be named because of 'lack of authorisation to speak with the media,' said that the MCD has recommended that new private players use the services of the existing wastepickers, but will make no effort to ensure that it is implemented. Repeated attempts to reach the MCD were met with silence and hanging up on phone calls, and a spokesperson did not reply to emails. But Chaturvedi doesn't believe these recommendations will amount to anything. "When you say privatisation, you presume that no private actors are already in operation, but there are," she says. "The wastepickers are entrepreneurs. The point is to recognise their entrepreneurship."

In April 2009, Colombia's Constitutional Court did just that, voiding a contract for private collection that had cut off wastepickers' access to the landfill. Brazil, too, has re-

cently recognised the legitimacy of informal waste collection. "We would like identical forms of inclusion in India," Chaturvedi says.

**IT'S EASY TO MISS** Sirara's small shop on C block in Jahangirpuri, a colony located a mere eight kilometres from the Delhi University campus and a stop on the Delhi metro.

He is one of the dozens of brokers or middlemen who buy scrap from the wastepickers. The neighbourhood contains rows of these 4-by-4 metre shops where people sit outside, rain or shine, and separate paper from plastic, glass from metal, and throw it into bags for sale to another specialised buyer. The streets are littered with piles of segregated scrap material, as stray dogs stop on their way to sniff at them and small children borrow them as toys. Young women hurry along; there's little place for them in this largely male environment. While 70 percent of women are wastepickers, in these areas, where shopkeepers sit by the sides of the roads for long hours, women are largely unwelcome.

Sirara is upset today. It has rained, which means no one will come by. He's just going to sit here with nothing to do. This worries him because business has been harder of late. The global recession and the credit crunch have impacted on this small shop as well. Running this shop takes capital, Sirara explains. He needs large sums of money—sometimes more than he makes in months—to buy the scrap from the wastepickers and process it for sale. Money that's quickly running out.





**Banav Bibi sits on the side of her road, sipping her daily cup of tea before she starts work in the morning.**

He has many clients: one only buys glass; another, a certain kind of plastic; another, a certain metal. Those buyers will then sell to recyclers who break down the material and sell it to scrap consumers. Lately, though, his clients have been buying less, and he's already invested the money in material he's purchased. The profit is not enough to keep him going—he makes a measly rupee per kilogram—which means he needs to sell several metric tonnes each week to keep afloat.

For most wastepickers, the dream is to become a middleman, yet very few ever get there. According to a survey done by Chintan, 78 percent of middlemen said they had been wastepickers at some point in their lives. That doesn't say, however, how many of the wastepickers ever become middlemen. "Every piece of intuition, knowledge, conversation, and data that I've ever seen suggests that very few wastepickers ever achieve that," says Chaturvedi.

**I**N THE LAST FEW YEARS, India has invested in more than 30 waste-to-energy plants across the country. In order for these Refuse Derived Fuel (RDF) plants to work, however, they need the highest calorific value waste that they can get, which means more paper and plastic. Because of the wastepickers' thorough segregation, India's waste has a low calorific value, and hence the wet organic waste must be dried and briquetted, consuming more energy in the process.

"And here comes the RDF plant at the end of it," says Chaturvedi. "So you've privatised not only collection,

you've privatised what happens at the end."

Environmentalists are critical of RDF plants for that and several other reasons, including that they emit dioxins, thereby harming the health of people in surrounding communities, and can create greenhouse gases. For a country like India, says Chaturvedi, we should be thinking about policies to reduce the waste and use the vast human resources that we have by letting the poor have a share of the modernisation pie. "We have a blank slate that we can draw on," she says. "And we're just throwing away this opportunity."

**I**T'S ALMOST NOON, and Bibi is finally finished for the day. She's going home, but her sons will continue to collect more waste and scrap until late in the afternoon.

She describes her home as a place where, if someone died, there would be no space to take out the body. Eleven people live in her small house in the Seemapuri slum, where, with an income of 150 rupees a day, she's the richest resident. Government workers burned down Bibi's thatched home many times, saying the slum-dwellers had encroached upon the state's land, so the family has now constructed a *pukka* home with concrete walls. The entire family works in the scrap business; only her youngest daughter has ever gone to school.

Inside Bibi's home, on the lap of a social worker, lies Bibi's three-day-old grandson. He will not get into this trade, she says. He will study and go to school and not do the dirty work of his grandmother.

Outside, the sorting continues. ■