

Safai Mitras: A Facelift to the Rag pickers and Sweepers

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Subodh (name changed), belonged to the Musahar community and took to rag-picking¹ when he migrated from his native village to the city around 15 years ago. He would collect rags and other waste from streets and garbage-dumps around Buddha Colony in Patna, Bihar (India) and sell them to itinerant buyers, which earned him a paltry sum of Rs. 50 to Rs. 60 per day on an average, that could go up to a maximum of Rs. 100 on a good day. Though this meagre earning was insufficient for running his household in an urban setting, he had no option! Each day brought new challenges and struggles that included social ostracism and police atrocities. He had no 'voice' in the society!

But Subodh was not alone in his struggle. There were a thousand rag pickers like him, who were going through similar experiences. In the year 2000, Nidan, an organization based in Patna, identified the rag-pickers and their issues and started strategic intervention to bring about positive changes in their lives.

How this was made possible is a story of hope and enormous will-power backed by firm conviction to make it happen...

Background

The rag-pickers and sweepers mainly belonged to the Musahar, or the 'rat seekers' community belonging to the 'social category' of Scheduled Castes or SC. 'Scheduled Castes' in India, is the legal and constitutional name collectively given to groups that have traditionally occupied the lowest status in the society, inferior to all other castes. Their socio-economic status was always considered low and they were treated as 'untouchables'. Post-Independence, various legal safeguards to guarantee the rights of SCs were put in place and untouchability, now, is considered a crime against law. However, even as the social-economic-political-legal situation changed, Musahars, because of the nature of their occupation, were still treated as 'untouchables' in India for a long time. ²

Lack of livelihood options in the village compelled the Musahars to migrate to urban areas in search of better opportunities. But, even in the urban areas, rag picking and sweeping became their easiest option for income generation. The Musahars, thus became the rag pickers and sweepers in the city!

¹ Rag-picking is a profession which involves people who are employed in waste recycling, starting from waste picking to operating small junk shops and operating reprocessing factories. (*Definition by Chintan, NGO*)

² Mukul, 1999, 'The Untouchable Present- The Everyday life of Musahars in North Bihar', *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 4, pp. 3465-70.

But, their 'occupational hazards' were many:

- Their earning potential was a meagre Rs. 50–60 after a full day's toil and this too was irregular and variable to the quantity of waste collected and depended on their negotiation skills with the buyers in a city like Patna till the year 2000
- This irregularity in income deprived them of access to basic necessities like proper housing, food, potable water etc.
- In order to sustain themselves, they were often forced to involve other members of their family, including their children, in rag picking, thereby depriving them of education.
- They were susceptible to diseases including skin problems, fatigue, stomach ailments due to lack of hygiene as well as addiction to alcoholism, guthka, smoking and other substance abuse often took a toll on their health.

Other geographical and situational factors added to the complexity of their problems. Despite an increasing investment by Bihar Urban Development Department on Solid Waste Management (collection, segregation, transportation, disposal and recycling), Patna Nagar Nigam (PNN) was merely capable of collecting around 40–50% of the total solid waste generated per day in Patna.³ Around 60% of the estimated 650–800 MT of waste generated⁴ was left on the streets which led to drain blockages, soil and ground water pollution that resulted in acute unhygienic conditions, causing a major threat to public health.⁵

This quantum of waste was collected, segregated and to some extent, transported by the traditional rag pickers and sweepers of the city.⁶ Thus, though the rag pickers were augmenting the work of PNN, yet there was little or no recognition of the contribution of this workforce to the city's solid waste management.⁷

NGO Chintan, rightly pointed out that rag pickers '*are unrecognized, have no voice and almost no rights to work, despite the fact that they save approximately 14% of the municipal budget annually. In Delhi, the army of almost 80,000 estimated waste pickers save the city at least Rs 6 lakh daily through their work.*'⁸

To top that, the emergence of private sector players to combat the problem of solid waste management in Patna put a question mark on the sustainability of the traditional livelihood of the rag pickers and sweepers of the city.

³ CDP, 'Patna under JNNURM, Urban Development Department', Bihar Urban Development Agency, Nov. 2006, pp. 64 - 66.

⁴ *ibid*, pp. 64

⁵ CDP, 'Patna under JNNURM, Urban Development Department', Bihar Urban Development Agency, Nov. 2006, pp. 66

⁶ Paper on rag pickers, Pratham (http://pratham.org/images/Paper_on_ragpickers.pdf)

⁷ Chengappa, Chaya, Organizing Informal Waste pickers - A case study of Bengaluru, India, March 2013, WIEGO

⁸ Paper on rag pickers, Pratham (http://pratham.org/images/Paper_on_ragpickers.pdf)

The community of rag pickers, sweepers and domestic help thus lacked livelihood security. Though the society was dependent on the community for cleaning of their household and offices, yet their occupation was not perceived as vital. The introduction of newer technologies of waste management in the urban localities and low social acceptance of rag pickers, created the problem of 'double bind' which in turn, threatened the sustainability of the livelihoods of the community.⁹

The Intervention by NIDAN

It is against this backdrop that Nidan, an NGO based in Patna started working towards strengthening the livelihoods of these rag pickers and sweepers of the city in 2000 as a pilot initiative. As a first phase, Nidan began by 're-naming' the rag pickers and sweepers Safai Mitras.

To take this initiative forward, Nidan decided to create a registered institution which could help in providing regular and dignified work to the thousands of Safai Mitras involved in the collection of rags and other cleaning related tasks. In October 2001, the UNICEF field office for Bihar initiated the **Chakachak Patna Abhiyan (Clean Patna Campaign)**, where the initiators decided that rather than setting up yet another organization to undertake the task, a network of existing individual organizations could be formed where each could bring to bear its existing priorities and skills to the common cause.

Nidan, acted as the secretariat and coordinated with all the partners. The network's primary objective was to create a platform for civic action, where, one of the key activities undertaken was to improve the working conditions of the rag pickers, who played a major role in sorting and recycling the city's garbage.

Formation of a co-operative with the name **Swachhdhara Swalambi Sahkari Samiti** was initiated in 2002 to organize the Safai Mitras. However, for more than two years, Nidan could not register the co-operative as the Safai Mitras did not have permanent proof of address, and, thus, could not become its executive members. Eventually with the help of Nidan, Nidan Swachhdhara Private Limited (NSPL) was registered under the Companies Act, 1956 in 2008. Later in 2009, domestic workers were also added under this banner.

Around 1150 rag pickers were organized into 102 self-help groups (SHGs). Of the rag pickers, 387 enrolled as Safai Mitras by 2007. They collected garbage from 18,500 households and 200 institutions, including hotels and offices. NSPL sensitized the society through seminars, training and workshops to ensure the mainstreaming of Safai Mitras. Sensitization campaigns were conducted that included drawing workshops for children,

⁹ Lyla Mehta, "The Double-Bind: A Gender Analysis of Forced Displacement and Resettlement," *Displaced by Development: Confronting Marginalization and Gender Injustice*, New Delhi: Sage Publications, Pp. 3-33.

'Nagrik Sabhas' (sensitization programmes for citizens) and HIV/AIDS awareness programmes. NSPL also enabled Safai Mitras with access to social security schemes on health and education and trained them in modern methods of solid waste management. NSPL took up the task of solid waste management to supplement the efforts of PNN in making Patna a garbage free city. Funding for all the above activities came from public-private partnership (PPP) with PNN. In addition, the American India Foundation also actively supported the waste management project of NSPL.

The Model

Initially, NSPL approached the rag pickers and sweepers in the city and brought them under the banner of Safai Mitras, but by 2009-10, domestic workers were also included under the same banner. NSPL also engaged itself in the recruitment and selection of support staff for the task of coordinating and managing the work of Safai Mitras in the process of solid waste management. Support staff acted as supervisors and wards in-charge for waste collection and disposal in different areas. They were also engaged in mobilizing more Safai Mitras.

The Safai Mitras were involved in door-to-door garbage collection from households and offices, segregation and disposal of the same, apart from sweeping the streets. While majority of those engaged in door-to-door garbage collection were men as they had to drive/push waste-laden carts, most of the Safai Mitras in sweeping were women. In addition to this, both men and women were engaged in housekeeping at government offices and academic institutes.

NSPL started operating in seven areas of Patna:

1. Patliputra/ Gola Road
2. Buddha Colony
3. Boring Road
4. Exhibition Road
5. Raza Bazar
6. Kankarbagh
7. Rajendra Nagar

Table 1 gives an idea about the operational model of NSPL.

Table 1: Operation of NSPL in Patna

Area	No. of HHs	No. of INS	No. of SM	No. of WI	No. of Org
Patliputra/Gola Road	14	31	34	1	3
Buddha Colony	168	23	7	0	1
Boring Road	70	15	12	1	0
Exhibition Road	22	9	1	0	0
Raza Bazar	74	2	1	0	1
Kankarbagh	727	16	18	0	2
Rajendra Nagar	307	38	11	0	2
TOTAL	1360 HHs	147 INS	92 SMs	3 W.Is	9 Orgs

Note: Each area has households (HHs) and institutions (INS) such as offices, restaurants and residential apartments from where waste is collected. A particular number of Safai Mitras (SM) work in each of these areas under organizers (Org) who then function under Ward In-charge (WI) acting as single point of contact (SPOC).

Source: Nidan Office, Patna

NSPL provided training and built the capacities of the Safai Mitras. The training comprised of sessions in sanitation, hygiene, livelihood, self-discipline, outlook and presentation and communication with people.¹⁰ They were also trained on collection and segregation of dry recyclable and organic waste. They were provided with uniform, gloves, ID cards, whistle and raincoat to give them the status of professional service providers.

In the words of Subodh, 'For my learning on waste management and segregation, Nidan SwachhDhara Private Limited (NSPL) even took me to Singapore to understand the working there. Just as a child is sent to school to learn, I have learnt from my involvement with Nidan. I now get a fixed income and time to engage in other traditional odd jobs to supplement my income. I now have hope for myself and my family.'

NSPL also mobilized and channelized the staff of PNN for licensing their solid waste management company. They formed a resident body and units at the ward level in Patna for proper identification of households and institutions from where waste could be collected. NSPL also collaborated with government schools and opened schools in the slum areas for the education of the children of the Safai Mitras. The children were provided with school uniform and stationery. NSPL also tied up with government hospitals for health check-ups.

¹⁰ Nidan: their website (http://nidan.in/otherpage.php?page_code_no=14)

The salary of the Safai Mitras, ranges from Rs. 2000 to Rs. 3000 per month, while the supervisor and ward in-charge responsible for coordinating the work of Safai Mitras earn in the range of Rs. 2500 to Rs. 4000 per month. Their working hours are from 6 am to 2 pm, six days a week with holidays on Sundays and national holidays.

After collecting garbage from door-to-door in their push carts, the Safai Mitras dispose off the garbage at dumping sites from where the municipality collects the waste in their vans. In addition to this, they segregate the saleable waste and earn additional income by selling it to buyers. Being regular employees, their salary is deducted on absenteeism from their job. The members of NSPL receive dual benefits that include salary from being regular employees and access to multiple financial services through Sanchay.¹¹ Safai Mitras are appointed as Directors to the Board and encouraged to become equity-partners at NSPL owing to Nidan's vision of community ownership.

The Impact

The socio-economic conditions of the Safai Mitras have definitely improved as a result of the intervention by Nidan. Individual rag pickers, sweepers and domestic workers have been organized for household garbage collection. This association gives them 'voice' in the social space. They are also granted social acceptance and brought into mainstream society.

Strengthening and Promoting Sustainable Livelihood

NSPL has strengthened and promoted the livelihoods of the rag pickers and sweepers, by training the Safai Mitras in techniques of waste collection and segregation. They are now able to isolate and sell the saleable waste to the itinerant buyers for additional earning, apart from having a positive impact on the environment. This has enhanced their skills and turned them into professionals in waste management. This has been a replicable social model and has been scaled to cover cities like Jaipur, Delhi, Bokaro (Jharkhand) and Muzzafarpur (Bihar), apart from Patna, where it started.

Access to Financial Services

In order to provide the community access to financial services, the rag pickers and sweepers have been organized into self-help groups. They meet regularly to access credit and micro-insurance. Basic premium for a member is Rs. 125 per annum, which covers illness, normal death, accidental death, death of the spouse in accident, damage to property, and loss of employment.¹² With some more premium, members can take additional cover like partial disability and/or total disability.

¹¹ A credit co-operative of Nidan which can be accessed by women for their thrift and credit needs.

¹² Self-Reliant Initiatives through Joint Action, Evaluation of AIF-NIDAAN Project "Strengthening Livelihoods of Rag pickers and Sweepers", The American India Foundation, New Delhi, 4th April, 2013.

Assured Income

Before NSPL was created, the rag pickers were not sure of their earnings. Though they toiled through the day, all they earned was a meagre sum of Rs. 50–60 per day. During monsoon, the situation would become worse. Now the **Safai Mitras** are assured of a regular income of Rs. 2000 per month for rag pickers (with an additional opportunity of extra income from selling scraps) and Rs. 2500 per month for sweepers for services rendered six days per week. The regularity in income provides them with financial security, reducing their dependence on loans and itinerant scrap buyers.

On being asked about their total household income, one of the women **Safai Mitras** engaged in house-keeping, replied: *'Humko toh 2700 milta hai Nidan se. Husband bhi kama leta hai idhar udhar daily mazdoori kar ke. Mila jula ke 5000-6000 rupya toh aamdani ho jata hai ghar mein....'* (I get Rs. 2700 from Nidan. My husband also earns through daily casual work. The total monthly household income comes to Rs. 5000–6000)

Restored Dignity

Rag pickers who were earlier branded as thieves and abused or beaten up at the slightest excuse are now called Safai Mitras and let inside the residential areas.

A Recognized Identity

Every Safai Mitra is provided with a uniform that includes a cap, gloves, and boots. This gives them a sense of identity and they have begun to see themselves as people who do 'respectable work'. The intervention by Nidan has instilled in them a sense of self-worth and pride in their job.

Children's Education and Health Facilities

There is an increase in awareness among Safai Mitras about the need to educate their children. Almost all the Safai Mitras who have children, send them to school, while the remaining also have plans to do the same. Apart from education for their children, health check-ups and medical services have also been extended through tie-ups with hospitals. The Safai Mitras have also been made aware of the positive effects of maintaining hygiene and living a healthy life. The notion of the job being 'dirty' has been changed through instilling in them a sense of cleanliness. The chances of catching diseases related to stomach and skin and other infections have reduced because of the uniform and protective gear, like boots, masks and gloves that they now wear.

Challenges Faced

Nidan has faced many challenges on its way and is still learning through its experiences. The scaling up of the intervention was fast, from 6 Safai

Mitras in 2000 to 387 in four years. However, since then, there has been a decline in the number of Safai Mitras to 92.

The reasons can be attributed to the major challenges that Nidan has faced as discussed below:

Challenges Related to the Organisation

The classical 'chicken and egg problem in a start-up: Nidan faced various issues and challenges while trying to consolidate and expand its work. On one hand, the intervention had to ensure financial and operational sustainability and on the other, enrolment of Safai Mitras became difficult with stagnation in the number of households and institutions for collection of garbage.

Operational issues: The municipality did not allot a site to NSPL for dumping the collected waste. Indiscriminate dumping of waste by Safai Mitras as a result of non-availability of designated sites led to additional work for the municipality. As a result, the municipal inspectors would often beat up and harass the Safai Mitras. Huge dues with the municipality affected the working capital flow of NSPL and led to termination of contracts of many Safai Mitras.

Challenges Related to Safai Mitras

Lifestyle issues: Social illnesses like alcoholism and use of gutka and tobacco among the Safai Mitras was an obstacle to the work of NSPL. Despite training and awareness drives these addictions were difficult to eliminate. NSPL received complaints from their clients, as sometimes the Safai Mitras would not turn up for work or arrive late in a drunken state.

Required manpower shortage: The inability of NSPL in getting the right manpower (supervisors and organizers) for coordinating the work of Safai Mitras became a constraint. As a result, NSPL lost many clients. At the same time, ironically, NSPL was unable to absorb all Safai Mitras as full time workers at the ground level.

Challenges Related to Salary

Irregularity in salary disbursement: Unforeseen expenditures often led to irregularity in salary disbursement by NSPL to Safai Mitras that led to a lot of bad-mouthing by the supervisors and ward in-charge. .

Salary discrimination: Another challenge for NSPL was to meet the demand for increase in salary of Safai Mitras. Some clients were ready to pay additional fees to NSPL as they were happy with the job of the Safai Mitras. This, however, was not the case with all. NSPL therefore found it difficult to ensure parity across wage scales. It was in constant search of solutions to match up to the expectations of all Safai Mitras in a standardized manner.

Challenges Related to Stakeholder

Stakeholder attitude: Another key challenge was the lack of participation from people of Patna. They did not see segregating waste as their responsibility. For them, it was the job of PNN or the Safai Mitras. The argument they would make was that they were paying taxes to the municipality to remove garbage, and hence, segregation was the task of the municipality. Though NSPL tried hard to convince the people for managing their waste at the household level, it could not bring about any change in their attitude. The Safai Mitras had to continue to carry out the waste segregation task that increased their daily load.

Expectation mismatch: Many clients were not agreeable to giving Sundays off. Client such as restaurant and hotel owners had an expectation that Safai Mitras would collect garbage twice in a day. These terms were not acceptable to the Safai Mitras, making the job of NSPL difficult.

Overcoming the Challenges

Although the challenges are steep, the issues can be resolved. Timely payment of salaries to the Safai Mitras can be handled by scheduling and channelizing the necessary working capital. The role of the government is critical in facilitating the partnership between municipalities and intervening agency for solid waste management in urban locations. It is known that Safai Mitras aid the task of the municipality in collecting waste. The support of the municipality would definitely go a long way in bringing about sustainability of the model floated by Nidan. The role of the citizens of urban localities is also crucial for ensuring social recognition to the 'Safai Mitras.' NSPL can set up client feedback mechanism to address the complaints of the clients.

The Road Ahead...

Having originated from Patna, NSPL has now expanded to cities like Jaipur, Delhi, Bokaro (Jharkhand) and Muzzafarpur (Bihar). Like all other start-ups, the project has gone through its share of ups and downs and transitions, but it has consistently made a positive impact on the lives of the Safai Mitras and the society. However, the replication of such an intervention across India surely requires an understanding of the reasons behind the issues faced during implementation in Patna.

NSPL plans to venture into diverse cleaning activities through skill enhancement of the Safai Mitras. The long term vision of the transfer of ownership of the intervention to the Safai Mitras cannot be achieved without proper information dissemination, capacity building and community participation. NIDAN is also working on organizing the work of waste-pickers for non-degradable waste and trying to enhance their capacity to dispose 70% of the garbage collected. They are trying to arrange sales of compost through various retail outlets.

NSPL needs to ensure that more rag pickers and sweepers enrol as its members. This would not only enhance livelihood security of the larger Safai Mitra community, but also help NSPL in meeting the demands of clients and in consolidating its services in the existing locations of the country. This would, in turn, help in reducing stress on the municipal task of solid waste management country-wide. This is critical not only for enhancing the livelihoods of the Safai Mitras and strengthening their position in the society; but also to bring about structure and system in providing cleanliness and hygiene in social living.