

SWaCH Cooperative - Transforming a Stigmatised Occupation into Decent Work

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Introduction

This case study tells the story of SWaCH Coop, a wholly-owned workers' cooperative which not only enabled a marginalised and historically deprived community to protect and promote its livelihoods rights, but which has also transformed waste collection from a precarious and stigmatised occupation into more regular 'decent work'¹.

From 1993 when they first organised themselves to 2008 when SWaCH was launched, how have Pune's waste pickers protected their livelihoods and how do they plan to retain the space within the urban economy that they have created for themselves? What are the threats they face? What impact, in real terms, has the SWaCH Coop had on their lives? Does the SWaCH model offer lessons to other cities? These are some of the questions this case study will try to address.

Background

The story of SWaCH hinges on the coming together of people, activists and waste pickers; waste pickers bonding with other waste pickers in solidarity; and waste pickers, government and citizens coming together to operationalise SWaCH Cooperative.

The story goes back to 1990 when a group of young social work graduates helping to implement the National Adult Education Programme through the SNTD Women's University, met child waste-pickers at an education centre. The children were peeping through the windows where their mothers and other women from the community were learning. Even though they were full of curiosity and obviously unschooled, when invited to enter and join in, the children (mainly girls) said that they had work to do, pointed to their sacks, and ran off.

Inspired by the pedagogical method of Paulo Freire, the 'teachers' (activists) decided to accompany the children on their waste picking

¹ "Decent work" means that they have better occupational health and safety conditions. It also means that the image of the waste pickers among the public and the waste pickers themselves has transformed from scavengers or thieves to citizens engaged in a profession which has immense social value. Furthermore, working conditions are improved through access to ..

- Shaded sorting sheds and proper infrastructure and storage which give protection against sun and rain, which caused other health problems, increasing health expenditure and causing loss of work days.
- Pushcarts eliminating head loading of heavy of recyclables, causing severe musculoskeletal problems.
- Uniforms acknowledging the status of waste pickers as public service providers and raising their self-esteem and public recognition.

rounds. Watching the children fishing around knee-deep in muck for recyclables, the activists speculated on how much easier and safer it would be if the children could have access to source segregated scrap. Would this offer them better working conditions and more time for 'education'? The activists felt it would make a big difference. They campaigned for and secured source segregation of garbage in an elite neighbourhood nearby so that the girls could source the scrap easily.

Then, events took an unexpected turn. Without the activists overtly broaching the subject of child labour or schooling, the children's mothers (who were waste pickers themselves) saw the chance to rectify a missed opportunity -- "Our daughters have never been to school", they told the activists. "Let them learn. We'll enrol them in school and we'll collect the segregated scrap."

In a first for waste pickers, SNDT University issued identity cards to about thirty adult women waste-pickers for collecting source segregated scrap in the neighbourhood.

The effect of access to source-segregated waste, 'legitimised' by ID Cards, had a measurably positive effect on the waste pickers' livelihoods. Since 'clean' waste and recyclables fetched better prices at the scrap shop, earnings improved dramatically, hours of work reduced and occupational hazards (animal bites, cuts and wounds, infections) were less.

Six months later, other events occurred which pushed the waste pickers closer to organising themselves to protect their livelihoods. An entrepreneur began to offer door to door garbage collection (using two labourers and a tempo) on payment of a fee, in the same neighbourhood where the waste pickers worked. He promised to rid the neighbourhood of garbage containers (and by default, of waste pickers). The citizens thought this a great idea (bins were smelly and waste pickers were widely perceived as almost 'criminal'). The waste pickers soon felt a direct and negative impact on their livelihoods. When protests and direct appeals had no effect on either the entrepreneur or the citizens, the waste pickers resorted to a *bin chipko andolan*, holding on to the bins so that they could not be carted away. The tactic managed to convey the waste pickers' desperation and need – the residents relented and discontinued the service and the entrepreneur withdrew.

This small victory put into focus several undeniable truths:

1. There could be other claimants to the "wealth in waste" and waste pickers had to actively guard and protect their livelihoods against threats.
2. Small group endeavours were not likely to be effective in countering such threats – waste pickers had to organise. Baba Adhav introduced the activists to the concept of 'critical mass' in organising the poor.

3. Waste pickers had to have ownership and had to script their own exit from exploitation – the activists could only facilitate the process.

Thus, began a long process of discussion, reflection and dialogue amongst the waste pickers, mediated by the young activists and researchers, guided by labour leader Baba Adhav.

The women from the group of thirty (convinced of the effectiveness of collective action by their earlier experience) campaigned alongside the activists, convincing their colleagues that it was time to stand up, speak out and assert their rights. Gradually, Pune's waste pickers became aware that their contribution to society was far more substantial than just "kachra chivadne"² (rummaging through garbage). Realising that they were in fact integral to the smooth functioning of the city, and that though they were poor they had rights as equal citizens, the waste pickers decided not to remain 'invisible' any longer and came together in 1993 to form *Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat* (KKPKP), a waste pickers' union.

Say Lakshmi Narayan and Poornima Chikermane, activists who were part of this process, "The core group sought to establish an alternate identity for waste-pickers as "workers" premised on the belief that scrap collection was *socially relevant, economically productive and environmentally beneficial "work"*, and that the working conditions *could be changed.*"

A seminal study in 2001 quantified waste pickers' contribution to the city and showed that by sorting and recycling waste, Pune's waste pickers saved the corporation an astounding Rs. 16 million annually in transport costs alone. Armed with these figures, the waste pickers campaigned for official recognition as workers, obtaining official endorsement of the union-issued ID cards and also successfully campaigned for workers' health insurance.

A third key demand, inclusion of waste pickers within the city's Solid Waste Management (SWM) system, was now waiting to be addressed. And it is this demand that eventually led to the formation of SWaCH Coop, the subject of this case study.

Waste pickers – A Profile of the Community and Sector

Poor, dalit³, unschooled, female, and usually main earner of the household – that would be an apt description of the typical waste picker in Pune. The majority of Pune's waste pickers are (or are children of) those who fled the devastating drought of 1972 which ravaged Marathwada and sent hundreds of thousands of villagers to towns and urban centres like Pune in a search of work and survival.

² Typically, when asked what work they did, waste pickers would answer: "Work? We don't work. We just rummage through garbage." Typically, they also did an average of 6 hours of back-breaking waste picking every day, walking about 10-12 kms and carrying loads of up to 40 kg!

³ The proportion of Scheduled Caste population to the total population in Maharashtra was 10 % and that in Pune District was 11 % (Census of India 2001) while the proportion of Dalits in this occupation is 94 % in Pune city (IEMS).

In the city, these rural urban migrants took to waste picking to earn a living. In any case, it was almost impossible for 'low-caste' women to get employment as domestic servants, and they themselves were not keen on becoming construction labourers, the only other option for unskilled manual workers in the city. But while waste picking staved off starvation, the livelihood it provided was precarious at best. As one elderly waste picker put it, "If you found recyclable waste, you sold it and your children ate that night. If you didn't, they drank tea and slept hungry. Sometimes there wasn't even sugar for the tea. And some times, there was no fuel for the stove."

Box 1: Profile of Waste pickers

- A third of the waste pickers were in women-headed households.
- A quarter were widowed or deserted.
- And almost half contributed more than 50% of the household income. A more recent study found that in their sample, 82% of women waste pickers were the main income earners in their households.

(Source: A 2001 Study)

Waste picking has historically always been at the bottom of the heap, even in the informal sector – in terms of social status, stigma and stability of earnings. But hierarchies held sway within the waste sector too⁴, and the women who eventually formed the core of the *Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat* and later, SWaCH, were working at the very bottom of this hierarchy – the lowest of the low, as it were.

That caste and gender play a defining role in this occupation is hard to dispute.

An Opportunity is Seized

In 2000, the government brought in the Municipal Solid Waste (Management and Handling) Rules. These new rules said that municipalities must recycle and process waste, set up door to door waste collection and minimise the volume of waste dumped in landfills. Like most other municipal bodies, Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) was at a loss as to how go about achieving these targets.

Within KKPKP, activists and members had been speculating about the impact that the Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) Rules would have on the free-roaming waste pickers. Who would PMC contract to do segregation and sorting of waste – would the contractor allow waste pickers' access to waste? Could the waste pickers of Pune take on this work? It could be one way of getting integrated into the waste collection system – and it would

⁴ The waste sector can be visualised as a pyramid, with various categories of scrap re-processors at the apex, various types of buyers (fixed and itinerant) in the middle, and at the very lowest level, the waste pickers engaging in "free" collection of scrap from municipal garbage bins and dumps, along the roadsides and outside houses in neighbourhoods.

give waste pickers access to 'clean' waste. It seemed clear that instead of waiting for events to unfold, it was necessary to jump in and seize the opportunity.

One of the KKPKP activists describes the waste pickers' decision to put away their doubts and propose a user-fee-based door to door waste collection scheme to PMC, as a 'leap of faith'. "The women trusted us and the union, agreed that in principle the scheme had the possibility of success - and took that leap. They were unsure about how many people would pay user fees. They were also unsure about how much dry waste they would get to sell. But they were willing to sacrifice some earnings in the immediate future for a chance of a better livelihood for all waste pickers in the future".

The seeds of SWaCH Coop were sown.

And in doing so, the waste pickers changed the paradigms of Pune's waste collection sector and in effect, changed their own lives.

SWaCH - Strategies and Aspirations

In many of the KKPKP group meetings and discussions, waste pickers would identify 'security of job', 'regular earnings' and 'decent work' as key points on their 'wish list'. But they were also quite clear that waste picking was what they knew, and this is what they would stay with. As an occupation, waste picking gave them flexibility, and allowed them to earn enough to survive on. Of course, everyone also wanted more regular earnings and access to waste without having to sift through the reeking bins full of all sorts of dangers. Moreover, who doesn't have aspirations for the future of one's children and old-age security?

Once the idea of SWaCH was mooted, it began to rapidly take shape. The two key and unique features of the scheme would be:

- User fees collected from each household
- Source segregated waste - wet and dry
- Waste pickers to retain rights over waste collected

The waste pickers called themselves *Swachateche Warkari* (harbingers of cleanliness), and a two year scheme was launched in 2005, in two wards of Pune city. Eventually, this 'pilot' scheme grew to cover 1.5 lakh households in pockets of 14 wards.

This was the most exciting but also most difficult time for the first 1500 waste pickers who made up the *Swachateche Warkari*. Many of Pune's citizens, unfortunately, viewed it as the 'duty' of some people to collect whatever waste was generated by others, in exchange for the occasional

handout, or they felt that free garbage collection was their due as tax-payers. Segregation of waste by citizens was also unheard of. The waste pickers realised that it would be a long haul to get Pune's citizens to view the door to door waste collector as a professional worker, and themselves as partners in the process of waste collection and disposal.

The entrepreneurial spirit of these pioneer door to door waste collectors has to be lauded – they joined in to shoulder an untried scheme, learned new skills and ways of working (being regular, keeping schedules and timings, handling the huge buckets and heavy push carts, dealing with the municipal drivers, negotiating with citizens), and persisted with their work even when citizens refused to pay the small user fee regularly and when a more remunerative alternative (collection from the bins) was available a short walk away. To be sure, there were drop-outs of *Swachateche Warkari* and some waste pickers went back to free-roaming waste picking. They felt that this door to door collection work was just too much trouble for too little money. Later, when SWaCH proved to be a success, some of these waste pickers came back and joined the organisation as members, which is testimony to the relative stability and support offered by SWaCH against the instability of free-roaming waste picking livelihoods.

SWaCH Sahakari Seva Sastha Maryadit (SWaCH) officially came into existence in 2008 on the basis of a signed formal memorandum with the PMC. The corporation would provide non-monetary support in terms of equipment, vehicles, uniforms, footwear and gloves, etc. as well as cover administrative and other costs. The waste pickers would collect user fees from citizens (Rs. 10-15/ household/month) and retain rights over the recyclable waste which they could sell.

SWaCH was conceived of as an organisation that would always belong to its members, and speak in their voice. It is not a top-down organisation where only the more 'educated' office bearers are the decision-makers and face of the organisation.

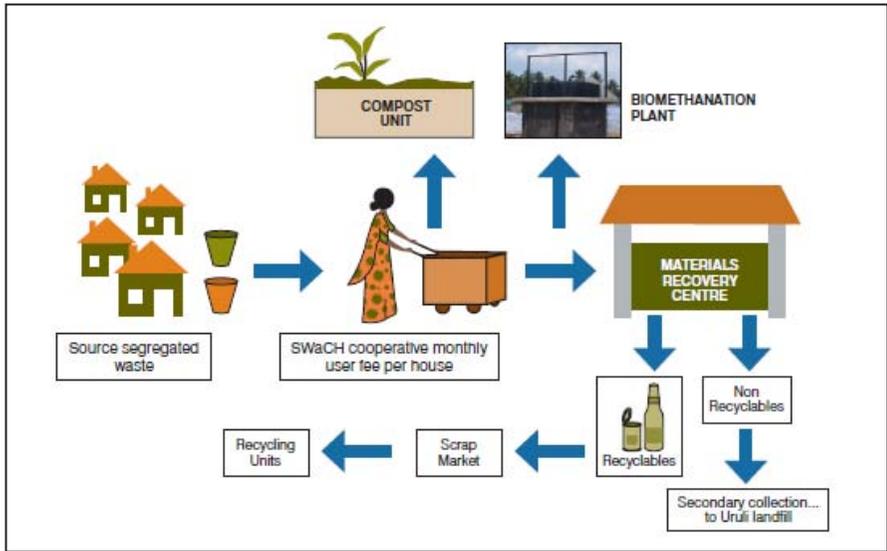
Box 2: A Typical Day in the Life of Members of SWaCH Coop



Long before most of Pune's residents are up, members of SWaCH Coop are preparing for another day of dealing with the city's waste. Before 7 am, SWaCH waste collectors are already trundling their pushcarts through the neighbourhood. Many wear the distinctive blue coats. By mid-day, the 2000 plus door-to-door waste collectors collect, segregate and hand over for transportation the waste from almost 4 lakh households. The afternoon is usually spent recovering recyclables from the dry waste (metal, paper, cloth, plastic, leather etc.) and fine sorting these into categories. Some members also maintain compost pits or handle zero-waste projects for institutions.

Structurally, SWaCH is a workers’ cooperative. All members are working members, not merely shareholders, with women constituting 78% of SWaCH membership. SWaCH bylaws require three fourths of the SWaCH members and two thirds of the Governing Board members to be women. This last requirement was specifically included in order to allow the women to retain control of the organisation – it was noticed that as the door to door collection work made waste picking less back-breaking and filthy and ‘more attractive’, more men (who may have earlier been jobless or unwilling to work) joined their wives/sisters/mothers on the collection rounds and there was always a fear of the cooperative being ‘hijacked’ by their (men’s) interests.

Figure 1: The Movement of Waste from Households in Pune



Maintaining a decentralised structure and ensuring democratic functioning is a real challenge in any mass-based organisation and more so when most members are not literate and all communication has to be oral – but SWaCH office bearers and coordinators recognise that not being able to read and write does not render a waste picker’s opinion/ideas any less worthwhile. Efforts are made to see that the participatory nature of the organisation is maintained, using the Vasti-Kothi-Ward-Board tiered structure.

Apart from the waste collection activities which generate earnings, SWaCH has also tried to make a difference to the quality of its members’ lives. KKPKP has effectively campaigned to eliminate child labour in waste picking in Pune city and SWaCH has taken this further by encouraging more of its members to retain their children in school and send them for higher education. Child marriages are discouraged. Everyday health

issues such as nutrition and mother’s health are attended to. Training programmes may not always be directly related to the practical aspects of work (although these are also given importance through workshops on communication, handling machines, driving lessons etc.) since empowerment and personal growth are seen as integral to the health of the organisation itself.

Sustainability

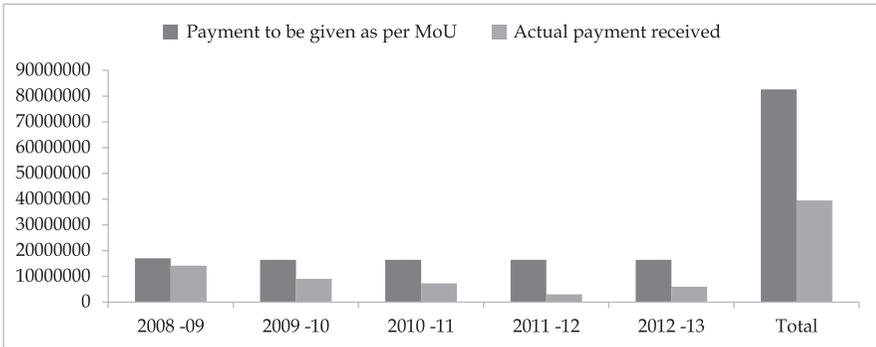
The figures in the Table 1 below show that in comparison to existing schemes in other cities, the SWaCH model is significantly more cost-effective for the Urban Local Body (ULB). This is because the decentralised management and fee collection system, in effect, minimises the overheads inherent in large structures. In any form of contracting out, contractors would need to build in a ‘profit’ margin in order to make their system worthwhile. Here, since the mandate of the organisation is essentially to upgrade the informal sector, the service provider is herself responsible for collection of fees (which again, accrue to her), as a result, cost is lower and efficiency is high.

Table 1: Comparative of User Fee rate (direct) and Rate per Household (HH) per month paid by municipalities to service providers in different cities

S.No.	Name of City	Service Provider	Rate per HH per month paid directly by municipality (Rs.)	Rate User Fee (Direct) (Rs.)
1	Vishakhapattanam	NGOs and Pvt Company	30/-	30/-
2	Nagpur	Kanak Resource Management	18/-	10/-
5	MCD	SPML, Ramky etc	18/-	40/-
6	NDMC	Ramky, NGOs	18/-	40/-
9	Patna	NGOs/Pvt Contractor	10/-	30/-
14	Bhopal	NGO (Alliance of Indian wastepickers member)	3.8/-	30/-
15	Nashik Cantonment Board	NGO	30/-	
15	Pune	SWACH	3.09/-	10/-

Over a period of 5 years, the PMC was supposed to spend Rs. 206 per household. Instead, the PMC has spent Rs. 98 per household. The remaining amount has been borne by SWaCH out of 5% contribution made by waste pickers towards running the cooperative. The total amount due from PMC is Rs. 4311840.

Figure 2: Details of Payments Received from the PMC



SWaCH Plus

As primary collection systems got established, SWaCH launched other allied activities under the umbrella of SWaCH Plus value-added services. SWaCH Plus aims at livelihood upgradation, allowing the waste pickers opportunities to work at a ‘higher’ level within the waste sector, or even to branch out into related activities. Since the average working time of a waste picker within SWaCH had reduced to about 4-6 hours per day, many waste pickers were willing to do other work in order to earn an extra thousand rupees per month. SWaCH Plus activities include: collection of unwanted household goods, e-waste through V-Collects; housekeeping; trading in recyclables; composting using mechanised composters and manual composting; bio-methanation plants.

For poor women who are frequently the main earning members of their households, fair remuneration for work, easy credit, and a safe savings scheme are vital. KKP and SWaCH Plus are in the process of growing *Kashtachi Kamai* (Earnings from Labour) Fair Trade Centres. At these centres, recyclable materials are purchased at market prices from members. Payment is immediate and in cash, and receipts are issued for every transaction. Previously, the waste pickers would never be able to prove that they were being cheated or short-changed – although they frequently suspected that this was the case.

The approximately 100 KKP-SWaCH members who sell their scrap at the *Kashtachi Kamai* centres are entitled to profits, calculated as a percentage of daily earnings from sale of scrap. In 2012, *Kashtachi Kamai* distributed a profit share at 18% on the annual earnings of each member. The total amount distributed was Rs. 588559. Members are encouraged to invest some of their returns in the Public Provident Fund or in a money-back insurance policy towards their retirement benefits.

Impact of SWaCH

Livelihood Security

In the pre-SWaCH Coop days, waste pickers' livelihoods were insecure and unstable. Much depended on the continued status quo of the municipality's collection system – any change which took away waste pickers' access to waste, would be disastrous. For example, city planners and citizens' groups would, from time to time, make demands for 'container-free city' or 'zero-garbage wards' – both laudable plans if they were inclusive of waste pickers. But removing the containers without taking into account those who depend on the waste for a living, would be a severe blow to thousands. Contracting out waste collection to private contractors who took away the waste from source, would have a similar impact. So, while working out the formal agreement between SWaCH and PMC clauses were included that would:

- Protect the collectors' continued and unrestrained access to recyclable materials from the point of waste generation, since these are the means of livelihoods.
- Protect the right of the collector to collect, sort, sell and retain earnings from the sale of recyclable materials.
- Permit the collectors to develop enterprises for collection of specific wastes such as e-waste and earn revenue from it.
- Permit the collectors to offer composting and bio-gas maintenance services.
- Earn revenue not only from the sale of recyclables, but also from user fees for providing services.
- Retain scope to negotiate and revise user fee rates.

Box 3: SWaCH Operations at a Glance

Scale

Operational Area: Pune City (PMC jurisdiction)
Coverage: 400000 out of 703,486 households
Slum Coverage: 28,716 out of 54,584

Member data

Member workers: 2,300
Daily worker absenteeism: only 3% of total workers (Jun-Jul 2012)
Three main reasons for absence:

- Death/accident/illness/maternity leave
- (self or family) – 26%
- Out of station – 22%
- Other family-related reasons – 12%

Contribution to SWM

Daily waste collected: 600 tonnes total
Recyclable: 90 tonnes diverted to recycling
Non-recyclable: 90 tonnes (includes recyclable materials for which the market is poor)
(Source: A 2001 Study)

By entering into a partnership with the ULB, SWaCH has managed to protect its members' interests more effectively by holding the ULB accountable for its actions.

Employment Status/Earning Capacity

Waste pickers who joined the cooperative went from being own account/self-employed individual workers to being member-owners of a wholly-owned SWaCH workers' cooperative/collective that can make and distribute surplus to members. They soon also realized the benefits of collective bargaining, using SWaCH as a platform to negotiate with the PMC. As members of SWaCH, waste pickers have also taken advantage of collective bargaining with scrap traders/buyers of recyclables for better rates and terms of trade.

Table 2: Earnings from User Fees (2011-12)

Monthly earnings from user fees in rupees	% of members
< 500	7
501-1500	30
1501-2500	27
2500-3500	13
>3501	23

A recent study of Pune's waste pickers found that while about 47% of waste pickers who were not members of SWaCH complained of fallen revenues over the previous year, fixed waste pickers (i.e. SWaCH members) reported more stable revenues.

Financial Benefits to Members

The earnings of SWaCH members are derived from user fees and the sale of recyclable materials that they recover. Residents of apartment blocks are encouraged to pay user fees collectively by cheque. SWaCH members now have access to constructed sorting spaces provided by the PMC. Quite often, they store materials in the sheds as well and sell later, because consolidation fetches better returns. Group sales are also common, with the trader providing the transport and sharing costs.

Box 4 provides a detailed analysis about the the impact of SWaCH on waste pickers' earnings.

Box 4: Economic Benefits to Waste pickers as an Impact of SWaCH

- SWaCH created 2306 decent-work jobs paying Rs. 6000+ monthly
- KKKPKP & SWaCH increased member income by at least 30% to over 100%, depending on the member's access to cash and in-kind benefits.
- Reducing middlemen's cheating increased income by 30% (also for many non-members).
- Improved social status gives SWaCH workers access to benefits worth another 18% of income through SWaCH Plus.
- SWaCH Plus - KKKPKP scrap shops' dividends increased income by another 18% for waste pickers selling to it.
- Fee income increased hourly earnings by 82% even though waste management income is unchanged (as working hours reduced).
- SWaCH reduced working hours by 45% allowing for more leisure (88% of workers) or add-on part-time jobs (12%). Women pursuing additional work earn Rs. 1000 to 2000 extra (e.g. in SWaCH Plus), equivalent to a further income increase of 20 to 40%.
- Collective annual income earned by SWaCH members from user fees in PMC area is Rs. 55930140
- Average annual earning per capita from user fees is Rs. 30,000 (approx.)
- Average annual earnings coupled with the income from sale of scrap per capita is Rs. 72000.

(Source: Internal Impact Evaluation)

SWaCH members have relatively more stable incomes than other waste pickers in India, and work fewer hours. Most also enjoy a weekly holiday. In addition, the PMC is supposed to provide safety gear, raincoats, footwear, uniforms and collection equipment. Thus, waste pickers now have a claim on some part of the municipal budget, whereas earlier they had none.

Better Living/ Work Conditions

Not all members of KKKPKP were enthusiastic about joining the SWaCH Cooperative. To some, it seemed too close to the sort of supervised, routine, time-bound job that their fiercely independent natures had always shied away from. They preferred to remain as informal, free-roaming waste pickers. But the 3000 or so waste pickers who form the SWaCH membership today are unequivocal about the positive impact it has had on their lives. They acknowledge that clean and dignified working conditions; recognition by citizens as a service-provider; regular work and earnings; pushcarts, gloves, masks and footwear; organizational support for workplace negotiations, loans, education, healthcare etc. have all brought about a sea-change in their lives. The positive changes, from dignity and job security to self-confidence and higher aspirations for oneself and one's family are like ripples in a pond. The case studies in Annexure 2

are eloquent testimony to the impact, as are these remarks by SWaCH members:

Mangal Gaikwad says, “Today I earn Rs. 3000 from doorstep collection



and the sale of scrap. The residents in the area who used to frown at me while I was at the garbage bin, now know my name and greet me. A resident gave me a second hand bicycle. I had never ridden one before. Today, I ride to work on that cycle. When I was a child I used to envy the children who went to school with their bags and water-bottles while I had to go waste picking. Since my work day is shorter now I was able

to attend the literacy class in my slum. I am now literate. I am the Treasurer of the credit co-operative and the representative for my slum. I used to be terrified of my abusive alcoholic husband. Twice I sent him to a de-addiction centre. He stopped for a while but continues to drink. I am no longer terrified of him. I do not give him money to drink. I have bought a bigger house from my savings and a loan I took from the credit co-operative.”



Another SWaCH member, Rupali Kale, who started picking waste as a child and is now determined to educate her children and make sure they have every opportunity that she herself missed, says:

“The help of SWaCH in getting loans, in resolving disputes has been invaluable...Thanks to our *sanstha*, I organise my home better, I look after my family better, and I am careful about cleanliness. I don't even

quarrel as much as I used to.”

Almost 50% of the SWaCH (women) members contribute more than half of the household income. Their regular earnings have made them financially stable. Several SWaCH members now have college-educated children, and almost all children of SWaCH members are in school or have completed school. Interestingly, several of these educated children of waste pickers have joined the cooperative and handle the operational aspects, whether as field workers or office staff.

Dignity and Voice as Workers

The story of SWaCH is the story of waste pickers taking up the challenge to transform themselves. Just before SWaCH was launched, they bought “uniforms” – green saris – to establish their intent of becoming service providers. While they have had to unlearn some aspects of behaviour and adapt themselves to others, SWaCH members are clear about what they expect in return for their services:



“If I am going to speak respectfully to you while I collect your garbage, you will also speak respectfully to me.” Says Saru Waghmare, a founder member. “Respect is my right as much as yours.”

Surekha Gaikwad eloquently says, “What is most important is the respect of other people. Today, when I go to the (university) department to collect my money, the lady there asks me to sit on a sofa. If she is drinking tea, she will ask for another cup for me... That is what I value the most.”



SWaCH members, dalit women from impoverished backgrounds, most unschooled, are today confident enough to voice their opinions on their work, its impact on climate change, their contribution to the city. Apart from the many conversations they have had and continue to have with citizens’ groups in Pune on the topic of waste segregation and eco-friendly waste handling and disposal, they have also taken public positions in the past to protest against sexual harassment, to campaign for their children’s right to education, and in support of the campaign for universal pensions.

SWaCH members have spoken out at conferences in Copenhagen, Bangkok, Rio and all over India. Certainly, the change in the way they perceive themselves and are perceived by others is directly related to the change in the way they work – from insecure informal waste pickers to members of a workers’ cooperative which ensures that they work in safe and dignified conditions.

Every time one more victory is won, self-confidence and self-esteem are further bolstered. For example, recently, waste pickers successfully got their occupation added to the list of ‘unclean occupations’ after a decade-long struggle. Their children can now apply for pre-Matric government scholarships available for children of those working in ‘unclean occupations’.

This campaign was spearheaded by a waste picker, Rahi Ingle, who first drew the union’s attention to the scheme. For ten years, the Government of India ignored their demands. Rahi’s earlier attempt to register her son for the scholarship came to a dead-end when her application was discarded because ‘waste picking’ was not specifically mentioned in the scheme. “Well now it is!” says Rahi triumphantly. “And I will make sure my son gets the scholarship.”

Contribution as Workers to the City

SWaCH member Baby Mohite is very clear about how the door to door waste collection work that she does impacts the city she lives in:



“What would this city be without us? Whether as door to door collectors or roaming waste pickers – we remove a huge amount of rubbish and if we didn’t, it would be there, piling up on the streets and in the gutters... The corporation would not be able to manage without us...the gutters would be choked with plastic bottles... I feel so proud when I see the clean streets and know that we SWaCH members are responsible for this.”

Challenges

Today, the main challenges confronting the organisation are finding a creative response to the threat to livelihoods by non-inclusive privatisation of the waste sector; continuing the partnership with the ULB in a non-confrontational manner despite repeated renegeing on commitments; and campaigning for increased social security measures for waste pickers.

Increasingly, waste pickers voice the opinion that ‘everyone has realised that waste is gold’. The waste pickers face the possibility of loss of work due to several issues – firstly, the drive towards ‘container/dumpster-free’ cities; secondly, competition from contractors who are entering the waste collection business but who do not share the larger goals of SWaCH such as welfare of waste pickers, environmentally-sound practices, etc.; thirdly, advent of large multi-crore Waste to Energy and incineration projects that make big promises to the city’s administrators but are yet to prove themselves efficient over a period of time.

As far as social security goes, SWaCH members have been part of the Pension Parishad campaign for universal pensions. Comprehensive health insurance, disability benefits and old age pension schemes are being worked out.

Conclusion

The SWaCH model can truly be called path-breaking because it has imaginatively built on the strengths of the informal sector to link an age-old problem (garbage collection and disposal) to upgrading the lives of a marginalised community.

It has also busted a few myths along the way. Few in Pune would have been willing to lay their money on a scheme that reposed confidence in a community (waste pickers), widely seen as socially irresponsible,

dishonest, dirty, unreliable, etc. to manage a civic service that required its workers to be responsible, regular, meticulous, cooperative. And yet, those are the very words that citizens' testimonials use to describe SWaCH members.

Another widely-held belief was that waste was not 'our problem', it was the corporation's problem – SWaCH has led citizens to accept some responsibility for what, where and how they dispose waste. In this sense, it is truly participatory in nature.

And perhaps most importantly in a deeply-stratified society, SWaCH has allowed poor women to *script their own* success story, on their own terms and with full ownership.

References

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ANNEXURE 1

Salient Features of the Pune Municipal Corporation-SWaCH Partnership in Pune City

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU): Signed in October 2008

Nature of arrangement: Pro-poor public private partnership

Main tasks: Door to door collection of source segregated domestic waste; maintenance of separate streams

Collection of road sweepings, biomedical waste excluded

Collection of garden waste, construction and demolition waste, e-waste on payment of user fees

Mode of collection: Manual push carts (small motorized vehicles introduced in difficult terrain)

Workers involved: Two workers for 200-300 households, offices, shops, other establishments

User fee: From all classes of users

User fee amount: Usually Rs.10 to Rs.30 per household per month depending upon certain variables; in slums Rs.15 per household per month

Collection from slums: To be part subsidized but this clause not implemented

Rights over recyclables: Collectors have rights over recyclables and retain income from sale of scrap

Provision of collection equipment and safety gear: Pune Municipal Corporation

Office, infrastructure and resource recovery centres: Pune Municipal Corporation

Terms of payment: Operational grant to cover management costs and some operational costs reducing annually

Worker benefits: to be provided by Pune Municipal Corporation but only nominal medical insurance cover provided

Complaint and customer care helpline: Operated by SWaCH

Performance indicators: Specified in agreement

ANNEXURE 2

Profiles of SWaCH members

Suman More



Suman More is a proud mother. Her son has completed his Bachelor in Arts, a diploma in journalism and is currently pursuing his Masters degree.

This did not come easily to Suman, a waste picker in Pune city, India. Her parents had migrated to Pune from their village in search of work and began waste picking. She started waste picking with them when she was around 13 years old. Suman married Mr. More at the age of fourteen and had her 4th child when she turned 22. Their main source of income was waste picking. Suman's husband also earned money by performing on traditional drums and conducting religious ceremonies. However income from these activities was sporadic and irregular.

When Suman started work, she would pick up recyclable waste on the roadside, in local waste depositories or public waste bins provided by the Pune Municipal Corporation. She walked long distances and worked from dawn to dusk. Her children helped to sort the waste at home as sorted scrap fetched a better price.

In 1992-93 organizers of KKPKP trade union of waste pickers came to her community to talk about the need to organize waste workers. They explained that the benefits of organizing included getting access to waste at source, fewer hours of work for the same amount of money, cleaner working conditions, insurance etc. Many of her neighbours discouraged her becoming a member saying that these benefits are utopian and that it was a new way for some people to make money!!! However, she decided to join KKPKP with a few other people in the community and has never regretted her decision.

Now, her working conditions have improved. Suman explains, "I work only 4 hours for more money, since I collect the waste from door to door. The quality and condition of waste is much better." Door to door collection has other benefits. She builds relationships with people and engages in casual conversation over a cup of tea. Coming from a lower caste and class of society she never thought this would happen in her lifetime. She is happy that she is able to have a proper lunch break and that they are provided with soap to wash their hands and legs before they sit to have lunch in a cool, clean place in the residential complex where she works. A higher income has also meant that she can afford proper medical care instead of self-medicating with the help of a pharmacist to avoid going to the doctor.

Suman no longer takes the waste home to sort. The municipal corporation has provided a sorting shed where several waste pickers gather to sort their waste while engaging in conversation and easy banter lightening up their day. Once she goes home, she has time now to watch some television to ease off the day's hard work.

As a member of KKPKP Suman took an oath to educate her children, and enlisted the help of KKPKP to enroll her children in school. Both her first and last sons have received cash prizes from KKPKP for their achievements. Her daughter-in-law is a computer engineer from a Brahmin (upper caste) family for whom she wants to be a good mother-in-law. She married her daughter only after she turned eighteen and did not give dowry, she smiles proudly.

Baida Babu Gaikwad

Baida Babu Gaikwad lives in the Mahatma Phule Vasti in Hadapsar. Baida Babu Gaekwad began waste picking in the Wagholi area when she was only ten years old. Needless to say, she is illiterate. Her husband, Babu, began drinking when he was fifteen years old and never left the bottle since then. As with all drunkard men, Babu would come home drunk and quarrel with the family members every single day. There was not a day of peace.

In 1993, the waste pickers' union KKPKP, was formed and Baida became one of its initial members. After a few years, the union began engaging its members in informal door to door waste collection work. This was expected to improve the working conditions of waste pickers, as they got access to segregated wet and dry waste, and also improve their income, as they got a user fees from the citizens. Baida bai thus started door to door collection work in Sattawadi, Hadapsar in 2001. She earned Rs. 2000 from user fees and about Rs. 2000 from the sale of scrap. She worked there for three years when, impressed by her ability to work hard and maintain good relations with citizens, she was given a row of houses in the posh new development at Magarpatta. She began with only ten houses from which she earned Rs. 200 per month and about the same amount from the sale of scrap. However, the area held potential as it was developing fast and large housing societies, abodes of the rich, were coming up fast.

In 2008, with the formation of SWaCH – Baida bai became a member of the co-operative of waste pickers officially authorized to engage in door to door collection of waste in the city of Pune. Baida bai's work increased as she began serving housing societies. 'The PMC supported us, gave us pushcarts and buckets. It made sure the Ghanta gaadi came on time to clear the waste.'

By 2009, her daughter joined her in her work and the following year, her husband also joined in. They would go out to work together in the

morning and come back together in the evening. Yet, at home there was no peace. Her husband continued to drink day and night and engage in abuse and bitter quarrels at home.

Today, Baida bai along with her husband and daughter serves five large residential societies and a large private hospital in the Magarpatta area of Hadapsar. They also compost the wet waste in two of these societies. They earn around Rs. 13000 as user fees for waste collection and composting and another Rs. 7500 from the sale of scrap each month.

They own a large tempo which runs outside Pune and brings in another Rs. 10000 per month. They purchased another smaller tempo to help them in their door to door collection work. It allows them to cover a larger area in lesser time.

Her husband stopped drinking six months ago and has not touched alcohol since then. Her son studied till class tenth and works as a casual labourer. Her twenty years old daughter, Reshma works with her. The three of them, Baida bai, Babu and Reshma work hard from six in the morning to three in the afternoon – collecting waste, segregating wet and dry waste, sorting out the recyclables, never taking a break, not even on Sundays. ‘What will the citizens do with their waste if we don’t turn up even a single day?’, asks Baida bai.

Satvashila Potekar

Satvashila Potekar is forty years old. Her mother is a waste picker; her two sons live at a boarding school for poor children; her husband, an alcoholic construction worker, had abandoned his family many years ago. She lives in Khedegaon, a neighbourhood in the Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation (PCMC).



“When Sangeeta John, the local SWaCH coordinator, asked me if I wanted to learn driving I told her that I didn’t know how to open the door of a truck. She expected me to learn how to drive the thing! But she insisted

that I take the course and I did. We went to the Regional Transport Office twice to take the driver's test. I passed on my third attempt. This was in August last year."

In the SWaCH PCMC model, waste-collection is done by independent teams consisting of two waste-pickers and a driver. Each team collects waste on an assigned route from approximately two thousand houses every day. The waste-pickers sort recyclable waste and transfer the rest at designated 'feeder points' to PCMC-run compactors for transport to the Moshi landfill.

"My mother could have worked with me. She still collects waste, sorts it and sells it. But she is too old for this work. I don't think she can climb on to the back of the truck at all. If she could, we could have been a team! If family members, or relatives or neighbours create teams then profit-sharing is not a problem." Forcing a profit-sharing arrangement on the team is an option that SWaCH does not want to pursue since it is likely to worsen the relationships between team members. The organisation reasons that waste-pickers must reach their own conclusions about the composition of their team and balance the prospects of higher profits versus the potential termination of their services – each team's performance is evaluated every month and residents' feedback is an important criterion. In other words, they must learn to realign, restructure or even rebuild their business model based on feedback.

Though Satvashila was a member of the KKPKP union, she too was not immediately welcomed into a team. She had to win the confidence of her colleagues. "When I got my licence no one wanted me on their team because they were afraid that my driving skills were not good enough. They were scared that I might crash the truck and they would lose their route. I did not lose hope," said Satvashila. A year passed. She worked as a wastepicker and maintained her driving skills by parking trucks and filling in for regular drivers who had called in sick. In July 2011, Satvashila was finally accepted by the team that worked on Route No. 16.

SWaCH hopes that Satvashila and her team will act as role models for their colleagues. At present, of the one hundred and nineteen drivers on SWaCH's rolls, twenty are waste-pickers. Six of these are women. SWaCH hopes that waste-pickers will encourage other members from their community to learn driving and join their team. Many waste-pickers on the SWaCH PCMC routes have been inspired by Satvashila's achievements. And a few take informal driving lessons too.

After analysing six months of consumer feedback and profits on all its routes, SWaCH is convinced that over the next two years all teams will groom and then hire a woman waste-picker as their driver. External funding will be used to buy a tipper-truck and hire a driving instructor. Apart from driving practice, they will also learn basic repair skills.

Older waste-pickers like Satvashila's mother could use this truck for less strenuous work like newspaper collection or as a short-distance (sorting shed to scrap shop) transport. Further, these relatively easier assignments would help inexperienced drivers hone their road-skills before moving on to the more demanding door-to-door work.

"My mother is a roving waste-picker," said Satvashila. "Strangely, though I work in the same business in the same neighbourhoods, my life is completely different!"