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Out of India's Trash Heaps, More Than a Shred of Dignity

By [SARIKA BANSAL](#)



Fixes looks at solutions to social problems and why they work.

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PUNE, India — “Trash! Trash!” yelled Chandani Nagtilak as she pushed her cart through a residential complex.

An older woman put two bins on her porch steps and exchanged pleasantries in the local language, Marathi. Chandani took the bins to her pushcart, where she and her colleague Rekha Shinde emptied them and began separating the contents into organic, recyclable and nonrecyclable waste.

Chandani wore a magenta sari under her uniform, a dark blue button-down shirt. Earlier that morning, she had eaten a rich breakfast of *poha* and *halwa*, washed her hands with soap, and complained to her friends that her teenage son would rather gossip than study.

This is significant. For many years, Chandani couldn't count on eating a good breakfast, washing with soap or rolling a pushcart. For more than 20 years, she has been a waste-picker in Pune (pronounced POO-nay), a city of six million. During most of that time, she dressed in tattered clothes and hauled a back-aching bag as she fought off dogs while scouring for recyclables at a landfill. She sometimes went without meals. She sustained injuries. Most hurtful, people often refused to make eye contact with her — except to call her a thief or a piece of trash.

“Now people offer me tea when I go to their houses,” said Chandani, beaming.

That's because her work has been formalized and people have come to appreciate the value of her services. In addition, waste management, recycling and composting are increasingly coming to be seen as vital to community health, environmental sustainability and quality of life around the world.

So how did Chandani go from being regarded as a thief to a potential house guest?

As with so many social changes, it began with organizing. In 1993, a collective called [Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat](#)(K.K.P.K.P.) was established in Pune, with an ambitious goal: to organize waste-pickers, one of the poorest and more marginalized segments of urban Indian society. Waste-pickers are often uneducated, rural migrants who sift through trash heaps or landfills, looking for plastics and glass that they sell to middlemen by weight, who send

them to be recycled. This informal system results in recycling rates of [almost 50 percent](#) for plastics (as compared with 8.2 percent in the United States) — which is why activists call waste-pickers “invisible environmentalists.”



Sarika Bansal Chandani Nagtilak sorted through recyclable materials in a residential complex in the University of Pune.

Waste-picking is full of occupational hazards. Waste-pickers sifting through trash with bare hands encounter rusty metal, cut glass, needles and menstrual blood; their life expectancy may be [a decade or more below](#) the average. With a daily income of 60 rupees (one dollar) in Pune, most cannot afford proper meals or medical care. Police and security guards harass them, particularly women. Governments offers little protection.

It took years for K.K.P.K.P. to mobilize the waste-pickers, who were scattered and reluctant to take time off work for meetings. As the group came together, however, they found a sympathetic ear in the Pune Municipal Corporation (P.M.C.), the city’s governing body.

That led to the innovation that changed Chandani’s life and has evolved into a waste-management approach that others can learn from. In 2007, the K.K.P.K.P. and Pune’s government got together to create a cooperative called [Solid Waste Collection and Handling](#)(Swach). The idea was to engage waste-pickers to handle almost all of the city’s waste, a remarkable departure from other cities, where private contractors haul waste to landfills with trucks. The question was: Could Swach save the Pune government lots of money, improve the environment and improve livelihoods for some of the city’s poorest inhabitants? The answer appears to be yes to all three.

After collecting trash, waste-pickers like Chandani and Rekha segregate the waste in nearby sheds. They send organic matter to be composted, sell recyclable items and collect nonrecyclable waste (like candy wrappers) for transport to a centralized facility to be incinerated.

The waste-pickers receive fees of about 60 cents per month from each household they serve. The city also extends a modest health insurance scheme to the workers — a hard-won victory for K.K.P.K.P., which argued that after doing the city’s dirty work, its members deserved some social protection.

By last count, Swach's waste-pickers were collecting trash from almost 400,000 houses, or 90 percent of Pune's non-slum households. "Pune is only second to Buenos Aires in the number of households from whom waste-pickers collect," said Lucia Fernandez, who works with waste-pickers globally through a network called [Wiego](#).

Swach and the P.M.C. observe several advantages to this model. Malati Gadgil, an organizer with Swach, says the waste-pickers cost the city 6 cents per household, while truck-hauled waste costs about 40 to 50 cents. Capital requirements are also less: pushcarts and buckets are a lot cheaper than trucks.

"P.M.C. hardly spends anything this way," said Suresh Jagtap, P.M.C.'s joint commissioner of solid waste management and key supporter of Swach. "Our spending on health insurance is hardly anything."

The Swach model provides environmental benefits, too. "Trucks are incentivized to focus more on tonnage and less on segregation," said Jagtap. When large quantities of mixed waste enter a landfill, it's harder for waste-pickers to pick out recyclables or compostable items. Uncomposted organics release methane, a gas that is 20 times more heat-trapping than carbon dioxide. By segregating waste in sheds closer to the source — which is safer and more hygienic than working at a landfill — Swach waste-pickers divert far more from waste streams. In fact, several Pune neighborhoods will soon be "zero waste" — recycling or composting virtually everything possible.

Waste-pickers receive income from fees from households as well as from selling recyclables, which combined can double or triple their previous earnings. "I can buy books, uniforms and soap for my kids," said Rekha. "I can run a house on this." And, equally important, Swach's uniforms and identification cards bring waste-pickers a measure of respect that many had not before received.

However, Swach's model has challenges. How do you manage thousands of self-employed waste-pickers? Most of Swach's workers have no bank accounts, so the group has to collect and distribute most of the fees in cash. And asking historically informal workers to provide a municipal service involves behavior change. For example, sometimes workers leave work without notice, leaving trash to pile up. Others do things like swearing or spitting that can offend middle-class sensibilities, noted Jagtap. (Swach offers training programs to improve the waste-pickers' professionalism.)

Some households refuse to pay the fees and some politicians oppose them, too. Indeed, Swach's biggest risk is political. "At the end of the day, Swach is a contract and not a policy," said Fernandez, of Wiego. "If the municipal government changes, [they could decide] it's more important to use a fancy international company than support the urban poor."

In fact, the municipality next to Pune, Pimpri-Chinchwad, recently dropped Swach in favor of a private contractor, and waste-pickers have returned to the landfill. In other cities, lack of political will and historic social stratification keeps the model from taking off. Prakash Patil, the deputy municipal commissioner of waste management for Mumbai, told me that waste-pickers "have no role" in middle-class society.

To develop political will in Pune, Swach had to clearly demonstrate, and document, the financial and environmental benefits it brings. The group estimates that it saves the city \$2.2 million annually. K.K.P.K.P. had also organized 6,000 workers over 14 years before the city decided to contract with them.



Sarika BansalChandani Nagtilak, left, and Rekha Shinde traveled with their pushcart and buckets.

In India, several cities have employed or are exploring similar models, including Ahmedabad, where the [Self-Employed Women's Association](#) has been organizing waste-pickers since the 1980s. Globally the idea is also gaining momentum. Albina Ruiz, the founder of Ciudad Saludable, a waste management organization in Peru, has been working with waste-pickers for more than two decades. "Twenty years ago, nobody would talk about the waste-pickers," she said. "Now they are visible, they can be 'seen', they attend international forums." In more cities, [laws](#) have become more supportive.

But Ruiz and others caution that waste-pickers need to be careful not to sell themselves as a cheap solution to waste removal. "The waste-pickers should only collect the recyclable waste," Ruiz says. If they haul trash, they should charge per ton, she added. Other activists assert that waste collection is part of a city's contract with its citizens. Accordingly, waste-pickers should be compensated in line with the value of their work.

For Chandani and Rekha, the simple opportunity to do this work and earn a reasonable wage and respect has been transformational. "I finally have a good life," Chandani told me. "I never thought I would see the day."

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Sarika Bansal is a journalist who writes about social innovation and global health. She is also the Director of Partnerships of the Solutions Journalism Network. Follow her on Twitter at @sarika008.