

# THE RAG PICKERS...

## Fellowships in Support of the Unorganized Workers

**Site:** Delhi

**Years supported:** Three

**Funding so far:** \$24,000

**Scope:** Organize and legalize the waste pickers, improve their working conditions, arrange for vocational training, education for children, etc. **Contacts:** Parmod Kumar (khushi3059@gmail.com): 9873600459

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No image captures the degradation of poverty more fully than that of the rag pickers. Whether moving stealthily through the back streets or rummaging through filth, the rag pickers epitomize the poor. Yet, they also symbolize the human spirit of survival, working against all odds to eke a living out of trash.

There are an estimated 1.5 million men and women (and an unknown number of children) that are engaged in this unorganized activity in India. **Their rapidly expanding numbers are a result of several historical developments:**

1. Massive rural displacement due to "development" projects
2. Increasing non-viability of the rural economy mainly due to the state's neglect of agriculture
3. Rapid urbanization and massive promotion of the 'use and throw' practices of the West
4. Inability of the governments to deal with the mounds of trash that are generated as a result



CPHEEO, The Central Public Health and Environmental Engineering Organization estimates the waste generation in India to be as much as 1.3 pounds per person per day. Although low compared to the 4.6 pounds in the U.S., having four times the population India could potentially generate up to 27 million more tons of waste yearly than the U.S. Yet, it has only one-third the land when it comes to finding locations for disposal. The population growth only magnifies the problem. The urban population has grown more than 20% yearly since 1980 and is projected to reach a rate of more than 30% by 2015.

Unfortunately -- given the disorganization of city governments, lack of public awareness and limited funding for programs -- cities have struggled for years to find a way to manage the ever-increasing amount of trash and the lack of a properly organized waste management system is causing serious health problems and irreversible damage to the environment. Given this background, the rag pickers have come to play an extremely important role in the process of waste management in India. And yet, they are one of the most shabbily treated segments of the Indian society.

### **This poor treatment is a result of:**

1. General disapproval if not a dislike of these "creatures" by the very people they serve
2. A deeply entrenched tradition of exploiting the vulnerable in the public agencies such as the police
3. The vulnerability of these migrants from far away places who often don't even speak the language

**This, then, is the mix that leads to their inhuman conditions of existence and ongoing exploitation.**

### **HOW IS IFA HELPING?**

IFA is supporting three Fellows in the city of Delhi whose work is focused on the waste pickers.



**Parmod Kumar**



**Parvati Barthwal**



**Prakash Kumar**

## GENERAL WELFARE MEASURES

In the short-term, the Fellows are providing welfare support as follows:

1. **Education:** 78 children have been admitted to Delhi government schools in the recent year.
2. **Health camps:** Utilizing public resources and volunteers, these create awareness of hygiene, sanitation and provide some basic health care. 91 women and children were immunized in one camp. 225 people had their eyes examined and treated in another. 70 people were provided free check ups and medicines in another camp. The beneficiaries also contribute by providing for tables, chairs, tea, refreshments, etc.
3. **Women's Self Help Groups:** Three SHGs, *Shakti, Muskan and Lakshya*, have been set up in the three *busties*. Each member saves Rs. 200 per month. Savings accounts have been set up with the banks.
4. **Vocational Training (Rangpuri Pahari):** 24 women are learning sewing. There are plans to start training for making candles and for turning waste materials into bags, baskets, coasters, etc.
5. **Scholarships:** Got the state to grant Rs.1000 scholarships to 39 children of rag pickers.
6. **Family Planning:** Women are provided input and access to various options. Fellows have facilitated tubal ligations in those desiring such intervention.
7. **Life insurance for the rag pickers.** Assisted one hundred of them to get life insurance. Also got the govt. to subsidize half of the Rs. 200 premium.
8. **Anganwadis:** Pressurize the government to set up these welfare centers for the children and women.
9. **Shelters for the homeless:** Fellows helped petition the Supreme Court that resulted in the Court directing the Delhi government for setting up homeless shelters during the extreme winter. Against the court directed requirement of one shelter for every 1,00,000 people, Delhi had only nine! The Fellows were instrumental in getting 84 such shelters of which one (Nilothi Extension) is actually managed by the Fellow, Parmod Kumar.
10. **Slum Clearance:** During the Commonwealth games, Fellows brought together various NGOs to ensure that adequate alternative facilities were provided during the slum clearance drive.
11. **Emergency assistance:** The Fellows are often involved in helping individual rag pickers such as getting their confiscated rickshaws released, providing legal support when they are unfairly picked up by the police and raising funds during times of need such as death, severe illness, etc.

## MAKING THEM COUNT

1. As a result of intensive lobbying by IFA Fellows 22,000 homeless people have been issued photo homeless ID cards by the Delhi government under the Samajik Suvidha Sangam scheme. These cards will permit them to benefit from the various government schemes. 2500 of them from the work area of Parmod Kumar and 3000 from that of Prakash Kumar had received the cards at last count. Parmod Kumar has also been appointed Coordinator for the homeless people survey in Haryana.
2. As another victory, at Fellows insistence, Registrar General of India Census has admitted its mistake for not having surveyed the homeless, rag pickers, rickshaw pullers, child labor and construction workers in the last census. An order to include these categories has been passed and a special census was to take place in February end.

## ORGANIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF NATIONAL NETWORKS

This is crucial for the IFA goal of making the widest possible impact. The Fellows are organizing the workers in to collectives (unions, cooperatives) so they can improve their working conditions. There are efforts to change the existing social security act to provide some security during accidents, illness, etc.

A planning meeting of the Alliance of Indian Waste Pickers (AIW) was held on 6th January in Mumbai. Representatives from 17 cities participated. Prakash Kumar was nominated on the Program Committee with the responsibility for laying out an activity plan for the alliance and helping execute it.



Subsequently, the Alliance organized the “National Convention of Waste Pickers” on 28th & 29th January 2011 Near Ahmedabad. The Kachra Kamgar Union, organized by Prakash Kumar was one of the 6 organizing groups. About 600 waste pickers participated in the convention. 300 of these from 28 different organizations came from 22 cities across the country. 13 participants from KKU also participated. Mr. Jairam Ramesh, Union Minister of Environment, Govt. of India was the chief guest. A memorandum was presented to him asking for recognition of the waste pickers as workers.



On February 23, 2011, there was a massive rally in New Delhi, followed by a public meeting jointly organized by all central trade unions of India. Around half a million people from across the country gathered along the Parliament Street to protest against the anti poor/ anti worker policies of the government. 200 members of KKU participated the rally. The Govt. of India was urged to control price rise of essential commodities as well as to provide social security coverage to all workers of the unorganized sector. A memorandum was submitted to the speaker of Lok Sabha after the public meeting.

**A major victory** was achieved when on February 7, the Ministry of Environment and Forests notified the new Plastic Waste (Management and Handling) Rules. One of the major provisions under the new Rules is the explicit recognition of the role of waste pickers. The new Rules require the municipal authority to constructively engage agencies or groups working in waste management including the waste pickers. It is the very first time that such a special dispensation has been made by the government.

### **THE LONG RUN**

India must follow development policies that are based on the needs of the people rather than those of the investors. Investment in rural development with emphasis on basic infra structure, health and education as well as strengthening of the agriculture base are key goals. Once there are decent employment opportunities where they live, it won't be necessary for millions to leave their homes in desperate search for work. At the same time, an enlightened national policy of a decent minimum wage, social security for all, and recognition of the critical role of the unorganized sector is badly needed.



In August 2010, Surekha and Prithvi visited this work for the second time. It is gratifying to see these happy women as they come together for this meeting. Their surroundings speak of their reality but their optimism and spirit speaks of their future. They are eager to learn ways to make their lives better and try hard to make it possible for their children to go to school often at great cost to themselves. Working with these activists, they are finding strength in togetherness. That is their biggest gain. We in IFA wish to play an even greater role in support of their efforts.