



CHINTAN

ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH
AND ACTION GROUP

No Child in Trash

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The Great Fire of Ghazipur



Among the hundreds who depend on Delhi's Ghazipur landfill for a living are 203 families of wastepickers. The community comprises mostly of migrants with near-zero support from the local authorities. They live in *jhuggis* (shanties) at the edge of the landfill with almost every able member of the family collecting or sorting waste.

There are around 315 children in the age group of 4-14 years whose parents pick waste living in Ghazipur. Approximately 35% of them are wastepickers themselves. The remaining children were also wastepickers, but have since become part of the NCIT learning centers. They still pick waste to make money whenever they can.

Although work in the landfill affords a slightly more regular income than waste-collection in the streets, it is an even more precarious existence. The exposure to toxic and dangerous waste is much greater, therefore increasing risk of injuries (especially during the night shifts) and diseases ranging from respiratory distress to chronic worm infestation.

However, a critical and more immediate danger is that parts of the mounds and hills of garbage that the wastepickers climb often catch fire and some can even give way any time. In Hyderabad's landfill, there are stories of women wastepickers who may have been buried alive right under the trash. Fire is a constant threat, not just during the scorching summer months, but throughout the year. Occasionally, the fire spreads to and destroys their *jhuggis* as well.

Earlier this year in the early hours of the morning of 1st February, the slums at Ghazipur landfill caught fire, yet again.

Over 240 wastepicker families lost every worldly belonging they owned, save the clothes on their back. The Sub-Divisional Magistrate of the area sanctioned help in the form of plastic sheets and poles for housing along with providing some food. Chintan, which has been working with these families for a long time, helped organize donations of



dry rations, utensils, blankets, clothes, and shoes for the children. Chintan worked with other groups to help the families face the crisis and rehabilitate themselves. The hardest part was reconstructing the physical structures after the expected



government compensation of Rs. 5500 did not materialize. Some officials informally told Chintan that they would be unable to give out any help to the residents of Ghazipur because the municipal elections had been declared, and this could be seen as subverting free and fair elections. So the money never came. Nor did any enquiry about how the fire took place and how such fires could be prevented in the future.

Having lost their houses in the fire, and with the promised relief never appearing, many had to stay in rented spaces till they could afford to build a new shack. By April, almost three months after the blaze, families were able to rebuild their homes. Many, however, are still repaying the heavy loans they had to incur to do so.

Stories From Ground Zero

Just over a month after the fire, Chintan spoke to some of the children from the affected families. All the children are part of the NCIT project:

Izul Khan, 10.

Originally from Gopal Chowk, Kolkata, he studied in a government school till Class III, and now attends the morning shift at Chintan's Ghazipur learning centre.

Why do you live at the Ghazipur landfill?

My family can earn more money here. We can collect more waste at the landfill. I pick waste like my parents. I work around 4-5 hours every day and collect 5 to 6 kilos of waste.

How long had you been living there when the fire happened? Do you remember the fire?

For 6 years. I remember the fire, but vaguely because I was sleeping at home. Everyone was shouting and someone woke me and held my arm and dragged me out. I don't know how [the fire] happened.

Did you lose anything?

Yes, TV, clothes, utensils, money, books, blankets. All our food.

What do you miss the most?

My school bag.

Has there been a fire before?

Yes, 2 years ago.

Do you worry that there may be another fire?

Yes. It has happened twice, so it could happen again.

Food and clothes had been distributed after the fire, but they did not always reach Izul and his family. He and his parents were living in a temporary shelter, like most other people who lost their homes after the incident. His father had to take a loan of Rs. 15,000 from a relative to rebuild their house. He pays an interest of 10% per month.

Izul still does not have a proper school bag. Instead he carries a polythene one to school. His other favorite possession, a cycle he'd found in the trash and repaired, was also burnt. He feels it had been a really lucky find, and is not hopeful about finding a replacement.



Halima Khatoon, 12.

Originally from Kolkata, she occasionally attends the afternoon shift at Chintan's Ghazipur learning centre.



Why do you live in Ghazipur?

We all collect waste from the landfill to earn money.

You work there, too?

Yes. Sometimes I go there at 8 in the morning and sometimes collect waste till 5-6 in the evening. When I work for a full day, I can bring home 7-8 kilos.

How long had you been living there when the fire happened?

Six years.

Do you remember the fire?

Yes. Everything was burning.

Where were you? What happened that day?

I was at home, sleeping. My parents woke me up and I went to get water to put out the fire.

What did you lose in the fire?

Our TV and clothes. My dolls and our blankets and utensils. My parents say we lost our money in the fire and there's no money to build a new *jhuggi*.

Is it difficult living in a makeshift place?

We have nothing there, it is not a home. We have no belongings. We don't have proper food to eat and the drinking water isn't clean.

Were things better before the fire? Were you happy living here?

Yes. I liked our home. I miss the TV and my dolls. It is difficult now.

Has there been a fire before?

Yes, there was another fire 2-3 years ago.

Do you worry that there may be another fire?

Yes. Someone said a *jyotishi* (fortune teller) was saying there will be another fire. I don't know the date.

Halima used to go to formal school before the fire. But her uniform was completely burnt. She started missing school because of this, and a replacement was not provided by the authorities. Eventually she was expelled because of low attendance.

Her parents saved and bought her a new uniform and the NCIT team has, after meeting with her school authorities, ensured that she's re-admitted into formal school. She is currently a student of Class VI and attends NCIT non-formal school for extra help with her subjects.

Prashanto Kumar, 12

He doesn't attend formal school. He comes for the morning shift classes of the Chintan learning centre.

When did you come to live at the Ghazipur landfill and why?

I came with my family three years ago. We don't have to travel too far for work, and can earn more money.

How much do you earn as a family?

Around Rs 300 each day.

Do you remember the fire?

No, I was in our village near Kolkata. When I came back I found our jhuggi had burnt down. Our clothes, mobile phone, bedding, buckets and utensils were all destroyed by the fire.

Has there been such a fire before?

Yes. I was here with my family when it happened.

What is the solution to these incidents of fire?

If we have better homes, with proper electricity connection and metres, this won't happen.

Proshanto's father, a long time waste picker, often keeps in bad health. His health deteriorated in recent months, and one of his kidneys' has become infected. Expenses shot up after the fire, and even more due to his father's persisting illness. Treatment in the city was too costly for the family, and his father has returned to their village for cure.

Proshanto, his mother and his siblings remain in Ghazipur to continue to work. His most favorite belonging, a He-Man tee-shirt, was lost in the blaze. Despite searching hard, he hasn't found one to replace it.



Sabina Meena, 10

She isn't a regular at the Chintan learning centre and only comes once in a few days for the evening shift.



Why do you live at the Ghazipur landfill?

I live with my parents. They go to work in the landfill.

Do you go to work with them?

No, I don't pick waste. I look after my younger brother and sisters at home.

Do you remember the fire?

I don't remember very much. I remember trying to save valuables from my home when my parents and other people were throwing water to put out the fire.

What happened that day?

The fire started at 3 in the morning. I was sleeping, so I don't remember what happened.

Did you lose anything? What do you miss?

I miss my clothes. We lost our clothes, utensils, blankets, rations. My parents' ID cards and ration card were also burnt in the fire.

What has changed in your life after the fire?

It is very hard now. I don't even have chappals (slippers). It is cold in the tent at night but we don't have enough clothes and blankets. I had no sweater. Someone gave me a sweater later.

Like Halima, Sabina's uniform was also charred in the fire and subsequently she too had to drop out of school.

She lives with her step mother and step siblings. The family's vulnerability has increased greatly after the fire. The step-mother now insists that Sabina continue to stay at home and take care of her siblings and household chores, while she herself works fulltime picking waste.

The NCIT team has been trying to persuade the family to allow Sabina to go back to formal school, but it seems challenging at the moment. We are hopeful that Sabina will eventually resume formal education.

From her years of working as a wastepicker, Sabina had gradually collected a whole sack full of discarded toys from the landfill. The entire pile was burnt in the fire. She is concerned that she will not be able to restore her treasure trove to its former glory.

Mohammed Koish, 12.

He has never attended formal school. He's fairly regular at the Chintan learning centre, where he usually attends the afternoon shift. At night he picks waste from the landfill.



Why do you live at the landfill? How long have you lived here?

My family and I can earn more money from the landfill. We have been living here for as long as I can remember.

Do you also work?

Yes, I work from early morning till 1 or 2pm, and sometimes I work at night. All of us in the family collect approximately 15 kilos of waste daily and earn approximately Rs 300 in a day.

Do you remember the fire?

Yes. We all tried to save some valuables, but we lost everything.

What did you lose that you miss the most?

I don't miss anything. There was nothing worth missing.

What happened that day?

I heard the fire happened because some men who were drunk threw their cigarettes around carelessly.

What has changed after the fire?

We don't have anything left. We have to start all over again.

Have you built a new home?

No, there's no money to build a new house yet. Everyone in the family wants to continue staying in Ghazipur. I haven't thought about it.

Koish's family lost their house along with all their possessions. Even the preparations made for his sister's marriage were completely charred. Koish's father had to sell their chota hathi (mini truck) to cover his sister's wedding expenses, rebuild their house and also for his mother's operation for which she had to spend several days hospitalized.

Now, after the fire, Koish has also started working as a waste picker to support his family.

Since the fire, the NCIT team has ensured that 5 children like Halima are readmitted into formal school. Project Armaan, a funding partner, provided stationery for 102 children studying in NCIT's non-formal school and NCIT used its own funds to provide new stationery for 8 children who are studying in formal schools.

There's nothing green about recycling if it involves child labour. Help Chintan ensure that no child works in trash and has the chance to choose his or her own future.

Chintan welcomes donations to help us sustain our learning centres and other programmes for child wastepickers. Every donation, however small, and whether one-time, monthly or annual, is a help. Regular donations help us plan and sustain our programmes more successfully.

All donations to Chintan are eligible for tax exemption in India under section 80G.



Here's what your money can do for children in our learning centres:

Rs 100 pays for three boxes of color pencils.

Rs 300 helps us replace old straw mats and rugs in a classroom.

Rs 500 will buy a month's supply of pencils and pens for a class.

Rs 1,000 pays for a notebook each for 100 children.

Rs 2,000 allows us to buy educational aids for a single subject.

Rs 3,000 is one teacher's monthly salary.

Rs 5,000 pays for a one-time basic health camp for a class of 40 children.

Rs 7,000 is one full-time social worker's monthly salary.

Rs 8,000 helps us pay the monthly rent for one learning centre (a set of two rooms).

Rs 10,000 pays for two educational outings by bus for a single learning centre.

Rs 12,000 enables us to hire a specialist for a month to train our teachers and help us refine our curriculum.

Any of these amounts can also help us meet several other expenses that go towards running our learning centres, ranging from hiring supervisors to organizing extracurricular activities.

We also welcome donations of unused or little used notebooks, text books in Hindi that follow the CBSE syllabus (up to class 8), PCs and laptops in usable condition, and DVD films and audio CDs of stories for children (in Hindi or in simple, beginner's English).



Visit our website www.chintan-india.org for more on waste recyclers, child wastepickers, and Chintan's campaigns and initiatives.