

No Child in Trash



CHINTAN

ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH
AND ACTION GROUP

Volume 2 • January 2012

Waste Collectors and the Challenge of Health



On 13 September 2011, five-year-old Rani Rai died of typhoid, complicated by respiratory disease. She was a student of Chintan's non-formal education centre at the Ghazipur landfill. She had joined the Bal Aangan programme for four- and five-year olds, and often spoke of her wish to grow up and be a teacher or a nurse.

Rani's parents are waste collectors who have worked hard over two decades to provide for their children, but their best efforts were not enough to save their youngest child. 'I realized very late that my daughter was that ill,' says Rani's mother, Pratima. 'I was too focused on working at the landfill. Rani would accompany me to the landfill after her classes.' Rani was treated at two hospitals—because her parents couldn't afford the fees at the first—but succumbed to her illness.

Like Rani, close to two million children die in India within the first five years of their birth. As with other children among India's poor, child wastepickers, or children whose parents or guardians work with waste, suffer from malnutrition, weak immunity and limited access to healthcare. But they also live with the greater risk of exposure to toxins, germs, pollutants and other dangerous material like broken glass and torn and rusted metal.

In 2011, Chintan conducted a survey and medical examination focusing on children who work with solid waste in Delhi's landfill sites. Eighty per cent had diminished vision and complained of redness, itching and burning sensation in the eyes; 73% had respiratory ailments; 51% had gastrointestinal ailments; 40% had skin infections or allergies; 22% had orthopedic ailments and 27% had cuts and skin lesions, of which 30% were directly occupation related.



Chintan organizes regular health camps for waste-collectors and their children, who have very limited access even to basic medical facilities (and the situation has only worsened with increasing privatization of healthcare).

In November 2011, the No Child in Trash team, supported by Hindustan Tin Works Ltd, organized three medical camps at our learning centres in Ghazipur, Nizamuddin and Tughlaqabad. A total of 450 children and over 500 adults were examined and advised treatment by a general physician and a child specialist.

But health camps, doctors and medical treatment are always a reaction to the problem. The challenge is to reduce the vulnerability of wastepickers to such illness. Children should ideally phase out of working, and the adults should move to doorstep collection of waste, which is safer and cleaner work. They should also be able to run micro-enterprises that trade in and value-add to waste. In this way, they make more money and don't endanger their health.

Here's what your trash does to wastepickers, especially the children among them:

- Handling rotten food, disposable diapers and medical waste gives them chronic gastro-intestinal tract (GIT) diseases and a range of infections.
- Toxic gases from burning plastic and electrical wires at landfills and garbage dumps put them at risk of respiratory diseases, severe allergies and impaired development.
- Mercury from broken thermometers evaporates easily, and when inhaled by wastepickers, can damage their nervous system.
- A Chintan study in Delhi found that 84% of children working as wastepickers were severely anaemic, had worms and suffered from recurring fevers and multiple injuries like cuts and gashes.



Against All Odds: Maqbul's Story

Maqbul Mulla started working as a wastepicker in Delhi's Nizamuddin area in 2001. The youngest child of Malik Mulla and Bishna Babi, he had arrived in the city that year with his parents from his village in Assam. Malik and Bishna hoped to find a way of supporting the rest of the family back in the village, including their four other children.

Maqbul had attended the village school for a few years, but had to drop out, and in Delhi his parents could not afford to put him in school. Even had they been able to, there was no permanent home where they could leave him when they went to work. So, at the age of ten, Maqbul began accompanying his parents to Nizamuddin's streets and markets to collect waste.

When Malik joined Safai Sena, the registered group of waste recyclers set up in association with Chintan, in 2003, he was persuaded to let Maqbul attend Chintan's learning centre in Nizamuddin. Maqbul studied at the centre for over two years, till he was fourteen.

Now, six years later, Maqbul has found an alternative to waste collection. He works with advocates at the Delhi High Court, photo copying, filing and,



at times, typing their documents. He was introduced to this profession by his friend Rukmaan, a former driver, who does the same work. Mukesh Kumar was the first advocate to employ Maqbul in 2006. 'Initially, he was a slow learner,' says Mukesh. 'But he was a determined young man and worked hard to improve his skills. Now he's pretty much indispensable. He's extremely punctual and never goes home leaving a day's work unfinished.'

Maqbul says his life has changed dramatically. 'I worked as a wastepicker for seven-eight years,' he recalls. 'It was a hard time. Despite the hard physical labour I put in, there was no security, my income was very uncertain. I would often fall sick. Now I have a stable job in a clean working environment and a regular income.'

Maqbul realizes that things could still be better, but, he says, they could so easily have been much worse. Education, he feels, is the key: 'I would like to tell all those children who share my background that they should never neglect their education. There are many different opportunities, in various fields, but only if we are educated can we benefit from those opportunities and live with respect and dignity.'

Project Arman Wins Praise and an Award



Project Arman, funded by Le Passage to India, the country's premier travel conglomerate, is one of Chintan's major initiatives in education for child wastepickers in Delhi. Under the project, Chintan runs learning centres in Nizamuddin and Sunder Nursery where child wastepickers and children of wastepickers are taught how to read and write and gain access to formal schooling.

For its association with Project Arman, Le Passage to India was chosen as the winner in the 'Most improved customer communications strategy' category of the TUI Travel Sustainability Customer Communication Awards for 2011.

Le Passage to India donated the £2,000 prize money to Chintan. The money is being used to buy computers and organize computer training and English speaking lessons at Chintan's learning centres. Mrs. Long, wife of TUI CEO Peter Long, herself both a mother and grandmother, visited Project Arman on 10 January 2012 to present the first two computers. "You must learn to use computers, but don't ignore how to read and write using books, it is very important," she reminded the children.



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.

We welcome 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 execute our programmes more successfully. All donations to Chintan are eligible for tax exemption in India under section 80G.

For details on how to donate, please log on to:
www.chintan-india.org/donate_to_chintan.htm



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

- Rs. 100 pays for three boxes of colour pencils.
- Rs. 300 helps us replace old chatais and durries 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).



CHINTAN
ENVIRONMENTAL RESEARCH
AND ACTION GROUP

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