Manorama Begum hauls her garbage cart in New Delhi, picking up trash for a living and using a whistle to signal her arrival.

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Picking Up Trash by Hand, and Yearning for Dignity

By AMELIA GENTILEMAN

NEW DELHI—After a bad day at work, Manorama Begum can hardly keep from vomiting. After a good day, she is merely disinclined to eat for a few hours, until the stomach has emptied from her nostrils and her fingernails have been scrubsodden.

A garbage collector in India’s capital, Ms. Begum is one of 200,000 little-seen workers who perform a vital role in the city: rifting through the detritus of modern life, recycling anything of worth and carefully disposing of the rest.

More than 95 percent of New Delhi has no formal system of house-to-house garbage collection, so it falls to the city’s ragpickers, one of India’s poorest and most marginalized groups, to provid e this basic service. They are not paid by the state, relying instead on donations from the communities they serve and on meager profits from the sale of discarded items.

But after centuries of subsistence silence, the waste collectors are beginning to demand respect. On Oct. 2, Gandhi’s birthday, the Delhi state government will make a small but significant concession. In response to pressure from a ragpicker union, it will supply about 6,000 with protective gloves, tarp and spray.

For now, though, they still pick through apothecaries of trash: shards of glass smeared with the remains of yesterday’s dinner, broken shoes mixed in with rotting meat — with bare hands.

This is the first time the government has made any effort to recognize this hard work of essential workers, and the moment will be marked with a celebration near the Chaupad Ghat.

“Looking at rubbish, anywhere in the world, is not dignified,” said I. K. Tyagi, secretary of Delhi’s Environment Minister. “The pride in which we’ve acknowledged it to be work we want to have their self-esteem and a sense of work and significance of their dignity.”

The waste collectors are underwhelmed by the move. They say it is not enough, not timely.

They want wages, pensions, health care, uniforms that they hope will discourage police harassment, education for their children.

The waste disposal system here is informal, highly organized. Its capacity to recycle plastics and paper is efficient beyond the dreams of the most progressive recycling nations in the West. In a country where hundreds of millions live in desperate poverty, everything has a value and nothing is redundant. Mattsickingly, too, one’s neglect of those who perform this service is typical of a much broader blinding toward those excluded from India’s blossoming economy.

Ms. Begum, 25, learned much about humanity during her daily rounds of 105 government apartments occupied by low-ranking state employees in south Delhi. Sifting through the onion peels, chickpeas and half-eaten chapatis, she can tell which families are struggling and which are feeling flush.

From her fleeting encounters with them every morning, she knows which households consist of good people and which she would rather avoid.

There are the hard-up families who save their plastic milk cartons to sell to passing dealers for a few extra rupees.

An essential class of workers, and one of the poorest.

In a home made from items salvaged from the ruins of the Walled City, lit with flattened cardboard boxes, the ceiling patched with automobile floor mats, they express bitterness about their lives. “In the past you could make us do this work,” Ms. Begum said, “I’d have to be passive, I wouldn’t be doing it. Who would like to collect garbage?”

At an event of ragpickers organized by a support group called Chintan, the government’s plan was met with little satisfaction. Several people told of beatings by police officers suspicious of their presence in residential areas in the early morning. Some said the CTY authorities refused to grant them space to sort their garbage and constantly harassed them to move on.

“They are prancing us with gloves and boots just so we don’t get sick and stop working,” Mr. Nazir said. “If we stop, who is going to do this work instead of us? They know we won’t find other people who are willing. Within two days the whole city would be stinking.”