



J. ADAM HUGGINS FOR THE INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE

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

### NEW DELHI JOURNAL

## Picking Up Trash by Hand, and Yearning for Dignity

By AMELIA GENTLEMAN

**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 stench has receded from her nostrils and her fingernails have been scrubbed clean.

A garbage collector in India's capital, Ms. Begum is one of 300,000 little-seen workers who perform a vital role for the city: rifling 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 provide 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 submissive 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 ragpickers' union, it will supply about 6,000 with protective gloves, boots and aprons.

For now, though, they still pick through refuse — 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 band of essential workers, and the moment will be marked with a celebration near the city's Gandhi memorial.

"Looking after rubbish, anywhere in the world, is not dignified," said J. K. Dadoo, the secretary of Delhi's Environment Ministry. "The very fact that we have acknowledged that we need to look after their health is a tremendous acknowledgment of their dignity."

The waste collectors are underwhelmed by the move. They do not want gloves, they say. They want wages, pensions, health care, uniforms that they hope will discourage police harassment, education for their children and decent housing.

The waste disposal system here is informal yet 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 society where hundreds of millions live in desperate poverty, everything has a value and nothing is redundant. Most strikingly, the city's neglect of those who perform this service is typical of a much broader blind-

ness toward those excluded from India's blossoming economy.

Ms. Begum, 35, learns much about humanity during her daily rounds of 350 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

had developed stamina.

Her husband, Muhammad Nazir, who works in a more affluent area, said he could see the city's transformation in the trash he handled. "People are earning more, they are spending more, they are throwing more stuff away now that Delhi has got rich," he said.

But it remains hard to scrape an existence from the refuse of middle-class life. The couple separate the vegetable matter from plastic bags (about 2 to 3 cents per 2.2 pounds), newspapers (2 to 3 cents) and glass bottles (about 18 cents), then take the salable items for sorting in their nearby slum, where the middleman is based. On average, they each earn 30 to 50 rupees a day, about 76 cents to \$1.26.

In a home made from items salvaged on their rounds (the walls lined with flattened cardboard boxes; the ceiling patched with automobile floor mats), they express bitterness about their lives. "It is the poverty that makes us do this work," Ms. Begum said. "If I had an alternative, I wouldn't be doing it. Who would like to collect garbage?"

At a meeting 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 city authorities refused to grant them space for sorting recyclable goods, and constantly harassed them to move on.

"They are providing 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 they won't find other people who are willing. Within two days the whole city would be stinking and filthy."

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

a few extra rupees. There are the generous ones, like those who recently donated money for Ms. Begum's 16-year-old daughter's wedding. There are the mean-spirited, who never give the expected monthly donation of 10 rupees, or 25 cents, she needs to feed her four children.

"If everyone paid me, I'd earn 3,500 rupees," she said, about \$88. "I never even get 1,500," about \$38.

She has other ways of gleaning a return for her work. Finding good food discarded among the litter, she transfers it to a separate plastic bag. Later she will give it to one of the dairies whose cows wander the streets of Delhi, in exchange for milk for her younger children.

The work is exhausting, but she said that after 14 years she

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