

Labouring on the Margins of Citizenship

Report of AMAN's Field-Based Research in Taimurnagar Basti, 2009

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Introduction

In April and May 2009, Arshad Husain and I carried out fieldwork in Taimurnagar basti (New Delhi), attempting to better understand certain aspects of living in this settlement of 7000-strong migrants. Our research was two-pronged: We focused, firstly, on childbirth and pregnancy- a crucial aspect of women's health and medical care. And secondly, on the system of waste picking work; waste picking comprising the occupation of a significant part of the population here. Investigating both these themes shed light on how the labour and health practices of basti-inhabitants interacted with state policy and practices. It pointed to the resourcefulness of this migrant population in negotiating life on the margins of law and citizenship, and also to the hardships faced by them.

This report focuses on the second aspect of our fieldwork, that is, on the informal kabadi sector in Taimurnagar. Its aim is both to highlight what we learned during the 2-month fieldwork period, and also to indicate directions for future research questions as well as activist work. The material used consists of primary interviews and conversations with basti inhabitants, workers, and MCD officials in the area, and also the secondary literature available on the subject.

The next section describes aspects of the setting and structure of Taimurnagar basti. Following this, the report discusses the kabadi sector and the state policies that impact it's working.

Taimurnagar: Spatial and Social Geography

Taimurnagar basti is located in the Okhla Assembly constituency in the district of South Delhi. The basti is situated behind the New Friend's Colony Gurudwara, directly across from Taimurnagar Village. The high-income residential colonies in the vicinity are New Friend's Colony and Maharani Bagh, and many women living in the basti work here as domestic help. Adjacent to Taimurnagar village is the locality of Khizrabad, and this is where the government school closest to the basti is situated.

The basti is divided into two 'camps' and is accessed only by crossing an uncovered nala (approx. 15 feet wide) that runs between Taimurnagar Village and basti. The camps are colloquially referred to as Camp number 'ek' and 'do'; and are officially termed 'Indira Camp 1' and 'Indira Camp 2'. Oral history has it that the camps were named in the 1980's during Indira Gandhi's reign, when tokens were first distributed for ration-cards to the inhabitants of the basti. The nala has been labeled 'Taimurnagar nala' and drains out, finally, into the Yamuna. Spatially, the basti runs lengthwise along the Taimurnagar nala, with Camp 1 preceding Camp 2 from the direction of the Gurudwara.



Taimurnagar Nala

Official statistics lacking for the locality, unofficial estimates place the number of households in Camp 1 as approx. 1200, and in Camp 2 as approx. 700. The total number of people in both camps would roughly figure around 7000, and many locals estimate the number to be higher than this. A large proportion of the inhabitants consist of migrants from West Bengal, UP and Bihar, and in smaller numbers, from Assam and Nepal. One couple that we spoke to had migrated from Orissa, but migrants from Orissa are unusual here. Many Bangladeshi migrants also reside in the basti, particularly in Camp 1. Locals sometimes speak of Camp 1 as comprising the Muslim population of the basti, and Camp 2 as housing the Hindu population. While a large number of Bangladeshis and West Bengal Muslims do stay in Camp 1, it is difficult to make this generalization. Hindus from Nepal, UP and Bihar also live in Camp 1, and concomitantly, a number of West Bengal Muslims and Bangladeshis live in Camp 2.

A majority of the basti's living quarters consist of mud huts, with the number of rooms ranging more commonly from one or two, to even six or seven. There are also a number of brick and cement dwellings. On the whole, this settlement is a slum settlement; but it is possible to see an internal economic hierarchy within the camps. To start with, living conditions in Camp 1 are relatively better than in Camp 2. Unlike Camp 1, Camp 2 is on a downward slope, and the consequences of this are extremely adverse for residents in the monsoon season: the only entrance to the camp is flooded and inhabitants have no choice but to wade in knee-deep water as soon as they exit their homes. The lanes between houses contain much more open refuse in Camp 2

than in Camp 1. A majority of the brick and cement houses are also found in Camp 1. Inhabitants of both camps obtain water through hand-pumps that are spaced through the basti; however, some Camp 2 residents that we spoke to did complain of water supply difficulties. By contrast, Camp 1 occupants said that obtaining water was not a problem.



Entrance to Camp 2 After a Single Rain

Secondly, economic hierarchy is visible within each camp. The ‘pucca’ dwellings of Camp 1 are found around its centre, near the Camp mosque. It is in this area that the Camp’s ‘pradhan’, or head, lives. It is also here that a number of one-room private clinics, and kabadi shops, are found. This area is flanked on both sides by ‘kuchcha’ mud houses, occupied on one side by a mixed population, and on the other by a considerable concentration of UP migrants of the Balmiki community/ caste. Hierarchies exist in Camp 2 as well, but here it is difficult to spatially mark out areas by economic level. Economic differences in the camps are related to various factors: the occupation of the inhabitants, the length of time for which they have been living in the city and in Taimurnagar, the network of kin and the corresponding social security that is available to them in the basti, and also where they have migrated from. This will subsequently be further discussed.

The kuchcha houses of both camps are either rented or owned by inhabitants: standard rent for these dwellings was Rs. 700 per month at the time that we conducted fieldwork. Some of the constructions were owned by residents of the basti, others by Gujjars who lived across the nala in Taimurnagar village. The ownership of the land

itself was something of a question: old time residents say that the makaan-maliks themselves had occupied whatever land they rented out, and that the land was in fact government land. This is likely because the Taimurnagar nala is public property and the basti runs adjacent to it.

One particular individual from Taimurnagar village owned a row of constructions close to the entrance of Camp 1; but apart from this, we could not establish that any single person owned a majority (or even large number) of the dwellings. Residents of the camps corroborated that at least as far as they knew, no single party owned a large proportion of the camps' constructions. In order to reside in their one-room hut, one family that we interviewed in Camp 1 had to feed and prepare fodder for the makaan-malik's cattle, with the makaan-malik himself living outside the basti. It is possible that this phenomena- the performance of certain tasks for the landlord in addition to the payment of rent- is not restricted to this family but is more generally prevalent here.

Before proceeding to the next section, it is necessary to briefly discuss certain aspects of the political and occupational structure of the basti, for this is linked to the condition of the kabadi labourers who are based here.

The main occupations for men in the basti are kabadi work and ricksha-plying; and less frequently, menial employment in nearby offices and shops. Women's primary occupations comprise housework, kabadi work, and employment as domestic helpers in neighbouring high-income residential colonies. There appears to be a greater amount of fluidity in women's occupations as compared to men's: some women are involved solely in household work; others while technically not employed in any extra-household activity perform the task of sorting the kabadi that the male members of the household procure. Still others worked as domestic helpers in New Friends Colony or Maharani Bagh in the morning and/or evening, perform their own household chores, and also help with kabadi-sorting. Men's work is, on the other hand, much more clearly classifiable in one or another occupational category. As far as income-generating cleaning work is concerned, it is interesting to note that while men are employed in offices and shops, women are employed in residences. From our own observation and interviews, and from AMAN's previous research on informal labour in the area (carried out in 2005-2006), it is possible to conclude that inhabitants' occupation and regional roots bear a strong connection to each other. Waste/ kabadi pickers and kabadi dealers are overwhelmingly either of Bangladeshi or West Bengali origin. Some Bengali¹ men are involved in other forms of employment- significantly, ricksha-pulling – but the reverse is not the case: that is, basti residents from other regions are not routinely involved in kabadi work.

While kabadi collection and trading are by no means the sole occupations of the basti, they do appear to be central to living and working here. Accounts of individuals who have resided here for more than 25 years hold that kabadi work was and is the mainstay of the settlement. These residents did not concur on whether kabadi work

¹ I use the term 'Bengali' to refer to persons either from Bangladesh or West Bengal, as because of the illegal status of Bangladeshi migrants; interview respondents would seldom openly refer to themselves as Bangladeshi. Migrants from West Bengal will be specifically referred to as such.

was the first occupation of basti dwellers. However, most said that Bengalis² comprised the majority of the population of the (much smaller) settlement at the time, and as kabadi work is entirely carried out by West Bengalis and Bangladeshis, it is likely that this work was a significantly important part of the basti's economic activity soon after the settlement came into existence. In the current scenario, waste-sorting work is carried out in both camps; and a number of kabadi shops are located within camp 1. The pradhan of camp 1 himself owns a kabadi shop. Members of his family say that they also have a house outside Taimurnagar, but continue to live in the basti because this is where kabadi work- the source of their livelihood- is carried out. Indeed, the basti is one of- if not *the*- key site of junk sorted and collected from nearby MCD dhalaos/ waste-sites and from household waste generated in surrounding neighbourhoods.



Women Segregating Kabadi Camp 2

In her paper 'Urban Poverty and Informality: A Case Study of an Assembly Constituency in Delhi' (2007), Rukmini Barua describes the vulnerability of informal labourers working in this area. In the course of our fieldwork, this was particularly visible in the case of kabadi workers, and in fact, all Bengali-speaking Muslim migrants residing in the basti, susceptible as they were to being classified as illegal migrants even if they were West Bengal Muslims, and even if they possessed voter ID

² Again, the locals that we had discussions with spoke generically of 'Bengalis'; thus from oral accounts it is difficult to establish whether the early 'Bengali' residents were solely from Bangladesh or also from West Bengal.

cards and ration cards. Existing on the margins of citizenship and at the bottom of the economic ladder, waste-pickers and Bengali Muslims have very limited, if any, recourse to the law³.

It is possible to see this in the way in which the accusation of “Bangladeshi!” is used to prevent persons from accessing basic rights on an everyday basis. A number of Bengali families in Camp 1 spoke of incidents of violence in the camp and of a gang of young men who were routinely responsible for these incidents. These different families all pointed to the same set of individuals as instigators of violence, and also as involved in drug-trafficking. What was significant is that for all those who said that members of their families had been victims of violent incidents, it was the fear of police harassment due to their labeling as Bangladeshi that prevented them from accessing the police machinery for their protection.

One particular Bengali family that I had discussions with on four occasions had a large pile of junk stacked at the entrance to their hut. I assumed that this was the kabadi that they had collected for sorting and selling, but they said that it belonged to the ‘gang’ who lived in the basti. The gang, they said, also blocked the drain in front of their house, so that it had to be manually cleared. They were unable to take any action against this group because the latter threatened to hand them over to the police as Bangladeshis. This family said that they owned their hut (that is, they did not pay rent for it), and that they rented out two other huts in Camp 1. The police (according to the family, at the behest of the gang) had picked up the male members of the household as Bangladeshis on more than one occasion, asking for “verification” for the huts being rented out. On these occasions release was only procured by the payment of money.

Without exception, families that gave accounts of harassment by the gang said that this group itself was comprised of Bangladeshi individuals, and that they, themselves, were in fact West Bengal migrants. It was difficult to establish what was actually the case, for accounts given to us of who-is-a-Bangladeshi and who-is-a- West Bengali contradicted each other. Such counter-reports indicated both the fraught nature of these categories and their fluidity, and showed also how the illegal immigrant label was routinely used to disempower Bengali-speaking basti residents.

Reports of harassment at the hands of the police included accounts of the extraction of money and threats of deportation. One middle-aged waste-picker said that on being taken into police custody, not only was he told that he would not be released, but also that criminal charges would be made against him, unless he made a payment of the demanded sum of money. The police, basti inhabitants held, was not actually concerned with whether or not an individual was Bangladeshi, for they also ‘sided’ with certain individuals they knew to be Bangaldeshi. According to these persons, the

³ This report will not primarily be concerned with putting forth the author’s or the organization’s views on the status of Bangladeshis as illegal immigrants, but will attempt to describe the working situation of rag-pickers irrespective of their nationality. The point has to be made, nevertheless, that rag-pickers carry out essential work for the city, and that their migratory origin should not deprive them of the right to the minimum wage laid out for the territory of Delhi. It is their susceptibility to being labeled ‘Bangladeshi’ that is used to dispossess them of any claim to legal pay and more generally to the law enforcement machinery.

police was solely concerned with money.

We asked basti dwellers about the role of the ‘pradhan’ in the scenario they described. Some said that the pradhan was mixed up with the police, others indicated that he was a nominal head and did not have any independent arbitrating powers. There was also some confusion in Camp 1 regarding the identity of the pradhan. While most spoke of a particular Bengali individual, Saeed, as the camp’s head (and this is who I have referred to above as the pradhan), one family said that Saeed was the ex-head and the new pradhan was a Gujjar who lived across the camp in Taimurnagar village. Another middle-aged kabadi dealer said that the pradhan was now a Balmiki who lived further ahead in the basti. Still others did not know who the pradhan was.

These accounts shed some light on the functioning of ‘law and order’, or ‘law enforcement’ in such ghettoized urban areas. They highlight the actual and perceived threats that confront basti dwellers, and signal the complexity of the power and political structures that exist here. The next section focuses on the situation of urban rag-pickers within this context.

State Policy and Urban Rag-Picking: the Case of Taimurnagar

Research Context and Method

We spoke to approximately 80 basti residents (excluding interviews with medical practitioners in the basti and Taimurnagar village) about aspects of their migration history, living conditions in the basti, health, health access, employment and working conditions. Many of the families that we spoke to were in some way involved in kabadi work, and through discussions with them, we had indications of changes in state policy towards waste pickers. Subsequent to these more casual discussions, we spoke in detail to fifteen basti residents (from different families), kabadi labourers as well as dealers. We also interviewed workers at the MCD dump-sites of Taimurnagar and Khizrabad, and employees at the MCD office located opposite the New Friend’s Colony Community Centre. Our method of research was qualitative rather than quantitative. Because of the subject of our inquiry and the vulnerability that basti dwellers and waste workers face, they would speak openly only after a few meetings, thus we found it more fruitful to have 2 or more interviews on separate occasions with the same individuals, rather than single interviews with a greater number of persons. Our fieldwork did highlight certain changes and continuities from the kabadi scenario as it prevailed when the AMAN team researched the subject in 2005-2006. What follows attempts to link the situation of kabadi workers with current state policy, and suggests directions for long term research and work in this area.

Taimurnagar: Some Conversation Pieces

An elderly Bengali Camp 1 resident⁴, working as a rag-picker in the Julena locality MCD dump-site for years, told me that since last year, he no longer had to pay to

⁴ The wife and daughter of this individual also recounted that he had previously collected the Surya Hotel kabadi, but that he had been forced out of this by other factions in the basti who wanted access to it. Accounts such as this indicate the complexity of the basti’s socio-political structure.

access waste at the site. Previously, he had been obliged to pay a monthly fee to MCD sweepers to access the waste materials they gathered.

Other basti waste-pickers working in neighbouring MCD dump-sites corroborated that for approximately a year, they had not had to pay MCD employees to access MCD trash bins and dhalaos. There seemed to be some confusion regarding the new arrangement. On one occasion, in a group interview, some of the men said that they were now to be paid for their work of collecting and sorting the waste. Others were doubtful of this. A local household waste contractor⁵, present at the discussion, insisted that payments were being made, and that those who were not being paid must not have yet been named on the 'list'. This mechanism did not seem clear to the kabadi workers, and even those who said that they were supposed to be paid maintained that they had not yet been paid anything.

The two MCD dump-sites closest to the basti are located outside Taimurnagar Village and Khizrabad respectively. Both these dump-sites are stamped with the insignia of 'DWM' or Delhi Waste Management, the private agency hired by the MCD to handle waste here.



⁵ Not himself involved in collecting kabadi, this individual said that he had obtained permission from a New Friend's Colony Housing Society to access waste from the residential complex. He was paid Rs. 2000 a month by the Society to collect the waste generated by the colony. The arrangement between this contractor and those who actually carried out the work of rag-picking was not entirely clear. These arrangements (in terms of how much kabadi is kept by the worker and how much by the contractor, etc.) did not seem to be standardized but to differ from contractor to contractor, both in the case of household kabadi and MCD dhalao kabadi.

‘DWM’ Stamp, Taimurnagar Dhalao Outer Wall

At the New Friend’s Colony Community Centre MCD office, employees told us that the dump-sites of six zones in Delhi had been handed over to DWM (they did not know whether other zones had been outsourced to other private companies in other parts of the city). DWM was responsible for transporting waste from dumpsites to landfills allocated by the MCD. Sweeping remained under the direct purview of the MCD; DWM was responsible for the waste only after it reached dump-sites. One MCD employee said that the MCD had attempted a recycling initiative in the previous year, and it was after the failure of this that waste management was outsourced to private parties. However, as far he and other employees present knew, the MCD was not concerned with what happened to waste- whether it was recycled or not- after it reached the dhalao, as long as DWM cleared the dhalaos and transported waste to landfills. These employees also said that the MCD had no direct dealings with waste-pickers working at the dumpsites. We asked about waste-pickers’ wages: “kabadi mazdooron ki tankhva kaun tay karta hai?” They responded that the MCD had no say over wages, which were handled by DWM.

We conducted two sets of interviews with rag-pickers both at the Taimurnagar and Khizrabad dump-sites. On the first occasion, the Taimurnagar dhalao was peopled by two workers and a private security guard, who said he was hired by the “Company”. The two rag-pickers said that they were supposed to be paid a monthly salary for the sorting and loading work that they did. They were not certain regarding *who* was responsible for paying them. We asked, “paisa kahaan se diya jayega?”; they said, “Company se”. They did not know whether the company was ‘sarkari’ or private, or whether they were officially registered as workers at this site. Their dealings were with a ‘Rakesh’- who seemed to be either a contractor or a contractor’s aid- who came every morning to survey their work. Both workers said that they had been promised Rs. 2000 per month, but had not been paid for the past 6 months. The source of their livelihood was the junk that they collected and sold at kabadi shops in Taimurnagar basti, and they said they earned between Rs. 80- 100 per day from this.

On the second day, a third rag-picker was present at the Taimurnagar dump-site (apart from the other two and the security guard). He said that he had been sorting kabadi here for three years, and had been promised a pay of three to three and a half thousand per month by the contractor. This was six months ago. None of the three workers had received any payment yet. When we asked them about living and working conditions, one of the three rag-pickers spoke of having been picked up twice by the police as a Bangladeshi, and released each time after handing over Rs. 1500 to them. The subject of their identity and their interactions with the police was not something that workers easily discussed.



Workers at the Taimurnagar Dhalao



Security Guard at the Taimurnagar Dhalao



Worker at the Khizrabad Dhalao

Waste loading and segregation work at the Khizrabad dhalao was carried out by a couple (by appearance, they seemed to be in their late-thirties), present on both days that we went there; and by one or two other young men (not the same persons on each day). Two of these males appeared to be adolescents in their late teens. No security guard was present at this site. The woman waste-picker said that she and her husband worked here from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. (but upto 7 p.m., depending on the amount of work) everyday. Collectively, they were to be paid Rs. 2000 a month; and she said that their pay had been regular. They also sold the junk they collected at Taimurnagar basti, and together earned around Rs. 100 to 150 a day. This woman and a few other men present (these men were not themselves rag-pickers, but local residents) said that the other boys at the site were not hired by the contractor, but simply collected junk from the dhalao.

These accounts indicate that arrangements between contractors and workers differ from site to site, and situations differ in terms of amount of pay and regularity of pay. So far though, rag-pickers here seem to keep and sell all of the junk that they collect. That is, at least at both these dhalaos, no portion of the saleable junk was given over to DWM employees or the contractors the agency hired.

The Privatization of the Trash Economy

The changes and confusions perceivable in the above conversations need to be contextualized. On the face of it, the transfer of waste management from the MCD to

DWM has not resulted in a complete transformation of the ground-level situation of kabadi workers: contractors were present under the MCD and remain present in the DWM set-up. Rag-pickers still earn their living from selling the junk they segregate to kabadi dealers. The situation of kabadi dealers⁶, from what they say, remains unchanged. Household rag-pickers⁷ continue as before, for DWM has not been authorized to collect waste from the doorstep of households, but only after it reaches dump-sites⁸. The changes that have taken place do not even seem to be wholly negative: while rag-pickers are not ensured *regular* pay under the DWM system, they also no longer have to pay a rent of sorts to access the waste gathered by MCD sweepers.

However, reports of the impact of DWM's takeover in other parts of the city, coupled with the precarious position of rag-pickers in this locality not only as informal workers but as *illegal* informal workers, suggest that the long-term consequences of this change will be adverse. And the negative fallout will be both social and environmental, affecting not only the livelihood of kabadi workers but also the recycling work that they are instrumental in carrying out.

A paper by the director of the Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group (2007) describes the situation of waste-pickers in the South Delhi locality of RK Puram. The article states that in this area, DWM itself functions as a kabadi-dealer, buying waste from rag-pickers at rates unfavourable to the latter. Rag-pickers are reported to have said that they if they dump their waste at dhalaos in the area, they are bullied into selling segregated junk only to DWM.

The report of the seminar 'Privatization of Waste Management in Delhi: What a Mess!' (appendixed) has the accounts of three waste-recyclers who said that they are being forced to sell waste to the private operator that had taken over in South Delhi (this is most likely a reference to DWM). The report also contains statements from DWM employees, who are clear that DWM wants to be allowed to handle waste from the doorstep to the point of recycling, thereby eliminating small-time kabadi-dealers.

In his article 'The Impact of Privatization of Solid Waste Collection and Transportation in Delhi: The Impact on the Informal Recycling Sector' (2009), Jomit C P outlines several negative consequences of waste privatization.

⁶ While kabadi or junk dealers are in a better economic position than rag-pickers, they are by no means either financially well-off or socially secure. The kabadi-dealers that we spoke to also lived inside the basti, and had each been taken into police custody as Bangladeshi on more than one occasion.

⁷ See Barua's paper (2007), for a description of the types of rag-pickers. Conversations with basti residents and our observations indicated that usually, men worked in MCD bins and women segregated junk. Household rubbish was collected by adults but also occasionally by children. These demarcations are not watertight. Also, it is not as if all children coming from kabadi-worker families were rag-pickers: many families that we spoke to said that their children went to the Khizrabad or Julena government schools. It is possible that they helped sort kabadi in their households, and it is also possible that interview respondents would not openly tell us even if their children were rag-pickers. But the point is that while child-labour does exist in this sector, the major part of kabadi work in this locality did seem to be carried out by adults.

⁸ See Jomit C P (2009); and report of the seminar 'Privatization of Waste Management in Delhi: What a Mess!', attached as appendix.

To start with, the MCD's contract with DWM has transferred the ownership of dump-site space to the latter. This means that rag-pickers can no longer carry out sorting work at dhalaos, for DWM does not allow this. Thereby, the only work-space available to rag-pickers is increasingly becoming unavailable (with the exception of their dwellings, and carrying out kabadi-sorting work here have adverse consequences on the health of workers and their families).

Secondly, the assigning of particular dhalaos to particular individuals- waste-pickers, also called 'bin guides'- disallows other rag-pickers from accessing these dhalaos, making it the monopoly of appointed bin guides/ waste-pickers. It is useful here to quote in full from Jomit C P's paper:

"Usually, most wastepickers move from bin to bin at peak hours along a fixed territorial route which is shared by other wastepickers. Alternatively, a few wastepickers take over dhalaos, from where they mine the waste as it is thrown in. This is then their monopoly. Wastepickers find several ways to both collaborate and compete through unwritten codes of conduct and community and peer pressure. As a result, a complex and evolving system of resource sharing comes into play, resulting in one of the highest rates of recycling in the world. This informal system therefore plays out not as the tragedy of the commons but remarkably, the opposite of it.

By breaking the existing system and replacing it with 'bin guides,' waste is no longer able to be shared amongst a vast community of the poor. It is instead monopolized via an individual... The poor typically harness their social capital to get through difficult times. Systems such as the one described above are likely to break up this social capital because they rupture the basis on acting like a community and instead, seek to create a new 'professional' individual outside this system. This considerably weakens the individual and the community, which is seen to provide valuable services where the state/government fails or is unable to."

Lastly, but importantly, the contract between the MCD and DWM transfers the ownership of waste from the state to the private operator. Article 5.15 of the contract, as given in C P's paper, states:

"The concessionaire shall be free to sell or otherwise dispose of recyclable substances and other materials recovered from the Municipal Solid Waste at such price and to such persons and using such marketing and selling arrangements and strategies as it may deem appropriate."

The MCD's ownership claim over waste was already problematic: as perceivable from the payment that rag-pickers had to make to MCD employees to access dhalaos, waste was treated not as public property but as the *private property of the state*. The transfer of this ownership to private corporate bodies has the potential to further worsen the situation for kabadi workers, for, according to the sources quoted above, DWM is beginning to make claims on all parts of the waste- not only the unusable part of the waste that they are to transport to landfills, but also the recyclable component of the waste. This would seriously impact all those who have traditionally subsisted on kabadi work, from rag-pickers up the chain to kabadi dealers.

Jomit C P's paper provides another important piece of information: that wastepickers in Delhi currently handle from 15% to 59% of the waste generated in the city, but that MCD's clause with private operators only demands 20% segregation in the 8th year of operation. Further, private operators are paid according to *the weight of waste they transport to the landfill*. This discourages the segregation of recyclable materials, resulting, firstly, in an increase in the quantity of recyclable matter reaching landfills, and secondly, in an increase in the city-space required for landfills themselves.

C P's article states a few more clauses of the MCD-DWM contract that are relevant to look at:

Article 5.19d : "Endeavor to improve the ancillary conditions and infrastructure related to the project, including assistance to informal recycling workers";

Article 5.19l : "Be responsible for all the health, security, environment and safety aspects of the project at all times during the concession period"

And, Article 6 : "MCD Obligations : Give all assistance to the concessionaire to employ the existing informal Municipal Solid Waste collectors including rag pickers and assist the concessionaire in solving issues arising from the redeployment and employment of such waste collectors by the concessionaire."

However, as far as we could observe at the Taimurnagar and Khizrabad dhalao, there were not any changes/ improvements in the working conditions of kabadi workers. There also did not appear to be any mechanism in place for the MCD to ensure that DWM abides by these clauses of the contract. The workers did not have any direct dealing with MCD employees (or for that matter with DWM employees); their communication was, as they reported, limited to the contractor or the contractor's men. The MCD employees that we spoke to also said that they had no direct contact with waste workers, indicating that they are probably not aware of the clauses of the contract, or that the MCD does have a responsibility to workers under the contract.

The contract between the MCD and DWM was signed in 2005. So far, this has not lead to significant changes in the living and labouring conditions of kabadi workers in the Taimurnagar locality. However, as the presence of a uniformed security guard at the Taimurnagar dhalao indicates, the private operator does lay some ownership claims over the dhalao. In practice, this currently translates into ownership over the dhalao space, and not to the recyclable materials segregated there. However, if DWM begins to assert rights over waste materials- and the contract with MCD certainly allows them to do so- then rag-pickers and kabadi-dealers are both likely to be hit badly. As accounts of rag-pickers reveal, "the Company"- or rather the contractors hired by the Company- does not pay them a regular salary, and where it does, this salary is approximately half of the legal minimum wage, which for the territory of Delhi is Rs. 151 per day or Rs. 3934 per month⁹. A loss of their traditional income

⁹ Delhi Government Labour Department Order Number: F .12(142)/02/MW/Lab/7283. Valid from 1.02.2009. Available on the internet: http://labour.delhigovt.nic.in/order/order_new190209.html (Accessed on 27/07/2009).

through the selling of junk to kabadi dealers is thus not likely to be compensated by a monthly salary. Kabadi dealers, in turn, would lose the source of their junk material.

Further, as mentioned above, segregation and thus recycling can also be expected to decline if DWM monopolizes waste material at dhalaos. This would be extremely unfortunate because, as C P's article states, currently our country has one of the highest rates of recycling in the world- and this despite lacking the best technology for the processes involved, and despite the fact that the *producers* of waste- the majority of Delhi's citizens- do not attempt to segregate household refuse for recycling.

The commonly perceived status of kabadi workers in this particular locality as *illegal immigrants* implies that, should they need it in the case of a loss of their source of income, they would have even less access to protection from the state than other informal workers. And this in exchange for performing indispensable civic and environmental work, in deplorable working conditions, for the capital city.

Assessing Changing State Policy

A report taken out by Subhash Projects And Marketing Limited, the Company behind the DWM venture, states: "In the wake of upcoming Commonwealth Games 2010, Delhi Waste Management Limited (DWM), a SPML group company has planned intensive awareness and training programmes to enable implementation of the door-to-door collection and segregation of waste at source. This is critical to the capital's representation of a clean and green city maintaining international civic standards as it hosts the Commonwealth Games in 2010" (2009).

This statement signals one of the impulses behind the privatization of waste management: the governing establishment's vision of the capital as a global city, and its attempts to realize this vision framed by the understanding that efficiency cannot be achieved without privatization. Jomit C P quotes a member of the Delhi Parliament commenting on waste management privatization: "All these measures would enable Delhi to become a clean and neat city, which is the need of the hour in view of the fact that the Commonwealth Games are due to take place in 2010 and thousands of foreign tourists would be visiting Delhi. There is a need to give a complete facelift to the Municipal Solid Waste Management System in MCD." (2009).

The 'need of the hour' appears for the state to be the *presentation of the city*, and its method of bringing about a 'facelift' appears to be through washing its hands off the waste management sector. However, the state needs to recognize that its aspirations are bound to fail if its attempts to create a global capital city do not address the problem of deprivation for the majority. The marginalized and their visibly marginalized living spaces cannot simply be swept off the city space, especially as the city continues to be highly dependent on the services they provide.

Under the current system of privatized waste management, there is no scope for an improvement in the living conditions of kabadi workers; rather, the reverse is likely to occur. Jomit C P cites a World Bank report on costs of waste management in the state of Karnataka, which concludes that the reduced costs incurred by private operators are achieved only by lowering the wages of waste-workers. Given both workers' primary accounts of the wages they are paid and secondary literature on the matter, the same is the case for Delhi.

From the construction work sector to education, the privatization that we see all round entails two things: first, it allows the state to distance itself from the non-payment of minimum wages. Second, it displays the state's attempt to evade responsibility for services that it is responsible for. These policies are justified through language that expresses the state's intention to achieve 'efficiency' and 'modernization'. But as the case of the waste-management sector shows, these goals are *not*, finally, achieved through private corporate takeovers of the public sector. Decrease in workers' livelihood and lowered levels of recycling spell, in fact, the opposite of efficiency and competency. implies

An Indian Express article quotes Rishabh Sethi, the director of DWM: "We are also trying to train rag pickers in the zones handled by us and are providing them with equipment like garbage carts" (2009). SPML's report also states:

"A total of 100 awareness programs with an approximate outreach capacity to 50,000 people have been planned until 2010. These include bin guides and rag pickers training... The main objective behind the activity is to enable timely collection of waste, along with segregation at source and efficient disposal. This will reduce the load on the landfills since recyclable materials are sent for recycling, kitchen wastes go for composting and only the inert materials go to the landfill sites thus creating resources from the waste.... In the last quarter DWM has already conducted more than 40 training programmes with over 400 bin guides and waste collectors... DWM has also helped the under privileged people-rag pickers, slum dwellers and others in earning their livelihood" (April 2009).

Such claims can either be seen as outrageous or outrageously unaware. First, in the absence of ensuring regular or legal pay to workers, DWM can hardly declare its assistance to rag pickers or slum dwellers. Second, DWM has much less experience in the waste-management sector than traditional waste handlers. Therefore, it does not need to train kabadi workers, it needs to be trained *by* them in the waste management process. Currently, DWM cannot perceive or present itself as *reducing* the load on landfills or of *increasing* the efficiency of the previous system. If the load on landfills has not yet increased, this is because they have not yet significantly taken control over recyclable materials- but they have expressed their intention to do so.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Work

In light of the above, certain recommendations can be made for research as well as activist work. In terms of the former, studies could attempt to better understand the changes that are taking place at the ground level with the takeover of private

operators. Specifically, they could look at:

- What changes, if any, are coming about in the contractor-system.
- How this affects resource sharing among waste-pickers and the communities they come from.
- The working of the traditional kabadi collection and recycling system: the route of kabadi from households to recycling units, the players involved, the equation between these players.
- The impact of the private operator's claim to the space and content of the dhalao. That is, were claim to dhalao-space is being made, where are rag-pickers segregating the waste they have collected? Also, where claims to recyclable waste are being staked, how are kabadi-dealers affected?
- Kabadi workers' understanding of the changes taking place, and their own analysis of their requirements.

The course of action for NGOs and civil society groups will of course be guided by the findings of further studies. However, the facts and indications that we already have point to the direction of the effort that needs to be made to ensure kabadi workers' livelihood, and also to retain the positive aspects of the current recycling system.

As a number of NGOs and concerned citizens have already stated, it is crucial that the contract between the MCD and private operators be re-negotiated so as to give informal workers in this sector primary access to waste. Along with canvassing for this, a number of other measures are imperative:

- To ensure that rag-pickers are fully aware of the takeover and its entailments, and also, that they are aware of minimum wage rates. Atleast at the dhalaos in the Taimurnagar locality, workers appeared to have only a vague idea of the identity of 'the Company' that had promised them wages (of course, indirectly, through contractors). They were not even certain of whether or not the Company was a private, non-governmental body. If workers are at any point to collectivize and ask for their rights, legal or customary; they need to be aware of the clauses of the MCD-private operator contract.
- To educate both government officials and DWM about the role of the informal kabadi sector, and of their efficiency in carrying out high rates of recycling. The state and the private corporation need to understand that the kabadi recycling sector functions as a highly competent, organized system, with a remarkable outreach. DWM needs to be aware that it has something to *learn* from kabadi workers, and focus on that instead of on "training" them. It should not, and should not be allowed to, introduce changes attempting to better the existing system without first understanding it: given SPML's claim that they will reduce the load on landfills by sending recyclables for recycling, it is clear that the Company does not at present clearly understand the extent of the recycling that already occurs under the traditional system.
- To put pressure on DWM to firstly, adhere to the payment of minimum wages and secondly, ensure that working conditions for rag-pickers are safe and more

hygienic.

- To also put pressure on the MCD to monitor DWM. Given the state's preoccupation with bringing about a visually presentable city, 'monitoring' could end up being restricted to ensuring that dhalaos appear clean and that waste is transported to landfills on time. However, it is crucial to pressurize the state to also take responsibility for the condition of informal kabadi workers, including the responsibility of ensuring that minimum wages are paid.

Some of the above are short-term measures, still working within the framework of the existing MCD- private operator contract. But any long term endeavour in this sphere needs to ensure that the informal kabadi sector- the chain that leads from rag-picking to recycling- is not pushed out of the waste management field but recognized as a legitimate (and in fact an integral) part of it. This is not only to ensure the livelihood of individuals working in this sector, but also in order to maintain an efficient system of recycling.

One way to achieve the latter aim may be through re-negotiating the MCD-DWM contract in such a way as to make mandatory higher levels of waste segregation and recycling from the private operator. However, in my opinion, canvassing for this is not the best route to take, as it leaves unaddressed the question of kabadi workers' livelihood. Moreover, if the state's concerns center around efficiency, then it needs to recognize that the traditional recycling sector already has a much more competent structure in place than private corporate operators less familiar with the complexity of urban waste management. To reiterate, DWM's control should not extend to recyclable waste, but restricted to transporting waste from dhalaos to landfills post segregation.

As Bharati Chaturvedi of Chintan states, the privatization of waste management has been a poverty enhancing measure for Delhi. But as Jomit C P suggests, what we are looking at with current policy changes is not the ushering in of 'privatization' but corporate privatization: for, city waste was previously also actually handled by private bodies, it was just that the informal kabadi management sector involved smaller, non-corporate players, who performed an unrecognized task *for* the state. It is then the corporate privatization of waste that is problematic keeping in mind its fallout for traditional kabadi workers and for the efficiency of recycling itself. The problem, then, is of a lack of recognition of the work of the informal kabadi sector; and their labeling as dispensable.

In order to gain recognition kabadi sector workers and dealers need to collectivize. But the problem with such organization- especially in a locality such as Taimurnagar where the sector is couched as illegal- is that it involves making kabadi workers visible. Visibility threatens informal players in the sector with police harassment, arrest, and deportation. The challenge before civil society groups then is to attempt to divorce the vexed issue of nationality with the issue of the rights of workers- whatever their origins- in this sector. Spreading an awareness of the tremendous import of the civic role kabadi workers perform (and that too in thankless conditions) would help achieve this end. But this would be a first step in the task of ensuring that the kabadi sector retains its management of recyclable waste. Finally, instead of viewing them as

a problem, the state needs to be taught to view them as a legitimate and useful constituent of the waste management process; and integrate them as a *resource* instead of attempting to sideline them in the service of mistaken notions of modernization.

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[Note: All photographs taken in June 2009 by the author]