



# A Governance Landfill

The Tragic Story of Capital's Waste-Picking Community during the Pandemic



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PUBLICATION DATE:

**25 FEBRUARY 2025**

IN COLLABORATION WITH:

**ALL INDIA KABADI MAZDOOR MAHASANGH AND**

**DALIT ADIVASI SHAKTI ADHIKAR MANCH**

PUBLISHED BY:

**PEOPLE'S COMMISSION AND PUBLIC INQUIRY COMMITTEE**



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**Cite as:**

Das, E., MJ, V., Akshara, U., & Sengupta, R. (2024). *A Governance Landfill: The Tragic Story of Capital's Waste-Picking Community During the Pandemic*. People's Commission and Public Inquiry Committee, in collaboration with All India Kabadi Mazdoor Mahasangh and Dalit Adivasi Shakti Adhikar Manch.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

In the past two years, the People's Commission and Public Inquiry Committee (PC-PIC) initiative has steadfastly pursued truth, accountability, and justice amidst the challenges wrought by the pandemic in India. Central to our efforts has been amplifying the voices and narratives of individuals affected by the pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns. Our collective mandate aims to revive civic discourse and provoke critical examination of injustices, particularly focusing on the profound impacts of death, debt, and distress on communities.

PC-PIC conducted several public hearings with various communities in different parts of India, such as Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, etc. In Delhi, there was an increasing demand for public hearings from waste pickers. As a result, our initiative unfolded in March 2023, with public hearings conducted across different locales in Delhi to comprehend the ramifications of the pandemic on their lives.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all who attended the public hearings and generously supported us in conducting them and publishing this report.

This is a joint effort by the All India Kabadi Mazdoor Mahasangh (AIKMM), Dalit Adivasi Shakti Adhikar Manch (DASAM), and People's Commission and Public Inquiry Committee (PC-PIC), resulting from a series of collaborative investigations. We take this opportunity to extend our solidarity and salaam to the waste pickers. And to their courage in sharing collective truth and perspective, exposing the constant claims and lies of the government. These insights provided critical guidance for our advocacy efforts and policy recommendations moving forward.

We thank the Wastepickers Welfare Foundation (WWF), the Association for Social Justice and Research (ASoJ), AIKMM, and the DASAM team for their dedication and support in realising this significant event. Their commitment ensured that the voices of waste pickers resonated effectively throughout the hearings, underscoring their invaluable contributions to this effort.

We especially thank Mr Shashi Pandit for coordinating and pushing this effort, Mr Sanjeev Danda for his support in mobilising, and Mr Umesh Babu for leading the field interaction and data analysis.

We also express profound appreciation to the volunteers for joining their hands in strengthening accountability and justice by taking time out to conduct extensive field visits and narrating people's truth. Their diligence and passion were pivotal in ensuring the success of these proceedings.

Special thanks to the expert panel of People's Commissioners for their participation and insightful suggestions and recommendations. We also thank the Association for India's Development (AID) and its team of selfless volunteers in their continuing support to the PC-PIC team.

We hope that by raising questions and making consistent efforts, other groups will come forward to investigate the truth about the ongoing impact of the pandemic on people's lives, despite the absence of accountability and efforts to encourage individuals to move past their lived experiences and memories.

## **ABBREVIATIONS**

AID - Association for India's Development

AIKMM - All India Kabadi Mazdoor Mahasangh

COVID-19 - Corona Virus Disease of 2019

DASAM - Dalit Adivasi Shakti Adhikar Manch

FIR - First Information Report

GST - Goods and Services Tax

ID - Identity Document

IPC - Indian Penal Code

OBC - Other Backward Class

PC-PIC - People's Commission & Public Inquiry Committees

PIL - Public Interest Litigation

PPE - Personal Protective Equipment

MCD - Municipal Corporation of Delhi

MLA - Member of the Legislative Assembly

SC - Scheduled Castes

ST - Scheduled Tribes

SWM - Solid Waste Management

WWF - Wastepickers Welfare Foundation



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COVID-19 hit India four and a half years ago, unleashing widespread devastation across the country. The government's mismanagement of the pandemic and ineffective policy implementation quickly escalated what began as a health crisis into a socio-economic disaster. Among the hardest hit were those from the working class and unorganised sectors.

This report, conducted by the People's Commission and Public Inquiry Committee (PC-PIC), analyses the lives of waste pickers in Delhi and the enduring impacts of the pandemic on their lives, through a series of public hearings conducted in collaboration with the All India Khabadi Mazdoor Mahasangh (AIKMM), in Bhupur, Bhalswa, and Gharoli.

The initial nationwide lockdown, unilaterally imposed by the Union Government, proved catastrophic for society's most vulnerable segments, including waste pickers, who play a crucial role in keeping cities clean and safeguarding public health. Despite their indispensable contributions, these workers—nearly two lakhs in Delhi alone—were left without guidance or adequate relief measures. While the Solid Waste Management Rules of 2016 sought to decentralise waste management and make it more inclusive, waste pickers report that their livelihoods are being increasingly threatened by the privatisation of waste collection, a trend exacerbated during the pandemic. In addition to economic struggles, they face regular harassment from Delhi's Municipal Corporation and the police, further hindering their ability to earn a livelihood. Their plight underscores a broader pattern of neglect and marginalisation by governmental and societal forces, undermining the rights guaranteed to them by the Constitution of India.

During the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, the suffering endured by waste pickers escalated dramatically as the government opted for a police-centric approach over a democratic state. The imposition of stringent measures under the Disaster Management Act (DMA) and Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) effectively created an atmosphere of a police state, stifling democratic processes. This period witnessed heightened conflicts between police and citizens, worsened by biases rooted in caste and class. Law enforcement authorities, leveraging their powers under the DMA and ESMA, often acted arbitrarily, labelling informal workers—including waste pickers—as 'lockdown violators' and attributing them with spreading COVID-19 without basis. Even as restrictions eased and waste pickers returned to their essential work, they continued to face relentless harassment from the police, who accused them of both spreading disease and encroaching on public spaces.

This report also examines the caste dynamics within the waste picker community, revealing that members of marginalised communities bore the brunt of the pandemic's impact. A staggering 34.4 % of OBC waste pickers reported a severe income loss of more than 75 %, while 56.5% documented instances of harassment by municipal officials. 12.5% of Scheduled Caste (SC) members reported income losses due to demands for bribes from police during waste collection. These findings underscore systemic inequalities and discrimination faced by waste pickers, who are often marginalised based on their socio-economic status and caste identity.

Despite the government's claims of people-centric governance and various achievements, it is evident that no specific schemes were introduced to support the waste picker community during the pandemic. Narratives from the ground attest that they were left to fend for themselves, with no assistance from the government. Even local councillors declined to extend aid to this vulnerable community in their time of need. As we reflect on the four and a half years since the pandemic began, it remains clear that waste pickers and their ongoing challenges have been consistently overlooked. When the government fails to adequately support vulnerable segments of society, especially during testing times like the pandemic, it becomes imperative to scrutinise these actions and hold those responsible for their neglect accountable.

# INTRODUCTION

## The People's Commission & Public Inquiry Committees

COVID-19 was first reported in India just over four and a half years ago. Despite the time that has passed, the lasting impacts of various government decisions continue to affect certain sectors and communities. People, particularly from the working class, are still grappling with the long-term repercussions of severe government measures purportedly taken to control the virus's spread.

On 24 March 2020, with COVID-19 case numbers rising, Prime Minister Narendra Modi abruptly declared a 21-day nationwide lockdown at 8:00 pm. This sudden move was reminiscent of the demonetisation announcement in November 2016. This unexpected move left the public directionless and forced them to fend for themselves. The lockdown had a devastating impact on informal workers, whose livelihoods depend on daily mobility. Stranded without clarity or aid, these workers faced immediate hardships. The Union Government's unprepared and harsh lockdown plunged millions of working-class and oppressed caste individuals into a crisis, as they faced a complete loss of livelihood.

The informal sector, already reeling from the impacts of the disastrous demonetisation and GST implementation in 2016, experienced severe financial and mental distress as a result of the mishandling of the pandemic. Between 2016 and 2021, the informal sector reported a loss of over 1.3 crore workers following demonetisation.<sup>1</sup> And the pandemic-induced lockdown further exacerbated this crisis, costing 12 crore people their jobs in April 2020 alone.<sup>2</sup>

India is yet to fully recover from the pandemic. However, the government would like to maintain that the pandemic was handled well and that we are now on the road to recovery.

While the government touts claims of a strong recovery and improved economic growth, it is crucial to reflect on key pandemic statistics—such as the unemployment rate, poverty levels, and more—to remind ourselves how a poorly planned lockdown and mismanagement of the crisis quickly transformed COVID-19 into both an economic and humanitarian disaster in India. When the first nationwide lockdown

1 <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/data-stories/data-focus/24-lakh-fewer-manufacturing-entities-in-informal-sector-in-2021-compared-to-2016/article68393093.ece#:~:text=In%20terms%20of%20employment%2C%20too,3.48%20crore%20in%202010%2D11.>

2 <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/data-stories/data-focus/24-lakh-fewer-manufacturing-entities-in-informal-sector-in-2021-compared-to-2016/article68393093.ece#:~:text=In%20terms%20of%20employment%2C%20too,3.48%20crore%20in%202010%2D11.>

was announced on 24 March, 2020, over 122 million people lost their jobs by April. India's unemployment rate surged to a staggering 27.11% in May 2020, up from less than 7% in mid-March, right before the pandemic.<sup>3</sup> According to the World Bank's Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2022 report, nearly 80% of those who fell into poverty in 2020 as a result of COVID-19 were from India.<sup>4</sup>

“India better off because of right decisions at right time,”

said PM Modi in July 2020. His statement came during a critical moment when the country's healthcare system was overwhelmed, with one million confirmed COVID-19 cases.<sup>5</sup>

The Prime Minister went on to make further boastful statements on global platforms that were a stark departure from the on-ground crisis raging in the country at the time.

“India has saved the world, entire humanity, from a major tragedy by effectively controlling coronavirus,”

PM Modi at the World Economic Forum on January 28, 2021.

“I want to assure everyone that while the pandemic lasts, we will protect the poor,”

PM Modi in February 2021

Despite the varying facts, figures, and ground-level narratives, the Union Government's inflated claims about its handling of the pandemic continue unabated. It is reasonable to conclude that the 2024 general election results reflect the public's demand for accountability and good governance over divisive religious and temple politics. The unexpected defeats of the ruling party in strongholds like Ayodhya, Raebareli, and Haryana signal a clear verdict from India's common citizens. People's rights and concerns outweighed the Union Government's continuous boasts about successfully handling the pandemic and its attempts to downplay mistakes and deflect responsibility. COVID-19 remained a central issue during several phases of

3 <https://www.thehindu.com/business/indias-unemployment-rate-rises-to-2711-amid-covid-19-crisis-cmie/article61660838.ece> <https://www.thehindu.com/business/indias-unemployment-rate-rises-to-2711-amid-covid-19-crisis-cmie/article61660838.ece>

4 <https://covidtruths.in/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Covid-Report-Card-2024-PCPICWeb.pdf>

5 <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/07/16/asia/india-wealth-gap-coronavirus-intl-hnk/index.html>

the elections, with exit polls indicating that the pandemic was a key turning point in the 2024 election results, making Modi government a minority government and compelling coalition.

The full scope of the consequences resulting from how various governments in India handled the pandemic has yet to be thoroughly investigated by any official government agency or statutory body. In the absence of a formal review, around 200 organisations came together in August 2021 to carry out an independent investigation on behalf of the public. To oversee the initial tasks of the People's Commission & Public Inquiry Committee (PC-PIC), an All-India Secretariat and Working Group were established—an initiative aimed at empowering citizens' right to investigate, question, and demand accountability from both the state and private sector. Given the government's lack of response, there is a pressing need for public-driven efforts to ensure that those in power are held accountable for their actions.

All India Kabadi Mazdoor Mahasangh (AIKMM) played an important role in this initiative by helping organise public hearings. In March 2023, meetings were held with AIKMM, in which regional organisations such as the Dalit Adivasi Shakti Adhikar Manch (DASAM) and Waste Pickers Welfare Foundation (WWF) conducted public hearings among the waste picker community in their respective regions in Delhi and Ghaziabad (Uttar Pradesh) to collectively investigate the pandemic-induced hardships they faced.

Individual public hearings were held in Bhuapur (Ghaziabad), Bhalswa, and Gharoli, culminating in a larger public hearing at the Constitution Club in New Delhi..

## Need for PC-PIC and public hearings

COVID-19 exposed a myriad of ways in which the government failed its people. The Indian government responded to this health, economic, and humanitarian crisis as a law-and-order issue, rather than a public health emergency. Instead of fostering a collaborative spirit between civil society organisations, the private sector, and political parties to address the crisis collectively, it invoked the Epidemic Diseases Act and Disaster Management Act, which allowed the deployment of police and paramilitary forces to enforce lockdowns measures and control the pandemic.

The government's undeniable deliberate mismanagement resulted in the loss of millions of lives and livelihoods. The World Health Organization estimates that 47 lakh COVID-19-related deaths occurred in India.<sup>6</sup> but the Union Government refuses

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/health/who-estimates-47-million-covid-linked-deaths-in-india-10-times-official-count/article65385669.ece>

to accept these figures, acknowledging only 5.3 lakh deaths, a gross reduction from actual numbers.<sup>7</sup> The government continues to reject WHO's estimates, claiming the methodology was flawed. During this already tumultuous period, people were left to fend for themselves while some businesses exploited the crisis, charging exorbitant prices for essential goods and services. Moreover, the repeated lockdowns decimated livelihoods, driving countless families to bankruptcy.

In the absence of government accountability and questioning, PC-PIC aims to create a democratic response 'by the people, of the people, and for the people.' Its goal is to deepen institutional accountability, foster transparent governance, and create a bottom-up approach that empowers citizens who have been left helpless by deliberate state action.

PC-PIC collected data on the myriad issues faced by people during the pandemic, including the lack of government welfare schemes to support vulnerable groups, the financial burden and added exploitation by hospitals and labs, medical mismanagement, loss of livelihood, lack of government intervention and aid. Case studies are documented and public hearings are held to form PC-PIC, which will address both the injustices that took place and the ongoing impacts of the pandemic on people's lives.

Over the past three years, the PC-PIC has conducted public hearings with various marginalised communities across India. Several public hearings were held with the forest-dwelling communities in Uttar Pradesh<sup>8</sup>, the handloom community in Andhra Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu, and the street vending community in Delhi.

Similarly, to understand the plight of the waste picker community, four public hearings were conducted in different parts of Delhi.<sup>9</sup>

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7 <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/india/>

8 <https://www.newsclick.in/covid-19-recounting-many-forms-losses-and-hardships>

9 <https://thewire.in/economy/is-the-pandemic-really-over-unearthing-stories-of-death-debt-and-distress>

# WASTE PICKERS IN DELHI

## The adverse impact of COVID-19 on lives and livelihoods

Waste pickers are individuals or groups who earn their livelihoods by collecting, sorting, and recycling materials from waste generated by households, businesses, and industries. They play an important role in waste management, by diverting waste from landfills, contributing to environmental sustainability, and supporting urban sanitation efforts. It is estimated that there are between 15 to 40 lakh waste pickers in India<sup>10</sup>, with Delhi alone being home to over 2 lakh waste pickers.<sup>11</sup> A study by Action India on Delhi's waste pickers revealed that 46.73% of their households are slum dwellers.<sup>12</sup> 60.54% of waste pickers earn below Rs 200 a day, 30.86% earn between Rs 200-500 a day, and just 8.61% earn over Rs 500 a day. Informal waste pickers recycle approximately 20% of the total waste generated in Delhi,<sup>13</sup> underscoring their critical importance in effective waste management.

Despite providing livelihoods for over 15 lakh people and playing a crucial role in sustainability and sanitation by keeping the environment clean, waste pickers are often underrepresented, unrecognised, and unsupported as workers. Furthermore, they are doubly marginalised by the scourge of the caste system, as most waste pickers belong to Dalit or other lower-caste communities. The very caste system that forces them into this line of work also leaves them further stigmatised. They are scorned at and excluded from social interactions due to persistent prejudice and discrimination.

A significant number of waste pickers in Delhi belong to historically oppressed groups and were traditionally brought from rural areas. Historical records indicate that in Delhi, individuals belonging to Scheduled Castes, particularly those known as 'Balmikis' were brought in from rural parts to work in sanitation and waste management.<sup>14</sup> Ironically, the very people who keep the city clean are ostracised by those from privileged upper-caste and upper-class communities. This deep-seated Brahmanical prejudice compounds the challenges waste pickers face globally—low wages, harassment, and health risks.

10 <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/developing-contemporary-india/is-there-a-role-for-informal-waste-pickers-in-the-new-waste-economy/>

11 <https://scroll.in/article/1007651/delhi-master-plan-2041-is-there-space-for-waste-workers>

12 <https://www.indiawaterportal.org/articles/down-dumps-delhis-waste-pickers-saga>

13 <https://www.wiego.org/impact-covid-19>

14 <https://www.wiego.org/blog/can-waste-pickers-help-solve-delhi%E2%80%99s-towering-trash-problem>

During the pandemic, this stigma worsened as waste pickers were also perceived as potential virus carriers. This social exclusion further marginalised them, making it harder for them to access support and relief. Waste pickers earn low incomes and are paid based on the weight of the waste they collect. They work in hazardous conditions without proper equipment such as gloves or boots, and they are exposed to various toxic chemicals, sharp objects, and disease-causing bacteria on a daily basis.

Having always lived on the absolute periphery of society, their difficulties only exacerbated during the pandemic; with the lockdowns and restrictions severely impacting their livelihoods, pushing them deeper into poverty.

When the pandemic hit and lockdowns were imposed, waste pickers weren't allowed to step out and collect waste, with many going several months without work. This in turn resulted in a complete loss of income, driving several families into abject hunger and deprivation. Waste pickers also reported living in constant fear of police harassment while venturing out for work. Amid the public health crisis, they also struggled to access essential healthcare services. The pandemic highlighted their already precarious existence, compounding the challenges and social exclusion they have long endured.

To better understand the multifaceted challenges that the waste picker community experienced during the pandemic, the All India Kabadi Mazdoor Mahasangh (AIK-MM), in collaboration with the People's Commission and Public Inquiry Committee (PC-PIC), conducted public hearings in various parts of Delhi.

These public hearings revealed not only the extreme daily hardships faced by waste pickers but also clearly articulated how a combination of COVID-19-induced lockdowns and informal, unauthorised privatisation of garbage disposal has deepened the suffering of the entire community.

The lockdowns resulted in significantly reduced waste generation, making it harder for waste pickers to collect garbage and sustain their livelihoods. With restricted movement and reduced garbage, waste pickers found it difficult to travel to their usual collection areas and disposal sites. Moreover, in one hearing, waste pickers shared how they were branded as 'Corona carriers', further isolating them and preventing them from entering localities to collect waste.

This combination of factors led to widespread financial distress in the waste picker community. With no relief options in sight, many waste pickers were forced to rely on moneylenders to survive, pushing them further into debt. The loss of livelihoods,



coupled with the harassment from Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) officials, contributed to severe mental and emotional stress, leaving waste pickers uncertain about their future.



# METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS

The four public hearings conducted with the waste picker community in 2023 took place in Bhuapur, Ghaziabad (1 March), Bhalswa (19 March), and Gharoli (23 March), and culminated in a final public hearing held at the Constitution Club, New Delhi, on 30 March. A mix of quantitative and qualitative methods were used to conduct the public hearings, based on primary research that included a month of fieldwork prior to the hearings. The purpose of the groundwork was to gather narratives from the field and gain deeper insights into the community's challenges. Members from AIKMM, DASAM, WWF, volunteers, and the research team of PC-PIC were involved in the fieldwork, identifying key concerns and investigation points.

The framework used to unpack these narratives was centred around three core themes: death, debt, and distress. Narratives were recorded in different locations. Based on the details that emerged, a questionnaire addressing these three specific concerns—death, debt, and distress—was specifically designed for the waste picker community to respond to. Similarly, the community's experiences were documented in the form of individual 'COVID FIRs,' a term chosen by the community to reflect the severity of issues, atrocities, violations, and struggles they faced during the pandemic. All the documents and data were then shared with the People's Commissioners for further review and analysis.

The People's Commissioners were identified based on their expertise in fields relevant to the issues discussed at the hearings, such as law, human rights, sanitation, economics, and public health. Their presence at each hearing ensured that the testimonies were scrutinised through a lens of professional knowledge and experience.

The data presented in this report is drawn from the filled-out questionnaires completed by members of the waste picker community. Analyses were conducted based on these responses, along with the personal narratives of the community members.

The report presents the caste composition of waste pickers by distinguishing between SC, ST, OBC communities, and the general category for a deeper analysis. While the graphs refer to these groups individually as SC, ST, and OBC, the analysis uses the political terminology *Bahujan community*. This approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of the demographic composition of marginalised groups and emphasises the collective severity of the challenges they face.

## Process

When the pandemic struck and the nationwide lockdown was suddenly announced, waste pickers in Delhi faced an abrupt loss of income and livelihood, with no government relief to rely on, leaving them severely neglected and forced to fend for themselves. With the community neglected by those in power, it became crucial to understand how they coped, who supported them, and how to find systematic ways for their economic recovery, highlighting the need for their voices to be heard and investigations to be conducted.

As a result, in March 2023, waste pickers of Delhi and NCR initiated a People's Commission and Public Inquiry Committee (PC-PIC) process to investigate their suffering during the pandemic, the subsequent lockdowns, loss of livelihood, the privatisation of sanitisation and its ongoing impacts.

During this process, a total of 230 individuals were interviewed. In the public hearings, 40 depositions were made from the interviews conducted with 175 of these 230 individuals. Based on these interviews and depositions, the community's concerns were categorised into PC-PIC's framework of death, debt, and distress, and these were then used for data analysis. The various facets of the testimonies, that of livelihood loss, harassment by police and MCD officials, increased privatisation, inability to work despite eased restrictions, corruption, difficulty accessing waste, etc. were also looked into. Most depositions highlighted that the community struggled the most with the privatisation of sanitation, unfair payments to contractors for waste collection, and relentless harassment by officials.

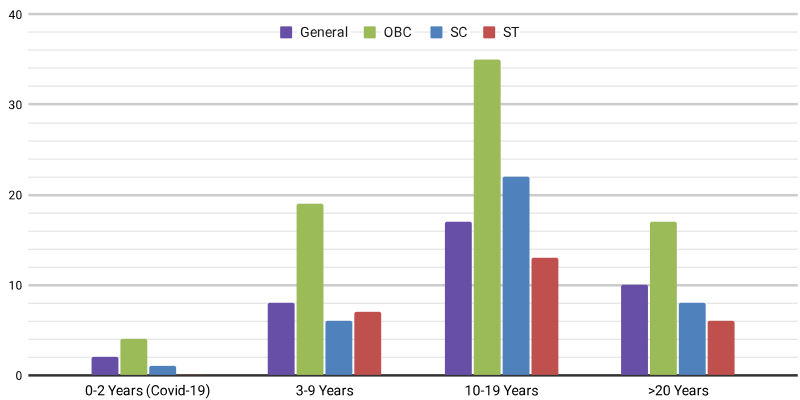
All four public hearings were attended by People's Commissioners. The People's Commissioners present at the hearings were: Ms Pamela Philipose, Ms Roma, Dr Shyamala Mani, Dr Vandana Prasad, Dr Avinash Kumar, Mr Rajesh Uppadhyay, Ms Shabnam Hashmi, Dr Koninika Ray, Mr Saroj Paswan, and Adv. Rahul Choudhury.

After listening to the depositions and narratives presented before them, they shared their findings and recommendations on how to improve the lives of the community, as well as on the nature of the investigation and evidence building that should be carried out. A brief profile of the 175 individuals interviewed, presented through graphs and key data points, is provided below. Their full narratives can be found at the end of the report.

# DEMOGRAPHIC DETAILS AND CHARACTERISTICS

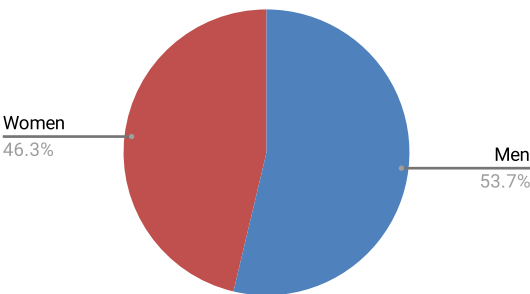
Based on the interviews, 40 out of 175 have been a waste picker for three to nine years. 87 respondents have been waste pickers for 10– 19 years and 41 have been in this occupation for over 20 years. In terms of caste composition, OBCs make up the largest group (20%) among those working as waste pickers for 10– 19 years, followed by SCs at 12.6%, the general category at 9.7%, and STs at 7.4%. Notably, 23.4% of respondents have been in the profession for over 20 years (see Fig.1).

Fig.1 Number of years as a waste picker



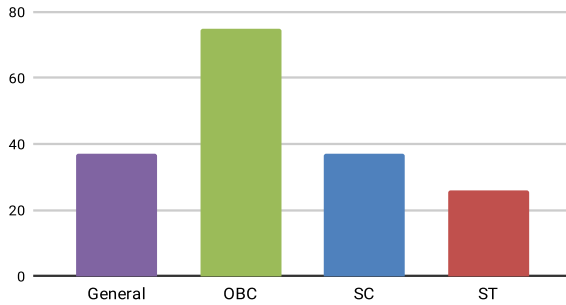
Based on the interviews, 46.3% of waste pickers are women and 53.7% are men (see Fig.2).

Fig.2 Sex ratio



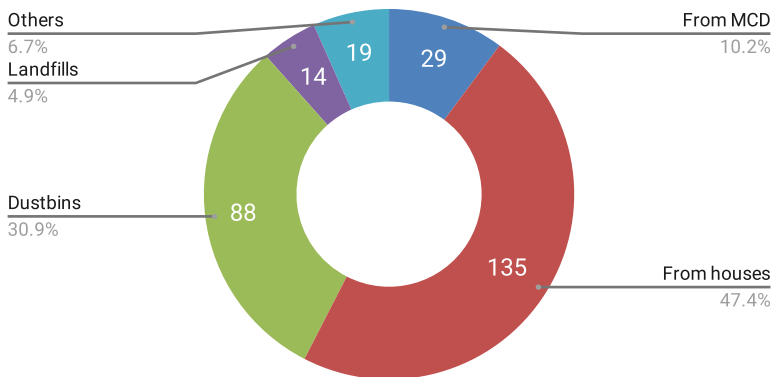
It is important to note that 42.9% of respondents belonged to the OBC category, 21% to SC, 14.9% to ST, and 21% to the general category (see Fig.3).

**Fig.3 Caste Composition**



Most respondents collect garbage directly from households. Specifically, 47.4% gather waste from homes, while 30.9% rely on dustbins. Additionally, 4.9% collect waste from landfills (see Fig.4).

**Fig.4 Source of waste collection**

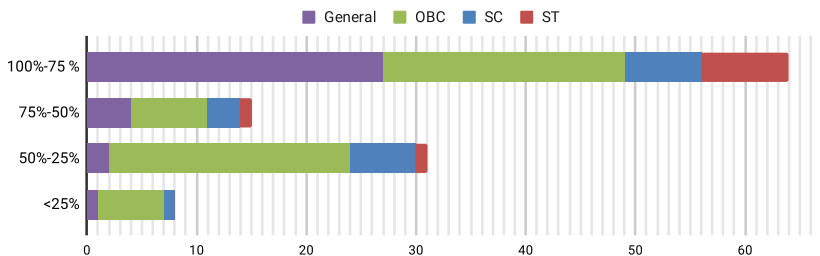


# FINDINGS

## The silent struggles; loss of livelihood

The public hearings revealed that 54.2% of respondents experienced an income loss of more than 75%, with 57.8% belonging to SC, ST, and OBC communities, and 42.2% to the general category. Additionally, 73.4% of those in the SC, ST, and OBC communities and 26.7% in the general category faced a reduction in income of more than 50%. This shows how the Bahujan communities were far more drastically affected (see Fig.5).

*Fig.5 Impact on income*



While the pandemic brought a sense of despair to all sections of society, communities like waste pickers faced an added layer of intense fear and uncertainty. This was not caused by the pandemic itself, but by the strict lockdown imposed, which caused their income to either dwindle or halt altogether in an unexpected way. With restrictions on movement and the closure of businesses, waste generation decreased significantly. This reduction in waste availability directly impacted waste pickers' incomes, as there were fewer materials to collect and sell. The prices of commodities such as waste paper and junk metal also dropped.

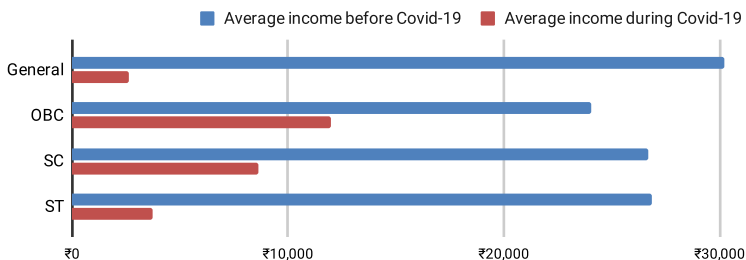
Delhi, as a major migrant hub, is home to a large population of migrants, including many waste pickers who originally hail from Bengal or have moved from other northern and eastern states.<sup>15</sup> The absence of formal institutions, such as an officially recognised workers' union representing the community, has placed an added burden on them, making it difficult to negotiate for regular payment of minimum wages or improved wages. Despite working long hours, waste pickers earn less than the minimum wage. The informal nature of their work excludes them from government

<sup>15</sup> <https://m.thewire.in/article/rights/bachaikari-of-bhalswa-narratives-of-waste-pickers-from-delhis-bhalswa-landfill>

support programs offered to formal sector workers. Another challenge faced by waste pickers in Delhi is the rise in inter-state migration, which often leads to a decrease in wages due to increased competition for work. Additionally, they are not covered under any labour legislation, preventing them from benefiting from social security, pension, medical insurance schemes, etc.<sup>16</sup>

It is crucial to remember that providing social security to vulnerable and historically marginalised communities is one of the key responsibilities of the Indian democratic state. The pandemic harshly brought down the average income of waste picker across communities. During the public hearings, it was revealed that individuals from the general category earned more than those from the Bahun communities before the pandemic. However, nearly half of people in both groups experienced an income loss of at least 75%. According to our data, individuals from the SC, ST, and OBC communities who earned Rs 26,000 per month pre-pandemic saw their income drop to between Rs 3,500 and Rs 8,000 during the pandemic. Meanwhile, those from the general category, who had a pre-pandemic income of Rs 30,000, saw their earnings fall to Rs 2,600. Despite this, the long-term impact is disproportionately severe for waste pickers from the Bahun communities, who are more likely to lack financial security and have limited access to formal safety nets, leaving them more vulnerable to sustained economic hardship (see Fig. 6).

**Fig.6 Average income before and during Covid-19**



“I used to earn Rs 10,000 – 20,000 before the pandemic. But with the pandemic, my income has drastically come down. I have a family of seven. What I earn is not enough to sustain”,

said Kapil, a waste picker from Bhalswa.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/waste/high-time-to-address-occupational-hazards-of-waste-pickers-88043>

The challenges faced by the community due to the pandemic are complex and far-reaching. The abrupt loss of income pushed many to the brink of poverty and extreme hunger. While some waste pickers waited in long queues to receive rations, others were unable to obtain any. Pushed to a helpless corner, they were forced to go out and find ways to collect waste. Even when restrictions were eased and some businesses were allowed to reopen, they still struggled to find an available shop or yard where they could sort and recycle the gathered garbage.

The pandemic, a health crisis, was a turbulent time when people were advised to limit social interactions and maintain social distance to contain the spread of the virus. Waste pickers found themselves working without any protective equipment, at great risk of contracting the virus. In addition to the growing waste in Delhi, the community put their health at risk by collecting discarded medical waste—used syringes, test kits, masks, and more—that were carelessly thrown away, potentially exposing them to infection.

Despite the efforts of the Alliance of Indian Waste pickers and their letter<sup>17</sup> addressed to Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 23rd March 2020, regarding the safety of the community during the pandemic, no effort was made from the government's end to adhere to their basic demands such as providing protective gear, ration for three months, clean water, sanitation, etc.

With their homes near dumpsites and their work in unsafe, unsanitary conditions, waste pickers saw little hope for change in the near future, and even the local councillor they approached for help turned them away, offering no solace.

“We did not get any help from the government. When I reached out to the ward councillor during lockdown for help, he refused”,

recalled Praveen, a waste picker from Gharoli.

## Harassment and intimidation: a continuum

The pandemic starkly highlighted India's entrenched socio-economic inequalities and revealed the troubling tendency to scapegoat marginalised communities during times of crisis. This diversion tactic shifts focus away from administrative failures while stoking public fear, conveniently protecting those in power. As discussed in the book, *Moral Contagion* by Julia Hauser and Sarnath Banerjee, history is full of such examples. The book cites a notable instance from the 19th century when

17 <https://globalrec.org/2020/03/23/waste-picker-informal-waste-collectors-of-india-seek-safety-measures-from-indian-government-to-safeguard-against-covid-19/>



authorities demolished an entire working-class neighbourhood in Bombay to contain a plague outbreak. Despite this, little has changed in how pandemics are managed. Each crisis seems to trigger a search for someone to blame, often at the expense of historically oppressed groups, whose vilification and harassment by authorities remain a disturbing and recurring pattern.

“One day, on my way to collect waste, people claiming to be the municipality’s contractors stopped me midway, snatched my cart, and harassed me. They also assaulted my son, who was with me at the time. They demanded a payment of Rs 3,000 every month to collect waste. I don’t have that kind of money to spend every month,” said Karthik from Bhuapur.

Waste pickers have long been victims of harassment and intimidation, with police and MCD officials often at the forefront of these abuses. During the pandemic, waste pickers faced heightened difficulty in carrying out their work. Police patrols would verbally abuse or physically assault them simply for being out collecting waste. Even after restrictions were lifted, the harassment continued, with some waste pickers prevented from collecting garbage due to the lack of protective gear. It is worth noting that despite requests, the government did not make protective gear available to the community, nor did the community have enough money to buy protective gear. The community’s day-to-day harassment intensified during the pandemic, including privatisation of waste. During the pandemic, the community observed smaller market players taking over waste management. These events were not isolated; they occurred alongside a period when major companies were issued notices to ensure proper auditing of their Material Recovery Facilities (MRF). It is believed that these companies, which hired third-party waste managers, sought to present compliant MRFs to avoid penalties. Moreover, it is suspected that the state was complicit in this system, as waste pickers faced increased harassment and demands for bribes. Interviews revealed a troubling new trend during the pandemic: officials increasingly refused to allow waste pickers to collect waste from municipality vehicles, community dustbins, or streets unless bribes were paid. Even waste pickers with official identification cards were not spared, facing further harassment from individuals claiming to be municipality contractors.

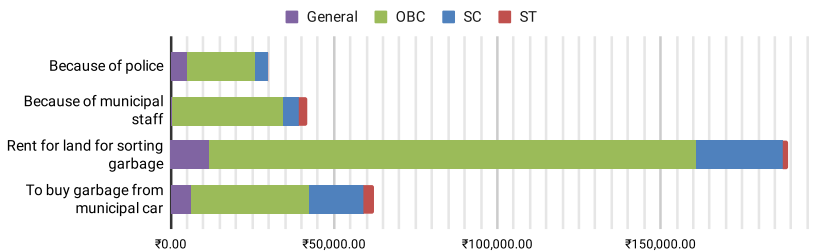
“I have an ID card identifying me as a waste worker signed by the Tahsildar. But the officials still don’t let me collect waste,”

said Pankaj from Seemapuri.

It was also revealed during the public hearings that the Municipal Corporation makes little to no effort to provide them with necessary identification cards. Not only has the community been wrestling with the livelihood loss the pandemic caused them, they found themselves in further dire situations as they incurred further financial losses from paying bribes to police and municipality officials, and private municipality contractors just to be allowed to collect garbage.

According to the interviews, 80.9% of waste pickers reported suffering financial losses due to bribes paid to municipal staff, while 69.7% were affected by bribes demanded by police officials. Additionally, 58.7% incurred losses by having to pay to collect waste from municipal vehicles. The bribes paid by waste pickers ranged from Rs 3,000 to as much as Rs 1,50,000, resulting in significant financial strain (see Fig. 7).

**Fig.7 Financial loss due to harassment**



Recounting the harassment and harassment-induced financial and mental distress they faced, the waste pickers explained that they paid huge bribes for meagre earnings that barely sustain their families. While they recognise that these demands are both unjust and illegal, they feel there is no immediate hope for relief from their situation.

## Financial distress = increased debt

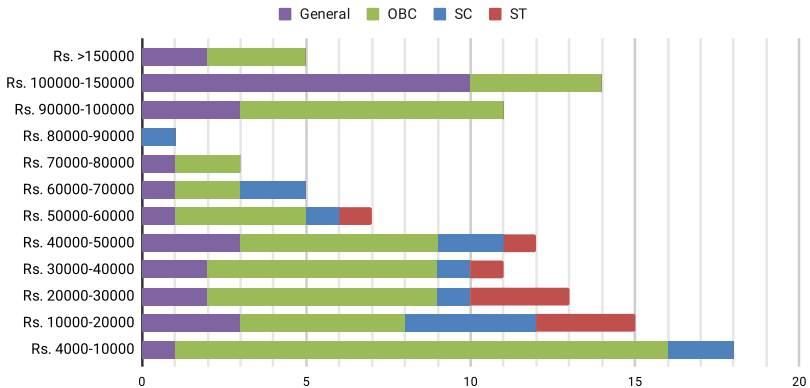
Unable to make ends meet, waste pickers were forced to rely on moneylenders for survival or sell whatever little property they owned. The community's growing dependence on moneylenders who imposed exorbitant interest rates has resulted in overwhelming debts that many members are still unable to repay. Several waste pickers also relied on moneylenders due to increased financial harassment by officials and contractors as they demanded hefty bribes.

During the public hearings, an average debt of Rs 61,464 was reported by the waste pickers (see Fig. 8).

“Before COVID-19, I used to earn about Rs. 10,000 per month. But now, even if I work two shifts a day, I earn only Rs. 5,000. I had no work during the lockdown, and I took a loan of Rs. 10,000 during this time to sustain my family,”

said Charan, a waste picker from Gharoli.

**Fig.8 Debt incurred**



As most waste pickers belong to the Bahujan communities, they were especially vulnerable to social inequalities and systemic oppression. This left them with no safety net to cope with the pandemic and its aftermath. Their livelihoods were abruptly halted, and for months, they faced a dire struggle with no work and no income due to the lockdown and the associated restrictions.

115 out of 175 waste pickers interviewed disclosed that they were forced to take a loan to sustain themselves and their families during the pandemic. Currently, 58 people from the SC, ST, and OBC communities and 11 from the general category are in debt, owing amounts between Rs 4,000 and Rs 50,000. In addition, 28 people from the SC, ST, and OBC communities and 18 from general category currently face a debt of Rs 50,000 -1,50,000.

“When my daughters and grandchildren fell ill, I had to borrow money from moneylenders for their treatment. I now have a debt of Rs 6 lakh,”

said Nasliya from Bhalaswa. She currently earns only Rs 3,000 – 4,000 monthly compared to Rs 7,000 – 8,000 before the pandemic.

Without effective policies to stabilise their livelihoods, waste pickers are forced to accumulate heavy debt just to support themselves and their families, leading to immense financial strain and mental distress.

## **Solid Waste Management Rules: Ineffective policies and unfulfilled promises**

The Municipal Solid Wastes (Management and Handling) Rules, 2000, was superseded by the Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016. SWM Rules were introduced with the goal of decentralising, promoting inclusivity, and fostering community participation in waste management.<sup>18</sup> But not much, if any, has changed for waste pickers since the introduction of SWM Rules.

These rules introduced key measures, such as integrating and organising informal waste collectors like rag-pickers and kabadiwallahs into the waste management system and granting them legal recognition to protect them from harassment.

Initially hailed as a beacon of hope for waste pickers, the SWM Rules have instead had a detrimental effect due to their improper and ineffective implementation. The failure to effectively implement these rules exacerbates the challenges faced by India's waste pickers, who constitute a vital yet marginalised part of the sanitation workforce.

Delhi has long grappled with escalating waste generation, leading to overflowing landfills. The lack of a structured waste management system has only exacerbated this crisis. The city generates nearly 11,000 tonnes of municipal solid waste each day, the highest of any city in India, with over half of it being dumped in landfills. A significant number of workers in Delhi rely on the waste industry for their livelihoods, a sector mandated for inclusion under the SWM Rules. Despite this, public hearings, numerous media reports, and research all indicate that the effective implementation of the SWM Rules remains a distant reality.

It was learnt that the local government's focus on privatising waste management took priority over integrating the informal sector. Instead of empowering informal workers to improve waste management practices, municipalities opted to outsource this responsibility to private waste collection concessionaires. Consequently, this shift has further marginalised informal workers. Furthermore, during the pandemic, when the community was already struggling to make ends meet, a sharp increase in privatisation of waste collection was witnessed. This prompted the constant harassment by private contractors and municipal officials and drastically impacted

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<sup>18</sup> <https://vidhilegalpolicy.in/blog/delhis-waste-management-process-is-pushing-waste-pickers-to-the-margin/>

their livelihood. The community has fallen victim to added financial distress as these private contractors, and municipal and police officials demand money from them to collect waste.

“One day on my way to work, municipality’s contractors stopped me and proceeded to threaten and harass me. They also snatched my cart. They demanded that if I needed to collect waste, I had to pay them Rs 10,000 monthly failing which, they won’t let me collect waste,”

said Kunwar, a waste picker from Bhuapur.

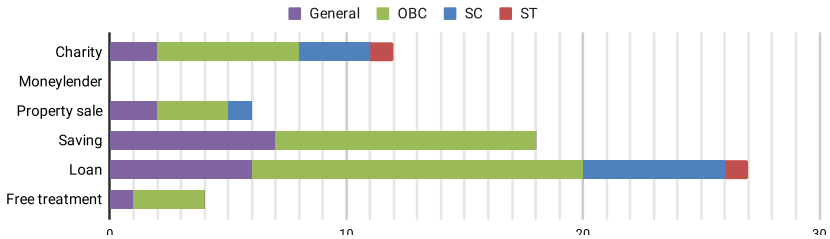
The waste picker community continues to face relentless harassment, stigmatisation, and the ineffective implementation of rules like the SWM Guidelines, which do little to help them. With no support from the government, they are left without a platform to voice their concerns.

The emphasis on privatising waste collection services often disregards the existing expertise and networks of waste pickers. This disenfranchisement not only deprives them of secure livelihoods but also disrupts established waste-collection routes. Additionally, the SWM Rules fail to adequately integrate waste pickers into the formal waste management system.

The consequences of this flawed implementation are dire for waste pickers. Loss of income due to displacement by privatised services pushes them further into poverty and exposes them to greater health risks. The lack of proper safety gear and infrastructure in dumping sites puts them at constant risk of injuries and illnesses. Moreover, the social stigma attached to waste picking continues, hindering their access to basic healthcare and education.

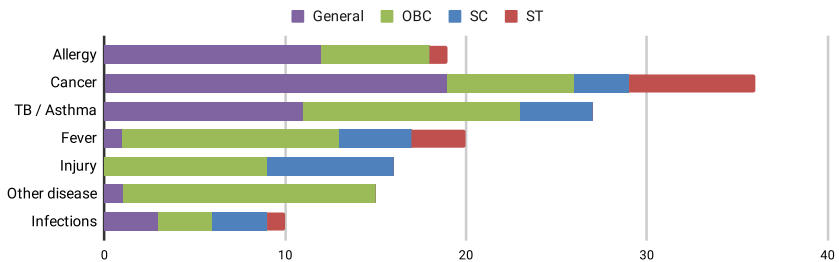
## Dwindling health

With diminishing income, an increase in health issues adds to the financial burden. While some waste pickers received free treatment depending on the severity of their diseases, others rely heavily on loans or modest savings. It is important to note that during the pandemic, the money spent by the community on healthcare was not specifically for COVID-19 but for treatments of diseases they faced due to occupational hazards. This underscores the government’s failure to consider or address the occupational hazards faced by the community on a daily basis. As a result, 52% of waste pickers had to take out loans to cover healthcare expenses (see Fig. 9).

**Fig.9 Financial source for treatment**

During the pandemic, the primary concern for waste pickers was not contracting the virus itself. Interviews and public hearings revealed that relatively few waste pickers were infected, although the community did report five deaths attributed to COVID-19.

However, the lockdown of services made it impossible for many to access regular healthcare, exacerbating existing health issues. While COVID-19-related health concerns were minimal within the community, waste pickers face a range of other serious health problems. Cancer is particularly prevalent, with 52.8% of waste pickers diagnosed with some form of cancer. Additionally, 63.2% suffer from allergies, and 44.4% have either asthma or tuberculosis (see Fig. 10).

**Fig.10 Health issues**

Waste pickers live in deplorable, unhygienic conditions due to the difficulty of finding affordable housing in cities, a challenge not faced by formal workers who have access to housing schemes like Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana. They often reside in slums or near landfills, surrounded by all kinds of waste, toxins, and chemicals. Those who primarily work and sort waste in landfills are particularly prone to major health issues. For example, the Bhalswa landfill, covering over 70 hectares, is home to more than 400 waste picker families.<sup>19</sup> Their living conditions, overshadowed by

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/waste/living-next-to-delhi-s-trash-mountain-policies-should-focus-on-easing-the-struggles-of-waste-pickers-9108>

the ever-growing garbage mountain, paint a grim picture of neglect and hardship. The unhygienic living conditions of the community is inextricably linked to their source of livelihood.

These families reside in makeshift shelters constructed from salvaged materials, a constant reminder of the very waste they sort for a living. The air hangs heavy with a noxious cocktail of methane, leachate, carbon dioxide, and burning plastic. Exposure to harmful gases, toxic emissions, and other hazardous waste poses severe health risks to the residents, including issues with eyesight, skin, and respiratory problems. The lack of basic amenities such as water and electricity add another layer to the existing misery. Access to clean water is scarce, forcing residents to rely on contaminated sources. Sanitation facilities are limited or non-existent, creating unsanitary living conditions and fostering the spread of diseases. The absence of proper waste disposal amenities within these settlements' further compounds health hazards. Children, who are especially vulnerable to environmental hazards, often play amidst the waste, further jeopardising their health and well-being.

A survey by Chintan Environmental Research and Action found that over 42% of waste pickers in Delhi segregate and sort wastes either in their homes, on rickshaws, or by the roadside as they have no designated space to work with the waste material.<sup>20</sup>

Due to abject living and working conditions, and inaccessibility to clean water serious health conditions such as malnutrition, anaemia, and tuberculosis are common among community members.<sup>21</sup> Malnutrition, in particular, became rampant in the community during the pandemic due to severe food shortage. Addressing hunger and ensuring a regular food supply was one of the earnest requests of the community at the time.

The community is also more susceptible to developing respiratory infections due to the nature of their work. The constant exposure to dust, particulate matter, and fumes from burning waste contribute to chronic respiratory diseases such as asthma, bronchitis, and pulmonary disorders. These airborne pollutants are especially harmful given the lack of protective equipment and the prolonged hours spent sorting through potentially hazardous materials. According to research studies, the likelihood of developing respiratory symptoms were significantly higher among waste pickers (28%), compared to the average of 15% for others.<sup>22</sup> Their physical injuries are higher as they constantly come in contact with blunt and sharp objects, such as shards of glass.

20 <https://scroll.in/article/1007651/delhi-master-plan-2041-is-there-space-for-waste-workers>

21 <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/waste/high-time-to-address-occupational-hazards-of-waste-pickers-88043>

22 <https://occup-med.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12995-017-0176->

The health challenges faced by waste pickers in India paint a distressing picture of the intersection between environmental hazards, socio-economic marginalisation, and public health. Not only do they work and live in hazardous and arduous conditions, but they also lack social security. While formal workers enjoy a safety net of social security benefits such as healthcare, pensions, and unemployment insurance, for waste pickers, this net is riddled with gaping holes. They lack access to basic healthcare schemes, leaving them financially exposed in the face of illness or injury. The absence of unemployment benefits means that their livelihoods are particularly insecure and highly vulnerable to sickness or other factors, pushing them deeper into poverty. Maternity leave and childcare benefits are unheard of, exacerbating the burden on women waste pickers.

The lack of formal recognition and social security for waste pickers is also a human rights issue. Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognises the right to just and favourable remuneration, social security, and an adequate standard of living. However, these fundamental rights are often denied to waste pickers in India, reflecting systemic inequalities and gaps in policy and implementation. In the aftermath of the pandemic, introducing social security for waste pickers and other communities in the informal sector is crucial, given the significant hardships they have endured.



# OBSERVATIONS AND COMMENTS

## By People's Commissioners

- Most members of the waste picker community did not possess a ration card. It was essential that every family be provided with one.
- They received no government support, and the absence of such support was particularly evident during the pandemic lockdowns when they did not receive any assistance from the government.
- The successive lockdowns made access to regular health services impossible.
- The community experienced inadequate access to water, with most colonies receiving only one tanker per day.
- The community faced increased harassment and corruption by MCD officials and supervisors. Waste pickers had to pay them to sweep a section of the road and collect the waste lying on it.
- They were also charged by the municipal authorities for dumping waste in the designated bins.
- After the lockdown, waste dumps (khattas) were handed over to private contractors and companies, which further exacerbated the challenges faced by waste pickers.
- The community had to pay a representative of the private contractor to collect waste from the dumps/khattas.
- Additionally, the private contractors sent their vehicles to the colonies to collect waste. As a result, traditional waste pickers had reduced opportunities to find and collect waste.
- Waste collected by private contractors was 'sold' to waste pickers at a high capital cost of Rs 10,000 per waste dump.

- All these developments drastically reduced the income of waste pickers by 33%.
- The community had to rely extensively on moneylenders during the pandemic due to the loss of livelihood.
- There was an urgent and undeniable need for increased transparency and accountability in Delhi's contracted waste-picking system.
- Addressing the loss of livelihood among waste pickers required targeted interventions and support.
- It was crucial for governments, local authorities, and civil society organisations to work collaboratively to support waste pickers, recognise their importance in waste management, and address the challenges they faced, especially during times of crisis like the pandemic.
- The Delhi government should have launched programs to provide social security to waste pickers, such as access to healthcare and education.

# WHY WERE WASTE PICKERS NOT A FRONT-LINE DEFENDER COMMUNITY DURING THE PANDEMIC?

Deep-seated caste and class prejudices in India confine the working class, including waste pickers, to a marginalised existence, subjecting them to constant ostracisation. While the community forms a significant part of the informal workforce—both in terms of the importance of their work as well as their strength in numbers—their contributions to urban and rural sanitation go largely unrecognised and unvalued. Despite the fundamental right to a dignified life enshrined in Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, these communities face constant challenges in securing it. Their livelihoods are under constant threat, jeopardising their ability to exercise the very rights the law guarantees them.

Waste pickers, affected by the nature of their work and exacerbated by caste-class divisions in society, often face significant obstacles in improving their quality of life. This hardship is further intensified by the lack of adequate government support. The community struggles with issues like a lack of recognition, limited access to social security benefits, irregular or insufficient wages, and more. Additionally, the growing privatisation of waste collection has further marginalised them, with the situation worsened by the challenges posed by the pandemic.

During the pandemic, poorly planned government measures meant to address the crisis ended up worsening the existing struggles of the working class, while also creating new, unforeseen challenges. Many communities are still reeling from these effects, with little to no government intervention. The waste picker community, in particular, saw their only source of livelihood wiped out due to mismanagement, plunging them into mounting debt and deepening poverty.

While only a margin of the waste pickers in Delhi could be covered in the interviews and public hearings, it is worth noting that out of the 175 people interviewed, 42.2% from the general category reported an income loss of 100%–75%. A whopping 46.7% from the OBC category reported an income loss of 75%–50%. Pandemic-induced income loss has directly resulted in an increased reliance on moneylenders and by extension, debt. 116 of the 175 interviewed are in debt of Rs 10,000 and above. Some are weighed down by debts as high as Rs 1,50,000.

There is a significant gap in understanding the full impact of the pandemic on India's waste pickers. With the government failing to conduct a thorough assessment of these effects, civil society organisations took the initiative, conducting detailed surveys to assess the ground realities faced by different communities. Emulating proactive steps taken by the UK government, such as their COVID-19 inquiry, is crucial for formulating robust response strategies to navigate future crises effectively. The significance of such a government-initiated inquiry is of utmost importance in India as the pandemic and its aftermath have been nothing short of disastrous.

Public hearings conducted by the PC-PIC and AIKMM offer a stark reminder of the pandemic's lingering impact on waste pickers' lives. Years after the initial crisis, their livelihoods remain far from stable. While governments are eager to push for a return to normalcy, the public hearings highlight the crucial need to recognise the lasting impact of the pandemic on vulnerable communities. By keeping the memory of the pandemic alive, we can ensure that future responses address the long-term needs of those who were most affected by the pandemic and least supported by governance measures.

In light of the government's silence, denial, and neglect, it is vital that these issues are not ignored or swept under the rug. Holding governments and authorities accountable in the face of mismanagement is crucial for a democracy. One must make conscious efforts to ensure that such events are not brushed aside and left unaddressed. Investigating the atrocities unleashed on marginalised communities at a precarious time such as the pandemic is of utmost importance. In the process of questioning and seeking accountability from the governments, PC-PIC aims to create a democratic response of 'by the people, of the people, and for the people.' It seeks to deepen the accountability of institutions and governing bodies and create a bottom-up approach. PC-PIC seeks to dismantle the walls of institutional silence and ignite a call for responsive governance. Furthermore, the initiative intends to empower individuals who have been systematically disempowered, fostering a future where their voices are heard and their needs are addressed.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONABLE POINTS BY PEOPLE'S COMMISSIONERS

Dr Vandana Prasad, Ms Pamela Philipose, Ms Roma, Dr Shyamala Mani,  
Dr Avinash Kumar, Mr Rajesh Uppadhyay, Ms Shabnam Hashmi, Dr Koninika  
Ray, Mr Saroj Paswan, and Adv. Rahul Choudhury

1. Guarantee basic rights to safe water, sanitation, education, and healthcare as a priority. These rights should be guaranteed as entitlements of citizenship, regardless of land tenure status.
2. Facilitating access to PPE, sanitisation materials, and health services to ensure hygiene and safety.
3. The living and working conditions of waste pickers, the challenges they face, and the possible solutions need to be communicated to higher authorities.
4. Local committees of waste workers should be established within communities, and these committees should form a federation to collectively advocate for the community's rights. Support should be provided to these communities in developing leadership skills for this purpose.
5. Regularise their work, ensuring fair wages, social security, and support for safe working conditions, along with secure housing near the worksite. While some supervision and management may be required, the entire chain of human resources should be employed by the city and paid for by tax.
6. This calls for a long-term approach to engagement and mobilisation, shifting the focus from short-term issues to a broader discourse built on the testimonies and lived experiences of the community.
7. In the short term, the community can be mobilised to demand more water tankers, allotment of ration cards, and to raise awareness about the bribes being extorted by officials through complaints and campaigns.
8. It needs to be ensured that women are given the opportunity of participation, if not leadership, in any follow-up that ensues.
9. The larger group of 'experts' etc. needs to position their work in the larger planning and systems that would be required for the waste management of the city. For instance, it is not reasonable to demand that there be no mechanisation. However, that can and must be done without marginalising waste workers.

10. Waste workers must be provided with opportunities for career advancement and capacity-building, enabling them to transition into more skilled and value-adding roles beyond basic collection.
11. Engage with local authorities to secure waste pickers' fundamental right to work free from fear, exploitation, or intimidation. The local councillor has pledged his support, and the collectives should leverage this relationship to facilitate engagement with authorities.
12. Build the community's capacity and transform waste picking into a more sustainable business model. Tri-partite models of safe collections, segregation, and disposal should be worked out with workers at the centre of it. It needs to be done in collaboration with local authorities, local people's representatives and possible market chains. Adequate training and handholding should be provided under available schemes from the government.
13. Ensure inclusive policies and recognise waste pickers' contributions to waste management. Aim and plan for better integration of waste picker community into formal waste management systems.
14. Privatisation of waste must be stopped and waste-picking communities should have unhindered access to waste collection.
15. As the corporatisation of waste collection (in the way it has been done) violates the provisions of the Solid Waste Management Rules of 2016 issued by the government regarding the participation of waste pickers in waste management, a PIL may be in order.
16. As there is a new party in power in the MCD, delegations of waste pickers may approach the new party and explain the need to reverse the policy of corporatisation.
17. The government should establish robust legal frameworks to regulate the activities of contractors and officials.
18. Motivational and facilitation activities should be conducted by the local organisations to promote the education of all children in waste picker settlements to lead a more dignified life. State government and MCD leadership should also guarantee it with some accountability measures in place.
19. Hold public awareness campaigns and stakeholder engagement to help increase transparency and reduce corruption in the waste management sector.
20. Cash transfers should be done to support waste pickers during periods of reduced income.
21. Address the increased communal attacks faced by Muslim waste pickers, ensuring their protection and safety through targeted measures that prevent discrimination and violence.

## INTRODUCTION OF THE PEOPLE'S COMMISSIONERS

**Dr Avinash Kumar** is a writer and a human rights activist. He is the National Co-convenor of Wada Na Todo Abhiyan

**Ms Pamela Philipose** is an independent journalist and researcher who has led various newsrooms throughout her career

**Adv. Rahul Choudhury** is a lawyer in the field of environment for more than two decades. He is also the founder of Legal Initiative for Forest and Environment.

**Mr Rajesh Uppadhyay** is a labour rights activist and convenor of the National Alliance for Labor Rights (NALR)

**Ms Roma** is a natural resource-based community rights activist. She is the General Secretary of the All India Union of Forest Working People

**Mr Saroj Paswan** is a housing rights activist from Khori Gaon, a settlement that was demolished amid the pandemic. He has been tirelessly advocating for the rights of his community in the wake of this displacement

**Ms Shabnam Hashmi** is a social rights activist and human rights defender

**Dr Vandana Prasad** is a community paediatrician and public health professional with over two decades of experience in the social sector

**Dr Shyamala Mani** is an environmental scientist transforming waste management and public health

**Dr Koninika Ray** is a human rights activist and a member of the National Federation of Indian Women. She also oversees biomedical research and is actively involved in social welfare and justice, with a particular focus on rights-based issues related to gender justice and equality

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# ANNEXURE

## Testimonies of waste pickers

*\*Names have been changed to maintain confidentiality*

### Bhuapur, Ghaziabad

#### 1.Name: Mr Naeem

#### Family (if any): Four members

He has been a waste picker for years and that is his only source of income. He collects and segregates waste making them recyclable and sells them through middlemen to recycling agencies. However, since January 2022, unknown people have been threatening him and forcing him to quit waste picking. "One day, on my way to collect waste, a few people came and snatched my cart. They then proceeded to abuse and threaten me. They hit me which caused injuries on my back." He could identify two of the culprits as Akhilesh and Mukund. He says that they claim to be the municipality's contractor to collect waste and that they have filed a fake FIR against him in Kaushambi police station under IPC section 151.

Before the pandemic, he used to earn Rs. 10,000 – 20,000. However, this has significantly decreased since the pandemic. His income especially since January 2022 is non-existent. No support was offered by the government during the lockdown and when he tried reaching out to the local ward councillor, he was denied help. He has incurred a loss of Rs. 40,000 – 45,000 due to how the government dealt with waste management. He further stated that he couldn't purchase a mobile for his children for their online education.

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#### 2.Name: Mr Akhil

#### Family (if any): Four members

Waste picking is his only source of livelihood. Before the pandemic, he used to earn Rs. 10,000 – 20,000. However, since then, the income has drastically reduced. He said that since the pandemic, people who claim to be the municipality's contractor to collect waste have repeatedly threatened and abused him, directly impacting his source of income.

During the pandemic, no help was received from the government and even the local councillor didn't offer any kind of help. Due to the financial distress caused by the pandemic and threats by contractors, he had to borrow money from money lenders. He is currently in a debt of Rs. 25,000.

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### **3.Name: Mr Pradeep**

#### **Family (if any): Six members**

He has been a waste picker for years and that is his only source of livelihood. He says that the biggest issue he has faced since COVID-19 is reduced income. Before the pandemic, he used to earn Rs. 10,000 – 20,000. However, now, he barely earns enough to sustain his family. He further stated that since the pandemic, people who claim to be the municipality's contractor to collect waste have repeatedly threatened and abused him, directly impacting his source of income.

During the pandemic, no help was received from the government and even the local councillor denied offering any help. Due to the financial distress caused by the pandemic and threats by contractors, he had to borrow money from money lenders. He is currently in a debt of Rs. 10,000, which he struggles to repay.

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### **4.Name: Mr Karthik**

#### **Family (if any): Four members**

He recounts that apart from the distress caused by COVID-19, added distress was caused by people who claimed to be the municipality's contractors to collect waste during the pandemic. He used to collect waste from Supertech towers, a private establishment.

"One day on my way to work, they stopped me and proceeded to threaten and harass me. They also snatched my cart. They said they were the municipality's contractors and demanded that if I needed to collect waste, I have to pay them Rs. 10,000 monthly. Failing which, they won't let me collect waste." Unable to pay the unfair and exorbitant price to collect waste, his income has dwindled and is struggling to keep his family afloat. He has been offered no help by the government or local leaders.

## **5.Name: Mr Rajeev Das**

### **Family (if any): Four members**

Waste picking is his only source of livelihood. Before the pandemic, he used to earn Rs. 10,000 – 20,000. However, since then, the income has drastically reduced. He said that since the pandemic, people who claim to be the municipality's contractor to collect waste have repeatedly threatened and abused him, directly impacting his source of income.

During the pandemic, no help was received from the government and even the local councillor didn't offer any kind of help. He further stated that he incurred a loss of Rs. 50,000 due to how the government dealt with waste management during the pandemic. Due to the financial distress caused by the pandemic and threats by contractors, he had to borrow money from money lenders. He is currently in a debt of Rs. 25,000.

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## **6.Name: Mr Sajith**

### **Family (if any): Seven members**

He recalls that since COVID-19, his income from waste picking has become abysmal. However, the bigger issue he faced during the pandemic was the repeated harassment by the municipality's contractors. He doesn't know if they are really who they claim to be.

"They have said that I need to pay them Rs. 3,000 monthly if I want to collect waste." With no savings and almost no income, he is struggling to make ends meet and sustain his family of seven. He also revealed that no government or local councillor offered any help during the pandemic. Additionally, his children's education was affected as he was unable to purchase them a mobile phone.

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## **7.Name: Mr Das**

### **Family (if any): Seven members**

He has been a waste picker for years and that is his only source of income. He reveals that since the pandemic, his income has come down drastically. Before the pandemic, he used to earn Rs. 10,000 - 20,000. But since COVID-19 and reduced income, he is

struggling to sustain and make ends meet. He further adds that since January 2022, he has been threatened and abused by people who claim to be the municipality's contractors to collect waste. He identified two of them as Akhilesh and Mukund. They don't let him collect waste and he doesn't know what he is supposed to do.

"I have an ID card identifying me as a waste worker signed by the Tahsildar of Ghaziabad but they still don't let me collect waste," he said.

With no assistance from the government, he is unclear as to what he should do.

## **8.Name: Bhawish**

### **Family (if any): Nine members**

Waste picking is his only source of livelihood. He stated that since COVID-19, he has been struggling with reduced income. He has a family of nine to sustain. Additionally, since January 2022, he has been constantly harassed by unknown people, who claim to be the municipality's contractor to collect waste. "One day on my way to collect waste, a few unknown people stopped me midway and harassed and threatened me. They also snatched my cart. They also assaulted my 15-year-old son who had accompanied me."

Due to reduced income and harassment by contractors, he was forced to borrow money from moneylenders. Rs. 60,000 remains unpaid and he is struggling to repay this amount and keep his family afloat at the same time.

## **Bhalaswa**

## **9.Name: Ms Nasliya**

### **Family (if any): Not stated**

Waste picking is her only source of livelihood. She said that before COVID-19, she used to earn Rs. 7,000 – 8,000 monthly. However, since the pandemic, her income has reduced by more than half. At present, she hardly earns Rs. 3,000 – 4,000 monthly.

During the pandemic, her daughters and grandchildren fell ill. When she took them to the government hospital, she was told that her grandchildren's condition wasn't curable. Out of desperation, she took them to a private hospital to get them treated, where she was charged a hefty amount. She had no option but to borrow money from moneylenders. "I am now in a debt of Rs. 6 lakh," she revealed.

## **Gharoli**

### **10.Name: Mr Charan**

#### **Family (if any): Not stated**

He has been a waste picker for six years. The supervisor of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) asked him to pay Rs. 120 per day and make a deposit of Rs. 10,000 to be able to collect waste, which he was unable to do. Now he pays the supervisor Rs. 2,000 per month to sweep one kilometre. Only once this is completed is he allowed to carry the waste by the supervisor.

Furthermore, if he has to dump non-recyclable waste in community dustbins, he has to pay Rs. 2,000 per month.

“Before COVID-19, I used to earn about Rs. 10,000. But now, even if I work two shifts a day, I earn only Rs. 5,000 per month. I had no work during the lockdown. I took a loan of Rs. 10,000 during this time to sustain my family,” he said.

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### **11.Name: Mr Vipin Das**

#### **Family (if any): Not stated**

He has been a waste picker for 10 years. His earnings have come down by half since COVID-19. Before the pandemic, he used to earn Rs. 20,000 – 24,000 per month. Now he hardly earns Rs. 10,000 – 12,000 per month.

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### **12.Name: Mr Naveen Prasad**

#### **Family (if any): Not stated**

He buys mixed waste from waste pickers and segregates it for better money. The segregated waste is sold in mundaka mandi. When they started their work in the middle of 2019, he used to get a sufficient quantity of waste to segregate resulting in a good monthly income. However, since COVID-19, his income has come down drastically, and he struggles to earn even Rs. 10,000 per month. He isn't earning enough to sustain his family.

## **Seemapuri**

### **13.Name: Mr Harish**

#### **Family (if any): Three members**

He has been a waste picker for 15 years and that is his only source of livelihood. He collects waste, segregates and recycles it, and sells it through middlemen to recycling agencies. Before COVID-19, he used to earn Rs. 25,000 – 30,000 monthly. However, since the pandemic, this has come down significantly to Rs. 10,000 – 15,000. This worsened further in January 2022, when he was constantly threatened by unknown people who refused to let him collect waste.

A distraught Harish said, “These people don’t allow me to pick waste from the municipality dustbins. They demanded that I pay them a hefty amount of Rs. 35,000 – 40,000 per month if I wanted to collect waste. They claim that they are contractors and waste collection and management belong to them now and if waste pickers like myself want to collect waste, we have to pay them the money they demand and collect it from them. I wasn’t able to make this payment and so, they no longer allow me to work there,” a distraught Habibul said.

When the lockdown was imposed, no support was offered from the government and local councillor. He was forced to rely on external sources to survive and took a loan of Rs. 50,000 of which Rs. 32,000 remains unpaid. “My family and I were forced to take COVID-19 vaccination because we were threatened that if we weren’t vaccinated, our names would be struck off from ration cards,” revealed Harish.

### **14.Name: Ms Sadiya**

#### **Family (if any): Five members**

She has been a waste picker for 15 years and this is her sole source of income. She reveals that a massive reduction in income is one of her major concerns since COVID-19. “I used to earn Rs. 25,000 – 30,000 before the pandemic. Now I hardly earn enough to sustain my family,” she said. Furthermore, since January 2022, her livelihood has been threatened by unknown people who claim to be contractors of waste management and segregation.

“They don’t allow me to collect waste from the municipality dustbins and demand that unless I pay them Rs. 35,000 – 40,000, they won’t permit me to collect waste. They also said that the entire contract of the waste collection belongs to them and if I want to collect waste, I have to pay them and buy the waste from them,” she said. This has further interfered with her income.

During the pandemic and lockdown, no support was received from the government and she was denied help when she reached out to the local ward councillor for help. She also revealed that her children’s education was affected during the pandemic as she couldn’t afford to buy them a mobile phone. She was forced to borrow her neighbour’s phone so her children could attend online classes.

Furthermore, they were threatened that their names would be struck off ration cards if they didn’t get vaccinated and were hence, forced to get them.

## **15.Name: Ms Jaslin**

### **Family (if any): Seven members**

She has been a waste picker for almost 35 years and waste picking is her only source of livelihood. She revealed that her primary concerns since COVID-19 are the drastic reduction in income and threats by people who claim to be contractors of the municipality who refuse to let her work.

“My earning before the pandemic was Rs. 25,000 – 30,000 per month. However, since the pandemic, I hardly earn Rs. 15,000 per month. I can barely support and provide for my family with my reduced income,” she said. Additionally, since January 2022, unknown people have been threatening her and not letting her collect waste from the municipality bins.

“They said that the entire contract of waste management and segregation currently belongs to them and if I want to collect waste, I have to pay them and collect waste from them. They demanded a pay of Rs. 35,000 – 40,000 per month from me for me to be able to collect waste. I have a valid ID provided by the local MLA identifying me as a waste picker but I am still refused my livelihood,” revealed Bibi.

Not only was no support provided by the government during the pandemic and lockdown, but due to the lack of work and savings, she was forced to borrow money from moneylenders and is currently in debt of Rs. 20,000. Additionally, her children’s education was also disrupted during the pandemic as she couldn’t afford to buy them a mobile phone for them to attend online classes.

## **16.Name: Mr Toufeeq**

### **Family (if any): Four members**

He has been a waste picker for nearly 20 years. He collects, segregates, and recycles waste and sells them through middlemen to recycling agencies. Since COVID-19, he has been struggling with a reduction in income. This was further exacerbated in January 2022, when people who claimed to be contractors of waste management and segregation threatened him and refused to let him collect waste from municipality bins.

“A few people stopped me on my way to work and told me that they were contractors and if I wanted to collect waste, I had to make a monthly payment of Rs. 35,000 – 40,000 to them and collect the waste from them and if I were unable to make the payment, they wouldn’t let me collect waste,” he said.

During the pandemic, as there was no financial support offered by the government, he had no option but to rely on moneylenders. He took a loan of Rs. 40,000 of which Rs. 20,000 remains unpaid. With reduced income and harassment by contractors, he is struggling to repay the amount and feed his family.

He and his family took the COVID-19 vaccination as they were told by the officials that in the absence of being vaccinated, their official documents would be termed invalid. However, despite getting vaccinated, he wasn’t provided with a vaccination certificate.

## **17.Name: Mr Jamal**

### **Family (if any): Six members**

He has been a waste picker for over 20 years. His earning before COVID-19 was Rs. 25,000 – 30,000 per month. However, since the pandemic, he only earns about Rs. 10,000 – 15,000. His livelihood was further affected in January 2022 when people who claimed to be contractors of waste management and segregation halted his work. “They said if I want to collect waste, I have to pay them Rs. 35,000 – 40,000 monthly and collect the waste from them. They no longer let me collect waste as I am unable to make the payment,” said Jamal.



He also stated that he was forced to take the COVID-19 vaccination due to the travel restrictions that were in place. However, he regrets getting vaccinated as he claims that he has developed recurring chest pain and breathing trouble, which have limited his ability to work.

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## **18.Name: Mr Aaqhil**

### **Family (if any): Four members**

He has been a waste picker for 15 years. He collects, segregates, and recycles waste and sells them through middlemen to recycling agencies. Reduction in income and harassment by contractors are his major concerns since the pandemic.

“I used to earn Rs. 25,000 – 30,000 before the pandemic. However, since then, my monthly earning has come down to almost half. I hardly earn Rs. 15,000 these days,” said Aaqhil.

The pandemic and subsequent lockdown also caused him financial distress and in the absence of any work and earning, he was forced to borrow money from moneylenders. He is currently in a debt of Rs. 15,000.

Additionally, since January 2022, he has been threatened by municipality contractors who claim that the entire waste management and segregation belong to them. They don't let him collect waste and demand a monthly payment of Rs. 35,000 – 40,000, if he wishes to collect waste.

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## **19.Name: Mr Munawar**

### **Family (if any): Seven members**

He has been a waste picker for over 20 years. He revealed that the drastic reduction in income since the pandemic is causing him severe distress and at present, he is struggling to keep his family afloat.

“Before the pandemic, I used to earn Rs. 25,000 – 30,000. Now I hardly earn Rs. 15,000 per month,” said Munawar.

Furthermore, he is being harassed and threatened by people who claim to be contractors for waste management.

“I am always stopped when I am on my way to collect waste from municipality bins. These people claim that the entire waste management and segregation now belong to them and that I won’t be allowed to collect waste unless I make monthly payments of Rs. 35,000 – 40,000. They said that waste pickers like myself have to now pay them and collect waste directly from them. I was also harassed by the police during the pandemic,” Munawar revealed. He also stated that the education of his three children was severely impacted during the pandemic as he only had one smartphone and couldn’t afford to buy another.

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## **20.Name: Mr Fazil**

### **Family (if any): Six members**

He has been a waste picker for 20 years. He said that no help was offered by the government during COVID-19 and the lockdown and when he once reached out to the local ward councillor, he was denied help. He stated that since the pandemic, he has struggled with reduced income as he earns only half of what he used to.

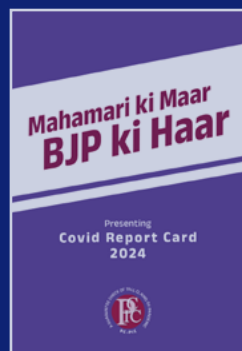
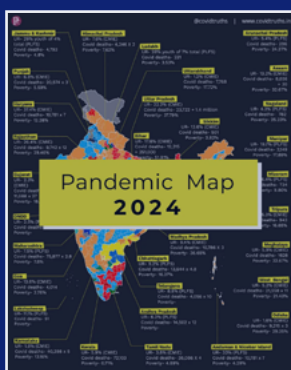
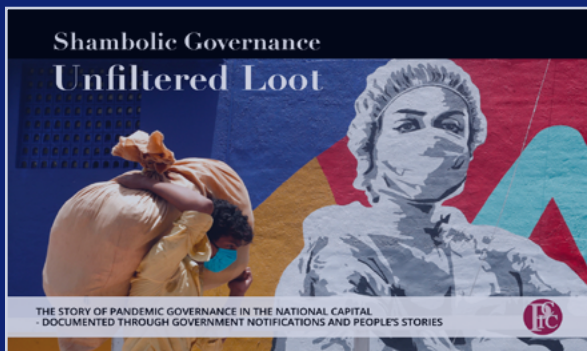
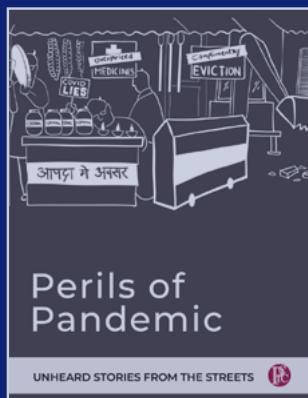
“My monthly earning before the pandemic was Rs. 25,000 – 30,000. At present, I hardly earn Rs. 15,000 per month,” said Saddam. He also detailed that since the pandemic, people who claimed to be contractors of waste management haven’t allowed him to work.

“A few people who said that they were contractors and waste management and segregation belong to them don’t let me collect waste anymore. I was told that I need to collect the waste directly from them for which I need to make a monthly payment of Rs. 35,000 – 40,000, which I can’t afford,” he said.

He also stated that his family took COVID-19 vaccination because they were told that their names would be struck off ration cards. However, he claims that since getting vaccinated, his mother complained of general weakness.



## Our Publications



Wastepickers Welfare Foundation (WWF)



Association for Social Justice and Research (ASoJ)



Dalit Adivasi Shakti Adhikar Manch (DASAM)



All India Kabadi Mazdoor Mahasangh (AIKMM)



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