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## INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)

Article DOI: 10.21474/IJAR01/11052

DOI URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/11052>



### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### A STUDY OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND HEALTH CONDITIONS OF CHILDREN WORKING AS RAG-PICKERS IN UDAIPUR, RAJASTHAN

**Prof. Veena Dwivedi**

HOD, School Of Social Sciences, Jaipur National University, Jaipur, Rajasthan.

#### Manuscript Info

##### Manuscript History

Received: 25 March 2020

Final Accepted: 30 April 2020

Published: May 2020

##### Key words:-

Working Children, Rag Pickers, Child Labour

#### Abstract

In India there is a large informal sector of rag-pickers who earn their livelihood from waste-picking from the streets, dustbins and waste dumps. It is estimated that these rag-pickers pick up about 5-10% of the total waste produced in large urban areas and pass it on to the recycling industries through various levels of intermediaries. These rag-pickers thus reduce the burden of local bodies by several million rupees a year in collection, transport and disposal cost, as well as the resultant saving of land fill space. Also, child labour in the profession present shocking facts. This study paper will help the city planners and policy makers and the implementation agencies need to take up the responsibilities, underline the outreach of schemes and their impact for a better change.

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#### Introduction:-

Waste management and recycling sector are the two terms directly associated to India's booming urbanization. As more people are migrating towards the cities, the amount of waste is increasing at a high place and waste management is likely to become a critical issue in coming years. The terms waste management and recycling sector are complimentary to each other. These terms have one thing in common – 'rag-picking'. In a society where hundreds of millions live in desperate poverty, everything has a value and nothing is redundant. Thus, goes the concept of rag-picking. Rag-pickers are the scrap-collectors who engage in collection of recyclable scrap from roads, garbage bins and land fill sites, for sale in the market. They collect items such as plastic bags, tins, glass, papers, etc. Thus, the role played by rag-pickers in environment protection and conservation, apart from their contribution to economic activity, is very significant.

The present study aims to highlight the socio-economic and health conditions of rag-pickers, focusing exclusively upon children. Rag-picking is essentially a children-dominating sector because scrap-collection is looked upon as polluting and demeaning work. These children suffer from unhealthy living conditions, illiteracy, alcoholism, physical violence, etc. So, this study systematically explores the socio-economic and health conditions of children rag-pickers in Udaipur city.

The production and disposition of waste, and the involvement of rag-pickers in garbage collection is same all-around, be it metro cities of the country or small towns. Despite of this fact, metros witness a proper institutionalized and wider system of waste management, whereas rag-pickers in small cities are forced to collect waste from bare hands. On October 2, 2007, the Delhi State Government made a small but significant concession. In response to pressure from a rag-picker's union, it announced to supply about 6,000 with protective gloves, boots and aprons. However, no such action seems to take place in smaller towns. Also, there are no specific rules in context of waste

**Corresponding Author:- Prof. Veena Dwivedi**

Address:- HOD, School Of Social Sciences, Jaipur National University, Jaipur, Rajasthan.

garbage disposition. The wet and dry garbage is all dumped together which makes it even more difficult, as scrolling through the wet scrap is a dangerous task because it becomes flammable. So, the study also attempts to bring into notice the difference in treatment of waste management in small cities, as compared to metro cities of the country.

**Structure Of Recycling Sector (In Context Of Rag-Pickers):**

The recycling sector is structured in the form of a pyramid, with the scrap collectors at the base and the reproprocessors perched at the apex. At the bottom of the heap are the waste-pickers that engage in the collection of scrap. Marginally above them are the itinerant buyers who purchase small quantities of scrap from households. Between the scrap-collectors and reproprocessors are various levels of traders including retailers, stockiest and wholesalers. The reproprocessors are in a class by themselves.

Most of the rag-pickers are not independent but work for middlemen or contractors who purchase segregated rag from them, on pre-decided rates. Rag-pickers are considered to be self-employed. They do not come under the purview of any labour legislation. There is no employer, government or office that is empowered to look after them. They usually enter the occupation as children and continue till physically incapacitated.

**Child Labour:**

In any country, children are considered to be its future. Same is true for India. In fact, India is known to be the 'nation of the young'. Despite of this, child labour is a common phenomenon in India. Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Act, 1986 prohibits the employment of children below the age of 14 years in certain scheduled hazardous occupation and processes, and regulates the condition of work and wages in other establishments.

**According to International Labour Organization:**

"Child labour includes children prematurely leading adult lives, working long hours for low wages under conditions damaging to their health and to their physical and mental development, sometimes separated from their families, frequently deprived of meaningful educational and training opportunities that could open up for them a better future".

**According to Encyclopedia of Social Sciences:**

"When the business of wage earning or of participation in itself or family support conflicts directly or indirectly with the business of growth and education, the result is child labour".

In other words, work that impinges on children's right to education, play, leisure, mental, physical, spiritual and psychological development is child labour.

**Gender perspective:**

There is clear gender based segmentation in rag-picking. The predominance of women in this sector comes as the most striking feature about the social composition of scrap-collectors. There is a high density of female involvement in this job because retrieving scrap is considered to be filthy and polluting. Hence, this study attempts to explore their living conditions, social environment and work culture.

There is also division in the methods of scrap-collection adopted by men and women. Men and women enter the occupation as bearers of their gender, on different terms and with differing skills and resources. Men are mostly itinerant buyers, who collect small quantities of recyclable scrap from households, shops, offices and other commercial establishments in exchange for cash. Women, on the other hand, collect garbage from dumping grounds, street bins and municipal garbage bins kept in residential areas. Adolescent girls are less involved in rag-picking because it is believed to be unsafe for them to be out on the streets. Although it is true for most cities in India, Udaipur witnesses a lot of adolescent girls as rag-pickers. This implies that the work environment is safe for them in this particular city. Some girls are found working as rag-pickers in the morning, sometimes attending school in the afternoon and coming back home in the evening to help their mother with the household chores or to care for their younger siblings.

**Health issues:**

Rag-picking is probably one of the most dangerous and dehumanizing activity in India. Rag-pickers work in filthy environments, surrounded by stray animals, under any weather conditions and have to search through hazardous waste without gloves or shoes. The children rag-pickers are subject to a number of health hazards because they

scroll through putrefying garbage, using bare hands. Tuberculosis, respiratory infections, skin diseases, animal bites, cuts and injuries are common to them. Most of the children rag-pickers don't have an identification proof or birth certificate and therefore, don't have access to basic government facilities, like free medical check-ups. However, in Pune, thanks to the scrap-collector's union, the municipal corporation now issues identification cards to rag-pickers and offers a limited health insurance plan, recognizing their contribution to recycling waste in the city.

**Social Issues:**

Children rag-pickers also happen to face some common social issues, such as illiteracy, child marriage, alcoholism and domestic violence. Born in the house, and with no education, there is no documented evidence of their age. Existing government documents like driver's license and election voter's identification cards are not available with them. Poor nutrition and harsh work conditions steal away their innocent childhood.

Similarly, literacy is not pre-requisite for scrap collection neither does it contribute to the general level of confidence among them. The lack of resources (money & time) and priorities in life (earning a livelihood) pushes education in the corner, and working right from the childhood takes over.

**Work Pattern:**

Rag-picking has a flexible work style. It allows for relatively, easy entry, exit, re-entry to the domestic imperatives that children at this tender age have to cope with. Most children rag-pickers also have to shoulder domestic responsibility. Rag-picking requires no skills and is a source of income for a growing number of urban poor.

**Research Methodology:-**

The present study brings into light the most striking feature about the social composition of rag-pickers, which is the overwhelming pre dominance of children. These children, in Udaipur city, generally belong to the denotified tribes such as Kalbeliyas, Nats, Bhagriyas, and Dalits. There is high density of children involvement in the job. These children suffer from unhealthy living conditions, illiteracy, alcoholism, physical violence, etc. So, this study aims to systematically explore the socio-economic conditions of children working as rag-pickers in Udaipur.

The study also attempts to bring into notice the difference in treatment of waste management in small cities, as compared to metro cities of the country. Metros witness a proper institutionalized and wider system of waste management, which is nowhere to be found in small towns. To add to the situation, there are no specific rules in context of waste garbage disposition.

Moreover, rag-pickers are considered to be self-employed. They do not come under the purview of any labour legislation. There is no employer, government servant or office that is empowered to take action against it, in this sector. The children rag-pickers are variously subjected to abuse, unwarranted suspicion and harassment from the police, municipal workers and the citizens. So, this study brings forward what all situations are faced by children, working as rag-pickers, in their social and work life.

**Literature Review:-**

According to the NGO Chintan, rag-pickers "are unrecognized and have almost no rights to work, despite the fact that they save almost 14% of the municipal budget annually. In Delhi, the army of almost 80,000 estimated waste-pickers save the city at least rs. 6 lakhs daily through their work".

Rajasthan Urban Sector Development Investment Program (RUSDIP) intends to optimize social and economic development in 15 selected town in the state, particularly district headquarters and towns with significant tourism potential. It aims at improving the solid waste management system, particularly collection, transportation and disposal facilities of Churu town. The project is under process but once implemented, it will prove to be a boon for rag-pickers, as in an indirect way it will improve their work conditions.

A report on 'Study of Scrap Collectors, Scrap Traders and Recycling Enterprises in Pune' highlights the entire structure and functioning of management of urban solid waste.

However, it has been found out that not much study has been done in respect of rag-pickers in Udaipur city, leave alone children working as one of them. There are no published sources of data, be it in the form of reports,

newsprints or information on the internet, in this context. The present study focuses on the child-labour perspective of waste-picking, as children are the major constituents of rag-picking.

### **Objective Of The Study:-**

The study was conducted, keeping in mind the following objectives to be achieved –

1. It was conducted under the purview of child labour perspectives.
2. The study aims to investigate the personal problems faced by children, focusing majorly upon their socio-economic and health issues.
3. The study found the reasons behind their involvement in this work.
4. The study highlighted the caste barriers and insensitive treatment of society towards them.
5. The study attempts to seek corrective measures for the same.

### **Research Design:**

The research methodology adopted for the present study is an exploratory research, which explores the living and working conditions of children rag-pickers, and also identifies the reasons which forced them to be a part of this work. Since the universe of study is a homogeneous and comparatively large group and the universe is not precisely determined, use of 'snowball' method of random sampling is made. The case study of 10 children rag-pickers was done, following a proper guideline and series of questions to be asked, such as about their family background, the reasons for being in this job, the work-culture, severities of the job, their aspirations and expectations in the future, etc.

### **Significance Of Case Studies:**

For the present study, case study has been used as a method of data collection due to the following reasons –

1. Rag-picking is an unorganized sector. In Udaipur, there is no précised system of networking in this profession. So, snowball method best suits this research because here, one respondent leads to the other.
2. Case study makes a research complete and vivid. Here, each woman has her own story to share. Though there stands a common ground to each story, working as a matter of compulsion, and not choice.
3. Case study looks intensively at an individual or a small participant pool. Thus, it proves to be the best method for this research because it brings forward the detailed information about their socio-economic and health status and their work-culture.

### **General Trends Of Rag-Picking In Udaipur:**

Rag-picking conceptually, is same round the country. However, the process of collecting trash varies, and so does the trends followed in each state, region and city. The common trends of rag-picking in Udaipur that came into light after conducting case studies and spending time with the people involved in the profession, are outlined below –

1. Though children (adolescent girls) contribute a major share in family earning, they are not empowered. Whether the elders earn or not, they remain to be the head of the family and hold all the power, authority and decision-making.
2. The male members are involved either in murti-making or work as an itinerant buyer.
3. Migration is witnessed as an important aspect of this profession. Most of them have left their traditional modes of earning a livelihood because according to them, rag-picking enables them to earn more of money.
4. The pattern of urbanization in Udaipur has also witnessed a drastic change since last two decades. This is evident from the fact that rag-pickers have established slums in areas which were once considered to be abandoned, like HiranMagri, Savina, Thoor, Bedla, etc.
5. The prime locations for rag-picking are Thokar Chauraha, Delhigate, Fatehpura, Ashok Nagar, Hiran Magri, Hathipole and Panchwati. Interesting to note that these are all posh areas of the city.
6. The business starts as early as 6am, irrespective of the season. This leaves children with the option of carrying other activities and household work in the noon or evening, when they return back from the work. In fact, children generally, take bath in the evening when they return back from the day's work. This gives an idea the extent upto which priority is given to the work.
7. Meal is prepared once a day, generally in the evening. Morning meals account for chai-biscuits or leftovers offered from by the residents of the area in which children do rag-picking.
8. If rag-pickers carry the segregated scrap in a public transport, half of the loading charges are paid by the retailer.
9. Kalbelia and Bavri are the two common castes involved in rag-picking. Interestingly, Bavri, who originally belongs to Schedule Caste of 'Kanjar', claim them to be Rajputs.

The business of rag-picking is strengthening its root in the city. Rag-pickers are generally the migrated people, who have established slums in most parts of Udaipur. There is lack of networking among them, as it is an unorganized sector. Illiteracy, health hazards, domestic violence, alcoholism, and child marriage are a few commonly observed social immoralities in rag-picking.

#### **Case Studies:**

Following are the case studies of 10 children rag-pickers, which represent not only their social, health and economic status but also unfold many dimensions that remain unnoticed.

#### **Lost Childhood:**

Childhood is a term that portrays a picture of children below 13-14 years of age, whose lives are full of innocence, education, playing around; learning mannerism, getting demands fulfilled and a protected environment to live in. But this picture of childhood is certainly not the same for children working as rag-pickers. A pile of garbage stacked up in a corner is not the only ignorance. The ignorance is a bunch of children lynching on the garbage, in search of scrap to sell and food to eat. The elder members in the family restrict them from playing till they are done with the days rag-picking. Thus, an age in which a child is supposed to be playing around, these children collect bottles, papers, glasses and tin and tie up the collected scrap in different bundles. The dumping yards are their playgrounds. The first case study presented here is of a girl aged sixteen years. It has been included because the UN Convention on Rights of the Child say, "any one below the age of eighteen years is a child". Also, this girl has never lived her childhood. So, this case study has been presented here because it perfectly exemplifies the title 'Lost Childhood'.

#### **Health Hazards:**

##### **Unaware Of Casteism:**

This case is a classic example of the extend up to which castes prevails in Indian society, that a child who does not know what caste means, but can very clearly identify that whether s/he is a 'kalbelia', or 'bavri', or 'rangrez', or 'baghriya'. Children do not understand the meaning of the term 'jaat' (caste) but clearly know the concept of it.

#### **Dignity at Stake:**

Vanu Bavri, aged twelve years, is a resident of Reti-stand (sector 9-11 link road). She was standing with her three friends who were carrying sacks on their back. They too work as rag-pickers. Vanu is the only child of her parents. Her father is a murti-maker and mother, a rag-picker. Vanu, dressed in a poshakh, had just taken her bath. Her hair was all wet with water dripping from the tip of her hair. It was nearly 2pm and the sun was burning hot right above the head, in sky. "This is my usual bathing time", she said.

She starts at rag-picking at 7 in the morning and is done by 12-1pm. Then she comes home and takes a bath. Her mother was still in the field, picking rags, and father was out. Her home, build with mud and tin shade as a roof would have been appeared to be traditional and fancy a year or two back. But at present, the art was washed off. The climate did not allow the aesthetic painting to remain the same. This shows the lack of time and money for maintenance. However, surviving in that place is a challenge it hardly shelters and protects from sun, wind and water.

Another thing that comes up in the study is that children rag-pickers are deprived of every kind of opportunity. Their parents fail to provide them with education and other basic necessities of life. Still they understand their responsibilities, and care for the entire family. They are concerned about their family members. They work hard for year long and hand over their earnings to their parents on the contrary, children who are grown up in a safe family environment and whose demands are fulfilled even before they say it, tend to get so engrossed into themselves once they start earning, that they do not even care for their parents. This makes us think that is it the education or the economic and social condition that are forcing children to obey their duties.

#### **A better tomorrow:**

No work is small if it provides oneself with an honest earning and a life of dignity. But does this statement stands 100% true in case of rag-picking? Where is the scope of a dignified life? But this child keeps up the good hope for a better future. In the streets of Hiran Magri, Sector 4-5, a young lad of thirteen years can be seen with a chewing gum in his mouth, goggles on his face, the buttons of his shirt all open and a sack on his left shoulder. When approached, he introduced himself as Ramu Singh, aka Shahrukh Khan!!

Ramu, a Bavri by caste, is a resident of Savina and does rag-picking in Hiran Magri. His family consists of mother, father and two younger sisters. All the members of the family are involved in rag-picking, except for his father, who spends most of the family's earning in drinking. They all pick rag in the same locality and sell it back in Savina. He is able to fetch Re. 1/beer bottle, Rs. 2/glasses and Rs. 8/kg of plastic.

Neither Ramu, nor his sisters go to school. He likes Shahrukh Khan a lot, though he has never seen him on television. "Mujhe uska naam pata hai, who bahut bada hero hai." (I know his name, he is a great actor.) Ramu aspires to live a life where he and his mother and sisters do not have to work and his father quits drinking. On questioning about how will this all come true if he do not go to school, he replies with confidence, "main bhi toh bada ho kar Shahrukh Khan banunga...!". (I will also become Shahrukh Khan when I grow up.)

### **Conclusion:-**

The conclusions drawn from the research conducted are presented in this chapter. These conclusion are broadly divided into three categories, which are mentioned below –

Scrap collectors can broadly be classified into two categories, the rag-pickers and the itinerant buyers. Rag-pickers are involved in 'free' collection of scrap. They do not require any capital for the same. Most rag-pickers have just a sack or two, which they carry along with them with them. Itinerant buyers collect scrap from households, shops and other commercial establishments.

Despite the fact that industries, hotels and institutions generate large quantities of scrap, it is rarely accessible to scrap collectors. Most large establishments sell the scrap directly to wholesale traders, or burn it.

Study reveals that 60% of children rag-pickers start work before 7am, and are done rag-picking by 3pm, on an average.

The average working hours for rag-pickers account for 8.44 hours per day. The mean daily income of children rag-pickers is Rs. 100/day.

Rag-pickers generally take a day off in a week. But this is not a day of rest for them, as most of them engage in selling of murtis on their off day.

The actual time spend by most rag-pickers in commuting to and fro from the place of residence to the place of work is over an hour.

The scrap commodities generally, collected by children rag-pickers are high in quantity and of low value. These include panni (paper), puttha (cardboard), plastic bags, milk bags, patra (tin), beer (beer bottles), patpat (plastic bottles) and kanch (broken glass).

Rag-pickers choose their sorting space near the collection site itself. Sorting involves twice the labour as they have to retie the sacks to transport it to the retail trader.

Generally, half of the loading charges of scrap from the site of scrap collection to the retailer's shop are borne by the retailer.

Rag-pickers usually sell the scrap to the same trader for years together because the prices paid for each category of scrap at every establishment is more-or-less the same.

Children rag-pickers face the following difficulties in their living and working environment –

1. The very idea of availability of basic amenities at the work place is ridiculous. The place of rest is under shades of tree, areas along the roadside serves as toilets, and older children looking after their younger siblings account for child care facilities.
2. Children rag-pickers generally, start their day with a chai and biscuits, lunch is arranged by the leftovers provided by the locals of the area in which they do rag-picking and dinner is available when they return home after the day's work.

3. Hard working conditions, poor living conditions and unhygienic work environment, notwithstanding, seven children rag-pickers out of ten, claims that they do not suffer from any minor or major illness. It is evident that children rag-pickers tend to ignore minor illness till they assume dangerous proportions and become regular 'conditions'.
4. Rag-pickers are even branded as 'thieves'. But when queried about police harassment, rag-pickers do not mention it as a problem. Three rag-pickers have actually, faced direct harassment from police.
5. When the children rag-pickers were photographed, they were not excited, rather they were afraid because this would stop their earning, if it is published in a newspaper.
6. Most rag-pickers have migrated and settled in the outskirts of Udaipur. The main reason of migration comes out to be no sources of earning livelihood in native villages.

### **Suggestions:-**

#### **Right To Education:**

RTE is a universal entitlement to education, a right that is recognized as a Human Right. The Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009 states it as an act to provide for free and compulsory education to all children of the age of six to fourteen years. However, children are working for long hours as rag-pickers, instead of going to school.

#### **Right To Health:**

The widely accepted definition of health is given by the World Health Organization in the preamble of its constitution, according to WHOM, "health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease". RTH is not included directly in as a fundamental right in the Indian Constitution. In India, the Directive Principle of the State Policy, under the Article 47, considers it the primary duty of the State to improve public health, securing of justice, human condition of work, extension of sickness, old age, disablement and maternity benefits and also contemplated. Article 48 ensures that State shall Endeavour to protect and impose the pollution free environment for good health. Rag-pickers are certainly deprived from the RTH as the polluted environment is their work-place and they are at a high risk of illness caused due to their standard of living and work environment.

#### **Human Rights:**

Human Rights are commonly understood as "inalienable fundamental rights to which a person is inherently entitled simply because she or he is a human being". Human Rights are thus, conceived as universal (applicable everywhere) and egalitarian (the same for everyone). These rights may exist as natural rights or legal rights, in both national and international law. Children rag-pickers' non-access to basic amenities of life, poor living and working conditions, RTE, RTD and RTH, all clearly highlight their deprivation of Human Rights. Children rag-pickers may belong to the most marginalized section of the society, but they surely are human beings. It is the responsibility of the Government and administrative authorities to see to it that children rag-pickers are provided with all the rights like the other residents of the city.

#### **Unorganized Worker's Social Security Act, 2008:**

This act states to provide social security and welfare of the unorganized workers and for other matters connected therewith or incidental thereto. Here, "unorganized worker" means a home-based worker, self-employed worker or a wage worker in the unorganized sector, and includes a worker in the organized sector who is not covered by any of Acts mentioned in Schedule II to this Act, and includes workers dependent on traditional livelihood system, as specified in the Schedule. The Act talks about social security and welfare of the unorganized workers. Children rag-pickers, though recognized as "unorganized workers", are unable to avail the opportunities of social security (as they are accused of stealing, they face severities of socio-economic and political life) and welfare (non-access to education, health facilities and poor health conditions).

Rag-pickers should be recognized as 'unprotected manual workers' who contribute to the economy and the environment in significant ways. So, they should be registered as municipal workers. Municipality should create a corpus towards the welfare of scrap collectors by offering them health insurance cover.

Widespread and extensive campaigning should be undertaken to educate citizens about the advantages in segregation of garbage. Wet and dry garbage should be disposed off separately. Segregation of garbage and direct

access to it, for rag-pickers, would mean not only a significant improvement in the working conditions but also a reduction in the overall quantum of garbage reaching the municipal bins.

Child labour in scrap collection is hazardous, and should be included in the schedule of Hazardous Occupation as listed in the Child Labour Prohibition and Regulation Act. The withdrawal of children from this section should be encouraged by offering parents incentives to educate their children, in the form of sponsorships, scholarships or special hostels for them.

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