

SPOTLIGHT



INVISIBLE SANITATION WORKERS @ COVID 19 LOCKDOWN: VOICES FROM 10 CITIES

SHUBHAGATO DASGUPTA | TRIPTI SINGH | ANJU DWIVEDI



Suggested Citation:

Dasgupta, S., Singh, T., & Dwivedi, A. 2020. "SPOTLIGHT: Invisible sanitation workers @ Covid 19 lockdown- Voices from 10 cities". *CPR Research Report*. New Delhi: Centre for Policy Research. DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.28851.37921



BACKGROUND NOTE

Sanitation workers are dominantly from caste groups customarily relegated to the bottom of the hierarchy and confined to livelihood tasks viewed as deplorable (Human Rights Watch Report, 2014). Nearly five million sanitation workers¹ are engaged in either full-time or part-time work (Bhatnagar, 2018). Considering many sanitary workers continue to be invisible, mainly due to the informalised nature of their work, these numbers are likely to be higher. They provide an essential service for public and environmental health working in precarious conditions at the cost of their safety, health, and dignity. Their position is currently, further jeopardised across the country with the outbreak of COVID-19. To combat the ongoing public health crisis, while most strategies focus on scientific and technical solutions crucial to contain the epidemic, simultaneously the role of sanitation workers in a public health crisis is central. However, at work, these frontline workers are exposed to a wide range of both social and occupational vulnerabilities. For instance, in the last ten days, a non-permanent New Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC)² worker tested positive and Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC)³ also tested positive for coronavirus. The situation is likely to become more grave if these frontline workers continue to interact with communities either without or with inadequate protective gear and safety equipment.

There has been some institutional response to sanitation workers by some states like Delhi, Gujarat and Punjab. Delhi government announces Rs 1 crore insurance for health workers, sanitation staff. Punjab government announced Rs 50 lakh cover for frontline cops, sanitation workers, Gujarat government announces Rs 25 Lakh Compensation for the kin of sanitation workers. Moreover, there has also been an announcement by the Financial Minister that

1 Bhatnagar, N. 2018. "Understanding the Problems of India's Sanitation Workers". The wire. Available from: <https://thewire.in/labour/understanding-the-problems-of-indias-sanitation-workers>. Accessed on [10 April, 2020]

2 PTI. 5 April, 2020. "Sanitation worker in NDMC's Moti Bagh hospital tests positive for Covid-19". India Today. Available from: <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/sanitation-worker-in-ndmc-moti-bagh-hospital-tests-covid19-positive-1663625-2020-04-05>. Accessed on [8 April, 2020]

3 Singh, N. 2 April, 2020. 54-Yr-Old Dharavi Sanitation Worker Tests Positive For COVID-19, Country's Front Line Soldiers At Risk?. The Logical Indian. Available from: <https://thelogicalindian.com/news/countrys-front-line-soldiers-at-risk-20432>. Accessed on [8 April, 2020].

sanitation workers will be provided medical insurance cover of Rs 50 lakh to the sanitation worker.

Motivations to roll the study

Over the last seven years, SCIFI: Water and Sanitation (Scaling City Institutions for India: Water and Sanitation) team nested at the Centre for Policy Research (CPR) has worked on issues and challenges faced by formal and informal sanitation workers to examine how these might be related to technology, service delivery models, questions of institutions, governance, finance, and socio-economic dimensions. SCIFI programme has engaged in research on manual scavengers, documented practices of manual and mechanical cleaning of sewers and septic tank emptiers, explored institutional responses to these practices and organised talks, webinars and podcast to strengthen sector knowledge and to support national, state, and city authorities to develop policies and programmes for intervention with the goal of increasing access to safe and sustainable sanitation in both urban and rural areas.

Given that pre-existing vulnerabilities of frontline workers are likely to exacerbate during COVID-19 lockdown, SCIFI: Water and Sanitation team launched a rapid research study to delve deeper into issues sanitation workers face during the lockdown. The study aims to strengthen preparedness and response measures to safeguard the invisible frontline sanitation workers.

Methodology

The study aims to assess the social and occupational vulnerabilities of sanitary workers during COVID-19 lockdown across ten cities. Given the current nation-wide lockdown, a purposive strategy was adopted for city selections. The study was rolled out across ten cities - Delhi, Faridabad, Gurgaon, NOIDA, Ghaziabad, Ranchi, Bhilai, Udaipur, Puri, and Bhubaneswar- where SCIFI researchers were already present during the lockdown.

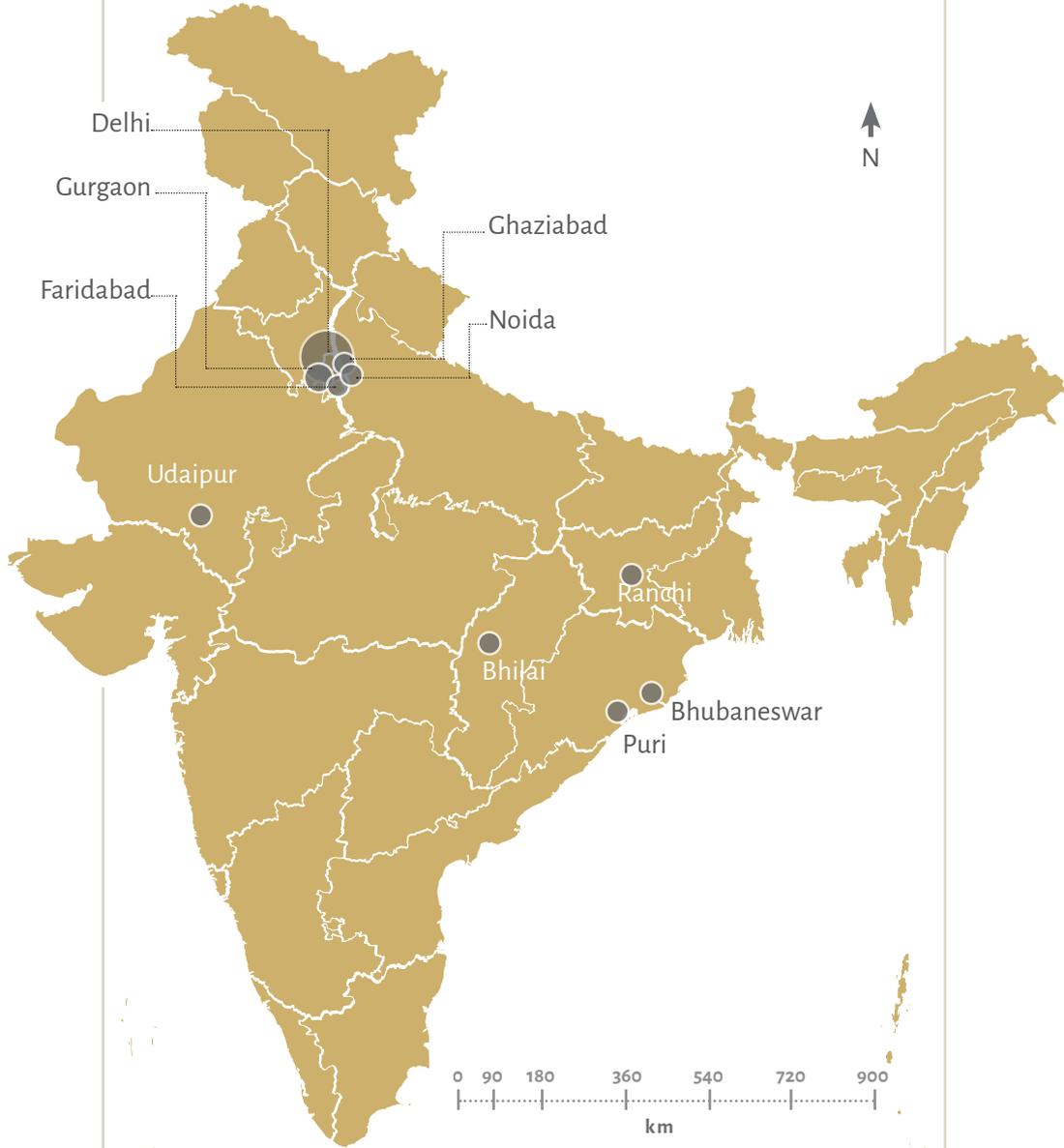
Researchers identified the sanitation worker in their area. Fixed a time for the interview according to the convenience of the sanitation worker. A total of 17 personal interviews were conducted across 10 cities. A mix of phone interviews and face-to-face interviews were conducted by the team. Norms of social distancing were observed during face to face interviews. No researcher left their building premise for the survey. A minimum distance of 2 m from the respondent as well as from the solid waste push cart was maintained.

BACKGROUND NOTE

Contd.

A mask was used to cover both nose and mouth. In the report, all names of sanitation workers have been changed. Pseudonyms are used in the detailed narrative to protect their identity.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW IN 10 CITIES*



Emerging findings and learnings from the study highlight the lived reality of sanitation workers during COVID-19. These rich voices present narratives that highlight variations across the country in terms of nature of the contract, procedure of work, access to protective gear and safety equipment, training provided to workers, and awareness of institutional response.

*Map by Tanvi Tomar

01

#Voices of our invisible sanitarians:

Covid 19 and Lockdown @ Permanent Municipal Sanitation Worker, Puri, Odisha

Jyoti Dei | 40

by *Aditya Bhol*



Jyoti Dei' (Didi) is a 40 years old street sweeper who has been employed by the Municipality of Puri for more than 20 years. She is currently responsible for the cleanliness of a stretch of around 1 km of the Armstrong Road in Puri town. At the same time, she collects solid waste in her wheelbarrow from some households, mostly located on the residential stretch. She begins her work at 5 am and usually wraps up by 11 am. She is helped by her husband, Kamal Dalei, who is 45 years old and has been unemployed for several years. Both of them toil the entire morning using *jhadus* and together clean pavements and streets.

¹ Please note, "Jyoti Dei" is used as a pseudonym

They declared themselves as Hindu *Harijans* upon being asked about their caste. Further, probing revealed that they belonged to the *Hadi* caste of Odisha which is a scheduled caste mostly ordained to carry out cleaning and sanitation work or menial labour.

Jyoti Dei and her husband reside in *Telenga Basti*, a notified slum comprising 70-80 households near the railway station in Puri. They live with their four children and two elderly members. They access a community toilet in their slum and public stand posts and hand pumps for drinking water and supplementary use. Neither of them has had a formal education, but both are literate. None of their family members is currently



engaged formally or contractually by the Municipality. However, Jyoti Dei said that she got the job of street sweeping with the Municipality after the demise of her maternal grandmother, who had the job earlier. Kamal was an orphan and mentioned that there are no other jobs for uneducated people from their caste.

Jyoti Dei has a permanent job with Puri Municipality as a street sweeper. There are no benefits associated with the permanent contract. While her husband does odd jobs later during the day in the *basti*, in the morning helps her in sweeping streets and collecting solid waste from nearly 80 houses and 10 hotels. Jyoti Dei gets a salary of Rs 16000 per month. Though her job description is that of a sweeper, Jyoti Dei and her husband also engage in drain cleaning and toilet cleaning for making extra money. They also reported engaging in septic tank cleaning (manually) for which they earn between Rs 2000-Rs 5000 depending on the size of the tank. For this kind of work, they are contacted mostly by the Municipality's septic tank truck operator whenever mechanical cleaning is not possible. For the aforementioned extra work, they visit localities other than their Municipality designated stretch of Armstrong road. They engage in manual cleaning of the septic tanks and pits but are not recognised as manual scavengers by the municipal authorities.

The couple were working without any protective gear such as gloves, masks and boots. Only Jyoti Dei had a Municipality provisioned fluorescent jacket. They have not received any protective gear barring raincoats for working in monsoons. They further said that they don't receive any cleaning soap or hand wash to clean themselves during their job. They are

prejudiced and shunned based on their caste status and, hence, are not even offered water in houses from which they collect garbage. They mentioned that the operators of the municipal tippers are usually from higher caste groups and have been provided with some protective gears.

Regarding the COVID-19 outbreak, the couple voiced their exasperation about having to work without any monetary incentives from the government. They have not been provided with any masks or gloves even during the outbreak. The couple had purchased masks on their own, which visibly were not N-95 or any medically prescribed masks to be worn during this pandemic. They clean their hands with soap only after completing their routine work since they are not aware of hand sanitisers nor have they been provided with any by the Municipality.

Jyoti Dei and her husband, Kamal, reported that there were around 860 total sweepers employed by the Puri Municipality. Sixty of them were permanent employees and were paid between Rs 24,000 – 25,000 per month because they operated in prime locations such as near the temple and on the marine drive. 100 more employees were permanent but paid around Rs 15,000 – 16,000. Finally, 700 employees were contracted by the Municipality at Rs 8000 per month. Almost all sweepers were *harijans*.

The couple mentioned that during the lockdown their workload reduced marginally since streets are relatively cleaner, but solid waste collection from houses has increased. Further, they said that most of the municipal officials are on leave, even the peons and office staff, but their work continues unsupervised by the

sanitary inspectors. As of now, they are reporting to the office of the District Magistrate who has been made responsible for things during the lockdown. There has been a delay in their salary payment since the municipal office remains suspended until April 30. In the wake of the outbreak and the risks associated with this kind of job, the couple voiced their dismay at not being provided with any training or with any special protective gear by the authorities even though they have invoked the essential services act necessitating them to work ceaselessly.

Sanitation workers largely work without any protective gear such as gloves, masks and boots, barring the fluorescent jacket provided by the Municipality. Further, they don't receive any cleaning soap or hand wash to clean themselves during their work. They expressed their exasperation about having to work without any monetary incentives from the government.

02

#Voices of our invisible sanitarians:

Covid 19 and Lockdown @ Permanent Municipal Sanitation Worker, Ranchi, Jharkhand

Vishnu Oraon | 35



by *Deepti Raj*

Vishnu Oraon¹ is around 35 years old sanitation worker. Over the last 20 years, he has been working with the Ranchi Municipal Corporation. A resident of the state belonging to one of the primitive tribes, *Oraon*, resides in Nangari, a village outside the city, 8 km from the place of work which takes him 45-60 to commute using his cycle. He has a house with seven rooms, where he resides with his wife and two children. He attended school till class 8, and after that, he was married. He constructed an individual toilet under SBM in 2019 for which he received around 2000 bricks, and he bore the rest of the cost. Before that,

¹ Please note, "Vishnu Oraon" is used as a pseudonym.

he used to defecate in the open.

He is employed on a contract by the Municipality on a monthly payment of INR 6,100 to work for 26 days. All Sundays are off for him. He is currently providing door garbage collection in HEC, Sector 3, Dhurwa, Ranchi. He covers around 500HHs in the area. He is a replacement for one of his colleagues. Before garbage collection, he was engaged in drain cleaning. He comes to work on his cycle. He takes a cart to collect the garbage.

In the time of COVID 19, he said that there is no behavioral change or precautionary measures taken by households (HH) and as usual they place their bin outside their gate for me to pick up. The Municipality



has not conducted any training or workshop or any other awareness programmes. He said that *“there is a possibility of spread of corona in the Municipality too, as we come from far off places, if we get infected, it will spread to people in the Municipality too”*. However, he also mentioned that *“there will not be corona cases in his village as people don’t travel to other cities like Kolkata neither people come from another city here”*. He is not given with any special pass. He comes to work wearing the jacket provided by the Municipality, and if he is stopped, police let him go after seeing the jacket.

Recently a resident in the sector had given him a white colour sanitizer and asked him to use it before having a meal or chewing tobacco. He also mentioned that some other sector resident gave him soap to use post corona break out. He mentioned using sanitizer as directed. Earlier he used to hang around after work, but after corona, he leaves around after finishing his work. He comes to work in his clothes, but after work when he reaches home, he takes a bath with soap and changes his clothes.

Though he thinks that as he is uneducated, not many employment opportunities are available for him, so he has taken up this job. He said that he had not faced any occupation related discrimination. In fact, people applaud him for his work. He is appreciated and told that he is doing a commendable job. Also, he mentions that it is difficult to get a job in the village. He has a municipality job even if it is very far from his place. He has a cycle, and so he can come for work. He lamented doing this work as he was uneducated and repeated: *“I am not educated and therefore doing this job”*.

He had attended three training programmes in his ten years of

service. The recent one was 2-3 month ago on waste segregation. He was made aware of dry and wet waste and segregation of waste. However, the waste he collects is not segregated at source. The other training program was on the use of protective gear. He mentioned that in the training programme, they were given a demonstration to use protective gear which included uniform and boots but he did not receive any. When he asked his supervisor, he was told that boots and uniform are not available. But he wears a jacket with the municipality logo over his shirt. He thinks that his work does not involve any risk, but he should be provided with protective gear. He said that the workshop is organized at places far away. To reach, he needs to spend money on commuting and miss work. Therefore, he rarely attends it. He suggests that the training should be provided with travelling remuneration to enable workers to attend it.

He is provided with a mask and protective gear. He has been using protective gear before the COVID 19 outbreak. However, he expressed unhappiness and said that how can one use a mask while blowing a whistle as a call for HHs to bring the bins outside the gate. He is not aware of quarantined HHs. According to him, there are not any such HHs in his area.

He carries a green plastic bin with a handle and collects garbage from all the flats in a building and then empty the bucket in the cart. The Municipality assigns each work the area and also divides the work between the door to door garbage collection and drain cleaning. The gloves he said last for only 2-3 days, and when he requests the supervisor, he is told that he will receive when

there are new gloves available, and in the meantime, he manages work without gloves.

He said that he is not aware of any government scheme for sanitation workers either in his state or other states, how could he be as he is not educated.

Municipality have not conducted any training or workshop or any other awareness program post-COVID-19 outbreak. But previously they had conducted training programs on use of protective gear, and waste segregation for solid waste management

03

#Voices of our invisible sanitarians:

Covid 19 and Lockdown @ Permanent Municipal Sanitation Worker, Udaipur, Rajasthan

Kunal | 50

by *Tanvi Tomar*



Kunal is a 50-year-old sanitation worker who has been serving Udaipur Municipal Corporation for the past 25 years. He belongs to Kamli Village in Udaipur district and has migrated here with his family seeking better job opportunities. His father is a retired Indian Railway Employee who still lives in the village and Kunal is the first one in his family to move to a city. Kunal has a small family of 4: a wife and 2 sons, who lives along with him in a three-bedroom house. He has studied till class 12 and follows the Hindu religion.

When it comes to describing what

¹ Please note, "Kunal" is used as a pseudonym

he does, he says *"we run this city. We ensure that drains are unclogged, and wastewater flows seamlessly. We do what is important but is often not regarded as."* His job responsibility entails unclogging drains and sewers. On people's perception of his work, he tells us that *"People are disrespectful. We are treated as untouchables. Often, if we visit a house, we are asked to stand outside. We are given water in separate vessels. It hurts to see people treat us differently"*. But after a bit of pause, he adds, *"It's understandable. I don't even want my kids to do what I am doing"*. In his job, instead of following a designated route, his daily route is decided based on phone calls he gets to visit locations from where the complaint is launched. He is



given instructions of site visit by the Health Officer on a daily basis and is generally accompanied by two more men for carrying out the task. When it came to sharing details of his income, he had some resentments and concluded by saying that it's meagre and doesn't suffice for his family.

When asked about how this new epidemic has affected him, he says *"we are scared. Especially when we don't know what this is exactly. But work still goes on. Udaipur Municipal Corporation has taken the necessary precautions and has made enough arrangements to ensure our safety"*. His commute within the city has not been affected because Udaipur hasn't seen a surge in cases. So far, a total of 4 positive cases have been detected which too have been tested negative on 12 April 2020. For ease of work, he needs to carry his ID card while commuting. Except for the requests from the area under curfew (1 km radius of HH where four people were tested positive), they are catering to all other requests. However, the number of requests received per day has drastically decreased.

Udaipur Municipal Corporation has taken all measures to ensure the safety of more than 1900 sanitation workers. Kunal says that they were explained how to use PPE by the officials. All workers were provided with masks, gloves and boots. They were also given a 200 ml bottle of sanitizer individually, and each cleaning vehicle (auto tippers/ sewerage trucks) is loaded with soap cake. He wears a full sleeves shirt while on duty. Udaipur Municipal Corporation has banned the assembly of sanitation workers, and so they are not allowed to enter the office premises. They communicate over calls and get work done. Furthermore, they used to work in shifts when the

lockdown started, but now a uniform code has been applied where every sanitation worker has to work for half a day only. Roads, streets and drains are being cleaned daily, and a team of 2 workers is deployed ward wise for disinfecting the areas. Post completing the work, Kunal goes back to his house, washes his feet and hands outside with soap and running water and then directly goes to take a bath. He keeps away his clothes for washing and takes a head bath daily. He puts out his mask in the sun and washes his gloves and boots daily. He says that his neighbours are a bit vigilant since they know his area of work but doesn't discriminate openly. Their interaction is pretty much minimised due to social distancing.

All workers were provided with protective gear including masks, gloves and boots. Sanitation workers were explained how to use protective gear by officials. They were also given a 200 ml bottle of sanitizer individually. Sanitation workers wear a full sleeves shirt while on duty. Udaipur Municipal Corporation has banned the assembly of sanitation workers. They communicate over calls and get work done.

04

#Voices of our invisible sanitarians:

Covid 19 and Lockdown @ Permanent Municipal Sanitation Worker, Delhi

Vrinda | 50

by *Baisakhi Sarkar*



Vrinda¹, fondly called Saroj by her family members and friends, is 50 years old. She works as a sanitation worker at the South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC) area of Malviya Nagar main market. She has been appointed as a regular employee of the SDMC in the year 2015. However, she had been working as a solid waste collector for the last 25 years. Initially, she was a contractual worker with SDMC. Now she is a regular employee and avails benefits of EPF and medi-claim, along with monthly salary. She collects solid waste from about 40 houses daily and sweeps streets that are designated to her by the SDMC. She has been

designated as a sweeper by the SDMC, but she continues to collect solid waste informally and collects Rs 100 from each household per month, in addition to the salary she gets. She starts working from 7.00 am and gets over with her shift by 1.30 pm. Though official timing is till 3.00 pm, they are allowed to leave early if the work is over before time. There has been no change in shift timings due to covid. She collects the solid waste from the apartments and puts it in the tipper truck that waits outside the colony. There is no official structure, but there are areas where the supervisors sit and mark attendance. However, there are public toilets which are far, and she usually resorts to open spaces for the toilet, even during the lockdown.

¹ Please note, "Vrinda" is used as a pseudonym



She is a resident of Kulshera village, Greater Noida in the state of Uttar Pradesh. She travels daily from Noida to Delhi, which is about 50 km one way. She usually travels by bus, and it takes about two to two and a half hours to reach her area of work. She has three sons and two unmarried daughters. All three sons are married and have seven children. She stays with her two sons and daughters. Her elder son Manoj stays in Delhi and is a casual labour, but since lockdown, he is also staying with her. Manoj was forced to leave Delhi and move back to UP because he no longer has a job and he could not continue paying rent. Her other two sons are now jobless as well. Currently, Vrinda is the sole earner of the family of 14. Her husband also expired six months back. She is a Hindu and belongs to Schedule Caste. She has never attended school, nor her two daughters. However, her sons have studied till 8th or 9th standard. All of them stay together, and they have a separate kitchen and toilet at their home. Access to the water supply is through borewell, or they buy drinking water jars for 10 to 15 rupees.

The impact of COVID-19 has been huge on her and her family. Travelling 100 km up and down daily has become a problem for her, in the wake of lockdown, since public buses have been reduced on the road. Initially, she was taking a lift from someone or coming to work when she got the bus. Now her son drops her by bike and takes her back home. Her son sometimes helps her in collecting waste from houses whenever she is unable to do it herself, but he does not get paid separately. She points out that, due to this, her commuting cost has increased. Usually, she spends approximately Rs 50 to 60 per day travelling but now given she comes by bike; the petrol costs about Rs

100 to 150 per day. It is particularly difficult for her because she has to cross the border to go to work. She said that there are checking points at every major junction, where they stop people and ask for id cards. She usually used to carry her uniform and change it after reaching the work, but now she wears the uniform all the time so that she is not stopped along the way for inspections, though she has her ID card also. Since her son usually drops her, she has borrowed a dress for him as well, from her colleagues and neighbours. She also points out that she had been appointed as a regular worker during 2015 when there was a dengue outbreak in Delhi. Hence, she hopes that some positions might open and one of her sons can join.

She also informed that SDMC had provided her with gloves, standard surgical masks, sanitisers and Vitamin C tablets, only once since March, due to Covid outbreak. The training was conducted by the SDMC to make them aware of the use of the PPE kit and instructions on handwashing due to the Covid outbreak. She said, *“We were shown how to wash hands properly. We were also asked to wash hands, before eating, after going to the bathroom and use sanitiser after handling waste. We are following the instructions while at work and also at home.”* Since she is a regular worker, she already had a uniform, which is full-sleeved, salwar kurta and a cap, which she wears daily. For extra protection, she covers her face with the scarf above the mask, and she also ensures that every part of her body is covered. She washes the gloves and dress after going home and takes a bath, to ensure cleanliness.

She believes that sanitation work involves a lot of risks. Yet, she feels that the government is not doing enough to secure them. She said

that she is only paid a monthly salary which is around 7000 INR and she has not received any other monetary help from the government. She has been going through a lot of troubles, but nobody is doing anything for them. She recalls and states, *“I was there during the plague of 1994 and then dengue in 2015. We are always on the frontline working and risking our lives, but the government never does anything for us. You can see how my sons are jobless, and I am the only earning member. Given that we are risking our lives, can't we expect a little additional monetary support from the government”.*

She is also of the opinion that sanitation work is not dignified, but she has never experienced any hatred from her neighbours or the residents at her workplace. She pointed out that one of the households in the Malviya Nagar area, from where she collects waste, has been providing her with lunch every day since the lockdown. Moreover, there are households who even in normal time give her breakfast and tea. She claims that everyone knows her since she has been working in the same area for long and is fond of her.

She seemed to be very aware and updated about the covid-19 spread. She complained, *“This would not have escalated if people stayed in their homes as directed. I see people roaming around; nobody seems to care. People should listen to the government and stay home”.* She even said that she watches the news every day, and there are areas in UP

SDM provides protective gear, along with training and vitamin C tablets to boost immunity.

that have cases of COVID -19; however, as of now, there is no case reported in her locality or village. She also pointed out that she tries to maintain cleanliness around her house as well.

She ended by saying that she hopes that the situation improves and everything becomes normal soon. She also hopes that the government will do something to improve their situation and give employment to her sons.

The sanitation workers have always been on the frontline but is the government doing enough for these warriors who are risking their lives

for the common people, the question remains. The CM of Delhi in a press brief on 2nd April said: *“Today, as a mark of respect, I want to announce that if unfortunately, any health worker - a sanitation worker, doctor or nurse - is martyred while serving COVID-19 patients, their families will be given Rs 1 crore.”* Still, there are no advisories, and this sanitation worker seems to be unaware of the provision.

In fact, on 31st March, SDMC reported in a press brief that *“To ensure the safety, 14,000 special nitrile gloves have been procured for its medical staff, DBCs, field workers and ‘safai sainiks’*

who are working relentlessly to combat the spread of coronavirus”. It also said *“According to health officials, these gloves are handy and long-lasting, and each glove will last for 15 days. It has to be washed with soap daily”.* Apart from this, the civic body has also decided to distribute 20000 Vitamin-C tablets per zone to its 20,000 sanitation workers deployed on the field. These are few positive and immediate steps taken by the government, and it is seen that the sanitation workers, in this case, the respondent also have received the gloves and the medicine as stated by SDMC.



05

#Voices of our invisible sanitarians:

Covid 19 and Lockdown @ Daily-wage Municipal Sanitation Worker, Bhilai, Chattisgarh

Suman | 35

by *Kshitij Jaiswal*



Suman¹ is a 35 years old solid waste collector who has been serving the residents of Russian Complex, Sector 7 Market Area, and a few streets of Sector 8 for the last eight years. She lives with her husband and 2 daughters in Kumhari-Charoda area (outskirts) of Bhilai, which is 9 km away from the service area. The house is a 2 BHK which was built over railway's land. She has access to toilet facilities at home. She follows the Hindu religion and belongs to Sahu Subcaste (Other Backward Class). She has studied till 3rd standard. Suman has two daughters who are studying in 10th and 12th standard, respectively. They

both go into a government school, but Suman wants them to attend private school since teaching is better over there.

Suman is the sole breadwinner of her family. She was brought into her current profession as a solid waste collector by her friend eight years ago, since then Suman has been doing the same thing. Before this, she worked as casual labour in the construction industry but had to quit due to the laborious nature of work. She faces no social status problem in working as a solid waste collector and sees her profession as equally important as other professions.

She works under a contractor who acts as a middleman and takes

¹ Please note, "Suman" is used as a pseudonym

away almost half of the money transferred in her bank account. So Bhilai Municipal Corporation (BMC) transfers Rs 375 per day in her bank account, but she only receives Rs. 220 per day or Rs. 6000 to 6500 per month. She was regretful of the fact that she is poor and has no choice but to get exploited by the contractor. If for any reasons she is unable to go for work, she is not allowed to send someone else to replace her (like her husband). Resultantly, she suffers a pay cut. She does not engage in any other part-time work. She leaves home at 6 am and returns at 4 pm. Her husband (who is jobless), drops and picks her from work on a bicycle. She does not have access to sanitation facilities during work. As the situation demands, once or twice a day, she urinates and defecates in the open.

Amidst COVID-19 outbreak, there is no special pass provided to demarcate her work under special service category, and she uses her old identity card only. She sees no risk in her work and shows her gate pass/identity card as her ticket to roam around during these days. She thinks there is no change in the nature of work post-COVID-19 breakout; they used to wash hands before and after the work even before the outbreak also. Her general day starts with giving

her attendance to the contractor at 6 am and getting the area allotted. By 7 am, she starts the collection, and parallelly segregation is done by another woman. After 5 hours of collection and segregation, they have lunch between 1 pm to 2 pm and then dispose of the waste to a common dumping site (*dhalaos*) by 3 pm. She has been regularly provided with the Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) like gloves, masks, boots and one time two pairs of uniform (*sarees*). She also received training from BMC officials on safety practices to be followed while on the job but feels that training was not useful for a less-educated person like her.

She reiterates that things haven't changed much for them after the COVID -19 outbreak and people have always been respectful towards her work. She doesn't feel "uncomfortable", that she has to work every day even though there is a lockdown. She is not aware of any quarantined families in the area and has no instructions not to collect waste from quarantined households. She is aware that there is some virus outbreak due to which they need to maintain social distancing. Though she was not aware of any special schemes announced by the government in the wake of COVID-19.

At a time like this, they have been instructed to wear full-sleeve and full-length clothes, cover wounds with a band-aid (*patti*) and carry water and soap to wash hands. They wash their hands before and after their work is done. Suman says that wearing a mask becomes uncomfortable when she has to blow the whistle for the call since she has to remove it again and again to blow it.

Amidst COVID-19 outbreak, there is no special pass provided to sanitation workers to demarcate her work under any special service category. Suman does not view her work as risky. She uses her old identity card as her ticket to get by during lockdown.

06

#Voices of our invisible sanitarians:

Covid 19 Lockdown @ Daily-wage Municipal Sanitation Worker, Ghaziabad, UP

Ranjan | 35

by Pooja Gupta



Ranjan¹, a 35-year-old solid waste collector is employed with the Nagar Nigam, Ghaziabad for the past 6 years. He started working as a privately employed solid waste collector, and after three years, started as a daily wage worker under authorities. His father had a similar line of occupation. He hails from the Valmiki community and resides in the Valmiki Colony of Ghaziabad area. He currently stays in a 556 square feet area in a joint family of 4 adults and 2 children. He is the primary caretaker of his children and parents. He has studied till eighth grade. He has a toilet facility at his home; however, he lacks a kitchen room and

cooks in an open area/veranda. He has a smartphone and utilises it for communication, entertainment and information purposes.

Although he has been working with Nagar Nigam for the past six years as a daily wage earner, he has not been given a contractual position. He earns nearly Rs 10,500 monthly. His place of work is about 1.5-2 kilometres from his residence, and he commutes via cycle daily. As part of his routine, he covers 1000 HHs covering A, B, G and H blocks of the Shastri Nagar Colony of Ghaziabad. The process of solid waste collection is door-to-door via a truck. A helper usually accompanies him. However, during the lockdown phase, he has been coming to collect

¹ Please note, "Ranjan" is used as a pseudonym

the waste alone. Due to his hectic schedule, he does not engage in any part-time work. Due to the commuting nature of his work, he relies on public toilets for sanitation. He also restricts himself to use these facilities once or twice in a day as they lack proper hygiene and handwashing amenities. He generally carries a water bottle and Dettol soap to wash his hands 4-5 times on the go, after using toilet facilities and after having lunch.

Post-COVID, privately contracted workers have stopped coming to work. Although there has been no hike in salaries, the workload and timings have increased. He and his colleagues have been trained by the authorities on general rules to follow while working amid the pandemic. They were provided with a safety equipment kit consisting of a mask, a pair of gloves and a sanitiser. They were also encouraged to bring an extra pair of clothes and to wash these gears everyday post work. Additionally, they are required to clean the truck twice in a day – pre and post-work hours. The workers are also asked to keep the glass panels of the truck up during working hours specifically. He has already been issued an identity card (ID card) which allows him to commute easily within the neighbourhood.

Since the outbreak, Ranjan continued his work, although this time he was appreciated by his neighbours and family for doing his job. He stated, *“I used to feel that we were destined for this work, but now it feels good and empowering that my work is keeping everyone else safe and healthy”*. He said he feels empowered as the job was categorised under essential services and he could serve people. He felt respected and valued by households from where he collects the waste.

Ranjan shares his fear of carrying the virus to his family after returning from work. Given the spike in cases, he often contemplates not going home or to shift somewhere else until the spread of the virus is contained. But, socio-economic vulnerabilities, and dependents at home, necessitate that he returns every day.

He has requested if necessary, arrangements for his commute can be facilitated by the authorities during this crisis period to reduce the number of times he comes in contact with personnel on his way to work. He is not entitled to any health, social or economic benefits and even gets a pay cut if he doesn't show up to work due to the non-contractual nature of

his job. Due to the potential threat of community transmission and the risky nature of his work, he has requested if the state can issue Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) gears and health insurance. Having worked for the past six years as a daily wage worker with the Nagar Nigam authorities, he aspires to be contractually enrolled with them to avail benefits and ensure future job security.

“I used to feel that we were destined for this work, but now it feels good and empowering that my work is keeping everyone else safe and healthy during the outbreak of COVID-19”.

07

#Voices of our invisible sanitarians:

Covid 19 and Lockdown @ Sanitation Worker employed by RWA, Delhi

Paras | 38

by *Abhinav Kumar*



Paras¹ is a 38 years old solid waste collector. He has been serving the DDA, Gautampuri residents for the last 18 years. He belongs to Jarbhanga (UP), but his family has been living in Delhi for three generations. He was born and brought up in Delhi. His father worked in All India Institute of Medical Science (AIIMS) in Delhi as a sanitation worker. Paras also worked at AIIMS for 16 years but, three years ago he left the job. He lives with his father and brothers in a three bedroom house owned by them. There are 14 members in the household, including eight children. He follows the Hindu religion and belongs to the Harijan

caste (Scheduled Caste). He has studied till class 6.

According to him, his work is essential, but people do neither respect his work nor the people engaged with this kind of work. However, he continues to work as a solid waste collector as he believes he does not have the skill to do other work. He covers 240 households (HHs) in Delhi Development Authority (DDA), Gautampuri. He has been working here since the Society came into existence. In his early days, he was asked by RWA to collect the waste from 80 HHs, but as the area began to expand, more residents came into the settlement, he was asked to collect waste from

¹ Please note, "Paras" is used as a pseudonym

240 households. He has a verbal agreement with the Residents Welfare Association (RWA). There is no formal contract. He collects INR 60 per month from all the households for collecting solid waste. He also employs two persons for assisting in his work and pays them INR 3000 each per month. They collect solid waste from homes, segregate plastic waste from it and dispose of the rest to Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) vehicles. He earns Rs. 9000-10,000 from household collections and Rupee Rs. 2,000 -3,000 on selling plastics, metals that they segregate from the waste. In addition to this, they also earn Rupee 3000-4000 every month from washing cars in Society. After the lockdown, the added income from car wash and selling of plastic and metal waste has been sacrificed. In addition to that, many families in the Society have locked their homes and returned to their hometown. As a result, the income from the household collection has also gone down.

As he lives just behind the society complex he does not require any public transport to commute. So, the lockdown during COVID 19 did not affect his commuting pattern. RWA has provided a pass to him, but he does not always carry it while coming to Society. According to him, after COVID 19, there is no change in his work. His working hours have decreased as many households have gone away.

He said that his work is essential and someone has to do it because if the waste is not collected daily, then it would be problematic for everyone. But the attitude of people towards their work has not changed after COVID-19. Although many households have paid him extra

money and some of them have provided him with disposable gloves, they also continue to discriminate against him due to his work. When asked if he faced any discrimination after a coronavirus outbreak, he said that *"people always discriminated against him due to his caste and work and they continue to do so"*. DDA society has a common toilet for the use of guards and other service providers, but they are allowed to use it only if they wash the toilet entirely after use. No other service provider is asked to do so. He further added that some of his neighbours would say something inappropriate about his work and caste and later say that they were joking.

After one resident of Society was tested positive in which Paras works, the Society was locked down, and nobody was allowed to enter the Society. All the service providers were provided with a pass. All people involved in waste management, including sweepers, were engaged in cleaning all shared areas, doors and knobs of all flats in the Society. They were not provided with any Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for cleaning the Society. Each of them was given Rupee 500 for doing this work. Paras bought PPE using his own money. He used cloth masks and disposable gloves immediately after the positive case was reported but as the cost of gloves increased he has stopped using it. Even though there was a positive case, he along with others has to clean the common area, no one from RWA or government provided them with any guidelines to tell them about necessary precautions. He had received no training from the government or RWA for using PPE. He does not wear boots or a full sleeve uniform while working. He said that many households ask

them to clean doorknobs and railings for which they carry surf mixed with water. He said that it is risky, but he does it. The Society has a facility for washing hands where he uses soap to wash hands properly. After he reaches home, first he takes a bath, washes his clothes, and then only he enters the house. He said that he knows the safety precautions because he has worked in AIIMS. He was not aware of any scheme by the Delhi Government about compensation of Rs. 1 crore for the family of the deceased sanitary worker. On making the work safer during COVID 19, he said that at least they should be provided with gloves, masks and sanitizers.

After a resident in the society tested positive for Coronavirus, the sanitation workers including sweepers were engaged to sanitise all common areas, doors and knobs of all the flats present in the society. However, they were not provided with any protective gear.

08

#Voices of our invisible sanitarians:

Covid 19 and Lockdown @ Sanitation Worker employed by RWA, Delhi

Pintu Sahni | 38

by Anindita Mukherjee



Pintu Sahni¹ is one among the five solid waste collectors engaged by the Resident Welfare Association of Block D in Chittaranjan Park (CR Park). He is a 38-year-old male collector who migrated to Delhi 26 years back. Since then, he has been engaged in collecting Solid Waste. He came to Delhi and settled in Nehru Place *Jhuggi* where his maternal uncles used to live and were engaged in the solid waste collection of adjacent South Park complex in Nehru Place. He introduced Pintu to the work who is serving C R park residents for over the past 25 years now. Pintu belongs to the 'Malla' Caste and practices the Hindu religion.

1 Please note, "Pintu Sahni" is used as a pseudonym

Pintu's family continue to live in Saray Khutaha village, Maharajganj, Gorakhpur in Uttar Pradesh where his wife, 2 sons and 2 daughters live with his parents. His family is upper caste and practices caste discrimination. When asked that he does solid waste work in Delhi makes his family face any discrimination, he informs that people are not aware back in his village what work he is engaged in Delhi. So he or his family haven't face any discrimination back home. He also says that people in the neighbourhood are cooperative and take care of his requirements. They have carved out a little resting space in a shed next to D Block Park for keeping essentials, e.g. soap water etc.

In Delhi, he lives in a rented *Jhuggi* in Churiya Mohalla in Tughlakabad village owned by Gujjar Mr Karanvir Dhheri. He lives in a 100 sq. ft *pucca* house at a monthly rent of INR 1500. About 6000-7000 families are living in the village. About 2000 families, according to his estimate, in this village work as solid waste collectors in various parts of Delhi. He has no access to toilets in his house and practices open defecation in the nearby jungle. Water from boring is available shared by 30 households.

With the advent of COVID 19, he thinks his work has become riskier. He finds that the government has not done much for them. The Resident Welfare Association (RWA) gave masks and gloves to three brothers. However, as the first set of gloves was torn off, one of the residents, who is a doctor, gave him one pair of nitrile gloves. Recently, however, it also got cut by the piece of broken glass in the waste. He has two more people to work with him who collect, dumps and segregates partly with bare hands. All the waste collectors, however, have masks but boots and aprons are not available to them.

He collects solid waste from about 200 households (HHs) and dumps it in the *Dhalao* next to Chandralok Cinema that is within 500 meters from the collection area. Earlier his brothers used to segregate waste and resell them to earn extra income to the tune of INR 150-200 per day. Since the lockdown, however, the business ceased to exist. Now they dump all the waste collected in the *Dhalao* where the Municipal vehicle comes to pick-up. The resale used to get them some additional income, which is unavailable as a source nowadays. Each of the 5 solid waste collectors, serving about 200 HHs earns INR

5600 per month. In the lockdown period, their duration of work has reduced now, and they can wrap up their work by 12:30 to 1 pm, which used to be till 3 PM or so.

During work hours, they use the nearby community toilets. The collectors were aware of the importance of maintaining hygiene. Solid waste collectors take back all their personal protective equipment (PPEs) to the house and get them washed and sun-dried. The soap kept at the workplace is used to wash hands after taking out the PPEs. HHs in the area ensure an adequate supply of soap so that he is not required to spend any additional money. Amidst the lockdown, they have to walk about 8 km (round-trip) to their work which they used to come by auto/e-rickshaw usually. It takes them about 30-40 minutes to walk down, and they start from home at 7 AM. Initially, the RWA instructed him to get passport size photos for issuance of passes, later he was given the letter about his engagement as the Solid waste collector which he can show if he gets stopped by the police. In the early days, he was stopped by the police, but now he doesn't face any problem from them. In the Tughlakabad village, he informed that in the early days of the lockdown, the Station House Officer (SHO) of the nearest police station came and made them aware of the lockdown restrictions. In the school, the local *corporator* distributed rice, wheat, pulses and oil once. The RWA, last week also arranged Rice, Oil, Pulses and other Masalas for them. The landowner has directed the solid waste collectors not to take back any solid waste for resale purposes to the locality as they used to practice otherwise.

He expressed his disappointment as

none of the politicians have reached out to them so far. He was not aware of Delhi government's announcement for compensation if a person dies of COVID 19. He also informed that he was hearing about the government's endeavour of transferring INR 5000 to the frontline workers, which, however, has not reached them thus far. "*Many people fled to the villages*" Pintu says, but he didn't as he was not sure if the village would be the safe place to be. He was informed that those who left for the village earlier couldn't go home as they were quarantined in the primary schools and Panchayat offices. He says, "*Although we are engaged in such risky work where we are putting our lives at jeopardy, we hardly get to hear from the government for any betterment and depend on the residents for support mostly*".

Urban areas offer anonymity. This upper caste person and his brothers are able to undertake sanitation work in Delhi without any inhibition of being discriminated against.

09

#Voices of our invisible sanitarians:

Covid 19 and Lockdown @ Sanitation Worker contracted by RWA, Gurgaon, Haryana

Mannu | 40

by *Isha Khurana*



On a typical day, one can easily spot a smiling housekeeping staff, Mannu¹, 40 years old around the apartments. He is ready to help and assist you with anything that you request him.

He belongs to the Scheduled caste and hails from Nadia district in West Bengal. He had his formal education until eight class. He knows how to read and write in Bangla. He moved to Gurgaon twelve years ago with his wife and son. Ever since he migrated to Gurgaon, he has been employed in society as housekeeping staff.

He is very content with his decision to migrate, as his native village did not

offer many job options. Here his son, 21 years old works in a private grooming parlour and his wife is employed as office staff in a private office.

He, along with his family, stays in a modest accommodation within 2-3 km of the society in Chakkapur, Gurgaon. His house is a modest room, and the kitchen unit also forms part of the room. There are two common washrooms for eight households in that building. They often experience space constraints, especially while washing and drying clothes. His accommodation costs around 4000/- per month plus electricity charges. He usually walks to society and takes twenty minutes to reach.

¹ Please note, "Mannu" is used as a pseudonym

His work timings in society are from 7 am to 4 pm. Before the lockdown, before the start of his duty hours, together with his son, he works odd jobs like washing and cleaning of cars to supplement the family income. This entailed him to reach the society around 5.00 am and together, they used to clean 17- 18 vehicles daily and charge Rs. 500 per month per car. The family as a unit had an income of 30,000-35,000 per month but unfortunately, owing to the lockdown housekeeping is the sole source of income for his family.

He, along with another housekeeping staff, has been assigned with the task of collecting household waste from approx. Thirty-eight households. This also includes segregation and transportation of the waste to the municipality van as and when they arrive within the society premises. Maintaining cleanliness in the common area within the building including staircase, elevators, parking area, window panes etc. are also part of his work domain.

He mentioned that his housekeeping employment is a yearly contract with the RWA through the contractor and earns Rs. 8900 for 26 working days in a month. Although there isn't a concept of leave in the contract, he gleefully mentioned that he has a weekly off. He indulges in other odd jobs as and when requested by the residents.

The RWA has provided him with two sets of uniforms and an identity card. He expresses the need to be supplied with protective hand gear, as many times during segregation of garbage he has been hurt due to sharp objects or by broken glass pieces. Despite no formal session on COVID-19 by RWA or the contractor, he is aware of certain aspects of COVID-19 and hence uses a mask made of cloth.

With strict enforcement of lockdown in Gurgaon, he has been stopped several times by the police personnel, but his uniform and identity card have acted as a saviour from their *lathi* blows.

The society consists of different courts, and every Court has many buildings. There is a separate security for every Court. The housekeeping staff is assigned to one particular Court, and each building has two housekeeping staff for adequate upkeep of the building. The Housekeeping staff has been allocated a common room on the ground floor of the building, where they can keep their belongings, and it also has an attached washroom.

At the entry of the society, their identity card is checked, and they are made to walk through the disinfectant tunnel. At the entrance of every Court, the housekeeping staff are required to show their identity card and then sanitize their hands. Before entering the building, it is ensured that they keep their belongings in the allocated common room and again sanitize their hands. Further, it is ensured by the guards that they wash/ sanitize their hands, several times during the day.

There has been a practice of contactless garbage collection in the society; therefore; the times of COVID-19 have not changed much for Mannu, professionally. He still walks for 20 minutes to reach the society; every morning cleans the common area and then starts collecting the household waste during the day. However, now he mandatorily has a bath after going back home and washes his mask, regularly.

The ration shops around his residential area are open but do not have the essential items, and many have been quibbling to get them. He majorly stresses on the need to provide basic essential things to the migrant workers,

as many do not have ration cards of Haryana.

It is interesting to notice that in the society and amongst themselves, they are addressed as housekeeping staff and not sanitation workers thus absolving them of the stigma attached to being part of the 'sanitation services'. He expresses that the job of a housekeeper is respected among his community or in his immediate residential area.

He is very vocal about his fear of COVID-19, and the anxiety aggravates due to the contagious nature of this infection. He does not wish to risk his life or his family members' life by working these days, but the need to sustain coerces him to come to work daily.

The rapid spread of COVID-19, is worrying. The contagious nature of this infection, further aggravates this fear. Although he does not wish to risk his life or his family member's life by working in these precarious conditions, the need to sustain coerces him to come daily to work.

10

#Voices of our invisible sanitarians:

COVID-19 and Lockdown @
Permanent Sanitation Worker
employed by a Private firm, Delhi

Vijay Pratap Singh | 32

by *Bharti*



Vijay Pratap Singh¹, a 32 years old Hindu belongs to an economically weaker section and Scheduled Caste (SC) category. For the past five years, he has worked as the Municipal Van Helper cum Solid Waste Collector with a firm sub-contracted by North Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC). He has been residing in the Vishnu Garden, West Delhi for past 30 years, but his forefathers originally had roots in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. Currently, he lives in a joint family with twelve adults and eight children in a very congested setting in the dwelling area of 1000 sq. ft. He is the eldest of five siblings and is the primary caretaker of

his ageing parents. He has completed his senior secondary education and post that to support his family has taken up odd jobs in the hotels and shops before joining NDMC.

Vijay has been working as the Municipal Van Helper which undertakes 'Door to Door collection' and 'Dhalao' waste collection. He is in contractual employment to undertake solid waste collection through 'door to door' and from 'Dhalaos (Common enclosed space for waste collection)'. Currently, the firm is on a 3-month renewal contract with NDMC for the municipal waste collection services. AGENVIRO, RAMKY and Metro Waste are three agencies contracted by NDMC for Solid Waste Collection in 6 zones of NDMC.

¹ Please note, "Vijay Pratap Singh" is used as a pseudonym



In response to COVID-19, NDMC has identified 800 households (HHs) in 6 zones of NDMC as 'COVID-19 Quarantined Households' with some foreign travel history. This list is prepared and updated by NDMC and periodically shared with the contracted firm for running special waste collection drives every alternate day for these houses. Vijay and his Municipal van driver are assigned the responsibility of door to door collection in the specially identified area (i.e. Jahangirpuri) with inhabitants identified as 'COVID-19 Quarantined Households'. There are six other teams of Driver and Helper rested with the responsibility of undertaking Special waste collection drive in the quarantined HHs community form 6 zones of NDMC.

In such a pandemic outbreak, Vijay along with the driver completes the day's runs every single day by collecting solid waste from quarantined HHs. This special 'COVID-19 door to door collection' drive is undertaken on every alternate day starting after 11 am and ending by 4 pm, with a concerned call made to the HHs beforehand. This solid waste collected is treated differently as a 'medical waste', never mixed with other municipal waste collected from other areas. It is not segregated in any form. The collected waste is further disposed of in a separate landfill located in 'Jahangirpuri' which is not the case for other solid wastes collected from other areas as those are disposed in landfills at Okhla and Bhan Sabha (Punjab bypass).

While executing this special waste collection drive from Quarantined HHs, Vijay, along with the driver, continuously fear that they might be infected anytime because of the nature of their work. Though they

wear protective gear including-masks, gloves, boots and gowns all through their risky task of waste collection, still they constantly live with work-related vulnerabilities. These protective gears are provided to both the helper and driver at free of cost by NDMC. They were also provided COVID-19 related training on usage of protective gear and health hygiene by NDMC and relevant health departments on ways of handling solid waste collected from the quarantined HHs.

Vijay shared, "*It is only during this health crisis we are given protective gear else we are not even provided any gloves, masks and boots in regular times of waste collection*". After finishing his work of solid waste collection, segregation, and disposal, he disposes his protective gear kit and washes his hands with water. Soaps and sanitizers are also made available to them, and they have been advised to practice healthy hygiene at all times. He accesses sanitation facilities at the workplace or access public toilets falling on his work route.

Vijay, besides suffering work-related vulnerability, also fears carrying the virus to his family post-work. As a precautionary measure, he usually wears full-body covering clothes and brings a spare set of clothes and sanitizer at such times. He travels to the work area in his two-wheeler (10-12 km) away from his house and therefore does not require any public transport facility. During the lockdown, he was given curfew passes by NDMC so that he does not suffer while commuting to work. So the COVID 19 situation did not affect his commuting pattern. He also keeps his two-wheeler covered to the extent possible to prevent any chance of transmission. Vijay upon returning

home, first bathes in hot water and washes his clothes outside his house and then enters the house. He further shares, "*we can still make our*

To contain the spread of COVID-19, the government has made Special arrangements for door to door collection of solid waste from 'COVID-19 Quarantined Households'. While executing this special waste collection drive sanitation workers wear protective gear provided by the government. However, their work is viewed with disdain and suspicion. Sanitation workers state that "we can still make our families understand. But the real scorn comes from the neighbours who see us a potential carrier of the virus and a health risk to the resident communities"

families understand. But the real scorn comes from the neighbours who see us a potential carrier of the virus and a health risk to the resident communities”

Besides being a risky work, he shared that no socio-economic and health interventions are made for workers in the sanitation space. Notably, in his case, no individual health insurance or any support is provided by his contracting firm or NDMC. Even he suffers a loss of salary (around INR 300 per day) whenever he doesn't turn up for his work. So it becomes mandatory for him to continue working in such dangerous times of COVID-19. However, such unprecedented times not only risked

his working conditions but increased the working hours. He earns INR 9000 per month as a Municipal Van helper and is entitled to only Employee State Insurance (ESI) benefits.

Vijay further shared he suffered acutely on account of arranging ration and essential commodities during the lockdown as he couldn't afford to be absent from work and by the time he would return home it would be too late to procure essentials from the markets. He also couldn't access health facilities for his ageing parents and his ailing son on fear of being contaminated with COVID-19.

Besides carrying the fear of being

infected at any moment, workers like Vijay see this work as a great responsibility towards the community and wish to continue doing it. In undertaking such unsafe tasks, they live in expectation of being rewarded for this service someday in the form of socio-economic recognition and better health support. In the end, he shared that the state should provide protective gear to all those who handle municipal waste as there is a potential risk of transmission anywhere. Additionally, training and awareness camps should be organised for everyone. Alongside, sanitizers and soaps should be given to all sanitation workers.



#Voices of our invisible sanitarians:

Covid 19 and Lockdown @ Sanitation Worker employed by a Private contractor, Delhi

Sandhu | 18

by *Aastha Jain*



Sandhu¹, a young Muslim boy, works as an informal solid waste collector in Bhogal (Delhi). He does not know his exact age but says he must be around 18 years old. He is a migrant from Guwahati, who came to Delhi two years ago. In Guwahati, he was pursuing his studies. Once he moved to Delhi, he studied for some time in class 8th in a nearby school. However, he soon dropped out of school. Now, he works as a helper to a solid waste collector on an irregular basis.

His family continues to live in Guwahati. His father is engaged in agriculture, his mother is a homemaker, and his older sister is studying. They grow rice, wheat and some vegetables in their small piece of land. Household income is limited and is just enough to subsist them. Although his parents did not want him to go to Delhi, he insisted and came with some friends/relatives.

¹ Please note, "Sandhu" is used as a pseudonym

He works as a helper to an older person. He goes to each house to collect waste while the older person is a supervisor. Both of them have been hired by another lady to do the waste collection. He was not sure whether this lady has been employed by the government or works in a private capacity. He only understands that some houses belong to her and she handed it over to a few people who work under her, before going to the village. Once she is back all will be handed back. However, residents of the area are well aware that this lady has been engaged in this work for 20-30 years. People go on to say that no new person can replace the dominance of this lady; she would resort to fighting if the need arises.

The lady also belongs to Assam, though not the same village, and she helped Sandhu in finding the accommodation. She told him about the work and said that he would get to keep all the recyclables plus Rs.2000 on a monthly basis. In



return, he will have to give her all the money collected from the houses.

He lives in Khaddar slum near Sarita Vihar (South Eastern Delhi) in a rented accommodation at Rs.2000 per month. The house is a *semi-pucca* structure with a tin roof. He has one room for himself with a slab on one of the walls to serve as a space for cooking. There is a common toilet for all the rented rooms which has a facility for washing hands with soap. People do use the toilet and do not practice open defecation, according to him. All the residents of the '*basti*' are engaged in sanitation activities, be it door to door collection or driving the solid waste collection truck. There seems to be no discrimination or stigmatization within the neighborhood.

His *basti* is approximately 10 km away from Bhogal. He and his senior commute in their cycle rickshaw cart from their home and it takes them around 45 minutes. They collect solid waste from 100-150 houses situated in the 3-4 lanes allotted to them. The older person stays with the cart, and it is Sandhu's duty to go and collect the waste from each house. The waste is segregated and unloaded at the local dumping zone. Though they charge Rs.100 (monthly) per house, people do not always give them the exact money. They receive payment in the range of Rs.20-100 from different houses. Institutions like offices/banks etc. pay around Rs.200. According to the contract, recyclables belong to him. He takes it back home and once a decent amount is collected, sell it to the *kabadiwala*. He earns Rs.2000-4000 per month from selling the recyclables, besides the fixed amount of Rs.2000 from the lady. Thus, overall he can earn between Rs.4000-6000 per month.

Presently, he is coming alone as his senior has gone back to his village and given him the responsibility to collect the waste. He says he is doing this work only on a temporary basis as there is no other work and would look for a proper job once the lockdown ends. He earns on an irregular basis but says his friends whom he calls his brothers, including his senior at work, would pay for his expenses if he runs out of money.

He is neither aware of essential service staff nor has received any Identity card (ID). It was only through his neighbors that he got to know that the police are not stopping the sanitation workers. In the initial days of the lockdown, no official was stopping or questioning him. He kept coming to collect waste, even during the lockdown, out of the fear that people would scold him for not being regular and also his senior would be angry when he came back. However, his frequency had reduced to only 3-4 days a week, compared to everyday earlier. He says less waste is being generated now and therefore; he finishes his work quickly. Moreover, post lockdown, earnings have reduced as he is not able to sell the recyclables. This work routine is going on only for some time. Now that various hotspots are sealed by the Delhi government, police have started checking for a pass. They also have beaten a few people who were without a pass from his *basti*.

He doesn't feel his work is risky. On a regular basis, he wears gloves which he changes every day. He has bought a big pack for himself for Rs. 300-400 and says it would last for a long time. He uses the public toilet in his work hours where he says water and soap are also available. Moreover, he keeps water in a bottle with himself to wash

his hands. He does not carry drinking water, and either takes it from any house or buys it if he feels thirsty. Post-COVID, he has also started wearing a mask which he washes every day at the end of the day. There was no training or guidelines from any government or RWA official, except that police officials have told them to practice social distancing. He heard about the mask on the TV after which he bought it. He had no awareness that some houses might be under quarantine. However, he knows that the virus is contagious and says that he would refuse to go to a house if he gets to know from someone that it is infected.

He has no awareness regarding any scheme/compensation for the sanitation workers, announced by the Delhi government. Their *basti* has not received any aid from the government till now, and he promptly adds that they won't be getting anything in future as well. He had no suggestions for the authorities but ends by saying that though police officers have not beaten him ever if he wants any help from the authority, it is that the officials do not beat them in future as well.

Post-COVID, he has started wearing a mask which he washes every day at the end of the day. He believes that their own preventive measures are the only shield they have to protect themselves during these pandemics.

12

#Voices of our invisible sanitarians:

Covid 19 and Lockdown @ Sanitation Worker franchised by a Private Contractor, NOIDA, Uttar Pradesh

Tarun | 32

by *Tripti Singh*



Tarun¹, a 32-year-old *safai karmi* from Nadia district in West Bengal, moved to National Capital Region (NCR) 15 years ago. In the first few years, he collected solid waste in Indirapuram. Over the last ten years, he was engaged by a *thekedar* for solid waste collection in the Jal Vayu Vihar Society (JVVS) in Sector-25, Noida. The Society has given the contract of solid waste collection to a Non-Government Organisation (NGO). The NGO has further given the contract to a *thekedar* who has engaged a team of seven, including Tarun for solid waste collection.

¹ Please note, "Tarun" is used as a pseudonym

The *thekedar* gives accommodation to Tarun and other sanitation workers in Baroda Gaon in Sector-49. Nearly 30-35 workers, including Tarun, live in the settlement. Each worker lives in an independent room. There is no separate kitchen in the house. For sanitation, they rely on a shared toilet built by the *thekedar*. Nearby, there is also a government built Public Toilet that on which they rely. They do not pay any rent to him. In return, these workers collect solid waste in different localities and monthly give INR1000 from their profits to the *thekedar*. Until 2-3 years ago, Tarun lived in this settlement with his family. However, a fire broke out in a nearby *jhuggi*. It spread rapidly in



the neighbourhood. He lost most of his belongings. Post the incident, he returned to West Bengal. He returned after 2-3 months but, without his family. Post his return, he re-joined the same *thekedar*. He was allotted a different room to live in. He continues to collect solid waste from JVVS.

From his home, Tarun reaches his workplace in 20-22 minutes. He uses a cycle cart to travel. He uses the same vehicle to collect waste. Every day he begins his work between 8 to 8:30 am along with six other sanitation workers. Together they collect solid waste from 1850 houses in the Sector. In case a worker is unavailable to go for SW collection, he informs the *thekedar* who then engages an “extra labor” on a per-day basis.

Every day Tarun goes from door-to-door to collect waste from 270 houses. Once he collects waste from a building, he segregates it into two *boris* – one bori is for recyclable waste and the other for the waste that cannot be sold (like vegetable peel, wet waste). At the end of his shift, sorted waste is dumped in an Authority truck/minivan that comes to the Sector daily at 2 pm. Workers sell recyclable waste to the *thekedar* and who sells it further. Worker gets to keep the profit. In return, Tarun monthly pays INR 1000 to the *thekedar*. Before the outbreak of COVID, his profits ranged from INR250 to INR325 per day. However, after the COVID outbreak, it has been reduced to INR175 per day. Tarun notes that residents do not order food from outside. They have started cooking food at home. He further adds, “now, there are no pizza boxes or take away boxes. Resultantly, the profits that we earned on sale of plastic have also reduced substantially”. Moreover, after the announcement of the lockdown,

the *thekedar* is unable to sell the waste that sanitation workers give him daily. So, he is unable to pay them. Consequently, sanitation workers do not have to give any money (INR1000) to the *thekedar* for at least two months.

The Authority van takes away the recyclable waste to a treatment plant in Sector-120 for making manure. Tarun tells us that post-COVID, the timings of the Authority car have slightly changed. Now, the van comes between 12 to 1 pm. So, workers segregate the collected solid waste by then. To align with the timing of the Authority van, workers have collectively decided to start work early. Now, they begin work between 7 to 7:30 am.

Besides engaging in SWM, two to three times a month Tarun cleans the park in the neighbourhood. Sometimes residents ask him to throw away *malba*. However, *malba* adds to the weight of the cart and requires more energy to pull the cart. So, Tarun usually refuses but, if households plead then he agrees to take it. However, he disposes it in a pit nearby. No fixed amount is paid to him for this work. He accepts any amount that residents give which usually amounts between INR30 – INR100. Additionally, residents provide *bakshish* during festivals, sometimes they also provide food and clothes.

After the announcement of the lockdown, the NGO told workers that if they feel uncomfortable going for work then they can refuse to do so. An authority vehicle can be asked to cater to the needs of residents. However, RWA Secretary of Sector pointed out that some blocks in the Sector have four-storey buildings with no lift facility. In such cases, it is difficult

for elderly living in these buildings to dispose of solid waste daily. Secretary promised to make special arrangements to improve working conditions of solid waste collectors during the COVID-19 lockdown. Moreover, sanitation workers decided that if they do not work then it would be difficult to send back money to their homes.

JVVS has made some arrangements for sanitation workers during COVID. Now, soap, water and sanitisers are available at two ends of the Sector. Workers use it if they need to wash their hands. Tarun tells us that “in the morning when we come for work, before entering the Sector, the Secretary ensures that we wash our hands with soap”. There are two public toilets (PT) positioned at Gate 1 and Gate 2 in Sector-25. They are charged no user fee for using toilets. Before the outbreak of COVID, soap was rarely available at these public toilets. However, post lockdown, it is ensured that soap is always available at PTs.

During the first two days of the

Post-Covid, Tarun wears both gloves and masks every day to work. He carries a bottle of water of 2 litres, along with hand wash, and sanitizer. He washes his face and hands every half an hour.



lockdown, Tarun was stopped on his way to work by a police officer. The Officer demanded if he had any letter or permit stating that he was a sanitation worker. Tarun managed to get the Society Secretary to speak to the Officer on the phone only then he was allowed to go. On reaching the Sector, he raised the issue with the Secretary. The same day a letter was issued to him by the Society.

Before COVID, they were not provided with masks or gloves by JVVS, NGO or *thekedar*. However, last year, an organisation provided protective gear (hard gloves and uniforms) of excellent quality to the worker. Tarun tells us, *“the material of uniform provided by the organisation was lighter. We used it daily. Hard gloves were also of good quality. It was durable; it did not require to be changed daily. However, now, hard gloves are not available. The soft glove that we use needs to be changed daily”*. Post-COVID, JVVS provided fourteen pieces of gloves for seven workers. They were provided gloves by the NGO. Additionally, Tarun received six gloves from a resident. However, these are not enough. Tarun tells us, *“we deal with waste every day. We need to wash these gloves daily. However, these gloves are quite thin. It does not last us very long. We need to change gloves every day and sometimes it needs to be changed twice a day as it soils or tears when we deal with waste. We end-up purchasing it from a medical shop.”*

Furthermore, some residents have come forward to support

sanitation workers. Tarun tells us that in the last two weeks, close to 90% households have explicitly come out to appreciate and thank him for performing his duty even in adverse circumstances. Moreover, twice 5 kg- *aata* packet was provided to sanitation workers and guards by the JVVS. Since the last four to five days, some residents have left home-cooked meals for sanitation workers in the guard room. After COVID, Tarun tells us that his income has reduced, but the situation requires him to spend money to purchase masks and gloves. So far, thrice he has purchased gloves of a pack of 2 and 4 costing INR 30 and 50. He has also purchased a mask made of cloth costing INR 80.

Tarun wears both gloves and masks every day to work. He carries a bottle of water of 2 litres, along with hand wash, and sanitizer. He washes his face and hands every half an hour. Once the water in the bottle finishes, he refills it from the station available at the two gates. Besides this, he also carries a separate bottle of drinking water. He tells us that *“these are not normal circumstances. Before the lockdown if we were thirsty, we asked residents for water but, right now, we can't ask people for water”*.

Post-COVID, sanitation workers held an internal meeting among themselves. During the discussion workers decided to avoid ringing house bells when they go for their rounds to collect SW. Now,

sanitation workers call out loudly, so that residents know that SW collection is taking place. They observe a minimum distance of 2 to 2 and a half feet at all times. They avoid all forms of direct touch. Workers refrain from touching boris of SW with bare hands. Even if a household gives money, sanitation workers decided not to take it directly from the resident's hand.

Post-work, once Tarun reaches home, he removes his shoes outside the house and puts on his slipper. He gets his clothes and soap from his room and goes to the community toilet to wash his work clothes, gloves, and mask. He places them under the sun to dry. Then he takes a bath and changes into fresh clothes.

To ensure that sanitation workers can continue to work in a safe environ, Tarun suggests that residents must strictly observe the norms of social distancing while giving waste. He further adds, *“Timings for SW collection are the same every day. Accordingly, residents should keep dustbins with solid waste outside their homes before the worker comes or once the worker calls out loudly in the building, residents must place their bins outside. So that there is no need for safai karmis to touch house bells”*. He also suggested that RWA and NGOs should provide support in the form of (ration, supply gloves and masks) to sanitation workers during this period as their income has substantially reduced.

13

#Voices of our invisible sanitarians:

Covid 19 and Lockdown @ Sanitation Worker employed by NGO, Bhubaneswar, Odisha

Sudip Naik | 28

by *Sunil Kumar Mishra*



Sudip Naik¹, aged 28 years, is an affable, genial and pleasant personality. He is from Bhubaneswar and was born in a scheduled caste (Harijan) family, and he practices Hindu religion. His family includes a wife and a four-year daughter. He has been staying in Barabari Topabana slum (basti), near Khandagiri, Bhubaneswar, Odisha for the last 12 years in a rented house. He pays monthly Rs.1500/- towards rent. His house comprises only one room with a size of 10x10 without separate but has one 4x3 size attached toilet. He was born and raised with extreme poverty and difficulties. He comes from a large family, and it was difficult

for his father to provide education to all the children, including him. But with acute hardship, he managed to get education up to class 7th and regrets that he could not pursue further studies. He is living with the dream to provide good education to his daughter and is hopeful that his vision will convert into reality.

Sudip has been engaged in sanitation work for the last six years. He moves within 5 km radius by walking, i.e. ward number 63 & 64 under Bhubaneswar Municipal Corporation (BMC); approximately covering 100 houses daily. He has been working under a private contractor, NGO. This NGO is partnering with Bhubaneswar Municipal Corporation (BMC) for

¹ Please note, "Sudip Naik" is used as a pseudonym.

sanitation in and around BMC. His monthly income is Rs.5700/-, earns Rs.190/- per day. Owing to illness or for any other reason, if he does not go to work, no one replaces him, and he has to forego his daily wage. Although he has been working in the difficult times owing to the COVID-19 outbreak but has not received the salary for the last two months.

Besides Solid waste collection, he is not engaged in any other sanitation-related work. He doesn't have access to sanitation and personal hygiene facilities during working hours. There is no hand washing station facility either, neither any toilet facilities. After completion of work, he goes directly to his house if he has to use the toilet. He said that he uses soaps which he buys himself.

He does not have a space for a handwashing facility at home. In front of his house, they wash hands with the lifebuoy soap. Sudip ensures that his family must clean hands before taking food, and his family follows the six-steps of handwashing for a minimum of 20 seconds. Sudip is well aware of the critical times for handwashing and the use of soap i.e. before taking food and after using the toilet. He said, *"We family members try to inspire everyone - other families, friends, siblings and community at large to follow behavioral changes practices for a healthy lifestyle. Fellow slum dwellers are leading disease-free lives owing to hygienic hand washing practices."*

In addition to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), he was provided only a mask (one pair) and uniform half-sleeve shirt. He was neither provided with boots nor with gloves. He mobilised a pair of gloves from a doctor staying nearby to facilitate his work. After coming back home from work, every day he washes, cleans and

dries his uniform shirt and mask.

Sudip knew that this was risky and in the absence of proper PPEs, the work is more hazardous. He does wear a half-sleeve uniform, mask and gloves. Sudip said, *"I face high risk in my work, but this is my livelihood. I have to work for my family. I can minimise the risk by following certain safety protocols."* Further, he didn't receive any training on using and removing PPE.

He has not faced any social discrimination after the outbreak of COVID-19 except a few residents restricted him to touch their entrance gate and categorically warned him to stay one meter away from the citizens.

He does not feel "uncomfortable", that he has to work every day even though there is a lockdown as it is part of his daily job. According to Sudip, his work saw not much change except that he now puts extra one hour in work after the outbreak of COVID-19. He has not received any briefing on COVID-19. His Supervisor said very little on Coronavirus mainly on safety protocols. Sudip learnt all about precautions for COVID-19 from the television.

He has not received an emergency pass from Supervisor for free-movement during the lockdown. Police allow him to go for work by looking at his uniform. He realised his uniform is his Identity. He was provided only one Mask, which he has been wearing at work without having other facilities. At times sanitizer is given to clean hands by the Supervisor but not regularly. Sudip blows the whistle at the entrance gate of the resident to collect waste. The residents advised him to maintain one-meter distance from the citizens. He is not aware of the quarantined household as he has

not come across any such house yet.

Though the Government of Odisha had announced three months' advance salary for all frontline workers, he does not have any such information.

He gave three recommendations to BMC-NGO to improve response and preparedness to support safe Solid waste management. Firstly, they should provide Training on safety protocols and list of do's and don'ts during COVID-19. Secondly, they should provide all safety equipment like boots, gloves (two pairs), masks (two pairs), uniform full sleeves shirt and pants etc. Thirdly, they should sensitise sanitary workers to handle the waste of a quarantined household.

Sudip hoped *"Together we can fight against COVID-19, and soon we will come out as a winner."*

He doesn't have access to sanitation and hand washing facilities during working hours. After completion of work, he goes directly to his house if he has to use the toilet.

14

#Voices of our invisible sanitarians:

Covid 19 and Lockdown @ Unlicensed Sanitation Worker and Employer, Gurgaon, Haryana

Asim¹ | 20

by Arushi Gupta



One of the solid waste collectors in the locality of Sector 41, Gurgaon is a 20-year-old man, reluctant to reveal his identity, who also works as a contractor for other individuals from his locality undertaking the same business. Residing in the slums of Sector 12 in Gurgaon, he has been working in the business of solid waste collection since the last one year. He moved to Gurgaon from Guwahati approximately ten years ago, follows the Muslim religion and is unaware of his sub-caste. He has attained education up to 8th grade, though he claimed to have barely attended any classroom sessions while in school.

¹ Please note, "Asim" is used as a pseudonym.

Now, he resides in a rented dwelling unit of 30 ft. by 8 ft., divided into three rooms without a separate kitchen or a toilet, shared by ten adults, incurring a collective rent of INR 8,000 per month.

There is a single toilet facility with a hand-washing facility (with soap) in his vicinity for both males and females, used by almost all residents of the slum, which often leads to long queues involving a waiting period of up to 10-15 minutes. On being asked if he had access to a sanitation facility during work hours, he laughingly replies "*Madam, everyone views koodawalas as dirty people. No one will let us inside their house to use a toilet or to wash hands*". Further, occupation-



related social discrimination and stigmatisation are ordinary for him, and he has accepted it as a norm in his profession. However, he adds that such discrimination is primarily along the divisions of class as *“the poor people understand each other’s predicaments and thus don’t stigmatise the job of solid waste collection, even though they may not be in the same business themselves”*.

In the one year of working as a solid waste collector, the respondent claims to have also engaged ten other individuals from the same slum to collect solid waste, which also includes children of 12-14 years of age. He doesn’t have any contracts with the RWA or the Municipal Corporation of Gurgaon (MCG). He claims to have been allotted Sector 41 in Gurgaon, approximately 5-6 km from his area of residence, by another higher-level contractor for solid waste collection. This contractor has also distributed other localities among his network for solid waste collection.

He covers approximately 50-60 houses in the location allotted to him. He pulls a rickshaw cart to commute and collects the solid waste for 2-3 hours every day. Within his network of solid waste collectors employed under him, he can pay each one of them a salary of approximately INR 5,000, and himself earns between INR 5,000-10,000 every month. He also works on a part-time basis as a raddi wala, which provides him with an additional income of INR 1,000-2,000 per month.

Although he was aware of the COVID-19 and its vast spread in Gurgaon, he proudly claims not to be afraid of contracting the disease. Instead, he seemed to be sceptical of even the “existence” of the virus and asks *“have you ever seen the coronavirus? Nothing will happen to us; God is with*

us.” His lack of awareness regarding the extent of the spread of the COVID-19, let alone the inherent risks of the same, is further complemented by the absence of any bearing of the lockdown on his business activities. He insists that it’s business-as-usual for him, without any increase in his plying timings, commuting patterns or his monthly income from the households. While he was no longer allowed to collect door-to-door solid waste in some apartment complexes and instead the residents now come to the main entrance to deposit the same, this practice was followed only in selected localities. Further, he was unaware of being under the ambit of Essential Services Staff and the requirement of a movement pass issued by the government, reports no intervention from the police or the local authorities and says *“no one stops a koodawala”*.

As the local authorities of Gurgaon have mandated the use of a mask on venturing outside their homes, he also reports having purchased masks allegedly lasting a month for INR 50 each, from his income. He casually proclaims that no one has taken the initiative to inform him or his employees about the prevailing risks due to COVID-19, especially the risks involved in solid waste collection. He reports that there have been some instances of the local policemen asking them to maintain distance from each other. He chuckles when asked whether the residents or Residents Welfare Association (RWA) or any other organisation have provided him with Personal protective Equipment (PPE). Instead, he claims that he and his employees sometimes use the polythene bags found in the collected waste to cover their hands and feet. However, it is observed that solid waste collection under him is

undertaken by young boys, without a mask, simply donning a pair of shorts, a t-shirt and slippers, collecting the solid waste with bare hands and dumping it in their cart. Picking up used masks and gloves disposed of along with the regular trash, or waste that may carry saliva with bare hands also does not seem to be a matter of concern for them. Moreover, this trend remains the same even for houses with a poster mandating their residents to self-quarantine, as foregoing the monthly income from even a single house is unaffordable for him. Thus, freezing business activities even during an extremely hazardous working environment and without

Picking up used masks and gloves disposed of along with the regular waste or waste that may carry saliva with bare hands does not seem to be a matter of concern for him. Moreover, this trend remains the same even for houses with a poster mandating their residents to self-quarantine, as foregoing the monthly income from even a single house is unaffordable for him.

any PPE, is not an option for him or his employees.

The lack of hand-washing facilities exacerbates the risks arising from the lack of PPE during work hours. On returning to his slum after completing the collection rounds, he reports taking a bath and simultaneously washing his clothes and asks *“what else can we do*

with our limited resources?”.

He also reported an incidence of the local police visiting the slum to note the names of the residents, claiming to provide them with some money and food grains. However, being unaware of the exact amount to be provided or the tentative time of provision, the scepticism regarding

actually receiving these resources was palpable in his demeanour. He questioned *“will you use this information to seal my business?”*, showcasing his distrust and cynicism in the informal system within which he operates and the utter lack of hope regarding the provision of better and safer amenities owing to such informalisation.



15

#Voices of our invisible sanitarians:

Covid 19 and Lockdown @ Unlicensed Sanitation Worker and Employer, Delhi

Ravi | 45

by Anju Dwivedi



Ravi¹ is a 45 years old Valmiki, solid waste collector who has been serving the Chittaranjan Park (CR Park), South Delhi residents for the last 20 years. He is from Meerut (UP). In the 1980s, he moved to Delhi with his parents. Since then he lives in Tigri in his own house in Jhuggi. He has never attended school. However, he wanted his four children to study. His eldest daughter is 22 years old, followed by two sons aged 19 and 18 and a younger daughter who is 16 years old. His two sons joined him in his work after studying until 8th standard. His elder daughter completed school but could not do well in college and dropped out while

the youngest daughter has been suffering from a heart ailment and is out of school now. He and his wife with four children live in a congested and dense place in Tigri in a small house having two rooms (8 by 8 feet each) and a toilet on the roof. He is worried that due to his weak socio-economic position, it is difficult to get his daughters married.

He opines that sanitary work is never viewed as a dignified work in the society. He said “*we are referred as kooda waala or kachra waala, that is our identity, and we live with it*”. He covers 100 HHs in G block, CR Park and reminisces the days of less dense CR Park when he had begun his work with his father. He proudly mentions

¹ Please note, “Ravi” is used as a pseudonym



that over the years he developed the relationship with the residents of CR Park. Resultantly, there exists an informal arrangement with the residents, and he can continue with SW collection in the locality. It was only a few years back that the South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC) enlisted him with his Aadhar card as a solid waste collector with the details of the locations he served and gave him an Identity card (ID).

There is no contractual agreement with the SDMC and neither with the Residents Welfare Association (RWA). He said *“all this RWA is a new development, it wasn't there when we started in this locality. It was an informal arrangement and continues to be, everyone knows me here, and I know them”*. He asked me *“so when you shifted to this house, who gave you my reference? Was it RWA or the residents”*, underpinning the recognition of his steadfast commitment and service to the residents for two decades. On checking with RWA President on the arrangements with Solid waste collector, it was found that over the years these informalities have been institutionalised and both SDMC and RWA recognise him as a waste collector of this area. The waste collectors in the block do not have any contract with RWA; they collect domestic waste from homes and dispose it off in a Dhalao (dumping zone) near Chandralok Cinema, G Block

Ravi earns Rs. 9000-10,000 from Household collections and some extra Rs. 2,000-3,000 on selling plastics, metals that they segregate from the waste and take to *raddi wala*, but this work has suffered too due to lockdown.

He travels to the CR Park in his cycle rickshaw cart from his home (located

4-5 km away from CR Park) and therefore does not require any public transport facility. So the lockdown during COVID 19 did not affect his commuting pattern. According to him, COVID 19 did not affect sanitary workers like him at all as their working conditions remain as dismal as before and neither their working hours increased. They do not climb up the buildings; instead, ring bells from the gates as directed by RWA, members from each HH come to drop the waste in their carts. Hence, the time of collection has reduced. He said that during the lockdown, the entire country is shut. At the same time, like soldiers (whom he referred to as *senanis*) who never go off duty, their services remain in the category of essential services. He proudly tells us that similarly, he works as a *swachta senanis*. However, this transient pride soon transformed into disappointment as he added: *“while soldiers are seen as Nations' pride, we are not so lucky to get that kind of recognition”*. When it was mentioned that the country is showering praises on sanitary workers and garlanding them, he said *“it is good if it is happening but will it last long? The city needs us in crisis, sanitation gains primary attention in all kinds of disasters, whether it is disease outbreak or floods, but the person who manages sanitation work is seldom lauded for their efforts”*.

Working in informal ways brings no benefits. He never receives any Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and he never used them. He worked over two decades without any PPE. It was only during COVID 19, the households and RWAs gave gloves and masks to him and his sons who helped him in the collection of domestic waste. Scarcity of masks in the market is adding woes. The surgical masks are flimsy and do

not protect from the killer virus. For better safety, better quality masks are required. He said, *“since now it is recommended to use masks, we have to wear it. However, these surgical masks do not last long, if you wash them, their fibres come out and go into the nose, causing discomfort and may cause other respiratory illness”*. He uses cloth masks also as it is easier to wash and can be made at home. After finishing his work of collection, segregation, and disposal in *dhalao*, he washes his hands with water. There is no handwashing facility near the *dhalao*, but there is a BSES building area from where he collects water and washes hands. Soaps and sanitizers are not available to them. Only when they return home, they take a bath and

I know it is not safe to go home with so much dirt and possible infections, but what is the option? We also fear that we may spread the infection to our family members and others in settlements, but there are hardly any open spaces. In two cramped rooms, six members live where norms of social distancing are unfeasible to observe.”

wash clothes. Toilets near *shiv mandir* and in some park areas are used during working hours, where they wash their hands too.

Ravi and his sons can't wash clothes outside the premises of the house as there is hardly any open space. They enter the house and wash clothes in bathing areas. He said, *"I know it is not safe to go home with so much dirt and possible infections, but what is the option? We also fear that we may spread the infection to our family members and others in settlements, but there are hardly any open spaces. In two cramped rooms, six members live where norms of social distancing are unfeasible to observe."*

The Delhi Government scheme of giving compensation of Rs. 1 crore for the family of deceased sanitary workers- is not applicable for workers like Ravi who are not part of SDMC. He articulated that the chances of catching the infection are highest in their case as they are in contact with the waste for continuous 5-6 hours in a day. With a rueful tone, he said that the waste from houses has all kinds of

dirty and infective materials such as discarded tissues, and in many cases spits of people, which the government is cautioning to stay away from to fight the battle against Corona.

During the lockdown, he has not been given any curfew passes. "Solid waste cart is my curfew pass", he said jokingly. On showing his ID, he is allowed to enter. Though he was stopped and harassed by police twice during the lockdown after a brief altercation and by seeing the ID, they had let him go. Other than these incidents, he did not face any discrimination from residents or his neighbours.

He said households are very cooperative and have educated him about the precautions to be taken during this time. President or members of RWA have given him and his sons the masks and gloves too. Other than that, there were no training and awareness programmes organised for them. Citing the examples of availability of ration and essential commodities during the

lockdown, he says since they come out of homes for work they can get essentials quickly from the markets. However, others are facing difficulties as they are not allowed to leave the home premises. In a school near his house, the government is organising meals for the poor and needy. On making the work safer during COVID 19, he said the government should not discriminate between formal and informal workers and should make available the PPE and organise training for everyone. Sanitizers and Soaps should be given to every sanitary worker, and some health protection schemes should also be extended to the workers like him. He ended the conversation by saying that we all should learn from the virus. Corona is non-discriminatory; it attacks the rich and poor, formal and informal workers, men and women, young and old in a similar fashion and with equal intensity, so why should the government discriminate between formal and informal workers?



16

#Voices of our invisible sanitarians:

Covid 19 and Lockdown @ Unlicensed Sanitation Worker and Employer, Delhi

Heera | 35

by *Anju Dwivedi*



Heera¹ is a 35 years old Hindu, solid waste collector who has been serving the Chittaranjan Park (CR Park) residents for the last 20 years. He is from Gorakhpur (Eastern Uttar Pradesh). He moved to Delhi 25 years ago. He lives in Tughlakabad area, commonly called TA in a rented accommodation which has just one room to accommodate him, his wife and two children-one 9-year-old daughter, and one 6-years old son. He belongs to the Sahani sub-caste (Scheduled Caste). He has never attended school, and his children are not studying as he thinks that education does not break the shackles of subjugation. He opines that his

children will also follow the ancestral work tradition as he did so enrolling in school does not matter.

The room which he has hired does not have toilet facilities, neither is there any community or shared toilet. Residents in Tughlakabd Pahari region defecate in the open. He pays Rs 2500 rent which includes electricity and water charges. He covers 120 HHs in two blocks- G&H blocks in CR Park. He is into an informal arrangement with the residents and has been serving the households for long. He has been enlisted with South Delhi Municipal Corporation (SDMC) through Aadhar card as a solid waste collector with the details of

¹ Please note, "Heera" is used as a pseudonym

the locations he serves but does not have any identity Card (ID). He is yet to apply for that.

There is no contractual agreement with the SDMC and neither with the Resident Welfare Association (RWA). He collects solid waste from homes and disposes it in a Dhalao (dumping zone) located near Chandralok Cinema, G block.

Heera earns Rs. 11,000 from Household collections and some extra Rs. 2,000-3,000 on selling recyclables but due to lockdown, he has to discard everything in dhalao only. He travels to the CR Park in his cycle rickshaw cart from his home (located 3 km away from CR Park). Nowadays, after the COVID 19 outbreak, he calls out or rings the bell of houses who come out and give him the waste rather than engaging in door-to-door-collection from households with his helper.

He had never used protective gears in his life. It was during COVID 19, the households and Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) provided him with gloves and masks. After finishing his work of collection, segregation, and disposal in Dhalao, he washes his hands with water which he carries in a bottle and also takes water from the residents. He does not carry soaps or sanitiser. There is no handwashing facility near the dhalao, but there is a BSES building area from where he collects water and washes hands.

On returning home, he takes a bath and washes his clothes, gloves and masks. However, this is also not possible every day as the water is very scarce in Tughlakabad, and there are days when water does not come for three to four days. They have to store water enough to last and washing clothes also is not possible. So he sometimes wears the same dress for two-three days. He understands that by not washing clothes, gloves and masks, there are chances of the family getting infected, but there are not many options.

He is aware that the Delhi Government has announced a scheme of giving compensation of Rs. 1 crore for the family of the deceased sanitary worker, but this is not applicable for him. He realises that during COVID 19 scare, he carries the risk of being the potential carrier of the disease but cannot do much if he has to earn a living to support his family.

During the lockdown, he has not been given any curfew passes. H Block RWA has issued him a letter that he carries with him to show to police officers if he is stopped by them. He said that he is allowed easily with his solid waste carts. He was never harassed or discriminated against by residents, his neighbours and officials.

He praised RWAs who are supporting him and are providing

gloves and masks. He said that protective gear should be arranged by SDMC and proper training programmes need to be organised to spread awareness about the disease and ways to curb it. Sanitizers and Soaps should be given to every sanitary worker, and they should also be covered under health protection schemes.

He had never used protective gear in his life. It was during COVID 19, the households and Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs) provided him with gloves and masks.

17

#Voices of our invisible sanitarians:

Covid 19 and Lockdown @ Sanitation Worker employed by a Private contractor, Faridabad, Haryana

Samir | 33

by *Neha Agarwal*



Samir¹ and his two adolescent daughters collect solid waste from five-hundred houses every day. He is 33 years-old and cautious about revealing his true identity for fear of violence and other adverse repercussions. He hauls a cart from the Jhuggi Jhopri Cluster (JJC) where he lives to the neighbourhood he serves at 8 AM and spends the next six hours on multiple rounds of collection and segregation of solid waste. A resident of the city for 20 years, since he first migrated here from Kolkata, he has been a solid waste collector for fifteen of these. He lives with his wife and four daughters in a one-room unit, lacking a separate kitchen, bathing facility,

or toilet. He pays a monthly rent of INR2000 for the accommodation. The JJC abuts wooded land where all the residents go for open defecation. The hundred or so households rely on a stand-post which supplies water twice daily. He does not have access to a dedicated handwashing facility either at work or at home.

Still establishing a rapport with the residents of the current neighbourhood he is serving (and has served for only the last six months) and owing to common perceptions associated with his identity, he works under the informal employ of the Urban Local Body (ULB)-based female sanitation worker. Her familiarity and longstanding relationship with

¹ Please note, "Samir" is used as a pseudonym

the residents act as Samir's access to the neighbourhood. Nonetheless, neither of the two have been formally engaged by the Residents Welfare Association (RWA). For his service, each house transacts individually with his supervisor, paying a sum of INR 70 every month. In turn, he receives INR 2000 as monthly wages and has been given the rights over the collected waste. Before the lockdown, he could eke out a sum of INR 3000 from the sale of recyclables to supplement his monthly income.

On the job, Samir and his two daughters do not have access to any public toilet. Noting that "*no one will let us inside the house*", they control their urges till they find a suitable spot for open urination and defecation. He usually keeps a plastic bottle with him for water which he asks multiple residents to fill for him through the course of the day. Despite the absence of a handwashing facility, they use the water only for drinking since he believes that the residents will not oblige his repeated requests for water if he squanders it on frequent handwashing. He reserves all hygiene-related tasks for when he gets home – taking a bath with soap once all the recyclables for sale have been stored away. Being an informal solid waste collector, he does not have access to protective gear, including gloves, and even before the COVID-19 crisis, minor injuries resulting from shards of glass and sharp materials in the waste were a fact of life for him. At the time of the interview, he was sporting an N95 mask that he had kept and washed for his own use on finding it disposed of in someone's garbage. His daughters were sans masks.

Saying "*the smell has made a home in my body*", he claims that he doesn't

find his work risky anymore since his body is inured to all the ills of the job. If he does fall sick, however, he can never take more than a couple of days off work since he is the sole earning member of his family and waste their only livelihood. Several households in the recent past have pointed to him that he should wear a mask, but neither his supervisor nor the households have offered one. Still, the spread of COVID-19 does not deter him as much as the policemen charged with maintaining the lockdown do.

Samir does not possess a pass, unlike his governmental counterparts, due to the informal terms of his engagement. The police have stopped him to ask for a pass during the 30-minute transit from his house to the neighbourhood multiple times in these last few days, with the last such incidence occurring four days before the interview. The informality of service delivery not being a peculiarity to the city, he has been let off each time after explaining himself despite threats of violence. Yet, he fears more for his daughters than for himself in these circumstances.

The objective precarity of his job, coupled with his inability to exercise hygiene, does not concern Samir in the present time as much as the threat of violence and the economic downturn does. Aware of the various government schemes for the protection of sanitation workers, he recognizes, not without dejection, that he falls outside the purview of their benefits. The lockdown has shut down the businesses and factories to which he sold the segregated waste, shaving off more than half of his already meagre earnings. Although he is stockpiling the recyclables in the hopes that he could conduct the

transactions when the government lifts the lockdown, he worries that the disruption in his livelihood will lead to his eviction from his current dwelling. Already he has been asking for food aid from the residents of the neighbourhood to make up the deficit. He believes that obtaining a pass or a uniform as an indicator of his status will help alleviate at least some of his immediate vulnerabilities.

The lockdown has shut down factories to which he sold the segregated waste, this has led to a substantial reduction in his already meagre earnings. Although he is stockpiling the recyclables in the hopes that he would conduct the transactions when the government lifts the lockdown, he worries that the disruption in his livelihood will lead to eviction from his current dwelling



CENTRE FOR POLICY RESEARCH

DHARAM MARG, CHANAKYAPURI,
NEW DELHI – 110021. INDIA



Tel: +91 (11) 26115273-76 (4 LINES)



Fax: +91 (11) 26872746



Website: www.cprindia.org



Twitter @CPR_India and @CPR_SCIFI



The Scaling City Institutions for India: Water and Sanitation (SCI-FI: Water and Sanitation) programme nested at the Centre for Policy Research (CPR) since 2013, is a multi-disciplinary research, outreach and policy support initiative. It aims to better understand the intersection of governance and scale in the Indian urbanising landscape with sector specific social and economic characteristics. The programme seeks to understand reasons for poor sanitation, and to examine how these might be related to technology, service delivery models, institutions, governance financial issues, and socio-economic dimensions. Based on research findings, it seeks to support national, state and city authorities develop policies and programmes for intervention with the goal of increasing access to inclusive, safe and sustainable sanitation. The programme is primarily supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF).



<https://scifi.cprindia.org>



Images: Shutterstock.com, Design: Trinankur Banerjee