

India's Hidden Environmentalists



(Image source: Panos London)

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India's Hidden Environmentalists

Introduction

According to the World Bank, an estimated one percent of the urban population in developing countries earns a living through waste collection and/or recycling and significant number is women.

Swachh Bharat Abhiyan inaugurated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on October 2, 2014, was projected as an initiative to inculcate the idea and habit of cleanliness among the citizens of India. Amidst the larger concerns of tackling dirt and garbage in public spaces, the initiative also prioritized issues of open defecation, sanitation and construction of toilets. However, while the aims of SBA are laudable, it is discriminatory in its approach. This entire campaign that aims to make India clean, ignores the people who actually work towards keeping our country clean. In the year 2014, the PM called upon the Indian citizens to follow the ideals of Gandhi and adopt the idea of cleanliness in and outside homes.. Several celebrities were roped in to drive home the point. There was a special emphasis on freedom from open defecation as a stepping stone to equality. But the bigger picture that is how the 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan' completely ignores the role and the reality of the lives of these invisible citizens, the lakhs of people who largely women and children struggling to make ends meet by rummaging through waste, tones of which is generated by us.



(Source: Hindustan Times available at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india/india-s-cities-are-faced-with-a-severe-waste-management-crisis/story-vk1Qs9PJT811bPCLJKsOTP.html>)

Lead Essay

The Uncounted People: Waste Pickers in India

It is ironical that the waste pickers find no place in the Prime Minister's Swachh Bharat narrative. Although the exact number of waste pickers in the country is not available, some estimates, city wise have been recorded in some studies. For example, in Ahmedabad, there are an estimated 30,000 waste pickers – a large proportion of them are women and children. In the state of Gujarat overall there are estimated to be over 100,000 waste pickers. Another study of Delhi estimates that the numbers of waste pickers in Delhi alone would be approximately 100,000. The total population of waste pickers in Pune is estimated to be 6,000 according to one study, of whom 72 per cent are women. Bettering their miserable working conditions and implementing adequate labor laws for their protection should have been a priority of 'Swachh Bharat' Abhiyan. Currently, the mission merely focuses on open defecation and garbage treatment completely ignoring the poor conditions in which the "waste collectors", work and there is an utter disregard to their rights, their health and protection.

Who are these People?



(Source: Youth ki Awaaz)

Given that waste picking comes under the informal sector and more than 90% of India does not have a proper waste disposal system, a lot of garbage clearing is done informally by these waste pickers who work without any job security, salary or dignity. They generally rank lowest in the hierarchy of urban informal occupations and a large number of these employed under this occupation are women and children. Illiterate, unskilled persons, migrants, those lowest in the caste hierarchy and the poorest of the poor, are some of the characteristics of these waste pickers. Even though there is no employer-employee relationship in these trades, some of the waste picking activity is organized by contractors. Since waste picking is part of the unorganized labor activity, there is no defined wage structure for the waste pickers. Apart from this they do not have access to social security, basic education, health benefits and financial inclusion

In addition to their position in the social hierarchy the nature of their profession exposes them to serious health risks. The waste pickers work in extremely unhygienic conditions and do not use any precautionary measure. This results in muscular, skeletal diseases, gastro-intestinal and respiratory ailments. The waste pickers work in decongesting our cities of garbage is unrecognized and further more the policies of Government are such that it becomes very difficult for traditional waste pickers to sustain their only source of livelihood. The recent development of the increasing privatization of municipal solid waste management has further impacted the lives of these unorganized workers who are left at the mercy of the private employers, harassed by the local police and looked down upon other members of the society. At a time where waste in India is set to reach gigantic proportions of 165 million

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tonnes by 2030 and 450 million tonnes by 2050, by simply leaving this burden in the hands of these marginalised people is not just a cause of worry but an alarm bell that some immediate serious action is required.

Awareness about diseases caused by handling solid waste among women ragpickers	Area of ragpicking			Total (%)
	DTDWC	SRP	DRP	
Skin ailments	2	18	17	51 (37.4)
Musculoskeletal diseases	3	11	34	48 (28.6)
Respiratory	3	8	6	17 (10.1)
Gastrointestinal	3	3	8	14 (8.3)
Jaundice	1	1	5	7 (4.2)
Ophthalmic	1	3	7	11 (6.5)
Typhoid	1	1	5	11 (4.2)
Malaria	2	1	6	9 (5.4)
Nil	7	6	5	18 (10.7)

DTDWC: Door to door waste collectors, SRP: Streetside rag pickers, DRP: Dumpsite rag pickers [Multiple response]

(Source: <http://www.ijoom.com/article.asp?issn=0019-5278;year=2014;volume=18;issue=3;page=140;epage=144;aurlast=Uplap>)

“As part of work we sweep, pick up garbage, clean drains and pick up dead animals. The dead animals smell real bad, we don’t get a mask, gloves or shoes to cover ourselves and we don’t have a uniform. If people just can’t bear the dirty smell, imagine what we have to bear while picking up a dead dog.” - Shankar Mukhi, Jharkhand

In this scenario the most dispensable, are the women workers. Women waste pickers, often scavenging or working only part time due to domestic chores, earn less. Trends from other cases of reduced incomes from waste-picking showed that in 2013, 63% of the children of an impacted site dropped out of school to start working in order to supplement their family income when their parents were unable to access waste. The recent step taken by the Government on introducing GST as further impacted the lives of these waste pickers. Under the GST regime most recyclable items have been taxed at 18 per cent, while some are taxed at 12 per cent. This simply means that recyclable items are sold in the market for the same price as brand new ones and this is causing a huge negative in the lives of waste collectors. This will lead to a further deterioration in the life of the waste pickers who are already living a life of extreme poverty and exploitation.

Recommendations

Given that urbanization and increasing population of India is going to create more garbage mounds, the Government needs to first understand the present conditions of those who are currently engaged in dealing with waste recycling and waste disposal. . The first step in this regard should be proper implementation of laws. While the SWM 2016 rules seem like a utopian solution to clean away the crisis, the problem lies in the implementation that called for inclusion of the waste pickers in door to door collection and other waste management services. The Centre needs to encourage the States to adopt its recommendations and begin implementation. Several countries have successfully tackled the issue of garbage disposal and waste recycling. We need to learn from them. . The Centre should also start investing more into developing more effective solid waste management mechanisms, capacity building programmes and sustainable sanitation solutions that go beyond stigma attached to it. Of the budget set for SWM, only 28.8 per cent of the funds have been released in the last three years. This means, almost 71 per cent money is still left to be used in SWM for the next two years. The focus for the remaining two years should now be on segregation, creating systems to support segregation, sustainable processing, and minimal land use for waste disposal. However, on June 5, 2017, the MoHUA did direct all 4,041 statutory towns and cities to adopt source segregation as a mass movement, where every household and every waste generator starts segregating their waste into two bins—green and blue. It is quite evident that, its implementation has been bleak. Apart from these required changes, the Government should also start incorporate programs and schemes that support these workers and their families who are stigmatized.

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Conclusion

Waste pickers have a role in major stages of garbage management — right from collecting waste to segregating it for recycling. Yet it is ironical that in a country with more than 1.2 billion people, generating close to 61 million tonnes of trash annually, it took 16 years for the Centre to revise the Solid Waste Management Rules to take cognizance of the changing circumstances in India. This may be because the whole emphasis of the Government all this while has largely been on brooms and toilets where the need of the hour is to develop and implement proper disposal/garbage mechanisms and sustainable sanitation solutions that will automatically help improve the status of these workers. The high level publicity around the Clean India movement promoting equality seems to have completely overshadowed those who are suffering and will continue to suffer if the Abhiyan persists on being a movement for the privileged. It's all very well for the PM and several other supporters to be paying token service to this cause time to time. But who are some of the real heroes? Waste pickers, the manual scavengers and many others are the actual warriors against filth. Yet their lives are destroyed due to inhuman working conditions that no one seems to care about. The Government needs to take an active step towards creating better working conditions for the people who are actually implementing the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan.

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Headline

‘This government is killing our businesses’: What small, medium enterprises think of GST revisions

(M. Rajshekhar, *Scroll.in*, October 9, 2017)

Speaking about spikes in tax burden, steep increases in working capital requirements, etc., in the post-GST period, business owners of micro, small and medium enterprises in Hosur and Surat do not share the enthusiasm of the government with regards to the latest GST Council revisions. Whereas small units in Surat are unsure if they can stay viable after paying GST – which charged an 18% tax on yarn and a 5% tax on subsequent value addition – larger units are worried about the input tax credit. Meanwhile in Hosur, wholesalers and shopkeepers are struggling as well. As with the manufacturing companies, credit periods have lengthened from 15 days to two to three months. At the same time, businesses paying GST are struggling to compete with unorganised sector rivals who are not.

Read more: <https://scroll.in/article/853353/this-government-is-killing-our-businesses-what-small-medium-enterprises-think-of-gst-revisions>

Date accessed: 09.10.2017

Economy

India loses fastest growing economy tag, IMF slashes 2017 growth rate by 0.5 pc

(The News Minute, 10 October 2017)

The IMF has slashed India's growth rate in 2017 by 0.5% from 7.2% to 6.7%. But the report projects it as a temporary setback and estimates a growth rate of 7.2% next year, which is also a reduction from 7.7% as estimated earlier. The impact of demonetisation and the uncertainty created by GST were attributed as the main factors for this slowdown. IMF has recommended measures for improving the economic climate in the country like simplifying labor market regulations and land acquisition procedures, inclusive policies as well as increased female labour force participation.

Read more: <http://www.thenewsminute.com/article/india-loses-fastest-growing-economy-tag-imf-slashes-2017-growth-rate-05-pc-69783>

Date Accessed: 10.10.2017

Governance and Development

POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE

Voiceless in Jharkhand: Freedom of Religion Act, 2017

(Virginus Xaxa, *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 7, 2017)

The Jharkhand Freedom of Religion Act, 2017 is the latest draconian act against tribes who are anyway battling dispossession of their land in the name of development. The Fifth Schedule of the Constitution provides for a number of measures to protect their interests. Yet, in the enactment of the law on freedom of religion in a number of states with sizeable tribal populations, their voice is missing.

Read more: <http://www.epw.in/journal/2017/40/commentary/voiceless-jharkhand.html>

Date accessed: 09.10.2017

GOVERNMENT

Gujarat govt cuts VAT on petrol, diesel by 4%

(PTI, *The Hindu*, October 10, 2017)

With elections just around the corner in Gujarat, the Chief Minister announce the decision of the government to reduce VAT on petrol and diesel, bring down the price by Rs 2.72 and Rs 2.93 respectively. This move will result in a loss of Rs 2,316 crore annually for the Gujarat government. The decision is claimed to be taken in the interest of the people after the Union Finance Minister asked all the state governments to reduce taxes on petrol and diesel.

Read more: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/gujarat-govt-cuts-vat-on-petrol-diesel-by-4/article19832978.ece?homepage=true>

Date accessed: 10.10.2017

HEALTH

Fixing Healthcare

(S N Mohanty, *The Indian Express*, October 11, 2017)

In India, more than 60 per cent of the population cannot afford quality private healthcare. The author argues that efficiency, no doubt, is a must for public health systems; but co-existing with private players in the same premises is not the best solution. This is because private players will be tempted to shift the expenditure to the budget book of the state, shooting from the shoulder of the poor. In a twin-system of healthcare from the same premises, the real pricing, both formal and informal, will go up because of the misbehaviour of market forces and functionaries. The inexorable march to profit-making will eclipse other systemic issues.

Read more: <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/public-healthcare-system-government-hospitals-aiims-doctors-niti-aayog-fixing-healthcare-4884133/>

Date accessed: 11.10.2017

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TRANSPORT

Neglected, starved and sold: the uncertain future of India's public transport

(Hussain Indorewala, *The Wire*, October 11, 2017)

The author writes that the recent Elphinstone Road crisis will be used to further delegitimise our public institutions and processes, and attack the very conception of public goods. With the facilitation of private transport as an active policy in Indian cities, public transport systems are being dismantled through administrative and financial 'restructuring,' the piecemeal privatisation of services and the surrender of public land to private developers in the name of 'infrastructure modernisation.' The author argues that small adjustments, up-gradation and improvements, intelligent management, accountability and regulation, can bring in substantial changes in some of the most pressing urban problems. A range of financial models can be found to run affordable, inclusive and efficient public transport systems: from direct subsidies to property taxes, from parking charges and fines to road-space use charges, from motoring and consumption taxes to cross-utility financing.

Read more: <https://thewire.in/186141/neglected-starved-sold-uncertain-future-indias-public-transport/>

Date accessed: 11.10.2017

LAW AND JUSTICE

Sex with minor wife is rape, says Supreme Court in landmark judgment

(*The News Minute*, October 11, 2017)

The Supreme Court has struck down the exception to section 375 of IPC which protected a husband having sexual relations with his minor wife from being accused of rape. The bench has termed the exception as arbitrary, discriminatory and capricious and without any rational nexus with the objective sought to be achieved by several other statutes like Child Marriage Prohibition Act. The exception was also found to be violative of the girl child's fundamental rights under Article 14, 15 and 21. The court however refused to comment on broader issue of criminalisation of marital rape.

Read more: <http://www.thenewsminute.com/article/sex-minor-wife-rape-says-supreme-court-69809>

Date accessed: 11.10.2017

Expert panel tells Government to amend laws to punish online hate speech

(*The Wire*, October 6, 2017)

The panel constituted by the government in the aftermath of the Supreme Court judgment striking down section 66A of the IT Act has recommended that changes be made to the IPC, CrPC and IT Act to tackle the increasing incidents of hate speech and incitements online. The committee head, TK Vishwanathan has recommended that there is no need to reintroduce Section 66A but strengthening of the IPC provisions is required to tackle the spread of hate messages. The first amendment suggested is IPC Section 153C be expanded to include in communication "spoken or written words, signs, visible representation, information, audio, video or combination of both, transmitted, retransmitted through any telecommunication service, communication device or computer source. The second is to amend Section 505A of the IPC to increase the punishment for offence under this Act. Section 78 of the IT Act should also be amended to enable police officers to deal with detractors more efficiently.

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Read more: <https://thewire.in/184920/post-section-66a-central-panel-tells-government-to-amend-ipc-crpc-it-act-to-punish-online-hate-speech/>

Date Accessed: 10.10.2017

India and the World

India votes against UN ban on death penalty for same sex relations

(The News Minute, October 4, 2017)

The recently tabled UN resolution seeking to ban imposition of death penalty in an arbitrary and discriminatory manner especially on the basis of racial, ethnic and sexual biases was turned down by India along with 12 other countries. India along with USA and China refused to support the resolution. While Indian law criminalises same sex relationships, it does not impose death penalty on it unlike countries like Yemen or Somalia. Therefore the reluctance to sign the resolution has come as a surprise to many with scholars declaring it as a contradiction to India's constitutional values.

Read more: <http://www.thenewsminute.com/article/india-votes-against-un-ban-death-penalty-same-sex-relations-69415>

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