

Translation of Ansuya- SEWA's fortnightly Magazine

Effects of Current Economic Melt down on the Waste Recyclers

“I gave you 10 kgs of waste paper and still you are giving me just Rs. 20! Why? Shouldn't you be giving me Rs. 40 at Rs. 4/- rate for the waste paper?” And the Scrap shop owner replies sternly, “If you want to take these Rs. 20/- take it or else find another shop to sell you collected waste. The prices of waste has also decreased due to recession, it is not just my decision.”

This is a very regular scene in the scrap shop since last 5 months. Recession has hit the entire world. Wherever we go every body is talking about it and each and every trade is affected by it. And so is the work of these scrap and waste pickers, who actually invest nothing but just their time and labour to earn money. Recession is like a disease, then how can these workers remain unaffected by it?

In Ahmedabad city approximately 35,000 paper pickers are there. In this city itself, 6,000 tons of waste is dumped each day of which approximately 300 tons of waste is picked up by these waste pickers. So in that manner these workers pick up 12 to 14% of recycling waste each day and thus significantly contribute to the physical and financial aspect of the environment of our city. Since early morning 5 o'clock these workers walk 10-12 kms each day to collect waste and thus at the end of the day are able to earn not more than Rs. 50 to 60/- in a day. And to most of these families this is the only source of income. But since last 5 months their incomes have decreased to at least 50% irrespective of the fact that they follow similar routine of work each day.

The table below will give a clear picture of the changes in the rates of the scrap from the month of September08 to January 09. On an average 50% of the rates have decreased in majority of the scrap items.

Types of Waste and Prices				
No	Type of material	Type of scrape/waste	Price (Oct. 2008)	Price (Jan. 2009)
1	Steel\Iron			
a	Special steel	Nut-bolts, Screws(big-small)	25	15
b	Steel sheet	Steel sheets, Steel boxes, Cup-boards, Broken barrel etc...	10	5
c	Waste steel	Waste collect from lathe Machine.	6	3
d	Solid waste	This waste collect after Welding work.	80	50
e	Steel balls	This is waste of steel which collect after making steel	7	5
f	Steel powder	This powder of steel is collected	2	2

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		after making steel balls.		
2	Plastic bags			
a	Type 01	This bags are use for packing of calculator and other electronic items	18	6
b	Type 2	White bags, bags which are used for packing milk and milk products, washing powder	8	5 to 6 rs.
c	Type 3	Different types of bags	5	3
3	paper waste			
a	Brown paper	Note book cover, Craft paper	3	2
b	Hard boards	Waste paper, Medicine boxes Notebook cover	1	1
c	News paper		8	4
d	Magazines		8	4 to 6 rs.
e	Office record paper	Office record papers	4 to 5 rs.	3 to 4 rs.
4	Hard Plastic			
A	No-1	Brush, Tumbler	15	6 TO 8 RS
B	No-2	Ice cream cup, Tea cup, Light waigh cup Light waste Plastic	13	3 TO 4 RS
C	No-3	Shoes waste, Broken Plastic, Bottle caps	10	3 TO 4 RS
D	No-4	Solid hard waste, Audio cassettes	20	10 TO 12 RS.
5	Cloth waste			
A	Clean cloth	Which are use for Lathe machine worker and in factories, and in garages	6	3
B	White Cloth	Which are useful for glass sellers	20	12
C	Cotton Saris	Some sellers purchased	20	15
D	Waste collected from Societies		20	15
	Waste collected from Dustbin			
E	Some used Cloth	This waste collected from Steel makers		
6	Animal Bones			
		Fresh	2	1
		Dry	4	2

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7	Hair waste		1000 TO 1200	300
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- ❖ The waste recyclers who collect the waste from the land fill site gets Rs 2/- per kg less for the waste collected then other waste recyclers

It is a general trend in this trade that the scrap shop owner gives bonus to the women waste pickers during Diwali, which varies from Rs. 101/- to Rs. 501/- or anything in kind. And this year they have not given anything to them.

Moreover the women waste pickers are not getting full wages, the rates of the scrap have decreased suddenly and surprisingly for the workers, which has lead to panic among them. They often question, “What is this new thing called recession in our trade? Why in our trade? What it is? Will it ever go..... when?”

To find out more about this situation we met many scrap shop owners in different areas like Danilimda, Odhav, Amraiwadi, Guptanagar, Narol, Maninagar, Ambavadi and others. There we were told, “Ben, we are not able to sell the scrap to the factories/ mills. They are not buying from us. And if they buy they are buying at fewer prices and thus I also have to reduce the rates and give less to the women paper pickers. I cannot do business in loss, can I?” Most of the scrap shop owners said this to us.

We also came to know that 10-12 scrap shops in Odhav, Gomtipur, Narol, Dariyapur, Guptanagar, have shut down, as they could not withstand the consequences of this recession. As a result of which the waste pickers have also shifted their work and have joined in construction or kitchen work so as to sustain their livelihoods. We also found that few members had actually collected the waste of iron, glass and such other items in their house and not sold it to the scrap shop with the expectation that the prices of the scarp will go up. But in vain.....their seem no hope for the increase in rates in near future, they have to sell it off in less rates itself.

Some of the members have also started to go early to collect the waste. Like they used to go in the morning at 5:00 am but now they start their work at 3:00 am with the mentality that ‘some one else will come early and pick it up, instead I will take it first.’ Thus they have started to devote more time to work so as to compensate the decrease in wages a little bit. Earlier, women member in the family would go to pick up the waste, now they prefer to take more members especially children of the family so that more waste is collected. Waste pickers unable to pay the fees of the school have started to involve the children in some or the other financial activities with them as well as otherwise. Simultaneously, women waste pickers have also started to take up other activities like cutting threads, peeling tuver, bindi sticking, and embroidery on chaniya choli etc.

If we sum up we can say that the women waste pickers have been affected in the following manner:

- Scrap shops have closed in various areas

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- In some of the areas the waste pickers have resorted to other trades
- Their physical activities have increased substantially
- There is 50% reduction in the scrap rates
- Their financial situation has deteriorated
- This will ultimately affect their health also

Thus these waste picker women members are actually suffering a lot financially as well as physically, still they are hopeful that one day situation will be under control and things will be back to normal and they will be able to earn their livelihoods as they used to previously.

- Minal (Organiser-waste picker)

Who has send this recession here?

- Ghangauriben (Leader-waste picker's campaign)

Waste pickers prefer this work because this is one trade wherein they have to invest nothing practically, they can work as per their wish, no restrictions regarding time or place, no employer to interfere, they just keep picking up the waste plastic, paper, iron wood, cloth rags and everything.

After Navratri, there is this environment in our trade which is named as recession and as a result of which where previous women waste pickers who used to work for 3-4 hours a day could also earn Rs. 40/- and now even though they spend more time to collect the waste they are not able to earn half of it. Which just manages their daily bread, and they have to forget about the education of their children or treatment of any ailment in the family. The effect of this difficult situation is clearly seen in each household.

Some of them had put their children to private school hoping that they will get good education, but now they too have shifted their children to Municipal school or just remove them from school as they are not able to pay the fees. The children were not allowed to sit for examinations because they did not pay the fees.

On the other end also prices of each and every item has increased and thus the expenses have also increased overall. As a result of this there are households wherein they have started to cook once a day only. They either do with the left over food of the night before or just do with some dry snacks. Main attraction of sending the children to school is that they get mid-day meal there, that saves food at home. In the evening, whatever women worker gets at home after selling her collected waste they eat their meals. Thus they are affected from both the ends one that their incomes are decreased and on the other hand the expenses have increased drastically. And in these times it is very difficult for a paper picker to survive.

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Ranjanben Ashokbhai Parmar who stays in Rabari Vasahat at Odhav is an old member of SEWA. When I visited her house during the area meeting, she started to cry, when I tried to explain her that is just a phase and every thing will be fine again, she started to cry harder and said, “*Who sent this recession! Why did they send it?*” I was actually speechless. Her situation is very bad, her husband is sick, she has 5 children, she stays in a rented house, she has to spend on the treatment of her husband and she is the sole earner in the family, how can she meet her ends. When she goes to collect scrap she takes along her little daughter, while her husband sits at home and makes bundle of wooden ice-cream spoons, from which he can earn not more than Rs. 10/- a day when he prepares bundles of 10 spoon each for 20-25 kgs of such spoon.

Another member, Kankuben depicts her story and says, “I used to collect waste from the factory in Odhav GIDC and used to earn from it. But now the factory owners have made the watchman sit at the gate so that we do not go inside. We are now not able to earn from this source.” But this member has to run her livelihood, so she now takes her girl child in the near by village to collect waste. Her daughter used to study but Kankuben stopped her schooling and asked her to help her earn. She says that she has to withstand these bad times and has to sustain this recession. She has to pay the rent of the house also, otherwise the house owner will vacate the house. And the story shall remain same even if they go anywhere else. Here at least she knows people who can give her loan whenever she needs it and she takes money from the money lender and pays her house rent. Previously, they could borrow money from the scrap shop owner, which they would deduct from her amount at the end of the month, but this practice has also stopped now.

Again, if these workers children gets sick, they cannot just sit and do nothing about it! They borrow money from the money lenders at very high interest rates also. Their debts are increasing, they are devoting more time to their work and even the children have been picked up from the school to assist them and thus all this is leading to tensions in the house. With the hope for increase in the rates waste pickers are not selling off all the collected goods but are storing it in the house so that they can sell it when the prices will go up. But this is not happening. They are now going even twice a day to pick up waste but still are not able to meet ends at the end of the day.

‘Trash has crashed’.....

New York times in its one of the articles on ‘trash’ has given this title. And we have also received similar messages from our various associations abroad.

The financial crisis and its effects are today felt in all the fields starting from car industry to the scrap industry. It is said that 2% of the population of the world and their livelihoods depend on waste picking like that of paper, hardboard, plastics and other metals. And their incomes are either below poverty line or just on it while majority of the workers is either women or young children.

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During the financial crisis this industry is being badly affected and thus the prices are decreasing here and this is the situation in practically all countries of the world. For example in Brazil, a kilo of any particular scrap that would earn \$1 now is able to fetch only 14 cents. In America also the go downs are full of tons and tons of such collected scrap. Nobody is ready to buy the scrap. Thus those industries which were involved in recycling of these scraps are now not actually buying these scraps. Similarly, those who collect these wastes, segregated it, bundle it and pack it and earn livelihood from it are also affected. Their incomes have either reduced or have closed completely.

It is said that the reason for this recession is the fall of export market. China it seems has stopped or has drastically reduced buying scrap (especially iron scrap) from America. And since the export of the scrap reduced, the rates of the scrap in the country have also decreased. Columbia (South America) informed that there is no buyer for waste polythene bags of any quality. The iron scraps price has reduced to 70%., Aluminium and copper's scrap rates have reduced to 60% and that of PVC scrap has reduced by 50%. The rates of the waste paper have not reduced. In Columbia there is monopoly of glass scrap, thus there is no difference in the rates since 15 years, therefore the waste pickers do not prefer to pick up this waste.

Waste pickers actually do not have any storage space, they barely manage to live in their houses which are so congested and small that they can hardly store any items. Still in Columbia, the association of waste pickers has rented a storage place from last 3 months in the hope that this industry will pick up. But now it is not possible to wait any longer. And thus they have to dispose of this waste in the dump yard for which they have to bare the transportation expense also. This is so pitiful!! Similar story persists everywhere.....

[Excerpts from the newsletters of Unions of Brazil and Bogota (Columbia)]

-Manali Shah

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