



Rag-Pickers in India

This editorial is based on [“Wheels of Swachh Bharat”](#) which was published in Indian Express on 05/03/2022. It talks about the social and economic upliftment of the rag-pickers in India.

For Prelims: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Solid Waste Management Rules, Plastic Waste Management Rules 2022.

For Mains: rag-pickers in India - challenges faced by them, issues to their upliftment and measures that can be taken for their welfare.

For decades, rag-pickers, working in dangerous and unsanitary conditions, have picked up what we throw away. They **form the base of a pyramid that includes scrap dealers, aggregators and re-processors.**

Unfortunately, **most informal rag-pickers remain invisible.** Between 1.5 and 4 million rag-pickers in India **work without social security, health insurance, minimum wages or basic protective gear.**

As India progresses towards meeting the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), the plight of Safai Saathis makes a compelling case to intensify efforts to address the challenges faced by them.

What is the Scenario of rag-pickers in India?

- It is estimated that India generates 65 million tonnes of waste each year and is **home to more than 4 million rag-pickers.**
 - **Predominantly women**, this army of rag-pickers or **Safai Saathis** is the backbone of traditional waste management in most Indian cities.
- There have been initiatives for the inclusion of rag-pickers such as:
 - A 1995 report of the **High-Power Committee on Solid Waste Management** constituted by the Planning Commission called for **integration of rag-pickers into the system.**
 - In 1988, an Expert Group constituted by the Supreme Court echoed the same recommendation.
 - The [Solid Waste Management Rules](#) and [Plastic Waste Management Rules](#), 2016, also recognise the contribution of rag-pickers and hold that they be included in the solid waste management of local bodies.
 - However, the rag-pickers have **not been included in any disaster management plan** of the administration.
- When the government announced [measures during the pandemic to support frontline workers](#), the rag-picker community remained conspicuous by its absence.
- Their multiple vulnerabilities, including **low and uncertain incomes, limited access to government schemes, high health risks, and severe social exclusion**, have all been

exacerbated by [Covid-19](#).

What are the Roadblocks to their Upliftment?

- **Unavailability of Data:** In 2018, the **UNDP India started working with Safai Saathis** through its Plastic Waste Management programme. However, the **paucity of data on this community** led to **obstructions in devising programmes** and policies to support Safai Saathis.
 - However, this led UNDP India to design and publish India's first large-scale analysis of the socio-economic conditions of Safai Saathis, based on a survey of over 9,000 workers across 14 Indian cities.
- **Lack of Formal Education:** The survey of the socio-economic conditions of Safai Saathis showed that they are **employed mainly on the margins of the urban informal sector**.
 - Their low incomes and job insecurity is compounded by the fact that nearly **70% come from socially backward groups** and over **60% have no formal education**.
- **Obstructions in Formalisation:** More than 90% of the workers reported owning an Aadhaar card - in line with broad national trends, but **only a tiny subset owned an income, caste, or occupation certificate**.
 - **This thwarts any attempts at formalising their work** and limits their access to government social security schemes.
- **No Health Insurance:** As per the UNDP survey, **less than 5% of those surveyed had any [health insurance](#)**, indicating very **high degrees of health-shock vulnerabilities**.
- **Not Connected to Government Welfare Schemes:** Out of the total Safai Saathis, surveyed, who had a bank account, **only 20% were linked to the [Jan Dhan Yojana](#)** — the government's flagship financial inclusion programme.
 - **Only half of the surveyed people reported owning and using a ration card** and this proportion was even smaller in cities where migrants formed a larger share among surveyed workers.

What Steps Can Be Taken?

- **Registration with ULBs:** An important starting point is the registration of Safai Saathis by **[Urban Local Bodies](#)**, and **providing ID cards that recognise them as municipal workers with a clear role**.
 - **Ensuring minimum pay** and enabling their **authorised access to waste** are essential next steps.
 - Diversified solid waste management-linked livelihoods like dry waste centre managers and machine operators can broaden employment horizons for these workers.
- **Ensuring Food-Security for Them:** With its focus on portability, the government's **[One Nation One Ration Card scheme](#)** has the potential to play a transformative role in **ensuring access to subsidised food grains for these workers**.
- **Economic and Social Upliftment:** The overall policy agenda for Safai Saathis must include a firm focus on **building resilience against shocks, expanding access to social protection**, and creating opportunities to **graduate towards safe, sustainable, and dignified livelihoods**.
- **Inclusion in Government Policies:** A welfare framework to design social protection schemes explicitly for Safai Saathis should be a policy priority.
 - Proactively reaching out to the workers for **enrolment in government schemes, minimising paperwork**, and a **greater awareness among Safai Saathis** about their entitlements are essential for linking them to government programmes.
 - rag-pickers' cooperatives shall also **strengthen Safai Saathis' collective bargaining power enabling higher prices** for what they collect.
- **Alternative, Better Employments:** India makes determined strides towards realising the Sustainable Development Goals, it must look at **exploring alternate, technology-led circular economy models** that eliminate the need for any person to do this hazardous work manually.
 - There is a clear need to create better, safer, decent jobs in the economy that informal workers like Safai Saathis can eventually move to, **supported by efforts to enhance their skills**.

“India is making determined strides towards realising the Sustainable Development Goals, however, the target is far from being achieved unless the poor working conditions of the rag-pickers in India is addressed”. Comment.

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Q. As per the Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016 in India, which one of the following statements is correct? (2019)

- (a) Waste generator has to segregate waste into five categories.
- (b) The Rules are applicable to notified urban local bodies, notified towns and all industrial townships only.
- (c) The Rules provide for exact and elaborate criteria for the identification of sites for landfills and waste processing facilities.
- (d) It is mandatory on the part of the waste generator that the waste generated in one district cannot be moved to another district.

Ans: (c)

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