

# In Defence of their Livelihood

## Hirabehn Parmar and Waste Pickers of Ahmedabad

by  
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This profile of a waste paper picker describes how despite increasing marginalisation of poor women in the economy, they continue to be primary earners for their families. It also documents the many layers of exploitation these women have to confront in their struggle for survival

HIRABEHN Parmar belongs to the Vankar caste of the Harijan community; she makes her living by collecting and reselling waste paper. She was born about 55 years ago in the outlying village of Mehesana. Her mother died when she was two. Shortly thereafter, her father wandered off to take up the religious life, leaving behind five young children. Hirabehn was brought up by her grandmother in the village and moved to Ahmedabad at the time of her marriage. "I was married at 13 and went to live with my husband. At 15, I had a daughter who died. At 16, I had a son who died. After three years, at 20, I had a daughter who lived. After that, I had a child almost every year. I always continued to work while I was pregnant. What of it? I came out of the womb working."

Like most paper pickers, Hirabehn turned to scavenging as a last resort. During her early years in Ahmedabad, she ironed clothes. "All of us lived in one rented room. It was difficult to keep our family there, and also to store all the clothes of the people whose ironing I was doing. I did the best I could. But it was difficult to keep house. The friends of my sons were always around. When I was out they used to go through my customers' clothing and if they saw something they liked they would steal it. It was



difficult for me to pay for all of this."

Finally, Hirabehn lost the business completely. "The last straw was the problem of electricity. The rich people used to give me their clothes to press and they would request that I use electricity instead of coal to press the garments. They said the coal did not give as nice a result. But I was afraid of electricity and so I told them no, I don't know how to do this. So I started to lose business. Next, I took up paper picking."

Although, her husband was employed by the textile mills, the family was under tremendous financial

pressure. When her sons were still children, Hirabehn's husband was an undependable drunk, squandering his earnings and leaving Hirabehn responsible for the upkeep of the household and the expense of marrying their three daughters. Hirabehn never considered confronting her husband during this period. Instead, she collected waste paper and she prayed.

"In our books it is written that the husband is god and we wives must obey him and serve him. We cannot speak his name and I used to call him *prabhu*, never speaking against him. Even when he used to drink and beat me, I used to obey him.

"But if we drink and if we die, who will help our children? Sol prayed to god to make my husband stop drinking. I don't want money, I don't care about wealth. All I want is for my husband to be good and to sit beside me and sing *bhajans*. And now both of us, husband and wife, sing *bhajans* together daily. Both of us are devotees.

"It took 10 years for my husband to stop drinking. He used to beat me all the time. But after 10 years of my praying, he stopped drinking and now he never beats me. Instead, he sits on his cycle every day and gives me a ride to the bus stand."

Today her husband is sober and remains employed. "My husband and

two of my sons are still earning. They are working in the mill where my husband is a foreman. One of my sons works during the day and the other from midnight to 7 a.m. so they sleep in shifts. My older son works with his father in the bobbin section. They fill the bobbins and put them on the machines. They also prepare the thread from cotton.”

Even with this salaried income, however, Hirabehn still feels the need to work in order to meet the expenses of her daughters’ marriages. “None of my sons are married. One daughter is married and I have my first grandchild. I also have a daughter who is 27. She was widowed at 23. I have recently found her another husband and soon she will marry again. And I have another younger daughter.

“I still have two unmarried, daughters. How can I marry them? It will cost Rs 40,000. So I must always work. In our caste we must give. In the Vankar community, it is necessary, we are backward. If I do not give, no one will marry my second daughter.”

While Hirabehn easily adopts some of the ideological components of membership in SEWA, she resists the encouragement given to reduce marriage and dowry spending. “SEWA teaches us not to give. But in our community we must. I used to sit on the floor all the time and never leave my home. No one else could ever be with us women and if they were, I would cover my face. I have stopped behaving in this way but paying a good dowry and having a big wedding, this I must do.” And so Hirabehn has been

collecting paper for the last 20 years.

When Hirabehn started scavenging, the work was not nearly as demanding as it has become in the last 15 years, during which Ahmedabad’s textile industry has almost completely shut down. Thousands of wives of previous employees have taken to the streets to bring in some income, no matter how meagre. (For a detailed account of this process of retrenchment of women textile industry work-ers, see **Manushi** No. 26).

“In the beginning, people didn’t know how much could be made from collecting paper so only a few did this work and it was much easier. Now there is a lot of competition among the women. You never see a single scrap of paper left on the road.”

Over 20,000 women work as paper pickers in Ahmedabad. Scavenging for waste paper on the roadside, roaming as far as 20 kms, and working as many as 14 hours a day, carrying sacks weighing up to 25 kgs, these women perform the task of collecting what society has judged worthless. For their work the women make as little as Rs 5 to 7 a day. All Harijans, all poor, paper pickers are unable to get any other employment. They have simply

fallen through the bottom of the economy: they have no job security, they get no respect, they are exploited by middlemen, harassed by police and perceived as a nuisance by the public.

Far from being marginal and inconsequential work, however, paper picking provides the crucial service of supplying waste to the recycling industry. Given the scarcity of natural resources, particularly trees, in India, nothing should go to waste. Scraps of all sorts are raw material for industries which produce goods used by all strata of society. As well as collecting paper, many rag pickers, almost always women and children, are engaged in collecting plastic bags, polythene sheets, bottles, broken glass, iron scrap and other materials. The extent of the waste economy has not been documented but in all cities and even in the smallest towns, thousands of ragpickers roam the streets. Everywhere, both consumer products and raw materials are made from reprocessed waste. Waste plastic is turned into buckets, sandals, and hoses; waste paper is used for hardboard; glass is cleaned and melted or reused; newspapers and magazines are made into bags.

This extent of recycling is crucial to maintaining the level of

consumption in society, yet the work of manually preparing the scrap for reprocessing, collecting and sorting is massively undervalued. Reprocessing demands very costly machinery and is quite profitable and thus this aspect of the work is respected as a legitimate industry

**Hirabehn with her family**



which provides a valued and scarce resource. Yet the women who collect the scrap are systematically excluded from the wealth created by their work as they have no savings and no access to the capital necessary for entering the mechanised stage of production. The constant supply of paper which sustains the paper mills is taken for granted as it is maintained by the most desperately poor whose destitution can be counted on to ensure a steady flow of raw materials at almost no cost.

A day in the life of a typical, non-organised paper picker begins at around 5a.m. The paper picker walks around her particular beat in the city which may include picking around residential neighbourhoods as well as rummaging through refuse dumps. By noon, when she has collected as much scrap as she can carry, she brings it to the waste contractor and sorts it out. He weighs it and she collects her pay. She then hurries home to attend to household responsibilities - cleaning, preparing food and looking after the children. In the afternoon she repeats the morning routine and again collects money in the evening.

There are four categories of waste. Coloured and dirty paper and hardboard are classified as D category for which the women get only 20 paise a kg. Slightly cleaner waste such as bags made of newspaper and magazine pages are C category for which contractors pay between 40 to 50 paise a kg. B category paper is mainly office waste, and can be sold for 50 to 70 paise a kg.



**Picking waste**

Newspapers are A category and, depending on their condition, can be sold for as much as Rs 1.80 a kg. Some women work directly for contractors and spend the whole day sorting scraps for which they might make Rs5.

Paper picking is the most physically demanding and socially degrading job available to the urban self-employed. On account of constant exposure to waste, a breeding ground

for bacteria, paper pickers experience frequent infection and illness as well as cuts and poisoning. They fall prey to hookworm, infection from contact with dead animals, intestinal infections, skin infections and poisoning from contact with empty chemical containers, snake bites, gashes and bruises which can lead to tetanus.

The majority of paper pickers live at subsistence level - a day's work missed frequently means a day without food. Thus, once a woman takes up paper picking, she is usually trapped in this work for the rest of her life. There is little opportunity to save no time to work towards any goal beyond providing for each day. The monsoon brings a special hardship as the rain makes it impossible to collect paper for several months of each year during which the income of paper pickers frequently drops by as much as 75 percent

As a result of their lack of education, paper pickers are exploited at every turn. Their dependence on paper contractors and the contractors' occasional sympathy lead them to trust these men beyond what is deserved. It is a simple matter for the contractors to underweigh the women's paper, to count money inaccurately and to provide false documentation.

The degrading nature of the work adds to its debilitating effects. Scavenging garbage carries no status and provokes contempt from those who feel they are better off. One paper picker told of being knocked down by





rickshaws on three separate occasions - all for "fun". Caste prejudice supports this degradation and ridicule. All Harijans, the paper pickers are considered the lowest of the low. Says one woman: "Picking paper is a real comedown for me. When I was in the mill, we used to look down upon the paper pickers. We would say we are workers, we earn a good salary.

These paper pickers wander around everywhere without shame. They are dirty. Today, I am degraded too. When I first had to start picking paper, I would try to make my *ghunghat* long so that no one could see my face. I was so ashamed. How low I have fallen."

In the early 1970s, SEWA began organising a small group of paper pickers to get contracts for waste paper from the few textile mills and government offices that committed themselves to offering their lowgrade waste to the women free of charge or at very low charges, as a show of support for these women. What follows is the story of how even this attempt by a small group of paper pickers backed by SEWA had to battle vested interests at every step. It should be remembered that these are not the mass of paper pickers in the city, who remain unorganised. Hirabehn was one of the fortunate women who entered the organised group.

"About 12 or 15 years ago, I knew some women who were picking up paper in the mill are as through SEWA. So I went, along with six or seven other ladies from my area and joined. At



At the SEWA office

that time dues were Rs 3 a year."

The first objective of this group of paper pickers was to minimise or eliminate scavenging wherever possible. The waste promised by the highest levels of mill management was being collected secretly by the lowest levels of mill management at a profit.

Eventually, Hirabehn was put in charge of paper collection from a division 'of the Civil Hospital near her home. "I got a contract for the Mental Hospital Education Centre. In this department there was so much paper. I had good work then. I myself went to meet the manager at the mental hospital. I sat in a chair and gave the chit for the contract to the manager and discussed the work with him.

"My husband used to take my jute bag on his bicycle so I never had to spend on expenses of a rickshaw to transport the waste paper. It was perfect. Every day, I got four or five jute bags. I could pack the papers in an hour. There were four buildings and the peons used to clean up and then gather all the garbage into one room. I would pack it and my husband carry it away. He would make many trips between the mental hospital and home."

Meetings among the women in

the slum and in the SEWA office provided a place and a reason for the women to get out of their houses and away from their duties as wives, mothers, and members of a larger community. As the women spent time together discussing the waste business and implementing strategies for increasing their control over their work, they came to see

themselves as workers outside of their domestic identities. From among the paper pickers, a group of core leaders emerged. "In the beginning, I didn't know Amba or Lakshmi or any of these women. We all met through SEWA. No one is boss. We are all members, we are all workers." The story of their organising efforts is best represented by their shared recollection.

The paper pickers' most profit-able accomplishment was securing a contract to pick up waste from the government offices in Gandhinagar. "When we started the work at Gandhinagar, there were 12 or 13 of us. Each jute sack used to weigh up to 50 kgs, depending on the size of the sack. We would get a whole truck filled with such sacks. We used to book a truck, weigh it, and then weigh it again with sacks loaded on it

"A lot of know-how is necessary. For the work in Gandhinagar, we employed 20 ladies and each made Rs 15 per day for work-ing from 11 a.m. to 3p.m. In addition to organising the paper collection, we needed to arrange for the transport of the paper, getting a truck and talk-ing to officials in commercial and governmental offices."

The corruption the women had

battled in the mill contracts was nothing compared to the labyrinths of corruption they have faced during the years they have been working in Gandhinagar. The endless battles have created a formidable solidarity and determination among the paper pickers and have forced them to devise highly imaginative tactics.

Before the women were given a contract for the lowest grade paper, this had been thrown in with the higher grades and auctioned off to the highest bidder. Frequently, the highest bidders, by offering bribes to government officials, were able to pay less than the agreed upon sum. In cases where the price was adhered to, more ingenious ways of cheating were designed. Paper contractors and the lower level functionaries who actually released the paper would conspire, recording paper collections at underweight levels. The unrecorded paper could then be sold privately and the profit split between the contractor and the orderly.

As soon as the women began picking up the paper at Gandhinagar, they were told that a stay from the high court had been placed on the directive which issued them paper. There was in fact no such stay and the rumour was merely a

ruse by the contractor whose illegal benefits were in jeopardy. This tactic stalled the women's paper pick-ups long enough for the contractor to file a case against them.

The contractor alleged that the women were not entitled to the paper since their contract stipulated that they were to be given only paper so low in quality that it had negligible market value. The contractor held that the paper did indeed have worth, as he had been paying for it when he had been buying it as part of a larger, mixed batch. This dispute dragged on

#### **Weighing paper at the contractor's**



for years during which the women's access to the paper was suspended.

The women committed themselves fully to this struggle, Hirabehn taking a vow not to wear slippers and Lakshminotto eat *ghee* until they were again able to collect paper at Gandhinagar. The women researched the contractors' tender system. The contractor had put in a bid of Rs 1,300 per ton so the women settled on bidding Rs 1,325 per ton. In addition to the per ton price, the women needed a lump sum of Rs 10,000 as a security the government could keep should the women fail to

pick up the paper. Thus, their limited financial resources kept them out of the commercial bidding.

SEWA secured the deposit from Oxfam and thus the government had no choice but to accept the women's bid. For the next two years the women bought the government waste at the agreed upon price, collecting their paper alongside the commercial contractors. But even for this high price, the women were unable to overcome the corruption of the contractors and the government. After having paid the government over Rs 100,000, the women learned that all the while the



highest grades of paper had been siphoned off by the orderlies and the contractor. The government officials insisted they knew nothing about this matter, and pacified the women by promising to close the paper godown both to the contractor and the women for a few days in order to look into the matter.

Rather than resigning themselves to trusting government officials, however, several of the

women kept a vigilant eye on the godown. Sure enough, one evening, during the time the godown supposedly shut down, a truck pulled up and paper was quickly loaded. The women waited until the truck was over half way full. As Ambabehn tells it, "If there were just three or four bags in the truck, they could have unloaded it and told a story. Once it was half full, the situation was clear. We asked everyone: 'Whose orders are you following in taking this paper?' but no one would take responsibility. When we confronted them they said to us: 'Show us your papers that say you have a contract for this paper. But we were not fearful and I said: You show your papers. Who are you to ask me?'"

The women tried to file a complaint against the contractor but the police would not even listen to their story. The police inspector, the contractor and the government official who controlled the waste acted as a united front. The paper pickers went from precinct to precinct trying to find someone to record their case. Fearless and tireless though they were, it appeared they had hit a dead end.

In 1983, however, a new opportunity arose for putting pressure on the government.



**Discussion at a meeting**

Doordarshan approached the paper pickers with the offer of doing a journalistic piece on a trade group struggling against corruption in local government. The women were warned that the show would be broad-cast on the local television channel and thus anything they said would become public and could cause difficulties for them in the future. Nevertheless, they insisted on participating fully, taking the risk in the hope that such publicity might do more good than harm.

Lakshmibehn, one of the youngest of the organisers, insisted on telling the story of the struggle of Gandhi-nagar in detail on TV, mentioning the full names and positions of every man involved. Public humiliation succeeded where everything else had failed, and the women again began to receive the full lot of waste paper.

The women must perpetually struggle against corruption. Mobilising public opinion through demonstrations, calling meetings among themselves and simply refusing to give up visiting the same office' for the same reasons year after year have established this group of paper pickers as a force to be reckoned with in the eyes of government and the contractors and, above all, in their own eyes.

As the waste paper business at the few organised sites becomes more profitable, Hirabehn's primary concern is that some provision be made for the Harijans within the group. "The main point is that all this work of paper and scrap collection should be done by us of the backward classes. In the past most people, even servants, would refuse to do this work. It is the work of the backward classes and should remain so

now." She and the rest of the paper pickers are moving towards this goal by extending their form of organising to other members of their community. The women have become stiff negotiators and have begun to secure paper contracts in other localities such as Bhavnagar where they educate women about the benefits of organising.

The paper supply comes and goes but Hirabehn identifies many other benefits of the organising process:

"When I was in the fourth standard, I won a prize for singing. As an award I received a big vessel. I sang a song about a sister who is singing her brother to sleep. From that moment, I lost my fear. Now I have developed and I have started speaking outside the home. I have learned about business management, I can save money in the bank, my income is fixed and has improved. Not only this but my work takes up much less time and energy so I can spend more time on other things. Through moving about with the SEWA organisers, I have learnt how to talk to officials. I am able to hold these discussions myself. I have come to know more of the world and have gained confidence." □