

# Economic Status of Rag Pickers: A Study in the Tricity of Chandigarh

**Dr. Rashmi Kohli<sup>1</sup>, Ms. Sunita Kumari<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Zoology, Post Graduate Govt. College For Girls, Sector-42, Chandigarh.

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of Environment Studies, Post Graduate Govt. College For Girls, Sector-42, Chandigarh.

## **Abstract:**

Many illiterate individuals turn to rag picking not by choice, but because of constrained circumstances like lack of education, skills, financial means, and social support. Many illiterate individuals are compelled to engage in rag picking as they lack formal education and marketable skills. With no capital to start a business and minimal access to resources or family support, they often have no viable alternatives for employment. This cycle of poverty and exclusion limits their opportunities for upward mobility.

**Keywords:** Waste pickers, economic conditions, Chandigarh, rates charges notified by MC Chandigarh.

## **Introduction:**

Waste pickers are the unsung heroes who play a crucial role in keeping our cities clean ensuring our health. They have the power to influence and enhance our country's Swachh ranking. The rapid growth of population, coupled with increasing urbanization and rising living standards, has led to a significant surge in solid waste generation in Chandigarh. This trend is further exacerbated by technological innovations that have introduced new products and packaging materials into the market. Consequently, both the quantity and quality of solid waste have seen a marked increase. In response to this growing challenge, waste pickers play a crucial role in managing Chandigarh's solid waste. They scavenge through garbage bins, landfill sites, dump yards, lakesides, streets, roads, and commercial areas, collecting and sorting recyclable materials. Despite their informal status, waste pickers contribute significantly to the city's waste management efforts by diverting recyclable materials from landfills and reducing environmental pollution.

However, it's essential to recognize the inherent challenges faced by waste pickers, including precarious working conditions, inadequate access to social protections and limited recognition of their contributions. Addressing these issues requires a holistic approach that involves collaboration between government authorities, civil society organizations and the private sector to ensure the inclusion and well-being of waste pickers in Chandigarh's waste management ecosystem.

To incentivize the integration of waste pickers into solid waste management systems, the Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan has allocated a maximum of 29 marks for cities where Municipal Corporations effectively involve waste pickers. Furthermore, guidelines for upcoming waste management surveys stipulate the

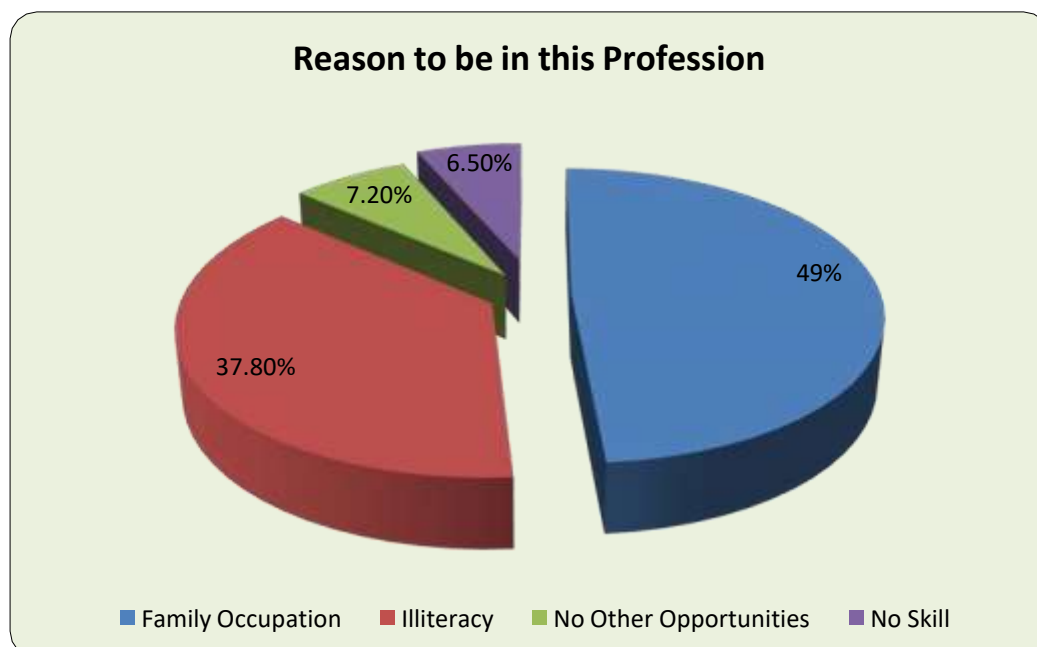
inclusion of waste pickers in recognizing their importance in the overall waste management framework<sup>16</sup>.

It's important to note that waste pickers perform their duties as a profession, with some engaging part-time alongside other jobs. For others, waste picking might be their only option due to lack of alternative opportunities for those who cannot compete with educated and skilled people. Empowering these individuals with knowledge about their entitlements and how to access them is crucial to bridge the gap between offered services and their utilization. Continuous evaluation and improvement of these awareness efforts are necessary to ensure they effectively reach those in need, sensitizing waste pickers and marginalized communities about the value of education, even basic education. Education can thus play a transformative role in breaking the cycle of poverty and providing greater economic independence and social mobility for marginalized communities.

## Discussion:

### 1. Reason to choose this Occupation

The major reason to be in this profession is by default as 49% choose it for being a family profession. Some individuals enter the profession of waste picking during childhood, while others take it up after getting married (women). 37.8% found it a convenient income source as they were illiterate. 7.2% cited lack of any other opportunities while 6.5% had no other skill to pursue anything else. Furthermore, many individuals are choosing waste picking over other informal economy professions due to the flexibility in working hours and the potential for daily or weekly income. They can earn as much as you pick or collect.



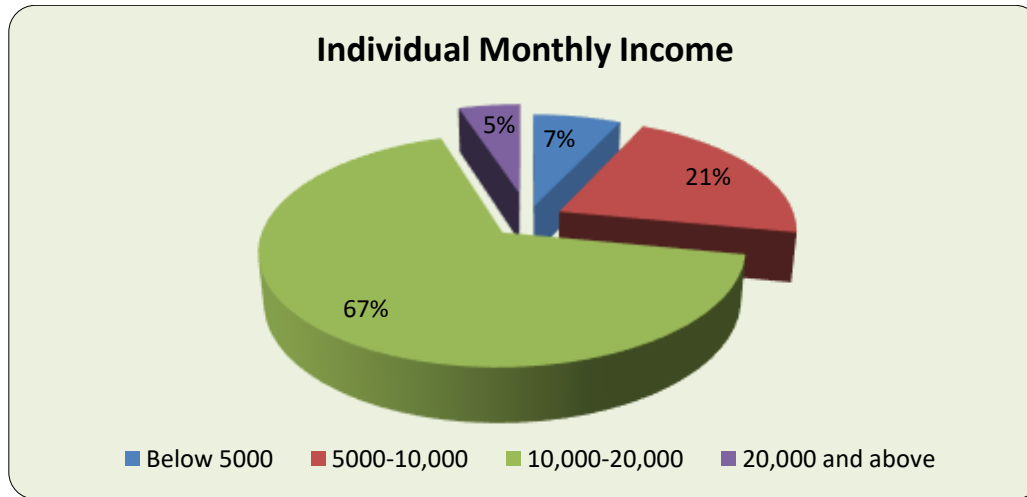
**Fig. 1: Percentage depicting reason to choose this occupation income and financial situation**

### 2. Income and Financial Situation

#### (i) Monthly Income /earning of individual waste pickers

It is investigated from a number of survey samples collected that 7% respondents have monthly income below Rs. 5000, 21% are earning between Rs. 5000 to Rs. 10,000 monthly. 67% respondents we can say

majority are in the income group range is between Rs.10,000 to Rs.20,000. Only 5% having monthly income 20,000 and above. This income is from individual respondents.



**Fig. 2: Monthly Income /earning of waste pickers**

This study investigates the wage structure of waste pickers in Chandigarh, adhering to the minimum wage regulations set by the UT Chandigarh Labour Law. According to the Labour law, unskilled workers are entitled to a daily wage of Rs. 486, semi-skilled workers to Rs. 491, and skilled workers to Rs. 503. However, despite these regulations, there exists a notable discrepancy in wage distribution among waste pickers. As a result, the average income for a new waste picker stands at approximately Rs. 14,580 per month, while those with over five years of experience, considered skilled as per municipal regulations, earn around Rs. 15,000. Survey revealed that 72% of respondents are earning as per labor law according to their work hours. But surprisingly, despite being classified as skilled labor, 28% of waste pickers in Chandigarh still earn below the average monthly income. Further, study reveals that annual wage increments range from Rs.800 to Rs. 1000, yet many workers experience delays in receiving their salaries. Additionally their income depends upon the number and type of house they serve. However, it's important to note that not every day yields the same amount of waste, so the income can vary.

S. No.	Items	Rate in Rs. per in kg
1.	Plastic	Rs. 15/-per kg
2.	Polythene Bags	50 paisa per polythene Rs. 9-12 per kg (depends upon thickness)
3.	Iron	Rs.33 per kg
4.	Aluminum	Rs. 150 per kg.
5.	Cardboard	Rs. 12 per Kg
6.	Newspaper	Rs. 15 per Kg

**Table 1: Rates of scraps confirmed from three local scrap dealers in Chandigarh**

S. No.	Area	Rate (Rs.) Monthly
1.	Flat	100
2.	2-10 Marla house	150
3.	10 Marla- Kanal kothi	200
4.	1-2 Kanal kothi	250
5.	Above 2 Kanal kothi	350

**Table 2: Rates charged for waste picking as notified on website of MC, Chandigarh April, 2023**

Door-to-door waste picker's typically serving 100 to 150 numbers of houses per individual. The rate for this service varies depending on the area, and it is crucial to examine these rates to estimate their monthly income.

### (ii) Monthly saving of a waste picker

Survey revealed that even though waste pickers seem to earn standard income as per labor law, their situation isn't much better. After all expenses on rent, electricity bill, food and other basic requirements for the family, 65% respondents are able to save monthly only Rs.



**Fig. 3: Monthly Saving of a Waste Picker**

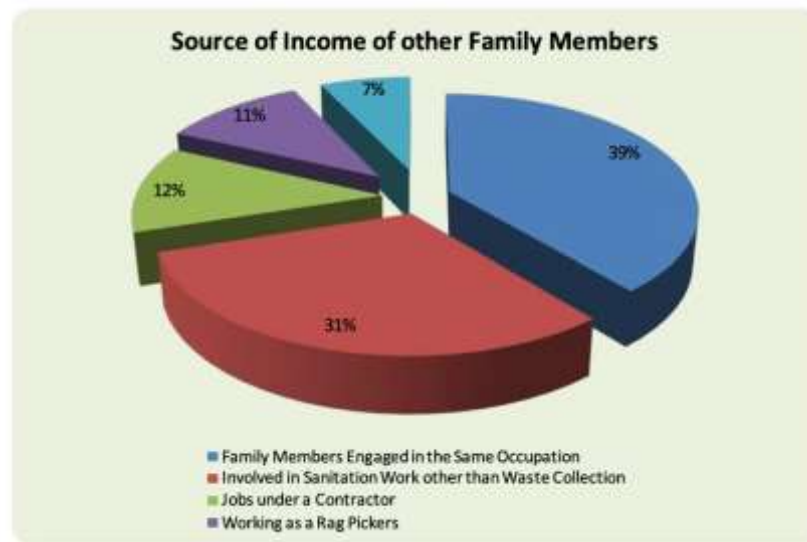
3000-5000, 15% manage to save between 500-1000 followed by 20% respondents showing no saving at all monthly otherwise.

They struggle with alcohol and other addiction issues, which worsen their financial woes. They rely on loans from scrap dealers, but the interest keeps piling up as they try to repay them. Also, the waste pickers pay half of their earnings to the scrap dealers in the form of debt clearance. Moreover, their expenditure on necessities such as rent, food, healthcare, and work-related travel consumes a significant portion of their income, leaving little room for financial stability.

### (iii) Source of income of other family members

The survey findings regarding the source of income of other family members are like 39% of respondents reported having family members engaged in the same occupation. 31% of respondents indicated that their family members are involved in sanitation work other than waste collection such as sweepers or public toilet cleaners. 12% of respondents reported that their family members are employed

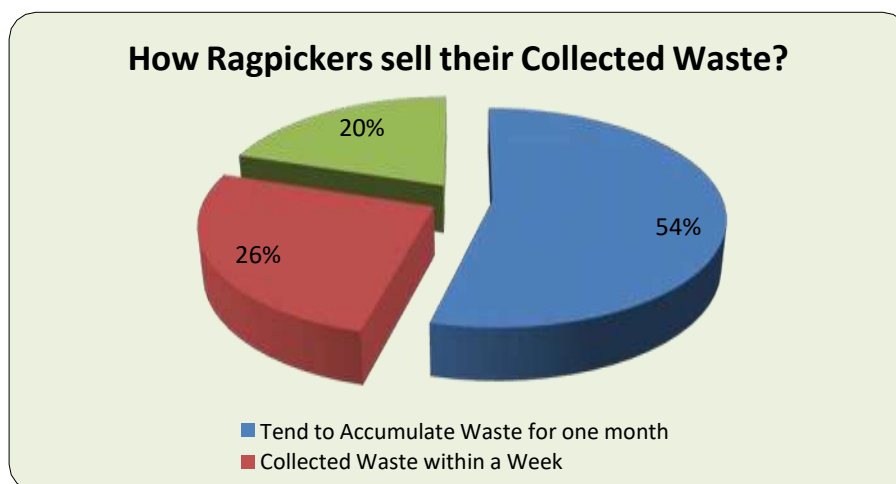
as peons or domestic helpers, 11% of respondents stated that their family members work as rag pickers followed by 7% of respondents mentioned that their family members are pheriwalas. These findings provide insights into the diverse occupations of family members associated with the respondents, highlighting the varied sources of income within the surveyed population.



**Fig. 4: Source of Income of Other Family Members**

#### (iv) How often do they (rag pickers) sell their collected waste ?

During ground truthing, it was noted that 54% of waste pickers tend to accumulate solid or dry waste for more than a month near or in their living place, with the intention of selling it in bulk for increased profit.



**Fig. 5: How Rag pickers sell their Collected Waste?**

Conversely, 26% of waste pickers opt to sell their collected waste within a week, while 20% sell on a daily basis to fulfill their immediate basic needs. Waste pickers typically sell the waste they collect on a regular basis, often once a week or more, depending on factors such as the volume of waste accumulated and the availability of buyers or recycling centers. This frequent selling ensures a steady income for



waste pickers and helps them manage their livelihood needs.

### **Conclusion:**

This situation calls for immediate public policy intervention to address the socio economic challenges faced by informal waste pickers. Providing skill-based training opportunities can empower individuals to have more options and choices regarding their livelihoods. This not only enhances their opportunities for a better employment but also enables them to pursue careers based on their interests and abilities rather than out of necessity. Such intervention could include measures to formalize their employment status, provide access to social security benefits, ensure fair wages, improve working conditions and offer opportunities for skill development and upward mobility.

Also catering to their needs related to health issues should be a priority for the law makers. Timely immunization of their children should be a priority for the government. Free hospitalization and medication can be very helpful to them. Despite all materialistic assistance the most important is an empathetic attitude towards them by both the public at large as well as the authorities. We need to value their important contribution in our society and treat them as humans.

### **References:**

1. DBRC India. (n.d.). Socio-Economic Status of Waste Pickers in Andhra Pradesh: A report. [http://www.dbrcindia.org/images/publications/Waste\\_Pickers\\_Study\\_Report\\_2017.pdf](http://www.dbrcindia.org/images/publications/Waste_Pickers_Study_Report_2017.pdf)
2. Chandigarh Administration. (2008). The Chandigarh Allotment of Prefab Shelter for the Rehabilitation of Ragpickers on License Basis Scheme, 2008. [https://upload.indiacode.nic.in/showfile?actid=AC\\_CH\\_60\\_901\\_00001\\_00001\\_1548411178914&type=regulation&filename=the\\_chandigarh\\_allotment\\_of\\_prefab\\_shelter\\_for\\_the\\_rehabilitation\\_of\\_ragpickers\\_on\\_license\\_basis\\_scheme\\_2008.pdf](https://upload.indiacode.nic.in/showfile?actid=AC_CH_60_901_00001_00001_1548411178914&type=regulation&filename=the_chandigarh_allotment_of_prefab_shelter_for_the_rehabilitation_of_ragpickers_on_license_basis_scheme_2008.pdf)
3. Chandigarh Administration. (2018). The draft of Chandigarh Solid Waste Management Bye-laws, 2018, as approved by the General House of Municipal Corporation Chandigarh. [https://chandigarh.gov.in/files/local\\_18-14054](https://chandigarh.gov.in/files/local_18-14054)
4. UNDP. (n.d.). Baseline analysis of Safai Sathis. <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/in/Baseline-analysis-of-Safai-Sathis.pdf>





**Pic: In Maloya, rags stored temporarily before selling**



**Engaging with informal waste pickers (ragpickers) during their working hours posed challenges, prompting We reached out to a few scrap dealers (Kabadiwalas) located at Sector 52, 48, Sector 38 West, Manimajra and Attawavillage to gather insights about informal waste pickers.**