Waste pickers hand over memorandum to Minister Lakshmanrao Dhoble

On February 5, 2013, waste pickers from Pune, Pimpri-Chinchwad, Mumbai, Sangli, Latur, Ahmednagar and Nasik gathered at the Press Club at Azad Maidan, Mumbai, to present a memorandum of demands to Mr Lakshmanrao Dhoble, Minister for Water and Sanitation, Government of Maharashtra. The demands included registration of waste pickers as workers, livelihood protection and education for the children of waste pickers. Accepting the memorandum, the minister promised to personally see that action was taken on each point. A delegation comprising veteran labour leader Baba Adhav, KKPKP member Poornima Chikarmane, and SWaCH Coop Pune member Shobha Bansode, also met Mr Hassan Mushrif, Labour Minister, to convey the urgency of formulating a clear policy to safeguard the livelihoods of waste pickers.

Addressing the gathering, Sonaltai, a SWaCH member from Pimpri Chinchwad where waste pickers have recently experienced first-hand the threat to their livelihoods from non-inclusive privatisation said: “Everyone has recognised that waste is gold! We did the work when no one else wanted to. Now they want us to just go away quietly. We refuse to do that. We have struggled to build credibility with citizens and we will not just hand over the fruits of our hard work to these contractors. We must be given priority for employment.” Hence, she stressed, registration of waste pickers and the setting up of a Board, was essential.

Shobha Bansode, another SWaCH member, spoke about the demand to include the children of waste pickers in the rules governing the education of children of parents ‘in unclean occupations’. She said “Waste pickers’ children need a chance to break out of this occupation. Why aren’t we included in this government scheme to help the children of those in ‘unclean occupations’?”

Added Bhausaheb Udanshive, a member of KKPKP Ahmednagar: “Yes, things are better for us today after our struggle, than they were 10 years back when we were constantly labelled as thieves and cheats. We have made a respectable name for ourselves in society and proved that we can work in an organised, responsible way – but much still needs to change. We need to continue our struggle and not be content to be used as a vote bank.”

As one waste picker after the other shared how difficult it now was to access recyclables, it became clear that the time was ripe to once again articulate the slogan with which waste pickers had first organised themselves a decade ago: “Kachra amchya malkicha, nahi kunachya bapacha!” (“The garbage is ours, not your father’s.”) This slogan rang out loud and clear in the hot Mumbai afternoon. Slogans were also raised for registration of waste pickers as workers, another key demand across the state.

The memorandum presented to Mr Lakshmanrao Dhoble, Minister for Water and Sanitation, emphasised the vital contribution of waste pickers to the economy while also stressing the need to undo the injustices of generations of caste-based oppression.

Some of the important demands included in the Memorandum are:

• Create a statutory regulatory and welfare board for all informal waste pickers, itinerant waste buyers and waste collectors by framing a Scheme under the Hamal Mathadi and Other Unprotected Manual Workers (Regulation of Employment and Welfare) Act.
  a. Register every informal waste picker, itinerant waste buyer and waste collector
  b. All municipal waste handling contracts should be conditional upon hiring workers only from the board and payment of wages and benefits shall be done through the board
  c. Only workers registered with the board shall be hired by waste handling and processing enterprises
  d. Every registered worker shall be provided death & disability cover; RSBY, maternity benefits and old age pension

• Include children of waste pickers and other recycling workers in the Central Government Pre-matric scholarship for those in unclean occupations

• Provide rest/storage sheds and other infrastructure and low interest credit

• Earmark land in the development plans and provide infrastructure for scrap markets

• Reserve land for recycling zones, give tax holidays and excise concessions to informal waste processing and recycling enterprises

The meeting was organised by Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP) Pune, SWaCH Pune and the Alliance of Indian Waste pickers (AIW).
Weight-based systems: Why SWaCH does not agree

SWaCH had been carrying out door to door collection of waste in two wards of Pimpri Chinchwad, since 2009. On the basis of an MoU signed between SWaCH and the Pimpri Chinchwad corporation (PCMC), SWaCH members collected waste in two wards, A and D, and also had the right to the income earned from the recovery and sale of recyclables. Although this scheme was functioning to the satisfaction of all, things took a turn in 2011.

In 2011, PCMC suddenly invited tenders for collection of waste in wards B and C, and awarded an integrated contract to BVG company, for door to door collection of waste and transport to the landfill. In this model, PCMC would pay the company on the basis of weight of waste collected; service users were not required to pay any user fees to the service provider — unlike in the SWaCH system where user fees were collected from households.

This led to a situation where residents in wards B and C got a free service and those in wards A and D were required to pay for waste collection! Justifiably, residents refused to pay for a service that others were getting free. Recognising that in the long run, SWaCH would now be placed in an impossible situation with regard to user fee recovery, it was decided to terminate the arrangement with the PCMC from October 2012 — and to negotiate with the corporation for retaining the jobs of SWaCH members, under the new contractors.

Some observers asked SWaCH why they did not bid for the new contract when tenders were called for, and engage with the PCMC in a competitive spirit. SWaCH answered that the weight-based waste collection system is not a sound Solid Waste Management system and goes against all that the SWaCH model promotes – such as segregation, reduction of waste, maximum recycling and citizen participation and monitoring through the payment of user fees. This new system, where trucks come and cart away all the waste and citizens do not have to segregate domestic waste into ‘wet’ and ‘dry’, may seem more ‘modern’ and problem-free on the surface, but it is not sustainable in the long run.

For example, being a weight-based system, there would be the possibility that the contractor may discourage citizens from segregating waste so that he could collect a bigger load. This mixed waste can not be composted or effectively recycled in any way — it has to just be dumped. Pune’s citizens, and citizens of surrounding villages near the dumps, are well aware of the problems involved with unregulated dumping of waste at landfills. Financially too, while the SWaCH model would pay for itself on the basis of user fees within 5 years, the new contract would require the PCMC to pay out increasing fees to the contractor each year — as the weight of waste collected was bound to keep increasing — eating into a budget which could be better spent.

And while the SWaCH model encourages citizens to reduce the quantity of waste by segregating and recycling and encourages them to take responsibility for the waste they produce and think about the larger issue of the city as a community we all share, this new system lays the burden on the Corporation which in turn simply outsources it to the contractor.

However, since jobs were at stake while signing out of the MoU, SWaCH did try to negotiate with the PCMC and convince them of their responsibility towards the displaced waste collectors to ensure them of jobs under the new contractors. Only when it became clear that there was no other option, a writ petition was filed by the waste pickers’ union Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP) against the Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation (PCMC).

And on February 5th 2013, SWaCH PCMC workers celebrated a small victory when the Bombay High Court passed a favourable Order, stating that existing SWaCH waste pickers within PCMC should be given preference by contractors while hiring Solid Waste Management staff. It also called for the setting up of a grievance redressal authority by the PCMC.

So SWaCH members will soon be back on their rounds in PCMC, collecting waste door to door, urging citizens to segregate wet and dry waste — and making our city a better place.

SWaCH Events

Swach to launch School Programme:

SwaCH is launching a school programme on Waste Generation, in partnership with the NGOs Centre for Environment Education and Parisar. The three-stage programme aims to make school children more aware about how much waste we produce, who collects this and how, what happens to it and how this affects the environment. The programme will be fun, informative and hands-on, with interactive sessions with resource persons, guided research activities like surveys and audits, field trips and practical activities. Participating schools will work towards having a zero-waste campus, and eventually earn a Green Star Rating and certification as an eco-friendly school. For more information on this school programme, please contact:
aparna.swach@gmail.com /9765405481

‘Youth & Social Entrepreneurship’: SWaCH model discussed

The Energy and Research Institute (TERI) conducted a two-day Youth Seminar in February at Fergusson College, on the theme ‘Green Growth : Preparing Youth for Sustainable Living’.

SWaCH was invited us for a panel discussion on the theme ‘Social Entrepreneurship: opportunities for youth!’. A presentation was made to about 100 students, on the SWaCH user fee model, waste management in general, sustainable lifestyles and waste pickers as social entrepreneurs.

SWaCH at Symbiosis School of Economics

Students of Symbiosis School of Economics helped to manage two SWaCH stalls set up in their college during their annual fest called ‘Laissez-Faire’ in February and during ‘Marketing Week’ of the Symbiosis Arts and Commerce College.
ST Dispo bags were sold from the stall (the stock was sold out in two days – worth Rs1468!). V-Collect bins kept for e-waste and clothes etc. were a big hit.

As students of economics, the students were interested in discussing the concept of Extended Producer Responsibility, and about the contribution of the Informal Sector to the economy.

Citizens step up

Rotaract members, Tilak Rd: Rotaract members from Maharashtra and Gujarat collected clothes (in very good condition) and together with SWaCH members and staff, sold the same at Savitribai Phule vasti. (The total sale was Rs 650.) They also distributed gloves to 25 SWaCH members in the Tilak Rd area, who work on composting waste.

Ghole road residents: Every year, a group of Ghole Rd residents who are part of the Shri Satya Sai Seva Sangathan, distributes some essential items to waste pickers. Mrs Bhatt, a member of the group, said that they feel that this is a more meaningful way of marking the festival of Sankranti, rather than the more traditional ‘haldi-kumkum’. Last year, they had donated saris to the waste pickers. This year, they distributed 35 kgs of sugar and 35 kgs of rice to SWaCH members in Chaturshrungi Prabhag 11,12,13.

SWaCH thanks these Pune citizens for recognising the contribution of waste collectors!

Supriya Sule appreciates SWaCH efforts

MP Supriya Sule visited the SWaCH stall at an exhibition of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) of Pune, organized by Bal Kalyan Vibhag, Pune. She bought S.T dispo bags and appreciated the same in her speech.

Let’s Meet:

Maina Thombre:

“After joining SWaCH two and a half years ago, I no longer have to worry about going hungry or earning a living. I have found respect and dignity here.” So says Maina Thombre, a SWaCH member who works in Manik Baug, Sinhagad Road, covering about 300 households.

Mainatai knows a thing or two about hunger and how it feels to be treated without respect. Her alcoholic husband walked out on her when her children were really young. She had no source of income but rather than live at the mercy of her in-laws, Maina left their house with her babies and made a home as best she could, beneath a bridge in Pune. She started picking waste at the containers in order to support herself and feed her family. Those were hard times and Mainatai struggled to survive.

Then, she heard about SWaCH from some women from a nearby vasti and joined the cooperative. This was a turning point in her life. Since becoming a SWaCH member, Maina has managed to become financially stable, even paying off a loan she had taken for her daughter’s wedding.

Maina’s work is appreciated by citizens in Manik Baug. Says senior citizen Mrs Rege: “I am very happy with Maina since she is always punctual, very systematic in her work and always ‘tip-taap’! I wouldn’t want Maina to be replaced by anyone else.”

Training:

SWaCH regularly organises workshops and training for its members and karyakartas, in order to refine their existing professional skills and also to build new skills. Recently, SWaCH members participated in three workshops:

Puppets for Communication:

Communicating effectively is a skill that is of key importance, especially to activists and karyakartas who often need to capture people’s attention and convey information correctly in a short span of time. Creative communication was the aim of a puppet-making workshop conducted by two interns from the Department of Adult Education, SNDT, Mumbai for 12 SWaCH karyakartas
and 2 waste pickers. The group made puppets out of waste materials (PET bottles, coconut shells, CDs, old clothes). At the end of the workshop, the participants also put up plays on issues like ‘Right to Education’, ‘Pension for All’ and ‘Direct Cash Transfer Schemes’. These puppets will be used in vastis during awareness drives. Puppets were used during the RTE awareness drive conducted last year, and it was found that they garnered immediate attention in the community.

Right to Education workshop: Now that the RTE Act has been passed, it is vital to spread information about the 25% reservation provision in private schools for children from disadvantaged backgrounds – lack of information and awareness was one of the biggest obstacles. SWaCH and KKP KP have been encouraging members to use this provision to gain admission for their children in good schools.

This workshop informed participants about how to apply for admission, who is eligible, what documentation is required, which schools they can apply to etc. Training was conducted in 14 SWaCH wards and in 20 vastis. Waste pickers have aptly used this training and got their children and even grandchildren admitted to schools. They now feel confident to go to schools armed with the training to rightfully get forms and report back to the organization of their good and bad experiences.

Buvaalisha, a member of Kagad Kach Patra Kashaktaki Panchayat (KKPKP) managed to get his daughter enrolled in a good school, thanks to the RTE advocacy work. He says: “We feel very proud when her teacher marks a star in her notebooks. She is doing well. Her teacher has given us a good review about her progress in the monthly meetings. We make sure we attend them.”

Recently about 50 children of waste pickers were given admissions through the RTE quota, in Pimpri Chinchwad schools.

Leadership workshop: The NGO ‘Samyak’ conducted a series of 10 sessions with Ward Representatives, on Leadership and Communication Skills. The focus of the workshop was to help the ward pratinidhis develop effective communication at different fora and help them realise the need to adopt different styles and methods of communication in different situations - at home, with their colleagues, with officials, at public gatherings etc. Participants learned how to get their point of view across effectively and in a non-confrontational manner while dealing with citizens and officials, public speaking and how to be an effective group leader who instils confidence and independent thinking in the team members. The group also designed a campaign and the different media that could be used to get messages across to larger audiences.