

MIGRATING TO RAG PICKING: UNFOLDING SOME FACTS ABOUT CHILD RAG PICKERS IN THE CITY OF ALLAHABAD, UTTAR PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

This paper studies the livelihood issues of rag picking children in the city of Allahabad in Uttar Pradesh during 2016. Based on the primary survey of a core sample of rag picking children and sub-samples of their adult parents/guardians, junk dealers and facilitators in the rag picking processes in the city, the paper concludes that the out of school children engaged in rag picking reflect their adverse inclusion at the bottom of the labour market. Because of the invisibility of the employers, the children working as rag pickers in the city of Allahabad are considered in this paper as self-employed. Most of the rag-picking children were living in dilapidated houses in slums of the city and they were engaged to earn income for their households. None of these children had shoes, gloves and masks for their protection at the workspace, making themselves prone to serious health problems. The paper suggests an urgent intervention from the State Government in providing basic healthcare facilities and safety-kits to the rag picking children who are under severe health risk.

Key Words: Migration, rag picking, livelihood, Uttar Pradesh

Introduction

People living at the bottom of the society arranged by castes are incapacitated to assert in public domain. Historically, they have failed to create capacity to liberate themselves from manual-menial works.

Some such communities live in the cocoon of invisibility and untouchability (Coundry, 2010: 3). In India, denial of rights and opportunities are cemented in the caste system (Olivelle, 2006: 189). Caste has played the role of one of the major determinants in India's institutions. The communities at the bottom of the caste hierarchy have remained silent for centuries. Silencing is conditioning the subordinated people to remain loyal to the authority, the latter determined by birth. Forced subordination was practiced by dominant sections of the society by instilling fear through rituals and tradition on the communities at the lower most rung of caste hierarchy.

The children in the age bracket between 5 and 17 years of such communities are often deprived of education, excluded from childcare and live in jeopardy. They often feel forced to engage in work to supplement household income. They work on a daily basis, are self-engaged, and work as much as possible by time and piece of work to enhance household income. This is notwithstanding the Acts on child labour that make it a punishable offence to employ any child in India as wage-labourer. Rag picking is one of the visible activities in the urban public space where the children below the age of 17 years are engaged for collection of materials discarded by the final users. Rag pickers refer to people who collect rags or recyclable materials that has an exchange value. Rag picking entails collecting, sorting and selling of waste materials that are found at dumpsites, river banks, sides of railway tracks, inside train compartments, bus depots, street corners and residential areas. The employer of these child workers either does not exist or exist by invisibility; the junk dealer is not within the ambit of law to be called as the employer of the rag pickers. A type of guardian mode was observed elsewhere where the junk dealers helped the rag pickers by providing shelter, arranging vehicle and protecting them from ill-treatment by police; the junk dealers were also observed acting as custodians of cash income the child rag pickers earned daily and providing interest-free credit in time of need of the rag pickers (Choudhary, 2003). Rag picking is not a household enterprise. It is thus difficult to identify the parents or adult guardians as employers. For some children, even the adult guardians are absent by invisibility. Precisely, the employer-employee relationship is characterised by the absence of employers in the case of child rag pickers in urban India.

Unlike re-use and recycling of goods used once by the final consumers in advanced countries, the used goods are disposed of by the users anywhere outside the residential areas in countries like India. While the rural space remains uncared for, the urban society expects that these materials discarded on the urban public space are also cleaned up.

The city civil society members do not generally obstruct these children from collecting these materials that is of no use-value for those who discarded these. The city administration gets in these working children a substitute of their responsibilities to keep the city clean in countries like India. A waste is a discarded material that has no immediate use-value to the consumer abandoning it (Cointreau, 1982: 4). The rag picking children discover value in these discarded materials by collection and extraction of exchange value. Thus, a market in the city develops to deal with junks.

Rather than spending time on formal education, the rag picking children devote time to collect discarded materials from the garbage. The children wander from one location to another because of unbound undefined economic space that they discover. The garbage as an economic space for the rag picking children is also a food-space for dogs, cows, pigs and other not-readily-visible insects. The rag pickers, thus, are in competition with the stray animals in collection of materials from garbage. In civil society, parlance, childhood is lost for the child rag pickers by being nowhere – they are neither in school to get education nor at home to be nourished by the parents. The rag picking children enter into an economy that is rejected by the first-hand users of materials. This inclusion shows more adverse consequences relative to the state of exclusion (Xaxa, 2012: 1). There has been a continuous influx of children into urban informal labour market (NCEUS, 2008: 101). The concentration of child labourers in the urban informal economy is because of the absence of any statutory minimum age for employment, impossibility in fixing any minimum wage rate, free entry and free exit of child labourers, absence of requirement of formal education, and manual nature of works. In the case of rag picking, the children get support in kind from the junk dealers.

The wasteland remains undefined – it becomes workspace once the garbage piles up in direct proportion with the rate at which the final users throw away these on the public space. The accumulated concentrated wastes become the wasteland for the economic engagement of the rag pickers. The rag pickers thus work on non-annexed public space or space not occupied by any private individual. Garbage as discarded materials on public space not being private property, the roaming rag pickers collect these for perceived exchangeability. These children generally live in slums that are offshoots of rapid urbanization. Multiple interacting factors responsible for migration to urban space show the absence of mono-causal explanations. Be it seasonal cultivation or underemployment in the rural economy, be it positive rural-urban wage-differential even at the bottom of the segmented labour market, be it movement from poorer region to less poor region, the precise point is rural push to urban pull in standard push-pull theories of migration (Majumder, 2015: 74).

The paper examines the nature, causes and compulsions that led the children to engage as rag pickers in the city of Allahabad and the resultant consequences that followed. The paper also examines their working-cum-living conditions, their security and identity, and the possibilities of their rehabilitation. The rest of the paper is structured as follows. Section I presents the sample and methodology. Section II briefly presents slum-living, the phenomenon of child labour and prevailing laws. Some selected quantitative indicators to unearth the nature of work of the child rag pickers are presented in section III. Section IV presents the qualitative dimensions explaining why the children remain engaged in rag picking. Finally, in Section V, conclusions and recommendations have been presented.

2. Methodology and Sample

Allahabad city was selected because it is one of the million-plus populated cities in the State of Uttar Pradesh (UP) as per Census 2011. Quantitative data were collected about the child rag pickers and their parents, and junk dealers (kabadiwalas), while qualitative information was collected through informal interviews with child rag pickers and their parents, observations of child rag pickers on the workspace, participants' observations, and facilitating zones like tea shops (the tea shop owner facilitated by providing rent-free space for keeping bi-cycles of rag pickers and allowing assembly of rag pickers every morning; the rag pickers used to term the specified tea stalls as *adda*), as assembly points for the rag pickers. In addition, distant observations and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with child rag pickers were also included.

The child rag pickers, most of whom live in slums of the city of Allahabad were observed for the study. Because of the non-availability of secondary data on the number of total child rag pickers in the city, pilot visits in the selected work-locations were made, five locations (*adda*) of rag pickers were identified. An estimate of the number of child rag pickers who assemble everyday at the selected *adda* early morning, was made by personal visits to these *addas*. Both male and female child rag pickers were selected from the *adda*. Interactions were made with the households of those rag pickers who could identify their houses (Box1).

Box 1: Coverage of the Study

Coverage	Number	Names
Rag Picking locations	5	Jhusi, Manmohan Park, Behrana, Allahpur, and Allahabad Railway Station

Sample Size

A sample of 25 child rag pickers from the city of Allahabad was taken for the study. In parallel, their parents (20) residing in slums, facilitators (5) and junk dealers (5) who had links with child rag pickers were also interviewed. However, parents or guardians of five child rag pickers could not be located. A structured schedule was also administered on the rag pickers and their households.

3. Slum, Child Labour and Laws

Urbanization shows a movement from an agrarian to an industrial economy, a progressive concentration of population in urban space (Golden, 1954; Davis, 1965). It is a long-term process of switch from spread-out pattern of human settlements to the one of concentration in urban centres (Davis, 1962). The cities experience the influx of population from rural areas. The expanding capacity of the city leads to formation of labour colonies and slums. Migration of population from rural areas to cities leads to increasing urban population, a part of which remains engaged at the bottom of the labour market and starts living in cluster of houses called *jhopdis* that ultimately get recognized as slums. Widespread urbanization is a twentieth-century phenomenon in India notwithstanding the fact that a city was a recognized space in India long back (Rangarajan, 1992: 57).

There are six million-plus populated cities in UP, each one showing varying slum population as a percentage of total city population (Table 1).

Table 1: Slum Population as Percentage of City (Million-Plus) Population in UP, 2011

City	Slum Population as Percentage of City (Total) Population
Kanpur	13.58
Lucknow	7.97
Agra	9.15
Varanasi	11.47
Meerut	40.57
Allahabad	12.15
Uttar Pradesh (Total)	16.66

Source: Census of India, 2011

The UNICEF India estimated that 28 million children aged five to fourteen years were involved in work (UNICEF, 2011). As per Census of India, the total number of child workers declined from 11.0 million in 1991 to 3.6 million in 2001. Following NSSO data, the estimated

number of child workers was 13.3 million in 1993-94 and 8.6 million in 2004-05. They constituted about 6.2 per cent of children in the age group 5-14 years in 1993-94 and 3.4 per cent in 2004-05 (NCEUS, 2008: 100). The enormous differences in the estimated number of working children reflect the difficulty of their cardinal counting.

Rag picking is essentially an urban phenomenon. The children from the weaker sections of the society are often forced to join the job of rag picking for survival and for supplementing household income. Hence, this kind of child labour is also a forced labour. A Report on 1,370 children in Kathmandu, Nepal, showed that around 46 per cent of the street children were rag pickers who were known as “Khaté”. These children were called “Bui Doi” (Dust Children) in Vietnam, “Resistoleros” (Little Rebels) in Honduras, “Marginals” (Criminals/Marginals) in Brazil (CWIN, 1996).

3.1 Legislations on Child Labour in India

The first legislation on child labour in India was introduced in British India in 1881 as incorporated in the Indian Factories Act which prohibited employment of children below seven (7) years, limiting the working hours for children to nine (9) hours a day and providing four (4) holidays per month.

In addition to India’s Constitutional provisions, the Acts that pledge to provide legal protection to working children include the following:

- The Children (Pledging of Labour) Act, 1933
- The Employment of Children Act, 1938
- Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986
- Child Labour (Prohibition & Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016

The 1986 Act was a follow up of the National Commission on Labour (1966-1969), the Gurupadaswamy Committee on Child Labour (1979) and the Sanat Mehta Committee (1984). The 1986 Act aimed to prohibit the entry of children into hazardous occupations and to regulate the works of children in non-hazardous occupations. The 1986 Act prohibited works of children between 7 p.m. and 8 a.m. (NCEUS, 2008: 159). The Act banned employment of children who did not complete their 14th year of age in 18 specified occupations and 65 processes; laid down penalties for employment of children in violation of the provisions of this Act and other Acts which forbid the employment of children.

The Child Labour (Prohibition & Regulation) Amendment Act, 2016 amended the 1986 Act. The 2016 Act distinguished between adolescents

and children, defining the former as persons aged between 14 and 18 years; and defining the latter as persons aged below 14 years, or such age as may be specified in the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2009, whichever is more. The Act completely banned employment of children below 14 years of age in all occupations, except those run by his or her own family with a condition of continued education. It defined children between 14 and 18 years as adolescents and barred their employment in any hazardous occupations. The Act made child labour a cognizable offence attracting a jail term between six months and two years or a penalty between Rs. 20,000 and Rs. 50,000 or both for employing children below 14 years for the first time. Repeat offenders will attract imprisonment between one year and three years. In case, the offender is a parent, it proposed a fine of Rs.10,000 for repeat offence committed by parent. The names of hazardous occupations as listed in 2016 Act were: mining, inflammable substances and hazardous processes under the Factories Act.

4. Rag Picking Children: Some Quantitative Facts

The incidence of child labour in the city's informal economy was because of poverty of the households living in slums. Each of the households in the slums identified as housing the selected rag pickers had at least one child who is engaged in rag picking or performs work related to rag picking, as informed by the sample rag picking children.

4.1 Demographic-Geographic Backgrounds: Selected Indicators

Rag picking children in the sample comprised of 84.0 per cent male. Sixty per cent of child rag pickers belonged to Hindu households (all belonging to SCs) and the rest 40 per cent were Muslims including 8.0 per cent from General caste within Muslims, as they reported as sub-castes (Table 2).

Table 2: Distribution of Households of Child Rag Pickers by Sub-Castes and Minority

Sub-Caste	Number
Banskar	13 (52.0)
Jamadar	1 (4.0)
Chamar	1 (4.0)
Sheikh	5 (20.0)
Khan	1 (4.0)
Ansari	1 (4.0)
Ahmad	3 (12.0)
Total Rag Pickers	25 (100.0)

Note: Figures in parentheses show percentages of total.

Source: Field Survey, 2016

The household size of 40.0 per cent of child rag pickers was between five and eight; for 24.0 per cent it was between 9 and 12 and for 16.0 per cent it was between two and four. The houses, parents and other adult household members were not found for 20.0 per cent of the children implying that these children were orphaned or abandoned or trafficked (Table 3). Forty-four per cent of the households of child rag pickers having houses lived in jhopdi (dilapidated kutchcha house), 20.0 per cent in kutchcha house, 32.0 per cent in semi-pucca house and 4.0 per cent in pucca house (Table 4). Sixty-four per cent of the child rag pickers never went to school, 32.0 per cent were drop-outs and only 4.0 per cent were school-going (Table 5) (Field Survey, 2016).

Table 3: Household Size of Child Rag Pickers

Households size (numbers)	Number	Per cent
2-4	4	16.0
5-8	10	40.0
9-12	6	24.0
Not found	5	20.0
Total	25	

Source: Field Survey, 2016

Table 4: Housing Conditions of Child Rag Pickers

Types of houses	Number	Per cent
Pucca	1	4.0
Semi-pucca	8	32.0
Kutchcha	5	20.0
Jhopdi (made by polythene and wood)	11	44.0
Total	25	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2016

Table 5: Educational Status of Child Rag Pickers

Variables	Number	Per cent
School going	1	4.0
Drop-out	8	32.0
Never gone to school	16	64.0
Total	25	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2016

4.2 Distribution of Households of Migrants by Period of Migration

All the rag picking households migrated from the rural areas of the adjoining states to the city of Allahabad over varying periods, the minimum being five years and maximum being unknown (the maximum number of years since when they migrated was not mentioned by 8.0 per cent of the households; mentioning more than 30 years could mean any span) (Table 6).

Table 6: Households of Rag Pickers migrated since Past by Years

Migrated since (No. of years)	Number	Per cent
5-10	1	4.0
10-15	2	8.0
15-20	7	28.0
20-25	5	20.0
25-30	8	32.0
More than 30	2	8.0
Total	25	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2016

4.3 Intra/Inter-State Migration

Most of the rag picking households migrated from the adjoining states of Madhya Pradesh (52 per cent) followed by Jharkhand (36 per cent). The intra-state migration was from the rural areas of the adjoining district Sultanpur (Table 7).

Table 7: States from where Households of Rag Picking Children migrated

States	Number	Per cent
Madhya Pradesh	13 (52.0)	4.0
Jharkhand	9 (36.0)	8.0
West Bengal	1 (4.0)	28.0
Uttar Pradesh (Intra-state)	2 (8.0)	20.0
Total Rag Pickers	25 (100.0)	32.0

Note: Figures in parentheses show percentages of total.

Source: Field Survey, 2016

4.4 Reasons for Low Level Education of Rag Picking Children

Household poverty was the major reason why the rag picking children remained deprived of education. The other reasons included reluctance of parents to send children to school as the latter were seen as bread earners; the reasons like children not interested in studies and coercion by teachers went parallel, the latter often reinforcing the former (Table 8).

Table 8: Reasons for Low level of Education among Rag Picking Children

Reasons	Number
Not interested to go to school	10 (40.0)
Parents did not send to school	13 (52.0)
Poverty of Household	15 (60.0)
Coercion by Teacher	9 (32.0)
Classmates teasing and abusing	5 (20.0)
Total Rag Pickers	25 (100.0)
Ahmad	3 (12.0)
Total Rag Pickers	25 (100.0)

Note: Figures in parentheses show percentages of total.

Source: Field Survey, 2016

4.5 Working Hours per day of Rag Picking Children

The working hours per day of the rag picking children ranged between four hours at the minimum and above 10 hours at the open-ended maximum (Table 9).

Table 9: Working Hours per Day of Rag Picking Children

Working hours	Number
4-6	8 (32.0)
6-8	5 (20.0)
8-10	12 (48.0)
Above10	3 (12.0)
Total Rag Pickers	25 (100.0)

Note: Figures in parentheses show percentages of total.

Source: Field Survey, 2016

4.6 Waste Materials collected

The rag pickers used to collect materials for sale and also were on the lookout for any saleable materials based on learning by doing. The children sometimes worked with a short-length brittle stick to extract the collectable materials from garbage; but mostly collection of waste materials was done by their uncovered hands; the use-and-throw stick was collected from some garbage. The kits for collection of waste materials were one backpack (bora) on the back of the rag picker and one small stick in one hand. The collected items were exchanged at different prices as fixed by the junk dealer (Box 2).

Box 2: Waste Materials collected by Rag Pickers

Waste Materials
Plastics, Bottle, Glass, Iron, Cans, Aluminum Foil, Bones, Hair, Medicines Wrapper, Papers, Electric Bulb, Tin, Copper, Petal, Medical Wastage

Source: Field Survey, 2016

4.7 Children as Bread Earners in Households

The major reason why the children were engaged in rag picking was to earn income for their households. The range of income that a child earned from rag picking was between Rs. 40.00 and Rs. 250.00 per day (Table 10).

Table 10: Income of Child Rag Pickers per Day

Income (Rs.)	Number
40.00-50.00	3 (12.0)
51.00-100.00	3 (12.0)
101.00-150.00	8 (32.0)
151.00-200.00	7 (28.0)
201.00-250.00	4 (16.0)
Total Rag Pickers	25 (100.0)

Note: Figures in parentheses show percentages of total.

Source: Field Survey, 2016

The income per month of 92.0 per cent of rag picking children's households was in the range between Rs. 2,000 and Rs. 8,000 (Table 11).

Table 11: Income per Month of Households of Rag Pickers

Income (Rs.)	Number
2,000.00 - 4,000.00	4 (16.0)
4,001.00 - 6,000.00	13 (52.0)
6,001.00 - 8,000.00	6 (24.0)
More than 8,000.00	2 (8.0)
Total Rag Pickers	25 (100.0)

Note: Figures in parentheses show percentages of total.

Source: Field Survey, 2016

The households of rag picking children reported approximate expenditure per month on food but failed to report the expenditure on non-food items (Table 12).

Table 12: Expenditure of Households of Rag Pickers by Food and non-Food Per Month

Expenditure (Rs.)	Number	Per cent
Food	100-150	15
	150-200	5
Non-food	NA	
Total	20	100.0

NA: Not Available

Source: Field Survey, 2016

4.8 Tenure and Trainers in Rag Picking

The children remained engaged in rag picking since immediate past (one year) and since remote past (10 years). Sixty per cent of the children learnt rag picking from their parents, 16.0 per cent from neighbours, 8.0 per cent from friends, and 16.0 per cent were self-learnt. Hence, there was no institutional role in training such workers or in making them aware of the safety measures at workspace. Fifty-two per cent of these children were engaged only in rag picking. Others were engaged part time in works in hotels, festivals and even begging.

4.9 Physical Injury, Health Hazards

Iron pricked unnumbered times in the hands and legs of all the rag pickers; 92.0 per cent were bitten by animals and insects; hands and legs of 84.0 per cent were cut by broken glass during working hours. All the children feel fatigued due to long working hours. Most of them consumed intoxicants like tobacco (gutkha), alcohol, drugs and were under the habit of smoking. The adverse working conditions resulted in their falling sick. Getting injured was common for them because of cold, malnourishment and exposure to contamination and bacteria. For curative healthcare, 24.0 per cent children took medical treatment from medical practitioners or from medical shops; others relied on treatment at home, *zadu-tona* (black magic) in illness.

4.10 Security Cards and Financial Inclusion of Households of Child Rag Pickers

Eighty per cent of rag picking children had Aadhar, 40.0 per cent had voter identity cards, 24.0 per cent had ration cards and 28.0 per cent had no cards. Forty-eight per cent of the rag pickers' households had Jan Dhan Yojna account, 36.0 per cent had no accounts in banks (Table 13).

Table 13: Bank Accounts of Households of Rag Pickers

Bank Account	Number	Per cent
Current Account	4	16.0
Jan Dhan Yojna	12	48.0
No Bank Account	9	36.0
Aadhar	20	80.0
Voter Identity Card	10	40.0
Ration Card	6	24.0
No Cards	7	28.0
Total	25	100.0

Source: Field Survey, 2016

4.11 Borrowing by Households of Rag Pickers

The households of child rag pickers borrowed from multiple sources like Mahajans (moneylenders), neighbours, kabadiwalas (junk dealers) and Samooh (self-help groups). The households borrowed to meet expenses related to basic needs (mainly food), medical treatment and rituals.

5. Rag Picking by Children: Some Qualitative Facts

Based on the observations, focus group discussions and case studies, how the rag picking children worked to live is presented below.

5.1 Household Works and Leisure

In slums during off-work all used to be engaged in daily unpaid activities; girl children used to provide support labour to supplement the specific gender role of their mothers. Household activities of rag picking girl children included childcare, cleaning and washing, cooking, fetching water and collecting fuel. Girl children were seen caring for their younger siblings at home because their parents and other adults were engaged in rag picking at the same time. This labour robbed them of their leisure. We observed the child rag pickers repetitively at different locations and found them engaged in multiple activities; gender differences were observed – girls spending more time in household chores in parallel to being engaged in rag picking and were subjected to external hostility.

Most of the household activities used to take place during morning or late evening hours since most of the day was spent on the wasteland. While the boys were engaged in outdoor works, the girl children toiled hard, both in outdoor and indoor works. Patriarchal society deeply internalized the idea of male superiority and female subordination. The society reinforced the stereotypes of gender roles with the result that girls remained incapacitated individually to break the trap. Girl children were discriminated against intra-household and socially. Most of the girls never went to school; they remained engaged in household activities to substitute or to supplement their mother's gender-specific role. Girl children experienced dual exploitation each day – at workplace and at home. They were engaged in rag picking at early age and stopped early for reasons of security and early marriage. In the lives of rag picking children there was no distinct demarcation of time for leisure and work; these two went in parallel. Labour by child robbed the child of childhood. The leisure time, as available, revolved around chatting, dancing, singing, playing games with the peer group, roaming around, watching television, and playing video game on their mobile phones.

5.2 Health of the Rag Picking Children

The immediate impact of adverse inclusion of the rag pickers was on their health. Most of them used to suffer from fever, cold, tetanus, skin problem, headache, pain in bone joints, eye infections, backache and injuries. They often touched materials contaminated with human excreta and then had food without washing hands. Malnutrition lessened their resistance to diseases. Living in poorly ventilated houses and overcrowding increased the extent of transmission of diseases. Consuming humanly non-consumable items found in garbage bins led to stomach ache. Injuries like cuts and wounds from sharp and rusted metals were very common that made them vulnerable to tetanus. The risks related to children's physical development on the workspace adversely affected their education and psychological development.

5.3 Self-Employment in Rag Picking: Nature, Causes and Compulsions

Most of the rag pickers were slum dwellers which facilitated them to get engaged in the city labour market. All the junk dealers and parents/guardians, and the Nagar Nigam officials in the city of Allahabad denied that they employed the children. Thus, by negation of existence of any probable employer, we presumed that the children were self-employed in collection of waste materials for sale to junk dealers. The employer remaining absent, the 2016-Child Labour Amendment Act remained outside the ambit of the Administration to bring to book any employer for engaging children in labour. The rag picking children had no idea about the existence of any such Act meant to protect them.

The waste materials dispersed daily on public space gives an opportunity to the children to scrape the dumped garbage in search of re-usable materials to collect for sale. This type of self-employment for collection of abandoned public resources did not need anybody to negotiate at the collection point. The collection, thus, was unobstructed and free from imposition of any penalty for trespassing.

5.4 Assembly Point of Rag Pickers

The rag pickers generally faced no resistance while collecting materials discarded by people on public space. The rag pickers used to assemble in a tea shop called *adda* coming either on foot or on bicycle depending on the distance to be covered within the city. The children formed groups in *adda* and self-allotted the number of collection points in the city and outskirts. The tea shop provided a communicative space for them for dispersal to different locations for collecting garbage.

5.5 Supply Point for Rag Pickers

The kabadiwalas (junk dealers) in the city of Allahabad having fixed locations were the purchase points where the rag pickers used to sell materials after these were classified. The prices of items were fixed by the junk dealers. The rag pickers had no Organisation to represent them in bargaining for fixing the price per unit of the exchangeable materials, while the junk dealers were in collusion linked with social network and communication over mobile phone. Our conversations with the selected junk dealers in the city did not reveal much about the market in junks. They however reported not to have faced any trouble from the rag pickers or the police and public administration in junk dealing. They did not disclose if they used to pay *suvidha shulk* (bribe money) to the caretakers of law.

5.6 Reasons why Children remained engaged in Rag Picking

The children could not be in school in spite of willingness because the adult members of their households did not have any certain source of income. The children opined that rag picking was the only means for survival notwithstanding the fact that many children expressed their reluctance to get tied to this activity. However, a few of them liked this job for this being a non-excludable activity performed on self-chosen time that required no employer and made them financially independent.

In Jhusi area of the city of Allahabad the rag picking children were afraid even to tell their names and addresses. What we came to know ultimately was that one of the rag pickers named Lakhan used to live at Gaughaat area and the other named Nizamuddin used to live in a slum called Munshi Purva behind Allahabad railway station. They used to migrate each year from the state of Jharkhand to work for around two months as rag pickers at Allahabad and go back to the village in Jharkhand where their parents lived. Their household members used to work as agricultural labourers for four months per year at the maximum during rain-fed paddy cultivation after which they remained unemployed. They found rag picking a free-entry job to get engaged in. Lakhan used to come to Jhusi daily riding bicycle. His household left the traditional occupation of making baskets and other products from bamboo for many generations because of increased input (bamboo) cost and became rag pickers. The group that they formed for rag picking consisted of around 15 members that included both boys and girls. These 15 members got scattered by sub-groups depending on the number of dumping locations of waste materials. They used to decide the location they would work in sub-groups. The assembly point of the rag pickers was mostly the central

area of the city of Allahabad but as the central area could not engage all of them, hence they used to get dispersed to go to far-off areas within the city. These children were not in schools. They had to continue rag picking because of household poverty. They either never got admission into school or were early drop outs in a trade-off between education and work, that went against education. Delinked from school education, they were forced into rag picking.

5.7 Caste as a Barrier to Entry in Educational Institutions

In India, deprivation and denial of rights and opportunities are strongly founded in the caste system. Historically, caste played a significant role in educational institutions, training institutions, employability, and upward mobility. Rag pickers are apparently excluded, but are actually adversely included in the labour market to be exploited by civil/elite society.

Caste-coupled practice of looking at human beings as untouchables erected historical barriers against the latter in India. Birth-determined social status kept the members of low caste households distanced from mainstream socio-cultural life. Children engaged in rag picking were victims of discrimination in schools and were often ill-treated by teachers and privileged children because of the social stigma attached to their work and their dirty clothes. Even the children enrolled in schools continued to work as rag pickers and were often absent or used to come late and their concentration in studies lessened due to their fatigue. In spite of being willing to go to school, some children could not do so for conflicting learning hours and work hours. According to some children, rag picking work was an enabler for their food security.

Every slum had a non-functioning primary school and Anganwadi centre. As alleged by the slum dwellers, some disputed buildings housed these schools or centres. In Alopi Bagh Jhopadpatti (slum) most of the rag picking children were averse to go to school because the teachers used to physically abuse them, made them wait outside the classroom, and non-slum children also used to abuse them. The Anganwadi centre that was set up inside Alopi Bagh slum in the past was locked because the inhabitants of this slum mostly belonged to scheduled caste (neechi jaati) and were engaged in rag picking. The lady teacher was from upper caste (pundit) household who declined to make the school functional by teaching the children from low caste households, lest they pollute her caste-purity. The caste discrimination faced by the child rag pickers in their schools was also observed in Minto Park slum and Huddi Godam slum.

The reason why children could not attend school was not only because they were engaged in rag picking or worked as wage labourer, in many

cases, parents could not afford the costs (fees, uniform, meals, and study materials) of sending their children to school. Children working on wasteland lived far from the nearest school. Girl children used to look after younger brothers and sisters. Education of girl children was not a priority for the parents. Children engaged in rag picking used to face discrimination in school from teachers and from children of privileged households because of the social stigma attached to the work of the rag pickers, their dirty clothes and the absence of sense of hygiene. Children enrolled in school who were simultaneously engaged in rag picking had often been absent or used to come late and their concentration in studies was reduced due to exhaustion and inadequate sleep at night.

5.8 Social Identity of Child Rag Pickers

The poor and illiterate parents needed more working hands to supplement household income. It was an easy entry for children in the labour market at the bottom without having an easy exit. The stigma of caste-cum-poverty encompassed the rag picking children in the city of Allahabad. In Alopi Bag Jhopadpatti and Minto Park slum, the child rag pickers and their parents revealed their experience of being looked down upon or viewed with suspicion by the non-slum dwellers because they belonged to the lowest strata of the society and were engaged in works that are considered dirty by white collar workers and by non-workers. A child rag picker, Rakesh, lamented, “hum loge neechi jaati se hain aur phir kooda uthaanewala ganda kaam karte hain” (we are from low caste and engaged in dirty works like rag picking). Many rag picking households felt socially excluded. In Alopi Bag Jhopadpatti, Vikas, engaged as a rag picker, explained that “the rag picking children are looked down upon, teased and beaten up by children from well-to-do families; they have no friends in the school. They feel isolated from civil society because the latter excluded them and perceived them as criminals. This is because the rag picking children belong to lower strata in caste hierarchy and their occupations are seen as dirty”.

5.9 Why do the Rag Picking Children remain Silent in the Public Domain?

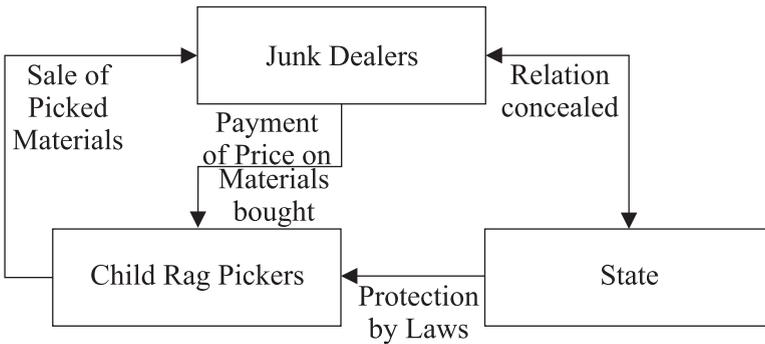
The primary reason why the rag picking children remained silent over generations was their birth in the pada-dalit (lowest of the low by caste hierarchy) Bansor community in Uttar Pradesh. They could not emerge as a strong political entity; they did not have adequate resources for secure livelihood; they remained incapacitated due to absence of education and awareness, and because of their Dalit identity by birth.

Many of these households lost their traditional occupations and were compelled to choose new jobs. They found income opportunities in the unobstructed non-excludable easy-to-find manual rag picking work. Their children did not go to school even in case their hamlet had a school in its premises because of their birth in lowest caste, and because they were living in dirty places and were engaged in work on wasteland. They always felt discriminated against in the school. The households of these communities lived in one-room jhopdi (dilapidated kutchcha room). Many children of these households worked as rag pickers to supplement household income. They had been struggling since remote past for state-identity. The rag picking households residing in the slums migrated from different states that left them demobilized. These households used to live in fear lest they were evicted anytime. Being economically weak and socially ostracized, they were incapable to protest against injustice. The rag pickers used to live under the scanner of suspicion and tolerate abusive language. The rag pickers lived as marginalized on the periphery of the city. They remained silent because civil society did not listen to them.

5.10 Rag Pickers, Junk Dealers and the State: Interlinks

The economic links between the rag pickers and the junk dealers were visible; the latter had storage-cum-shops displaying dumped discarded materials that were the supply point for the rag pickers. The relationship between the rag pickers and the junk dealers was extremely unequal – the former were not represented by any union in price fixing, weighing and counting of materials. The roaming kabadiwalas (hawkers generally plying cycle carts purchasing disposable materials from residential houses at piece or weight rate) were the substitutes of the rag pickers for the fact that the disposable materials purchased by these kabadiwalas reduced the quantum of disposed-off materials on the public space. While the roaming kabadiwalas generally owned or hired a cycle cart and had access to doors of houses of the households, the rag picking children had no such cart-support for collection of materials and no access to reach the doors of the houses; the latter also lived in fear lest the household members perceived them as thieves once they would enter the private space adjoining the residential houses. The child rag pickers had no competition with the kabadiwalas for the fact that the wastes the kabadiwalas collect was more than what the rag-picking children could manage over time. The links between the junk dealers and the state administration was opaque though it was alleged by one of the junk dealers that he used to pay extra-legal money to local *dabang* (muscleman) for smooth running of his business (Flow Chart).

Flow Chart: Interlinking Rag Pickers, Junk Dealers and State



5.11 Relevance of Law: A Critique

The introduction of Acts to protect children from hazardous occupations and sending them back to school had only partial impact for the reason that the adult members of the households considered these children as the earners of main or supplementary income for the households. The parents/guardians could hardly be made to pay penalty for their denial of the fact that they sent their children to work on the dumping ground of garbage; this is apart from the impact of clause in 2016 Act of the Government of India that delinked domestic works of children deemed as child labour from penal provisions conditioned by the fact that education of the children continued unabated. The children were out of school not only because of their engagement in rag picking, but also due to conflicting hours between rag picking and institutional education. Further, the time-compartmentalization of household works and garbage collection was opaque particularly for the girl children who were either at home substituting their mother’s gender-specific role or in garbage collection on the wasteland. State intervention in intra-household child labour is also a difficult proposition. The employer of child rag pickers remaining absent or invisible in a city like Allahabad, the inspection and control by the official entrusted with the task may end up in failure contrary to the pledge of the 2016 Act that ‘The appropriate Government shall make or cause to be made periodic inspection of the places at which the employment of children is prohibited and hazardous occupations or processes are carried out....’ (GoI, 2016). The de jure distinction between children and adolescents as in Act 2016 is opaque and not verifiable de facto. At the socio-cultural level, the girl children working as rag pickers and out of school were withdrawn from rag picking after they attained two-digit age for security and imminent marriage decided by the adult members in the household, making the distinction between children and adolescent

in the 2016 Act not-much-relevant. The 2016 Act had a provision of constituting ‘a Fund in every district or for two or more districts to be called the Child and Adolescent Labour Rehabilitation Fund...’ that will show accumulation of money deposited from collection of penalty on the offender for the purposes of rehabilitation of the rescued child labour (GoI, 2016). The fixing of responsibility in maintaining this Fund once created at district levels needs transparency.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Most of the rag picking children lived in dilapidated houses in slums of the city of Allahabad. They were not in schools because their illiterate parents found in these children additional working hands at an early age, and thus children were engaged to earn income for their households. They were self-employed to collect the materials from garbage to sell to local junk dealers. The rag pickers hardly understood the equivalence in exchange. The children followed flexible time for rag picking. Female children experienced eve teasing during working hours. Work-related fatigue was common among the rag picking children. None of these children had shoes, gloves and masks for their protection at the workspace. All rag pickers felt isolated from the rest of the society that perceived them as unwanted because they lived by collecting materials discarded by households and public institutions. The rag picking communities remained silent in the public domain for their inability to emerge as strong political entity, due to their incapacity to accumulate private resources, and uncertain access to public resources.

The study proposes the following short term measures to improve the livelihood of rag picking children. First, the state government needs to identify the households having children as regular rag pickers. Second, initiatives must be taken to provide cost-free carry bag, and third, protective equipments like gloves, footwear, masks and tools to sort rag must be given to them. Besides these steps, a Healthcare Centre well equipped with the facilities for medical treatment by registered medical practitioners needs to be set up for each cluster of slums in every city to take care of the rag picking children.

The long term measure should be to identify, based on city-specific slum census, the children engaged in rag picking plus the street children working as rag pickers and rehabilitate them to boarding school and retain them there for each million-plus populated city in India by cost-free distribution of food for education. The Rehabilitation Fund as incorporated in 2016 Act may cover the cost of education and food of the rescued and rehabilitated children.

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