

# **Organising the Unorganised**

**A Case Study of the  
Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat  
(Trade Union of Waste-pickers)**

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We analyse the evolution of the 10 year old Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (trade union of waste-pickers) based in Pune city, India and draw out its distinctive features in terms of ideology, structure and process in support of our argument that process and methodology are critical in empowering the poor, and in realising the transformatory potential of organisations of the poor. We also highlight the meanings of "collective ownership", "participation" and "empowerment" as they are understood and operationalised by the organisation.

### **Section 1: The Genesis**

It was while implementing the National Adult Education Programme through the SNTD Women's University in 1990 that we first met child waste-pickers at one education centre. Inspired by the pedagogical method of Paulo Freire, we accompanied them on their forays into the garbage bins and soon realised that collection of source segregated scrap would offer them better working conditions and more time for 'education'. We campaigned for source segregation of garbage in an elite neighbourhood nearby so that the girls could source the scrap easily. Excited by the prospect, their mothers, who were also waste-pickers told us that, "our daughters have never been to school, let them learn. We'll enrol them in school and we'll collect the segregated scrap". About thirty adult women waste-pickers were issued identity cards by SNTD for collecting source segregated scrap in the neighbourhood. Their earnings improved dramatically because source segregated scrap fetched better rates, reduced their hours of work and improved the actual physical conditions of their work.

Six months later, an entrepreneur offered a doorstep garbage collection service (a motorised vehicle with two labourers) in the same neighbourhood for a fee, promising to rid the area of garbage containers. The citizens bought the idea which had a direct and negative impact on the livelihoods of the waste-pickers. We protested, first appealing to the entrepreneur and then to the residents. "You are educated and you have capital, why don't you start some other business?" "We have been doing this for generations. We are not educated and have no money. As it is we live off what you throw. If you take this away what will we eat?" Finally, we did a *bin chipko andolan* (held on to the bins so that they could not be carted away). The residents relented and discontinued the service and the entrepreneur withdrew.

By this time it was clear to us and to those directly affected by the entrepreneur that there could be other claimants to the "wealth in waste" and that small group endeavours were not likely to counter the threat and this became the basis for organising waste-pickers on a mass

scale. It was Dr Baba Adhav, President of the Hamal Panchayat (trade union of coolies/headloaders) and veteran labour leader of informal sector workers in Maharashtra who homed in on the importance of "critical mass" in organising the poor.

The process of organising waste-pickers pre-dated the actual formation of the Union. Waste-pickers and *their perceptions of issues* were central in the organising process. Since the activists accompanied the waste-pickers on their beats the *reality of the present*, and the ongoing process of *reflection and analysis* enabled them to crystallise the *critical issues* that are so important in process of organising. This also offered the opportunity for establishing *close and enduring reciprocal relationships* with the waste-pickers.

Typically, the poor define their needs as jobs and credit. It was no different with waste-pickers. In the waste-pickers' own words what they did was not "work" but "*kachra chivadne*" (rummaging through garbage). Work was "a secure job in the government or in a company". The reflective and analytical process that the activists and waste-pickers jointly engaged in focussed on understanding the concept of work. It was during this process that the waste-pickers acknowledged that waste-picking had been a means of earning that they had been pushed into when they migrated to the city in large numbers during the drought in 1972. Then, even more so than now, their caste had prevented their easy entry into domestic work. Construction labour had been an option that they had rejected because "Who wants to work as a construction labourer? The supervisors treat you like their wives". They concluded that waste-picking was relatively more lucrative than domestic work, more "free" from sexual harassment and the servile feudal relationships in wage labour, that they had been subjected to in the villages. They had always been aware that secure jobs were hard to come by and also realised that we would not be able to fulfil this aspiration. Neither were waste-pickers interested in income generation programmes that could enable occupational change but also entailed a long, slow process of learning new skills and surviving in the market. They were interested in changing the terms and conditions of work in their present occupation. This understanding translated into KKPKPs perspective on scrap collection and the organisational strategies that derived from it.

Until that time the concerned waste-pickers had never foreseen a time when there would be no garbage on the streets. It had always been there and generations had lived off it. What they did know was that they had to contend with dogs, cats, cows and vermin when in the garbage bin; that the stench of putrefying garbage became an indivisible part of their olfactory organ; that the metal and glass shards could cut their hands if they were not careful; that the scrap came to

the bin already filtered by domestic workers and security guards who had taken the high value material; that the police rounded them up *en masse* when there was a theft in a neighbourhood; that municipal conservancy workers often asked them for "*chai pani*"(pin money); that citizens complained about the mess they made whilst sitting on the roadside to sort the scrap; that citizens saw them as "dirty, thieving scum of the earth"; that it was only the "*malwari*" (moneylender) who saw them as creditworthy; that the scrap trader arbitrarily fixed the purchase rates of scrap depending on how vociferous the waste-picker was; that the scrap trader would arbitrarily reduce the weights of the scrap claiming that it was dirty or moist; that the scrap trader was not going to give them a pension when they became too old to work; that their husbands suspected their fidelity and would be waiting to thrash them; that their children were ashamed to acknowledge their mothers' occupations; and above all that there would be no food in the house if they felt like taking a holiday. These constituted the critical issues as identified by the waste-pickers.

It is these critical issues that informed the process of organising and then sought to establish an alternate identity for waste-pickers as "workers" premised on the belief that scrap collection was *socially relevant, economically productive and environmentally beneficial "work"*, and that the working conditions could be changed. The women from the group of thirty campaigned alongside the activists, convincing their colleagues that it was time to stand up, speak out and assert their rights. They had already learnt from their earlier experience that it had been their *collective action* that had resolved the problem. The formation of the KKPKP was a logical progression in the process of organising.

A "Convention of Waste-pickers" was organised under Dr Adhav's leadership, by the SNTD activists and Mohan Nanavre, the son of a waste-picker, leader of the Dalit Swayamsevak Sangh (a Dalit rights organisation) and a long time associate of Dr Adhav. Dr Adhav's stature among the urban poor, acquired through 30 years of sustained work among the headloaders lent credibility to the effort.

The first of its kind, the Convention held in May 1993, was attended by over 800 waste-pickers from across the city. The Convention presented the waste-pickers with a platform to voice their grievances. Successive waste-pickers spoke about the indignity of their existence, the harassment from the police being a recurrent theme. "*Kachra amchya malkicha, nahi kunachya bapacha*" (garbage belongs to us, not to anybody's father) became the unifying slogan. When asked what she felt about the Convention, Hirabai Shinde told the press, "*Ata paryant amhi*

*janavarat jama hoto, Baba Adhavanni amhala mansat anun basavlay*"(Until now we were counted among the animals, Baba Adhav has brought us to sit here as humans).

Those present at the Convention resolved that:

- the Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (organisation of scrap collectors) would be set up as a registered trade union to represent the collective identity and interests of scrap collectors
- members would pay an annual fee to support the running of the organisation
- men and women working as scrap collectors would be eligible to become members irrespective of caste, region and religious affiliation
- the organisation would not only address the immediate/ sectoral needs of members but also be part of the larger struggle against injustice and exploitation, for a socially just, equitable and humane society
- the organisation would adopt non violent methods of resistance and "*satyagraha*" to challenge systemic injustice

Although the organisation offered and promised nothing by way of tangible benefits or services, it offered hope that collective action could end the isolation and injustice experienced by individual waste-pickers, and the response was tremendous. The news about the Convention spread like wild fire through the networks of waste -pickers congregating at the scrap stores, the dumping sites, the garbage bins and the sorting sites and the Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat was born.

## **Section 2: Strategy, Form, Governance structure and Membership**

### **Organisational Strategy**

1. The sector specific collective organisation of unprotected and unrecognised waste-pickers and itinerant buyers who are the poorest and the most marginalised among poor urban workers. Waste-pickers have been overlooked in all kinds of organising and development endeavours. Trade unions continue to be preoccupied with workers in the organised sector; the social workers from NGOs rarely meet waste-pickers who are usually at work when they come around; and *Dalit* organisations are somewhat sceptical about an attempt that, in their perception, reinforces the links between caste and occupation. Another reason was that the

waste-pickers were hitherto subsumed under the 'urban informal sector'. For the first time, they had an opportunity to represent themselves and an accompanying risk of being 'left out' if they did not.

2. Waste-pickers often complain that, "earlier we used to get lots of good quality scrap. That time there were not so many young men. Now they (itinerant buyers) buy scrap so the shopkeepers store it and sell it to them. And even the men (male waste-pickers) who collect from the containers, they go around at night on cycles and by the time we go there is not even a scrap of paper left!" Nonetheless, they recognise that there is nothing inherently antagonistic in their relationship with men. They know that men in the sector are also poor and from the same castes and almost as powerless as they are, the difference is in the degree of powerlessness.

They experience that it is mostly within the household that men exercise their power. Like Ranubai Kamble, when asked what her husband does said, "Oh my husband? He is the Maharajah of the Buddh Mandir", referring to the place outside the Buddha Shrine where the men congregate to play cards and while away their time. At one level they resent it but at another they rationalise it by saying "what to do? Men have to exhibit their masculinity somewhere." Gender inequalities further exacerbate the disempowerment of women.

Therefore, the Union includes both men and women, but recognises and addresses the gender inequalities.

3. A holistic approach that encompasses struggle against all forms of injustice, inequality and exclusion in the social, economic and political spheres. This is based on the understanding that poverty is not only an economic issue but has social, cultural and political dimensions as well.
4. Use of a combination of mass struggle (mobilisation/struggle/agitation) and development activities (reconstruction/development of alternatives). This is based on the belief that development activities such as the credit co-operative and the scrap store cannot challenge entrenched power structures but sustain the involvement of members for whom the costs of struggle are high.

## Organisational Form

The decision to register the KKPKP as a trade union had to do with the fact that legally a trade union is a 'workers organisation' and we saw this as the first step in establishing waste-pickers as 'workers'. That a trade union is also a membership based organisation was not the only consideration in determining the organisational form.

Like all other organisations, the KKPKP has had to relate with institutions of the State (municipalities, labour department, education department, social welfare department, police); with scrap traders; with citizens and their neighbourhood associations; and with NGOs, trade unions, women's organisations and other organisations working with the poor. The group that reacted most strongly to the trade union form were the retail scrap traders who tried to resurrect an otherwise defunct Association of Scrap Traders, within months of the KKPKP being formed. The attempt by traders was short lived because of the intense competition within the retail segment of the scrap trade.

Unlike their reaction to threats like the entry of new traders, which frequently included arson and physical intimidation, the scrap traders were always wary in their interaction with us. This was partly due to the numerical strength of the mobilisation of waste-pickers. Another reason was the inability of the traders to gauge our financial and political potential due to the obvious socio economic, cultural differences between the activists and the waste-pickers. On our part, we were also cautious in not overtly threatening the existing relationship which we recognised as exploitative yet 'close'. Retail scrap traders share the same socio-cultural background with waste-pickers. They also have the advantage of having interacted with them on a direct and daily basis over long years, sometimes generations, in the course of which they have assisted waste-pickers in various ways.

The extremely dehumanising conditions in which waste-pickers carry out their work and their obvious vulnerability is powerful enough in itself, for the average thinking, reasonably conscious human being to feel a twinge of sympathy, concern and guilt. Waste-pickers have been called names, been discriminated against, victimised and abused but their horrific work situation is not one that a citizen (including bureaucrats, politicians, generators of garbage, even scrap traders) would feel comfortable about. While the actual physical working environment of municipal conservancy workers is similar, that they are *paid* employees of the municipalities constitutes a significant difference for the citizen. This "sympathy" factor as we call it (for want of a better term) is also due to the fact that waste-pickers have relatively less contact and

interaction with other sections of society than say other working poor like domestic workers who are pitted against their employers on a daily basis.

Although the KKPKP is a trade union, and trade unions are stereotypically looked upon as "militant", "disruptive", "unreasonable", "violent" and "demanding", the antagonism so far has been overridden by the "sympathy" factor. The issue of "you are a Union, you will bring a morcha (protest demonstration) tomorrow" does crop up periodically. Nonetheless, the waste-pickers' struggle for their rights is seen as having a justifiable basis. The KKPKP has consciously and systematically tried to build support for waste-pickers among citizens. The fact of KKPKP being a trade union has not therefore significantly affected its relationship with the groups mentioned above.

Over the years the KKPKP through its work and approach has also established its credibility as a responsible, methodical and mature organisation. This credibility has been built on the basis of its peaceful and disciplined agitational methods (rallies, demonstrations, sit ins, courting arrest). Unlike conventional trade unions the KKPKP has also focussed on social development activities such as credit provision, education and child labour in addition to work related economic issues.

### **Governance Structure**

The President, Mohan Nanavre, the son of a waste-picker, heads the Union. The other office bearers are the General Secretary, the Joint Secretary and the Treasurer. There are eleven members on the statutory Governing Board, eight of whom are scrap collectors, two men and six women. The statutory governing board although 'legally' the centre of power, has never been the decision making body. Right from its inception the Union has adopted the broad-based democratic structure detailed below.

The membership of the Union is drawn from among scrap collectors living in slums geographically spread across the Pune Urban Agglomeration comprising Pune-Pimpri-Chinchwad. They are concentrated within certain pockets in slums and sometimes the entire slum is dominated by waste-pickers. The process of broader representation of waste-pickers in decision making was started immediately after registration of the Union.

The Representatives Council consisting of 80 elected Representatives (75 women and 5 men) and the office bearers governs the Union. The Council meets once a month to deliberate issues and for review, planning and decision making. The decision making process is consensual.

In the initial years, the more vocal members and already existing leaders, among waste-pickers became *de facto* Representatives. As the Union grew and evolved, an alternate leadership developed. From 1996 onwards, members from different geographical areas have been selecting their Representatives through an informal election process. The members' recall and replace those Representatives whom they consider ineffective or those involved in some kind of financial misdemeanour. Representatives do not receive any remuneration from the Union or any benefits other than those applicable to ordinary members.

The Union employs four paid Staff members and one part-time accountant. They belong to the same social and economic class as the members and some of them are from the same castes. The educational level of the staff ranges between VII and XII class and they perform multiple functions.

The Union also has three Activists, two of whom were actually involved in the process of setting up the organisation and nurturing it (see genesis). None of the activists share the social, educational, economic or caste background of the members. The activists are not paid employees of the Union. All three are involved in the governance processes.

### **Profile of members**

The recycling sector is structured in the form of a pyramid, with the scrap collectors at the base and the reprocessors perched at the apex. At the bottom of the heap are the waste-pickers engaging in “free” collection of scrap from municipal garbage bins and dumps. Marginally above them are the itinerant buyers who purchase small quantities of scrap from households. All categories of scrap collectors rudimentarily sort and sell the collected scrap commodities to retail scrap establishments by weight or unit for onward trade and processing.

Between the scrap collectors and the reprocessors are various levels of traders including retailers, stockists and wholesalers. The *crème de la crème* among them are the Registered Dealers. The reprocessors are in a class by themselves. The activity levels of this pyramid differ in terms of the factors mediating entry, socio-economic backgrounds, work conditions, market environment and levels of income.

Waste-pickers retrieve paper, plastic, metal and glass scrap from garbage bins or receptacles that are provided by the municipalities for the disposal of garbage on the street, and from landfill sites where the collected garbage is transported and dumped. They establish ‘territorial rights’ over bins and dumping sites and frequently squabble over their infringement.

Ninety two per cent of waste-pickers are women, 30 percent of them being widowed/ deserted and 50 per cent of who contribute more than fifty per cent of the household income. Only 8 percent are literate. They move mostly on foot covering up to 10-12 kms a day with head-loads of up to 40 kg. Some of them travel by train or truck to the villages and industrial belts around the city in order to collect scrap. They leave their homes at sunrise and return at sunset after a 10-12 hour working day. The average daily earning is about Rs.60<sup>1</sup>.

Itinerant buyers purchase small quantities of scrap from households, offices, shops and other small commercial establishments. Eighty one per cent of them are men. They access small amounts of capital from the scrap traders who deduct the amount from their earnings at the end of the day. The push-carts which the men use are provided by the traders for a fee. The items collected by the itinerant buyers are of relatively better value than those collected by waste-pickers. Consequently their earnings average at Rs.75 per day.

Scrap collectors are almost exclusively Dalits<sup>2</sup>, the erstwhile 'untouchable' castes, more specifically the Mahar<sup>3</sup> (including Mahars who have converted to Buddhism after 1956 and are now called Neo-Buddhists<sup>4</sup>) and the Matang<sup>5</sup> castes. They rank the lowest within the urban

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<sup>1</sup> 1 US \$ is approximately Rs.50

<sup>2</sup> The term Dalit meaning oppressed was used by Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar for the collective of all the erstwhile untouchable castes. It has been imbued with political meaning ever since and will be used henceforth in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Grant Duff highlights the position of Mahars as “one of the most important and useful of all the village establishment. He acts as scout, as guide, frequently as watchman he cleans the travellers’ horses and is obliged to carry the travellers’ baggage: he is the principal guardian of the village boundaries and in Maharashtra, the Mahars are a very active, useful and intelligent race of people”.

The Mahar was entitled to carry all the dead bodies of animals, cows and buffaloes in his village, but was obliged to give the skin of the buffalo to its owner. In a village with a large Mahar population, a senior person was selected as Mehtar Mahar who was in charge of the general management duties of the Mahars. For this service he was entitled to 1/9th of the entire watan (land entitlement) including grain, perquisites and donations.

<sup>4</sup> Neo-Buddhists are the Mahars who embraced Buddhism after the Dalit leader, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar propagated that conversion to Buddhism was the only avenue open for the ‘untouchables’ to liberate themselves from the oppressive clutches of caste ridden Hindu society.

<sup>5</sup> Mang was one of the 12 balutedars (village service providers), and his main job was to make the leather ropes from the skins of cattle and several other things like leather bag for fetching water from the well for irrigating the land, thongs, whips used by the cultivator. He also acted as the village watchman. Though Grant Duff does not speak very highly of these people, it seems that before they were admitted into the group of village servants, they were rulers of Kishkindha State situated on the banks of the Tungabhadra in ancient times. Mang is the corruption of the Sanskrit word Matang, meaning thereby the most powerful person. Matang rishi of Varanasi, it is believed, was born in a Mang family. The Brahminical dominance reduced them to poverty and eventually they became nomadic tribes. Mangs were different from Mahars and lived separately in the village. Their habitation was called Mangwada. Mangs though assimilated in the village from time immemorial, and were participating in all the festivities and

occupational hierarchy even within the informal sector. The total population of such workers in Pune is estimated to be 6,000 of which waste-pickers constitute 66 per cent and itinerant buyers 34 per cent. The proportion of women in the sector is 73 per cent. That the occupation is mediated by caste and gender is evident from the above (Chikarmane, Deshpande, Narayan, 2001).

### **Membership**

The KKP KP has 5025 registered members. All registered members participate in mass programmes (rallies, demonstrations, conventions, protests) and every scrap collector in the city is aware of the existence of the Union. The registration details of all registered members (individual profile, family profile, type of housing, civic amenities, work details) have been computerised and regularly updated since 2000. The deceased members and those who have stopped collection or shifted occupation are classified separately. The membership of the latter category is renewed if they re-enter the occupation. The registered members are broadly classified (see table below) on the basis of their levels of participation and involvement in Union activities.

Category of Member	Number
Active: Involved in all activities and processes of the Union; membership fees up to date	1700
Regular: Participate in some activities and processes; membership fees up to date	800
Prospective: Participate in some activities and processes; have paid some dues in the current year	1000
Irregular: Participate in some activities and processes; membership fees due in arrears	1000
Reluctant: Participate in some activities; not convinced about the Union; no inclination to pay membership fees	525
Total registered members	5025

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activities of the village, they were not entitled to any Haqs and were not regarded as Balichabhau i.e. Brother of Bali, the cultivator.

**Note:** While the figure for registered members is accurate, the others are fairly accurate estimates. The database is on the Union computer. The exact figures will be included in the final paper.

### **Section 3: Process and methodology**

Within the KKPKP empowerment is understood to be a process in which the poor critically reflect upon their life situation, analyse it and experience a sense of confidence and self-worth through the building of a collective identity, and then exercise the power to make, influence or control decisions that affect their lives.

The methodology derives from this understanding and the organisation seizes or creates opportunities for reflection and analyses that often lead to action. Sometimes these are presented by the members themselves in the form of issues, concerns, complaints and grievances. At other times it is more formal as elaborated in the section on capacity building of members. Less frequently it is based on data generated by the Union. Action entails mobilisation around issues or activities and programmes, all of which offer opportunities for further reflection. The focus is on the engagement and sustained involvement of the average member in the process and the Union is always exploring creative ways to ensure this. The process is seen as continuously evolving and unfolding in the desired direction of change rather than in the form of targets to be achieved or activities to be accomplished.

#### **Collective mobilising around issues**

The KKPKP has mobilised extensively on a range of issues based on the understanding that awareness of rights is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for change. It does not automatically equip those whose rights have been violated with the strength to fight injustice. It necessarily begins with the individual/s speaking out against the perpetrators of injustice, while gaining security from the knowledge that he/she is not alone. The mobilising against the injustice is issue based and not a general show of strength. In the case of other formal and informal workers, the employers are penalised to different degrees by such protests. We have recognised and emphasised that in this sector it is the waste-pickers themselves who pay the heaviest price in the short term.

## **Mobilising around exploitation**

### ***Speaking out against police harassment***

*In August 1993, a Police Constable of the Yerawada Police Station was in uniform when he propositioned Shobha Yuvraj Ovhal, a 30 year old pretty, young waste-picker from the Laxminagar slum at Yerawada. She was on her way home from work at Koregaon Park. "He stopped me and asked me to go for a film with him. Infuriated with my refusal, he asked why I was not responding. I was terrified, not only of the policeman but of my husband who would accuse me of soliciting his advances, if he got wind of it. I told my friend Shobha on the way home and she said something similar had happened to her near Mangaldas Police Chowky. I was worried that he would pursue me so I got back home and told some of the other women". Ordinarily she would have suffered the ignominy quietly. The issue was that the policeman had taken advantage of the fact that she was a poor, 'low' caste woman. He would not have behaved similarly with a woman from another social class. In the process of mobilisation, Sham bhima Kamble, an itinerant buyer reported that he was forced to pay a bribe of Rs.600- to another Police Constable, also from same police station. All 3 of them were KKPKP members and had Identity cards.*

*Over 300 women attended the dharna (sit down protest) organised outside the police station. "The big Commissioner sahebs gives us I cards, shakes our hands on the stage and asks us to speak out. But these dogs at the chowkey (police outpost) treat us with no respect" they said. Two passing Municipal Councillors saw their vote banks and stopped to extend their support before rushing off. Meanwhile there were some factions developing among the members attending the dharna. The waste-pickers and male and female itinerant buyers were each accusing the others of thieving and unnecessarily drawing the attention of the police.*

*Sensing this, the strongest among the many speeches that were made was that by Dayaram Rajguru, urging the women to stick together and not make their internal differences obvious to the police. "The police are hoping for exactly this. They will target each of you separately and you will be the losers" he analysed urging them to unite against the common enemy.*

*The concerned constable had to tender a public apology and the bribe was recovered.*

### ***Confronting extortion***

*30 year old Shashikala Waghmare complained that a municipal employee at Deccan used to harass her and regularly demand money from her in return for 'allowing' her to collect the waste from the bin. The matter grew worse because her husband started suspecting her of being involved with this man, resulting in a fight they chose to resolve at the police station. The policeman agreed to 'settle' the case for Rs.400. She knew the name of the PSI and remembered the date and other details. He was seated at his table when we arrived, polite, smiling, oozing a sickening sweetness. "Oh yes, I know their situation so well and have often paid for their children's small needs. Anyway tell me, Shashikala bai, who was the policeman who took your money?" he asked gently. Here was this same policeman who had deprived Shashikala bai of almost a week's earnings, now pretending to help by taking action against .....whom?*

*“It was you, sahib (sir)” Shashikala said firmly but politely looking him in the eye. He was flustered and immediately got up and went outside the police station gesturing to us to follow. I imagine they think it is a sign of disrespect to their office to ‘return’ money extorted by them within the same premises. He pulled out a wad of fifty rupee notes and gave 8 in the activist's hand. “You may not believe me Madam, but I had actually taken only Rs.300” he said.*

### **Fighting injustice**

*Nagnath Kadam, a small scrap trader did what every other retail scrap trader does in the event of cash flow problems. He started giving ‘chittis’ (handwritten receipts on torn cigarette cartons, for material sold, in lieu of cash) first to the meeker women and gradually to all his clients. We had to rely on that and the women’s average earnings to calculate the total amount that he owed the women. He closed down his shop and absconded when his cumulative dues to the waste-pickers crossed Rs.10,000/-.*

*The wastepickers from Rajivgandhi Nagar approached us, under Chandrabhaga Gholap’s leadership. She was the widow of a headmaster who had educated her and therefore the oldest and yet most educated member of RGN. “Baba Adhav will definitely ensure justice” she promised. We made several visits to Kadam and to the Police chowkey. The dues were recovered after a dharna at his house and very effective intervention by Police Sub-Inspector of the local police station.*

### **Challenging stereotypes**

*On 26.4.1994 Anusaya Bhosale and Indu Sable of Tadiwala Road found a gold chain wrapped in a small piece of paper in a garbage bin. They were on their way neared the scrap dealers shop and were accosted by the police. They immediately handed over the property to him explaining how it came to be in their possession. “Perhaps someone threw it into the bin by mistake” they explained. He was adamant that they had stolen it and registered an offence of theft against them. What followed was 14 months of court hearings where the women stood by their position. The only thing they had in their favour was their own honesty.*

*At the end of the long wait, Ms M.D Dahir, the Judicial Magistrate, passed a landmark judgement acquitting both the wastepickers and ordered that the property be handed back to them. In her 4 page judgement, the Judicial Magistrate categorically states that the two accused were licensed to collect scrap (this was in 1994 before the PMC had endorsed the Identity cards) and further, that the explanation given for being in possession of this property ‘should be accepted to exonerate them in the normal course’. She also accuses the prosecution of not accepting the explanation due to their ‘biased mind’. Her judgement is still a source of pride and victory, not only for Anusaya bai and Indu bai, but all wastepickers and those who work with them.*

*(Source: Unpublished documentation of KKPKP)*

## **Mobilising around Economic Issues: KKPKPs Perspective on scrap collection**

Unlike in some developed countries, source segregation of garbage into organic (bio-degradable) and recyclable (non-bio-degradable), is not mandatory in India. The statutory responsibility of the municipalities extends to providing public receptacles for depositing garbage, its transport and disposal in a manner that is not detrimental to public health. The municipalities themselves do not undertake segregation. It is the waste-pickers who perform this task, thereby earning their livelihood from the sale of scrap. The commodity prices of scrap constitute the earnings of scrap collectors. They do not get paid separately for the labour that they expend to collect the scrap. Legally, the waste-pickers have no rights to scrap. It belongs to the generators till such time that it is deposited in the municipal container after which it "belongs" to the municipality.

### **1. Establishing scrap collectors as "workers" and scrap collection as "work"**

It has been mentioned earlier that the organisation was founded on the premise that scrap collectors were unrecognised "workers" contributing to resource recovery, cost-saving for the municipalities and environment protection.

The premise was substantiated by first estimating (on the basis of data generated by the co-operative scrap store run by the Union) and later quantifying through formal research the contribution of waste-pickers in the management of urban solid waste.

While the arguments remain the same, the data given below are based on a formal study commissioned by the International Labour Organisation and undertaken by a team of researchers from the SNDT Women's University in 2000-2001. There were 4594 registered scrap collectors in the Pune Urban Agglomeration comprising the Pune and Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporations at the time that the study was conducted.

The arguments put forth to the municipalities were,

- ⇒ Collectively, scrap collectors salvage 144 tonnes of recyclable scrap prior to its transportation, thereby saving the Pune and Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporations the sum of Rs.15822750 (Rs.16 million) per annum in transportation costs alone. By implication each waste-picker contributes Rs.246 worth of unpaid labour per month to the municipality.
- ⇒ Each waste-picker and itinerant buyer, average earnings of Rs.60 and 75 per day, respectively. At conservative estimates this amounts to Rs.375000 per day, in the primary

transaction that takes place between the scrap collector and the local retail scrap store. Further value addition takes place as the scrap is sorted, graded and traded.

⇒ The annual contribution of the scrap trade to the total income generated in Pune is Rs.184824000 (Rs.185 million).

⇒ The environmental benefits that are derived from the work done by waste-pickers would be difficult to quantify in economic terms.

(Source: Chikarmane, Deshpande, Narayan, 2001)

## **2. Seeking State recognition of scrap collectors as "workers" and scrap collection as work**

The KKPKP spearheaded the struggle for recognition of scrap collectors as "workers" and scrap collection as "work" by the Municipalities and later the State government through a series of processes. Foremost among them was organising and mobilising scrap collectors through public rallies and demonstrations. The above arguments formed the basis for the demand for the municipal endorsement of photo-identity cards issued by the Union. The demand was put forth in 1993 by means of several public demonstrations in which thousands of members participated.

The Pune Municipal and Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporations conceded to the demand in 1995-1996 and became the first municipalities in the country to officially register (through the KKPKP) and endorse the identity cards of waste-pickers in recognition of their contribution to the management of urban solid waste. The endorsement *authorises* waste-pickers to collect scrap.

This has since been followed by a notification from the Maharashtra State government directing municipalities to register waste-pickers and issue identity cards and pursue methods of integrating them into solid waste collection through their organisations or through NGOs.

Municipal endorsement of identity cards transformed the stereotypical image of waste-pickers in their own eyes as well as those of the public. Scrap collectors have independently used the I cards creatively, sometimes as bail when arrested on suspicion and sometimes as surety when they did not have enough capital for immediate payment while buying scrap. Today the average waste-picker on the street is clearly able to state her contribution to the city's cleanliness, to argue her claim for space to sort the scrap, to convince citizens that she is not dirty because she cleans the waste that they generate and to confront the police saying she earns an honest livelihood.

### **3. Claiming State resources on the basis of State recognition**

#### **(a) Medical Insurance**

The KKPKP argued that while the financial benefits (savings in transportation costs) accrued to the municipalities, the costs (health costs) of contributing to municipal solid waste management were borne entirely by the waste-pickers labouring under abominable conditions of work leading to higher levels of morbidity. The argument was substantiated by the findings of studies that showed that waste-pickers suffered from occupation related musculo-skeletal problems, respiratory and gastro-intestinal ailments. Scrap collectors, particularly women, tended to ignore minor illnesses till they assumed dangerous proportions and became regular 'conditions'. Only a 5 percent sample of scrap collectors in Pune had one incidence of Tuberculosis, 3 of occupation related accidents, 6 respiratory tract infections, 9 major injuries including falling from/into garbage bins, 1 eye infection and 36 cases of severe musculo-skeletal problems (Chikarmane, Deshpande, Narayan, 2001).

In 2002-03 the Pune Municipal Corporation became the first municipality in the country to institutionalise the Scheme for Medical Insurance for all Registered Waste-pickers in its jurisdiction. The above arguments are detailed in the docket (prepared by the Municipal Commissioner) that was presented before the decision making bodies of the PMC. The payment of the annual premium to the New India Assurance Company has become part of the annual municipal budget. Hospitalisation costs of up to Rs.5000 are reimbursed by the insurance company. Claims are processed through the KKPKP.

#### **(b) Education**

The KKPKP argued for the inclusion of children of waste-pickers in the Central Government aided Scheme for Pre-Matric Scholarships to Children of those engaged in Unclean Occupations the basis of municipal recognition (endorsed I cards). Until then only children of night soil carriers were considered eligible for the scheme that was implemented through schools. The government initially refused to accept that waste-picking was an "unclean occupation". The press played a very effective role in this campaign and articles titled "Government finds ragpicking too clean to merit help!" alongside a photograph of a waste-picker inside a garbage container, hit the headlines. In 2001, the Maharashtra government conceded to demand that the municipal endorsed I card constituted proof of "unclean occupation" and extended the benefits of the Scheme to the children of waste-pickers.

#### **(c) Space**

In 1997 the KKPKP successfully argued for the right of waste-pickers to use by-lanes without obstructing traffic, as sorting sites for scrap. The argument elaborated on how the municipality allocated parking space for the cars of the rich but could find no space for waste-pickers to sort the scrap that had been generated not by them, but by the relatively better off citizens.

In 1998 the organisation also managed to get constructed space *gratis* for running a co-operative scrap store within the limits of the Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation.

#### **4. Integration of waste-pickers into the doorstep collection and management of urban solid waste**

In 1998, the Hon. Supreme Court of India set up an Expert Committee on Solid Waste Management in response to Writ Petition no.888 of 1996 filed by Almitra Patel and others. The KKPKP was asked to send recommendations to the Committee, which it did. These have been incorporated in the final report of the Committee.

The Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India formulated the Municipal Solid Waste Handling Rules, 2000 based on the recommendations of the Committee, after directives from the Hon. Court. The Rules direct the municipalities in 41 Class I municipalities to extend their mandatory responsibility (collection from common points) and undertake measures for door-step collection of waste and citizens education for source segregation. Although the Rules do not make specific mention of waste-pickers, they are explicit in offering a wide range of choices to the municipalities in the systems that they may want to adopt depending upon local conditions. Caught between the compliance criteria for collection and budgetary constraints, municipalities have been experimenting with different methods with varying degrees of success. Contracting out the system of doorstep garbage collection, partly or fully, to both local and multinational operators is the most popular because there is a strong lobby that believes that privatisation of garbage collection is cheaper and more efficient. Frequently these measures displace waste-pickers as has happened in Nasik, Maharashtra where they are unable to access the scrap since the garbage is carted away by the contracted parties.

The integration of waste-pickers into the doorstep collection of garbage is the one of the methods that will guarantee their access to scrap; improve their working conditions; improve their earnings; and transform the status of the occupation from scavenging to service provision. In order to demonstrate this, the KKPKP initiated “Swachateche Varkari” (harbingers of cleanliness) which is promoted as Pune’s only eco-friendly doorstep garbage collection service offered through its

members. The KKPKP does not function as a contractor but promotes the service. About 400 members are involved in the collection of source segregated garbage from 40000 households and commercial enterprises across the city. They retain the scrap for sale through the usual channels and deposit the organic garbage in the municipal container or the vermiculture composting pit. Apartment blocks contract the waste-pickers and pay them a monthly service charge per apartment. The rates vary depending upon the location and the class of citizens living in that particular neighbourhood. Effectively they fill the gap between the generators of garbage and the neighbourhood garbage container. The Pune Municipal Corporation is now officially promoting this programme.

*Mangal Gaikwad resides in a slum in Aundh. The difference that her involvement in door-step collection and in the Union made to her life is presented in her own words. "Today I earn Rs.3000 from doorstep collection and the sale of scrap. The residents in the area who used to frown at me while I was at the garbage bin, now know my name and greet me. A resident gave me a second hand bicycle. I had never ridden one before. Today, I ride to work on that cycle. When I was a child I used to envy the children who went to school with their bags and water bottles while I had to go waste-picking. Since my work day is shorter now I was able to attend the literacy class in my slum. I am now literate. I am the Treasurer of the credit co-operative and the representative for my slum. I used to be terrified of my abusive alcoholic husband. Twice I sent him to a de-addiction centre. He stopped for a while but continues to drink. I am no longer terrified of him. I do not give him money to drink. I have bought a bigger house for Rs.65000 from my savings and a loan I took from the credit co-operative".*

*(Source: Unpublished documentation of KKPKP)*

The transition from waste-picker to service provider has not been simple for waste-pickers. It has required them to change their dress, demeanour and styles of work. Since they are ordinarily abused or ignored by the middle classes, learning to relate with them has been a new experience. They have perforce learnt to be punctual, regular and cordial.

Till date, the Pune Municipal Corporation has not pursued the privatisation through the contractors' route because of the presence of a strong municipal workers union and an equally strong waste-pickers union, both of which would oppose the move, albeit for different reasons.

The KKPKP is therefore poised at an interesting node in the struggle where the livelihood rights of waste-pickers may come into direct conflict with the struggle of organised sector municipal workers to protect and extend their preserve. It is significant to note here that the municipal conservancy workers and waste-pickers share the same caste and social background. The fact that door-step collection of garbage was never the mandatory responsibility of the

municipalities and the prohibitive costs of hiring regular labour to fulfil that added responsibility, offers the space for waste-pickers (through the KKPKP) to negotiate their claims for public-private partnerships to fill the gap between the door-step and the common collection point, without antagonising the municipal unions.

The new policy framework opens up possibilities for the integration of organised waste-pickers into systems of solid waste collection (through public-private joint ventures), but also constitutes a threat to their livelihoods in cities where they have not been organised. It is a strange paradox that while on the one hand NGOs and MBOs are preoccupied with the need for policy change in favour of the poor, there are so few that are willing to organise waste-pickers to explore the possibilities that exist in a favourable policy environment in this specific context. Even those NGOs (Centre for Development Communication, Jaipur and Nagpur; Exnora, Chennai and Hyderabad; Forces, Mumbai) that have entered into solid waste collection contract arrangements with municipalities have chosen to recruit/involve slum youth for doorstep collection rather than the waste-pickers in those cities. This only substantiates the established fact that the improvement in the conditions of work in any sector leads to the displacement of women by men, the lower castes by the upper castes and informal sector workers by corporate entities.

### **Mobilising around Social Issues**

Violence against women, child labour, school enrolment, child marriage and domestic violence are among the issues on which the Union has taken very strong collective positions since the formative years.

#### ***Speaking out against rape***

*Changuna Ankush Gaikwad, a 53 year old waste-picker of Panmala, was among the many who overthrew the myth among waste-pickers that 'only young, attractive girls get raped', when a 28 year old man from the slum forcefully entered her house and raped her. She was horrified more than anything else and approached the Organisation immediately. A quick morcha (protest march) to Duttawadi Police chowkey and the gravity of the incident pushed them to action. The man was arrested, paraded through the vasti (slum) and charged with rape. Although Changuna bai had already suffered the trauma, having so many members of a new collective rallying around her gave her a strong sense of solidarity.*

*(Source: Unpublished documentation of KKPKP)*

## Child Labour

All child waste-pickers in Pune are children of waste-pickers. Many adult waste-pickers resented the presence of children in the sector because their agility in scrap collection impacted on their earnings. Further, the presence of children depressed the market prices of scrap because traders found it easier to cheat them. Most waste-pickers sought occupational mobility for their children but doubted that education would enable the shift. *“At least they can collect waste and fend for themselves if they are uneducated. Who will give them jobs if they become graduates?”* The documentary requirements for school admission and poor quality of public education also acted as a deterrent in school enrolment. Today there is a distinct change in the attitude towards education. It is visible in the collective strength that they assert to demand quality education from the municipal school system.

The findings of two studies (Chikarmane, Narayan and Phadnis, 1995 and Chikarmane, Deshpande and Narayan, 2001) reveal that there has been a significant reduction (76 per cent) in the number of child waste-pickers. The decline is the result of a combination of factors linked to the KKPKP and State initiatives in education. Based on the position taken in 1995 that the presence of child labour in the occupation is detrimental to the interests of the adult workers and that compulsory education is the primary means to ensure that children do not enter the workforce, the KKPKPs attempts at reducing the incidence of child labour have shifted from persuasion to coercion.

The non-formal education classes for out of school children (conducted by the SNTD Women's University from 1989-1996) were initially supplemented with and then replaced by, annual school enrolment drives. The enrolment drives were accompanied by close monitoring of the system to ensure that it did not push out these children. Procedural requirements like age certification that cost time, money and energy were done away with after negotiation and agitation (along with child rights organisations) against the concerned government departments. In the early days, first generation learners were often sent back home for not being neatly dressed or for wearing torn clothes. They were the first to be shouted at and the last to receive the textbooks and uniforms due to them from the Municipal school system. The Union focussed its efforts on sensitising the school system to these issues to prevent such drop-outs.

Thereafter, children of waste-pickers were encouraged to continue in school by providing them token incentives like prizes and notebooks sourced from local philanthropic organisations.

The independent introduction of a government scheme that provided 3 kg of rice per month for every child with 80 per cent attendance in municipal schools also helped. Destitute children and those from single parent families (unable to cope) are enrolled at residential educational institutions as required. The scholarship for the children of those engaged in unclean occupations has also helped (see claims on state resources).

Certain deterrent measures were also concomitantly initiated. The identity card endorsed by the Municipalities carries the proviso that children below the age of 18 years cannot engage in waste-picking. Now the campaign has reached the stage where groups of adult women confiscate the scrap collected by children in surprise checks on the street. The police and municipality have also assisted in this endeavour. Since 2001 waste-picking has been included among the hazardous occupations prohibited for children under the Child Labour (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 1986.

### Child marriage

*Chitra Kshirsagar represented the Bal Tarun Slum in the Representatives Council. At one such meeting, we confronted her with the fact that her family had arranged the wedding of her underaged nephew later that week. Shobha and Yuvraj, both kids from Bal Tarun had attended our NFE classes. We had known them for years and were in no doubt about their actual ages. We had convinced Chitrabai and Shrimant to postpone their children's wedding by a couple of years with the help of all the members of the Representatives Council. They had agreed graciously and had immediately been felicitated. The meeting had been perfect... too good to be true we thought.*

*The next day as we came to SNDT for a staff meeting we saw the wedding mandap (tent) the cooks, the horse for the groom....they had not even made a pretence of cutting down on any of the ceremonies. We decided that we had to stop the marriage. We had worked with them for years. We knew the entire community, the alcoholic husbands, the waste-picking mothers, the children who had attended our NFE classes and got married as young adolescents and were back in a couple of years with a couple of children each...to be looked after by the grandmothers. All this and more had been discussed with the mothers, the fathers and their daughters and sons in various meetings over the preceding 5 years. In a sense we felt that they had betrayed the Union. They had consented to a postponement and were now making fools of us, of the Representatives Council and of their own commitment.*

*We went ahead and complained to the police, first having to convince the police that there was a law against child marriage! Within minutes of the police action, the police station was surrounded by a 400 strong mob protesting the action. Sitting within we could hear the choicest abuses and dire threats intended for us. We ended up earning the wrath of the community. We had to be escorted out of the police station and had to stop working in that particular slum. But we decided it was the only way to be done.*

*Six months later, they were back at the office because they needed to get PMC endorsed Identity Cards. All of us pretended nothing happened and we started afresh. It*

was Chitrabai who raised the issue again at a meeting with some visitors. She spoke about the Union and how it had changed her. Comfortably and easily she went on to describe the whole child marriage episode and how it had embittered us but how we both accepted our own faults. "You have to admit you too were wrong in breaking up the wedding celebrations like that. What a waste of money it was for us" she turned round and told us. She is now one of our strongest allies in advocating against the practice of child marriage.

(Source: Unpublished documentation of KKPKP)

### **Mobilising around political issues**

The KKPKP has not independently led mobilisation around political issues. It is an important constituent of the Angamehnati Kashtakari Sangharsh Samiti (Action Committee of Organisations of Unorganised Labour) led by Dr Adhav in Maharashtra. Political mobilisation has taken the form of marches, rallies and other forms of public protest, during the campaigning periods preceding the elections against the disregard (of politicians and their parties) for the legitimate demands of informal sector workers for the right to carry out their livelihood activities, legislative protection and social security; against divisive communal forces during the communal genocide in Gujarat and against the politics of hate. The slogan has been "*tumchi nivadnuk, amchi fasavnuk*" (your election, our deception). It has also taken the form of voter education where candidates have been invited to participate in question-answer sessions with workers on public platforms and in slums.

### **Building and sustaining relationships with members**

Ongoing contact with members is an important part of organising. The primary locations of contact are the worksites (containers or the landfill), their homes and at the Union office. Over the years of intensive work with members, the activists and the staff have developed a fairly good "map" of the locations of their '*kheps*' or beats; containers that various groups of members frequent; their '*thiyas*' or the places where they congregate to keep their filled sacks; their sorting sites and the scrap traders to whom they sell the scrap, and the times at which they would be available at each place. Since waste-pickers are concentrated in pockets within slums it is relatively easy to contact them there. Members also visit the Union office if they have a problem.

The Union has gone through three distinct phases. During the first phase of organisation building from 1993-1996 there was heavy reliance on paid staff and the onus of maintaining contact with members was on the Activists and staff. During that period there were 10 staff

members assigned to different geographical areas and our insistence that the waste-pickers should be reached on their terms, at their workplaces or homes at their convenience translated into very demanding jobs for the staff. There was no fresh recruitment when the staff members resigned or were asked to resign either because they were ineffective or because they had been involved in financial irregularities.

From 1996 to 2003 there was greater emphasis on building the capacities of Representatives. Representatives have been given lists of the members in their geographical areas and they are in regular contact with members. Today, the Representatives rather than the Staff are the first recourse of members in case of difficulty. This has been consciously promoted to ensure sustainability. Local issues, complaints of police harassment, domestic violence, and neighbourhood squabbles and squabbles between waste-pickers for control over garbage bins are routinely handled by the Representatives. The Representatives contact the Union office if the need arises.

The onus of maintaining contact has progressively shifted from the paid staff to the Representatives and now to the members. The shift was not easy because members had become used to the easy availability of staff.

*When the informal elections were held in 1996, we had tried to explain why the kkpkp staff would have to reduce their visits to the slums. Among other things we mentioned the costs of supporting so many activists. We had asked, "In the long run you will be paying for such workers to visit you. Is it worth it or is it better to elect your own leaders who can handle local issues effectively?" At this point we had also discussed the salaries that the staff members earned after which most members immediately started stating the kinds of roles for which they felt the kkpkp staff were indispensable. They were acutely aware that it was not possible for their subscriptions to ensure the continuity of many such staff. In fact they started complaining about some of the staff members who were visiting the slums regularly but were unable to address the issues. "What is the use?" they said, "she just comes and sits in the house and chats with us. We don't need her to come." The same worker was discontinued a couple of years later due to her ineffective performance.*

(Source: KKPKP unpublished documentation)

From 2004 the emphasis has been on building the capacities of members themselves. Earlier this year the Union organised one day orientation programmes for groups of members at the Union office that were attended by 3200 members. Every member has the telephone numbers of the Union offices, office bearers, activists and staff and is free to contact any of them at any time.

Nonetheless, there is a day fixed for each slum when the Representative along with the staff holds meetings, specifically contacts the members who are classified as other than active and is available to members in the slum itself.

The participation of members is not uniform. There are a few pockets where the members have been remarkably uninvolved, other than in mass programmes, despite regular attempts to be more inclusive of them (see membership table). This led to a change in strategy when some of the active members said, "they'll pay up when they feel the need. Beyond a point everyone cannot be convinced unless they suffer".

There are also waste-pickers who are 'non members' and are not even registered with the union, but have used its existence to their advantage. They have conveniently claimed membership of the organisation to outsiders in order to stave off threat, harassment or extortion.

People being people seek immediate tangible benefits. We have members, not a significant number, who have required persuasion to participate in programmes. They however, rapidly paid up their arrears in annual subscription when they realised that their children would get government scholarships or that they would get medical insurance coverage or Below Poverty Line ration cards only if they had a valid membership identity card. We find this frustrating at times because ideally we would like every member to feel equally involved in collective action and committed to the larger struggle for a socially just and equitable society.

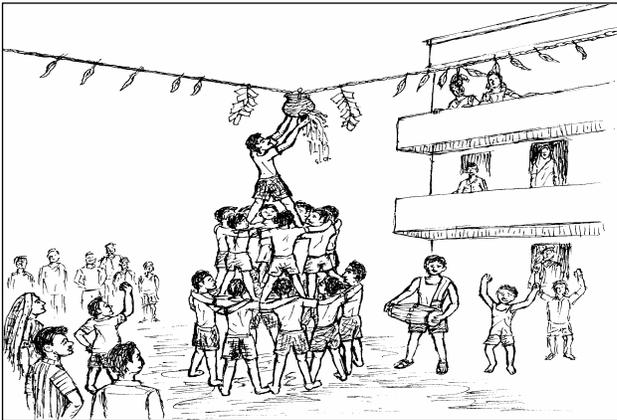
### **Building the reflective and analytical capacities of members**

Over the years the Union has attempted to address the issue of member's education in many ways. Perhaps because of their familiarity with street dynamics, waste-pickers demonstrate a greater propensity for engaging in collective action, organisation and agitation as compared with more formal discussion. In the initial years there were attempts to organise formal training programmes for members and Council Representatives. Although the methodology was participatory, they would get restless because of the unfamiliarity of sitting in a 'class-room' and concentrating. Various kinds of training programmes have been organised periodically but the emphasis has been on field based training. The average member who complains about police harassment for example has to accompany the staff and confront the police. Members who have been through this experience are encouraged to accompany other members. Representatives have

also learnt to handle different kinds of issues and the grievances of scrap collectors while accompanying the staff. Some of the other methods utilised by the Union are given below.

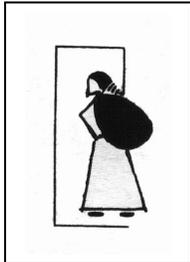
#### Structural analysis

The '*dahi handi*' (pictorially depicted below) is an annual public ritual in Maharashtra on the occasion of Janmashtami, celebrating the birth of Lord Krishna. Formation of a human pyramid to reach an earthen pot filled with curd that is tied on a rope along with currency notes at a considerable height is part of the ritual. Success frequently results in monetary rewards.



The pyramidal formation of people and the fact that the one at the apex ascends upon the shoulders of those below him and gets the largest share, lends itself to structural analysis of society, including gender, caste and class and of the recycling sector. It is also used to question the trickle-down theory of development.

#### Discussing and debating issues: Symbolic Representation



The logo (given alongside) of the Union became a contentious issue in the early years. Men refused to accept the identity card because they believed it was beneath their dignity to carry identification featuring a woman. The women members and the activists were very clear that they were larger in number and that their conditions of work were much worse than those of the men. The women also pointed out that the presence of the men had reduced their access to "free" scrap. We believed that the logo was representative of the bulk of the membership as well as the Union's focus on gender inequalities. After the debate the men relented and the matter was resolved. The logo remained. It was left to the men whether to become members or not. Most men took the Identity cards except one reluctant group that did so as recently as 1998.

For the illiterate, symbolic representation both visual and action based is easily recalled and imbued with meaning. The Union has used this in its various programmes. At one demonstration demanding identity cards endorsed by the municipality, the members carried the tools of their trade (sacks, baskets and push carts) in a public rally. At another rally all had black bags over their heads as if they were going to the gallows, preceded by a tableau of a woman with a hangman's noose around her neck. The demand was "if you cannot offer us legislative protection, you may as well send us to the gallows".

#### Self-representation through Street Theatre

In most developing countries, street theatre is a form used to 'educate/ create awareness' among poverty groups. In a reversal of this process street theatre was used as a method of

enabling waste-pickers to articulate their concerns in order to 'educate' the more elite sections of society about the source segregation of garbage. It portrayed their lives as women and as workers, their trials and tribulations, their role in urban solid waste management and the apathy of the citizens and the State towards them. Although there was a story line, there was no formal script and each group improvised as the occasion demanded. Developed in 1997, the fiftieth year of Indian independence it was titled, '*Swatantryacha Zala Kay? Amchya Hathi Alach Nhay!*' (Whatever happened to independence? It has eluded us completely!) The most popular punch line was, "you accuse us of thievery, after all what are we going to steal, your torn clothes, your discarded shoes, a broken bottle? And that Harshad Mehta (stock market scamster) he duped thousands of people of millions and the government debated for days about whether they should arrest him."

### Capitalising on oral traditions

Waste-pickers being illiterate are steeped in the oral tradition. Slogans appropriate to each occasion are coined and are remembered by them. Obviously the use of words and puns is appropriate to their regional language, Marathi.

*Kachra amchya hakkacha nahi kunachya bapacha* (scrap is ours by right it doesn't belong to anyone's father)

*Zat pat ani dharamachi ladhai nahi chalnar nahi chalnar* (down down with caste and religious strife)

*Kashtakaryanacha ekjuticha vijay aso* (victory to the toiling masses)

*Bhulo mat ye mat bhulo tum janta raj lana hai, bhulo mat ye mat bhulo tum samata raj lana hai* (don't you forget about power to the people and equality)

Songs have also used for the same purpose and waste-pickers have been encouraged to compose their own lyrics on social themes set to their traditional folk tunes. These were showcased at a "*Jagran Gondhal*" on social issues. A *jagran gondhal* is a ceremonial all night folk singing event that is organised to propitiate the gods following an auspicious occasion such as a wedding.

### Situating current struggles in historical contexts: Reaffirming the Contribution of Icons

The abolition of untouchability in independent India and the shift to urban centres have not had a very significant impact on the lives and status of the *Dalits*. They continue to reside in enclaves/ghettos within slums.

The state of Maharashtra has a rich history of mass mobilisation against the caste system. The leaders of these movements have become icons in the consciousness of the poor and the oppressed. The Union makes concerted efforts to situate its current actions in a politico-historical context. This is done through reiteration of the beliefs of these leaders, celebration of their anniversaries and organisation of Union programmes on days commemorating historically significant events at historically significant sites. The focus is therefore on 'peoples' history rather than textbook history.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Mahatma Jyotirao Phule challenged the unjust caste system and Brahminical dominance by starting the first school for girls and 'untouchable' children in Pune. Until that time girls and the 'lower' castes were not permitted entry into school. '*Bamnacha livhna, kunbyacha dana and maharacha gana*' (The Brahmins writing, the farmers seed and the

mahars song) was a common saying about the occupational distinctions inherent in the caste system. Mahatma Phule was one of the first proponents of gender and caste equality in India. His thoughts were penned in verses called '*Akhands*' that the Union uses today.

The late Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, architect of the Indian constitution and leader of the Dalits, occupies a special place in the hearts of the Mahars and the Neo-Buddhists. He used the term Dalit or oppressed peoples collectively for all the 'untouchable' castes. He believed that eschewal of caste related occupations, migration away from the villages that were the sites of oppression, education, political representation and inter-marriage were some of the means to challenge the unjust caste system. Dr Ambedkar through his writings and social action exhorted the Dalits, '*shika, sanghatit vha ani sangharsh kara*' (educate, organise and struggle) against the injustices perpetrated on them. This politically charged phrase continues to be used by the waste-pickers Union.

The late Lokshahir Annabhau Sathe, mill worker and revolutionary poet is the icon of the Mang/Matang community. He wrote, '*pruthvi brahmanachya mastakavar navhe thar kashtakaryanchya talhatavar nachte*' (the earth does not revolve on the forehead of the Brahmin, but on the palms of the toiling masses). The Union also uses his songs and poems.

The late trade Unionist Narayan Meghaji Lokhande organised the first protest of women workers in India at the erstwhile Jacob Mills in Bombay on March 25<sup>th</sup> 1895. They intercepted the General Managers car demanding equal wages for equal work, paid weekly holidays and an eight-hour working day. Several agitating women were martyred when the colonial administration fired upon them. A hundred years thence the demands of women workers remain the same.

Since 1995, the waste-pickers Union has been commemorating this historical struggle through the organisation of mass programmes. In 1996, 800 women waste-pickers travelled at their own cost to attend one such programme organised at the original site in Bombay.

Similarly public events are organised jointly with labour and women's organisations on International Labour Day and International Women's Day.

## **Organisational Culture: Resources, Transparency and Accountability**

### 1. Core values and principles

Core values and principles are the backbone of a movement for change. The structure and functioning of the waste-pickers Union adhere to the values and principles of honesty, integrity, accountability, equality, secularism, democratic participation and non-violence that are non-negotiable. The Union believes in the twin strategies of struggle or peaceful agitation and reconstruction or exploring alternatives. All struggles are non-violent and based on the principle

of 'satyagraha'<sup>6</sup>. The Union believes in non-party secular democratic political processes and is not affiliated to any political party. It seeks to challenge all inequalities of gender, caste, class and geographic region.

## 2. Questioning

The KKPKP has consciously built on the strengths of its members. Waste-pickers are naturally forthcoming and articulate and extremely vocal about their opinions because of the daily struggle in their lives on the street. They feel free to question anything and everything including the individual performances of the activists and the efficacy of the Union without mincing words. This internal questioning is set against the backdrop of the larger questions that are commonly raised about external hierarchies and power structures. Nothing and no one is considered sacrosanct not individuals, not office bearers, not activists or staff, not members, not religion, not caste and not culture. The questioning is reciprocal and arguments about issues are loud and hot. This makes for a fairly high level of transparency and accountability that is maintained by the demands of the waste-pickers themselves.

*We have also pushed members to speak up and we have fought with them when they have been reluctant to do so to the extent of saying why are you complaining if you don't want to do anything about it? This is the only reason why we have managed to recover the bribes taken by so many policemen (sometimes even when our members have been at fault) till it has been perfected to an art form when a telephone call to the police station results in the money being returned to the waste-picker.*

*The entire "malwari hatao" (boycott moneylenders campaign) was carried out without a hitch after the initial success of one member speaking out boldly. Once a frank and fearless admission is made about any kind of injustice it is difficult for either the member or us or the accused to deny it later. Then the only alternative is to fight against it.*

*Undeniably waste-pickers are willing to stick their necks out and make such admissions more frequently than other informal sector workers. They have after all, so little to lose. Encouraging this strength in them has been a learning experience for us. Not only have some activists and staff actually been empowered to fight against such injustice, even on a personal front, but it has also taught us different ways of struggling. Often, our members explain the situation but tell us not to intervene till they have tried their own methods which include arguing, joking, mentioning casually and sometimes offering very practical alternatives. Not only have such methods been effective, they have also brought home our limited contribution in some cases.*

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<sup>6</sup> Gandhi defined Satyagraha as follows: "Its root meaning is holding on to truth, hence truth-force. I have also called it Love-force or Soul-force." If man-made laws are unfair, he wrote, the Satyagrahi "breaks them and quietly suffers the penalty for their breach." Gandhi was careful to distinguish non-violence, an active form of protest, from passive resistance, which he regarded as "a weapon of the weak." (Gandhi 4-7)

*Of course this is meant a lot of questioning of all of us too. Waste pickers openly and boldly question our limited efficiency, joke about our individual weaknesses and take us to task when we have been slack. Unfortunately we have not always been able to respond to some of their valid criticisms.*

*(Source: Unpublished documentation KKPKP)*

### 3. Setting the Agenda

The activists realised fairly early in the process of organising that while they considered the issue of access to garbage as a key issue it was actually exploitation by the police (as foreseen by Dr Adhav and Mr Nanavre) that catalysed waste-pickers into collective action.

Complaints of all kinds of harassment by the police, by municipal workers, by scrap traders and by security personnel began pouring in and the Union's first attempts at mobilisation were around these issues. Since then members' perception of issues have determined the priorities, activities and programmes. Members have to feel convinced about programs and activities before they are taken up by the Union. The availability or the lack of resources has never been a consideration in this matter.

Sometimes worthwhile activities have had to be shelved as in the case of insurance which was discussed with the members in 1994 itself. "We want benefits in our old age when we can no longer work. What is the use of insurance that will benefit our husbands even after we die? As it is most often we support our families", were the most common responses. The idea was resurrected in 1999, when 14 members, many of whom were young with small dependent children, died within a period of two months. Some of them also happened to have a loan from the credit co-operative. Insurance as a possible safeguard against destitution in the event of untimely death was discussed once again at which time it was approved.

It needs to be mentioned here that we have come full circle, from the foreseen threat to the now very real threat of waste-pickers being denied access to garbage by new municipal initiatives. As far as Pune is concerned we are perhaps in a position to negotiate from a position of greater strength, but it may already be too late for waste-pickers in the rest of the country.

### 3. Sustainability

#### ***Financial frugality and sustainability***

*When the trade union was only a few months old it embarked on a programme of issuing identity cards to members. This was a complicated task as the Union had to coordinate with the photographer who took their pictures for a very small price and then affix it on to their identity cards. It was during monsoons which are the worst time for the waste pickers. Getting them to pay 5 rupees each for their photograph was no mean task. A*

*large crowd would collect as one waste picker would scream and rant about how the organisation was forcing them to pay money on a day when her small children were lying hungry. The few waste pickers that were considering paying the money would quickly push the coins back into their pouches.*

*After all if one waste picker can do it why can't you, I argued while Nanavre was talking about collecting it later. I admit that it was difficult for us even then. There was no disputing the fact that this was one of the poorest groups that we had interacted with. The women lived in tin houses that were less than 100 Square feet in size. They would return home tired in the evenings having haggled at the scrap stores for a few rupees more. The scrap dealers defiantly continued to reduce the weights of the material they collected because it was wet.*

*We had to convince the members and sometimes even ourselves that the members had to pay if they believed that the situation could be changed by the trade union. What perhaps compelled us to persist was the fear that our confidence in our ability to recover anything later would be undermined if we started with accepting that the participation of the poor in their own organisation had to be subsidised. Years later the Union continues with the same policy that if the members believe in the organisation they have to pay towards it. Nothing is subsidised and the unwillingness to spend money unnecessarily has become part of the organisational culture. We do occasionally wonder whether we're pushing the issue of sustainability too far. Many other older larger better known trade unions and mass based organisations we realise charge only a token membership fee.*

*(Source: Unpublished documentation KKP KP)*

The KKP KP does not provide services and nothing is provided free to members. This has been the practice since inception and has become part of its organisational culture although, it is difficult in a context where NGOs are sponsoring children, distributing and offering soft loans with a subsidy component.

Any direct economic gains (see claims to state resources) that have accrued to members without their contribution have been in evidence only since 2001. Ever since, the registered members (as opposed to active members) have been quite happy to approach the organisation to pay their dues. Many among them were those who had questioned the payment of membership fees saying, *"what has the Union done for us that we should pay membership fees-has it given us salaries or gotten us jobs?" "Why do I need to pay the membership and take the I card? I have never been harassed by anyone." "What is this new thing? I have been waste-picking since paper was 10 paise per kilo and no one has stopped me. And my mother did it till she died. No one stopped her".*

For the initial five years the Union was not so insistent upon members paying up their membership dues before approaching the organisation with their complaints or problems.

Nonetheless, there was continuous pressure on the members that they should pay up. The renewal of membership is documented on the I card.

The organisation has long since established its credibility and effectiveness among waste-pickers. Today, any registered member approaching the organisation has to pay up his/her dues. The same rule also applies to new members who have to pay up the arrears for the previous years. The decision is based on the logical arguments of the existing members who said, *"They are benefiting because we struggled. For years without complaint we attended programmes, protest marches, meetings and conferences. We did not calculate in terms of the immediate benefits. All those years these women laughed at us. They taunted us with-what has the union given you? Has it given you jobs? Today, they benefit because of our efforts. Let them pay for it"*. In 2004 waste pickers who want membership to the Union would indeed be willing to pay and do pay 350 rupees (in instalments) without a question.

The issue of sustainability has been a constant preoccupation. We have been very thrifty in our expenditure. Our entire expenditure over ten years is 90000 US\$ which works out to only 2 US\$ per member per year in development parlance. In this context it is significant that each of our members pays half a dollar per year as subscription fees. They also pay their own life insurance premium and forgo their day's earnings to attend meetings, protest marches and programmes. The quantum of money that waste-pickers collectively get through the scholarships (see claims on state resources) is twice our annual expenditure. The annual medical insurance premium paid by the Pune Municipal Corporation exceeds our annual budget. The savings-credit co-operative and the scrap store have already proven to be financially viable ventures with no subsidies. This is not remarkable because we believe that such ventures have to be viable and ought not to be subsidised.

#### 4. Willingness to take clear unambiguous stands

The willingness to take clear unambiguous stands is another feature of the decision making process within the KKPKP. Often this has meant taking uncompromising stands against members with justifiable cause that is understood by both parties as illustrated below. While the stand itself may be uncompromising, it draws upon the strength of the open reciprocal relationship that has been nurtured by the office bearers, activists, staff and the members. The disagreements, loud and hurtful though they may be, rarely destroy the relationship itself.

*Chitrabai has pulled all the activists and members of the Union into lengthy arguments, leaving us crying, laughing and wondering at the end of it. She had been peripheral to the Union for some years initially, since she was an active 'khavdivali' (involved in theft of scrap). Faced with the task of raising 3 children alone she used to regularly pilfer scrap from Kirloskar Cummins (engineering company); she was a maestro in the trade known to the police and the scrap dealers. She had consciously never approached us for membership and was also aware that it would never be considered. When and how exactly she gave up that business for the more honest if less paying garbage collection, we do not know.*

*We remember one particular Representatives meeting when we conducted an exercise. We wanted to get the less articulate, quieter women to talk. Everyone was given a chance to talk about how their membership in the Union had affected them. The topic was just incidental. Chitrabai had stayed quiet for a long time, then got up and said, "I didn't get any job, no garbage collection work. I haven't taken a loan, no small children so I haven't got notebooks; but I can't say I haven't benefited. I used to do 'khavdi'. I only stopped because of the Union. I finally realised that there was someone to stick up for you if you were honest. I think I have been much happier since."*

*She went on to say that she had fought with a policeman who had accused her of carrying stolen scrap, long after she had stopped pilfering. She had insisted that he refill her sack on a crowded main road after proving that his accusation was baseless, and had waited till he had done it. This was despite the fact that she had been caught by the same policeman while pilfering scrap some years ago. "For my previous crimes, I will see you in court. You can't continue to harass me now when I am not involved in crime," she had asserted.*

*She was elected Representative and attended the Representatives Council meetings on behalf of Bal Tarun Mandal. She was the one who was involved in the child marriage incident (described earlier in this paper).*

*She had been unanimously chosen by the Representatives Council to 'receive' on behalf of the KKP, an award (of Rs.300000) for excellence in mobilising the poor, presented by the Maharashtra Foundation. For months later the other members in her slum had tormented her. "What did you do with all that money?" they would tease. "I don't know if they are saying I 'ate up' all the money, or that you 'ate' it and I got no share!" she would laugh.*

*The same Chitra had been the only one to volunteer for the doorstep garbage collection service in a particular neighbourhood where the rate of payment was a paltry Rs.5 per household per month. After demonstrating her punctuality and regularity she had independently negotiated for higher payment. She came proudly to the office one morning with a small sheet of handwritten paper. "Read this" she announced. Smt. Joshi, of Kothrud had written "Chitra Kshirsagar who collects garbage from our houses is a very honest worker. She found my purse and some utensils in the garbage bin and promptly came and returned it to me. We appreciate her honesty."*

*Chitrabai explained, "Joshibai was saying Thank you, Thank you. I immediately told her to put whatever she wants in writing. That way we have 'puruf' (proof). I'll show it to the Police next time they touch me."*

*We have had our share of arguments with Chitrabai too. Like the time she wanted help in recovering her money. During the "malwari hatao" campaign (described later in the paper) we had encouraged members to report instances of such exploitation by neighbours, friends, relatives and moneylenders. Chitrabai had approached us and then argued hotly that she needed our support to recover money from Bhamabai, another member for whom she had been a 'madhyasti' (intermediary) when the latter had borrowed money from a moneylender at 20% interest. "When Bhamabai failed to pay up I had to, and now because of some new scheme of yours Bhama is refusing to pay me. What kind of justice is this?" she had asked. We stood by Bhamabai of course, and used the same argument that we had used with many other moneylenders. "Tell us the name of the person you paid it to, and we will recover it for you, but in this case we will in fact, urge Bhamabai not to pay you."*

*She left in a huff stating that we had helped her recover money she had lent out in the past. How could we take such a contrary stand she wondered? We didn't believe her. But as I went through the old case records for this documentation, I saw an application by Chitrabai which suddenly put things in place. In 1996 she had lent money to Dhavre, a scrap dealer, at 10% interest, which he had not repaid within the agreed time frame. She had not needed any help from us, the mere threat that she had complained to us had got her the money. So of course she was right. In 1997, when we had neither the gold loan nor the malwari campaign in place, we had taken it up as an instance of exploitation by the scrap dealer. And the difference was discussed with her.*

(source: unpublished documentation KKPKP)

When stands have been taken, predictably there has been some immediate but often temporary backlash from the community. For example, *Sakhu Khavle has never forgotten the fact that the organisation supported the girl who accused her 19 year old son of rape and put him behind bars, neither does she continue to bear a grudge.*

Whereas organisations are usually reluctant to interfere in cultural issues, the Union challenged the practice of child marriage amongst waste-pickers. The organisation has stood its ground and maintained that if it is unjust, illegal and against the law of the land, the Union will not support it. While there is a respect for culture within the organisation there is also an attempt to explore newer ways of "being", "seeing", "thinking" and "doing" such as our community wedding celebration where expenses are shared by a number of couples who are of legal age. The Union has also taken similar public stands against staff for misappropriation of funds and against members who have been involved in theft or accused of wife battering.

5. Willingness to experiment, review, reconsider and change

The attention to detail and intensive record keeping by the Union has generated extensive longitudinal data that primarily informs the activities and programmes of the organisation, formulation of strategy and advocacy or is used to substantiate claims on State and societal institutions.

#### 6. Activities not directly related to issues raised by members: Research and Publication

*We have been diffident about undertaking formal research because we accept the basic question of the members- "How is it going to help us, answering all these questions?" So although we have always had a database of the registration information, the first formal research was undertaken only after the International Labour Organisation approached us and commissioned us to do the study. By this time not only did we know the waste-pickers very well (we had already been working with them for over seven years), but we also knew the traders and some of the reprocessors. This ensured that the data we collected was reasonably accurate, or at least that we were aware when it was not. The waste pickers accepted that there might be some value to this particular study. The findings were presented to them at a Convention.*

*Due to a combination of good advocacy efforts, a sensitive bureaucrat, good timing and a lot of good luck the major benefit of the findings of the ILO study was that all registered members of the KKPKP were covered under a special medical insurance scheme by the municipal corporation, months after the report was published .*

*Formal documentation for publication has also not been done for similar reasons. Our time spent on it has to be accepted by the members. The question "writing for whom and for what purpose?" has always been a contentious one. In a context where there are more people writing than reading and where printing costs are justified only with volume, we have avoided everything except the most basic process records. This has saved us time, money and energy and ensured a focused approach to the work. However it has also meant that a lot of people with less experience or none have written not very accurate accounts on the subject. Of course the consolation is that not many will be reading them in any case.*

*Today we write because we perceive that this is the ideal time for new group's to emerge for similar action. We believe that we have some learning to share with them. A document may save us and them some time.*

(Source: KKPKP unpublished documentation)

Some of the unpublished studies that have been undertaken are a study of child waste-pickers, the findings of which were used to focus on elementary education; and the study of cases of theft filed against waste-pickers from police records, the findings of which revealed that even preliminary charges had been actually been filed against only 7 per cent of waste-pickers who were arrested on grounds of 'suspicion' while the others had been released for lack of grounds on

which to file any charges. The study established that the criminal element among waste-pickers is no greater or no less than that prevalent in other sections of society.

#### **Section 4: Activities of the KKPKP**

##### **Activities of the KKPKP**

The activities of the Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat are determined on the basis of the need expressed by the members and the number of members that will be involved in it in relation to costs (financial, staff time and activist's time). We are therefore reluctant to initiate any long term activity that benefits only a few members, requires a great deal of investment and is not likely to be self sustaining in the long term. The activities broadly comprise redressing individual grievances; developing institutional mechanisms for social security; creating platforms for social and cultural renewal; market interventions in the scrap trade; and advocacy and lobbying for legislative protection.

##### **Redressing individual grievances**

###### Domestic violence

Unless specifically requested by the complainant, discussions on domestic violence are held in public/ groups. Unlike among the middle classes, poor women do not view family violence as a 'private matter' because of the dense living conditions. Most often group pressure is used to resolve the crisis. Police and legal intervention have been sought when required.

*In 1996, tired of being harassed by her alcoholic, unemployed husband and even more tired of police inaction when she lodged a complaint, 35 year old Mathura Hatagale finally asked us to take it up with the Mahila Dakhata Samiti (Domestic Violence Committee, Pune Police Commissionerate).*

*Mathura's husband was known and feared in the vasti (slum) for his disgusting, lewd behaviour. As he almost fell over the women in his alcoholic stupor, we had to relocate the meeting. When the SHG (self help group) was still functional, and Mathura was the treasurer for the group, he had drunk away the entire savings of the group kept in Mathura's cupboard. Mathura had stood by him through all this. "He was drunk. He didn't know what he was doing", she argued. She even repaid the entire amount to the group. Once, when an activist had ensured that the police acted on Mathura's complaint and arrested him, Mathura had gone the next day to 'release' him.*

*We understood, analysed and even shared the cyclical theory of violence with all the members, and tried to explain Mathura's position, her perceptions, and how she was 'trapped' in the cycle. But we could not expect everyone to stand by her again. In fact we were not even sure that we wanted to stand by her. Sadashiv had returned home drunk*

*and cut her nose with a sharp piece of metal. "Today you are seeking our help to put the case at the MDS and get him arrested. Tomorrow you will beg us to give you a letter to a private hospital so he gets good treatment after the Police beat him up..." we had said.*

*But Mathura had had enough. "No, I will not" she asserted.*

*She stood true to her word. Not only did she speak out openly against him at the police station when none of us were present but she also refused to sign the 'statement' prepared for her and read out to her by the police. "I have no idea if what you read out is what you have actually written. I will sign it only after I get it read by an outsider." And the following day, she did.*

#### *Monetary compensation for accident victims*

*Konda Mahadev Jadhav of Ramvadi was not a regular member; in fact she had not even cleared her membership dues. But she did not hesitate to approach the Union when she was knocked down by a motorcyclist while ragpicking in May 1998. Fortunately, she had all the relevant details of the accident. It was possible to recover Rs.2000 by way of hospitalisation and medical costs and Rs.1400 towards compensation for the number of working days lost. We however did not manage to recover her membership dues from her. Subsequently, we started insisting that such 'members', who were essentially just registered with the Union, clear their dues before we take up their complaints.*

*(Source: Unpublished documentation KKPKP)*

### **Institutional mechanisms for provision of social security to scrap collectors**

#### **1. Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Nagri Sahakari Pat Sanstha (Savings linked credit co-operative)**

The relevance of savings linked credit programmes for the poor has been well established and extensively documented. As has been the fact that the repayment rates of the poor are very good.

The KKPKNSPS was formally registered as a financial institution (savings linked credit co-operative) in 1997, exclusively for the members of the KKPKP. Other than the President and the Secretary, all other members of the Governing Board, including the Treasurer are scrap collectors. The Credit Co-operative has 2040 members. While financial operations are centrally managed, to minimise administrative costs, operationally it functions along the lines of self-help groups. Savings are collected by group leaders and deposited with the office of the co-operative. Loans approved by group members are also disbursed centrally. Lending is to the extent of three times the amount saved and the two other members of the co-operative are required to be guarantors. The lending limit is Rs.25000= . The rate of interest on is 12 % per annum with an additional 12% social security charge towards social security schemes for members.

The Credit Co-operative did not receive any external financial assistance for provision of credit in the first fifteen months of operation ending March 31, 1999. The entire loan

requirement of members was met through savings. From May 1999, a sum of Rs.3,00,000 in the form of interest free deposits has been collected from well-wishers.

Although the existence of the Credit Co-operative has reduced the members' dependence on usurious informal channels of credit, '*malwaris*' (moneylenders) who follow the system of daily doorstep disbursement and collection continue to service the needs of those who find it more convenient, because it requires no collateral, not even savings. At the present time the transaction costs of starting a similar service through the credit co-operative are perceived to be quite high.

In the initial years the majority of loans were consumption loans. There has been a slight shift with more waste-pickers taking loans to fund their children's secondary school or college education, to purchase cooking gas and to buy or repair houses.

The paper will not expand on the credit activity because the experience is not significantly different from such initiatives elsewhere. Suffice to say that it has 2040 members; that it has been able to declare dividends (effectively interest on savings) @ 10 % per annum since the first year of operation; that the repayment rates are very good; and that all the administrative and management costs are met from the operations.

#### ***'Malwari Hatao, paise bachao'* (Boycott Moneylenders Campaign)**

The data gathered at the Annual General Meeting of the credit co-operative in 2002 formed the basis of the '*Malwari Hatao*' campaign. Typically, members had pawned gold and silver at 60 percent of their value at interest rates of 5 and 10, respectively, per month to goldsmiths, jewellers and even grocers in some cases. An offer to redeem the pledged gold after lowering the interest to 2% per month was made to the members at the AGM itself on the condition that *they were willing to take clear stands against the pawnbrokers and moneylenders.*

The members were required to repay the sum at the same rate of interest to the Union, after which the gold would be returned to them. Well-wishers supported the campaign through interest free deposits of Rs.200000. The campaign was immensely successful and within a period of two months gold amounting to Rs.180000 belonging to 44 members was redeemed and placed in a safe deposit vault in the bank. No police intervention was required. As the word spread, no serious resistance was encountered from the pawnbrokers.

Attempts to institutionalise the initiative through banks failed because the paper work was too cumbersome and time consuming. The KKP KP now runs its own 'gold loan scheme' at the same rates of interest as the credit co-operative.

## **2 Group Life Insurance Scheme**

A group life insurance scheme was introduced in November 1998 in collaboration with the Life Insurance Corporation of India. Enrolment in the scheme is optional and members have to pay their own premium. For a premium of Rs.25 per annum, members are insured against natural death, accidental death and disability. Claims amounting to almost Rs.500000 have been disbursed since the commencement of the scheme. 3500 members insured themselves in 2004.

## **3. Group Medical Insurance Scheme (see Mobilisation around economic issues)**

## **5. Gold Loan Scheme**

### **Market Interventions in the Scrap Trade**

#### **Kashtachi Kamai (earnings from labour): Co-operative Scrap store**

Retail scrap trade establishments are usually located in slums. No receipts are issued for transactions with scrap collectors and it is doubtful whether any taxes are paid. The wholesale scrap trade is closely held and controlled by the trading castes and communities. The scrap commodities market is subject to seasonal price fluctuations and is also influenced by the imports of scrap from developed countries.

*Kashtachi Kamai* was started with the following objectives.

- ⇒ ensure better returns for labour for the waste-pickers
- ⇒ improve the bargaining capacity of waste-pickers
- ⇒ provide insights into the closely held scrap trade (data base for advocacy)
- ⇒ quantify the economic productivity and contribution of waste-pickers (data base for advocacy)
- ⇒ demonstrate that it is possible for the store (and by implication the scrap traders) to provide for contributory provident fund (data base for advocacy)
- ⇒ demonstrate that it is possible to generate profits in the scrap trade using fair business practices.

Based on the learnings from three unsuccessful experiences at other locations, *Kashtachi Kamai* was started as an activity of the Union in February 1998 with working capital of Rs.50,000, provided by donors through the Project for the Empowerment of waste-pickers of the

SNDT Women's University and in the space provided *gratis* by the municipality. The store has run as a profit making enterprise ever since, with no subsidies whatsoever. This is based on our strong conviction that economic enterprises have to be run without donor subsidies. The provision of free space does not constitute a subsidy because retail scrap traders occupy encroached spaces in slums. Payment is strictly cash and receipts are issued to the waste-pickers for every transaction. No children are permitted to sell scrap at the store. The purchase rates of scrap are periodically determined in consultation with the members. Accounts are presented annually. All the costs of labour and management are met through the income generated. A young woman whose educational level is class X manages the store. Her salary is comparable with that paid in similar enterprises. There are also two hired labourers paid at market rates. The three employees are entitled to a paid weekly holiday, paid leave and bonus. The monitoring costs of Rs.12000 per annum are also reimbursed to the Union from the net profits.

The 40 members who sell their collected scrap at the store everyday are provided with a cup of tea daily and are entitled to a share of the profits generated. The profit share constitutes between 8 and 10 percent of the annual earnings of each waste-picker (calculated based on the record of daily transactions) distributed annually. Half the amount is distributed as cash the balance is deposited by members in PPF (Public Provident Fund) or Long Term Money Back Policies of the Life Insurance Corporation of India.

Over the years, Kashtachi Kamai has generated reserves of Rs.175000 which have been put aside for starting more such ventures. Although Kashtachi Kamai is a successful enterprise in all respects, it also raises several key issues that must be addressed. Firstly, it alters the relationship between the members who patronise the store and their own union from an equal relationship to a clientalist one. The members' perception of the exploitative relationship between scrap trader and themselves get transplanted onto the Union, which comes to be seen as the "employer"/"patron". Secondly, if the investment (money, time and effort) that is to set up successful enterprises is taken to be the "cost" then the benefit accrues to only 40 members as compared with the total membership.

## **Platforms for Social and Cultural Renewal**

The Union has consciously created spaces for alternate social and cultural practices. Traditional forms of cultural expression have been used to promote messages of change. The ‘*Samajik Jagran Gondhal*’, ‘*Kashtakaryanchi Lok Adalat*’ (peoples court), ‘*Samudayik Vivah Solah*’ (community wedding celebration) and street plays have been the means used to counter social practices like child marriage, dedication of girl children to deities and caste related ritual begging which are widely prevalent amongst waste-pickers.

Some illustrations are given below.

### ***Samajik Vivah Solah (Community wedding celebration)***

*The community wedding celebration was started in 1998 as another means to address the issue of child marriage. Couples intending to get married in this manner have to be of legal age. It is an annual feature and the parents have to spend very little because costs are shared and expenses are kept to the minimum.*

*There has always been some tension between the Mahars/Neo-Buddhists and the Matangs on account of historical factors. Both believe that the other is inferior and marriage is endogamous within the caste. The community wedding celebration created a history of sorts in the year of its introduction, with couples from both castes being married on the same platform. This has now been extended to inter-religious marriages which the Union wholeheartedly supports.*

### ***Theatre with a Difference***

*Some of the negative attitudes of the middle and upper classes towards the poor are due to lack of opportunities for communication between the haves and the have-nots. The waste-pickers Union organised an event, ‘Theatre with a Difference’ in order to address this issue on 25 March 2001. About two hundred waste-pickers and two hundred citizens and members of the press together watched the presentation of two plays about the lives of waste-pickers.*

*The first play called ‘**Kalokhachya Lekikadun**’ (from a child of darkness) was the dramatisation of a diary of a Brazilian ragpicker and her daughter presented by a mother-daughter team of professional actresses. The second was a play titled ‘**Swatantryacha zala kay? Amchya hati aalach nhay!**’ (Whatever happened to independence? We have never experienced it!) scripted with, and presented by, five waste-pickers themselves about their life experiences. An eminent playwright and filmmaker and two waste-pickers were invited as discussants to comment on both the plays. The novelty of the event and the presence of eminent personalities ensured that it was widely covered by the media. As was expected the presentation and on stage improvisation by the waste-pickers stole the show. The audience was also extremely appreciative of the experiment and particularly impressed by the stage presence, earthy language and the sense of humour of the waste-pickers.*

*(Source: unpublished documentation KKPKP)*

## **Networking, Advocacy and Lobbying**

### **Networking**

The media have played a significant role in highlighting the environmental contribution of waste-pickers and transforming the stereotypical image of waste-pickers in the public consciousness. Both the English and the regional language press and the electronic media have been sensitive to issues concerning waste-pickers right from the inception of the Union. Waste-pickers have been quite comfortable in their interactions with the media. Events such as protest demonstrations and state level conventions of scrap collectors have been widely covered. As have the activities.

### **Strategic alliances**

While the Union limits itself to issues concerning waste-pickers, it recognises that social reality and change involve a complex interplay of social, economic, political and cultural factors. Consequently, it links up with similar groups and movements. The Union is part of several fora such as the *Angamehnti Kashtakari Kruti Samiti* (Action Committee of Unorganised Labour), *Stree Mukti Andolan Sampark Samiti* (Committee of Women's Organisations), Action for the Rights of the Child, Campaign against Child Labour, citizens civic action groups and environmental groups.

### **Legislative protection**

Waste-pickers are considered to be self employed having no legally tenable employer-employee relationship either with the municipalities or the with scrap traders. They are not *paid* by the municipalities while with the scrap traders the relationship is a sale-purchase transaction, at most a patron-client one built on years of dealing with the same scrap trader. Therefore, waste-pickers are not covered under any labour legislation and are not entitled to social security benefits. There are several possibilities that are being explored simultaneously and the KKPKP has chosen not be prescriptive about any of them because of the complex and changing nature of the issue and the external environment. It is conceivable that in the foreseeable future, the integration of waste-pickers into solid waste collection through licensing/public-private initiatives/ joint ventures (see mobilising around economic issues), can be negotiated to include social security provisions. The

options that have been pursued till date by the Union itself or through larger fora are outlined below.

### 1. State Legislation

The Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat raised the demand for extension of the Mathadi Act to waste-pickers in 1998 at a mass rally attended by over 4000 members. Since then attempts have been made to initiate similar organised efforts in other parts of the state. State level Conventions of waste-pickers were organised at Pune on 25 March 1999 and 5 May 2001. The most recent was attended by over 7000 waste-pickers from Pune and 5 other cities in Maharashtra.

The Maharashtra Hamal Mathadi and other Unprotected Workers (Regulation of Employment and Welfare) Act, 1969 is an existing legislation that can be extended to waste-pickers with some modifications. The Act presently applies to head-loaders/porters. The definition of "employer" and "wages" within the Act is fairly wide ranging and can be further modified. The Act provides for compulsory registration of 'employers' and workers with a Statutory Board. The constituents of the tripartite board include representatives of the employers/traders organisations, trade unions of workers and the state. The costs of administering the Board are defrayed through a levy payable by the employers. 'Wages' are deposited with the Board by the 'employers' along with the levy, which includes contribution towards provident fund and other statutory benefits. The Board deducts the workers contribution and makes the wage payment to the workers. The Act allows for multiple employers and payment at piece rate. The Act applies to a list of scheduled 'employments' specified in the Act.

The Act has been very beneficial to the workers covered under it, in the three decades since its enactment. Its efficacy has been directly proportional to the strength of the workers trade unions in different districts of the State.

### 2. Central Legislation

The Draft Bill for Unorganised Workers based on the recommendations of the Second National Commission on Labour set up by the previous government was never tabled in parliament. The Union had made representations to the Labour Commissions and the report includes a brief section on waste-pickers. The Union representatives also participated in some of the workshops organised by the Commission.

## **Section 5: Expansion**

As a deliberate strategy, the Union has tried to promote organisations of scrap collectors in other cities in the state through local initiatives in those cities, rather than setting up branches. The efforts to promote organisation of waste-pickers in other cities through local NGOs/ trade unions/mass organisations have met with varying degrees of success. During the last five years some form of organisation of waste-pickers has been undertaken by local organisations (NGOs and trade unions) in Nasik, Mumbai, Solapur and Ahmednagar in Maharashtra. Surat and Ahmedabad in Gujarat; Indore and Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh and Bangalore in Karnataka are some of the other cities where there are organisations of waste-pickers/organisations working with waste-pickers.

Having said this KKPKP does face a problem with expansion. Our focus on process and methodology that is applicable to any form of organisation interested in work with waste-pickers, has few takers in a market dominated by donors promoting or seeking 'models' with universal replicability. Organisations themselves operate in a culture which values and emphasises targets, outputs and sometimes get entrenched in certain ways of doing things. Driven then by a struggle to sustain programmes and source funding for them, they find it difficult to change. In a context where donors play a role in determining the kinds of projects that are funded, their willingness to support process oriented initiatives that do not always fit into project cycles, will go a long way.

## **Section 6: Mapping Social Change**

In this Section we will attempt to map the changes that the organisational processes of the KKPKP have been able to achieve. The KKPKPs understanding of empowerment has already been elucidated earlier in the paper (see section on process and methodology). Powerlessness is a state of *'being'* in which the individual experiences and has no power to exercise choice, determine the course of one's life and no control over the external environment that determines the choices or the absence of choices that can be made. Empowerment then is an ongoing process of *'becoming'* increasingly empowered from a beginning state of powerlessness. It is therefore not an end state but an enabling process.

Social change in the above context has several dimensions and takes place in different domains and at several levels. Change in one sphere impacts and influences change in other spheres. It is clear from Section II that change as outlined above has taken place at different

levels on waste-pickers themselves, in their social relationships, in the material conditions of their lives and in State policy.

Organisational outcomes can and are usually measured by quantitative indicators. It is more difficult to measure empowerment. They are either ignored or loosely measured by individualistic success stories and emotionally worded reports describing the 'glow on the members' faces'. We reflect here on some of the changes in terms of shifts that have taken place within the realm of the key institutions of the family, the community, the market and the state.

We begin with stating that waste-pickers are strong. They have the kind of strength that is developed during the course of coping with adverse conditions. The process of collectivisation has built on this strength and enhanced it.

### **Numerical indicators for collectivisation**

1. Shift from an individual unorganised state to a collective identity.
2. Increase in membership of the Union from 800 in 1993 to 5025 in 2004.
3. Increase in membership of the credit co-operative from 200 in 1998 to 2050 in 2004.

### **Change in levels of participation**

Shift from passive membership to active participation in programme planning and implementation.

Shift from relying on others to advocate critical issues to advocating ones owns issues

### **Change in consciousness**

1. Change in self-image from perception of being a devalued 'non-worker' to valued 'productive worker'.
2. Change in the perception of individual powerlessness to recognition of collective strength.
3. Change in self-image from that of recipient to actively questioning the interventions and leadership.
4. Change in perception of education as irrelevant for the poor to recognition of its importance in occupational mobility for their children.
5. Change in perception of child labour as being inevitable and acceptable to being harmful to the interests of adult labour and children's rights.
6. Increase in willingness to examine cultural issues.
7. Increase in the willingness to resist violence, humiliation and injustice.
8. Increase in nomination of girl children for life insurance policies.
9. Increase in willingness to delay marriage of children.

**Change in public perception**

1. Endorsement of identity cards by the municipalities.
2. Reduction in harassment by the State authorities.
3. Change in public perception of waste-picker as a 'nuisance' to 'service provider and environment protector'.
4. Invisibility or negative representation in the media to positive representation in the media.
5. Invisibility in State records to recognition by the State

**Change in material conditions**

1. Increase in institutional savings and creditworthiness. Improved access to credit.
2. Increase in bargaining power with the State and scrap traders.
3. Social security benefits- Life insurance and Medical insurance
4. Increase in school enrolment and retention of children
5. Actual reduction in the number of child-wastepickers.
6. Central government scholarships to children of those engaged in unclean occupations
7. Increased access to source segregated garbage.

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