

Socio-Economic and Educational Status of Rag Pickers: A Geographical Study of Patna District

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Abstract

The subject of this research paper is to study the socio-economic and educational status of rag pickers and their environmental effects on their health, education, housing, work system, workplace, and pitiable condition. This survey-based study used randomly collected data from 50 rag pickers that included women, men, and children of all ages of Patna, Bihar, India. The study revealed that the socio-economic and educational status of the rag pickers was very weak. They were victims of illiteracy, poverty, filth disorder, superstition, mishaps, etc. They were also deprived of their rights and facilities. The government and society have failed to accept their contribution to the economy and environment of the city. Rag pickers are directly or indirectly involved in solid waste management that helps in the development of the city's economy. There is a need for both the unorganized and organized sectors to work together with coordinated planning for achieving developmental goals in a better way. Ragpickers are undoubtedly useful members of society but there is a dire need for their formal identification from the government to direct and manage the junk picking process in a planned and coordinated manner.

Keywords: solid waste, socio-economic development, reuse, health risk

Introduction

'Rag picker' is a term used for those who collect recyclable items from the waste. The process of picking junk involves collecting, sorting, and selling. Items to be collected mainly include bottles, cardboard, papers (Singh, 1980). Most of the rag pickers come from the backward classes of society. The percentage of scheduled castes is 81.8 and most of them are immigrants, who migrate from villages and rural areas to urban areas due to extreme poverty. They suffer from several diseases, but only a few of them get health care facilities. 75% of junk-picking children live with their families. They are victims of dust, heat, rain, violence, road accidents, exploitation, etc. (Rialp, 1993). A survey conducted jointly by UNESCO and the National Commission of India revealed that 28% of child laborers are involved in the work of rag-picking. Given that rag-picking is an informal sector, it is hard to quantify how much waste is collected in this manner, but there are rough indicators: only 75%-80% of the waste generated in India is collected by municipal bodies. Rag picking is the economic activity of the poorest section of society. Ever since the markets for recyclables have increased, the urban poor is also getting oriented to collect junk for livelihood. Rag pickers are mostly those who have no alternative to other economic activities. They work in difficult and polluted environments. The view of society is also very conservative towards them.

Rationale of the study

India is one of the most densely settled countries in the world where the world's second-largest population lives. It shows that the ever-growing population needs more resources to fulfill their demand and utility. Our natural resources like land, water, air, etc. are constant but our needs and demands are increasing day by day. In the era of mechanization and industrialization, most illiterate and unskilled people migrate from their native

place to nearby towns in search of jobs and their livelihood. They are illiterate and unskilled so they are engaged in such menial work for which they get lesser wages or lower remuneration. Such works are treated as marginalized work in society. Rag pickers are engaged in junk collecting and sorting at very low remuneration (Raj, 2019).

Krishna & Chaurasia (2016) stated that the socio-economic conditions of rag pickers are pathetic. The role of the rag pickers is very significant in solid waste management but they are treated as antisocial elements which are supposed to be unfit to live with society. The medico-social problems faced by under 15 years of rag pickers are very conceivable (Parasuramalu, 1993). Krishna, Kumar & Chaurasia (2019) concluded that the socio-economic conditions of rag pickers are very low but they played a significant role to maintain the ecology by sorting out the waste materials from the area at the frontline. Godara & Meenu (2019) studied that the socio-economic conditions and demographic aspects of female rag pickers' involvement in the informal sector of Harayana and nearby areas are very pitiable and they are not aware of their social benefits and rights. Government must support them by providing basic needs, safety and security. The child laborers engaged in junk collecting work are at high risk in health conditions (WHO, 1988 & Arimpor, 1992).

Analysis of the above-mentioned research studies revealed that the socio-economic and educational status of the rag pickers is wretched. Their work which helps in solid waste management to maintain the ecological balance is not given importance by society. Rag pickers are perturbed by the misanthropic behavior of society. They do their work without consciousness of their health risk for their livelihood. This research is mainly focused to explore the socio-economic and educational status and the various other aspects of rag pickers in the Patna district.

Objectives

- To study the educational status of the rag pickers of Patna district.
- To study the socio-economic status of the rag pickers of Patna district.
- To study the socio-economic effects of rag pickers on their health, education, housing, work system, workplace, and the pitiable condition of the children.

Research questions

- What is the educational status of the rag pickers of the Patna district?
- What is the socio-economic status of the rag pickers of the Patna district?
- What are the socio-economic effects of rag pickers on their health, education, housing, work system, workplace, and the pitiable condition of the children?

Methodology

Research Method

The study under consideration is descriptive survey research. The numerical and non-numerical data is used to achieve the objectives of the study.

Population and Sample

The population of the study includes all rag pickers of Patna urban areas where more than 1000 rag pickers are engaged in the work of collection of junks and waste materials. 50 rag pickers were selected conveniently for the interview from the following eight areas of Patna urban area i.e. Railway station, Boring Road, Digha, S.K Puri, Rajapul, Gandhi Maidan, Aashiyana, and Koyari Tola.

Tools Used

In the present study, the researcher used a self-constructed questionnaire and a checklist based on the objectives for the collection of data.

Analysis of Data

The present study is primarily a qualitative study. The researcher classified, analyzed and interpreted the data so as to get meaningful inferences. The data was analyzed and interpreted into the following heads.

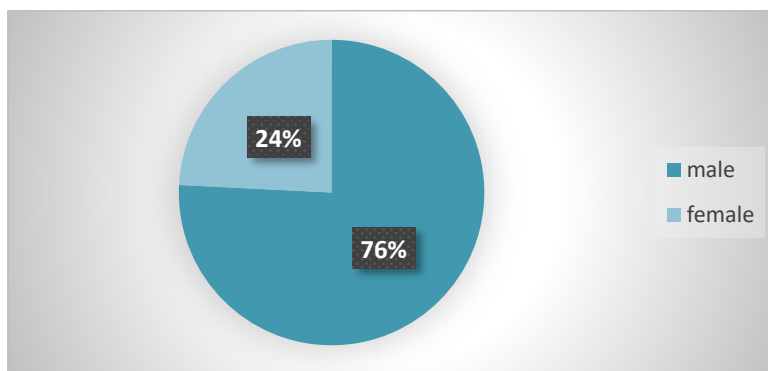
Personal Information of rag-pickers, Educational status of rag-pickers, Socioeconomic status of rag-pickers, Health and hygiene of rag-pickers, Nature of collected junks and their disposal, Social Support to rag-pickers and Rag-picking process and Child labor.

Personal Information of Rag Pickers

Most of the rag pickers were migrants who came to the city from nearby rural areas in search of employment. There were no gender or age restrictions in garbage picking. Women, men, children all were involved in the work of rag-picking.

Table 1: Original sites of junk pickers

Original site	Number	Percentage (%)
Migrants	25	50
Local	18	36
Temporary resident	07	14



Sex-ratio of rag pickers

None of the rag pickers received any kind of formal training for rag picking but they got information about things to be collected by other rag pickers or from the buyers of junks. They felt no need for any work experience, skill, or training to do this work.

The age structure of the people involved in this work is 5-65 years. There was no age bar for the job. Even five-year small child was found to be engaged in this job.

Table 2: Age structure of the junk pickers

Age group	Number	%
0-14	17	34
14-30	26	52
30-50	05	10
50+	02	04
Total	50	100

Most of the ragpickers are migrants who came from nearby rural areas in search of employment. Mostly they lived in single-family, but the total number of members in nearly half of the families was 8-10, as a couple had 5-6 children. Some junk pickers also lived alone. Almost all rag pickers belonged to backward castes or minorities as shown in the following table.

Table 3: Caste of the rag pickers

Caste	Number	Percentage (%)
S.C.+ Minorities	35	70
S.T.	04	08
OBC	10	20
General	01	02
Total	50	100

Educational Status of Rag Pickers

In the sample selected for the study, only about 5-7% of rag pickers studied up to primary level and they could read and write. Most of the rag pickers had a roof to hide their heads and fulfill their basic needs of life. Their literacy was among the lowest even after a decade of implementation of the Right to Education Act 2009. It is high time to improve the status of these marginalized people in society by improving their education, health, security, etc, to maintain equality, liberty, and idea of justice i.e. social, economic, political, cultural, and educational. Education can transform human beings into human resources.

Socio-Economic Status of Rag Pickers

Data revealed that the rag pickers either lived under the open sky or temporarily built a hut in a slum area or were street sleepers. A few of them had taken the house on a monthly rent of 600-700 rupees per month.

Table 4: House availability

House	Number	%
Private	11	22
Government	08	16
Homeless	26	52
Rent	05	10
Total	50	100

They chose work items from the garbage heap throughout the day but their earning was very low. Rag pickers worked as full-time workers. During the survey, it was revealed that about 88 percent of the rag pickers had a full-time engagement in this profession, while only 12 percent of them were partly engaged. During the field survey, it was also revealed that most of the junk pickers worked alone. Children worked in groups of 3-4. The daily income of waste pickers was found to be very low from 50-200.. Their average daily income was Rs.100 – 150.

The data revealed that rag pickers played an important role in the 'waste management' of Patna as they select recyclables. Most of the rag pickers (above 80- 90% in different areas) depended on daily earnings. Some of them said during the interview that sometimes they faced a very hard situation and went to sleep hungry as they had nothing to eat. These people worked 365 days of the year. It was also common for them to fall ill because their workplace is very unhealthy. They worked for an average of 10-12 hours per day to get both meals. Their maximum daily earnings were up to 150-200 rupees.

Table 5: Daily income

Income	Number	%
0-50	13	26
50-100	21	42
100-150	07	14
150-200	04	08
200+	05	10
Total	50	100

The socio-economic status of the junk pickers is extremely pathetic. They are cut off from the mainstream of society. They are unwanted and despised in society. Despite the hard work of the day, their economic condition is quite weak. Most of the junk pickers come from the marginalized class of the society such as Dalits and minorities etc. The existence of rag pickers and their contribution to social development is often ignored. Due to poverty, illiteracy, and unavailability of other employment opportunities, they are oriented towards this work. They are also very insecure in terms of social security. They are victims of poverty, illiteracy, filth,

disorder, superstitions, mishaps, etc. they are also unaware of their rights and facilities available.

Health and Hygiene of Rag Pickers

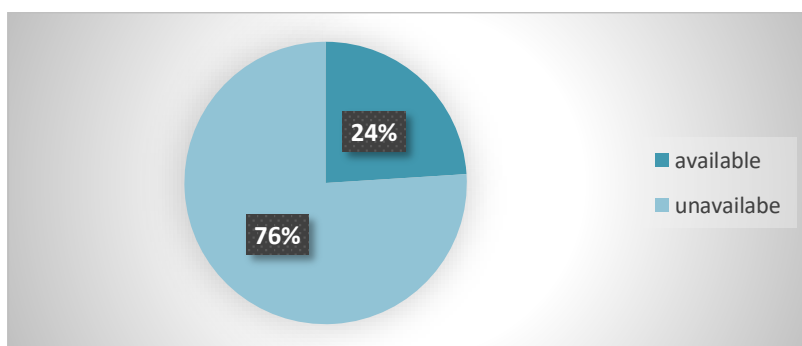
Choosing useful items from a pile of garbage is very unhealthy work in itself. Those things which we throw away after being considered unusual or rotting, they find a way to earn their living in the same pile of filth. These bare hands pick up items from the dustbins, which is quite dangerous as there is a possibility of being torn by broken objects.

Most junk pickers lived in slums, mostly in the vicinity of the garbage heap. Most of them (90%) lived in mud, half raw, and temporary houses. There was no hardly any arrangement of air or light in their dwellings.

Table: 6 Residential types

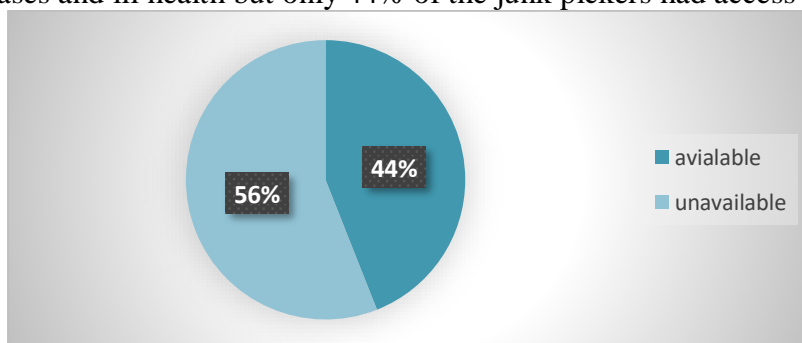
Types of houses	Number	Percentage (%)
Pucca house	05	10
Mudhouse	09	18
Half raw	19	38
Temporary	17	34
Total	50	100

Some of them (10%) were provided pucca houses under the “Indira residential project”. The availability of clean toilets is very important from the point of view of health, but nearly one-fourth of the waste pickers’ dwellings had availability of toilets and none of them was found to be clean.



Toilet availability

Availability of clean drinking water is the basic necessity of good health. Drinking dirty water is the major cause of diseases and ill health but only 44% of the junk pickers had access to clean drinking water.

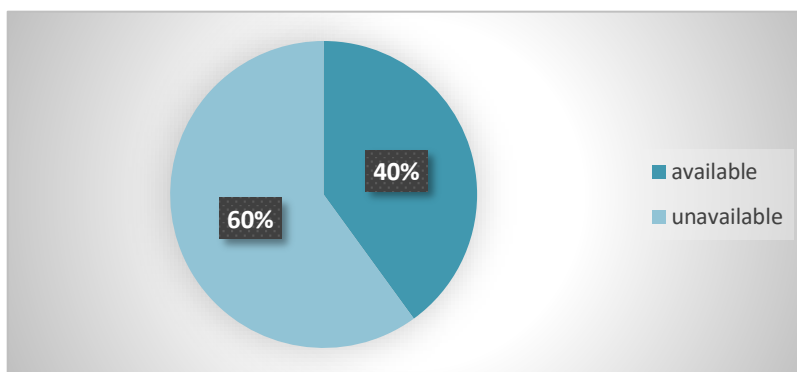


Availability of clean drinking water

Most of the rag pickers were provided drinking water by the municipal corporation. Since the workplace of rag pickers is highly contaminated and unhealthy, they are prone to many diseases, including diarrhea, fever, TB, malaria, asthma, skin infections, respiratory diseases, etc. Although data on diseases they were suffering or suffered earlier could not be procured but most of them reported to be facing some health problems. They suffered from scabies, lice, chronic dysentery, lungs, ear, nose, and throat infections, wounds, and scratches, etc. all these diseases are caused by poverty, malnutrition, and an unhealthy

environment.

40% of them visited government hospitals for treatment occasionally. They could not avail themselves of health services provided by the private hospitals. All of them largely relied on local quacks for treatment.



Availability of government medical facility

Rag pickers have to travel a long distance in search of junk. They travel an average of 4-5 km per day due to their work. This is because, in one place, junk is not available as per the requirement. The junk collected is sold at different rates. Plastic bottles are the main item to be chosen, as they have a high sales rate and are also easy to choose from.

Table 7: Junk sales rate to be selected

Things/commodity	Rate (Rs./kilo)
Paper/cardboard	30
Glass	01
Iron	15
Plastic and others	10

Nature of Collected Junks and their Disposal

The type of objects to be chosen also depends on work experience. Newly attached people chose easy-to-pick items such as bottles. Whereas, experienced chose high-priced items like metals as per selection. In a day, a junk picker collected 7-8 kg of waste on average.

Mostly, the junk pickers sold the junk they had picked the same day because they had to arrange the food of the day from this income. The selected junk is sold in the junk or scrap shop. During the survey, scrap shops were found in the following areas:- Station, Rajapul, S.K Puri, Boring Road, Aashiana Mod, Gandhi Maidan. There are a large number of junk shops at the station. Generally, the rag pickers sold their junks in scrap shops of nearby areas. They sold their junk themselves, not through a broker or middleman.

Social Support to Rag Pickers

Rag pickers are generally excluded from the social circle. They are considered undesirable in a civilized society. They collect rags and junk from roadsides, streets, industrial areas, dustbins, and residential piers. They are seen with suspicious eyes. The police often chase them while picking rags. Sometimes police search them in their huts on suspicion. 16 percent of the rag pickers admitted that the police along with the goons collected money from them.

Since rag pickers come from different places, they lacked organizational unity. As a result, they are deprived of government assistance. In the absence of solidarity, they are unable to convey their voice to the concerned officer or government. Due to illiteracy and poverty, they are also unaware of the government facilities available to them.

The data revealed that there existed no organization or association of the rag pickers. Even those who purchased their rags and junk did not help them. The investigators did not come across any NGO or self-help group working to uplift the socio-economic status of the junk pickers.

Table 8: Social support to Rag Pickers

Social support	Number	Percentage (%)
Good	-	-
Unconcerned	12	24
Satisfactory	02	04
Unsatisfactory	36	72
Total	50	100

Rag picking process and child labor

Child labor is a blot on a civilized society. According to data from Census 2011, the number of child laborers in India is 10.1 million of which 5.6 million are boys and 4.5 million are girls. A total of 152 million children – 64 million girls and 88 million boys – are estimated to be in child labor globally, accounting for almost one in ten of all children worldwide.

Children belong in schools, not workplaces. Child labor deprives children of their right to go to school and reinforces intergenerational cycles of poverty. Child labor acts as a major barrier to education, affecting both attendance and performance in school.

Child labor is a global problem. In urban areas children serve primarily as domestic help in hotels or dhabas, shoeshiners, street vendors, or repair workers. But the work of choosing junk pickers is most harmful to children because the filthy environment has a direct impact on health. Mere a glance of these children reveals their poverty. There are many reasons why children get involved in works like junk picking. There is no age limit in this business. It is easy to connect and leave this business. It also does not require education or training. It is a matter of concern that the age at which children should study or play in school; they do unhealthy works like junk picking. The percentage of children in the total population of junk pickers is 34 percent, whose age is less than 14 years. (India 2010, chapter-21)

In the morning, these children go out barefoot to pick up junk hanging the sack on their back. They can earn 40-50 rupees a day. Children are mostly forced to do these tasks under family pressure. As the daily earning of rag pickers is among the lowest, children are forced to the rag-picking job. Most of these children do not go to school. Some are also orphans or runaways; they work for a junk buyer. These children are victims of heat, rain, dust, road accidents, violence, etc. sometimes, they are sent to child improvement homes, assuming anti-social elements. They are deprived of proper love and guidance from their parents. They suffer from various diseases caused by poverty, malnutrition, and an unhealthy environment.

Conclusion

This field-based study done in Patna shows that the action of picking up junk is one of the main economic activities of the urban poor. These include mainly people from the socially and economically marginalized section of the society. They come to the city in the hope of a better future. But due to the unavailability of other employment opportunities, they engage in this work. Rag picking is an unorganized economic activity. Therefore, this is the easiest and quickest way to earn money, in which there are no legal hurdles. Nearly one-third (30%) of the sample rag pickers were satisfied with their work, while 64 percent were indifferent to their work. But everyone accepted that this work provided them a means of livelihood in a city like Patna. Junk

picking is a key element in the active process of reuse of goods in the organized industrial market economy. But so far neither the government nor the society has acknowledged their contribution in protecting the economy and environment of the city.

Although rag pickers are directly or indirectly involved in solid waste management, their voice remains unheard due to a lack of legal organization and social awareness. Most of the waste pickers are uneducated and rural migrants. There is a lack of awareness about health and hygiene among rag pickers, as a result, they suffer from many types of diseases and health problems.

Suggestions

For the development of the economy of the city, it is very important to work together between the units of the unorganized and organized sectors, because these two are complementary to each other. Therefore, junk pickers should be accepted as useful members of society who help in solid waste management and keeping the city's environment clean and liveable. By taking steps at the level of policymaking, the role of the people who opt for rag picking in the urban economy will be coordinated in a way to improve their standard of living.

This study has shown that there is a complete absence of institutions to monitor and direct the work of junk pickers. There is a dire need for formal identification from the government to direct and manage the junk picking process. For this, NITI Ayog, Ministry of Labor and Employment, Ministry of Urban Affairs, Municipal Corporations, etc. will have to be specific in their respective responsibilities and they will also have to reconcile with each other. The major bodies that can define the legal framework of junk pickers are as follows:

Ministry	Implementation plans
NITI Ayog	Resolution on organizing the rag-picking activity as a support mechanism to solid waste management of city & towns
Ministry of Labor and employment	Define the junk pickers as their rights to protect their human rights.
Ministry of urban affairs	Define then the work activity of the municipal corporation so that the corporation can work for the upliftment of the junk pickers.
Municipal corporation	To provide a platform to the junk pickers by implementing and periodic schemes and making them a part of waste management.

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