

A banner for Workopolis featuring the company logo, a bar chart, and the text 'IS NOW HIRING: INSIDE SALES EXPERTS'. It includes a green button that says 'CLICK HERE TO APPLY' and a hand holding a white card that reads 'reason #2 TOP COMPENSATION'.

## Poor pay price of progress in India

**'Ragpickers' face grim future as New Delhi decides to use modern means of collecting the city's waste**

April 09, 2009

**RICK WESTHEAD**  
SOUTH ASIA BUREAU

NEW DELHI—One recent morning, as she'd done most days over the past 20 years, Fatima Begum left her hovel in a slum tucked in the corner of this city's diplomatic enclave and shuffled to a nearby dumpster to begin her work day.

As Begum began to root through refuse, searching for bottles, old light bulbs, and anything else that might be recyclable, someone punched the 65-year-old in the back of the head. She collapsed. Her attacker continued to punch and kick her.

"It was a man who said he would do worse to me if I came back there again," Begum said, her arms and hands still scraped from fending off her attacker two weeks ago. "He said he worked with a company that had a contract with the city for the garbage from that dump."

One of about 150,000 so-called "ragpickers" in New Delhi who've spent their lives rooting through waste, Begum is a testament to a battle over garbage that's being waged across this fast-growing capital city.

New Delhi will host the Commonwealth Games next year and, as part of a push to modernize and clean up, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi has awarded waste-collection contracts to private companies in eight of its 12 zones. The move may improve cleanliness on garbage-strewn streets here but also stands to leave thousands of already impoverished ragpickers like Begum with no way to earn a living.

"Privatizing garbage collection is a death knell for these people," said Bharati Chaturvedi, who works with Chintan, a support group for ragpickers. "The Delhi government wants to show it's a world-class city; it's much the same syndrome we saw in Beijing before the Olympics when they shut down factories to improve air quality. India cares about its image, not its poor. The ragpickers are being pushed out of their jobs and left with nothing, and the government doesn't care. These people simply don't matter."

Private companies are paid by the city based on how much waste they actually deliver to local dumps. Chaturvedi said Begum may have been attacked by someone who had paid a local company for the right to search "its" dumps for recyclables.

Crouching in front of her hovel as she cooked some lentils under a scorching afternoon sun, Begum said she doesn't know how she'll get by without the \$3 a day she made rooting through dumpsters. A week earlier, the widow, who supports two grandchildren, sold her cycle rickshaw for \$40. Now, that money's running short.

"I'm totally washed out," she said.

New Delhi trucks much of its garbage to the eastern suburb of Ghaziabad. But recently, Ghaziabad announced plans to close its massive landfill and reopen it as a waste-to-energy plant. In a city where power outages are a near-daily event, that's good news. Yet here, too, progress comes at a cost.

Roughly 1,500 garbage collectors make their living on the 60-metre-high mountain of foul-smelling garbage, scouring rotting food, wilted flowers and a myriad of fast-food containers for old copper wire, newspapers and discarded metals.

Bhojari has worked here since he left his parent's home in Calcutta 25 years ago for this city of 18 million and its opportunities. The 45-year-old starts his day at about 4:30 a.m. He typically finishes by 4 p.m. and on this particular day, the father of three grinned as he recounted his day's efforts.

He'd collected about \$2.50 worth of recyclables, enough to buy a litre of buffalo milk (62 cents), three eggs (30 cents), and a kilogram of beans (40 cents).

"I know we don't eat a lot. We had chicken for the last time about three months ago, but I'm doing the best to get food for my children; I'm no different than a father in your country," said Bhojari, who, like many Indians, only uses one name.

"What am I going to do when they close the landfill? I have no idea," he said, sitting in his darkened hovel as his wife hammered the bottoms off old light bulbs.

There's no easy fix to the uncertain future ragpickers face.

Many residents here say that while the current waste disposal system might provide the 150,000-some ragpickers with a meagre livelihood, it leaves New Delhi looking second-class. "Most parts of this city are stinking and filthy," said Vinod Kumar Jain, a professor of environmental science at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi. "If private players are being engaged it's only because of inefficiencies of the current system."

Chaturvedi sadly disagrees.

"We've had private waste disposal in some parts of the city for three years and those parts are no less filthy," she said.

"If these ragpickers are squeezed out, we'll see them cutting back on what they eat, they'll stop feeding their children milk, and we'll see more women entering the sex trade. Is this progress? I don't think it is."

#### Ads by Google

##### आप College में है?

बैंकिंग Course Join करें  
और अपना Career बनाएं  
IFBI.co.in

##### ICICI Car Insurance

Save money on your Car Insurance.  
Apply now to get a Free Quote!  
ICICILombard.com/CarInsurance

##### Compare car rent Toronto

Compare rental cars in Toronto  
All inclusive car rent deals!  
CompareCarRent.com

