

Ambition, hard work, and a happy family: Gauri Devi

Back in her village, Gauri Devi worked as a farm labourer. The search for better livelihood opportunities led her family of five to Delhi a decade ago. Her husband works as an informal door-to-door waste picker in Shastri Nagar, Central Delhi. To support her husband, Gauri began working with him as an informal waste segregator. “We didn’t involve the children in the work as they are young and should be studying”, she said. Their two daughters are now 13 and 12 years old, and son, is 10. All three children study at Sewa Bharti School and go to tuition classes too. Her eldest son, 17, lives with the rest of the family in their village where they practice farming.

“I found out about Chintan’s Material Recovery Facility at Zakhira when it was built a few years ago as it is close to where we live. Working here gives me independence and allows me to benefit society. My husband and I work as a team to raise our children together. He is very supportive of me. On the days I take leave from work, he always asks me why I didn’t go”, she says with a smile.



“I love that we have set working hours at the MRF and can come and go as we need to. This allows me to take care of my children and the household while earning my own money.”

There is a major difference between the informal waste segregation she was part of earlier, versus the formal waste segregation she is part of now. “The MRF is built very nicely, and we are provided with good quality equipment and uniform that makes working here easy. Work satisfaction is high, I feel safe and get respected for the work I do.”

As a result of the hard work of women like Gauri, thousands of tonnes of mixed waste have been saved from entering the Bhalswa landfill in Delhi.

Making time for work and a family: Tetri Devi

Three years ago, Tetri Devi left her village in Nalanda, Bihar to move to Delhi with her husband and 3 children - a boy and two girls. When they first came to Delhi, they moved into a small home in Zakhira. They were looking for better incomes when a neighbour told them about work opportunities at Chintan's Material Recovery Facility at Zakhira. Tetri Devi's relationship with the waste management industry was not new. Her parents work as informal waste pickers in Gurgaon and gave her an early introduction to the life of our waste after it is thrown away (and forgotten about) and the life of people who deal with this waste in its afterlife. Thus began Tetri and her husband's journey with Chintan. They both work at the MRF at Zakhira.

Working at the Material Recovery Facility and managing 3 young children is a lot of work. However, Tetri displays an example of time management and passion for her work. A typical day in her life begins with waking up at 4 am to wash up and pray. She then cooks and gets her two children ready for school which starts at 7 am. "My elder son is 12 years old, my daughter is 10. They study at the Government Sarvodaya Kanya Vidyalaya in Inder Lok." Her youngest daughter is only 3 years old, and so after taking care of her needs, she leaves her daughter with the neighbours while she gets to work. "I get here by 9 am every morning, wear my uniform, mask, and gloves, and only then begin work. We start the machine and begin sorting the mixed waste that goes through the machine", she says.

Back in her village, Tetri Devi used to work as farm labour on lands belonging to bigger farmers. However, as the work was seasonal and unstable, it was an irregular and unreliable source of income. "Compared to then, working conditions have improved significantly here at this MRF. On the farms, we used to work in the harsh sun, versus now, where we work in a formal workplace with a roof above our heads. Earnings back then were also very low and not sufficient for sustaining the family. The reason we left our childhood home was because of the poor earnings and living conditions."

Tetri's sincerity is displayed by the hard work she puts in daily life to balance her career with her responsibilities of having young children.



Through hardships towards a secure life: Gudiya

Over the last 6 years, Gudiya has been living in Zakhira, Delhi with her husband and two young children, 6 and 8. . Her other two children are 10 and 15, and live back in their village near Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh, with the rest of their family. Back in the village they worked as farm labourers and came to Delhi in the hopes of finding better opportunities. “My husband works as a chain repairman for broken bags, shoes, clothes, etc. and I work at Chintan’s MRF in Zakhira as a waste sorter”, she said.

Gudiya started working with Chintan 2-3 years ago. There were talks of Chintan’s MRF being built near her locality, which got her intrigued about becoming a formal waste worker.

“Even though I love the independence that working gives me, it is also the stability of a regular income that I rely on. My husband fell ill a few years ago and needed an operation. We took him back to our village for his treatment because healthcare is expensive here in the city. That was a tough time in our lives that led us into quite a lot of debt. We still owe over rupees 2 lakhs and are working hard on paying off our debts. He is doing better now, but taking time to rest and recover is often not an option for us. Thankfully through my monthly salary, our income has become more stable than before.”

The benefits of a formal waste management facility are manifold. While less waste is entering our landfills, water bodies, and open pits thanks to women like Gudiya who work at this MRF, the facility has also provided a sense of security for them.



It is never too late to start working: Radha

Radha moved to Delhi over two decades ago after marriage. Born and brought up in a small village in Uttar Pradesh, she now lives in Zakhira, with her husband, son, and daughter-in-law. Until two years ago, the men of the family went out to work as door-to-door chain repairmen, while the women used to look after the home. However, the earnings from this were not sufficient to support four adults in an expensive city like Delhi.

Taking matters into her own hands, Radha started working as a waste sorter at Chintan's Material Recovery Facility about two years ago when she heard about it from her neighbours in Zakhira. She believes that it is important to work to of course earn money but also to use her time in a way that improves her family's life. The three now split the share of household expenses.

Highlighting the importance of bringing back a repair economy, she says, "My son also followed my husband's footsteps and works to repair broken chains of jackets, shoes, bags, etc., but repairing isn't as common as it used to be." With the support of the additional income, however, Radha's family is now doing much better.

"Everyone at the facility supports each other and this makes the environment here even better. The senior staff is also helpful, and we can comfortably share our problems with them, although we barely face any. I have not witnessed any major injuries from irresponsibly disposed sharps in the mixed waste, but a first aid kit is available at the MRF in case of its need."

To truly loving your job: Lakhender Mehto

Lakhender has been living alone in Delhi for the last 6 years. When he started working with Chintan 4 years ago, it was out of the need for better livelihood opportunities. “Here, the income was better than my previous workplace, the facility nicely made, the waste segregated with proper safety precautions, along with the benefits of working in the formal setting. The senior staff treated us like an equal part of the family”, he says.

However, this ‘need’ soon changed to a ‘want’ for Lakhender. “It was when I visited the Bhalswa and Ghazipur landfills with the Chintan team that I realised they look like real mountains! This is why I love the work that I do. I am being able to contribute towards keeping my country clean and that makes me proud”.



Lakhender has a very positive outlook on the waste problem. He says, “Earlier waste used to be littered everywhere but now because there are dustbins across Delhi, people’s behaviour is changing. As the waste leaves the house, MCD workers pick it up, and NGOs like Chintan are working with waste pickers to ensure the waste is properly disposed. I am sure things will keep getting better.”

Waste pickers’ work is hard. Despite protective equipment, their job isn’t free of risk. If mixed waste is disposed together, organic food waste contaminates the recyclable dry waste and reduces its recyclability. Mixed waste also increases waste workers’ risks from sharps and hazardous substances. Therefore, source segregation is the first, and easiest step to solving our waste crisis.

