

Waste, Work and Worth: Reclaiming Human Rights for Rag Pickers in India

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This paper examines the condition of rag pickers in India through the intersecting themes of waste, work and human dignity. Despite playing a crucial role in urban waste management and environmental sustainability, rag pickers remain among the most marginalized sections of society, often denied recognition, fair wages and basic human rights. Their labour, though essential, is stigmatized and carried out under hazardous and exploitative conditions, reflecting deep-rooted social and economic inequalities. The paper engages with broader debates on human rights and equality by highlighting how rag pickers are systematically excluded from access to education, healthcare, social protection and knowledge systems. It reflects on the persistent gap between constitutional guarantees of equality and dignity and the lived realities of those engaged in informal waste work. The marginalization of rag pickers is not only economic but also social and epistemic, as their access to knowledge and opportunities for upward mobility remains severely constrained. By foregrounding issues of recognition, dignity and justice, the paper calls for a rethinking of societal attitudes and policy approaches. It emphasizes the need to acknowledge rag pickers as vital contributors to urban sustainability while ensuring their rights, inclusion and equitable access to knowledge and resources.