

SAFAI SENA - CHINTAN

- **Background**

Safai Sena — an army of cleaners — is a registered group of waste pickers, doorstep waste collectors, itinerant buyers, small junk dealers and other types of waste recyclers. Its aim is to ensure that the work of waste recyclers is recognized and that they have safe and secure work conditions.

Safai Sena is the new name for an older organization called Rashtriya Safai Seva Sangathan (RSSS), which was set up in partnership with Chintan in 2001. Since the focus is on waste pickers, Chintan works mainly with organisations of the urban poor, like rag pickers and *kabaris*. However, to see success, the organisation also works closely with policymakers, students, parents, teachers, municipality employees, elected representatives and, naturally, the police. Chintan's initiatives are in the fields of research, campaigns, policy interventions, capacity building of recyclers, and creating awareness about the need for reducing consumption and better waste management among the middle and upper classes of society.

- **Location, Date**

NCR, 2001 onwards

- **Areas**

Urban

- **Stage/Scale**

Self-sustainable operations (in partnership in some places)

- **Objective of the assignment**

Safai Sena's vision is that adult waste handlers must be able to upgrade their work to green jobs, which means that apart from being good for the environment, their work should be safe, respected, recognized and clean for us. Their dream is also for the children to go to school instead of becoming waste pickers. They work for the uplift of the waste workers at the same time cleaning the surroundings.

- **What was done**

- Hundreds of waste handlers (hence forth called Safai Sena members) work at Gazipur and Okhla landfill sites and are very dependent on the waste coming to both the landfills. This waste will be diverted to two waste-to-energy plants, as they begin functioning. This can cause loss of livelihoods to Safai Sena's members, and force them to make their children work, at least part time. So, the team has made a 'Rehabilitation Committee', and is looking for a re-habilitation scheme where people can work and earn equivalent or more money than they do currently. Many of us will look for waste related work and some are looking for new work. All of workers want to live a better life where their work is recognized, safer cleaner and their children can study. Safai Sena offers all of this.
- One of Safai Sena's main objectives has been to ensure decent green jobs for its members. A part of this has been to ensure that waste pickers either directly undertake

doorstep collection or they work with contractors in a transparent, fair manner. After Ramky Infrastructure Limited got the contract for doorstep collection in Faridabad, Haryana, Safai Sena worked with them to ensure that the existing waste pickers were able to upgrade their work through becoming the doorstep collectors under the new system. They have signed a contract and over 200,000 households were serviced in the year 2012. Ramky paid for the costs of supervision, uniforms, and help-lines and Safai Sena executed the doorstep collection, ensuring its members could earn living wages or more. Chintan helped with their training.



- Safai Sena members work wearing masks, gloves and boots. They are looked after financially, taught how to become self-reliant and send their children to good government schools.
- Another facility run by the Sena is at the New Delhi Railway Station—the land has been provided by the Northern Railways. The processing plant daily handles 4 tonnes of waste generated from 18 Rajdhani Express and Shatabdi Express trains, and also from the 210 bins on the railway station, which are emptied and cleaned thrice daily.
- For the children of Safai Sena members', Chintan's "No Child in Trash" programme runs 15 centres that hold classes—basic education is provided to prepare them for the municipal schools. The teachers are trained at Chintan. The parents themselves are finding alternative means of employment.

• Impact

- Chintan is one of the few organizations in India that is authorized to work with e-waste. In the past four years, it has managed to divert 25 tons of electronic waste material to recycling.
- The organization has brought some order to the work-life of at least a few of Delhi's over 150,000 rag-pickers. Even the most elemental aspects have proved to be transformative. The laminated ID card that the Sena issues to *kabadiwallas*, has given them a formal recognition of being waste collectors. It has reduced their harassment by the police.

- **Challenges and Issues**

Waste pickers and *kabaris* are usually treated like criminals. Previously, there were also no policies or rules for organizations like Safai Sena (now there are some, but the situation is still very far from ideal). These workers' job forces them to work under hazardous conditions, and they often suffer from diseases and poor health because of it. They want to be recognized, appreciated and work under safe conditions. For this, they must have a strong voice and be able to ask for our rights. This campaign helps workers have all that they wish for.

- **Innovation**

In India, even electronic waste items are usually discarded as part of household waste. Unless the waste weighs at least three tons, formal recyclers do not take in electronic waste items. Chintan trains the waste pickers to segregate these waste products, which are then stored in the facility till the required amount is reached and they can be sold to recyclers. This project has given the workers fixed working hours.

- **Lessons learnt**

Chintan, in cooperation with Safai Sena, helped alleviate the lives of thousands of waste workers by means of properly organizing things. Just by making an association of such workers and getting contracts they made their project a literally instant hit.

Safai Sena is a newer name for an older association. They came together as a group called RSSS, or Rashtriya Safai Seva Sangathan. However, they were frequently confused for another, better known organization with which we have no links. Besides, many members felt it was not a good name even otherwise. Therefore, they agreed upon another name. The RSSS began in 2001. Safai Sena registered itself in 2009, after over 2 years of struggling with the government, because their name was not initially acceptable to the Registrar of Societies.

- **Financials**

Some parts function on donations and volunteering while others on contracts. Workers who were paid sub-standard wages now get standard wages (and sometimes even more!).

- **Economic sustainability/Revenue Model**

Workers get a minimum of INR 8,400 every month. They also have health insurance. The employees are also provided with protective gear of shoes, gloves and masks. A small portion of their earnings go towards running of the project. Since the workers are organized, the collection is done very smoothly and PPPs like the one with Northern Railways will add to the workforce, making the sustainability of the project improve everyday.

- **Implementer Contact Persons**

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