

Unraveling the experiences with Aadhaar of the waste pickers community in Hyderabad

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Satyamma decided to give up farming in her village, and migrate to Hyderabad city in search of a more stable source of income. Soon after, she ended up rag picking. Satyamma mirrors the bulk of waste picker's population, who exhibit similar characteristics of migration to cities from villages in search of regular income. The waste picker's community is typically characterized as the illiterate, unskilled, migrant, those lowest in the caste hierarchy, poorest of the poor population, and are in the profession of waste picking as they are unable to find any other kind of employment¹.

Additionally, this community suffers from serious identification problem. Anecdotal studies have demonstrated that for many workers—particularly unorganized workers such as street rag pickers, having an identity (including Aadhaar/employee ID/voter ID and ration card) is critical. After obtaining these, they 'feel' they can access benefits, although they do face an array of challenges in the process. In the absence of any sort of identification, could possessing Aadhaar card potentially lead to higher social and economic benefits for the waste pickers? In a bid to answer this question, I started my interactions with the waste pickers from distinct parts of Hyderabad city to understand the role Aadhaar has played, if any on their livelihoods.

As of 2018, rough estimates point to the waste picker population being approximately between 7000 – 10,000 in Hyderabad. Prior to Aadhaar enrollment, most of my sample group of 100 waste pickers lacked any sort of identification documents other than ration card and in some cases voter ID. Although ration card is usually left behind with their family members or relatives in their hometowns to access PDS benefits from their local shops.

With Aadhaar, several of the waste pickers stated experiencing fewer challenges and ease, notably, in gaining admission for their children's education to government schools, medical care from anganwadis, opening a bank account. All of the waste pickers in my sample group, confirmed that each member of their family possessed an Aadhaar card as their primary form of identification. This might not be the case for other cities, such as Delhi, where as of June 2018 media reported a large percentage of waste picker population lacking Aadhaar or any other source of identity card.

As lack of identification has been a serious struggle for this community, Aadhaar can indeed be seen as an enabler to improving their livelihoods by means of improving their accessibility to benefits of government welfare schemes. In Hyderabad, women leaders of the community who were also a part of the self-help groups² in their villages, brought about a big difference to their counter parts in the city in educating them about their ability to access welfare schemes with Aadhaar. Owing to the marginalized nature of their living, it could be seen that most of them were unaware of the number of welfare schemes that they could access after obtaining Aadhaar. Based on our observations, for such communities, SHG's and NGOs can play a substantial role in bridging this information gap.

¹ Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WEIGO)

² Self-help groups (SHGs) popularly known as DWCRA groups were formed in Andhra Pradesh with the focus of implementing welfare schemes for rural women.

Coming back to Satyamma, after years of rag-picking in unhealthy and exploitative work conditions with unstable income, she was able to access an opportunity for employment in a waste management company, where Aadhaar served as her primary and only source of identification. Majority of the formal-informal firms in the waste management space in India are riddled with issues of lack of adherence to proper working conditions, wages below minimum wage rate, and child labor, owing to both supply and demand side labor market issues.

On the supply side, waste pickers are typically the marginalized sections of the society looking for any source of income, and absence of any identification and/or birth date documents keeps them bereft of their rightful benefits the workplace should provide. On the demand side, employers can potentially avail of their willingness to work for below living wage with no benefits for higher profits. As in the case of Satyamma, accessing work through an identification card contributed to a sense of empowerment, in addition to the medical and insurance benefits she was able to gain with it.

Discussing about their experiences with Aadhaar, an issue that prominently came up with the community was to do with their migration from their villages. This made it difficult for them to access government welfare benefits when linked to Aadhaar biometrics requiring their physical presence in their places of permanent residence.

Chandra, a waste picker from Nanakramguda waste picker colony, says she or her spouse travel once every month to get ration from their hometown in bulk for the month. This is clearly costly and cumbersome for them, nevertheless a requirement to manage their monthly meals. Portability of government benefits ranging from PDS to LPG has been undertaken in Telangana and this would go a long way in addressing the issues that migrant sections of population like waste pickers, would face after linking of Aadhaar with government welfare programs.

It is reasonable to argue that case studies like Satyamma's or sample of Hyderabad waste pickers do not necessarily represent the entire population and should not be used for hastily arriving at conclusions on the state of Aadhaar and its effect on communities. Nonetheless, such case studies bring out the issues faced by communities or sections of population, which can be lost in the 'law of large numbers'.

The need of the hour is to ensure that we do not exclude any beneficiary from the state welfare benefits owing to its linkage to Aadhaar. In this context, understanding the experiences of individuals and communities such as waste picker's serves to be of paramount importance towards framing interventions needed for the fix.