

April 8, 2026

Waste Pickers Built the Recycling Economy. Now They're Being Cast Aside.

By: Prakashani Singh

Failing to integrate waste pickers into India's Extended Producer Responsibility framework risks making recycling initiatives mere greenwashing: environmental goals achieved through the erasure and displacement of those who built the recycling economy in the first place.

India's cities appear cleaner today than they have ever been. Since 2014, initiatives such as the Swachh Bharat Mission and circular economy policies have transformed urban spaces, with colour-coded bins, bans on single-use plastic bags, and 'zero-waste' wards symbolising modern governance. Municipal corporations compete for 'cleanest city' rankings. Smart Cities dashboards display real-time data on waste collection. International consultants arrive with presentations on European recycling models.

Formalising waste work does not require displacing workers. It requires recognising them as essential service providers and structuring systems around their existing knowledge and networks.

Yet beneath this progress lies a stark contradiction rooted in policy design: the informal waste pickers who collect, sort, and trade recyclables (the backbone of urban recycling) remain invisible, precarious, and excluded from the very frameworks that depend on their labour.

This is not merely an oversight. It reflects a deliberate policy choice, one that prioritises the aesthetics of modernity over the messy realities of existing systems. India's waste policy borrows heavily from 'global' models emphasising mechanisation, private contractors, and technological solutions, yet implements them in a context where between 1.5 million to 4 million waste pickers already manage 60-70% of urban recyclable waste (ILO 2022; Chintan 2023). Most are women from marginalised communities, working without contracts, social protection, or occupational safety.

Policy frameworks, from municipal tenders to Extended Producer Responsibility rules, systematically exclude those who make urban recycling function. India's clean city campaigns rest on a deliberate erasure: we celebrate modern waste management while rendering invisible those who actually manage waste. Understanding this policy blind spot is essential because it reveals how top-down urban governance, obsessed with global templates and visible modernisation, fails to see, or chooses not to see, the informal infrastructure already keeping cities clean.

Circularity Without Workers

India's Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) framework, introduced under the Plastic Waste Management Rules (2016) and expanded in 2022, requires producers to collect and recycle packaging. The 2022 amendment set ambitious targets: 60% recycling by 2024-25, rising to 100% by 2027-28.

On paper, this should create opportunities for waste pickers, who already collect most post-consumer plastic. In practice, EPR implementation has systematically excluded informal networks.

The rules remain silent on how to integrate informal recyclers who currently handle the majority of plastic waste. The Solid Waste Management Rules (2016) mention "integration of informal waste workers" in passing. Rule 15(z) directs local bodies to "facilitate integration of waste pickers," yet no enforcement mechanism exists, no budget allocation is mandated, and no penalty applies for non-compliance. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs' Circular Economy Action Plan (2023) emphasises technological innovation and public-private partnerships but allocates no specific provisions for labour inclusion. Producer Responsibility Organisations (PROs), entities that coordinate collection on behalf of producers, have contracted almost exclusively with mechanised recycling plants and formal aggregators.

By failing to institutionalise waste pickers' contributions, the circular economy narrative risks becoming greenwashing...

In practice, municipal tenders continue to favour large private contractors over worker cooperatives, not because cooperatives are less efficient, but because policy frameworks privilege scale, mechanisation, and formal corporate structures.

Consider Bengaluru. In 2019, the municipal corporation shifted to private contractors, promising "scientific waste management" and GPS-tracked vehicles. The tender specified mechanised collection and excluded cooperatives from bidding. The result? An estimated 8,000 waste pickers lost access to residential waste overnight, forcing them to compete for shrinking volumes at dumpsites while recyclable materials entered private collection streams (Chintan 2023). The policy treated existing informal recyclers not as infrastructure to be incorporated into a formal system, but as obstacles to be replaced.

This pattern repeats across cities. In Delhi, private contractors have erected barriers (literal gates and guards) preventing waste pickers from accessing high-value recyclables in gated communities and commercial complexes. In Hyderabad, the 2021 municipal tender mandated door-to-door collection by mechanised vehicles, effectively criminalising manual collection that waste pickers had conducted for decades.

As a result, in Delhi, Hyderabad, and Indore, informal recyclers report declining access to high-value materials as PROs and private contractors monopolise collection points (Chintan 2023). Gated communities, office complexes, and retail chains increasingly sign exclusive agreements with PROs, barring waste pickers from premises where they previously collected.

This is policy-induced displacement. EPR rules could require PROs to source materials through registered waste-picker cooperatives. They could require that collection targets be met primarily through informal networks, with mechanised plants handling only materials that cooperatives cannot process. Instead, the rules treat informal recyclers as invisible, creating parallel collection systems that compete with, rather than complement, existing infrastructure.

By failing to institutionalise waste pickers' contributions, the circular economy narrative risks becoming greenwashing: environmental goals achieved through the erasure and displacement of those who built the recycling economy in the first place.

When Policy Centres Workers

Brazil's experience offers a sharp contrast. The National Solid Waste Policy (2010), known as PNRS, legally recognises waste picker cooperatives (catadores) and mandates their priority in municipal waste management contracts. The policy did not emerge from technocratic planning but from decades of organising by the National Movement of Waste Pickers (MNCR), which mobilised thousands of workers to demand recognition.

The policy framework is explicit: municipalities must prioritise cooperatives in waste collection contracts. Public procurement laws exempt cooperative contracts from competitive bidding requirements. Federal funding supports cooperative formation, equipment purchase, and infrastructure development. Producers' take-back obligations must, wherever possible, utilise catador networks for collection.

Indian cities import mechanised systems designed for contexts where informal labour does not exist, then implement them in settings where informal workers are already performing the same functions more efficiently.

By 2020, over 800 cooperatives had been integrated into formal waste systems, covering approximately 100,000 workers (MNCR 2020). Workers earn stable incomes, access social security, and operate from municipal warehouses equipped with sorting infrastructure, safety equipment, and sanitation facilities. The model is not perfect (many cooperatives struggle with management capacity and market volatility), but it demonstrates that policy can centre workers rather than erase them.

What made Brazil's approach possible? First, legal recognition gave cooperatives standing to demand inclusion. Second, financial mechanisms (earmarked federal funds, exemptions from competitive bidding, subsidised infrastructure) lowered barriers to formalisation. Third, political organisation by waste pickers themselves created pressure that technocrats alone would not have generated.

India's context differs (scale, caste hierarchies, fragmented municipal governance), but the principle holds: inclusion requires explicit policy design. It will not emerge from vague directives to "integrate" workers or aspirational language about "just transitions." It requires legal mandates, enforcement mechanisms, and financial resources directed toward cooperatives rather than corporations.

Yet, there have been experiments that succeed in India as well.

The SWaCH Pune Seva Sahakari (SWaCH), a waste-picker cooperative, also demonstrates what inclusion looks like in practice. SWaCH was established in 2008 through a partnership between the waste pickers' trade union and KKKPKP (Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat), a membership-based organization of waste pickers founded in 1993. Unlike municipal contracts that treat workers as labor to be hired, SWaCH is owned and governed by waste pickers themselves. The cooperative has over 3,500 members, 80% of whom are women from Dalit and other marginalized communities.

SWaCH handles door-to-door collection across Pune, achieving 95% household coverage. Workers collect user fees directly from households (Rs. 30-50 per month) and retain earnings from the sale of recyclables. The municipal corporation issues identity cards, confers legitimacy, and grants households access, while SWaCH manages collection logistics, trains members, and negotiates with scrap dealers on behalf of workers.

Crucially, this model addresses the exploitation inherent in informal recycling. SWaCH members earn higher, more stable incomes than independent waste pickers, averaging Rs 6,000-8,000 monthly compared to Rs 4,000-5,000 for unorganised workers (SWaCH 2023). They receive protective equipment, health check-ups, insurance coverage, and childcare support. The cooperative structure gives workers collective bargaining power with scrap dealers, who can no longer set prices unilaterally.

The economic outcomes are equally compelling. Pune's per-capita waste management cost is approximately 30% lower than comparable cities using fully privatised systems, while recovery rates are higher. The municipality saves money not through wage suppression, but through reduced transportation and landfill costs: waste is segregated at source, reducing the volume requiring disposal (MoHUA 2023).

SWaCH demonstrates that formalising waste work does not require displacing workers. It requires recognising them as essential service providers and structuring systems around their existing knowledge and networks. Yet SWaCH remains an exception in India. A 2022 survey by Chintan found that only 47 cooperatives nationwide received formal recognition from municipal corporations, covering fewer than 15,000 workers out of millions (Chintan 2023).

Mandating Cooperative Inclusion

Reforming EPR to include waste pickers requires changing two things: eligibility criteria for PROs and compliance metrics for producers.

First, PROs should be required to source at least 50% of their collection tonnage from registered waste picker cooperatives. This creates immediate market access. Second, EPR compliance should be assessed not only on tonnage but also on employment impact; producers receive compliance credit only for materials collected through cooperatives or systems that employ informal workers under formal contracts.

|| If waste pickers are seen as essential workers rather than marginal scavengers, their exclusion from municipal contracts and EPR frameworks becomes indefensible.

These changes do not require new legislation. The Plastic Waste Management Rules already grant the Central Pollution Control Board authority to set compliance criteria. Revising criteria to mandate cooperative inclusion is technically straightforward; it requires political will and pushback against producer lobbying.

Brazil's model demonstrates feasibility. Producers initially resisted cooperative mandates, arguing they increased costs. In practice, cooperatives proved cheaper than mechanised plants for certain material streams, particularly low-value plastics. Cost concerns gave way once systems operationalised.

Municipal budgets are constrained, but financing mechanisms exist. EPR fees collected from producers (currently used for centralised recycling infrastructure) could be redirected toward cooperative capital grants, training, and equipment. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) funds, mandated at 2 percent of net profit for large companies, represent another source. Currently, CSR funds flow primarily to high-visibility projects; waste worker cooperatives receive negligible support.

A dedicated Waste Worker Cooperative Fund, capitalised through a 2% cess on EPR compliance credits, could finance cooperative formation, infrastructure purchase, and emergency relief during market downturns. Tamil Nadu's 2018 policy guidelines recommend a monthly honorarium of Rs. 10,000 for door-to-door waste pickers, funded through municipal budgets. Implementation has been slow, but the principle is established.

The question is not whether resources exist, but whether policy directs them toward workers or continues channelling them toward corporations.

Clean Cities, Dirty Work

Reframing waste pickers as "informal recyclers" or "environmental service providers" is not merely semantic. It challenges the ideological foundation on which policy exclusion rests. Several states (Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu) issue identity cards to waste pickers, recognising them as workers eligible for social schemes. Yet this recognition remains largely symbolic.

The problem is that waste pickers are not classified as a distinct occupational category within welfare schemes. They fall through gaps between "construction workers," "street vendors," and "unorganised labor." Identity cards do not translate into access to Ayushman Bharat health insurance, pension coverage, or NULM training unless schemes actively enroll waste workers. A recent study found that only 18% of waste pickers with identity cards had successfully accessed any government welfare scheme (SEWA 2022).

|| The workers who sort, lift, and recycle our waste are not obstacles to modern waste management. They are its foundation.

Municipalities that continue to rely on informal collection without formalisation, effectively outsource risk to workers while evading legal responsibility. Waste pickers, classified as self-employed, have no "employer" to enforce legal mandates for protective equipment and safety standards mandated under the Occupational Safety, Health, and Working Conditions Code (2020). If municipalities contract with cooperatives, responsibility is clear; cooperatives become employers.

India's transition to sustainable urbanism cannot rest on invisibility. The Clean City Paradox persists because governance treats cleanliness as a technical problem rather than a labour question. Waste pickers, mostly women, built India's recycling economy long before "circularity" became policy jargon. Municipal reforms under the Smart Cities Mission prize digital dashboards and mechanised collection vehicles, yet waste pickers' bodies remain the real infrastructure of recycling.

The pursuit of 'modern' waste management, modelled on European cities with entirely different labour markets and social structures, drives policy away from ground realities. Indian cities import mechanised systems designed for contexts where informal labour does not exist, then implement them in settings where informal workers are already performing the same functions more efficiently. The contradiction is not resolved by incorporating workers; instead, policy treats it as inevitable and modernisation as requiring displacement.

The invisibility of this labour is not accidental; it preserves what the sociologist Nikhil Anand calls the aesthetic of a "clean" city while displacing its "unclean" subjects to the margins (Anand 2020). Urban cleanliness campaigns often reproduce caste hierarchies by associating cleanliness with citizenship and dirt with degradation.

The language of waste policy reinforces this erasure. Official documents refer to "scientific waste management," "technological solutions," and "mechanisation," while waste pickers are termed "rag-pickers" or "scavengers": labels that emphasise degradation rather than skill or environmental service. These are not neutral descriptors. They carry the weight of caste-based associations between manual scavenging and social pollution that continue to structure urban space. If waste pickers are seen as essential workers rather than marginal scavengers, their exclusion from municipal contracts and EPR frameworks becomes indefensible.

The workers who sort, lift, and recycle our waste are not obstacles to modern waste management. They are its foundation. Policy must see them, not as problems to be solved through displacement, but as essential workers whose inclusion is the prerequisite for an urban future that is both environmentally sustainable and socially just.

Prakashani Singh is a PhD scholar in the Department of Economic Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur, India. Her research lies at the intersection of public economics and public policy, political economy, and development.