

## EXPLORING

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## PART FIVE: Trash Pickers, Children and Health in India

Thank you for joining us as we visited Asia and explored the human impact on the environment. This five-part series ends today.

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**W**hen I first visited India in 1987, there were few plastic bags. If I bought a cup of tea or pot of yogurt from a vendor's stall, it was in an unfired clay cup or pot that could simply be thrown into the dirt when it was empty, where it would begin a fairly rapid decay back to dirt. Street vendors sold snacks such as popcorn in bags fashioned from old newspapers and other paper. Most store-bought items had no packaging or the packaging was recyclable or compostable.

There were, of course, many problems with this system of distributing goods. Crude clay pots are not very durable, and they can spring leaks. Newspaper is not always a sanitary way to serve food. It can be difficult to carry goods home without any bags, particularly after monsoon rains have flooded streets in just a few hours.

### An Explosion of Waste

Over the past two decades, with the tremendous growth in India's economy and the rise of a middle-class consumer culture, plastic bags, cups and packaging of various kinds are now very common, particularly in larger metropolitan areas. Consumers



Passenger rickshaws parked near the Old Delhi railway station. (Photo: Keith Snodgrass)

enjoy the benefits of these innovations: The plastic cup their tea is served in probably has not touched another person's lips; the plastic bag in which they take food home from their neighborhood vendor has not previously held any other material. But this new convenience and sanitation has brought a great increase in trash, especially in major cities. The amount of waste generated in India is likely to triple over the next 20 years, the vast majority coming from urban individuals.

Collection of waste in India's cities is complex and tremendously variable. Most cities do not have a single system of collecting household or business waste. Rather, an estimated 1 million to 2.5 million mostly very poor people collect waste using handcarts and cycle rickshaws. These collectors (often called ragpickers) sort the waste, sell reusable items (such as plastic bottles and newspaper) to neighborhood

vendors, and dispose of the rest, mainly in open fields within city limits. These fields are often near where the trash collectors live, so they constantly live with their work. These individuals work with little or no personal protection, such as gloves, boots or masks, and are often paid only by donations from those whose trash they collect. Many people working as ragpickers are children.

These children are usually the offspring of adult ragpickers. Their families are often recent migrants to the city and have few secure connections there. The children rarely are enrolled in school, instead helping their families earn a meager existence sorting the trash of wealthier people. They often live in shelters made from materials collected in their work, such as cardboard or automobile floor mats. They are subject to illnesses from being in constant contact with waste from homes, factories, restaurants, hospitals

and other institutions.

### Outreach to Ragpickers

Some government and nongovernment organizations are attempting to alleviate these problems for child laborers. Pratham, (<http://pratham.org/>) an Indian NGO with offices throughout India and the world, has opened drop-in centers for child ragpickers in Mumbai, India's commercial capital. These centers provide shelter, bathing facilities, entertainment such as games and television, and a gradual introduction to educational and vocational activities that might eventually allow the children to leave their work as ragpickers.

Economic growth, the rise of a middle-class consumer society and its accompanying material waste have increased the number of children working as ragpickers. Organizations such as Pratham hope that this new economy may also provide the means for these children to move on to safer, more secure and productive lives.

### Comprehension questions:

- 1) What has contributed to the growth of trash in India?
- 2) What is a ragpicker?
- 3) How has economic growth increased the number of children working as ragpickers?

**This is the final installment.  
Thanks for reading.**



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