



photo: Laxman More

From Waste Pickers to University Graduates in One Generation the Story of the More Family

By Nalini Shekar, KKPKP

Impact: *Suman More has improved her working conditions and income by organizing with other waste pickers through KKPKP (trade union of waste pickers). Before becoming involved with KKPKP, Suman collected recyclables along the roadside and from trash bins, working very long hours in difficult and unhygienic conditions. Suman now has improved working conditions and income and has (along with her husband) provided an education and opportunities for her children.*

Suman started waste picking with her parents when she was 13 years old. She married Mr. More at the age of fourteen and had her 4th child when she turned 22. Her family's main source of income has been waste picking. Suman's husband also earns money by conducting religious ceremonies. However, income from these activities has been sporadic and irregular.

When Suman started work she would pick up recyclable waste on the roadside, in local waste depositories, or public waste bins provided by the Pune Municipal Corporation. She walked long distances and worked from dawn to dusk. Her children helped to sort the waste at home as sorted scrap is more valuable.

Suman joined KKPKP in 1993 after organizers came to her village to explain the benefits of joining the union. As a result, Suman's working conditions improved significantly. Suman now collects waste door to door, working fewer hours and collecting better quality

waste. Door to door collection has additional benefits. She builds relationships with people and engages in casual conversation over a cup of tea. Coming from a lower caste and class of society she never thought this would happen in her lifetime. She has essentially transformed from being an outcast in her society to someone providing a valuable community service.

Suman is happy that she and her colleagues are able to have a proper lunch break and that they are provided with soap to wash their hands and legs before they sit to have lunch in a cool, clean place in the residential complex where she works. Suman no longer takes the waste home to sort. The municipal corporation has provided a sorting shed where several waste pickers gather to sort their waste while engaging in conversation and easy banter lightening up their day.

As a member of KKPKP, Suman took an oath to educate her children, and enlisted the help of KKPKP to enrol her children in school. Two of her children have received scholarships from KKPKP for their achievements. Her son Laxman has completed his Bachelor in Arts and is currently pursuing his Masters degree in journalism. Laxman also works with KKPKP as manager of its scrap shops.

The impact of organizing waste pickers can be seen in a single generation. As larger groups of workers articulate their needs and concerns to decision-makers, improved working conditions are possible. In Suman's case, these improved conditions resulted in securing more education and better opportunities for her children, thereby escaping the cycle of poverty that only a generation earlier seemed inevitable.