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A journey from rags to conferences

A rag-picker till 12 years ago, Chembur resident lectures on garbage disposal

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In India, already a handful of housing societies and organizations have adopted a zero-garbage policy, while many countries elsewhere have yet to take a step in this regard
—Sushila Sabale

Sitting in a small office at the Ramabai Ambedkar Maternity home at Chembur Naka, Sushila Sabale, 45, looks like any other woman working hard to finish her paperwork before she leaves her office. The difference is that from office, she heads to the bastis (slum dwellings), where she meets self-help groups of women rag-pickers, helping them with their personal problems.

If these women look up to Sushila, it is because till 12 years ago, she too was a rag-picker. Her family comprising her parents and five sisters moved from Jalna, a drought-prone district in central Maharashtra, to Mumbai when she was nine and survived as rag-pickers.

Sushila's life took a dramatic turn when, in 1998, the Stree Mukti Sanghatana, a well-known NGO working, began organising women rag-pickers into self-help groups with the task of separating dry and wet garbage at source. The dry garbage is sold to vendors and the wet garbage is turned into natural fertilisers. In the illiterate Sushila, the sanghatana found a leader and she was soon heading a self-help group. In 2001, she stopped being a rag-picker, working instead with the other women rag-pickers.

Today, Sushila heads the Parisar Bhagini Vikas Sangh, an umbrella organisation comprising 180 self-help groups with 3000 women, spread across Mumbai, Thane, and Dombivli. This organisation is now pushing the BMC, large companies, and housing societies to think of a zero-garbage policy!


 [Enlarge Image](#) "In India, already a handful of housing societies and organizations have adopted a zero-garbage policy, while many countries elsewhere have yet to take a step in this regard," says Sushila.

Sushila's eco-friendly initiatives have won her international acclaim and she was chosen to represent India at a garbage workers' conference in Copenhagen in 2009. "It was a wonderful experience. I spoke in Marathi and my team member translated my speech into English," says Sushila. She attended three more conferences at Beijing (2010), Durban (2011), and Rio de Janeiro (2012), where she explained the methods of garbage disposal in India. It's been a long journey for Sushila, who was pregnant when she left her matrimonial home within two years of marriage.


"He did nothing to earn and I was forced to roam through the city picking garbage. I didn't find any reason to stay with him and went back to my parents," she recalls. Her son went to become a BMS graduate and is employed with a private firm. Residing in a small room in suburban Mumbai, Sushila is now hoping to help other women rag-pickers change their luck.

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AGAINST THE ODDS
Most rag-pickers in the city are women, who face tremendous difficulties.
"They roam the city in the search for their next day's provision. And cannot fight with goons," says Sushila, pointing out that women rag-pickers are not found in Colaba.
"The goons block their access to Colaba where big hotels, malls and alcohol outlets are abundantly available and which bring good returns."
"The women also suffer harassment at the hands of their husbands, who are drug addicts or alcoholics, or both."
"They were taken up these initiatives and the work goes on. I hope someone takes up this cause to change the lives of this segment of society," Sushila adds.

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