

Shadowing Kishore on his waste-picking route in Vijayawada

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I was excited and apprehensive about the shadowing exercise and hoped that I would gain some understanding of the daily lives of waste pickers. I have worked with marginalized communities for more than two decades, I have empathy, a reasonable level of competency in the local language (Telugu) and I had taken care to dress appropriately. But I was concerned about being part of a one-off form of disaster tourism.

On the one hand, I felt it would give me a glimpse of their lives and some understanding of the community. On the other, I was conscious of my entitled upbringing and the colour of my skin which would create power differentials.



We met during the pre-monsoon season. Kishore's home was on the riverbed and I could see that children were sleeping in the open and all were in makeshift tents.

Kishore's prized possession is his platform bicycle

Kishore begins his day at 3.30 in the morning. He is around 21 years of age, married with two children. The woman next to him in the photo is his mother-in-law who is in her mid-thirties.

He bought a used platform bicycle for Rs1500 (US\$21) and spent another Rs1500 on repairs. This was still cheaper than buying a new one. The platform bicycle has improved his mobility and ability to collect waste because he is no

longer restricted to local areas and can travel longer distances.

We traveled around 10 kilometers away from where he lives to start picking the waste.

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Because households in Vijayawada do not practice waste segregation, people like Kishore spend their days rummaging through mixed waste without any protection and do not have access to gloves and masks.

Kishore had to sift through waste with flies all around him

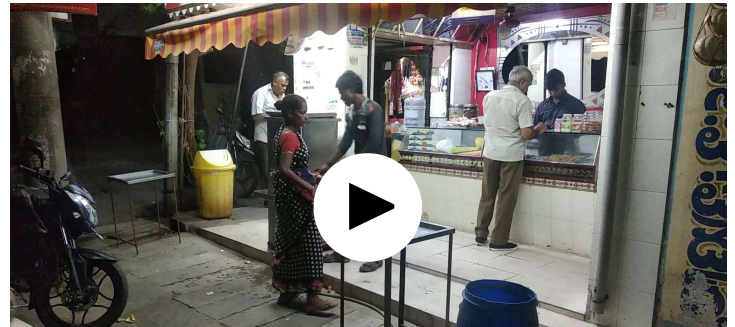
After years of struggle we have decent waste segregation at source in Bangalore. I wasn't used to seeing mixed waste dumps. The insensitive way in which the waste was thrown by the public left me very sad and angry.

Dredging through the mixed waste without any protection puts him at a daily risk of coming into contact with toxic substances like acids and harmful objects such as broken glass, broken and rusted metals. The lack of protection means that he is in danger of receiving cuts and burns. Rusted metal handling means that he is under the constant threat of getting tetanus infection.

During the course of his daily routine Kishore takes small breaks to drink some tea

The café that we visited when I was shadowing him had running water. But sometimes I saw him drink water from a public tap using his hands. He can't usually wash his hands before drinking and eating on the road. During the nine hour working day we did not have access to any public toilet.

When he stops to stock up on chewing tobacco, Kishore sometimes buys water that costs around Rs 5 each time. His average daily earnings are around Rs. 300 (4 USD).



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Kishore ignores the glass bottles that litter the ground. Despite the political push for glass recycling, it doesn't fetch a great price at the scrap dealer.

Throughout the day, Kishore carries heavy loads on his shoulders and walks on uneven paths.

He was continuously bending and picking for up to nine hours, lifting heavy weights, which is a clear occupational health hazard.



Precariously balancing himself to pick up the recyclable from a nallah (drain) – no place was a ‘no-go place’ – it did not matter how dangerous the topography was he ignored it and went about collecting whatever he could.

Kishore had a breakfast break at a roadside eatery at around 9.30. He bought Idlis (rice cakes) a relatively healthy option compared to the heavy, fried food sold at many places along the road. That cost him around Rs. 15 (0.4 USD).

We discussed his eating habits and he said that he would have idlis on the days he has money with him.



Dogs and monkeys are always into the trash and it is very common for them to chase the waste pickers.

Kishore was bitten by a dog two months before our shadowing date. He did not seek medical care and treated the wound himself with the sap from the Calotropis (California gigantea) tree.

I was horrified on hearing this and it made me think of the protected life I have had.



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There is bonhomie among waste pickers and few fights.

Kishore can fill up his bicycle cart and leave it unattended without fear of it being taken away.

This surprised me as I was apprehensive when there was exchange of words between them that it could be around territorial issues.



Until dawn I was in an ambiguous state – oscillating between comfort and discomfort with the shadowing experience. Once daylight broke and we were going through residential areas, I began to feel distinctly uncomfortable.

I worried people might think I was the contractor overseeing Kishore.

Despite my best efforts to put him at ease. Kishore felt guilty and he paused almost every hour to ask me whether he should stop. So even though I did not intend to intrude, I was still being an ‘intrusion’.



At the end of his day Kishore took his waste to the scrap dealer.

He gets paid Rs 14 for the mixed recyclable waste irrespective of whether it is electronics, plastic, metals etc. The scrap dealer operates at a higher level in the value chain and gets paid more for these goods.

57 Kilos fetched him Rs 798 (11.25 USD) for the day and this was one of the better earning days for him.



After finishing at the scrap dealer, Kishore went back home. He mentioned that he would take a bath and if there is any food at home he would eat it or alternatively go to 'Anna

Canteen'. A subsidized eatery run by the government.

This Anna Canteen (and similar outlets in the other states) is looked at with derision by the middle class and upper middle class as a 'dole' by the government. But they are a lifeline for these people who need to get somewhat nutritious food at reasonable prices.

I have been associated with communities for quite some time. But the emotional churning that kept happening through the nine hours with Kishore, from when I saw children sleeping in the open to the end of the day, was way too much for me. I was switching between saturation and fatigue. Kishore went on about his business bending and lifting. I was struggling to just be a by-stander without being of any help to him (since we did not have the ethical clearance to intervene). I wanted to point out the recyclables which he had accidentally overlooked. After the shadowing, as part of my solidarity with Kishore, I thought it would be insensitive on my part to freshen up and change my clothes. During the subsequent team debriefing, I was visibly distressed and broke down.



While the entire country looks forward to the respite from the monsoons, the waste pickers look forward to summers because the value of the recyclables reduces in monsoons, meaning longer hours of work and greater exposure to hazards.

This is what Kishore's home looks like now. It has been washed away by the monsoon, which drives home the point of how precarious his existence is.

Acknowledgements

The intention of this exercise was to get to know the people and communities that we will be working with through the course of ARISE. It was meant to be an immersive and reflective exercise – trying to walk someone else's path.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Kishore for allowing me to shadow him. Kishore is not his real name but was used to protect his identity. Kishore chose his pseudonym in remembrance of his close childhood friend.

This shadowing would not have been possible without the unwavering support of the **Dalit Bahujan Resource Centre** (DBRC), especially Anil, Jhansi and Teja. They were instrumental in organising the smooth logistics of the shadowing.

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