

# Chintan — The NGO That Turned Waste Into Wealth and Workers Into Citizens

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Environment

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Delhi generates approximately 10,000 tonnes of municipal solid waste per day. Of this, an estimated 2,000 tonnes — fifteen to twenty percent — is collected and sorted by the informal recycling sector: waste pickers who move through the city's streets, squatter settlements, and middle-class neighbourhoods, collecting the plastic, paper, glass, and metal that Delhi's formal waste management system would otherwise send to landfill.

There are around 150,000 waste pickers in Delhi. Ninety percent are women and children. Most are Dalit or from marginalised communities — people whose social location means that waste picking is one of the few livelihoods available to them. They work without protective equipment in environments full of toxins. They earn what buyers offer, with no collective bargaining power. They have no formal employment status, no social security, and no recognition from the city that depends on their labour to keep its waste partially manageable.

Chintan was established in December 1999 to address all of this simultaneously.

## Who They Are

Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group works at the intersection of environmental justice and social equity in Delhi NCR. Their mission: to ensure equitable and sustainable production and consumption of materials, and improved

disposal of waste — with a central commitment to ensuring green jobs, security, and dignity for the urban poor who earn a living as waste recyclers.

Their approach: training, organising, research, policy advocacy, and direct enterprise creation — simultaneously, because the problem is simultaneously environmental, economic, social, and political.

## **The Numbers That Define Their Scale**

Chintan's documented programme outcomes across their existence: trained 50,000+ waste workers in safety and legal protocols; established 30 micro-enterprises for waste pickers, primarily women; trained 1,250 informal actors as e-waste entrepreneurs; improved income for 2,645 waste workers; created 4,952 green livelihoods; mainstreamed 10,000 waste picker children into schools, of whom 70 percent are girls.

They operate nine micro Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs) and one automated MRF in Delhi NCR. They have trained 200 women as repair workers. They facilitated the self-organisation of 15,000 waste workers under Safai Sena — the association that gives waste pickers collective voice and institutional identity.

The 10,000 children in schools — particularly the 70 percent female figure — is Chintan's most important long-term outcome. A child mainstreamed into school from a waste-picking family is a child who will not inherit the waste-picking livelihood as the only option.

## **Safai Sena: The Waste Worker Union**

Safai Sena — Clean Army — is the waste worker association that Chintan incubated and that now has around 12,000-15,000 members including waste pickers, small traders, itinerant buyers, and recyclers. Safai Sena provides waste pickers with collective identity, peer support, and the institutional standing to engage with municipal authorities, bulk waste generators, and the formal waste management

sector.

The political economy of waste picking is specific: waste pickers are economically essential (their unpaid labour reduces Delhi's formal waste management costs significantly) but socially and legally invisible. Safai Sena's existence changes this — it creates a counterparty that municipal authorities must engage with, that formal waste management companies must account for, and through which individual waste pickers can access legal protection and social security.

## **Five Policies Changed**

Chintan's policy advocacy has resulted in the passing of five new policies and rules that are inclusive of the informal waste handling and recycling sector. This is the specific outcome that makes Chintan's advocacy work more than a campaign: changes in Delhi's waste management rules that formally recognise and protect the informal sector's role mean that waste pickers have a legal status that previous rules denied them.

One particularly documented contribution: Bharti Chaturvedi, Chintan's founder, served on the Ministry of Environment and Forests Expert Committee on Plastic Waste and the Ministry of Labour and Employment Task Force on Social Security for the Informal Sector. These positions gave Chintan direct access to national rule-making on the two most critical issues for waste workers: how plastic waste is regulated (which determines whether waste pickers can access the material) and whether informal workers receive social protection.

## **The E-Waste Pioneer**

Chintan's work on e-waste — training informal actors as e-waste entrepreneurs — addresses the fastest-growing waste stream in India with the highest health risks. E-waste contains lead, mercury, cadmium, and other toxins that informal recyclers typically extract through processes (burning, acid washing) that release these toxins into the environment and into workers' bodies.

Training 1,250 informal actors as formal e-waste entrepreneurs creates the economic pathway for safe e-waste processing without eliminating the livelihoods that informal recyclers depend on. This approach — formal pathways that include rather than displace — is the alternative to both unregulated toxic processing and corporate e-waste monopolisation that excludes the communities closest to the waste stream.

## Why This Matters Beyond Delhi

Chintan's model — waste picker organisation, green enterprise creation, policy advocacy, school mainstreaming for children — is directly applicable to Odisha's urban and peri-urban waste management. Bhubaneswar, Cuttack, Berhampur, Rourkela, and Sambalpur all have informal waste picker populations facing the same conditions as Delhi's. The Safai Sena model of worker organisation and enterprise formalisation is the missing institutional layer in Odisha's urban waste management.

JaBaSu's Technology and Government Interface pillars can specifically support Odisha's waste picker organisations in accessing the formal waste management system, including the e-waste and plastic waste rules that Chintan helped write.

## Contact and Further Reading

**Website:** [chintan-india.org](http://chintan-india.org) | **Contact:** Bharti Chaturvedi, Founder | Bhopura, Delhi NCR

### Key evidence:

- Give.do Chintan profile: comprehensive programme outcome documentation — 50,000+ trained, 10,000 children in schools
  - EMpower profile: No Child in Waste programme and STEM integration
  - ScienceDirect: *Greening the City: A Holistic Assessment of Waste Management Alternatives in India* — cites Chintan's informal sector data (2,000 tonnes/day)
  - Chintan Baseline Report 2025: Climate education programme baseline in Bhalswa and Bhopura communities
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