

FROM TOXICS TO GREEN - THE STORY OF SAYRA BANO

*By Bharati Chaturvedi & Chitra Mukherjee
Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group²⁷*

Sayra Bano, aged 32, has always lived near the landfill in Bhalaswa, North Delhi, the place where much of Delhi's nearly 8000 metric tonnes of trash is dumped every day. Sayra was just 6 months old when she moved to Delhi, along with her parents, 2 brothers and 2 sisters, from Kolkata in West Bengal. Sayra never got to go to school. She spent her time picking through trash on the landfill, with her parents and siblings. They would spend the day separating paper, plastics and a hoard of other recyclable materials from soggy discarded food, used sanitary napkins and diapers, rusted blades, needles and syringes: stuff thrown indiscriminately in the city's mixed garbage.

Her family was very hardworking and struggled from dawn to dusk on a dangerous landfill where avoiding severe burns from spontaneous combustion of methane-rich waste was the norm. The mounds of soggy wet waste were treacherous and they often slipped and fell right into it. Trucks carrying garbage would sometimes start an avalanche of trash, almost burying hundreds of wastepickers in the landfill. This was the only life Sayra and her family knew.

Growing up, Sayra's hard life continued. The living conditions were dismal. They had no electricity, safe drinking water or access to clean toilets. Her husband Lutfar, also a wastepicker, despaired about ever being able to make their lives and those of their 5 little children better.

In 2012, Sayra attended a meeting of Safai Sena, an association of wastepickers, doorstep waste collectors, itinerant waste buyers and small waste traders, held in her community. They talked of formalizing the industry and training wastepickers to help them achieve more dignified livelihoods. Sayra was curious, if not entirely convinced. She joined Safai Sena and its partner Chintan. She soon found herself being trained to pick up electronic waste, and selling it to authorized dealers. She knew all about e-waste in any case, because she was increasingly finding so much of it in the trash.

²⁷ <http://www.chintan-india.org/>

Sayra began to focus on e-waste, and made it her specialization. She began collecting electronic waste from households and shops. She would collect old mobile phones, laptops, monitors and other electronic devices that people indiscriminately disposed of.

Sayra became a part of the whole new initiative of Chintan to convert “toxics to green” and generate livelihoods, especially for women. By her own interest, she became part of Chintan’s Responsible Electronics initiative, which trains informal sector workers to serve as grassroots e-waste collectors, and sell to authorized recyclers. Sayra now sells the electronic waste via Chintan, which is authorized by the Delhi Government to collect e-waste for safe recycling, to an authorized recycler. She is directly paid by the recyclers for her work. Chintan helps collectors like her because no matter what, they collect very small amounts of e-waste. Under the E-Waste (Management and Handling) Rules, 2011, only authorized collectors can collect e-waste and they must store it in self-run authorized collection centres, which are hard and expensive to run. Besides, the recyclers only accept large quantities of e-waste. But collectively, Sayra and others collect enough e-waste, along with Chintan’s own e-waste drives, to attract recyclers.

By doing this, Sayra has not merely conjured up a livelihood for herself, but has also prevented e-waste from being burned, and poorly recycled, which can generate dioxins and furans. It is people like Sayra: who are poor, illiterate, but enthusiastic about being trained for their livelihood, who help India phase-out furans and dioxins and move towards responsible e-waste recycling. Sayra’s work also brings her dignity and a far more stable livelihood. “I can now send my 5 boys to school. I never touched fresh clean paper as a child working on the landfill, but my boys will,” says Sayra with a satisfied smile on her face.

