

Towards A Zero-Garbage City

A Crusader for Citizens Initiatives

Interview with Iqbal Malik

*Dr Iqbal Malik hit the headlines some years back being the first and the only woman in the country to conduct extensive research on monkeys in the wild. Ever since, the ecologist-ethologist and a former adjunct professor of the University of East Carolina and the State University of New York, USA, has been hopping from one project to another. Involving study and analysis, the projects have exhaustively dealt with garbage, pollution, zoos, monkeys, and the ridge in Delhi. Besides, she is the founder-director of **Vatavaran**, an environmental NGO. Working at the grass-root level with local communities, **Vatavaran** has launched **Cleaning Brigade**, which operates a decentralised scheme for collection, transportation, sorting, disposal and composting of garbage. In an exclusive interview with **Manushi**, Iqbal Malik talks about her crusade to make Delhi garbage free, **Cleaning Brigade** and its activities. Excerpts:*

DELHI has become a big garbage dump. The total garbage produced every day is 7,800 tons. And even the garbage which government authorities claim they are clearing is only 4,800 tons. The rest of the garbage keeps piling up, and the result is that 5 per cent of Delhi's land mass has been converted into wasteland because of the open garbage dumps. These garbage dumps are present in residential localities, hospitals, markets, industrial areas, parks, and on the roadsides. With each day, these garbage dumps are becoming bigger and bigger. According to the government figures, there are 1,804 community collection centres for garbage. According to my figures, in the middle class colonies, there are over 508 collections centres which do not have even garbage bins. There are 1,020 *jugghi* clusters which do not have bins. Residents of these areas keep complaining to me.

But why is there so much mismanagement?

When I complain to the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), the offi-

cials say that the subject does not come under the MCD; it's under the Delhi Development Authority (DDA). And when I go to the DDA, the officials say that the area comes under the MCD. There is so much confusion due to the multiplicity of authorities that no one is ready to take responsibility at all.

How is the garbage supposed to be managed?

Garbage management is handled by three government organisations in Delhi: Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), New Delhi Municipal Corporation (NDMC) and the Delhi Cantonment Board. But the MCD is supposed to manage over 96 per cent of Delhi's garbage. The NDMC has to manage only VVIP areas where politicians, ministers and bureaucrats stay. Obviously, cantonment and NDMC areas are better managed than the MCD areas. According to MCD officials, one major reason for the MCD's poor performance is the fact that it has the lowest budget. The Delhi government's total annual budget for all the three

organisations for garbage clearing is Rs 12 crore. But a disproportionate amount (nearly 60 per cent is spent for the New Delhi area where all the VIPs live. I'm against this budget allocation disparity because cleanliness is as important for a lower middle class colony as it is for the President's estate.

Apart from the lack of funds, what are the other problems?

The lower staff of the MCD has never been put through any orientation programmes. They do not have a work culture. About 40 per cent of the MCD workers only mark their attendance and do no work for MCD; they do a private job after that. They don't actually do the work that they're paid for.

What is the way out?

Since the government departments are not doing the work they are supposed to do to make Delhi clean and garbage-free, the residents have two options. Either they approach the court or they take charge of their own neighbourhood. I preferred to move in the direction of citizen initiatives. I want-

ed to create a model. I feel today citizens are not shouldering their responsibility. The MCD didn't tell them to throw cans and plastic bags in the parks. They want their houses to be spotlessly clean, but they sweep the garbage next to the wall of their neighbour's house. Or they put the garbage in a bag and leave it near a tree which is not near their house, or they will chuck it wherever they can. So the fault is on both sides.

How did you start?

When I shifted into this colony (Asiad Village) in 1991 it was full of garbage and filth. The garbage bins were overflowing. There was no system at all. Residents were supposed to go and throw their garbage into those bins. Nobody could ever reach the garbage bins because they were already overflowing with garbage. The situation was becoming intolerable. Each corner of the colony had garbage dumps.

Bins were not cleared for days. Whenever the MCD truck came, it would pick up whatever it could — 25 per cent of it — and the rest would just remain there all the time. It would stink, and you had to literally walk with a perfumed hanky over your nose. I thought, something has to be done. I had to apply my mind: What do I do?

The first thing that I did immediately was to talk to people who come and pick garbage for whatever can be recycled. I said, "Let us organise ourselves, and make a team." It took me a very long time to convince them of my honest intentions. I told them I would put in voluntary work, and they would earn more using the approach I suggested than what they had been earning up to then. And being in the form of a team, they would not be harassed by the local people or by the police.

Why do people harass them?

Because they think they are thieves. The common perception is that they



Iqbal Malik : an example of responsible citizenship

go to the colonies and, besides picking up the recyclables, they also pick up whatever else they can. And the police thrashes them to extract money. I talked to these boys, I met their mothers. It took me 4 or 5 months just to convince 10 of them to form themselves into a team.

Who else did you talk to?

At the same time, I started talking to the residents. That was a very tough job. The first circulars stated, "It's a green, quiet colony, but it is very dirty and it can lead to so many diseases. Since we create garbage, it is our duty to share the responsibility of manag-

ing the garbage." I also introduced my scheme, called the Cleaning Brigade.

After two months of spade work with the residents (there are 850 households here), only 150 were ready to join the scheme. What they had to do to join the scheme was to simply give Rs 15 a month. And they didn't want to do even that. They said: "No, no, we have a servant. Our servant goes and throws away the garbage." Anyway, I started the scheme. Then I sent a second circular saying "we do have a scheme in Asiad Village, but unless everyone joins in the results will not show. And these boys are not taking over your servant's job, but they are reducing his

job. Your servant does not need to go and throw the garbage under the tree or in the drain.” The second circular got a better response, and the number of subscribers finally increased to 650. During our membership drive, we also organised a function with the converted residents. And they could see that the colony was cleaner. There was no garbage lying around. They could see that we were composting the garbage and using it in a very useful manner. And their contribution was only Rs 15 per household.

How exactly do the Cleaning Brigade boys work?

The Cleaning Brigade boys were trained by me on how to organise their time in three phases. First, the boys would distribute themselves in the whole area in the morning hours to collect garbage. For people who leave very early, we have put a hook outside their houses, so that they can hang the garbage bag where dogs cannot reach it. But normally, my boys reach the areas at 7 o’clock in the morning and they complete garbage collection by 9.30 a.m.

What is the next stage?

Second, I trained them to separate garbage at the source. There are two teams working simultaneously. One team takes the garbage quickly to the rickshaw. These are massive rickshaws, not regular ones, which I have designed myself. They’re easy to cycle and can contain lots of garbage. The other team is near the rickshaw, which is on the main road. They immediately put the garbage in two basic categories. For recyclables, we have massive gunny bags. The boys have been trained about what can be sold, and what all is bio-degradable. There is a third category, the inert garbage, which we can’t treat and it’s put aside. After the separation of garbage has been done, we go to the third stage—

composting. In each colony we have also selected wasteland.

When I talk about my scheme to the people in a colony, I also ask for a patch of land where composting can be done. Invariably, they give me the dirtiest area. I don’t mind that.

How is composting done?

Scientifically, there are three methods of composting. Aerobic composting, anaerobic composting, and vermi-composting. Aerobic composting involves using air to degrade the garbage, and requires stirring the garbage very often. It leads to a lot of stink. Besides, there should be sheds so that the rain water doesn’t go into it. It requires heavy investment, so I did not go for that. For vermi-composting, I would require Rs 1,500 to buy 1,000 worms for treating the garbage of only three households. So I did not go for vermi-composting either because the Cleaning Brigade is not restricted to a small street. I am managing at least 3 to 4 lakh Delhiites’ garbage every day, and it would be very expensive. Another reason I did

not go for vermi-composting is that worms constantly need moisture to survive. In all of Delhi, there’s water scarcity. Fourth, if I went for vermi-composting, I could not have put egg shells and the remains of non-veg foods or eggs in the composting pit.

There are other reasons also why I haven’t gone for vermi-composting. I am basically a scientist. I understand the cycle of nature and I realise that if we did that, we might not know the impact immediately. If we introduce some dangerous microbe that somebody has produced, I do not know what might happen eventually.

So what did you do?

I went for anaerobic composting which doesn’t need any investment. It is the Gandhian way of composting. It is a way that Indians had followed for centuries. I just revived that. We just need to dig a pit. The size of the pit varies from colony to colony depending upon how much garbage is generated in a colony. A pit is made and we put in a thin layer of bio-degradable garbage everyday, and that



Cleaning Brigade, Pitampura

layer is covered with a few centimeters of earth. Then second layer of garbage is spread. We put in layers. A layer of garbage, a layer of earth. The earth layer has to be much thinner than the garbage layer. When it gets filled, we cover it and give it the shape of a hillock. As composting takes place, the garbage gets reduced. As it shrinks, this hillock keeps coming down. This takes three months to four months. The difference in the amount of time it takes is due to differences in the soil in different colonies. If it is a rich soil it takes less time. In other areas, it takes slightly longer. And the variation is also due to the weather. In summers it will be faster, in winters it takes slightly longer. But initially, six months might be the maximum period before the residents get compost. Then it is a cycle. Whatever is composted this week will come out after six months. Whatever will be composted next week will come out after six months and a week. So they keep getting the compost regularly. That is another side benefit for the residents. Besides, it's a safer path. It doesn't matter if it takes a slightly longer time. It just doesn't fail at all.

What are the practical problems you face in all of this?

Every area has its own set of problems. For example, Jawahar Lal Nehru University (JNU) is like a mini city. Besides residents, there are hostels, offices, canteens, and dispensaries. So it was more challenging. There are acres and acres of land. When we went to JNU to do the spadework, everywhere, there were piles and piles of garbage which had not been cleared for years.

Why was that?

Because the MCD cannot enter JNU. So it wasn't the MCD's fault there. Today, you ask JNU professors, and they would say, "The Cleaning Brigade has changed JNU." The only zero-garbage area in Delhi is JNU.



Dead cow near a MCD open garbage bin

How did the idea of cleaning up JNU occur to you?

The authorities contacted me. They didn't ask every household to give Rs 15 to the Cleaning Brigade. They took it from their pay directly.

In JNU everyone was forced to join, so JNU became a zero-garbage area. There's not a single place in JNU whose garbage doesn't come to us. So that is the secret of converting an area into zero-garbage area. That each household joins in, that each member of the community becomes an extended part of the Cleaning Brigade.

Are you always open to starting new schemes?

I never start more than one scheme in one month. There is so much start up work to be done. Before residents start paying money, I must know how many

blocks must be covered. How many houses? Which will be the composting site? How many rickshaws are needed? And then we launch the scheme. And normally, when we launch the scheme, we want community participation. I want people to know that there is something happening in their colony. We make it like a ritual. Each Cleaning Brigade employs local boys so that the workers don't have to travel 10 miles to reach the area of their work.

Please elaborate.

For example, in Nizamuddin our boys contacted people and told them what the Cleaning Brigade is all about, and how it works. After the residents agreed to promote the scheme, on the appointed day, my boys were there in their new uniforms, including proper

shoes. Besides they had new rickshaws. Everything was ready. We also had a little inauguration ceremony by breaking a coconut and doing a little ritual *puja* with flowers. We had the person in charge of the area break the coconut. I want the local people to know that it's their scheme. I want them to get involved in the whole process. We distributed *prasad*, and we put flowers on the new carts. I do all this because there is more involvement of people that way. And it works.

How many schemes are you running today?

Today I'm running 15 schemes and the number keeps increasing. For example, I get calls even from an NDMC area, which is supposed to be relatively clean because all the VIPs live there. They asked me, "Can you start your Cleaning Brigade here?" I said, "See, your area is much better looked after anyway. And if you are not satisfied, why don't you lodge a complaint? Most of you are people with clout." I don't want to take over the whole of Delhi. I've created a model. I can't become the MCD or the NDMC myself. But I'm interested in working in middle-class areas.

How are the finances managed?

I don't touch a single paisa. For me, to show that it really is a voluntary job is also important. So in each colony I select a model resident. This model resident keeps the accounts of that colony. I want total transparency in my work. Whatever money has been collected by the Cleaning Brigade is

deposited with the model resident. Besides there is the selling of recyclables. Each colony generates different quantities of recyclables, depending upon the lifestyle of the inhabitants. The richer the colony, the more the recyclables. I am against a throw-away culture. We have a contract with the local wholesale *kabadis* (junk dealer). The *kabadis* give the money in advance to the model resident every month, though they pick up the recyclables on a daily basis. So in each area, both the collected money from the residents which they have paid for the cleaning as well as the money which has come from the *kabadi* is given to the model resident. The model resident uses that money to give salaries to the boys of the Brigade.

Do the people pay up willingly?

Right now, my supervisors collect the money. It's a big headache. I've sent circulars to the residents saying that they must hand money over by the 4th. But in Vasant Kunj, Suraj Bhan (supervisor) finishes his collections only by the month end. The whole month he keeps going around. They don't pay. There are so many excuses: "We don't have money today; *Memsaab* is not home; You have come at

the wrong time." Here in Asiad Village I've been able to tighten it because if the residents don't pay, I call them up.

Suraj Bhan's scheme is not a very old scheme; only a few months old. I cannot convert the residents in one month.

If residents start doing all this work, what should be done with the money at the disposal of our corporations?

There should be decentralisation and privatisation, which means that the money the MCD is spending on a colony to keep it clean should be given to the residents' associations (RAs). And RAs should monitor the workers. That is how our colonies will be come cleaner. I gave in such a proposal for Asiad Village and in principle it has been approved. Once that happens, it won't be necessary for the residents to pay each month. Because it is the MCD's job. For our colony the MCD will give the money. And I will get all the work done.

How much do you pay the boys at present?

When I started the scheme, I could pay Rs 800 only to each boy per month. Now, it is Rs 1,600, 1,800, 2,000



Demonstration for a cleaner Delhi

or 2,500. This is another thing I feel really proud of. As the houses keep increasing, we earn more. I think this is the only scheme in which every second month the pay increases. Why? Because it is not a business. The supervisor will just not swindle all the money and the boys keep getting only the same salary. I control that very strictly. I'm not increasing supervisors' salaries. They are already better paid. They are getting between Rs 2,500 and Rs 3,000 a month. But boys' salaries keep increasing.

Do the boys get any other benefits?

With the Cleaning Brigade, boys make between Rs 1,600 and Rs 3,000 a month. Some unorganised ragpickers can manage Rs 1,600 a month, depending on where they are working. They have to get up very early in the morning. The sooner they get up, the more they will earn. There is competition amongst them: who reaches the area first, who can pick up the most. So some of them can't even manage Rs 500. There's a lot of variation. Besides, they have to shell out money to the police. I do not employ boys who are less than 18. I believe in adhering to laws against child labour.

One day one boy, Abdul, a rag-picker of one of our teams, said something unusual: "I have been doing this work for all of my childhood. But since I have joined the Cleaning Brigade, I have got respect." That touched me a lot. It might be that I haven't been able to give them a lot of money, but now they have an identity and with that comes self respect. So there are various types of benefits. Besides, there is consistency in their earnings. They can budget for the month. We give them lunch, with milk and *jalebi* or something which gives them energy. There's care when they join us. They belong to an outfit. The police will not dare harass them the same way. So there are benefits of more than one



Garbage strewn in the midst of Khanpur Colony

type. They have fixed hours. They no longer have to rush in the middle of the night to get to an area so that no one else reaches there before them. That's why today they are better off.

And if there is a saving, what do you do?

After some time the scheme starts generating savings. And we do need that kind of kitty. For instance, the boys need raincoats during the monsoon. The scheme should generate enough money so that uniforms, gloves and boots can be replaced.

As the scheme became popular, some of the residents said: "Why don't you tell the boys to clean the bylanes also? Our stairs? Our drains?" Their demands kept increasing. So, I talked to my boys. They said: "We are ready to do it. But we need more staff." So, in many colonies we are cleaning everything. They clean the stairs. If the drains are blocked, they clear them out.

The charges in these colonies have gone up to Rs 35. My instructions are that they should not enter the houses. All my boys have been checked by the police which safe-

guards them in case anything happens. All my boys have identity cards.

Has the police harassment stopped?

One boy, whose name I can't remember, had to face a problem of a different kind. As I said, a police inquiry is done on all of them. The police went to this boy's village for the inquiry and they said to the mother: Your boy has been caught stealing things. We have come for the inquiry." They demanded Rs 200. That woman, who had never been to Delhi, came to my house because she knew her son was working with me. She asked me, "Has my boy done something wrong?" I said, "No, he's such a wonderful boy." I knew him very well. She said, "But the police came and demanded money from me".

Do the boys give trouble?

It happens once a while. Once Ajay (a field supervisor) went to his area after 4 p.m. when all work is supposed to be finished and he found the boys drinking. How were they able to afford it, I had to find out. It meant that whatever they were earning, they were not giving to their families. We contacted

the families first. There was no *atta* to make *roti* in their houses. There were no *dals*. There were no rations. And these boys got into drinking because they were earning so much now. What could we do? We started making them buy rations. "You're wasting so much money. See what you could have had." For the people living on the edge, Rs 2,000 is a tidy sum. So they just go berserk.

Each of my Cleaning Brigade boys keeps demanding advances throughout the month. They take an advance of Rs 200 on the 7th, and an advance of Rs 500 on the 20th. The advance is deducted from their pay, and when they are paid, then it starts again. This is how it works.

Why don't you refuse to pay the salary advances?

I could refuse them advances. But we are dealing with a class which doesn't have any reserves. If there is a problem in the family, I think the scheme must help them. How do we help them? The supervisors see that more than 50 per cent of the pay doesn't go as advance. Otherwise, they will get nothing at all on the first of the month.

But they can still blow up half the money?

This advance that they were taking, we realised, was the money they were using on drinking. Now, if a boy tells my supervisor in JNU: "I need Rs 200," the supervisor will ask "Why"? And if the boy says for rations, this supervisor will say: "Come with me, let's go to the superbazar. Here is your Rs 200, buy rations in front of me." We don't buy and give. They might think we're short-changing them. I want to be totally transparent. Because it's a model, that's how things should be. Not only should you be honest, it should appear very clearly that you are honest. They have faith in the scheme, in the supervisor, so a closer relationship is built.



Model residents and cleaning brigade of Vasant Kunj

What are the other problems with the boys?

Another thing the boys can do when they are collecting garbage from house to house is to siphon away empty mineral water bottles. Mineral water bottles sell very well. They all know the prices of various things. Maybe a boy will hide it quietly somewhere and will not put it in the main bag. Team spirit has to be cultivated and they have to understand that the money earned is for everyone. That's why we maintain transparency. They all know: this is what the colony is generating, and this is what they are paid. The money is kept with this supervisor or with this model resident, and with this money they will get new T-shirts or they will get raincoats, or they will get sweaters in the winter. I don't want them to be dishonest. So when they cheat, I warn them. And when this doesn't work, I politely tell them: "As a punishment, you are out of the scheme for some time. When you think you have improved, come back to me." And I have taken them back many times.

Any other problems?

Besides there are other types of problems. I did hire a girl once, but there were too many troubles concerning her.

The problem started with the supervisor. He would just sit with that girl in the composting area all the time. I eventually had to throw that supervisor out. And I got that woman a job at some other place. If some day I could have an all-woman team, I would love it.

But as awareness spreads, people themselves begin to demand that we expand the scope of our activities. For example, last monsoon, a resident of one of the colonies said to me: "Iqbal, now it is very clean, but we don't have any trees. Let's make it green. So I went and got 500 free saplings from the conservator of forests, Delhi, and, today the trees are thriving very well. This monsoon we are also planting in other areas.

On World Environment Day, in all my colonies, residents and children, got together and divided themselves into groups. I went and talked to people in all the colonies about how plastic bags, cola cans, and things we discard immediately after use are littering the place. In another colony, it was followed by a painting competition by children. Awareness comes gradually. □

All photos with this article are by Vijay Bhan