

## Incinerators in Delhi Threaten Waste-Pickers

By Daphne Wysham

The waste-pickers of Delhi may soon rank among the world's endangered species if carbon markets continue their rise. Now numbering in the tens if not hundreds of thousands, waste-pickers have plied the garbage of Delhi's streets for decades. A disturbing spectacle, often including women and children in their ranks, they nonetheless provide a vital service: recycling. In a country like India, paper, plastic, and metals are an increasingly valuable commodity. And for slum-dwellers, this may be their only source of income. And so they join the cows and dogs in a daily forage through garbage by the side of road, searching for plastic, paper, metals—anything that can be turned into cash.

Bharati Chaturvedi, director and co-founder of Chintan, a small non-governmental organization (NGO) servicing India's waste-pickers, claims that more than one percent of Delhi's population is engaged in waste-picking—a significant source of revenue for the poorest—and that they recycle nine percent to 59 percent of all of the waste generated in the city. "These waste-pickers are providing a public service—for free," Chaturvedi says.

But a waste incinerator now proposed in Timarpur, a suburb of Delhi, may change all that. Like other incinerators, this one will generate cancer-causing dioxins, mercury, and other heavy metals and persistent organic pollutants. What's new and different about this particular waste incinerator: It will generate carbon credits under the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM).

The CDM was originally established under the Kyoto Protocol, the climate change treaty, to address the need to provide new aid to developing countries to acquire and implement new clean energy technologies and projects. Its intent was also to provide a vehicle for development. However, critics say, the CDM is rapidly



devolving into a subsidy for some of the dirtiest industries in the Global South and an excuse for inaction in cutting the significant greenhouse gas emissions by developed countries. Dirty industries and banks are growing rich on the schemes. The World Bank, for example, is becoming a major broker of many of them, charging a 13-percent commission on all of the carbon trades it brokers.

Gopal Krishna, a public health researcher at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, had succeeded in dissuading government officials from accepting other proposals from Australian and Danish incinerator companies in Delhi, based on public health concerns.

"We had managed to stop half a dozen of these dubious projects in the past," Krishna adds. "But this time around, in the name of carbon credits, fraudulent claims are being made with impunity."

Left over incinerator ash flies everywhere. "I've been all over India," says Patricia Costner, science adviser to Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) and the International Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs) Elimination Network. "I know what happens to incinerator ash. Most of it ends up by the side of the road. There are no engineered landfills in India."

Waste-pickers are being harassed by dump managers and actively denied access to the dry, high-calorie items the incinerator will devour. They're also denied access to the waste stream.

"Instead, they go through the ash looking for metal, the only substance to survive incineration intact," says GAIA's Neil Tangri. "I've seen people picking through thigh deep incinerator ash for metals. You're using the human body as a toxic absorber—you're basically spoon-feeding it to these people."

Today, with an incinerator contract looming on the horizon, and with it the potential for millions of dollars in revenue from the global carbon market, the political dynamic has changed. "They are effectively denying a livelihood to the poorest of the poor in setting up this incinerator," says Chaturvedi. "To take that miserable existence away, it's criminal. And now we're seeing skyrocketing food prices in India. Huge local skills in recycling are now being wiped out, skills essential for a sustainable society. What will these people do?" ■

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This issue is dedicated to Luke W. Cole (1962-2009)

Founding co-editor of the journal *Race Poverty & the Environment* and founder of the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment.



**Photos:** (Above) Montage from the Luke Cole memorial booklet published October 25, 2009. Courtesy of Nancy Shelby.

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