

EDITED BY ASEEM INAM

CO-DESIGNING PUBLICS



The book is dedicated to Elahe,
for her extraordinary love.

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04

CO-DESIGN AS LONG-TERM PROCESS:

HASIRU DALA, BENGALURU

NALINI SHEKAR

My name is Nalini Shekar, and I co-founded Hasiru Dala, which means “green force” in the regional Kannada language, and which is an organization that works with the waste pickers primarily in Bengaluru, India. Waste pickers are people who pick up recyclables on the street, which is what we throw as waste, and with their labor they sort, grade, and make it into a tradable commodity. Our main objectives at Hasiru Dala are to provide space for these workers within the formal solid-waste management system of the city by working with wastepickers who are part of the informal sector and to promote appropriate, decentralized, and cost-effective solutions for solid-waste management and decent livelihoods.

NEHA SAMI

I am Neha Sami and I am currently faculty at the Indian Institute for Human Settlements in Bangalore, India, where I teach on questions of governance and sustainability and anchor the Research Program. My research focuses on the governance of infrastructure, especially mega-infrastructure in the context of post-liberalization urban India. I also work on questions of environmental governance particularly at the sub-national scale, focusing on institutional analysis and state capacity. I am a corresponding editor for the International Journal of Urban and Regional Research, and have served on the editorial collective of Urbanization.

Nalini Shekar: There is a huge perception in India that waste pickers are dirty, and that they don’t know anything. They are not educated. We are changing that perception to acknowledge

that they're in fact semi-skilled workers and that they know more than you and me about waste material in order to make it into a tradable commodity and raw material for the recycling industry. We don't call them waste pickers; we call them robust entrepreneurs and silent environmentalists. And we consider their views to be design tools to move forward and make changes. We aim to do this through both research and implementation. Research is always important: through our analysis, we showed that the city of Bengaluru is saving almost 8.2 million Indian rupees from its municipal budget because of the informal work that waste pickers do through the collection and transportation of recyclable materials that are recovered from municipal solid waste.

One of the things that we at Hasiru Dala were able to demonstrate early on was the establishment of Dry Waste Collection Centers as decentralized infrastructure for waste collection and sorting. These are places where inorganic waste like paper, plastic, cloth, metal, and glass are aggregated for the formal collection system. These Centers are run by waste pickers who are otherwise not integrated in the formal system. It is also important for Dry Waste Collection Centers to look aesthetically attractive as well as functional, particularly given the assumption around waste management and waste picking being 'dirty' or 'unclean' work. We used a mural to paint portraits at these Centers of the people who work there. We are also working on educating citizens through awareness building among the wider public about waste pickers and the critical service they perform for the city.

Another important aspect of our work at Hasiru Dala is to negotiate with the municipal government of Bengaluru in ways that are helpful to waste pickers as well as citizens. We have created a range of spaces for waste pickers to contribute through dialogue with multiple stakeholders as well as petition for their rights to the judiciary and the court system. For example, in 2011 when we asked the local commissioner for decentralized infrastructure



Figure 4.1
Dry Waste Collection
Center painted in
a colorful pattern.
Source: Hasiru Dala.

for inorganic waste management, he said "Bengaluru is such a big city, how can we allocate space for Dry Waste Collection Centers in every administrative ward?" However,

through constant dialogue and negotiation, we have now created 166 Dry Waste Collection Centers throughout the city. This space is given by the city to the poor to provide their utility services and it has taken about 10 years to create these physical spaces. The bylaws of the city have been amended to now say that all the dry and inorganic waste will be collected only by waste pickers or a small women's collective. We have managed to change the policies. All this happened because citizens demanded it. We partnered with citizens to demonstrate how waste pickers were beneficial to sustainable waste management and to streamline collection services, and those efforts helped make it happen.

Waste pickers and their work are often invisible and unacknowledged. An important part of our mission at Hasiru Dala is to change this. In addition to pushing for policy changes, we are also aiming to make this work more visible in public spaces around the city. One illustration of this is a recently completed mural on



one of the walls of one of Bengaluru's prominent iconic public buildings. Located along a major thoroughfare in Bengaluru, the 'Utility Building had become a place where garbage was dumped. The mural is a painted portrait of one waste picker and one sanitation worker that depicts the interconnectedness of informal and formal waste sectors and "essential workers" engaged in it. We cleaned it up and we engaged with a lot of people who came, stood, watched, and asked us, "What is this? Why are you doing it?" In the process, many of them participated, including upper- and middle-class citizens alongside waste pickers. There was lot of discussion that happened during that phase. These are some of the types of things that we have done in the public realm.

Neha Sami: The thing that's interesting about the work that Hasiru Dala does is that they take something like waste, which is an output of our shared urban life, and they have found a way of making it visible and of making the people who do that work visible as well. The way in which the Dry Waste Collection Centers have been developed and the way in which the ownership of the process of managing and collecting the waste has been transferred over to the people who do the work has gone a long way in helping them feel empowered. Hasiru Dala has now gone from being present only in Bengaluru to working across southern India, which is a huge achievement in the last decade for a community-based organization.

Another thing that I also want to highlight is the importance of designing collectively and the time that it takes. The temporal aspect of co-designing the physical spaces but also the time that it takes to build trust within government, the time it takes to build these alliances across multiple stakeholders and players within a city, then beyond the city to take that to other locations, and to continue to use the same philosophy. It allows us to rethink

Figure 4.2
Mural of a waste picker and a sanitation worker on the side
of the Utility Building on a major thoroughfare in Bengaluru.
Source: Hasiru Dala, 2021.

the idea of public realm as not just something that's a physical, tangible space but also something that's an ongoing process, as well as opening these processes up much more collectively to broader groups of people.

Question: I'm really glad Neha brought up the question of time. Can you take us through how Hasiru Dala started and what was your original intention? This second question is specifically dealing with the relationship between social stigma of waste pickers and the time it really takes, in your experience, to challenge such a social stigma?

Nalini Shekar: I moved to Bengaluru in 2010, when there was lot of discussion by middle-class environmentalists about sustainable waste management. They were all very well-meaning people but there was no discussion about waste pickers who were entirely absent from the process. So, we did a study that showed 35,000 waste pickers were there in Bengaluru. How can you not recognize them? That is why immediately we started organizing them on the ground. At the same time, we went to the court, which is called the Lok Adalat and is an alternative dispute resolution system within the High Court where they bring all the parties together to negotiate, discuss, and find a way forward. They brought in the state government, they brought in the local government, they brought in the citizens, and we represented the waste pickers. We were not well organized at the time but we started to show them how much money is being saved through the informal work of the waste pickers for the city. Then, I said, "You have to recognize their historical contribution and you have to start by giving them occupational identity cards." When we started in 2010, it was not very clear who the waste belonged to that was on the street. When the waste pickers used to pick it up, they used to be shouted at by the local government officials. They would be shouted at by citizens. They were harassed by the police. The occupational identity card, that we helped to obtain,

said they had a right to collect waste on the street within the jurisdiction of Bengaluru, which was a big achievement for us. Now, it has become a law across the nation. So, that's how we started very small, and we grew organically, but our vision was big.

Question: Could you talk a little about the way in which the waste collection workers were convened around your initiative, and how you helped them to understand the need for—and meaning of—such work? How was trust built? What were the mechanisms for communication, interaction at the very basic community level?

Nalini Shekar: This is an interesting question, because I have done this from ground up in the Indian cities of Pune and Bengaluru. It's a similar story. For example, I remember one of my colleagues who came and said, "These two women, whenever I go to talk to them, they go and hide in the rainwater drains." Because they don't see you around normally and because they don't want to believe you since there have been so many people who have already been cheated when somebody tells them, to the effect, "Okay, give me money and I'll get you this social benefit." And so, it was difficult but going in again and again to meet them is the best thing for building trust over time. Then, when the government said they would give an occupational identity card to the waste pickers, it became an extremely good vehicle for us to build upon. Persistence is the only way and once they begin to trust you, then you have won the war. Now, we hear from people in different cities, "We have heard that you guys work with waste pickers; why don't you come to our city?"

Question: Neha, could I ask you to speak a little bit more about the way your research and teaching institution, the Indian Institute of Human Settlements, has been working with Hasiru Dala, and what are your future projects with them?

Neha Sami: Before that, I just want to add that everything that Nalini's been saying demonstrates the temporal aspect of

designing collectively. I think that it's something that we often disregard, partly because we want quick solutions. We often ignore the amount of effort and time that goes into not only building but also sustaining long-standing embedded solutions. As Nalini was saying, it is a constant struggle of keeping at it.

One of the things that Nalini mentioned earlier today is to find ways in which waste-picker communities can express themselves in multiple formats, and the murals that you saw were one aspect of it. Now we're trying to find ways in which we can help and train around issues of writing and communication. We're trying to find ways in which we can conduct workshops that would allow us to train and facilitate capacity building within the community to be able to be their own voice in terms of writing. A lot of people have written case study analyses about them by coming and doing research on them, including our institute. But the community itself has not been able to find a way of speaking. So, we're hoping to start with both Kannada (the native language of the state of Karnataka, where Bengaluru is situated) and English, with Kannada as the language that they're most familiar with. We would like to find different ways of incrementally continuing to support the work that they do.

We also have several of our current and former students who work with Hasiru Dala in various capacities. Over the years, we have also brought the team from Hasiru Dala into our classroom and teaching spaces in an attempt to broaden the kinds of knowledge that get transacted in such spaces as well as broaden the notion of who counts as 'faculty.'

The case study analysis that we (i.e., Indian Institute of Human Settlements) researched and prepared about the work of Hasiru Dala was used to train not only the Indian Administrative Service, which is the elite civil service of the national government of India, but also for state and municipal governments. We're trying to provide knowledge on the other side of things to show it as a kind of demonstration project where potential bureaucrats can



Figure 4.3
Hasiru Dala works collectively through alliances with multiple stakeholders, including the local government.
Source: Hasiru Dala, 2021.

take into their own practices and their own cities.

Question: Are there global forums or platforms for different approaches to waste picking? This activity exists globally in various ways, and I wonder if such a network would be useful, if it doesn't already exist?

Nalini Shekar: It already exists. Our different groups have all come together to create a network called the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers. There are differences because the laws of each country are different, but there are some common principles and actions we can work on together, such as member-based organizations and ways of working with different kinds of private waste management companies. [Editor: For more information on the Global Alliance of Waste Pickers, please visit their website: <https://globalrec.org/>]