

# Socio-Economic Conditions of Collectors of Post-Consumer Clothing Waste in Mumbai, India

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**Abstract**—Discarded clothing from households are collected in exchange for utensils by men and women called *bhandivale* in Mumbai. This unique door-to-door recycling service earns them a livelihood. With the objective to understand the background of the *bhandivale* in Mumbai, the percentage of *bhandivale* in various age groups, the male to female ratio among the sample of respondents, caste-wise and sub-castes distribution, their migratory status, State of origin, original occupation, domicile, possession of ration card and income are studied. A field survey was undertaken; data was gathered through personal interviews. Literature reviewed showed the presence of *Waghri* tribes involved in the trade of used clothes. In this study the presence of two more tribal communities were found, namely *Gondhali* and *Kunchikorve*. A comparative study between the three sub-caste revealed that *Gondhali* and *Kunchikorve* have better educational and socio-economic conditions than the *Waghri*.

**Index Terms**—*Bhandivale*, collection, clothing waste, redistribution.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Cloth and clothing is never just thrown away in India. Whether the used clothes are passed on for reuse, given in charity or exchanged for money or commodities, the key word is recycling. Rag pickers do the tasks of collecting waste in small and big cities. They earn their livelihood by collecting waste in the city. This activity provides income opportunities for migrants, unemployed children, women and handicapped [1]. In the city of Mumbai, rag collectors collecting old clothes from residential areas are called *Bhandivale*. *Bhandivale* are those engaged in collection of used clothes either from door-to-door collection or at street corners in exchange for stainless steel utensils or plastic articles.

According to a website, a profitable market for used clothing is conspicuous both in the urban and village areas [2]. They are known to be economically backward people. They may sell the clothes that are collected directly to consumers at the flea market in Mumbai called '*Chor Bazaar*' or through agents called *Chindhivale*. *Chor Bazaar* is the thief market where second-hand clothes are sold. *Chor Bazaar* is located near *Bhendi Bazaar* in South Mumbai, is

one of the largest flea markets in India [3].

Second-hand clothes find a market on footpaths, railway bridges, street side and weekly markets in various parts in the City of Mumbai.

*Bhandivale* are not rag pickers by definition but studies on rag pickers done in Mumbai [4], New Delhi and Kurukshtra [5] refer to those who deal in old clothes as rag pickers. The research in Delhi between the years 2003-2008, presented as narrations on the way they deal with housewives and go about their daily business [6]. Literature reviewed provides insights into the *Waghri* tribe involved in the trade of old clothes in Delhi [4]-[7]. There are many sub-castes in the tribes in the un-organized sector. They are seen pursuing different occupations to earn their living. Apart from exchanging steel utensils for old clothes, they are also engaged as daily wage labourers in Mumbai. They follow the Hindu religion and worshiping different Hindu Gods and Goddesses [7]. Data available on the *bhandivale* who exclusively make a living by collection and redistribution of clothes in Mumbai is limited. The objective is to study the present socio-economic profile, family and educational background of clothes collectors called *bhandivale* in Mumbai City.

## II. METHODOLOGY

Descriptive Research Design was found suitable for the study. The primary data was obtained through personal interviews with the *bhandivale* through field survey in different localities of the Western and Eastern Suburbs and Central Mumbai. Data was collected by the use of a semi-structured interview schedule with structured questions and some open ended questions were included. Non-probability convenience sampling design was used to select the representative sample. Random sampling and snowball technique was used as they have a mobile nature of work. Most of the indicators were quantifiable for analysis. Secondary data was gathered from books, e-books, national and international research journals, newspaper articles, thesis, dissertations and select websites as limited printed data was available exclusively on *bhandivale*.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To understand the background of the *bhandivale* in Mumbai, the percentage of *bhandivale* in various age groups, the male to female ratio among the sample respondents, caste-wise and sub-castes distribution of *bhandivale*, their migratory status, State of origin, original occupation, domicile, possession of ration card assets and income are studied.

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A. Caste and Subcaste, Religion and Language

All the *bhandivale* under this study followed Hindu Religion. There was no respondent following any other religion than Hinduism though it was assumed that there may be other communities involved in the collection by bartering of old clothes. During the data collection for this study, other than the Gujarati speaking *Waghri*[4], [6]-[9] the presence of two other communities were found, they are the *Kunchikorve* and *Gondhali*. Both these sub-castes called themselves as *Marathias* they speak the *Marathi* language. The two distinct caste population who are in the *bhandivale* business are namely the *Waghri* and *Marathi* in equal numbers in the sample. The number of respondents from each of these castes being in a ratio of 50:50 is co-incident. Though the proportion of *Kunchikurve* subcaste ( $n=8$ ) were in the minority as compared to *Gondhali* ( $n=18$ ,  $N=52$ ). Having lived in Mumbai, most of the *Waghri* were able to speak in *Marathi* with a Gujarati accent and pronunciation. As seen in Table I, nearly 35 percent *bhandivale* belonged to the *Gondhali Samaj* and the remaining 15 percent to the *Kunchikorve*.

TABLE I: DISTRIBUTION OF *BHANDIVALE* IN THEIR SUB-CASTE

Sub caste	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Waghri-Dattani	26	50.0	50.0
Gondhali	18	34.6	84.6
Kunchikurve	8	15.4	100.0
Total	52	100.0	

Age and Gender

TABLE II: AGE WISE DISTRIBUTION OF THE *BHANDIVALE*

Subcaste	Age					Total
	11-20	21-30	31-40	41-50	51-60	
Waghri-Dattani	2	13	7	4	0	26
Gondhali	0	7	2	2	7	18
Kunchikurve	0	0	8	0	0	8
Total	2	20	17	6	7	52

Most of the *bhandivale* that is above 70 percent ( $n=37$ ,  $N=52$ ) were in the younger and middle age-groups between 21 and 40 years. A marginal number of less than four percent were less than 20 years of age. But there were no minors independently involved in the trade. Although, more women in the *bhandivale* trade were noticed on the streets of Mumbai; statistical data showed that the presence of both men and women is almost equal in the *bhandivale* business. Out of the sample population 48 percent were male and 52 percent were female. The Table II, shows the age wise distribution of *bhandivale* belonging to the three subcaste.

B. Migratory Status and Origin

All the *bhandivale* in the sample population ( $N=52$ ) in Mumbai are migrants from the States that are neighbouring Maharashtra; namely 50 percent from Gujarat ( $n=26$ ), 25 percent Karnataka ( $n=13$ ), 4 percent Andhra Pradesh ( $n=2$ ) and the rest from interior parts of Maharashtra 21 percent ( $n=11$ ). The *Gondhali* are migrants from the neighbouring State of Karnataka originally belonging to the Gulbarga District close to Andhra Pradesh border. It was observed

that they speak *Marathi* in a dialect which is a mix of *Marathi* and *Kannada* languages. The *Kunchikorve* originate from Sholapur District of Maharashtra. Most of them carried their original culture, language and accent but their origin could be identified by the researcher by their appearance. They claimed to have migrated to Mumbai more than two generations ago. Most of them could not report their original occupation, the year in which they migrated or the number of generations back that their family had moved to Mumbai. Few could recollect their native place and some of them had their relatives living there and from continuing their original occupation. A brief description here would help understand the background of these *bhandivale* better.

C. *Waghri*

The Gujarati speaking *Waghri* are migrants from Gujarat and belong to the tribal community originally from Kutch, Bhuj and Kalol Districts of the neighbouring State of Gujarat [8]. The *Waghri* they adopted the occupation of exchanging old clothes for steel utensils...pursuing the same occupation in Maharashtra since generations who have settled in Bombay, Pune, Kalyan, Thane, and Dhulia districts of Maharashtra. Apart from exchanging steel utensils for old clothes, they are also engaged as daily wage labourers in Bombay. Those who have money are also in the business of ready-made clothes [7].

D. *Gondhali*

Russel described *Gondhali* as a caste or order of wandering beggars and musicians found in Maratha District of the Central provinces and in Berar. The name derived from the *Marathi* word *gondharne*, to make a noise. In 1911 the *Gondhalis* numbered about 3000 persons in Berar and 500 in the Central provinces, and they are also found in Bombay. Kitts stated as in [10] that in the Berar Census Report of 1881, that *Gondhalis* are attached either to the temple of Tukai at Tuljapur or the temple of Renuka at Mahur. They were performers and musicians and perform on the occasion of marriages [10].

E. *Kunchikorve*

Limited literature was available on *Marathi* speaking *Kunchikorve*. According to the barefoot researchers of PUKAR, an NGO this community has lived in Mumbai since decades: community originally hails from the Nilgiri hills in Tamil Nadu. Migration took some to Andhra Pradesh, some to Karnataka and brought some to Maharashtra and Gujarat. The community traversed from Bijapur in Karnataka to Sholapur...came to Mumbai after 1950. This tribal community came to Mumbai in search of better livelihood and their ancestors worked in many different occupations...to conduct street shows with monkeys...making brooms....When the *Kunchikorve* community migrated to Mumbai city, they first lived in Worli (South of Mumbai) but later shifted to Dharavi...availability of meat around Bandra near Dharavi. Bandra consisted of a pre-dominant non-vegetarian community that depended on *Kunchikorve* hunting skills to find food.

Women in the *Kunchikorve* community seek alms in spite of good living conditions at home and even if people at home oppose it, the women continue to step out to

beg...during the festival season. Some believe that women continue begging as a habit or as a tradition now[11].

During the interviews some of the *bhandivale* reported that they had few relatives in the native villages who continue the traditional occupation of performing at temples and some were cultivators. Most of the *Kunchkorve* women also sell vegetables in Mumbai. Some of them have been in the profession of collecting and selling old clothes. All these three communities from different places of origin claim to have been in this profession for generations. Some were not aware of their original occupation.

#### F. Domicile

The domicile status enjoyed in Mumbai is by birth or by having lived more than 15 years in the City. The ration cards issued by the Government of Maharashtra are identified by the colour codes of yellow, orange and white for different sections of people depending on the economic level of the family. This document is proof of residence. This gave them the eligibility to consider themselves as locals and enjoy the rights of a Maharashtra State domicile. A large majority of nearly 83 percent (n=43, N=52) of the *bhandivale* had a domicile of Mumbai having been born and brought up in Mumbai or had lived here for over 15 years. They were issued orange colour ration cards. Those who had lived for less than 15 years were women who had come to live in Mumbai after marriage. There were some *bhandivale* men belonging to the *Waghri* who had married girls from Kathiawad, Kalol and Ahemdavad. There were less than one fifth of women respondents who had been born and brought up in Hyderabad, Gulbarga, Bijapur and Sholapur and had come to Mumbai after marriage. They had their names included in the ration cards as proof of residence. There were 17 percent *bhandivale* who did not possess a ration card. Half of the *bhandivale* who did not have a card were migrants from Gujarat while a fourth of them from Karnataka, a fifth of them were from parts of Maharashtra and marginal from Andhra Pradesh. Not being able to read and write may have hindered them from reading notices, filling forms, submitting applications and generally being aware of their rights and opportunities.

They could read limited sign boards[12]. Most of those who did not have a ration card belonged to the *Waghri-Duttani* caste, were low in their literacy level and had no documents to prove their domicile status.

#### G. Education

*Bhandivale* vary in their educational levels. Almost 35 percent (N=52) of the *bhandivale* were found to be illiterate as they said that they could not read and write. Most of illiterate belonged to the *Waghri* caste. The rest of them had primary education in Hindi or Gujarati languages. It was observed that during the course of the personal interviews with the *bhandivale*, some of those who claimed could not read and write could take and make phone calls to numbers stored in the cell-phone contact list from their mobiles.

A comparative analysis of the educational level of the different castes revealed the prevalence of illiteracy in the *bhandivale* communities namely *Waghri* and *Gondhali* communities. A marginal four percent has limited reading and writing knowledge. About 40 percent had received primary education either in Gujarati, Hindi or Marathi.

There were nearly ten percent who has received middle school education and dropped out. Only about 12 percent of the *bhandivale* had high school education. Nearly 40 percent of the *bhandivale* have primary education which may enable them to read sign boards and write. Very few of them have had access to middle school and this makes them unfit or not eligible for taking up jobs. They are compelled to continue with the family profession that they had grown up with. High school education for their children remains a priority in most of the *bhandivale* families with school going children. Parents in *bhandivale* trade whose children had given up formal education regretted that the children had dropped out school. The girls who dropped out of school were compelled to accompany their parents and got into the trade by helping the parents at a very young age. The boys who dropped out of school were expected to supplement the family income and helped in the business by directly selling the clothes collected the previous day at *Chor bazaar*. As seen in Table III, those who are illiterate were mostly from the *Waghri-Duttani* caste (42 percent) and 39 percent from the *Gondhali* Caste. About 19 percent of the *Waghri* had attended middle school but there was none who could complete high school education.

TABLE III: COMPARING THE EDUCATIONAL LEVEL IN THE SUBCASTE

Educational level	Subcaste						Total
	Waghri-Dattani		Gondhali		Kunchikurve		
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	
Illiterate	11	42.3	7	38.8	0	0	18
Pre-School	2	7.7	0	0	0	0	2
Primary School	8	30.8	9	50	4	50	21
Middle School	5	19.2	0	0	0	0	5
High School	0	0	2	11.1	4	50	6

Half of *Gondhali* and half of *Kunchikurve* had at least primary education. The *bhandivale* of *Gondhali* have been more educated as compared to *Kunchikurve* and *Waghri*. According to a recent research, the present generation of the *Kunchikurve* community learns in English medium schools but the secondary begging occupational practice continues in *Kunchikurve* families [11]. There was no respondent from the *Waghri* community who had high school education.

Although most of the respondents from the *Waghri* community who had children of school going age, wanted to educate their children, the school drop-out rate was found to be high. The most important reason for the lack of education was poverty, other reasons being lack of motivation and interest. Due to the economic conditions they are compelled to give up education and supplement the family income at a young age. It was observed that as soon as the children drop out from school they are expected to start earning for the family. Inevitably, these children take to involving themselves in the family occupation of transacting in old clothes.

#### H. Family Details of Bhandivale

Size of family, type of families, marital status, number of members in the family and the number of children in the *bhandivale* household, to help in understanding some aspects of their family lives in the social context. *Bhandivale* live in three types of families- nuclear, joint and

extended. *Bhandivale* live in large families. Nearly 54 percent of the *bhandivale* have more than eight members in the family. The joint families comprised of three generations of family members living together.

Table IV shows that there were two families which had 20 and 21 members respectively. Two other families had 14 and 15 members each. Two more families had 11 members each. In all 46 percent of the *bhandivale* live in families with five to seven members which is minimum in a nuclear family. Another 42 percent had eight to ten family members. Half of the *bhandivale* lived in joint families, comprising of three generations living together. At least 42 percent ( $n=22, N=52$ ) of the *bhandivale* lived in nuclear families. The smallest nuclear family had five members. A small proportion of eight percent of the respondents were living as extended families. Since *bhandivale* have more than two children, the number of family members was generally large. The *bhandivale* live in mostly nuclear or joint families and a few live in extended families.

TABLE IV: COMPATATIVE SIZE OF FAMILY

Subcaste	Number of Family members					Total
	20 and more	14-16	11-13	8-10	5-7	
Waghri-Dattani	0	0	0	8	18	26
Gondhali	2	0	2	10	4	18
Kunchikurve	0	2	0	4	2	8
Total	2	2	2	22	24	52

I. Marital Status

None of the respondent was living alone or from broken homes. Early marriage was not observed in the families of the respondents. As in Table 5, more number of women were married as compared to the men. Most of the respondents were married while less than a fifth of them were from the younger age group and unmarried. About 10 percent of the married women who had been deserted, separated or widowed were lived with their joint or extended families. This showed the strong family ties existed. The *Waghri* tribe were being governed by social norms of the *Panchayat*; it is mandatory to care for the women in the family [7]. Similar norms prevail in *Gondhali Samaaj* as reported by one of the respondent. Most women continued in the profession and contributed to the family income after being widowed. However it was noted that there was no widower or male divorcee found in this study.

A comparison was made in the marital status of *bhandivale* of sub-caste of *Dattani Waghri*, *Gondhali* and *Kunchikurve*. From the sample under this study there was no case of desertion or widowhood found in the case of *bhandivale* belonging to the *Gondhali* and *Kunchikurve* communities. The *Waghri-Duttani* community had a few who were either widowed or deserted. However, these women were living in extended joint families. There was no destitute woman that was found in the sample. Most of those who were unmarried were male but not of marriageable age and they belonged to the *Waghri* caste.

TABLE V: MARITAL STATUS IN THE GENDERS OF *BHANDIVALE*

Gender		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Male	Married	16	64.0	64.0
	Unmarried	9	36.0	100.0
	Total	25	100.0	
Female	Married	20	74.1	74.1
	Widowed	2	7.4	81.5
	Deserted	2	7.4	88.9
	Separated	3	11.1	100.0
	Total	27	100.0	

As Fig. 1 shows the support system of the joint family ensure that women are looked after. The traditional joint family system still prevails among the *bhandivale* families ensuring that all members were taken care of and maintain close family ties. Though *bhandivale* had migrated from their native villages generations back; they claimed to have kept in touch with relatives there.

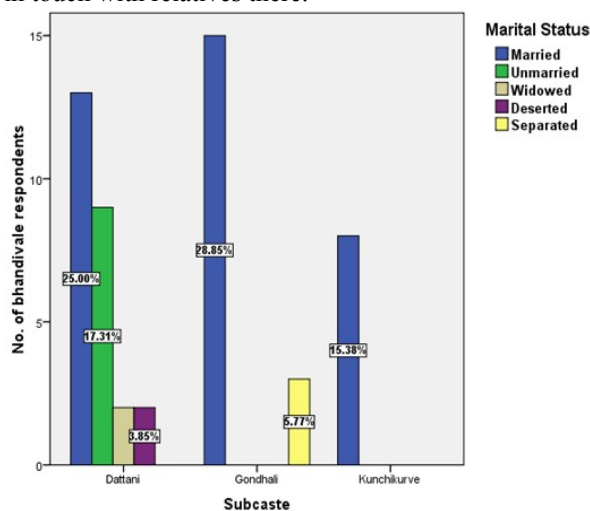


Fig. 1. Marital status of *bhandivale* of different sub-castes.

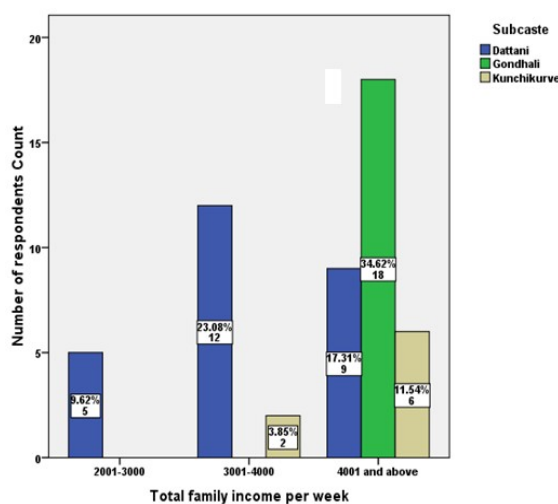


Fig. 2. Income distribution across various sub-caste of *bhandivale*.

J. Income

Comparing the income earned by the *bhandivale* of the three sub-caste, the *Gondhali* and *Kunchikurve* communities earned on an average a weekly income exceeding Rs.3000 per week. Whereas, the *Waghri-Duttani* community the earnings were more varied across the income classes. It was noted that greater number of *Waghri* earn less than Rs. 4000 per week. Comparison of the various sub-castes shows that

*bhandivale* from *Gondhali* and *Kunchikorve* castes earn a higher income than the *Waghri* as seen in Fig.2. Statistically, it was seen that there is a moderate positive ( $p= 0.593$ ) correlation between income earned by the three sub-caste. There are a greater number of *Gondhali* earning an average weekly income of above Rs. 4000.

#### K. Saving and Assets

The *bhandivale* utilize the daily earnings to purchase utensils and plastic ware for the next day's collection work. Hence there was no figure as savings that they could spell out. There were a greater number of 67 percent of the *bhandivale* who lived in ownership flats. About 15 percent lived in rented houses, nearly 8 percent lived with relatives. On the other hand there were nearly ten percent of the respondents who lived in huts made of cheaper materials built on encroached land. Those who lived on encroached land shared the expenses on consumption of water and electricity with other tenants. Among the *bhandivale* 58 percent had a television at home. The television was a major source of entertainment. Only 21 percent of the *bhandivale* did not have a mobile phone while majority of 79 percent were using a mobile phone although a few of them said they were illiterate. The expenses on fuel for cooking and heating depended on the type of fuel used. Most (75 percent) of the *bhandivale*, use gas (Liquefied Petroleum Gas) for daily cooking and heating. About 19 percent use kerosene and the others use firewood as fuel. Few of them had some other electrical gadgets like the mixer, geyser and some others.

#### L. Perception of Economic Condition

The *bhandivale* were asked how they perceived their economic condition. As seen in Table 6 it was found that majority of the *bhandivale* expressed that their economic condition was fair but could be better. Nearly 37 percent felt that they were poor but could be better. A marginal two percent complained they were poor and basic needs were not met.

TABLE VI: PERCEPTION OF ECONOMIC CONDITION

Perception of economic condition	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very poor, but basic needs not met	1	1.9	1.9
Poor, but basic needs are met	19	36.5	38.5
Fair, but could be better	32	61.5	100.0
Total	52	100.0	

#### M. Socio-Economic Status

Occupation is one of the major determinants of the family status. *Bhandivale* depend on daily income. Most of *bhandivale* in Mumbai live in flats and have satisfactory income from the sale of the collected used clothes. The *Waghri*s are less fortunate as compared to the *Marathi* speaking *Gondhali* and *Kunchikorve* who enjoy a higher socio-economic status. The socio-economic status of the family plays a significant role in socialization of the *bhandivale*. *Gondhali* and *Kunchikorve* are more fluent in *Marathi* and blend better in the local *Maharashtrian* community. They therefore have more acceptance in the

social mainstream as compared to the *Gujarati* speaking *Wagri*. It is observed that *bhandivale* maintain a low profile in the society. They are not treated with respect. Society does not recognize their contribution to the informal economy and unorganised clothing recycling industry. The aspect of re-sale in the redistribution chain of used clothes may add to the existing knowledge and open up further avenues for research.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The study on *bhandivale* reveals that other than the schedule caste tribes of *Waghri* equal number of *Gondhali* and *Kunchikorve* are involved in collecting and redistribution of post-consumer waste clothing for a living. They were all migrants to Mumbai City. Majority *bhandivale* were between the age group of 21 and 50 years. They live in large families and are engaged in the collection activities of used clothing in exchange for stainless steel utensils, plastic ware or money from residential areas. Majority have a domicile status and possess a ration card. Their educational level was low and they lack awareness. Children, who drop-out due to low income and lack of motivation, inevitably join the trade at a young age to supplement family income. Early marriages were not found to be prevailing among the *bhandivale*. There was no widower found in the sample. There was no woman who was found to be destitute and helpless among the sample of *bhandivale*. Most of them perceive their economic condition as fair. Majority of the families had between five to eight members. The *bhandivale* from *Gondhali* subcaste are better educated, earn better income as compared to the *Kunchikorve* and *Waghri*. *Bhandivale* expressed a strong desire to provide education to the next generation for a steady income, respectable jobs and a better living.

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