

A broom that knows the corners

This not-for-profit organization provides residents with multiple services to keep the area clean

BY VISHAL MATHUR
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The sanitation and cleanliness problem is massive in India. It needs to be sorted out urgently," says 62-year-old Iqbal Malik, founder and executive director of Vatavaran, a not-for-profit organization. In 1991, when Malik shifted residence from South Avenue in central Delhi to the south Delhi locality of Asian Games Village, she was shocked at the lack of cleanliness in the area. "There was garbage lying all around," she says. In 1992, she employed a few workers to clean the area. She initially paid them out of her pocket but soon other residents started chipping in. This initiative was taken after multiple, unsuccessful attempts to get the local civic body, the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD), to clean up the area. "Citizens pay the government and then they pay a second time for the same service. That itself is a big issue. Our health is related to these things," she says, giving examples of tap water not being fit for drinking, and lack of solid waste management processes.

In 1993, the then registrar of Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) asked Malik to start the same initiative on the university campus, but since JNU was bound by various rules regarding payments for services, Malik had to register Vatavaran as an NGO. The Vatavaran teams are

known as Cleaning Brigades, and at Saraswati Apartments in New Delhi's Vasant Kunj area, 10 workers collect around 100kg of waste daily from 500 houses. This locality was added in January. A streamlined process is a must, and the area supervisor, Rajkumar (who goes by one name), is responsible for this. "We have multiple carts. Work starts at 7am. Some teams start with the collection, while the others get down to cleaning the area. Each knows which towers they have to go to and what tasks need to be done from beforehand (they have a standard task list), and that allows them to quickly get on the job," he says. Once the collection process is done, the waste is segregated and the recyclable stuff kept aside.

Vatavaran is working in 14 localities in Vasant Kunj, and also provides services in parts of Sheikh Sarai, Mahipalpur and Pitampura. The resident welfare association (RWA) of a particular locality has to send a request to Vatavaran. Members of the organization then visit the place, understand the requirements and discuss with the RWA how the workers will be paid, and what infrastructure is needed.

Vatavaran does not get involved with the monetary side of things. The RWA is responsible for collecting the monthly charges (₹100) from the residents, paying the workers and taking care of any equipment or



PRIVANKA PARASHAR/MINT

Joint effort:
Vatavaran's Cleaning
Brigade sorting
garbage at Saraswati
Apartments, Vasant
Kunj, New Delhi.

infrastructure needs. What Vatavaran does is keep tabs that all workers are paid on time, and treated well.

Vatavaran's area in-charge hires the workers from nearby areas. "We never bring leadership from the top. We let the supervisor set the requirements according to the needs of the locality, which only someone there would know best," says

Malik. "I want all workers to become more and more independent." Vatavaran provides training to its workers on health and safety, once every few months.

The proper treatment of the waste is a big challenge. "If the locality has a compost area, we compost as much as possible," says Malik. "But some localities do not have a compost area, and

Waste Management (DWM) Ltd. The reality is that they get money from the government according to weight of the garbage they throw at the landfill sites. They have been working behind the scenes to ensure that RWAs don't get the waste composted," she alleges (DWM is a public-private partnership between the MCD and SPML Urban Enviro Ltd). Deepak Sethi, director, SPML Infra Ltd, however, says, "Yes, DWM gets payment from the government on the basis of the weight of solid waste that is deposited at landfill sites. But, DWM is responsible for collection and transportation only. There is no one responsible to create compost in each locality." Regarding the claim that the RWAs are being influenced, Sethi says, "We have never advised anyone against compost plants in any locality. We conduct regular awareness campaign on monthly basis, wherein we promote 'reuse, reduce and recycle', which also encompass making compost."

The recyclable garbage segregated by Vatavaran workers is sold by the RWAs and the money earned distributed among the workers. "Sometimes, that money is also used for expenses such as making of new uniforms or for the purchase of any necessary equipment for cleaning," says Rajkumar.

Along the way Vatavaran has faced quite a few issues. Certain residents do not pay on time, which causes delays in distribution of workers' salaries. Second, the government does not provide any health facilities for the waste management workers, Vatavaran's brigade or otherwise.

Malik reiterates that Vatavaran is not a business and they would never get into a bidding war to get tenders for keeping colonies in the Capital clean.

The idea is to keep working, in as many residential localities as possible, and also increase awareness about why an unclean environment is bad for everyone.

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A ₹10,000 DONATION CAN HELP

Vatavaran does not accept any donations. "With donations and partnerships comes pressure and influence, and that hinders our work," says founder Iqbal Malik.

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For mobilization in communities and managing their website and Facebook page.