



Socio-Economic condition and Occupational Health hazards among the Rag-Pickers Workers in Malda district of West Bengal: A Micro Level Analysis

Dr. Md Areful Hoque*

*Assistant Professor, Department of Geography, St. Xavier's College, Mahuadanr, Latehar district, Affiliated College under Nilamber Pitamber University (NPU), Medininagar, Jharkhand, India.

ABSTRACT :

Rag picking is severe and worst form of manual labour works, they have no identity cards, no pension, lack of access of health care facilities etc. Rag picking is a dead- end job pursuing by a number of poor Childs and adults due to poverty, unemployment, Indebtness etc. In our country India, a near about 1.5 and 4 million rag-pickers are work without social security, health insurance, minimum wages or basic protective gear. Rag picking also known as “Waste Picking” or “Scavenging” or “Safai Saathis” is the backbone of traditional waste management in most Indian cities. The main objective of this research paper is to assess the socio-economic condition and major causes of Rag-Picking works, to highlight the major health problems in Malda district of West Bengal. The study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data. Malda district of West Bengal has been selected as the study area. The results of the study shows that majority of Rag-Pickers are not used any kinds of shoes, gloves and mask for the safety and protection during the working hours. The researcher suggested that Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of West Bengal and Youth Red Cross Society should awareness regarding occupational health among Rag-Pickers in the study area.

KeyWords: Dumping Sites, Health, Manual Work, Rag-Picking, Poverty, Income

Introduction:

“A man will remain a Rag-Picker as long as he has only the vision of a Rag-Picker”

Orison Swett Marden

The Rag- Picker, with a gunny bag on his shoulder is a universal pitiable scene in all the metropolitan cities in India. Rag picking is severe and worst form of manual labour works, they have no identity cards, no pension, lack of access of health care facilities etc. Rag picking is a dead- end job pursuing by a number of poor Childs and adults due to poverty, unemployment, Indebtness etc. Rag picking is one of the inferior economic activities in the urban and semi-urban areas of informal sector, mostly taken by weaker sections of the society for their survival and for supplementing their family income. Now a days rag picking is rapidly increasing day by day in the metropolitan cities of India, they collect dirty rags near outskirts of the city from heaps and mounds of rubbish garbage. Rag pickers are very vulnerable group who exploit by both fate and society. Rag picking also known as “Waste Picking” or “Scavenging” or “Safai Saathis” is the backbone of traditional waste management in most Indian cities. They are individuals who collect and segregate recyclable materials from waste to earn a livelihood. Majority of Rag-Pickers are not used mask and gloves, long rubber boot, wooden stick, separate clothes during the working time.

For many decades, rag-pickers working in dangerous and unsanitary conditions. In our country India, a near about 1.5 and 4 million rag-pickers are work without social security, health insurance, minimum wages or basic protective gear. Rag pickers properly separate the biodegradable and non-biodegradable wastes. Most of the rag-pickers work in harsh and unhygienic conditions, often under extreme weather conditions. Majority of Rag-Pickers and their families often face social exclusion and are excluded from mainstream society due to their occupation. Rag Pickers are an essential component in the smooth functioning of the city because majority of them contributing for recycling the wastes. Rag Pickers in India form an astounding population. Most of the rag-pickers are extremely poor, illiterate and belonging to rural immigrant's families. Very unfortunately, a large number of these rag-pickers are children who never attend any school or have any formal education.

Definition of Rag Pickers: The term “Rag Picker” refers to people who collect rags or recyclable materials consists of plastic, bottles, cardboard, tin, iron, aluminium, copper, brass etc. that can be sold for money to junk dealers or broker. Rag picking entails sorting, collecting and selling of waste materials that can be found at dumpsites, rivers banks, street corners, residential areas, railway stations, bus stand, outside of restaurants and hotels, commercial areas, markets areas, hospitals etc. The work process of rag pickers can be found out in three phases: collection, separation and sale of materials. Occasionally bi-cycle they may use or the rag pickers carry their loads themselves.

Table 1.1: List of Products collected by Rag-Pickers

List of Recyclable, Waste and Reusable Materials Collection by Rag-Pickers
Waste and Unused Paper, Paper boxes, cardboard and cartons sacking, Plastic bottles and containers, Bags, Tins, Alluminum, Iron, Brass, Copper products, Boxes discarded Utensils, Glass Bottles, Jars, Broken Glass, Medical used plastic bottle and injection, Alluminum Foil, Bones, Hair, Electric Bulb and others products

Review of Literature:

The review highlights the distinction areas covered by the many researchers and academicians which may be helpful to understand the issues relating to the present study and it also helps to find out the research gap. The basic sources of literature review of my study areas are- published research papers, articles in the journal of national and international repute, books, Government reports, Research agencies reports etc.

Shaheda, Swamy and Syamala (2013) insisted that rag pickers played a important role in solid waste management in their own way of channelizing the recyclable materials such as glass, metal, rubber, plastics and other miscellaneous items. Their study reveals that rag picking is one of the most dangerous and in- human activity where the rag pickers are exposed to harsh weather conditions surrounded by stray animals and infectious solid waste that may induce them with any diseases. **Aparnesh, Suchita and Sunil (2023)** examined that rag picking is one of the inferior economic activities in the urban informal sector, largely undertaken by economically weaker sections of society for their survival and foe supplementing their family income. Their study reveals that rag pickers are working in filthy environment surrounded by dust, dogs and pigs. A large numbers of rag pickers suffer from many diseases such as respiratory problems such as anaemia, fever and other problems which include cuts, rashes and injuries. **Humera Nuhah (2020)** observed that child labour and in particular child rag pickers reflect the callous attitude of our society. The study reveals that most of the rag pickers live in poor huts and unhealthy environment and harried by public. **Tejswini (2023)** expressed that working and living conditions of rag pickers are utterly inadequate and unhygienic. Children work in unsafe surroundings, crowded, dingy places in severe health hazards. The study reveals that majority of rag pickers are taken this profession due to poverty, unemployment and poor socio-economic conditions.

Statement of Problems:

Rag picking is one of the most serious issues in different parts of Malda district of West Bengal. The socio-economic condition of the rag pickers is very pathetic. They are work very hard from early dawn to late night but are paid very less. Majority of rag pickers have bad habits such as smoking bidi and cigarettes, chewing pan, tobacco, gutkha and also likely to be exposed to alcohol and drugs. They are also more prone to anti-social activities such as pick pocketing, gambling, robbery, prostitution, homosexuality theft etc. Rag picking or waste picking activity is illegal profession in Malda district of West Bengal. So rag picker are faced harassment by police, by local public, and municipal authorities. Most of the rag picker is living in Kaccha house and unhealthy, unhygienic environment. The rag pickers in Malda towns areas come from rural area. The school dropout rate amongst rag pickers is high. More boys than girls engage in rag picking. These combined problems faced by Rag-Pickers, So the researcher are very much keen interested to taken up this particular study. The outcomes or findings from this study will be very helpful for administrators, policymakers, economists, sociologists, Researchers, Academicians, Journalists, NGO workers, and the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Ministry of Women's and Child Development Government of West Bengal, as well as the Central Government of India for their various policies making.

Objectives of Research:

Keeping in the view of the socio- economic status, health condition and working profile among the Rag-Pickers workers in Malda district of West Bengal in particular, the following objectives have been taken into consideration:

1. To assess the socio-economic condition and major causes of Rag-Pickers in the present scenario in Malda district of West Bengal.
2. To highlight the major health problems of Rag-Pickers in the study area.
3. To give valuable suggestion for better improvement of working profile and standard of living among the Rag-Pickers workers Malda district of West Bengal.

Database and Research Methodology:

The current research work is analytical, descriptive and empirical type of research work. The present study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were collected through field survey via interview schedule based on well structured questionnaire with regards to objective in mind. For the collection of primary data a near about 125 Rag-Pickers workers (respondents) within Malda district has been selected based on simple random and purposive sampling method. The survey was conducted during the month of October 2023 to December 2023. The survey has been conducted at different areas of dumping site, Junk dealers factories and Plastic Godowns in Sujapur areas, Englishbazar areas, Kaliachak areas, Moathabari areas, Malda Town Railway Station, Malda Medical College and Hospital areas etc.

The secondary data has been collected from Bureau of Applied Economics and Statistic Government of West Bengal, District Statistical Handbook, Malda Collectorate, Books, Research Paper, Journals, Newspaper, Researchagate, Google Scholar etc. After the collection of data for showing the result Simple Percentage Method, SWOC analysis and Computer Cartography has been used.

A Geographical Profile of the Study Area:

Malda district of West Bengal has been selected as research study area. Malda district is entirely located in North Bengal, it is also known as “**Gateway of North Bengal**”. It lies in North Bengal on lower Indo-Gangetic plain. The latitudinal range of Malda lies between 24°40'20" North and 25°32'08" North, and the longitudinal range is 87°45'50" East and 88°28'10" East. For administrative purpose the district has been divided into 15 Community Development Block and two sub-division namely Malda Sadar and Chanchal Sadar. The district is very much famous for Mango Production, Litchi production, Jute Production and Sericulture activity (Raw Silk production), school educational sectors. Majority of the male population of this district are migrants labour, agricultural labour and Hawkers due none availability of any large scale, medium scale industries, majority of female population in rural are engaged in bidi making household industries. According to 2011 Census of India still 86.14 per cent population are belong to rural area.

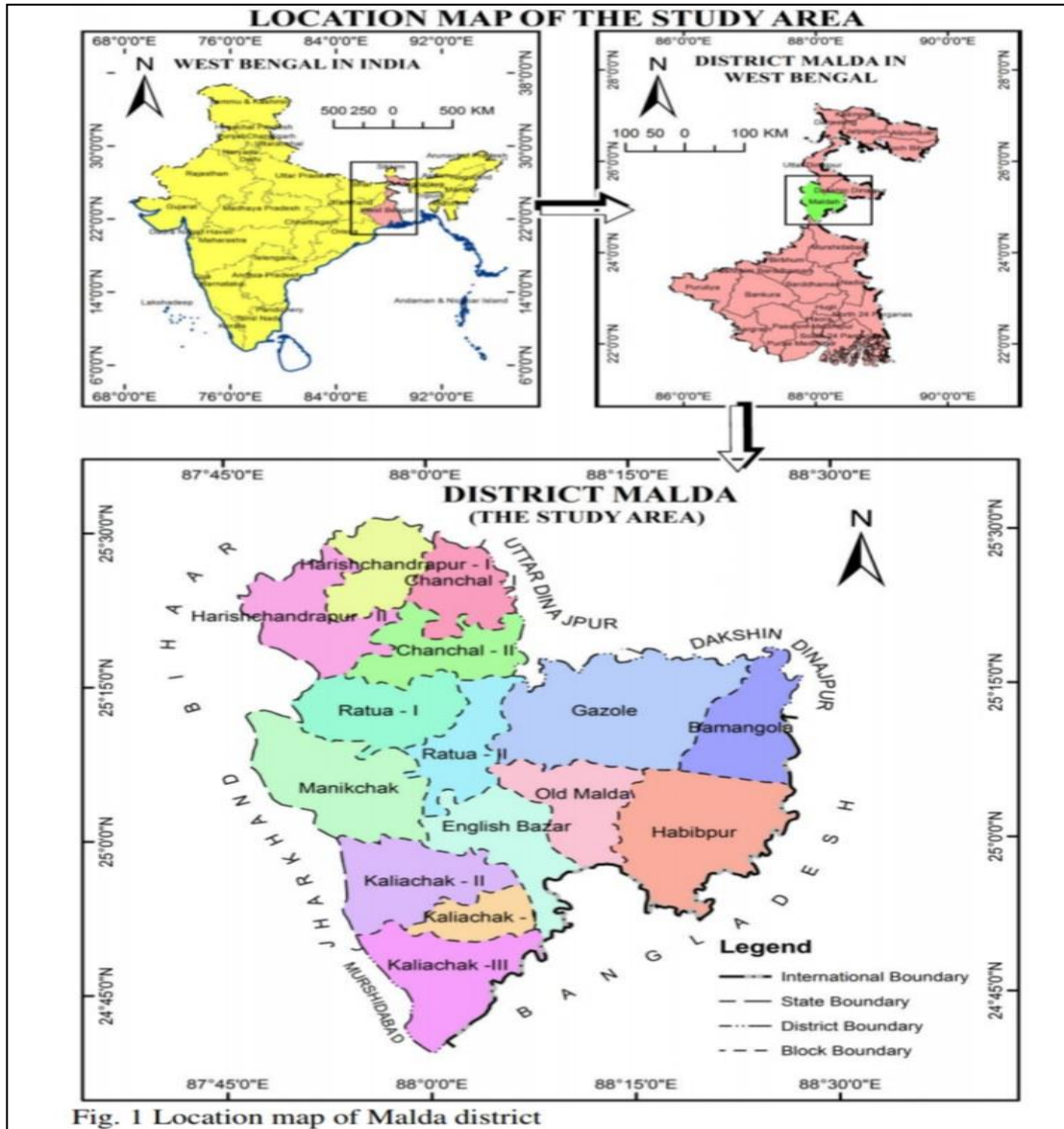


Fig. 1 Location map of Malda district

Result and Analysis:

Table 1. 2: Gender-Wise Sampled Rag-Pickers Workers in Malda district, West Bengal

Sl. No.	Gender	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1.	Male	86	68.8
2.	Female	39	31.2
Total		125	100.00

Source: Field Survey, October-December Month 2023

Table 1.2 shows that 68.8 per cent sampled rag-Pickers are Male which is highest percentage and only 31.2 per cent Rag Pickers are female in various parts of Malda district of West Bengal.

Table 1. 3: Age-Group of Sampled Rag-Pickers Workers in Malda district, West Bengal

Sl. No.	Age-Group	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1.	Between 10 - 18 Years	71	56.8
2.	Between 19 - 35 Years	26	20.8
3.	Between 36 - 45 Years	11	8.8
4.	Between 46 - 65 Years	17	13.6
Total		125	100.00

Source: Field Survey, October-December Month, Malda District, 2023

Table 1. 3 shows that 56. 8 per cent of sampled Rag-Picker has age-group between 10-18 years which is highest percentage and only 8. 8 per cent of the respondents have age group between 36-45 years which is lowest percentage in Malda district of West Bengal.

Table 1. 4: Housing condition among Sampled Rag-Pickers in Malda district, West Bengal

Sl. No.	Housing Condition	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1.	Pucca	13	10.4
2.	Semi-Pucca	41	32.8
3.	Kutchha	47	37.6
4.	Jhopdi (Made by Polythene and Wood)	24	19.2
Total		125	100.00

Source: Field Survey, October-December Month, Malda District, 2023

Table 1. 4 shows that 37. 6 per cent of sampled Rag-Pickers have living in Kutchha houses which is highest percentage and only 10. 4 per cent of sampled Rag-Picker is living in Pucca Houses which is lowest percentage in Malda district of West Bengal.

Table 1. 5: Educational Background among Sampled Rag-Pickers Workers in Malda district, West Bengal

Sl. No.	Educational Background	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1.	Illiterate	56	44.8
2.	Primary level (Class I-IV)	35	28.0
3.	Up to Class 6 th	17	13.6
4.	Up to Class 8 th	12	9.6
5.	10 th	5	4.0
Total		125	100.00

Source: Field Survey, October-December Month, Malda District, 2023

Table 1. 5 shows that 44. 8 per cent of sampled Rag Pickers are Illiterate, they are never gone to school which is highest per centage and only 4. 0 per cent of the sampled Rag-Pickers are up to 10th class pass which is lowest percentage in the various areas of Malda district of West Bengal.

Table 1. 6: Income Level among Sampled Rag-Pickers Workers in Malda district, West Bengal

Sl. No.	Income Level (Daily)	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1.	INR 1- 50	26	20.8
2.	INR 51-100	72	57.6
3.	INR 101-300	18	14.4
4.	Above INR 300	9	7.2
Total		125	100.00

Source: Field Survey, October-December Month, Malda District, 2023

Table 1. 6 depicts that 57. 6 per cent of the sampled Rag-Pickers have daily income INR 51-100 which is highest per centage and only 7. 2 per cent of sampled Rag-Pickers have Above INR 300 income per day which is lowest percentage in various parts of Malda district of West Bengal.

Table 1. 7: Major Causes of taking Rag-Pickers Profession among Malda district, West Bengal

Sl. No.	Causes of taking Rag-Picking Profession	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1.	Poverty	42	33.6

2.	Interest in work and earning	12	9.6
3.	No skill required	10	8.0
4.	Supplementing family Income	16	12.8
5.	Utilization of Free Time	8	6.4
6.	For Own Expenditure	15	12.00
7.	Unemployment	17	13.6
8.	Not interested to Study	5	4.0
Total		125	100.00

Source: Field Survey, October-December Month, Malda District, 2023

Table 1. 7 shows that 33. 6 per cent of the sampled Rag-Picker are taken this profession due to poverty which is highest per centage and only 4.0 per cent of respondents are taken this profession due to not interested to study which is lowest percentage in Malda district of West Bengal.

Table 1. 8: Nature of Work among Sampled Rag-Pickers in Malda district, West Bengal

Sl. No.	Nature of Work	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1.	Permanent / Regular	56	44.8
2.	Part-Time / Occasional	69	55.2
Total		125	100.00

Source: Field Survey, October-December Month, Malda District, 2023

Table 1. 8 shows that 44.8 per cent of the sampled Rag-Pickers profession is regular work and only 55. 2 per cent of the sampled Rag-Pickers profession are occasional types of work in Malda district of West Bengal.

Table 1. 9: Major Health Problems among Sampled Rag-Pickers in Malda district, West Bengal

Sl. No.	Health Problems	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1.	Worms	22	21.6
2.	Injuries	18	14.4
3.	Eye Problem	11	8.8
4.	Skin Problem	24	19.2
5.	Cough	13	10.4
6.	Fever	18	14.4
7.	Rashes and Dust Allergies	19	15.2
Total		125	100.00

Source: Field Survey, October-December Month, Malda District, 2023

Table 1. 9 shows that 21. 6 per cent of the sampled Rag-Pickers are affected from worm's diseases which are highest per centage and only 8. 8 per cent of the sampled Rag-Pickers are suffered from Eye problems.

Table 1. 10: Means of Transportation for collection of Products among Sampled Rag-Pickers in Malda district, West Bengal

Sl. No.	Means of Transportation	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1.	By Cycle	46	36.8
2.	Walking	79	63.2
Total		125	100.00

Source: Field Survey, October-December Month, Malda District, 2023

Table 1.10 depicts that 36. 8 per cent of the sampled Rag-Pickers are using by cycle for the collection of waste recyclable products and only 63. 2 per cent of the sampled Rag-Pickers are by walking for the collection of waste recyclable products in different areas of Malda district of West Bengal.

Table 1. 11: Working Hours per day of Sampled Rag Pickers in Malda district, West Bengal

Sl. No.	Working Hours	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1.	4-6 Hours	22	17.6
2.	6-8 Hours	58	46.4
3.	8-10 Hours	30	24.0
4.	Above 10 Hours	15	12.0
Total		125	100.00

Source: Field Survey, October-December Month, Malda District, 2023

Table 1. 11 shows that 46. 4 per cent of the sampled Rag-Pickers are working daily 6-8 hours for the collection of waste recyclable products and only 12.0 per cent of the respondents are working daily above 10 hours for the collection of waste recyclable products in different areas of Malda district of West Bengal.

Table 1. 12: Place of selling of recyclable products among Sampled Rag-Pickers in Malda district, West Bengal

Sl. No.	Place of Selling of Products	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1.	Junk Dealers	65	52.00
2.	Brokers	32	25.6
3.	Contractors	18	14.4
4.	Shopkeepers	10	8.0
Total		125	100.00

Source: Field Survey, October-December Month, Malda District, 2023

Table 1.12 depicts that 52.00 per cent of sampled Rag-Pickers are selling the recyclable products to Junk Dealers which is highest per centage and only 8.0 per cent of the sampled Rag-Pickers are selling the recyclable products to Shopkeepers in various parts of Malda district of west Bengal.

Table 1. 13: Major Problems faced by Sampled Rag-Pickers in Malda district of West Bengal

Sl. No.	Major Problems	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1.	Torture by local Municipal Workers	32	25.6
2.	Neglected attitude showing by local peoples	46	36.8
3.	Infection from toxic waste	17	13.6
4.	Dog Bites	10	8.0
5.	Snake Bites	5	4.0
6.	Threats and Warning by local Police	15	12.0
Total		125	100.00

Source: Field Survey, October-December Month, Malda District, 2023

Table 1. 13 shows that 36. 8 per cent of the sampled Rag-Picker are facing Neglected attitude showing by local peoples and only 4.0 per cent of the sampled Rag-Picker are facing snake bites problems in various parts of Malda district of West Bengal.

Table 1. 14: Bad Habits and Anti-Social activities among Sampled Rag Pickers in Malda district of West Bengal

Sl. No.	Bad Habits and Anti-Social activities	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1.	Smoking of Bidi / Cigarettes	22	17.6
2.	Chewing of Gutkha and Tobacco	58	46.4
3.	Alcohol Drink	16	12.8
4.	Pick Pocketing	5	4.0
5.	Gambling / Betting	17	13.6
6.	Theft	7	5.6
Total		125	100.00

Source: Field Survey, October-December Month, Malda District, 2023

Table 1. 14 shows that 46. 4 per cent of the sampled Rag Pickers have Chewing of Gutkha and Tobacco bad habits and only 4.0 per cent of the sampled Rag-Pickers have Pick Pocketing bad habits in various parts of Malda district of West Bengal.

Table 1. 15: Average Waste Collection Per Day by Sampled Rag-Pickers in Malda district, West Bengal

Sl. No.	Average Waste Collection Per day (Per Kg)	Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
1.	1 - 10 Kg	33	26.4
2.	11 - 15 Kg	56	44.8
3.	16 - 25 Kg	26	20.8
4.	More than 25 Kg	10	8.0
Total		125	100.00

Source: Field Survey, October-December Month, Malda District, 2023

Table 1.15 shows that 44. 8 per cent of the sampled Rag-Pickers are collected daily 11-15 Kg recycle waste and only 8. 0 per cent of the sampled Rag-Pickers are collected daily more than 25 Kg in various parts of Malda district of West Bengal.

Table 1. 16: SWOC Analysis among Sampled Rag Pickers Workers in Malda District, West Bengal

SWOC Analysis	
Strengths	Regular Employment Status, Flexible timing of work, local area jobs, Easy to sell the products to junk dealers,
Weakness	Lower Income, Risk in Health, No drinking water facility, No first aid Services, Low standard of livings, Poverty,
Opportunities	No experience required,
Challenges	Sexual Harassment and Molestation to the female Rag-Pickers Workers, Suffered from respiratory symptoms and Diseases,

Major Findings of the Study:

1. Majority of Rag-Pickers are self-employed to collect the materials from garbage or dumpsites and sell to the local junk dealers in Malda district of West Bengal.
2. It is evident from the field survey that majority of Rag-Pickers are followed flexible time for rag picking.
3. It is evident from the field survey that female Rag-Pickers workers are faced eve teasing and bad comments during the working hours.
4. It is evident from the field survey that majority of Rag-Pickers are not used any kinds of shoes, gloves and mask for the safety and protection during the working hours.
5. During the field surveys researchers shows that a quite large numbers of Rag-Pickers have practices bad habits such as smoking of bidi and cigarettes, Gutkha, pan masala and alcoholism which is very harmful for their health.
6. It is evident from the field survey that the involvement of Child labors in Rag-Picking works is prevalent in the study area.

Suggestion and Policy Implication:

1. The district local authorities, Municipal authorities and NGOs should provides and distribute the various equipments such as masks, protective clothes, hand gloves, footwear to the Rag-Pickers Workers in order to avoid work-related injuries and harms in Malda district of West Bengal.
2. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of West Bengal and Youth Red Cross Society should awareness regarding occupational health among Rag-Pickers in the study area.

Conclusion:

The problems faced by Rag-Picker in Malda district of West Bengal are multifaceted and require urgent attention. Poverty, low literacy levels, unemployment, supplementing family income, etc. are the major reasons for taking up this profession among Rag-Pickers workers in Malda district of West Bengal. The majority of the Rag-Pickers workers suffer from health-related problems. One of the special features of Rag-Pickers workers is that they may be one of the most vulnerable and marginalized communities in Indian society. Thus, there is an urgent need for social concern to frame measures to improve the living and socio-economic and good working conditions among Rag- Pickers workers for inclusive growth in Malda district of West Bengal.

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