

EACH DAY, A FIGHT FOR DIGNITY...



Working with
the homeless
in Mumbai



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Introduction

Food, clothing, water and shelter are four basic human needs. Out of the four, shelter remains beyond the reach of many thousands in Mumbai today.

Homelessness stares Mumbai in the face on every street.

India's financial capital and its richest city, is also where many thousands sleep rough because they have been lured by the big city lights and the promise of a better life. According to the 2011 census, Mumbai has over 57,416 homeless residents but the actual figure is far higher - civil rights organisations state the figure is closer to 200,000.

Homelessness, is neither new nor rare. Migrant workers, ethnic minorities, homeless itinerants, the poorest in society

and vagrants are a diverse community, belonging to different age groups, gender, livelihoods and places of origin. The majority work as casual daily wage labourers.

Policymakers attribute the following factors as the main causes of homelessness: poverty, famine, natural disasters, caste based violence, childhood neglect, drug abuse, relationship breakdown, domestic abuse, mental illness and the failure of the housing supply system.

The United Nations defined a homeless person as; not only someone who lives on the street or in a shelter but also someone whose shelter or housing fails to meet the basic criteria considered essential for

health and social development. These include security of tenure, protection against inclement weather, personal security as well as access to sanitary facilities, potable water, education, work and health services.

According to the Indian government's definition, homeless or houseless are those who live in "open or roadside, pavements, in hume-pipes, under flyovers and staircases or in open places of worship, mandaps, railway platforms etc. However, when it comes to providing the homeless community with basic needs, successive governments have failed them.

In September 2016, the United Nations adopted a breathtakingly ambitious set

of global development goals for solving many of the world's most acute problems, including homelessness and poverty. Known as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), these 17 aspirations apply to all nations and come with 169 targets for action. Eliminating homelessness and ensuring adequate, safe and affordable housing for all is one of the targets listed under the SDG - to make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. The deadline for meeting all 17 goals is 2030. The UN estimates the total cost for the 15-year plan could reach \$172.2 trillion, much of which will have to come from individual nations.



Migration

From its colonial days, Mumbai, (which is surrounded by water on three sides), has waged a constant battle to find space to expand. In addition, the burgeoning employment opportunities in the city led to an influx of migrants from across India. Mumbai's population has shot up by a massive 990% since 1911.

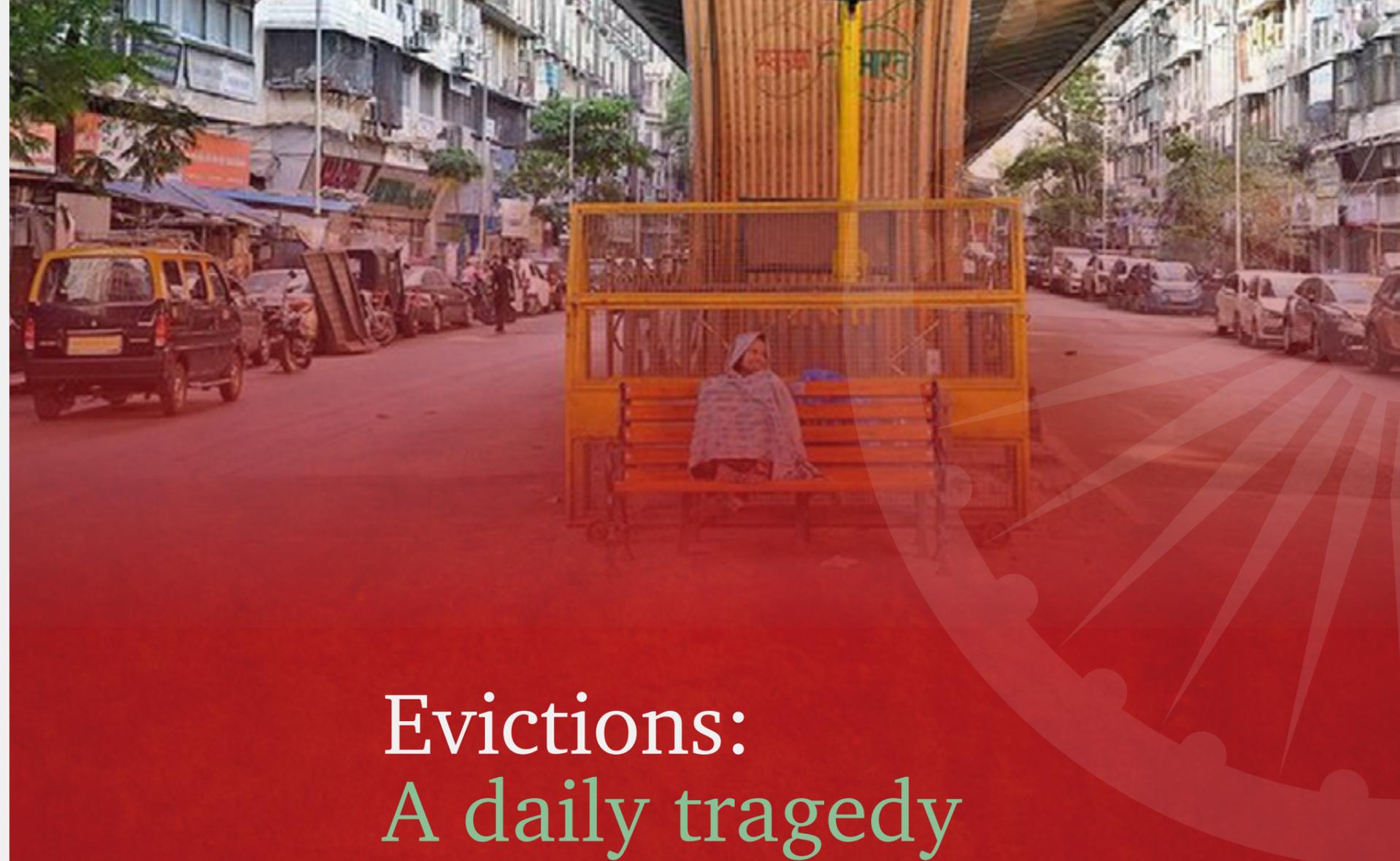
Migration to urban areas occurs for a variety of reasons ranging from loss of land, the pressing need for sustainable employment, lack of clean water and other resources and in many cases, loss of all property and complete displacement. Furthermore, activists say flood and drought often drive the rural poor to major cities. Those who are landless among them often stay on. In particular, many leave their villages to 'escape caste-based' violence which has destroyed their ability to make a living. Risking their lives under the open city skies, they hope its many work opportunities will help them survive. Once reaching the city, the homeless attempt to create shelters out of tin, cardboard, wood and plastic. Slums can provide an escape, yet sadly for many even this is a costly option.

The homeless are deeply tied to the informal economy of Mumbai. **It is their contribution in the form of cheap labour that makes the city what it is today**, as much of Mumbai's economy falls under the informal sector. In the city,

employers are more attracted to migrants than local workers because migrant workers supply labour at a cheaper rate and are more willing to work in unsafe conditions. Many are not able to pay for rent and thus are forced to live on pavements, streets, parks and other open public spaces. They are predominantly from neighbouring states but many travel across India to seek a better life.

Today, more than half of Mumbai's population live in slums (which equates to over 9 million people). Mumbai's slums occupy 12% of its total geographical area and between 20% and 25% of the available construction area. They suffer from overcrowding, tight spaces, intermittent (if at all) electricity, scarcity of clean water and unhygienic conditions. Slum inhabitants also suffer from housing insecurities resulting from pressure from their landlords to pay rent on time. Informal housing and homelessness remain a major issue in Mumbai as migration from rural areas continues and low incomes force people to locate to streets and pavements.

Many of these migrants do not have any sort of identity documents and thus are not registered for potential government welfare support. These migrants originally worked in agriculture for landowners; they moved to Mumbai in search of a better life.



Evictions: A daily tragedy

Life on the streets means frequent eviction, confiscation of; bare essentials, identity documents, clothes, cooking utensils and even schoolbags of children. These indiscriminate actions push these communities back years and into a perpetual cycle of deprivation. If they muster the courage to challenge the authorities to get back their confiscated belongings, more often than not, officers ask them to pay a bribe of over Rs 1,000 per person (£13). To demand such an amount from those who have practically nothing, is soul destroying.

On a daily basis, evictions are carried out for the most arbitrary

reasons. In the past, even visits by dignitaries to areas with homeless populations have led to evictions. More recently, evictions have also been carried out under the banner of the Swachh Bharat Mission. (Clean India Mission, a countrywide campaign from 2014 to 2019 to eliminate open defecation and improve solid waste management in urban and rural areas). Along with the cleaning of streets and pavements, many homeless communities inhabiting such spaces were evicted.

Today, the homeless live a life bordering on the margins of unlawfulness. They are frequently detained under the archaic

Bombay Prevention of Begging Act (1953) and harassed by municipal authorities and the Police. This is a classic case of the law being misused against the poor, leading to further marginalisation and exploitation. Young children of homeless families are also easy targets for the Police - they are frequently subjected to arrest or detention during emergencies or high-alert situations. This is merely a glimpse of the human rights violations the homeless face due to an insensitive political and police system.



Living on the streets

Life on the streets

For the homeless, the streets become their homes. They may be homes without safety, without privacy, without roofs to protect them from heavy rains and without walls to keep the winter winds at bay but homes nevertheless.

As they face challenges on a number of fronts, they build their resilience to exposure to extreme weather in summer and winter. The high risk of road accidents and the constant threat of sexual violence are but to name a few. Homeless people also suffer from bad health and extremely limited access to medical facilities. Many live in nondescript public spaces, ranging from bus and train terminals to commercial junctions and places of worship. **For them, each location has a memory associated with it, be it the porches of shops that sheltered them in the rain or busy pavements where they have lost loved ones.**

Over the last few years, the drastic transformation of Mumbai in the form of various development projects mean that the homeless have been subjected to increasingly frequent evictions, demolitions and displacement. Given the fact that the authorities can come un-announced at any time and as urban governing bodies increase restrictions on people dwelling on the streets, the homeless are forced to remain one step ahead keeping their belongings packed at all times, in order to save their bare essentials from being seized.

Despite the Supreme Court's directive to provide shelters for the homeless in all the major cities in India, Mumbai's local governing bodies have failed to shelter most of the homeless. According to census data, of the 57,000 plus homeless population, only about 200 have access to night shelters.

Their predicament

For the homeless, each day is a struggle for identity, dignity and survival. As the day draws to a close and the night unfolds, these feelings are transferred into fear and trepidation, anticipating the slow crawl to dawn amidst screeching vehicles and flickering streetlights. As the chorus of birds announces the arrival of another day, the fight for survival ensues. They can be found everywhere but somehow they are invisible to the authorities.

The city's homeless face daily battles for things so many of us take for granted – access

to toilets, clean water, security and a good night's sleep. This is contrary to the popular urban, middle-class belief that people living on the streets are thieves, beggars, drug addicts and all round general troublemakers. Moreover, homelessness has fatal consequences. Unnatural deaths peak at the height of summer, winter and the monsoon seasons. In addition, several instances have been reported whereby reckless driving has claimed the lives of many pavement dwellers.

Most women are employed as domestic helps, cooks, rag and

waste pickers earning a meagre Rs 60 - 70 per day. (90p per day) On average, a homeless household with two working members earns around Rs 150 a day (about £1.80) – barely enough to survive on a daily basis. Men work as construction labourers, helpers in shops, garages and in the waste recycling industry. Their work is largely informal, irregular and seasonal, with no assurance of a fixed daily income and never enough to save for emergencies. The monsoon season is by far the worst period, with almost no work or savings, many families don't eat sufficiently for days.

THE PLIGHT OF WOMEN

“
My dream is for a good night's sleep.”

Homeless woman, Mumbai

Homeless women, particularly young women, suffer the worst kinds of violence and insecurity and are amongst the most marginalised, isolated and discriminated. Indeed they are more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and trafficking. Instances of rape, molestation and women spending sleepless nights guarding their young adolescent girls, are a common feature among homeless women.

Women and young girls, (with or without families), are exposed to physical abuse and harassment and denied basic rights to lead a dignified life. Women very often find themselves in the middle of fights on the streets, protecting themselves and their children from anti-social elements. With frequent cases of children being kidnapped, whilst sleeping **women are forced to tie their infants to their bodies, ensuring they don't lose them.**

The daily ordeal for many homeless women begins with collecting water. They rise at 4 am as they commence their struggle to collect enough water (from various sources) to last the entire day. Walking at least a kilometre with water-filled vessels so that they can cook and carry out household chores. The routine of cooking, sending the children to school, working throughout the day and then spending the night in fear of being physically or sexually abused or of their meagre belongings being stolen and children being kidnapped is a perpetual cycle of anxiety.

For these women, shelter is synonymous with protection from abuse and harassment and the hope for a better future for their children. When I asked a homeless woman, what her dream was, she thought for a while before answering: “My dream is for a good night's sleep.”



Toddler sleeping on top of her mother, strapped to ensure she is not snatched whilst asleep

Daily struggles

The poorest among the homeless communities in the city – who have no cash to spare – are even forced to defecate in the open. Some of the homeless work under contract with the municipal corporation as sweepers. **It is ironic that those employed to clean the city, are not even provided with a toilet pass.**

For water too, whether for drinking or cooking, the homeless are dependent on nearby chawls,

(tenement buildings for the poor), restaurants and the kindness of security guards. The authorities have consistently failed to supply water even after the 2011 census confirmed their existence as a considerably large group. “Right to water” along with the right to a dignified life is denied by arbitrary acts and laws.

The Public Distribution System, which provides subsidised food grain to the poor, still excludes

a vast majority of the homeless population because of the inability of many to provide proof-of-address documents required to obtain a ration card. The small minority, which has access to subsidised food grain, complain of inedible quality, insufficient quantities and other irregularities, forcing them to often buy food directly from the market.

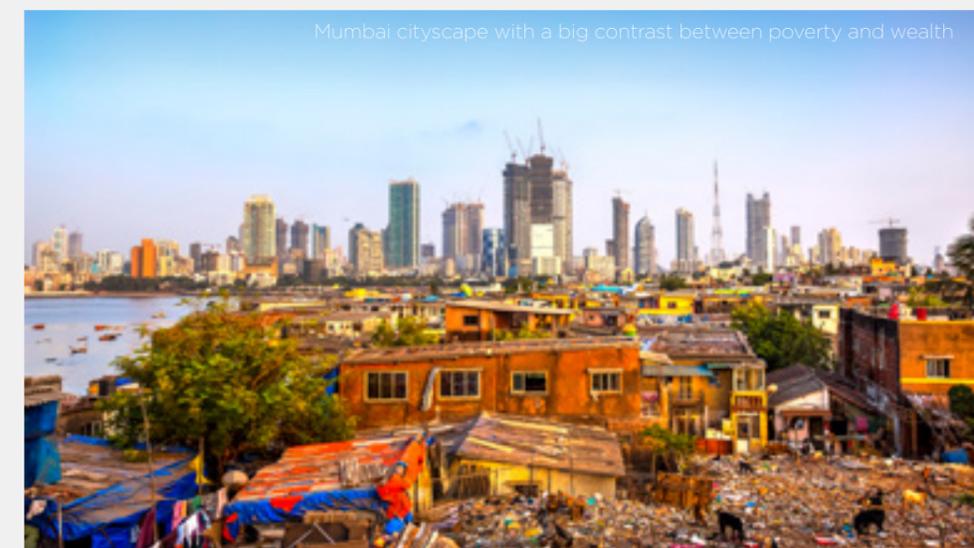
City of dreams

As Mumbai awaits a slew of development projects that will reinforce its image as the ‘city of dreams’, it is systematically leaving out sections of society that are invisible, simply because they lead a life not suited to a city that champions itself as a ‘premier global financial hub’.

The daily life of the homeless in Mumbai is reflective of the nature of urban spaces in our times. The poor and vulnerable are pushed to the perilous margins of the urban landscape to; pavements, street corners, railway platforms and spaces underneath bridges and flyovers, always struggling to survive with dignity, constantly experiencing harassment and living with uncertainty and fear. **They live without shelter, not because they choose to or because they deserve to but because they are forced to.**

The response by the authorities has been poor to say the least – the homeless in Mumbai have been systematically denied identity documents. Even if they manage to collate some paperwork, they are denied the services and access that other comparatively privileged sections of society enjoy, forced to live the life of sub-standard citizens. It is a matter of irony and from sheer desperation that the poorest, most vulnerable members of society are paying exorbitant rates for services like basic sanitation and water – issues under the domain of the municipal authority.

Subsequent to the release of Slumdog Millionaire in 2008, Mumbai has become a slum tourist destination where homeless people and slum dwellers alike can be openly viewed by tourists.



Mumbai cityscape with a big contrast between poverty and wealth

Case Study: Meet Kavita

It's nearly midnight when Kavita stretches out her bamboo mat on a Mumbai roadside to catch a few hours of sleep. Kavita is in the same colourful salwar kameez she wore throughout the day and with no bathroom to wash up in and no door to lock, preparations for bed take just seconds. All that surrounds her, what she can call "home" is the small, enclosed space created by old sheets. Her house of cloth is one that can be constructed and deconstructed at any moment, depending on the whims of city officials or local residents. However, this unassuming spot is the only one she knows; she's been there for decades along with thousands of other men, women and children who call the pavements home.

Sleep for Mumbai's homeless doesn't come easily. Although the relative quietness provides some relief, night brings its own worries. Kavita lives with her four brothers, three sisters, mother and father but rarely feels safe enough to fall into a deep slumber. She and her friend Sangeeta, who lives on the pavement nearby with her family, say they often take turns staying up through the night to ward off men with unscrupulous intentions.

This open-air routine is tirelessly familiar to her. Kavita was born on the streets 21 years ago. Her parents were married here and for 50 years, the family has bathed, cooked, cried, celebrated, worked and slept on a slice of footpath no bigger than a bathroom you'd find in a typical household in Europe. **Without permanent walls, Kavita is forced to conduct her daily routine in full public view.**

As the eldest girl, Kavita carries herself with the confidence and determination needed to take on a system that has left Mumbai's working poor in a decades-long state of utter neglect. Torrential monsoon rains bring fever, illness and sometimes even unnecessary death. Kavita and her family do not have access to clean water and they must pay to use the toilet and to wash their clothes at public bathrooms, extra expenditure they can ill afford. Harassment from authorities and local residents puts their pavement homes under daily threat of being pushed out. Kavita owns few possessions: a small cooking stove, a few changes of clothing, a bucket to bathe in. In a life filled with waiting for

“
I want to be something.
I want to improve my life.”

Kavita

government intervention, for respect from the city she calls home, for a day without struggle, Kavita is also in a constant state of readiness to being 'moved on' at any moment.

Kavita rises at dawn to head to a nearby market, where she sells used clothes that she collects from housewives residing in the nearby tenements. She deals in small amounts 10, 20 or 50 rupees just enough to feed her family members for the day, with little left over to meet her one aspiration: to



Kavita with her meagre belongings

move her family into the security of a small room, any space they could safely call home.

“I want to be something.
I want to improve my life.”

“
We don't need coins...
we need change.”

Homeless person in Mumbai

I can't live my entire life this way," she says. Like most children of the streets, she left school to help support her family. Illiteracy, Kavita confesses, has been an obstacle to getting better work and wages. Her own lack of education has fuelled her crusade for the next generation of girls in her family, especially for her two nieces. "I'll do anything ... I'll make garlands from flowers, any kind of domestic work, even if I get 20 rupees, I'll save it up. But I'll make their life better. Tomorrow, my nieces won't say, "my mother's sister left me illiterate". Rather, "I was illiterate but I overcame this by the help of my mother's sister."

Kavita and her family live their precarious existence surrounded by the abundant offerings of central Mumbai, one of the sprawling city's busiest and most affluent neighbourhoods. The city's main train station, Mumbai Central, loads off legions of new arrivals to the city from villages across

the country. Kavita's parents once disembarked from this station, never realising they would spend half a century just outside its doors, giving birth to their children there and watching them grow up in the open. They quickly realised that the "city of dreams"- where Bollywood and India's Wall Street converge, doesn't roll out the red carpet for everyone.

Kavita, and her family are some of the first beneficiaries of our ID program. They will be part of the first cohort to enrol and in time receive official documentation, which in turn will help them move on. The little time she has to herself she devotes to advising other women and families on how to receive schooling or find jobs in the area. What she really wants though, is respect "Being poor," she says, "is not a crime," and she wants the city to see its homeless residents as contributors who need help and who have dreams and aspirations like any other member of society. "We also want a house and want our children and grandchildren to do well," she says. "I also want a better life."

Daily life for Mumbai's homeless is conducted completely out in the open



THE IRONY

India's poorest are also document poor.

In 2010, the United Nations Development Programme India, conducted a survey that found that only about 3% of the homeless possessed any type of ID documentation such as a voter ID or a ration card. Official India data suggests that even at an all-India level, when it comes to paperwork, the poorest are most likely to be further marginalised by any process that demands legacy data (which prove ancestry) or documentation. The prime example is the birth certificate, which only the most privileged social groups are likely to possess.



Even if one was to get to this stage, most charge a fee to get an identification card - not to mention fees for other documents such as a copy of a birth certificate. But even with waived fees, getting an ID can be an arduous process entailing multiple visits to a nominated government office. The constant battle to provide documentation makes many homeless people give up. When this happens, they lose all sense of hope and fall into a vicious cycle of despondency.

More often than not, helping the homeless obtain ID requires the investigative skills of a Detective. Given the fact that many homeless often have trouble remembering when or where they were born and to obtain a copy of a birth certificate, then needing proof of their parents' birthplace, one can start to understand the enormity of the task that lies ahead. **It's almost as if you're trying to 'walk them back through their life'.**

To get an ID card, you need an ID.

The authorities require multiple proofs of identity or permanent residence, utility bills or birth certificates. Some even require proof of homelessness, such as a letter from a relevant government agency. This situation is exacerbated further by the fact that many homeless have very limited (or no) schooling so navigating through a myriad of agencies to understand and obtain documentation is nigh on impossible.

Obtaining Identity

With an ever changing world, the tragedy is that a piece of laminated paper is stronger proof of human existence than one's own physical presence.

Obtaining ID is a crucial step in escaping homelessness. Identity documents are used for multiple purposes, principally to obtain government benefits. Homeless people face unsurmountable barriers to obtaining ID. When people become homeless it makes it much harder to find a place to shelter and in many cases even stay at a homeless shelter. They cannot access all the services they desperately need because they do not have an address. Without an address, they can't open a bank account, obtain a mobile phone contract, access the internet, find employment or indeed gain entrance to

government buildings so they can apply for an I.D document. One fully understands the value of official documentation, when the simplest things like buying a train ticket is not possible due to having inadequate paperwork.

The inability to obtain any form of ID renders it virtually impossible to

escape homelessness and so the vicious cycle continues. Obtaining official paperwork will force the authorities to recognise them and open the door for receiving appropriate state support, otherwise they remain invisible to the government. **Ultimately no ID means, no recognition, no rights, no voice and no vote.**



Government failure

India has committed itself to providing housing for all its citizens by 2022. 'Housing for all', an ambitious scheme, heralded by the government aims to build 20 million urban units. A report by a leading Housing and Land Rights Network has called the project faulty, arguing that the funding is discriminatory and lacks human rights indicators, especially for the poorest in society.

The nation's achievement is often celebrated through double-digit growth but the condition of homeless people draws attention to the underlying inequality. More often than not, homelessness is the result of the failure of institutions to provide for citizens living in poverty. The homeless in particular faces the loss of self-respect, privacy, security, health rights and social dignity. Additionally, many youth fall prey to a myriad of addictions.

Affordable housing, social housing and the creation of employment opportunities could empower societies to combat homelessness. Affordability is the key here because homelessness is driven by the lack of affordable housing. Fewer and fewer housing units are produced in the market by developers that could cater for low income groups. There is a strong case for the government to provide better incentives to developers to provide affordable housing. Moreover, employment opportunities would enable the homeless to vastly improve their well-being and to make a positive contribution to society.

Homelessness is associated with numerous problems and complexities and requires interventions at several intermediate stages. The policy interventions/responses need to adopt global approaches, to bring about lasting change and sustainable development. Yet rampant corruption, inadequate funds and the shortage of land are reasons cited for insufficient shelters. Repairing and renting dilapidated housing stock may well be a way forward.

The partnership

Kamla Foundation has partnered with a remarkable charity based in Mumbai called Pehchan, (pehchanindia.org). The word 'pehchan' translates as 'identity' in Hindi and provides the cornerstone for their work. Pehchan works to bring positive change to the lives of those that live on the streets of Mumbai. It started as a people-led homeless rights initiative back in 2011. Pehchan now campaigns and lobbies the state government on behalf of the homeless community on a series of key issues affecting them.

The primary aim of this collaboration is helping Pehchan to become efficient and speed up its ability to provide the homeless with a 'state acknowledged identity'. These documents are essential to link people to government schemes, welfare benefits and entitlements such as pensions and healthcare.

What we are doing

Leaders from the homeless community will be recruited and schooled in filling forms, completing applications and other necessary formalities in order for the homeless to gain identity documentation.

Once the first cohort have been fully trained, they will be tasked with steering members of the homeless community through the arduous process of applying for identity documents. They then will be charged with recruiting a new cohort and have the responsibility to deliver the same intensive training and support. Pehchan will be working closely with the cohort to provide ongoing advice, guidance and related support.

We hope the initial 'ripple effect' will create an army of volunteers, which in time will grow into a bank of expertise for members of the homeless community to exploit when needed. In parallel to helping the homeless obtain these vital documents, we will also conduct regular document verification outreach camps.

Ultimately, to challenge the incessant negative narrative of the homeless community, we will develop a high profile information campaign, engaging a variety of civic stakeholders (students, business leaders, academics, community leaders and influencers). We will host a series of interactive workshops using a range of tools such as visual media, photography and theatrical plays - highlighting the plight of the homeless community and explore ways in which these stakeholders may be able to support our work in the future.

Conclusion

No matter who we are or where we come from, we all deserve to have a decent life. We routinely need to feel strength and stability and to know we have the power to take care of ourselves and build our own futures. This is why our next big challenge is to ensure we can be the 'catalyst for change' to support the thousands experiencing homelessness in Mumbai, with the paperwork they desperately need.

I find that we cannot always predict when change will happen but we can help the homeless be better equipped to deal with it when it does. Attainment of the relevant paperwork will give the homeless an identity and gaining identity, will bring an element of visibility and dignity. Otherwise these people will remain forgotten, forced to live on the margins of society with all the stigma and difficulty that that entails. Once they obtain official recognition, they can start the journey of pursuing opportunities, grow, prosper and ultimately gain acceptance back into wider society.

Finally, I end with some food for thought, a powerful quote by John Allen Paulos, an American Professor who succinctly captures the daily reality facing the homeless community. He says, "Uncertainty is the only certainty there is and knowing how to live with insecurity is the only security".

Bhupendra Mistry

Founding Director
KAMLA FOUNDATION
2021

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John Allen Paulos, American Professor



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