

EACH DAY, A FIGHT FOR DIGNITY...



Working with the
homeless in Mumbai

SUMMARY



Contents

- 02 Introduction
- 04 Their predicament
- 05 Migration
- 06 Obtaining identity
- 06 The partnership
- 06 What we are doing
- 07 Conclusion

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. More often than not, homelessness is the result of the failure of institutions to provide for citizens living in poverty. In particular they face the loss of self-respect,

privacy, security, health rights and social dignity. Additionally, many youth fall prey to a myriad of addictions.

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.



Living in a hume pipe - Mother getting her child ready for school

Migration

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.



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

Homeless person in Mumbai

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 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.

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. As they face challenges on a number of fronts, they build their resilience to exposure to extreme weather in summer and winter. **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.



Obtaining Identity



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. Ultimately no ID means, no recognition, no rights, no voice and no vote.

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.

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.

The partnership

Kamla Foundation has partnered with a remarkable charity based in Mumbai called Pehchan. 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.

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 we work with. 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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Kamla Foundation is based in the UK helping vulnerable communities in India, develop their capacity to meet basic needs and create solutions to poverty and injustice.

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