

Caring for the Homeless

Neither the spectacular increase in un-planned urban population nor the consequent poverty and deprivation is unique to India, but they become more pronounced here due to concomitant poverty in the city, slums and the marginalized population. Half of the world's population has already moved to the cities, touching nearly 28% in India as well, creating countless unauthorized habitations, squatter settlements, unhygienic and sub-human conditions of living.

A Planning Commission's Expert Group reported in 1995-96, about 39% (97 million) of the urban population living in India in abject poverty, the bigger chunk in plus-million and metro cities. Delhi has its own share of nearly 4 million slum population and the recently estimated 140 thousand homeless. Such people - destitute children, handicapped, rag-pickers, rickshaw pullers, construction workers, vendors, daily wage earners, even beggars constitute the city's most vulnerable and marginalized segment. All of them, clubbed together, are considered unwanted invaders to the city, raising the basic issue as to whom the city belongs. The issue is compounded further in the face of an authentic report that the combined habitation of the 2700 odd unauthorized colonies and slum clusters now constitute nearly 52% of city's population.

During the past two and half years, the homeless in the city i.e., those without shelter, personal or even common space, are being identified through continuous surveys conducted by some voluntary organisations. The problems being encountered by them include major hardships of water, toilets, food and clothing besides health and medical care, harassment by municipal, land-owing and police authorities, victimization by organized anti-socials, uncertain earnings and employment, complete lack of identity and, last but not least, the vagaries of nature — rain, heat and cold. Women and children among them suffer the most. Surprisingly, however, it is found that nearly 75-80% of them are the working people, creating goods and services for us as cogs in city's 'engines for growth'. However, they too join the hordes of the homeless, even beggars since they can't afford the roof.

Such homeless, who must be categorized among the most marginalized, not even counted as 'citizens', are found sleeping on the roads, pavements, under-flyovers, on rickshaws and carts. Many of them are found sleeping in the same space for decades, turning into medicants, drug addicts and psychic cases. They suffer extreme mental and physical hardships reducing their longevities to half due to mal-nutrition and chronic ailments. Many of them even die completely un-noticed and un-identified. Some dead bodies were found lying for days together

for two months in a thickly populated city area in one particular case. Perhaps, it was never understood that the un-identified bodies (UIDBs) found by Delhi Police, 2,348 in 2000 and 2,407 in 2001, and nearly 3,004 this year, who were mostly homeless.

If we count the entire population in the city living without regular shelters, the numbers of shelter less could be atleast half a million but, taken the last count of 140 thousand, the available space in 12 MCD run Rein Baseras for 2400 homeless, is an abysmally low figure. Thanks to the State Government, voluntary organisations and spirited citizens. This year a major effort is being made through a Joint Apex Committee to accommodate between 5 to 10 thousand such homeless in temporary and permanent shelters being created. The civil society, particularly some market associations have responded overwhelmingly with blankets, durries and such other items. Several voluntary organisations, namely, Prayas Ashray Adhikar Abhiyan, Delhi for Change, Sulabh International, Butterflies, Child Watch India and others have joined hands with the slums and J.J. wing of MCD to undertake this mammoth task.

It's being increasingly realized that such marginalized people in the city also need to be covered within an inclusive governance and a caring society. There is a move in the city government to create a High Power Committee to look into the issues of such people and to tackle the same through a concerted plan of action.

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