

Pattern of Exploitation and Organised Crime: Study on Homeless Beggars in Patna, Bihar

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Abstract- Homelessness has been one of the issues that remain unresolved in parts of India due to complicated and interwoven factors. Human rights groups have also found that in India children are sometimes forced into pornography, prostitution and sex slavery. The purpose of the study is to find out the pattern of exploitation and victimization of the beggar population in Patna district. The study is qualitative and exploratory in nature. Purposive sampling was used to conduct this study with 22 beggars including female and male beggars aged between 13 to 55. The study reveals that homeless beggars are victims of organized crimes and face exploitation such as physical torture and economic loss. Female beggars face sexual exploitation and are manipulated into prostitution. Young beggars are manipulated and forced into drug abuse and drug dealing, pick pocketing, stealing and robbery. With no doubt, the illegal activities are being operated by gangs & supported by local police. Homeless beggars are being targeted and continuously exploited by gangs especially young girls & children. State needs to take immediate steps to prevent these vulnerable populations from being victimized being homeless. The study is conducted at specific places where beggars' daily activities are centralized with consequence that the findings are potentially very context specific.

Index Term- Homeless, Beggars, Exploitation, Victim, Prostitution

I. INTRODUCTION

Homelessness has been a global concern for centuries for governments, the general public and no doubt, the homeless population themselves. The causes of homelessness are plenty-fold and complex, which interface with multiple psychosocial and ecological domains in societies. Homelessness can be defined as having no home or permanent place of residence. The Census of India defines 'houseless population' as the persons who are not living in 'census houses', which is referred to a 'structure with roof'. The enumerators are instructed – "to take note of the possible places where the houseless population is likely to live such as 'on the roadside, pavements, inhum pipes, under staircases or in the open, temples, man daps, platforms and the like'" (India, 1991 p. 64). [1]

According to 2001 Census, there are about 2 million homeless people in India. This figure is very likely a gross underestimate due to the fact that it is not easy to trace this population, which do not have a stable address. Government's general attitudes toward this population has been negligence and insensitive. Rather than focusing on designing policy and implementing interventions, criminalization and penalization of the homeless population is a common practice to get them out of the streets. Stated in the Indian Law, homeless beggars are treated as criminals under "The Bihar Prevention of Beggary Act, 1951". The general public's image of a homeless, who usually resort to begging for survival entirely or subsidizing their daily expenses, depictions of "deviant subcultures" such as the stereotypes of danger, disease, criminality and inferiority from mainstream society is the norm in many places. It leads to processes of social exclusion, incarceration, regulation, criminalization, and enforcement [2].

Quoted from a leading Supreme Court lawyer and civil rights activist, S. Muralidhar, "*Criminalizing the homeless is a serious problem; wandering people of a wide variety can be defined as beggars and powers are given to the police to deal with such persons. Squatting on the pavement is nuisance under the Municipal laws. Creation of nuisance be penalized. Same is the approach of the law of trespass. Given the non-availability of space in urban centers, every unauthorized dwelling would amount to trespass and be punishable as such. Housing, therefore, has law and order dimensions and there is a crying need for a human rights approach to it*" (Muralidhar, 1991). [3]

In 2009, State Society of Rehabilitation of Ultra Poor (SSRUP) was established under the department of Social Welfare to formulate rehabilitation program and schemes for marginalized populations such as beggars, transgender, homeless, destitute, street children & other vulnerable groups. Under The Chief Minister Beggary Prevention Scheme (CMBPS), SSRUP gave a survey assignment to Medha, a non profit organization for conducting a survey of 2500 beggars in the Patna district. During the survey, field investigators came across many unreported realities, which involve children and teenage beggars being forced to engage in criminal activities. All forms of abuse are evident, and the effects on victims are highly traumatic, which lead to our advocacy on behalf of this vulnerable population. Conducting the study to understand the exploitation & victimization of homeless beggars is essential to unfold the invisible plights to the public.

Bihar has the first law on beggary prevention in independent India called "The Bihar Prevention of Beggary Act,

1951” and it defines begging as soliciting alms in a public place and having no visible means of subsistence, and wandering about or remaining in any public place. [4] If any person is found begging within an area to which the Act applies, he shall be guilty of an offence under this Act. In other words, many communities have used legislation and criminal law to target those who have no choice but try to survive on the street level. On the other spectrum, some NGOs by themselves or partner with law associates to reprimand this inhumane response to the homeless population, which do not solve the root of the problem.

II. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Different interwoven factors push people off the social safety net and they end up begging on streets. The most crucial universal factors include poverty and lack of affordable or supportive housing in both the public and private sectors. Others include mental illness, family dysfunction such as abuse and neglect, criminalization, drug and alcohol addiction, and rural-urban migration. Battered women and their children also compose a significant portion of occupants of homeless shelter. The causes of begging can be structural and highly circumstantial due to natural disasters, accidents of various kinds like traffic accidents and work-related accidents that lead to loss of ability to work temporarily or permanently; death of an income-earner in families; serious illnesses or health concerns, loss of employment for various reasons, social services and welfare cuts, domestic abuse, and so on and so forth. Most of them started begging because of one or more factors mentioned above, and some become targets of criminals.

Woman abuse is one of the most common causes of homelessness at many shelters or on the street. [5] The Indian film titled as “Slumdog Millionaire” has evoked a very powerful vision of how children are victims of organized crimes in India. The beggar mafia is a ruthless gang of people. They target street children and get them addicted to drugs to their own advantages. Plenty even bribe doctors to amputate healthy children’s arms and legs for more lucrative profits from passers-by in the begging process. [6] Gaetz (2004) argues that street youth living in Toronto, Canada are much more likely than domiciled youth to be victims of a broad range of crime. [7] Similar observation and beggar’s cases were reported during the survey work in Patna under CMBPS by Medha, field investigators reported that beggars experienced physical torture, mental illness, economic loss, sexual assault, drug abuse and drug dealing. With reported cases and observations of field investigators, the research aimed to find out the pattern of exploitation and victimization among the beggar population in Patna district.

The objectives of the study are

- i. To study the nature of exploitation of beggars by organised gangs.
- ii. To study the process of victimisation of beggars by organised gangs.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

Qualitative approach has been used for conducting the study. The nature of research design is exploratory in nature. Qualitative aspect of the study will reveal the context of the exploitation and victimization by organised crimes. The qualitative method is used to explore and record the experience of victims of organised crime and pattern of exploitation by local gangs and its members.

B. Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to conduct the study. Beggars, who shared their plights and disclosed their exploitation during the survey work under The Chief Minister Beggary Prevention Scheme in Patna district, were included in this study with their consent. The sample (N=22) includes 3 female adult beggars, 12 male adult beggars, and 7 street children. The participants are between 13 and 55 years of age. There are 6 key informants in the study including local vendors and shop keepers, a former crime reporter and a priest of the Mahaveer Mandir¹ where beggars gather days and nights.

C. Data collection tools

Looking at the nature of study and participants of the study, unstructured interview schedule was used to capture the experience of the victims and key informants. Also focus group discussion guide was developed for capturing the victimization and its process. In depth-Interview, field visit, observations, focus group discussions were used for data collections. The data was collected during March, 2012.

D. Data Analysis

Collected data was analysed manually under different themes. These themes are exploitation and torture, sexual exploitation, drug abuse and dealing, victimization, challenges and obstacles in justice delivery.

IV. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Exploitation of beggars by gang members

The reasons for becoming a beggar are various but reason for begging for beggars is a mean of survival. According to field investigators, beggars have to pay money to gang for begging at nearby Patna railways station area. During interview, a 35-year-old male beggar disclosed to interviewer:

“About 20-25 beggars work for the gangs and keep watch on beggary related activities. These beggars also engaged in directly collecting money from other beggars, information sharing with gang leaders, controlling the beggars groups near the begging area and in return these beggars get part of the collected money.”

Another 39-year-old male beggar said:

“Few days back, one of the beggar refused to pay the money and tried to run away but he was caught and then beaten up badly”

¹ Mahaveer mandir is a Hindu temple near Patna railway station.

It was found that there is existence of gangs who operate and have control over beggary activities within Patna railway station area. There is a hierarchy in the gang at different level. Beggars, who always sit at a particular place for begging near Mahaveer Mandir, are forced to pay gang members about 60 to 70 per cent of the daily amount of money obtained from begging. They beg for survival and their needs especially for foods and drugs. When asked about if they ever asked for help from local police, 45-year-old male beggar replied:

"They are also associated with gang members. Why we need to go to complain about them. If they come to know that we want to complain, they will kill us."

Another 42 year-old beggar replied:

"Every day the money collected from beggars, handed over to gang leader and every evening some part of money is shared with a local policeman who comes to collect around 6 to 7 pm."

Association with local policeman and gang creates strong barrier to seek help and support from law enforcement and/or agencies. And the process of exploitation continues to be unreported. Another research participant expressed his feeling and said, "We are helpless and can't do anything. We are living with fear".

B. Sexual Exploitation and Prostitution:

In a report of Social Science and Medicine, Perron et al (2008) have mentioned that homeless persons are victims of violent and non-violent crime at higher rates than housed populations. [8] Women appear particularly vulnerable to victimization within the homeless population. Homeless women are two to four times more likely to have been physically or sexually assaulted as adults when compared to house women of similar socioeconomic status (Jasinski et al, 2005). [9] Moreover, it was found that younger homeless males had a higher likelihood of theft and physical assault while females have higher likelihood of sexual assault. Homeless young women face increased vulnerability to specific forms of violent crime such as sexual assault. As Chaudhry et al. (2010) mentioned that Indian city streets were extremely unsafe for women for various reasons such as rape, theft, murder, kidnapping, sexual violence and exploitation, and risks to security and personal safety. [10] A 10 year-old female child beggar disclosed to interviewer:

"I am 10 years old. I was raped and forced into prostitution. They give me solution and rape me. I don't remember much but when I get up in the morning I feel the pain and then again I take solution for decreasing the pain."

Young female beggar victims are sexually and physically abused by other beggars, rickshaw and auto drivers, policemen, and street teenagers. These abusers take the girls to quiet places such as railway tracks or inside standing train coaches for sexual activity. The small amount of money given to these young female beggars goes into purchasing food, drugs and other items and usually spent it all on the same day. In an interview with a female beggar, aged 20 and single, said:

"I ran from my home 4 years back and since then I am living and begging near Patna railway station area. While begging, I met with few street people and got addicted to substances like solution under their influence of gang. They raped me and then I was forced into prostitution by other beggars; and was often physically abused by beggars & policeman."

She told the interviewer that her health is very poor and she is suffering from T.B., and she also feels very helpless and hopeless about her current situation.

According to local shopkeeper, key informants & male beggars, a group of people including gang members, the police constable and few female brokers are in charge of arranging the activity. Along with these female brokers, there are other middle men involved in this process and their job is to keep looking for potential clients for the female beggars. These female brokers are also sex workers themselves. Besides, other gang members are brokers, who pass the client's name and address to particular street vendors and accordingly female beggars are contacted for prostitution at a give place and time.

C. Trapping into Drug Abuse & Drug Dealing:

The research findings have suggested that the homeless people are more likely to be victims of crimes and violence than being perpetrators of it.[11] Children & women continue to be victims of crimes of drug taking and dealing, prostitution, trafficking, child labor, and forced begging. According to official figures, every year nearly 44,000 children fall into the clutches of the beggar mafia in India. Most of the victims are under ten years of age. [12] According to child beggars & key informants, gang members make use of whitener, which is highly addictive if inhaled in a large amount, to force children to become addicted to this solution which is associated with high health risk. According to these children beggars, they got addicted after a while. The addiction forces them to find means to get more money by begging, stealing and prostitution, as guided by gang members. These drug solution especially whiteners are easily available in nearby market, and are also sold by few beggars in railway station, Mahaveer Mandir. Drug addiction in According to Narcotic Drugs & Psychotropic Substance Act, 1985 selling of drugs to children is an offence and punishable under law. During interview with a 53 year-old male beggar, he said:

"From all beggars aged from 3 to 50 year, children, young girls, women, everyone is habituated to take drugs. You can see, everyone is holding a small piece of cloth. They use something like sprite in these cloths and inhale it whole day & night and feel pleasure."

When asked about how they become addicted to drugs, a 45-year-old male beggar said:

"Initially, if any new child beggar doesn't want to take these addictive solutions, gang member beat those children and forcefully made them addicted. Sometimes they cut their body by knife or blades. When children feel pain, they use these drugs or solution in helpless situations"

Children, who are new on the streets, are usually identified by gangsters quickly provided support to work for them and in return they provide food, shelter and fixed monthly money. After a while, these persons influence these young children in criminal activities as selling of "Marijuana" i.e. *Ganja* to collies, beggars, rickshaw drivers, and other local customers. A street child, aged 11 told interviewer that he was forced to sell *Ganja* to other beggars and collies together with a group of 5-7 children. This process continues to involve children in vulnerable conditions such as those who live in poverty, with domestic abuse and/or other circumstances.

According to a former crime reporter, criminals take advantage of innocent young children and make them pick pocket and steal near railway stations and temple areas. Some of the money and stolen items are given to older street children and/or to other beggars who are behind these crimes. Other parts go to some significant people such as leader beggars, local leaders of the area, and policemen. These are people who have an influence over the police and act as "helpers" in the criminal activities so that they will not get caught or prosecuted.

D. Barrier to Access Government Program & Schemes for Homeless Beggars:

According to the The Bihar Prevention of Beggar Act, 1951 the only approach to deal with this situation is to send these beggars to Beggar Homes. Indeed, there is a lack of systemic structure in the government framework to deal with any crisis situation or attempt to solve the practical problems of beggary. In 2009, The Bihar State Government started The Chief Minister Beggar Prevention Scheme, but not much was done in the past three years except on pilot survey. Bureaucratic system & the processes of the government have delayed the implementation of schemes and services.

For vulnerable & marginalised population, there are other government programs and welfare schemes available such as student scholarships, disability pension scheme, old age pension scheme, and widow pension scheme, Indira Awas Schemes (housing schemes) for welfare of these populations. All the interviewed beggar shared that they do not receive any benefits of any sorts from government welfare programs and schemes. Low awareness about these program and schemes is one of the reasons for not applying and another reason is that most of the beggars do not have any identity card or residential certificate, which is required for applying for any schemes or programs. This population comprises of the most vulnerable people with disabilities, old age, severe diseases such as leprosy, destitute women, young children, and people with mental illness.

E. Challenges and Obstacles in Justice Delivery

The beggar population are at risk due to their socio-economical, physical & mental health for injustice treatment, and they often fall into the role of victims of organized crimes. Most homeless populations live in extremely harsh environment like near railway tracks or highways with very poor sanitation condition. Children, women and the elderly group are the most vulnerable especially children with no parental supervision/guardians, are easily manipulated by gangsters to

perform illegal activities such as forced begging, stealing, involvement in consumption of and dealing with drugs, and prostitution.

Beggars who are victims of organized crimes require immediate attention and the situation needs to be dealt with properly without any delay by concerned government department such as the law enforcement bodies, social welfare and child welfare departments. Penalizing them through the criminal justice system is not only costly and ineffective; it does not solve the roots of the problems as mentioned earlier. Ironically, the gangsters of organized crimes are not prosecuted due to various reasons.

Beggars are struggling with a totally inhumane and devastating situation. It is the real lives of these populations, and the brutal and harsh reality that they are facing. Young children especially girls, women, old age & people with disability are soft target for organised crimes and gangs. The "partnership" between the criminals and gang members with local police has created a very exploitative environment where these vulnerable populations are continuously forced into illegal activities. The immediate need is to provide a safe environment for beggars with some skills so that they can earn a living to be self sufficient. Most beggars interviewed are desperate, helpless, hopeless, and struggling to survive. Most beggars interviewed reported getting almost no help of any kinds from the government.

The lack of information and education of the provision of services, and trained professionals in Patna district obstruct justice delivery. Lack of emergency shelters equipped with facilities and services/programs such as job training and counselling; supportive low-cost housing and a sound law enforcement and judicial system are key barriers to a successful service delivery system. It is time government took an active role in tackling the roots of the problems and come up with workable solutions to relieve the plights of these victims.

Public awareness and change of the stereotyping attitude towards beggar might be the first step to provide a channel for communication, collaboration, and policy planning. Research generating reliable and accurate information and data regarding the homeless population serves as a bridge, which is of paramount importance, in linking all parties concerned to start constructive dialogues in resolving the urgency of this matter. Most of the homeless beggars especially female are victims of domestic violence, physical abuse and various forms of discrimination, which force them to leave their home in the first place. They are targeted by organized criminals, victimized and forced to involve in unlawful activities such as prostitution, begging, stealing and selling of restricted drugs.

Government needs to take immediate action to provide a safe environment to homeless beggar population and further start enquiry and prosecution of the criminals and members of any gangsters involved in the victimization of beggars. Government should partner with NGOs, which work for the welfare of the beggar victims and offer them more support and if possible some financial or any other assistance with their work.

V. CONCLUSION

To conclude, criminalizing homelessness does nothing to address its underlying causes of the issue. It is ineffective and costly in the process of prosecution and putting beggars behind bars. Indeed, this is injustice forced upon the victims of the homeless beggars who are controlled by criminals to engage in their lucrative business. In revealing the actual lives of the victims through participatory research, it is hoped that concerned government departments in Patna will change its apathetic attitude toward the plights of these victims. Instead, provision of affordable housing, comprehensive and timely welfare programs and social services, fighting corruption and improve its justice delivery system are highly recommended. Even though the challenges and obstacles are huge, but only through cooperation and collaboration with concerned parties will locally and globally justice be delivered to victims.

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