

URBAN HOMELESS – A Thought

“Homeless are those who sleep under a mere plastic/tin sheet roof or without roofing (even if it’s for a few months of the year) in parks, railway stations, under Flyovers, on pavements, vacant sites (private/public), in front of temples, mosques, churches etc.”

Many of the people who are homeless in cities arrived here in search of a better life. They are from villages and regions whose existing economies do not provide for even the minimum standards of living. While in their own villages, these people had their own social networks, a community life and enjoyed political and civil Rights; they are forced to migrate to the cities in search of better opportunities. The failure of the agrarian economy is mainly the reason, which pushes people to migrate and forces them to live without homes. A failed economy in rural areas also means survival is threatened. In such a situation it is the children, elderly and the disabled who are the worst affected and women are the ones who are seen to bear the maximum burden.

Homeless people in cities usually live on daily wage jobs like loading trucks, cleaning of drains, construction of drains and roads, rag picking, street vending, working in the informal food sector as cooks, helpers, suppliers, cleaners, and so on. They are usually unable to afford a home or shelter of their own in the city. During the day they are engaged in work/livelihood activities. Later, they wait for the shops, establishments, religious places to be closed to sleep in front of them or in public places like parks. This poses to be a challenge when we attempt to survey them or do a census. So, if one has to trace them or meet them, it is only during nights after the city becomes quiet and after the shutters of shops are pulled down, that we can get even a rough estimate of who the homeless in the city are.

Even within the homeless, some are particularly more vulnerable – for instance, women, children who have left home, the infirm, elderly, disabled, persons with mental illness, transgender, victims of substance abuse, and groups with no shelter.

Homeless citizens have remained more or less completely neglected by the State. Governments have rarely provided to them even minimal essential services necessary for basic survival, such as shelters, to ensure that they do not have to sleep rough under the open sky¹.

Urban Homeless in Bengaluru

Homelessness is a common phenomenon across the world and almost every major city in the world has its share of citizens who are homeless for various reasons. Bengaluru (Bangalore) is no different. However, there was very little data about the homeless in Bangalore before 2010. While the Census of 1991 estimated that there were 10,654 homeless people in Bangalore; Census of 2001 put the number at 12,014. One study by The BRIDGE network in Bangalore in 2006 indicated that there were at the least 86,266 homeless people in Bangalore, however, records or details of the survey could not be found.

¹ Source: Shelters for the Urban Homeless - A Handbook for Administrators and Policymakers, <https://bit.ly/2ZGC7Ut>

First Intervention (2010 – 2012)

The first interventions for the Homeless in Bengaluru started in the year in 2010 with a survey of people without homes by the Indo-Global Social Service Society (IGSSS) along with 29 Bengaluru based NGO partners.

The first survey of Urban Homeless (UH) involved around 191 investigators. 198 wards of Bengaluru were distributed to 29 NGOs. Small teams of 4-5 surveyors continuously scanned each of the wards over a period of three nights between 10 pm to 3 am. The survey counted about 16,345 UH and this data was submitted to Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), Bengaluru's Urban Local Body (ULB). In depth interviews were also conducted with about 2000 UH. Based on this survey and interviews, an action research study titled "Invisible City makers"² was published on the status of Urban homeless in city of Bengaluru.

During 2010 & 2011, various Supreme Court judgments/ orders were passed on Public Interest Litigations (PIL) related to the Urban Homeless issue.

The writ petition (196/2001) brought to fore the severe denial of the right to food and shelter of people living on the streets that threatened their fundamental right to life. The Supreme Court took cognisance of the alarming situation and in 2010 directed the Central and State Government to provide permanent shelter for homeless in cities (in a phased manner).

As per Hono'ble court orders, ULBs/state government were instructed to construct at least one homeless shelter for every one lakh population. The order emphasised that for every one lakh urban population, facilities for shelter and allied amenities must be provided for at least one hundred homeless persons and the shelters were to remain open 24 hours a day across the year. Even after a decade, State-supported shelters for urban homeless have been poorly implemented across India due to apathy and bottlenecks in the system.

Post these rulings, lobbying and advocacy were initiated by the NGO Network to initiate construction of shelters in Bengaluru. As a result of this intervention, 12 shelters were opened across all eight zones in 2012. A state level monitoring body, headed by the Chief Secretary, was also created by the state Government. IGSSS conducted sensitization workshops for Government officers. Some short-term interventions to build rapport with the UH were formulated along with the process of procuring social securities for the UH.

The issue received no furtherance between 2014 -2018 with both CSOs and ULBs. As a result, the number of homeless shelters came down from 12 to 9. These nine shelters continued to operate with NGOs managing it.

All this while, there were developments happening on the government side as well. Funds were routed through National Urban Livelihood Missions (NULM) with guidelines³ from the government regarding types of shelters, facilities, rehabilitation process, funding, staffing, etc.

Second Intervention (2018 onwards)

The work on Homeless got revived with entry of three key stakeholders viz.,

² Reference: www.ihm.org.in/files/editor/Invisible%20City-Makers_An%20Action%20Research%20on%20Homelessness%20in%20Bangalore%20City%202010.pdf.

³ All this information is available on our website in the articles.

1. Impact India Consortium (IIC) which is a network of NGOs,
2. Institute of Global Homelessness (IGH) based in Chicago – a unit of De Paul University, UK, and
3. Azim Premji Foundation.

IGH, an international organization created to address the issue of Homelessness select key cities across the world called as vanguard cities⁴ to study UH and pilot interventions. In the first phase, Bengaluru was one of the 13 cities chosen to be a vanguard city.

1. Adelaide, Australia
2. Montevideo, Uruguay
3. Bengaluru, India
4. Brussels, Belgium
5. Chicago, USA
6. Edmonton, Canada
7. Glasgow, Scotland
8. Greater Manchester, UK
9. Little Rock, USA
10. Rijeka, Croatia
11. Santiago, Chile
12. Sydney, Australia
13. Tshwane, South Africa

IGH facilitates exchanging of information by holding annual conferences, training the stakeholders working on issues related to homelessness along with espousing other interventions.

In Bengaluru, **Impact India Consortium (IIC)** has been playing a key role addressing the issues of UH since 2018. Its interventions and contributions are mentioned in this website.

Dignity of life for the Homeless

Here are some real-life stories of homeless people that continue to instigate work on Homelessness by all stakeholders and fight for a dignified life for every individual who is homeless.

Kariappa who is in his late sixties had small land holdings. He remained a bachelor after he lost his family at a young age. As he became old, he sold his land, cleared his debts, and came to Bengaluru; only to land up on the streets. He now works as a watchman and guides parking in a city hotel.

Sunil finished his tenth grade in a small town and came to Bengaluru with a promise of a job in a hotel. Even as he worked there, he was not given the payment as promised. He tried working in several places. Finally, he found that an income from the collection & sale of plastics and other wastes was better compared to all the false promises. He now continues his job and sleeps in the city Railway station. He wakes up everyday by 3 a.m. to collect his treasure and make a living.

⁴ Reference: <https://ighomelessness.org/vanguard-cities-page/> and <http://ighomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Defining-an-End-to-Homelessness.pdf>

Jagga owns a small piece of small land that he has to share along with his three brothers. So, he came to work in Bengaluru as a cleaner in hotel. Unfortunately, he was hit by a bike and had a major fracture. First, he was helped by the city Police. The initial treatment was not successful, and he needed to undergo another surgery. By then the Lockdown for Corona was imposed and he was brought to an IIC managed shelter by the police. Jagga continues to receive treatment at the shelter.

Meera, a flower seller in Nanjangudu temple had come to visit Bengaluru during the first phase of Corona. Before she could return to her native, all transportation was cancelled. She was brought to one of the shelters where she stayed for almost 3 months. As she was single, she went to her sister's place after the lockdown was lifted. With fear that she may infect others, the family did not accept her. Meera had to return to the shelter, as even the religious places now had shorter period of operations and her flower business never picked up.

Sarasu Bai was sent to Bengaluru to work as a maid by a Kolkata agency. She was working for a rich family. With Lockdown due to corona, she was sent out by her employer without any compensation. He was clever enough to erase his mobile number, as well. Sarasu, who is in thirties has two children and aged mother in Howrah. She did not know other languages other than Bengali. When she was sent out, there was an attempt of abuse by strangers on her. She was helpless. Luckily, she got police help and was sent to the shelter.

Muruga, a porter lived with his wife and three daughters on a half-constructed building terrace with a blue tarpaulin over their head. They cooked food and slept under an open sky on a terrace. They would finish their bath near a public tap when the city was still sleeping. His wife who worked as a maid died of ill health. An NGO working with children provided shelter & education in an institution to two of his daughters. Now he continues to live on this half-built building along with his eldest daughter.

Another porter works during the day and sleeps in a temple. He is from Tamil Nadu. Given his extreme poverty, age, and sickness; he was deserted by his family. He suffers from Elephantiasis and has swollen legs. But he continues to work as a coolie from 5 a.m. to 12 p.m. He buys his food, from whatever little he earns as a coolie. He also tries to save money and periodically visits his native village to provide for his children.

Krishna, a farmer, works as a porter during the off season to earn some money to pay his debts. Else, he will land in long term debts. He works in the market and sleeps outside a temple.

Mary was infected with HIV and was deserted by her family. She lives on the streets, doing some petty trade, sometimes as a sex worker. She has been sleeping in front of the city market shops during night.

Ammu, who is in her late fifties has a house in outskirts of the city. However, she cannot find any work that suits her energy and age in her neighborhood. She, now, sleeps near Cantonment Railway station. During the day she works as a domestic maid in a couple of houses nearby. Without these earnings she cannot manage her family.

Khan carries his knife sharpening instrument and walks around the city during the day. He hails from a village near Kuppam. He chose to work in Bengaluru, which provides him more earnings. He sleeps near a Mosque, has his bath in a public bathroom and works until late evening. He returns to his home once a month, to provide for his family. After a rest of two-three days, he is back in Bengaluru for his livelihood.

A young graduate Gopal lost both his parents and became orphan. He succumbed to a group of addicts and became an alcoholic. He works as a porter when he needs money. Rest of the time he drinks and sleeps on streets.

A mentally retarded young woman who has no family is abused on the streets. She lives on begging.

These are some live cases picked from the streets to highlight the challenges that the homeless face and why they need live a life of dignity!

Profile of the Urban Homeless

Families

There are many families residing on the pavements for generations. Having migrated permanently they have been residing on the streets, while picking waste of pavements for several years/decades.

Seasonal & Occupational Migrant Families

Families from inter-state and intra-state, they migrate for a specific work or season. Once the task is completed, they usually move to another area where there is a work requirement.

Distress migrant families

Families who have temporarily migrated from their area of origin due to social ostracization, natural calamities like droughts and floods, indebtedness or poverty that rendered it impossible for them to continue residing there. They may choose to either move out on a permanent or temporary basis.

Nomadic Tribes

These are tribal families who are nomadic by nature. They do not stay for long in one particular place but keep shifting.

Individuals

Migrants (Men/Women) whose families continue to reside in their hometowns. Either the man or the woman in the family would have migrated to the nearest city in search of employment.

Destitute and others

- Destitute elders residing on the streets
- Destitute Women/Men/Children residing on the streets
- Persons with Disability/Persons with psycho-social difficulties residing on the streets

- Sexual and Gender Minorities residing on street (LGBTQ)

A homeless can be a destitute elder, a person with disability and a person of gender minority.

It is to be noted that some of the homeless individuals/families are involved in begging. There is also a need to differentiate between those involved in begging to survive and those involved in organized begging.

Therefore, it is important to understand the profile of the homeless so that specific interventions can be planned for them.

DID YOU KNOW?

- There are 2,56,896 urban homeless households and 9,28,348 urban homeless population in India (Census 2011⁵)
- Activists who participated in many cities, being part of the IGSSS initiative, National City Makers Caravan (nCMc), as volunteers in 2011 Census made a representation to the then Census Commissioner stating that in many cities, the homeless were not counted to their exact numbers, leading to gross underestimation. This needs to be borne in mind when we plan for an initiative for the homeless.
- Homeless comprise 0.15% of the country's population (India Spend⁶)
- There has been a 20% increase in the number of homeless people living in the cities as compared to the 2001 Census.
- 26% of the homeless in the country are living in Greater Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, and Bangalore.

How to identify the Urban Homeless

The urban homeless are the most invisible residents of the city, living under the shadows of the structures they build. There is a need for adopting a sensitive, pro-poor approach while identifying the homeless. Some of the ways by which an urban homeless can be identified are as follows:

Mapping of Homeless Locations: Before conducting the survey, the mapping of hotspot locations has to be conducted jointly by the ULBs and CSOs. The mapping of locations should commence based on discussions/consultations with the local authorities, NGOs and CSOs working on the issue of homelessness and the homeless persons.

Myths Vs Reality⁷

Myth: The urban homeless are lazy.

⁵Census 2011 - <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011census/hh-series/hh02.html>

⁶Reference: <http://archive.indiaspend.com/cover-story/indias-target-for-homeless-60000-houses-a-year-29465>

⁷ Myths Vs Reality-Ref: Indu Prakash Singh, City Makers: Tribulations and Triumphs – A Saga of Heroic Struggle of the Homeless Residents of India. New Delhi: Mukul Prakashan, 2016.

Reality: Definitely not, latest surveys across different cities reveal that over 85% of the urban homeless are involved in hard physical labor work. And the remaining are elderly, destitute or children who require state support and care.

Myth: The urban homeless deliberately choose to reside on the streets jeopardizing the safety and welfare of their dependents.

Reality: Definitely not, as the livelihood options of the homeless are location-centric and as rental houses in the urban areas are not affordable, they are forced to remain homeless. They do not live on the streets by choice but because of compulsion.

Myth: The urban homeless are a burden to the city

Reality: Definitely not, they are the ones who built the city thus they are rightly called City Makers. They are the movers and shakers of the urban local economy. And their human rights need to be ensured and protected.

Myth: The urban homeless are largely into addiction, crime, and wayward life.

Reality: Only a minuscule section of the homeless are into drugs. And it is the harsh life on the streets that forces some of the homeless into substance abuse. Many who are addicted to substances of various kinds need more support in the form of better de-addiction programs and shelters.