Evaluating the Socio-Economic Status of Beggars in Indian Cities

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Abstract— This research delves deeply into the intricate socio-economic conditions faced by urban beggars in India, employing a combination of qualitative and deductive research methodologies. Through a carefully chosen purposive sampling approach, the data collection process involves an exhaustive examination of secondary sources, which illuminates the deeply marginalised status endured by beggars. According to the 2011 Census, the number of beggars across the nation exceeds a staggering 400,000, with West Bengal bearing the highest burden. The empirical analysis presented in this study underscores a disturbing trend of an ever-widening socio-economic gap, further exacerbated by factors such as soaring unemployment rates, widespread illiteracy, and the economic downturn brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. This confluence of challenges has created an even more precarious environment for India's beggars. Of particular concern is the discord between different legislations that criminalise the act of begging and the government's initiatives, notably "SMILE," which promises collaborative efforts between authorities and civil society to reshape the socio-economic landscape for India's beggars. This contradiction reflects the complex and multifaceted nature of the issue at hand. India's beggars, as revealed in this study, face a deeply entrenched predicament. The social and economic forces working against them are formidable, with the already vulnerable group suffering the most. High unemployment rates, limited access to education, and the economic fallout from the pandemic have compounded their struggles, pushing them further into the margins of society. On a more optimistic note, the study highlights the potential for change and improvement through collaborative endeavours like "SMILE." These government-led initiatives, working in tandem with the involvement of civil society, offer a ray of hope in reshaping the socio-economic landscape for beggars. By bridging the gap between punitive legislation and supportive programs, there is potential for meaningful change, ensuring a more equitable future for India's beggar population. This research serves as a critical resource for those seeking to understand and address the complex challenges faced by this vulnerable demographic.

Keywords— socio-economic status, beggars, beggars in India, the government of India, government schemes

I. INTRODUCTION

The socio-economic status of beggars in Indian cities can be broken down into various components, such as access to education, access to food and shelter, access to occupational opportunities and access to social, political and economic facilities. The beggars of any urban area are victims of deprivation, desolation and neglect, projecting an unbalanced socio-economic system in the urban areas of India. The following paper primarily aims at evaluating the socio-economic status of beggars in Indian cities, to address the issues of socio-economic policy and opportunity-related discrepancies that affect the scope for social mobility for beggars.

The wide population of beggars in Indian cities are often victims of limited resources and opportunities. A study based on a field survey of the Aligarh district, Uttar Pradesh, articulated that the primary cause of begging was a prevalence of illiteracy, caste inheritance, poverty, diseases and handicapped conditions, orphanage and old age (Khan, 2014). The Government of India (GOI) further asserted that the beggar population in India was 3.7 lakh, reaching over 4 lakhs according to the 2011 census, among which 25% are Muslims, higher compared to other communities (Zeenews.india.com, 2016). Thus, the issues related to the growth of the beggar population in Indian cities highlight a religious cause as well that is considered in the paper.

The socio-economic status of beggars in Indian cities is astoundingly lower, creating a marginalised group of individuals who are unable to access adequate food, shelter, education and occupational opportunities. The Beggar population of India is scattered throughout all the states of India, amounting to a significant number of people deprived of any socio-economic opportunities. The following table illustrates the beggar population in India state-wise according to the 2011 Census:

Table 1: Survey on Beggars, Census 2011

India/State/UT	Beggars, Vagrants etc.		
	Persons	**Males**	**Females**
JAMMU & KASHMIR	4134	2550	1584
HIMACHAL PRADESH	809	504	305
PUNJAB	7939	5197	2742
CHANDIGARH	121	87	34
UTTARAKHAND	3320	2374	946
HARYANA	8682	6504	2178
NCT OF DELHI	2187	1343	844
RAJASTHAN	25853	15271	10582
UTTAR PRADESH	65835	41859	23976
BIHAR	29723	14842	14881
SIKKIM	68	46	22
ARUNACHAL PRADESH	114	59	55
NAGALAND	124	65	59
MANIPUR	263	117	146
MIZORAM	53	33	20
TRIPURA	1490	607	883
MEGHALAYA	396	172	224

ASSAM	22116	7269	14847
WEST BENGAL	81244	33086	48158
JHARKHAND	10819	5522	5297
ODISHA	17965	9981	7984
CHHATTISGARH	10198	4995	5203
MADHYA PRADESH	28695	17506	11189
GUJARAT	13445	8549	4896
DAMAN & DIU	22	15	7
DADRA & NAGAR HAVELI	19	7	12
MAHARASHTRA	24307	14020	10287
ANDHRA PRADESH	30218	16264	13954
KARNATAKA	12270	6436	5834
GOA	247	131	116
LAKSHADWEEP	2	0	2
KERALA	4023	2397	1626
TAMIL NADU	6814	3789	3025
PUDUCHERRY	99	54	45
A & N ISLANDS	56	22	34
INDIA	**4,13,670**	**2,21,673**	**1,91,997**

(Source: Press Information Bureau, Government of India, 2021)

The table exhibits the state-wise division of the beggar population in India to indicate specific urban cities that accommodate the highest and lowest number of beggars. For example, it is seen that West Bengal accommodates the highest beggar population in India with 81,244 people whereas Lakshadweep has the lowest beggar population with merely 2 people (Newindianexpress.com, 2021). On the other hand, The National Statistical Office (2017-2018) indicates that over 139 people in India are living in poverty, with 68.8% surviving on less than $2 a day and 30% people surviving on less than $1.25 per day (Indiatimes.com,

2022). Thus, the high rate of employment and rigid social structure in India creates a critical gap in the socio-economic status of beggars.

Additionally, during COVID-19, due to the disruption of economic transactions, the poverty scale in India declined further, widening the socio-economic gap. The issues of the food crisis seen during COVID-19 contributed to inflation of above 5% among 88.9% of low-income countries, 91.1% of lower-middle-income countries, and 96% of upper-middle-income countries (Worldbank.org, 2022).

Alongside that, the socio-economic issue is attributed to the lack of proper education and employment (Tribuneindia.com, 2021). Therefore, the prevalence of poverty and lack of opportunities for earning a livelihood makes begging a prominent and consistent problem in the country.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework for the research consists of various elements, supporting the evaluation process. A qualitative and deductive approach is adopted for data collection and analysis of empirical data gathered through various secondary resources. The deductive approach aided the process of evaluation as all information was evaluated to generate concrete hypotheses on the subject. The data collection process is also aided by a descriptive research design framework that is aligned with the process of qualitative analysis.

The data collection process from secondary resources was conducted by a targeted internet search, based on a purposive sampling technique. Setting inclusion-exclusion criteria included, peer-reviewed journals, newspaper articles, government reports, and publications in the English language containing certain keywords such as socio-economic status, socio-economic problems, beggars, beggars in India, urban slums, urban beggars and so on. Thus, the complete methodological framework provided essential tools and techniques used for the development of a sound and logical research work.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The critical facets of the prevalent socio-economic issues, leading to a gap in the status of beggars in Indian cities, create a marginalised and socially and economically stagnant position for the poor people. According to Sharma *et al.* (2019), a survey of Mumbai households facing energy poverty issues is aligned with the lack of education. The comprehensive issues in the social structure further encompass the variables such as lack of schooling opportunities and proper learning environment for children belonging to poor households, leading to high unemployment and eventually begging.

On the other hand, the lack of proper knowledge restricts the ability for social mobilisation with the help of various government schemes. Sultana and Alam (2018) articulated that, based on a 2017 survey in Amroha city (Uttar Pradesh), the weakest section of the society is constituted by the beggar community among which 14% are literates, while 79% of beggars earn money solely from begging. The rest may work part-time jobs, earning merely 100-300 INR per day (Sultana and Alam, 2018). Thus, the lack of proper education and information constricts their accessibility to poverty alleviation schemes and the amenities and facilities provided to beggars are of extremely poor quality.

Begging however is also associated with a criminal issue prevalent in Indian cities. The Bombay Prevention of Begging Act 1959, considered begging as a form of social crime, leading to the registration of 32-35 cases per month, as a bailable offence of ₹5,000 fine (Hindustantimes.com, 2022). The social cell of the city indicated that beggars earn ₹800 to ₹1,400 per day, making it a business however, the syndicate is strong and child abuse for creating handicapped beggars is prevalent (Hindustantimes.com, 2022). The Bombay Prevention of Begging Act 1959, was adopted by 20 states across India however, recently, Supreme Court has opined against it as begging is to be considered a socio-economic issue and declaring it as a criminal act damages the fundamental rights of citizens (Hindustantimes.com, 2022). Thus, the current socio-economic issues of begging as an act of social crime diminish the scope for communal growth. In Indian cities, the true nature of begging associated with criminalistic syndicates and businesses also makes it a critical issue to solve.

The lack of economic support to access nutritional food creates a barrier to the growth of the status of beggars. In essence, the lack of proper food causes beggars to retain health issues, damaging their overall ability to work in society. According to a survey, 16.3% of the population in India falls under the category of Proportion of Undernourished (PoU) (Pib.gov.in, 2022). Thus, The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World, 2020 report by FAO estimates 189.2 million people as undernourished with 51.4% of women and 34.7% of children (under 5 years) mentioned as undernourished in the report (Indiafoodbanking.org, 2022).

Along with the lack of food, shelter is also a critical issue, associated with the socio-economic status of beggars. According to the Census of 2011, approximately 1.7 million residents were homeless in India, among which 938,384 are from urban areas (Hlm.org.in, 2022). In the capital city of Delhi, a constant estimated 150,000 - 200,000 are homeless among which 10,000 are women. (Hlm.org.in, 2022). Thus, the issue of shelter contributes to the precarious socio-economic status of beggars in various Indian cities.

Fig.1: Estimated homelessness across different Indian cities

(Source: Hlm.org.in, 2022)

However, to eradicate the issues of beggars in India, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment has established a "SMILE- Support for Marginalised Individuals for Livelihood and Enterprise" scheme, under which 'Central Sector Scheme for Comprehensive Rehabilitation of persons engaged in the act of Begging' will be provided for rehabilitation, medical facilities and provisions, basic education, economic linkage opportunities and so on (Pib.gov.in, 2022). The success of such initiatives, however, depends on collaboration and the proactive position of society and the government.

IV. DISCUSSION

Based on the above findings, it can be stated that the socio-economic status of beggars in Indian cities holds a critical position. The primary causes of begging cited as, orphanage, old age, illiteracy, poverty and so on (Khan, 2014). A distinct lack of accessibility to proper facilities, resources and provisions highlights the socio-economic gap existing in the country, creating a persisting issue of begging. On the other hand, considering the beggar population of above 4 lakhs indicates the lack of government initiatives to aid the process of social mobilisation. The lack of proper knowledge among beggars restricts their ability to gain access to government schemes while the provisions and amenities for them exhibit poor quality (Sultana and Alam, 2018). However, certain government schemes are implemented, as mentioned above, but the lack of cooperation, collaboration and coordination is expected to lead to failure. Thus, it can be stated that the

socio-economic status of beggars in Indian cities is deteriorating due to the lack of adequate government policies and schemes. A distinct lack of social awareness has also led to the formation of criminal syndicates, using begging as an act for conducting anti-social activities that require further investigation for mitigating the socio-economic gap.

V. CONCLUSION

The socio-economic status of beggars can be concluded as marginalised, surrounded by poverty, illiteracy and limited access to social amenities and services. Despite the existence of certain government schemes, begging is perceived as a social crime and issue. Thus, the socio-economic gap widens due to the lack of proper regulations that may aid the beggar population in urban areas. Especially, due to COVID-19, global inflation, agricultural issues and high unemployment rates, the rise of poverty is indicated, affecting the socio-economic position of beggars further. However, the adoption of government schemes such as "SMILE- Support for Marginalised Individuals for Livelihood and Enterprise" aims at providing equal opportunities to these marginalised people. Hence, it can be concluded, a collaborative and proactive approach in society and by the government is required to eradicate poverty, contributing to the mitigation of begging as a socio-economic issue in India.

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