

## HOMELESS IN AN INCLUSIVE CITY

In June 2000, Aashray Adhikar Abhiyan, Prayas and some other voluntary organizations joined hands to conduct a 15 night-long survey to identify at least 52,765 homeless sleeping on the pavements, parks, rickshaws and such other places unfit for human habitation in Delhi. This figure could now be over a lakh, including the women and children destitutes.

Although, their concentrations may be in the areas of walled city, on railway stations, bus stands and shopping centres, the homeless may be found all over, including in the Lutyen's city, near high profile Govt. offices, residential colonies and elsewhere. The life for urban poor and slum dwellers is bad enough, but for the homeless, it is precarious. They confront starvation everyday, live under sub human conditions, have to literally beg, borrow and steal to survive. The most defenceless among them are the women, children, old, disabled and the ailing. They evoke mixed feelings, ranging from pity to contempt, even hostility.

This city has more than its due share of 3.5 million urban poor with a disputed figure of nearly 2 million below poverty line, mostly living in slums or in the open and unauthorised places. Such urban poor, particularly the homeless are perhaps the most vulnerable among the one billion people living in the cities world over without adequate shelter and basic services. Nearly half the humanity, now inhabiting the cities and a major part of India's 275 million urban inhabitants, have to live in environmentally uninhabitable and conditions of abject poverty.

The big cities act as mega-magnets for the migrants, who are driven by socio-economic and personal reasons. They come from different parts of the country, mostly attracted for livelihood or to fulfill their dreams. Majority of them somehow survive or sustain, some others even excel, but sizeable number end up being homeless or destitutes. Such homeless are, perhaps, among the most deprived and marginalized, having no legal existence or identity.

They may be found going around as beggars, street children, unauthorised porters, even as a petty thieves, drug-addicts, peddlers, disabled, and, surprisingly, a sizeable number as daily wage-earners who are unable to find a place to live and sleep. Even among those who earn their livelihood honestly and yet remain homeless mostly go unrecognized by the city planners, policy makers and administrators and are treated as simple nuisance by the police and the Municipal functionaries. The civil society, even voluntary organizations who choose to target the more stable slum populations, may not notice the homeless who are taken note of mostly for punitive action by the police and the Municipal authorities.

Now, the Govt. and voluntary initiatives are actively trying to understand and to ascertain the real status of the homeless in the city. There appears to be a need to raise awareness and mobilize resources in the Govt. and outside the Govt. for them. In a campaign launched for good urban governance at the global level with a distinct programme in India, an attempt is being made to create a space for such people within the broader concept of inclusive city governance.

Perhaps, there is a need to have more positive involvement of the Social Welfare Department, city police, Municipal bodies and the other concerned Govt. departments. There are several 'rain baseras' (night shelters) for the homeless besides homes run in the city by the Govt. and the NGOs for the destitute children, women, elders, beggars and the challenged, but they are most inadequate for the given numbers. The community at large has to respond through the voluntary initiatives, religious bodies and charitable organisations, some of whom, in any case, patronize them. Since we can neither push nor wish them away or eliminate them from the urban scene, it is only appropriate that under projects like 'Delhi Cares', we create actual programmes and activities for such homeless to include them as productive partners in our systems.